

The forest wasn't dense, at least not in this part of it, but Julius had been bumbling around for quite some time in spite of the map he was now peering at quizzically. A tiny dot was labeled with his own name and another with the word destination, and an approximate distance. Apart from that the map was blank. He took a step forward and watched the distance number climb slightly. Turning around, he took two paces in the opposing direction. The number decreased. Scowling, Julius brushed a leaf from his dark hair and began walking again.

It had, perhaps, been a mistake to simply take the map without looking at it first, but when one is handed a map one expects certain things. Topography, for example. When the intermediary handed him the rolled up hide Julius had simply assumed, as would most anyone, that the map would be more than a simple enchantment on a bit of animal skin. This expectation had carried him a fair way into the woods with a confidence that was unwarranted. By the time the trail ran out he was too far in to even think of walking back for an additional map.

He forged ahead and was initially pleased by the simplicity of the enchanted map, until the stream. He scowled at the memory kept fresh by his soaking pants. It looked shallow enough to walk across, and most of it had been. For reasons known only to whatever force controls geology a deep trench had been scraped along the bottom of the river bed. At first it sloped gradually, but near the center of the water it simply dropped off and he was partially plunged into ice cold mountain water. His love affair with the map began to ebb away from that point forward. Somehow Julius had managed to stay on schedule, although he was far more tired than he wanted to be because of his, magically inspired, straight path travel.

Now he was very near his destination. A laborious scramble put him on a ridge that looked down into a wooded valley. He could make out a stone structure built into one edge almost hidden by the trees. At least this bit would be downhill.

He attempted a step, but found his right foot held, quite firmly, where it was. A pair of roots were slowly tightening around his ankle. With a weary sigh he pulled his shortbow from his back. Scanning the ground he quickly found the source of his problem. A willowy tree, several yards away, had vaguely feminine features. A face was nearly obscured by drooping leaves, but he could clearly see a playful smile. He held up his bow so that it gleamed clearly in a ray of light. The tree grinned even wider.

"I'm sorry" He yelled, with his free hand cupped to his mouth. "I'm kind of in a hurry. Maybe when I'm finished, okay?"

The roots had stopped moving, but they hadn't released him either. The branches of the tree seemed to droop forlornly. The smile faded into a pout. Unfortunately patience Julius might have had for this creature earlier had been spent on a certain bit of cartographic equipment. He fumbled with his quiver for a moment. Two arrows later he found the one he was looking for. One with a sickly purple amber covering the head. He aimed it at the roots and looked towards his new friend.

"I really must insist." He called out.

The woody face turned away haughtily, albeit much more slowly than would produce the same effect for a human woman, and the roots slowly released their grip. Julius replaced his gear, took a step away, then pitched a candy onto the ground near his former captor's "feet", which began transporting it back to her immediately.

The hits just keep coming, he thought to himself as he began stumbling down the slightly steep wall of the valley. After several long minutes of hazardous scrambles Julius finally found himself on mostly level ground. He glanced at his map just to make sure the stone structure was, in fact, his goal and trudged onward.

As he moved closer signs of other architecture became more frequent. Bits of wall and road peppered the mossy ground where trees hadn't decided to be. The forest became more and more thin as he walked. Soon he could see a clearing in the distance, and at the edge of that clearing stood a woman in light armor.

He slowed his pace even more. People in armor had a tendency to dislike him before getting to know know him on a personal level. Caution was in order. He crept a few more paces forward and crouched behind a log. Carefully he retrieved his bow again, taking aim with no arrow. He looked into the space where an arrow should have been and the tall, blonde, woman was suddenly brought into crystal clear focus.

Her armor was blue with gold trim and of a style popular with Elven dragoons. Her mane of hair and green cape moved gracefully in the slight wind. She was leaning casually on a pike with a blade as clear as diamond... and she was looking right at him.

There was no way she could see him. If elves could see this far they wouldn't need magical bows... Maybe it was happenstance. Yes, happenstance. Out of all the possible directions she could be facing she was looking directly at where he was crouching, and grinning wryly... for no reason.

As Julius studied her face he couldn't help but notice that it didn't look exactly elfish. She was probably half or less, but her ancestors still must have been exceptionally attractive and passed it right down the line. Her whole face was involved in her adorable smile and he studied it intensely. A few stray hairs fell across one side and she brushed them away gently, then pointed at one of her sky blue eyes. She then flicked one of her very large ears and pointed at him.

"I could hear you," thought Julius, rolling his eyes at his own incompetence. There was no point in pretending he was hidden now. Hopping over the log, he set off towards this seemingly good natured person.

She watched him make the entire, laborious, trek down the mild incline. He fussed and struggled with his cloak as it caught on brambles, stumbled here and there, and was remarkably entertaining. If he hadn't been flailing around so much she would never have been able to see where he was. His clothing perfectly matched the coloration of his current environment. The distinct sound of cursing and exasperation radiated away from him with every slight failure. In spite of all this he made good time and soon she could make out his features more clearly.

His hair was shoulder length, and parted in the middle. It was managing itself quite well considering its master was whipping it to and fro, like and idiot, at random intervals. In the moments when he was struggling against invisible enemies she could make out weapon handles on each side of his hips. Whoever he was he was well armed in spite of how shabby he looked. Although she was having a hard time seeing this odd man as a danger to anyone but himself.

Rather than stand and wait she decided to go back to the shaded spot where she'd been sitting, before she heard him trampling the foliage. At length he marched, with as much dignity as he could amass, into the little clearing. She leaned forward, hanging on her pike, and grinned broadly at him. He couldn't help but notice her prominent front teeth, which were not very elf like at all.

"Hello." He said after a long moment.

"Hello." She grinned back melodiously.

Julius held his map out. The two dots had been replaced with text. She read it aloud.

"You have reached your destination." She held out her own map. The same text stared back at him.

"These things are terrible." She said. "You should have used a proper map."

"We see most clearly that which has passed." He replied, slumping onto a patch of moss. "Are you my client, or another member of the party?"

"The latter. I'm an associate loremaster, or mistresse if you prefer to be specific." And with a wiggle of her spear she added. "In addition to other potentially useful skills."

She rose and offered a hand. Julius did likewise, but found himself looking up at her which, at a tad over six feet himself, was atypical when greeting a woman. Up close she was more majestic than he was emotionally prepared for. He instantly felt shabby and the sensory perfection that was touching her hand didn't help this feeling at all.

“Julius Drywood.” was all he managed to sputter out.

“Niona Black.” She smiled down at him.

“Black?” He said, desperately trying to gather composure. “So you're not an Elf?”

“No, my grandfather was, but I'm too far removed for them to claim me.” She rolled her eyes. “You know how some families are. Granddad was the black sheep.”

He did know how they were. At least, he knew how the portion she was talking about was. Particularly old, well off, Elven families were wildly racist. Judging by the resplendence of her armor, which was likely enchanted to adapt to suit whoever put it on, Niona's relations were probably extremely rich and extremely horrible. It must have been quite a scandal when he married her grandmother. Up this close Julius could do nothing but empathize with him. If her grandmother was a quarter as enchanting as Niona she probably had him spellbound as soon as she said hello too.

Suddenly Julius realized he'd been shaking her hand longer, and more vigorously, than he had intended, and jerked it away awkwardly. She hadn't noticed apparently.

“When grandpa left all he had was this armor.” Niona continued as she returned to her seat. “He made his entire fortune on his own. Well... not on his own exactly, I guess. Grandma helped.” She pointed at her spearhead. “She was quite the weapon smith in her day.”

A thought arced across his mind as he gawked at the blade.

“You're grandmother is Gretchen Black!?” He exclaimed, looking from her weapon back to her a few times before becoming self aware again. Niona nodded and grinned.

“That spear... It must be priceless!” She nodded again. There was a long silence while his consciousness was overwhelmed these revelations and his reactions to them. Eventually one question managed to work its way out of his face.

“Why in the world would the granddaughter of Gretchen Black be scavenging with the likes of me?” He blurted out.

“Intellectual curiosity” she laughed. “I want to know why the last group didn't come back.”

“Didn't come back...” Said Julius, turning towards the stone archway a few meters away. “Nobody told me anything about a prior expedition...”

“Why did you take the job then?” She asked cocking her head to the side.

“The guildmaster told me it was just some basic trap spotting and...” He hesitated. “Some reverse lock smithing...”

“Uh huh...” She said. “Either he thinks very highly of you, or is trying to get you killed.” Julius considered this for a moment.

“Could go either way really...” He smiled. She giggled.

“So, you're what, a grave robber? A thief?” Julius winced a little at her candor. “How do you describe your talents to a client?”

“Rogue is the diplomatic term.” His fingers fidgeted with themselves as he spoke. “But both of those things... And more... And worse... Have been accurate... To varying degrees and at various times. But I assure you, in spite of the negative connotations associated with my abilities, I am very trustworthy. At the best of times I'm more like a locksmith. I open things for the right reasons.”

“A common thief would hardly use connotations in a sentence, I expect.” She grinned.

“Quite...” He replied. “I'm a fair hand in a fight too. Though I prefer to avoid those sorts of entanglements.”

By way of proof he drew an arm across himself and drew a weapon. Niona had never seen its like. It wasn't exactly a sword, but it was longer than a dagger. The closest thing she could classify it as would have to be a machete, but it was modified, if that was indeed what it started as. She held a hand out and Julius relinquished his strange armament.

There was little elegance to it, but she had to admit it suited its master. Most of the blade was meant for hacking and was clearly balanced for that task, and precisely so, but the end of the blade was angled to the spine to a fine point. With enough force he could probably penetrate armor with it. Possibly far enough to give an aggressor pause. For some reason she got the impression he had fashioned the odd thing himself. Perhaps an interest in weapon crafting was how he guessed her lineage so quickly.

“Did you make this?” She hazarded.

“A long time ago.” He said. “Unfortunately I've gotten used to them. Don't know what I'd do if I lost one. Probably couldn't make another one after all this time.”

She handed handed back his dagger, for lack of a better word and cast an eye towards his bow.

“I take it you didn't make that.” She said nodding at it.

“No, no, that would be a feat well beyond me.” He replied, handing it to her. “I found this on a job and was given it after.” She raised an eyebrow. “I swear to it” He said, raising a hand.

“This was a princely gift...” She mused, turning it over in her hands. “Older than my armor... Enchanted too I shouldn't wonder.”

“Draw it as if to aim.” He instructed. Niona complied and was noticeably startled by the telescopic effect.

“How fantastic!” She smiled. “How did you ever convince the owner to part with it?”

“He was a fool.” Scowled Julius. “Only wanted gold. No idea of the value of such a thing. I expect he thought he was cheating me.”

“Serves him right then.” She laughed, returning the bow. “You could buy a plantation for the price of that.”

“No.” He smiled. “This is a once in a lifetime get. I'm actually surprised you could identify it.”

“Such are the incredible powers of the loremistresse!” She laughed, raising her arms above her head.

“Well, you've certainly proven your story.” He laughed.

“And you.” She replied.

They returned to their seats and silenced filled the space between them for a moment. After considering the sky for a few seconds Niona spoke again.

“What shall we do till the others show up?” She asked. Julius thought it over.

“There's a dryad at the edge of the valley that seemed lonely.” he replied. “We could go ask it questions about the area if it speaks English, or you know whatever their language is called.”

“Oh neat!” She exclaimed, and in moments he found himself struggling up the slope again after her, regretting having said anything.

Niona did not know enough forest talk to be conversational, but the dryad knew an archaic form of Elvish that she could parse out. Julius felt a little like a third wheel, but every so often Niona would give him a synopsis of the conversation. The dryad's name translated to something like “the first ray of light passing through morning dew”. Which Niona mashed around into Dew Beam after his suggestion of Sunny Dew was voted down. Dew had been in that part of the forest for a very long time and seen much. Not the origin of the temple in the valley wall, but many things none the less. She didn't have an accurate count of time, or perhaps her perception of it was different, but Niona couldn't pin her age down. Generations older than either of them at any rate. More recently she had seen the first scouting party enter the temple gate, but they never returned. A bad sign to be sure. Of course, if foul play had been involved it was still possible that the surviving party members slunk away after backstabbing the rest. Julius had to admit, however, that theory seemed unlikely. In her loneliness Dew Beam seemed to have kept a close eye on the visitors.

Once the conversation switched to being about things like how pretty Dew thought Niona's hair was, and displays of her ability to mimic the humanoid body, Julius excused himself. By the time the sun began to set he was sure the rest of the team wouldn't be arriving. It was doubly irritating since he'd gone to so much trouble to get there at the appointed time. Niona arrived at his makeshift camp as the last light of the setting sun faded away beyond the walls of the valley. Dew Beam had offered to guard the campsite on her side of the valley wall, so Julius put his back to it on his portion of the night watch.

Niona stripped down to her small clothes with no outward consideration for modesty, and it took every ounce of Julius's will not to leer at her in hopes that her image would sear itself into his eyes forever. Once she was snugly rolled up in her noticeably clean and ostentatious bedroll he was able to settle in for a boring few hours.

The forest was alive with sounds. Which is much better than a quiet one. When nature goes silent that means something isn't right and tonight every nocturnal creature seemed completely at ease, and willing to give away its general position to who ever might be listening. It was all Julius could do to stay awake. Eventually, as his mind began to wander, his eyes fell upon the crumbling temple gate. It

was barely visible in the firelight. He'd set up camp as far away from it as he could in fact. Something about it was wrong. He was more and more sure of this feeling as the light had begun to ebb away. Being far from it seemed like a very good idea. Now, under the light of the stars, it looked the very picture of ominous dread. The longer he looked at it the more it seemed like he could hear the sound of slow breathing. Eventually he turned back to the forest at large, but some portion of his consciousness continued to monitor the gate from his periphery for the rest of his watch.

Eventually Niona stirred and cheerfully relieved him, although she did so without putting on any more clothing, which made falling asleep a herculean task afterwards. Exhaustion eventually overtook him though, and he settled into a decent sleep. When he woke up he was on his side, leaning against a warm, soft, something that was doing likewise to him. He rolled over to see what it was and nearly passed out as Niona slid her back snugly against his belly in her sleep.

