

PART I



Rikoo leaned on the doorframe, his hand wrapped around a hot cup of coffee. He looked out through the open doors, past the railings of his balcony, and down onto the street below. It was close to the middle of the afternoon and the weakening sun cast an orange tint over the scene. It was still warm and would remain that way through the night, but a recent storm gave the shadows an edge of coolness.

The older, dark green-skinned orc could see the usual crowd below; shoppers haggling for clothing or tools while small groups of pedestrians formed islands of loud conversation off to the side. A tavern was open and packed full to the point that some drinkers sat outside on the logs that formed the boundaries of the street.

The establishment was called The General Chat, and Rikoo watched it almost every day. It was his job to make sure the citizens of the town -- and the continent, if he could manage it -- got along as much as possible, and one of the easiest places to spot trouble brewing was at the bar below. He stood on his balcony for so long, many citizens forgot he was there. The truth was that he was within a pike's reach of the ground. Or, in some cases, a stone's toss when he announced something the citizens didn't like.

He sipped his coffee and glanced up at the greater city that towered above them all. Centrum it was called, and it was easily the largest and busiest city in the entire continent. He sighed; it would be another long night. He could tell from the gathering noise below.

"Sir, your guests?" said Tyran, Rikoo's helper. He turned to see the familiar face of his servant, an elf. Rikoo nodded and held out his cup. The elf took it and paused.

"More?"

Rikoo shook his head no. "Are you heading home for the night, or do you want to stick around for the meeting?" he asked Tyran. The elf shrugged, turned around and headed to the kitchen. Rikoo smiled to himself. The little elf was one of many orphans left at the city's gates. He took him in at the urging of the city's religious leaders.

The boy was referred to as a servant but Rikoo made sure that the youngster could do whatever he wanted. He knew that a young elf needed to explore and get into trouble; their long life deserved some fire. Tyran, in exchange, helped with household chores and was a fantastic assistant to Rikoo.

“Oh yes, Tyran, before you go?” Rikoo yelled at the hallway. “Prepare some more snacks and coffee? Oh, and some beer.”

Rikoo heard a muffled, affirmative sound from the back kitchen. He knew the goods would be on the table by the time company arrived.

An hour later, the first of the guests began to arrive. First was [Koda, the astronomer](#). He was a short man with a striking stare. He showed one blue eye and one green eye, both shiny as tiny jewels glinting from within his tanned skin. His hair was a mess and he was usually clothed in a primitive fashion. Many thought he could turn into a bear or beast, and no one knew what he did during the night. He came to the council by the community’s demand. Despite his strangeness, he was very popular with the citizens. The man walked over to Rikoo, took his hand in his and shook vigorously. Rikoo smiled.

“Koda. So good to see you again.”

Koda smiled and nodded. “You too! I brought you a pack of goods!” he said. The wily looking man leaned out of a window, whistled at something on the street below and made a symbol. He paused as he watched the thing move into position. Rikoo could hear the growl of a bear, the standard companion for Koda. Koda leaned up out of the window and looked at Rikoo, smiled, then made his way to sit down.

“Uhm, you can get it later.” he said. Rikoo nodded. Next walked in a pair of humans.

One, a taller woman in full armor, with pale white skin and long, black hair, [was named Rill](#). She was the geographer, known to be involved in almost all areas of government. She knew almost everyone and could rattle off laws that no one seemed to remember.

[Nokigon, the historian](#), was a human man with white skin, goatee, and eyes that seemed to constantly dart around underneath his bushy eyebrows. He broke off from Rill and sat in a chair. He nodded at Rikoo and folded his hands on his lap. He was known as someone who possessed the greatest overall knowledge of the lands.

[Aurordan the ambassador](#) walked in next. He was a tanned-white human with a sharply-maintained goatee and broad shoulders. He had spent most of his time travelling on behalf of Centrum and the King, contacting old and newly-discovered groups or factions. He recently went on a very long trip to the Broken Lands, the newly-opened continent to the south of Elgea. He shook Rikoo’s hand wearily and sat down, looking through the refreshments on the table.

Next stomped in [Artefore, the biographer](#), a male dwarf with tan skin, bushy facial hair and glittering eyes. His job seemed simple enough; to catalog the royal family and its history, but his path was very dangerous. He had to decide which information was good for the public, and

which bit was better left unpublished. He sat down next to Aurodan, grabbed a cup and drank it without seeing what was inside.

Rikoo considered the group. It was a fine gathering and counted for some of the most experienced minds he could find for the task. He sighed, however, because he would eventually have to tell them the truth of why they gathered.



“Thank you all for coming once again. I know that many of you are busy.” Rikoo began. He noticed Koda playing with his food. “Be sure to give me your listing of expenses so I can refresh your accounts. Many of you travelled a long, long road to be here, and the city wants to show its thanks.” He sat down, opened the massive book in front of him and prepared to take notes. He looked over at the magical scribe that would take minutes of the meetings.

“Begin.” he said to the magical quill. It drew itself up and readied itself to write on a stack of blank pages.

“As the first order of business, we will turn to Koda.” Rikoo started. “He brings with him details on the calendar. As many of you might know, King Avrael the Mad not only ruined much of the land but also burned off much of our knowledge.” Rikoo turned to the quill to see if it was writing. It scritchd away at the paper. “So, the date.”

Rikoo turned to Koda who was busy with a stack of papers. The hyper man flicked through some, tossed a handful on the floor, smiled and began.

“Currently it is the year 1037 -- just turned 1038, actually -- of the age of conquering. Just the current age, really, but I thought it needed a name. I would, of course, allow the King or his company to title the current time. I like conquering, though. Yes, it’s a peaceful time but so much conquering as well... I mean, if you consider...”

“Koda.” interrupted Rikoo. “To the topic?”

“King Sigurd, eldest of three,” Koda continued with a smile, “took the throne at age fifteen in the year 1012.” Koda snapped a look at all of them with a smile. “His family first took the throne around 762 with his earliest relatives showing up around 734. Before that, records get spotty. Dusted. Broke. Artefore can speak to the kingsline more?”

He looked at Artefore, who nodded.

“If you don’t mind, Koda, I would like to interrupt while we are on that topic.” Artefore said.

Koda nodded. “Please!” he responded to Artefore.

“Well, I found this interesting bit. It seems to argue against your date of the royal family’s beginning, but this is just one conflicting bit. I found not much more.

‘At the foundation of the current dynasty, some 800 years ago, it is known that statues were erected across Illyria to the first King’s two grandfathers and eighteen great-uncles, all of whom carried arms in the struggle to establish the dynasty. However, the Order of Allembine at that stage had more urgent duties than the recording of the Royal Family’s predecessors, and so no written records were made.’

“That’s from the [Allembine Scribe’s](#) tomes. So, you can see, the royal family is supposed to have started before your estimation, but the records were also -- admittedly -- poor.”

