

Chapter 1 – Desert Outpost, Drotia

Tied to the shadows, Lox moved quietly towards the outpost's main tower, gravel grinding softly beneath his spiked shoes. The pale moon sat overhead, gleaming in the night sky, its soft rays sliding between the dark clouds as it illuminated the small military camp below. As always Alex followed, padding silently along beside him. Up ahead on the road, hazy motion in the darkness caught Lox's eye, he quickly pivoted to change his path, ducking behind a nearby tent. He drew shallow breaths, listening, straining his ears in an attempt to capture every sound of the approaching men. He exhaled, just another standard patrol. A few moments later the pair of guards came into view, marching slowly in his direction; their swords clacked softly against their hard leather leggings as they progressed along their route. Time drew on slowly, the half alert men making their way at an almost leisurely pace.

After a brief eternity the soldiers had finally disappeared, their footsteps fading back into the night. Lox glanced around, scanning his surroundings one last time, an unnecessary but habitual precaution before continuing forward. In such limited light, he was forced to keep his eyes fazed, utilizing their heightened sensitivity. The enhanced eyes allowed him near normal vision, even with the heavy clouds and creeping shadows. More importantly though, they helped him see the scant trace of magic essence floating in the air. It floated around intermittently, almost like small swarms of insects fluttering aimlessly. Sometimes in packs, other times just specs here and there. At such a remote outpost he had been quite surprised to find it in such concentrations. Well surprised until he had found out a weaver had been stationed here as well. An odd detail that peaked his curiosity, what purpose could she have so far from the war front?

Lox paused again, trying to recall how much time he'd spent walking, he knew the next wave of surveillance webs must be coming any moment. He crouched again in some nearby shadows and waited, his eyes squinting uphill, towards the tower. Time slowed, returning to an infuriating crawl that approached stagnation. First a minute, then two, then five, until finally, glistening through the dark, he saw the gold dust of the web floating smoothly down the path toward him. Just as it drew upon him, he unfazed his eyes, his vision returning to an uneasy haze of blurred objects obscured in the dark. The surveillance webs had become a minor nuisance, forcing him to freeze every half an hour as they swept the small camp. He forced himself to wait another couple moments, then, confident the wave had passed by, he refazed his eyes. The increased sensitivity blinded him for a brief agonizing moment. He turned back down the hill and began to focus, catching the trail of the magic dust. Now far below, the web crept on into the darkness, sweeping the now vacant path.

Annoying as they were, the webs didn't pose much of a threat. They were simple, they began at the center of the camp and spread out in a circle, flowing throughout the camp until they became too weak to sustain themselves. If the wave touched anyone using magic, faze, weaver, or otherwise, it would erupt, emitting bright flashes and setting off a loud alarm. They were fairly easy to circumvent, Lox just had to keep a vigilant eye out and when he saw the soft gold light gliding toward him, he would then unfaze and wait. Though it was not a particularly

complicated or clever spell, he knew more than a few fazes that had been killed because they had set off an alarm web. Usually those less tuned to magic; they often failed to see the flakes of gold dust that marked the web's presence. It had taken months of practice with Alarian weavers but eventually it became second nature to him. After those long hours of repetition, his eyes were even able to pick out the small glistening magic in the light of a summer's day. Still, he couldn't chance getting lazy.

Redirecting his mind to the task at hand, Lox continued onward, sending a sideways glance at Alex. The fade sat a little ways away, looking as vain as ever. Well if fades could look vain that is. Of course there was no real *need* to check on Alex, Alex wasn't really a thing, yet another habit that got the better of him more often than not. Alex was his fade, a sort of physical representation of his faze powers when he wasn't using them. Manifesting itself as a large wolf, far bigger than any real wolf but not quite the size of a bull or horse. Sentient to a degree, it seemed to avoid webs instinctively.

Lox cleared his head for a second time, irritated at himself for getting distracted. Alex was grinning smugly, suspiciously aware of Lox's thoughts. Soon the shadowy pair were nearing the bottom of the tower and the guards were becoming more numerous. Arias had ordered Lox to eliminate anyone of note or rank at the Drotian desert outpost, or Despot, as the men around here called it. The vague instructions had not specified who that might be, or how many he should eliminate. In fact, as a whole, Lox found the mission rather mundane. To liven up the task, he had taken it upon himself to make it a bit more morbidly interesting. Deciding to test his skills he made a sick game of sorts. He decided to kill a soldier a night for five nights, each one in an ascending order of rank. He figured by doing so, it might allow them to put up a few preventative measures for the last two or three. Truth be told, the first two men were probably not worth the effort; had the orders been more specific, Lox wouldn't have bothered killing them at all. They had minor ranks but they still slept in the same tents with the other soldiers and the first one didn't even have a guard. That emphasized his point though, he hoped the pattern would be figured out by the time he made it to the three actually important people in this far off and largely forsaken sand camp. The lieutenant, the general, and the weaver.

The third man died last night. Lox had slipped by the guards watching the lieutenants' cabin and lightly pricked the lieutenant in his sleep with a thin needle coated in Alarian blue poison. It was not a very exciting method of killing a man but it did cause quite a scare for the inept General in charge. The blue made a particular mess of death, causing parts of the body to swell to the point of popping. It was a slow death of asphyxiation or blood loss, often a mixture of both. The General had gone rather spastic at that, ordering surveillance webs to be cast around the clock and the night guards doubled. Ironically this gave away the General's last hand, the weaver. The first webs had caught Lox off guard, after all, in his preliminary scouting he hadn't been able to locate any magic and thus was quite surprised to find a wave of gold coming towards him the next morning as he skirted around the camp. Thankfully he had kept his eye's fazed or else things may have become quite a bit more messy. After that initial wave though, the increased protection didn't pose much of a threat to Lox; it just kept him a little more attentive.

Lox came to a stop, he had reached the tower, standing about twenty feet away from the base on the rear side. The light of the guards' torches emanated into the darkness and Lox could hear them talking on the other side; for some reason people often assumed assassins would come from the front, as if he would just walk up to them, waving a sign over his head announcing his intentions. Regardless it did make the next part more straightforward. Besides he had no quarrel with these men. They were general foot soldiers stationed in a useless camp, killing them was hardly necessary. They posed only a minor threat if they did notice him, or if he did decide to go through the front entrance. And that way would involve lots of noise, and time, and sweat. He groaned internally, thinking back to his younger, more inexperienced years, a time where he had made a similar decision. He recalled the slow agonizing crawl up the cramped stairs; dodging blades by only hair-lengths then struggling to avoid slipping on the fresh pools of wet blood. Never again would he make that mistake, at least when it could be avoided. Sometimes the brute force method was the only available method. This time, thankfully, it wasn't. And such effort was definitely not worth it for the General at the top. Lox had scouted and found another way into the tall building. Scaling the outer wall would be far quicker and cleaner, maybe a tad bit more tedious but overall the far superior option.

Before committing completely to his climb, Lox walked up to the tower's base, fazed his hand, and pressed it gently against the wall. Immediately a glimmering line traced the outline of his fingers, pushing back. The weaver had put a shield web into the stone walls of the tower, he had expected as much after seeing the alarm webs but it never hurt to check. In the current age, it was extremely uncommon for fazes to be able to pass through the walls of a high ranking officer's or diplomat's quarters. Perhaps a century or two ago when fazes were still young and more legend than fact, but no longer. Shielding spells were too simple to master and any weaver worth their salt could put one up in a few minutes, eliminating any potential fazing. Lox had in fact fazed through the cabin's wooden walls the previous night, though he now suspected that the only reason he had been able to was due to the General's incompetence. Well, incompetence or malice, perhaps the General didn't care about his soldiers as much as his own life. It was possible that the General simply hadn't thought a faze would be all the way out here in the middle of nowhere, and Lox had tried to make the first few kills as plain as possible, fast silent pulls of his knife across the soldiers necks as they slept. Quick and quiet deaths to be sure, but nothing beyond a normal assassins' capabilities. In retrospect, it was almost a stroke of luck that Lox had decided to give himself away with the cabin killing. He had been curious to see the General's response, and to his genuine surprise, the General showed the ace up his sleeve. The weaver. Thankfully for Lox though, there were many benefits to being a faze. He looked up, straining his eyes to inspect the balcony above, it was high, probably five or six stories, the stone bottom jutting out sharply from the tower wall. Lox did some quick estimates and decided, in full faze form, he could cover the first four or so stories with the initial jump and run, that left maybe a bit over one story left to climb.

After taking a dozen or so steps back, Lox looked at Alex and fazed. After years of work and countless transformations, it still fascinated him to watch Alex simply fade out of existence. The large wolf dissipating into nothingness in the night. Now engulfed in faze form, his body

burst with energy and the restricting hands of gravity loosened their tight grip. He stretched briefly, feeling the power moving in his muscles. Then, with a few quick breaths, he sprinted at the wall, covering the short distance in seconds. Right before smashing into the wall, he scrunched down. Pushing with all his might, he jumped.

Lox soared upwards. His loose, smokey gray cloak billowing out behind him as he soared through the air. His dark shape would be hard to see in such limited light, but he didn't want to waste time and run the risk of being seen now after taking such care earlier. Someone with a sharp eye and some good timing could possibly make out his shape contrasting against the light gray stone as it reflected the pale moonlight. His ascent started to slow, individual stones composing the wall started to stick out from the gray blur. Using his toe spikes to snag any footholds in the rough rock he started running, continuing to climb up towards the tower's sole balcony. The spikes clacked and scrapped against the stone, trying to find grip as he pushed upward. Internally Lox grumbled, mentally reprimanding himself for neglecting to resharpen them the night before. His movement upwards began to slow further, his shoes began to slide, slipping on the soft dry moss that grew in sporadic patches on the stone wall. With a final moment of effort, Lox slammed his arm blades deep into the stone wall. A sharp crack sounded as the thin blades sunk in, echoing into the night.

Once confident that he was secure, and unnoticed by the guards now several stories below, Lox looked up. A short breath of relief escaped him, he was only ten or eleven feet away from the ledge; he wouldn't have to climb far. As if to offset his momentary relief, an internal clock set off an alarm in his brain. The next surveillance webs would be coming soon. He quickly tried to remember exactly how long he had but the time escaped him, hopefully there were still a few minutes left. Drawing in a deep breath, he started climbing, pulling the sharp blades out of the stone and smashing them back in. *Shhhhk, chink. Shhhhk, chink.* The noises emanated quietly as he pulled the sharp blades out and then slammed them back into the stone. His breathing became heavier as he repeated the task, pulling the blades out and smashing them into the rock again and again. The lack of trees and shrubbery meant the noise though relatively quiet carried freely into the darkness. If he kept it up for much longer, soldiers might notice and come to investigate. He tried to climb faster, hoping the sounds would be mistaken for a soldier putting their blade to a sharpening block or some other menial task. Just a few feet away now, if he needed to, he could unfaze during the climb, but it might be rather painful. The thin blades were not meant to support the full weight of a man, plus, this close to the origin, there wasn't going to be much warning of the coming web. If he was going to unfaze, he was going to have to react quickly and hope he could hold himself against the wall while it passed. Just as his gloved hand was reaching up for the balcony ledge, he saw the gold dust start to come through the outer walls and door. With a quick burst of effort he pulled himself up, flipping over the balcony railing, unfazing in midair. His dense, sweat soaked body hit the stone landing with a muffled *thud*. He didn't move. He waited for the alarm to sound over his heavy breathing. Internally he almost laughed, *looks like it is time to stop slacking off and start training again.* He lay there a moment longer, partially to make sure that the wave of gold dust had passed, and partially to help catch his breath.

Lox strained his ears, listening for an alarm or the footsteps of running soldiers. He heard neither. In an effort to remove himself from the cold stones, he rolled over and pushed himself up. Alex sat next to him grinning. *Stupid wolf.* Alex seemed to enjoy Lox's struggles, currently amused that Lox had been so taxed by the climb. Why that was, Lox could only guess. Rolling his eyes, Lox started towards the balcony entrance. He fazed again and energy immediately started flooding back in, filling his body and rejuvenating his muscles. Silently he passed through the wooden door and stepped into the main room. There were no lights on; a faint glow flickered from under one of the three interior doors. Presumably that was the bedroom and the glow was a night light. People in fear were often comforted by the presence of a flame. Lox didn't blame them, after all humans had such little chance against the darkness and the things that moved through it. Unfortunately when it came to fazes, a small light would not do much to help their cause.

Lox glanced around the room, double checking the other doorways. No light appeared to be coming from underneath them. The main room was surprisingly well furnished for an outpost tower, empty by most city standards, but for a military man, this General was living quite comfortably. A low chair and footrest sat next to a small side table, in the center a firm wooden table sat upon a large rug. A cloth covered bench sat near the far wall, snuggled between two bookshelves. *Perhaps the General was doing someone above him a favor by taking this position.* He thought, *an unfortunate decision.* Lox glided over to the bedroom door and listened. Deep, heavy breaths came from the other side, slow and steady, only interrupted by an occasional snort or a grumble every few breaths. *The General was sleeping deeply, for such an anxious man.* Lox fazed through the door, inch by inch, letting his eyes come through the other side.

It was an interesting feeling, fazing through objects. Thin cloth objects like tents were hardly noticeable, kind of like walking through a light wind, the resistance was there but it didn't do much to hinder your movements. The thicker and denser the object was though, the more difficult fazing through that object became. Most fazes could pass through wood doors and some could pass through thin stone walls. Lox was probably one of five or so fazes capable of passing through thick stone walls. Walls where you had to completely submerge yourself in the stone. It was as if you were moving through heavy mud, or swimming in thick swamp water. Where one could barely move, and each step was enormously strenuous and took an extraordinary focus. None though could pass through metal, which was why many royalty and high ranking military men frequently had metal doors and sometimes even metal paneling on their walls. This door, thankfully, was made of wood.

Once his eyes had adjusted to the light on the other side, Lox gazed carefully around the room. As expected there lay the sleeping general, the man's large back facing the door only half covered by the thin bed sheet. Lox fazed the rest of the way through, silently passing completely into the room. It was a pleasant enough room, not quite as nice as the main area, but it had a soft civilian bed, a small desk, and a rug, leading from the door. Despite these, there were no ornate decorations or frivolous furniture. The General's worn clothes were stacked neatly in the corner. Lox couldn't see a sword or other weapon amongst the pile but also didn't really feel like digging through the man's belongings just to be sure. Taking note to avoid stepping on the

carpet, lest there be some sort of clever alarm underneath, he made his way slowly towards the bed. He softly placed a foot on each stone as he moved, testing it first before placing his full weight. Despite his trepidation, no further traps appeared to have been set.

Coming to the edge of the bed, Lox slowly reached for his dagger. Most fazes usually brought one or two customized weapons along during their journeys and Lox was no different. Made by an old friend, his dagger was nearly flawless, its thin metal blade balanced perfectly with the slender handle and small guard. To offset the fragile nature of such a delicate weapon Lox had made sure a weaver put a strong web of durability over the blade. The result had worked so well that Lox ended up paying the weaver to cover all his weapons. It practically ensured they wouldn't chip or break when used to block attacks. Unfortunately even the strongest webs couldn't stop all damage. Repeated attacks or blows from heavy weapons, like war hammers or maces, could easily snap a blade in two, especially thin ones such as the dagger. Regardless, Lox was quite fond of this particular dagger, it had served him well throughout the years, sometimes chipping but never yielding to the blows. Unlike his shoe spikes, the dagger he had remembered to sharpen. He looped his pinky finger through the small hole at the end of the handle; he pulled the blade out slowly, the metal sliding out with the faintest *shhhh* as it passed over the leather frame. Flicking it up into his grasp he stepped over the General. Just as he began to lean over, getting into the perfect position, he froze.

Beside the General lay a woman, her petite body and near inaudible breathing completely masked by the much larger man's. Lox paused, taking some time to decide what to do. The man had obviously brought her to bed with him as either a distraction, a comfort to help him sleep, or an extra defense against his would be assassin. Possibly all three. Lox slinked back into the darkness while he considered his options. He could kill both of them, it wouldn't be too much harder and he could probably manage it before either made any noise. As with the guards though, he had no ill will towards this woman and she may very well be unaware of the danger the General put her in. Though she didn't look the part of a hired night guest. He could try and separate the two of them a bit more and then kill just the general. But that would risk waking her up, the military bed left little room for the both of them. Of course then he would be forced to kill her too. Plus if he did that, she might have a chance to scream, which might as well be an alarm for the whole squad of nearby soldiers to come up. He could have poisoned the general from the back, that would be the least interactive, and therefore safest, option. Unfortunately he hadn't predicted the need would arise and had not refilled the small vial from the night before. An obvious and rather amateur oversight on his part. There was a meager amount left but the general was a large man. If it weren't enough it might only make the general ill and not actually kill him which was unacceptable.

Lox leaned back and unfazed. After a moment more of thought he started pacing slowly. There was no rush, he had all night and would be long gone by the time people came to check on the general the following morning. The re-materialized Alex watched silently as Lox walked, following him as he traced a line back and forth across the room. Occasionally he looked at the door or the two sleeping bodies. Lox looked at Alex and whispered, "What do you think?"

"Kill both of them and be done with it," replied Alex.

“Any particular reason?” Lox raised an eyebrow as he turned around yet again on his line.

“I don’t trust her. She smells of magic and frankly this area is too dry for me”

“I thought that too, she does seem to glow with weaver magic, but I wasn't sure if it was her or the webs emanating from the tower.”

Alex gave a nonchalant shrug, “Could be, but she doesn't feel right. I doubt she is here just to keep him warm.”

Lox nodded silently in agreement. He found the fact that they were both turned away from the door oddly suspicious too. Apparently Alex was just as paranoid as Lox. He fazed again and walked over to the bed. The lady might be dangerous but his objective was, first and foremost, the General.

It took another long, silent minute for Lox to decide his plan, but then he put one hand near the woman's mouth and positioned his blade with his other. The tip waited a hair's width from the back of the General's neck. In one fluid motion, Lox shoved the knife up through the man's neck into the back of his brain while clamping his other hand tightly over the woman's mouth. The General's body lurched violently as the knife went in then just as quickly back out. The woman's eyes shot open. She attempted to scream but his gloved hand muffled most of the noise. She started flailing, frantically trying to get a hold of something, a half-hazard attempt to defend herself. Lox swiftly brought the blood soaked blade to her throat speaking quietly into her ear, “Stop.” She froze. “Good, I am going to take my hand away from your mouth so you can turn around. If you try to scream, cast anything, or run, you will quickly be joining the fat General here in the afterlife.” She gave a small, tight nod. Lox let go. She spun around, fear running rampant across her face, her eyes stretched wide open. She looked terrified, her body was as stiff as a board, but true to her indication she made no sound. Now that Lox could get a good look at her he thought she looked rather young, or at least younger than he. He sighed internally, he always had been poor at age estimation, something he'd been scolded for multiple times in training. She was staring at him, her eyes darting around trying to focus on his faze form. His body undoubtedly looked like a dark, blurred silhouette to her; the only thing she would be able to clearly make out in this light would be the glow of his eyes.

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She stared into the icy blue eyes, so bright amongst the black shadow of the body. The monster seemed to tower over her, its wavering body swelling, filling the room. She didn't dare move, she wasn't even sure she could. She could feel the cold gaze combing her face. She stood motionless. *I am a soldier, I was supposed to be trained for this.* The fact that she hadn't collapsed or fainted might have been proof that some of the training had worked, though that was nearly all she could manage. *Why can't I move?* She had studied, she had specifically taken anti-faze courses, but none of what they told her matched what stood before her. Fazes were supposed to be human-sized and to resemble a man. But this was more like a giant demon glaring down at her. Its blackness not just obstructing but rather stealing the light of the

room and pulling it deep into the abyss. Something clicked in the back of her head. *He had spoken to her and let her go. Why?* The creature motioned for her to sit on the bed. She obeyed. As she sat, she wondered if she could get a web off without it noticing. She doubted it, the creature seemed too vigilant, its eyes never stopping, catching each and every movement she made. Every blink she took sent a terrifying shiver through her body as she worried he might change his mind before her eyes could reopen.

The darkness moved fluidly, seeming to float as it moved across the room. It grabbed the chair from the desk, as it turned away from her she saw a shimmer of red light emanating out of its upper back. *What was that? A light? She had never heard of fazes giving off light. Was he carrying something, an enchanted lamp? What gave off that kind of red glow?* Thoughts raced through her brain but her mind she drew up short, the confusion heightening her fear.

It turned back towards her and put the chair a few feet in front of the bed. It looked down at her, it seemed to be motioning for her to be quiet. All of a sudden the darkness vanished. The monster standing next to the chair was gone. In its place stood a man. A man, not big like the goliaths, but taller than most. His dirty blonde hair flowed in a little wave as it curved towards the back of his head. His sharp facial features gave way to a thin jaw. His light skinned body was lean, she could practically see the sinewy muscles behind his clothing. The way he stood was pronounced. He had a fierce presence, an almost arrogant posture that pushed the fine line of confidence. Besides the fact that he was an Altarian assassin, it was immediately apparent that he was unlike the men from Drotia. Drotians always strove to be big. The more mass one had the better, this man obviously disagreed. His body was more like a coyote, long and sleek, but taught, ready for action like a stretched bow. He had an odd air about him; She was struck by how similar to King Gordsing he was, not in appearance, they could not have been further apart, but in his innate ability to take over the room. The only thing that hadn't changed were his eyes, they still cut into her with their steady gaze. Amazingly, and she didn't know how it was possible, the man standing before her almost looked friendly.

He smiled and sat down. She couldn't help but to be slightly impressed by him. His ease and control were oddly calming. Even though she was terrified, something about him made her feel remarkably serene at the same time. She had just finished analyzing him when she noticed something moving by his side. Averting her gaze momentarily, she squeaked and nearly fell out of the bed as a new wave of fright hit her. A giant wolf had come to sit next to him. It was pitch black with cold blue eyes, identical to the man's. It had two red stripes running down its back. *Was this a fade?* Her teachers had told her most fazes absorbed their fades in their teenage years and that if they hadn't it was usually a sign of immaturity and weakness. But that didn't make sense. This man wasn't old but surely he wasn't a teen. Even more confusing is he was certainly not weak. She strained internally, trying to pull up all she could remember on fades. *Fades took the shape of an animal or beast that was connected with or represented the faze.* That, she did understand. The giant wolf gave off the same single purpose drive and stared at her much the same way this man had. As her brain processed the wolf, she became even more confused. Fades were supposed to have red eyes, yet this one had blue, and they were supposed to be pure black, this one had two red stripes running down its back. *How could her instructors have been so wrong?*

The wolf started to stand up again, her hands clamped tightly to the mattress, holding herself in place. The wolf looked at her briefly then started walking towards the door, continuing right through as if it didn't exist. She had known that fades weren't actually physical beings but the sight of it simply sliding through a door was rather unnerving. She turned back towards the man, he was still looking at her, a small look of puzzlement on his face. He slowly opened his mouth, then closed it, then opened again, as if pondering what to say. Eventually he spoke, "My name is Aesir Lox, but you can call me Lox, if you'd prefer. It is, after all, much easier to pronounce. Would you tell me your name?"

He spoke softly but crisply; she had to reach for every word just to make sure she didn't miss it.

"Natalie. Natalie Ahmos," her voice too was little more than a whisper.

He smiled again, "Hello Natalie, it is nice to meet you. Tell me what are you doing up in this tower tonight? Are you a soldier? Or were you keeping the good General here a more personal company?"

She felt herself blush as she quickly blurted out, "Soldier!" She felt her whole face go red. He sat silently, obviously waiting for her to continue. "I mean, I was sent up to help protect General Dorak. He thought you, or someone, was coming for him. My webs were supposed to keep him safe."

The man, Lox, paused for a moment, as if pondering her words, "Your webs? You are a weaver then?"

She nodded slowly, she hadn't meant to say that. It had slipped out in her rushed attempt to explain.

"Of what order are you?"

The blood left her face, she had just put a target on her own head and was about to make it even bigger, "I was recently promoted to Tier Four."

It was probably foolish to tell him the truth but she feared lying to him more than anything at the moment. His eyes would know, they were reading her, piercing into her head, assessing her thoughts as she had them. He leaned back; as if he were calmed by the newly learned knowledge. Not exactly the reaction she had been expecting.

He let out a breath through his nose as he smiled, "Congratulations, for someone as young as you appear to be, that is quite an accomplishment." Natalie was speechless, he couldn't be more than a few years older than her but he spoke down as an old hand would to a new apprentice. Before she could gather her thoughts he spoke again, this time with a more serious tone, "Tell me Natalie, and be honest. If I leave, will you track me?" He held up his hands as if in surrender, "Don't worry, I don't plan on killing you either way. A Tier Four weaver is not much of a threat to me, I am merely curious."

She wasn't sure she believed her ears. *How could someone be so casual? Especially about a tier four weaver!* She was young and she wasn't a caster but weavers were far from useless in fights! Most soldiers kept their distance, even goliaths paid attention to level four and five weavers. Who could he be that he would so easily cast her off as if she were a child threatening him with a wooden sword?

"That depends, would it be worth my while?" She stopped. *What? Did I just say that? What was I thinking? Why did I just say that?*

His smile broadened, his cheeks starting to pinch his eyes, it looked like he was on the verge of laughing.

"Normally, I would say 'No. I would not like you to pursue me. In fact, being chased by the enemy is often not terribly enjoyable' But to be honest, I've grown quite tired of arguing with Alex and a new companion might liven my journey up a bit. Perhaps you'd consider accompanying me rather than chasing?" He shrugged before standing up, "I'll leave it up to you. I am going to go out the door and wait for the next wave of your alarm webs to pass, if by that time you have not come out I will assume you do not wish to come and I will leave. I do hope that you don't try to follow me after that, I assure you I won't be as patient on our next encounter." He paused just as he started to turn around, his eyes suddenly becoming a frightening glare. "Should an alarm be raised however, I will take the brief time required to release your soul from its current, bodily, constraints." He stopped glaring, his mouth turning into a small smile, "But, if you do decide to come out, I will lead you on my travels. I enjoy talking to weavers, you all are an odd bunch. Plus, I think you would find me quite useful, unless I've grown too large of the head, I should be able to show you a thing or two about spells. Well, that is if you should wish to learn of course." He shrugged, "Beyond that, I can not promise."

Natalie was dumbfounded. *This man, Lox, a faze, an enemy from which she was raised against and taught to fight, was simply asking her to join him? For what, a random journey? And who was Alex? Was it his lover? Was he tired of her? Did he want to take her as a new object of lust.* He hadn't so much as touched her since he let her go, and she knew, he knew, she was no match. If he had really wanted her, she doubted her choice in the matter. Unlikely, after all, he had talked of spells and learning, not made lewd remarks. *What did a faze know of weaving. What could he teach her?* The wolf walked back in through the door and came to Lox's side. It looked at Lox and appeared to say something she couldn't make out. He looked towards the wolf, "Soon Alex, soon. We'll be leaving in a short while, don't you worry." He turned and walked towards the door. He glanced back toward her with a soft smile, "Remember, I will only wait until the next web." He then turned and just as the wolf had earlier, walked right through the door, his body blurring as he made his final steps.

Natalie sat in a daze, her eyes looking around uncertainly. It was almost as if everything was a dream. The limp body lying next to her and the blood soaking on the bed said otherwise. He had called the wolf Alex, she hadn't known fazes named their fades. *Another lesson not taught.* She had only a few minutes before the next web came. She had to decide what to do.

She wasn't positive she could believe him, when he said she could stay, but she knew he wasn't lying about what would happen if she raised an alarm.

Looking at her hand she tried to think of a web that could help her. Her mind drew up blank. Weaver's more often trained to cast webs on others, rarely themselves. Then she thought about what might happen if she stayed. She could act like he had overwhelmed her, killed the general, and left. After all that was mostly true, albeit slightly abridged. It's possible she wouldn't be punished for letting General Dorak die, but she didn't think that was likely. She would be viewed as incompetent, possibly jailed, or worse if thought a traitor, possibly executed. Even if she lived, she would be forever chastised by such a failure, especially this early on in her career. The ideas swirled around in her head, the thought of the old weavers and military intelligence officers looming over her, deciding her fate made her nauseous. Natalie wasn't sure she could handle that.

The other option though, to go along with him, was equally as worrisome. Natalie wasn't sure it would be any safer. When she had looked into his eyes though, she didn't see malice or anger. No, in fact it was almost boredom or perhaps emptiness. Her brain wandered off momentarily as she wondered if he enjoyed his job. If he did, what kind of man would enjoy such a job? Of course she knew he was powerful, which meant he would be highly ranked amongst the Alarian army. At the very least if she went along she might find out useful information. Then should it start to go poorly she could escape and return to Drotia. An almost logical plan but deep down, she doubted she would. If she left she wouldn't be coming back as the same person.

It was then that another idea started to creep into her brain then, Lox seemed important, he would be well connected. More important than information, he might know some weavers, weavers that could teach her things Drotian weavers couldn't, or perhaps wouldn't, teach her. She had heard whispers that Alarens had developed dark webs and mutating enchantments, things Drotians deemed too inhumane to study. Maybe too, he could teach her things, after all he had said he could. *That settles it.* She was a weaver and she wanted, needed, to learn more about magic; if he could help her then she would tag along, for better or for worse. With that resolved, she tried to put on a stiff upper lip. She knew she was in no bargaining situation but maybe she could help the Drotians one last time before abandoning them.

**

Lox sat idly on the balcony railing, one foot swinging over the edge, his cloak dancing in the near constant wind. He saw the gold dust start drifting through the walls, slowly making its way towards him. Too bad, he thought, he might enjoy having some company on the ride home, and leaving a tier 4 weaver alive was pretty much the exact opposite of what he was meant to do on this mission. *Oh well.* He looked at Alex, "Time to go." Just as he was getting up the door creaked open and the young woman's head appeared. She slowly looked around searching for him. She saw him just as the dust passed; she paused a moment, perhaps second guessing

herself, then started towards him. He stretched his arms upwards, arching his back, "Have you decided to come along then?"

"Yes, but I have one condition. You have to promise you won't hurt anyone else while we're leaving"

Taken aback, Lox laughed, he tried to contain himself but a small chuckle escaped. This tiny girl, Natalie, either thought he wanted her far more than he did or thought herself far more important than she really was. Why on earth would he bargain with her, he shook his head. *Was anyone ever, in a worse position to bargain?* For the shortest instant, probably a shadow of his training, he almost whipped out his knife and pressed it into her throat but he quickly disregarded the notion. *What would be gained by instilling such fear?* He hadn't planned on killing anyone as he left anyways but the fact that she had asked, no demanded, it was quite amusing.

"Very well, I promise not to hurt anymore of your precious little Drotians while we leave here. But you do realize, if you come with me, you will no longer be Drotian. Once in my party, you *will* be Alarian."

Natalie paused a moment before nodding curtly, "I understand."

"You might not end up fighting Drotians but you *will* be helping the Alarians."

"I understand." She confirmed.

A smile spread across his face, "Excellent, then up you come. I will have to hold you while we descend." He motioned for her to come closer. He looked over at the wolf, "Alex, off you go."

**

Natalie looked around. *Descend?* She looked over the balcony, there wasn't a rope or ladder. *How did he get up here? How did he plan on descending?* Natalie looked back at Lox, he had already faded. The sight sent shivers down her back and she almost changed her mind and ran for the door. Her feet held, and the longer she stared at him the less terrifying he became. He didn't look nearly as frightening as he had mere minutes ago. His shadow no longer spiked violently but wavered softly in the night wind. She wondered if he could control that or if it was a trick her mind was playing on her merely making it seem different. Lox walked to the edge, in the powerful moonlight she could almost make out his body wrapped in the blurring clouds of faze darkness. He picked her up in a swooping motion and put her in his arms. The way he picked her up, smoothly with almost no resistance, one would have thought she was made of feathers. *Perhaps we underestimated the power fazing gives them.*

He peered downwards, "Hold on."

**

Lox pushed off the balcony. He felt her slender arms grip him with all her might, fearing she might plummet like a sack of stones. *Poor Drotians, even after all this time, they still know so little about fazes.* He was fully fazed and focused on lessening their gravity. Fazes might not be able to fly but they glided very well. Some thought it was because they weren't completely physical, others thought it was because fazes could control gravity, he figured the latter, given his current situation, but he didn't very much care. The pair floated over the camp. Sailing gracefully through the open air. Tents, fires, and soldiers all passed below them, if anyone looked up it would probably look like a small dark cloud drifting in the night breeze. As their descent continued, Natalie slowly loosened her death grip and began to look around. Eventually she looked up at him, "Why aren't we falling?"

Lox chuckled quietly, "Natalie, there is so much I have to teach you, but that will have to come at a later time. For now just wait, we will be landing outside the military grounds. If you hold on, and don't lose contact, you will be just fine."

Natalie nodded and tucked herself securely into place, one arm gripping his forearm, the other around his neck; he carried her across the edge of the camp, wafting slowly away from Despot.

Chapter 2 – Vox, Drotia

Cole's eyes snapped open, his head banging from the sharp sound of Sarah's alarm web. Someone had fazed through his tent wall. Grunting, he quickly pushed himself up, unleashing his goliath. He landed with a heavy thud as his weight collapsed the bed. He glanced around, taking in his surroundings. There was a flicker of movement to his right, he turned and put up his arm. The faze's blow glanced harmlessly off his stone arm. The faze stopped, confused for a moment and jumped back. Cole uncurled and reached to grab his battleaxe. The axe, feeling his goliath form, morphed into its goliath size. The faze looked around, scanning for an escape route but quickly realizing he had gone too far. The small attacker was clearly inexperienced and hadn't thought his plan completely through. Cole almost felt sorry for the faze. Almost.

Much like a cornered animal, the faze had no other option than to fight. It burst forward, Cole swung his giant axe. The faze twisted, allowing the axe to pass right through the air above its body. The heavy weapon, not hitting any resistance, pulled Cole forward. He stumbled a step as it threw him off-balance. The faze used its short dagger and tried stabbing at Coles head. Using his already off balance momentum, Cole tucked and rolled, feeling the thin dagger pierce into the back of his shoulder. Cole slammed the axehead deep into the ground stabilizing himself while the faze struggled to remove the embedded blade. Cole reached out and grabbed the being's slim arm. Using one enormous hand, he clenched, shattering the bone in his grasp. The faze screamed in pain, flailing about as it tried to grab another blade. Cole didn't give it the chance. He grabbed the faze by the shoulder and slammed its dark body into the planted axe.

The corner of the axe's long blade peaked out as it pushed straight through the faze's chest. There was a high pitched scream, blood pouring out of its chest, the faze's darkness flared. The black light briefly covered the room in darkness before the creature returned back to its human form. Its dead body now sitting slumped over, securely impaled on the axe.

Cole binned his goliath back, forcing the energy back down. Wincing, he pulled the dagger out of his shoulder. *Sarah is not going to be happy.* A steady flow of blood had begun seeping out of the wound now that the blade had been removed. Ignoring the growing moisture, Cole's gaze fell upon the young boy who had tried to attack him. The kid couldn't have been more than 15 years old, barely a light scruff on his chin. Cole wondered why Arias would waste a faze with such a futile attack, surely he would have known the boy had no chance.

Sarah and General Bradley burst through the tent entrance. Their eyes looked rapidly around the tent, seeing the dead body, they lowered their weapons. Bradley spoke, "Sorry Lord Gordsing, we were listening to a messenger that had just come to camp a little ways away and didn't hear the alarm over the camp noise. I hope you have not been harmed." Cole shrugged, "It's nothing, the boy landed his short blade into my right shoulder but I don't think it was poisoned." Sarah gasped, "You don't think it was poisoned? Well, you'll have to excuse me if I ignore your thoughts for a moment." She walked over and started to inspect the wound. He sighed, Sarah would ignore pretty much anything he said if she thought his life was at risk. The blade had cut surprisingly deep though, if he didn't have Sarah to heal him it might have left permanent damage. As if reading his mind, Sarah started muttering under her breath, "Goliaths are far too foolhardy. Any normal person would try to dodge a blade coming toward them or at least try to stop the bleeding afterwards but all goliaths do was walk around until someone else stops it for them." Her muttering continued as she evaluated the wound.

Cole grinned at Sarah as she started casting healing webs over his shoulder, he then turned back to Bradley, "So, what did the messenger have to say?" He heard a snort come from over his shoulder, "Yea, let's ignore the fact that someone just tried to kill you. No big deal, just the heir to the throne could have died and no one was around to even catch the killer." She stopped to look him in the eyes, "Your father won't be happy that you keep telling your guards to leave. When he hears about this he'll put two high goliaths on you, day and night, not to mention the earful I'll get for letting you talk me into putting an alarm web on your tent instead of a shield web." He waved her off, "You worry too much. Plus, my father knows I hate being followed around like some soft skinned rich merchant. I enjoy my privacy! Besides, it's not like I am defenseless. I am a high goliath too after all, and, believe it or not, I have had my fair share of combat training."

Sarah groaned, "Yes, yes, I know but you were still attacked and could have been killed."

"While I appreciate you worrying about me, I was in no more danger from this 'assassin' than a man is from a mosquito. He was a kid trying to make a name for himself. It is nothing to lose sleep over."

“A mosquito who happened to stab you in the shoulder. If that blade had been poisoned and I was not around to fix you, you could have fallen and never gotten back up.”

“Ah, but it wasn't poisoned, and you are here! So, like I said, nothing to stress about. Although your shield aside, I was surprised his blade went through my goliath stone.” He scratched his head ponderously, “He must have spent a long time sharpening that blade to make it pierce so well.”

Sarah waved in his face to get his drifting attention, “Yes, well, it shouldn't surprise you! You know you have become a bigger threat recently; your repeated victories against the Alarens has got to be worrying some on their front lines and irritating many more in their war councils.” Her voice was almost rising slowly, “A couple years ago you were only a target because of your heritage, but now, now it's your abilities too! Regardless of that though, I told you not to trust that shield. We don't know how it works and it could very well be weakening as you age.”

“Yep, you did say that” He chuckled, “But I was groggy. It seemed so much easier to have faith in your shield than try and fight carefully.” Laughing as Sarah took a valiant swing at his head, “Kidding! Kidding! The kid was motivated alright? That motivation led to a small injury for me and a permanent death for him.” He eyed Sarah, she still looked rather unimpressed “Stop looking at me like that. It's fine.” After a few more moments of a cold glare to emphasize her point, she rolled her eyes. Cole's deep laugh boomed out again. Sarah ignored his laughter and went back to fixing his wound. Sarah was one of the best weavers in the camp and while she could have healed him faster she took her time doing smaller, more careful webs. Of course she claimed it was because she didn't want to miss anything, but Cole was pretty sure she just liked poking his wounds. All in all, it was barely fifteen minutes before she was done. Practically good as new, judging by the cool soothing feeling in his shoulder as her last webs finished rebinding the last few layers of skin.

Turning back to Bradley, who had sat impassively during the whole affair, Cole spoke, “So, as I was saying. What message did the messenger bring that was so engaging you two would allow me to get attacked for?” Sarah pushed the back of his head and jumped off the broken bed. “I think it would be better if we gathered up our officers. It isn't an urgent matter but it is rather serious and I would rather it not be postponed too long.”

“Well can I get a summary? I'd rather not be blindsided during a meeting.” Cole's tone approached formality, meaning it was more of a strong request than casual banter.

Bradly shrugged, “Long story short, sir, five men were killed at Despot, including General Asire, and a girl went missing, a tier four weaver named Natalie Ahmos. They have some squad captains taking control of the site for the time being, but they will need a new commanding officer soon.”

Cole nodded. After thinking silently for a brief period, Cole took a deep breath and blew out slowly. These attacks seemed to be getting more frequent and aggressive. He should send a message to his father. Without looking at Bradley, “I guess you're right, call an officers meeting

for just after dinner. I want some time to think.” Bradley took the cue, “Very well, I'll get it done sir. Anything else before I take my leave?” Cole thought for a moment, “If you can find any reports on past assassinations either here at Vox or at Despot please bring them to the meeting. Otherwise, you are free to go.” Bradley nodded to the request, “Yes sir, I will see you at the briefing.” he bowed respectfully, “Prince Gordsing. Lady Sarah.” They both gestured farewell and he bent out of the tent.

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Cole leaned back onto the bed. Laying down with his knees hanging over the edge, his hand behind his head, he looked up at the ceiling. Sarah walked over and sat next to him. She knew he was trying to decide which of the buzzing questions in his head to ask her first. She waited patiently, used to the ritual after so many years. A little time passed and he still lay still. She lay down next to him, resting her head against his arm. Her gaze joining his on the ceiling as she waited. After an unusually long time, he finally opened his mouth “The weaver, Ahmos, do you know anything about her?”

Being a high tier weaver, Sarah knew, or at the very least recognized by name, most of the other tier four and five weavers. She had already been raking her memory for the name Ahmos, after she had heard the messenger say it earlier in the morning. Still squinting at the ceiling though, she spoke slowly as she tidied up her thoughts, “Yes. She is that one people keep referring to as the second me, actually. She is the young girl who became tier four just recently, one of the youngest weavers to be granted such a title. People say she looks to be as strong as myself, or possibly even Samantha's level, with enough time and training.”

“Well. Shit.” Cole said. He waited a bit thinking, “Can you think of anything else? I'd like to know more about her for the meeting.”

“I don't know too much. Other than a few brief meetings I don't think we've interacted much. Physically, she was supposed to be pretty enough with short blond hair, probably my height, but with pale skin and blue eyes. As far as her personality I don't know much; the weaver council were hesitant to give her the promotion to tier four though. She definitely had the skill if I recall correctly but something personality wise made the council nervous. They thought perhaps she lacked the right temperance, some sort of will, or conviction, or whatever you want to call it. Ah yes, apparently she didn't seem too “drawn to our cause” and preferred studying alone over group lessons.” She shrugged, “Maybe they thought she might not be up for the command responsibilities of tier four, or that perhaps people wouldn't listen to her. I can't really say for certain, but I'll reach out to the council for more information later today.”

Sarah turned to look at Cole's light brown face, his father's skin was almost almost pitch black and yet his was so much lighter. Still quite a few shades darker than his mother's though, more. “Other than that I don't recall much else.” Cole nodded slowly and sat up. “Why do all the best weavers seem to be the little women? Where are the giant weavers, the ones with saucer plate hands and muscle?” He laughed, “I remember when I first introduced you to Bradley. He didn't quite believe me. The poor man pulled me aside and asked, 'Prince Gordsing is this really

Sarah? Your personal weaver? The second strongest weaver in Drotia? ' when I assured him you were, he could barely keep a straight face, overrun with disbelief. You know? I think I heard him later muttering about how he wished he had such a pretty young weaver with him." Cole smiled and winked at Sarah, she ran her hands through her short curly brown hair and smiled back. "Bradley's right too, except he doesn't know how much of a pain in the ass you can be." Cole laughed loudly as Sarah's deep green eyes shot up. Quickly ducking as a pillow flew at his head.

Cole turned his back, still protecting his head as a second pillow flew over him, his broad shoulders blocking most of the light from the tent flap. Cole was big, though again not quite as big as his father or many of the royal goliaths, but he stood well over six feet. Plus the carefree confidence he carried himself with made him near impossible to miss. He had a pleasant face with broad features and a bald head. Not by his choice of course, all goliaths had bald heads. Something to do with their stone form prevented hair growth. His whole body was like a big muscle, every feature cut into his body like a sculpture. Although by the way he ate, she would have thought a big squishy ball might be more appropriate, she smiled to herself at the thought of him turning into a round boulder instead of a goliath. Cole turned around, "What are you snickering about?" Sarah felt her face flush pink, "Nothing! What are we doing today?" Ignoring her small embarrassment, Cole stood up and stretched, "I think we should go find some suitable men to send to Despot."

"Why? I thought Bradley said they had commanding officers handling it."

"Yeah, but something doesn't feel right. The pieces just don't add up. There have been too many assassinations at random places without any military follow up. Sure, a dead general here and there is a victory that any army would take but to what end? Arias must be planning something. I want more men stationed at Despot, just in case. A couple goliaths too. Vox is secure enough as it is; Arias prefers battles to take place south of the mountains, far away from Ares. I'm confident we won't need to worry too much about large attacks this far north. No it is far more likely to be sporadic skirmishes, just enough to keep us busy and doubting."

"I guess that makes sense." Strategic planning wasn't really Sarah's forte, "Should we get going then? Oh, and I told an errand boy to bring some food, you get crabby when you miss breakfast."

Cole grinned, every time food was brought up he turned into a small boy thinking of birthday cake.

Sarah waved absentmindedly, "And put your behemoth of an axe away. It's big enough without being in goliath form."

Cole walked over and casually picked up his axe. Sarah knew was extremely heavy of course, but the ease of which he picked it up was amazing. He was able to swing it around like a human soldier would a sword. In fact, oftentimes, he was quicker. Feeling Cole's human form the weapon returned back into a regular axe. Despite her extensive research into the topic, she

still didn't understand how simply grabbing a weapon in goliath form made it change or how letting it go didn't make it change back. Regardless of what weapon a goliath used, the metal and wood morphed, growing and changing shape depending on its users form. *Goliaths are strange*. Cole hung the battle axe across his back; it was a wicked weapon, double bladed with sharp curved tips at each end of the blades. The wooden handle had light blue metal lines tracing up towards the blades. It was an odd choice, after all, axes weren't common amongst goliathes, no more than they were amongst regular soldiers. Their large size and weight were often impractical and didn't work well with traditional fighting styles, but Cole wouldn't be parted from it and, to its credit, it had not failed him yet.

Cole was just finishing putting on his boots when the errand boy came in with his food. The young lad quickly laid the tray down and backed out of the tent without saying a word. Sarah mindlessly checked her knives while she watched Cole scarfed down his breakfast. Inhaling everything from meat to bread to water. When he was done he picked up his short knife, which he had been using to eat with, and led the way out of the tent. The sun was just clearing the horizon and its intense rays lit the camp brightly. Once outside, Cole turned and headed straight for the training grounds.

Sarah kept with his brisk pace as they walked, "I thought we were going to find some men to send to Despot?"

