'The goblin's that way.' The scruffy, almost dwarven man said, pointing towards the yawning chasm just ahead.

'Marvelous.' He grumbled, tossing his heavy, rune inscribed battleaxe over his shoulder. 'That's real specific.' Sighing, he pushed onward, toward the goblin, his five gold reward, and if lucky, a few silver or copper from the goblin itself.

'Good luck sir.''

He tossed his free left hand up silently, a halfway acknowledgement in passing.

Right away he could smell the mistake. How these farmers could confuse a troll for anything else was beyond him. Either way- a troll meant more payment. The pay was five gold; it was all these villagers could afford. However, it hadn't escaped him that it was reaping season. A bushel of corn would do just as well.

He tapped the runes on his axe, preparing for combat. The axe momentarily glowed blue; it thrummed slightly in his hand. It was ready, and so was he. Smiling grimly, he pushed into the cave.

Rounding a slight bend, he knew was in for a long day. The troll was a juvenile, who was just coming into maturity. He glowed orange, and cast long eerie shadows on the low cavern walls.

'Hey big fellow.' He greeted, bringing his axe up to the ready.

The troll grunted, and slapped the walls.

'Human, go.'

'I'm afraid I can't do that. Seems you wandered up on some farmers.'

'Don't care, humans not matter.'

He roared a series of guttural sounds, which indicated that he was undergoing his ku'a tu da'naan, or rite of passage. Denying him that would render him unfit, and that was really, really bad.

There was another way though, and that was through combat. Unfortunately, that involved someone losing their head.

The troll began grunting rhythmically, pounding his fists into the yellow soil, which meant he was charging up. The warrior charged; shouting a powerful ward. It was meant to slow down the troll, giving him a chance to swing his axe.

Instead, the troll waved it away with one giant fist, while bringing his other up, meeting the charge. The warrior barely had time to swipe down on a ward on his axe shaft. The troll's fist met the giant axe, and ward or not, it hurt a lot. Quickly reaching into his belt, he grabbed a small dirk, which glowed green. It was coated in the venom of a Death's Hand tarantula. Against a man, it'd be deadly, against a troll; it merely stung, and further pissed him off. Releasing the small knife, he jammed his axe forward, shrugging off the troll, and before he could pull the knife free, the axe was buried in the trolls' skull. He roared in pain before falling dead to the floor.

Emerging from the cave, he tossed the trolls' severed head at the feet of the gathering crowd.

'You people,' He began, wiping Mythor on the grass. 'You people need to learn the difference between a troll, and a goblin.' He seated the great axe in an almost hidden holster slung across his broad back. 'And it's going to cost you extra for not knowing that difference.'

Walking into the sun, with the coins firmly cinched against his belt, the irony of his situation hadn't escaped him, but what else was there? Sighing, he guided the bartered mule and bushel of corn down the dusty path towards home.

His name? Kydor. He was a Barbarian, and an Outcast. He told his father, the village elder, that this life wasn't for him. His father's response? The law of the village- turning his back on he who would turn their back on the tribe, or its ways; even if that person was his own son, and next in line to rule the clan.

 Kydor the Crestfallen

The walk home took almost two hours. Kydor looked up at the fat sun overhead and smiled. He remembered that his mother used to call the it "that old orange dog". She claimed he was doomed to chase the twin moons for all eternity as punishment for disobeying the gods.

As Kydor got closer to home, the broad open road narrowed. Short wooden fences began cropping up, and the bleat of sheep and goats permeated the warm air. Further along, the cornfields began. They stretched on for a goodish distance. Throughout their golden acres men, women, and a few children were scattered. Sunlight glinted off steel tools, and the low murmur of voices carried over well. The road stretched onward, past the fields, leading into a tiny village that was more of a waypoint into the interior of the island. Deep within the island were much larger towns, and even the capitol, but here at its fringes, tiny villages, like the one ahead dotted the landscape.

The small village was a gathering of shabbily leaning merchant’s huts, and squat mismatched brick buildings whose mortar was crumbling. The few windows all rattled in their panes, and needed reglazing. All around him were the musical calls of merchants tempting him with their wares. Moving along the road was slow work, because the broad avenue was alive with the thrum of traffic. Dwarves, elves, humans, and a few trolls mingled along the packed roadway. Dust flew up in small twisters, but nobody seemed to notice, or care. Making his way along, dodging traffic, he never allowed his hand to wander from his coin purse. Barbarian, or not, there were thieves.

Coming up on Hestia's small whitewashed inn, he noticed the sign was still hanging sideways. Sighing, he knew that he would have to repair it sooner than later, or face Hestia’s ire. Tying the ass to the low post out front, he undid the bundled corn, tossed it over his shoulder, and pushed open the thick door, entering the inn, his home.

The heavy ironbound door opened with a groan, racing along the groove worn into the plank floor. The inside of the inn was small, but kept neat and tidy under the watchful eye of Hestia. To his right as Kydor entered was a massive stone fireplace that did its best to keep the small building warm during the bitterly cold winters. Right now there was no fire. An iron cauldron hung over the cold pit, waiting to be used. The crude tables and chairs were laid out in small, a neat grid. There were thick log support beams spaced throughout the cavernous room; they offered a support for the second floor, whose stairs were against the far wall. In all, it made great use of the space in the dining room. To the left was the long L shaped bar that Hestia stood behind. She briefly looked up at Kydor when he entered. Behind her, where none were allowed was the tiny kitchen, and steps leading down to the earthen wine cellar, where a large amount of corn wine currently rested.

Hestia was his best friend, and worked her family inn while everyone else toiled in the fields dotting the landscape. The inn had been her idea. It was her way of contributing. She figured that a one armed girl was useless, and dangerous out in the fields.

Her father had finally caved in to Hestia’s demands, and was pleasantly surprised at how much business the small inn managed. Most of the success was owed to the corn wine they served. Her mother usually spent a week preparing it, a month getting it ready, and five minutes getting it sold. Not this year though, this year had been an excellent crop, and there was wine aplenty in the cool cellar below.

Hestia was a strong woman with a straight back. Her missing arm had long ago stopped being a hindrance with help from Kydor. With his training she was able to move with a fluid grace that few women possessed.

Kydor cleared the door and saw Hestia return to scrubbing on the bar with a rough wool cloth. Her unruly black hair was haphazardly stuffed under a tightly knotted bown kerchief. She had a white apron tied over her plain brown dress.

'Here.' He grunted tossing the corn onto the warped bar, quickly sliding a gold piece after it.

Hestia was quick; quicker than some people with both arms. She caught the corn, pushed it aside, grabbed the gold and pocketed it in her voluminous apron all in one fell swoop.

'One day you're going to let me give you the gold back.' She mused, pulling a small rusty, but very sharp knife from another pocket. Hestia cut the twine holding the corn together while eyeing him.

Kydor didn't slow; he wasn't feeling chatty, even for his best friend. Something about the troll hunt really upset him. Pausing at the stairs, he grabbed a clay bottle of honey sweetened corn wine. Swinging on the worn newel post, he bit off the cork and spat it on the ground.

'Send me up some of that lamb and corn later.' He said taking the stairs two at a time; barely hearing Hestia's reply before slamming the room door.

Easing Mythor from his back, he kissed the etched, metallic face, and thanked him for the victorious combat. Taking a deep pull of the strong wine, he kicked off his boots, and fell into bed, sending up a few stray tufts of hay. The wine sloshed over his hand, and he cursed silently, taking another drink.

Untying the pouch from his waist, he leaned over, and tapped the bedside table in three hidden spots. Doing so activated a ward that allowed access to the tables' contents. As always, there were two copper pieces lying inside, courtesy of Hestia. Grabbing them, he tossed the gold inside, repeating the ward trace, locking the drawer.

A few moments later, someone knocked at his door. Crawling out of bed, he grabbed the copper pieces.

Tomias- Hestia's little brother, stood in the hallway. Kydor handed him the two copper, and was handed two more pitchers of corn wine in return.

'Sister says you gotta bathe 'fore you come down to dinner. She don't want no stinky person at her table.'

'Well, tell her that she can go on outside, and kiss my ass.' Kydor said with a smile.

Tomias, now fortified, brayed laughter, and ran off, presumably to tell his sister just that.

Bottles in hand, he pushed his door shut, just missing the washcloth missile, hurled by Hestia. For a one armed woman, she had good aim.

Smiling, he dropped the new bottles on the table remembering the day he met Hestia; Kydor remembered the blood pact Hestia's father had signed in debt to his father, the man who slew the drake that took Hestia's arm. Mostly though, he remembered the blood and screams. The smile flew from his lips, and he took a drink.

'For the love of Aantor, hold her down!'

The blonde giant- his mother, bellowed. The four maiden healers doubled down in their efforts to control the bleeding and writhing child. In one quick motion his mother had her blouse ripped open. Hestia screamed in agony.

His mom cuffed him behind the ear, startling Kydor into action.

'Child! Quick now, before the life slips from her!' She commanded. Dutifully he handed over the wet rag, and reached into the bowl for another.

The sticky medicine reeked, and the smell clung to his skin for days. At present, he merely handed his mother one carefully unwrapped bandage after another. Soon the bleeding stump and long gashes along her ribcage were wrapped tightly in bandages. The girl was breathing erratically, but steadily. His mom placed small colored stones on the end of the wrap and began chanting. The maidens joined in, and the bandages glowed a bluish-green color. Hestia's breathing evened out, and the bleeding slowed.

'She is for now safe.' Kydor's mother said, gathering the stones. 'Watch over her throughout the night.'

'Yes my lady.' The maidens answered in unison.

'Not you.' His mother told them. 'You,' she said gripping Kydor's shoulder tightly. 'You ask me what is expected of you. This is merely a part of it. There is no greater good than watching the health of the ill.

'Yes mother.' Kydor said quietly.

Child or not, chieftain's son or not, he had responsibilities to the tribe. This gravely wounded girl was now his responsibility. If he failed that, he failed his tribe. There simply was no greater dishonor.

Throughout the night, he watched over Hestia. To pass time, he told stories, legends, of his people. It wasn't until he was fully engrossed in a tale of his greatest father’s father, that he noticed two bright eyes looking at him.

Blushing, he took his seat.

'Please continue.' She requested after Kydor gave her a sip of water laced with the smelly medicine. Hestia made a face, but kept the vile brew down.

'Are you sure?' He asked, wiping her mouth.

Smiling, she nodded.

 Kydor the Challenged

Lying in bed, the wine pleasantly buzzing, he almost didn't hear the second knock at the door. Answering it, he saw a neat bundle lying there. Knowing Hestia, it was a towel, washcloth, a cotton shirt, and hemp trousers. Smelling the homemade lavender soap, he made a face.

'I'm not wearing this!' Kydor bellowed downstairs, leaning out the door.

'Well come down bare ass, but bathe before you do!' Came Hestia’s reply. It was followed by catcalls from the few scattered guests.

Groaning, he leaned back into his room. Knowing Hestia, Tomias already had a warm bath drawn. He knew there would be no end to the grief if he let the water cool.

Sighing, he slid into the steaming tub. Fewer things in this world were more hated than baths, but he couldn't help the sigh of contentment as he eased into the hot water. Dunking the soap and washcloth, he saw no need to delay the inevitable.

Walking into the dining, cinching his rope belt, room he saw Hestia sitting at a nearby table being regaled by an old wizard in long, gray woolen robes. The mage sipped from a red clay mug. Upon seeing Kydor approach, he quickly stood.

'If my old eyes were deceiving me, I'd swear that I stood in the presence of Lord Kortis, but old Zilant knows better. You must be Lord Kydor, every bit as striking and as handsome as your pa.' He bowed, and struck his chest twice in the tribal greeting of Kydor's clan.

'And you are?' Kydor asked, yanking a chair out backwards.

'Pardon me my lord, I am Zilant. A poor excuse for a wizard; I merely know of your clan by reputation.'

The salute was returned as Kydor sat down.

'I thank you for the cordial greeting, but even one such as yourself must have heard by now.'

'Heard what?'

'That I am no "My Lord" anything. I am Outcast.'

He waved away the comment in mild irritation.

'The stuffy, and outdated laws of your people mean nothing, what does the color of one's armor truly mean anyway? You, I promise, are a true Lord.'

Hestia grunted.

'And you; child of tragedy, an inn mistress. They said you'd never be anything, but here you are, running an inn!' He spread his hands widely, smiling broadly. 'The Gods truly favor Zilant on this day!'

'Mister, I don't mean to be dwarf\*, but what do you want? I can hardly imagine an elder mage coming all the way to the dusty Barrens for a mug of corn wine. No, I suspect you are about to lay a scheme. I can tell you now- forget it; I'm uninterested.'

(\*dwarf: to be short, irritable, or overly blunt)

'Gods, if your father could but see you now!' Zilant exclaimed leaning back in his chair. 'Yes, you are correct, I aim to lay about a scheme, but pray tell, why do you think I am an elder? I wear no vestments of such a position.'

'You wear neither the ebony, nor ivory rings of the True Guilds, there is not the scent of a familiar about, and your semi-crazy act rings hollow.' He leaned forward. 'So again, I ask- what do you want?'

For an answer, Zilant dropped a heavy leather purse on the table, the coins inside jingling musically.

'Not what I want, but what I can help you to discover.' He answered, all frivolity gone from his voice.

'I thank you, but...'

'One hundred gold.' He said.

...I told you I'm uninterested.'

'I'm interested. Hestia said leaning forward, taking the purse.

Zilant smiled behind his salt and pepper beard.

'Tis but an adventure mild. Into the wild you must ride, my child. There, within the ancient depths of San Everus lies a tome. I ask that you return it to its rightful home.'

'Wait, San Everus?' Hestia asked. 'Forget it. They call it the halls of madness you know.' She pushed the coins back across the table.

'Aye, the halls of madness, where none but the foolhardy venture. Where many an adventurer has come to the clearing and met their greatest father.' He stroked his beard, waved his hand in front of him, and pushed the coins back toward Hestia. 'I tell you true, these are the whispers of babes from beneath their mother's dresses.'

'Well then, if it's so easy, why don't you venture forth, and reclaim it?' Kydor asked.

'...I cannot. He said after a brief pause. One such as myself would attract far too much attention.'

'I say thank you elder one for this counsel. I am humbled by your wisdom, but such a quest is not within my realm of interest.'

'For one who would turn his back on the ways of his clan, you speak the patterns of Eld well.' He mildly observed.

'I bid you fond evening.' Kydor said between clenched teeth, standing. 'I've lost my appetite.'

He turned to walk away.

'I can lay your hands upon the Elder Sword. Surely such an item would find you within the graces of your papa.'

'Perhaps, but sir you are mistaken. I've no interest in pleasing my father.'

'Every damned bit as stubborn as your father.' Zilant sighed. 'Child, I promise you one hundred gold if you accept this quest I lay at your feet, I promise you the Elder Sword, and Hestia, I promise you an arm.'

Kydor looked to Hestia, who shrugged.

'Excellent!' He exclaimed, clapping his hands together.

 The Departure

'You know we must tell my parents if we are to depart. It would do no good to bear the rough side of mother's tongue.' Hestia said, leaning against the doorway of Kydor's room.

'Aye, and your father is apt to have a cross word or two if we just wander off. Someone has to run the inn while you are gone.' He finished what he was doing, packing his rucksack, and looked at her. 'I am curious about our new "friend". Something unsettles me about him.'

'He is a curious thing, isn't he?' Hestia agreed, juggling the bag of gold. 'I wonder who so freely gives away this much gold for a book. I wonder what this book is, and if there is more to this story.' Sighing, Hestia looked over her shoulder at the nearly empty room below. 'I quaver at the prospect of once again being whole.' Depositing the bag in her apron, she flexed her hand. 'Perhaps it is foolish ambition to have such a desire. I should be grateful for my health, wealth and love of family.'

Kydor dropped his bag at the foot of his bed, and patted Hestia on her shortened arm.

'There is nothing wrong with the desire to be whole, but Hestia, I care deeply for you the way you are.'

'Oh? Would one such as you marry one such as me, Mr. Outcast?'

'That is a subject for another time.' Kydor answered uncomfortably. 'Perhaps we should now venture to your home and converse with your parents; they should be in from the fields by now.'