Language fails to accurately describe the complex emotion soup Julius was feeling. Even through his clothing he could tell Niona had the nearest to perfect female body he had ever, and likely would ever, encounter. Conflict arose between factions in his mind. Part of it was just happy to be alive, to be experiencing this. Another part was annoyed, both with the embarrassment this situation would likely cause in the future, and about the fact that he had done his whole watch while Niona apparently decided it was okay to go to sleep. It wasn't done in a haze of drowsiness either. She had placed her blankets over his and slid her bedroll flush with his own.

She had done this on purpose...

The thought did a few laps in his head. Was this a hint? He was terrible at reading women, but they did seem to have a certain kind of connection. She smiled and laughed a lot more than was usual for a first encounter. Did that mean anything? Had he failed to pick up on the signals? Maybe she was impressed with his knowledge of armaments. Who would be impressed by that? What was going on here!?

While the intelligent portion of his mind began its decent into madness the instinctual part offered up a course of action to the motor control centers. We should just put our had on her hip and see what happens. It suggested calmly. If she moves it we just get up and walk away. If she doesn't...

Julius became aware of his hand moving. It reached Niona's waist and all the noise in his head was replaced by complete focus on what he was feeling there. It slid a little further down to the curve of her hip and stopped. She rustled a bit. He braced himself for having his hand broken, wishing now that they were reversed in position and he was using his off hand. She began to turn towards him, his hand sliding across her tummy as she rolled. Her sleepy eyes met his and she grinned her toothy grin.

"I was cold."

Julius was at a loss. The expression wasn't one of seduction. She looked as if wadding herself up against whatever person was warmest was completely natural and not an invitation to amorous activity. At length he posed a question.

"Why aren't you keeping watch?" Niona motioned her head backwards. He followed the movement across the imaginary line and saw a tree standing where none had been before.

“She must have spent your whole watch wandering down here.” Niona explained. “I figured she would be more than enough protection, so I went to bed again.”

Her logic was sound. Most animals had sense enough to give dryads, and indeed most treefolk, their personal space. Which is why it wasn't uncommon for the very rich to keep them as guards. That was also why Julius was familiar enough with them to know they were basically harmless unless stirred up. Much like with a dog you could get past them with the appropriate treat. This trusting nature was probably part of why there weren't a lot of them left.

Dew Beam was swaying gently in the morning sun. Apparently oblivious of their awkward situation. Julius turned his attention back to Niona.

“Is it time to get up? She asked.

“Uh... I suppose it is.” He said after a brief pause.

With that she spryly hopped to her feet, whipped the blankets around, separated them, and flung his gracefully back upon him. He blanket wrapped around her like a fluffy cape leaving her exquisite form disappointingly obscured. She retrieved a moist towel from a device that Julius guessed somehow collected dew and began sponging herself down here and there.

“I'd kill for a shower.” She mused. On this point they were in agreement. The filth was one of his least favorite parts of this adventurous lifestyle. He gazed longingly at the little cloth as she rubbed it vigorously up and down her leg. Niona wasn't sure if it was the cloth he was staring at or not. Just as a test she held it away from herself for a few moments, casually, while pretending not to be following his eyes, which followed its movements. It was actually a little disheartening. He hadn't attempted to make a move on her, and now he was looking at her washcloth rather than her glistening leg, which she knew was really quite fantastic. “Do you want a go?” She said, wiggling the little towel at him. Julius nodded vigorously.

Niona dipped it in its little reservoir and wrung it out a little. Then she whipped it at him with a degree of speed and accuracy he was not at all prepared for. As it impacted upon his face with a stinging, wet, slap he couldn't help but notice that the little washcloth smelled of Niona dipped in strawberries.

There's was something weirdly intimate about wiping himself down with the little towel. Although at the same time he wasn't sure it was more sanitary than stewing in his own juices... That said it certainly felt better and smelled better, so whatever. There was some question in his mind about how thorough he should be with someone else's cleaning supplies. In the end he decided to keep things above the waist. That said, once he got started he wasn't shy about getting as clean as possible.

Niona was nearly finished setting up for breakfast when she noticed Julius was still wiping himself down. It was pretty amusing. How this strangely awkward man was supposed to be a locksmith was beyond her. He was now trying to mime having his back scrubbed at Dew Beam who was enthusiastically trying, but clearly not understanding. When he handed her the cloth she simply looked at it for a moment then made a game of keeping it from him. By the time he had clambered up one of her arms Niona was laughing so hard she was feeling faint. It was distracting enough that Julius was able to retrieve the washcloth and wander back over to the little basin with dignity, or whatever it was he had left. After he finished up he strode casually over to the fire and sat down with as much

confidence as he could scrounge up. Niona was on the ground in a little ball, weeping from laughter. At length she was able to compose herself and sit up. Julius was as red a humanly possible, but committed to his charade of casual disinterest. Niona did not make eye contact for a few moments while she adjusted strips of bacon in her pan. Once it was settled in she finally turned to him.

“Are we feeling springtime fresh?” She asked, deteriorating into a fit of laughter before she was even finished.

“As clean as a summer rain...” He replied, slumping forward, giving up all pretense of confidence. Niona eventually composed herself enough to converse naturally again.

“You are very entertaining.” She offered. “I was afraid this trip was going to be dull.”

“I bring a wide range of skills besides my mastery of traps, locks, and what have you.” He replied. “I feel that keeping the party entertained is crucial to morale and eventual success.”

“Well, you're doing a cracking job!” She grinned.

The rest breakfast was less eventful. Niona's camping set was far and away better than anything Julius had ever seen. It was practically a civilized meal. How she had managed to lug it all out here was beyond him. For an academic she was in uncommonly good shape was all he could say. Maybe the books she liked were exceptionally heavy. If her range of knowledge was any indication they had to the biggest books in the world. There was virtually no topic she couldn't speak about. He was beginning to wonder why they needed him at all. Niona seemed more than capable of understanding even complex mechanical locks, and disarming fiendish traps. Maybe he was just the spare.

After the best outdoors meal he'd ever had the little band trekked to a high point and tried to see if anyone was coming their way. The most anyone could see was birds being disturbed here and there, but it seemed to be coming closer. If it was people they were making good time.

It was approaching noon by the time their suspicions were confirmed. A dark haired elf with a hawkish nose strode haughtily into camp. He looked harried, but determined to take control of the situation. His bearing suggested he was of noble birth, but he was dressed in a manner that would have looked at home on Julius. His armor was well worn and leather mostly, dyed a sad blue green. At his side was a slim, thrusting, sword breaker, and there appeared to be a violin case slung across his back.

“Hello Regalius.” (reh-gay-lee-us) Chirped Niona. His scowl had fallen on Julius and hardened considerably, but upon hearing Niona's voice it melted away as if he'd never even laid eyes on him.

“Niona!” He exclaimed. “You beat us here. Even with your disability you manage to shame me again!”

“Disability?” Julius mumbled at her.

“He means my lineage” She snorted. “Backhanded is the only kind of compliment he's familiar with.”

“I meant no offense, dear lady!” Regalius interjected.

"It's okay." Niona smiled. "You're so amazing you can be offensive without even trying."

"My apologies..." He mumbled. "My tongue outpaces my head where you are concerned."

"It kind of does that all the time actually, but you're getting better at least." She replied. "Fancy some lunch?"

"You are too kind." He said, taking a seat in front of Dew Beam, apparently unaware that she was anything other than a tree. In his defense she had been doing little more than swaying in the sunlight for a while now and hadn't taken any notice of him either.

"Make a fire, will you?" Niona asked Regalius, pointing at the pile of sticks Julius had tossed in the fire pit. He expected the dark elf to start fiddling with a tinderbox or something, but instead he readied his fiddle and rose from his seat. Regalius fixed a hawkish sneer to his face which he directed at the kindling and began to play. The tune was quick, syncopated, and Julius had to admit, reminded him of fire. A few seconds in the wood burst into flame so violently it made Julius jump and Dew Beam scream. The scream was so peircing and unexpected that Regalius nearly pitched into the fire in his mad scramble to escape it and observe the source.

"By the stars! A dryad!" He gasped. "It was nearly upon us! You, thief, cover me! I'll make short work of it!"

Julius stayed where he was, confounded partially by being addressed at all and partly by being addressed as thief. Regalius, however was already starting his song of flame again, but with more intensity than the campfire had been portioned. Dew Beam was simply scooting gingerly away from the fire towards Niona, who was the only one unmoved by the ruckus. She picked up her spear, and casually gave Regalius a light jab to the stomach, one armed, with the blunt end. He crumpled like a blanket.

"She's a friend, doofus." She scolded, barely looking up from the frypan.

"Of course..." Coughed Regalius. "How... foolish of me... not to notice... Even... the trees wish... nothing more... than to be near you..."

Julius had to admit, in spite of his irritating nature, Regalius's overt devotion to Niona was kind of endearing. Against his better judgement he offered him a hand up.

"For future reference," He instructed. "my name is Julius."

"Of course, I'd forgotten." Replied Regalius. "It was I who brokered your employment in our cause."

It suddenly occurred to Julius that Regalius was likely the one who saddled him with the useless magical map. He considered letting him fall back down again, but his better nature won out. As Julius helped Regalius to his feet he became aware of another presence in camp. How long she'd been there, was unclear, but no one seemed to have noticed in the commotion.

The silent figure was apparently taking in the scene, arms crossed under her dirty white robes, features obscured by her hood. Once Regalius was righted he took notice of her too.

“Commander!” He sputtered. “That was-”

“Typical.” She said, cutting him off. “Once we're down that hole that sort of nonsense will not be a luxury we will have.” An arm flipped open one side of her cloak and took hold of a truly impressive mace. Except it appeared as though her arms were still folded across her front. His brain did the math and Julius gaped in spite of himself. If she took any notice there was no sign of it. The remarkably busty cleric simply tossed her weapon down, casually, next to one of their makeshift seats. Once settled she removed her hood and surveyed the campsite.

She was redheaded, and said hair was cut in a boyish fashion. It was rebelling somewhat here and there, but overall the look suited her face perfectly. It was a face he recognized, but he could hardly believe it. He'd seen it before. He'd seen it on posters. In fact, he'd seen most of her, in various stirring images, all over the country, but he'd always assumed they were exaggerations. Two places in particular, but in actuality she lived up to those images and then some. He was completely unable to regain control of his face.

Eventually her gaze lit upon him. She raised an eyebrow and cocked her head, as if she expected him to give her a report.

“You're... the hammer of god!” Was all he managed to blurt out. Her eyes moved past him and on to Regalius.

“He's a quick one.” She intoned pleasantly. “Where'd you find him?”

“He came very highly recommended!” Regalius said, sounding accused. “The best in his guild by all accounts!”

Julius looked to Niona for support, but she was completely unmoved by the revelation that the commander of the entire land's military was just sitting there. Niona looked up from her pan briefly.

“Want some lunch, Alina?” Alina nodded and let herself slide onto the soft ground. Once she was settled again she looked back to Julius, who had placed himself under the shade, and possible protection, of Dew Beam.

“You gonna tell me your name?” Asked Alina. “You already know mine apparently.”

It was true. Practically everyone in the country and almost everyone in all the others knew about Alina Redgrave. The youngest commander ever to lead the army and only the third female to do so. Promoted in battle when the previous commander fell, along with most of the elite guard, she had successfully defended the city gate with, basically, a group of students as backup.

“Julius Drywood.” he replied hoarsely. All the moisture seemed to have left his mouth.

It slowly began to dawn on Julius that they were all veterans of that battle, but Alina had been chosen as the face of the legend. A feeling of intense inadequacy began to wash over him. That was six years ago. She couldn't be older than 24.

He had been in the capital that day. It would have been a slaughter if she hadn't turned aside wave upon wave of reanimated dead. They called her Redwall, The Crimson Thunder, The Hammer Of God, and many other names hinting at how unstoppable she was. None of them were exaggerations. He'd been close enough to see her fight. The ground shook when she struck it. Waves of force rippled away,

making the ground look like water. She was a living legend, and to top it all off she was breathtaking. He was completely awestruck. Between her and Niona it was almost too much beauty to have in such close proximity. Even Regalius seemed to appreciate what he was experiencing.

“I thought this might happen.” He explained. “But I could hardly tell the guild master who I was hiring him for...” Alina nodded.

“He'll get over it in a minute.” She replied, casting her gaze back over Julius.

“I don't think I could ever get over meeting someone as amazing and beautiful as you” Suddenly tumbled out of his mouth. He wasn't even sure where it had come from. He'd said it, but it was more like he was watching himself say it from outside his body. His face was instantly ablaze with embarrassment as the realization of what he'd just done sunk in. He half expected to be driven into the ground like a tent spike.

Much to his amazement, however, Alina actually looked taken aback and went as red as he had. The note of sincerity in what he'd blurted out had taken her by surprise.

“Well,” She replied, suddenly becoming interested in the dust on her robes. “I am pretty great... I guess.”

Regalius looked at Niona and raised an eyebrow. She grinned her biggest grin.

The three friends decided that it would be better to spend another night in the woods, rather than wander into the underground temple that afternoon. Julius didn't protest for several reasons. He was starstruck for a start, plus the temple seemed to radiate unpleasant energies more strongly the closer to evening that it got. He would have been outvoted anyway, so there wouldn't have been much point in protesting in any case. The other two obeyed Alina's slightest command, although it seemed to be out of loyalty rather than mindless consideration for her rank. She had an aura of confidence that made you want to trust her. It wasn't arrogant, or ostentatious, like Regalius, but somehow candid. At the same time you knew it would be unwise to cross her too. She was every bit a leader.

Julius didn't do much talking that afternoon. The trend continued into the evening. He didn't like the sound of the temple at all. The first exploratory team never reported back, and they seemed to have been trusted comrades. This was unfortunate on a variety of levels that he didn't care to ponder. Niona had found a very detailed map however and Julius spent several hours of daylight listening to them talk while memorizing as much of it as he could. It was complex, a lot of places to hide triggers. Not only did he not intend to meet the same fate as the first team but he desperately wanted to impress these people. Two of them in particular...