"We'll get to that, but first, I'm stiff. My body needs to loosen up after this morning's excitement. I think a little training might just do the trick." They wound their way down through the camp, Cole greeted many of the men they passed. As always, Sarah was amazed that he could remember so many. Of course she knew a man here and there but not a group went by that Cole didn't greet personally. She figured that was one of the qualities that made him so popular with the soldiers. They felt like they knew him, and to a small extent, they did.

The camp was neatly ordered, small groups of individual tents circling small fire pits. Places for men to relax or cook their own meals. Free spaces were spread out periodically, allowing for larger groups to gather. Large tents marked with silverware and cups were grouped in pairs, places where men could receive pre-made meals or buy ingredients to spice up their food. And of course, every now and then a tent that smelled of filth, food, and bodily fluids, the ever sought after ale houses. Never empty, these houses provided a good place for men to relax if they could bear the stench. Sober soldiers were often present too, on duty in order to maintain order, should someone drink too much. On the outskirts were colored tents, places for the men to barter for a variety of goods. Merchants sprouted up around the army with wares they hoped to sell idle soldiers. Then in the more secluded sections were the night tents, so called as they offered the ability to purchase an hour, or sometimes a night, of a ladies time.

The pair passed all of these, walking towards the far edge of the camp. When they arrived at the training grounds there were already groups of soldiers moving about. Some were training individually, others were doing one-on-one practice, while even a few were doing group challenges. Cole walked right by all these and went over to the goliath area. This part of the grounds was a newer edition, made so goliaths could wrestle, fight, lift, or whatever else they

wanted to do without the risk of accidentally hurting the other men. To further differentiate the area large wooden poles had been placed along the border. For the benefit of the rest of the camp, Sarah had invented a sound reduction web that could be put over the entire field. She couldn't understand how people hadn't thought of one before, what with all of the grunts, thuds, and countless other noises goliaths seemed so prone to making. Their mere footsteps were like small earthquakes.

Once through the barrier, Sarah nimbly climbed up one of the wooden poles and sat on top of it. She could see the entire training area from her new perch, which made it easier to keep an eye on Cole, in case he decided to go and hurt himself. She waved at the weaver on duty, the camp tried to have a weaver watching the battlegrounds as often as possible, an always-ready medic to heal any soldiers who might accidentally injure themselves while training.

Cole quickly walked over to the archery range and grabbed a couple short spears, there were bows and arrows too but spears were easier for goliaths to handle with their bulky fingers. Walking past all of the short and mid range lanes, Cole went to the first empty long range lane and started throwing the spears. He hadn't even unbanded yet and was still hitting the close targets. Sarah was continually amazed that he could be so accurate with the spears. Goliaths often struggled with accuracy because they frequently solved issues with brute force, but Cole trained almost daily to hone his skills, despite the fact that he hated such ranged weapons. She had only seen a few men who could throw further than him and fewer still were as accurate. Cole walked to the side and put down his axe and knife.

**

Cole unleashed his goliath and felt his body grow. The amount people grew varied quite a bit when they went into goliath form, he thought it had to do with the type of soul stone that particular goliath was bonded with. Whatever the case his diamond stone made him grow an only a modest amount, maybe pushing nine feet. Going back to the lane he looked over at some soldiers playing king of the hill. They were all stone goliaths, the most common type. Almost all goliaths were stone goliaths, the other types were very rare, he knew of a couple coal types, his father was a steel type, and he, himself, was a diamond type. Apparently there were silver, gold, and a few other types in the past but none presently. Regular stone goliaths were rather difficult to tell apart, the large stones blurring their features, but the special types stuck out quite easily. Their stone armor was laced with their element stone, the color showing clearly against the bland gray stone. He looked down at his arms, tracing the light blue lines that marked him a diamond goliath.

**

Sarah watched as Cole picked up another sack of spears and threw them down range, hitting the center two circles of his target mostly and never missing the target completely, regardless of the range or wind. She looked at him, a giant stone man throwing what now appeared to be small trees. Having grown up around goliaths, she was more than used to them. The steady pace at which they moved, the deep thuds of their footsteps as they walked, even

their enormous size, it all went right by her but she often imagined for someone who had never seen a goliath it might be pretty terrifying. They were like moving statues, unaffected by the elements and insanely durable. Most weapons had little effect on them, a bowmen might shoot straight at a goliath and it would barely chip their stone armor, and most swords had a similar effect. The only really effective way to attack a goliath was to use a sharp blade and push it into weak areas, such as behind the knee, up an armpit, or inside the collar bone. That or have a faze simply go through the stone and plant the blade. It usually cost the faze a blade but it was often deadly for the goliath. She shivered at the passing thought.

**

As Cole aimed at the furthest target, his mind went blank. The wind blew softly from the right side; he waited for a lull before whipping his arm forward. The spear flew through the air, arcing gracefully, it took only a second before he heard the satisfying *thunk* of the spear hitting the wooden target. He looked down, *guess that's all of the spears. Good, time to do something more interesting.* He practiced his throwing often just in case the need arose but, truth be told, he would rather take the time to run across a battlefield to kill a man in close combat than throw a spear. Spears weren't a goliath's weapon, but he knew that a time may come when he needed them.

Cole maneuvered himself over to some men fighting on a small tower. The men, occupied by their current bout, didn't notice him. He gave a deep coughing growl, producing a sound not unlike two boulders rubbing together. The men turned, surprised by the noise, "Now that I have your attention, I was wondering if you men would like to have a little tournament." The goliath on the top of the hill unmorphed, "Shit Lord Gordsing, was that really necessary? And what do you mean by a tournament?" Cole only then realized it was John Steer, John was big, even by goliath standards and from the times Cole had trained with him he knew John wasn't just a show but was actually an unnaturally gifted fighter. Perfect. Cole laughed, "Sorry John, I didn't realize you frightened so easily, I'll sing a lullaby next time." The other goliaths started laughing and taking note from John and Cole they started unmorphing as well. "Anyway, a little birdy told me that a few men will soon be selected and sent to Despot. Apparently Despot has been having some issues keeping the Alarens out and needs some back up." He walked around the mountain, "With that in mind, I propose a small tournament, only the people present may participate. A series of one-on-one grapples, top two will get my word of recommendation for being sent. Maybe those of you who win can teach the men at Despot how to handle their little faze problem." He paused briefly for their laughter, "As an added bonus, the winner will get to fight me, and if they are able to win, well they might just receive a promotion." He said with feigned uncertainty.

The men stirred a bit more from the idea, it was a sure way to lighten the spirits of any Goliath. That is to mention fighting and talking down about the Alarens. Cole knew the men liked to show off and for those who didn't care much about the promotion aspect, they would relish a chance to beat a high goliath such as himself. "Everyone who does not wish to participate, I would ask to step over towards the sidelines." No one moved, "Ok, because there are eight of you, we will have two fights at a time. Each one of you will fight every other participant, after

everyone has made their rounds and fought each of the other seven men, the man with the highest score will have the chance to fight me.

**

Sarah huffed, of course this was the way Cole would pick the two goliaths to send. Any normal person would select men they knew or get recommendations, but goliaths weren't normal, they had to do everything their own way. Often that way was with a bit more barbarism. Even though Goliaths may look normal most of the time, something about being a giant stone statue tended to bring out their brutish nature. Brutes who decided things by butting heads as often as with words. "I guess we're lucky the soul stones are such a good judge of character or we would probably have a bunch of boneheads in command." she half thought half muttered aloud. As the men started to pair up she noticed other soldiers coming around to watch.

Word spread quickly in the small training area. As the day went on goliaths and men alike started lining the sides of the mock arena eager to watch. As the men continued fighting the crowd continued to swell, larger and louder. They cheered their friends and good matches, they winced and groaned at rough hits, and applauded the fighters. After a few fights she could hear the crowd starting to make predictions, who would win against whom and which fighters were the best. Within an hour, Cole had turned the whole tournament into a social event. Sarah smiled to herself, maybe not *all* goliaths were bone headed.

Cole had an unnatural ability to bring people together and even while men of the same cause were punching each other as hard as they could, the army became closer and tighter. Sitting on top of her observation pole, Sarah had an excellent view of the fights. She watched as the two stone men punched, kicked, wrestled, and threw each other. It was quickly apparent that John would be the goliath to fight Cole. He was simply too big for the other goliaths to handle in such a straight on fight. His matches ended faster and much more one sided than any of the others. As the fights drew on, food was brought out to the fans and fighters and even a few ranking officers who had come to watch.

In the end the two winners were John, with seven wins, and a smaller goliath she didn't recognize, with six wins. Before the final match Cole went around thanking all of the fighters for participating and talking up each of them to the crowd in his booming goliath voice. Every fighter was smiling as they unmorphed and joined the front lines of the cheering crowds. John sat and rested, waiting eagerly for his chance against Cole. After Cole had made the rounds and John had rested a bit, the stone goliath walked into the arena opposite of Cole and roared, the deep booming sound echoing throughout the grounds. Cole made his way to his side of the area and responded with his own booming roar. His massive stone fists banged against his chest once then slammed into the ground. The earth shook from the impact. The crowd cheered louder. This was a rare event, a high goliath fighting in a recreational match was more than uncommon, it was pretty much unheard of; the fact that it was the prince made it all the more spectacular. Sarah smiled at Cole, this was his bread and butter. He loved being with the men and boy did they love having him.

Before the match formally began, one of the weavers in camp walked into the middle of the ring, she spun around and using a volume web talked to the crowd, "Ladies and gentlemen, I hope you've enjoyed the wonderful show we've had so far today," the crowd cheered and whooped, "but that was just the appetizer. Now, we are about to witness the final fight!" She sent sparks and colored beams out into the sky, turning away from the Prince. "On this side we have the larger than life John Steer. Standing over twelve feet tall, he is the champion of the tournament, and an obvious mountain amongst these mere boulders." She paused as the crowd cheered wildly, "And his opponent, Prince Cole Gordsing, Heir to the throne, and part of the elite rank of high goliaths." The crowd grew to a deafening roar. The small weaver smiled widely, "With introductions out of the way, I think you all know what time it is!" The weaver turned to the fighters, "Gentlemen get ready, for on my mark the match begins!" She walked off to the side, away from the coming action, twirled around and after a brief pause shot a bright beam of light straight up out of her hands, "BEGIN!" Cole and John sprinted at each other. The force of the collision could have leveled a building. There was a split second of silence as the shock went through the crowd then the cheering resumed. Cole and John broke apart. They started circling each other, punches were thrown, some connected others were dodged. Every time a punch landed squarely the crowd groaned with the impact while a skillful dodge or move brought forth a cheer or a long "oooooooooh". The fight continued. Sometimes it looked like Cole was pulling ahead and then John would land a solid blow and the field would be evened. John tried to use his size and reach to his advantage but Cole was much more deft and agile.

Sarah had seen Cole fight more than she would have liked and could tell he wasn't taking the fight too seriously. Cole had trained with and eventually promoted to a high goliath. If he had wanted to Cole could have leveled John in a moment, quickly ending the match, but that wasn't a good show. No one wanted to see that. So, Cole let John land solid punches. The fight lasted longer than any of the previous fights, and it seemed to be taxing John's stamina. The large goliath was losing energy after so many fights. His moves began to slow, his punches hitting with less force than before. In a final effort to finish the fight John went for a tackle. He sprinted towards Cole and lowered his shoulder. Right before the impact however, Cole crouched and spun, grabbing John's leg and lifting it upwards. John flipped over and landed flat on his back with a solid thud. The crowd went wild. Cole unmorphed and held his hand out to John, who now lay unmorphed on the ground. With a broad grin on his face, he grabbed Cole's hand and together the men waved to the crowd. John may not have been the smartest man but he knew enough about fighting to see what was going on, he knew he wouldn't beat Cole but he enjoyed the chance to show his skill to the rest of the army. The crowd cheered for both men as the fighters bowed. After some more prolonged waving, Cole thanked everyone for coming and said he hoped they enjoyed themselves. For a period of time longer, the pair went walking around talking to some of the observers. John smiled and beamed as people came to congratulate him on his fight. Eventually, many congratulations and enthusiastic greetings later, Cole was ready to go. With a parting wave and a smile, Cole motioned to Sarah and started to head out of the training grounds, leaving the crowd to revel their new camp celebrity and disperse as they pleased.

Sarah hopped off her post, throwing a quick cushioning web as she landed, then walked over to Cole, "Was that all really necessary to get two goliaths for Despot?" her sarcasm was

not very well hidden. Cole got the meaning, smiling at her he said, "Of course not, but this way was more fun." Before she could respond he put a large arm around her shoulders, "Kidding Sarah, those men were out training even though we haven't had a real conflict in months. They are probably some of the most dedicated soldiers around here, or at the very least, some of the most diligent. Plus, like I said, we haven't had a real conflict in ages; people get bored with nothing to do. I decided to spice up camp life for a bit, my gut is telling me a fight is coming and I want people reinvigorated. I want them ready for when the time comes and the true fight arrives." Glad that she hadn't chastised him too badly, Sarah reached to hold onto his large hand.

The pair slowly walked back toward Cole's tent, Cole didn't really understand why she needed her own tent but she insisted. Something to do with position or something. Sarah leaned into him, "You should wash up before we go to the meeting, and don't take too long. I want to eat before the meeting; who knows how long it will go." When they got to the tent Cole stripped as Sarah heated his bath water. "You must be getting soft, I can see bruises starting to form already." Sarah mocked, while casting heat webs into the cool water. Cole grinned as he stretched out his sore muscles, "What can I say, John came ready to fight." He chuckled, "I bet he isn't going to be able to lay comfortably for a while either. I might not have been using my full force on him but I wasn't fooling around." Cole flexed his muscles for mock-effect. Sarah laughed, he looked like an overgrown child beaming over some silly accomplishment. She walked around the basin and slowly rubbed his back, habitually using soothing webs, "Do you think that the council will take your recommendations?"

"I can't say for sure but probably. After all, I am the commander in charge. Regardless, I don't see why they wouldn't, John and the smaller man, Dennis I think his name was, are good soldiers. Both fought well and they both made sure to thank me for the opportunity."

"Were you planning on sending anyone else? Despot could probably use an officer or two. The goliaths will help them feel secure but they will need some competent men to do more than just deflect any attacks.

Cole nodded slowly, "Yea, I was thinking about that. I haven't been here long enough to really gauge the officers too well; I think I will ask Bradley to make that decision."

Sarah nodded back, "That should be fine, I remember Bradley saying something about a few greener officers who were ready for a more leading position. We'll talk to him."

"Good. Did you see any such officers watching the fights while you were on your perch?"

"I thought I saw a few but to be honest I wasn't really paying too much attention. I was more worried about injuries."

After he was finished bathing, Cole got out of the tub and started drying off, "I hope at least a few were there, I want to talk to them about having more events. Today was fun, and I think the men enjoyed the break from the monotony of camp life. Things like this are good for moral" Sarah shrugged, "As long as they have a few extra weavers around for safety, I don't see

how it could hurt. Although who knows how long the lack of aggression will last from Alar.” Sarah tied her hair back into a small ponytail while Cole finished getting dressed. When he was all set they headed to the dining hall. Normally he and Sarah would go to the officers' tent or have food brought to Cole's, but Cole liked to stop in and eat with the rest of the men. It allowed them to talk to him in an informal manner and he thought it resulted in better, more loyal, soldiers. After they grabbed a small dinner, the two headed off towards the commander's tent, a relatively short walk from the mess halls. The large tent sat closer to the center of the camp.

It appeared they were a little late to the meeting; Bradley pardoned himself from the table as the other officers talked about who to send. Cole and Sarah listened quietly as he caught them up to speed, “The messenger that came said that five men were killed from Despot, like I had told you.” He paused, “As you know one of them was General Asire, there were also two officers and two upper level soldiers. They were killed in five subsequent days with each death being of a higher rank than the previous, the final one being General Asire. Apparently the first three kills were rather, well I hate to say normal, but they looked like any other assassination, meant to spread fear rather than actual damage. The fourth was different.” He paused, looking at both of them, “On the fourth night a faze went through an officer's wall to poison him, the men hadn't thought it was a faze until then or else they would have added a protective web to the walls.” He fidgeted trying to keep his voice low, “This is where it gets... difficult. After the fourth death they knew that it was a faze, they knew he had been killing in increasing rank, and odds were he was going to attack again that night. In order to prevent such a thing from happening they had their highest weaver, Ahmos as it was, cast webs over every ranking officer and had an surveillance alarm web sent out every half an hour. Subsequently she spent the night in Asire's tower with him. Alongside this there were men stationed around every tent and building with increased patrols, probably not enough to really stop the faze, mind you, more to hinder him if the alarm sounded and await reinforcements. I say all this to clarify that they did take the attack seriously.”

Cole held up a hand, “So, how is it that a faze climbed multiple flights of stairs, killed the general, grabbed the girl, and left without anyone noticing?”

Bradley nodded with a slight frown, “That's what I asked. It turns out the faze had some sort of climbing contraption that he used to scale the wall from the outside.” Pausing momentarily, “The men said they heard clanking noises but it's a war camp, there lots of random noises, could have easily been men hammering or cleaning their weapons” Cole nodded trying to show he wasn't blaming the men. Bradley continued, “They figured the faze then entered through the balcony, killed the general, and took the weaver. The strange thing is though, no alarm ever went off and the room was in perfect shape like there hadn't even been a struggle. Our best guess is that the faze entered and exited through the balcony, somehow taking the girl as he left. The only person to have even thought to have seen the faze was a man walking back to his tent after drinking. Apparently he looked up and saw a small dark cloud floating over the camp. The man hadn't thought anything of it until he noticed a weird red glow fading in and out of the dark cloud. At the time he had just attributed it to the drinking, but it could have been the faze.” Bradley leaned in even closer, “In fact, I think it could have been *that* faze people keep whispering about.”

Cole stood in silence for a moment, taking it all in, "I thought fazes floated because they didn't have much weight in their faze form. So how did he carry a girl with him? She might be light but light humans fall just like everything else."

"I don't know sir, maybe they don't float that way. For all we know they might actually have wings we just can't see in the darkness. Another option I've been told, though I don't really understand it, is that they can somehow manipulate the gravity around them." He waved a hand distractedly, "Anyway that pretty much sums it all up. The officers and I were just talking about whom to send over to Despot."

"Very well. Thanks for catching us up." They turned back towards the group, "Also, I'm sure you heard about my little event today." Bradley nodded, "Good, then I would like to recommend sending those two goliaths along with whomever else you wish. I haven't been in camp long and would prefer to leave the rest of the team to your discretion."

"Thank you sir, I will talk to some of the officers and we'll figure it out."

The small group rejoined the circle and set about talking and making plans. Roughly halfway through the meeting a woman walked in, a messenger by the look of it. She glanced around briefly then walked to the side of the tent and sat in a vacant chair. Cole thought it odd but figured it might be a low officer coming in late, whom he had mistaken for a messenger. However, throughout the rest of the meeting she didn't join the group or even so much as attempt to speak a word. Cole had completely forgotten the woman was even there until she stood up as the officers started to leave. She seemed disinterested as the officers passed but then motioned for Cole and Bradley to stay in the tent. Once the tent had emptied, apart from the two men, and Sarah, the stranger walked into the center of the tent and pulled her hood back. Long blonde hair tumbled out, as the light caught her face Cole immediately picked out the tattoos under her eyes. A Royal. Bradley and Sarah made a short bow of respect as she did the same to Cole. Cole was a little confused, "Hello, my dear. Might I ask what brings a Royal so far from my father?" Royals were a personal guard of about twenty to thirty men and women assigned to the king. They were selected by the king and trained specifically for his protection. They were the most loyal soldiers in all of Drotia and answered to no one but the king, and occasionally, in dire situations, the heir.

"Greetings Prince Gordsing. I bring a request from your father." Cole thought about asking her name but decided against it, Royals could be quite resistant and didn't like to reveal personal information to people if they could avoid it. She would tell him if he commanded of course but what was the point? We waved off the thought, "I appreciate you coming here but what is so important that my father would send a Royal instead of a messenger to tell me?"

"I am sorry, prince Gordsing, but I do not know. King Gordsing asked that I locate you and accompany you back to the castle. He has something of great importance to discuss with you that he would prefer to disclose himself."

What could be so important that father wouldn't trust a Royal? Strange.

“Did my father say anything about it? Is it urgent?”

“I’m sorry sir, King Gordsing did not say. He simply asked that I find you and bring you back. He also mentioned that he expected Sarah would be coming along as well.” Giving a small courteous nod in her direction, “As for the urgency, I am not sure either. I do not think that we need to leave immediately, but, I would not lounge around the camp for much longer, sir.”

Cole barked a quick laugh, only a Royal would call running a military camp lounging around.

The Royal turned to Bradley, “The king requests you stay and that you are reinstated as the chief commander of this division. Furthermore, his Majesty believes a battle is coming, he asks that you start preparing.”

Bradley looked less than shocked but took his queue, “Very well, if that is all, I will take my leave. Farewell Prince Cole, Lord Sarah, I bid you a safe journey.” With a slight bow he ducked out of the tent. “I guess Royals make even high generals a little nervous.” Cole whispered to Sarah. With Bradley gone the Royal looked back to Cole, “The king warned me that you are prone to taking your time, so I have made some arrangements. I have sent for my things to be placed in your tent, Prince Gordsing, but I suggest we do not take more than a few days to depart. Of course from now until we meet with the king, I will be by your side and I am yours to command.”

Sarah groaned when she heard the last sentence; Cole gave a light chuckle. Unlike most people he liked Royals. Normal people found them unsettling, their face tattoos and serious demeanor, such things drove people away. Cole, for some reason, found them hilarious, he would often go out of his way just to try and provoke a Royal into having a reaction. Both Sarah and the Royals somehow didn’t see the humor. Cole leaned in until he was but an inch or two from the Royals face and looked at her tattoos, she had a sword underneath her right eye with the blade pointing down her cheek and a dark blue stripe that ran vertically across her left eye, it matched the color of her eyes. There was supposedly a great deal of lore behind a Royal’s tattoos but for the most part Cole hadn’t been able to figure it out, he figured the sword under her eye meant something about sacrificing herself and her sword for the king, or some other similar self sacrificing notion. Cole moved around as he examined her face, the Royal made no move to stop him and for the most part seemed to be unaffected by his presence.

Sarah cleared her throat, “Right, so, I guess we should be heading back to our tents and start putting our things in order. Shouldn’t we Cole?”

Noting the glaring lack of pleasure on her face, Cole straightened and tilted his head towards Sarah, “Oh very well.” He looked back at the Royal, “Come along then missy. We’ve got things to do, can’t just stand around all day like a statue.” With the demeanor of the aforementioned statue, the Royal turned and picked up her bag. Sarah seemed ready to get the whole thing over with but Cole was just beginning to think of fun things he could do to provoke the Royal. After all, apart from Sarah, most people treated him with too much respect, Lord Cole this and Prince Gordsing that, but not Royals. They were loyal to the king, not him.

Cole and his party walked back to the tent, the Royal hadn't put her hood back up and people started to steer clear of them, well out of her way. Cole knew he should heed his father's message, it was probably important, but he also had some affairs that needed to be put in order before he left. As the trio neared his tent, Sarah left towards her own tent, often she would stay in his but she didn't enjoy Royals' company and definitely wouldn't enjoy having to live with one. *Some day in the future she isn't going to have much of a choice.* Once inside, the Royal set down her pack and started to gather a little pile. Cole knew it was for him, in the unlikely case they had to suddenly depart, Royals liked to be prepared. Cole stripped off his shirt and boots, using some of the now cool water remaining from his bath he wiped his face and got into bed. It had been a long day. He was almost asleep when he heard the Royal lay out her mat at the foot of the bed. Apparently a defensive measure in their eyes, so they could respond immediately should a night attack occur. Cole had forgotten that little tidbit, of course remembering now, he chuckled, just one of the various reasons Sarah didn't like having Royals around. Cole laughed silently to himself, imagining Sarah's pouting face, he was just happy he'd gotten a female Royal and not some cave bear of a man. *Was that chance or father's doing?* A few more improper and then unrelated thoughts drifted through his mind as Cole slipped silently into a comfortable sleep.

Chapter 3 – Undocumented Fort, Alar

Natalie and Lox had been traveling steadily for a couple weeks. Riding on and off the road, sleeping fairly comfortably in the makeshift camps they set up every night. Sometimes in the trees, sometimes in an empty field. Despite the time they spent together, she had learned precious little about him. She knew he had been born in a small town, whose name she could no longer recall, but now lived in Ares. He was beyond fond of learning and had studied a great swath of subjects. Far more than she had, some of which she wasn't entirely sure existed, but all of which did not seem necessary to being a faze or any soldier really.

Beyond small discussions and the childhood nibblet of himself, he had remained fairly quiet. Alex had remained silent. The pair didn't speak much, either to each other, or to her. Despite what she had assumed to be a conversation between the two in the tower, now she wasn't even sure fazes could talk. In fact, Alex mostly ignored her and if she did ask a question, Lox would answer it. As the days passed, through a mixture of boredom and nerves she had eventually figured out that while Lox would always start with a short response, if she persisted long enough, he would eventually dive into fantastic detail on whichever subject she desired. Tales from ancient Drotia and Alar, methods for finding edible bark and plants, common tales of the stars, how to tell time and direction at sea, and a dozen other topics. His mind seemed to contain a scholar's library on just about every subject she brought up, which was especially remarkable given his age. Well, every subject that did not include himself.

Beyond the blatantly obvious fact that Lox was a faze assassin, there was nothing Natalie was able to gather of his current life. She couldn't even figure out how high in faze rank he was. When she asked him about his employment or duties, he simply said, "I work for the king." To which she would respond with, "Doesn't everyone work for the king?" Then he would

shrug limply and say, "I guess so." Eventually she decided to give up and dropped the subject; there were plenty of other topics to occupy her thoughts with.

The further they traveled together the more he baffled her. A few days into their journey Natalie had half heartedly complained about her clothing being dirty and duly unfit for travel, fully expecting him to scoff or blow her off. Instead he had offered to buy her new ones at the next town. She had assumed this to be some sort of verbal dismissal of the topic but then, sure enough, when the pair had arrived at a town big enough to have a merchant selling clothes, he tossed her a small purse of Drotian coins. When she had opened it up to count the Slivers or Rods she found herself pushing around a dozen or so Clips and a pair of Stacks. The pouch contained more money than she had ever carried at one time. In fact, it was probably more than most nobles carried at one time. Before she could even mentally grasp the situation he had wandered off, talking about making sleeping arrangements at a nearby inn and where she could find him once she was done. Natalie had half laughed, assuming he was joking. Wondering how he could trust someone he had just met with such a purse, but he continued off toward the inn without so much as a second glance.

Taking what she assumed to be a rare opportunity, she bounced between the few stores the town could support. She went about purchasing new traveling clothes, and while she hadn't exactly squandered money, afterwards she felt she might have spent more than she should have ought to. That night, she slowly walked up the steps to the room, suddenly worried and fully expecting Lox to chastise her for how much she had spent. After entering their room she sheepishly started to hand the bag back to him, notably lighter than when she had received it. He had waved her off. "I have plenty of money. This way, if you ever need anything, you don't need to find me in order to purchase it" The whole ordeal had left her quite confused. How could he have so much money? She had never heard of anyone, let alone a soldier, giving a bag of coin away to someone except maybe some priests or witch doctors. She was quite sure noblemen would hold onto stale bread with more concern.

As they traveled, Natalie sometimes wondered why she had come along, and why she continued to remain. Even after multiple internal debates she didn't have a clear answer. The only thing that kept her going was an experience long in the past; the time she had spent with her grandma. It was the only memory Natalie had of her grandmother. The old, stout, woman had pulled her aside, taking Natalie's small face in her heavily wrinkled hands, she had stared critically into Natalie's eyes. She held the gaze for a long moment before speaking, "Natalie, there will be times in your life when you will have to make hard decisions. Decisions that will change your life. Decisions that will take you places or will keep you home. Your mother and I, as much as it pains me to say, always took the cautious route." Her grandmother then shook her head in sorrow, "We have had good lives, stable homes and beautiful daughters but I often wonder what could have been. I was never a talented weaver like your great grandmother but your mother was quite gifted when she was younger. Quite learned in both books and weaving but she often would shy away from using either. Now I don't want to push you away from such a life, in many ways it is a great gift to live quietly but I ask you to look where your mother is now, darling. I can not tell you what your future will hold, but I hope you see, and consider, both options when forks in your road appear." It had always seemed to be an odd thing to say to

young girl but it stuck with her to this day. In fact, Natalie had followed the advice more than once. She often didn't know if she had made the right decision, but she knew now she wouldn't end up like her mother.

Natalie rode slightly behind Lox as they approached the small cutthroat town, her horse offset to his right as to give the appearance of common riding companions. Her nerve had begun to waver as they drew near. The place might better be described as an arena than a town. It was full of thieves, mercenaries, and an assortment of other dangerous and barbaric folk. The locals were almost entirely men and the few women who did live in the town, aside from those who were the dangerous type themselves, were effectively limited to being cooks, barmaids, or prostitutes. Many were a combination. A small tingle slithered down her spine as she thought of such a life. Natalie hadn't been looking forward to this way-point.

Lox pulled their horses over to the side of the road. He was originally hesitant to give her a horse but after a few days of riding he had given in. Her horse was not quite as big or young as his but it plodded along steadily and allowed her much more freedom and comfort. Lox leaned close and caught her attention, speaking with a muted but serious tone, "Before we go into the town there are a few things we need to go over." He paused to make sure she was paying attention before continuing, "First, never leave my side. Period. This is a dangerous town and I don't want to have to kill half the men here because you went wandering off." Natalie cringed a little, feeling not unlike a small child being warned off playing with fire or some other dangerous toy. "I know you're used to respect because you are a high class weaver, but believe me, your weaving prowess matters little to these men. Weavers use passive magic, they know you can't shoot lightning bolts so don't waste time trying to make threats. If you lose me, you are to cast a flash web." He held up his hand to stop her from talking, "which I will teach you in a moment." Natalie was growing slightly frightened but even more that that she was increasingly curious, she had been through rough towns before but people usually didn't bother weavers. And what was a flash web, and how was Lox going to teach her? Lox continued, ignoring her internal pause, "This is a vile town and the king likes it that way, it keeps people from straying too close to the border. That means he doesn't do much to patrol the area or control the people. These men have no alliance and don't care about anyone but themselves, if they want something they take it. That includes you. Most would have no problem taking a young woman such as yourself, and those who would aren't going to come running to your defense." Natalie shrank down a little further. "So do as I say and stay close. These men respond to power, they don't care about anything else so that is what I will show them. If things go south, get behind me. I've been through here plenty of times before, I know how to handle these affairs."

Natalie nodded. The past few nights she had been looking forward to sleeping in a real bed, but now she longed for a spot far away from this place. Once Lox was satisfied that she had taken his warnings seriously he sat down and motioned for her to join him on the ground. "Do you know how to cast a traditional flare web?"

Natalie nodded.

“Good, that will save quite a bit of time. My flash webs are similar to those, but, with some minor additions.” He positioned his hands in front of him, “First instead of shooting your flare into the air, I want you to simply let it shine right in front of you. This is done by releasing the web line early in the cast. Instead of shooting up in the air, the flare will sit around you. If done correctly, it will temporarily blind everyone near you as their eyes adjust. A relatively short diversion but one that may give you some precious time. Now watch, but shield your eyes, you don't want to blind yourself while doing these” His hands started working then, moving in and out, flowing around as if he were building a normal flare. Suddenly he stopped, the small orb he was crafting floated in front of his chest, “Let's start with that. Try letting the flare go in front of you rather than shooting it into the sky.”

Natalie started to stand but he motioned for her to stay sitting, “It is easier to cast while standing.” Lox started to say something but quickly stopped himself. He took a short breath before starting again in a softer tone, “Yes, but you might not have such a luxury when men are trying to pin you down, and their hands are groping at your body.” Natalie sat back down, slightly embarrassed by her naivety, the sharpening contrast between school and reality coming back into focus. Clearing her mind, she nodded and started to create the flare in her hands. Once it had grown to a decent size she looked up, “So, I just let go of it?”

“Not exactly. If you do, it will quickly fade like mine did. You see, flare webs get their power from the energy you put in, traditionally this comes from the weaver throwing their arm up to shoot it. The harder you throw your hand the faster and brighter the flare. But we aren't shooting a flare, we don't want the light to go anywhere beyond a couple feet. Instead, our flare's energy will come from clapping our hands together. The impact will help give strength to the web and in doing so it will shine brighter. Just like the throw, the harder you clap, the brighter the flash”

Natalie figured that made sense, but in truth she hadn't thought to explore the topic before. She took the glowing ball and clapped her hands together, the light burst through her hands with such intensity that she instinctively covered her face and turned away. When she could finally see again, Lox was smiling, “That was excellent. Most people don't get that right away; perhaps you *do* have a knack for weaving.” He looked very pleased with the knowledge, “Maybe I will be able to teach you a thing or two after all” Natalie on the other hand practically beamed, not only was it rare for Lox to be some friendly but she had also learned something new about weaving. Before she could reflect he was speaking again, “As you probably noticed, that was brighter than a normal flare. The clap allows for energy to be added to the flare without wasting any energy on speed or movement. It is important to note that the harder the clap the brighter the light. There are ways you can also emit sound with the flash but we'll work on that later. For now, we'll work on light control. For example, should you need a sustained light instead of a flare, slowly pull the light apart with your hands instead of clapping. It will feel like you're pulling apart honey but the light will glow like a torch for a time and is invaluable when you find yourself lacking the ability to see.

Natalie tried it excitedly, but despite her immediate success with the flashing web, the torch turned out to be a tougher challenge. She slowly began to become frustrated as her flare continued to burn out as soon as she stopped molding it. Sensing her growing irritation, Lox stepped in. He reached out and began to guide her hands, "You need to pull the web, not just move your hands. There needs to be resistance, the more strings you pull, the harder the web will be to stretch but the longer it will burn." After a dozen more tries and a few guided examples, Natalie started to understand. Her fingers wove intricately into the many layers inside the web. She felt their ethereal matter wrapping around her fingers. Her muscles strained, slowly stretching the fibers apart, the soft light of the flare burning steadily. It illuminated the pair brightly, lasting until she could no longer stretch her arms further apart. After a few more successes she took a break, her brow dripping of sweat from the sustained effort. She turned towards Lox, "How do you know how to weave?" She shook her hands, trying to loosen them up, they were feeling quite tight after so many intricate spells, "You aren't a weaver, and non-weaver's don't have the ability to study webs. Even those weavers who can see the webs can't explain how they work. Yet, despite all that, you've just taught me how to manipulate a web in a way I've never even heard of."

Lox shrugged, "Fazes are required to take classes when they are young. Most take things like weapons combat, hand to hand training, battle strategy, military history, and the like, but I was a fast learner and decided to stand in on weaver lessons as well. I found out that, contrary to popular belief, almost anyone can weave. It is just the power and control that varies. Everyday people can't see webs and would struggle to create so much as a trace of one, however I've seen regular towns people who can do small webs. Things like add a small amount of heat to their bodies or dull some pain. Oftentimes they do such small webs without even realizing it. Of course traditional weavers can have great control over the threads, creating great complicated patterns. But as you should well know, there is significant variety in weaver control. That is why the weaver ranking system exists, level one weavers can't do much beyond maybe tripping a soldier or two, and can't hold onto more than one web at a time. Tier fours, like yourself, however, could trip a whole squadron of men and can hold onto tens of webs at once. It's simply a mixture of natural talent and dedicated practice.

As for my knowledge, the weaver students didn't particularly like having a faze hanging around but the king said that I could practice with them and so I did. Unfortunately I never became overly adept at creating or manipulating webs but I had a knack for understanding and repurposing them." He smiled and chuckled, his eyes looking slightly distant while remembering his youth, "The weaver instructor was very pleased when I showed him those same flare manipulations that I just showed you. He and I began to spend a great deal of time together after that. Discussing the vast and varied possibilities of webs"

Natalie sat quietly for a moment, letting it all seep in. Suddenly it hit her, "You created these webs when you were in schooling?" He nodded. Natalie's jaw dropped, "Most weavers don't create new webs in their entire life. Level four weavers often spend years developing new techniques"

Lox chuckled again, "Like I said, I was a good student. Webs were just another subject to me." He shook his head, "But that is besides the point, that is only the first part of the web."

Lox stopped to make sure Natalie was paying attention again and not lost in some fantasized world of her imagination before continuing.

"The flare as I've taught you is useful in causing a diversion but it is probably not going to get you out of harms way. To make it more useful I made an addition." He put his hand together, "Right after you clap your hands to make the flare I want you to throw your arms out to your sides like you're stopping walls from closing in on you. Much the same motion as sending out an alarm web." He did the motion, "instead of sending out an alarm though, just send out the light." He looked to make sure she was following. "The key is to loosen your hands and keep them open, any remaining light from the flare will be sent out in quickly dissipating waves. With any luck, I will see these waves and can follow them back to you." Natalie nodded. Lox motioned for her to try it.

Natalie tried, her flare worked but when she tried to send out the waves nothing happened. Lox gave her a few critiques on technique and she tried again. Natalie practiced the webs most of the afternoon breaking only to eat and stretch. Lox wasn't satisfied until she had gotten four successful attempts in a row with each. He had expected her to get irritated with the repetition but surprisingly she never did. Instead she just seemed to grow more determined. During one of their final breaks Lox leaned in, "I am used to people complaining about learning webs, but I guess real weavers are used to practice." Natalie shrugged, "My old instructor would often make me practice doing the same spell over and over for hours. Fatigue can throw a weaver off and he wanted to make sure I would get it right even when I didn't have time or energy to be careful. Lox nodded approvingly, "Sounds like a good instructor to me!" With the weaving all settled Lox stood up and started preparing a meal.

The pair ate dinner with quiet conversation, Alex padded around their small camp, often present but always silent. Natalie noticed the wolf's gaze, "Why are Alex's eyes not red like other fades? In class we were told all fades are black with red eyes" Lox shrugged, he didn't know why Alex was different either. After that the conversation grew sparse. Once Lox had finished eating he set about sharpening his blades, "Tell me Natalie, what do you know of gravitational pressure?" Caught slightly off guard, Natalie thought back to her schooling. She spoke slowly idly picking at a piece of bread, "Not too much I guess. I know that castors and weavers produce it, supposedly other magic dealers too like necromancers and warlocks, and perhaps an occasional faze or goliath. Most of the time you can't really feel it unless the person is really concentrating." She paused briefly, "I haven't dealt with it much but I'm told proficient castors and high level weavers can control it as at will. Usually as a distraction, something unexpected to throw their enemies off guard."

Lox carefully laid down his knives, "Can you control your pressure?" She put down the bread, "Mostly but I haven't trained much with it. I'm told weaver pressure isn't very strong so it

didn't seem to be worth spending too much time on it when there was so much else to learn." Lox nodded, "Well if you wouldn't mind, I'd appreciate it if you gave it a try." Slightly confused by the request but happy to oblige, Natalie focused, her face went blank and her body tensed. Her eyes scrunched and her jaw flexed in effort. Lox felt the air thicken, a little. The heavy air lingered a few moments then she let go and the soft pressure lifted. Lox sat back down, "Was that everything?" He hadn't meant for it to be condescending, though Natalie seemed a little hurt, giving a small nod. "Very well, when you use the flare use your pressure too. It won't help you escape trouble but it may help me find you. Otherwise, please don't use your webs or your pressure. I don't need some idiot chasing you because he wants to add a weaver to his trophy collection." She nodded again, after their ominous talk earlier that day she had no plans to do anything that might make her stand out. *I wish there was a web for invisibility.* She pouted silently, though now speculating on the possibility of such a web. The duo finished their work, cleaned up the small camp, and headed into town.

It was getting dark as Lox and Natalie wound their way through town's streets. All of the buildings looked worn down, halfway between abandonment and demolition. Lights flickered dully in the windows and rough shadows moved behind the glass. There weren't a lot of people out and those who were mostly kept to themselves. The chilly wind stole what little warmth existed from the barren streets. Women called from doorways, informing anyone who passed by how they might be kept warm. Lox walked purposefully through the small town, ignoring everything around him, until he reached the inn he was looking for. It was the biggest in the town and compared to the other buildings, looked remarkably sturdy. *Lox mentioned that was important.* She hadn't asked why. He glanced back briefly, then walked through the door. They were met with a large room half-full of large men. They were drinking and eating. Most sat alone, dispersed intermittently across the open area. A few groups gathered around larger tables, being far louder than the individuals. Men were groveling or calling at the barmen and barmaids. The room smelt of burnt roast and old ale. Lox made his way towards the bar and started talking to the inn's keeper.

As Natalie followed, unfortunately noticing that many of the men appeared to be tracking her. They glanced toward Lox too, sizing him up before darting back to her. Dread began to fill her, she was keenly aware of the tension building. They hadn't been by the bar long before one behemoth of a man stood up from a table, "That's a mighty fine whore you've got there stranger. Why not take the night off and share her with the rest of us." His voice had a strange accent to it, almost like a mix between Drotian and the mountain folk. Lox ignored the man, instead continuing his discussion with the inn's keeper. The big man, presumably annoyed that his verbal jab hadn't had an impact, resorted to a more physical one. He grabbed an empty bottle sitting on his table and casually threw it, "Hey, scrawny maggot, I'm talking to you!" Lox's hand flickered as he caught the bottle out of the air, putting it smoothly and softly on the bar.

Apologizing briefly to the keeper, Lox turned around. He paused a moment as he looked at the man who'd thrown the bottle, "I suggest you sit down and shut up." Lox's eyes burned intensely, their blue light dancing brightly in the dimly lit inn. "I don't take kindly to people insulting my friends. Especially those with the wit and appearance to match a troll." The man, not caught off guard at all, laughed. He motioned to his group and the whole table stood up, five

large, drunk, burly men. They all leered menacingly at Lox, “Half wits and trolls you say? Well, I can't say I like your tone little man, I think my boys ought to teach you a firm lesson in manners. Oh, and don't worry, I'll make sure your *friend* doesn't get lonely.” The brute let out a deep chuckle, blatantly rubbing his crotch as if to further emphasize his point. The men around him laughed and started towards the bar, knives and blades quickly appearing from coats and boots. Lox stretched out his arm, pointing in their direction, “Very well, not the first idiots in this town to forfeit their lives.” Natalie started to reach for her dagger when her head exploded in pain. She doubled over, almost falling as the whole room started to shake. Chairs around the tavern broke underneath the men sitting on them. Glasses shattered on the tables, their contents flinging themselves quickly to the ground. Lox walked slowly through the room, people crawling away from him as best they could on their stomachs or all fours. The air was heavy and hard to breath. Natalie was being squished between four walls with a giant standing on her shoulders. She struggled to remain upright, only two or three men remained sitting in the room now. She was sure she wasn't going to make it. Her vision started to blur, blackness creeping in from the outside. Her body started to feel cold as if the very warmth of her blood was being sapped into the crushing air. Suddenly the pain vanished, Natalie collapsed, her body slouching to her knees. She looked up and saw Lox standing tall, the bodies of the men who had insulted her littered the floor around him. Their pale eyes gazing into the afterlife's haze. Lox turned in a full circle around the room, his eyes burning into everyone he looked at, “Anyone else?”

The inn was silent. Men averted their gaze and turned to finding new chairs. Lox nodded and walked back to the bar. She noticed his face suddenly changed to a mixture of embarrassment and apologetic. He put out his hand and helped Natalie to her feet, “Sorry Natalie, I forgot to leave the pressure off of you. I guess I'm not used to having company.” She nodded dumbly. He looked back at the keeper, “Sorry for the mess. I hope this covers the room and cleanup” He handed the inn's keeper some coins. The keeper took them slowly, as if deciding whether to take the coin or not, “Thanks, I guess. Though it's no't your fault really, tha' man an' his gang 'ave been naugh' bu' trouble for me and my inn. 'lieve it or no't I think you migh' 'ave saved more 'han a few people's lives wit' that stunt you jus' pulled.” Motioning for them to follow, he led them off towards their room. Lox put his arm under Natalie and supported her up the stairs.

The keeper told him he would grab some food and drink for the two of them. Lox thanked the man and laid Natalie on the bed, sitting down beside her. He felt her small hand grab his arm, “How did you do that?” Her face was pale, “I didn't think that one could be both a faze and a castor.” He removed her hand carefully, speaking softly, “I'm not a castor.” She didn't look convinced, “But that pressure. How can you have such pressure?” Lox shrugged, “Truthfully? I don't know. I just, do.” He scratched behind his ear, again almost as if he were embarrassed, “I'm sorry I put you through that, though I figured you had been trained to deal with pressure.” “We did” she shivered, “but nothing like that. The castor that taught us was nothing like that. Your pressure was so violent. It felt like it wanted to suffocate me and smash me into the ground.” She sat up and curled into a ball next to him. “I thought I was going to die. My shoulders ached against some unseen weight and each breath was like sucking in water.” He slowly rubbed her upper back, “Yeah, I've heard that before, that my pressure is different. Probably has something to do with me being faze.” He gave an empty laugh, “I guess I'll have to

teach you some gravity defenses.” She simply nodded and laid down, curling into a tighter ball. He added a log to the fire and grabbed another blanket to put over her. He then sat in a chair, idly watching the flames as Natalie's soft breathes declined into a steady pattern as she drifted off to sleep.

“What do you think Alex? Was it wise to bring her with me?”

The wolf grew into being, padding up to the bed before sitting on its hind legs, “Hard to say, she is surprisingly trusting of you, much more than I would have guessed. Especially considering you almost just killed her.”

“Unreasonably? Hmm, I guess so... You know I needed an opportunity to test her. That was practically the whole point of coming here. She did well, very well in fact. I put over twice, close to three times the pressure on her as I did everyone else.”

“She wasn't able to stay on her feet.”

“She almost did, made it right to the very end. Plus very few have the constitution to remain standing. Remember Norb? He fell to the ground much more quickly and was almost crushed the first time I did that to him.”

“Norb doesn't have any pressure. He is just a human.”