'Aye, they should.' Hestia said, narrowing her eyes. 'I suspect there is more than you are saying. But that is for another time. What say you Barbarian?'

'I say Tomias can run the inn while we visit your parents.'

'I agree. Shall we be done with this then? I am sure you wish to depart at first light.'

The walk to Hestia's home was a short one. The heavy traffic had subsided as the sun set lower and lower. A cool breeze had kicked up. It was a pleasant trip, but Hestia was imagining a world with two arms. Kydor was imagining laying hands upon the legendary Elder Sword.

Entering the low thatch roof log home, Hestia saw her mother sitting in a chair, contentedly knitting. Her father was leaning over the cold fireplace, building up kindling for the evening fire.

'Mother, father good eve.' She kissed each on the cheek in turn. 'I bring supper, if you'll have it.' She held up the wicker basket that she brought along.

'Oh thank you honey.' Her mother said, smiling. 'Put it upon the dinner table if you please. I am to take it that you've eaten?'

'Aye mama, Kydor and I had dinner at the inn.'

'One day, you'll name that blasted place, so at least something around here will be named.' Her father said, turning and clasping Kydor on the shoulder. 'How goes it my boy?'

'All is well, sir.' Kydor answered, looking to Hestia.

Spinning away from the table, she looked at her parents.

'Mother, father, I mean to take a trip.'

'Aye?' Her father asked, arching an eyebrow. 'Is that so?'

Hestia's mother paused her knitting, regarded her daughter, then carried on. Her needles clacking as she knitted.

'Where do you intend to venture to?' Her father asked mildly. 'Who will care for the inn while you are away? Tomias cannot. The boy does well to not burn it down when you come to the house. Are you to travel alone?'

Hestia pulled the bag of gold from her pocket and dropped it into her father's hand.

'Papa this is enough to care for the whole village for a year.' She looked away, briefly at her mother, who had paused again. 'I aim to see a dwarf about an arm. Kydor, as always, is to be my escort.'

In her usual way, Hestia jutted her chin out defiantly, daring her father to countermand her.

'A dwarf?' Her father stammered. 'I don't like it!' He shouted. 'It is madness to attempt!'

Hestia's mother put her knitting down and regarded the trio.

'Brennan, it wasn't long ago you yourself had a thirst for adventure. Now you tell your daughter that her way forward is madness.' She clucked her tongue and continued her knitting.

'Rheia my love, yes I had a thirst, and look what it cost me. Look what it cost us!' He motioned to his daughter, who stared back rebelliously.

'Aye love, it cost your daughter her arm.' She put her knitting down again. 'We live with the choices we make.' Rheia smiled warmly. 'Besides, there is Kydor to watch over her.' She gave her husband a knowing smile. 'I am thinking that this is the perfect opporitunity for them to converse.'

Brennan waved his hand. 'That part of her life is at an end. Kydor saw fit to that.' He looked at Kydor a moment. 'What say you lad?'

'I believe in Hestia. I believe she is much stronger than she appears. Sir, you know for certain what she is capable of. Running an inn is no small feat, yet she is able to do so effortlessly. I say that if the lady is willing to chance some form of magic to feel whole again, then by all means let her!'

'Father,' Hestia began, her features softening. 'I understand how you feel. Truly I do, but you cannot keep me locked inside a box until the end of my days. I firmly believe that Kydor will watch safely over me. Let us not forget your daughter is no weak babe. I have been taught well.'

'What guarantee is there that you will return home safely?'

'None.' Hestia answered baldly. 'But daddy, what of you? Is there such a guarantee that you or the boys will return safely from yonder fields?'

Brennan looked to his wife,who was smiling as she knit.

'Aye, tis humorous.' He grumbled. 'It is your fault woman.' He looked at the gold in his hand, pondering. 'Very well, I give my consent to this. Gods help me.' He placed the gold on the mantle. 'Rheia, help your daughter get ready. Young master Kydor and I are to converse.' He opened the door. 'Lad?'

They walked a moment in silence, getting out of earshot of the home. Finally after enough distance, Brennan stopped, looked overhead at the rising twin moons, then to Kydor.

'Son,' He began slowly. 'Know that I do not mind you staying at the inn, in fact I welcome it. I see how you treat my daughter, see how you look at her when you think no one notices. What of your troubles? Do you intend to ask permission for her hand? You cannot, can you?'

Kydor stared at the moon pondering.

'At present sir, no I cannot ask for your daughter's hand. However, I have been given a way that is possible. A way that all parties may be satisfied.' He looked to Brennan. 'If I am successful, do I have your blessing?'

Brennan clapped him on the shoulder, laughing slightly. 'We shall see about that. But I thank you for seeking permission. So damn many people rush headlong into situations without thinking them through. Not you. No sir, some may think you slow. I know better. You merely think, or try to think of all the ins and ours of a situation.' He sobered. 'But lad, not all puzzles may easily be solved, if at all. Take care of my child sir Barbarian. Of this, I beg you.'

Kydor bent at his waist and formally saluted Brennan. 'Sir, I will go to my clearing to protect mistress Hestia from all harm.'

Hestia was busy tying supplies onto the back of the ass the next morning as Kydor sleepily dropped his pack on top of the mound. Hestia moodily snatched the bag into a spot she had picked out, dropping two fat water skins on top of the bundle before cinching it all tightly down. She scratched the small animal between the ears, took its reins, and they were underway.

 Kydor, the Well Met

The walk took them all day and into the night. They reached the edge of the forest as the low, fat twin moons began to rise overhead, casting bright moonlight. Going forward was easy work until the thick canopy of branches overhead blocked out the light from above. Hestia debated on using her staff to light the way, but it was not needed. There was a faint yellow glow coming from ahead.

'I've seen this rune before.' Kydor said, taking the paper from Hestia, holding it under the wan light. 'They say that he is stone mad.'

'Who is "they", and what is stone mad?'

'"They", are the drunks in your bar, and stone mad is when a dwarf wanders far too deep into The Hollows.' He shrugged. 'I've not met this mad dwarf, but I've seen his sigil about.' He tapped the paper. 'Are you really willing to let a dwarf attach some form of mechanized devilry?'

'I've no qualms; I've come to peace with my life, but,' She sighed deeply. 'What I wouldn't give to handle things with both hands again.'

'I take no issue with your desire, but are you willing to endure this?'

'I survived the chomp of a drake; I think I can withstand a stone mad dwarf.' She clapped Kydor on the shoulder. 'What you endure, I endure.'

They rounded a bend in the trail, and saw the small home. It was built of log and mud stucco. The thatch roof seemed to be molded into the forest. The glow they noticed was coming from a rune, the same as the one in Kydor’s hand.

'You do the honors.' Kydor said, pushing Hestia forward.

Swallowing, she stepped forward, lifted the heavy iron knocker, and rapped three times on the door.

'What!' A gruff voice bellowed from the other side of the door, after a few long, tense heartbeats.

'I've come for Dorbin, the gearsmith!' Hestia answered.

'No such dwarf resides here. Go away!'

'Zilant the elder sends us. He bids you to look upon your sigil.' Kydor said from behind Hestia.

'Oh, that sly old man. He's after the book, and he's sent two babes to do his bidding.' The voice mused. 'Allow me a gander at my sigil then.' A small slit opened. 'Place it here.' He commanded.

'You are mad, if you think I am to give freely my only bargaining chip.'

'Wise... wise.' He mused. 'Very well, step inside.'

The door groaned as it was opened from within.

Dorbin stood before them, his head shaved bald in the front, the ruin etched into his forehead. His blonde beard nearly touched the ground, and it was tightly braided into a single rope. Mad or sane, the dwarf was a mass of solid muscle.

The interior of the home was cleverly designed. The tightly packed earthen floor sank deep into the home. Three steps led down inside. A massive fireplace was at the center of the house, acting as a central pillar for the roof overhead. A low, orange fire crackled in its bowels. To the right of the door was a small, but neat and tidy kitchen. To the left was a sitting room with shelves built into the walls. There were books of every size and color lining its shelves. A desk was shoved into a corner, and its top was littered with scrolls. Most were open, some were held that way with a colorful stone, or pot of ink. The rest had been allowed to curl back inward. An overstuffed red leather chair sat opposite the desk. It had a scroll draped over one arm, curling into a form there, while the other arm held a thick green book open face down. The house shifted to the left, and the remaining rooms were hidden from view behind the great fireplace.

The door slammed shut as they entered. Kydor bowed, touched his forehead, tapping his heart.

'A greeting does not get more formal than that, my lord. I am Dorbin, and it is my honor to have met.' He took the slip of paper from Kydor, and stepping in front of the fireplace.

At his touch, the magic within the page activated, and small dwarven script raced across it.

He tossed the note into the fire; it flared bright green before burning out. Dorbin sighed, and looked to Hestia. 'Do you child, do you understand what you are to endure?'

Hestia nodded bravely, jutting her chin out. Dorbin laughed.

'You may think as much, but I have my doubts.' He looked to Kydor. 'You there, Barbarian, you know of healing; you will help. It is late. Eat, drink, and rest. I have much to do, and we begin at first light.'

Kydor and Hestia chose to sleep outside, under the trees and stars. Dorbin shrugged, as he closed the door after them.

Leaning against the door, Dorbin cursed the gods for putting that infernal mage in his path. He cursed his lust for knowledge. Mostly though, he cursed the fact that he was cast out and declared mad. A smile traced the corners of his mouth. Maybe the gods would deliver a champion to rid the world of that gray bearded bastard, and maybe that very champion was now making camp outside his door. Either way, he had a night full of work that needed doing, and standing here was not getting it done.

He made his way through the home, stopping in front of a door just beyond the sitting room. Dorbin tapped a series of runes on the door frame, and it fell open with a creak. Just inside was his tidy workroom. The glow of a forge lit the room well. This room was spotless, and lined top to bottom with shelves and drawers. Items of every stripe were neatly placed within. There were sets of planetary gears, burro hair brushes, small clocklike gears cast in an unknown metal. Stones lined a shelf. Each had a different rune etched into it. Next to the stamps was a long row of awls in every size and shape. The bellows sat on the ground, and Dorbin stepped on it, causing the fire to whoosh and flare up briefly. Sighing, he yanked out a low stool, grabbed a handful of gold bars from a shelf, and tossed them into a smelter hung just off the fire.

Soon, the molten gold was poured into a thin mold. Allowing it time to cool, Dorbin reached up and grabbed a wooden bowl filled with a thick blue substance. He reached into another drawer and pulled out a brush, and cringed at the smell of the blue substance.

The hammering of metal was soon underway, and Dorbin’s expert hands molded the object into the shape he wanted. Pausing, he daubed the brush in the blue goo, and began lathering the object in front of him. He placed the brush aside, and grabbed a thin, needlelike awl. He began etching runes into the surfaces of the gears and inner workings of the device.

Hours melted away, as Dorbin became lost in the art of creating something. He snapped a gear into place, etched a rune, and smiled. He was finally done. He stretched his sore back, and reached down by his knees, kicking open a shelf. Within were herbs of every variety imaginable. He reached in and grabbed a mortar and pestle, setting them aside. He returned to his masterwork, wrapping it in a burlap cloth.

 Hestia Endures

Dorbin woke Hestia and Kydor before the morning sun touched the horizon. He beckoned them to follow, and led them into the workshop.

‘There is everything you may need Sir Barbarian, I suggest you get to work, the day will be long.’ Dorbin said, pointing to the herbs. He turned to leave, beckoning Hestia to follow. ‘Come now lass, we are needed in the kitchen, it won’t do for us to work with grumbling bellies.’

Sitting down, Kydor grabbed the mortar and pestle and set to work.

Sometime later, Hestia handed Kydor a plate and steaming brass mug. Thanking her, he wolfed down breakfast, and finished his preparations.

'We are ready.' Dorbin said, laying the device on the table. 'Remove your top.'

Hestia looked at Kydor, who nodded. Sighing, she undid the buckles, and stood there topless. The dragons bite stood out against her pale flesh in three puckered scars that traced the line of her bosom, ending in the stump of her arm, which had been taken just above the elbow.

'Drink this.' Kydor said, handing her a stone cup. 'Now this.' He took the cup, and handed her another.

'Lie down there on the long bench.' Dorbin ordered.

He unwrapped the object, revealing a masterwork of great dwarven craftsmanship. The arm was golden with a spider web lattice that ran the length of the outer arm, showing off the fine intricate gears within. Dorbin twisted an area near the bicep, and a long spike shot out. Satisfied, he nodded, twisted it again, and the spike retreated.

'I hope for your sake you are as strong as your heart.' He said, taking a small, pointed stone rod from the glowing remains of the morning fire.

Kydor took Hestia's right hand in his, leaned close, and touched her forehead with his.

'What you endure, I endure.' He said kissing her forehead, letting go of her hand.

Dorbin began tracing runes into the remains of Hestia's bicep, the flesh searing with each stroke. Hestia gripped the bench tightly; sweat standing out on her forehead. The runes, Kydor later found, out signified the union of flesh and machine.

'Barbarian take the knife there, and cut the flesh from the bottom of that stump.' Dorbin commanded, putting the stone rod aside, grabbing the arm. 'This will be most unpleasant.' He said to Hestia.

Kydor cut into the tender flesh of the ruined arm, eliciting a scream from Hestia. It was soon done, and Kydor rubbed a numbing salve into the fresh, bloody wound.

Dorbin moved in quickly, jamming the prosthetic against the stump, twisting the bicep as he did so. There was the sound of it shooting home- coming to rest within the bone of the stump; Hestia screamed again, passing out.

Ignoring her, Dorbin twisted the new arm again, driving the spike further in. He took thin spidery tools, and began inserting screws into the arm, firmly attaching it to the remains of Hestia's arm.

Kydor watched Hestia closely, rubbing salve onto her lips, hoping it helped in some way.

Dorbin opened the latticework, adjusting the mechanisms within. He shut it, and traced a rune.

'It is done.' He said, tracing a final rune into the bicep of the arm, cinching a metal sleeve tightly against flesh. 'Now, she must rest, as must I.' He hopped down from his workbench. 'Keep vigil over her, there is still chance her body may reject the magic.'

And so Kydor was yet again holding watching over Hestia. He grabbed a wool blanket and covered her.

'Amazing!' Kydor heard some time later. Belatedly, he realized he'd fallen asleep. Sitting up, he looked at Hestia, who was admiring her new arm in the wane glow of the fire. She turned the arm every which way, admiring the craftsmanship. Agilely, she picked up a corner of the blanket, and smiled brightly. Seeing him, her smile increased. 'I have endured!' She leaned over and gave Kydor her first two armed hug in a long time.

'Well now, there is no end to the mischief you can find.' A sleepy Dorbin said from nearby. 'How feels it?'

'Amazing!' Hestia said again. 'I cannot believe that I now possess two arms!'

'Slowly. Get used to it; let it get used to you.' Dorbin ordered.

'As you say, my Lord.' Hestia replied, bouncing from the table, leaving her blanket behind. She bent, and with her new arm, picked up her corset, and slid into it.

 Kydor, Ambushed

The forest was dense with sound. Everywhere in the thick green foliage there was life. Insects and birds made up most of the quiet cacophony. Sign posts were placed in odd, random places on the foot worn path. Travelers were never sure of their accuracy.

The midsummer sun was warm, and there was a faint breeze that often smelled of the wildflowers everywhere.

'You know, I've always wondered why people call Orrapos "The Moldy Bun"?' Hestia mused, flexing her new golden fingers.

'Well my dear, it is because on the outside of The Great Island, it's all barren. Starting with the coast, which is salty, and not very hospitable...

...the people aren't much better...

...then we move into the Faldor desert, which despite claims to the contrary, is one continuous desert.

Aye, not three, but six different tribes inhabit it, some human,' He paused, thinking. 'It is mostly elven. Then, we move onto the Outer and Inner Barrens, so called because of the seemingly barren land. Of course, you already knew that; you already knew of its abundantly rich soil...

'Moving on, my dear, is the Great Forest, which again, is one continuous bunch, not four. And finally, there is Mount Jatoa, the Forbidden Distance, death to any who attempt entry.' A man dressed in fashionably outdated clothes said, stepping from behind the nearby trunk of a massive tree.

'I say thank you for the geography lesson, but what brings you to cross our path, bandit?' Kydor asked, unsheathing Mythor.