That night Niona displayed the same cavalier attitude toward propriety that she had the night before, as did Regalius. Although Julius noted that he only stole furtive glances at Niona while she acted as if she was the only creature on earth. The pair of them pranced around mostly naked right up till the bedrolls came out. In contrast, Alina changed into whatever it was she wore to sleep in the safe confines of her long cloak. If she'd changed at all it was almost impossible to tell. As night closed in around them Regalius played a soothing tune that carried all around the little valley. Niona assured Julius that there wouldn't be any need for a watch, but he decided to stay up for a while just the same. The idea of a magical song being the only thing between him and a knife in the dark was not quite enough. He had to admit that the disquieting aura of the temple seemed to have been pushed away however. After a few laps around the clearing he settled down at Dew Beam's roots and kept his ears

open. The only thing that disturbed him from that point on was the sound of Niona crawling under Alina's blanket and the resigned protestations she put forth before Niona snuggled in good and tight.

Julius was the first to wake up and he busied himself with the fire until the others rose. After a quick meal, and a cleanse with Niona's magic container, the group began their quest in earnest. He'd kept quiet for quite some time so Julius decided to venture a very obvious, yet still unanswered question.

“What was the original team looking for?”

“You've probably sensed it,” Alina began, as she slid open one of the massive stone doors. “the evil aura of this place, I mean.” Julius nodded. “It was built over something. What it is exactly isn't clear.”

“The texts I found called it the vein of the demon.” Interjected Niona. “It's supposedly a site where an evil creature was slain, but its defeat cause negative forces to flow to this spot.”

“And a bunch of stupid humans decided to dig down to it...” Regalius drolled.

“I sent the first group here the see if it had been disturbed” Continued Alina. “I think places like this are where the skeleton king draws strength.”

Julius almost asked what would posses someone to build something like this, but his brain caught up to his mouth before it spoke. There was always some group of jerks doing stuff like this. Making trouble for no good reason. This was just another one of those places left behind when trouble caught up to them.

The long hall was faintly lit by round baubles stuck at intervals along the walls. The source of their light wasn't clear, but the sickly glow suggested it was the negative energy of the site itself. Their dim light was perhaps testimony to its waning potency. So much the better as far as Julius was concerned. Alina led the way for a fair while before Julius's wits came to him. Her natural leadership made him forget his function.

“Hey, wait!” He exclaimed. “You guys need to get behind me.” The sudden outburst was enough to make the others obey without question. They quickly repositioned themselves behind him and made ready to fight.

“No, no...” He explained waving their weapons down. “There's nothing around. I just need to be first in case of traps.” Niona laughed.

“You know, I don't think we ever had a thief who went before the party before.”

“Well you still haven't.” Julius corrected. “I'm much more like a locksmith. A craftsman.”

“Do you pick pockets?” Alina asked. Julius considered his answer for a moment.

“Yes.” He replied. “But only if they mark is a known jerk. I have standards.”

The party laughed. Truth be told Julius had hardly pick-pocketed at all. He hadn't grown up in the profession, so to speak. He came to it later so he didn't go through the various ranks generally associated with being what was commonly called a rogue. Dwelling on that wasn't doing him any good

at the moment though.

The first few levels of the temple were essentially stripped. Other groups, or perhaps even the people who built the structure had removed anything that wasn't bolted down, or too heavy to lift. Plating had been picked off statues, jewels dug out of eyes, you name it. The easy pickings were gone. Every so often however there was evidence of an unfortunate who had been careless in their robbery. Skeletal remains of various types were scattered about in pockets here and there. Single thieves, groups, large parties, all laid low by cunning traps. The further they went the worse the carnage was and the older the remains. People had clearly survived to tell tales of this place. At least one had been in far enough to relate a very accurate map to someone. Niona relinquished it to his care as they moved briskly through deserted chambers and hallways. At length Regalius made note of something that was beginning to bother each of them.

"Has anyone else noticed that the lower we get the brighter it is?" They had all been thinking it. The sickly glow coming from objects had been increasing steadily. It had gotten so bright by the time Regalius mentioned it that they had doused the torches from a few floors back.

"What do you suppose is lighting everything." Asked Julius to no one in particular.

"The source of the problem I expect." Niona answered. "I think the closer we get the easier it is to draw power from it. Whoever built this place must have tapped into it."

"But why did they put lights at the top when there wasn't enough power for them to work properly." Asked Regalius.

"I think there was once." Niona said, inspecting a glowing bauble. "In fact I think there still is, but something is drawing off enough power that it's draining the source."

Julius glanced at Alina, who had remained silent. Her face hardened as she looked around.

"We need to shut this down somehow..." She observed.

Everyone nodded in silent agreement, although exactly how 4 people would shut down a temple that had remained operational for more years than anyone had an accurate count of was anyone's guess. They pressed on, Julius carefully leading the way, for a good long while before anyone spoke again.

"I don't think we're going to be able to do this in a day..." Alina sighed. "These chambers just keep going and going..."

"And we're running out of map." Julius added.

"What should we do then?" Asked Niona. "Just camp in the hallway?"

"No, definitely not." Replied Alina. "We need to seal ourselves in a chamber someplace. A safe one. Can you find one, Julius?" He studied the map for a moment.

"I think so." He replied. "There seems to be a pattern to the rooms. Every 13th one is basically just an empty room. Or, at least not where they were keeping something worth killing people over."

"That'll have to do then." Alina said, leaning on her mace. "I'm sick of walking."

After that Julius counted their way to the next 13th room and scanned it for traps. He'd been taking note of the sorts of things that were in the other rooms, but these were always darker and mostly bare. They had already passed several. Each floor had a seemingly random number of rooms, but always at least 13. Depending on how you counted the 13th one was always a clean room. No artificial light, just a room. It couldn't be a coincidence, but the point of it all was beyond him.

After he was convinced things were safe he motioned everyone inside. Niona lit a torch and they found that the room had a very standard, but also very sturdy, stone door. It was perfectly balanced to swing with ease. Once they moved it into place the door sealed itself. Trying not to look panic stricken Julius checked to make sure they could open it again. It opened up without the slightest snag. He said nothing, but was greatly relieved, and a little disturbed by the convenience. With the door shut the room was completely dark. If not for the torch they would be in total darkness darkness. None of them were keen to have the light extinguished, but the room was too small to leave one burning if it was truly sealed.

Torch in hand Julius marched around the room trying to decide how secure it was. He could just tap the ceiling with the torch if he stretched his arm as far as it could go. It was while checking a corner he noticed that something was moving the flame slightly. Scanning around he noticed small vents where the wall met the roof. He held the torch in front of one for a moment. The flame waved to and fro rhythmically. Air was passing through the space from somewhere. It was a little unsettling that the movement of it resembled breathing, but he thought the others would sleep better not knowing that fact. He desperately wished he didn't.

The room was quiet beyond quiet. It was little more than an empty square of stone. It was cold, dry, and a film of grit covered the floor. No person had been in this room for years without count. It seemed almost a crime to disturb it. In spite of the fact that the room was ventilated it was agreed that starting a fire was a bad idea. Niona produced a small lantern. That glowed with a small blue flame. It became their only light source.

The idea of going without a hot meal didn't please Julius, but the three party members who had started the quest with an idea of what was going to happen had thought to bring food that didn't require cooking. Niona, whose pack was the most burdened, seemed to have tried to pack for any eventuality. How she lugged the thing around without withering beneath its weight was beyond him. Hard breads, biscuits, cheese, dried meats, candy, jellies, jams, among other things were set out on her blanket for the group to enjoy. The nature of the food caused them to eat in silence for most of the meal. The sounds of their consumption reflected back and around the walls. They were all feeling uneasy about staying in the claustrophobic space, but no one said so. By the end of the meal all save Niona seemed jaw worn by the act of chewing the difficult food. Julius couldn't help but wonder if her prominent teeth had magical properties beyond her smile.

Eventually Niona began making nervous small talk. Her familiarity with Alina and Regalius made it hard to continue finding topics so increasingly her attention turned to Julius. The others were not only glad to have attention drawn from themselves but also to learn more about their untested party member.

“Have you lived in the city all your life?” Niona asked

“No, I came there after my village was sacked.” Julius replied morosely. “It was the first place to be attacked and bore my family name.”

“I knew I'd heard that name before!” Alina exclaimed, leaning forward quickly. “They say it was the first time anyone lay eyes on the Skeleton King.”

“I don't know if that's true,” said Julius “but less than ten pairs of eyes lived to tell the tale, including mine.”

“Did you get a good look? What was he like?” Regalius asked, unable to maintain his air of arrogant disinterest.

“He was just a boy as far as I could tell.” Julius replied, his responses sounding more and more distant with each question. “He could have been my age. Maybe younger, but men bowed before him as though he was a god. They obeyed without question. We had no idea what was happening until it was too late.”

“A boy?” Regalius scowled. “I thought he was called the Skeleton King because he was one. That's what I've always heard.”

“That was the only time he appeared on a battlefield, or so they say.” Alina explained. “I've seen reports from most of the survivors, even they don't agree on what he looked like. I doubt he he wandered into the town and declared himself Skeleton King and started ruining the place.”

“You're right.” Said Julius “He didn't get that name until later. When he started sending the reanimated into battle instead of men. He was only the Skeleton King retroactively. I don't think even his closest minions know his true name. If they did they never spoke it.”

“How could you know that?” Regalius asked with a hint of accusation in his voice.

“I was guarding the shrine when he wandered into town.” Julius replied, emotionless. “The only person to actually face him in combat.”

“Nonsense!” Regalius exclaimed. “I don't believe a word of it!”

“No one ever does. That's why I quit telling the story.” For a moment Alina locked eyes with Julius. Deceit made no home there. Regret, perhaps, sadness... but not deceit.

“What did he want?” Alina asked.

“I think he thought our shrine held a weapon, but whatever secrets it kept they died with my family.” Julius explained. “I wasn't old enough to learn them. He had already killed most of the town before he thought to ask anyone what you were supposed to activate the shrine... and I didn't know. He beat me nearly to death trying to get me to tell him, but I couldn't.”

“I've been to that shrine.” Alina said. “The alter is still there, intact.”

“Yep... I still don't know how to open the damn thing.”

His words hung there for a moment. The sincerity of his replies making even Regalius rethink his beliefs. The person known as the Skeleton King had become legend in the few short years since he had appeared. His bloody hand reaching into the lives of every person on the continent and a few beyond. His origins were unknown, his motives, virtually everything about him was a mystery. The only widely known truth was that he gave battle to every nation and gave it freely and well. Every altercation

increased the size of his forces as the defeated warriors simply got up and followed him away. He was lord of purification. Many people had claimed to have seen him, but there was no way to prove it. Being alive was as much as anyone needed to suspect a lie. And yet... the words Julius spoke rang with the sound of someone burdened with the truth.

“There was nothing for me there. It was as though he meant to grind the memory of the town from the soil.” Julius continued when no one else moved to fill the silence. “Except he couldn't destroy the shrine. Not the altar at least. But it's a useless to me as to he. So I moved on.”

The others looked at one another. Even the oppressive darkness seemed pushed away by their racing thoughts.

“It still... seems hard to believe.” Regalius offered.

“Indeed.” Julius replied. Regalius suddenly found it hard to meet Julius's gaze.

“I've heard enough of this nonsense.” He stated shakily. “I'm going to sleep.”

Somehow the girls knew that the evening's conversation was over. With a little idle chit chat they made ready for sleep. Being mindful to keep combat essentials on hand. Julius made no move. His gaze was fixed someplace beyond the torchlight, beyond the walls, and it remained there long after Niona put out the light.

None of them could be sure if it was actually morning when they woke. Alina had simply risen, lit a torch, and the others followed. What rest they each had was not quality, but it was a full measure of it. When all was ready Julius carefully released the chamber lock and moved cautiously outside. The pale light was only slightly less bright than the torchlight, but it bathed the walls evenly, unceasingly. Dread seemed to hang over them all as they moved still deeper into the temple.

They were 11 levels down by Julius's reckoning. Now past the most detailed portions of the map. Things were beginning to no longer sync between their reality and the parchment. Soon they would be moving blind. The floors had been becoming more complex and maze like the further they went and number 12 was the worst yet. Even as Julius and Niona attempted to construct a more complete map it seemed as though the walls were shifting. Perhaps this was the fate of the original team. Lost in a still worse floor, no opposition besides starvation and navigation. Julius wondered if the others had considered this. In his opinion a death in battle would be a mercy compared to wandering endlessly until your body gave out.

It seemed like hours before they found the stairs to the next floor, but it was hard to tell time properly. Neither Niona or Julius were satisfied with the accuracy of their map, but going back now didn't seem like a better option than going forward. The four of them descended again, but instead of another open room they found massive doors. Much higher than the ceilings of the previous floors. After they were checked for traps Alina swung the perfectly balanced doors apart. They swung silently, as though they were untouched by time or decay.

The room that spread out before them was unlike any they'd encountered so far. It was vast, empty, and stone pillars were placed at widely spaced, but even intervals. It was lit with the same eerie light, but only in a band around the pillars, and even then only a few at a time. The room seemed to know where they were and adjusted the light accordingly. It was like looking into a dark, stone, forest.

Blackness filled in beyond the limit of the light, making it seem as though the room spread out forever. The doors closed so quietly behind them that they didn't even realize they were trapped until they heard the sound of many somethings clattering closer and closer.

Instinctively they readied themselves. Julius ran his hands quickly around the edges of the door looking for some kind of release mechanism. There seemed to be an indication running along the right side of the door, into the darkness. He decided to gamble on this chance.

“This way!” He said urgently. “Keep them off me if you can!” Even as the group began moving laterally into the room a desiccated figure shambled into the unnatural glow that followed them. No one was surprised. The skeletal warrior, dressed in dusty armor, was followed by another, and another. Each one was dressed after the same manner as the first. As they stepped further into the lit circle they seemed to become more focused, aware of what was in front of them. Their jaws mouthed silent warnings at the group, their hands gesturing at them as if giving instructions.