“Well, mostly. Either way, it is done now. I think she is performing excellently”

“How many more tests do you have? Which was the first? The purse? Was that an attempt to test her greed with all that coin? Hah, she still carries that around and treats it like some sort of infant with a precious blanket. Keeps it nearby at all times”

“Ahhh indeed, she does seem too attached to that money. I don't think she had much before now, perhaps Drotia doesn't pay quite as well as Alar. Though still, she is much like Norb in that regard too, he still can't spend money very well, always bartering and bickering trying to save a pin here and there”

“What was next then? The horse? She must have shown honesty with that, or perhaps low bravery. She could have easily taken the horses and rode back to the Drotians while she was taking one of her watches.”

“True, I had thought about that. She might know that fazes can be faster than horses, in which case she might have thought I would catch her. Though, that wasn't really a test. Two people with packs are too much for one horse. Regardless I don't think she wants to leave, and I don't think she's a coward. Despite what reservations you may have.” A small smile played across his lips.

“And magic? I guess that was a test as well? She learned your webs very quickly. Maybe she is far more clever than I gave her credit for back at the tower. And as you noted, she didn't completely crack under your pressure, after all.”

“I wonder if she trusts me. I believe she does, she didn't seem nervous afterwards. I wonder if I can trust her.” Lox was half murmuring to himself

“Why did you want her anyway? It's not like you, to have a traveling companion.”

“I don't know.” He walked over to the window and stared into the night, “I *do* know one thing though. A storm is brewing Alex. This war has been stagnant for too long. Both sides have grown weary of small skirmishes and messy raids. Oh, I'm not sure what is going to set it off but when the war returns. Truly returns, I want to be with people I trust.”

Alex bobbed his large head in agreement, “Arias huh? He did seem eager for you to finish this mission and come back. What do you think your next mission is?”

“I'm not sure but if my gut is to be trusted, it's going to be important. Every mission Arias has sent me on recently has been too generic, killing important people, gathering new information, infiltrating this facility, he is causing more distractions than destruction.”

“Perhaps it is just like your tests on Natalie. Perhaps he is testing you. This could be the last one.”

Lox gave quiet snort, “There's a thought. Well if you're right then I hope you're also right about this being the last.”

There was a soft knock on the door, Lox waved at Alex and walked over. The wolf faded out of existence. When Lox opened the door the inn's keeper pushed in a small cart. It was loaded with bread, soup, and wine on the top, with pieces of dry meat stacked neatly on the bottom tray. Fortunately, the inn's keeper noticed Natalie sleeping and refrained from speaking; Lox nodded his thanks and the keeper bowed his way back out.

Lox quietly moved the food to the room's small table and started setting out dishes. He was just pouring some glasses of wine when he heard the bed rustle. Natalie was sitting up with the blanket around her small form, her face had begun regaining much of its former color. Lox motioned for her to join him, “The inn's keeper brought some food. If you're hungry.” She smiled at him, “Starving. We haven't had a solid meal since we left the last town.” “I'll pardon your slight against my cooking, but I must insist you come to the table.” Her smile grew warmer. He bent down and half-picked her up half guided her, still wrapped in the blanket, to the table. The sleep and food seemed to lighten her spirits.

After they finished, she helped him clean up the small table. Lox laid down on the bed, “Sorry about having to share a bed, the innkeeper isn't used to me having friends. I should be big enough though, and it's going to be a while before we sleep in comfort again. We're not going to be able to stop in any towns from here to Aires. It's a pretty long trek; I've asked the

inn's keeper to pick up some rations for the final stretch of our journey. We should be able to head out tomorrow morning before the streets get busy and make good time.” Natalie absently nodded, too tired and warm to speak. The comfortable embrace of a full stomach took over and Lox lay on his back, eyes closed, sleepily thinking about the travel ahead. Natalie blew out the candle and quietly slipped into the large bed next to him. Her back close to his side as she scrunched up her pillow and drifted back to sleep.

Chapter 4 – Vox Military Camp

Cole woke up. The royal, Charlette, or Char as she preferred, lay sleeping at the end of his bed as usual. The group was supposed to be leaving today; he had spent the last few days making sure everything was in order and saying farewells to the men he had befriended while living in the camp. He had enjoyed his time here and before Charlette had come he hadn't even realized that he was growing restless. Now that she was here, however, he could feel the stirring energy in his body. Though not in a huge rush to see his father, Cole was quite curious what his father wanted to talk to him about. He figured he would find out soon enough, but there were things to do first. Cole started to slide out of bed. His feet hadn't even touched the floor before Char started moving. Cole laughed, he was confident she had been dead asleep just moments before. Royals really were an impressive breed.

“Morning sunshine.” Charlette gave him an annoyed look, his favorite look to see on any royal's face. “Why were you trying to leave without waking me?”

“Oh Charlette, you just looked so peaceful, I couldn't bring myself to wake you.” he spoke with mock romance.

“I asked that you to call me Char, and nice try but you should know better than to try and sneak off around a royal.”

He ignored the last part and sat down next to her, “Char is no name for such a beautiful lady, Charlette is much more fitting.” She was pretty, in a mountain cat sort of way, her lean body wrapped in tightly fitted clothes, her blonde hair tied tightly in a braid. An undeniable strength emanating away from her. She was both beautiful and menacing. The type that moved with grace but was filled to the brink with deadly power. She shrugged, apparently not wanting to push the subject, “So, are we actually heading out today or do you have to say goodbye to the other half of the soldiers in this camp.” Cole patted her head as he got up, “We'll be on our way soon enough, don't you worry.”

Cole was just putting on his shirt when the tent flap opened. Sarah walked in carrying food, she was already dressed in her traveling garbs. The tight rugged pants she wore were similar to Charlette's but Sarah donned a looser shirt. She also wore her weaver's crest banded across her right arm. She usually didn't wear it in camp but it was an expected and helpful

formality when traveling. "Morning Cole, Char." Char finished putting on her travel garb as well. She was baring her royal insignia tight over her arm too, not that she needed it. Royals tended to stick out amongst normal people and soldiers like an old pine in a desert.

The group ate a pleasant breakfast and after Cole finally convinced everyone he truly intended on leaving, Sarah went off to grab her travel pack and finalize preparations with Bradley. Cole alternated between bites of food and assorted packing, while Charlette bounced around the tent, grabbing things and helping to fill Cole's bag. Since she had never fully unpacked her own, Charlotte was already set.

Cole was just tightening the final bag's strings up when Sarah returned, accompanied by Bradley and Cole's huge warhorse, Chester. Bradley walked comfortably over to Cole, "Are you sure you don't want a pack horse? You guys might want it for your extra belongings." Cole smiled, "We'll be alright. Chester here is used to carrying me after all, a few extra pounds won't bother him."

"Very well sir, if you insist." Bradley shrugged, "I also came to say goodbye, normally I would ride you out of camp but some scouts have come back and are quite insistent on talking to me right away." Bradley put up his hand to halt Cole's thoughts, "No, we'll be fine, you go on your way and travel safely." Cole let out a husky laugh and obliged. After everyone said their goodbyes, Sarah's being the longest and Charlotte's being a mere half sentence, the three waved him off.

Cole loaded the bags onto the horses as Sarah did a final walk around the tent to make sure Cole didn't leave anything that she deemed important. Cole, like Char, lived a mostly military life on the road and as such didn't have very much: a few changes of clothes, a couple trinkets he was fond of, some food, and of course, his weapons. Sarah, on the other hand, had a lot. Even at a military camp she seemed to accumulate items. More accessories than he could understand and Cole idly wondered if he should have kept the fourth horse after all. He almost mentioned it but thought it better to hold his tongue. They were in no rush, their horses could take breaks if they needed and some of the men could help share the load. Cole wasn't fond of traveling in a group but Bradley insisted that he take a small guard of fifteen men with him. Char and Sarah were less than helpful to Cole in arguing the point.

The trio went towards the east border of the camp where the men were to be waiting. As they reached the camp edge, they could see the men saddled and ready to leave. As the three past, the soldiers fell in line behind them. Cole was relieved to see that Bradley had listened enough to not send goliaths with him. He didn't need protection and it would have been a terrible waste to have a goliath with him should an attack actually occur at the camp. Forming up, the group left through the east gate.

Cole, leading the party, immediately turned south. Char quickly trotted up beside him, "Why are we going south?"

Sarah likewise brought her horse to his other side, "The fastest route would have been the east road."

He ignored them for a moment, smiling as he kept riding, "That's true but I haven't gone swimming in a while." Sarah rolled her eyes, his tone was very matter of fact about the subject. While he was a prince, he might sometimes act like a child or a stuck up diplomat. In these cases Sarah was there to ensure he didn't go too far, "**We** don't need to go swimming, **we** need to go see your father."

Char chimed in as well, "I agree with Sarah. I don't think this is a wise choice of path. It will add days to our trip going around the great plains. The fastest route is to cut across then skirt the mountains down to Taria"

"Well I'm glad you two are in agreement but we're still going to swing by the lake." He stretched, "I think a stop in Tule might be productive, before we make our way to Taria."

Char, suddenly seeming to understand something Sarah did not, simply nodded as if that response made any more sense than the last. "Cole, what does that mean? What is Tule and why are we stopping there?"

"It's a pretty little beach town right on the edge of the northern lake, mild weather and perfect for a little vacation." Cole laughed as he saw Sarah get even more confused verging on irritated, obviously annoyed that she was missing something.

"He wants to swing by Tule because there have been rumors of, ah, poor soldier conduct in that area." Apparently Char didn't seem to find Sarah's embarrassment as funny as Cole did.

"Charlotte! You ruin all the fun!" He shook his finger in mock disapproval. He turned back to Sarah, "Problem is, it is hard to know what poor behavior is. I've heard everything from the men being excessively rowdy, a common complaint for a small town mind you, to reports of soldiers engaging in, well more nefarious activities with local women." Cole's tone became soft and somber, "I hope it's the former." Sarah still appeared confused, scrunching her face slightly trying to put it all the pieces together. Char filled the rest in, "Should it be the latter, then the men responsible are to be summarily executed and the whole military structure at the location will have to be reorganized."

"Ok, but then why didn't you just send some men down there? Why are we going?"

Cole shrugged, "Not just anyone can command the execution of soldiers or the demotion of officers, it has to be a higher ranking general to pass such an order and it's not like I was going to send Bradley. In fact, that is why I agreed to bring these fine men with us."

"In case the men resist? Cole, there's no way someone would argue with you. You're not only the heir to the throne but you're a high goliath. Even conniving soldiers would know better than to disobey."

Char chimed in again, apparently seeing the plan much more clearly than Sarah, "He doesn't need them for back up, he brought them to replenish the soldiers there. It's safe to say they'll be needed, the reports indicated that there were more than one or two errant soldiers, my guess is that Cole plans on replacing them with our current party."

Cole reached out and rubbed her head as though she were a small child, "Right you are Charlotte." He laughed again, dipping as she glowered in his direction. "I asked Bradley to give me some older, more loyal men. This area doesn't have many bandits or pillagers so the soldiers are more of a symbol for peace rather than fighters. I also want the people to realize they aren't being ignored, that their concerns have been heard, and that soldiers are not inherently vile."

Sarah looked around, she hadn't noticed it before but most of the men in the party were slightly older. Patches of gray in their hair and beards, their faces more wrinkled. Not to the point of being fragile but they had definitely weathered more than a few seasons, and by the number of scars, battles.

"But don't worry about that, it is probably nothing. This is mostly just an excuse for me to go swimming!" He started laughing, a great belly shaker of a laugh. Sarah slowly pulled her horse back to talk to Char. "Char, do *you* think it is nothing?" Char looked a little surprised that Sarah had chosen to ask her rather than press Cole, "I honestly don't know. I do know there have been some reports but I'm too inexperienced to know if that is common or not for an area such as Tule." Sarah looked less than satisfied with the answer, Char continued, "It happens sometimes, men get greedy, soldiers get bored. They get too wrung up and go wild. It used to happen quite often, now though, after the punishments got so severe, it has become more rare, though not unheard of." Char noticed Sarah looking uncomfortable, she leveled her voice, "Drotian soldiers are trained fighters, not some hired barbarians. They know the rules and they know the penalty for breaking the law. I do not believe it likely that we will have to... *release* anyone; I think Prince Cole is simply playing it safe."

Sarah nodded slowly. She wasn't entirely satisfied but she knew Char, a royal, wouldn't lie to her. She decided to change the subject. "Char, you seem very young to be a royal, you look like you are no older than Cole or I."

Char nodded, "I'm not. In fact, I was born a year after Cole. I was brought to the castle as an infant and spent my years growing up there." Sarah waited for Char to continue; "In my earlier years, I spent my time as a maid mostly. I helped with the cooking and cleaning in exchange for food and bedding. As I grew, one of the older maids insisted that I take lessons, and so I did, as often as I could without interfering with my chores. I enjoyed the distraction and over time it became apparent that I had a mind for the basic subjects. One day, my instructors asked the king if he would allow me to become a full student, rather than a maid. Upon his approval I was moved out of the servants corridor and into the student wing. I was overjoyed. I would finally be able to study without long hours of work afterward. My free time increased. I was able to explore the grounds more and meet people. As I became more involved though, my peers started to realize that I wasn't a noble or an heiress. Most didn't much care, I was just

another student to them. Sitting in classes, working through my studies, enjoying my youth, all the same as them. A small group however, didn't care for it. A few of the older boys, and girls, used to pick on me, calling me names and throwing me to the ground. Things like that.

“This lasted for a while, berating me occasionally but mostly just ignoring me. Then one day we got our final scores back. I was in the top three of the class. They saw my pride and it angered them. The idea that I, a nobody, could beat them was unfathomable. They grabbed me and took me out behind one of the buildings and started beating me. They said it was improper for an orphan to be smarter than a noble and that I must have cheated. I wasn't a fighter, at least not then. I curled into a ball on the ground as they kicked me. It went on for what felt like ages but then suddenly they stopped. A young boy had come around the corner eating a platter of chicken.” Sarah leaned in, surprised by Char's openness and intrigued by her story.

“I had never seen the boy before and apparently neither had the three boys beating me. They told him to get lost. The boy ignored their taunts and asked rather dumbly 'Why are you beating up that little girl?' The bullies told him it was none of his business and that he should scam before the same happened to him. The young boy started laughing then, 'I think it would take more than a few bozos like you three to take me down.' Which, unsurprisingly, only made the three boys more angry and they went after the little boy with the chicken. I tried to tell him to run but I couldn't work up the strength, so I just laid there in the dirt and watched. As the three moved toward him, the curious boy carefully put down the food and then proceeded to methodically beat the three bullies into the ground. It was so smooth and simple, his movements so orderly as he casually broke them apart. After it was all over he picked up his chicken and walked over to me, an odd smile on his face as if nothing had ever happened.

“The little boy had just beaten three older boys, all twice his size, with barely a scratch on him and didn't seem affected by it at all. He held his hand out and helped me stand. As I struggled to remain upright, he offered me some chicken. When I declined he seemed quite confused but shrugged it off, 'your loss' he said, laughing. I stumbled as I tried to walk, the boy caught me. He then handed me the tray and picked me up. The boy carried me across the grounds into the castle, not bothered by my weight at all. Finally when we came to the medical area, he put me on the bed and told the lady working to help me. He said, 'This girl needs help. She turned down my chicken so I know something's not right.'”

Sarah laughed, “Who was this child?” Char looked over at Sarah and smiled, a small, private, smile, “It was Prince Cole of course.” Sarah smiled too, “That does sound like him, more focused on food than anything else. He never stopped eating when we were kids, we girls used to speculate that he would be prince rolly polly when he grew up.' she giggled, 'I don't think there was ever a time he didn't have some snack on him. It's strange though, I spent most of my childhood with Cole and I don't recall hearing such a story.’”

Char seemed to recede sheepishly, “I don't think that it was a very big deal to him, in fact I doubt he even remembers that it happened. I mean, I didn't learn who had helped me until the next morning when I had recovered slightly. I asked the nurse and she seemed a bit shocked that I didn't know. When she told me it was the prince, I was so embarrassed. I had heard

stories of the young prince and often dreamt about meeting him, as many young girls did. I finally had and he was just as remarkable as the stories I'd made in my head, fighting off three bullies and carrying a lowly orphan maid." Sarah stifled a laughter at how romantic a royal was acting but didn't want to risk embarrassing her. "It was then, after I got better, that I decided that I would become a soldier. It was clear, I wanted to protect people the way Prince Cole had protected me."

"So you just up and joined the army? Didn't anyone protest?"

"Initially, yes. I was ten or eleven at the time but it wasn't unheard of for kids to join the forces, especially because I was an orphan. I'm not sure anyone would have guessed I would become a royal but then again, neither did I."

"Yes, but *how* did it come about? I've never heard of someone so young being admitted."

Char's cheeks went a little red, "Sorry, I had forgotten that was the point of the story. I got so caught up in my memories! It is a bit of a tale, are you sure you wish to hear it all?"

Sarah nodded eagerly.

Char smiled, "Well, as I said, I joined the forces and while I had excelled at books I found weaponry to be much more difficult. We were trained in all forms of weaponry, swords, bows, clubs ect. I struggled with most, often having to put in long hours to get acceptable marks but I was determined. Eventually, as we expanded to more unique weaponry, I started to make solid headway. Though, it wasn't until I got my hands on a bladed staff that I began to stand out. It seemed to fit me naturally, more like an extension of my being than a tool like many of the other weapons had." She noticed Sarah looking at her horse, "Oh, I would have brought one with me but mine broke on my journey to meet you. It will be replaced when we return. Anyway, I did all my studies and even participated in a few small battles on the border when one of my officers recommended I try officer training. After all, it made sense given my aptitude for learning and lack of skill when fighting in large uniform groups. With his recommendation I was admitted and thus went back to school. A few years later I was awarded a low officer rank, I was just about seventeen at this point. After the honoring ceremony I left camp and was sent out to work below some other mid level officers near the narrows.

"It was there that I honed my skills, both in battle and strategy. For the next few years I was promoted multiple times and soon became second only to the general in my camp. I think he must have felt threatened by my rapid rise because he sent me back to the capital. That was a bit over a year ago. I then taught and trained soldiers while I waited to be sent back out into the field. As time bore on I became irritated and started spending countless hours training with my staff, alone on the grounds. One night I was in a particularly foul mood and went out to let off some steam, next thing I know I see a giant step out of the shadows. Given my mood and current mindset I was halfway into my attack before I realized it was King Gordsing himself. Quickly apologizing I fell to a knee, terrified that I'd let my clouded mind get the better of me.

The king laughed and told me to stand up. He asked me if I would like to go for a walk. Obviously I accepted.

“As we strolled through the gardens, the king informed me that his son was getting older. Approaching the age where he would rule should King Gordsing himself die. He said that it was time for Cole to have his own royal guard. Being unfamiliar with royal norms, I simply nodded and agreed. Then out of the blue, he asked me if I would be willing to be the first, and perhaps, eventually the leader of the prince's guard. King Gordsing told me I would train with his royals for six to eight months, or however long his team deemed necessary, then I would be appointed to Prince Cole's royal.

“I was so overwhelmed at the time that I don't believe I even comprehended the whole situation. Like I had the whole night, I simply agreed. King Gordsing said he was pleased, he informed me that Prince Cole didn't like giving older people personal orders very much and thus wanted Cole's royals to be closer to his son's age. After that, I spent the better part of a year training with the king's royals. Then, a few weeks back, he comes to me and tells me it's time for my first task. So, I packed up my bags and came to retrieve you two.”

“Char, that is quite the tale! Have you talked to Cole at all? He might be interested to know you two have a past.”

Char blushed, “Apologies for rambling, I fear I might have made it out to be more than it is. It was really only that one encounter. I doubt he remembers.”

Sarah smiled knowingly, Cole was a remarkable person in his own way. He made more of an impact on the lives he came in touch with than he often realized. “I still think you should tell him. He loves stories, but you might want to leave out the part about the chicken unless you want to hear him go on for days about the glorious foods he used to feast on and how now he must struggle on without the hope of eating such delicious foods but on a rare occasion.” She snorted a laugh, “Sometimes I wonder if he will ever truly grow up.”

Char was still blushing, obviously she wasn't used to dealing so casually with royalty.

“So Ms. Sarah, how long have you known Lord Cole?” She cut herself off, “I apologize if I am intruding of course.”

“Not at all, Char. I have known him since we were toddlers, although we weren't very close until we were about ten or so. A little before you met him I guess.”

“How did you meet? I mean for you two to become so close.”

Sarah laughed and tossed her hair, “Sorry Char, that is an interesting tale in itself. But I don't want to get into it now, I will tell you another time when we can, I promise. Until then you will just have to wait.”

“Very well Ms. Sarah.”

“And don't call me Ms. Sarah, Sarah is quite fine. You are a royal, officially we are of equal standing, and more importantly, friends don't use titles.” Char smiled; Sarah trotted off to rejoin Cole in the lead. Happy that she had talked to Char and despite her original thoughts, Sarah was pleased that of all royal's she'd met, Char was Cole's royal.

Chapter 5 – Capital City Ares

Natalie and Lox strolled leisurely through Ares. The two of them had been traveling for weeks, and while Lox appeared as alert as ever, Natalie was exhausted. The sun was just peaking as they entered through the city gates, but Lox warned her that it would probably be near night by the time they actually arrived at his home. He lived on the far west side of the city, his house sitting on the cliffs overlooking the sea. With the end so near, they pressed onward.

She had been to Taria before, Drotia's capital, and was expecting Ares to be similar. Instead, Natalie found the cities to be polar opposites. Taria had been built into the mountains; the buildings were tight and stacked upon each other, allowing the large number of people that resided there to inhabit a fairly small area. Ares though, was a huge span of buildings, sprawling for miles across the flat land. Some buildings climbed a few stories upwards but most were only one floor. In fact others were no more than a single room with a door.

When they first arrived at Ares, Natalie had been skeptical that it would really take all day to cross the city, but now she wondered if it might take even longer. Lox watched as her eyes bounced around, much like a curious child. Her head swiveled back and forth trying to take it all in. Lox spoke merrily, “Welcome to Ares, city of the king.” Natalie's head turned towards him, “This is amazing! It is nothing like I had imagined.” Lox raised an eyebrow, “Huh? What did you imagine?”

“I don't really know. I guess I sort of assumed it would be a huge wasteland. You know, streets filled with beggars and trash, people looking run down, living in shacks while aristocrats and lords loomed above, forever looking down on the lot.”

Lox laughed, “What in the open blue sky made you think that?”

Rose tinted Natalie's cheeks as she cast her gaze downward, “I guess. Well, because you guys were supposed to be the enemy. A society of evil doers and all that.” Lox laughed louder, “I apologize, I forgot to tell everyone that an ex-Drotian was coming; they would have put on their scary masks and poked at you with sharp sticks” Natalie's lip curled slightly, “It's foolish when I think about it now, but I guess I never really had reason to think of it any other way. I definitely would have never thought of it like this. I mean Ares looks so pristine. It's cleaner than Taria! And the buildings, even though they're not stone like in Taria, they look sturdy and well maintained. Well except the odd shanties.

“Ah, the king will be pleased to hear that. You see, he employs those down on their luck to make sure the city stays clean. It’s supposed to help keep beggars and pickpockets off the streets. Plus the people tend to keep the areas around their houses and shops clean by themselves, it is almost a matter of pride to be tidy around here. As for the buildings, every now and again large rain storms come in from the waters, so the houses are built purposely, to be able to withstand the torrential rains. But that is all very boring, I find the organization of the city much more interesting.”

“Organization of the city? What do you mean?”

“You haven’t noticed? I guess it is hard to tell from the ground, but the city is laid out in a circular grid. With the small exception of a few roads, all of the streets run towards the center of the city, the castle, or in a shallow arc around it. It’s divided into sections with large key roads marking off large areas and then smaller roads dividing it from there. Once you figure out the pattern it is very unlikely you will ever get lost, regardless of where in the city you are. ’

‘You can tell which area you are in by the buildings and street signs; each area has a different style and color, for example we’re in the north section where all of the official signs are blue. This is a commerce section, it is where most of the locals live and work. The south side is similar but with red signs. The east is more for the farmers who must leave the city to tend their fields as well as the poor and black market type. Usually not dangerous, but for some, a less desirable location. The west, where we’re headed, is mostly private estates and high end markets. We have green signs. If you ever need to find my house just go towards the coast, I live as far west as you can get, unless you want to go swimming.” He laughed at his quip. Natalie nodded, barely noticing his groan-inducing joke.

As they continued walking west, the buildings became progressively nicer and the more colorful. The streets turned from gravel and loose rock to fine cobblestone, and all of the buildings had elegant signs depicting their name and trade. One tavern they passed called *The Golden Valley* had a beautiful landscape of rolling hills covered in gold wheat and a setting sun fading in a blue sky. Natalie slowed as they passed, her eyes stuck on the beautiful work of art; Lox adjusted to match her speed. There were blacksmiths, tailors, produce markets, and all sorts of other buildings. The women they passed wore brightly colored dresses and the men wore loose suits or uniforms of their trade. As they continued out, away from the city center, the commercial buildings became more and more separated. Houses began appearing in the new found space. Eventually they left the city, on the very western edge. Natalie gazed about, “ I thought you lived on the west side of the city?”

“I do. This is the end of the commons, we are now about to enter the estates. We have a little further yet.”

“Do you live in a house like the ones we just passed?”

Lox chuckled, “Not quite.”

The pair walked onward, trees and grass began taking up more of the ground, lining the sides of driveways or scattered across the lawns of sprawling houses. Fences turned into walls and gates started popping up at the entrances. The sun was slowly beginning to set when Lox finally turned off the main road towards a large steel gate, he paused briefly before continuing, "I almost forgot, before we enter I want you to tell you something." Natalie turned her eager head, "First, and I should have mentioned this earlier, I would recommend not mentioning that you are Drotian. My people won't really care but it can't hurt to be safe, this city is large and it is crawling with listening ears. For the most part my estate should be safe, I have my own guard and everyone here was hand picked by myself or my people, but every now and again we have visitors and words can slip tongues."

Natalie nodded. Lox continued, "Second, my second in command, so to say, is named Norbert Cone. Everyone here listens to him in my absence. He will know I'm here but he doesn't know you are coming so I'll have to introduce you two in a moment." He stopped, "Anyway, you don't need to heed his words. You aren't a worker of mine so he probably won't try to order you around, but just in case he gets a big head and tries, know that you have no obligation to follow his commands. Got it?" Natalie nodded. Lox smiled, "Excellent, in we go then." The pair turned away from the road and started walking to the gate, as he approached, it swung open, allowing them to pass.

Lox spread out his arm making an unsuccessful attempt at a smooth showman, "Welcome to my not so humble abode." Natalie looked at the gate as she moved through, a winter tree was inlaid into the center of the gate with its empty branches reaching to the stone pillars on either side. On its metallic bark read *Shadelight*. Natalie wondered if that was Lox's name or if he had inherited it. Past the wall, the road turned abruptly. As her horse turned the sharp corner, Natalie practically gasped in shock. Her eyes panned across Lox's estate.

Before her was a long stone road leading through a plain of green grass. Both sides were lined with light posts, already lit, though the sun had not quite fallen over the horizon. Beyond, the grounds spread out on either side, there were buildings, walkways, and ponds. She saw people walking around, tending to one task or another. She gazed down the long stone road, at the end sat a mansion, as large as any castle she'd ever seen. A warm glow from the sun shone around the building, ringing it in soft light. Before the house sat a small water fountain flowing around the feet of a large stone man and woman. The man, standing in front, was draped in a stone cloak, his face covered in its shadow. The woman stood tall behind him, her long hair flowing out behind her as if caught by some soft wind before being cast to stone. The man stood in defiance against some unseen force, one arm bent back towards the woman, the other turned bone as it protruded out from under the cloak. In its grasp, was a long wicked scythe. The woman, confident, held the man's hand with one of hers. With her other, she held a ball of stone fire. Its solid flames curled before her as she held it in her palm.

Lox spoke over Natalie's shoulder, "What do you think?" Natalie jumped a little as she turned around, "That is the most stunning thing I have ever seen. What is it?" "The statue? I don't really know." He shrugged innocuously, "It was a gift from a witch I once had the pleasure of saving. I figured the front figure has to be me, being a faze and all, but when I asked her if it

was or if it had some sort of meaning, she didn't answer. The sly woman simply looked at me, smiled, and left." Natalie shook her head, "Lox, this whole place is amazing. Your house is enormous, and beautiful. Your grounds make it feel like we're in a fairy tale. And that statue, it is like a shrine. How is this possible? I thought you were just a faze?" Lox shrugged, "I told you, I work for the king. I am the King's Faze." She waited for him to continue. "I report to the king. I do whatever he asks of me and in return, he pays me generously for my successful missions. As you may have guessed, I have a pretty strong track record." He let out a short laugh, "I also get to keep anything I bring back with me, and that's not to mention the gifts I receive for helping out some of the king's friends on occasion." He smiled at her, scratching the back of his head, appearing somewhere between embarrassed and pondering, "I guess you could say I am sort of a faze for hire in the royal circles."

Natalie was a bit overwhelmed, "You work *directly* for the king..." She seemed lost in the moment, "I mean, you said that, but I assumed you meant that, like, a soldier works for the king. Not that you literally work *for the king*. And you can afford all of this?" He shrugged, "Yea, Norb was a bit shocked too, when I first brought him." Lox grabbed Natalie's horse's lead and started towards the house, "You'll get used to it." She didn't respond, doubtful of that fact.

As they made their way up to the house, Natalie saw more and more of the estate. It was like a tiny village, men and women worked on the plants and cared for the horses, kids played on the lawns. There were small buildings for storage all over the grounds. Off away from the main road sat what appeared to be a small neighborhood, "What is that little clump of buildings over there?" she pointed off in their direction. Lox turned to see where she was pointing, "Oh that, well a while back, a pair of the workers decided they didn't want to stay in the worker house, the building next to the mansion. The couple asked if they could have their own, separate residence. I told them as long as they kept it relatively close by, just in case, they could. It wasn't long before others followed their lead and so I helped them build their own houses. I think they like having a building to call home, one that isn't attached to where they work." It really was a small town she thought, "How many people work for you?" He looked off, estimating in his head, "I don't really know. I guess if you count the children who stay here on the grounds with their families, a bit over a hundred?" Natalie's jaw dropped, "A hundred?" "Yea, turns out it takes a lot of people to clean the house, cook the food, care of the horses, tend the grounds, and handle my affairs while I'm away." He laughed, "They are damn good at their jobs too, I seem to come back to more money than before I went away. Hell, one ambitious young lad wanted to start a shipping port out of my personal dock. I gave him his first boat just before I left, we'll have to see if he's made any progress."

Natalie had always thought pretty highly of herself, after all she was a weaver, and the youngest tier four alive; but even with her accomplishments, she felt very insignificant compared to Lox. She could see now why he hadn't worried about the bag of coins. From the looks of it, he could have bought himself a city and funded a medium sized army if he was inclined to.

Approaching the main stables, beside the house, they hopped off their horses. Immediately two men came to tend them away. As they walked, the men welcomed Lox back from his journey; they welcomed Natalie as well, apparently not put off by her unplanned

presence. As they made their way to the front steps, Natalie was again struck by the house and statue, both seemed surreal. *They are just too big, too grandeur, too... everything.* She hadn't realized before but the statue was made of pure marble and complemented by the house's slight marble accents. She huddled close to Lox as they walked up the stairs.

Before either of them had taken the last step up, the door swung open. Out came a short, broad, hairy man. He was shorter than Natalie but about twice as wide, he wore a simple vest over his meaty body and a giant grin spread across his face. "Lox, I fel' yeh coming, but I was nah expect'ing yeh so soon! I's great ta 'ave you back, my good lad." Lox smiled down at the man, "Norb, my friend, it is good to be back. You're looking even bigger than when I left." The man laughed a hearty laugh, "Yeh don' give me enough work ta do, so I star'ed sellin' my skills to the worl'! And le' me tell yeh, the worl' likes it!" He laughed again, stopping mid breath, seeing Natalie, "Bu' we can talk o' tha' later, for now yeh must introduce your companion." Lox smiled again, turning, he brought Natalie forward, "Norb, meet Natalie Ahmos. She's my new right hand out on the road. Well, maybe sidekick is a better word." There was a touch of laughter in his voice as he finished. Norb bounced up towards Natalie, "Well, I always liked ta consider myself 'is righ' hand," he threw a thumb in Lox's direction, "bu' I guess it is only natural tha' such a pretty thing as yeh take my place." He bowed down and kissed her hand. Lox snorted and tried to smack the back of Norb's head. Norb ducked and then shot back up, his face beaming bright as ever. "Well come inside then. I imagine yeh two mus' be righ' famished." He leaned over towards Natalie, "Lox's food ma' keep yeh breathin' but doesn' do much for the taste buds, does it?" Lox smacked Norb on the back of the head, this time connecting, "My food is delicious." Norb just laughed and continued to bounce his way ahead, "You al' go wash up, I'll make sure the food is hot an' ready for when yeh come back down."

Lox took Natalie's arm and led her upstairs, "Come on, we *should* get cleaned up." They walked up two floors of a beautiful wooden staircase that continued upwards, arcing its way further though the house. Then moved down a long hall, rooms lined either side. At the end were two big doors, "This is my room. In case you ever need to find me." He opened the doors to reveal a wide open room. It had an enormous bed at the back, soft fur mats covered the floor and giant windows lined the walls. "There are plenty of rooms around the house for you to stay in, you can have your choice." Natalie stopped gazing around and looked at him, "I'm not staying here?" she had grown used to Lox's constant presence and was not sure what to do in such a setting. Lox shrugged and pointed to the door to the right, "You can use that room if you'd like, it shares a balcony with mine." She gave a small nod. "If it suits you. Anyway, go through the door over there, the workers should have been through by now and there should be a bath ready. I'll have your stuff brought here and you can unpack later. If you'd prefer, there is also a room just across the hall." She nodded again, apparently undecided.

Natalie came back out of the bath area, a little while later. As she turned into the main bedroom, she saw Lox standing with his back to her. With his shirt off, she could see two marks running down the edge of his shoulder blades, almost on his spine. They shone red against his pale skin. She thought they were just discolored scars at first, but then she realized that they were actually glowing. A soft light radiating from each mark. Lox's thoughts must have been elsewhere as he apparently didn't hear her walk up behind him, she absentmindedly put her

hand against the marks, tracing the long red scars. He recoiled against the sudden and unexpected contact. Natalie had seen hundreds, if not thousands of scars before, being a healer in the army, but none like these. The scars were so neat, they weren't raised against the rest of his skin like normal scars, they just seemed to blend in with his body. They would have been difficult to notice except for the eerie red light that they emitted. She had traveled with him for months but hadn't noticed them before. Suddenly she realized that she had seen them before, the first night she had met him. She remembered the red glow in the darkness of his faze form. "How did you get these scars?" Lox turned and put on a shirt, "I was attacked when I was young, a pair of short blades and a terrible defense." Natalie looked up at him, "But why are they red? I've never seen scars glow before." Lox shook his head a bit, "Honestly, I don't know; I have some ideas but nothing concrete." He stopped, "Now is not the time. You'll hear the tale at some point I'm sure."

Finished dressing, the two of them walked back down a different set of spiraling stairs to a small room near the kitchen. Natalie had expected them to eat at a grand dining table with places for dozens of people but instead sat a simple, but elegantly carved wooden table for four. It was covered in food and drink with three places set out. Lox must have noticed her surprise, "I prefer to eat here when I am not entertaining company. I find the dinner table far too formal; this table is comforting." As they settled into their seats they could hear Norb approaching, singing one of his many drunken songs:

Of love I've heard a thing or two

of lust I've heard a lot

For one you'd cross the rugged seas

the other you'd probably not

I think of all the people

I've known throughout my life

ladies, lovers, and some friends

but all I got was strife

What then does that say for me

if I cross the mountains cold

To wrap my tired lips around
the drink of liquid gold?

For with a pail all filled with ale
the troubles went on their way
And drinking wine to pass the time
I smiled throughout the day

So tell me then, you wisest men
which one you'd have me take
The toil, trouble, and the rubble
or some mead the friars' make?

I think the choice is rather clear
for all of those caught up
It's love and lust combined in one
and it's spilling from your cup

So take a drink, a drink with me
and fill your heart with joy
For happiness is godliness
and that's the brewer's ploy

Norb closed out his song as he entered the room, goblet in hand. "Oh finally, I though' I'd starve before the two of yeh finished bathin'." He cheerfully sat at the remaining open spot, Lox

refilled Norb's goblet with more wine before pouring his and Natalie's, then the group started to eat. Natalie sat quietly through most of the meal, only chiming in when asked a question or to specify some details. Norb and Lox talked for hours, they covered Lox's mission, how he had met Natalie, and the journey back. When that tale was finished, Norb explained what had been happening around the estate, they discussed business and the families of various workers. It turned out the young worker had done exceptionally well with the porting business and had even acquired another ship over the last few months.

Lox seemed genuinely happy for the lad and told Norb to make sure the boy was adequately supported, both financially and with workers. Natalie only half listened, Lox was usually so quiet. It was nice to see him so open for the first time. She wondered if he would ever talk to her like that. The meal finished, maids and servants came to clear plates and refill drinks. The group moved to a sitting room, it was full of big soft couches and chairs. There were paintings and decorations but the main attraction was a giant window that took up most of one wall. The view was stunning. The window looked out over the water, waves came slowly in, softly reflecting the stars off their smooth dark surface. Curling up in her seat, she listened to the two share stories and slowly drifted off into sleep.

Natalie awoke. Sitting up, she looked around. She appeared to be in the room next to Lox's, sunlight shined warmly through the open windows, a cool morning breeze flowed through the room. She sat for a moment, expecting to hear Lox. When she didn't, she stood up and walked across the hall, not finding Lox in his room, she went downstairs. Norb noticed her immediately and led her to breakfast, "This way youn' missy, go' some foo' ready for yeh over here. Lox apologizes fer no' bein' here bu' he wen' to go mee' with the king. Said he expects t'be back sometime tonigh', bu' if yeh should nee' anythin', just ask me or one o' the servants. We can ge' yeh anything yeh'd like. He also asked tha' yeh stay on the grounds for today, bu' if yeh should venture inta the city, tha' yeh bring along two guards." Norb smiled brightly, "Though I'm pretty sure tha' secon' par' wasn' a request." She nodded, she wasn't sure why she would need guards to go to the city but she didn't worry about it, she had plenty to explore on the grounds.

Natalie stopped as she turned towards the food, "Will you be joining me for breakfast?" Norb rubbed his stomach slowly, "Well, I alrea'y ate a bi' ago, bu' I don' see why I shouldn' ea' again. Af'er all, if I wan' ta grow big and strong, like Lox always promised I woul', I h've ta be well fed." He gave out a hearty laugh and set up another spot at the table for himself. Natalie looked at Norb, taking in his small stature and broad shoulders, "Are you a dwarf?" Norb chortled, "Sharp and blun' aren' yeh? I guess Lox did mention something abou' tha'." He didn't seem offended, "Only par' dwarf. Don' reckon there has been a true, full, dwarf in quie' a long time."

"I thought the legends said dwarfs left once the barriers went up?"

“Aye, tha' is mostly true. Dwarfs mixe' wit' common folk to avoid extinction as it were, 'though I guess, in a way, they didn' really escape their fate.” He shrugged.

Natalie took that as an end to the current topic and guided the conversation away, “How is it you and Lox became so close? He doesn't seem like the type to acquire close friends.”

Norb tilted his big head, “Go' yeh though didn' he?” He chuckled lightly, “No, Lox and I go a fair way back.” Norb refilled his cup, “A lon' time ago, when I was bu' a young lad, I worked as a blacksmith's apprentice ove' yonder in north-town. North side of Ares tha' is. I spent all my wakin' hours workin' and honin' ma trade. Ma mentor was a bastar' of a man bu' a damn good blacksmith. I was a diligen' studen' and learned the trade well. Mind yeh, Lox says tha' it's because of my dwarf heritage though, they were supposedly master craftsmen, and all tha'.” He winked, “Anyway, as I learned, I slowly started takin' orders. My work steadily became popular around the area. Firs' with jus' normal folk tha' wanted some tools, then some soldiers tha' 'ad heard good things. Eventually, even fazes an' high rankin' soldiers started t'come aroun' an' order a new weapon or two from me. Lox claims that was why he was there in the first place that day.

Well anyway, one day, as I'm labor'n away at my work, some youn' hooligan musta though' he was clever and pu's some tar wood near the ol' furnace. Ain' long before tha' wood catches fire and before yeh know it half the shop is ablaze. Bein' a focuse' worker an' all I didn' notice 'til it was too late. I was trapped between my work station an' the fire. Now mind ya back then I was jus' a wee lad, not too deep on critical thinkin'. I panicked, frantically lookin' for an escape.

The fire kept growin', closin' in on me from two sides, pinnin' me inta the corner. I was hootin' and hollerin', hopin' tha' someone would come help. I could hear the people ou'side yellin' too but I couldn' make ou' wha' they were saying. So I crouch low, doin' my bes' ta stay away from the smoke an' move towards the stree' side wall. I throw my hammer at the small window thinkin' I may be lucky enough ta pull myself out if I can make it there.

Nex' thin' you know, I'm ou'side in the street. My clothes're bloody an' there's a kid sittin' nex' to me, bloody as all hell too. Turns out he 'ad jumped through the window ta save me though I don' rightly know why. We sa' there licking our wounds as the whole shop burns down. Soldiers an' what not show up to lead the boy away. Formally write it all up as an acciden' they says. I'm kicked ou' by my mentor for the inciden' o'course an' left to the streets. Wasn' 'til a week or so later tha' I hear the boys still lookin' for me. Says he still wants me to make 'im a weapon, says he isn' worried about the shop.

Norb looked up for a moment, “Tha's pretty much it. After tha' I joined Lox here at the estate, though it was qui'e a bit smaller at the time, an' started makin' weapons, tools, an' anything else I could for 'im. In return he taugh' me how ta fight, gave me food, a place ta sleep, an' eventually, paid me. As we gah older, he started spendin' time away on missions an' I began ta have free time on my hands. So he star'ed recommendin' a few of his closer colleagues ta buy from me an, overtime, allowed me ta become caretaker of the place.”

Natalie had regained her composure, "I would never have guessed. But that does explain why you two are so close."

"Aye, practically family a' this poin', been together too lon' ta be otherwise. From the looks of it though, he probably has plans ta add yeh too."

Natalie flushed a little, Norb laughed, "Well, I bes' be gettin' off, go' things ta do and all. Feel free ta do as you wish an' if yeh need anything jus' holler, I or one of the workers will help yeh out." He tipped his head and started to walk out, then paused, "Oh, almos' forgot. Lox told me ta give yeh this when yeh awoke." Norb walked over to a small bookcase and grabbed a book that lay on the shelf. "It is a book about picture weavin'. Nah overly useful in the traditional sense but Lox though' yeh might enjoy it. Even added a few notes himself, though he was never very goo' at it."

"Picture weaving?" Natalie asked, while she took the book. "Yeh know, using those magic webs ta make art. Kind of like paintin' excep' tha' the image is kind o' fluid." He scratched his head, "Hold on a moment."

Norb then ran upstairs, only to return a moment later with something in his hand. He handed it to Natalie, it was a small picture of a boy fishing. She looked at Norb, "It's just a boy fishing." Shaking his head, "Nah, look closer. Watch the water and the trees." Then she saw it, small ripples flowed across the little boy's pond and the leaves blurred as if by some wind. The changes were slight and she really had to look to notice them, but they were there. "This is amazing! How is that possible?" She squealed, looking back at the small picture. Norb laughed, "I'm surprised yeh've never heard about it before. Guess Drotian's don' care too much for art." He shrugged, "As for how to make it, that is wha' the book is for. I never ha' a hand for magic, despite Lox's efforts. This is probably the bes' I've ever produced. Yeh though, from what I hear, yeh may very well be able ta animate the whole thing." He smiled, "An' if yeh do, I would very much like ta see it!"

Natalie was only half listening, she was already prying open the small book. Norb laughed, "Like I said, I best be off. Bu' le' me know if yeh need anythin', and don' forget ta eat lunch! Lox can get so engrossed in things tha' he forgets ta eat, don' let that happen ta yeh!" With that, the short man strolled out the door. Natalie was still motioning a half wave, after he'd gone. She walked slowly to the parlor, her eyes never leaving the pages as she curled up onto one of the large chairs.

Chapter 6 – Capital City Ares

Lox walked through the king's enormous castle, idly wondering how long it would take to explore the whole place. People probably got themselves lost if they wandered alone but Lox had visited the king enough times to know his way from the entrance to the king's office. His feet

led him onward out of habit as he beheld the marble work and tapestries that adorned the castle halls. It was quiet in the castle, as usual. For a building of this size, the king kept few servants and had even fewer guests. Lox walked in silence, encountering no one until he arrived at a pair of huge wooden doors, both accented with shiny metals and colorful jewels.

Lox knocked once and upon hearing the king's summons, fazed through the door. The king was a strange man; he preferred Lox to faze through the doors rather than open them. Lox wondered if it was some sort of test or if the king just didn't like unlocking the door. Once through, Lox unfazed and turned toward the king. Arias was a slender man, an inch or two shorter than Lox and much thinner. He had short, black hair that spiked upwards off his skull. His pale green eyes danced around intelligently, always gathering data. Arias wore his normal robes, loose fitting black with speckles of soft green. He held out his hand, gesturing Lox forward. Arias was a weaver, a tier 5 weaver, the only one Lox knew of that was alive. He was also terrifyingly brilliant. Lox had met few people as sharp as the king and Lox made sure to keep his own wits about him in their dealings.

