Felerion the bard liked Wealdsfyrd. Not for its sleepy thatched houses, nor the warm and homey meadhall, nor even the timeless stone bridge that stood watch over the river as generations of towns grew and fell beside it. No, Felerion liked Wealdsfyrd for its people.



“Watch and listen,” he said to his traveling companion on the winding road. He unslung his lute, tuned, and began to play.

The dimwalker called Lydana considered the gentle tune with her usual reserve as they trod the loamy road beneath the thinning trees. There was good land surrounding Wealdsfyrd. A bit stony, but dark rich soil, once the trees were cleared. Plenty of acreage for farmsteads and large families whose children came running when they heard the music.

They babbled like sparrows as they flocked to the bard’s intricate tune. Lydana could feel the vitner woven into the song, carrying it far over the fields and through the woods, against the breeze and into peoples’ heads. “Is it always like this?” she asked.

Felerion grinned and led his train to the Troll’s Axe meadhall steps, his tune dwindling on the breeze to its final note. He bowed to the applause and cheers, then staggered, amused, under the storm of eager questions from a dozen squeaky voices.

“Where have you been, Felerion? How long will you stay? Who’s that with you? Will you tell us some stories? Will you tell us about wurms? Yes! Wurms! Tell us about wurms!”

“Wurms, is it?” He appraised his questioners. “What do you children know of wurms?”

“They big! Scary! A wonder! Huge! Bigger than the meadhall! They grant wishes to people that worship them!”

He held up a hand for quiet. “Stop there. Grant wishes? Who says so?”

A towheaded boy blushed under the sudden attention. “My cousin said so. He said that if you wake a wurm and give it a feast it will grant wishes.”

Felerion could only chuckle. “Yes, wake a wurm and you’ll find yourself intimately involved in a feast.”

“But you do know about wurms! You’ll tell us, won’t you? A story about wurms!”

“I might,” Felerion said, turning to enter.

“Have you met the witch?”

He paused. “Which witch?”

“The one in the meadhall!”

“We haven’t been inside.”

“My mother said the Tenet doesn’t approve of witches,” said the towheaded boy. “Or whatever your god is, miss.” He pointed to the symbol at Lydana’s neck.

Lydana cocked her head at the kid. “I’m not sure Stormi much cares about the Tenet’s approval. Let’s go inside and meet this ‘witch’.”

She was there, dressed in colors of the forest, a raven-haired woman of piercing gaze. Her feathered staff leaned against the hearth beside a great leather chair which she sat like a throne. She ate blue-veined cheese, rich dark bread, and was setting down her ale. Felerion smiled broadly. “Kattly!”

“I thought it might be you weaving into that music,” she said.

He turned to the children. “This is no witch. She’s a master weaver, a practitioner of vitner.”

“The Tenet of Nid says—” the towhead began.

“No one cares,” said the little girl next to him. “This isn’t Westmark.”

“Nice flock you’ve gathered,” Kattly said. Her eyes rested on his companion. “And who’s this?”

Felerion swept off his hat for introductions. “Lydana, dimwalker of Stormi, meet Kattly, master of vitner and leader of ten stone tribes in the Darkwood—”

“It’s the Tribe of Ten Stones,” Kattly corrected.

“Yes, but leading ten tribes sounds better.”

Kattly grunted. “Just like you’re a man of only fifty winters instead of a hundred.”

“I like her,” Lydana said.

“Ha! You would,” Felerion said, sitting. “What brings you out this way?”

“Did you see any sign of bull trolls on the road?”

Lydana and Felerion looked at each other then back. “No. How many?”

“Several. On the move.”

“On the move?” Lydana asked. “Strange.”

“Very,” Kattly said. “They passed through our territory leaving many—” she broke off, seeing the children. “Er—leaving the usual mess. I’ve lost track of them, but if they plan to cross the river, they might come here.”

“I know someone that might help,” Felerion said, unlimbering his lute. “I’ve seen his signs as we’ve traveled. A ranger, and he’s nearby.”

“I didn’t see anything,” Lydana said.

“You weren’t looking.” He rose and went to the door strumming. “Get us some ale and refreshment while I play. The wind will carry my tune to his ear. If bull trolls are wandering around, we want to know why.”



The vitner-laden tune had ghosted past Maelling the ranger for some time before it crept fully into his awareness. A tickle on the breeze, a mere suggestion of song, it made him pause and hold his breath. It wandered beneath the trees against the faint wind, seeking an audience that strained to hear.

Maelling stood still as stone until a sparrow on a nearby twig erupted into tweets.

“Shush,” Maelling said. “Do you hear that?”

The sparrow cocked its head, eyed Maelling and the breeze, then shot away through the trees in the music’s direction. Fleet feet brought Maelling through the forest in the sparrow’s wake until the tune became clearer. He slowed his pace, now hearing the individual notes. He snorted and laughed as recognition dawned. It was ‘Ballad of the Rusting Jarnwurm’, a meadhall tale.

“Felerion,” he said to himself. The old bard was out there somewhere, looking for Maelling. He paused and considered. Maelling was on an errand himself, tracking a vitner weaver with an urgent message. The weaver was headed to Wildland, and Maelling knew he wasn’t far behind. Still, if Felerion was calling, it could mean trouble.

He broke into a ground-eating stride and headed towards the blushing western horizon.

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Maelling finished a long draw from the tankard and set it down with a satisfied “Aaaahhh…”. He stifled a belch and said, “I could wish we were camped in the wilds, but there are worse places than Wealdsfyrd to lure me.”

“Ha!” Felerion slapped his prodigious belly. “Listen to him. ‘Lured’. As if we forced half a keg down his gullet and have him tied to his chair!”

“It’s an obscure form of torture, but I’ll endure it,” said Maelling. “So, a pack of bull trolls? No, I can’t think I’ve seen any troll sign lately. Not bull trolls, anyway. Where did you lose them?” he asked Kattly.