'You wound me with such accusations, my lord.' The man said, bowing deeply. Silver bangles danced on his narrow, muscular forearms.

'Are they not true?' He asked, thumbing a powerful rune on Mythor's face.

'Are not the woes of the world too much for a child to bear?'

'Aye, and the words of a fool are damnable.' Kydor answered, finishing the quote, which was merely a polite way of asking what the point was.

'You call me bandit, and I respond with: 'do we not all need to survive?' He drew a thin rapier from under his deep blue cape. The blade was covered in runes in a language Kydor had never seen before. 'I find such words offensive.'

Quick as lightning, Hestia had her staff drawn, tracing a spell.

A blast of warm air pushed him backwards into the underbrush. The blast startled the small ass, who brayed miserably. Looking to his right, Kydor saw Hestia at the ready, fingers already tracing the outlines of another spell on the shaft of her long, gnarly staff. There was a smile tracing the corners of her mouth.

'And I find a dandy bandy to be offensive.' She growled, itching for a fight.

The bandit cleared himself from the underbrush, wiping leaves off his silk shirt. He retrieved his sword, and adjusted the low riding red hood covering the upper half of his face.

'A fine how do you do. The Isle is thusly called Moldy Bun because all the foliage at its brown center...'

'Looks like rot.' Another bandit- a sinewy, dark elf said, coming from behind another tree. She had an arrow notched, and was aiming it at Kydor. 'I see you carry a broad-axe, and wear the black armor of the Outcast. Tell me Barbarian; are you a killer, or coward?'

'Come to me, and find your answer.' Kydor growled, tracing more runes on Mythor's face. 'None survive long with accusations of cowardice on their lips.'

She smiled, showing off rows of straight silver teeth.

'I told you Brantor, told you he was true of heart.'

'Bold words and fancy axes make not a warrior, my love Neci.' Brantor stated, his eyes dancing between the companions.

'I've had just enough of you.' Hestia said, finishing her next spell. A giant fireball erupted from the end of her staff, but Brantor was much quicker. He somersaulted backwards, dodging the fireball easily.

'Well now!' He exclaimed, dancing around, warily eyeing Hestia, who was already tracing another spell. 'I seem to have upset the lass with the golden arm!' He bowed deeply. 'I cry your pardon!' If Kydor thought he was merely quick, he was wrong. Brantor was quicksilver. One moment he was standing near a tree, the next, he had the point of his Rapier nestled against Hestia's throat. 'I have not the patience for children playing mage.' All humor had left his voice.

'And I've not the patience for bandit's who threaten safe passage.' Kydor said, flicking a small dagger at the dark elf. As he figured, she easily dodged it. Moving in quickly, Kydor brought Mythor around in a tight deadly arc, stopping just shy of Brantor's skull. 'Shall we continue to dance? Are you ready to find your clearing?' He whispered, holding Mythor steady.

Brantor smiled broadly, stepped back, raising his arms in surrender.

'My lord Kydor, you are every bit as handsome, and deadly as the tales claim. I've no quarrel with you, or Mistress Hestia. I come bearing ill tidings instead, from a very foul man.'

'Aye, and if instinct is to be trusted, is much more than he seems.' Neci said, smiling.

'Much, much more than he seems.' Brantor finished, sheathing his rapier. 'But fifty gold, is fifty gold.' He said, smiling as well. 'Until our paths cross again, my Lord.' He finished, bowing.

An arrow thudded into the ground near Kydor's feet; he leapt to the side, ready for another arrow. None came, because the mysterious couple was gone, they had melted into the thick forest.

'Wonder what that was all about?' Hestia asked, sheathing her staff.

'I wish I knew.' Kydor answered. He bent and retrieved the arrow. It had a slip of parchment snugly bound to its shaft.

 Interlude

Night had fallen, and insects began their usual chorus. The small fire crackled and popped. Hestia was spread out on a bedroll across from Kydor, who jabbed listlessly at the fire with a stick. The mule was tied to a slender tree nearby, contentedly munching on sweet grass.

'Tell me the story of the two lovers again. You tell it with such sincerity.' Hestia requested, holding her arm up under the glow of the twin moons, the two lovers, overhead.

'How feels that?' He asked, unwrapping the scroll. Kydor began to snap the arrow, but a minute thrum of Fae magic halted his hand; instead, he placed it on top of his battered rucksack. Unrolling the small piece of paper, he looked over at Hestia questioningly.

'Tis a fine piece of machinery in all; though it'll never be flesh and bone.'

'Do you wish to return to having but one natural arm?' He asked, examining the scroll. 'By the Gods!' Kydor exclaimed, leaning forward, into the orange light of the fire.

'What is it?' Hestia asked, sitting up.

'A map to the Elder Sword. That daft old mage was speaking true!'

'Oh aye? Does this mean that when you get it, you'll go running back to your island?' She clenched her mechanical fist. 'In either case, no. I am happy to have a new arm.' She laid down, and rolled over away from him.

'Rest easy.' He said to her back. 'I told you when I entered the inn, that I have no desire to return to Barbery. This has not changed in the least.'

'But if you bring forth the Elder, your father has no choice but to accept you back.' Hestia said, still pouting.

'Aye, you speak true, but it is up to I to choose to re-enter the tribe. I have no intention of doing such a thing.'

Hestia rolled over, and looked at Kydor angrily.

'You are the only person outside my family to accept me! ...who else have I got?' She wiped her face with her natural hand. 'I cannot bear the thought of losing my only friend!'

Sighing, and poking the fire, Kydor changed the subject.

'The two lovers were doomed to failure upon meeting.' He began. 'D'arterius, and Gywnevenne knew they were cursed to die the moment they embraced. The Gods forbade their love, but true love knows not the bounds of tradition, or honor. So the lovers fled the heavens, leaving streaks of stardust in their wake, creating all the light in the night sky, but sadly, it was also their undoing.

Thinking quickly, D'arterius, drew upon his magic, and created the Night Archer.'

He paused, and pointed out the line of stars that stood sentinel, bow at the ready.

'The Gods were not fearful, 'fore it was their own magic D'arterius dared use against them. Their response was to create Carducius, the canine guardian of Qort- the Slumbering Kingdom.'

Again, he paused, and pointed out Carducius, and then Qort to Hestia.

'These two mighty guardians lay into one another, their sparks threw magic hither and yon, and those sparks fell to the earth below, creating the Blue Veins that run rampant under us, enabling us to use magic.

The lovers were caught, and as punishment, were forced to eternally orbit this world. They pass in the night sky, never to embrace, and only see one another in passing. Tis why this week is special. It is the only time of the year that the twins may embrace the night as they do.

Legends of old state that the Gods, drunk on power, created a race of humans, fair of skin, and blue of eyes to watch over the world, to prevent another such tragedy. The Gods called those people Barbery, or "Watcher" in the olden tongue. As the legend goes, we Barbarians were placed upon the northernmost island as a reminder of the Gods' eternal vigilance. The lovers overhead must forever chase one another, and my people must forever watch over everyone.' Kydor rubbed his face, suddenly tired. 'Of course, watching in its truest meaning also includes healing, which is why every Barbarian knows herbalcraft as well as weaponry.

He looked at Hestia, who stared into the fire.

'You're worried that I'll leave you once I get the Elder Sword, but I speak the truth- you are the only friend I have. Now can we go to sleep, please?'

Hestia smiled, curling into a tight ball.

 Kydor Through the Brambles

Pushing through the brambles, tiredly swinging the machete, his mood darkened with each prick. He tried to recall exactly whose idea it was to take this "shortcut", but the only blame he could lay was on himself.

'Come now, Kydor,' Hestia protested. 'One fireball will cure what ails us. We would encounter no more prickly vines.' She swatted away a low hanging vine with her golden arm.

'Feel like fighting the briar bear?' He asked, testily.

A briar bear was a small woodland creature, whose claws were venomous, and whose powerful jaws could easily snap a man's forearm. They had seen his leavings on the trail, and his foul smelling claw marks deeply burnt into the bark of an ancient oak.

'A fireball would surely turn his puffy tail she insisted.

'Aye and pigs make great shields.' Kydor groused. 'No, a fireball would only enrage the beast, and then where would we be?'

'Fighting an angry monster on his terms.' She muttered.

'Aye, you speak true.' He said, slashing away another thorny vine. 'At least, it would seem that my counsel is taking hold in that thick skull of yours.'

She stuck her tongue out, and yanked on the bridle. The small beast of burden was enjoying the days' adventure as much as Kydor and Hestia.

He swung the machete in a brutal over-hand swing, clearing a thicket of brambles, and jumped back when he hit stone, throwing up sparks.

'Gods be praised, we're here.' He said, sliding the machete back into the sheath tied to his upper thigh.

'Where is here, exactly?' Hestia asked, wiping her forehead with the sleeve of her undershirt.

Against his advice, she'd removed her leather corset, and tied it to the already overloaded mule.

'Here, according to this blasted map, is the crypt of Zaltar.'

'Who?'

'Zaltar. Allegedly a grand leader, who turned his back on the Barbary, also the first to have the Law of Outcast declared upon him. However, unknown to his heir, he took the most beloved treasure from his people.'

'The Elder Sword.'

'Aye.'

Kydor cleared away centuries of dead foliage from the entrance, and marveled at the ancient script.

'What's it say?' Hestia asked, stripping off her undershirt, easing back into her armor.

'A warning.'

"Foolish be he who trespass upon this sacred place of slumber. Cursed be he who removes any item from within".

He began chanting in the ancient tongue, and tracing the etched outlines of some barely visible runes. A camouflaged doorway outlined itself in the old stone, and turned inward, belching out aeons of dust.

'Shall I tie him up?' Hestia asked.

'And leave a feast for the briar bear?' Kydor asked, trying to peer into the murk ahead. 'No, bring him along. There seems to be a chamber ahead, light a fire on your staff, so we don't bump into the walls.'

Hestia did, taking the lead. Kydor took the reins from her, so she could better grip the staff.

'Be wary, there's no telling what form of devilry we may stumble upon.'

Once inside, Kydor found a small, twisted tree that he tied the ass to. There was also a torch resting in a rusty sconce, taking it, he lit it off Hestia's flame.

'For an Outcast, this Zaltar rests easy.' Hestia said, marvelling at the opulent, but spartan chamber.

'It seems a king is a king, even in exile.'

 Kydor the Worthy

The chamber wasn't deep, but it was massive. There were three pathways leading further into the crypt. One wrong turn, and they would discover just how clever the ancients were with their booby traps.

Luckily, Kydor had a map.

'Rightmost branch.' Kydor directed, taking the lead again.

There was another doorway etched with more runes.

'What does that say?'

'Be gone from here, befouler of the dead.'

'Poetic.'

He pushed the heavy stone door inward, and peered into the dark passageway beyond. It was a short shallow room with a low, crumbling ceiling. Pushing the door further in, and holding the torch overhead, he could see why the ceiling was in poor shape.

'Careful, some damned fool has found a booby trap.' Kydor warned, stepping over stones, and the crushed skeleton of a would be adventurer.

'Unpleasant for him, fortune for us.' Hestia said, jabbing the grinning skull with her staff. 'Wonder how he made it past the entryway?'

'Someone filled him with grand visions of vast treasure, and a limited understanding of the dangers he would face.'

Just ahead, beyond the reach of the skeleton lay a calm body of blue.

'Is that...' Hestia inquired.

'Aye, it is pure magic, beautiful as a woman's passionate sigh, deadly as her wrath.'

He stopped short, dropping the torch at his feet. The eerie blue glow of the pool lit the chamber well. The liquid was calm, and did not splash. All was quiet, except their voices, which echoed off the stone walls.

'Gods be praised!' He said taking in the view. 'That poor soul died within touching distance of his goal.'

'Aye, and how will we make it across?' Hestia asked, pointing at the aquamarine pool in front of them. She extinguished her staff. 'You know as well as I, that anyone who bathes in the Blue Magics will die.'

'Tis a vessel, maybe you've heard of it? They call such a thing, a raft.' Kydor pointed to a sorry excuse for some wood bound together.

'That? You're as mad as the desert hare! That lumber is older than the ages! It looks to crumble at a harsh glance!'

'Oh ye of little faith.' He said moving towards the raft.

'Stop!' Hestia commanded.

He froze.

'A thin strand blocks your path. I only mention it, because I do not fancy keeping the dead company.'

'Wise counsel.' He replied, withdrawing his leg. Bending down, he traced the thread to a small gap in the wall. 'If we step careful, we can make it past.'

After a few tense, exaggerated steps, he, and Hestia stood at the shore of the deadly pool.

'Gods, but pure magic smells foul!' She complained, grabbing her nose.

'Aye, and mages drink of it. Feeling thirsty?'

Surprisingly, the raft was much stronger than it looked. It didn't crumble to dust when it was picked up, and put into the sludgy liquid. Looking to Hestia, Kydor warily step onto the craft, testing its durability. It held, and he extended a hand to help Hestia on. Once on, she used her staff to push away from the shore.

The trip was short across the murky, viscous blue puddle. Soon, they bumped against the low, sandy shore of a nearby island.

In front of Kydor a stone guardian blocked the way. It was easily as tall as the massive chamber. The statue stood spread legged, both hands resting on the pommel of an enormous stone sword, blade-down in the sand. Behind the sentinel lay an enormous black onyx crypt. It was covered in powerful runes of protection and warding. Magical light played off the numerous jewels embedded within its surface. A deep sense of forbidding enveloped him.

'Stay here.' He ordered Hestia.

'Who dares disturb my slumber?' A deep voice boomed.

'I am Kydor of the Barbery, Old Father.' He answered, slipping clumsily into the ancient tongue.

'Be ye descendant of the House of Howtir?'

'Aye, tis my father's greatest father.'

'Indeed.' A spectral form pondered, fading into existence.

The form took shape, and Kydor stared into his mirrored double. King Zaltor stood tall, broad shouldered, and chiseled. His long blonde hair and beard were flawless. Icy blue eyes regarded him.

'Oh, the humor of the Old Ones.' The ghost chuckled, 'You, my son are here for my sword.'

'Aye.'

He laughed again.

'That which you seek lies at the bottom of yonder puddle. If you want the sword, you must brave the depths.'

'I will surely die! That is purest magic!'

'Aye? Have my people become soft?'

Bowing, he placed Mythor on the ground at King Zaltar's feet. Steeling himself, barely sparing Hestia a glance, Kydor dove into the blue murk.

Immediately his body seized, and felt heavy. The strange liquid burned wherever it touched skin. His mind was crazed with the pain, and he wanted to scream. Instinct drove him, pushed him to open his mouth, and drink the poison, but Kydor endured. Soon his vision cleared. The pain receded, and he pushed on, swimming deeper. Kydor saw a faint glow ahead. A sword was buried in the silt, and something told him that it was the treasure he sought.

Kydor grabbed it, and yanked.

As his hand involuntarily clenched the handle, a lightning bolt exploded behind his eyes.

Images of battles, long since fought, raced across his mind. He felt the sword bathing in the glory, empowering its user. An ethereal voice whispered to him, declaring him worthy. His hand unclenched, and the blade slid free of the silt.

He broke the surface of the thick liquid, and paddled to shore.

'I thought you died!' Hestia cried, moving toward him. 'Is all well?'

For an answer, he held up the sword.

'Is that...'

'Aye child, he grasps the Elder Sword; pride of the Barbery.' King Zaltar stated, easing into the modern tongue. 'Take these gifts, and falter not in your quest, 'fore I sense darkness ahead.' With that cryptic declaration, King Zaltar faded from existence.

Where the ghost stood, now lay a large blue shield, bearing an inverted red arrow. Near that, lay a worn leather satchel.

Hestia picked up the satchel and shield. Curiously, she peered inside the bag.

'Would you look at this?' She exclaimed, holding up a handful of semi-cut gems and gold coins. 'This shield looks heavy, but feels light as air!'

'Take it, I do not need it.' Kydor said, indicating the shield. 'Now, I would guess, is time for us to leave.'

Kydor had a hard time remembering events from that point forward. He remembered getting on the raft, the rest was a blank.

 Kydor Endures

Waking up was misery. Slowly Kydor opened his eyes and groaned. He was warm, and heard a fire crackling nearby. He realized that he'd been stripped out of his armor, and that night had once again fallen.