Arias stood up and walked over to a squat table, two chairs stood on either side and a box laid on top. The king was also very fond of board games, and this one was a particular favorite. Lox didn't know where it came from but it was very old and a respectable test of one's strategic abilities. Arias and he often talked while playing, Arias boldly claimed he had never lost to anyone besides Lox and thought they were pretty evenly matched. Lox didn't believe either statement but took it as a friendly compliment. He took his seat and Arias moved his first piece, "I take it everything went well?" Lox almost laughed, "Of course." Arias nodded his head slowly in approval. Lox looked at the board, taking in the game, "Can I ask why you sent me on such a mundane mission?" Arias looked up, "Mundane? Yes, I guess for you, it probably was..." He smirked, "Well, if you must know, I didn't want anyone to know about it. I've got some interesting plans in the works and I want to keep information limited to a select few."

"Plans?" Lox made his first move.

"Yes!" He spoke excitedly, "Big plans. You see, everyone suspects there is a war coming, and there is, but it is not the war that most people think." Arias paused, "The boundary over the sands is fading and if the current prophecies are to be trusted we're not going to like what is on the other side." He glanced up to read Lox's reactions, Lox didn't have any. Lox had heard prophecies before and while he wasn't sure if what Arias said was true, he knew he couldn't discredit it either. Arias continued, "As you know, it is usually a bad idea to fight on two fronts. I have no idea if what is to come will be a large threat or a minor one but either way I want to have a unified front to face it."

Lox thought he knew where this was headed but double checked, "Unified front? As in allying with the Drotians?"

Arias let out a bark of a laugh, "Allying? Hardly. I've been setting up the pieces for our victory for a while now, and you have been my tool. The Drotians lack focus, always sweeping with a broadsword; I have been using a scalpel. All of your more recent missions have been setting the stage. Here at home I have been making the pieces. I have been working with Gala to create a new weapon." Lox's face flashed with disgust, Gala Torbane was Arias's high caster and, in Lox's opinion, quite a vile being. "I know your views on Gala, but trust me Lox, even you will be impressed by this." He paused to watch Lox make his move. "I never doubt Gala's powers, just his motives" Lox replied. "A wise view, perhaps. Regardless, Gala and I have mixed our powers to create a new form of soldier. We are still finalizing the prototype stages but the results are promising." Arias stood up, "Here come take a look." He led Lox over to one of his balconies. Looking down Lox saw a group of giant men training below, even from the height he could tell they were the biggest men Lox had ever seen, each would have stood three heads taller than him and equally so as wide, "You made giants?"

Arias laughed heartily, "I guess you could say that, in a way. But these men are much more than just big, by combining our powers Gala and I have given them a magic boost of sorts. I'm not quite sure how to explain it other than it is a sort of temporary increase in physical prowess. As you can see they are already much larger than normal men but when they release their *copper*, as I like to call it, they are even more powerful." He turned towards Lox and with a grin, "Powerful enough to fight goliaths." Lox was taken aback and stood silently for a moment. Fazes were often viewed as the counter to goliaths but in reality, in a straight one-on-one battle, a goliath was far superior to a faze. Arias seemed pleased by Lox's reaction, "They can't sustain this power for too long currently but we're getting better. We had one *coppereye* stay in form for an hour! Given another month or two I think we might be able to achieve close to half a day."

The two stood watching for a while. The giants were impressive, they swung enormous swords, axes, maces, and an arrangement of other weapons. One cut down a training post with a single swing of his large, single-sided axe. Two more wrestled on the ground, their enlarged muscles straining to overpower each other, their bodies coated with sweat and dirt. Grunts of exertion and pain crawled up to the balcony. A single high faze stood above them watching, a black flag waving in the wind. He walked around watching, occasionally jumping down to talk to some of them giants. Lox didn't recognize the faze but he saw that he bore Gala's mark, an insignia on his clothes much like the one Lox wore, but of course his was Arias's sign.

"Why do you call them coppereyes?"

Arias shrugged, "Gala made it up. For some reason our magic makes their eyes change to an orange yellow color. An unintended side effect I guess, and for better or for worse, it makes them easier to spot, not that it's needed with their size." He turned and walked back to the game table, "With these new soldiers I think we can finally break through the front and over take our stone neighbors."

He chuckled to himself as they walked back to the board game, "That brings me to why I've summoned you. As you have probably noticed, I've been centering your missions around the north. I'm hoping with the killings you've done recently will make Gavion think that I am trying to make him think I will attack from there. He therefore undoubtedly will assume I will attack, in the south, as I will, and leave the north in its weakened state. Should the barrier fall before I attack, I'm hoping the Drotian army in the north will be distracted and sparse. Whatever comes through is not going to be friendly and hopefully it will turn away from our more sturdy defense and push east into Drotia. Mind you, I don't think that is very likely but it can't hurt to have some backup plans."

"That's all good and well, but what does this have to do with me? I have no doubts about your ability to make plans but I do not see where I fit in."

"You, Lox, you will be the slender knife up my sleeve. This war has been stagnant for a long time and while I don't know if Gavion has any new tricks I want an ace in position just in case. Gavion knows that we've been slowly overpowering his forces on every front. His army is beginning to crumble, each passing week it becomes marginally weaker. If the war continues as it has, it will only be a matter of time as the Drotian army is driven into the ground.

I anticipate he has been up to something, our spies haven't reported anything unusual but I do not see Gavion simply waiting around for the demise of his kingdom. Much like our coppereyes, he is probably making something, be it magic or otherwise. Who knows if I am right or not, but in case I am, I want more than just the battle itself to decide our fate. While I prepare for the upcoming battle I want you, Lox, to go back into Drotia. I want you to locate the king and maneuver yourself as close to him as you can without becoming suspicious or putting yourself in harm's way. I want you to trail him, follow his royal entourage wherever it goes. When it eventually comes down south, to the Narrows, I need you to be in position. Then when the battle occurs, and all the chaos of war ensues, I want you to utilize the chaos, the opportunity, to kill Gavion."

Lox choked a bit, he had guessed that his assignment was going to be a big one, but he had not anticipated a direct attack on the king's life. How many attempts had been tried against both kings over the years, none of which had ever come close to succeeding. He felt nervous; oddly, it felt good. It had been a long time since he had been put up to such a challenge. He tried to regain his focus, Lox was the best, he could get it done.

Arias continued, "He will be out in the field, not in his castle. There will be a large amount of commotion and unfamiliar faces, there will be cleaners and cooks, merchants, blacksmiths,

and an endless supply train flowing into the army. He will be thinking about the front line where our army sits facing his men, not the back line. I believe, given your skills, you should be able to get into his camp and get close enough to take him out.” Lox vacantly nodded, he was already thinking about the mission prep. This was not going to be a simple storm-the-wall mission, but he was the best faze to ever go through the academy and he hadn't failed a mission yet.

The two continued discussing plans for a while, their conversation drifted occasionally as Arias asked about the estate. The pair talked and played onward through the day. It was approaching evening when they finally finished their fourth game. Arias had won, but just barely. Almost all of the pieces had been taken on both sides and it was merely attrition that had determined the outcome. The king smiled in triumph, “Absolutely wonderful game, Lox. I do enjoy when we get to play, you are the only person who can keep me on my toes.” He smiled and walked with Lox to the door. He briefly put a hand on Lox's shoulder, “Farewell old friend, I look forward to our next meeting. With any luck, it will be quite the day to remember.” With a formal farewell Lox faded through the door and back into the castle hall.

Lox was tired, it had been a long day and he still had to walk back to his manor. Between playing against Arias and prospecting on his mission, Lox was mentally drained. As he walked out of the castle, the sun was beginning to sink past the horizon, casting a soft glow across the castle's stone towers. He had always admired how majestic Arias's castle was; it didn't stick out like a jewel among dirt but rather sat like a sharp general watching over his army. It looked fitting. Lox had commented on it once to Arias. The king had been very pleased with the compliment. Arias went on to explain that it was his intention to have the castle this way, “Some leaders like to stand as far above their people as possible, but to do this they end up driving their people downward. I prefer to overlook my people, I have no interest being gawked at for my wealth, merely respected for my position. You see, a healthy people makes a healthy nation, a healthy nation is a strong nation, a strong nation makes a ruler powerful.” It was interesting to think about and for the most part Lox could see what he meant. Kings who took all of their citizen's money didn't usually give motive for hard work or loyal men. Such rulers rarely survived through old age.

Chapter 7 – Capital City Ares

Lox was most of the way home when he decided to stop for a quick bite to eat. He stopped by a small outlet on the side of the street. While he was eating, a group of low level fazes and a mid level faze walked in. Lox recognized the leader vaguely, some hothead from the year above Lox if he recalled correctly; the rest were unfamiliar. They of course recognized him, almost anyone in the military would, to his chagrin. The group spotted him and came over to his table, the hotheaded leader sat down across from him, “So the big man's back in town huh? I've

heard the king had his lap dog doing all sorts of minor errands recently.” The man smirked, Lox didn't react, “What too high and mighty for us lower fazes? Can't spare a few words for us underlings?” Lox was getting annoyed, he now remembered who this guy was, he was the same kid who had challenged him to individual combat back when he was still at the academy. He had heard that Lox was going to be promoted to the king's faze right out of schooling and had wanted to make a name for himself. Lox had embarrassed the boy thoroughly. It seemed he hadn't forgotten. “You know Lox, us *lower* fazes have had just about enough of you. You run around on your amateur missions and still get all of the reward. We're all getting sick of it.” He knocked over Lox's drink. Lox looked at the hothead, “I'm not sure what you're on about, but I am pretty sure a first year could handle *your* missions.”

The spark was lit, the faze lashed out at Lox's head. Lox ducked and pushed the table, it jammed into the hothead's stomach. He doubled over for a moment only to come back up with a blade in his hand. He swung it quickly, Lox let it slide through him and punched the hothead in the nose. With a roar of frustration the hothead motioned at his friends and they all started closing in, Lox ran into the street, he needed more room to move. Two men came from behind, Lox dropped. He spun low and kicked out one's knee while pulling on the other's foot, they both fell to the ground. Hothead continually swung his short dagger, stabbing and flailing at Lox. Lox dodged and caught a man running at him from the side, he caught the dagger and slammed it into the back of the man's head. Hothead fazed, so did his friends, Lox didn't. With a scream the four remaining rushed him, Lox turned and jumped, slamming his knee into the face of one of the incoming men. Twisting out, he broke another man's nose with his elbow. Lox felt a pain pierce through his back, he danced away. He felt blood dripping down his back, hothead had cut him, not a direct stab but it still stung something terrible.

Hothead smiled, carefully whipping the blade on his sleeve, “Oops.” He sat there smirking, inspecting his blade. Hothead and his last man came at Lox, they both swung, their blades cutting from different directions. Lox ducked and twisted, weaving between the blades. The extra man's blade whipped back around and barely caught Lox's stomach, making a shallow cut; Lox grabbed the man's sleeve and punched him hard in the stomach. The man struggled for breath, Lox was pretty sure he had knocked the wind out of him. Hothead reared around with his knife, cutting downwards. Lox rolled to the side, popping up next to the hothead. He rammed his knuckles into the side of the hothead's neck. The body went limp; his neck broken from the impact. Leaving the spread of bodies on the ground Lox straightened himself up.

He inspected his stomach, blood was dripping slowly from the wound; it didn't need immediate attention. He felt his shoulder and back, it hurt but too wasn't deep. He kicked the road in frustration. Lox started back towards his estate, he would have to ask Natalie to heal

him, the five fazes had done more damage than they should have. Lox scolded himself, being cut by such attacks was unacceptable for his position. He saw men coming to deal with the bodies, none said a word as they passed him. It wasn't uncommon for fazes to fight but it usually was a one on one grudge match. Lox knew that if he wasn't the king's faze he would probably have had to explain himself. *I can't even remember that prick's name.* He thought as he walked away, lost in the sea of people.

The last traces of the sun were barely visible as Lox pulled up to his manor. Stopping for a moment to catch his breath, he looked on at his home. Lox could hardly remember his various homes before this one. The king had given it to him after he left the academy and while it was a beautiful building, full of people he cared for, it never quite filled him the way a home ought to. He sighed, the motion caused a sharp stab of pain in his stomach. He winced. Stabilizing himself he went inside.

Once inside he told one of the staff to go find Natalie, while he sat down on a small bench by the entrance. *This really shouldn't be affecting me so much.* He thought, *What the hell is wrong?* It felt like his blood was thicker and his mind was slowly dragging thoughts across his consciousness. He leaned back against the wall, he heard Natalie come skidding around the corner, see him, and gasp. "Lox! What happened?" She rushed to his side. Lox raised his hand to stop her questions, "Please." Natalie nodded quickly and silently looked him over. She cast a thick web over his stomach to stop the bleeding then focused on his shoulder.

Norb stumbled into the room, ale in hand. *Apparently whatever work he was doing during the day was done and he had been drinking at dinner.* Lox thought, laughing painfully, *Dwarves...* Seeing Lox and Natalie, Norb dropped his mug and ran out of the room. He was gone only a moment before he returned with wet clothes and a bin of water. He felt Lox's head and neck, "Which offsprin' of a troll poisoned yeh?" He looked Lox in the eye, "I know it musta been a troll cuz no one else's stupi' enough ta attack the king's phase." Lox laughed, wincing, if Norb was making jokes it couldn't be that bad. Norb looked at Natalie, "Do yeh think ya can heal him or should I go ge' my things?" Natalie looked less worried and waved him off, "I might not be the best fighter but I am an excellent healer. That is the main role of weavers in the Drotian army after all. He'll be fine." She paused, "The poison looks worse than it is. All it is meant to do is slow the victim down, not kill him. I'd guess so whoever used it could decide whether to kill his victim or not." Norb nodded, it was not uncommon for fazes to cover their blades with any assortment of poisons, making their victim slower would definitely fit the mentality. It would help them reduce risk while still being able to gain information.

Natalie spent the next hour weaving webs over various parts of Lox. Norb periodically placed a new wet cloth over Lox's head. It took another whole hour for Lox to begin moving again, he was not pleased. He looked over at Natalie, "Any idea what that was? I've been poisoned before but this one was new. It didn't even hurt; hell I didn't realized what was wrong until I got inside and my body started to give out." Natalie shrugged, "I don't know. There are too many poisons out there. My training doesn't really cover identification of specifics, only effects, and how to reduce or cure them... sorry" Lox stood up, he put his hand on Natalie's shoulder, "Don't apologize. Hell, if I didn't have you, I would have had to put up with Norb's healing. And trust me, dwarves aren't known for their healing." Norb laughed, somewhat manically, "Wha' can I say. We dwarvings are a hearty folk, not so susceptible to petty ailments." He laughed again as he picked up his things.

Natalie supported Lox upstairs and helped him clean up while Norb went and prepared some extra food. She patiently watched as Lox ripped off the rest of his torn clothes, "I wasn't sure we would be seeing you tonight. Norb said you have spent quite a few nights at the king's palace before." Lox nodded, "I sometimes stay there, not by choice though. It's usually only upon request or bad timing. Sometimes the king wants me to be present for a fancy dinner, or to meet some dignitary in the morning or any number of other pointless things." His wounds were essentially healed but the clothing stuck to him from the absorbed blood, "I prefer my own bed." Even though his body was mended, he still was bruising pretty mosaically, various colors were spotting his body.

He began cleaning himself; Natalie helped here and there even though he insisted he could have managed on his own. She went a little scarlet as he finished undressing which made Lox scoff, "Don't blame me. I told you I could manage." Her face became even redder as she averted her gaze as he eased into the water, "No, it's my job to help. You're injured and I know that the stomach and shoulder injuries will make it hard to bend and reach." Lox just shrugged, "As you wish."

Natalie was washing his back, gently cleaning his injured shoulder, when Lox spoke, "Why did you stay?" Caught off guard by the vague question Natalie stopped scrubbing, "What?" Lox turned around, "Why did you keep traveling along with me? I figured you would run off as soon as you got the chance." Natalie's face had gone red again, he wasn't sure if it was because of the question or the fact that he was again standing facing her. She quickly turned him back around, but took a second before she started scrubbing again, slower than before, as she turned the question over in her mind. He didn't press.

The pair silently finished and Lox dried off. Finally, as he began getting dressed, Natalie began to speak, her back still turned towards him, "I don't really know. I'm not sure I meant to initially... I guess I just decided that there might be more in my life if I continued following than if I stayed there..." Her voice trailed off. Lox finished putting on his fresh garments, "You must have left behind a fair amount though. I mean it's not as if you were some grunt soldier just scraping by for a living." She nodded, "I guess you could say that. But truth be told, I wasn't leaving behind much more than a position. After my father ran off with some vagabond woman, my mother stopped being a very good mother. I don't recall much of either of them, my grandma checked in from time to time but she couldn't move very well. I ran away eventually, living off the streets for a bit but I wasn't suited for such a life and was discovered and caught quickly. I was then sent to an orphanage where, after a time, they discovered that I could weave.

Of course once the government found out, I was sent to weaver school. Since then I've just been bouncing around as a weaver." Lox looked taken aback, "What about friends from weaver school? Or other soldiers?" Natalie looked down with a slightly embarrassed look, "None really. I was moved often, I mean who wants a scrawny little orphan to look after. Plus, it took me a long time to truly come into weaving. I started off with very poor results, and in weaver school, talent is status. No one wants to be friends with the worst weaver in class. By the time I figured it out, I was so far down the social totem pole it didn't really matter." Lox nodded understandingly. She caught his eye and smiled, "But what can I say? Once I got it, I **really** got it. My skills grew quickly and I was sent from weaver to weaver, learning what I could. Though, again never being able to really set down roots."

Natalie and Norb sat with Lox as they slowly ate some soft desserts. They had listened to Lox's encounter in the cafe and asked a few questions. Lox answered as best he could. Eventually, after they had expended their curiosity on the subject, Natalie seemed to remember the more important part of his day, "I nearly forgot! What happened with your meeting at the castle?" Norb seemed to have forgotten as well, though that might have been the alcohol. He now looked intently, or what intently might look like for someone who'd been drinking all afternoon, at Lox. *It is truly astounding the amount of alcohol a dwarf can drink.* Lox chuckled inwardly. He sat for a second, while he gathered his thoughts. He had been rather hoping to breach the topic tomorrow but now that it had arrived it was probably for the better. "Before I go any further I want you both to relax." Norb and Natalie glanced at each other, puzzlement plain on their faces. "The king has given me a very important mission. One that is fairly secret, apart from our present company, the king, and presumably Gala, I would doubt anyone knows about. " He paused again to let the severity sink into the dwarf's thickened mind. "King Arias has asked that I travel to Drotia and assassinate King Gavion." The words had no sooner left his mouth before Natalie gasped. Norb looked wholly underwhelmed, though he took a long pull from his mug.

Norb wiped his beard, "Well 'bout time isn't it?" Natalie turned towards him looking almost as shocked as when Lox had spoken. She looked back and forth between them for a moment, "What?" Lox then went on to retell his visit to the castle. Natalie asked far more questions than Norb but Norb did have a few. He seemed mostly curious about the copper eyes. The moon was now high in the night sky and Lox was getting tired. He stood, "I am going to sleep. I suggest you both do the same. I plan to leave tomorrow, mid-morning. I don't think there's time to waste so try to get some rest. Also Norb please see that provisions are made." Norb nodded acknowledgment. With that Lox turned and headed out of the room, "It's nice out tonight, if I'm needed I'll be on the balcony."

Lox walked by himself upstairs, it had been a longer and more eventful day than he had anticipated. *Not that it was going to be getting easier.* He undressed slowly, his body still aching, and went out onto the balcony attached to his room. The soft wind wrapped around his body, cooling his warm face. He uncovered one of the outside beds and laid down on his back. Despite his weariness he didn't sleep, instead looking up at the black sky. He enjoyed clear nights. Nights where he could fully appreciate the stars. Clouds drifted darkly through the sky as he gave in to the sleep, the faint voices of Natalie and Norb talking downstairs drifted in and out with the slow gusts of wind. Some time later he was half aware of movement; he thought he heard Natalie uncover and lay down in a bed some ways down the patio.

Lox awoke early the next morning. The sun hadn't quite crept over the horizon but its light had begun to ease the darkness. He slipped out of his bed quietly, glancing over to find Natalie sleeping in the bed by her door. The morning air felt brisk against his bare skin. He stretched, carefully testing his sore muscles. He had a long journey and he needed to make sure he was in peak shape. He hadn't slept as much as he might have liked but he had long since accepted sleep as a luxury rather than a necessity.

Normally before leaving he would go and check on the preparations, but he still felt a bit stiff. Grabbing a pair of shorts from his room he silently jumped off the balcony. Landing lightly on the soft grass. He then went for a casual jog around the estate. The grounds had many paths, some through the gardens, others by the stables and housings, but he jogged over to the water. He slowed down as he looked out at the waves. He often wished that the sun would rise from the west so he could see it break over the beautiful water. Although he had spent many wonderful nights watching it slowly sink beneath the horizon's waves, casting its red light across the water. After running the length of his docks he turned back towards the manor, long days approached.

Lox walked cheerfully into the kitchen, the jog having lightened his mood. Food was set out, Natalie and Norb were in casual conversation as they ate. He sat down to join them. Lox

turned to Norb, "Is everything ready?" Norb nodded, "Aye, I checked in with the stablemen this morning. Says he's go' two horses primed an' ready to leave whenever ya like." Lox had expected nothing less, "Good, then Natalie and I ought to be leaving here in an hour or so. I just need to grab a few things before I leave."

"Figured as much. Tha' bein' said I'd like you two ta come down to ma forge before yeh leave. I've fixed yeh up somethin' real nice." He gestured to Natalie, "Made some quick adjustments fer you too, after our talk." Lox nodded, "Alright. Expect to meet us there in an hour." He turned to Natalie, "I suggest you double check you have what you need. If you would like any herbs or plants or other ingredients it will be much easier to bring them now as we won't be able to harvest new ones for quite some time." Lox fortified himself, "We're going through the caves."

For the first time Norb looked slightly taken aback, "Are ya sure? Lox, those caves are a nasty business, no' really meant for travelin... uhhh... ladies." Natalie looked a bit offended by the last remark but held her tongue. Lox shrugged, "Yea, I agree that the caves are far from ideal but I don't fancy dealing with the borders and if my estimates are correct, which they often are, the caves will be the fastest route." Norb didn't look convinced, "Maybe, bu' they ain't exactly proven are they? Hell, who knows wha's residin' in there, not ta mention what resides on the other side."

"Agreed, but I've made it through before, there is no reason I shouldn't make it through again." Lox paused. Norb was about to respond again but before he could, Lox added, "We're taking the caves." Norb barely nodded, accepting what he clearly thought was a bad idea. "Well, guess it's a goo' thing I didn' skimp off on my duties." He stood and started for the door waving his hand, "I'll see you lo' in a bi'." He then left, presumably to make some final touches to whatever he had prepared.

Lox and Natalie went about sorting their belongings. Natalie grabbed a few extra items from the kitchen for herself and helped pack Lox's things as he went to talk to a few of his workers. Natalie asked a few questions about the caves but Lox waved her off saying they'd discuss it later, once they had left. Taking that as final, she probed him about the web painting book. She had spent the entire day earlier engrossed in it, trying to create pictures of her own, but couldn't quite figure it out. Natalie had meant to talk to him about it earlier, but it was totally forgotten amongst the poison incident and the king's orders. Lox was pleased that she liked it but again said he'd need more time to explain. He promised to help her more when they stopped for camp.

It was a fairly busy hour but at its conclusion Natalie and Lox headed off towards the forge. Their horses clopped loudly against the stone paths. Rounding the corner they saw Norb sitting between two tables, clothes covering whatever lay upon them. As they dismounted their steeds, Norb stood and straightened his vest. Looking at Natalie, "I have only talked ta ya a bit and haven' had the opportunity ta see yeh train or fight. Tha' bein' said, I know yeh are a weaver an' that weavers only get basic weapons training. So, I decided ta keep it simple for you. On this table lay my humble gifts, welcomin' yeh into the family." With a bit of exaggerated showmanship flair he whipped off the covering of the first table.

On it lay a short, slender sword. It was thin and tapered on both sides. Clearly not meant for extended fights but designed for quick jabs and sharp cuts. Next to it lay a small dagger. Both blades had ornate lines weaving down from the point to the handle, slowly arcing back and forth as they descended. The hilts too were sculpted with the utmost care, the handles were line wrapped with thin metal wires spaced slightly apart, giving a dash of elegance while retaining a strong grip. Neither blade was overly decorated and yet both had a noble quality about them. Even with their rather elegant appearance though, they were built purposefully for self defense first. Natalie looked on in awe at the two blades, Lox leaned over towards her, "I told you there was a reason I hired Norb." He laughed and Norb gave the two blades to Natalie, each with its own matching sheath that he pulled from underneath the table.

Natalie held the sword in one hand, it was sturdy enough to be held with two but light enough that it could be managed with one. In her other hand she tested the dagger. She was no expert on blades but both seemed perfect to her. Thin and lightweight meant she could maneuver them effortlessly. After another fine look over, she sheathed the blades, the sword attached to her hip, the dagger strapped to her thigh. Natalie hoped she wouldn't have to use them but she felt confident that they would not let her down.

Once Natalie was done situating her gifts, Norb walked to the second table. Again he looked at Natalie, "As yeh may or may not know, Lox has a specialty weapon, as all pompus fazes ten' ta 'ave." He laughed heartily for a moment, Lox rolled his eyes. "Ya see, Lox uses a very rare type o' weapon, the scythe. Fer wha' reasons he chose this weapon, only the dead know, bu' I assure yeh the dead do no' question 'is proficiency." He turned to Lox, "This my good frien', 'as been long in the makin'. I presen' wha' is undoubtedly my best piece of work ta date. I give yeh, "*Voidmaker*." As before, he whipped off the cover. Before them lay a black scythe, so dark as to only be matched by the form of a faze. Its staff was laced with gold, which was woven in with the blackness, marking its path from the bottom to the blade. The blade itself stuck out sharply from the wood, its metal was as dark as the staff it was attached to. The blade curved to a fine point, extra spines protruded slightly from the back edge, like teeth of some fiendish

beast. Tassels of black and gold hung from the back of the staff, trailing in the wind. Finishing off, at the bottom was a nasty spike, tapering quickly downwards into a spear.

It was easy to see why Norb had chosen the name *Voidmaker*, the blackness was so imposing that anyone would fear its reaping. Lox took up the scythe, immediately he felt something. It was unlike anything he had ever held. The weapon felt connected to him as he held it. He felt its longing to be used. Its power stored along its elegant form. It almost seemed like a living entity bonding with him rather than an object. Without truly meaning to, he fazed. Immediately, the scythe fazed too. Unlike Lox himself though the scythe remained visible but a soft haze of emitting blackness surrounded it. He heard Natalie stifle a yelp. Realizing what was happening Lox unfazed, the weapon followed suit. Norb stood open mouthed for a moment before a giant grin covered his face, "By my mother's beard; it worked!" Lox looked at him, "What worked? How did you get it to change when I fazed?" Norb started bouncing up and down with glee, "Well yeh know how goliaths 'ave their special weapons an' all? Like the ones tha' change when the trolls go all rock like? Well I go' my hands on a few o' those blades an' spen' a good time examinin' them. I can' really explain in simple terms wha' I found but essentially I found tha' each was laced with some sor' of living stone. So I did a little fiddilin' and added some cave gold, and I got some interestin' effects. O' course I couldn' really test them, as I don' sell ta other fazes, an' you weren' aroun'." He looked like he might explode from happiness.

For the first time in many years, Lox was in awe, "Norb, you are amazing." Norb's grin stretched even wider, "Thank you! Bu' honestly I was worried it migh' nah work at all. Bu' it did. It matched yeh." Natalie stared at both of them. She hadn't uttered a single sound since her muffled scream, she stuttered, "What... but... how?" Her face was a muck of bewilderment, fear, and excitement all wrapped up into one, "I didn't know that was possible." Norb bounced over and placed his arm around her shoulders, "No 'ne did my dear. Yeh see, this here is the firs' ever *faze* weapon." He looked at Lox, "Mind you I won' be makin' em for anyone bu' yourself bu' if anyone asks yeh tell 'em I invented it won' ya?" Lox nodded with a smile, still admiring the scythe. "Norb, you have truly, unequivocally, out done yourself... I hadn't even considered the prospect of making a faze weapon." Norb laughed, "Tha's why I'm the brains o' the operation." Lox and Natalie laughed too.

Lox swirled the long weapon around a few times and though he longed to test his new toy even more, he knew they didn't have time to waste. Still he took another minute, admiring the weapon before saying farewell. Even with such a wondrous start to a pleasant day, he didn't want to fall behind his intended schedule.

After another prolonged goodbye, Natalie and Lox left, waving all the way out the front gates. From there, Natalie and Lox made a swift passing through the city and were back into the wild country. The path to the caves would take a bit more than two weeks if they were quick. Which they were, stopping only to eat a light lunch on their days of travel, riding from dusk till dawn. Often at night, the two would talk, and Lox would work with Natalie on webs. She was quite capable, picking up what he wanted without too much difficulty, but she often lacked the creativity to take the webs beyond what Lox showed her. The one exception being her paintings. It had taken a bit to get her started, her first few nights producing no more than simple wavering lines, but every night she improved. As the first week drew closer to an end she had surpassed Norb's simple scenes and was fine tuning elements. By the end of the second, Lox was amazed at the work she could produce, her magic being much stronger than his, she could produce weather and lights in ways he'd never seen. He almost felt bad that she could only spend a few hours at a time on it. He would love to see what she could do with more time.

Chapter 8 – Faze Caves, Alar

On the last day, Lox pushed a little harder, he was eager to make camp at the caves before nightfall. After the long ride, Natalie was grateful to see a small camp a ways down the road, "Are we staying there? Is that a town for the caves?" Lox shook his head, he hadn't explained what the caves were yet but he would, "That is a faze training camp of sorts. Not a very pleasant place." He motioned off to the side a ways, "The caves are a bit further down the road, so we can go around the camp and set up for the night a bit closer." Natalie wasn't sure why they didn't just stay at the camp, after all Lox was the high faze, but she nodded and followed. She'd learned that some things were just best left alone with Lox. Though he hadn't told her anything, she was beginning to think there was something unique about the caves, and not in a pleasant fashion.

After circumventing the faze camp, they traveled for another hour or so before coming to a large area sunken deep into the ground. The path wove downwards leading into a large hole in the ground. They had arrived at the caves. Lox and Natalie set up camp and got a small fire going. Lox had been increasingly quiet as they had neared the caves. "We'll spend the night here and head into the caves tomorrow morning." Lox spoke softly. "The light of day won't be of any help inside, but it is important to have a good night of sleep before going in. Once inside we won't be able to sleep." Natalie looked across the fire at him, "Why? What happens if you fall asleep?" Lox's eyes looked vacantly back, "I don't know." He paused for a brief moment, "Before we go to sleep, I need to tell you a few things. First we'll have to cover the caves, and my rather unique connection with them. After that we will work on some webs I've been wanting to teach you." He could tell Natalie had perked up, she had been waiting days to hear him talk about the caves. He wasn't even sure she had heard the second part.

“Do you know how goliaths are made?” He asked. Natalie nodded slowly, wondering where this was headed, “Boys are taken into the mountains and they try to find a soul stone to bind with. If they are selected by a stone it bonds with them and they can become a goliath.” Lox laughed, “While not exactly accurate, that is pretty much the gist of it.” He took a sip from his drink, “Well becoming a faze is not quite so.. simple. Fazes are not selected by other objects, like the soul stones; they simply are. There is no process of creating a faze, only strengthening one.” His eyes had faded in memory, “It is common practice for kids to be watched and tested yearly all over Alar to see if they exhibit any faze abilities. It isn't mandatory but if a child does display faze abilities, they are often sent to Ares, where they are trained. It is common for parents to know by the time the child is about six, but some know by five, others by seven. It is usually thought that the stronger fazes exhibit signs earlier than weaker ones.” Natalie cut in, “What about you? When did you first start showing signs?”

Lox held up his hand, “We'll get to me in a bit.” He continued, “Once a child is sent to Ares they are trained for about a year or so, they study survival and combat mostly. If they make it through their first year, they are sent into the caves. It has long been known that the caves are somehow tied to fazes, in what way, we aren't sure, but there tend to be more fazes born around the caves and it is only by going into the caves that a faze can *awaken* as it's commonly called.” Natalie saw him shudder slightly before continuing, “The children are sent into the caves. They are allowed to bring whatever they wish with them, as long as they can carry it. Usually food, water, weapons, and the like, but once in the caves they are alone. Depending on the number of students that year, sometimes there are multiple children in the caves at once, but the caves are large; they don't find each other. Once sent in, the child is to stay in for as long as he wishes, the longer a child stays in the caves the stronger his faze abilities tend to develop. A small amount only stay in overnight or a few days, those who don't make it a week are either sent home or to other parts of the military, they are considered too weak for full faze training. The majority of fazes that go into the caves make it the week minimum, plus maybe an extra day if they're being careful, before coming back out. A select few make it around two weeks, and only a handful may have made it to three weeks or beyond. Once they come out, supposing the time has been long enough, they are congratulated and welcomed back into the military. They are promoted and move on to begin real faze training.”

Lox stopped, waiting for Natalie to ask her questions. She did, “What is so special about the caves? What makes them so faze oriented?” Lox didn't respond immediately, “I am not sure anyone really knows. It is commonly thought that because the caves are so dark and barren that the children end up connecting to their inner faze powers in order to survive. Others think the water inside is somehow special and changes the children's bodies, giving them more access. Others think it is connected to the underworld, and the unearthly exposure makes you stronger.” Natalie nodded, “That is kind of like the goliaths. No one really knows why they are chosen either, what makes the soul stones bond to some kids and not others... Do kids ever not make it out?”

“Yes, a handful of children every year disappear in the caves. Most that do die, other children sometimes find their bodies, others just disappear, and are never seen again. That is where the no sleeping comes in. It is thought that there are creatures in the deep, things that attack and

take the children. Things that move in the dark and take those who are unable to stay mobile. No one knows for sure, the caves are too large, only a seer could know what truly lies in their depths.”

Natalie had gone a little pale, “Why don't soldiers go inside and find out? Surely if a child can survive, a group of men could search the caves.” Lox nodded, “They have, every now and then a group will go inside, after a child doesn't come back out. The most they ever find are bones or clothes, if that. Like I said the caves are large, full of turns and paths leading into an endless maze. The only areas even remotely explored and mapped are the gold tunnels, sometimes miners will come in to harvest some of the special gold, like the gold in my staff. It is a little bit darker and is said to possess extra properties not found in other gold. Its value makes it worth the risk. For some at least.” Natalie asked a few more questions about the cave, the gold, and the lore. Lox answered to the best of his ability but he wasn't an expert on any of it and wondered if he brought more confusion than answers. After she was satisfied he went on to his experience.

“With the background set, that brings me into the picture. I wasn't quite four when I first started showing signs of being a faze.” He noticed Natalie's quizzical look, “As you can imagine my parents were pretty shocked that I had shown signs so early but they didn't want me in the military. My father was a simple man, a carpenter and odd job hand and my mother a sort of local healer. Both worked for their living and were pretty well regarded in our little community. They told me to not show anybody what I could do and so I spent my days as any young one would, with total disregard for the severity of my situation. Time passed uneventfully until a month or so before I was to turn five. I was out in the woods collecting herbs for my mother when I heard screams coming from my village.” Natalie noticed how all emotion seemed gone from Lox's voice, it had become a blank recording of historical events. “I ran as fast as my child legs could manage but I arrived only to see smoke billowing out from the houses and men on horses riding off. I managed to stop my house from completely burning down but I think it would have been much better if it had. Some sights never truly leave your memory.

Two days passed with me living with my dead parents, two days before Gala and his private guard came to my village and found me. I wasn't the only survivor but there weren't many of us, only a few children scattered in the ruins. We were taken back to the Ares. As we traveled we were talked to by some soldiers, in my daze I told them about my life, forgetting to exclude the faze details. It is no surprise then that I ended up at the faze training camp.” He motioned back up the hill, “I was by far the youngest, just reaching the age of five but that didn't mean anything here. Everyone was the same: young, scared, alone. Eventually they sent us through the caves, we didn't really know what to expect, after all no one ever returned to camp after being sent to the caves, they were sent to the city for proper training.

I was only the second one to be sent in, a day after the first. Others brought food and water or weapons, I brought an empty flask and a dagger. Looking back I don't really know why I brought so little. I entered the cave and started walking, there were many turns and it took only a few minutes before I was in complete darkness. I didn't know what was expected of me now that I was in the cave, so I just kept walking. I walked for what must have been days, at some

point I heard something that sounded like a child's scream but it was too muffled to know for sure. It took me a while to figure out how to move in the caves, how to take things slow and not trip over rocks or run into walls.

I never stopped moving after I entered the caves, I knew the stories and besides it just seemed better to keep moving. I found pools of water and little streams running through the caves where I could fill my flask. I ate insects and mushrooms that I could find with my hands. A few times I would think I heard movement, a deep slow rumbling, and I would stop to listen, but the noise would be gone.

Eventually my eyes started to adjust, faze as I would later come to realize. I slowly began to regain my vision, I could see lines of gold in the walls and the general shape of the caves but little else. I kept moving. What felt like an eternity later I found a light in the cave, I smelled a new fragrance, it had been so long since I had smelt anything but damp rock and wet decay. I followed them, I was pretty sure I hadn't accidentally doubled back and ended up at the entrance but the instructors hadn't told us of any other exit. I approached the entrance slowly, the light became increasingly bright, blinding my new hyper-sensitive eyes. By the time I reached the exit I had to wrap a piece of cloth ripped from my shirt over my eyes to block some of the light. Even with the cloth though, I could still see clearly. I looked around, I was not back at the opening of the cave, I was somewhere else. Where, I did not know.

Being that I was still a child, I explored. I found wondrous things, flowers, birds, trees, grass. Things that I had almost forgotten in the darkness of the caves. I could finally feel a breeze and get some sleep, sleep which hadn't come to me in ages. After a time I wandered about, staying relatively close to the cave, I knew I would have to go back eventually. I was in some sort of mountain range full of color. I explored all day, for days on end, but it couldn't last.

On the last day before I decided to head back I was climbing up the mountain and I heard some foul curses. I carefully snuck towards the noise, curious to see who was making the noise as I hadn't seen a person since arriving. What I saw shocked me, a nasty little creature. It was about my height but with a bigger presence, it was thin and gray with nasty black lines covering its skin in some sort of complex pattern. Its hands firmly grasped a cage, inside a glowing thing bounced around violently. I silently took off my cloth to get a better look, and with my faze eyes I could see it was a little woman. And by little, I mean no bigger than my hand is now. She was bald with a colorful dress and had some sort of glow emanating around her. She looked terrified and was trying with all her might to break free.

The gray creature poked her with a stick with a wicked grin across his face. It was then that an urge to help overcame me and I broke my cover, stumbling as I entered the opening. The gray creature noticed me, carefully put its prize down and looked me over. I told it to let the little woman go. It laughed at me. Its mouth was open wide, full of sharp little teeth. I demanded it let the woman go or I would make it. For some reason the thing didn't really react, it just sort of looked at me. After a short stare down, I pulled out the dagger I had brought; the creature moved the cage with the woman but didn't look overly concerned about me. I got mad and

rushed the thing, without turning, it side stepped me. Fluidly moved out of my range and smacked me on the head with one of its long arms, laughing.

I was furious. I picked myself up and charged again. This time the thing didn't even move, it just put its arms out and knocked me over. When I got back up, I could have sworn it had a look somewhere between amusement and bewilderment. I moved towards it more slowly this time, eyes sharp. When I got close, it started to back up slowly. Eventually I made it back up enough that I was near the little caged woman. Before it could react I bent over and cut the cage, letting the glowing woman escape. I realized then that I might have made a mistake; the gray beast's expression changed dramatically as it lifted two tiny blades from its pack, a nasty glare in its eyes. In the briefest flash of time, I saw the thing move towards me then the next thing I know, my back stings as if pierced with sticks of fire and the creature is bounding off into the forest.

It took me a whole day to get myself together, I found plants to help prevent infection but the cuts were on my back and hard to reach. I knew then that I needed to head back through the caves or risk dying, either from infection or from the accursed creature. I gathered my few belongings and quickly returned to the caves. I walked straight back, I don't really know how but my eyes seemed much better suited to the caves on my way back. Everything seemed clearer. It was like I could just see, and the path back was simple enough to find, I just traced my footprints backwards.

The pain from the cuts and the fear of being attacked again drove me to move swiftly. It probably only took a quarter of the time to make it back. When I finally found the exit, however, I was exhausted. My body ached all over and it took all the might I had to crawl into the light. Once outside I realized no one was there. All of the trainers were gone. All of the students were gone. The opening was empty. I almost gave up then. The pain in my back was almost unbearable and my legs were beyond function. I spent the rest of the day and the first night lying face down at the opening of the cave. Convinced I was going to die, it took all the focus I had just to stay conscious.

Some time later I woke up. The pain in my back was all but gone. My body had energy. My mind was clear. I rolled over to find I was in the medic tent back at the training grounds. Apparently a group of miners had found me and brought me back. I later found out I had been gone for well over a month. Longer than anyone in the history of the cave trials. I tried to tell them what happened, about the exit, the gray creature, and the pixie lady. No one believed me. The weavers who were healing me said that my mind had made up a world because I had been in the silent blackness for so long. They said that the two cuts on my back were probably from some sharp stone I accidentally fell on deep in the caves. They assured me that everything was all right, that I should be excited for having put on such a successful cave performance. Everyone had thought I was dead, but to return after all that time and with my young age, made me the prospect for the strongest levels of fazehood.

After the medics were sure I was stable, despite the two cuts running down my shoulder blades refusing to heal despite their webs, they sent me to faze training. There, I joined the

other fazes and fell into the regular schedule of my training. The other students didn't know about my cave experience and I wasn't going to tell them. The teachers knew of course, and they pushed me all the harder for it. From that point on I became the pride of the faze academy. I broke dozens of records in my time, some of which had been standing for a century, but that is in itself another story for another day. The last thing I will say about it is that the two cuts took months to heal. Many weavers tried but nothing they did helped speed up the healing, they eventually resorted to simply blocking the pain. Over time, my back slowly started to heal, eventually leaving nothing but two nasty scars; scars that would forever mark me by glowing in the night. I later decided that this glow might have been the reason I could see better on the way back. But it was far too long ago to remember."

When Lox finished he took a long swig of wine, Natalie sat in silence for a while. She just looked at Lox. Lox made no effort to get her to talk, he was content with the silence. She spoke quietly, "Can I see the scars?" Lox was a little taken back by the question but shrugged and removed his shirt, "You've seen them before..." Natalie nodded, "Yes, but there was always light and I never really was able to examine them." He felt her hands on his back. Her hands traced the long scars that had stretched as he grew. It was night now and the glow from his back lit up her hands in soft light. Natalie had seen and healed a lot of wounds and other than the red she couldn't see anything strange about these scars. *Yet another mystery*, she thought.

After a few more questions about his time in the darkness, Lox stopped the conversation. He was getting impatient, "Enough, we need to move onto something much more tangible and important." Natalie cocked her head. "I'm going to teach you how to cast a string web, or path web. I haven't really named it yet."

"What?"

"We're going into the caves and I want you to be able to find your way back should you need to and I am not around or otherwise unable." Catching on, Natalie quietly nodded. "Good, this web is actually easier than the flare web I taught you because it is just an enchantment modification of a spell you've probably learned, a tracker web."

"The one that is used to mark something and follow it? I thought only assassins... oh" She looked down in embarrassment.

Lox laughed, "Well yes, I guess it is commonly used that way. But we're going to do it a little differently. Instead of marking something to follow, we're going to change it to mark things it touches. The web won't last forever but by enchanting our hands we can leave a trail marking our path through the caves. Should you ever need to, you can come back and follow them." Natalie seemed excited again, her passion for magic was remarkable, "Excellent!"

Lox lifted up his hands, "In order to give an inward enchantment, like strengthening a blade or making a cloak waterproof, a web must be cast loosely around the object and then pushed into it." He lifted up a coin, "For example this coin, if I want to make it glow I cast a light

web” he moved his free hand in the air above the coin causing a glow to build, “then press the web into the object.” He pushed the glowing web into the coin by closing his hand and pressing them together. When he let the coin go it emitted a soft light. Natalie was nodding, she already knew such things. “Now in order to do an outward enchantment one simply just does the opposite. Instead of staring loose and pushing inward the web must be done with the object then pulled apart.” He lifted his hands and started to create a web onto his left hand, then after a small web was created he used his right hand to touch various parts of his left hand and pull the web outward. “These webs are not particularly hard to do, they just take more time and precision.” He then stopped and held his left hand up, it left a soft glowing trail behind it. “This trail will only visibly last for a short time but with a strong web and by touching a physical object a magic trail can be seen for quite a while by those who know what to look for.

Lox sat with Natalie, watching her practice the new web, stepping in when she made mistakes or got stuck. It didn't take long for her to master it, she had much better control over webs than he did and she just had to take her time and not pull the web too violently, as she was occasionally prone to do. Once Lox was satisfied with Natalie's webs he doused the fire and set up for the night. He then lay down on his back, “We'll leave tomorrow after breakfast.” Natalie lay down on her mat to his right and curled toward him, “How come you watch the sky so much?” Lox shrugged, “I don't know, there is just something about those lights. I find them engaging. The small dots of white separated by such darkness, I find it calming.” He paused, “It's like looking out to sea, you know what you're going to see but for some reason you look anyway.” She put her head against her hands, tilting her head back, she too looked up at the night sky, “It reminds me of fazes, all that darkness.” She almost stopped but added quickly, “Not in a bad way, but more like it makes me sad.” Lox didn't understand but he didn't respond. Natalie curled back away from him this time and they both went to sleep.

Chapter 9 – North Lake Camp, Drotia

Cole pulled his party off the main road and headed down towards North Lake. He led them down to a soft beach area next to an open field. Turning to the men, Cole spoke loudly, “We are going to stay here for a few days. Set up your tents, set up some training posts and get some fires going. Think of this as a mini vacation; enjoy the waters and explore the area, some of you may be here for a while.” With that he moved on, motioning for Sarah and Charlette to follow him. The three went a bit further up the beach and set up camp on a small hill overlooking the men's grounds. Sarah and Char went about preparing for an early dinner while Cole set up their tent. It had taken a fair bit of arguing, but Sarah had conceded to sharing the tent with them as opposed to her more formal separate tent set-up.