“North by northeast, through the forest atop a short, but steep escarpment that raises up from the forest floor. It’s not high, but—”

“Oh, I think I know it. White rock? Like some great stone slab at an angle rising from the ground? Maybe ten leagues square? When you’re atop you can just make out the far end?”

“Aye, that’s it. I came down the southern slope and found the road here. No sign of the creatures, even when I doubled back.”

“Yes, it might’ve known you were following them. Lots of ways up that, lots of ways back down on the eastern and southern sides.”

She shrugged. “Well, that’s where I lost them.”

“An entire pack?” Felerion said.

“Seven or eight,” she said. “I know, they’re not the most stealthy of beasts, but they do have a low cunning.”

“No, it’s a problem,” said Maelling. “More I think about it, the more I think they suspected you were around. They may have laid an ambush, and you were lucky to avoid it.” He mulled it over further. “Well, they haven’t come south, not along my trek over the last two days. We should go take a look.”

“Will there still be signs of it? This was three days ago,” Lydana said.

“It hasn’t rained. Maybe. Might also have lingered there. Lots of places to skulk in the woods thereabouts, even for that many.”

Kattly rose. “Well, we can be there midday, day after tomorrow if we get an early start. Might even find your weaver friend to deliver your message. I hope she hasn’t run into the bull trolls.”

Maelling stood as well, stretching. “It’s a he. We can be there tomorrow, early afternoon. I know a path, if you’re not afraid of a little climbing.”

“Ah,” Felerion held up a hand. “How much climbing?”

“Heh. Only a little.” Maelling wandered outdoors to find a tree to nap in.

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As the sun began feeling the day’s age, Maelling and Lydana heaved on the thick rope to haul the cursing bard over the escarpment’s stony edge. Kattly had had no trouble following Maelling up, neither did Lydana. Felerion, alas, was not light on his feet.

Breathing as if he’d run ten leagues and sweating like a summertime glacier, Felerion glared at his friend. “’Only a little’ climbing?”

Maelling shrugged. “Seemed like a little.”

“To me, too,” said Kattly.

Lydana just laughed.

Felerion opened his mouth to respond, but snapped it shut at the distant sound of a roar. All four hearkened until the sound repeated itself along with a yell that might’ve been human. “That way!” Kattly pointed down the stony slope to the north. They broke into a run, even Felerion, his fatigue abandoned.



The party’s long strides brought them in sight of the forest’s edge where a lone dwarf grappled with a bull troll. Another bull troll lay dead beside them, its skull crushed in. A bearded man in dark robes lay unconscious on the ground, his leg at an unnatural angle.

Maelling distrusted his eyes as the dwarf and bull troll struggled to shove one another over. No dwarf was ever so strong!

“Stop your gawking and help!” the dwarf shouted at them all.



Shaken from the spectacle, Maelling’s bow found his hands and arrows flew. Fire exploded around the beast’s head, and Lydana roared as she charged, sword in hand. But the bull troll’s hide was thick, and Maelling’s arrows drew but scratches. The fire startled it, but it roared all the louder, singed but not burned. Lydana smashed into its buckling leg, but the beast held its footing and slashed with its horns. It bore the dwarf over.

Maelling spotted an unconscious man in dark robes sprawled near the wood’s edge. Looked like the vitner weaver he’d been seeking. But, he had no time to contemplate the man’s fate.

Felerion’s strumming began, discordant, sharp and painful, but was directed at the beast, laden with vitner. The cacophony struck the bull troll like a physical blow. It staggered back, eyes rolling, confused.

The dwarf gave a mighty heave and ripped himself free of its grip. He scooped up his axe and began slashing at the bull troll’s legs and feet. “Push it back! Towards the tree line!”

Maelling had no time for questions, and targeted weak points at the neck, joints, and its bovine ankles. Kattly’s fire erupted before its face, as the warriors slashed and bashed. Felerion’s song grew sinister, laden with hidden dangers and certain death, working on the bull troll’s instincts to run.

The bull troll edged back and back, not seriously injured but overwhelmed by the onslaught. Leaves exploded from the tree above it as a slender figure in black shimmered into existence hurtling down on its shoulders. A blade flashed in the sun and bit deep into the space between throat and meaty shoulder. The bull troll roared and clawed at the figure astride its shoulders, but the blade whisked outward, spraying blood and gore. The figure—a woman—somersaulted away to land in a crouch, bloody dagger ready. But it was the end for the bull troll.

The beast weakened over seconds, then collapsed forward with a last, plaintive roar, and breathed no more.

In the silence no one spoke for a long moment, just heavy, exhausted breathing. Finally, the woman in black rose, wiped her dagger and sheathed it. “You were supposed to lure it past my tree.”

The dwarf threw his hands up. “I would’ve, but it charged!”

“It’s part bull! Of course it charged!”

“Bah!” he spat, but the woman was already deep in the beast’s bags and looted packs.

“We haven’t had the pleasure,” Felerion said.

“Volgr,” said the dwarf, extending a meaty hand to almost crush Felerion’s. “That’s Briya. Check that man there. He killed the first one as we ran up.” He pointed to the fallen weaver, but Maelling was already there.

“Tolgjar,” Maelling said as they gathered around the man lying beside the dead beast. Shattered pieces of a heavy stave lay near its caved-in head. “Still alive. That leg is in bad shape.” His breathing was shallow, and his bearded face pale and sweating.

“Let me look him over,” said Lydana, beginning her examination. “The wound is too old to heal immediately. I can lessen his pain, however. Wake him up, perhaps.”

“What happened?” Felerion asked Volgr.

“We’ve been following these things for a month. Ran across this one fighting him alone. You know him?”

“I do,” said Maelling. “Brought a message for him.” He held up a scroll, sealed with a Mittland Jarl’s signet.

Volgr took the note, grunted, and broke the seal before Maelling could protest. He studied the message under shaggy brows, then grunted again. “’Seek out Volgr and Briya in the Wildland and render them what aid you can’, it says. Well, guess he found us! Bah. This is from the Jarl that hired us to look into his troubles. It led us to the Wildland, and then following these damn things.”