“Noted.” Rikoo said as he wrote something in his paperwork. “We’ll examine that later. For now, let’s assume Koda is spot on?” Artefore nodded.

“So, on the first age? We are currently in the third age – or the age of conquering -- titled thusly for now.” Rikoo was still looking at his notes. Koda smiled at the use of his title. The note-taker scritch'd feverously. “So what about the first one? Do we have dates and information on that?”

Koda fished through his stack of papers. "...the end of the first age, yes. From [the page on Tenaril](#). Uhm... here we are:

‘In the very south of Illyria, beyond the coast of Tallimar, beyond the reach of Council and King, stands a tower of granite and gold, of hope and power. This is Stormstone, once the home to Tenaril, born at the close of the First Age, and legend and inspiration to sorcerers across Illyria. Many of the mightiest magics wrought in any age were formulated here, by Tenaril himself, an enchanter claimed by some to be Elven, and by some to be Human, and by some to be a god.’

The man looked up, smiling. It was a lovely passage, he thought.

“This would be the end of the first age. So, what about year ‘zero’?” Asked Rikoo. “When did this all begin? Time?”

Nokigon interrupted with a wave of his finger.

“In my opinion, year ‘zero’ was the foundation of the Order of Allembine -- 1038 years ago -- and year one was at the establishment of the ‘first house’ because its foundation started the calendar we use today. Here, from the Allembine papers.” The man shuffled through a stack.

“These three duties have preserved the Order for ten centuries, and will preserve the Order for centuries to come. But the Order is not to be preserved for its own sake, but as a light for the world. The Order has risen as civilization has risen. The calendar is dated from our foundation,

as blessed Allembine founded the first House in the year that we now call year one, and our historians have been chroniclers of the years since.'

"So year 'zero' was the foundation of the Order of Allembine, and year 'one' was the 'first house?" He asked the room.

"1038 is the date right now, so the 10 centuries figure is about right." Artefore responded. "The 'first house' refers possibly to the first lineage of Illyrian kings, of which Sigurd is part of the second, or maybe even the third. I will need to check my papers more closely."

"But, it reads to me as though it means the first Allembine church, or monastery, or whatever they had." Aurordan added with a dismissive wave of his hand. "It's unusual to describe someone as having 'founded' a family. Just my impressions. Take them as you will." He finished with a sort of polite nod.

"I tend to agree with Aurodan." Rill said. "I read that as the founding of the first monastic house of the Order."

Rikoo smiled and waited for Koda's rebuttal. None came. "This is all well and good, but of course you are saying that the first age started 1300 years ago. Fine." He said to the group. "But be aware that this means you leave hardly any room for the second and third age as well, unless I am misunderstanding when they could have started." He looked around the room. "We'll have to add that on to the notes and will investigate it further." He heard no objections, and so continued. "Concerning the age of the world itself, Koda?"

Koda looked up. "When I was investigating the factions I discovered that they believe, uhm, ah, here it is:

'...they will fight whatever foe may come, to persevere in the memory of the valiant souls who have stood as they stand for one hundred generations, since the First Age.'

Koda looked up at the group, all of who sat listening.

"That means one hundred generations -- a generation is known as ten years, so. Anyway, here is a slightly confusing bit, and would perhaps become a bit of controversy in the community:

'After travelling through the densely populated and fertile valleys of the Wen Kun, the population gradually dwindles as we head up into the foothills bordering the Tien Zao Mountains. We can see this young mountain range proudly spiking up into the heavens ahead of us, fiercely piercing the clouds with its pillars of ice and snow capped granite. I estimate the range to be less than 200 million years old...'

The group gasped.

“Yes, I agree.” Rikoo said. “There would be a lot of... dissatisfaction if we let that out now. It might or might not be true, but we need to verify it first”

“Oh, and here.” responded Koda, pointing at another paper, “From the New Light:

‘In the Second Age, the Order of Silver Light brought peace, prosperity, stability and order to these lands, but failed to keep control over their subjects. After the Sundering, surviving mages, hedge-witches and sundry practitioners of secret arts came together to rebuild the Order.’”

He beamed at Rikoo.

“That would mean,” continued Koda “That if we can date this Second Age, we can get a date on the sundering of the Broken Lands as well!” Rikoo smiled and the others shuffled. While Koda’s enthusiasm was nice, they all knew the scope of the task he was describing.

“And, from [the Clan Dolloigh, here,](#)” he pointed at another piece of parchment from his stack.

‘When the Sundering ripped across the land at the end of the Second Age, the magics tore trees from the ground, whipped the air into great cyclones, and tore at the earth itself. The lands shook, plains rose up to form ridges, and mountains plunged into an abyss to be swallowed by the sea. For surface dwellers this was a cataclysm. Millions died, and only thousands survived.’

“This is excellent news, Koda.” Rikoo said. “If we can work on setting a solid date on that entry, we might be able to move back and tell when the sundering occurred. But, for now we have to agree that the First Age occurred, well, somewhere between now and 1038 years ago?” Rikoo looked at the others for any objections. None came. They were all slightly struck by the enormity of their task. This meeting only served to show just how much they still had to do.

“So, we know that the current year is officially 1038. We are in the Age of Conquering. The end of the Second Age -- as we’ll call it, was when the King’s families first took over, 700 some-odd years ago. The end of the First Age? That we’re not so sure of. We’ll have to come back to it.” Rikoo nodded and stacked a few papers. The magical quill scratched away. He knew it was also recording emotion and even the foods they ate. He eyed the half-eaten bread on his plate and smiled.

“Now, on to the roots of the factions.” He continued. “Where did the factions come from? Obviously, this is something we think we know a lot about. [There is no shortage of information on the factions,](#) thanks in large part to the last three king’s insistence of maintaining connections with the outside world through ambassadors and trade. Of course, much of what is written about the different factions of our world is -- possibly -- suspect. Not only have record-keeping techniques become more effective in only the last few generations, but the factions themselves have only recently become more trustworthy.”

“Some of them.” noted Nokigon. “For example, the Breaking of Alda Amar. Presumably it happened some time ago, what humans might consider to be a long time ago, but the Elves remain bothered by it. The Illians, the Lyrians, and the Turians -- at least -- spun off from this.

Then there’s the Fall of Duraz Karag, also some time ago depending on your race, all the Elgean dwarf clans split up after this. Or look at the Orc War Nobody Ever Calls the Same Name Twice, within living memory of both humans and orcs. It had a defining impact on most of the orc factions. There was also the Council's various wars to expand their control out from MK, maybe prompting Sigurd to send the Lords of the West to the WR. I don't recall if it ever says what that was...”