Julius was nearly running along the wall now. A smaller bubble of light began breaking off to follow him. The others couldn't keep up and keep an eye on the slow moving threat. He was too focused on opening the door, panic was beginning to take hold. He didn't notice the pile of bones and metal in his path until he was sprawled on the cold, stone, floor. Several feet away he heard Regalius beginning to play his song of fire. The others had been attacked in earnest now and he had gotten himself separated. Julius righted himself as quickly as he could. There were several piles of soldier scattered around the area he could now see, and the one he tripped over was beginning to stir. He recognized an arm bone and brought his heel down as hard as he could. It splintered into a two halves. He did the same with the forearm of the other side, but only split one bone. As the figure stood its hand lost hold of its weapon and hung there lamely. Julius watched in horrified fascination as the skeleton cast its empty eye sockets over its mangled limbs. Its mouth silently uttering curses. This was not normal even for a reanimated soldier. After a few moments of what appeared to be panting and sobbing the crippled thing noticed its attacker. Julius thought for a moment he could hear screaming from someplace very far away. HIM! IT WAS HIM! Julius was almost totally lost in the grim spectacle, but he became aware in his periphery of other figures heeding the call of their comrade.

A short distance away the others were beginning to spread out as they were forced to parry more and more attackers. Regalius had switched to fighting outright as the others could barely keep themselves safe, let alone cover him as he played. He was still attempting to cast verbal spells but the onslaught was too much to concentrate through. More attackers were beginning to fill in the gaps between them.

“Don't let them separate us!” Alina called out, and the others began trying to regroup as best they could.

“These things are organized!” Cried Niona. “They're not supposed to be like this!”

“This is powerful magic! I've never seen the equal of it!” Regalius replied. “It's like they don't know they're dead!”

“It doesn't matter!” Yelled Alina, swinging her mace with thunderous force through a cluster of enemies. “They still crumble if you hit them hard enough!”

Alina was wiping sections of their attackers away with every arc of her mace but the ones who weren't disabled simply rose again and resumed their charge. The pillars were making it hard to get

enough room to close ranks. Both Niona and Alina required a fair bit of space to fight effectively and the skeletal warriors seemed bent on filling in where they moved apart. Julius began deftly weaving through the crowd, attempting to rejoin the group for a proper defense. After a few close calls he was close enough to Regalius to keep him covered. Without needing to be told Regalius began to play again. The tune somehow reminded Julius of the mountains. It was resonating through him somehow. He didn't feel as tired or afraid now. As another attack came he parried it effortlessly and the boney arm holding the offending weapon shattered when their blades touched. He chanced a look around and saw Niona's spear gliding through skeletons as easily as it might move through air. A cloud of splintered bone erupted in front of her and empty armor clattered to the floor. The tide had turned.

“We need to move that way!” he called out, motioning in the direction Alina was fighting. Her blows were so destructive now the pillars near her were shaking and beginning to crack. The bands the cast the eerie glow appeared to be oozing whatever it was that caused their illumination. Then, suddenly, Alina lost her footing. Her swing went wild and she struck a pillar full on. It exploded like a pile of sand. The force of the error caused Alina to be blown from the point of impact as well as throwing Regalius into Julius. Niona rushed over to help them up. As soon as Julius found his feet he sprinted towards Alina's crumpled form, hoping the undead were as confounded by the situation as they were. He nearly pitched onto the floor too as his boot slid on a greasy spot. A trap of some sort? If so it had been effective. He tried to gather her weapon, but it was beyond his strength to lift it. How the Hell could she swing this thing!?! With no time to deal with that he scooped up Alina and rushed back to the others to regroup. As he moved he noticed the scent of decay coming from someplace. It was out of place in this dusty chamber, wet and festering rather than dry and gritty.

“Did we win?” Asked Alina, looking up at him.

“It's a work in progress.” he replied, relieved that she wasn't unconscious. “Can you stand?”

“Yeah, I'm good.” She said, shaking off her stupor. “Where's my mace?” Julius grimaced and pointed at the wall of enemies closing in behind them. “Fantastinc...” She drolled.

Niona and Regalius were sorted, but his fiddle had been destroyed in the fall. He was whistling the tune from before while rummaging around in his pack. Niona seemed to be the only one benefiting from it, but it was enough to keep the hoard in front of her at bay.

“I need that mace.” Alina said to no one in particular.

“Well, we have to go through them to get it” Julius replied. She looked around as he offered her one of his daggers. Pushing it aside she selected a chunk of pillar, or ceiling, said a prayer he couldn't make out, and threw it with such force it passed through several bewildered skeletons who fell to pieces.

“Come on then.” She replied, hefting another stone.

The group began working it's way back to the shattered pillar's base. It was only a few feet, but the enemies seemed to have redoubled their efforts. It also seemed to be getting brighter. As they closed the space between Alina and her weapon Julius understood why. The glowing substance was oozing out of the mangled structure in spurts. It was rhythmic, like watching something bleed. A glowing pool was spreading out across the floor. Somehow they all knew it would be very bad to touch it.

Alina barely managed to gather her mace before it was overtaken by the expanding puddle.

“We need to get away from that.” She said urgently.

Julius made to follow her but stopped when Niona and Regalius didn't follow. His gaze fell on Alina as she too saw whatever it was they were seeing. The color drained from her face and tears began to form in the corners of her eyes. He followed her line of sight. As the greenish light spread further around he saw 3 people standing, lit from below, as the ooze reached them.

They now knew the fate of the first party.

The danger was too great to let grief take the rest of the party. Julius jumped forward, placing himself between them and their fallen friends.

“We can't help them now!” He shouted. “Keep your wits about you or you'll share their fate! Keep moving away from the light!”

Even as he finished speaking one of the rotting comrades lunged forward, swinging a huge sword overhead at Julius. He reacted in time, but the force of the blow was far more than he expected. Legs crumpling like paper he was forced down to one knee. This husk was no longer held back by the frailty of life. In death he was no more formidable than ever before. The icy chill of mortal fear washed over Julius. Rather than try to parry another blow he rolled away, causing the next strike to connect with the stone floor.

The attacker's sword broke cleanly, nearly in half. He seemed taken aback by this and made the motions of cursing, which caused fetid blood to burp out of his mouth. This seemed to confuse him and Julius took the chance to make a break for it. By comparison the entire hoard of dry bones were less dangerous than these freshly dead.

Still obviously horrified at this turn of events the others followed, batting aside attacks in a bid to put distance between themselves and their massacred friends. They charged headlong into the retreating darkness. More skeletal soldiers slowly rising to undeath as they ran. Suddenly Julius understood, and the other seemed to catch on as well. Niona voiced what they were all realizing.

“It's the light.” She gasped. “Where ever we move it wakes them up...”

“We need to stand our ground,” Alina said. “Finish off what we've woken up, then move on. It's the only way to cross the room.”

“I- I think it might be too late.” Regalius observed. “We've activated too many. I don't think I can keep fighting this hard.”

The sound of clattering armor was closing in all around them. Somewhere in the deeper darkness the guttural moans of their unfortunate friends were also coming closer. For a moment Julius considered leaving them behind. He could probably get past the chamber door if he made a mad dash for it. Who were these people to him anyway? What did he owe them?

“Everyone get behind me.” Came Alina's voice, clear and determined. “Niona, on my right. Julius to my left. Regalius, make a wall of that pillar. Cast whatever you think will aid us best.”

He owed that woman his life at least, and there was a good chance he owed that much to the other as well. He took a small stone from his pouch.

“Can you cast a light spell?” He said turning to Regalius.

“Of course I can.” He replied “But we have light. Why would-”

“I need real light, as bright as you can make it for as long as you can make it! Can you do it?” The urgency in his voice seemed to convince Regalius. He pointed a pinger at the ceiling.

“Everyone, cover your eyes!” He shouted. They all complied and a burst of brilliant, white, light exploded above them. Julius turned away, holding the little stone up to his mouth.

“Twig, if you're listening I need help.” He spoke urgently to the little rock. “I'm seriously about to die here.” With that the little stone began to glow faintly blue in the darkness of his shadow. Julius let go of it and it hung in the air. A voice drifted out of it.

“Master, I obey your call.”

With that a small, female, figure rose from his shadow as if it was water. It's hand closed around the glowing pebble. She looked as though made of shadow itself, but wasn't dissipated by light. Regalius gaped.

“What have you summoned?” He asked shakily. The figure of shadow turned towards him and laughed in a very unsettling way.

“You'll see soon enough, elf...” She replied, though her voice seemed to whisper from his own shadow and echo in the darkness all around them. Julius turned slightly.

“Whatever you do, do not let that light fade out!” He commanded. Regalius nodded in stunned silence as the little shadow woman strode casually into the darkness.

Niona and Alina were keeping back the tide of bones as best they could, but their numbers were over whelming. For every one they took out another was right behind it to take its place. Then Niona noticed something strange. At the very edge of the circle of light a skeleton suddenly fell over, and she heard a little outburst of maniacal laughter. Then one fell backwards out of sight. Moments later a skull exploded into a cloud of dust, the decapitated form flailing around wildly before being taken down by other soldiers. A noticeable gap was forming in the ranks of oncoming foes and continued to grow. Whatever was taking them down was doing so with total impunity. It was as though the darkness itself had turned upon them, and was laughing at them.

Soon Regalius could keep his illumination spell going while also playing his rousing tune on a small wooden flute. It wasn't as effective as his violin had been but it was enough to keep the others going. The tide was slowly shifting in their favor again.

Of course they all knew it was only a matter of time before their lost teammates stepped out of the darkness and they would have to face them. In spite of this it was still a shock when it happened. The man with the broken sword crossed the distance between his rotting self and Alina in a few long strides. His attack vicious and resounding, but Alina stood as a stone stands against a wave. Strike upon strike

rained down on her too quickly to answer, but she held her ground. Julius kept lesser beings from causing her trouble, but wondered how long she could keep up her defense.

The other slain friends soon stepped out of the darkness as well and rounded upon Niona. One was a slender man dressed and armed in a manner similar to Alina, but pierced many times, the other a woman, possibly an elf, whose long hair had been hacked wildly, had a badly injured arm. It hung lamely, but still held a shield.

Julius decided to take up arms against the man. His speed would be a better match against the slow swing of the mace. Though brutal the swings lacked finesse and he avoided them easily. Niona had reach over the shield maided. One armed she couldn't properly defend against Niona's skill. She was soon literally disarmed. After a clumsy swing that shattered a large section of floor Julius was able to do the same to his opponent. Regalius bitterly chanted the strongest fire spell he knew and the pair were released from their torture.

A few more of the skeletal soldiers meandered into the circle, but no longer in numbers to vast to deal with. The party turned its attention to Alina, still holding her foe at bay, unable to gain an advantage. As they made ready to help the little shadow woman casually walked back into the light. While the big man continued to wail on Alina's mace she cut the legs from under him with no more effort than someone opening a letter. With no base the mountain crumbled. Alina stepped away, tears streaming down her face, as Regalius sent this poor soul to Valhalla as well.

The room was silent again apart from the weary panting of the party. Regalius slid down the pillar he was backed up against, exhausted. His light spell finally fading away. As it did the darkness seemed to melt away from the shadow girl leaving a beautiful, but very normal looking, dark skinned, human walking up to Julius. Her hair was short, black, with a streak of blonde in the front. Her clothes looked like Julius's might have if he wasn't so shabby, and liked wearing them skin tight. They were also mostly an immaculate shade of midnight blue.

“Did I please master?” She said sweetly embracing Julius in a somehow catlike way.

“Very much so.” He replied wearily. “But please don't do the master thing right now, okay?”

She rubbed face lovingly into his chest.

“Yes master...”

After a few lurid moments of cuddling Julius started wagging his arms around in an attempt to shake her off, which caused a fit of giggling little else. As casually as he could Julius half dragged Twig to another pillar and leaned on it nonchalantly. In spite of the horrors they had just faced the rest of the party all grinned at the spectacle.

“So...” He began in as cool a tone as he could muster. “This is Twig. An associate of mine.”

“What kind of a name is Twig?” Wheezed Regalius.

“Mine, elf!” Twig spat back, moving behind Julius to look at Regalius.

“It's a nickname I gave her.” Said Julius. “She... doesn't care for her real name, and I won't risk harm to my person by uttering it here.”

“How can someone that young shadowphase?” Regalius asked. “I've been studying it for years and I can barely go across a room. It's insanely difficult.”

Julius considered this for a moment. “I don't know actually.” He finally replied. “I can only go a little way myself, but after I showed Twig she just seemed to... get it.”

Regalius gaped. “You can do it too?”

“Yeah, not well. Not well... but I can do it a little” He replied. “Once or twice a day tops, and not very far. Twig can go... Well, I'm not exactly sure what her upper limit is. Miles for sure, and more than once a day for minutes at a time.” Twig beamed around at the group, basking in the clearly displayed awe.

“That's amazing...” Niona gasped. “Why didn't you bring her with you from the start?”

“Well,” Julius replied. “I hate to put her in danger, or wear her out with a bunch of questing. She's kind of my weapon of last resort.”

“Who's that one?” Twig asked quietly, pointing at Niona.

“Ah, sorry, yeah. That's Niona, she's a scholar. That's Regalius, he's a tone mage... and that's... Alina Redgrave.” Julius said, pointing to each one in turn. At the revelation of Alina's name Twig's eyes almost tore her face in half trying to widen wider than they'd ever been before. Before Alina could even speak Twig had crossed the distance between them and was all but groveling at her feet.

Twig couldn't seem to form words and she was nearly crying, but she managed to scabble around in a little pouch and produce a bright stone, like the one Julius summoned her with, and press it shakily into Alina's palm.

With that she sprinted back to Julius and buried her face in his chest again. He seemed almost as surprised as Alina.

“Uh... Twig says, should you ever need help, just speak clearly at the stone.” Julius instructed. “If it's in her power to help she'll defend your life to her last breath... Mistress.”

“This is an exquisite gift,” Alina replied, turning the little stone over in her fingers. “but I certainly haven't earned it. If anything I should be giving her something.”

“She was in the capital, at the battle of the gates.” Julius explained. “You can understand how... I mean...”

“It is a very rare event when someone repays that debt.” Nodded Alina solemnly. “Our accounts are balanced, Twig, but I'm afraid I can't bring myself to return your present. I'll have to owe you for a while now.”

Twig forced herself to look Alina in the eyes and nodded.

“She is wonderful, Master...” She said in a tone even Julius had trouble hearing. “As wonderful as you.”