“Why’s that?” Kattly asked.

“Because they killed the people I was initially following,” Briya said, standing. “Here we are.” She had a satchel in hand. She popped the locked clasp with her dagger and rifled the contents: a few scraps of parchment, most blank, some written in strange script, and a white runestone inlaid with silver. She handed it to the dwarf. “Told you they were part of it.”

Volgr grunted, eyed the stone, then spat.

“If I might?” Felerion extended a hand.

The dwarf tossed it to him. Felerion snatched it from the air, then stood stock still, entranced. He didn’t move for a long moment until Lydana nudged him. “Hey. You awake?”

Felerion shook it off. “A vision! A great stone door with an emblazoned rune. I… can’t place it. Dwarven maybe?”

“It is a waystone,” said the man on the ground. Everyone looked at Tolgjar, himself struggling to sit up.

Lydana pressed him back down, using his pack for a pillow. “Your leg is badly broken. I’ve set it, and you’ll feel no pain if you lie still.”

“Damned bull trolls,” he said. “Came upon me unawares. There may be more about.”

“It’s true,” said Maelling. “We shouldn’t linger. I’ll go cut wood for a litter.”

Volgr had the stone back. “I didn’t see anything when I held it.” Briya looked on, her sharp gaze intent.

Lydana took the stone, turned it over in her hands, then shrugged. “Nothing.”

“Only vitner weavers and those laden with it can sense the vision,” said Tolgjar.

“Let me,” Kattly said. Again the trance, and a brief shake broke her blinking out of it. “The bard is right. A great rune, with smaller ones etched around it. A seal or ward, I want to say.”

“And it was cold,” Felerion said.

“Freezing,” she agreed.

“The mountains?”

“Or, just winter. I saw no snow though.”

“No, only the door.”

No one else saw the vision with the stone. Just the vitner users.

“This is a puzzle,” said Briya. “The people carrying this were traitors, guilty of crimes committed in the Wildland and Mittland and traveling south again for reasons unknown. Our job was to follow. But then these bull trolls got hungry.”

“I was sent to find a colleague in the Wildland,” said Tolgjar. “But now….” He gestured at his leg uselessly.

“I’m afraid we’ll have to leave you behind,” Felerion told Tolgjar. “We’ll get you somewhere you can rest up. Maelling’s sure to know a place nearby. And then, on to your colleague in the Wildland.”

Volgr snorted. “Another month of walking. Bah!”

“Not necessarily,” said Maelling returning with wood. “I know a path. Two weeks. If you don’t mind some climbing,” he added sidelong at Felerion.

The bard groaned. “What have I gotten myself into?”



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Felerion huffed and puffed his way up the steep slope, sweating, cursing, hand over hand on the thick guide rope. “’A little climbing’,” he muttered. “Ngh….’Won’t take long.’” He grunted. “Ngh…. A bloody goat would have trouble without its wings. Ngh….”

“Are you still grousing?” Briya asked from behind him. She was last in the line, collecting the excess rope around her in great coils. The others were already over the edge, twenty yards up.

“It’s not grousing,” said Felerion. “Ngh…. It’s commentary.”

“How would I know the difference?”

“Grousing serves no purpose. Ngh…. Commentary simply details my experience… ngh… in a relatable way.”

She laughed. “Yes. Not the same at all.”

“Ngh…. What’s your interest in all this, anyway? Ngh…. Chasing criminals halfway across the world? Ngh…. Sounds like more than just money.”

He could almost hear her shrug. “It’s a living.”

“Not really an answer.”

“Isn’t it?”

Felerion continued hauling himself for another three pulls. “Ngh…. You’re a Shadower.”

“Is that right?”

“Ngh…. Well, we share common cause here. Ngh…. Let me know if that changes, will you?”

“Sure. I’ll provide some commentary,” Briya said.

Felerion’s chuckle was lost in a final heave over the side.

Volgr, Kattly, Lydana, and Maelling broke into polite applause from the shade of a great tree. “Oh, well done, well done indeed,” said Volgr, laughing.

Sweating buckets and breathing hard, Felerion executed his best performer’s bow, and turned to pull Briya up over the lip, but found her vaulting up easily.

She shrugged off the coil of rope and surveyed the scene. “Oh, a picnic. So glad we have the leisure of taking our ease.”

“I could stand some ease,” said Felerion.

“The Wildland,” said Maelling, sweeping the horizon in one motion. “The western edge of the Copper Path, in fact. Now, where are we headed?”

“Not towards a place, but towards a person. One of two, in fact,” said the bard. “We find one, we’ll find the other. They work together often in this part of the world.”

“Sounds simple enough,” said Kattly. “Where do we look?”

“For the first, an ale house—well, a longhouse in these regions. For the second, a dimgate.”

The group looked at each other, then Felerion.

“I’m voting for the longhouse, lad,” said Volgr.

“Seconded,” said Lydana.

“A dimgate?” asked Maelling. “I don’t know the Dimlands well at all—”

“He won’t be inside the dimgate,” said Felerion. “They tend to follow him wherever he goes.”

“That’s…,” Maelling trailed off, brows up. “Yes, a third vote for the longhouse.”

“There’s a settlement east by southeast along the Copper Path,” said Briya. “We can get there by dusk if we cut cross-country for part of it.”

“Any climbing?” asked Felerion.

“Nothing worth commenting over,” Briya said innocently.

Felerion hung his head. “Why do I even ask?”



Since entering the Wildland, Lydana had felt a growing sense of menace, eyes unseen peering at them from the sparse woods. Yet, if the ranger Maelling hadn’t noticed anything, then was the danger truly there?

She liked the territory. She herself was from the Stormlands, a region of vast peaks and dark forests, wild enough, but they bore an air of quiet civilization, even in their wildest regions. Nothing like Westmark with its vast cultivated fields, but in the Stormlands one could travel but two days in any direction and find a village or town or at the very least a farmhold. Not so the Wildland.