“Alright, thank you.” Rikoo said, holding up a hand. Nokigon had a brain like a trap, and when he became animated about a topic, he could go on for a while. “We’d like to revisit that, Noki, but I believe the next topic is going to be the King himself, guard his name. When did his family or ancestors first make an appearance in record? What are some of their origins? I believe we assigned Artefore to this task.” He looked at the dwarf. “What did you find?”

“It’s interesting,” Artefore began, spitting a pair of bread crumbs from his beard. “I found a wealth of information on much of the topic. Most of the kings of the past had a respect for information and did very little in the ways of overlaying their own names or families on the pasts of the previous kings and queens...”

For example, the question of ‘when did the royal family first make its appearance?’ They first appeared in the year 734. Simple, I know, but I found out only after I did some digging. Or, for example, this interesting bit I found...” he rummaged through his own stack of papers.

“The royal family, ancestors to the King Sigurd, first made their appearances in the year 734. They began with Harken Geyrik, the first son of Lord Saren Geyrik, a Lord formerly in Keppen. The Geyriks had been recently driven out of Keppen by goblins. Harken went on to marry Brenna Groensen. Now, Brenna was a daughter of Asmund Groensen, Duke of Norweld. The Nordlanders had been reduced to a small portion of southern Norweld and a small part of the Middle Kingdom by that time, yes?

The King at the time, year 734, was ‘Mad’ King Avrael of Illyria, who was rumored to be half-elven. Although at the time he wasn't mad, necessarily, and although the kingdom was in decline, he ruled from Hastelbury as Centrum had been abandoned because of orcs overrunning a large part of the east. Meanwhile, the Geyriks – Harken, his wife and his family -- settled a new home for themselves near their Norweldian allies and founded Pellimont. Harken and Brenna have a son, named Brandar, in the year 736.

Now, to Brandar! At the age of sixteen, Brandar takes a company of friends to the ruins of Centrum, discovers an ancient crypt full of silversteel weapons and armor and gifts them to his friends to form the first Praetorian Guard! Ha! Can you imagine! The guts of that child!

Brandar goes to Centrum and attempts to build it back to its former glory, but it is known now that it was also an attempt to find more treasures. He is very successful in restoration, and eventually forgets about the treasures and becomes dedicated to restoration of the kingdom and capital.”

The others smiled at the thought of old glories.

“He also decisively destroys an orcish horde in the Battle of Trottingham Fields in 758.”

Rikoo grimaces at the mention of the old orc wars, but only for a split second.

“Jealous of Brandar's success, the now fairly-insane King Avrael imposes harsh taxes on Centrum. Brandar refuses to pay, so Avrael declares him an ‘enemy of the throne’ and banishes him from the kingdom. Realizing he is in control of the true capital of the kingdom, Brandar garners the support of the Nordlanders and his parents at Pellimont and declares himself King, thus beginning the Deyrik-Groensen lineage. He then defeats Avrael's forces at the Siege of Centrum in 762 and marches on Hastelbury.

After catching the mad king trying to flee Hastelbury as it is stormed, Brandar banishes him to the mountains of the deep northwest, where Avrael’s followers found the Undying Flame. Brandar weds Avrael's daughter, Mara, in 764, further cementing his throne-claim. Their first son, born Eirik in 766, is the second king of the Deyrik-Groensen lineage.”

He looked at the others, but they had no objections.

“This is excellent, work, Artefore. Thank you.” Responded Rikoo. “I have to admit to some embarrassment as even I – someone who spends a good deal of time around the royal family and its caretakers – did not know much of this. Or, I should say, have not had it put this way.”

“Good work.” Rill said. The others smiled and nodded.

“We come to his majesty, the King Sigured himself.” Artefore continued. The others reached for their drinks. “He is, of course, the current ruler of the land and the eighth monarch in the Deyrik-Groensen lineage, and he took the throne in 1012 at the age of fifteen. He is the eldest of three.

His brother, Lord Grendam of The Western Realms is one of three Lords of the West. He was sent by Sigurd to rule over the West in 1019, to subdue the region and make it a loyal bulwark on the Kingdom's west flank. I have a note here:

‘...the Lords of the West charter lists the year of their sending by the Council as 1002, which means either Grendam was sent later to replace someone or the dates are off by some.’

Grendam was a hardened veteran of many battles and is the middle brother of the three.”

Artefore paused and reached for a drink. The others took the chance to sip their own.

“Next we have Lord Porthur, the Royal Duke of Keppan,” he continued, “and the youngest of the three siblings. He was sent by the King to rule over Keppan in 1019, in the hopes of increasing the region’s agricultural output.

King Sigurd’s father, the great Drendor of Illyria, the seventh monarch of the Deyrik-Groensen lineage... he passed away – rest his soul – in 1012, shortly after Sigured became king.”

“I can locate more if I gain more access. Perhaps to the king’s personal library. I have your permission to access the private files of the king?” Artefore raised his eyebrows and looked at Rikoo.

“Yes, of course.” responded Rikoo. “Excellent, thank you Artefore.”

“I think we will turn to Rill next. Rill, you were tasked with making some sense out of the continents Elgea and the Broken Lands. Curious what you find out about some of the major geographical elements of the land?”

Rill looked up, took a sip of tea and began.



“A seemingly simple task!” she giggled. “This planet is called, we believe, Illyria.” she waved her hand, indicating the whole of the land. “While this might sound like common knowledge, many citizens think we live on a great platter or on the back of some animal. Discussing planets is not a common hobby, and we can hardly see outside of our own place in the greater soup of stars.

Still, I found some interesting facts concerning the Broken Lands. Probably the major geographic feature in Broken Lands is the huge expanse of lava and volcanic terrain in Calumnex, roughly centered on the map, right here, at the faction hub called Omen, or often-named The Tower.” Rill pointed at the map, to a dark ominous area that was rarely visited.

“There are many obsidian mines in the area, and you will occasionally come across some brave souls who have settled in the rare fertile nook or cranny. They seem safe there, but personally I wouldn't want to be around when things heat up.” The others nodded.

“Another major geographical feature would be the body of water dividing the ‘Lands in ‘two’ where Glanhad and the ‘pirate isle’ are located.” she pointed at a very large map that covered a good portion of the table. The others scooted their drinks and plates away. Without their noticing, a young elf carried the dishes away into the kitchen.

"I also found many minor geographical features. First, the Lapou Lua sea. It's due west of Lapou Lua, here. It boasts some interesting flora and fauna." The others leaned in to see.

"In Newlands, here," she moved her finger, "of the west there is a peninsula, noted for its giant fruit! There in Glanhad... many large, massive hills. Possibly a plateau, but we have not found our way to the top yet! Also surrounding the coordinates of -129, -1691 in Glanhad there is a peninsula, and west of that is a bay with an island in it. I wonder if the location at -203, -1595 is a strait?" she shrugged. Rikoo marveled at her ability memorize locations.