After Cole was finished erecting their temporary home, he went over to the fire and sat down next to the women. From their slight elevation, the group could see the entire camp. Cole had instructed Bradley to give the men the individual tents as opposed to any larger group tents. The men had already gone about setting up their small tents and were now doing various

activities. Some cooked, others sat quietly, cleaning or sharpening their weapons, a bold few were wading out into the lake's shallows. The sun was still hot in the sky and Cole imagined that the cool water must feel pretty good.

The three sat comfortably, watching the proceedings as they ate. Finishing the meal, Cole broke the silence, "Sarah, I think it's time we started serious training again. If I am to see my father soon I would prefer to be in top form." Sarah nodded slowly from side to side, "I guess, but I really don't know what you plan on accomplishing. We've been on and off training for the last few months and no matter how much time we take off, you don't seem to lose your edge." Cole shrugged, "I may not be losing my edge but I'm not progressing either. I feel like I have plateaued and I don't like it." Char piped up, "Why not use me then? You've never fought me before. Maybe I can bring a change to your training." Cole perked up a bit, "Better yet, both at once. Sarah is a fine fighter but she really excels at weaving. If you two work together it could be just the push I need to get to that next level." The two women agreed and the three went about discussing the matter as they cleaned.

Cole then spent the rest of the afternoon exploring the nearby area, deciding where he wanted to train. Sarah and Char relaxed on their hill. Having spent the last week on the road together, the two had gotten much closer. Sarah now knew Char's last name, Soria, Charlette Soria. She liked how it sounded, even if Char didn't. Sarah had always known royals to be business first but compared to the other's she'd met, Char was easy to talk to. She may take her position as Cole's guard very seriously but that didn't make her as much of a statue as the others.

Looking down across the sand they could see Cole setting up some sort of ring in the sand. Presumably a place he was looking to train in. Seeing this brought Char back, "So" she said, turning towards Sarah, "now that we have some time to kill. How did you and Prince Cole meet?" Sarah turned and smiled, she knew she didn't have an excuse not to tell Char but for some reason she didn't like to tell people. It wasn't that private of a story but she always felt protective of it. Cole couldn't care less though, and she knew if she didn't tell it then Cole would, and he was far too prone to embellishment. Gazing at the mountains far off in the distance, across the water, Sarah began.

"It all started when I was a small girl, about eight years of age. I had been living in the castle studying to be a weaver for a few years and given my proficiency often had free time. This isn't always the best thing for a child, especially one who likes to wander. As you know, the castle is nestled into the soul mountains, which were aptly named after the fact that that is where the soul stones are almost solely found. Well, I often spent my free time climbing those nearby mountains and making up adventures that only a child would take.

Obviously I couldn't go too far or else I might not make it back in time for lessons and get in trouble. Thus I explored as much as I could nearby, but I grew bored. I eventually ventured upwards, ignoring the many warnings that I had received about dangerous animals in the peaks. Why should I worry about them? I was so mighty and brilliant, or at least that is what younger me thought at the time.

Anyway, one day I was exploring a bit higher than usual when I happened upon a blue soul stone. Now, I had seen my fair share of soul stones before, given my family's position and my constant explorations, but I had never seen a blue one before. It wasn't as big as most soul stones but it shone brightly in the sun, later I would find out this was because it was a diamond soul stone. I walked slowly up to it, transfixed by its glow. Instinctively I knew this had to be rare. Non-rock soul stones were all rare and this one looked especially so. After eyeing me for a while it slowly allowed me to come close to it and touch it. It was so hard with sharp edges. I spent all afternoon playing with it, watching it walk around, sparkling in the sunlight.

Eventually it got to the point where I knew I should head home or risk getting in trouble, but I just had to play a little longer. As the sun began to fall I finally stood up and started to say goodbye to the little soul stone. It was then that I heard a deep rumbling snarl. I turned around to see a massive cave bear eyeing the soul stone next to me. I was terrified, cave bears were very rare in those parts and I'd only ever heard stories of them. That they were such huge, violent creatures, fighting everything they came across, that the king had decided the bears were too much a danger and that they needed to be driven deep into the mountains.

More importantly though, they were exceptionally fond of eating soul stones. Few creatures had strong enough teeth to eat them but to cave bears, there was no better snack. I knew the bear was more interested in the stone than me, it's eyes barely watched my movements. I also knew that to lose such a rare soul stone would be an awful waste. I wove one the strongest deflection webs I could, quite the feat at the time, and sent it over the little stone. A moment after the bear rushed, fearing for my life, I ducked under some shrubbery, the soul stone was not so lucky. The bear tried to bite down on it but its teeth bounced off to the side. I screamed for help, hoping beyond reason that one of the mountain patrols would be nearby.

I remember watching as the bear tried over and over again to get the stone, as the small blue stone pitifully tried to run away. The bear was slowly cornering it, realizing that it couldn't just bite the moving stone. Just when I was sure it was going to end an arrow shot right over my bush and into the side of the bear. It roared with rage and turned its head to see what had attacked it. There stood a small child with a bow far too large for his body size. Before the bear could turn its body the boy shot another arrow at the bear, this time hitting it in the nook of the shoulder. The bear roared and stood up on its hind legs, towering over us. It stood over ten feet tall, glaring down at its attacker.

I longed for the boy to run but he stood his ground, notching another arrow. The bear dropped to all fours, bristling as it prepared for another rush. Right as it started its charge, four men came racing around the corner. They were in royal guards armor and stood spears ready. The bear, quick to recognize the change in circumstance, pulled up short. It stopped and did a quick once over before roaring angrily and rambled off into the mountains. As soon as it was gone I ran out to look for the stone, but it was gone. The boy came over and asked me if I was alright. I simply nodded. The guards asked me what I was doing all the way up here and I told them what had happened. They scolded me good, and rightly so, for climbing so high. They told

me that I was lucky that they too had been in the area, looking for soul stones. Had they not been I might have been lost to the cave bear.

It was only then that I realized the situation, that it was odd that a small boy should have four royal guards escorting him around the upper areas of the mountain. The area where someone was most likely to find a soul stone. The boy had remained quiet during most of my story but had asked many questions about the blue soul stone. The guards too had been intrigued and asked many times if I was sure it was blue. Once I had convinced them I remember one pulled out a map and marked the spot they had found me. It turned out diamond stones were beyond rare. Once we arrived back at the castle the guards brought me to the medical area to have the doctors make sure I was all right before warning me to not stray so far up the mountain next time.

From then on I kept my head down and did my studies. My teachers were not happy either when they found out I had been exploring. I was given extra webs to learn and additional magic channelling in an attempt to occupy my *free* time. A few days later I was studying in my room when I heard a knock at my door. Without thinking I told them to come in. I looked over as the door opened and in walked the young boy. He walks right up to me and holds out his hand, 'My name is Cole Gordsing. YOU, are Sarah Klovish. We are going to be friends.' I had offhandedly assumed him to be an important noble of some kind to have such guards as before but to find out he was the prince, well I almost died again of fright and embarrassment. Even at that age the position was not lost on me.

I was so overwhelmed at the time that I didn't fully comprehend what he had just said. Nonetheless, true to his word, we spent a fair amount of time together over the next few months. He would come to my school housing room and talk to me at first. Asking about the blue stone and the other wonders I'd seen on my explorations. Then I would listen to his tales of training and stone searching. He was at the age where a boy finds out if he is to be a goliath, and spent much time looking for a stone to bond with.

As my studies eased up again we became more and more inseparable, spending hours exploring together. I would show him around the mountain while he watched with his dark eyes, keeping his grown up sized bow at the ready. Whenever we found a stone he would do a sort of courting dance with it to see if it would bond with him, he never got very far. The stones were always rock soul stones and skirted off quickly. Every time he would look downtrodden and sad but always a look of renewed determination would overtake his face.

One day we were walking by a waterfall high up in the mountains, not too far from where the cave bear incident had taken place. The guards that followed Cole everywhere stood off a bit as he and I played in the water. Cole and I swam around, splashing each other, jumping off rocks, and having a blast when all of a sudden Cole yelps in pain. He pulled himself onto a rock and his foot was bleeding, apparently having stepped on something sharp at the bottom of the shallow pool. After diving down a few times to find out what it was, he returned with a large, bright blue stone. As he got closer to shore to show me, the rock sprouted legs and started flailing. Cole dropped the rock in surprise and jumped back.

Sure enough it was the same blue soul stone I had seen before. I remember the guards coming over when they heard Cole's yelp, until they too saw the stone and became stiff. Cole backed up a few steps before squatting down. It was the start of the dance, I had seen it many times before but the stone never responded. This time as Cole moved through the motions, the stone didn't run away as the others had; it simply remained motionless. I had never seen Cole so serious before that moment, his dark brown eyes burned with intensity, he slowly moved to the stone, never breaking eye contact. The stone remained motionless as he crept. After what felt like hours of slow movement Cole stood directly in front of the stone. He pulled out his small blade and slowly cut a long gash across his palm, blood drenched the blade as he pulled, his face winced in pain as he continued.

Once he had opened up the gash he lifted the blade high into the air and placed his bleeding palm onto the stone. The blood started to cover the little stone creature, and as it did the blue began to grow in intensity, time dragged by until all of a sudden Cole slammed the blade into the ground. A bright flash covered the waterfall pool and when my eyes readjusted there stood Cole. A giant smile across his face, his hand held up in triumph. Blood no longer dripped from his wound but instead a thin blue line remained where it had once been, first brightly until it faded and almost no trace of the scar remained.

I remember the guards cheering in delight and rushing the two of us down the mountain. The whole way Cole smiled and cheered, he had finally proven that he was a goliath, and a diamond one at that. Once we made it back to the castle, I was brought along to the king himself, whom I had never seen up close before. I remember almost fainting from all the things that were happening around me, being so overwhelmed by the situation, and yet somehow enamored and elated as the rest. When the king found out, the giant of a man bear hugged Cole with such intensity I thought he might break his son, but Cole only smiled all the more.

The next week a feast was held in Cole's honor, lords and ladies, weavers and goliaths all came to celebrate this right of passage. I was mostly baffled by it all, but for some reason the fact that I had been present for the stone selection made me far more interesting to my fellow students and many young nobles. I was bombarded with questions and for a time I wasn't sure if I was happy or annoyed by it all.

It took weeks for it all to calm down, the feast had long since been over by the time things truly settled back to normal. Well, except Cole now had stories of his goliath training. He would spend hours telling me of how it felt to change. He told me how at first he had no control, sometimes the goliath would just overtake him and he couldn't figure out how to change back. He would laugh as he told me of how he broke a whole bench he was sitting on at dinner when he suddenly turned into a pile of rocks. I was overjoyed for him, and happy to hear his tales. Time went on and while many things changed we never lost our connection, which eventually brought us here.”

Char was so caught up in the story she had been leaning in very close to Sarah. Now though she slowly pulled herself back, trying to pull back from being engrossed. "That is amazing! What happened after that? Did the king make you his personal weaver?"

Sarah laughed, "No, no, no. Nothing of the sort. As we grew we simply were good friends. I excelled at weaving and spent much of my time studying and practicing. He spent hours learning strategy and training. It wasn't until much later that I sort of turned into his weaver slash personal care taker. Though I think his father might have had a hand in that, he knows of all the trouble Cole likes to get himself into."

Char nodded, not pressing too much. Nonetheless thrilled by the tale, and she liked that Sarah too, hadn't simply inherited her position on family name either. Sarah came from a much higher standing family but it wasn't just luck that got her assigned to Cole. As a royal, she was glad that Cole had such a person looking out for him. The two of them talked for a while longer, reminiscing on past times at the castle, watching as the sun set over the mountain. As it was slowly dipping out of sight when Cole's hunkering figure came up the hill. He was still wet from washing in the lake and the two women just smiled as he approached.

"Well I'm glad you two are getting along nicely." He said when he got close enough, "Hopefully that means you will work well together tomorrow, when we train." He then grabbed some fruit and went inside the tent, the women stayed outside a bit longer enjoying the last few rays of light. As it cooled off and stars began to shine they too went inside to sleep.

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Cole woke up on the third morning, after arriving at the lake, looking at the ceiling. The early morning sun glinted in softly through the cracked opening of the tent. He quickly realized he was again pinned down, trapped on all sides by the girls, The tent wall on one side and behind, Sarah curled up next to him on the other, and Charlette lying on her mat at the foot of the bed facing the entrance. Even with him trying to be quiet and careful, he didn't get two inches off the pillow before both women were awake. He snorted to himself, *no peace*. Giving up any hope he had of letting them sleep, he rolled Sarah off his arm, sat up, and stretched. His muscles ached a bit as he prepared them for the arduous day. He walked outside into the soft morning light, he had more bruises than he was used to. Sarah and Charlette had not taken it easy on him. At first they hadn't worked well together, often tripping over each other more than helping, but during their last sparring session Cole had struggled to win. As he laughed, his side spiked in pain. He looked down at his bruised body, small bruises were all over but that particularly painful one came from neat side blow he had received from Charlette's stick. Although he was pretty sure they bore their own bruises as well, after all he didn't go easy on them either.

Once the three had a small breakfast they went down to the sand bar where they had been training. Each did their own warm up, Cole did some light stretches and went for a swim in the cold water to wake up his body. Sarah and Charlette both stretched extensively and did light jogs. Once they were all finished Cole took his practice axe and stood facing the two women.

Sarah pulled out some practice short swords while Charlette grabbed the staff she had been using previously. It took a few practice rounds for everyone to perk up and get back into top fighting form, but once going, it was a flurry of motion.

The two women had learned that it worked best if only Charlette fought Cole while Sarah moved back and wove in the background, only stepping in when she thought she could get a good strike. Cole was a fast learner though, and it didn't take long for him to pick up on their tricks. He was improving as he tried to keep pace with Char's attacks while making sure not to fall to one of Sarah's webs. She had tripped him up a few times throughout the sparring sessions and each time had cost him a sharp smack from Charlette's staff.

As the morning progressed they took periodic breaks, checking for injuries and cooling off in the water. Lunch was near as their fights peaked. Cole was shirtless, sweat covered his body, blood was dripping from his lip, a victim of the staff. Charlette and Sarah too were worn and bruised though no blood flowed. Cole burst at them with a mad dash, pulling his axe across his front in a monstrous swing. Charlette blocked, using both hands wide on her staff but was flung from her feet from the force. Seeing her weakened position Cole pressed forward only to have to dodge the quick slice of Sarah's short swords. She ducked low, swinging at his legs, he pressed the handle of his axe down, stopping the blades before whipping around with his own kick. Sarah jumped back deftly.

Cole noticed a shadow flying toward him and pulled his axe above his head just in time to stop the staff from connecting with his head. Pushing the staff up he kicked out, catching Charlette in her stomach. He stepped forward only to feel the strings of a binding web wrapping around his legs. With a push of effort he broke the web and threw a small wooden dagger at Sarah. She lost concentration as she moved to dodge. Cole used this time to finish off Charlette, who was still coughing on the ground. He slammed his axe next to her head, ceremonially marking her finish before turning towards Sarah. Noting her partner's demise, Sarah stopped trying to weave and steadied her swords. Cole approached cautiously, when he got close, she made a quick leap towards him, her left blade came smacking into his readied axe, inches from his face. Immediately she twisted around, her right blade coming in from the side. Cole grabbed her free arm and pulled her close, her right blade went behind his head, bending back towards herself. In a quick twist Cole flipped her over his head causing her to land on her back. Before she could react his foot was on her, she dropped her swords.

With a childish grin Cole easily lifted Sarah up, gave her a quick peck on the cheek, and put her back on her feet. Charlette came over, still breathing heavily, "I've trained harder than almost anyone I know. I've put more hours into the grounds than many soldiers will do in their entire lives and yet I slow while you retain your speed." She breathed again, "How is it that?" Cole laughed, "Aye. You royals may spend a lot of time training but I grew up training. My father had me on the grounds every moment I wasn't doing my lessons. Most people train their bodies for endurance, I was raised that way. I'm not sure my body would know what to do with itself if I didn't keep going." Sarah snorted, "While Cole likes to think highly of himself, it is also partly do the fact he is a goliath." Char didn't look convinced, "I've heard goliaths can run for days without rest but he hasn't transformed once this entire journey." Sarah nodded, "It is true that goliaths

can work almost tirelessly for unnatural long periods, assuming they have rocks to eat, but even when not in goliath form their bodies store more energy than yours or mine. Back at Taria, after Cole became a goliath he would fight all day. They had to cycle through soldiers just to keep him occupied.” She touched Char’s arm, “I know you think royals are the defense of the royal family, but that is only partially the case. We keep him alive from short bursts, things like assassination attempts. For actual combat, I envy no man put up against a royal goliath.”

Cole was jumping around shaking out his arms and legs, “Well if you two losers are done consoling each other, I think you two have hit your limit so I say it is time for lunch.” With that he picked up all their weapons and started off up the hill. Char and Sarah followed, perhaps with less show but with equal appetites. They ate a slow simple lunch and looked down across the camp. Sarah liked to see the men enjoying themselves, she had spent so much time in war camps that the effortless calm was more than welcome. She watched some race through the water while others threw a thin piece of wood back and forth. She watched the men for a while, the wooden disk they threw seemed to float better than it should and she wondered if a weaver had put some web over it. The pas-time was growing amongst restless soldiers, even if there was no real objective.

Once they finished their meal, Cole went back down to the beach to practice. Sarah and Char drank cool water as they watched. He would explode into a goliath, stand very still for a while, then start to visibly shake. Then all of a sudden he would be back to his normal form. He repeated this for hours. “What is he doing?” Char asked.

“He is trying to shrink his goliath, or I guess more accurately, make it denser.” Sarah rolled her eyes a bit, “Cole is under the impression that goliaths are too large and bulky. He says that if he can compact his goliath form down closer to his actual size he can move more quickly and defend better. He also thinks the denser stone would help deflect piercing attacks, such as faze strikes.”

Char looked bewildered, “Is such a thing possible?” Sarah shrugged, “Hard to say. It does seem that his goliath form has been shrinking over the past year or so but if so, it is only by a few inches. Plus, who can say how much further he can shrink it.” Char tilted her head, “If he is making it smaller then are the other properties working as well.” Sarah snorted, “Only the gods could answer that one. He swears by it, yet as you recall it was not so long ago a faze was able to pierce right through.” She paused for a moment thinking back, “Though he does seem quicker.” Their conversation drifted, the two again talking for most of the afternoon. Sarah made sure to slip in a few glasses of wine during their talk. She and Cole had some questions for Char and they knew she would be much more likely to answer if she had consumed something to loosen the tongue.

As they sat down for dinner Sarah gave a nod to go ahead. Cole started the investigation, “So Charlette, why do you suppose my father sent for me?” Charlette didn’t pause a moment, “I do not know, he didn’t say. Only that I should find you and bring you back.” Cole nodded, “True, that does sound like my father, but are you sure there were no indications?” She didn’t seem bothered, “Motives aren’t terribly important to royals. We get an order, we execute

the order.” Cole nodded again but moved in closer to Charlette, “But Charlette, surely you must have noticed something before you left. My father is a clever man but do you mean to tell me that I mistook how sharp you were as well?” He knew he’d stuck a cord but she willed herself to ignore it, “I am sure if the king wanted you to know ahead of time he would have told me. After all, my life is connected with yours, I would sooner swallow my own tongue than betray you.” He laughed, royals were one of a kind, “Well, that is a pleasant thought... But I insist. Surely he must have done something worth noting.”

Slowly Charlette gave in to their barrage. As it turned out, the king had been spending a large amount of time in his study and even more time with an old book keeper. Both Charlette and Sarah didn't think it was related but Cole was convinced otherwise. “When I was younger, maybe fifteen or so, a man wearing mossy green clothing came to the castle. He walked right into the castle as if he had been there a hundred times before and asked to speak to my father. My father of course was bewildered by the man, the guards insisted they never even saw him enter the city or the castle, yet here he stood.

My father seemed to think it was worth hearing the man out and the two stayed up late into the night speaking. The next day the man was gone, nowhere to be found. Apparently he left as he came, without being seen. Over the next few weeks my father seemed on edge, it was then that I noticed the old book keeper coming to and from my fathers study. It all lasted about a month before my father returned back to normal. I remember asking my father what was happening but he said it was nothing to be concerned about.”

Cole stopped for a moment, drinking a cup of wine as he thought, “Though I continued trying, I never found out what that man said or what my father had been looking for, but if it had to do with the book keeper I knew it probably wasn't pleasant.” He looked the women in the eyes, “My father is strong in the old beliefs. He puts much faith in the notes of old mystics and believes they are infallible. Of course many times they have been proven wrong yet there are times too that they turn out to be acutely accurate. Unfortunately the times they have been true were quite significant and usually not in a pleasant way.”

Sarah didn't seem overly convinced, “Are you sure? It is possible that he is simply looking for something else. Those old documents contain information on many subjects, prophecies are but a small section.” Cole nodded, “That is true, but I know my father and I would bet that whatever he found back then is the reason he is calling me now.” He sat in silence, debating internally about what his father might have read and whether he should care or not.

The group was sitting on the hill eating dinner, as they did every night when out of the blue Charlette piped up, "Do we have men over there?" Cole turned his head to see where she was pointing, "No, that is towards Tule. Why?" "Oh, it is just that a lot of smoke seems to be rising from there." Cole looked again, closer this time, paying more attention. Sure enough smoke was rising from beyond the hills towards Tule. It was too big to be a standard fire yet too small to be a town fire.

Cole looked on for a brief moment before standing up, "Send word down to the men. We leave in an hour. I don't know what is happening over there but I think it would be best to check on it before darkness falls." Charlette nodded and scampered off down the hill towards the men's grounds. Sarah joined Cole in disassembling the tent and packing up their belongings. Sure enough, within the hour they headed down with all of their belongings packed. The men too finished up their packing and fell in behind.

The trek to Tule wasn't very long or arduous and they arrived as the sun was just starting to sink below the horizon. Cole had watched the smoke during their ride but it didn't seem to change. Whatever was burning was being controlled, which was a relief. Tule was a fairly small town but because of its proximity to both the barrier mountains and Alar it had a small wall and a military presence. The gates were almost always left open with only a soldier or two standing by. Most of the city's trade was fish from the lake being sent out so it wasn't a terribly busy place.

When the guards saw Cole and his entourage they immediately straightened and gave the common salute of banging their spears on the ground once. Cole hopped off his horse to speak to the young men, "Good evening" he spoke with his usual casual tone. The two responded disjointedly, "Good evening, your highness." "Good evening sir." Cole spoke again, "My party and I were just over those hills over there," he pointed back the way they had come, "and saw smoke coming from here. We were wondering if something had happened." The guards fidgeted silently for a brief moment before the older one responded, "We had an incident yesterday, sir. I would try and explain but I think it best if I brought you to lieutenant Sheer." Cole hadn't really known what to expect so he simply nodded, "Very well." He motioned to the other guard, "Please show these men to some quarters and help them find some food." The young guard nodded and with that Cole, Sarah, and Char followed the older guard into the town.

As they walked through the military building Sarah leaned over to Char, "Doesn't it seem a bit empty?" Char responded, "I guess, but it is a small town. I don't think they have more than thirty or forty men." "Yes, but still. We didn't pass any soldiers on the way here and there were only a few at the gates." Char just shrugged and walked on. Eventually they made it to the head office, where they found a young man looking wholly overwhelmed. He was probably around Cole's age but obviously didn't feel confident in his abilities. The guard stayed at the door while the three walked in, "Lieutenant Sheer I presume?" Cole said as he walked up to the small desk. The man nodded quickly, "Yes sir, Prince Gordsing. I am pleased you made it here so quickly, I only sent out the message last night." Cole raised an eyebrow, "Message? We didn't receive a message. We just happened to be in the area, saw the smoke, and came by to check in." Sheer seemed a little nervous, "The fire yes that, uh yea, it should be winding down soon. It should definitely be out by sunset."

“Yes, well, what was it for? And what message did you send?”

“It is a bit of a story so please take a seat” he motioned for all three to sit down. He spent a moment fidgeting as if trying to figure out where to begin before finally starting.

“To start off I would like to point out that I am not really a lieutenant, or rather, I wasn't until yesterday. You see, over the last couple years or so this town has been pretty much out of touch with everything. We were paid and supplied but we didn't really do much other than chase off the occasional want-to-be bandit group. Because of our stagnation it seems some of the men got rather, uh, bored.” The lieutenant paused, caught Cole's eyes staring at him and seeming rather embarrassed continued. “Well boredom is where it started at least. Or that is how I remember it. We have, had, about forty men stationed here, more than we need to get the few jobs we have done. Well, uh, with all the free time some of the men started to get stir crazy. It started out with drinking mostly, a lot of men would go down to the taverns and just drink the time away. Over time though, some came to drink more and more often, delegating their tasks to others so they could go get drinks. Many of them were lonely and often spent their nights with, well, women of the night.”

Sheer looked up sheepishly but seeing no reaction from Cole's rather blank but serious face continued, “Well these habits get expensive and while we get enough to live here fine it isn't enough to buy out the tavern or rent women on a daily basis.” Cole held up his hand, he had heard similar stories before, things like this happened from time to time in small towns, “Sheer, skip ahead.” Sheer nodded, “Right well, eventually, the heaviest drinkers and brothel visitors ran out of money and decided they could just take a little bit extra from the town. They said they were doing the protecting and they needed some extra protection money. Of course this town is not poor, the fishing is exceptionally good on this side of the mountains, but it isn't big enough for regular troop rotations so the town complied. I think they might have tried to talk to the old lieutenant but he was one of the biggest offenders, so to speak, and, well, I don't think he or his men cared much. This continued for the last few months now, with about half the men in the 'deal.' The rest of us tried to help out the town as best we could but, well, we didn't have the funds to help too much and since we were doing the work we didn't have the time either.

“So, as I said, this continued. Then two days ago a man and a woman came to town, no ones ever seen them before, but you know how it goes, so we pretty much let them do as they please. I think they just rented a single room at one of the inns. Anyway they get caught up in a drunken brawl, who started it, I don't know but a few of the men, the old lieutenant among them, get a little beaten up. Well they can't really let that stand, so they go to the tavern the next day to pay the stranger back for the beating he gave the night before.” Sheer looked up sheepishly, “Apparently the man had single handedly beat half a dozen of the drunk soldiers the night before.” Cole thought Sheer almost seemed happy about that, “As I was saying, the lieutenant, uh, brought his gang around to the tavern and well, uh, as near as I can tell the stranger didn't care for the idea of getting jumped, and uh, resisted. To make a long, uh violent, story short, he killed nearly twenty men in about ten minutes, supposedly using a short sword and wicked looking scythe of some sort.”

Cole raised an eyebrow, "One man killed *twenty* soldiers with a *scythe*?" Sheer nodded, "That's what the tavern lord said at least. Said the soldiers started pushing the man around and insulting him and his lady friend, then next thing he knows all the soldiers are dead and the man is standing just fine with his long black scythe. Well uh, the strangers up and got out of town and we, uh, went about burning the soldiers bodies. That was the smoke you saw. I wrote up a whole report and sent it off last night but I guess it missed you."

After rubbing his face, trying to process all the data, "You said there were two people right, a man and a woman?" Sheer nodded. "What did they look like?" Sheer shrugged, "I asked everyone in town who had seen the two but the best descriptions I could piece together were, the man was tall, maybe a tad shorter than you, with light blue eyes, blond hair, and, uh, a skinny face. The girl was small, both were light skinned. That is about all I could gather. They both wore long grey-black cloaks the whole time and didn't speak much to anyone but each other." Sheer perked up, "Oh and they rode a big black horse." Cole could hear Sarah and Charlette whispering behind him, what about he didn't bother wondering.

Cole continued questioning Sheer for a time before standing up, "Sheer, I will be leaving all the men I brought. I'll appoint one of them to be an active lieutenant; you can remain second lieutenant if you wish. My friends and I will be spending the night here but tomorrow I will be heading off. Please send word of what has happened here and of my plans." Sheer nodded sharply, apparently relieved that he wouldn't be in charge any more. With that Cole and his group said farewell and left for the tavern Sheer had mentioned.

Sarah and Char went ahead to get dinner and acquire a room while Cole went to the men to tell them the news and appoint a new lieutenant. The sun had long since set by the time the three of them finished dinner and were back in their room. Over dinner Cole had asked the tavern lord more questions about the man and woman but refused to speculate on any of it until he had thought it over. Eventually Sarah became impatient, "So what are you thinking?" asked Sarah. Cole strained, "I don't know what to make of it all." He crossed his arms and leaned back in his chair, "On one hand, we have a man, and presumably a woman, though I'm still not sure how important she is, that killed twenty odd soldiers. Which is troubling for two reasons. First, he killed our soldiers which means he isn't our ally, and second, he killed *twenty* soldiers. Which means he isn't likely to come in easily."

Sarah paused him, "But he only killed the corrupt soldiers right? The ones who attacked him and none else. I mean, Sheer made it sound like it was almost all self defense anyway." Cole nodded, "That is the other hand. The tavern lord said the pair hadn't seemed dangerous before, maybe a bit secretive, but nothing abnormal for these parts. Most near the boarder mountains know to keep their heads down. They shared a room and kept to themselves mostly. Had nothing occurred he probably wouldn't have had a second thought about them." Sarah cut in again, "Just because some people like to keep to themselves doesn't mean they were looking to cause trouble, perhaps he was a retired soldier with his daughter." Cole nodded again, "Eh, perhaps. Descriptions didn't sound too Drotian to me though. It all seems too weird and fishy to me. Hell, the tavern lord said he thought he felt some gravity pressure, but couldn't be positive."

This time it was Charlette that spoke, "That would change things significantly. A skilled soldier is a threat but if the man is a caster that's beyond dangerous."

"Precisely. And as unlikely as that is, I can't ignore it. Though more likely, the woman was probably a weaver helping out. It would explain how one could take on twenty and the tavern master wouldn't be any wiser for it." Cole said grumpily, "I think it is best if we head out after them tomorrow morning. We know the direction they headed off in, hopefully they won't be too far if we ride hard." Sarah spoke, "Do you think the man was some sort of bodyguard for the woman? Maybe she was a noble, or the daughter of a baron?" Cole shrugged, "Who knows. There is no point speculating at this point. The best we can hope for is that we catch up to them and can ask them ourselves." The two women nodded, lost in their own thoughts. "Now, like I said, let's get some sleep. We might have a busy few days ahead."

Before falling asleep Charlette came and spoke to Cole, "I was thinking, what if the man wasn't a weaver or a caster. What if he was just a really strong goliath?" Cole looked at her, speaking in hushed tones, "The thought had crossed my mind but it is almost impossible. A much more probable scenario is that he was a very strong faze." Charlette's body snapped into tension as if she expected them to be attacked at any moment, "No way. In this remote town?" Cole motioned for her to relax, "It isn't unheard of, especially given the skill this man seems to possess, remember he killed twenty soldiers by himself. Not an easy task, especially without completely giving yourself away." Charlette thought about it, "He must have a lot of training to maintain control that whole time. If he is a faze surely he could have fought a lot easier in form." Cole eyed her, "Now you see why I would like to find him, and quickly." He turned away but spoke once more as an after thought, "And don't mention this to Sarah. She hates fazes, and I don't need her constantly worrying about a faze attack." Charlette nodded stiffly, she didn't like secrets, especially when Cole's life was in danger.

Chapter 11 – Road to Taria, Drotia

Lox and Natalie were heading east. They had been moving quickly, trying to put as much distance between themselves and Tule as they could. The first day or so had been fast travel, but now, as they approached larger roads, they were forced to slow. It might stand out if they seemed too hurried, as they began to pass other travelers. Fortunately though, as it steadily became more and more crowded, blending in would become easier. His hood had fallen off during the fight and he knew if anyone went investigating, they would probably get a pretty decent description.

Natalie rode next to him, thankfully she had stayed out of the fight and no one had seen her. She was much more likely to be recognized, and if her description got out, they would be in much deeper trouble. Lox figured they were relatively safe, but as always, kept his eyes peeled. He had long ago learned the cost of being comfortable, just because they didn't stand out didn't mean they wouldn't be found if someone was looking. He patted his horse's neck, feeling the soft mane. The horse was sturdy and sure-footed but it was no scout horse, it was meant for

heavy loads, not fast travel. Natalie's was the same. If the pair were spotted, the odds of them out running their pursuers was dismal.

The day continued, stopping only to eat and stretch; Lox's eyes didn't rest. Nightfall of the third day was approaching when he noticed a group of three coming up behind them on the trail, two women and a man. They were moving much faster than any of the other travelers. The man, riding in front, sat stiffly on his horse, he was big and bulky, definitely not the most comfortable rider. The man's head constantly turned back and forth, looking at everyone the group passed. Lox didn't think the group had seen him or Natalie yet, thanks to the dimming light. He quickly moved closer while trying to remain inconspicuous, "I think we might have some company." He grabbed her arm to stop her from turning, "There is a group of three back there. I think they are looking for us." He stared intensely at her eyes, "I need you to leave your horse and run over to those woods. Stay out of sight. I'm going to stop and see what happens. Hopefully they will ignore me and ride past but if not, I'll deal with them. It's imperative you stay hidden. I can take care of myself. Wait for my signal, then return."

His tone left no room for argument. It was the same tone he had used back at the mercenary village. She looked into his eyes a second longer, nodded her understanding and slipped off her horse. Within moments she was at the forest's edge, pausing briefly before entering. She was immediately lost to vision. *Good.* He wouldn't have to worry about her if things went south. He moved a bit further down the road, before he too, hopped off his horse. Maneuvering over to the side of the road, Lox started digging into his packs, doing his best impression of a man searching for a lost good. It wasn't long before the three chasers had caught up to him, and while they attempted to be nonchalant their objectives were more than clear.

The large man hopped off his horse, he had light brown skin, no hair, dark eyes. A large battle axe was strapped to his back. Lox tried to maintain composure and waved as he approached, "Hello there, friends." The two women dropped off their horses as well. The hood fell off the taller one, blond hair shown. As she turned around to face Lox his stomach tightened, she had face tattoos, a sword under one eye and a line through her other. A royal. *That's not the king... the king's son?* The description matched what he had heard. He hoped he was wrong but if that was the case then that meant the other woman was probably the weaver. Lox cursed inwardly, things were about to become much more difficult.

The large man smiled falsely at Lox, he was an inch or two taller and far broader, "How's it going?" He spoke with a casual tone that didn't quite reach his eyes, "What brings you to these parts?" Lox tried to remain calm, they weren't positive yet, or at least they were not positive that he was their enemy yet, *Thank god I sent Natalie away.* He motioned to his horses, "Oh, just bringing a present to my niece over yonder near Taria." Everyone would recognize a royal so the group obviously wasn't worried about keeping their motives secret, "Taria you say? Where about are you coming from, if you don't mind me asking." Lox shook his head, "Not at all sir, I was just coming down from my farm, tis a few days ride, back on the Green Planes. See, this here lady is getting a bit old, she is nice and gentle, figured a good horse for my niece to start with." His facade was less than impervious.

“Ah, well that is very nice of you. A horse is quite the gift, even an old one, as you say.”

Lox knew this wasn't going anywhere, he was stuck, “Tis sir, but if you don't mind me asking, what brings your interest to me?”

The large man stood a little straighter, bigger, “Well you see, my company and I are looking for a man who came from Tule recently. See this man killed almost two dozen Drotian soldiers and well, as the Prince, I'm a bit obligated to find said man.”

Lox swore intensely in his head, it was indeed the king's son. He had heard enough reports to know the man was far from the average dimwitted goliath.

“You see, we're looking for a tall blond man, bout my height, blond hair, slender face. Not too unlike yourself.”

Lox knew he had no chance of walking away from this. Before anyone had a chance to continue, Lox threw three darts, one at each of the members. The prince dodged it and deftly pulled out his axe. The other two blades sailed towards their targets, the royal turned, dodging hers to take the dart aimed at the weaver. The small blade penetrated her light armor, driving into her shoulder. Grunting in pain, she too pulled her weapon.

The prince ran at Lox, swinging his giant axe. Lox grabbed his scythe which he had mostly hidden on the horse. He situated himself, parrying the blow, regardless it sent him back a step or two. The Prince appeared surprised by the weapon, but only paused a moment before continuing his assault. He lifted his axe over his head and brought it down in a chopping motion on top of Lox. Lox used the staff of his scythe to catch the axe's handle, bracing himself against the impact. As soon as he bore the weight, Lox pivoted, catching the bottom of the axe blade with his staff and pulling the prince toward him, bringing him off balance. As the prince stumbled a step, trying to catch himself, Lox dropped and did a low kick into the side of the prince's knee.

Before this moment, Lox had no plans for killing the prince on his mission, but with the prince currently flat on his back, Lox knew he would be remiss not to. He pivoted bringing his scythe down towards the prince. Before it struck the prince rolled and a sword came into Lox's vision. He jumped back. The royal steadied her sword, blood dripped down her right side, coloring her sleeve. Lox spared a moment to glance at the weaver, she was making some sort of web, he didn't have time to decipher which. Both the prince and the royal rushed towards him, he jumped back further, deflecting their attack.

The two pressed and pressed, attacking in unison, playing their strengths. Lox tried to counter each opportunity he had. It had taken all of his focus but he made an opening and caught the royal in the stomach with the edge of his blade, causing her to double over. He used her vulnerable position and brought the end of his staff into the bottom of her jaw. It knocked her flat on her back. One down, he thought. The prince paused a moment then, he looked at the royal before giving a yell and exploding. His body burst in size, skin cracking and turning gray. Suddenly Lox stood before a blue and grey goliath. *Shit*, he couldn't win this anymore, not in his current state. He fazed, it was only then that he saw what the weaver had been doing the whole

fight. All around him were webs on the ground, little circles just waiting to be stepped on, probably some sort for leg binding web.

Embracing his full faze, he loosened up his gravity, flaring hard as he jumped forward. The prince's axe had transformed with him, turning into a monster of a weapon, now with two huge, long, edges. Lox's scythe had changed too, its wicked hooked edge came down upon the axe. Lox used the axe as a hinge and flung himself up further into the air, twisting and kicking the goliath in the head. The goliath stumbled sideways, bringing his axe in a cross swipe, Lox twisted on his back foot, letting the axe go right by him before rushing in, uppercutting with his scythe. Right before the blade made contact however it sheared slightly off target, the change in momentum threw Lox off. He used his misguided path to roll away, putting some distance between himself and his attackers as he began to right himself.

The battle continued. The goliath swung his huge axe over and over again but his slow swings couldn't land their mark. Lox often broke free but something was preventing his attacks, many of which should have been crippling, if not fatal, from landing. Blow after blow bounced and ricocheted away from the goliath, as if deflected by some invisible shield. Both fighters were getting furious, the number of trip webs was growing too, the longer the fight went on the more likely Lox was to step on one. The longer the fight went the more it strained his focus. He was constantly sweeping the areas around him for footing.

The two fought on. The royal started to stir and stand up, Lox knew he was running out of time, he ran straight at the royal. The goliath ran to intercept him, Lox was faster but the goliath was closer. Right before he attacked the royal, Lox turned and, using his staff as a brace, launched himself at the goliath. Realizing the change of target, the goliath countered with a small swing. Lox focused and fazed through the axe, the density of the axe was thicker than metal, it took all of his focus to pass through the behemoth blade. The goliath, obviously surprised to see Lox pass through his weapon, couldn't react in time. Lox didn't quite make it through though, the axe's back edge sliced his left side as he exited. Ignoring the sudden explosion of pain, Lox utilized the proximity to use his elbow blade. The sharp steel cut deep into the goliath's face, starting just under the goliath's left cheek, sliding up through his eyebrow, causing him to bellow out in pain. Lox grunted in pain too.

He then pressed both legs against the goliath and pushed off. He landed with a thud and rolled towards his scythe. He tried standing. His leg wouldn't move, he had landed in a web. Flaring his gravity, Lox focused it on top of the weaver, causing her to scream out in shock and pain. Her body collapsed to the ground. She lost concentration. Lox quickly pulled his leg out. He needed to run. He'd been hit and at this rate he wasn't going to win this fight. *The royal at least*, he sprinted at the woman. Right before he cut he heard a noise, he turned just in time to take the axe handle to the chest, he heard something crack, he coughed up blood. He grabbed the rest of his darts and threw them, all three dodged the barrage but it allowed Lox time to run. In full faze almost nothing was faster than him. He sprinted off, blood falling from his side, each step sending a shudder of pain through his chest. Only the softness of being a faze kept him on his feet.

Lox heard the goliath attempting to chase him. He quickly grabbed a couple bags off the horses and was off into the forest. The whole event took mere seconds. There was no way a goliath could catch a faze in a straight race, let alone in a forest. Goliaths were too big and fazes too nimble. He pushed onward, deeper into the forest, away from the prince and his group. Lox had injured them but they had hurt him far more.

Chapter 12 – Road to Talia, Drotia

Cole yelled in frustration, walking back to the two women. He had tried to follow the faze into the forest but had lost the trail almost immediately, *God damn devil was too fast*. He unbinded and slammed his axe into the ground, “God damnit.” The two women looked at him. Blood still poured out of the cut on his eye, Sarah went to work on it, “You are very lucky Cole, you very nearly lost an eye.” He snorted, “Damn faze was good. Son of a bitch would have taken a lot more than that if it hadn't been for your web.” She nodded solemnly, “He was unbelievable.” Char voiced her solemn agreement, “I don't know who the hell that guy was but he was ridiculous. He threw three darts before I even saw him move! Plus, the way he fought, it was like we were all fighting our own battles at once!” Sarah looked at Char, “I know what you mean, were it not for you I wouldn't be here. I didn't even see the darts coming until you were in front of me. And the way he hit me with that pressure, I felt like I was suffocating and being squeezed to death at the same time. It was terrible.”

Cole whipped his head up to look at her, “What pressure?” Sarah gazed down at him, still working on his face, “You didn't feel it? It was like a cave bear had just hugged me, pressure squeezed like boulders on all sides.” She looked at Char, “You felt it right?” Char shook her head, “I didn't feel anything, but that might have been from numbness. That staff of his nearly took my head off, I was lucky it wasn't the bladed end.” Cole spat some blood out onto the ground, “Whoever that guy was, he was no ordinary faze.” He grinned with sick satisfaction, “Son of a bitch nearly fazed through my goliath axe, I've never seen that before. He didn't make it, but that was the most damn impressive stunt I think I've ever seen. Unlucky for him though, it cost him a good piece of his side.” He let out a half laugh, “I think I got him good in the ribs too.” Char nodded, “You did, I heard them crack. He was right in front of me, if you hadn't thrown your axe...” She trailed off.

Cole ignored it, “Good, I hope he dies slow and painful out in the woods.” Sarah wiped the cut, “You think he'll die?” Cole nodded confidently, “I don't see how he could survive, between the blood loss, internal damage, and chance of infection, he has no chance. Plus even if he did pull through, he would have to lay low for months, nothing but an extremely skilled weaver could fix the gash I gave him.” Char agreed, “What about that red light though? Have you ever seen something like that?” Cole shook his head, “Never. It's like he was carrying a red

torch on his back or something.” Sarah nodded agreement, “I have never seen a faze like that, and his presence shook so violently.” She shuddered, “Not to mention those eyes, staring out of the blackness.” She hated fazes. She hated everything about them. Cole rubbed her arm briefly before taking her hands off his wounds, “I’m fine, check Charlette, I think she took the brunt of the fight.” Sarah cast one last web before wiping Cole’s cut and moving over to Char.

Char sighed in appreciation, she wasn’t feeling fantastic after the fight but Cole was the number one priority. Sarah started with where the dart had hit, “I wish we had had our men with us, then we might be positive he didn’t get away.” Cole shrugged, “Maybe, but regular soldiers mean little to fazes. I mean look at what he did to Charlette, she’s a royal and he took her out with little effort.” Charlette looked down, both embarrassed and shamed. Cole stuttered quickly noting his words, “No, no, I didn’t mean it like that. I just mean that fazes are too quick and have far too much training for regular soldiers. Plus, that faze, in particular, was something else. I think we would have needed another two or three high goliaths to have stopped him.” Sarah stopped weaving, “You really think he was that strong?” Cole tilted his head from side to side, “I do, he saw us before we saw him and he decided to make contact rather than run. I mean, his horses don’t look too spritely but I think if he had really wanted to, he could have ran. He didn’t however, he fought, and like I said before, if I hadn’t had Sarah’s web protecting me, I’m not sure any of us would be standing here now.”

That sobered the group, they sat quietly for a moment before Sarah spoke up, “What about the other horse, shouldn’t the girl have been with him, the one the village people spoke of?”

Cole frowned, “Huh. I had forgotten about her.” He shrugged, “I don’t know.” Char, who was beginning to feel much better due to Sarah’s healing but still rubbed her neck and jaw, spoke up, “Maybe she wasn’t really a companion of his? Could have been just an escort or something, I mean it’s not like she would have stayed around once she saw him kill all those men.”

Cole tilted his head, thinking, “Maybe. Could be that or any number of other things. Whoever she is, I doubt she is as dangerous as that man was. If she was, she would have stuck around for the fight. Normally I would say we should put word out for her but we don’t even know what she looks like.”

Sarah chimed in, “I don’t think there is any point speculating at the moment.” She was going back over Char’s body, looking for other injuries, “Besides, she technically didn’t do anything wrong in Tule, other than being with that Faze.”

Char nodded in agreement, “Not to mention, this whole thing has been a detour from our original goal of going to Taria, even if it turned out to be a rather important detour.” She added under her breath, “I hate to imagine what that man could have done if we hadn’t ran into him...”

Cole stood up, his hand felt the cut over his eye, it wasn’t bleeding but it would take time to fully heal. Weaver’s could heal pretty well but they weren’t perfect, he would probably have a scar there for the rest of his life. He motioned for the two women to stay where they were, “I’m

going to look through the rest of his bags, maybe he left something worth finding. You two sit tight for the moment and rest.” The women stayed put, Sarah tried to relieve some of the headache Char was left with from the staff. Cole walked over and started rummaging through the horses.