“I was with her you know?” Complained Regalius, pulling himself to his feet. “We were in the same company. It's not like Alina did it all by herself you know.” He remembered himself for a moment and cast a quick glance at Alina, who had on the expression of someone who had heard this many times already.

“Not that she isn't the commander for a reason.” He continued carefully. “But no one ever gives me presents when they meet me. Or Niona for that matter.”

“I don't believe you, Elf!” Twig replied, casting an appraising eye towards Regalius. “You seem like a bad elf...”

“It's true, as hard as it is to believe sometimes... Regalius is a hero.” Alina chimed in. “I'd never've survived without he or Niona.”

Twig regarded Regalius for a long moment, slowly digging around in her bag, then violently whipped a stone at him. He caught it by luck as much as anything else because his hands were in front of his face when he sensed danger. In spite of the method of delivery he seemed genuinely pleased with his gift and even managed a believable thank you for it.

Twig offered Niona a stone by means of an upturned palm. She still seemed unwilling to let go of Julius, although she was holding on to his sleeve now, rather than his whole body. Niona's smile seemed to put Twig much more at ease. By the time she had risen and made the short trip to where Julius and Twig were standing Twig had even managed to release Julius and take a few steps away.

“You must have been 14 or 15 at the battle of the gates...” Niona said. “Had you already been studying combat?” Twig shook her head.

“My daddy was a soldier, but I was sposta to be a witch. Sometimes I watched the training though.” She explained.

“How extraordinary...” Said Niona, turning to Julius “And you taught her to shadowphase, with no real combat or magic training to speak of?”

“Yeah... It, uh... She does it like she was born to it.” He replied nervously. “She only has to see something a couple of times and she can copy it almost perfectly.”

Suddenly Niona made a complex gesture with her hands that ended with a shower of sparks erupting from her fingertips like a gun. Without speaking Twig copied the movements almost exactly, which resulted in a smaller, but significant, sparkle of her own.

“Astounding! How utterly fantastic!” Niona grinned. Julius seemed a little disturbed. Twig had already replicated Niona's cantrip perfectly and was well on her way to improving it.

“Yes, fantastic as always, Twig, but you probably shouldn't-” He said, making to stop Twig from already trying an eighth time. Unfortunately, before he could break her concentration, a tongue of blue flame was doing significant damage to the pillar Regalius was now scrambling away from like a cockroach. Twig was squealing with laughter at her new trick.

“Oh my goodness!” Exclaimed Niona. “I didn't-”

“Don't worry about it.” Julius replied, taking hold of Twig's hands. “It's just something you have to be careful about.” He addressed Twig sternly. “Not indoors. Not around people we know. Okay?”

“Yes master!” She replied cheerily.

“Why does she call you-” Niona started.

“I don't know where she got that. I never told her to. Mostly I think she does it to tease me.” Julius interjected, casting a glance at his incorrigible protege.

“Master is kind and wise. We love master.” Twig responded, causing Julius to go red and Niona to giggle.

“Well, listen...” He said, attempting to divert attention away from Twig's lurid pawing. “we know what happened to your friends now, and I'm very sorry for your loss. Should we gather their remains and leave or...?”

The others looked at one another. They each then separated and began adjusting the remains of their comrades. Useful items and remembrances were removed, then they were lined up in a tight row. Julius and Twig helped, trying to be as respectful as possible. Once things were set in a way that seemed to please the three old friends Alina stepped forward and began to sing a prayer. Niona came and stood with Julius and Twig. After a few bars Regalius began accompanying on his little flute. Twig began sobbing unashamedly and hugged Niona, who was weeping silently.

As they sang green flames engulfed the fallen and began to slowly shift to a bright blue, then to white. They all had to close their dark adapted eyes, but everyone present joined in the last chorus, as was traditional. They had each heard the song far too many times not to know it by broken heart. When the song was finished they opened their eyes and nothing remained of their friends.

“They wouldn't've wanted any more than a soldier's pyre.” Alina said above Twig's loud sniffles.

“So, what now?” asked Julius.

“You may leave, if it suits you. You have fulfilled the terms of our original agreement and more.” Alina replied. “I want to see how much further this place goes, and destroy it if I can.”

“There was also one last member of the original party...” Niona remarked sadly. “It would be a miracle if he survived...”

“We can't leave then.” Julius stated flatly.

“I'm glad to hear that, but you shouldn't feel obligated.” Alina smiled weakly.

“If the entire party isn't accounted for then I haven't completed the contract.” Julius stated. “I never leave a job unfinished.”

“Nor me!” Sniffled Twig.

“That pleases me to hear more than you know.” Replied Alina, placing a hand on Twig's shoulder. “If we press a little further maybe we can find a safe spot to rest.”

“And I, for one, don't fancy going any further in without an expert...” Proclaimed Regalius dryly.

As they made ready to move out Niona leaned in and hugged Julius and Twig and said a very sincere thanks.

Once again Julius led the way, but now fully aware of what the room had to offer they moved in tight formation so that only a very few enemies could rise at a time. As a team a handful skeletal fighters stood no chance against them. Slowly, carefully, Julius led them to the far side of the room. There wasn't even a door on this end. A few of the skeletons seemed to have tried walking into the next chamber, but whatever power made them mobile in their room seemed to fail them, leaving a few crumpled heaps in the doorway.

“I guess they never expected anyone to get this far.” Remarkd Alina.

“I can't say that was an unfounded expectation.” Replied Regalius, who was attempting to use the remains of his violin to craft a makeshift lute.

“We aren't the only people to have made it this far.” Julius interjected from a little ways ahead.

“We're not?” Niona gaped.

“There's tracks in the dust. Their already being covered up, but they're fresh enough to see” He replied.

The path seemed safe enough, and whoever had been there first had been running flat out by the looks of it. There were even drops of dried blood every few strides. This being the case Julius moved swiftly down the corridor. Eventually the trail terminated at a door not unlike the one they had used for shelter a few floors back.

“Can this be disengaged from outside?” Asked Alina.

“Possibly.” Replied Julius. “but it would be significantly more difficult. I think they were meant to be fail safes.”

“Maybe we can just knock?” Said Twig. Before anyone had a chance to protest she was tapping the stone with the butt of a dagger. “Hello!? Are you dead? Let us in if you're not!”

They all listened for a response.

“I'm not sure we'd be able to hear a reply.” Julius commented.

“I'll go in and look!” Twig exclaimed.

“No.” Said Julius. “I'll go. You can't open the door if it has some kind of lock.”

“She can't lockpick?” Asked Niona.

“It's not something you can learn by observation.” Replied Julius. “She can cover me though.” And with that he melted into Twig's shadow and then she into Niona's.

On the other side of the door the room was completely dark. While shadowside however Julius could see. He scanned the room quickly. With strangely muted eyes he could see a body curled up in a corner. There was evidence that they had been alive relatively recently, but they couldn't stay in the reverse realm long enough to check. As he shifted into the real darkness he felt Twig take hold of his arm. Fully blind, Julius slid his hand along the edge of the door. The mechanism was identical to the one in previous rooms. He disengaged the lock and the door swung easily open.

The strong greenish light flooded the room. Twig's somewhat unnerving shadow form melted back into her less imposing self.

“Is he alive?” Asked Regalius quietly.

“Not sure.” Replied Julius. “It's a really bad idea to startle someone who's cowering in a totally dark, totally sealed room. The shock alone could kill a person.”

“Fair point...” Mused Regalius. Alina stepped forward.

“Herrin?” She called kindly. “Herrin, are you alright?” The body didn't appear to respond. A note of heartbreak crept subtly into Alina's voice. “We came looking for you...”

Regalius flicked a ball of white light into the corner. It took a moment for their eyes to adjust, but Twig adapted fastest.

“He's breathing.” She hissed. Alina motioned for Niona to prod him with her spear. As gently as she could Niona complied. As soon as the cold butt of the rod touched him Herrin sprang to life in a flurry of screaming and swinging. Everyone was startled by it and scattered in various directions away from him. Twig disappeared entirely as far as everyone could tell.

Backed into the corner Herrin was covering his eyes and brandishing a broken sword. It was still dangerous enough that no one dared approach.

“come on, you bastards!” He yelled. “I still have some fight left in me!”

Nobody moved.

“Herrin, it's me, Commander Alina.” She said slowly. “Regalius, Niona, and I came looking for you.”

“I don't believe you... This place whispers... in the darkness.” He said shakily. “You're using my mind against me!”

“Honestly, it's us!” Niona pleaded. “Put down the sword.”

“No! You're figments!” He replied waving the broken blade less forcefully than before.

“How can we prove who we are?” Regalius said tugging Julius casually towards the door.

“Ask us something only we would know.” Suggested Alina.

“If you're a figment you'd know anything I would know you know, and if I didn't know I wouldn't know if you were right or not!” Herrin sputtered.

“That's the most logical thing, presented in the craziest way, that I've ever heard.” Julius quipped.

Alina cast him a withering look. “Okay... fair enough.” She continued. “What can we do to prove who we are?”

“I don't... Let me think...” He replied.

Now outside the room Regalius whispered to Julius. “Can you... shadowphase behind him, or something?”

“I don't think so.” He replied. “Getting in the room was about my limit. Even then I don't know how I'd be able to incapacitate him. He's still strong enough to get a good strike in with that blade by the look of him. Can you put him to sleep?”

“He's trained to resist. We all are.” Regalius said, peering around the door.

“Wait... I think I have an idea.” Exclaimed Julius, stepping back into the room, and whispering something to Niona.

“Herrin,” She said soothingly. “My spear is unique in all the world. Even if I was some kind of shape shifter I couldn't replicate it, right?”

“Right...” He replied slowly.

“Here then!” She said tossing it onto the floor. “You could plant it right into that stone without harming it. If it's fake it will blunt like any common weapon!”

Herrin eyed the spear cautiously. Slowly he reached out and tapped it, then grasped it and used it to stand. His eyes darted from the spear to the party and back as he steadied himself. He touched the clear tip of the weapon, mumbling. Then, suddenly, and with speed shocking for someone looking so haggard, he plunged the blade into the stone floor. A high pitched screech came from the stone and sparks erupted as he sank it the short distance to the staff. Then, as easily as pulling it from sand, he retracted the spear again.

“Only one in the world...” He said, sliding down the wall again. Tears forming in his eyes, but relieved laughter following his words.

Tension finally broken, the reunited friends rushed Herrin. Julius could hear the sounds of hugs, laughter, and tears as he walked out of the room and began looking for Twig.

A little way down the hall he found her carefully slinking back towards the others.

“Got spooked, huh?” He smiled.

“A little.” She replied sheepishly.

“You know, it really throws off your sexy cat persona when you scramble away from danger.” He laughed.

“It does not!” She groused. “Cats do that all the time. It's very catlike to spaz out and run off.”

Julius opened his mouth to rebut, then closed it.

“Fair point.” He admitted. “Did you go far?”

“No... just down there a little.” She said, pointing back the way she had come. “It's not good over there. I phased in and walked back because it feels gross.”

While her explanation was not technical it was accurate. Julius could feel it too. Even in the short moment he'd been passing under the door. They had to be near the source of whatever powered the ruins. Whatever it was gave off a repellant aura even more pronounced in the shadow plain.

They walked back into the room where Herrin had been hiding. He was not as tall as Julius, but stoutly made and darker skinned. A mop of wild black curls capped his head, and he looked to be a paladin in the same manner as Alina. Still clearly shaken and in a bad way, being found by friends had done a lot of good. He was able to recount the tragic tale of his party and how he had escaped, by sheer luck, into the deeper part of the temple. His injuries had made it impossible to fight his way back across the skeleton room, and this section was sealed off from whatever was next. There was no choice but to wait for rescue, which he actually could have waited for even longer. Julius suspected that madness might have claimed him before then though, and the thought of staying down here for much longer gnawed at him.

“Can you take him to the surface Twig?” Asked Regalius. “Being down here so long... Seems detrimental.”

“I don't think so... maybe.” Twig frowned. “It's long, and I've done it a lot.”

“I'd rather she not risk it.” Said Julius sternly. “We could lose them both.” There was a tone of finality in his voice that seemed to settle the matter.

“He's well enough now to come with us.” Said Alina. “Just keep to the center and try not to strain yourself.” She said patting Herrin on the shoulder. Herrin nodded enthusiastically.

“I want to get to the end of this place and get out as soon as we can.” She continued. “It's already likely to take us a day to get out, even though we have a clear map now.”

“We should rest for a few hours at least.” Niona signed. “I don't think I can keep going like this if there's more fighting to be done.” Everyone nodded in silent agreement. They had another miserable cold meal and settled down for a few hours of restless sleep.

It wasn't clear how long he had been asleep, but Julius was suddenly wide awake in the darkness. He could hear the others breathing. Twig was snuggled up to him and he could feel her strangely relaxed breaths on his shoulder. He carefully extracted himself from her and stood. The complete blankness of the room was unnerving. Above the sound of sleep there seemed to be the faint echo of people talking a great distance away, and a slow, heavy, rhythmic, movement of air. He needed light. Even if it was

creepy and green.

Compared to his movements the snoring and whatnot seemed like the crashing of thunder. Maybe it was his imagination, but he didn't even feel the need to mask his steps. He opened the door and sickly light arced inside in a clear beam. He made to shut the door, but almost screamed as a hand stayed his own. Alina's hand.

"I can't be in there anymore." She whispered. Panic subsiding, Julius let her step into the corridor with him. The door remained slightly ajar as it was meant to be sealed from inside. "Where are you going?"

"I can't take being in there either." He whispered in response. He made a motion for her to follow and they began slowly walking along the long hall. Once they were a fair distance away Alina spoke again.

"You've been invaluable on this expedition." She began. "I don't really... Praise isn't something I'm good with..."

"Well, I'm not used to getting it, so maybe we can take it as read that you appreciate my work and leave it at that?" He replied.

Alina smiled and nodded.

Not wanting to stray too far from the party, Julius slid himself down the wall and Alina did likewise. They sat there in silence for a long while before either spoke again. Alina seemed lost in thought and Julius chanced a good, long look at her. He could hardly believe she was just a human woman. One with martial prowess that far exceeded that of most, but still. He might have crossed her path in the street and never noticed. Well, no... Not with that hair. He would have noticed, but not had an inkling of her astounding skills. He remained lost in this reverie until a moment after Alina had noticed him gazing at her in apparent wonder.