Its people were semi-nomadic, she knew, with most settling in a region in late summer and staying through until early spring where they’d move on to greener pastures. Cultivated fields were a rarity, and no structure stood which could not be broken down and loaded atop a horsecart or simply rebuilt with local material in a matter of days. Thus, when they departed the path and cut through the woods, she was surprised to find a longhouse on stacked stone walls, surrounded by temporary thatch and wattle round houses she expected, now bearing signs of abandonment.

Wildlanders in furs and bone with rare pieces of worked leather, eyed the foreigners from faces painted with intricate symbols in gray paste. Yet these weren’t the watchers tickling at Lydana’s mind. These gazes were wary, but not hostile. Open, not hidden. Not like whatever was out there. If there was something out there at all. The feeling persisted until Felerion brought them into the longhouse.

A squat man dominated the high bench at the head of the long, smoky fire pit. Lydana thought him a dwarf for a moment, such was his width, but no, he was simply built like a low, wide boulder, his face also painted in gray runes and patterns. His eyes flicked between them like a bird’s, wasting no time on the intervening space.

He watched them approach, flanked by two guards as squat and wide as he, his eyes catching the dying embers in the pit.

Felerion and Kattly moved directly before the high bench. No one spoke for a long moment.

“Greetings to you and your house,” Felerion said, bowing.

The squat chief flicked his eyes between the pair, settling on Kattly. “You are of the Ten Stones.”

“Chieftan, in fact,” she said. “I greet the Chieftan of the Gray Mark. May your road be gentle, and your game plentiful.”

“May the wind find you beneath the trees,” he said formally. “I am Uthnag. You come at a late hour in the season. My people prepare to leave this place. It is cursed.” His eyes darted to Volgr and Briya. “You return. Did you find your quarry?”

“What they carried, Chieftan,” Briya said. “It brings us back. We seek a meaning to this mark.” She handed him the runestone they’d acquired from the criminals’ looted packs.

His eyes traced the inlaid rune on the smooth stone several times. He shrugged, and handed it back. “I know it not, and I am eldest among my people.”

“We’re looking for someone who may know it,” said Felerion. “Two someone’s, in truth, for one may know where to find the other. The first is a scarred man, badly burned. He wears his helmet to cover—”

Chieftan Uthnag shot to his feet, spear in hand, roaring, “The burned man! That wretched drunkard! That pauper! That… that—!”

“You do know him, then,” Felerion said.

“Bring him out!” the Uthnag roared to his guards.

A big man was led up from below, chains around his wrists and ankles, shirtless and hairy. He still wore his helm, and Lydana could make out the horrible scarring crawling down his neck. She could only imagine the burns beneath the metal. He was certainly a Stormlander, like Lydana.

“This is the man you seek?” Uthnag demanded.

“Felerion!” the chained man cried. “You voiceless, fat, rotten bastard!”

“Who’s rotten?” Felerion asked, offended.

“Where’s my coin?”

“You’re the one in chains, and you’re demanding coin now?”

“Fifteen in silver, right now!”

“Certainly,” Felerion said. “Just hold out your hand.”

The chains clanked, but of course the Stormlander was bound fast. “Well… maybe in a little while.”

“Chieftan, it pains me to say, but I do know Hjalmar here. He’s an ale-swilling, monster-smashing ruffian, but he’s not a criminal.”

“He quarreled with three of my men, broke two arms, and nearly set fire to the longhouse.”

“Ah. Well he might be a criminal, but if I miss my guess then drink was involved, no?”

“This is no excuse!”

Kattly stepped in. “Chieftan, would there be a gildr or blood price that could be paid?”

“If the broken arms heal, then yes. If not…,” Uthnag left it hanging, his eyes darting among their faces.

“What would be his price if the men died?”

“Enslavement at best. It would go to their families to choose.”

“What about for freedom?”

Uthnag’s eyes stilled on her a moment, then his face split in a barking, grating sound that might’ve been laughter. “He could lift the curse from this region, nothing less!” He barked again at the thought.

“What is the curse?”

“You truly wish to know? A dimgate has opened nearby. The dead wander where the living hold domain. We have lost much blood to their hunger, and it is time we moved on.”

Silence descended, broken finally by a snapping ember in the pit. Volgr said to Felerion, “Well, you wanted to find a dimgate.”

“I didn’t *want* to find one, no—”

“Same difference.”

Felerion addressed Uthnag, “Honored Chieftan, if you release this man, he can take us to one who can close this gate.”

“You mean Ketil, don’t you?” Hjalmar said. “Everyone always wants Ketil. No one shows up just for me.”

“Not so,” said Felerion. “When I have too much mead, I know just the man to find.”

“Bah! You never have too much mead.”

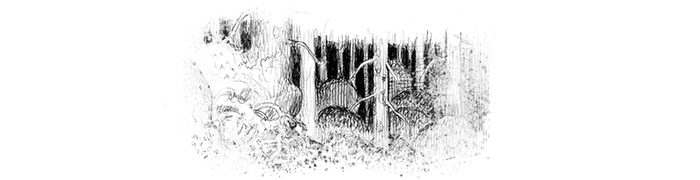
“Very well,” said Uthnag. “If Kattly of the Ten Stones speaks for him, then it shall be done. One season to close the dimgate, no more. After that, we are owed silver or blood.”

Kattly shot a meaningful glance at Felerion. “Then I so speak.”

“Release him, and give him his arms,” Uthnag said to his guards. “One season.”

“Sooner than that, if we can, Chieftan,” said Lydana. “This is one of the reasons I walk the world.”



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“What in Wotan’s black beard possessed you to start breaking arms?” Felerion asked of Hjalmar as they trekked through the Wildland towards Ketil’s hovel.

“They said something they shouldn’t have,” said Hjalmar.

“Well? What was it?”

“… I don’t remember.”

“You don’t remember.”

“That’s what I said!”

“Well, it must’ve been some insult,” said Felerion, equally annoyed.

“Probably the smell,” said Briya.

“They smelled worse!” Hjalmar shot back.