Sarah, who was sitting behind Char, leaned in and carefully hugged her. She spoke softly, “Thank you, Char. I know I said this earlier but I really mean it, if you hadn't reacted that quickly, and jumped in front of the dart, who knows what could have happened.” She shuddered, Char softly grasped her arms, “It was nothing, really. It is my job to do such things, plus, I knew you would heal me after.” She let out a half-hearted laugh. Sarah softly webbed Char's shoulder, doing her best to mitigate any residual pain from the dart's needle. Char watched Cole continue his search, Sarah wasn't quite as weathered as she and Cole were.

Eventually Cole returned, his hands empty. Char looked at him, “Nothing?” Cole shook his head, “Nothing of note. Some food, random cloaks and other clothing, and a few vials of something. Probably poison, I grabbed them just to be safe but if that faze had anything important it was probably in the bags he grabbed.” Sarah was relieved, she didn't know why but for some reason the fact that he hadn't found anything made her feel better. Maybe the faze wasn't anything but a talented faze.

Cole picked his axe off the ground, “There is a farming town a bit further up the road, I know it's getting late but I'd rather sleep there. Plus, I think it's time I started getting ready for being back at the castle.” Sarah looked a bit more cheerful at that, she loved the castle and didn't much care for sleeping on the side of the road. She might have been upset about the afternoon's events but they had made it through and were now heading back towards home.

The group woke up after a good night's sleep. Cole's body was stiff, but revitalized. Sarah helped the farmer, who had offered them lodging, cook breakfast and the four ate a pleasant meal. After, the group thanked the farmer, gave him plenty of money for his troubles, and hit the road; they were still a few days out from Taria and now, more than ever, needed to make good time.

The group's mood steadily became more cheerful as they rode, doing their best to put the whole Faze ordeal behind them. The roads were busy but not packed, allowing them to move swiftly across the land. Over the coming days Sarah became more and more giddy. She and Char talked endlessly about what they were going to do in the city, how amazing it was going to be to have a full bath with perfumes and real garments, and how they would finally be able to sleep in real beds. Cole ignored most of the talk, he didn't care much where he slept or what he wore. He wanted to talk to his father. Truth be told though, he was a little excited about one other thing, the food. Though a warm full-sized bath, big enough for him to stretch out in, might be nice. He thought briefly on the warm water before continuing his pondering. *What did his father have to say? And now I have news for him too.* They would probably spend a good deal of time talking, both telling their stories and what they had learned. It wasn't often that they saw each other now, the war and Cole's age pulled him away.

Cole loved his father, even if the man was stiff at times. He missed his mother more though. He wondered how she was holding up. Her health had been failing for longer than he cared to remember. She had never been a particularly strong woman or a woman with great plans, but Cole often wondered if that was one of the best things about her, she didn't scheme, or plot. She never pushed or got angry. Instead she liked to walk the gardens and visit the city. She loved to talk to staff and strangers alike, listening to their problems or celebrating their accomplishments. She, in many ways like Sarah, had a kind heart, not meant for the violence of war. Thankfully, she was able to distance herself from such things, unlike Sarah. Since their introduction many years before, his mother had loved Sarah and the two had grown close. Cole's mother saw her as a daughter, and while Sarah wouldn't openly admit it, she probably felt the same. In fact that was something his mother had been pushing recently, to formally make Sarah her daughter-in-law.

Cole thought back, remembering how the two women would often take walks through the castle grounds while Cole and his father trained or conversed about the war. Cole smiled at the thought, Sarah looked beautiful in the summer dresses she used to wear, her hair had been longer then. He didn't mind the short haircuts weaver's often had but he thought long hair was better. *Maybe that's because I don't have any.* He chuckled to himself, drawing the attention of the two women beside him.

"What are you giggling about over there?" Sarah asked in a slightly mocking tone, back to her old self, now that she had less to worry about. Cole eyed her, "Oh, just remembering the good old days. You know, back when you had long hair and walked around in those pretty dresses." Sarah smiled brightly, "I loved those dresses. They were much softer than these traveling garbs." She flashed a grin, "I also remember you in your formal wear. You used to look so sharp in those suits. Oh and when we used to go to formal balls. You looked so handsome!" She drifted off, smiling into her own memories.

Cole let her, he wasn't meant for such attire, but it was expected of him. Plus the food that seemed to accompany such events was worth the annoyance of a stiff collar. After that brief spat though, Charlette, who hadn't grown up as a noble, bombarded the two of them with question after question. She had been to a few formal events while training as a student but actual banquets had been above her. She listened avidly, even allowing Cole to talk about the huge tables of food and the constant topping off of drinks while the next entree was brought over. She quickly learned his priorities and switched to questioning Sarah on all the other matters. It wasn't just a mild curiosity, as a royal she would now be part of the festivities and couldn't risk embarrassing herself, or worse, Cole, whom she represented.

She asked sheepishly about some things like servant etiquette and how to politely excuse oneself. She delved deeply into what clothing was to be worn and typical eating practices. Cole insisted that there was nothing to worry about, royals could do whatever they wanted. Char, less than reassured by Cole's bravado, had Sarah explain in varying detail all the different customs.

Sarah started with the basics. Assorted situations Charlotte was likely to come across and pointed out which rules were lenient and which ones were not. In the end though, she too reassured Char that royals could get away with pretty much all rules. Some royals dressed up, others didn't, some ate like the nobility, others simply used their hands, though that was usually only the old or barbaric males. As the party neared the city, Char churned through the new found knowledge and looked forward to an occasion to put them to use.

Chapter 13 – Mountain Forests of Talia, Drotia

Lox had stumbled onward, trying to put as much distance between himself and his attackers. He hadn't paced himself but Natalie still caught up to him by nightfall. She assured him that they weren't being chased and that he needed to rest. As soon as she was sitting, Natalie started healing. Despite working through the night, she was barely keeping him stable. The deep gash in his side was too large for her to heal outright, instead she used webs to limit blood flow and pushed webs into the back of the wound, forcing it to heal naturally, though at an accelerated pace. Lox didn't utter even the smallest complaint as she wrapped up his side, but she could tell from his near constant wincing that he was in immense pain.

Despite his condition, Lox pushed them onward, slowly moving further into the woods. When they finally stopped for the night Lox was pale, cold sweat dripped from his brow. Natalie wasn't sure he was going to pull through at first, the wound was taking a heavy toll and she worried she might have missed some internal damage. Lox spoke little, an occasional, "Thanks" as Natalie helped him up from a fall or added webs to his wounds. Now, he lay on his back as she prepared dinner. He seemed to be slightly more stable though still very weak. The sun was sinking low and shadows crept across the clearing. Natalie was so preoccupied with making the food and tending to Lox that she didn't notice the two figures that had approached until one spoke.

Natalie whipped her head around, reaching for her dagger. Not more than ten feet away from her stood a man and creature, well she thought it was a man but it looked disproportionate and the shadows limited her sight. The man held his hands up, he spoke in a soft quick tone, clicks interrupting some of his words, "We mean you, *click*, no harm." His voice sounded strange, he pointed at Lox, "He is very sick, *click*, we help" Natalie didn't trust them but she was exhausted from travelling and casting webs all day. She couldn't have held them off and Lox was in no position to fight, she lowered her blade and motioned for them to come forward.

As the man stepped into the firelight Natalie stifled a yelp, she hadn't been able to tell before due to the darkness but the man clearly wasn't a man, or at least, not a human man. The thing was tall, far taller than any human, though it seemed perpetually leaning forward, making it appear a bit shorter than it actually was. It was extraordinarily thin too, its long legs and arms looked little more than bone. Its skin was a light red and shiny like a shell. It didn't look soft, like human skin, but sort of rough and stiff like dried blood. The creature bent down further, it had a long face with a small mouth, thin nose, and huge eyes. It held out its hand, it only had four

fingers, two in the middle and one on either side like human thumbs. Its fingers were long too, with wicked nails or claws. Natalie numbly shook its hand while it spoke again, "My name, *click*, is Dar Li'kes. This, *click*, is my friend Tor Re'te." Natalie inspected the creature, she wasn't sure if it was male anymore, but it wore small cloth shorts. Its whole body was taut and armory. It also didn't appear to have external or at least protruding ears.

It was only when the thing motioned that she remembered the shadow it had been with. Out came another one, sort of, at least that is the only thing she could think at the time. She had thought the first creature was disturbing but this was worse. It walked on all fours but its front hands looked similar to the other creatures. Four long transparent wings were tucked tightly on its back, and when it got close enough it sat up, bringing its hands together in front of it. Its body was similar to the first, long and skinny, but it had little hooks on the inside of its arms and legs. It too wore the same small shorts. The creature, Tor, turned to the other one, Dar, and made some weird whirring clicking symphony. Dar returned the noise, she figured it must be their native language.

Dar waited while Natalie took it all in. Eventually he spoke again, "I, *click*, will heal. We can't, *click*, linger." Before Natalie had thought up a response the creatures had both turned towards Lox, who lay silently, his eyes amazingly focused, forever sharp. She thought he might not trust them but he was too weak to move or resist.

Once they were at his side, Dar took one of his long claws and slowly pushed it into the tongue of Tor. It started bleeding instantly, Dar then cut off the bandages covering Lox's wound. Natalie started to stop him but his other hand was raised, telling her to wait. Once the wound was open Tor leaned over and covered the wound in spit. Or rather spit and blood. Natalie retched from the nauseating spectacle. She moved forward again, Dar spoke, "Blood, *click*, heal wounds. Saliva numb pain." She looked at Lox, who gave the smallest of waves, Tor continued until Lox's whole side was covered in the disgusting mixture then stopped. Dar pulled some leaves out of his pack and rested them on top of the wound. He leaned close to Lox, "You must, *click*, live. Queen needs you. *click*, We won't be, *click*, around. Train, fight, evolve, *click*, we leave, time will, *click*, bring us back, *click click*, together. Eventually." Dar then turned to Natalie, "He rest, tomorrow will, *click*, be alive. Don't follow, we leave, *click*." And with that he motioned to Tor and they both walked back into the shadows, she followed them with her eyes but as soon as they hit the trees she lost them.

Natalie stayed up late into the night alternating between watching the forest and watching Lox. He had fallen asleep shortly after the two insect men had left and his breathing had slowed to a relaxed pace. It was nice to see him at ease after watching him struggle and fight all day. Despite her best efforts, she too fell asleep. The sound of wood cracking awoke her, her hand dropped to the blade at her side, her eyes jumped to Lox. He was gone. She frantically looked around searching for the source of the noise. She saw it at the edge of the clearing, Lox was breaking apart pieces of wood. He was standing... moving. He walked back to the now depleted fire, "Before you ask, I feel significantly better, not healed but better. And no, I don't know who or what those creatures were, nor have I ever seen or heard of such creatures before in my life. That said, I am very pleased they turned up." Natalie ran up and hugged him,

holding him for a moment before speaking quickly, "How is your side, and your chest? Do they hurt? I thought it was going to take ages for me to heal those. I wasn't sure I was going to be able to. What do you think those things were, what do you think they wanted?"

Lox held up his hand, "Easy. My side is, uh, better." He lifted his shirt to reveal a huge scab like layer of mucus but as he peeled some away she could see it did look significantly better. "That said it still hurts like hell and my chest has much healing to do, not much you can do about cracked ribs I guess." He put his shirt back down. "I don't know what was in that creature's blood but whatever it was it was far more effective than any web or spell I've ever seen. And as for the creatures, I have just as many questions as you. Believe me." Natalie seemed overjoyed; she made him lift his shirt up again so she could inspect his ribs. She hadn't done much to them as she was so focused on his side wound earlier. Now though, she cast a few webs over the area, small spells to help ease his pain and secure the bones.

Eventually she calmed down and helped him get a fire going to make breakfast. Lox was eagerly testing his body. She watched him do slow jogs, small stretches and a few careful jumps. He fazed and unfazed, tested his scythe. He seemed to be halfway healed and if someone had told her he had been bed ridden just yesterday she would have thought them crazy. When he was all finished testing his limits he came back and sat down to eat. Natalie had watched him, she noticed things, even as he tried to hide them. Mostly he would look just fine but then suddenly he would do a small clench in pain, a sign the damage was still there even after the miraculous recovery. It would take a few more weeks of her webs to fully recover. "What now?" she asked, "I mean I know your mission but I don't know if you're ready to keep going towards the castle. The prince and his group may still be looking for you."

Lox shrugged, "Doubtful, all they saw was an extremely hurt faze running into an apparently empty forest. I would imagine they think I'm dead, and if not, that it will take the better part of a year for me to recover. After all, I don't think they saw you, and even if they did there is no way in hell they could have expected those insect men to show up and help us." He absentmindedly traced the outline of his wound, "That said, I think it's best if we pass through the mountains. We can still head towards the castle but we won't have to worry about running into people, that should let me both heal and train before I arrive." Natalie eyed him questioningly. Lox helped himself to seconds, "I was horribly over-matched in that last fight. Yes, I was unprepared, but regardless, they were too much. Especially the prince, something was different about him. I almost died fazing through his axe, it was like the axe itself was rejecting me and getting denser." His voice trailed off as he thought. Natalie spoke up, "Well isn't that what happens to goliath weapons? I thought they were supposed to become much denser when in goliath form."

Lox nodded, "That's true, but his was different. It was like the blade was actively pushing me off, trying to separate itself from my presence, kind of like how my blows kept bouncing off him. I'm not sure what it was but something was definitely different." He turned and caught Natalie with a sharp inquisitive gaze, "You can't cast protective spells on humans can you?" Natalie rebounded a bit but answered steadily, "One shouldn't be able to, or rather, it would be very weak and wouldn't last very long. It would take much more energy than any one weaver

has to cover a man, or goliath, in a web and make it powerful enough to actually deflect anything larger than a stone or at best an arrow.”

Lox looked at her carefully, apparently deciding she was telling the truth. He nodded, “That was my understanding as well, but I needed to make sure. It wouldn't be the first time Alarian weavers missed something.” She let out a small breath of relief, Lox could be rather intimidating, even if he didn't mean to be. She spoke up, “I'm training too. Next time, it won't have to just be you. I'll fight right along side you. They had a weaver, so you should too” She tried her best to sound resolute. Lox's face didn't reveal anything, “Perhaps, but if you want to fight with me, you're going to have to do real training, my way.” Natalie nodded curtly, but inside she was thrilled over the small victory. She had been expecting Lox to resist the idea and had already formulated a long argument. She wondered if him giving in so easily was a good or bad thing. They finished up their meal and headed towards the mountains.

Chapter 14 – Capital City Talia

Cole and his party rode steadily towards the castle. They had taken side roads where possible, to avoid most of the traffic but those they did pass recognized them immediately, after all, they had changed into formal garments. As they neared the front gates they joined the main road, which was packed with wagons and horses, and livestock. People flooded towards the city with goods, others left with empty trailers having sold their stock and were headed back to their homes. Even though it was quite packed, Cole didn't have much of an issue moving forward, he was very easily spotted and the other travelers gave his party plenty of space.

As they crested the last hill of their journey, Taria rose up above them. It was perched on the side of a mountain range, overlooking the farm land before it. It rose up many stories, half the city protruded from the mountains, while the other half carved into the mountains themselves. Lore had it that the city was originally built with dwarf help, for they were much better mountain dwellers than men. The stone city lacked color but its light gray reserve marked it openly against the darker mountains. At the top of the city sat the castle, a white crown. It's massive towers could be seen from all around as it sat in a rift between two mountains, their peaks standing like guards on either side. Cole had been to plenty of cities in his life, but Taria alone took his breath away.

The girls rode silently as they took in the commanding sight. Cole and Sarah had been away from the castle for a long time, and their recent visits were often brief. Cole looked at the outer wall as it rose from the ground, running in an arc from one mountain to the other. Flags flew lazily in the soft breeze, posted periodically across the wall. His eyes fell upon the white flag. It shone brightly in the sunlight and even from their distance he could see the details. It was a simple flag, plain white background with a black sword in the middle, the king's sword. A red jewel sat in its hilt, a fire stone. It was an homage to the founder of Drotia, the first king. He was the only goliath to ever exist with a stone not made of metal or rock. It was said that his sword was originally silver like any other, before the king took a piece of his goliath form that had been chipped off in battle and inlaid it into the sword. When the red jewel was cast, the sword turned black as ash and sealed the jewel inside.

Cole didn't know how true the story was but he did know that the sword his father carried was indeed black, as black a thing as he'd ever seen, and that in its hilt, sat a red jewel that sparkled in the sunlight, as if some inner energy flowed through it. A chill ran down his spine as Cole recounted the times his father had told him the old stories as a child. Cole had asked his father often if the stories were real, but his father never gave a definitive answer, instead shrugging and saying things like, "I do not know for sure, I only know that these were how my father told me the stories and everything has turned out as the stories say. Don't believe me? Just take a look at my sword sometime and tell me if you don't see the energy of our people inside of it." Cole had, and while he wasn't completely convinced, it had lent some weight to the tale.

Once his mind was back to the present, Cole noticed the women were talking about what to expect on arrival; they gossiped about a welcome feast and a walk through the grounds. Cole didn't much care, so he let them talk without interjecting. He sat silently, riding towards the capital.

Once inside, their smooth riding stopped and it took close to twice as long as it should have to wind their way through the packed city streets. Merchants called from their side shops at all those who passed by, children ran around in packs, playing games only children's minds can create. They wove in between the adults and carts. There was no true layout to Taria, shops and houses were intermixed, butchers sat next to blacksmiths, fine silks next to produce. The only guide there was, and it was more of a general rule, was the further up you went, the more expensive things became. Almost all of the nobility lived near the castle. The shops near the top sold only the highest quality goods, there were significantly fewer people up there as well so shops had more room. Signs promoting their newest goods hung from canopies or stood near the front door, tables and chairs with refreshments too, for their customers to enjoy, should they have to wait on some friends or an idling wife.

By the time they finally made it into the castle, Cole was slightly annoyed and rather impatient. The three of them walked through the castle, saying only curt greetings to those they met along the way to see King Gavion. As they walked down the hall leading to the King, the chamber doors opened and out came a man in a simple white robe with one sleeve fading to mossy green. On either side of the man were two extremely tall men covered in black robes. They towered over everyone they passed and certainly towered over the green sleeved man, even as they bent over to listen to him. Cole saw that each carried large worn swords, very simple, very used.

As they neared, Cole heard the green sleeved man say rather irritated, "That king is a buffoon. He sits around fighting a stagnate, draining, war when a much greater danger approaches? Bah, the ignorance of him makes me think he would be just as useful were he lacking bones... and I could use bones like his..." Before the man spoke again Cole had his axe out, pointed at the man, stopping him abruptly. Strangely, no sooner had his axe reached it's position that he found the man's two giant guards had their swords equally pointed at him. Regardless he addressed the green man, "I would watch your words, I do not take lightly to people insulting my father." The man waved his hand and the guards returned their swords,

Cole did not. The man looked him up and down, and was about to say something when the doors behind him swung open. King Gavion strode towards them, waving at Cole to put his axe away, "Cole! How wonderful to see you! It has been too long my son!" He embraced Cole in a giant bear hug before doing the same to Sarah and Charlette. After his greetings he turned to the impatient man and explained, "Lord Ren Scores, from across the barrier." Ren snorted, "Unlike lesser men, Gavion, necromancers have no need for petty titles. Take heed to what I've told you, your war needs an end." With that the man did a mocked bow, dipping low in front of everyone, before turning and walking away down the hall. Cole saw what looked like the bone hand slightly protruding from the green sleeve, judging by the hushed whispers behind him, so did the women.

Gavion sighed, "Well, at least that's over." He scratched his large stomach, taking in his son's appearance. Cole too, eyed his father. He looked more round and more weary than usual, not just tired but actually worn, "Who was that?" Gavion chuckled, "Like I said, *necromancer* Ren Scores."

"I didn't think there were any necromancers left in the world."

"Well, that's partially true, there are none on this side of the barrier, but a few remain on the other side, and unlike us, the barrier doesn't hold the same sway over necromancers. They do not abide by the same rules of reality that we regular folk do."

Cole frowned, "Why did he come here? And what was he saying about the war?"

Gavion sighed again, he would have liked to talk about these matters later but Cole could be rather impatient, "Ren thinks that the barrier is going to fall soon, not that I necessarily doubt him, and that what is waiting on the other side is going to be pushing into our land. In fact, he believes our would be enemies have already been sending special scouts and non-human spies across. He believes our constant struggle with the Alarians is weakening us and unless we find an end to the war then Drotia, and possibly Alar as well, is done for."

Sensing a barrage of questions bubbling up, Gavion motioned for everyone to come inside the chambers and sit down, wine was brought out immediately. Gavion continued, "As I said, Ren is from the other side, and he warns that struggles are growing over there. Once-united kingdoms are beginning to fall apart, and wars are arising throughout the land. If the barrier falls, those forces will see our land as easy pickings, not only to take the land itself but as fuel for their army. Apparently there is a Queen whose land butts up against the border on the other side and Ren claims she has some lofty ambitions. Ren thinks we are far out matched, he believes that unless we can either beat Alar or unite with them we will have no chance. Or as he said it 'My niece is but a novice necromancer and even she could cripple your armies.'" Gavion shrugged, "I don't know who his niece is, but I told him I would heed his warning."

According to Gavion, the two guards were actually bone men, reanimated dead used by the necromancer as guards. As to the reason for his sleeve being green, it was because Ren

had lost his left arm in some incident and rather than abandon it he reattached it. But because it wasn't truly connected it degraded to bone, and because it was animated rather than controlled, the essence of necromancy emanated out and dyed the cloth. All in all it was very unsettling and Cole decided he didn't care much for necromancers, nor their view on the world.

Gavion moved the conversation to a lighter note, informing them about the night's activities, "Now that that is out of the way, you three go bathe, and put on some fresh clothes. I have sent news of your return and tonight we shall feast and share stories, especially how you got that big new scar, Cole." He almost seemed to laugh as he said it. Gavion gave a short wave and headed off down the hall. Gavion often enjoyed tales of combat but this one, Cole figured, he would not find quite so entertaining. Cole led the way through the castle, eventually leaving the two women so they could all get ready for the feast to come. He bathed slowly, enjoying the warm water. He knew that regardless of how much time he took, he would still be ready before Sarah. He figured she would take days to get ready if she could. And now that he thought about it, Sarah would probably corrupt Charlette into doing the same.

Cole met Sarah and Charlette in a side chamber leading to the main hall, he was wearing one of his formal suits and while he had long since become accustomed to wearing such clothes, he still didn't care for them. The women too were dressed to impress, Sarah wore a light green dress that matched her eyes. It wound its way tightly around her upper body until it flared out at her waist cascading to the floor. Charlette's dress was a soft gray with white accents; it fit just tight enough to show off her form but not enough to be restricting. Cole guessed that she had a blade or two hidden somewhere on her person.

After they had all finished assessing each other's appearance, Cole led them, Sarah on one arm, Charlette on the other, into the main hall. The hall was already bustling with activity when they arrived, men and women of importance gathered from around the city and the nearby area. They all donned fine attire, tight straight suits for the men and a variety of dresses for the women. Fittingly, the hall had been decorated with intricately woven banners and fresh flowers. The tables were covered with white table clothes and food enough to feed a giant sat on each one. The only thing that wasn't changed for the party was the active royal guard, their military attire made them instantly recognizable, though even their armor seemed to be more polished than usual.

Cole and his party wound their way through the masses to the head table where Gavion sat, talking to his second, Thomas Mortis. Thomas was a very simple man, he was intelligent but most thought he lacked the ambition that might make him great. It was this lack of ambition though, that made him so useful to the king. Thomas had never tried to be promoted, nor had he done anything outside his bounds, he simply did what he was supposed to and did it thoroughly. He was fiercely loyal to Drotia, and therefore Gavion, and could be counted on to do what was best for Drotia, should Gavion be inaccessible. In addition to all of this, Thomas was also one of the most deadly men in Drotia. He was a tier 3 castor, and had at one time earned the rank of head castor, though he never used the title and it was then moved to a more active member. Due to his position, or rather occupation, he wore very plain clothes, as most casters

did. Tonight he had on simple black pants and a long red shirt. Cole didn't find Thomas all that fun to talk to but he respected the man greatly.

As Cole took the seat across from his father, Sarah and Charlette sat to his left, across from his mother. He had been waiting to see her but feared the worst. Thankfully she seemed in modest health, her body still looked rather frail compared to his youth but a smile sat comfortably on her face. Her eyes beamed as they took him in and she took his hand in both of her's as they greeted. The greeting lasted but a second before Sarah jumped in. She and his mother burst into conversation. Cole really only spoke when his mother asked a question, or when Sarah exaggerated their story. Charlette was sucked into their madness as well, though, unlike Cole, she seemed rather excited to regale their story and joined in with Sarah, their two voices flowing together as they brought the queen up to speed.

It took a fair bit of time for the group to finally settle and by the end of the tale Cole was pretty sure his mother had adopted Charlette in much the same way she had adopted Sarah. Cole sat quietly listening to both the women speaking and his father, though to be fair, his mind had slipped from conversation to anticipation. He could smell the food in the kitchen and knew it must be fast approaching the feast portion of the night.

As if signaled by his very thoughts, Gavion stood and motioned for the room to quiet, which it did in moments. The whole assembly of people looked at their large king, waiting for him to speak. He gave a short polite welcome to all his guests, thanking them for coming to the celebration and asking that they enjoy themselves. Once the usual formalities were over he had Cole stand up and welcomed him back to Taria and the castle. The crowd cheered and with one last wish of health and merriment, the night began in truth.

The evening flew by for all parties involved. Cole had promised to wait until tomorrow to talk to his father about military issues but he regaled the story of his new scar to his eagerly awaiting father, "How did I get this new scar, you ask?" pointing at his eye, "Well I'll tell you the tale but be warned it is not one of joy or drunken debauchery but rather one of mixed feelings and a tempted fate." Sarah rolled her eyes, Cole loved stories as much as his father. Even if they both knew the story was actually very serious they both treated it as if it were a ballad of old, needless to say nearby ears turned in to hear as well.

Cole noticed the new attention and began even more boldly, "It all started from a humble request from my dear father, sitting right here, to have his son return to the castle. I, being a diligent and mindful son, responded immediately to his calling." Chuckles from the crowd showed they knew Cole's reputation for "haste"; Cole continued. He told them of his departing of Vox and the military issues of Tule, though embellishing them as to hide some of the military's shame. He then spoke about Cloud, using a false whisper when pretending to be the Tule soldier, as they spoke of Cloud as an unimaginable power. By the time Cole finally got around to his fight with Cloud, the actual intent of the story, some of the nearby tables had drawn in and stood quietly listening.

Cole basked in the attention as he regaled the terrifying fight with Cloud, this part he didn't embellish at all. The fight was spectacular and dangerous enough that Cole couldn't have added too much to it even if he wanted to. The crowd gasped as he spoke of Cloud's barrage of attacks on the group and they 'ooohed' at the moments of his might. The only person not completely enchanted by the story was Gavion, who seemed to understand a little better than most the serious undertone. Cole eventually finished with Cloud's attempt to phase through his Goliath axe, which shocked some of the more experienced military personnel of the crowd, no faze had ever been able to move through something so big or dense. Cole expressed genuinely how impressed he was with Cloud's fighting capability and how, even though the move had cost Cloud part of his stomach, he had made it so far. Farther than anyone would have thought possible. It was this skill that had allowed the faze one last attempt at Cole and thus the large new scar across his eye where the blade of his enemy had struck its last blow.

As Cole concluded he was met with applause. The crowd saw the story as a heroic victory of their prince over an impressive foe, whom he vanquished to die alone in a forest. Gavion, however, didn't seem so pleased. In fact, Cole wasn't sure what was going on in his father's head, it looked like something between deep thought and worry. Gavion apparently knew it would be better to deal with it later as he quickly brought a smile back to his face and motioned for the room's center tables to be moved aside.

With another wave, the musicians stuck up a lively tune. Gavion picked up his wife by her waist, and quite literally carried her to the floor. He gently placed her down in the middle of the floor and the two began to dance. Cole's mother, Marianne, loved to dance and while she often wore out quickly she would do what she could to keep dancing for an extra song or two. Before long, many from the crowd joined in, mostly young couples and a few more excitable nobility. Cole took a little coaxing, but after the third song Sarah convinced him that he had eaten enough and that she deserved a dance. So, Cole, moving aside his numerous plates, led Sarah to the dance floor. They were swept up into the lively swarm of dancers and before long Charlette had lost them to the crowd.

Charlette sat quietly then, enjoying herself as the evening wore onward, but she wished she could dance. She didn't know what the rules were for royals about dancing but she figured even if they were allowed to dance, her status might be too intimidating for the young men in the crowd. Plus, she didn't really know anyone but Cole. She had learned it was custom for men and women to switch dance partners throughout the night, but she doubted Cole cared much for what was custom. Cole and Sarah swung into view occasionally, the giant man moving carefully through the crowd, accompanied by a radiant green dress flowing with the beat. She lost herself to thoughts for a time, when all of a sudden a hand touched her arm.

Looking up, Charlette saw Cole beaming down. Sarah, her face flushed a bit red, held close to his upper arm. Next to Cole stood a man of similar size, he had the same strong arms, thick legs, and large chest, but instead of Cole's abs, sat a belly for two. She had met the man only a few times, but she would recognize him almost as easily as she would the king. It was Boro! The man was the royal blacksmith and arms mason. He had quite the reputation for perfect weapons, good humor, and a love of bagged wine. Boro had molded all of her weapons

and taught her how to maintain them. She wondered if he had come to say hello, but before she could talk Cole interrupted, "Char, I present to you, though you have probably met him a time or two, BORO!" He practically bellowed the name, Boro grinned like a victorious toddler, Cole continued, "You may know him as a great man, a master of blacksmithery and things with that make you saw 'owwww' but I would like you to meet him as my good friend since childhood and your partner of dance!"

Charlette could tell the two had drunk more than they might ought to have, but she couldn't help but smile. She imagined this must have been how they behaved growing up. That said, Boro held out his hand, apparently very eager to dance. Charollete gave a quick glance at Sarah, who beamed, her smile glowing. Maybe she too had a bit too much to drink. Before another thought had crossed her mind, she took Boro's hand and with a blur of speed they were on the floor. It was only then that she remembered she had never really learned to dance. Of course, growing up in the castle she had been taught the basics, but nothing to the tune of real nobility. Boro seemed oblivious though, he whirled her around, laughing and spinning. As the song continued, she wasn't sure he knew how to dance either but his energy was more than enough to ease her worries.

As the night wore on Charlette danced with Boro, Cole, the king, and some of the off duty royals whose names she had already forgotten. She still wasn't sure if she was supposed to be dancing but she had long since stopped worrying about it. Her only worry now was if Cole would be safe, after all, she was first and foremost, his protector. She made sure to keep an eye on him as best she could but the prince had a bad habit of disappearing. It wasn't until the night approached it's finally and the dance floor had emptied down to a dozen or so couples, that she realized Cole and Sarah were not to be seen.

She must have tightened her grip, anxious, because Boro stopped moving, "What's wrong?" His face did it's best to resemble worry but the thought was too contorted through wine and the simple joy of living. She took his hand and quickly made her way to the queen, "Lady Marianne, have you seen Cole and Sarah?" She felt ashamed for her failure as a royal, which was quickly overcome by embarrassment as Boro and the King started laughing. "What have you done girl! You've let my deranged son out of your sight? Surely you've condemned him!" wailed the king. Marianne quickly, but sharply, hit his arm, he silenced. Marianne spoke calmly, "He's kidding dear. These boys, they get a few drinks in them and there is no controlling them." She saw the redness burning on Charlettes face and the worry which hadn't left, "Don't worry, Cole and Sarah just left a few songs ago. They're out in the gardens. It's not often that those two get to relax." Charlette stood preparing to leave when Marianne snagged her arm, "It's not often they get to be alone either. Stay with us, you can keep me company while my husband, Boro, and the select few left show you a true *tradition*."

Charlette felt compelled to go after Cole but she couldn't ignore the queen, who probably knew best. Plus, the way the last word, tradition, she hadn't known a word could be spoken with such sarcasm. As she looked around, she noticed that only a few people were left now, the King, Boro, Thomas of course, and a few others of various ranks, accompanied by their wives. As if on cue, the men, except for Thomas, who sat patiently at the high table, strolled into the

middle of the floor. Boro helped the King drag a round table into the middle and all the men stood around. Charlette glanced at the wives, they were all seated together too, they seemed amused yet in slight disbelief as if they couldn't believe their husbands would do whatever it is they were doing.

It was only when the two men on the stage started strumming a song that Charlette realized that most of the band had left. They played a rhythmic tune, not too loud to drown out any talking but enough to feel the energy. The men around the table had started placing goblets in the middle of the table and filling them with wine. Once all of the cups were filled two men on opposite sides grabbed one each. They both took out a gold coin and dropped it into their drinks. They then lifted their drinks and touched them together.

As soon as the two rims knocked the men pulled the goblets to their mouths and started drinking the contents. The larger one finished his first and slammed it on the table, he grabbed the coin from his mouth and bounced it on the table, it did a weak flop. He grabbed it again. By this time the other man had finished and he too slammed his drink on the table and tried bouncing the gold coin. On his third bounce the large man bounced his gold coin into the goblet. He then slid it to the man on his left. The new player, a skinny man with boney fingers, deftly grabbed the coin and bounced it in on his first try. He too slid the cup, this time two to his left. The smaller man who had started finally bounced the coin in, much to the enjoyment of the crowd, apparently. This continued, the men with the cups would bounce the coin until it went into the cup, when it did, they would slide the goblet to their left.

The men drank from their own personal drinks as well, Boro especially, drinking often from his bag. It wasn't until two men next to each other were playing that the group started getting excessively rowdy. The man on the right bounced his coin in before the man next to him. He then slid his cup past the man next to him and flipped the bouncing man's cup upside down. The man in the middle, who's cup had been overturned, grabbed a new goblet, drank the wine, then started bouncing again.

It took a few rounds of this for Charlette to grasp the game and strangely, it seemed the longer the men played the better they became despite the wine. Soon the middle goblets were being drunk with haste. Most of the time the men passed the cup to their left but every now and again they would pass it somewhere else, Charlette wasn't sure why. She was entranced by the game, she looked at the queen, who sat smiling fondly at the group of men, "You know, my husband once scoffed at the idea of this game, 'Goblets', as they call it. He said it was ill fitting of the king and said he wouldn't partake in it when he became king. Now though, I think he sees it as a time to not be king. A time to be a regular man, competing with his friends, and not worrying about tomorrow. You know, a lot of the time I feel sorry for Gavion, with all of his duties and responsibilities, but it is times like these that I may just be a little jealous." Marianne sighed a little, Charlette knew it was more than just the game that the queen was jealous of, it was the energy. The men bounced around and jostled each other, it was rowdy, it was loud, and it was fun.

Charlette turned to Marianne, "Do the women of the high court have their own games?" Marianne chuckled softly, she patted Charlette's arm, "Games? In a way, yes. But not like this, this is a man's game, it does not do well to consume that much wine. I have seen a few women try, but they always regret it in the morning. I believe there is something that we can't quite see that makes it worth it for men. For us," she swept her hand to the other women, "it is just nice to see our husbands and friends enjoying themselves. Of course, some women like it because it can make their men last longer afterwards, assuming they haven't had too much." Marianne laughed then, probably the truest sound she'd made yet, but it took a moment for Charlette to understand her meaning. When she did, she turned bright red, which only made Marianne laugh all the more.

The men played multiple rounds, refilling the goblets after all of the cups had run out. Charlette wasn't sure how long they lasted but eventually a man ran outside, she heard heaving sounds. It was then that the women stepped in and took their husbands. The time had come for the night to end. Everyone dispersed except for a couple single men, Charlette, and the king and queen. Boro turned and walked over to Charlette, "Lovely even.. ing, I hope you... enjoyed yourself." He then swayed a bit in an attempted bow and turned to join the leftover men. As the party left, they could be heard singing the of the old fair maiden:

I came down the river,

just the other day

To find my fair maiden,

I lost along the way

She's tall and she's slender,

with hair of curly gold

She's smooth and she's tender,

a sight for one to behold

To find my fair maiden,

I'd walk the whole way home

And only for my maiden,

I'd walk the whole way home

I say's to a stranger,

I past along the way

Have you seen a fair maiden,

dressed in blue and gray

Her eyes are like the summer skys,

do shine against pale skin

Her voice is like the sunlight,

a pleasure to all take in,

I've lost my fair maiden,

from which the tale begins

And only my fair maiden,

from which the tale begins

I wander through the night,

and I hope I find her soon

Alone from my fair maiden,

I fear for my fare's now doom

I think I drank too much,

Don't know where I'm meant to be

But I must search through the night,
she's that import to me

Ohhhh my fair maiden,
you're too good for me
And only my fair maiden,
you're too good for me

So if you have a lovely lass,
be wary of my tale
Be sure to love your maiden,
and never leave her trail

Drink only with your eye's on her,
and never leave her side
Or else she may leave earlier,
and you may miss her tide

The love of a maiden
gets better all the time
And only my fair maiden
gets better all the time

As the troupe faded the queen motioned for Charlette to follow her as she led the king away. Charlette thought it might be a once in a lifetime experience to see the king in such a light

and took it in as best she could without laughing. The king seemed totally oblivious of everything but his wife and despite his attempts, they made it into their chambers before anything, not befitting a king, occurred. Charlette walked onward to her room. She washed and put on some loose clothes. It was late into the night, the moon had passed its peak, but she took a moment on her balcony. From there she could look out over the garden, which still hid a couple or two, and beyond. She let the soft wind blow through her hair, taking in the fresh air for a while before returning inside to sleep.

Chapter 15 – Kings Castle in Talia

When Cole walked into the morning meeting, the grand table was filled with high ranking military men; messengers and scouts stood eagerly around the edges. There were multiple conversations going on around the table; the king was talking to Thomas. Cole took his seat at the left of the king, a mark that he was the heir, not the right hand, of the king. Once the table settled down the men went about discussing various topics, ranging from war strategies to supply routes, possible war negotiations and a fair number of other things. Cole held his tongue for most of it, he only spoke when he truly felt he had something to add or when asked a question. He wasn't overly fond of these gatherings, he was tapped into the nation but not to the level of this. He didn't focus on the micro or macro movements too much. Secretly, Cole thought his father felt the same.

The real meeting occurred after most of the table had cleared. Cole sat down with his father and a few select men, and of course Cara. Cara was in charge of supplying almost the entire army, she managed supply trains, routes, merchants, storage, and a million other things. Cara was calm and collected, she could be cold as steel when she needed to be, but normally was a quiet and warm woman. She and her husband were common guests at the king's dinner table, partially because of her importance, but more so, because he enjoyed her company.

With the tighter group assembled, Gavion started bringing up slightly higher topics. These ranged from disputes, such as Cole's encounter at Tule, to rebels, to secret or unofficial plans. The group talked for a good amount of time but the last two topics were the most important. Gavion explained that he was planning to move down to the straights, or the "Wild Passage" as the men called it. Spies had picked up that Arias was planning to push the straights in hopes of being able to attack the wall from both sides and secure an opening into Drotia. The table of course argued for a long time on the matter, it was not a small thing to move the king into battle, even if rumors of the opposing king doing the same were true.

Some people argued that it was unnecessary; neither side had ever been able to successfully push the straights before. Not only was there no easy way to hide the attack but there were also the brutes and giants to worry about. The two groups had been fighting for longer than Drotia and Alar. The giants, who thankfully were closer to the Drotians than the brutes, had always ignored the human wars and wouldn't attack unprovoked. However, they hated the brutes, and the brutes cared little for who they killed. The brutes were monsters. The smallest ones were ten feet tall with the larger ones growing to twenty. They had no hair, they wore no clothes, yet they were extremely difficult to kill. Unlike the giants, who farmed a little and created metal weapons, the brutes simply used what they had or stole. They bred quickly and died quickly, it was widely believed that the giants would have been wiped out long ago if not for the brutes killing each other almost as often as everything else.

The brutes and giants weren't the only concerns either, they were simply the largest. There were plenty of things that could kill men in the tropical pass between the mountains. Snakes with two pairs of wings would drop from the sky, and while they often didn't attack men, their poison was extremely lethal and if soldiers walked too close, they would die quickly and painfully. Spiders, insects, forest bears, and a million other creatures lingered in the area. There were plenty of reasons to leave the area alone.

Cole and a few others argued that it was still too early to commit. Send some men, a high ranking general or two, and wait until further information was collected. Cole volunteered himself but Gavion dismissed it, Gavion had made up his mind. To him, this would be the finale of a war fought for far too long. Cole didn't speak it out loud but he feared his father might be giving too much thought to the necromancer's words. He also feared that the necromancer wasn't wrong.

After long and arduous arguing, everyone gave in. Gavion, accompanied by Thomas, would lead the majority of the army south, he would hang back from the passage until they were positive the Alarians were committing. He also asked that some of the generals disperse to various other fronts, just in case of diverted attacks. Cara, it was decided, was to traverse between the army and Taria, both to keep things in order, as well as be safe in case she was needed to run the kingdom before Cole returned to be crowned.

It was then that Cole realized his father did not mean to bring him along. He was about to raise his protest when Gavion lifted his hand, thanked everyone for their time and wished them well on their upcoming tasks. As the group stood and shuffled out of the room, some distraught by the news, others anxious to start their work, Sarah and Char entered. They looked on for a moment before Gavion motioned for them to sit down, "Now, the real reason I asked you back to Taria." Cole's jaw was already flexing, he knew he was going to be irritated by whatever was coming next. Gavion continued, closing the door and pouring himself a glass of wine, "I want you three to go to the gap of two waters."

Everyone sat for a second, in slightly uncomfortable silence before Cole spoke, "What?" It was the only thing he could think of, what his father had just said didn't make much sense. Gavion resealed himself, "You, Sarah, and Charlette, are to go to the gap of two waters and find

a young caster girl, said to be about your age, and talk to her.” Gavion was being unnecessarily vague, eventually he continued, sensing Cole's rising irritation. “I don't know her name and until recently I refused to believe she existed. She is supposed to be an extremely powerful caster, the few that have claimed to see her said she was a tier 5 without a doubt.” Cole raised an eye brow, “Now you can see why I was skeptical, I mean, there hasn't been a tier 5 in generations. Well anyway, lately I've been receiving more and more reports of her presence and prowess. I was considering what to do when Ren, the necromancer, spoke to me. Amongst the other drab things, he mentioned a way for us to end the war. He told me, the girl, even he did not know her name, is not in fact a tier 5 caster, but rather she is a mage.” Gavion paused for a moment, raising his hand to silence the group, “Ren spoke with conviction far beyond anything I've heard before. He told me that you would be able to convince her to accompany you back to the straights. How he did not say, all that he said was that it was urgent that you find her and that she would help put and end to this vile war.”

Cole let it sink in for a while, he was having a hard time believing what he was hearing, let alone hearing it come from his father in such a manner. It was strange, “How did you know to summon me if the necromancer has only just been here?” Gavion nodded, “He had been here for far longer than most would guess, almost two months I believe, but he sent a message ahead that you were to be summoned.”

Cole was aghast, “And you just did it? With no basis? You're the king of DROTIA! People can't just tell you to do things with no explanation or reasoning.” Gavion sighed softly, “Cole, you must understand, necromancers are extremely passive individuals, except for a very few rare and corrupt ones, they do not seek power and they do not revere titles. They can almost be thought of as messengers between the next world and this one. They don't waste words or monger fear. Yes, I could have ignored him and been on my merry way, but inevitably it would have been a grave mistake. He has been an ally, of sorts, for decades and while he may have joked about his niece crippling our army, I know first hand, if he had wanted to, he could have taken this castle by himself.” Gavion shook his head, “You have always seen me as the king, the ruler, the top, but I hope you noticed more than my position relative to others. Here, I could order anyone to do anything, but what does that make me? A king? No, it makes me a Tyrant, a man worthy of being assassinated in his sleep.” He sighed, “You will be king someday, and you have to learn to be calm. You can't take offense to everything. If you do, you will wear yourself out and make enemies quickly.”

Cole hated king lectures, they reminded him of his future and while that wasn't a fear, it would mean the passing of his father. And that was terrifying. Cole switched back to the topic, “So how do we find this girl? And how do we convince her to join us?” Gavion shrugged, “I imagine she will find you long before you find her. After all, she is a mage, and you are a giant stone barrel rolling through her forests.” Gavion laughed a deep hearty laugh, Sarah thought it was a pleasant change of tone. “As for how to convince her, I don't know that either. Maybe she just needs some facts, or maybe she just needs a friend. All I know is that the day after tomorrow, you three start your journey. Time is running short.”

Cole argued with his father; how could one person, even a magic person, change the fate of a war that had been going on for decades. Surely she wasn't more of a force than himself, Sarah, and Charlotte. Even if she was, how was he supposed to find and convince her to join them in such a short amount of time, and what if he didn't or couldn't, and the battle started before he arrived. Did it not make more sense for him to simply join the fight, and once the battle was won, then find the mage. That way there was less of a time element, and she could still be used to finally finish the Alarens. The king was patient but never gave in. Cole eventually did.

Cole, Sarah, Charlotte and the King began to plan what would happen over the next month or two. Many things were happening quickly, Charlotte tried her best to help, giving her input when she could, but she was a soldier, not a strategist. At the end, once all of the planning was finished, she resolved herself to one simple idea, she was Cole's protector. If he went to the gap, she would be right behind him. That was her role. She was his only royal.

Chapter 16 - Mountains of Talia

Lox stretched, feeling his muscles strain. It had been over a month, pushing two, since the insect men had helped save his life and he had been training ever since. His muscles were full of energy and his body moved with refined strength. He went over to the woods to collect some firewood, testing his muscles, stretching them individually as he moved across the clearing. He and Natalie had been working out intensely and it had paid off. He figured it was about time he returned to his mission.