"Still a little awed by my presence?" She asked, blushing in spite of years of this sort of attention.

"Uh, yes!" Julius spurted, whipping his gaze away in embarrassment. "You are easily as awe inspiring in person as on a poster."

"Do you... actually have one?" She asked slyly. "One of those silly propaganda posters?"

His face had already answered, but not being aware of this he replied anyway. "I... might have taken one. For... decorative purposes."

"You aren't alone." She laughed. "Every new group of trainees comes in with a few boys... and some girls... who hang them by their beds."

"That honestly doesn't make me feel much better." He admitted.

"No? Well, you're a big boy. You'll get over it." She teased.

"It must be annoying." He said. "Going through this every time you meet someone new."

"Not exactly annoying, but I miss being a nobody sometimes." She replied. "I've never really felt

like that woman in the posters. I understand their purpose, but they look like someone I don't know to me too. I only ever meant to be a medic, you know? And I certainly wasn't supposed to be at the gate that day. Our commander fled when the line broke. We were in a complete rout. When we saw the elite guard overrun I decided I'd rather die fighting than with an arrow in my back. When I stopped running so did Niona and Regalius. I picked up a mace and prayed that our sacrifice might allow others to escape."

"That's not the story they told us." Said Julius.

"I know. They always made it out like I was something more than just a terrified healer. As arrogant as he can be Regalius has every right to be angry when people only credit me for saving the city. If he hadn't been there, if they all hadn't been with me, I wouldn't be here now. But that was not the story the council wanted told. And honestly I think the others count it as a blessing, even Regalius, in spite of his protests. It is very... vexing... being a living legend sometimes."

"I'll have to teach you the art of not being seen." Julius smiled.

"I would like that very much." Grinned Alina. "But from what Niona tells me I'd be better off letting your cat teach me"

"Yes, in that case the student has surpassed the master..." He sighed with a smile.

"What is she to you?" Asked Alina.

"Family." Julius replied. "Having lost our originals we made our own."

"So, how did you come to find her?"

"As I'm sure you're aware," He began. "There are settlements all around the wall of the capital. Really just the city spilling out of its border. I was an apprentice to a locksmith. While the master was out on more complicated jobs I took care of day to day problems. On the day of the siege I was on the very outskirts, installing locks for a new shop. A weaponsmith named Burns was the client. He was an ex soldier. Nearly seventy, but built like an oak. He pestered me all day with small talk. I think he was nervous about starting a new business. Just talking to hear himself talk. I listened to his whole life story. Really it was the story of his whole family. Right down to his granddaughter who was studying magic. If it had been any other day I wouldn't even be able to tell you what he looked like now... but it's all burned into my memory.

I was trying my hardest to escape when his wife and granddaughter came running up the street. It was only then that I noticed the plumes of smoke starting to rise all around us. The alarm bells began to sound and the amplified voices of guards told everyone to make for the gates as quickly as they could. I turned to run, but the old soldier put his hand on my shoulder. 'You'll be safer with us.' he said. I stood there for a few moments with his granddaughter while he and his wife armed themselves. That was the first time I met Twig. Standing there as chaos closed in around us."

"I was standing in a training room when the first alarms came in." Offered Alina. "We were the advanced class. 'Those who have shown exceptional skills in combat situations.' I hated it. I only joined because I had a blazing row with my parents, but once you're in, you're in. The fact that I was exceptional at something I hated made it so much worse. I started as a healer. That's it. No combat classes at all."

“How did you learn to fight?” Julius asked.

“Niona needed extra sparring time once we got into the advance group.” Alina replied. “Basically all I was doing was reading books with occasional field tests. So I was getting really... plump. It's good to be like that as a healer, so you have some extra reserves to draw from, but you have to balance it with being fit enough to move with a team. I was starting to tip the scales. It comes so naturally to me I didn't have to try... So I volunteered to help Niona. I actually know all kinds of fighting styles because of it. Not well enough to have mastered them, but I can make due if the situation calls for it. I only favor the mace because I have some kind of affinity for it.”

“You certainly use one more effectively than anyone else I've seen.”

“Heal with one hand harm with the other... but I interrupted you. Please, what happened next?”

“Oh, uh, well Burns was only gone for a moment. When he emerged from the shop he was fully armored and ready. As was his wife, though after the fashion of a mage. He gave me bastard sword and Twig a rapier. I had my daggers, but he had told me earlier he didn't care for the look of them. Which is fine, but I couldn't use a proper sword to save my life at the time. Twig however held hers as if she'd been using them her entire life. And that was it, we ran for the gate like maniacs. Of course so was everyone else by that time, so the streets were choked with people. They were doing as much harm to each other as the invaders. Crazy panic had taken hold. Which exploded when the skeleton army caught up. It was bedlam. We were stood there between the insane mob trying to escape and a relentless army of the dead.”

“How did you survive?”

“We ran along the rooftops. Burns smashed in a door and told me to run along the roofs to the gate. He said he couldn't make the jumps. He told Twig to watch me and do exactly as I did. Then he took me by the shoulders, looked me right in the eyes, and said 'Protect her.' So I did. We sprinted across the tightly clustered building, avoiding fires, until we were nearly to the gate.”

“But the buildings spread out towards the market circle...”

“Exactly. We couldn't cross to the gate once we got there. And we weren't alone other people had the same idea as us, but we were all stranded above a lake of destruction. We watched the elite guard fall and were sure it was over for us. Once the fighting stopped in front of the fountain they turned toward the buildings and started torching the ones with people on. I had no idea what to do. I was even worse at shadow walking then, so that was out. I was at the point of suggesting a suicide charge, just so we could go out on our feet, when the far side of the plaza exploded.”

“It was us...”

“It was. The multitudes pivoted to see what had caused the commotion and woman strode out of the dust. A wild mane of red hair blazed against the backdrop of gray smoke. She raised her club and brought it down with such thunderous fury that the very ground roiled and shattered like glass. Before the dust had settled again I watched her come rampaging out of the cloud. Every wide arc sweeping aside attackers as easily as one might sweep a floor.”

“Everyone else was lost in those ridiculous clouds I kicked up. They were backing me the entire time.” Alina said almost apologetically, her face completely pink.

“Well, in the confusion you caused, I chanced a run for it. Compared to you we were so minor a threat we barely encountered any resistance. We sprinted through the alleys to the wall, then made a mad dash for the gate. Of course it was sealed, but I gambled that I could shift through the crack with Twig. The guards inside were stunned when I fell onto the ground out of nowhere, nearly dead, with a young girl clinging to me for dear life.”

“So you managed to shift through the gate with another person? That's impressive.”

“Only just, like I said I nearly died in the attempt, but it was a better chance than standing there waiting for a near certain death. Several people who followed us were overwhelmed in spite of you turning back the tide.”

“I couldn't save them all. If I moved that way there was a risk I might accidentally bring down the doors. They'd already declared the outer settlements lost before we got there.” The apologetic tone had crept back into her words.

“You don't need to explain it to me.” Julius replied. “The needs of the many and all that... We got lucky, they didn't. Nobody wanted it to be that way. It just was.”

Alina nodded solemnly.

“I woke up a few days later in a hospital. Twig was curled up in the bed with me. They told me she went totally feral if they tried to separate us, so they just let her stay. I didn't know it at the time, but her father and mother were with elite guard when they fell. She had already tried to contact her grandparents. Her grandmother invented those little stones she uses to talk over distance. But when she made an attempt the stone just fell to the floor. So... Since I agreed to protect her, and there was no one left to end the contract, I remain her protector.”

“That's so sweet...” Alina cooed in a tone Julius was surprised by. “You've been raising her all this time?”

“It's not like that really.” Julius said nervously. “She was already a teenager when we got thrown together. I'm only 5 years older than her. We kind of... raised each other in a way.”

“Are you two...” Alina began with a raised eyebrow.

“No! No, we've never been that.” Julius cut across her. “Contrary to how she acts around me she's more like a sister. A really weird sister, but also my best friend kind of.”

“Well it's sweet all the same. That day ruined a lot of lives. It's always nice to hear about people who came through okay. I always wished I could have done more... Got there sooner.”

“You saved an entire city of people. That should be enough for anyone.”

Alina opened her mouth as if to offer an argument, then paused. Her face softened.

“You're welcome, and thank you.” She said after a moment. “I'm glad you got over being amazed by me. So we can talk like regular people.”

“Oh no, I'm still in total awe of you. I'm just an incredible actor.” He grinned.

“I appreciate the effort more than you know.” She said, rising then helping Julius to his feet. “Let's see if the others are awake. I'm getting to a point where I can't stand being down here much longer...”

Back at the camp the others were beginning to stir. Alina opened the door wide, allowing the green hued light to penetrate the room. No one looked very pleased with the situation. Herrin seemed to be the least affected having, doubtlessly, been sleeping much of the time he had been trapped. He scuttled over to the supplies and busied himself with helping Alina prepare some food.

In spite of everything they'd experienced Niona woke up smiling, which offset Regalius's sour mood. He set himself apart from the group, with a little pile of the remains of his violin, and began to tinker. His mumbled curses punctuated with the sounds of whittling.

Twig woke up looking horrified that Julius wasn't near her, but managed a save once she realized that he was in the room. After that she began warily observing Regalius's machinations, her observation eventually evolving into wide eyed staring, which he took no obvious notice of.

“Herrin,” Julius began. “Did you do any exploring while you were alone?”

“A little,” He replied. “but it was hard to go far with my injuries, and I don't know traps. All of the rooms near here are empty as far as I could tell, but I didn't go in any. I only used this one because I knew it was safe.”

“I'm still not convinced that going forward is the best idea.” Julius offered. Everyone looked at each other. “Do we have enough supplies to make it back?”

Niona poked around in the bags for a moment. “Well, we've added two members, but Herrin had most of his party's supplies... So we can make it back with a couple of days to spare. As long as we're careful.”

“I don't intend to order anyone to go forward who thinks it's a bad idea.” said Alina, “What say you all?” No one spoke for a long while.

“That's good enough for me then.” Julius broke in. “As long as we're still prepared.”

The group nodded and mumbled in agreement then settled down for another disappointing meal. By the time they had finished Regalius had a rudimentary string instrument that made weedy notes when played, but were recognizable as music. He even chanced a little of his enervating song to help everyone recover from the fitful hours of sleep they had all suffered through.

The gears was divided between everyone except Twig, who all agreed was potentially more useful unencumbered by anything apart from her normal gear. Alina took half of what would have been allocated to Herrin as she wasn't convinced he was well enough for an overloaded pack. Thus prepared they set off down the dusty corridor again. Several rooms from Herrins safehouse the encountered a

sealed gate. It had no obvious signs of mechanism. Indeed the only reason they knew it was a door was because it was at the end of a hall and seemed to be split down the middle. It was a long while before Julius found something that appeared to be a safety release, and longer still before he deciphered how to activate it. The effect it had on the team was noticeably disheartening. Fortunately after a few adjustments were made to one of Regalius's flutes Julius had a makeshift key which caused the doors to glide apart as though they were floating. As a precaution Julius wedged a butter knife into the seam to keep the doors from properly closing, and possibly trapping them. The victory over the door was short lived however. What lay beyond was the most mazelike portion of the temple so far. Dead ends, required backtracking, eating up time they all were beginning to feel they didn't have. A feeling of omnipresent malignance seemed to be increasing the further they went. The rooms that had previously been unoccupied now had groups of human remains in them. Some of them seemed serene in their repose, while others appeared to have died in torment. The mounting sense of mortal peril was on the verge of overcoming them all.

Several hours passed before they finally found another gate. Unlike the previous one this seemed to be the focal point for the lighting system. Many small tubes, like the ones that lined every wall but much thinner, were woven together and connected to the walls on either side of the door. The light they gave off was more like actual light than anyplace else. The sickly green hue not nearly as evident. "This has to be it..." Said Niona.

"If it isn't it's certainly putting on a good show." Replied Julius. "You'd best all keep back until I've figured this one out."

Julius inspected the door for several long minutes before finally stepping back.

"This has been tampered with." He said gravely. "Someone was here before us."

"Are you sure?" Asked Alina. "How can you tell?"

"Someone's put a magical barrier on it, but it doesn't match the style of the other doors. Not even close." He replied. "It's necromantic at least. Possibly demonic. I don't know magic well enough to make that call."

"Can you dispel it?" Inquired Herrin.

"Not on my best day." Said Julius shaking his head. "A real magic user will have to do it, and I'm pretty sure it's rigged to do something to anyone who tries."

Everyone was silent for a moment.

"I think I can open a hole in the enchantment." Alina said, breaking the silence. "How fast can you open the door if I do?"

"If it's on par with the last one it could take an hour or longer." Julius grimaced.

"Well, we should at least try." Said Alina, rolling back her right sleeve. "Regalius, back me up. Herrin, you help as much as you can."

"Right" They said in unison.

Stepping forward Alina began to chant in a low, measured, tone. Holding her palm forward she seemed to push on the air between the door and her hand. Regalius began to play in time with the chant. After a few rounds Herring composed himself and joined in. A point of clear light formed in the center of the door. It slowly expanded out from that point. The white marble of the door was now, perhaps for the first time in centuries, being seen as it was the day it was quarried. As soon as the field of resistance was large enough Julius began carefully, but hurriedly, examining the door. There were a series of buttons, and rotating tumblers, in the center of each side of the door. No clues at all. No surviving records. He would have to try it by ear and hope for the best. Centering himself Julius placed an ear to the cold stone and blocked the chanting from his other ear with a finger.

Click click click THUNK! No good. A reset.

Click THUNK!

Click click THUNK!

Over and over, the muted sound of prayer penetrating his head, Julius methodically deciphered the lock.

After about half an hour he stepped away from the door.

“You can rest for a while.” He said. “Niona, I need a bit of paper if you have any to spare.”

The others slowly reduced their chanting to silence. The unnatural light reestablishing itself all around. While they rested and ate Julius scribbled furiously on a few bits of parchment Niona had presented. After another hour or so he slapped his hands down.

“I've got it!” He exclaimed. “Push back the curse as quick as you can. I'm not sure how long I can keep this memorized.”