'Oh there you are.' Hestia said conversationally. 'I thought for sure you were dancing in that blasted clearing with your ancients.' She dumped an armful of kindling near the fire.

'Where's my armor?' Kydor asked, his head flaring up with each syllable.

'Where's my armor, he asks. Never mind thanks for dragging his heavy butt half a league away from that chamber of the dead, never mind the fact I had to outrun a briar bear, never mind I've been worried out of my skull. NO! ALL I GET IS, "WHERE'S MY ARMOR?"!' She stomped her foot, and sat down heavily.

You're in a mood.' Kydor ventured.

Hestia favored him with an angry look. She picked up a thin stick from her pile, broke it over a knee, threw half into the fire, and pointed to a nearby low hanging branch with the other half. Kydor's armor hung there drying.

'Next time, you decide to be a damn fool, warn me.' Hestia said, staring into the fire. 'I had to wash your armor. I couldn't stand the reek, and that foul goo was burning you.' She sighed, and tossed the other half of the stick into the fire.

Hestia stood, and dusted her knees off.

'I'm going to find dinner.' She said, grabbing a small leather sling and some polished round stones.

'I speak true,' Kydor began. 'It wasn't my intent to cause you stress.'

'Intent or not, you acted a fool.' Hestia stuffed the pebbles into a pocket of her cotton skirt, patted the ass, and retrieved a wrapped package from its stacked pile.

Wordlessly , she tossed the item towards Kydor.

'A damn fool who claims not to care about his people, yet risks his life for some rusty relic- how intriguing.' She mused, vanishing into the forest.

Kydor retrieved the package, which was warm to his touch. Carefully, he slid the sword out. It wasn't rusty, but it was well used. The blade carried minute nicks, the leather wrapping around the hilt was coming undone. It looked like any other cheap blade one would find in the stalls of unscrupulous salesmen. Despite its looks however, the blade thrummed with power. Kydor rewrapped the Elder Blade, lay it near his head, lay back down, and was almost immediately asleep.

 Kydor the Witness

'Kydor! Danger!' His mother warned.

Kydor dropped the wooden practice sword he'd been using to eviscerate the hay filled dummy with, and ran to his mother, barely remembering to grab a hatchet buried in a nearby stump.

'Mother?' Kydor questioned, rounding a slight bend.

His mother stood at the mouth of the camp, her long iron-like wooden staff held at the ready. Approaching his mother was a female ogre, who towered over Kydor's tall mother. The ogre's gray fur was matted and bristling, clashing with Helena's long blonde hair, which was plaited tightly, and wrapped into a neat bun at the back of her neck. At the tip of each of the ogre's paws were several gigantic razor sharp claws. The beast stopped, tilted her head slightly, and sniffed the air.

'Begone, foul creature!'

The ogre smelled Helena, her nostrils flaring, her small blind eyes narrowing. She leaned forward and belted a full throated roar. It would have sent most men running in fear. Not Helena. She stood bravely, staff at the ready.

'Come then, you unruly bitch, let's have at it.'

'Mother!' Kydor cried, charging the ogre.

'Stay back, foolish boy!'

'FATHER!' Kydor bellowed, knowing his father was anywhere but in camp. He banged heavily on a nearby anvil with the flat side of the hatchet. The dull clanging echoed in the camp, and armed men began charging in from everywhere.

'I said stay back!' Helena ordered, bringing her staff up lightning quick. She cracked the ogre in the head, and the beast roared indignantly. 'Aye? Have I your attention, you nasty monster?' She taunted, quickly tapping several runes etched along the staff. It glowed a bright blue, and twin blades shot from each end. 'Your quarrel is with me, and I shall give you a long slumber.'

The next moments stretched an eternity for Kydor. He snatched a spear from a nearby soldier, and charged. Damn his mother's orders, he'd deal with those repercussions later, he thought in a blur. Upon his first step, he reared back, and tossed the hatchet. The ogre swatted it aside. Helena took the chance, and rammed her staff forward. It jammed in a bony mass right under the ogre's breast. As she struggled to free it, Kydor reared his arm back to launch the spear.

Kydor was not fast enough.

As Helena wrenched her staff free, the ogre swatted her. The heavy blow pushed her back a few paces, opening a deep, bloody gash on her face. Ignoring it, Helena swung her staff around. She aimed for the throat of the ogre. The matted beast, however was already bringing its sharp claws up, roaring.

Roaring, they met.

Kydor's mother landed her swing, which merely glanced off the creature's thick hide. Kydor launched his spear.

The ogre connected.

The blow sent his mother flying, and Kydor's spear jammed into a shoulder, not much further from where his mother had struck it. Kydor paid the ogre no mind. He ran to his mother, barely heeding the swarm of bodies that rushed the ogre.

Helena lay in a bloody heap, her breath coming in gurgling whistles.

'Mother!' Kydor cried.

He took his mother's head in his lap, and held her bloody hand. Smiling, she gripped his hand, and was still. For Helena, she had found her clearing.

With a start, Kydor woke up. He still lay under the stars, the fire still burned, Hestia was still gone, and his damned head still ached.

Suddenly, he missed his mother more than he had since that bloody day in camp so long ago. Understanding began to seep into to his pained head, and he knew he'd have to explain some things to Hestia, or risk alienating her for good.

Rubbing his head, he remembered that he wasn't fast enough to save his mother, remembered his vow never to be so slow again.

Kydor looked to the heavens, hoping his mother understood what he did, and why he did it.

 Kydor, Silent

The next day as the sun peeked over the horizon, things were still tense. There was a heavy silence in the camp that neither Kydor, nor Hestia seemed willing to break. Breakfast was cold rabbit, flat wine, and silence.

It wasn't that Kydor wanted to ignore Hestia; it was that he just did not know what to say, or how to say it. The small camp was soon packed up, and re-tied to the asses back; the fire was carefully stomped out, aided with water from a nearby stream. He tried taking the reins, but had them yanked from his grip.

After several hours of tense silence, Kydor couldn't stand it anymore.

'Hestia, I must tell you some things.' He began slowly.

Hestia looked over her shoulder, but kept walking.

 Kydor the Dancer

'What I'm interested in,' A familiar voice began, 'Is how in the blazes you managed to retrieve the sword? I mean, swimming in pure magic? God’s man! That is madness!' Brantor said standing on the trail in front of Hestia and Kydor.

'I see the master, where is the pet?' Kydor asked, easing Mythor from his back.

A familiar small dagger embedded itself inches from his booted foot.

'Here I am lover.' The dark elf teased, slithering from behind a tree.

Clad in a long loose green silk dress, she wore long, thick golden ropes around her slender neck. An unstrung bow was casually slung across her back; its bowstring was being used to hold her long silky white hair back in a taut ponytail. Her movements were lithe and easy as she slid the thin bow from behind her.

Kydor bent and retrieved the dagger.

'I'm in no mood for clowns this day.' Hestia growled, easing her staff from her back, sliding her golden arm into the shield. 'Come at me, but keep your silence, you braying ass!'

'Aye?' You've not told her the truth of the matter?' Brantor asked, drawing his rapier. He flipped his cape aside, and made an exaggerated show of bowing to Hestia. 'Very well my lady, I shall give you release.'

Hestia banged her staff against the shield, and roared. She was in such a state, that she didn't even bother tracing any runes.

Brantor eased forward, sidestepping her guard. Laughing, he slapped her on the cheek- hard. Hestia roared again, sweeping at Brantor's feet with her staff. He expertly dodged her a second time, still laughing.

Kydor was waylaid by a blow to his head.

'Their dance is private, but I am ready, and willing.' The elf said, her bright yellow eyes glittering dangerously. 'They call me Neci, dancer of the flame.' She bowed deeply, swinging her long staff around in a lazy arc.

'Oh, you know of the staff, and its many uses?' Kydor asked neutrally, gripping Mythor with both his hands. 'My lady, allow me to introduce you to Mythor. His name,' Kydor began, swinging the axe overhead, driving it into the ground. He twisted the shaft, and simultaneously drew out a special rune. The handle disengaged from the axe, and Kydor traced another rune which elongated the now staff considerably. 'His name means "Of Two".' He swung the staff around in a tight, expert circle.

'Delicious.' Neci purred, licking her lips.

She stepped in, swinging the staff low; which was met with a clattering of hardened wood. Neci drew her hand away, shaking it.

'Careful now, that stung.' She pouted, swinging her staff in a downward arc.

'That was the intent.' Kydor answered.

Neci, feinted to her left, flipped sideways over Kydor, bringing her staff down as she did.

He met her swing and managed to spare a glance over at Hestia, who parried a blow from the thin, needle-like sword Brantor wielded, pushing him away with her shielded arm, swinging her staff at his thigh. It appeared that her anger had ebbed, and her training had taken over.

Kydor met another swing from Neci, and expertly forced her hand to strike Brantor in the opposite thigh that Hestia had already struck. He withdrew his staff, tapped a rune, causing a blade to slip from its end. Holding the blade against her throat, he forced Neci's head up.

'My lady, this slender piece of wood belonged to a great woman, and she named it Mythor the Blade. Do you yield?'

Neci whistled loudly, and Brantor stopped, just shy of Hestia's cheek.

'We've no quarrel, Lord Kydor.' She answered, easing her staff into a leather holster strung sideways across her back. 'We yield to your mercy.' She smiled, the sun playing on her silver teeth.

Brantor playfully slapped Hestia's shield as he slid his rapier into the sheath at his thigh.

'No, we were bored, and looking for sport.' Brantor said, smiling. 'We shall undoubtedly meet again.' He said, adjusting the silk hood he wore.

He began walking away, down the opposite trail as Kydor and Hestia. He paused when he realized that Neci wasn't with him.

'Coming, dear?' He questioned.

Neci gently pushed aside the blade at her throat, and smiled brightly.

'I am impressed with your skill.'

She ran her stung hand down his cheek, leaned in and kissed him.

'But anger?' She pulled away, pouting. 'Anger gets you nowhere honey.' She patted his cheek, laughed and joined Brantor on the trail.

'One other thing,' Brantor began, holding up a finger. 'Who exactly is Zilant, and why does he want that book?'

'Better yet,' Neci said, playing with the end of her long ponytail. What is that book?' She dropped her ponytail, and laughed again. 'Best of all- why can't he get the damned book himself? Until our paths cross upon the 'morrow.' She bowed deeply.

'Oh, Kydor?' Brantor asked, turning to walk away. 'Just tell her already, she knows how you feel, and will accept your answer no matter what.'

Neci winked at Hestia, held her left arm up, and mouthed: "Keep thy guard up". She joined Brantor, and they disappeared around a bend in the trail.

'My brain feels scrambled,' Hestia said, turning to Kydor. 'The more I talk to them.' She finished, sheathing her staff and shield behind her.

'I know what you mean.' Kydor said, looking after the mysterious couple.

'Whatever was that lunatic carrying on about anyway?' Hestia asked, narrowing her eyes, glaring at Kydor.

'...um' Kydor began, grabbing the back of his neck, blushing.' ...you see...' He stammered. 'I love you?'

'Uh huh...' Hestia said, crossing her arms, leaning to the side. She began tapping her foot. 'Go on...'

'Well, you know how your family is bloodbound to my clan?'

'Your head is in the sand.' Hestia said, pointing to Mythor's head, still where Kydor buried it.

'Oh!' Kydor exclaimed, bending to retrieve it. The ass swished his tail, hitting Kydor in the face.

Hestia pulled on the reins, leading the animal along.

Kydor hurriedly retraced the runes, and had Mythor whole again. He jogged to catch up to Hestia.

'I believe you were telling me something...'

'...um...'

'We've established that. What about my father's bloodpact?'

Sighing, Kydor looked at her miserably.

'WE'RE WHAT?' Hestia bellowed, sending nearby birds up in an indignant, squawking cloud.

 Kydor, and Lessons Learned

'Kydor,' His father began. 'As my eldest, you must now understand one thing.' He fixed his son with a steely gaze.

'Yes papa?' Kydor asked, as his mother stormed in.

'Always remember to say sorry.'

'You dirty, rotten...' Helena began, before hammering Kortis in the jaw with a vicious right hook. 'MY SISTER?' She spat at him angrily. 'I don't mind your dalliances, even ignore them. A handmaiden here, a bastard child there, I mean, the Orange Dog chases the twins, horny old goats will do what they will. I don't like it, but I don't say anything.' She leaned in close, her thin forearms taut. 'But Kortis,' She yanked him forward by the scruff of his cape. 'My sister?'

'My love...' Kortis began.

'Yes?' Helena asked, teeth clenching.

Kortis cuffed her behind the ear, jamming his forgotten mug into her stomach.

'Calm down.' He pushed her away, and twisted her arm.

Helena liquidly performed a flip in the small confines of the hut. The move untwisted her arm, forcing Kortis to let go. Just as easily, she stood in a ready, practiced stance.

A knock at the door interrupted the fight.

'WHAT!' Helena and Kortis answered in unison.

'My Lord, my Lady, I apologize for the disturbance, but there is someone wishing to speak with you both.' A young soldier answered, nervously licking his lips. 'It is said that the matter is most urgent.'

'Tell whomever, that at this time I am not entertaining,' Kortis said, putting his mug on a table, flipping his hand dismissively.

The soldier lingered, and finally bowed deeply, saluting each in turn. 'Pardon me sir, I don't mean to speak out of turn, but if we do nothing, the child will die.'

'Die, you say?' Helena asked.

'Aye my lady. She is gravely injured, and bleeding quite badly. None in camp have your skill of healing.' He nervously looked up. 'Lord Kortis, the child's father wishes to speak to you, as well. He offers this for your time.' He stood up and held out an emerald, easily as big as his fist. Kortis took the gem.

'Very well, lead on son. My lady, tend to the child if you will.'

'Aye, but know this "my lord", we shall finish this discussion later.' She eyed Kydor, all but forgotten about in the brawl. 'Come child, it is time you learn more of herbs.'

Obediently, Kydor followed his mother, catching his father's eye before ducking under the heavy hide covering the doorway. Kortis mouthed "remember". He followed them outside to meet with the father, carrying the green stone.

 Kortis the Lawman

Kortis walked through the muddy camp, ignoring the cold, drizzling rain. Ahead, under guard stood a broad chested man with a headful of thick auburn hair shot through with streaks of gray. Even his droopy moustache had strands of gray. He wore crude but thick fur armor; his massive biceps wore sleeves covered in a blue and green plaid pattern, on his right hand he wore a massive blue stone ring. Each of the troops in his small contingent had strands of the same pattern tied to the end of their long, slender spears.

The man saw Kortis and immediately took a knee, clasping his right fist over his heart. The soldiers all took a knee together, holding their spears across their body.

'My Lord Kortis, I am named Brenan, and I come asking a favor.'

'Aye?' Kortis asked, pulling up short. 'Is this the favor the life of your child?'

'My eldest and only daughter, yes that is part of it. The other thing I ask is for you to slay the beast responsible for this.'

'Carry on then, tell me what happened please.' Kortis answered, helping Brenan to his feet. Obediently, his troops stood as well.

'My men and I were foraging abandoned drake nests, when a smoker attacked us.' He looked down. 'Well, actually he attacked Hestia, who was nearby picking berries.' He looked at Kortis fiercely. 'My lord, we broke no by-laws. We scouted that nest for six moons. It was abandoned, on this I swear to my father's greatest. That drake was rogue. I only ask you to slay the beast because I am not skilled enough with a blade. My people are simple farmers.'

'For simple farmers, you have a thirst for baubles.' Kortis said, bringing up the stone.' He examined it momentarily, pondering.

'That blasted mage. He led us to misery, and I was fool enough to follow. It cost my daughter her arm. For that to be avenged there is no price too great.'

'Aye?' Kortis asked, handing the stone to a nearby soldier. He stepped closer. 'Very well. The price I ask is thus: ten percent of your fullest crop for the next three generations.'

'Done, with gladness.' Brenan answered immediately.

Kortis held up a finger, silencing him.

'And a blood pact upon my clan. You will swear fealty, and obey all laws of the clan. Finally, your daughter must one day marry my eldest. Eldest for eldest, is that not the way of the ancients?'

'My lord, you ask much...' Brenan stammered.

'As do you.' Kortis returned.