“Enough,” Kattly said. “How much farther? The sun grows old.”

“No farther at all,” said a voice from ahead. A tall man stepped on the path, balding, carrying the iron standard of a powerful dimwalker.

“Ketil!” Felerion said. “It’s good to see you.”

“Felerion. And company. Hjalmar, I heard you had a falling out with our neighbors. I was on my way to see what could be done.”

“A disagreement, nothing more,” said Hjalmar. He glared at Felerion’s smirk from behind his iron helm.

“Enough of a disagreement that Hjalmar is under obligation to lift this land’s curse,” said Kattly.

Ketil sighed, deflated, as though a heavy mantle settled on his shoulders. “The dimgate.”

“The dimgate,” said Kattly. “Felerion says you know of them—”

“Ha! Know of them, yes, very much so. Wherever I go, the dimgates follow.”

Lydana’s brows shot up. “Did I mishear that?”

“You did not, devoted of Stormi,” said Ketil. “All our powers stem from the divine, but mine draw intimately from Dimhall. If I settle in a region too long, the dimgates are sure to follow. This curse is my doing, however innocent.”

They stood in silence beneath the trees a long moment. Ketil roused himself from introspection and spoke. “Why did you seek me? Surely not this curse.”

“No, it has to do with—” Felerion began.

“One of these,” Briya held up the smooth runestone inlaid with its silver tracery.

“A waystone,” said Ketil, surprised. “If you can channel vitner, it will reveal to you a destination.”

“Exactly what it does,” said Felerion. “Do you know its symbol?”

Ketil studied it. “Not offhand. It holds a vision, yes? May I?”

Briya put it in his hand, and the bald man’s eyes went distant. He shook it off rapidly. “A doorway. The symbol on it…. It tugs at my memory.” He thought hard, but finally shook his head. “It’s difficult to concentrate. The dimgate, you understand.”

“It’s… distracting,” said Lydana. “My mentor had the same problems in proximity to a gate. The dead whisper from beyond. That must be why I’ve felt like we’re being watched since we entered these woods.”

“Exactly so,” said Ketil.

“Then we’d best handle it,” said Volgr.

“I couldn’t ask—”

“Bah!” said Hjalmar. “They’re offering, Ketil. I say we take them up on it. This is a big gate, no?”

“Yes. Very.”

“I don’t understand how you can close it alone, then,” said Kattly. “I’ve seen it done, but you’ll need vast amounts of vitner to seal it.”

“As I said, I draw my power from Dimhall itself. The closer I am to a gate, the greater the draw.”

Kattly stared at him. “That’s horrible! What did you to gain such power?”

“Not a thing. Truly,” he said sadly. “Dimhall loves me, but the affection is quite one-sided. Nevertheless, when I begin the weaving, the dead will come. Can you stand against them?”

The companions looked among themselves. Felerion finally said, “I don’t see anyone running.”

“You especially don’t want to see him run,” Briya said, tossing a head at Felerion.

“Ha!” Felerion said, slapping his belly. “I’m a svelte figure of a man, a pleasure to see in action. Ketil, we’ll camp here, and in the morning just point the way to the gate, and Maelling here will get us there. No climbing this time, though.”

“Right, have to preserve your svelte figure,” said Maelling.



Maelling could’ve found the dimgate soon enough even without Ketil’s guidance. The closer one got, the darker the sun grew. Mists rose from the surrounding woods, turning the twilight beneath the canopy into near darkness. Torches helped, but merely pushed back at the enveloping murk, like a clenching fist gloved in black velvet. The animals had long gone silent, and the ranger could almost sense the trees wishing to uproot and take their leave. The sickly green glow tainting the mist told him they were there.

“Stay a moment,” Ketil said to them all. “I must stand in the rune I etch upon the ground. It will help me channel. The dead will focus their attention on me. I must remain undisturbed if I’m to close the gate.”

“How long?” Volgr asked.

“Minutes,” Ketil said. “Sooner, if I can, but much will depend on my concentration.”

“It will be like a worship bell sounding when you begin closing the gate,” said Lydana.

“Or a dinner bell,” said Felerion.

“Oh. Thank you so much for that,” said Hjalmar.

“We form a circle around Ketil,” said Kattly. “Eyes out. Take them as they come.”

“One thing,” said Briya, holding up her daggers. “I’m trained to strike vital organs. The dead don’t have any.”

“They still need legs to walk. Break them, and then crush the skulls,” said Hjalmar. “Here, use my spare mace.” He dropped the weapon into her hands. The heavy head thudded into the earth, almost pulling her over.

She hefted the thing over her shoulder and shot him a look. “Thanks.”

“Are we prepared?” Ketil asked.

Everyone nodded.

“I’ll lead the way.”

Cold flowed from the gate, raw, unchecked, like eternal winter stood on the other side of the green, glowing door. In many ways, it did. Obsidian pillars rose from the earth, regal but twisted, warning of horrors within.

Ketil stood before it, not twenty paces away. He raised his staff, uttered a few words, and brought it crashing to the earth. A sigil in silver exploded in the earth around him, pulsing with the gate’s power. A freezing mist flowed from the gate to the sigil and into Ketil’s upraised staff. He spoke words, horrible to the soul, whispered but riotous. The earth groaned to hear it.

The dead came. Slowly at first, in ones and twos, some rushing, some shambling. They bore down towards the circle and the companions with weapons held ready and grim purpose in their eyes.

Maelling lost count of the minutes as his arrows flew. He’d fought the dead before. Eye sockets made good targets. Failing that, skeletal necks had little to keep the skull attached to its spine. Felerion’s vitner-heavy strumming made the dead lose their stride. Kattly’s fire took them by the score. Lydana’s sword arm and explosive powers sent them reeling. Volgr and Hjalmar destroyed them by main force with hammer and blade. Nimble Briya had discovered some still hand tendons in their knees. The loaned mace made short work of their skulls once down.