"I've noticed that in Glanhad there are seven islands, though these are hard to find without access to a strategic water map, and the Argiri faction on Glanhad hosts a city called Seven Blessings. Might be much more than a coincidence." She took a breath, finally. She leaned back in her chair, sipped her tea and looked at the others.

Rikoo stood and walked to windowsill. Dust motes swam in the light.

"Do we have an idea about how the lands came into being, how they were literally formed and when?" he asked.

Rill nodded. She reached into a dusty notebook and pulled out several burned pages.

"I have found my task much more difficult than I expected. There are many different ideas and opinions about how the lands of Illyria first formed. As such, I still need at least a few more days to investigate some competing ideas about the origins of the lands. First, here is the legend I heard as a child in Norweld. I am still awaiting reports from the Temple of Reason and a scroll from the Circle of Five giving their accounts of this same legend." She unfurled an ancient scroll and began by saying "This is the scroll from my old village. I promised to bring it back."

'In the beginning, the world was formless and void, and the spirit of the Crow hovered like a storm over the deep.

And then the Crow said 'Let there be land,' and there was. And he peopled the land with orcs and elves, dwarves and humans, each in their time. And cities rose and fell, and it was good for a time. But the land was flat and without features, and it pleased the Crow not. So, the Crow said,

'Let there be mountains in the north, in Kal Tirikan and Ursor, and in the southwest in Tor Carrock. Let there be plains in the northeast in Tamarin and Qarosslan and mighty forests in Norweld.'

And so it was, but the Crow was not finished. He called forth jungles in Kumala and with fiery breath laid waste to Kul Tar until only desert was left. And the Crow looked at his creation, and it was better than it was before.

Then the Crow's companion the Lion spoke to him and said,

'This is well enough, but what is land without water?' And so the Crow called forth in Kumala the river Ataman, and from it sprang great oceans, mighty rivers, large lakes, tiny streams and small lakes, lochs and tarns. The rising of the water was not without consequence for the inhabitants of the land. Some cities were caught in the floods and were saved only by the power of the great mage Tenaril. The Crow looked then upon his work and said that it was a beginning.

The hills resounded to the boots of marching dwarves and the plains to the hoofbeats of human cavalry. The thwang of elven bows and the chanting of orc hordes filled the air. And yet still the land was too silent. And the Crow created the animals, the wolves to howl, the scuttlers to rustle, the lions to roar and the elephants to trumpet.

At first the animals were shy and solitary, each keeping to the spot where it first arose. But the Lion said to the Crow,

'This is not the way of animals. They do not stand still and wait to be slaughtered. Set them free and let them roam the land. Let them divide and multiply and do higher mathematics.'

The others looked up at Rill. Rikoo raised an eyebrow.

"And so the Crow freed the animals from their pens and let them wander. Behold, they multiplied, and soon there were myriads of scuttlers, cornucopias of alligators and vast herds of mammoths. But none of the animals were so prolific as the poisonous crawlers. The crawlers divided and multiplied and added and subtracted and until they threatened to take over the continent. And the Crow saw that was very bad indeed. He called back the animals by the twos, by the tens, by the thousands and tens of thousands. He smote the excess poisonous crawlers and decreed that each animal should reproduce according to its kind, never too many and never too few. And that was much better.

The land was fruitful, and the people of the land prospered. But never was there sufficient food for the multitudes. So the Crow in his wisdom called forth fish into the seas and into the rivers, and finally into each lake, loch and tarn so that the people could be fed. And the fish were good, for the people who were starving.

And the Crow called forth minerals from the earth and herbs from the land for the people to harvest. But the people were never satisfied, and as their cities grew and more and more inhabitants swarmed the land, they called upon the Crow for relief.

'The land is not enough,' they cried. 'Give us a new place to live!'

The Crow muttered and gnashed his teeth, and the Lion growled deep in his chest, for the land was not yet prepared for them. Even so, they listened to the cries of the people. And so the Crow flapped his great wings and the Lion gave a mighty roar, and from the southern ocean more land arose.

The plans of the Crow and the Lion had not had time to mature, and so lo, the land was broken into many parts, and the whole south of it was still molten and raw, and volcanoes in the north seem dormant but may not be so, a trap for the unwary. And the people flooded into the new land. The Crow watched in silence, for even he could not tell how it was this half-formed land would hold the people. But they settled in the land, and to them it was very, very good.”

The others looked at Rill, wondering how much more she had. To them, this was all new.

Rikoo smiled, took a sip of coffee and watched as Tyran began to clear the remaining dishes. “Thanks.” He said to the boy.

“Does anyone else need anything before I go?” the elf asked the table. Each person shook their head and began to help clean up the mess they made. They are, if anything, a polite bunch thought Rikoo.

Once the dishes were cleared and Tyran gave his goodbyes, Rikoo walked to the balcony doors and looked out. The crowds were strong. There was a great noise that came from the streets below, and Rikoo had learned to love it. Would he miss it if it all went away? Of course he would.

He closed the doors behind him and latched them tightly. The others exchanged concerned looks. What was Rikoo doing?

“Fiona, PaganMistress, will you come in now, please?” he said to the air.

The others heard a small shuffling sound as a female orc with dark green skin walked in, followed by a tall female elf who maintained flowing blonde hair over pale white skin. They all knew the orc from the King’s court; he often turned to her when magic was the concern. The elf was lesser known but power emanated from her. It was rumored that Fiona had a hand in designing the magical clay plates that helped transport prestige to needy commanders.

The pair seemed to ignore the others and barely nodded to Rikoo. He stepped back to the table, sat down and watched. The others looked at him, perplexed, and then back at the pair of ladies.

The two women split and walked to opposite sides of the room, drawing from pouches at their sides handfuls of a form of powder. Its distinctive smell meant that it was goldstone, a rarely-used mineral. It was a reagent in magic?

As the pair walked around the perimeter of the room, they hummed a quiet song. The powder began to glow on the floor until the two met behind Rikoo. They poured the mineral lines into each other so that there was a glowing line around them all. The pair looked at each other, said something in a strange language and clapped their hands twice.

Snap! went the air as the mineral powder shot upwards and formed a glowing wall. It bent at the point where the walls met the ceiling and climbed across until all of the room seemed to be encased in a glowing box.

The ladies turned, crossed their arms and watched the others. Rikoo turned and looked over his shoulder.

“Thank you,” he said. He turned back to the others around the table.

“Alright, this is better. Now no one can hear us or see us. In fact, to the outside world we don’t even appear to be here. I needed this sort of privacy to talk to you about...”

“About what?” piped Koda. He looked concerned, even though he was one of the more magically-inclined citizens Rikoo knew.

Rikoo held up his hands. “I’m getting to that.” He took a sip of his drink, stood, walked over to a shelf and withdrew a small cache of five scrolls and one massive, rolled map.

“These come from agent Luna, who has been off in the south for a while, as you may know.”

“Luna?” asked Rill. “She went to study magic in the north!”