Brenan bowed, laying his arm across his chest.

'I accept the price you ask, Lord Kortis.'

'Most excellent!' Kortis said, smiling and embracing Brenan in a fierce hug. 'I say welcome, and bid you well health. Trust in the skills of my wife, Helena, for there is no greater healer. Shall we find a drink to celebrate?'

 Kydor the Lonely

'Betrothed, eh? Was ever there a time you were going to tell me; or were you going to announce our betrothal on our wedding day?' Hestia asked tersely.

'The words wouldn't find themselves.' Kydor offered lamely.

'Naught for ten years, but they seem to flow so easily now.'

She sighed, the anger suddenly leaving her.

'But why have you said nothing until now?'

'Would you have loved me, cared for me were I to force your hand?'

Hestia looked at him, offering a crooked smile.

'So you left your tribe to care after me, and hope I fell in love?'

'...tis part, aye.' Kydor said, once again stammering. 'There is more.'

'Aye?'

'Aye. I am not your betrothed.'

'I'm sorry?'

'My brother, the now rightful heir is your to-be husband.'

'So because you walked away, I get passed down to the next?'

'Aye, but there is a way, if the lady permits.'

'Go on then.'

'I must meet Krata on the field of battle.'

'You truly are a damnable fool.' Hestia muttered, wiping away a strand of hair from her face. 'So retrieving the sword, what? Grants you an audience? Then what? You challenge Krata?'

'The lady speaks true.' Kydor acknowledged.

'Very well, I accept, but know if you best him, you will answer to me.' She waved a finger at him, and walked on.

 San Everus

The trip to San Everus took several longer, tense days. What little conversation there was at times, was light and strained. Hestia was brooding, thinking over things. Kydor felt lingering effects from his brief swim, but nothing felt dire. He munched on a twisted brown root to help quell his aches, and distant headache. The air got colder and drier the closer they got.

'San Everus lies at the base of Mount Jatoa?' Hestia asked, kicking a stone out of their path.

'Aye,' Kydor answered, wiping his brow. 'San Everus lies abandoned after a very long time, and no one knows why. Rumors abound, but truth to tell, nobody knows with certainty. However, San Everus is no simple mages hall; it is an entire city. Some say that it lay as whole as the day it was abandoned. None have actually ventured within to verify for themselves.' He rubbed his head, trying to quell the dull pounding he felt there. 'It will be quite satisfying to resolve this mystery, wouldn't you agree?'

It took them another day to find the gates of San Everus. Once seen, even under countless layers of forest greenery, there was no mistaking the massive white stones of the ancient city. Kydor was barely conscious, and requested to camp the night through, not willing to risk the mysteries within in his current state.

'What interests me,' Hestia said, unpacking the ass. 'Is how quiet things are. These woods should be teeming with life, but I hear naught.' She looked around uneasily.

'Animals sense danger as well as we.' Kydor said dropping a small pile of sticks.

'Be that as it may, it unsettles me. Whatever lies beyond this point is dangerous, perhaps truly cursed. Can you not sense it?'

'Aye.' Kortis mumbled, striking a flint stone and some kindling, creating a small fire.

Whatever ailed him was not getting better. In fact, seemed to be getting worse.

Kydor slept fitfully that night, and dreamt of priests in long white robes and low blue hoods. They were chanting rhythmically in a language Kydor did not understand.

He woke early the next morning with Hestia squatting near him, looking concerned.

'Gods! You are burning up! Are you ill?' She asked, touching a hand to his forehead. 'I only check, because you were muttering in your sleep.'

'I am fine; it's just weariness from all this travel.'

'So you say.' Hestia muttered, unconvinced. She stood. 'Shall we proceed, or do you wish to lay about all the day long?'

I sense the lady is eager to explore within those cursed depths.'

'What I desire is to see beyond those gods damned gates.'

Even in misery, Kydor managed a smile.

'The lady speaks true! There is no use lying about!' Unsteadily, he got to his feet.

Realizing that the undergrowth was far too thick to drag the mule through, Kydor ended up tying him up to a thick leafy vine. He grabbed his rucksack and a water skin. He checked his bag, and pulled a yellowed, tightly rolled map free. He took the Elder Sword, and pushed it down the back of his belt, shoving the map into the belt nearest his hip, within easy reach. Turning, he tossed Hestia the skin, and shrugged into his pack. He patted the ass one last time, hoping he'd see the little beast again.

After hours of fruitless searching, the couple found themselves staring at the massive stone gates. It was Kydor who spotted the opening first.

'There! Among the brambles! Do you see it?'

'Aye!' Hestia answered after a moment.

'A fireball would perhaps open our way, wouldn't you agree?' Kydor asked, smiling from behind his beard.

'Aye, a fireball would do wonderfully. 'Hestia said, sliding her staff free.

 Amongst the Halls of Madness

On the far side of the crack spanned a wide vista. San Everus was at present, an abandoned ruin; once it had been stately and impressive. The roads were wide and cobblestoned. All the buildings were white, crawling in suffocating vines. As they wandered further into the city they began to detect signs of a large scale battle. There were shattered bricks strewn about, as well as various pieces of armor, and broken weapons. Shattered bits of clay pottery lay strewn everywhere.

'Whatever befell these people destroyed their city.'

'Look there! Does that not look like claw marks?' Kydor asked, pointing to three large gouges in a nearby wall.

'Aye, and that looks like scorch marks. Kydor, this town was felled by a dragon. Gods, what a fate!'

'Several dragons.' Kydor said, turning right on a pockmarked avenue. 'Look.'

In the middle of the roadway lay a very large skeleton, its bones had grown mossy. There were several broken spears lying on the ground around it. One spear, unbroken was jammed in between the first two neck bones. As the beast fell, his bulk crushed a nearby building. A skeleton lay nearby, clad in the tattered remains of chainmail covered by a faded yellow tunic. What was left of the material had obvious signs of being ripped, as if from a vicious blow.

Making their way around the skeleton offered them a better understanding of the fight. Two streets further down was another, much smaller set of bones. A sword was wedged into an eye socket. All around it were black pockmarks, and several small gouges.

'That looks to be what is left of a spitter drake.' Hestia said, leaning in. 'Growing up, I thought they were tall tales, told to wee little ones over a nights fire.' She squatted, using her staff for support. 'But to be at the resting place of such a mythical beast is truly amazing.'

'I've never heard of such a creature.' Kydor admitted. 'Why call it a spitter drake?'

'I don't imagine a northerner would, they roamed the Lower Faldor at their height. See those marks? These little beasts spat venom so caustic that it would eat through a man in little time at all. Horrible way to find your clearing, because even if you survived the acidic venom, the poison would get you. It is said that a man would often linger for days on end in absolute misery.' She pushed up with her staff. 'I am both saddened, and relieved that there are so few dragons left.' Absently, she rubbed the bicep of her prosthetic arm. 'Shall we push on?'

Further down was an entire block crushed and charred. Around the destruction lay several skeletons, or pieces of them. A dwarven battleaxe was deeply embedded in a stone wall. At its base, was another small skull, cleaved neatly in half.

'That dwarf fought valiantly, and either lived the rest of his days, retelling the story with but one good arm, or he lies amongst these scattered dead.' Kydor said, pointing out the skeletal remains of a dwarven arm.

'One sympathizes.' Hestia muttered, walking past.

After a moment, Kydor pulled the map free of his belt, unrolling it. Curious he may have been, but all the exploration was taxing him significantly.

'We must venture into the square. A church is there, what we seek lies below, in the crypt.' He studied the map before re-rolling it. 'Shall we?' He asked, leading the way, map in hand.

The church was beautiful, even in destruction. There were four tall white spires tipping each corner of the building. All but one spire had either been destroyed by battle, or time. The front of the church was covered in a colorful tile mural. It bore the image of a man in a red shirt, blue cape, loose black pants, and long black boots. He stood at the edge of a cliff, and held a brightly glowing orb aloft. Brantor and Neci stood in front of the wooden church doors, both of which had fallen in.

'My children are you ready to hear the story of this wondrous city's end?' Brantor asked solemnly.

'You?' Hestia asked incredulously.

'Aye, tis me, and I bear you no ill.' Brantor answered, bowing slightly at the waist. 'The time for games, and frolicking is at its end.'

'Step forward, and bear witness to a peoples last stand.' Neci said bowing as well. 'It is a tale of woe, and misery.'

Hestia looked to Kydor, who shrugged. Together they approached the church.

As he passed Neci, Kydor felt a prick at his neck and wobbled.

'Easy my lord, easy.' Neci urged, grabbing him around the shoulders.

'You witch! What have you done?' Hestia shouted, reaching for her staff and shield.

An iron grip encircled her hands. She looked into the deep green eyes of Brantor.

'Trust me child, we mean no harm. What my wife has done is save him. Please, come inside.'

Hestia felt no deception in his words, but remained alert all the same.

 The Alarm Sounds

'DRAGON!' The watchtower bellowed. 'A dragon approaches!' The man repeated, cupping his hands over his mouth.

A large iron bell sounded and several signal fires were lit. Word spread fast among the town guard. The barracks were an organized chaos of yellow tunics, rattling chainmail, and the clattering of swords. Watch commanders lined up, barking orders at their troops.

Outside, a man in highly polished splint mail covered by a yellow tunic walked hurriedly beside a tall man with aquiline features, a sharp pointed nose, deep black hair, and a short, well trimmed beard.

'Lord X'ara, the men are gathered, we have sent out the signal fires. The dwarves have answered; we can already hear the war drums and by the sound, they'll beat the drake handily.'

'Why light the signals if but one drake approaches?'

'Because lord, he is an Elder Drake.'

'By the gods man! What reason does an elder have for attacking us?' He chewed his lip thoughtfully. 'What makes you certain he means harm upon us?'

'The farms, and farmers are gone my Lord. We could see the black smoke since break of day. We heard the foul creature shortly thereafter. Gods, the smell when the winds shifted.' He looked away, and back at his lord. 'I could hear screams. I fear to the gods and my ancients that this creature is not alone.'

For the first time, X'ara paled, and looked frightened.

'What of the elves? The Barbarians?'

'The Barbarians should arrive by noon of the day, the elves, I fear will arrive too late to offer any help.'

'Do we have any trolls nearby willing to help?'

'No my lord, there are none.'

'Very well, arm all the towers with bows, arrows, spears and halberds, ensure the gates are reinforced, get everyone to the temple, it will shield them. If you'll pardon me Corbett, I must prepare for the coming battle.' He patted his commander on the shoulder.' I just pray what you've trained me will pay off.'

Corbett bowed deeply as X'ara walked quickly into his private armory.

The alarm bell sounded again, and the towers were in an uproar. A redheaded sergeant leaned over the railing, scanning the crowd below. He spotted Corbett, and frantically motioned him up.

Corbett cleared a ladder two rungs at a time.

'Yes Marka, what is it?'

'Our doom.' The sergeant answered, pointing.

In the distance, but growing closer was the elder. His red hide threw off bursts of sunlight with each powerful thrust of his wings. Corbett began to ask a question, but suddenly realized that the black cloud behind him moved.

'By the gods? Have you ever seen such?'

'No commander, I have not.' He stared miserably at Corbett. 'I must go, my family needs me!'

Corbett grabbed him roughly, pointing.

'My son, we are already doomed; there is no escape. Now do you wish to die like a man, or like a baby, with piss running down your legs? Face it man, our fate was sealed the moment that creature chose battle. Now buck up soldier, and keep my walls clean!'

Corbett slid down the ladder. As he cleared it, Lord X'ara came from his armory. He wore long plates of golden mail. On his breast was the symbol of his clan. He carried a long, heavy war hammer with a lethal point on either side of its head.

'What news?' He asked, sliding on a golden helmet with a long red ponytail and narrow eye slit.

Corbett slapped him on both shoulders, and smiled bitterly.

'Good luck X'ara, may you slay hundreds of them.' He pushed the visor of his helm down and drew a large, flat broadsword from behind him.

'It has been my honor old friend.' X'ara said, tracing a rune on each hammer point. 'Fight well, and may your reunion be joyous.'

'And may your ancestors welcome you upon the clearing with open arms.'

'Dwarves! Dwarves approach!' A wall guard yelled.

'Finally, some good news. Shall we greet our stout allies then?' X'ara asked, flipping his visor up.

'Gladly.' Corbett answered, sliding his visor up as well.

A guard snapped his long halberd to attention when he saw the duo approach. Two other guards opened a much smaller gate. A gray bearded dwarf wearing a stone crown entered, surrounded on all sides by men bearing wide axes, or hammers, not unlike what X'ara wielded.

'My Lord Tort.' X'ara said cordially. Corbett bowed deeply. 'So glad we were able to roust you. You and your people will have ample chance to slay dragons. There appears to be an elder on the charge.

'No boy,' this day’s news is much grimmer. There appears a cloud, dark as the storms. This cloud is purely dragons. I bear bad news. Your city of stone will not survive.'

X'ara looked at the king and smiled.

'All is well! I did not want to live to be old.'

Much later as the dragons poured into the city, his armor covered in gore, X'ara saw Corbett felled by an orange drake lazily spewing white hot gouts of flame. The same drake also mortally wounded the dwarven king. Staggering, the king drove a broken sword through the roof of the dragon's mouth. Both fell to the cobblestones, dead. X'ara was able to help stem the tide away from the temple, and was able to see the Barbarians as they stormed into the city.

Any hope of actually greeting anyone was cut short. The Elder Dragon landed, and X'ara charged. The dragon made short work of him. Spears flew in from all sides, and the great beast roared.

 Kydor Among the Dead

Kydor came to lying on an uncomfortable stone floor. A low fire was lit nearby. Brantor, Neci, and Hestia all sat around it cross-legged. The Elder Sword lay across Neci' legs, she was gently touching its blade. Sadness echoed across her features. Noticing Kydor, she looked up, wiping her face.

'My lord, you wake!'

Brantor and Hestia looked over.

'Aye, I've not felt this way in a long time.' Kydor said miserably.

'A heavy night of drinking brings misery, but swimming in magic is madness.' Brantor said, smiling. 'You have the constitution of a dragon, my boy.'

Neci shot him a look, and Brantor uncomfortably cleared his throat.

'Where are we, and what is this building?' Hestia asked.

'Tis a shrine to the Gods, child.' Neci said, handing the Elder Sword over, hilt first, to Kydor.

'And the last refuge of a doomed people.' Brantor said, giving his wife a mysterious look. Minutely, she nodded, and Brantor slid off his hood.

'We were priests of the Order of Heavenly Light, this was our temple.' Neci said, standing easily. 'Come, we shall explain.' She offered a hand to Kydor.

Kydor and Hestia looked to Brantor. He had a long, twisted scar that ran from his forehead to just behind his ear. He beckoned them to follow, and got to his feet.

Kydor took the offered hand, and got unsteadily up, using the wall for support.

'We were here, inside this church on that dark day, so long ago. We stayed with the people of the town. Mostly, we comforted the children. Too many were without a father already. Mothers, daughters ran about, trying to aid the wounded, but it was for naught. The dragons easily overtook us.' Brantor cleared his throat. 'It was slaughter.' He opened an inner door to the church.

Inside was helter-skelter. Pews lay strewn about, scorch marks dotted the interior. Everywhere there were bones. With dawning horror, Kydor and Hestia realized they were mostly children.

'By the gods.' Kydor whispered, awe struck.

'To what end?' Hestia asked, her hand flying to cover her mouth.

'Aye, it was horrors beyond comprehension.' Neci said, picking her way through the mess. She made her way to the altar where a small white blanket lay. A tiny skull peeked from under it. Fresh wildflowers were laid atop. 'Our daughter.' Neci said, laying a hand on the altar. She covered her face.

'What was the meaning of this madness?' Kydor asked.

'Why, the book of course. The book of Eld.' Brantor answered, slipping back into his hood. 'The very thing you seek.'

 Inside the Slaughterhouse

The battle raged unabated outside, but the priests had gathered the children together in a tight circle, and were fervently praying to the gods to deliver them. The outer door was kicked in, and inner door rudely shoved open. A giant of a man stood there wielding a massive sword. His long blonde hair was intricately braided. A long, deep gash ran the length of an arm, which he ignored.

'Priests!' He beckoned. 'Is there another exit to the city?'