Time held no meaning in the mist and the cold. Maelling’s quiver ran dry, and still they came. His axe did its work now, felling skeletal legs like tree limbs, the blunt end bashing skulls, and still they came.

“Not long now!” Felerion shouted, his fingers raw and thumb bleeding. Every companion bore signs of the fight from bruises to cuts. Blood flowed freely down Volgr’s right arm.

The gate thrummed, grew, then vanished. Light dawned beneath the trees, the inky darkness thrown back, and the mist burned away in mere moments. The remaining dead crumpled or fled, some struggling away by clawed hands alone. They would not last long without the gate to sustain them.

“Hjalmar!” cried Ketil, and rushed to the crumpled man.

Hjalmar’s chest sucked more air than his mouth and bubbled pink foam as he labored. “Rest easy,” said Ketil.

“Pah. Know… when I’m… done,” said Hjalmar.

“Wait,” said Lydana. “Let me.” She knelt down, her holy sign clenched in her fist. “This will hurt,” she told him.

“Heh. Doesn’t… tickle now.”

Lydana concentrated on her symbol and murmured words of her faith. The symbol grew bright, then white-hot. She slammed it down on Hjalmar’s wound. The huge man cried aloud, booming through the woods despite his metal helm. The light burned bright for a long moment, then faded. When Lydana sagged away, exhausted, the wound was closed. Still ghastly, but closed.

The big man had passed out from the ordeal, and Lydana wasn’t much better. “We should get them to the Gray Mark settlement,” said Ketil.

“Volgr, give me a hand,” said Maelling. “I’ll cut us some stretchers.”

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Chieftan Uthnag greeted them with his arms crossed, but upon hearing the tale had ordered food, mead, and rest for the companions. Even Hjalmar was given care, though with orders for no drink stronger than milk.

After the feast, Ketil asked again for the rune. Briya passed it over as they sat the long table by the fire. Ketil raised it, eyes appraising. “A waystone, as I said, but what troubled me was the mark.” He pulled out a small journal, and inked the waystone’s rune on a blank page. “Alone, it means nothing. But, add in the mark on the door…,” he said, drawing the vision’s mark atop it. “And you have a sign I’ve only seen once before.”

Kattly and Felerion studied the rune and exchanged shrugs. “And it is?”

“The sign of Jurgan’thun,” said Ketil.

Felerion felt a chill, though he couldn’t say why.

“What is that?” asked Briya.

“An ancient power. Of what type, I couldn’t say. My memory isn’t what it was, you understand. I remember a text on ancient powers of the world before the elves did their purge so long ago. This symbol was there, and these two signs make the word Jurgan’thun.”

“It certainly sounds like an ancient power,” said Felerion. “Probably evil too.”

Ketil spread his hands. “What is evil? My power comes from Dimhall. I use it for good.”

“That aside,” said Briya, “this was in the hands of men intent who nearly succeeded in assassinating two Jarls on the Filjmoot. There would have been war. If they seek the sign of Jurgan’thun, then we need to know more.”

Ketil nodded, weariness in his every move. “I agree. I think I can point you in the right direction, but I must consult some texts in my hovel. Tomorrow though.” He rose, creaking. “Yes. Tomorrow.”



3





Volgr the dwarf always liked Dranvelt. Rolling plains, wide open spaces, sky stretching upwards to forever.

“You look pleased with yourself,” Felerion said as they walked the dusty road.

“No bloody trees, no bloody mountains,” Volgr said simply. “At least nothing worth mentioning. I don’t mind shade on a hot day, but Wildland and the Darkwood press down on the spirit.”

Felerion looked at him curiously. “Yes, but mountains? Are you certain you’re a dwarf?”

“Do you need proof beyond my beard and height?”

“It’s just a curious position to hold for one of your kind.”

“Would ye like me tae do the accent too, laddie?”

Felerion laughed, “Not many dwarves speak that way anymore.”

“Nor myself, ever. I was raised among giantkind, in the mountains, yes, but not underground. For my part, I like a wide open sky. What’s so strange?”

“Nothing, I suppose. Just passing a remark.”

Volgr was about to respond when Maelling called a halt. He pointed into the sky at circling carrion birds. “There’s a little farm in that direction. I stayed there for a night last time I came this way.”

An easy jog brought the companions to the outskirts to find the fields in need of tending and the small house half destroyed. The birds circled over a pair of corpses, once human, now picked mostly clean. Briya studied the bodies. “Half-crushed.”

“There’s no livestock,” said Lydana.

“And there were children here last I was around. I look for signs.”

A search of the area found nothing, not even tracks. The house had been bashed in, the roof collapsed and the stacked stones that made up the walls scattered.

“Money,” Briya said, holding up a purse she’d found. “Also tools and a few other valuables. This was no bandit or goblin raid.”

“A beast of some kind,” Maelling said. “I need to track this down.”

“We need to look for the man Ketil aimed us at,” said Felerion.

“No,” said Lydana. “These were faithful of Stormi.” She pointed to a discarded holy symbol made of copper, lying near one victim. “Vengeance is required.”

“We could split up,” said Felerion.

“That’s a great idea—” “That’s a horrible idea—” said both Maelling and Briya respectively.

Felerion chuckled. “Look, we’re after information about this Sign of Jurgan’thun. We all know what to ask.”

“We could very well find the people looking for him—it—well, whatever it’s supposed to be,” said Briya.

“It’s possible, but we’re not even sure how many there might be. For all we know, most of them were eaten by the bull trolls. Have you finished decoding their letters?”

“Not yet,” she said. “I get the impression of agents in every major region, though.”

“So, we’ll be discreet.”

She cocked her head at him. “You? Discreet?”

“I’ll go with him,” said Volgr.

“Oh, that’s just so much better,” Briya said. “I’m going with you.”

“So, we’re agreed?” Felerion asked. “Volgr, Briya, and myself will go west. Lydana and Maelling will hunt down whatever did this and handle it. Kattly, how about you?”

“If it’s a hunt, I’m in.”



Maelling could tell Lydana hadn’t fully recovered from her ordeal in Wildland. “Do we need to take some rest?”