“She did, but only partially.” Rikoo responded. “She is also an agent of the kingdom and always has been. And an apt spy.” Rikoo rolled out the massive map. On it was a series of scribbles that looked to be text of some kind.

It glowed around its edges and began to hum. The others stood up from their chairs and walked away from it. Had this been a trap?

“Don’t worry, all, just give it a moment.” Rikoo reassured them.

The map’s edges glowed even brighter. An image of the map spread out from the real thing and soon touched from one edge of the room to the other, cutting into their midsections. Rikoo walked into the image. It appeared to stretch and move as he grabbed it with his hands. It was some sort of projection that he could manipulate.

“Her, uhm, her handwriting is horrible.” Rikoo rotated the map until he could make it out. Nokigon felt his stomach turn as the massive image rotated as the room stood still.

"I have confirmed that the Undying Flame is active again. They are massing numbers in the South and East, here and here, and slowly moving towards Centrum, here. They do so boldly, and for good reason." Rikoo looked up. The others were starting at him, their mouths open. First this map, now the words Undying Flame, something rarely heard in official business. The faction was connected to Mad King Avrael and had, for centuries, been a growing menace but a distant one.

"They need not move in large numbers," Rikoo continued, "for they have their hands in the kingdom already. I have heard agents tell it themselves, the stories of the influence the king is under. Such an influence as to cause him to make decisions based on their needs and plans."

"No!" Nokigon stood. "This is madness and you know it, Rikoo. Perhaps it is Luna who is..."

"Nokigon I am well aware of how mad this all sounds." Rikoo said. "And I am also aware of the better-known influence of the Circle of Five. But I can assure that there is none other as loyal as Luna and her agents. What Luna says in this is true, isn't it Rill?"

They all gasped and turned to Rill. She sat with her mouth closed, confident.

"You believe," she said to them "that my expressions of support of the Undying Flame defeat my loyalty to the crown and kingdom? How dare..."

"I am not questioning your loyalty. At all." Rikoo responded, "In fact we do not care where your loyalties lie, as long as they lie dormant! But have you not expressed, on many occasions, a joy at hearing mentions of the Undying?"

"I have." She replied, jaw clenching.

"That's fine. I know plenty who do." Rikoo smiled. "You are not on trial here. No one is." The rest of the table shuffled uncomfortably. "The Undying is not taken seriously, not like the Circle of Five."

"Then why are you asking Rill about the Undying Flame?" asked Aurordan.

"She knows them better than most here. Correct, Rill?" Rikoo responded.

"Yes. Probably." Rill responded. "So why all of this, then? Why put us all through these hoops when you could have just asked me to come to Centrum to be questioned."

Rikoo held up his hands. "Hold on." He said. "I never said we needed only you, and I never said we were going to question you. We have no issues with you. In fact, the opposite is true. We value your participation. All of your participation." He looked at each person around the table.

“You are a key part of this, yes, Rill. But, I want to caution each of you; this has been planned for a long time, and if you feel like you might not up to helping us, then let me know now.”

Everyone looked at someone else. No one budged. Rikoo smiled.

“I didn’t think you’d leave. That’s why we picked each of you. We asked you to gather this information as part of the council because the king does need this information and did ask me to form this council. Your hard work means that we now know more than we did before. And I thank you for that. But, now we come to the part that we do not want the king to know about.”

“Our cover is the council. We’re really here to discuss a connection between the king and the Undying Flame.” Nokigon said. Rikoo nodded.

“As I was saying, Luna has sent details about the Flame’s plans. Her information is solid and our other senior agents have confirmed it where they can. It appears that the Flame has agents in Centrum, right now, and even some that have managed to make their way into the inner court. We even believe that the king is under some influence of theirs, one that might be working through the Circle of Five, but we’re not sure if it’s magical or something else.”

“What else could it be?” Asked Koda. “The king would never volunteer to help the Flame!”

“They could put something in his food or drink,” Aurordan answered “ ...and control him with that. There are very few who master the art of mind-control poisons.”

“And it’s our task to find them.” Answered Rikoo. “So for each of you I have an assignment.”

He walked around the table and handed each of them a small scroll that was tightly bound.

“It’s sealed magically. You can only open it when you are safely back home.” He said. “Inside you’ll find details about your particular role. I will give you some details now.”

“Please do,” said Artefore. “You have us in the dark, here, Rikoo, and I know I am not just speaking for myself when I say that this feels a bit sudden and well more than a bit dangerous.”

Rikoo looked at the glowing map. Around it stood citizens whom he hoped were best for the job. He knew they were, but even he wasn’t sure what they were going to uncover. He sighed. Where was his coffee? Oh, yes, Tyran went home.

“Alright, then. Let’s begin.” he said to the group.

PART II



The castle was only half there. It rested precariously on the side of a small mountain as though it had been built whole and then rammed into the mass of rock. Normally it would appear mighty and defensible, but now it was smoking and falling apart from a side where dwarven siege weapons had taken it apart. Smoke issued from several towers, and occasionally a wooden whine would slither across the battlefield and into Rikoo's ears.

"They've been bombarding for a long time, now." Rikoo said.

He was a dark-green skinned orc with heavy lines of worry around his face. He wore a set of light armor and kept a massive hammer at his side. On the ground, sleeping peacefully, was his massive war-wolf Royal. They were inside a large tent that rested upon a small hill, positioned so that he could see the siege unfold. In the room with him was a large table, chairs, food and drink and several others.

Among these included Tyran; his young elf assistant who featured pale skin and golden hair that was currently tied back into a war braid. Next to Tyran was Dreafah, a young female human with dark skin, a mass of black hair and light leather armor. She rarely said a word. Rikoo wasn't sure if she *ever* spoke, come to think of it.

"And they will for a while longer, yeh." Responded Artefore, a bulky white-skinned dwarf who sat at the large table in the middle of the tent. "Meh cousins will not stop if they are not told to. Bombardin' is somethin' they feel the *need* to do."

Rikoo glanced at the dwarf then returned his eyes to the scene of battle. A fresh wind caressed his brow and he smelled the fire-scent it carried. At the foot of the mountain, on all sides, wide-open plains fanned out. They ran off into the distance, leaving the mountain alone like a lighthouse. The landscape was broken up only on one side; there was a dense forest that looked as though it was attempting to sneak up and grow on the side of the mountain.

Late in the night the dwarven armies set up their siege weaponry. It took twelve hours at least to move the massive machines into place. Yes, they wanted to attempt the construction at night to help hide from their enemies, but it was mainly to avoid the heat of the day. Dwarves didn't care much for sneaking and cared less if someone knew they were coming, but heat should be avoided if possible.