'No, there is none.' A short priest answered, lowering his hood. 'This is truly our last refuge.'

'Well make peace with your gods, and grab a weapon, for something wicked this way slithers.' He tossed the man a bloody short sword. The priest clumsily handled the weapon, not sure how to properly wield it. 'Pointy end towards these blasted creatures priest. Keep that in mind.'

A roar at his back caused the Barbarian to spin about. As he did so, a dragon bit him in half. The creature was big, almost too big to fit through the door- almost. The children screamed, and the priests hugged them tighter. The dragon roared, filling the small opening with its cry.

Neci charged into the fray, white sleeves bloody to the elbows. She'd been outside tending to the wounded when she saw the juvenile drake heading towards the temple. Wielding a broken halberd, she brought the blade down. It merely skidded off the dragons armored scales, causing sparks to fly. It kicked a rear foot out in irritation, sending her sprawling.

From within, Brantor managed a grip on the blade. He swung it down, catching the creature in the eye. The blow was luck, not skill, but it had the same effect. The dragon roared in pain, and began thrashing about, knocking prayer books and pews every which way. He stoked his bellows, charging a blast. Brantor barely had time to duck the jet of flame. Others were not as fortunate. The screams of dying children followed him as he dove to the floor.

'KITERA!' Neci screamed, forcing her way into the mess. The dragon swung a paw about, catching her in the chest. The blow knocked her sideways, opening a diagonal slash across her breast. Neci lost her grip on the halberd and felt her breath knocked from her.

An inhuman roar from above saved her from the next flame. Brantor wielded his sword, gripping it by the hilt with both hands, the blade pointed down. He managed to strike a soft area just behind the neck. The dragon roared in pain, flinging its sharp claws about, catching Brantor in the face, laying it open in a bloody ribbon of flesh.

'I've just enough of you, creature.' A disembodied voice said as a blinding ray of light flooded the room.

Neci carefully picked herself up, greatful no bones were broke. Her chest was on fire from the wounds there. Brantor was nearby on a knee, hand to his ruined face.

The dragons head was tilted sideways. It sensed some other, more powerful creature.

Ignoring it, Neci made her way past, and began wailing when she saw the bloody heap near the altar.

A figure emerged from the light. The dragon, heeding instinct, charged.

'Oh you naughty boy.' The figure taunted. With one glowing finger, it touched the nose of the dragon, and turned it to ash.

'Now then,' The figure, a strikingly muscular man in great white armor, said, walking to Brantor. He picked him up as if he weighed nothing. 'Oh that will not do, will not do at all.' He touched Brantor on the face. 'Now then. Who am I, and what do I... Eh?' He asked when he realized that neither Brantor or Neci were paying attention. Neci had the small child cradled in her arms, tears streaming down her face. Brantor had his hand on the girls' head. He too was crying.

'Most unfortunate.' The newcomer said solemnly. 'If you please.'

Neci and Brantor were inconsolable, cradling the tiny child.

'My children?' The man asked.

Neci gently handed the child to her husband, as a war played itself across her delicate features.

'YOU!' She bellowed, angrily. 'You and your kind!' Grief wracked her body. 'A lifetime of solemn dedication, a lifetime of praying. For what? For naught, as it ends! What good are the gods if they merely stand idly by while this... this chaos unfolds?'

'The gods do not interfere in the ways of man, or any other creature.' The god answered.

'Oh aye?' Brantor stated, laying his daughter on the stone altar. What of dragons, Lord Aantor? Are they not between realms? Do the gods not owe protection from such beasts?'

'The gods,' Aantor began, taking Neci in a gentle embrace. 'Owe nothing to anyone.' He put his hand over her wounded chest. The flesh knitted itself whole again.

'Oh?' Neci asked, wrenching herself free of his grasp. 'What then do the people owe the gods?' Fear? A lifetime of bowing and scraping? For what?' So we can bear witness to the death of our child? Of all these children? This is not godly, this is madness!'

'My question,' Brantor said, easing up next to his wife. 'Is why the very god of war would bother to visit at all? Tis not a battle you witness, this is annihilation.'

'T'was needed, child. In time you shall understand.'

'What I understand, is that the gods are mad.' Neci said taking her husbands hand in a tight, panicked grip.

'I stand with my wife. Our days of serving your kind are at an end.'

'You think you have a choice?' Anator asked mildly, a faint trace of irritation creeping into his voice.

'No, we know better. There is no choice. The gods beckon, we must heed.' Brantor stated, looking at Aantor tragically. 'To think, this could have been avoided had you stepped in.'

'As I stated, we do not interfere, but in time you shall understand.' He straightened, and looked about the mess. 'Tis tragic, I'll grant, but even in tragedy, there is hope. You are to be tasked with a quest from the Gods.'

 Kydor, and the Truth

'So what did the gods want of you?' Hestia asked, stepping closer to Kydor.

'To watch over the book.'

'But the blasted Gods knew not of its location.' Brantor said, smiling.

'I fail to understand why San Everus had to fall.' Kydor stated looking from Neci to Brantor.

'Why, to protect the book.' Neci said, turning away from the altar. They could not sense of it because of the magic of Eld. Even to this day, it is unknown how the bloodline of Eld managed to hide it even from curious gods.'

'Why hide it at all? And, I still fail to grasp the reason for needless slaughter.' Kydor said, motioning the destruction around him.'

'They know not where the book is, but know it is within San Everus, and in order to protect it- they allowed the destruction of its resting place.' Hestia answered, comprehension dawning in her eyes.

'Seems heavy handed.' Kydor protested.

Neci shrugged, as if to say: "Who knows?"

'Which brings to mind a question.' Hestia said. 'Who is Zilant, and what is his interest in this book?'

'That is the question of the ages, he called upon us to deliver the scroll, nothing more.' Brantor stated, walking towards the door. 'Shall we depart? This place makes me ill.'

'What piques my curiosity is why the Gods chose you, and what is it they ask of you?'

'We were chosen to watch over this place and deliver unto the bloodline of Eld the book. We know not why we were chosen, other than as a punishment for blaspheming against Their word.' Neci answered. 'We will live unto the end of time, it seems.' She shrugged again, uninterested.

'How do we find this book?' Hestia asked.

'We stand atop its resting place.' Kydor said, retrieving the now bent map from his belt.

'I see nothing, but a blank page.' Brantor said, looking down.

'I see, clear as day, the path we must take, come now, shall we have an end to this madness?'

'Gladly.' His three companions answered almost in unison.

 Kydor and the Book of Eld

The ancient crypt was musty, and full of spiders, making Kydor realize he had not seen his little green dagger in some time. He pushed the thought from his head, and followed the map. Hestia's firelit staff cast an orange light that elongated shadows into hideous forms.

'A city of the dead, under a city of the dead, how strange.' Brantor mused, taking in the open stone crypts. Most were full of dusty skeletons time had all but forgot.

'At least some dead rest easy.' Neci sighed.

They walked on until there was nowhere else but a wall in front of them.

'It seems that map of yours has led you wrong.' Hestia said, lifting her staff high. 'Now what?'

For an answer, Kydor placed his hand onto the wall.

A series of runes glowed brightly at his touch, and a small, low door forced its way into existence.

Hestia tilted her staff forward to see inside the room. Lying within, on a low stone pedestal, lay a great ancient book bound in red leather.

Kydor stepped forward.

Hestia tried to follow, but Neci grabbed her arm, shaking her head.

Kydor put his hand on the book, and felt lightning explode behind his eyes; he finally understood his true quest. He gently lifted the ancient tome from its resting place.

As he left the chamber, Kydor took a knee as the wall reknitted behind him. Shrugging out of his pack, he looked around the small chamber.

'There is but one place we must venture if we are to truly end this.' He fixed Hestia with a hard look. 'You face grave danger if you continue. I cannot promise you safety.'

Hestia smiled grimly. 'I've been with you to this point. If there is a chance to puzzle out this mystery, then I cry hells with consequences.'

'If but your father could hear you.' A smiling Kydor said walking back through the dark crypt.

Once inside the church, Hestia and Kydor stood near the door while Neci and Brantor said their goodbyes to their daughter.

Leaving the church, Kydor looked around at his group.

'I know not much, but laying my hands on the book brought several things to light. The first is that the Eld were not a single bloodline, but three different clans. They are called Eld because they are of the Gods, not divinity, but clever enough to where they were able to fool the Gods long enough to create this book. I think we all know of a certain mage very interested in it. What I still do not understand is the why, but this book is that answer, and in order to find the question, we must all travel further.' He looked to the misty, sparsely forested incline of Mount Jatoa in the near distance. 'Zilant, it seems is much older than he appears,' Kydor stated, picking up his thread. 'And has been hunting the descendants of Eld for some time. He feels a sleight against him, but for what reason I do not know. Are you all willing to see this through? I cannot promise any safety.' He looked at Hestia, who pushed a strand of hair out of her eyes.

'I told you once already. I've not come all this way for naught. Lead on if you're to lead at all.' She clenched her mechanical fist to emphasize her point.

Brantor and Neci both shrugged.

'The Gods have never been specific in their words, but we both know they've laid the two of you before us.' Brantor answered. 'Strange, isn't it?'

'Indeed.' Kydor looked up at the midday sun. 'If we leave now, we can make it to the foot of the great mountain.'

 Kydor Relays a Tale

They broke camp as the sun sank below the horizon. Neci dropped three small rabbits near the pile that Kydor was building into a fire. Brantor came back with full water bladders from a nearby stream that at one time fed cold mountain water to San Everus. Hestia began stripping the rabbits, rubbing green, leafy herbs into their pink flesh.

Once the fire had started in earnest, and the rabbits were roasting, Kydor looked around the fire, jabbing at it with a stick.

'I suppose now is a time to relay something that's been on my mind for some time, but finally makes sense.'

Leaning back, he began.

The day was cold and drizzly. There was a small contingent of soldiers gathered around the charred remains of a bonfire. Some of the men were joking nervously; others were tightening bits of armor, or checking weapons. In all, there was a sense of urgency to be gone. Women darted in and out of the gathering, carrying bits of food, or small trinkets for luck. In all, the men were waiting on their village chieftain who was still inside his low clay brick and hide covered hut.

'But father,' Kydor protested. 'I am of age! I am old enough, and trained enough to accompany you!'

'Boy, the matter is not up for discussion. Now, how do you set this blasted thing properly?'

'Kortis, you old bull.' Helena said, grabbing the stray bit of chainmail. 'The boy will one day have to taste battle. Why can it not be against a drake? Think of the legends that would create.' She snapped a bit of the outer armor, a leather top into place.

'Two against one will not change my mind.' Kortis said easing dual leather holsters over his head. He rested them snugly in a crisscross across his chest, took his dual swords from the nearby mantle, eased them into their sheaths, and grabbed a crude leather helm from a nearby chair, untangling its chinstrap. 'Lad, one day you will face so much combat, you'll wish for these days again.' He patted his son on his head, leaned in and kissed his wife, who cinched his helmet snug. She untangled the long black tail that streamed down the helmet. 'But this day I set out hunting drake!' He pushed his way out into the cold. The rain had picked up considerably, and the whole village was muddy. Smoke from various fires puffed their white smoke into the winter sky.

'Gentlemen,' Kortis began, seating a heavy fur cape against his back. 'I am sure there are none among us who are not aware of our quarry. If any of you feel your knees weaken, please feel free to stay behind.' There was a thrum of nervous laughter. 'I'm sure the pigs could use a good feeding, or mayhap, the village elders could do with some company.' He looked at his men, who looked back, ready to go. 'Know that I cannot promise each of you safe return, but know that the Gods will sing your praises, and your ancients will rejoice with you once you find yourself at your clearing. Come with me, let us hunt this dragon, and make the heavens quaver in recognition of the wrath of the Barbarians! Are you ready?'

His reply was a hearty roar from his men. They headed out, leading two pack mules. Their destination would take two days to get to, one by foot, the other by a small, crude wooden boat.

The island was a rocky lump covered in sparse growth. Pock marking the wild landscape were deep limestone caves. Here and there large, colorful seabirds called out, or made lazy dives, hunting the small rat-like creatures that lived in the undergrowth. In the all, the small island was alien and inhospitable.

Spear's had been drawn and held at the ready by a few of the greener troops. Kortis however hadn't even moved his cape free of his swords. Currently, he walked next to a gray bearded man with crisscrossing scars across his face. One of his eyes was a milky blue and blind. However, there was no one else Kortis trusted more with strategy, or ability to keep the men in line. His name was Tata, and his family had been loyally serving the Barbery for an age. At Tata's hip, he carried a long slender sword that belled slightly at its tip. The blade had served him well over its lifetime.

'Tata?' Kortis asked, looking around the small island. 'Were you a sly, crafty old lizard, where would you hide?' Near the edge of the island was a small cliff. 'There?' Kortis asked, motioning.

'No, it seems too obvious.' Tata answered in his gravelly voice. 'Were I this dragon, I'd not stay on this island long, if at all. There are countless other islands, far too many to count, that he could be resting on.'

'Aye, but our scouts saw the gray bastard circling this island. Look there; is that not a thatch of berries? Perhaps just the thing a girl might want to take with her on that long march home, all the way to the Lower Barrens?'

'Aye perhaps, or perhaps that harpy of my wife might suddenly look good at the break of day. Lord, I'm not as convinced as you about this drake coming here. These sly bastards live as long as they do for a reason.'

'You speak true, but they also have egos as large as their scaly old hides. No, I feel that if we make camp, and keep watch, he'll come around to us.' He patted Tata on the shoulder. 'Find us a cave, I'm going to walk this Gods forsaken rock, and see what I see.'

'As you say, my Lord.' Tata answered bowing and saluting. 'You there,' He said motioning to one of the nervous spearmen. 'Keep vigil on Lord Kortis.' He pointed to the spear. 'And for the love of the Gods, put that blasted thing away before you hurt yourself.' He turned to the rest of the troops, barking out orders. Soon, men were fanning out, searching the caves.

It took three days before anyone spotted the dragon. During that time, the men had managed to amass a small pile of precious stones and gold coins- souvenirs to take home with them.

The scout pointed out the southernmost tip of the island to Kortis. The giant dragon was making large, lazy circles, snapping at seabirds foolish enough to fly close.

Even through the overcast, salty rain, the deep gray scales were visible. The dragon's ridges, which ran the length of his body, were black. He found a good spot and landed heavily, snout up in the air, smelling and tasting it. His yellow eyes snapped around to where the small contingent of men lay in hiding.

Kortis was the first to stand.

'Dragon!' He bellowed. 'I've come for your head!' He pushed his cape aside, revealing the crude wooden hilts of his blades. 'You've attacked an innocent! You know that in accordance with the by-laws our people have, you are in the wrong.'

The dragon roared, and charged Kortis, who stood his ground.

'Oh, I am truly honored. Tis Lord Kortis himself, come for my hide.' The dragon mocked, in its deep voice that sounded more like a growl than actual words. 'I shall enjoy crunching your bones the most.'

'And I shall greatly enjoy separating your head from your shoulder, beast.' Kortis answered, drawing his swords. All around him, men began to rise.

'What great sport this shall be!' The dragon exclaimed, licking his chops. 'Know this human, I serve one much greater than old by-laws written in an age time has forgot. I serve one whose sole purpose in life is to extinguish the line of Eld completely. I serve one who will rise to his rightful place, and one day restore dragons to their rightful place!' He attacked.

The battle was brief, but extremely brutal. Less than half the contingent of soldiers made it back to their island. Tata lay in the boat, strapped to a makeshift gurney, severely wounded. Kortis stood at the bow of the boat, a single dragons tooth firmly grasped in his bloody hand. His shoulder bore a puncture mark, and was oozing blood. Among the herbs that were brought, none seemed to quell the bleeding. The island had served as a makeshift pyre for the dead, and all around Kortis, men held onto various items from fallen comrades.

 Kortis Understands

'So, that gray drake, the one who took your arm served none other than our mystery wizard.'

'So you mean to tell me that Zilant himself can control dragon kind?' Hestia asked, leaning forward.

'Aye, it would appear so.'

'And we are to confront them?'

'Aye, it would appear so.'

Kydor sighed, kicked at the fire, and looked to Hestia.

'I wish you would cry off, and take the ass home.'