Hurriedly the others renewed their chanting. Julius was at work as soon as there was space enough to get to the mechanism. His hands mirroring each other on either side of the divide. In a few short moments the door let out a metallic THUNK and slid itself open. Julius quickly went through, scanned for traps and motioned everyone in. Niona and Twig went first then the others while they continued their chanting. They slowly subsided again and turned to look into the high ceiling chamber.

“It looks like the steam tunnels, under the capital.” Niona gaped.

“Combined with a nightmare.” Added Regalius, and he wasn't exaggerating. In addition to the tubes of glowing liquid there were holding containers filled with the toxic substance and the petrified remains of what must have been humans at one time, long ago. They stared, blank faced and warped, out at nothing in particular. Slowly though, the cloudy eyes began rotating, necks began craning, and these trapped persons appeared to become aware of them.

The party stood as if rooted. This strange green fluid coursed through the entire structure like blood, save for a few rooms. Now they stood at the heart of the thing and hundreds, if not thousands of souls appeared to be the source of the power. The piping itself seemed to make no sound though evidence of rhythmic flow was evident. Further in however the barely audible breathing that seemed to fill the entire structure was obviously real, and the whispering that one thought imaginary, when laying in the

dark, was a clear and constant muttering.

“What in the world is up with this place...” Julius rasped.

“If anyone else ever made it here and back I never found their books.” Niona replied. “and not for lack of trying. The stuff I brought is literally all I ever found and, as you know, it's grievously incomplete.”

“We need to do what we came here to do and get out. As fast as humanly possible.” Alina declared.

The group agreed quickly and Julius was soon briskly trotting ahead to check for other traps. As they moved more gaunt faces turned to observe them and words began to become more clear in the continual muttering. Julius did his best to keep focused on his job. There was evidence of activity that hadn't been obliterated by dust. Organized activity. Perpetrated by far more people than they had thought to bring. Piping of a type more in keeping with what was commonly used had been added here and there. Someone had been tampering with whatever this place was meant to be, or do.

Eventually the hall opened up into a domed room where all the piping terminated. This now was the true heart of the structure. It was far more corrupted by the alien piping, which ran all around and at random angles.

Alina finally said aloud what they all knew. “Necromancy...”

“On a scale not seen for ages.” Niona added. “Perhaps never before or since.”

The native pipes ran like a spider web to a massive vat in the center of the room. It seemed to be gently pumping the fluid out, throughout, and back in to itself. Although hidden the mechanism was partially visible here and there around the room. Vague shadows seemed to be wandering formlessly. The additional piping also terminated at the center, but at some kind of device. The specters seemed drawn to it, taking no notice of the intruders.

“Is everyone else seeing the ghosts?” Herrin asked.

“Yep.”

“Indeed.”

“Eeep!”

“Yes...”

“Definetly.”

“Good.” He continued. “I'm glad it's not just me.”

“Do you think they're corporeal?” Asked Niona.

“You mean can they hurt us?” Replied Julius.

“Yeah.”

“I'm not sure.” He continued. “It's so hard to tell with spectral things...”

“I think these are trapped souls.” Interjected Alina. “Or at the very least bound to this infernal mechanism. There's a good chance they have influence in our dimension.”

“Can you dispel them?” Twig asked shakily.

“I don't think so. Temporarily maybe, but they'd be drawn right back.” Alina answered. “We four know shield charms. We should be able to repel them as a group. Long enough to undo whatever this is anyway.”

“Twig and I know some as well...” Julius mentioned in passing.

“Excellent. We should be fine then. I'll generate a barrier for us all, if it looks like that won't be enough we each come in as needed according to ability.”

“Wait.” Julius interrupted. “Where do twig and I come in?”

“It's Me, Herrin, Regalius, Niona Twig, then you.” Alina explained.

“I'm last?” Julius sulked. “I studied as a temple guard...”

“Your protege, has already displayed more natural talent than any of us, apart from Regalius maybe, but as a team I'm more comfortable relying on known variables and tactics.” Alina replied testily.

“Still...” Julius mumbled.

“Really?!” Alina growled. “This is the thing you decide to argue about? In the bottom of a haunted temple!?”

“No, no!” Julius backpeddled. “I just felt a little slighted.”

“I can't even tell if you're being serious.”

“I'm kind of wishing I hadn't brought up the issue at this point.” Julius recoiled.

“In that we are agreed.” Alina replied, slugging Julius hard on the arm.

Julius summoned all of his will to stifle a scream. It was like being hit with a rock. Eyes watering, he moved ahead at Alina's direction. The group stepped into the room completely and slowly made for the center. Evidence of tampering became more and more apparent as they went. There was no way they could avoid all of the hazy specters so Julius elected to simply approach one. At first it didn't take any notice, but as they moved by it seemed to be deciding if it had actually seen anything. It was vaguely female. Its slim arm reached out as if to interact with them, but was halted by Alina's barrier. After a few moments a small band of the spirits were slowly following the team. A few even made to impede their progress, but simply fell away, unable to find purchase on anything.

Though apparently safe Twig was clinging to Julius as tightly as she could, while trying to seem cool in front of new people. She need not have worried however, as the ever increasing hoard of disembodied people was beginning to frighten everyone. Especially because the more spirits joined in the more the faint whispering that seemed to be everywhere sounded more like actual words.

The machine in the center of the chamber had clearly been tampered with brutally. Evidence of rough handling was everywhere. Discarded plating, pipes, screws, and all manner of tools littered the area. The workmanship was poor at best. The glowing liquid “blood” had formed scabs around places where the seals weren't tight enough. Corrosion was setting in in places. This had been done relatively recently, and the job was sloppy and amateurish. In spite of this the team was having a difficult time understanding what the machine was actually for and what the recent additions were meant to do.

“My best guess,” Said Niona. “Is this is some sort of battery, or maybe even an engine. I couldn't begin to tell you how it functions though. I know a little about machinery, but this is... something different. A combination of mechanics and magic perhaps?”

“Aren't they supposed to be opposing disciplines?” Asked Regalius.

“Generally speaking, yes.” She replied. “But sometimes opposing forces can be combined in productive ways. Like water and fire to make steam power.”

“So... it's magic and machinery to make... what, do you suppose?” Asked Julius. Everyone was silent.

“The original mechanism powered the temple obviously.” Offered Alina. “But I don't see whay they bothered. There's nothing here worth protecting. Not anymore anyway.”

“She's right. It doesn't make any sense.” Agreed Regalius. “Why go to the trouble?”

“It's possible that there was something here and the original creators moved it, or lost it. That's lost to history. There are huge blanks in the historical record between the silver age and the fall.” Answered Niona. “We may never know the point of any of this. I think dispatching a full archeological survey would be worthwhile to say the least.”

“Assuming we can make the area safe...” Added Alina.

“Indeed.” Said Niona.

“So we're back to square one.” said Julius. “We don't know the why of this place or the why or who of this tampering.”

“Someone with better historical data than we have for sure...” offered Niona.

“With people capable of getting here unharmed...” Added Regalius.

“Who has a superior knowledge of necromancy and mechanics...” muttered Julius.

“This is bad.” Alina growled. “We need to disable this somehow.”

“We can't.” Said Julius. “Not without killing ourselves in the process.”

“I think it might be a worthy sacrifice.” Replied Alina.

“That's totally insane!” Replied Julius. “Can you imagine what would happen to the morale of the people if we lost you? It would be a catastrophe!”

“You sound like the council!” Spat Alina.

“Well they aren't the council for no reason are they?” Julius retorted.

“They're a ridiculous gathering of cowards and thieves!” Shouted Alina. “I don't trust them any further than I could toss them.”

“I expect you could toss them a fair way actually!” Shouted Julius. “Damn it all, I can't believe I'm defending them... Throwing our lives away isn't going to help anything.”

“I KNOW THAT! I'M Just... sick of it all...” Alina replied, losing her thunder. “I want to get out of here. We need to leave this place. I don't feel right.”

“Seconded.” Exclaimed Regalius.

“Me too.” Said Herrin.

“I think it's safe to assume this place is toxic...” said Niona.

“We'll have to think of something once we've been out a while.” Alina declared. “We've got enough information to work out a plan...”

“Can you warp us out of here, Regalius?” Asked Niona.

“No... something is wrong with this place. I've been trying to send stuff outside since yesterday.” He replied. “I can't even begin to tell you how that girl managed to get in here. It's nothing short of miraculous.”

“It wasn't as bad before.” Said Twig. “It was gross, but I could still see master... Now it's greasy, and putrid...”

“We have to walk back out...” Groaned Julius. “Weak...”

From somewhere a voice floated down to them.

“You don't have to leave right away do you?”

Instinctively the group snapped into fighting formation; each of them scanning a section of the room. Julius did his best to fade into the center. There was something familiar about the voice...

“You! Is this your doing?” Regalius asked. Everyone turned to where he was facing. A figure was striding toward them out of the crowd of hazy spirits. It looked like one of them, yet whole and solid. Soon the form of a very attractive young woman stood before them. She was dressed after the fashion of an enchantress, meaning she looked like a magical stripper.

“If you mean the alterations to this ridiculous old nonsense then yes. It is my doing, more or less.” She replied. “It's something of a failure if I'm honest. Although I feel that it's more the fault of these fools than mine.” She continued, waving her hand in the general direction of some of the more formless spirits. “Their attempts at harnessing necrotic forces were a little too pathetic to live up to my plans.”

“Who are you?” Demanded Alina. “I lost three friends to this place. If you had a hand in that-”

“You'll what? Be belligerently fat and stupid at me? I'm sorry dear, but you're already doing that and it's not working.” The woman cut across her.

Alina advanced menacingly, but the woman made no move to retreat. She simply help a hand out against Alina's barrier.

“This kind of pathetic student magic is EEEEEAAAARRRGH!” After a few seconds of touching the magical wall the ghostly woman's hand had begun to sear. Acrid smoke rose from her now metaphorically blackened hand. “You! What are you!? A simple shield charm shouldn't do that!” The woman screeched. Her other hand extended and let fly a bolt of power. Alina's barrier held, although the strain of maintaining it instantly showed on her face.

“Protective spells have always been one of my strong suits.” Sneered Alina.

The woman's expression evolved from blind rage to epiphany. “It's you... Red hair! The bitch of the council! Ha! I knew my defenses weren't to blame! You've some experience you have...”

“I do, and I am not without mercy.” Alina replied in a measured tone. “If you give yourself up without further struggle I will lobby for leniency on your behalf. It will likely mean life in captivity for the loss of three lives, but you will keep your wretched life.”

“You ridiculous cow! I'm not here. This is a projection through the conduit's power.” She laughed. “You could no more capture me than you could tie the wind in a bag!”

“The hard way it is...” Alina replied, nodding at Herrin.

Without warning Herring lunged forward with a grabbing motion, and though his hand never left the barrier an enormous, white, spectral hand extended away from his arm and slammed the enchantress to the far wall. She shrieked in agony, her body burning in the places where it made contact with Herrin's shield hand.

“I expect that wherever you are those wounds seem very real right now.” Said Alina. “So real that you can't rejoin this bit of your soul to the rest of it for a few minutes at least.”

Herrin released his grip. The woman slumped to the floor. Some of the hazy spirits approached her cautiously.

“Mind your distance, dogs!” She snarled, batting the spirits away with concussive force. “You’ll pay for that, Redgrave...”

“Herrin!” Alina yelled. Again Herrin made to grasp their opponent in his mighty hand, but this time she was prepared. Her arm transformed into a claw and gripped Herrin's hand.

“This place is a massive battery for necromantic power, you idiot. I can draw on it indefinitely!” She screamed.

Suddenly music began filling the spaces between words. Regalius was playing a jaunty tune on his makeshift instrument. Herrin bore down on the glowing claw, which began to buckle.

“You could draw on the power indefinitely,” Replied Alina. “but it would bur its way all the way back to your actual body. Believe me, this isn't my first encounter with your kind...”

“You whore!” Screamed the enchantress. “I’ll bring this place down on top of you!”

Before anyone had a chance to react she released Herrin's hand, allowing it to pin her to the wall again, but the free arm lashed out at the device in the center of the room. Slabs of stone and piping crashed to the floor. Gallons of the sickly ooze began hemorrhaging into the room.

“I don't need this place anymore, and the master will reward me handsomely for making it your tomb, Redgrave!”

“DAMN IT ALL!” Yelled Alina. “MAKE FOR THE DOOR!”

As one the party dashed toward the exit. Alina's barrier holding back a tide of slime at a visible cost to her strength.

“It's too much...” She muttered through clenched teeth. “it burns!” Staggering, she fell to one knee.

“Keep going!” Yelled Julius, scooping Alina into his arms.

Standing in the ever rising tide of ooze the enchantress finally caught sight of Julius as he hoisted Alina off of the ground. Somehow he knew. Their eyes met for the briefest of glances before he pelted away.

“It can't be...” escaped her awestruck lips before the slime obscured her view.

“We don't have time to hold back the seal, Julius!” Yelled Regalius. Julius steadied Alina and ran his fingers along the door.

“It's gone. It's just the door mechanism now.” He fiddled with it for a few moments. “It's not locked. The conduit must have made it work. I can't open it!”

“I can.” Said Herrin, shattering the door with one hand while shielding the others with the spare.

Without waiting for instructions the party scrambled over the rubble. Herrin held up the weakened ceiling until they were all safely on the other side.

“That's it, kids...” he gasped. “One more stunt like that and you'll be carrying me out too...”

“Alina's already straining my limits, Herrin.” Julius smiled. “Please take it easy from here on.”

He winced as Alina jabbed him weakly in the ribs.

“I don't think that's going to be enough to stop the slime.” Niona observed worriedly. “We need to keep moving.” Green jets were already spraying onto the wall opposite the crumbled doorway.

Soon the team was moving briskly back the way they had come. Niona and Julius helping to steady Alina while Regalius and Twig steadied Herrin.

“How far do you think we'll need to go?” Asked Twig.

“Hard to say.” Niona replied. “That stuff was being pumped throughout the structure... It may reach a point of equilibrium as soon as the lower floors fill up. Assuming that there isn't some kind of reverse pressure we should be fine.”