They began their assault by late morning and it continued on now, though the frequency of bombardments had slowed. Rikoo watched in wonder as the giant machines moved as though in a dance. If one was damaged or if room was needed for more, they moved smoothly, flawlessly, even over the unfamiliar terrain. How they managed to transport and set up not only

on the edge of a forest, but inside it as well, was beyond Rikoo's knowledge. The dwarves worked hard to achieve machine-like precision in much of what they did.

Suddenly, the massive gates of the castle rose and a wave of cavalry shot out towards the engines. Unfortunately the riders had not understood the dangers of riding into a forest, and their hopes of breaking the siege before the castle lost most of its inhabitants were dashed on the waiting spears of a host of orcs who were there to provide a guard for the engine-keepers.



From the far side of the castle, caravans of goods could be seen approaching. They had been arriving for some time until a gathering of charioteers flew out of the far side of the plains. They circled the caravans, capturing most and blocking any path into the besieged castle. Rikoo looked at Artefore, who shrugged. The mass of horses created a cloud dust around the caravans, and the cloud rose slowly until it blocked Rikoo's view of that side of the mountain.

"Damn. I can't see anything now." Rikoo said, waving at his assistant, Tyran. "Send my messengers to find out what is going on, and get someone here who can communicate over distances." The young elf bowed to Rikoo and rushed out of the room.

"I dinna' who that force belongs to. Looked human. Couldn't see the standards." The dwarf said, answering Rikoo's unspoken question.

"Take your guard out there and see." Said someone behind Rikoo.

Rikoo turned to see a gray-skinned elf with dark red hair that was braided down the front of her blue metal armor. It was a mercenary named Tock who had recently come under employment by the kingdom, specifically for this mission. "Or are you worried about tarnishing that armor they wear? One suit costs more than a normal army!" she sneered.

"You are not here to demand the definition or use of my guard." Rikoo said, pointing at her neck. "You are here to fight, and you did so when helping to siege the castle. You will forgive me if I need a moment before I can pay you the remainder."

"*Take the hammer*, Rikoo. Use it with your guard. You could make a real difference in this fight." She responded.

Within an eye's blink Rikoo undid the Hammer and tossed it at Tock. The elf caught it in her hands. She held it up and gasped.

"It is... it is much lighter than I thought it would be. It feels... it feels almost like a toy." She said. Within another blink the hammer was gone from her grasp and back at Rikoo's side.

"It's no toy, but now you can say you held it during a battle. Now leave us or stay quiet."

Rikoo turned back to the dwarf.

“Arte, where’s that messenger?”

Within a few minutes the dust began to settle, but in response a hail of arrows arced from the walls of the castle. Some of the arrows were massive things. *Shot by giant creatures*, Rikoo thought. The arrows did not do much to the siege engines or troops inside the wooded area, but the dwarves who operated the engines or who were unlucky enough to be without cover were beginning to fall. Artefore made a sound of alarm.

“Tock, *there*. You can see that the enemy demands a response. Have you something to say to that?” he asked the mercenary.

“My trueshots will, yes.” she responded.

Rikoo could not take his eyes off of the battlefield but could hear the mercenary issue a command outside of the tent. The person he commanded yelped the command to someone else, and that person yelled it to another who was farther down the line. Within under a minute the command had reached the hidden trueshot archers, nestled in tall grasses that lined the perimeter of the woods.

Arrows shot up and over the wall while some zipped straight and directly into the open spots that pockmarked the castle’s stone walls. A few screams pierced the crowded air, bodies fell forward and to the hard ground below. The rain of arrows from the top of the wall slowed considerably. Rikoo smiled. This seemed too easy.

“Rikoo, someone is here to see you.” came the voice of Tyran behind him.



Rikoo turned to see Tyran bow and move out of the way to make room for a tall female human in full armor. Her dark eyes were set inside pale skin and dark hair swept over one shoulder. Her weapons were ancient and used, but still strong and deadly-looking.

Rikoo smiled and took a few steps towards the woman.

“*Star*.” He said. Artefore grimaced at the sound of the name, but Rikoo gave him a quick sideways glance. “You do still prefer Star, yes? I cannot get it in my head to call you *The*

Star.”

“No, Star is fine, of course.” She answered. Her voice was cracked from the dust. “The Star was a given name, brought on by my commanders. They wanted to show their loyalty, I heard, and so issued the name as a proclamation of their stubbornness to follow me anywhere.”

“Ah, as in the southern star?” Rikoo asked.

Star looked at Rikoo for moment and then slowly smiled. She shrugged and the armor made a sound.

"You're here to help, as we asked. But, we did not *expect* you, to be honest."

Rikoo motioned to the table with the map on it. "Koda is in the North, *here*, with his bears. They attack an encampment of... whatever it is we are dealing with in this castle." He pointed between the folded opening of the tent and towards the castle. Star nodded and looked at the map.

"Rill and Nokigon are *here*, to the East. They are holding a pair of cities that once belonged to our enemy. They are analyzing the information they found inside." He gestured at the map.

"Aurordan is below them, *here*, with a smaller band of spies. Luna is bound to catch up with him at Rill's location, then they will all return home for rest and supplies."

"Who continues to *hold* the cities?" Star asked. She was known to capture and hold cities with almost minimal effort. She was not only a superior fighter, but strategist as well.

Rikoo waved in the air. "The usual. A force from the kingdom." Star crossed her arms and the metal skin of her armor creaked slightly. "I am not playing the issue, Star," he said. "it is simply not something I can talk about."

She paused, nodded, and decided to drop it.

"You might have seen my charioteers riding and capturing the incoming caravans?" She said.

"So that was you, eh?" Artefore asked. "We couldna' see the banners."

"The road kicked up much dust. It would have been hard to see anything from any distance," she responded, "But we did capture the incoming caravans. Not much inside, which was odd, but we stopped them from going anywhere."

"Thanks for that, Star. But... I need someone with your army and skills to go *inside*. I need to see what they are protecting in there." Rikoo said.

"In *there*? Into a castle that is in the middle of a siege?" she snorted.

"My dwarves will stop the engines soon, lady," Artefore said "but I have found out that my infantry has sustained a good amount of damage from a wave of attackers that burst from the castle."

"Convenient." Star responded.

"The *truth*." The dwarf growled.

"Please. Let's not." Rikoo held up his hands to stop the fight before it started. "Artefore will still go in, and I will submit some of my guard as well, if you need the help. After the dust clears

some we will be able to see where we should enter. I believe we might go in at different points, but I need to wait to see what the scouts say, if anything.”

“Again, sending someone else to do the work the hammer could do.” Tock cracked. Rikoo forgot she was there. “*Use it, Rikoo. I’ve heard the stories and know it...*”

Rikoo quickly slipped the hammer from its belt and pointed it towards the elf.

“This is a *tool*, not a *weapon*. I am not its owner nor do *you* give it commands!” He yelled.

“It looks like a weapon to me. Perhaps next time you could arm yourself with a pair of smithy tongs!” Tock barked.