'I am not going anywhere, if the Gods wish me dead, why there is nothing I can do.' She gave him a hard look, and flexed her mechanical fist. 'Besides, it would be a waste of such a wondrous gift.'

 Mount Jatoa

They heard the whistling of the wind long before they saw the strange tower. It was a narrow jet black onyx needle that stretched far into the distant clouds.

'Are we meant to climb all that distance?' Hestia wheezed in the thin mountain air.

'No.' Kydor said, pointing to a low, flat circular balcony that jutted out from the tower midway up. 'Can you not feel it? I feel drawn.'

'Thank the gods then, we'll only be half dead when we get there.' Hestia groused, leaning on her staff, pushing on.

The ancient doors did not want to open, but with all four of them lending a shoulder, they managed to open it just enough to squeeze through. The tower was lit naturally through enormous stain glassed windows. Each window bore two scenes. As the group began ascending the steep, narrow stairs, Kydor realized the windows told a story of a massive dragon battle. By the time they reached the balcony the battle had turned in favor of the dragons. The story carried on as far the stairs went, which appeared to go on for some time.

The balcony doors were black and heavy. The twin doors were much easier to open than the ones at the base of the tower.

As they walked onto the expansive, flat balcony they fanned out. Kydor silently pointed to a low, jet black plinth. It was at the twelve 'o clock position of an enormous white granite pentagram. All around the gigantic symbol were strange runes set into the black floor in precious and semiprecious stones. Everything thrummed with powerful magic, and Kydor felt himself drawn, easing out of his pack as he approached the pedestal. He reached in, grabbed for the book, but grabbed an arrow instead. Gripping it, he tossed it to Neci.

'You'll know when. Until then, keep watch; I am going to lay the book down.'

Drawing her staff and shield, Hestia followed Kydor. She motioned for Neci and Brantor to stay back.

Nodding, they drew their weapons. Neci shoved the arrow through a loop at her waist.

As he laid the book into the pedestal, a rune at his feet lit off, casting an eerie blue shadow. Kydor ran his thumb to a page marked with a red satin bookmarker. The ancient parchment opened easily. More strange runes, much like the ones set into the floor lined its pages. Instinct guided his hands, and all around him runes in the floor began to light up. A blue dome began to flicker into being around him. Hestia nimbly stepped inside, before the dome solidified. A form began to materialize at the center of the pentagram.

'By the gods!' Hestia exclaimed, recognizing the shape.

 Zilant

A familiar mage stood in the pentagram, regarding Hestia and Kydor.

'So, I am to be summoned by the two of you, then?' Zilant said, looking around. 'It was a day much like this, you know,' He said, pointing around. 'The last time I was summoned through that blasted book. But the sky was much darker. In fact, it was full of dragons, and we were winning the war.'

Kydor finished the page, turned to the next, and saw a big black rectangle, stretching from page to page. Three runes were etched into the page. They shifted, morphing into characters in a language Kydor understood. The runes simply read: "Prison".

'Who are you?' Hestia asked, thumb resting on a rune.

'Not who, but What, child!' Zilant exclaimed, smiling toothily.

'Then what? What are you foul creature? Fore you are not human by a sight.'

'Aye, the Barbarian nose. So delicate.' He bowed to Kydor. 'My lord, you are quite correct. I am not human. I am something much worse! I was once a king! No mere dragon, I was the most powerful of my kind.'

He began shifting form; his face elongated, his nails grew into talons, his back grew ridges. Groaning in pain, he quickly shifted back into a human.

'Your people!' He bellowed, swiping at Hestia with his claw-like fingernails. 'Your kind! They did this!' He cried, drawing closer to Hestia.

Thinking quickly, fingers dancing, Hestia flung a bright fireball at Zilant. Kydor leapt, drawing Mythor. He tapped runes as he moved. Mythor glowed bright, pale blue. Zilant swatted aside the fireball, spun and caught Mythor between his hands. He kicked out, catching Kydor in the stomach. The kick sent him flying backwards. Zilant approached, looked up and saw Neci and Brantor standing outside the dome, weapons ready.

'Oh? Bored my dears?' He smiled again, tossing Mythor away, bowling Hestia over. 'I can certainly remedy that.' He snapped his fingers. 'You ask what I am?' He chuckled mirthlessly. 'I am where nightmares originate. You see, long ago, we dragons ruled the earth, while the Gods ruled the heavens. Then suddenly all these little creatures began sprouting up!' He humped his shoulders in exasperation. 'What were we to do?' He dropped his shoulders and smiled. 'We ruled! As rulers we had domain over all dragon kind. Living or dead.'

In the distance, a great beast bellowed. Within the bowels of San Everus, a moss covered skeleton began to reknit flesh, blood and scale. The half formed creature bellowed again.

'Just an old friend, I thought I would invite to play along with you.' He grinned, bowing to Neci and Brantor. Spinning quickly, he caught Mythor, this time in staff form, and flung him away. He kicked Hestia in the ribs as she swung down with her staff.

'Now where was I?' He pondered, stroking his beard. He held up his finger and exclaimed. Ah yes! Your people did this to me. The gods, indifferent as always, let the dragons work it out. Three tribes of humans came together and formed through a blood pact, the Elder Sword, and that damnable book. Most infuriatingly, they hid them both from the Gods, and dragons. Unfortunately for them, they got it only half right. They managed to trap me in human form, and keep the exact location of the book a mystery.' He nodded to Neci and Brantor. 'Which is why San Everus fell. X'ara was the last of his bloodline, and his death closed that line to the Elder pact. He went to his clearing to keep the book hidden. Tis a tragedy he didn't know that though. His was truly a noble death. Then, the other two. I almost had you and your father was it not for a blind old drake. The Gods must truly favor me though to present both of you for the slaughter.'

A large red dragon roared from above as it landed near Neci and Brantor.

'You!' The couple said together.

The dragon roared again in agreement.

Neci and Brantor charged.

Zilant parried a blow from Hestia. He cupped his fist in front of his mouth and spat out a bright orange fireball. As she dodged, Kydor swung in with Mythor's blades singing. He struck Zilant in the shoulder, opening up a long gash. Roaring, he swung out, catching Kydor in the breastplate. Blood pooled to the ground, where it steamed. Kydor checked himself, nothing was broken, and the thick leather had absorbed the impact well enough. Roaring, Zilant charged, bellowing another fireball, spinning his arms. Kydor blocked the blow and parried, dodging another fireball from Hestia. The fireball caught Zilant in the back. He spun, yanking out a small green dagger. He flung it at Hestia, who couldn't dodge it in time. The small blade sank into Hestia's shoulder. She cried out in pain and surprise.

Kydor sank one end of Mythor into Zilant's shoulder, quickly drawing the Elder Sword from behind him as he did.

'Now Neci, now!' He commanded.

Neci lithely dodged a stream of fire, flipping backwards. Brantor leapt in, jamming the thin rapier forward. The blow caught the dragon in a tender spot where his two jaws came together. Neci had taken a knee, quickly yanking the bowstring free of her hair, she strung the bow taught, expertly bending the bow into shape, snapping the string into a notch. Standing, she notched the arrow, took aim, and released.

The thrust caught Zilant between the ribs.

The arrow sank into the soft yellow flesh of the dragon's eye.

He bellowed in pain.

Kydor ran to the book, and quickly tapped the three runes on the prison page. Light erupted from the pages. Kydor reached over and pushed the sword further in before yanking it free. Zilant bellowed in pain and rage. He was helplessly drug toward the book until he was consumed in bright yellow light, and was gone-trapped within the pages of the book, which slammed shut, and laid smoking on its black plinth.

The dragon skull bonged hollowly to the floor, Neci reached in and yanked the arrow free, and looked over to Kydor, who held Hestia in his arms, frantically rubbing herbs into her wounded shoulder. Nothing was working; Hestia was gone to her clearing.

The Proposition

'Such tragedy.' Aantor said, materializing. 'Fortunately, there are more in her bloodline. He reached for the book, only to be stung by a dagger.

Kydor stood, gently laying Hestia on the ground.

'Oh?' Aantor asked, arching an eyebrow, tossing the dagger aside. 'You have something to say human?'

'Aye, I do.' Kydor said, stepping forward. 'The book, the voices of the ancients, whoever you call it, spoke to me. It tells me something I know interests your kind.'

'And what did it tell you?'

‘Zilant was but one. There are others like him out there. It is why this tower stretches on as it does. Each balcony is a beast. Someone the Gods want imprisoned, I feel that you know this, but I've got a proposition all the same.'

'Go on.'

'Spare her life; allow us to be your champions. She's of Elder blood. The remaining Eld together, fighting for the Gods?'

‘Aye, but I need only one champion. You’ll do Barbarian.’

‘I shall do no such thing, God.’ Kydor growled, swinging Mythor around in a tight circle. ‘You’ll kill me before I bow to you or your kind willingly, unless my demands are met.’

‘Who are you? Who do you think you are, human?’ Aantor cried, swiftly moving in on Kydor, batting aside Mythor. ‘If the Gods will it, it will be done!’ He grabbed Kydor by the throat and lifted him off the ground.

‘Kill me then, Lord of War, kill your only chance at felling these beasts that hide right under your nose.’ Kydor choked from under Aantor’s grip.

Aantor snorted derisively. ‘Aye lad, I could pinch the life from you.’ He dropped Kydor. ‘But what good would that do? It would only give you peace to be with the one you love.’ He motioned to Hestia, who Neci was sitting over. ‘My dear sister, Yanis, thinks I am mad.’ He smiled. ‘Well, no madder than you humans claim.’ He snapped his fingers and brunette woman in a diaphanous gown appeared. She was stunning, and every bit as perfect as Aantor.

‘You beckon, dear brother?’ She asked looking around the room. Her eyes fell on the red book, still resting on its stone pedestal. ‘Is that…’

‘Aye it is that blasted book. This one,’ He beckoned to Kydor, who stood loosely gripping Mythor. ‘This one claims that if we bring his lady fair back to the realm of the living, he and she will for all time be our champions, hunting down The Fallen. What say you to that proposition?’

‘You summon the goddess of life and death, to ask her opinion? Were you a human, I would strike you dead, but since you are my brother…’ She closed her eyes briefly. ‘It is done.’

Hestia began coughing and sputtering.

‘You may want to do something about that Death’s Hand venom, I hear tale that it is quite deadly to your kind.’ Yanis said to Neci before disappearing.

‘Well, there you have it.’ Aantor said, looking to Kydor. ‘Your conditions are accepted. He looked to Neci and Brantor. ‘And you two. We shall be in touch.’ He too vanished, and the four travelers were alone on the black expanse.

Kydor methodically put Mythor to rights, retrieved the book, and tossed Neci a small bag of herbs.

‘Have her eat that, it will help with the poison.’ He looked around, he looked up, and he looked back at the door. ‘I hope I know what I’ve gotten myself into, but I suspect that I do not.’ Sighing, he dropped the book into his rucksack. ‘My only hope is that Hestia can forgive me.’

‘Lad, I wouldn’t worry much about her anger. In time it will fade. It took Neci and I an age to calm down and come to grips with our situation. I suspect the same will be true of you and Hestia.’ Brantor said, adjusting his hood. ‘Neci my love? How does our sleeping beauty fare?’

‘She is well, but delirious. I recommend we depart this cursed place, it chills my bones.’

‘Wise counsel my love.’ Brantor said finally sheathing his rapier. ‘Very wise counsel indeed.’

‘Well then, shall we be under way?’ Kydor asked, pushing the Elder Sword into his belt. He bent and helped a woozy Hestia to her feet. She was mostly unconscious, and Kydor was mostly dragging her along.

Hestia lay on her back staring at the night skies. She heard voices. She tried remembering where she was, or what happened. Images came to her in a ramble, gone as soon as she saw them. She distantly remembered her grandmother's warm chuckle, but it was gone in the fog. Pain raced up and down her shoulder. Why couldn't she remember anything?

Moaning, she put a hand to her forehead, trying to quell the roaring headache there. She couldn't feel her arm, and in a panic, she remembered a great gray beast, gnashing teeth, and so much red. There was no pain though, and she could feel fingers, but they felt strange. Smacking her dry mouth, she began to remember a dwarf, and another dragon. There was a dark elf, and a man dressed in fancy clothes. She tried to focus on one name: Kydor. Where was he with his blasted herbs? Sitting up, her head swam, and her vision blurred.

Kydor sat in front of a low fire, and to his left and right sat Neci and Brantor. Upon seeing Hestia rise, he turned his attention to her. He offered her a stone cup.

'Where am I? What has happened?' She asked, downing the concoction.

Kydor told her everything.

Hestia lay down, groaning.

'Have I no say in the matter?'

'You were dead.' Kydor answered.

'I suppose I should be grateful that I live.' She rubbed her head, noticing her headache retreating. 'But immortality? Ye gods, man!'

'So what of you?' Kydor asked Brantor.

'We shall move on. The gods may have you as champions, but I've a feeling that we'll meet again one day. Smiling, he stood. 'My dear?' He inquired, looking to Neci, who was already standing.

Neci took his hand, and regarded Kydor and Hestia.

‘What my love says is true. I feel in my bones that our paths are destined to one day cross again. I hear the eastern side of the island is renowned for its seafood. I wonder how two such as us have lived as long as we have, yet have not ventured that far. You take care of one another, time is not the enemy.’ She let go of Brantor’s hand, leaned over and kissed Kydor on the cheek. ‘Aye, we’ll meet again.’

With that declaration, they were gone, melting into the forest.

‘Oh my head.’ Hestia groaned, rubbing her forehead. She looked into the fire, put the cup aside and looked to Kydor. ‘What of us? What are we to do now?’

‘I still intend to journey to Barbery, and see an end to this madness with my father and people. If we are to walk among the sands of time, it would not do to have generations of people angry at us.’ He smiled, tossing a stone into the fire. ‘What say you?’

‘I say you are a fool.’ She looked into the fire. ‘But a fool or not, you have a point. Very well, we travel on to Barbery at first light. If you’ll excuse me, I must rest; death takes a lot from a lady.’

Barbery

The journey home to Barbery took half the next day. Somehow, the small ass had not been made a meal of during their adventures, and the animal seemed happy to be led along by Hestia. Kydor was pensive the entire trip, Hestia merely tried to understand her new life. Once again, there was silence in the party, but it was not a tense quiet. The forest began to thin out, and dark brown sand began to crop up. There were dunes scattered everywhere, and a few hardscrabble farmers were attempting to make a living in the inhospitable terrain. What few people they encountered merely regarded the duo suspiciously before vanishing into their crude homes.

‘It is strange that the northern end of the island is so different than the south.’ Hestia mused, watching someone dart between shadows, following them, or watching them, she wasn’t sure, but she kept a watchful eye out. She’d already died once, and was in no hurry to do so again. Of course, being immortal may very well mean that she couldn’t die, but she was not willing to give such a theory a test.

‘Some say that a great apocalypse visited these lands, others claim that it was great battle between man and god. No one is for certain, but it is for certain that it works to our benefit as a tribe wishing to be left alone. Not many are brave enough to walk the Cursed Lands, and risk the wrath of the Barbarians. I suspect that sooner than later there will be scouts watching us, running ahead, warning the tribe of our impending approach.’ Sighing, he took the reins from Hestia. ‘I expect my father to be at the dock if so.’

They heard and smelled the sea before they saw it. The crashing of waves, the cool salty breeze, and the taste of the ocean told them everything they needed to know; they had arrived. Hestia led the ass onto the small boat; the animal belted a frightened cry, but allowed himself to be led aboard. It was as if he sensed the danger of being left behind.

The trip took a short time, but to Kydor it felt an eternity. It was so very long ago that he took this trip in reverse, head hung in shame, black armor burning as if it were heated. Not this time though, this time he was returning victorious, his plans come to fruition. Through guile of the Gods, or plain luck, he had an artifact that no Barbarian could look away from, and that was his way in, and hopefully way to get his father to listen.

There were a small army of soldiers standing at the dock. At the head, closest to the water stood a giant of a man whose blonde hair had traces of silver in it. Despite that, he stood straight backed, hands on his hips, dual swords holstered across his back, eyeing the boat as it approached.

‘You have some audacity to approach the island, Outcast.’ A man with a twisting scar said looking down at the approaching party.