“Would reverse pressure cause a place that had been damaged previously to flood as well?” Asked Regalius, who had stopped at the stairs leading into the skeleton chamber.

“Very probably.” Answered Niona.

“Then it seems we have a problem...” He replied, gazing at the slowly rising level of green ooze advancing up the stairs.

“This...” Remarked Julius. “This is bad. Remarkably bad.”

“There's no other way out of this place...” Gaped Niona.

“Can a shield charm hold it back enough for us to walk across?” Asked Twig.

“If I was rested maybe.” Replied Alina. “But as it stands I couldn't get us more than a few feet in.”

“I'd always hoped to die disgustingly old and rich...” Said Julius.

“Looks like you got as far as disgustingly...” Observed Regalius.

“We could shadowjump.” said Twig.

The group turned to her as one.

“But it could kill you, it could kill all of us.” Offered Niona.

“At this point we're just settling on a method.” Said Julius. “Even if it doesn't work...”

“What do we need to do?” Asked Alina grimly.

“Uh... hold on to each other hard.” Twig began. “It's super important you don't let go... Master will be

our guide since I never saw the outside of here.”

“Can you do that, Julius?” Asked Alina.

“I have over very short distances. Again, what have we to lose?” He replied.

“Fair enough.” said Alina.

“We need to do this now!” Shouted Herrin, as the slime crested the top step, a few disoriented skeleton warriors slipping around in it comically.

Everyone linked themselves together. Julius in the lead, followed by Twig.

“Fair warning,” Said Julius. “This is probably going to suck for you guys.”

Before anyone had a chance to reply Twig shifted them into the shadow plain. Alina felt as though she was being smeared across the floor. Then, suddenly, she blacked out from the experience. Her last thought focused on the idea of clinging to her friends.

Focusing on the little clearing they had camped at Julius strained to lead the group. Thought to someone observing outside the event it would seem like seconds inside the pathway the seconds stretched out like minutes. It was painful, like breathing dry air on a hot day. If not for Twig anchoring them all there would be no way he could have stayed phased out so long or far. After several agonizing moments he spilled out of the long shadow of a tree. Skidding to a halt, clutching Twig's hand, in the soot of their campfire.

The air was cool and moist. The taste of green and soil was in it, mixed with the burnt taste of cold cinders. He might have been there for hours as far as he knew. Suddenly a spike of terror arced through his heart. The little hand he was grasping was much colder than his own. Without accepting the possibility he felt tears beginning to form in his eyes. They shot open and were assaulted by the light of afternoon sunlight. Stricken he pulled Twig's limp body into his arms.

“Twig! Wake up, girl!” He gasped. “This is no time for jokes!”

A long silence filled the spaces between the rustling of leaves. He began shaking, and clutched her chest to his ear. Somewhere to his right a bird sang it's cheerful call. Then, a heartbeat. Still panicking, Julius lept to his feet. Carefully he scooped up Twig and ran to the edge of the woods. As he pelted across the soft ground he noticed the others, laying at odd angles to one another, still dazed, but clearly alive and well.

Julius ran until he found a patch of verdant grass and carefully placed Twig upon it, then, with one hand on her chest and one in the grass, he concentrated. Slowly the grass began to wither. All around his hand it wilted away and he quickly moved it to a fresh patch as each section was spent. Soon Twig was laying in a circle of brown grass, and she took a weak breath. For just a moment Julius allowed himself to feel relief, but after her intake of air she gave a weak cough and bright red blood drooled from the side of her mouth. Julius came apart. His mind now hung someplace beyond panic or terror. Then a voice.

“Is everyone alright?” Asked Alina. Before she got a response from anyone else she was being half

dragged across the ground. Julius, completely mute and weeping, motioned frantically at his little friend. Years of training focused Alina's mind. Everything else pushed back as she passed her hands over the Twig.

“This is bad...” She muttered, turning to Julius. “Get the others!”

Julius scrambled to rouse everyone else. Herrin was still completely out, but Regalius and Niona snapped to life at the site of Julius's frantic manner.

A little way away Dewbeam had noticed the commotion and was making for the group of new friends as quickly as she could. Whatever they were doing seemed very important, and she hadn't seen them come out of the horrible cave from before.

“It's not enough!” Cried Alina. “I don't have the strength to do heal this!”

“Should we move her to the trees?” Asked Niona.

“It wouldn't matter...” Said Alina. “I'm not strong enough to force the transfer.”

“What do you mean force it?” Asked Regalius.

“Healing magic doesn't work properly unless it's done willingly.” She explained. “When you do a regular spell you're giving part of your essence away. I can transfer essence from a tree, but it doesn't understand what's happening, so it resists. It makes it much harder.”

“Can't you use one of us?” Asked Regalius.

“I can, but these are magical wounds. I could drain all three of you dry and it might not be enough...” She replied.

Julius reached out and grasped her wrist. “Try.”

“I won't sacrifice 3 people to save one. I can't.”

”Just me then!” He begged.

“No!” She said. “You're basically fine! It would be a waste!”

“But she's special! You saw her when Niona showed her the spell!” Julius pleaded. “She's all potential! I'm nothing compared to her!”

“I'm sorry Julius! I truly am!” Alina cried. “She sacrificed herself for us, and I won't piss it away!”

Utterly broken, Julius slumped into a heap. Alina, now crying, stifled a sob with gritted teeth. Even Regalius turned away, unable to force his mouth to make the shapes needed to play.

“Alina wait! Don't give up yet!” Cried Niona. All looked to her. “I explained things to Dewbeam, she says she knows what you need her to do!”

Dewbeam strode up to the party, in a manner equivalent to running for her species, and held out a limb to Alina. Grasping it tightly Alina concentrated. Dewbeam stretched herself into the sunlight, her leaves rustling in the gentle wind. The soft soil gave way easily as she sunk her roots deeply into it. Twig took another breath and couched up more blood. Alina bore down, her hair beginning to levitate from the power moving through her. Dewbeam's hand began to brown, but she made no move to withdraw it. The discoloration began creeping up her limb.

"I don't think... this is going to be enough..." Alina muttered. "They're both going to die if I keep going..."

She made to remove her hand, but Dewbeam's fingers moved, wrapping tightly around her wrist. Alina pulled her hand away from Twig's chest, but the dryad simply repositioned herself and forced her hand back in place.

"She says you need to quit fighting her, Alina!" Explained Niona.

"But... it's going to kill her..."

"She says it won't and you need to stop being... not nice..."

"Did she now? Fine then! I won't hold back anymore!" Sensing Alina's renewed commitment Dewbeam eased her grasp. Alina extended both hands and concentrated with all her might. Regalius played with renewed vigor. Dewbeam's leaves began wilting and falling to the forest floor, her bark turned brown, then gray. In places cracks began to form. Her movements stiffened then she stood, frozen in place.

"I think..." Alina said, panting. "That should do it..." With that she fell limp, suspended in the dryad's withered, motionless, arms.

Everyone gathered around Julius, who was cradling Twig in his arms.

"Twig. Twig! Wake up! Can you hear me?" He asked. There was no response apart from her slow breaths. Julius looked around then back at Twig. Very quietly he whispered in her ear. "Athena... it's time to wake up."

A frown crossed Twig's face. She opened one eye partially.

"Juuuuuliussss... don't call me that."

Animals of all kinds, and great distances away, were startled by Niona's triumphant whooping.

"It's no good" Remarked Regalius. "We're going to have to cut her out."

Alina was still suspended in the frozen grasp of Dewbeam, who showed no outward signs of life since her healing of Twig.

"I don't understand it..." Moped Niona. "She said she'd be fine..."

“She seemed to understand perfectly well that I wouldn't trade a life for another.” Said Alina. “For whatever reason she lied to us.”

“I guess so.” Agreed Niona, inspecting Dewbeam's withered bark. “She was one of the oldest creatures in this forest. What a loss...”

“It's a shame.” Agreed Julius. “I'll never have a chance to thank her, nor will Twig.”

“Honestly, it's tragic and everything, but she was still basically a tree.” Said Regalius.

Niona gave him a glance so withering he felt he might end up like the dryad and spoke no more.

“Just cut me down already.” Said Alina, trying to cut the tension. “As terrible as this has all been I don't think I can handle hanging here much longer.”

Julius began hacking at Dewbeam's wrists, trying to mar her remains as little as possible. Niona pushed him away, gently.

“Here, let me.” In two fluid strokes Niona cleaved both limbs in twain, leaving Alina to slump onto the ground. Regalius and Julius carefully slid the wooden hands away from her shoulders. She stood, stretched, and considered the creature whose grasp she'd been released from.

“Maybe they can regenerate somehow.” She mused. “I've seen regular trees leaf after seeming to die like this. Honestly I don't know much about Dryads...”

“Powers beyond what we know are certainly possible.” Replied Niona. “Even in captivity they refuse to reveal things like reproduction and what have you. Like any sentient being would...” Her gaze lingering on Regalius for a moment with the final words. He was inspecting the remnants of Dewbeam's hands with a clear eye to making new instruments. In spite of Niona's gaze he refused to let something as durable as dryad bark go to waste.

“Se's not dead.” Twig remarked casually. No one had noticed her rise from her makeshift bed, or heard her approaching. “She's in the wood. Right here.” Twig pointed to the middle of Dewbeam's trunk.

“How do you know that?” asked Alina kindly.

Twig shrugged. “We should get her out.”

“Out? How?” asked Julius. Twig indicated two places on the trunk.

“Cut here and here.” She replied. “She'll do the rest.”

Niona carefully positioned herself then gracefully split the bark where Twig had indicated.

“It'll be easier for her now.” Twig explained, curling back up in her blankets. “Wait till morning.”

In moments she was audibly snoring and sucking her thumb vigorously. Everyone looked blankly at one another.

“Well, we can hardly set out now anyway. May as well see what happens.” Said Alina.

Everyone settled in for a restful night, and Niona was in a much better humor from that point on, even towards Regalius who was now brazenly crafting with Dewbeam's severed hands.

The next morning the party awoke to find Twig listening to Dewbeam's trunk. She motioned them over as the sound of cracking wood became more audible.

“We should stand here.” She said, moving everyone into position.

“How long it this-” was all Regalius managed to say before wood chips were blasted out of one side of Dewbeam's body. A pair of vaguely humanoid legs were sticking out of the hole. With another shattering spray of splinters a small woman slid out and landed solidly on her feet. Her skin looked like the moist inside of a tree, cream colored, and new. A mane of tiny green leaves hung around her face. She looked more or less like a sculpture of a woman that wasn't quite complete. Her eyes were big, bright, and brilliantly green.

Unable contain herself any longer Niona rushed over and grasped Dewbeam's hands. They spoke briefly in her language before she turned to Twig, who also had a short conversation with her. Each one spoke in their own tongue, so the others only understood Twig's portion.

“Twig,” asked Julius, “how can you understand her?”

“Why would I not?” She asked in return. “She's talking normal.”

“No, she isn't” corrected Julius. Twig gave him a quizzical look.

“Don't be dumb Master.” she continued. “She's talking people talk.” Dewbeam made a sound and Twig looked at her. She then turned back to Julius. “Nevermind. She say's you're right. It sounds like people talk to me though.”

“Fair enough...” Said Julius.

After a few pleasantries the groups finally made to part company. Dewbeam even seemed pleased when Niona explained that Regalius wanted to use some of her old body to make instruments. Saying that being part of something so beautiful was an honor, which made Regalius so smug he was barely spoken to from that point on.

“What will you do now?” Julius asked Niona.

“Report to our superiors.” Explained Niona. “After that I'm not sure even Alina knows. These events bode ill, obviously. For my part I intend to learn as much as I can from Dewbeam about her people and this forest. I suspect she saw a lot more than she understands right now.”

“She's going with you?”

“Indeed! She asked as soon as she realized we were leaving.” Said Niona. “I think she's been lonely here. There don't seem to be any others of her kind for miles and miles around. At least in the city she can mingle with the house Dryads and such.”

“It was a pleasure meeting you.” Said Julius offering his hand. “I hope this isn't the last we see of each other.”

Niona ignored the hand and gathered him up in a strong hug.

“Till we meet again, master locksmith.” She said, her face decorated with her toothy grin. “Farewell wherever you fare.”

“Till we meet again...” He answered.

Alina watched them from a little distance away. When Niona turned to go Alina made as if to speak to Julius, then thought better of it. With a wave she turned away.

“Alina, wait!” Called Julius. She stopped and turned back.

“I wanted to say I was sorry.” She said, before Julius could speak. “About the affair with Twig, I mean. I just didn't want to part on a sour note. I'm not without compassion, you know? I just have responsibilities... People depend on me. When I make mistakes they die sometimes... It's not easy. I just wanted you to know that. I would have been heartbroken in you had lost your friend. It's just a luxury I don't get to have.”

“I understand.” Said Julius. “I wouldn't have held it against you. Not after I had some time to come to terms with things anyway.”

“I'm glad... Anyway I was going to have Niona give you these, but here.” She said, pressing two silver coins into his palm. “Those bear the seal of my command. I would be honored to consider you and your protege part of my team. Should you ever need to prove it those can be verified by any lawman in the country.”

“I don't know what to say... It's an honor.” He replied bowing low.

“The honor is mine, sir. I look forward to when next we meet. Till then, fare you well.” She said earnestly.

“Farewell, my lady.” Replied Julius, quickly bowing low again to hide the look of embarrassment for saying such a ridiculous thing.

Alina waved and took several steps away, then turned again. “Do you think I live up to that woman they paint posters of?”

“If she could feel shame I think she'd fall dead in every one for falling so short of your magnificence.” He replied.

His answer earned him a smile and blush that haunted his dreams for many nights to come. He watched her walk away for quite a while before turning to leave himself. Twig was resting in the shade at the edge of the woods, waiting for him.

“Your hair looks longer, Twig.” He said.

“Does it?” She replied.

“All those different magics mixed together in such a short time, we're lucky it didn't turn white.” He replied.

“I think I'd look striking with white hair.” She stated.

“I think you would at that.” Laughed Julius.

“Come on, Master. Let's go home.”

“Okay, little one.” He replied. “Here, you read the map.”

Twig looked at her name on the scrap of hide he'd handed her for a few moments.

“This map is terrible, master!”