“And perhaps you can arm your mercenaries with fenceposts!” Rikoo responded. Artefore stood back, eager to watch the display.

“My mercs would happily fight, but could you say the same? You have a weapon that could make much difference, but all you can do is commit a few hundred troops in golden armor ...” Rikoo grunted and swung the hammer at the air in front of Tock. The elf crackled and split and was gone.

Artefore gasped. “Did... did you...” he asked.

Rikoo, turning back to the table, sighed. “No, she is back with her mercs. She can go away from this field of battle, payment in her pockets, as far as I am concerned. Her deeds are done and my debt to her is paid.”

He looked at the map, turned to view the castle. “It’s dying down,” he said. Star walked to the opening of the tent and looked out. She could smell the sharp odor of the elf’s disappearance.

“We can do it.” She said. “I have what and who I need. We marched up from the south earlier. My charioteers were only a smaller, faster portion of my army. We can do it.”

Rikoo looked at her and then back at the scene.

“I need as many alive as I can,” he said. Star laughed sharply.

“*Alive?* Alive! As they shoot me full of holes and poke us with their swords, we’re supposed to ask them to stop and come with us? Why this, why now?” she demanded.

“I didn’t say they *all* needed to survive. I said I needed as many left alive as you can spare.” He said. “You and I both know there is something more at work behind those walls, and this is the first larger castle that we have been given the chance to capture. We need to know why and what.”

She sneered and waved her hand at the scene, indicating the fields. “There’s nothing to know. They are invaders, and need to be contained. Those dead bodies will tell you nothing, nor will the captured fools who heap themselves inside that dying house. This is a strange day, Rikoo.”

He held up his hands. "I know. I *know*. But I ask this because we feel there is something to learn here. Something, but I cannot tell you what."

The woman turned and looked at Rikoo for a moment. *He's not lying*, she thought. *But do I trust him?* She turned from the scene and walked towards the exit. She paused and turned back to Artefore and Rikoo.

"I expect a free round of drinks when I return." she said. Her tone was tense. Rikoo nodded slowly, frowned. He knew what he was asking her to do, what he was asking her soldiers to do.

"Bring back as many alive as you can," he said. "We *need* that information."

"Don't worry," she responded "... we're *harmless*."

She walked out of the tent. They could hear her issue a few commands as she walked towards her mount. Rikoo sighed, turned back towards his view of the destruction. He would send some of his guard to accompany Star's forces, but could not go into battle himself. He was one of the few in the kingdom who knew the influence the enemy held in his kingdom *right now*, and was the only one who knew this secret while having such access to the king.

"I'm rallyin' mine, and we'll join up t' Star before she goes in." Artefore said behind Rikoo. The dwarf looked around the table, chewed a morsel of food and a swig of beer and picked his helmet off of a stool. Rikoo looked at him and nodded.

"Thank you." He said to the dwarf.

"You'll be paying for *two* rounds," Artefore responded.



The dwarf noisily stomped out of the tent. Rikoo wondered how a company of dwarves could ever hope to surprise the enemy. Luckily, they didn't need to. They *wanted* their foes to hear them coming. Rikoo's own people, the orcs, believed in a similar tactic, but chose to take it a few steps farther by making incredible noise as they approached the battlefield. The resulting sound had confused even veterans; after all, you never knew when the host of orcs that ran towards your ranks was actually made up of a few or much larger numbers.

Rikoo stood and waited for the silence. Once it would become quiet, he knew it would had come down to soldier versus soldier inside the crowded streets of the sieged castle.

An hour later, one of Rikoo's scouts poked his head inside the tent. Rikoo was still standing, waiting for any news. This time he sipped on a cup of hot coffee. He raised an eyebrow and held out a hand, inviting the scout to enter. The smallish, brown-skinned orc dipped inside, bowing.

“We found someone, sir.” He said in a husky, gravelly voice.

“Who?” Rikoo answered.

The scout turned and made a signal to someone who stood directly outside of the tent. A woman, an elf, with white skin and a pinched mouth and dark hair that swept over darkened armor, was pushed in. Her hands were bound tightly behind her back, and her face was scratched. Rikoo frowned. *What is this?* he thought, *they know better than to anger me with slavery.*

Behind the elf walked Albine, one of Rikoo’s commanders. He held his sword out, ready to cut the woman down.

“Albine... what... what are you?” Rikoo stammered.

“We found her, sir, out and about and up to something ‘orrible.” The human man grimaced and looked as though he was on the verge of spitting on the woman. Rikoo considered his commander. He was a slight man, sickly looking but tough in battle. He had tanned skin and reddish hair, but was so dirty now that his clothes, skin and hair were all the same color. “She was sneakin’ ‘round th’ camp. We just ‘appened ‘pon ‘er, me and two of me soldiers did, and there she made ‘way with two of their lives. We remaining two caught ‘er but even then she gave us a fight. Luckily Sned caught ‘er wit’ a poison blade, made ‘er sleep for a while ‘en we searched her.”

Rikoo held up his hand, quieting the chatty, dirty man.

“Have her sit. There.” He said. “*Put your sword away.* Keep an eye on her, get an extra pair of eyes in here to help you with it if you need to, but put the sword away.”

The man pushed the elf onto a stool on the far side of the table. Rikoo poured a drink, held it to her to see if she wanted it. She scowled and shook her head. He put it to his mouth and drank. He forgot how parched he was. Another man came in through the flap, stood behind the woman and set his hands on her shoulders, pressing her into the seat. Rikoo made a sharp look at the man who then released some of the pressure.

“What is your name?” Rikoo asked the elf.

She sniffed and looked away.

“What were you doing here?” he asked again.

She made no notice of the question.

Rikoo sighed, looked around the room. These people had never seen what he was about to do, but they all talked about it. *Oh well*, he thought, *now they can talk about it as if they were there.* He undid his hammer from his belt and set it on the table. It looked smaller now, less

intimidating. It was less a war hammer and looked closer to the hammer a smithy might use. He set it upright on the flat top of its head and slid it closer to the elf woman. She eyed it nervously but looked away.

“What is your name?” he asked again.

The woman looked at him and stared. She had the look that someone gets while daydreaming; far away, looking *through* Rikoo more than *at* him.

“Alyrra.” She answered. Her voice was cracked. Rikoo knew that she had not been offered food or drink while she was captured.

“What were you doing here?” he asked.

“To kill. Kill anyone whom I could.” She answered in a thick accent. The two humans looked at each other.

“Who sent you? Are they inside that castle?” he asked.

“I do not know, but they are in that castle. Yes. They sent me. I was paid by someone who... someone...”

Rikoo let her pause to sigh. She was under a spell, and it tended to tire those it affected.

“They paid me, said their commander needed me to stay away from the battle. Until, until I could...”