Natalie rolled over, looking off at Lox. His pale shirtless body shone in the early sunlight. Muscles creased around his body, larger than anytime she'd ever seen him before but not bulky or stiff. His back was to her and she could see the soft red glow that always emanated from his scars. Their strange light forcing strange shadows across his body. She just stared for a moment, taking in the soft glow. He had always been in shape, even at his laziest, but this, this was different. Everything was just tight and organized, no one muscle stood out above the rest, no group was overbearing. He had worked himself into near perfect physical form. He had worked her too. Lox knew that they needed to be in the best shape of their lives if they were to accomplish their mission.

Natalie looked down at her body, she could feel the energy in her, her arms and legs were strong, toned. She had asked that he train her alongside himself, and he hadn't taken it easy on her. At first, even with his recovery, he would outmatch her in everything. He could run faster and further. Climb hills and chop down trees in far less time than it took her but she was improving. She improved each week, getting stronger and faster. She was both sore and bursting with energy. It was the best shape she'd ever been, she was lean and fit.

The two had pushed themselves as long and as often as possible when not traveling. Lox had led them deep into the mountains on their way to the castle, and in the mountains there

were many dangers, but for the pair of them, they were merely workouts. Cave bears became nothing more than a nuisance. Natalie marveled how something that used to terrify her, she could now dispose of with a few strikes. Lox had taught her to move efficiently, not wasting energy on exaggerated or wasteful motion. Always attacking the cleanest spots. Cave bears were large and strong but they were also blunt and straightforward, they didn't feign attacks and they didn't dodge. Natalie simply needed patience, waiting for an opening and then her blade could be in its throat before the bear knew it had missed.

The pair moved onwards, deeper. They encountered packs of dwellers, spider-like creatures with poisonous fangs. Unlike the bears, the dwellers moved fluidly too. Their attacks were fast and accurate. Lox used them as tests, their speed and tenacity pushed him to his limit but he was too quick. They were tenacious but the roaming packs couldn't defeat the scythe wielding assassin. He often left one or two alive so that Natalie could train too. The first few times he wounded them to remove their fangs. A necessary precaution at the time. It had been hard but she had learned. Watching their bodies, looking for patterns, learning to read attacks.

Out here it didn't take long to fatigue. Everyday was a struggle and everyday brought new challenges. Exactly what Lox had hoped for. As they continued to climb upwards, angling towards the castle of Talia, goldens started appearing. Goldens were life stones that never bonded with a human. They grew slowly, eventually turning into large rock and metal beasts. They started off around the size of children but given enough time they would grow beyond human proportions, growing into small mountains. These were the real challenges. They didn't have easy weaknesses, they didn't feel fear or pain as other animals did. Legend told that they had no real minds; that their lack of bonding with a human drove them mad. Natalie thought that might sound contradictory but the ones she had seen fought with pure malice and without mercy. Lox had made them run a few times simply because they couldn't beat the rock giants.

Lox had learned to faze enough to detach their rock 'necks' if you could call them that. There weren't really organs but they seemed to still act much like any other animal. He had also taught her how to weave spells into her blade. She could now make them sharper than any wet stone, and she could weave a spell that helped fracture rocks. It didn't work too well on goliaths, in Lox's experience, but it seemed to work just fine against goldens.

Today was the day. Today, Lox had said they would be starting a direct path towards the castle. They would keep training but would no longer take their arcing path. He wanted to be at the castle by the week's end. Natalie wasn't exactly sure how far they were but she trusted Lox would get them there.

She watched as he carried a stack of wood towards her. For some reason his more ungainly movements brought back thoughts of Norb. He caught her eye with an inquisitive look, she blushed and rushed to start gathering their cooking supplies. The one thing they did seem to have was plenty of food. The mountains were abundant in meat and berries, and when Lox could faze and literally run down any animal they came across it didn't make eating a huge worry. They ate a light breakfast, Lox was antsy, he wanted to start their trek. Natalie helped pack up their two bags, with so little to carry, packing never took too long.

Once everything was ready Lox led her through a morning workout. They started with a long run, up and across part of the mountain then back down again, towards their camp site. That would have constituted a work out for her at almost any other time in her life but now it was a hearty warm up. They then did sprints across the clearing, Lox had made sure there were no holes or other tripping hazards earlier. They ran back and forth, again, and again, and again. Lox held the breakneck pace every time, never slowing, sweat beat down his face. Natalie slowed steadily, wearing down. She eventually stopped, getting some water ready as Lox ran on. He pushed himself, he didn't faze but edged his body to the brink. Floating between the mist of a faze and the matter of a human. His legs burned with fire-like energy, his eyes peeled the area. Everything was visible to him, every hook, hole, cranny, he felt like he could see the very wind itself blow.

Eventually he stopped, winded but smiling. He joined Natalie and drank the cool water, refreshing his depleted body. After a nice cool down, he wiped himself clean and shouldered his bag. Natalie hoisted hers too and they were off, onward into the mountain. Energy was already flooding back into his body.

They kept the same routine for four days before they saw the castle for the first time. It sat across the mountains from them, nestled between two peaks. It shone brightly. They had both seen it before but they quietly absorbed the sight for a time. Sitting in silence, looking over the trees and rocks, at the enemy's castle. The throne of Drotia. The city was a fair bit smaller than Ares but it was no less stunning. Despite the negative connotation all Alarians had of Talia, Lox that it was a fitting home for the stone king. A stone throne in a giant rock, for a giant rock, it was a bit on the nose but stunning nonetheless.

Lox and Natalie did some light training as they head across the final mountains. Two more days and they were coming up on the back side of the castle. They stopped to swim in a waterfall, it was enormous, it fell from a lake high above and broke repeatedly against rocks on its way down. Pouring itself into smaller then larger falls over and over again. It weaved left and right, splitting and merging as it made its way downwards. Finally ending in a twenty foot or so cascade, forming a shallow expanse of water before it ran further down the mountain as a small stream. The two of them bathed and swam in the thigh deep water. Enjoying its cool temperature as the warm sun baked their bodies and the rocks around them.

Floating calmly around the water, Lox had almost fallen asleep, when he heard a soft rumble. The sound of shifting rocks, ever so slightly. He immediately stood up and moved towards his weapons. He grabbed his scythe and stood, his half naked body poised for whatever might come. Natalie followed his lead, she hadn't heard the noise but she too grabbed her blades. Lox looked around, his eyes bouncing left and right, up and down. He turned slowly, taking in everything. Natalie moved towards dry land, Lox didn't. He slowly stepped towards the waterfall, wading deeper into the middle of the pool. He watched, his eyes looked forward but his peripherals looking for any movement to his side.

Suddenly the water shifted, the waterfall split halfway up, turning into two smaller waterfalls. Lox shifted his grip, the golden straightened and turned around. It was enormous,

over ten feet tall, possibly twelve standing straight up. It cocked its head and moved its shoulders, each of which was the size of a small boulder. It stepped out into the pool, the ground shaking with each step, small waves flying across the shallow water. It eyed Lox up and down, it had flakes of silver in its rock. The golden had once been a silver stone, none of which had been seen, as far as Lox knew, in the last hundred years. Then again, to grow to this size, the golden might be that old.

It leaned back and bellowed, a roar so loud it shook the floor. Lox tensed, this was the largest golden he'd ever encountered, probably the largest he'd ever even heard about. He knew that the beast was different than the others, it didn't rush right away. It moved with as much grace as a pile of boulders could manage, which is to say not much, but more than previous goldens. It pushed forward, Lox retreated, Lox feigned sideways, it lowered its large arm defensively. Natalie stood on the water's edge, not sure what to do. She thought about moving in but didn't want to distract Lox. He gave her his answer, he sprinted in.

The goliath smashed down his massive hand, barely missing as Lox side stepped, the wave however, flung Lox sideways. He landed in the shallow pool and righted himself. The golden didn't waste the opportunity, it rushed forward sending a wave in its wake as it tried to grab Lox. He fazed, jumping straight upwards. He landed on the outstretched arm of the golden and ran towards its head, he needed this fight over quickly. The golden dropped, it did a sort of belly flop against the ground, both shaking the mountain and throwing Lox off balance. As he aimed for his landing he saw the leg of the golden sweep out toward him. He braced and deflected off the giant stone leg, the move threw him into the waterfall. Lox didn't wait to recover, he pushed as hard as he could against the wall behind the water and burst through the wall of cover. The golden was getting up, just in time to see Lox flying at it. It knelt and put up an arm, Lox sliced with all of his might, separating it at the elbow.

The golden roared again, though whether it was anger or pain Lox didn't know. It grabbed its fallen arm and threw it at Lox, much like a spear. Lox jumped again, running hard on top of it, jumping off the back end. He used the added height to bring down his scythe with all his might, the golden had learned its lesson, it dodged. Something goldens never did. *Why would something made of rock that doesn't feel pain dodge?* It then backed up and started bombarding the area with stones the size of dogs.

Lox bobbed and weaved, ducked and jumped. He slowly worked his way towards the golden, moving first right and the left, but always forward. Eventually the golden reached for a stone that wasn't there, Lox used the brief moment of hesitation. He leapt forward, hooking his scythe around the beast's neck, swinging his body around in a wide arc. He landed softly on its upper shoulder blades. He pulled. He pulled with all of his might, his arms burning with effort; the scythe moved, slowly at first, through the rock neck. The veins bulged from his forearms and his hands turned white from gripping the staff. With a final heave Lox sliced through. The giant head flung off into the air, the body falling heavily into the water with Lox still on its shoulders. There was an eerie silence for a moment. The mountain itself seemed to shudder, almost as if it had lost a guardian. Lox jumped down carefully, making sure to land as far away as possible from the body. As he landed there was a strange feeling of sorrow and motivation. He didn't

know why he felt bad for killing the giant golden, maybe because it had been so old, so rare, possibly the last of its kind. But he also gained drive, that had to be sign. He was ready.

Natalie watched in awe at the event. The fluidity of Lox's movements, dodging rocks as if they were in slow motion. The way his body stretched as he curved over to top of the beast. The tendons in his neck strained as he pulled on his blade. It reminded her of the stories she used to hear growing up and she almost forgot she was present. When the body had hit the ground, she was abruptly awoken, brought back into reality. Lox watched for a moment, letting the water settle, his long scythe over his shoulder, the unique weapon only made him look even more surreal.

It was only then, when Lox stood still, silhouetted against the mountain that she noticed Alex. She had forgotten it existed, Lox had kept it invisible to remain inconspicuous but she wondered if he was losing it. Alex was a mere shadow of what it once was. Its size remained but it was no longer the dark wolf from before. It barely shimmered like a translucent vapor. Had it not a slightly red back and light blue eyes she didn't think she would have noticed it all. Lox was getting too strong, his fade was finally disappearing. She knew Alex didn't exist, not really, but the fact that it would disappear completely, a part of Lox that would simply be gone forever, almost made her sad. A chapter of his life closing quickly.

Lox picked up their bags, handing Natalie her things, "It is time. We will reach the castle soon, it is time for you to master some final webs." He then walked off, leaving one battlefield behind, but heading towards a much grander one. She hoped the result would be the same, though she doubted it would be as quick.

Chapter 17 – Uncharted Barrier Mountains

Cole trudged onward, Sarah and Charlotte followed closely behind. They had been in the mountains for over a week and hadn't seen so much as a magic field mouse let alone a powerful mage. His father had said she would probably find him, but what if she had? What if she had decided to ignore them? Or worse what if she hadn't and they were simply wandering around aimlessly in a maze for something that could very well be on the other side of the mountain range. Cole thought he had patience but this quest was testing it. He and his group had stayed a day or two longer at the castle than his father had wished but eventually they moved out, a month or so before the king and his royals would. The King drove south-west to meet up at the pass, Cole and his company went straight west, through the farmlands. Simple boring traveling.

When they had finally made it to the forest, Cole had half expected the mage woman to come out and greet them. This was a foolish notion of course, something he realized once they were at the forest edge. He and the girls had spent one last night in the open before heading into the mountain range. These mountains were not as dangerous as those by the pass but there were still goblins and kors. Nasty creatures, both of them. Goblins with their strange magic

and clever hands. They were small, agile, and crafty. One on one combat was not their strong suit but if a pack was around everyone should keep their guard up. Kors on the other hand were always dangerous.

Kors were somewhere between the size of a wolf and horse, looking much like wolves except for their large wings and metal teeth. They mostly hunted on the ground, unlike wolves though, they tended to hunt alone. They would sometimes use their wings to hunt but they were heavy and flying used up too much energy. The teeth were another story, Cole wasn't sure how Kors had metal teeth but they did and they were perfect for cracking rocks. Legend had it, long ago there were hundreds if not thousands of goldens around the mountains and that the kors evolved the teeth to fight off the giant rock beasts. Cole didn't know if that was true but there were no soul stones or goldens in these mountains, or at least none that anyone knew of. Others said that the kors used their teeth to eat rocks, gaining some nutrition or sustenance. Either way, they were dangerous and to be avoided if possible.

Not everything in the mountains was lethal though, pixie fairies were fairly common, small creatures with little intelligence, they mostly gathered flowers and grew plants. Their magic was weak, by human standards, but was often a wonder to gaze upon. Their friends, or companions at the very least, were star birds. Star birds were small, roughly the same size as the fairies, that roamed in small flocks. Their bodies emitted a soft glow during the night. Sometimes people would look up and see a flock flying by and mistake them for shooting stars. It was thought of as good luck if a flock of star birds and pixies flew over your camp. Cole hoped they might have such luck on their side.

After the group had wandered some more, picking their path arbitrarily, they happened upon a rather precarious scene. They had heard some noise earlier and went to find the source, hoping it was the mage. What they found was rather the opposite, in front of them lay a scene they had spent the last week trying to avoid. Six goblins were pushing in on a wounded kor. The kor was not much larger than a regular wolf, perhaps a youth, and was getting cornered against some rocks. Its wing was bleeding heavily but it snarled its silver teeth viciously, snapping at a goblin that inched too close.

The goblins had gnarly little blades, their thin bodies hunched over, wicked grins covered their pointy faces. Neither group had noticed the three humans, they were far too occupied with each other. The goblins were shooting small darts at the kor, probably poisoned. It didn't seem that they were doing much to the kor but in its weakened state it was losing ground. If nothing stopped them, the kor would be harvested by the end of the night.

Against his better judgment, Cole ran into the fray, his goliath unleashing his pent up fury on the goblins. His axe caught two before they could comprehend the change of events but the other four changed strategies. They regrouped in a hurry and seemed surprised by the stone beast before them but they didn't want to leave their prize. Unfortunately for them, Cole wasn't alone, Charlotte had moved to guard him and with a swift dagger took one in the eye, dropping it to the ground. Cole ran at the others; Sarah had entangled their legs with a web. They stood

no chance against his enormous axe and Char's sharp blade. Cole turned for the last one, only to see its torso being ripped in half by the wounded kor.

As soon as the goblins were taken care of Cole realized his mistake. He was in the open, by himself, with a kor. Even a wounded kor could do permanent if not lethal damage to him. He brought up his axe in a defensive posture, the kor eyed him coldly. Its large eyes taking in both him, and the two women on the far side of the clearing. Sarah and Charlotte both had their weapons ready as they ran forward, Sarah behind him and Char coming just next to him. The kor staired a while longer, then with a soft howl before it laid down on its stomach. It was only then that they saw the damage clearly. The kor's wing was broken and it had a goblin blade lodged in its side, that in addition to the poisoned darts littered across its neck and chest. Cole wasn't sure if the beast would survive if left alone.

Sarah pushed softly against Cole, "Should we help it?" Cole wasn't sure how to answer. "Cole, it looks so helpless. It can't be more than a year old, look at its size!" Sarah squeezed his arm, "I know they are dangerous but don't you think it would have attacked us if it could?" Cole's silence egged her on, his lack of disapproval a pleasant surprise. After a few more minutes he gave in, Sarah slowly approached the injured animal. She was no more than a body length away when lightning scorched the ground in front of her.

Sarah jumped backwards, the other two edged toward her, their eyes looking at the sky, though there were no clouds to be seen. "It didn't come from up there" The voice cut through the silence. The small group looked to their side, high up on a large stone sat a young woman. She sat cross legged, her right arm was raised with her pointer finger aimed at the small group. Her long white hair blew softly in the steady wind. She sat calmly on the rock but her eyes blazed brightly, like molten gold. Her hand seemed to pulse with energy, distorting the air around it as she held it aloft.

Cole had his axe raised in front of him and he inched slowly between the woman and Sarah, "Who are you and what are you doing?" The woman dropped, she was at least twenty feet in the air and for a moment they all gasped, only to see her glide slowly downward. Her feet shimmering with the same distortion as her hand, which was still pointed at them. She landed with impressive grace then moved slowly towards them, "I am Kahlen Sauder, keeper of the mountains, and protector of the kors. Who are you and what is your business here, Drotians?"

Well, we found the mage, Cole half chuckled at the thought. Apparently they had offended her in some way, perhaps she didn't like them interfering with the goblins? Sarah spoke before either Cole or Charlotte, "I am Sarah Klovish, this is Cole Gordsing, and that is Charlette Soria. And I'm trying to heal this poor creature!" With that explanation, Sarah went back to weaving on the injured creature, she didn't think it had time for their bickering.

As Sarah spoke though, Kahlen lowered her hand and her eyes faded in intensity. She swept towards them, heading for the kor, "Watch out, I can fix her." She waved a backhand at Sarah, and an invisible wind gently lifted the weaver's body upwards and sent her floating back towards her companions. Kahlen then placed a hand on the kor's snout and chest. With a flare

of magic the creature's body was traced in light. It then closed its eyes and slumbered. Kahlen then set about picking the darts out of the kor's body. She did her best to ignore the curiosity growing inside her. These weren't the regular farmers or hunters that showed up every now and again.

Kahlen had watched the group for a few days now and had been taking note of everything they did. Her father had told her people would come looking for her eventually, and many people had, but none had ever fit his description. She finished healing the young kor, easy enough, kors were strong and goblin poison was not, the wing could be healed but she would let the kor heal on its own. All young must learn lessons. She heard Alena then, falling from the sky, "Please lower your weapons, we need to talk." The group did, just as Alena landed next to Kahlen. The large kor eyed the strangers dangerously for a moment.

No sooner had the foreigners let their weapons fall and the big one banded his goliath when a giant kor fell from the sky. The creature was massive, it was all white but with black eyes. Larger than almost any other kors in the area, it pushed the size of a healthy warhorse. Its large wings folded dramatically to its sides as it turned, heading towards Kahlen and nuzzled up against her open hand. The goliath's fist was tight on his axe, she was fairly confident he wouldn't act foolishly but kept an eye on him regardless. She spoke again, "This" motioning towards the giant kor, "is Alena. She is both an old friend and ally. She also holds high rank amongst the kor, treat her with respect, the moment you don't, you might not receive another chance." She let that sink in before continuing, "I know you have been looking for me but I do not know why. If you would please follow me; we can talk back at my home."

The giant kor did a sort of bobbing bow, which Cole took as a farewell, before laying down next to the now sleeping kor. Cole was hesitant to follow, he didn't like being ushered and his brain was bursting with questions, but this might be his only chance. Plus, other than the initial bolt of lightning, she hadn't done anything threatening, he chuckled at the moronic logic. Nonetheless, her power, which he now perceived to have been accurately described, made him nervous. Her casual motions that seemed to outperform anything he'd ever seen. *Shooting lightning, floating off the rocks, lifting Sarah*. These were not lost on him and he worried what might happen if she turned truly hostile.

The group walked a short way up the mountain, following Kahlen's weaving path, before coming upon an old manor. Two stories tall and in excellent condition. It was by no means a grand building but it was definitely larger and more impressive than your regular mountain cabin. It had large tree trunks acting as pillars in each of the corners, and stone fell in between. Kahlen led them through the large front door and into the dining room. She then had them sit while she prepared some tea, though prepare was a loose term, she boiled the pot immediately and within a pair of minutes the group had fresh drinks. "As I mentioned before, I know you three have been seeking me, but I do not know why. What is your story?" She spoke with a very strong authority and a cutting tone. Cole leaned back, hoping the casual action would help ease the tension, as well as calm his own nerves, "My name is Cole Gordsing, prince of Drotia, this is Sarah Klovish, high weaver, and my royal guard, Charlette Soria, as mentioned earlier. We come seeking your help, or perhaps your guidance."

It was then that Cole realized that given all of the time the group had searched for the mage, he hadn't thought about what he was going to say or what his father expected her to do. He pushed on, awkwardly, "I guess I don't actually know why were looking for you, other than we were told to look for you by the king, who was told to send us to look for you by a necromancer, who didn't exactly explain why we should be looking for you." He felt his ears grow hot, how poor a spokesman he was being for the empire, "I mean to say, we were sent to find you in hopes that you would help Drotia in our constant struggle with Alar."

The mage raised an eyebrow, "You wish me to fight your wars for you?" Sarah hopped in hastily, worried the mage might be offended if she thought they tagged her as a mercenary, "Not exactly. Truthfully, we do not know what exactly we are finding you for. Obviously your talents would be immensely useful on the war front but I think, given the fact that you are only one person, perhaps the necromancer had other ideas, ideas we have not been told." Why was she talking poorly too? It wasn't uncommon for Cole to stumble through negotiations but Sarah was usually very controlled. She hadn't meant to say all of those words, her thoughts just seemed to fall out her mouth before her brain could process them. It was Charlette who spoke next, "Please refrain from your magic, Miss Kahlen. We mean you know harm, we have simply come to talk to you."

Magic... Of course, why hadn't he thought of that, of course that is why he and Sarah had spoken like bumbling children who were caught by their mother. Kahlen smiled softly, her eyes had turned a soft green, like a flourishing leaf, "I meant no disrespect, I have been in these woods for a long time and those who I come across tend to have more ulterior motives than what they originally profess. I find I save a lot of time by opening their minds." She then sipped her tea, and suddenly there was a shift in the room, as if the tension was sucked out of the air, finally allowing them to relax. The effect was immediately visible. The mage spoke again, "As you have all guessed, I am Kahlen, the mage in the mountains, daughter of Kahn, the last of the great seven."

Cole stretched his stiff shoulders, damned magic he thought. He also realized that he felt a warmth coming from the manor. It's soft energy or essence, it seemed vibrant. When Kahlen paused, obviously expecting a reaction to what she had said he simply stared, he didn't know who the great seven were. She continued, appearing slightly disappointed that none of the three had understood, "My father left long ago, but he left many things to guide me as I grew. His manifestations have told me much but I wonder if you are the man he spoke of, tell me, who was the necromancer who sent you? What did he look like?"

The memory replayed in his head, "His name was Ren, skinny fella with a green sleeve."

He saw Kahlen perk up immediately, "Green sleeve? Did he have a bone arm? Like a skeleton?"

"Aye, that's what it looked like at least, couldn't see too well but it looked like a corpse's fingers trailed the trim of his sleeve." He didn't know who would get excited about hearing of a necromancer, unpleasant people as they were, "May I ask why, do you know him?"

She nodded quickly, an almost childlike excitement grew over her face, “Ren, as you call him, was a friend of my fathers! He was a wonderful man, he taught me so much, about magic, about healing, about growing. He was the only one to ever talk to me without sounding degrading. So many of my father's acquaintances, well at least the ones who could come through the barrier, were so mean. A few told me stories, or at my fathers request taught me skills, but they had no light in them. Not like Gallow, or sorry, Ren as you say! Funny thing to have changed his name, but he was a funny man. Anyways, Ren was always so excited to teach, and he would tell me of his niece and nephew. He had so many stories from the other side, he even taught me maps, told me I would make it there someday. Oh, and his bone hand, how it walked around by itself, it would drive my father nuts.”

Kahlen giggled, the group stared blankly, the mage woman beaming with her memories of the necromancer. Cole wasn't sure what he had just heard, he was shocked to hear that others, besides the necromancer, had crossed the barrier, especially without the Drotian's knowing about it. That and that the girl that had scared him half to death not an hour earlier now looked like a child with a delicious meal in front of her. Her eyes beamed light green now, her smile radiating. She was exceptionally pretty, at least when she wasn't threatening them. Cole noticed the girls staring too.

Kahlen's face grew red, “What?” Cole laughed, despite himself but her persona had changed so dramatically that it was almost infectious. Cole paused, on second thought, perhaps it was, “I don't think I've ever heard anyone speak of a necromancer so lightly, even the tales speak” he paused for a moment, “cautiously, of them.” She seemed to shrug it off, “If you say so... Anyway, that reaffirms my thoughts, please follow me.” She hopped off her chair and tread lightly through the manor, before stopping in front of a large wooden door. It had a pool of water, sitting vertically, set into the door. The water didn't fall, nor was it motionless, rather it waved softly, small ripples running across its surface.

A face appeared in the water, a young man, clean shaven, blue eyes, perfectly white hair, just like Kahlen's. It looked as if it could have been her brother, it spoke evenly, “Speak purpose to your disruption.” It was neither friendly nor aggressive, simply a statement. Kahlen spoke cheerfully back, “Hello younger version of my father! We wish to hear the three events that will come to pass.” The face looked back at her, nodded then swung forward, “Enter and wait.”

The small group walked into the room, it was large and dark. There were no windows, the only light came from two small orbs that glowed softly on either side of the room. The room was empty except for a few cushions in the middle, formed in a circle. Following Kahlen's lead the group sat on the cushions. The door closed and the orbs went out, Kahlen whispered softly, “Please don't interrupt or move too much, this magic is old and decays more quickly when challenged outside its original parameters.”

They sat quietly. Eventually bright beams of light shot out of each orb, they collided in the center of the circle. Their convergence grew, at first a blob of morphing light, then into a humanoid shape, then the young man in the door, Kahlen's father. Once his whole body was

formed, tall, thin, dressed in plain robes, the orbs shut off, the man remained. He turned around, taking in the small group. His voice was much warmer this time, more human, "Welcome friends. I am Kahn. Before you I stand, young and healthy but alas I doubt I am still as such. You have requested the three events, please watch carefully, the time runs short."

The illusion, Kahn, then faded away and the beams came again, this time they were wider, creating a misting of light before them. Images started to form in the mist and Kahn's deep voice resonated from nowhere, "The events shall occur, in order. They are not vague nor are they exact, they are not prophecies but neither are they free will. The players have not been chosen, yet someone will play the part. If you are watching this, then you may be the first player, for my daughter has no reason to show this to anyone else."

A large creature formed in the mist, something like a golden or a goliath, "A stone will rise from the forest, it does not belong." The creature walked through a misty forest, "It will meet two enemies, one it fears, one it ignores." The creature walked into a triangle, at one end sat a wolf, or kor, or bear, it was large and dark. At the other a vague black silhouette, "If the stone destroys both the strong and the weak, it will fall, for the strong is not alone." The creature destroyed both the animal and the blackness, only to be surrounded by dozens of new shadow creatures coming out of the forest. "Should it destroy the strong and not the weak, the weak will praise the stone and bring it to temporary glory." The creature walked with the darkness, into a castle filled with dark figures, the figures appeared to be celebrating, then suddenly a storm grew, fire rained from the sky and the castle collapsed in a thunderous shockwave. "But, should the stone only destroy the weak, and bear no threat to the strong then the events will continue." The creature sat down, looking at the kor, who too, sat.

The illusion faded, "If the first two happened then you are not here, as you are not my daughter alone, we shall assume the third happened and the following events will come accordingly." A battlefield came to life before them, "Two kings will fall, one by a perceived friend, one by a shadow of death." Two crowns fell to a stone floor, "Truth bares no will, only finality." The display changed, fading to a dark gray, "The final, an act that will start the final decay of the wall. A man will both ascend and descend, his spirit will be gifted, his soul will be sacrificed. His mind will remain, but it will be torn from every direction. His heart and core will be locked behind a cage of malice. His presence will break the old and drain the present. To some he is the new, to others, he is the end." The gray had shown nothing during this, only streaks of white and black, swirling in a whirlwind of chaos.

The image faded, the lights from the orbs grew to a dim glow. The door swung open, Kahlen led the group from the room. As the door closed softly behind them, the water spoke, this time with no face, "Now you know." The simple statement hung as they walked back to the kitchen.

Lox and Natalie had spent less than a day in Talia before finding out that the king had left the city. The two of them were sitting in a mid-level restaurant, after spending the morning climbing the city's roads, and had stopped for a bite to eat. While they were awaiting their meal, they overheard some guards talking. The guards were speculating on the length of the battle, or rather how long Gavion was going to be away for the battle. At first, this greatly irritated Lox. He and Natalie had spent most of the past week planning everything around the castle; paths to the castle, away from the castle, rendezvous points, signals, everything they might need during the mission. To hear they were not only in the wrong location but had wasted time on pointless planning was a blow to morale.

Lox had even decided that he would teach Natalie his guiding web. It was a rather strange web, something he didn't fully understand even though he created it. Essentially, he taught her how to connect her unconscious with his body, in a manner of speaking. It allowed her the ability to know what direction he was in at all times, similar to how she knew which hand was her right hand and which was her left. Regardless of what happened, Natalie could now head in the general direction of Lox, should she ever need to locate him.

Lox had been nervous to teach her. He didn't very much like the idea that people could find him regardless of where he was, but he also worried that they might be separated at some point and thought it best to trust her. It was one of his closest secrets, almost no one knew the web existed and very few had been 'connected' to him, the king and Norb being the main two. He had made two points very clear to Natalie, she could not mention it to anyone else, and if she agreed she couldn't leave his party. Ever. To do so would make her one of the biggest threats in his life and he would have to respond accordingly. She had taken longer than he'd expected but decided to join him rather than risk not having the bond. Thankfully, the sense became more vague the farther away Lox got from the host. At this point, where they were located, the king and Norb would only be able to tell that he was alive and maybe that he was east of them. To further protect himself, he made it so that both parties were required to perform parts of the web, and he only taught her how to do her end. His end was beyond private. Secretly, he feared what would happen if others could cast the web without his consent.

As with all new things, it had taken Natalie some time to get used to. Lox would run off into the forest and hide then Natalie would leave sometime after and attempt to find him without using any tracking abilities. Eventually, she figured out the *feeling*. It wasn't honed quite as well as Norb's was and he didn't think she understood the distance too well but for their current purposes it was good enough. He was confident that once in the area, she would be able to find him.

As they entered the city, Lox was initially worried that they would have trouble blending in, him being so distinctly non-Drotian, and Natalie being a ranked weaver, he thought they might be questioned by nosey guards. Luckily, loose clothes hid most of their bodies and Natalie hadn't spent too much time at Taria since her youth. The pair did their best to avoid generals and high level military personnel, and as a result they didn't run into any surprises. Simply

blending in with the crowded streets was rather easy, after all, people came from all over Drotia, and some even beyond, to trade in Taria.

After hearing the disappointing news, the two spent the rest of the day fishing for information. Both to confirm the story and to find out as much detail as they could about the King's travel plans. As it turned out, it was far easier to gather such information than Lox would have thought; Drotians were far too trusting, and the soldiers that remained spoke liberally about the topic as if it were as plain as the weather above them. Between the two of them, Lox and Natalie had figured out both the King's travel path and the location where his tent was to be set, in the final campground. Well, as near as a location could be determined without a map. Of course it was in the mountains surrounded by soldiers, and probably on a highly visible plateau as to be the beacon of their forces. Whatever the reality, it was still good to know. It was a point from which they would start to plan again.

Neither Natalie nor Lox had much, as many of their bags had been abandoned during the Cole encounter. Natalie spent the rest of her day gathering essential supplies for their journey. Lox went about acquiring two top tier scout horses. A costly expense but one he hoped would make up for lost time. He wasn't a horse expert but he was reasonably confident the beasts were healthy and well bred. Afterwards they met at a small, well kept inn just outside the highest city level. It was expensive but he knew he could either afford it, or it wouldn't matter.

Lox sat patiently outside, he had selected the farthest table from the inn, nearest the wall's edge. It provided two wondrous benefits, they were less likely to be overheard and the view was stunning. He hoped inwardly that Natalie would make it before sunset, for her to miss such a scene would be a true loss. Neither of them would likely have the opportunity again. He was a bottle of wine in and nibbling at some fried cheese when she finally arrived. She was wearing a deep blue top that contrasted her pale hair and light tan riding pants. He smiled as she walked over.

As Natalie sat down a waiter came by, a prim man with too tight of clothes and too thin of hair. He was polite enough though and after bringing their drinks left them to their devices. Lox pointed out across the skyline towards the sinking sun, "I would take my sunsets over the water above all others, but even I must admit that this throne in the mountain has a lovely view."

Natalie laughed lightly, "Been through a few drinks already have we?" She nudged him softly with her elbow.

He smiled then shrugged, "I may have. I figured I may as well indulge my cravings one last time."

She eyed him, "You haven't eaten without me I hope?" There was mockery in her threatening tone and she pushed the plate of crumbs in his direction.

"No, never. I was merely wetting my appetite and perhaps my lips."

“Oh? Well then let’s get some food on order! I haven’t eaten all day and am famished.” Her tone was still light and happy.

The pair ate and drank for the next few hours, in total they split four courses, excluding Lox’s appetizer and finished a few more bottles of wine. It was perhaps a foolish move, to gorge oneself in luxury when there was work to be done and many miles of road ahead but Lox couldn’t help himself. Natalie seemed all too eager to keep the night going. They discussed many topics as the light slowly disappeared. Lox liked music, and complained about the lack of minstrels and bards. He had bought instruments for his house and often pushed for his servants to learn but only a couple had a true gift. He bemoaned over missed opportunities to her, “I should have had them play when we were last home. One boy can play the drums in such a way as to reverberate the soul. It is all one can do to not dance.”

For her part Natalie didn’t seem to mind, “I’m sure there will be more opportunities. Though I would have loved to see you dance.”

He glanced at her with a raised eyebrow.

She laughed, “Oh come now. Norb, sure but you, no way?”

He puffed air out of his nose with mock indignity, “I’ll have you know I dance quite well. According to people who are socially obligated to tell me as such.” He smiled and she laughed even harder.

Lox and Natalie grew slowly quieter, drifting off into personal thoughts as they often did during the evenings. At some point Natalie placed her hand in his. It was an unexpected sign of affection but not one he didn’t appreciate. The comfortable silence of companionship settled over them as the night drew to an end and even the bar keeper had closed up for the night. Lox knew they should go to bed but now, under the stars he couldn’t bring himself too. To leave such a moment would be to sign a painting only halfway done or to hit a cymbal long before the crescendo. He savored it, drawing the warmth of Natalie’s hand into himself as his head tilted back towards the twinkling lights above. As with a painting or a symphony though, the night had to end. He held onto her hand as they receded back inside, he hoped that this was not the final performance of the new duet.

Chapter 19 – Uncharted Barrier Mountains, Drotia

Cole, Kahlen, Sarah, and Charlotte sat talking late into the night, discussing the strange and prophetic experience. Regardless of what the girls discussed, and all the other topics the

mirage had spoken of, Cole could only concentrate on one small portion. "Two kings will fall." He had argued incessantly, wanting to leave right away, but Kahlen said she would only accompany them if they stayed the night. It was getting dark already and she claimed to have a few items to take care of. She said she could finish them quickly and the group could leave the next day. So, begrudgingly, Cole and the group spent the night. He knew his father wanted the sorceress but all he could think of was he would be too late. He tossed and turned all night.

The group departed as the sun's rays started to break the fog of the next morning. The group reclaimed their horses at the edge of the wilderness, having left them with a nearby farmer while they ventured into the mountains. Kahlen, to everyone's surprise, rode on Alena. Cole was fairly confident no one in history had ever ridden a kor, but he had stopped questioning normal; almost everything about the last few months had been far from normal. In fact, the more he thought about it, the more concerned he got about what the necromancer said.

They rode in as direct a manner as possible, Cole pushing them ever faster. Internally he debated whether it might be better for him to ride ahead. He could make better time by himself and in the worst case could use his goliath to keep running until he arrived. Ultimately though he decided against it, it was risky and he wondered what use he'd be tired and alone. He tried his best to push the thought of his father out of his mind, but there were only two kings. If the message was believed to be true, Gavion would die. Cole wasn't sure what to think, if it were not true, then perhaps he didn't have to rush, but if it were, then it wouldn't matter if he rushed. Neither was reassuring. Maybe he could make it in time, he could protect his father, hell, maybe Kahlen could protect his father, after all, she was the magic one. Their horses drove ever forward.

Kahlen spoke mainly to the other women, Cole said little, except when prodded directly. His sullen mood cast a gloomy shadow over the area. Sarah and Charlotte filled Kahlen in on the recent events of the war, explaining the precursors to the large battle coming. The group was tense and for their part, the women were all skeptical. Kahlen tried her best to comfort the group by pointing out that there were other kings across the boundary, many more than the two here, but it didn't seem Cole would listen to any of it. She thought his attitude was continuing to sour and it put an additional strain on the group the further they rode.

After examining the bright scar that went across Cole's eye, and covered a good portion of his face, from the back of the group, Kahlen carefully prodded the girls for the story. Charlotte filled her in on their encounter with the faze. How they had traveled through Tule and heard an extraordinary tale of a man killing the local soldiers. Doing their duty, they attempted to catch him, and then the brief, albeit extremely vicious, fight that had taken place. It ended with the faze's flight into the woods, leaving back nothing but a few bags and lots of blood. Kahlen listened intently, though she felt her eyes grow ever so slightly at the mention of the red glow coming from the faze's back.

Don't betray your thoughts with emotion, Kahlen reminded herself, secretly trying to keep her face calm. The story had been interesting enough at the start but she had not been prepared for the description of a red glow being emitted from the faze's back. She had been

immediately drawn back to her childhood, and the chance encounter with a boy. She had been but a child then, her father was still around, working the mountains, teaching her, guiding her. Kahlen had gone exploring that day, wandering through the forest, when she had heard noises nearby. She carefully snuck towards it, keeping herself silent and invisible. When she finally broke onto the scene, all she saw was a goblin, the twisted features of the beast were worn into her memory, its scarred face, wicked grin, and its long fingers grabbing at fairies. She had almost ran back to grab her father when she heard another noise.

It was then that a boy came into the green. He couldn't have been much older than she was but he seemed ages older in demeanor. His body was full of cuts and bruises, and his face was too serious and his eyes blazed with a passion far beyond anything she had ever seen. The boy attacked the goblin with his little blade, but he was no match for an adult goblin. She was sure the boy was going to die, she wanted to run but she couldn't take her eyes off the scene. Somehow, amidst the one sided fight, the young boy managed to get near the pixie. He paused briefly to cut the poor creature loose. Doing so cost him his defense though, the goblin had jumped and stabbed his blades deep into the boy's back. Tearing the skin down from just below the neck to mid waist, she could see the whole tear from where she hid. She had stifled a gasp.

The goblin had then ran into the forest, the boy gasping in pain, stumbled off into the foliage. Kahlen had run then, as fast as her young legs could carry her, to grab her father, hoping he might be able to heal the boy. She ran and ran, tears welling, all the way back up the mountain. When she had finally found her father she explained what happened and he was suddenly panicking as well. The pair had run back to the green, searching for the young man. The boy was nowhere to be found but the ample blood made a trail they could follow. Eventually though it led to the caves, and into the darkness. Kahlen had wanted to press on, into the caves, but her father had grown serious, insisting it was time for them to leave.

Everything changed after that fateful day. When they had returned home, her father had locked himself in his study. Over the next few weeks she barely saw him, he remained in his study for days, from sunup to sun down. What he did inside she could only guess. Eventually he sat her down. She remembered him looking so tired, worn, bags under his eyes, his long white hair askew. He had told her that he needed to go, that events were coming faster than he could have anticipated. He explained to her that he had to leave but should she need to, she could talk to him through his projection. He said he was sorry, tears fell slowly from his pale sunken eyes as he said it, but he needed to go. He then kissed her, told her he loved her, and told her he would be back some day. Dawning his traveling cloak, he had set off into the forest.

It had taken Kahlen months to accept what happened, years perhaps. She hadn't understood what had happened. Some of her fathers old acquaintances had come by, some spent a week or two, some longer. Ren had come multiple times, spending over a month with her at a time. He helped her grow, helped her understand, helped her to both learn and heal. When her mind had finally grown into its path, she began asking better questions, her fathers projection couldn't answer everything but she found the older she grew, the more it spoke.

When Ren decided she was old enough, he had informed her about the *events* and let on that her father had a role that needed to be played, that she would too someday, just like all of the characters. From then on, while Kahlen still longed for her father and missed him greatly, she was no longer alone. Her solace was her fate, she knew she too had a role, and she would find it. Perhaps then, when the events took place, she would see him again.

“Kahlen!” Kahlen snapped back into the present, the group was staring at her. Their six eyes felt like needles against her skin. “Where the heck were you? Your face was blank and your hair was flashing colors!” Sarah said. Kahlen felt Sarah’s hand against her own. Charlotte and Cole both had their hands suspiciously near their weapons. Kahlen blushed, “Sorry, I guess I’m not really used to company. I was just thinking about my father.” Sarah gave her an inquisitive eye but didn’t push when Kahlen said no more. The group rode on, Kahlen would just have to let them speculate. Some things she figured were better left in her mind alone. The boy for example, she knew he was connected to the events, she wasn’t sure how but he had to be. It was almost embarrassing that it took her so long to connect the dots. Why else would her father have panicked so much about a small boy and then have left so suddenly after the encounter. She had thought about it often and she had a feeling that he was the key to understanding her role. These three had run into him, and it had to have been him. Very few people knew it but goblin blades leave glowing scars, and she doubted anyone else had wounds to match the description. Who he was, what his role to play was, and how they were connected, were all beyond her. The small group trudged onwards.

Cole, Kahlen, Sarah, and Charlotte had followed the wall for days, they had been more or less following the curve of the lake when they came to it, a straight black line across the horizon. Drotia’s finest creation, except for perhaps Taria. The wall was one of the largest structures ever created, it ran from the south lake all the way to the gap at the far mountains. It was built by one of Cole’s ancestors, or perhaps multiple, given its magnitude. The wall was incredible, not only because it was extremely tall or thick, though it stood stories high, but because of its shape. It curved, slowly at first then steeper, away from Drotia, so that it overhang into Alar. A giant stone wave running from horizon to horizon. The Alarian side was smooth, covered with metal plates from end to end, an extra level of protection preventing fazes from moving through the already dense stone wall. On the Drotian side, it was leveled, each one with drains running downwards towards Alar. This served two purposes, one to allow the Drotians to pour boiling liquids down on any Alarians camping below, the other to corrode the land, making the wall higher on the Alarian side than the Drotian. To compensate for this, the Drotian side had to be dug deep into the ground, to cast the stone and metal into the earth so that it could not be dug under.

There were also outposts built into the wall, built upwards towards a flat plateau where men could stand. This allowed for men to gather and attack a greater spread of Alarians who might be gathered below. There were many other small intricacies built into the wall, Cole could only remember a handful as the rest had long been lost to irrelevance. The wall had been attacked constantly during creation but only a handful of times after its completion. Alar realized that direct assaults were costly and ineffective and had decided to pursue other avenues of

attack. It had been so effective that even now, it was only manned by a handful of men, mostly watchers and messengers, just in case Alar should ever try their hand again.

They gave one last look back as Cole and his group ascended the mountain that marked the end of the wall. It was a fairly solitary and desolate mountain, sitting at the end of the gap, a large crack in the earth that ran for miles towards Alar. On one side sat the wall, on the other side, sat the straights. From their vantage point, they could see the wall cutting north towards the lake marking the many miles they'd come over the past week. To the west, a zig zaging hole in the ground, many times deeper than it was wide. To Cole's surprise, there was in the distance, spanning the chasm, what appeared to be a bridge of sorts being constructed. It didn't make sense, why would they waste the materials on building a bridge right before a battle. Cole made a mental note of its location then looked to the south.

The armies sat across from each other, sprawling over the land in either direction. It was the largest grouping Cole had ever seen and probably the largest the war had seen in decades. Tents ran from the fissure to the mountains and as far back as their eyes could see. An empty patch of ground was all that stood between them. Cole couldn't be sure but it looked like there were no more than a few black spots, bodies, already in the gap, apparently there had been a preemptive skirmish or two already but it didn't look like the ceremony had yet occurred. Detail though was hard to decipher from this distance, both camps just looked like swarms of insects, movement without clarity or definition. Cole sighed with relief, given the order, the relative calm, his father had to be still alive. He wasn't too late after all.

Repositioning his bag he continued towards the camp. The women followed close behind, gazing down at the almost surreal view below them. Kahlen used her powers to scan both armies, the Drotians and their fairly homogenous groups, goliaths and soldiers mixed together. Their tents sitting next to each other, the men grouped together. Then the Alariens, their neat segregated groups so orderly and defined. Each camp group set to their area, she could see archers, spears, cavalry, and many others, all placed in a complex pattern across their campgrounds. Fazes were a little more sporadic, a group here, an individual there, a pair by itself, apparently there was no set legion of fazes. She could also see some tumultuous groups, she didn't know what they were. Enormous men, separated completely from the other groups, with only minimal resources. Kahlen wished she were closer so that she might get a better view.

Chapter 20 - Base of the Drotian Battle Camp

The ceremony was about to begin. It had taken a few weeks to catch up to the army and another week to wade into the crowds but Lox and Natalie had slowly been working their way

through the Drotain camp. Always making their way towards the mountains, towards the King's Tent. From their current vantage point, some ways up the mountain, they could see the armies lining. Lox had always thought the ceremony a strange formality of war. It didn't happen often, usually only occurring when at least one king was present and when the armies were to meet in face to face open conflict. It signified the straightforward battle that was about to occur.

The ceremony itself was fairly straightforward too. It was a series of one on one fights. Each army sent forward a small band of men, a bet, as it were, to the middle of the battlefield. The groups then fought in a series of one on one fights until only one side remained. The original significance had long been lost but currently, the smaller the group sent forward, the more confident the army. There was a mixture too between having enough men to win and not too many to be embarrassing. To win was to have a divine blessing for the battle ahead, but field too many men and it was a sign that you were scared of your opponent.