“No,” she said quickly. Too quickly.

“Well, I could use a brief respite,” Kattly said. “We’ve not eaten in hours, and the sun is hot.”

“I suppose,” Lydana agreed.

Maelling led the way to a long tree, a great oak, alone on a hilltop. There he pulled out cheese and bread and dried meat. He sliced the bread into thin sections, laid meat and cheese between, and ate it held in his hand.

Lydana watched him curiously. “That’s an interesting way to eat.”

“Useful, isn’t it?”

Lydana and Kattly prepared their food the same way. “You’re certain this is a flying beast of some kind.”

“No question,” he said between bites. “No question at all. No real tracks to speak of leading to or from the place. A horse was missing, but hadn’t run off. The other animals I found tracks for or we found corpses for. And who knows what happened to the children? I fear the worst. Something carried them away.”

“What would do that?

“I found a great feather. Could’ve been a giant hawk or eagle, but those don’t prey on adult humans. Certainly wouldn’t leave food to rot. A child they might take, but both?”

“Not a dragon, surely.”

Kattly shook her head. “No burns. Or frostburns for that matter. And we’re pretty far from the mountains.”

“Right,” said Maelling. “I thought a landwurm of some kind, maybe, but again, no tracks. No, whatever it is flies—”

“A gryphon,” said Lydana.

“Yes, could be—”

She thwapped his arm and pointed. “Gryphon!”



A speck high in the sky, almost obscured by the sun, hurtled towards them until its vast wings flared to break its fall.

Lydana and Maelling rolled in opposite directions as the mighty predator slammed to earth, roaring. It body-checked Kattly against the tree. Her head slammed the trunk, and she collapsed beside her staff, unmoving. Maelling had his quiver, but had set his bow aside. It toppled under the impact and lay on the earth beneath the tree.

Lydana’s sword was in hand, but her shield lay next to Maelling’s bow.

“Keep it between us,” Maelling shouted, his axe in hand. “Don’t let it rush you—*Gah!”* he cried as the beast rushed him. He dove aside at the last moment, leaving a bloody trail along its swiping forearm. Maelling rolled to his feet and backpedaled to a flanking position.

The beast moved back under the tree, head whipping back and forth between them, like the great hunting bird it was. It hissed, a grating, rasp that set Maelling’s hackles on edge. “Hit its wings if it flaps at you. If we can ground it, it’s ours.”

“Oh, I’d be fine if it wanted to leave,” Lydana yelled. It rushed her all at once, two quick bounds and a gliding leap, claws extended forward.

Maelling rushed for his bow and her shield as Lydana braced herself, blade held straight out like a spear. It screeched on impact, impaled in its meaty chest. It bowled them over, talons raking on Lydana’s fur armor as she punched and stabbed.

Maelling’s bow was up, arrows flew and bit into its hind quarters and flanks. The beast leaped aside, swiping and slashing at this new pain.

“Shield!” Lydana yelled.

Maelling grabbed it by the edge and sent it bouncing and rolling along the earth to her, then renewed his fire, keeping it away from Lydana. The enraged beast screeched at Maelling and bounded his way, ready to rend the ranger limb from limb.

Maelling had no shield, but ducked behind the tree, interrupting its charge. But the beast bent low, sniffing at Kattly. Maelling roared a challenge, fired an arrow into its neck and ran. The gryphon abandoned Kattly and charged after him. He dodged and leaped, rolled, and came up firing, but the beast was far faster and stronger. A wing buffet laid him on his back, and air exploded painfully from his lungs. The creature reared up, talons ready to descend, when a wall of fire erupted between them.

The gryphon screeched, leaping away. The sound of thunder and a warrior’s cry brought it whipping back around as Lydana charged, shield glowing with holy might. Kattly stood by the tree, fire in her eyes and encircling her hand.

This was too much for the gryphon who bounded away, wings flapping to gain the air.

“Perfect,” Maelling gasped, nocking a special arrow. He took aim, and let fly. The blunt head struck with the force of a mace right at the shoulder joint. The wing collapsed, the gryphon dropping back to earth. It whirled on them, hissing and spitting, shattered wing tucked protectively along its side.

“Get me a shot,” he said to Lydana. She raised her shield and charged.

It was over in minutes. Denied freedom of the skies and unable to seriously injure the brave dimwalker, Maelling’s deadly arrow eventually found its eye. Lydana finished it quickly with a stab to the heart.

He returned to the other two, all breathing like they’d run a dozen leagues. “Well…,” he said between breaths. “That was easy.”

Lydana looked at him and snorted, amused. “Are you okay?” she asked Kattly.

Kattly was fingering a goose-egg on her forehead near her temple. “I’ll live. But what about the children?”

“We’ll find the nest,” Maelling said. “Sometimes they take prey alive. There’s a chance. And, if not…,” he let the sentence trail off.

“I know the rites to perform,” said Lydana. “But, I think we deserve a brief respite. In earnest this time.”

Maelling couldn’t agree more.



Felerion, Volgr, and Briya had found Ganveldt easy enough, but Mordhan the Bard had proved elusive. Everyone knew the instrument playing wanderer who’d made a home in Ganveldt for the last three seasons, but no one could say exactly where he might be. Thus, the adventurers spent the time in the largest tavern doing what came naturally: drinking.

“So,” Felerion was saying, “these giants that raised you… frost giants?”

Volgr eyed the bard over his drink, set it down, belched. “Aye, that’s so.”

“And they didn’t eat you?”

“Apparently not.”

“Why, I wonder?”

Volgr belched again. “Because I’m gorgeous, obviously.”

“Yes, that’s it, I’m sure,” said Briya.

“Felerion, you fat, old, voiceless hack!” called a voice from the top of the stairs. He was a big man with a mighty beard, on the young side, though certainly no youth. An instrument case was slung across his back, and he was tying on his belt.

“Mordhan!” They clasped forearms. “Who are you calling ‘hack’?”

“Where’s my money?”