‘My quarrel is not with you, or the Barbarian sir, I’ve come to speak to Lord Kortis, I come bearing an item that I feel warrants his attention.’ Kydor answered, stepping as forward as the narrow boat would allow.

‘Aye? What trinket have you that you think may sway the ways of Eld?’ The scarred man asked, sneering.

Ignoring him, Kydor addressed the blonde and silver haired man.

‘Father, I have had chance to lay my hands upon the Elder Sword. By our ancient ways, such an item grants me an audience if you’ll permit.’

Kortis stepped forward, narrowing his eyes. His voice was a deep baritone that seemed to boom.

‘One who is Outcast has no claim to the ancient ways of our kind. Be gone from my sight.’

‘Of all the wisdom you have imparted upon me throughout my lifetime, I never thought I would stand in the presence of a damn fool.’ Kydor said, not lowering his eyes. ‘I have come to claim the right of eldest, and will do so “father”.

Kortis was quick, and had both his swords out. The blades clanged against the shaft of Mythor, and the two men stared angrily at one another.

‘Aye father, there is your anger. For a time I thought you felt nothing, but it is good to see the old man still has feelings.’

‘Your duty,’ His father began. ‘Your duty was to the wellbeing of the tribe and its people! You turned your back on that, and brought my house shame! Why should I even continue this conversation? Sword of Eld? Lad, don’t be daft. I care not for a weapon from an age gone by!’

‘Aye? Then you care not that this very weapon slew a great beast that even the mighty gods knew not how to handle? Perhaps you’re interested in understanding that this very Outcast adhered to the ways of a clan that turned its back on him in some damnably old fashioned display. Father, you were not the only one hurting after mother’s death. I stood there and could do nothing! She chose to find her clearing! She chose to allow me life!’ He beat his chest in frustration. ‘Damn this, damn you old man.’ He dropped Mythor, letting him clatter against the boat. ‘Run me through if you must, vent your anger. Excise the venomous poison seeping in your veins. Your eldest failed to protect his mother, your wife. Aye, I lay claim to such a failure!’ He eyed his father, whose twin blades were pointing at him.

The blades wavered before Kortis finally pulled them away. He sheathed them.

‘You speak well son. I take it that it is the lady’s doing?’ He regarded Hestia. ‘What manner of device is attached to your arm, child?’

‘My lord that is my arm.’ Hestia answered, flexing her golden fist.

‘Aye?’ He made a face. ‘Interesting to see you whole and grown young lady, you are a fine woman.’

Hestia bowed.

‘Show me what you bring son; let me judge it to be true or the naiveté of a child.’

Kydor held the Elder Sword hilt first out to his father.

Kortis snorted, but reached out with his hand. Gripping the blade, his face transformed from disbelief to awe.

‘By the Gods!’ He exclaimed, holding the ancient blade up against the sunny sky. ‘The boy speaks true! This is the blade forged in a time of great wyrms!’ He ran his blade along the cutting edge. ‘For such a plain blade, it positively thrums with the power of the ancients!’ He stepped aside. ‘Allow them passage, for I deem this authentic.’

The contingent moved aside. No one offered Kydor help, but men were almost falling in the water trying to get Hestia onto the dock.

‘Lay not your hands on that which is mine!’ A new voice boomed from the rear of the crowd.

Another man whose long blonde hair and beard were braided commanded, stepping forward.

Hestia looked to him, and laughed.

‘Sir, I know not you, but I am thinking you are Krata, if so, you have no claim to me, despite what you think.’

‘Aye? She is a rebellious one. I like that!’ Krata said, smiling broadly.

‘Brother.’ Kydor said, stepping onto the dock. ‘You may think that the girl is yours to claim, but I claim the right of eldest, and challenge you.’

‘I accept, but know this “brother”, as the now rightful heir to the clan, I choose the battle.’ He chuckled. ‘And my champion.’

‘Aye, brother, I know this, and I suspect you aim to call forth Kota?’

Krata merely smiled broadly.

‘Children, as is customary, the challenger is to be allowed a feast before combat. This old bastard is hungry!’ Kortis bellowed, pushing through the crowd.

The group began walking down a narrow pathway. Hestia realized that the small island was laid out in a neat, concentric circle with neatly fenced off segments. One segment had a small herd of goats, while another was a field of some unknown grain, in yet another there were boys training, their instructor mercilessly berating them as they crawled through mud, or attempted to swing heavy iron swords. The layout led directly to the heart of the island where an archway stretched over the fence. There were words written in the Barbery script, which Hestia read as: “Only the brave of heart may enter”. On either side of the fence post stood a sentinel, bearing a lethally sharp spear. Seeing Kortis approach, they snapped to attention, and allowed their eyes to show their incredulity at the sight of Kydor. A hot bonfire burned in the center of the small village, people were milling about working at a crude blacksmith shop, or beating up on hay filled dummies. The reaction was universal. Upon seeing Kydor, all action within the camp stopped.

Kydor was shown to a low grass hut at the edge of the village and given the curt instructions that he would be beckoned when needed. Hestia was invited to tour the camp, but she demurred, choosing to stay with Kydor.

‘So this is your plan?’ She asked after a moment.

‘Aye, the lady speaks true.’

‘And what if you lose? What if your father told you to go soak your head, what then?’

‘Then we’d be playing the Gods’ games without resolving this issue.’ Kydor sighed. ‘But I know my father. Growing up all I would hear of are tales of that sword he now possess.’ He sat down on the low fur cot, and looked at the roof. ‘Tis not great luxury I offer you, but welcome my lady to my home.’

‘I wonder something, and wonder if you’ll explain it to me.’

‘What is that?’

‘Why do all your names sound similar?’

‘Because,’ Kydor answered, sitting up. ‘The first syllable of my clan name means “Of Power.” For example, my father’s name means “Powerful Roar”, mine is “Powerful One”, since I am eldest. Krata means “Powerful Thinker”, and lastly Kota means “Powerful Little One.”’

‘Aye?’ Hestia questioned, trying to picture a little Barbarian, but unable to do so.

‘Aye.’ Kydor answered, lying back down. ‘If the lady will permit, I aim to nap, the day ahead is long, and we have much to do yet.’

‘Good idea.’ Hestia said, crawling into the low cot next to Kydor. ‘Move over sir, a lady wishes to share your bed.’

They napped for some time before someone opened the flap of the hut, and shook them awake.

‘Food is ready.’ The person said, vanishing as quickly as they’d appeared.

Kydor and Hestia ate in silence while the crowd around them seemed uplifted by the prospect of spilled blood. Kortis led the charge, the Elder Sword firmly cinched against his waist. In one hand he held up a giant drumstick, the other he held a silver goblet. He was telling a story to someone to his right, emphatically punching the air with the drumstick. The food was good, and Hestia and Kydor ate well, but no one spoke to them. Kydor understood it was a way to make him nervous, to keep him off his feet. He knew better, and ate sparingly, ignoring the crowd around him.

Dinner was soon over, and as maidens cleared the giant table, Kortis led Kydor and Krata towards a giant, dusty circle. There was a single giant chair sitting at the topmost position of the circle. To the left and right were four low tables. Each table held a weapon. Left of the chair the tables held a staff and an axe. The tables to the right held a long broadsword and a shield. Taking his seat, Kortis motioned to the tables.

‘You may choose one weapon challenger.’

‘I choose the staff.’ Kydor said immediately.

‘And as rightful heir, I call forth a champion to fight in my stead.’ Krata said, grinning. ‘I call for Kota, the littlest one.’ There were some good natured laughs at that.

The biggest person Hestia ever saw made his way through the crowd. Kydor was tall, but dwarfed by this giant. His long blonde hair almost touched the back of his knees, which were almost to Hestia’s chest. His shoulders were broad; his arms were rippling with solid muscles.

‘That’s Kota?’ She asked, open mouthed. ‘Kydor, beg off! He’ll kill you!’

‘Nay, I am not to be bested this day by my baby brother.’ Kydor said, shaking his head.

For his momentary distraction, he was belted and sent flying. The crowd roared its approval, and just like that the battle was underway.

Kydor quickly leapt to his feet, swinging the wooden staff around in tight circles. He feinted left, jabbing that way with the end of the staff. Kota fell for it, and Kydor cracked him in the back of the head. Kota roared, and grabbed the staff, yanking Kydor forward. Kydor, quick as ever, jammed his thumb into his brother’s Adam’s apple. Kota, choking, let go of the staff, and was cracked in the jaw. Kydor spun the staff around again, but again it was caught. Kota dragged his brother forward, gripping him in a bear hug. They fell to the dirt, rolling over. Kota trying to get a chokehold on Kydor, Kydor trying to free an arm. Kydor finally freed his arm, and belted Kota in the face, once, twice, three times before the pain became too much. Kota let go, and was yet again cracked in the jaw by the staff. He quickly reached down and flung a handful of dirt at his brother, who swiped at it. Kota, for his size, was quick, and brought a massive fist around that sent Kydor flying, bloodying his nose and lip. The crowd roared again. Spitting in the dirt, Kydor swung his staff overhand, aiming at Kota’s head. Kota dodged, and Kydor switched directions, bringing his lower hand in, cracking his brother between the legs. The crowd moaned in sympathy. Kota went to his knees, gripping his wounded manhood.

‘Do you yield baby brother?’ He asked, laying the staff along Kota’s cheek.

‘Aye, I yield brother, I yield!’ He groaned, rolling over, still gripping himself.

The crowd was unsure of how to react. Their champion, Kota lay in the dirt moaning in pain. An Outcast had just beaten him. They all looked to Kortis who stood, smiling broadly.

‘My son! I welcome you back into the clan! Be well met!’ In two quick strides, he was in the dirt circle, embracing Kydor.

Later, in Kortis’ hut, Hestia, Kydor and Kortis stood over a small fire.

‘You mean to tell me that you do not aim to stay?’ He asked. ‘Then why return at all?’

‘Because father, I love Hestia, and I suspect she feels the same.’

‘Aye, you could’ve had that within your clan son. I do not understand your choice.’

‘Father, I spoke true. I failed mother, failed her when she needed me most. I cannot bear the thought of being such a failure ever again, and I know that makes me not a Barbarian.’ He sighed. ‘There is more.’

‘Aye?’ His father asked, looking up from the fire.

‘Aye. Hestia and I have been tasked by the gods as champions to do their bidding; I ask that you allow the betrothal to be at an end.’

‘How noble.’ His father answered, flatly. ‘When you see the gods again, ask them why your mother had to perish. She was far too young to find her clearing. And this betrothal business? I suspect that Krata would end up with a dagger between his ribs before the first day had fallen. Very well, I bless you and your lady, son.’

‘Aye father, you speak true, but she lives on in our hearts.’

‘A memory keeps not a bed warm.’

‘No father but the flood of young maidens you have in and out of here keep your bed plenty warm.’ Kydor sighed again. ‘Father, allow Krata to continue to be the heir, he is a much better leader than I am anyway. The rest of the village looks up to him in ways that no one ever did me.’

‘It is because you are much too damn bullheaded like your mother.’ Kortis groused. ‘Very well boy, if you are to fight for the gods, then who am I, a mere mortal to argue.’ He clasped his son on the shoulder. ‘Good health, long days, and pleasant nights. Take good care of Mistress Hestia, for she will correct you proper if you do not.’

‘As you say father.’ He turned to leave, but pause before doing so. ‘With your permission, I would like to visit on occasion.’

‘As you wish son. Gods how I’ve missed you boy.’ His father said, looking back into the fire, hand resting on the pommel of the Elder Sword.

Just like that, the conversation was over. Kydor and Hestia found themselves outside Kortis’ tent, looking around the small village. People had resumed their daily activity as if nothing was ever amiss. This time, Kydor noticed, they stopped to greet them, or wish them good day.

Home

The trip across to the main island was a lot shorter. Hestia looked to Kydor.

‘Do you not wish to remove that armor? Are you now no longer dishonored?’

‘Aye, but I wear it because it fits me, it fits how I feel. I cannot explain it better than that.’

‘Tis okay, I understand your meaning.’ Hestia answered, patting the ass.

Days later, they were passing dusty cornfields, waving at random people they met along the path. The day was full, but Hestia insisted that they stop by her parent’s home. She felt that there was much to be done, and much to be explained.

‘You’re what!’ Her father bellowed, a short time later. He stared at Hestia and Kydor accusingly.

‘Father, it is the way things had to be done!’ Hestia answered, her voice getting hard.

‘But all eternity? Child do you not understand what that means?’

‘Aye papa, I do. I do not like it, but I understand it.’

‘And you!’ He said pointing to Kydor. ‘You’ve a hand in this?’

Kydor nodded.

‘I do sir. At the time, it was the proper choice to make.’

‘Bah!’ Brennan growled irritably. ‘There is always another choice to be made.’ He sighed, the anger seeping from him. ‘I guess it is what is meant to be done.’ He looked at Kydor again. ‘And what of your troubles, sir?’

‘All is well, my plan worked to fruition, and Mistress Hestia is no longer betrothed to anyone.’

‘Do you still intend on marriage?’

‘If Hestia is willing, and you are willing to give your consent, then aye. I do.’

‘Hestia?’ Brennan asked, looking to his daughter, who was flummoxed.

‘Just like that?’ She asked. ‘That is how you ask a lady for her hand in marriage?’

‘No my love, it is not. I will ask you proper, but it will do no good without permission from your father, wouldn’t you agree?’

‘Aye, you speak true.’ Hestia mumbled.

‘You have my blessing, if my daughter permits.’ Brennan said, closing the subject. ‘In the mean time, there is an inn to run, and your mother to update. If you’ll excuse me, I must get back to work.’ He embraced his daughter in a long hug, kissed her cheek, and exited the home.

Kydor insisted that Hestia go on ahead of him to the inn, he had business in town to tend to. Hestia gave him a wary look, but went ahead to the inn.

Sometime later, splattered in paint, Kydor went inside and grabbed Hestia’s hand, dragging her outside. He pointed to his handiwork, smiling.

The sign, no longer crooked, finally bore a name:

Eternity’s Inn

Smiling and clapping her hands, Hestia stood on her tiptoes and kissed Kydor on the cheek.

‘I think it is perfect.’ She told a flustered Kydor.

Inside the Dusty Circle

The cool early morning was quiet except for the occasional crack of wood on wood. The dusty streets were still coming to life, so traffic was sparse. However the action was around the back of the newly built inn. Within a crudely drawn small circle, two opponents squared off. On one side, expertly wielding a staff, Kydor stood ready. Hestia stood across from him. Her staff lazily held in her only hand.

‘I say this is madness!’ She cried.

‘Aye, tis madness to wallow in pity, my lady.’ Kydor answered, swinging his staff around, cracking Hestia in the unprotected ribs.

‘That hurt!’ She cried, her eyes narrowing. ‘You’re supposed to be training me, not torturing me!’

‘Well if the lady would keep her guard up, one such as me would not be able to land a blow. Now, get your blasted staff up, and parry!’ He cried, leaping in. Hestia quickly brought her staff up, clumsily blocking the strike. Kydor put a foot out, and tripped her. She nearly fell to the ground, but used the staff to catch herself. Kydor kicked the staff out, and Hestia fell on her backside.

‘That was mean!’

‘Nah, mistress, it is not. I am merely attempting to help you understand the benefits of balance, and proper weight distribution. You may have one arm, but are not unarmed.’ He grabbed a nearby shield, and walked to Hestia. ‘If the lady will permit?’ He asked, stepping forward.

Hestia nodded, and Kydor attached the shield to her stump.

‘Now my lady, you have a counterbalance. It is my hope that one day soon you will not need the shield at all, and are able to fend off a blow with ease. Now, prepare yourself!’ He cried, launching another attack.

Quick as she could, Hestia brought the shield around, blocking the attack. Just as quickly, she swung her staff. It met Kydor’s staff. He smiled, and swung another blow around from the opposite direction. Hestia clumsily swung her staff around to meet him.

‘Good, good, you are learning.’ Kydor said, smiling. ‘It seems that there is something between your ears besides stuffing and anger. The gods are merciful!’

Hestia cracked him in the back of the legs. Though she was serious, a smile played along her lips. This young man, this Barbarian was training her, and she felt a yearning to learn everything he could teach.

‘Come at me good sir!’ She cried, all thoughts of pity gone from her head.