A drum started, a slow beat, counting out the time. Across the field another joined in its cadence. They both sped up, building in tempo. At the end, when the drums sounded like a whirl of noise, they stopped, a brief silence before a single horn blew, marking the start. Lox and Natalie watched as six men marched forward from the Drotian side, all from their own groups. Three from Alar came to match. The six from Drotia seemed like normal soldiers, two women and four men, all bearing their weapons. The three from Alar were far different. The first was as skinny as the spear he carried, the second was a small girl, who looked to be barely pushing adulthood. The last was a giant. A fat man, pale as the soft moon. He towered over his group in height and had to have weighed more than the four men approaching him. Cole would have thought it was a goliath except for it being an Alaren, and plus, while it wasn't forbidden to send goliathes or fazes, it was seen as an insult and kings almost never risked it, lest it tempt fate.

The two groups walked slowly away from their front lines. The young Alaren and one of the Drotian men stepped forward. As they neared each other they drew their weapons, it was obvious the man was confident, he swung his broad sword from a distance, using his superior reach. The small girl moved nimbly, deflecting blows and dodging, always dancing away and matching his swings. She dove in and out, his cleaves glancing off her small shield or hitting nothing at all. The man became impatient, taking bolder and bolder moves, backhanded swings, short cuts, attacking with bad footing. The girl took her time, jumping around, staying light, then she acted, a smooth parry and her blade was in his stomach, piercing the light armor he adorned. He fell to the ground, trying to stop the blood that poured out of his midsection. The Alaran army cheered loudly.

Next, a woman from Drotia stepped forward, she was far more cautious but in the end, meeting a similar fate. The third fighter, a thin blond from Drotia, matched the young Alaran. The two fought for a while, they both were slender and light footed, keeping their bodies moving, in and out, parrying and dodging. They appeared very evenly matched, but as the fight wore on, it became apparent that the Drotian had more stamina. In the briefest moments of exertion, she felled the Alaren with a swift roll and a clean cut across the neck. She bowed, a sign of acknowledgment to the fallen. The thin male Alaren used the opportunity to attack quickly. A foul move. One booed by the Drotians and Alaren's alike.

The Drotian was ready however and she danced back, smoothly denying his spear. Her moves were calculated, never too far back, just enough to not be hit. She let him swing again and again. The man stabbed and cut with his long reach. Left, right, down, up, spinning, the spear was a blur. He attacked consistently, never stopping. His drive was impressive but no human could keep the pace for a prolonged period of time. He started to slow, every pull of his blade strained his muscles and depleted some of his vigor. Eventually, the Drotian soldier found herself in an open position and with a sharp twitch, her blade swung down breaking the man's spear. Using the momentum, she twisted, her sword slicing upwards. Her movement was smooth and her aim true, the man fell slowly, not even a cry of pain leaving his exhausted body as he slumped to the ground.

The Drotians roared with approval as they took the lead. It was then that the giant came out. The behemoth waddled forward, a giant meat cleaver in each hand. He was yelling something as he walked. He was repeating something over and over again. Slowly the Alaran's started to chant with him. At first Lox couldn't decipher the noise, but it came again, and again. Growing louder with each round, "I am the Butcher. I am the Butcher. I am the Butcher." Louder and louder, everyone picking it up, everyone screaming, "I am the Butcher. I am the Butcher."

The crowd rang with noise, louder and louder. The fight began. It was a truly boring and lackluster fight, the butcher moved slowly, his body marching towards the Drotian. She would jump in, attack, get blocked, dodge his flail, and repeat. This lasted for what seemed like an hour, until finally the Drotian couldn't dodge any more. The steady butcher swung again and again until finally his massive cleaver caught the left side of her head. The round was over.

The next two rounds were the same, no one could truly pierce the butcher's wide blade defense, minor cuts hit but their main blows were blocked by his two cleavers. They grew tired and eventually they both succumbed to exhaustion. The Butcher was persistent, moving with inhuman stamina. The Butcher beat them down with the steady pace of heavy blows.

The final Drotian stood back from the butcher. He was very near the army at the start, he was the last hope for Drotia, their last chance against the Butcher. He stood straight, two blades attached to his back. The Butcher stood in the middle, his giant arms wielding their cleavers, blood running down his enormous stomach and arms. He smiled menacingly at the Drotian, slowly rubbing his blades against each other. The beast then licked one of the giant blades and yelled, the Alaren army started again, "I am the Butcher. I am the Butcher. I am the Butcher." It swelled, growing louder and louder. It drowned out everything else. All other noise was gone, everything was replaced with, "I am the Butcher." "I. am. the Butcher."

The Drotian started then, he didn't remove his blades, he just started running. He ran along the front of the Drotian army. Slowly at first, then curving back the other way, slowly gaining speed. He ran and ran, faster and faster, slowly turning towards the Butcher, the crowd kept chanting. The Drotian ran like some sort of mechanical device, his arms pumping steadily, his head barely moving, his legs a blur. Faster and faster. His speed kept rising, as fast as horse, he ran straight for the Butcher. Dust whirled behind the man as he blazed forward. Noise from both armies had grown to deafening levels. The Drotian hit the Butcher, his shoulder

driving into the gluttonous belly. The impact was like a small earthquake. The Butcher took the full might of blow with his body, sliding back as the soldier plowed into his stomach. The whole valley drew silent.

As soon as the Butcher stopped sliding the Drotian jumped back. He drew his blades, twirling them in a magnificent display of skill. He jumped and slashed, hitting the Butcher again and again. Blood started accumulating as it slowly dripped from the wounds of the large man; he continued forward. The butcher had his blades, swiping slowly, steadily, ever moving towards the Drotian. Pushing him back and back. The Drotian cut, stabbed, swung, nothing hit but minor blows. The Butcher kept coming, even with the blood seeping out of his body. His mass was unimaginable, his will unstoppable. He drove forward. The Drotian attacked and attacked, his blade deflected again and again. After minutes of painful retreat the Drotian stopped. He braced his feet for what must have been a final attack. The Butcher moved with the first show of any speed all fight. He dropped a blade and grabbed, barely snagging the soldier by the arm. There was the briefest pause, then in a quick motion the arm was broken and the Butcher had his other hand around the Drotian's neck.

The Alarens were rampant with noise, their voices as clear as the horn crossed the battlefield, "I am the Butcher. I am the Butcher. I am the Butcher" Again and again. Drums started to beat with their call, the bloody giant turned towards his army. With one arm holding the Drotian, he bent and picked up a cleaver, then dragging the broken man, the Butcher walked towards the bodies of the previous slain. Standing over the bodies of his enemies and his comrades, Lox could just make out his scream, "I am the Butcher." The Drotian soldier fell to the ground. His body joined a small pile at the Butcher's feet.

The Alaren camp went insane with noise and movement; silently, Lox wondered if he should be cheering along with them. Today's fighting was over, the ceremony had spoken. Though it would be a bloody battle, the gods had chosen the Alarens to win. The gods were not always right, but folks believed it was their blessing that had caused more than one victory in the past. Tonight, the Alarens would celebrate their good fortune. Tonight, the Drotians would prepare, over the next few days or weeks they would do their best to defy the gods. Drotia and Alar would connect in a fight not seen for many years. A battle would rage, and those who were prepared, would rise to the top. Lox hoped his part would be done and he would be long gone by then.

Chapter 21 - Mountains above Drotain Encampment

Natalie awoke to Lox quietly packing their small bags, in the distance she could hear the Alaren's still making noise, as they had been all night. Lox had used the diversion and led them up past the king's tent to sleep in the woods above. It had been tricky to approach the area, as

the closer they got to the king, the more likely it was that someone might question them or recognize Natalie. The pair was forced to backtrack or take wide arcs around specific tents to avoid people Natalie recognized. When night came, Lox even silenced a few who were impeding their path and the pair did their best to hide the bodies. In the end they were further up the mountain then the king and deep into the woods. The king's tent was set up way up the mountain on a little plateau that jutted out away from the slanted terrain. Lox and Natalie sat on a perch high above, on a cliff wall that acted as the backdrop to the king's tent. It was a very nice spot for a tent, high enough on the mountain to see the armies and be away from the fights but not too far as to be ineffective in communication.

The two sat silently, looking downwards at the few tents around. The king's was the largest and fanciest, though not by much, it had only slight grandeur compared to the plain tents of the other men. Nearby sat three other tents, one of which they believed to be Thomas's, the others were probably housing supporting generals. In the middle, sat a wooden table with more than enough room for the four men and a handful of royals who would occupy it. Slightly further down the slope, beyond where they could see, there would be some staff tents, a place for the cooks and cleaners to sleep. A couple group tents that probably housed some additional royals were also present. Lox hoped the structures would help deflect some of the sound away from them.

The sun slowly climbed over the horizon, two men Lox didn't recognize came out of their tents first. They ate some breakfast brought to them and gave instructions to what appeared to be royal messengers. Thomas joined them soon after, the three men sat peacefully, exchanging a few words as they waited for the king to awaken. The small group at the table, perched on a ledge overlooking mountains, a field of endless tents, and a giant void. From Cole's removed view, it was almost picturesque, except even from this distance, the camp's anxiety was apparent. Soldiers walked with their backs a little too straight and their movements a little too stiff. The tension was still there, even as the men appeared to be doing their best to calm it.

Lox went over the meager plan again. Drop down, land on Thomas before the group can react, removing him from the fight before it begins, and try to kill at least one of the generals with a knife almost simultaneously. If a general survives, attempt to cripple him for Natalie to kill later. Then fight the king, hopefully without his sword. Kill the king, steal the sword, and make for the wood line. From there it was a straight shot towards the giants.

Natalie too, silently scrolled through the plan again and again in her head. She didn't think it was a very fool proof plan, there were too many unknowns and not enough contingency options. They didn't even know how many royals were with the king. Lox was being too rushed and that did not help quell her unease. She had attempted to delay the attack for a more structured attempt, but that had been put down by Lox. He had made up his mind, and as was sometimes the case, he was either too anxious or too stubborn to change it.

The morning crawled by, the sun rose higher, lazily spreading its light over the land. Natalie went through it over and over again, punching holes into the plan left and right, thinking of fixes, debating alternate routes. She was making her way through a possible escape route

when she noticed Lox shift. The king, Gavion, had stepped out of his tent into the morning air. His giant body opening the tent flaps wide. He was only half dressed as he walked towards the table but he had a large knife at his hip and his scabbard, carrying the king's blade, was slung loosely across his shoulder. Even from this height, she could make out the black blade with the glowing red stone. As Gavion approached, four royals exited the tent, Natalie didn't know any of them but they all looked menacing enough. Perhaps that was just her imagination as she viewed all royals as menacing. Setting the king's blade down against the edge of the table, Gavion moved down and took a seat towards the middle, with the other men. As Gavion became situated, and before Natalie could react, Lox tapped her shoulder and dove. His body launched downwards at the table, a projectile on a collision course. From above, Lox threw a dozen small blades, at least one for each person at the table, multiple at the king, and one at the black sword. It all happened too quickly for Natalie to be sure. Suddenly there was movement from the group, either the noise or his shadow spooked them. Natalie saw Lox crush Thomas with his weight as he slammed into the thin man. His small knives arrived a moment before him. Natalie started down the mountain.

Lox quickly pulled his blade through the back of Thomas's neck, sending a blast of gravity outward as he turned towards the group. His daggers hadn't been as accurate as he would have hoped. A few had connected on target, killing a general and maybe a royal. The other general was hit in the shoulder. The three other royals looked uninjured. Thankfully, the one aimed at the black blade connected with a solid ping, sending the blade sliding away from the table, far out of reach. The last dagger had struck Gavion in the side of the leg. Lox had hoped for more damage but couldn't have realistically expected any better results. Especially since he had killed Thomas, arguably the biggest threat, and he hadn't even needed to fight yet. Lox did a quick thank you to all his aerial training as a youth.

Gavion roared, throwing the entire table at Lox. The general and the royals pulled their blades, Gavion made for the King's blade. Lox lunged, blocking his path, forcing the king to draw his short sword. Swords swung in from the left, Lox parried with the blade in his left hand. Swinging the scythe in his right to again block Gavion's attempt to move towards the black blade. Jumping back, he kicked the sword even further away. The king moved in, his short blade swinging in a barrage of powerful blows. Agility protected Lox, back, right, duck, down, left, back. Over and over the king swung with impressive speed but Lox just dodged backwards in retreating moves. The last general appeared to be going for help while the royals came running to help the king. One fell forward, a knife in his back. Another turned to see Natalie running at him. Lox fixed his stance, spreading his feet, bending his legs. His blade out in front and his scythe curving behind him.

Gavion released. The giant form of his body swelling and bulging as he ran forward. The small blade turned into a wicked sword as the goliath energy engulfed it. Lox held his ground, pushing to the brink of fazing. He hoped he was ready. The creature barreled into him, the blade connecting with Lox's weapons. The once small blade crashed upon Lox's defense. The mammoth of a man towered over Lox. Swearing sharply, Lox twisted, sending the blade past him, swinging his scythe at the legs of the stone man. It clipped the injured leg, chipping some stone causing Gavion to limp even more. His fazed eyes could see Natalie fighting in his

peripherals. Her small frame clear against the royal, he quickly scanned but failed to find the last royal.

Jumping back again, Lox regained his posture, the king ran at him before he could stabilize, his steel veins glowing and the leg injury having minimal effect in his rock form. Ducking at the last moment and rolling to the right allowed Lox to end up behind Gavion. He jumped, not quite fazing but straining with effort. He caught the left shoulder of the stone beast with his scythe, his muscles toiling with effort. There was a brief moment before an eerie cracking noise, as the stone gave in. The scythe went straight through, cutting deep. The king swatted and roared with anger, throwing Lox a good twenty feet with tremendous force, his body bouncing off the hard rock ground. Blood seeped into his mouth as he tried to regain his breath, *shit*, he scrambled away, putting distance between himself and the king. Until then he had done well to keep the king separated from the sword but it was too late. Gavion picked up the black blade and it exploded with the king's energy. Retaining its pitch black color, the helm curved wickedly into sharp points and the red stone in the hilt sent off a fiery light. The king, now holding his true weapon approached. More slowly this time, his left arm dangling weakly, almost detached.

Out of nowhere a blade came flying into view from Lox's side, the other royal whipped her thin blade in a barrage of attacks. Lox dodged repeatedly, landing a quick jab to her side but not a fatal blow. The enormous black blade smashed down. Lox parried with his scythe, but the blow sent him sliding back. Lox mentally thanked Norb for his brilliant craftsmanship. Again and again the royal and the king came down upon him, their attacks slowly driving Lox backwards. Acutely aware of his position, Lox desperately looked for an opening. Dodging as best he could but he needed to do more. He wasn't going to win on defense. Just then the king stumbled on something invisible, Natalie appeared in a flash, her wicked blade catching the royal in the side of the neck. A moment later a blast of something caught Natalie, flinging her body sideways, drawing the king's attention.

Lox finished fazazing instantaneously, not wasting his opportunity. With all his might he rammed the speared point of his freshly morphed scythe into the neck of the king. Caught in both his momentum and the king's own, the stone cracked beneath the impact. For the briefest moment Lox wasn't sure if it worked, then the spear pushed through, fracturing the stone. As the king's head shifted, his body collapsed to the ground, returning back to its human form. Blood began to pour out of the now human wounds.

Lox glanced around, the royal Natalie had been fighting still sat slumped over, his blade loosely grasped in his dead hands. He looked over at Natalie, she lay injured on the ground, holding her side. The look in her eyes was intense, staring at her attacker. Lox followed her gaze to Thomas. He was on his knees just beyond the overturned table. He had one arm bracing his weight as he struggled to crawl. Blood covered his uniform, dripping from the soaked cloth. His hand outstretched, a ball of gold pulsing in his palm. Lox tried to think quickly, Natalie had progressed immensely, and while she wasn't just a weaver anymore, she couldn't fight a caster. Wasting no time, he motioned to Natalie, sending her to the far side of the plateau. Lox ran towards Thomas, how the man was alive baffled him, the crushed bones and a knife through

his neck should have been more than enough to kill him, but Lox hadn't fought a high level caster before, who knew what other abilities they had. Now that Thomas could see Lox he moved his arm. An orb of light came flying at Lox, he barely dodged it, his faze abilities allowing him to react at superhuman speed. A loud blast from behind him sent a chill down his spine. Another and another came, gold lights flying past him. Thomas appeared to be using all of his energy to kill Lox. A noble move. Carefully Lox moved in, having to route backwards occasionally. Rocks blew up around him, sending dust and shrapnel into the air. Thankfully, the wounds from earlier were severe, Thomas couldn't sustain the attacks for long. After a few more moments and another hail of light bombs, the caster collapsed face down into the ground. Lox ran forward and pierced the man's heart, this time making sure he was dead.

Lox then turned towards Natalie. Their fights may have been fairly brief but the other general would have surely raised the alarm and soldiers would be arriving soon. Lox moved to grab the black blade as Natalie waited near the side of the plateau. Mixed feelings of elation and fear pumped through Lox. Adrenaline coursed through him, he could feel his hands shaking with it. He had done it. He had killed Gavion, the king of Drotia. It almost seemed too good, it had even gone smoother than he had expected, no small thanks to Natalie. Lox never would have guessed that she would be such a powerful ally. He quickly bent down to pick up the sword when he was hit. Some flash of light and he was sent sprawling ten feet back on the ground. *No!* He had killed Thomas, he was sure of it. Twisting, he looked at the mangled body of the once great caster. The man's dead body lay motionless.

No sooner had the thought crossed his mind when an impact shook the plateau, standing over the sword was a giant kor, or at least what Lox assumed to be a kor. He had never actually seen one before but this fit the description. It was truly a terrifying creature, standing as tall as a horse, its metal fangs showing as it snarled. Atop it sat a woman in tight traveling garbs. Her thin fingers pointed down at him, her gold eyes boring into him as her white hair moved with an invisible wind. Lox stood slowly, one hand reaching carefully for the scythe, mounted on his back, the other towards a dagger hanging by his side.

Natalie screamed, Lox threw his dagger. It went no more than a few feet before stopping in mid air and falling to the ground. Pulling his scythe he ran at the woman. Right where his dagger had stopped he collided with something. He felt his body smash up against some invisible object, rebounding from the impact he withdrew into a defensive posture. He glanced over at Natalie who seemed to be pushing against some invisible barrier, her face awash with fear. Lox moved forward slowly, he stopped before the barrier, then swung. His scythe collided as before, but this time he saw a sort of glimmer where it had impacted, but it seemed the wall remained. The woman slowly dismounted the kor to stand beside it. The creature hunched down, a position somewhere between lounging and pouncing. The woman watched only him but the kor swiveled it's head between Lox and Natalie.

Fear started to creep into Lox's mind, an unwelcome guest from ages past. He struggled to retain control. He needed to leave the plateau. He fazed again, using all his might, he pushed the limits of his control. He hoped he wouldn't break himself with the effort. A black haze trailed the dark scythe as Lox swung it in a massive chopping motion. The blade smashed

into the barrier, then with an ear splitting bang, the barrier broke. A small shock wave blasted out in all directions. The woman yelped with shock, she must have been some sort of caster and apparently hadn't expected him to be able to break through her magic.

Though she may be surprised now, Lox knew better than to push his luck. He didn't trust an attack, instead, he darted towards Natalie. A shadow appeared off to his side, without changing his momentum he swung down at the kor as it hurtled towards him. His staff connected, bashing the top of it's thick skull, sending it stumbling and Lox into the air. Lox heard the sorceress shouting. He didn't waste time, using his fall to gather speed he smashed the second wall surrounding Natalie. He could now just trace the edge with his faded eyes. Just as before, the transparent wall shimmered then exploded, sending Natalie to the ground.

Chapter 22 - Gavion's Camp Plateau

The dark figure of a faze and the girl with him, dropped over the edge, a soft red light trailing them, as Cole, Sarah, and Charlette came up to the shelf. Cole and the others immediately went to the fallen men at the table and the king. Kahlen stared off after the faze. Her mind raced. It was the same boy from her memory. Of course he was no longer a boy now, but it had to be him. The confidence and self assurance in his actions, and the red glowing lines trailing from his back were in the exact same spots as the young boy who had been struck by the goblin. She thought of the long smooth strides of the pitch black as he fled, the red light swirling in the darkness.

Kahlen noticed the others yelling, Cole was screaming orders to someone. Her brain was elsewhere, her body autonomously following in the direction of the faze. She could still feel his presence. How did he break through her walls? That was supposed to be impossible, nothing had been able to break them before. She'd used them on men and creatures, even adult kors couldn't break a barrier of that strength. And yet he had broken it down in a single blow. She recalled the feeling of his faze energy as it blasted through, its darkness hitting her in a wave. And how had his weapon done that, it matched its master, she had seen it. The blade had been emitting faze energy when the man had turned. Goliaths could do that but not fazes... She snapped back into the present, Cole and the women were running after the faze.

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Natalie's heart pounded as she ran, her side wound throbbed in blinding pain. Lox led the way as they fled swiftly through the woods. Between them and safety, the Alaren army, was a path skirting the battlefield. It ran just along the roots of the mountains, to their right would be two opposing armies, to their left, giants and brutes. The giants were closer, if they could just make it there, they *might* be ok. Giants were fairly calm and probably wouldn't mind the pair of them running through their land. A search party though, if the Drotians tried to bring too many men they would be threatening to the giants and they might just pay the price.

Oxygen struggled to fill Natalie's lungs as she panted onward, doing her best to keep up with Lox's blistering pace. She was more worried about the brutes, if they ran into a group of those, she and Lox might be in serious trouble. The vile creatures didn't have any specific dislike for Alarens or Drotians other than their general dislike of everything. Brutes would fight, kill, and eat anything that moved. Should they encounter a group of brutes, Lox had instructed her to distract and make for the battlefield, better to be in the open near a battle than fighting brutes in the forest. She wasn't sure where either group had camps, nor did she know how many people were following them, but she had heard yells coming from behind her as she had jumped off the plateau into the woods. Soldiers would be close. Ducking under a low hanging branch she ran onward, following Lox's path as he broke through the dense foliage. Over roots, around bends, under vines, they moved west, then without warning they burst through into a clearing, right onto a small camp of three brutes.

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Cole thundered through the trees, breaking branches, slashing vines, his enormous shape didn't slow down for anything. Kahlen, Sarah, and Char, were hot on his heels, easily following the wide path he created. Anger filled his brain, consuming his thoughts, moving his body. Fear, worry, doubt, sadness, none of these processed, only anger. That faze, the one that had killed Cole's father, he recognized it. It was the same one from the woods. He didn't know how the faze had survived, but that didn't matter. What did matter was that the faze had survived and had gone on to kill Cole's father. Grunts of effort escaped his body as he pushed on, he knew he should slow down but he couldn't risk it. He was not losing the faze this time. Not now. Not again. He wanted to blame the mage for all of it but he knew it was not her fault. After all, She was the one who had warned him that something was happening up on the plateau, she had even gone ahead to trap the faze. It hadn't worked but he wouldn't blame her. It was no one's fault but the faze's, and that girl, who had to be the traitor, Natalie. His anger swelled past his darkest times.

Noise wove its way through the woods, drawing the small group onward. All of a sudden they broke the tree line into a small green. In the center the faze and the women with him fought two brutes, another brute lay dead on the ground, its hairless body surrounded in blood. The faze was a black blur, moving in and out, his black scythe moving perfectly in sync with his body. The weaver girl darted in, slicing, then retreating, sometimes attacking with her thin blades, other times casting some spell. The brutes wailed down with their blades, which appeared to be swords stolen from some unfortunate giants. Their huge bodies taking blows from the humans while their attacks sent the smaller humans sprawling with each deflection or dodge. Muscles strained visibly on the smaller of the two, though still over ten feet tall, as he tried to make his blade connect with the black blur.

Without a moment of thought Cole yelled, his body was exploding in energy. He barreled into the brawl, his axe lifted high over his head. Charlette was no more than a step behind him; Sarah frantically started casting webs. Kahlen, on the other hand, stayed back with her kor, this was not her fight, and she wasn't thinking clearly, overwhelmed with the thoughts running through her head.

The fight turned into a mess of blades, blood, and noise. Cole was trying to make his way towards Lox, who was trying to handle the bigger brute. Natalie was poking at the smaller brute and trying to give support to Lox. The smaller brute, excited by the newcomers, had switched his attention to Cole and by extension, Charlette. The whole scene was mayhem, there were no strategies being implemented, only reactions. The three way brawl continued in chaos, blades flying everywhere, blood covering the ground, pools of it making solid footing hard to find. Even in goliath form, Cole was smaller than the brutes, but because he was bigger than the other humans, he drew much more of their attention. Somewhere during the fight, the smaller brute lost a leg and started making a terrible barking sound as it lay rolling on the ground. Cole and Lox had exchanged a few blows but neither could focus solely on the other for more than a moment without being attacked by someone else. Natalie tried to hold off Sarah and Charlette at the same time. Deflecting Charlette's attacks with her blades and trying to fend off Sarah's webs with her own. The large brute had no preference, it appeared to be having the time of its life. The monster roared with joy as it swung its blade wildly, attacking everything it could.

Lox could catch glimpses of Natalie every now and then, she was losing ground. He saw blood dripping from her arm and leg. Fatigue weighing down her stance. Flaring his faze he made a push on the large brute, cutting some tendons on its shoulder. As he rolled out of his landing and managed to ram his body into the Charlette, sending her sprawling into the dirt. Just then an enormous pale brute came into the field, immediately followed by a group of giants. All of them brandishing huge weapons and yelling. The giants were apparently chasing the brute, who must have heard the injured, smaller brute's barks.

With the addition of the giants, the brutes switched their attention away from the humans and to their newer, larger enemies. That meant that Cole was free to focus all of his attention on Lox. Charlette, who was still recovering from Lox's hit, took a glancing kick to the side as Natalie ran towards Sarah, who, seeing Natalie coming, had started moving towards Cole.

The giants and the brutes took up most of the free space in the small clearing, their large bodies running about, their big blades, hacking into each-other, blood and flesh continued to fly everywhere. Cole and Lox weaved around the larger creatures, trying to keep solid footing, all the while fighting their own battle. Cole taking large swings with his enormous axe, Lox sliding just out of reach before driving in with his scythe. The goliath body, coupled with Sarah's spell, proved to be extremely difficult to penetrate, and yet, Lox's full faze was simply too fast and nimble to take blows.

The two danced a play of glancing blows and near misses. The stone armor was slowly being eroded as Lox pushed on with a seemingly infinite stamina. Around them, the three women fought, dodging both the giants and brutes battle, as well as Cole and Lox's duel. Their blows rarely connected but blood dripped from dozens of small wounds on all of them. Natalie braced her injured arm and Charlette limped with each step. Natalie knew she was nearing her limit, her wounds were taking a heavy toll and this was the fourth royal she had to fight, plus now she was dealing with a weaver as well.

The mayhem continued for over half an hour, the smaller humans flying between the larger creatures, trying to fight each other while not gaining the interest of either the brutes or the giants. Meanwhile, the brutes took opportunities between hacking at the giants, to swing at any human nearby. The small brute with the severed leg swung wildly as he hobbled around, his substantial reach posing a significant threat to all nearby.

The large brute caught one of the giants in the ribs with his blade, nearly cutting the creature in half. In a moment of triumph, the beast kicked the embedded sword, sending it straight through the giant's spine and out the other side. The giant's body fell in two pieces, posing yet another obstacle and filling the scene with a new level of gore.

Natalie was locked in close range combat with Charlette, their blades danced in the wind. Natalie was losing, slowly being picked apart by her enemy. Charlotte had made a few cuts already and could probably tell Natalie was near her limit. A well timed parry brought the royal close to her and led to a small short stab that landed. The blade smashed into Natalie's hand, three fingers and the dagger dropped to the ground. Natalie let out an ear piercing yell. Lox must have heard her because she could feel the momentary column of energy that smashed into Charlotte causing her to stumble forward. Working to regain her balance the royal stepped into a pool of slick blood, her boot slipped out from under her. Natalie didn't hesitate, she used her thin blade and stabbed. It was a clean shot, right below the chin and out the back of the neck. The royal didn't even have time to scream.

After sparing only the briefest moment to help Natalie as best he could, a giant stepped in between Cole and Lox. He used the momentary distraction. Lox shoved his scythe between the giant's legs and cut Cole at the knee. As the scythe came around and connected, cutting deep into the stone, the back swing of a giant, who was attempting to kill a brute, plowed Lox in the side of the head. The blow knocked Lox clean off his feet, his head swirling in pain. Blood flooded his mouth again, choking him, his vision wavered in and out as he tried to get back up. Cole, seizing the opportunity, limped quickly forward, lifting his axe high above his head. This was his time, he steadied for his finishing blow.

Kahlen saw it happening in slow motion, Cole's huge arms lifting his axe, Lox struggling on the ground, blood dripping thickly from his mouth. Her heart raced, time stood still. Was Lox about to die? Was he supposed to? Maybe he'd get out of it. Maybe he wouldn't make it. What if he died? She couldn't let it happen, not yet, she had to know his part. He was too important to what her father had told her, he had to be. If he died now, she wouldn't know what his role was, what he had done, how he fit in. The axe began to fall, its long arc leading downwards toward Lox. She lashed out her arm, a shock wave leveled the field. Everyone fell over. Quickly, before anyone could react, Kahlen put her strongest knockout spells on the large disgruntled creatures who were already recovering. She then did the same to Cole, Sarah, Natalie, and Charlette. Everyone aside, Lox, re-flattened from the shock wave, laid on his side, spitting up blood, breaths coming short and sporadic. He was struggling to get back up after the repeated blows.

Swiftly but carefully moving around the bodies, she knelt by Lox. She had to know. She sent some of her power into his body, expelling the blood in his lungs. He started to breathe

more evenly, his eyes started to focus on her. She grabbed his head, one hand holding his chin, the other his forehead, then, as her father had taught her, used her enlightening. Time dilated, a soft gray light spread throughout the green, making things both brighter and more obscured. She entered his mind, seeping in through his eyes. Immediately the power of his gaze hit her, its dark energy pushing against her as she moved in. It tried to suffocate her, strangling her senses, grinding against her mind. Kahlen had trained for this, she had done this a hundred times, but Lox's mind was the first to actively fight her. Even healthy people didn't resist this much; perhaps he wasn't as close to death as she thought. With all her will power, she pushed onward, his weakened state fought hard and she struggled to make any progress, but slowly, she dove deeper into his mind. The shadow of his presence trailed her always.

After an eternity of defiance, she broke through. Into his memories. She looked into them. The closest ones were fresh, the fight currently happening, the death of the king, the slow motion creeping through the Drotian camp. She went deeper. Days flew by, then weeks, time became a blur. Key events were filtered out of the masses and displayed for her. She kept going. She started to worry then, nothing seemed terribly integral, nothing made him different than anyone else, he was an insanely gifted mage but that wasn't important. Deaths and training, his home, a dwarf named Norb. Years disappeared, she saw him on the mountain, his journey through the cave, feeling the fear of being lost, the anger at the goblin, the determination as he wrapped his wounds and delved back into the blackness.

Kahlen began to understand his life, his lack of empathy for the Alaren cause, his constant pondering of what he was doing, and lastly, the constant and yet not subconscious thought, always in passing in the back of his mind, of his childhood. She could tell he couldn't really remember it, before arriving at the capital to become a mage it was all gray and fuzzy to him. When she finally made her way to that instant, she realized why. Inside his memories was a barrier. At least that is what it seemed to be, someone had put some sort of cover up, blocking the path further down. She pushed against it, it didn't budge. Mental blows didn't work either. Kahlen feared she didn't have much time so she blasted at the wall with magic. She wondered if this might damage Lox's mind but it was too late for her to back out. Whatever was being hidden from Lox was important, she had to see. The barrier broke, suddenly crumbling down after her latest push, dissolving out of existence. All of the memories trapped behind it came flooding out. Kahlen carefully started through them. Someone had gone through a lot of effort to put a barrier in Lox's brain, something she hadn't even heard of before. She suddenly worried that perhaps it was there for a reason.

Suddenly there was a young Lox, sitting in the castle, some thin man next to him. The man was casting some sort of spell on Lox, *the memory block*. Then Lox was a toddler, running around in the woods with a young woman, *his mother*. Her blonde hair fell about as she chased him. Lox was a baby, his mother and some other man stood nearby, a skeleton rocked him back and forth in its bony arms, *his mother was a necromancer*. Suddenly the world was on fire, Lox was running through burning buildings, yelling for his mother. Fear encompassed his thoughts as his little legs carried him down the street. He was at his house, screams came from inside as it blazed in red and yellow glory. A man picked him up, Lox didn't react, his face stuck on the building, his arms reaching for his mother.

Men came, military men, soldiers of Alar. The thin man was there, he spoke quietly, "Make it look like raiders, kill everyone who can talk. No one can know we came here today. I especially can't have the king asking questions." A soldier spoke up, "Sir, won't the king be angry though, surely he wouldn't want this nephew at such a risk. He had to have a reason for leaving the boy and his mother all the way out here." The thin man smirked, "I'm sure he does, but I'm not going to sit by and let the most promising weapon we've ever seen just slip through our fingers." He leaned in towards the soldier, "This boy has been displaying faze abilities since he was five months old. Do you understand the importance of that? Even our best fazes right now didn't show abilities until they turned four or so. No, this level of aptitude can not be left alone." He leaned back, "Now as I said, clean up any survivors, we'll say some raiders came through and we were lucky to happen on the boy. The king trusts me, he will be happy the boy is alive, even if his sister isn't." As they turned away the man muttered, "And I'll clean his memories too. My words will be his memory..."

The memory faded again, the thin man and another man were sitting down at a table, the thin man spoke, "I'm sorry, you're majesty. We were too late. Everything was burned down, everything was destroyed. Everything but him." The king sobbed quietly, shaking his head, "No, it is a miracle he survived. She had sworn off using her powers when she moved here, but I never thought she would let herself die before using them." He cried softly, walking over to Lox's small body, looking down at him, "Don't worry Aesir, you will never know our connection, but I will look out for you. I can not raise you as a son, but I will do the best I can from afar. Forgive me young one, and may you grow up strong and healthy and forget this pain."

Kahlen reached the end of the memories, she started pulling herself back, out of Lox's mind. It was much easier than going in but she felt a new anger as she withdrew. Pure, unadulterated fury, it was suffocating. Her body snapped back to her body and consciousness returned. The misty light lifted from the clearing. Everyone started to move, time had progressed while she was inside Lox's mind, not much, maybe just a minute or two.

Chapter 23 - Uncharted Mountains South of the Gap

Sarah picked herself up, looking around. She was at the edge of the field, furthest away from the fights. Cole was kneeling, he looked like he was about to throw up stones. Charlette lay still on the ground in a pool of blood, Sarah prayed it wasn't hers. The giants and brutes were working their way to their feet, apparently still groggy as they shuffled and stumbled. Natalie was bent over, blood dripped her clenched hands and her body was rigid with her face tight in effort. Then Sarah saw the faze and Kahlen, right next to each other. They were both standing, the faze's back was towards her but something looked wrong in Kahlen's eyes. They weren't gold, or green, or any color she'd seen before, they were pale and filled with fear.

Suddenly Sarah couldn't breathe. Her legs gave out as weight smashed down onto her shoulders, dropping her to her knees. She couldn't scream, blackness crept around her,

violently attacking her body. She could barely make out pained barks from the brutes and whines from the giants. Kahlen's face had gone pale too, her usual calm features had turned into one of pure terror. Wind whipped around the clearing, brush, leaves, sticks, weapons, everything was being flung around in a whirlwind of debris. Her eyes started to lose focus, then she heard Natalie scream something; it all stopped. The pressure, the pain, the wind. Oxygen filled her lungs as she coughed, her body writhing in pain from being squeezed. She had never felt such gravity before, she didn't know it was possible. Even castors didn't produce that level of gravity.

Small motions caught Sarah's gaze, it was Kahlen, backing away slowly from the black abyss that used to be the faze. Light seemed to bend in towards him, the air sat stagnant. Cole must have collapsed as well since he was just now starting to stand back up again. He appeared to be fighting his way to his feet. Natalie was crawling towards the blackness. Cole threw a small blade at the darkness, it sailed straight on through it.

Lox's faze hadn't even moved as the dagger smashed into his nothingness. Suddenly motion stopped, sound stopped, light stopped. Then in a clap like thunder, everything shot up in the air a few feet, hovered for a moment, then slammed back to the ground. Standing where Lox's faze had been, where the dagger had gone in, was a black robe. Its color beyond nothingness, it was like staring into an empty night sky. Haze flickered ever so slightly off the edge of the robe, surrounding it. Lox lifted his scythe, it had changed again. It was now a simple black staff, the same color as the robe with the same haze, and at the end was a double blade. One end long and arced, curling outwards, the other shorter and hooked, making a wicked curve. At the top stood a simple spike. It was simple, elegant, and made a chill run down the spine.

Gripping the fiendish blade, sticking out of the robe, was a decrepit hand. Not quite pure bone, but with a bit of muscles and veins still clinging on. With the staff end on the ground, the monster lifted his other hand, it too was bone and rotting meat. It turned towards Kahlen before speaking, "You have given me an amazing gift, you have shown me my past. For that you will always have my gratitude." It's voice was quiet, soft, straining the ears of everyone listening, but everyone heard the words. He paused, "Gala does not. He will pay for his actions. he. will. pay." The darkness then moved, it swiftly bent down and lifted Natalie, speaking in the same voice, "I can not bring you, but you know how to find me." It then put it's hand over her, darkness covered her body and a dark ball of blackness surrounded her hand then faded away. It helped her up, she seemed better. It wiped her face and she lifted her hand, bones stuck out where she'd lost her fingers. She flexed them without saying a word. It turned back to Kahlen, "Take her away from here. You have helped greatly but I will hold you responsible for her safety regardless."

With that, the shadow turned away from the group. Natalie stood motionless, obviously still in shock. Then with a blast of energy, blackness shot out from around it. The creature lifted slowly into the air, climbing upwards, then with another flare of darkness, went flying off towards Alar. Sarah didn't know how to react, her gaze simply followed the black speck as it crossed the sky. Then she heard something, Kahlen was whispering to herself, her voice shaking, "The grim... the grim... the... grim" Her unsteady body now clung onto Alena who seemed to have

appeared from nowhere, "What have I done?" Sarah watched as the sorceress dealt with some internal debate before she suddenly grabbed Natalie, "Do you know where he is going?" Natalie nodded. Sarah wasn't sure what was going on, she could barely hear them. Her own brain was cloudy and confused. Kahlen nodded sharply, "Get on, we have to catch him." Without so much as another glance back, she swept Natalie onto Alena with a magic gust then mounted Alena herself. With a quick word to the kor they were off, quickly ascending into the air.

Moments later Cole stirred, she watched his body shrink back to human form. He jumped up in alertness, looking around. He cursed loudly. His eyes looked accusingly at Sarah. She was still standing stiff as a pole. She quickly tried to describe what had occurred. But even as she finished, she could tell he was furious. Blue lines started creeping across his skin like veins. She watched as he tried to contain his anger. In a violent roar he unleashed, or at least she thought he did. Then Sarah thought nothing happened, Cole's body didn't grow. Suddenly she saw it. He had cracked. His body had turned to a mixture of blood, skin, and stone, diamond traces laced his outer skin-shell. His eyes burned with a light blue fire. She had heard legends of goliaths being so distraught that their mind started to break and their body permanently bonded with their stones to become one. She hadn't known it was actually possible, it was both amazing and horrifying to witness.

Without another word, she watched as Cole walked over to the recovering brutes and giants. He picked up his axe, in changed but differently. It didn't grow or anything but emanate blue lines. She watched in horror as he smashed both breeds of creature to death. Hacking again and again, screaming occasionally in anger. He continued long after everything had stopped breathing, his weapon mutilating their bodies into an organic pulp. She begged him to stop, she could feel the tears burn as they rolled down her face.

Cole turned away from his destruction, venom poured from his eyes, in a final display of fury, he threw his axe off into the direction Sarah had pointed earlier. It sailed into the sky flying far away from the mountain's cliff to some unknown spot below. He then walked over and picked up the black blade from the edge of the forest where Sarah had dropped it before the fight. The black sword fluctuated violently, growing and shrinking rapidly, as if not sure what to do with the strange cracked energy, then with a loud snapping noise, it returned to its original shape, but where the blade had been pure black before, now it was laced with glowing blue lines. What had once been a fearsome blade, was now pure malice, the stone of fire burned beneath a blade of angry lightning.

Cole then walked off back into the woods towards his fathers camp. Sarah watched as he went, his new body disappearing into the brush. She made her way towards Charlette, whose body still hadn't moved. Sarah knew what she'd find but she had to check. She collapsed to her knees next to her friend's side. The mixture of blood went up around her as she fell onto Charlette's chest. She shook as she wept, her exhausted body heaving as she tried to pull Charlette back to her. She felt so alone.

Sarah sat alone, as she often did these days. It had been a month since it all occurred, since Gavion died, since Cole cracked, since Charlette died. She had responsibilities but she didn't really care and no one would bother her. In the days afterwards the whole world had been pure chaos. It turned out the Alarians had a trick up their sleeve. While Sarah and the others had been dealing with the fight up on the mountains, the two armies had gone to battle. It wasn't a fair fight, the Alarians had created something. Some sort of super human, or human brute hybrid. They called them "Coppers" because apparently their eyes were copper colored. She'd never seen one in person so she couldn't be certain but why lie about such a trivial detail. Regardless of their eye color they were huge, they fought like mad men and could take on goliaths in almost even numbers, and the numbers weren't very even. The first day had been a massacre as the fazes and coppers ripped the Drotian soldiers apart. The fighting stopped when all the Alarians suddenly pulled back to their camp.

The Drotians didn't find out until the next day what had happened. They'd caught a fleeing Alarian soldier and he'd given the secrets out freely, desperate to get as far from Alar as possible. The Alarian's king had been assassinated, killed by his right hand man a week prior to the battle. Apparently the caster had fashioned himself as king, going by the same title, King Gara. He'd been the one to help make the coppers, and claimed it was his genius that would lead the Alarians to victory. Alarian's went along with it at first, after all, he controlled the army.

After that first day of battle though it all changed. A robed demon had descended upon the Alarian's main tent. It was searching for Gala. When the demon found out what had happened it had gone berserk, slaughtering men left and right. It swept through the Alarian battle camp wrecking havoc. It seemed to prioritize coppers but it killed pretty much everyone in its path. The soldier had watched as men, fazes, and coppers tried to fight it. Their weapons were useless against it and it cut them down. Weavers were summoned to trap it with web nets but that only seemed to slow it down, it crushed four of them with gravity and fled towards the Alarian capital. The soldiers had routed then, no fear based allegiance was going to keep them following Gala's orders. Most went back west, either home or back to camps further inland, some, those who had seen the madness up close ran the opposite way. They chose surrender as the best option to get as far away from the demon as possible.

With the Alarian's routed the Drotian's cleaned up the gap easily. What few soldiers had remained loyal were no match for the remaining groups of goliaths and assorted horsemen that swept their meager defenses. Within two days the gap was clear but there were no victory bells or celebratory parties. News of Gavion's death had spread, the nation mourned the loss of their king. None more so than his son. Cole had originally gone to the battlefield, he'd tried to bash his way after the demon creature but it was no use. Once he'd heard of the Alarian route he returned to his own camp. He'd not done much else since. The official transfer of power would take place later, back at the castle but none would question his authority.

Sarah had hoped then, that he might return to normal. That perhaps the cracking hadn't altered his brain but only his figure. She was wrong. He was different. He was still there, the man she loved, but he was colder. He didn't smile, he didn't joke, he didn't hug her tenderly. He gave barking orders and schemed battle plans. He'd built a strategy tent where he had a map

of Alar drawn and worked with his best strategist to plan an offensive. There was no more defense in Drotia, only offense.

There were moments though, moments where she saw glimpses of him. Times when she'd see him weeping by himself in the woods asking for his father's help. She'd seen it too, when they buried Charlette. It was the only time she'd heard emotion from him. He gave a short speech to the meager crowd who knew her. She'd been his first royal, a loyal friend, and a faithful soldier, even cracked that meant something. When he'd laid her fragile body into the shallow grave just off from the captain's plateau she saw his pain. His humanity wasn't all gone, not yet. Sarah could only hope that with time he would heal. She would try her best to help, after all, she was a healer. Though she wasn't sure if this was beyond her abilities or not. She wondered how Marianne was doing. The queen would have heard by now, would she die of a broken heart. Perhaps not, there was more strength in her than people gave her credit for. More love in her too, perhaps she could help heal Cole too.

A cart rolled by, it was filled with leftover armor and weapons, things taken from the fallen dead. The camp was closing up, a smaller group would stay, just to watch the gap but the main group would be heading back to the castle soon. Cole had given in, he must return home. The king needed to be buried in the mountain and he needed to go through the coronation ceremony. It was mostly tradition but it was still important. Sarah knew he didn't care, Cole would do it because his father had cared. Gavion, who regarded the dead so highly and held great pride in traditions. Cole would never risk tarnishing his fathers name by ignoring his rights as king.

The day crawled by and Sarah tried to think of ways to help. Webs that might help ease Cole's pain and bring healing to his soul. She wrote down questions, items that needed Mariannes advice. A small part of her thought of her future too. She and Cole would be married, they'd put it off long enough and with no other heirs to the crown, the empire demanded it. For so long she'd looked forward to the day, now she wondered if there would be any joy when it came. She tried to hold back her tears, she'd cried enough in the past month over things that actually occurred. She had none left for things that may not yet come to pass.

Something tickled from the back of her mind, a fading memory from Kahlen's cabin. She tried to remember it, perhaps the omen she'd heard there. She couldn't bring it forth, instead she thought of the old lamentation, "Onwards". A prayer hymn for the fallen.

In the night, the darkness creeps alone

it closes in, to steal the throne

Its long arms reach, beyond the veil

it never sleeps, it never fails

So fair thee well, poor taken soul
please find your way, and pay the toll

For heaven comes, its light awaits
to give you warmth, beyond the gates

You may now rest, your story told
and please be patient, as ours unfold

for in the end, when we meet again
forever gleaming, our time does end

End of part one.