“Could what?” Rikoo asked. He sat back, considering his prisoner. She looked like she was fighting the desire to speak. Unusual, thought Rikoo, the hammer will make her talk, though.

“...until I could distract you, somehow...”

Rikoo leaped up from his chair. *Distract me?* His thoughts screamed, *from...*

A crack of lightning burst across the landscape. There was a boom, and Rikoo fell to the ground. A great wind tore the tent from its ropes and it fell. Rikoo covered his face as the heavy cloth muffled him in darkness. He could hear another boom, this time slightly muffled due to the thick cloth that encased him. His heart felt like it was being crushed by the shockwave. The ground felt like it was rising like a wave of water.

He could hear some of the guards and knew that they had been hurt. He didn't hear his prisoner but could tell that the guards were wrestling with her. He attempted to work his hands free, tried to call to the hammer or his wolf, but his body was pinned.

He felt a slight lessening of the weight; someone was attempting to lift the tent off of him. He heard another crack of lightning, an echo, and another. The weight was coming off of his chest. For a moment, he could see a female elf, black armor...

A hot dart of pain thrust up under his arm and into his chest. He began to let out a scream, but his world faded to black.



Star opened her eyes. She could see glossy sky breaking through strands of smoke. Her ears were ringing and it took her several moments to will her limbs to move. She leaned up on one elbow and looked around, smelling acrid smoke and tasting blood. Something had hit her in the face. A rock? A piece of wood? Something flew at her when...

An explosion, she thought, the castle? Somewhere? Where did it come from? Where... where am I?

Slowly she stood and could barely make out her surroundings. She was in the clearing of a wall of smoke. It writhed around her, carrying with it bits of burning paper. She adjusted her helm; the old thing had likely saved her life.

What just happened? I was standing... somewhere, watching for any sign that my soldiers had finished their mission... what mission? I was talking to... to someone. They were telling me about...

Star grimaced. She could feel the words stick in her mind. She held her hand to her forehead and winced. *She could not remember.*

Suddenly, someone fell into her. She stepped aside, pulling her sword in one quick movement. It was Duran, she thought but didn't quite remember, a local commander and businessman who had volunteered some troops to the effort. She thought that she saw him back at the camp, but did not know if he sent some troops into the battle.

He was falling to his knees, panting heavily. A cut had settled on his scalp and it bled heavily. He looked up slowly, squinted at her face and smirked.

"Star, is it? Good to... see you... here." He was obviously in some pain. She reached down to help him up. "Where... *where am I?*" he panted.

Star? The name registered in her brain and it unlocked the gate that held back her thoughts. She could remember standing, looking at the castle. The siege engines had stopped their bombardment and a few skilled archers continued to peck at the troops on the walls. She had just finished watching the last of her troops stomping into the mess of a castle. Strangely, they seem to be receiving very little resistance, at least that she could see. She prepared to follow them in.

She sent a smaller force than normal, and maybe that was a mistake. Maybe if she would have overwhelmed the enemies, what she saw soon after would not have happened.

An explosion, she thought, an explosion! That's what happened. I sent my soldiers in and the entire house went up in an explosion. It sounded like a thunderclap from heaven, a death-boom hammering across the straight expanse of these bloody plains!

She felt her knees weakening slightly, but her training told her the reaction was based on shock and could be overcome with her will. She stood up straight, looked past the dying Duran and into the smoke.

"Ah!" the man exclaimed, "...the smoke, it is blowing away!"

She could see the dark shape of a small mountain coming to stand before them. Its peak... something seemed different than she remembered. The smoke continued to clear and she could make out trembling bodies in her peripheral vision. Moans and creaking armor started to break through the high-pitched whine in her ears.

The mountain was there, yes. She sent her warriors into the city that rested in the side of that mountain. The city, *where was it?*

The city had vanished and in its place was left a gaping hole. Rock and debris was still pouring from the wound, piling at the foot of the gray mountain.

"The city! It is gone!" she pointed. Duran, holding a hand over the gash on his head, sank to one knee.

"So it... so it is." He gasped and slumped to the ground. One of his troops came out of the mist and bent to him, stepping over piles of the dead.

She could hear someone walk up behind her. A hand pulled on her shoulder. She turned quickly, sword in hand. It was her second in command, a mighty human man with dark skin and brilliant pale eyes. His silver armor was coated in fine dust and spots of blood.

"The Star, my commander!" he attempted a salute but his breath was shallow. She could see that he had a wound at his side. Something must have hit him, hard. "*I remember. We were standing here, planning our next steps. You were convinced that we should have sent in a next wave of...*" he tried to catch his breath. She stepped forward to help, but he held out his hand. "*...but then, an explosion. It sounded like lightning, and the entire castle, it, it erupted into the air, pushed by a ball of light or fire.*"

She gaped at the man. Her memory came back fully. She recognized the sight, the sound, the smell of the explosion.

It was a spell of Tenaril.

A massively powerful spell, true, she thought, but one that rarely caused damage. It was used to transport entire cities and their citizens across the landscape. Developed by a mage of

incredible abilities many generations earlier, it was even used to terraform the landscape, but never as a weapon. What went wrong?

“A *Tenaril*.” Star whispered into the air. Her second-in-command was standing next to her now. His brow wrinkled at the word. He knew, like she did, that the spell was never used in situations like this. It required not only the most powerful magic users in the city, but commanded that as many citizens as possible to concentrate on the magic user. Without the aid of its citizens, no city could teleport. It was impossible to pull off during the delicate first few days of a city’s settlement and it was very nearly impossible during a siege.

Somehow, the enemy had transformed the mighty spell into a weapon. The thought stuck in Star’s throat. She was someone who had fought in many battles. She saw many horrible things, and many of her people had died in front of her. This was something more than that. This was a weapon that could potentially be used anywhere, even during a siege.

Her sword’s tip dragged in the sand. She felt it catch and instinctively picked it up.

As she did, a mangled monster whose head stood taller than her ran out of the dust; it showed green-black eyes that were embedded in gruesome, wet-leather skin. Its hair hung down in knots, and its armor resembled flesh that had recently lost a scab. She pulled the sword up, drew it back and sliced forward.

The beast fell just before its hands reached her throat; the two halves of its body on either side of her feet. She was awake now; alert and ready. The smell of blood woke her from her dream.

More screams came towards her. Whatever survived the explosion that claimed the plains was coming at her now. After all, the city was long gone... there was nowhere for its defenders to go but towards the enemy. Star looked back to see many of her soldiers coming to and forming defensive lines. It filled her with pride to see her battlemates falling back on years of training and experience.

So, she thought, my arrogance saved me twice. Once when I sent so few into the city, and now when the many remain to defend my flag.

She could see dozens of her soldiers in bright armor standing in a line beside her. They had their weapons drawn, ready and waiting for the enemy to hit.

She could hear the screams of the creatures getting closer.

She smiled and tasted blood.