“In your purse, I’d suspect.”

“Don’t smooth-talk me, old man. You owe me fifteen in silver.”

“Do you owe everyone in Trudvang money?” Briya asked.

“Only the worst elements,” said Felerion.

“Well, hello!” Mordhan said, on seeing Briya.

“Don’t waste my time,” she said.

“Got it! Mordhan, a bard by trade. And you are?”

“Briya. That’s Volgr. We’ve been looking for you.”

“Bringing this scoundrel to pay me my hard-won coin, I’m sure,” Mordhan said of Felerion.

“Hard-won my eye. We’ll argue about it later,” Felerion said. “Drink?”

“Always!”

They sat, and Felerion explained what they were looking for. He produced a drawing of the rune. “Ketil called this ‘the sign of Jurgan’thun’.”

None of them noticed the blond-bearded man in a dark hood whose head tracked their way at the name. He huddled down in his hood, nursed his drink, and cocked an ear at them.

A queer look passed across Mordhan’s face at the name. He studied the rune and said, “Jurgan’thun? You’re certain?”

“Ominous, isn’t it?”

“Certainly.” He continued examining the drawing.

“Well? Strike a chord?”

“Good choice of words.” Mordhan set the parchment aside and hefted his ale. “Not two months ago, a pair of shady characters were in the taphouse up the road. They sought me out after my performance, and wanted to commission a song.”

They waited while Mordhan drew a long draught on his tankard. “It was *The Bounty of Jurgan’thun.”*

Volgr grunted. Briya and Felerion traded a look. “Sounds like what we need. Did you write it?”

Mordhan shrugged. “Started to, but it didn’t sit well. You know how it is when you compose, yes? You wrote many songs before your voice was taken. You put a part of yourself into it, right? It’s as much about you as the subject matter.”

“Very true,” said Felerion.

“Well, this wasn’t one I wanted my name on. It was about how the ‘power of old, borne of darkness and cold, would reward the faithful foretold’, or at least that’s part they wanted in there. Sowing chaos and destruction and getting the ‘bounty’ when the darkness returned. I worked on it for half a day before giving them their money back.”

Felerion’s brows shot up. “You? Gave money back?”

“Well, I wasn’t going to steal it. I’ve got my notes back at the inn I’m staying in. You’re welcome to them. Come along, and you can buy me some supper for my trouble.”

They rose and stepped outside onto the steep street. The region of Dranvelt was largely flat, but the town of Ganveldt had built up around a steep hill topped with a fort. Up the street, a tinker hawked wares from his overladen cart as townsfolk went about their business up and down the incline. None of them noticed the blond man slip out of the tavern in their wake.

Felerion eyed the steep road and asked “Up or down?”

“Down.”

Felerion blew out a breath. “Thank the gods for small fortunes.”

“He’s got an issue with climbing,” Volgr told Mordhan.

“Slander!” cried Felerion as they started down the hill.

None paid notice to the commotion behind them until: *“Look out!”*

The four turned to see the tinker’s cart bearing down on them at high speed. Felerion and Mordhan were caught flat-footed, certain to be crushed. Briya dove away into a roll and came up with a dagger drawn. The cart jolted suddenly in a cloud of dust not a pace from them, trinkets and odds spilling everywhere.

The dust cleared and Volgr stood there, having caught the cart by its foreaxle. “You two okay?” he asked, turning. He easily held the cart with one hand alone, to Mordhan’s astonishment.

The tinker ran up, a middling-aged man in a wide blue hat, out of breath and full of apologies. “By the gods, no one is hurt? Master dwarf, your strength is incredible!”

“There!” Briya shouted, pointing. A man in a black cloak run pell-mell up the street, long blond hair whipping at the wind. Briya took off in pursuit.

They watched a moment, but there was no way Felerion or Mordhan would ever catch the fleet-footed Briya.

“Would you mind securing this? It’s not exactly a feather,” Volgr said to the tinker.

“What happened?” Felerion asked as the tinker kicked wedges under the front wheels.

“The damndest thing! A blond man asked to see something from the back. When I went around, he kicked the wedges out and bolted up the street!”

“He was behind us in the tavern,” said Felerion, eyes grim.

The wedges held, and Volgr dropped his hand.

The tinker took off his hat and wiped sweat from his balding brow. “I’ll tell the guard about this! See if I don’t! I hope your friend catches him.”

“I think I’d better get you those notes, then make myself scarce too,” said Mordhan. “I think anyone hearing the name of Jurgan’thun should keep their heads down in the future. We’ll wait for your quick-legged friend at the tavern.”



At a ford marked by Maelling as their meeting place, the companions streamed in over two days and shared their experiences. Felerion turned a spit over the fire, roasting a wild boar. “Gryphon, eh? You wouldn’t fool an old man, would you?”

Lydana pulled an enormous feather from her pack, shimmering blue-black in the firelight. Sharp as a blade. “I would fool an old man, but not this time.”

“Impressive,” said Briya.

“And the kids?” Volgr asked.

“In the nest high in a tree, the biggest tree in Dranvelt, I’d wager,” said Maelling. “Alive,” he added on seeing Volgr’s raised brow. “Along with three eggs, ready to hatch. Getting them down was a trick,” he said, chuckling. “We took them to the next farm over. The beast had been nested there for the last season, and no one had taken up the bounty. We gave them the talons, beak, and eyes to sell. Good coin to be had to help the kids. We left the rest of it for the plains and its scavengers.”

“Fitting,” said Volgr. “Orphans should be looked after. You have my thanks.”

“No luck with the blond man in the hood, then?” Maelling asked.

“Even you would have lost him,” said Briya, irritated with herself. “Went to ground, and Ganveldt is too big to search quickly.”

“Perhaps this list of elements the two strangers wanted in Mordhan’s song will prove useful then,” said Felerion. “A mighty feast, gold without measure, and the eternal warmth like a summer sun.”

“The supposed ‘bounty’ of Jurgan’thun?” Lydana asked.

“That’s it.”

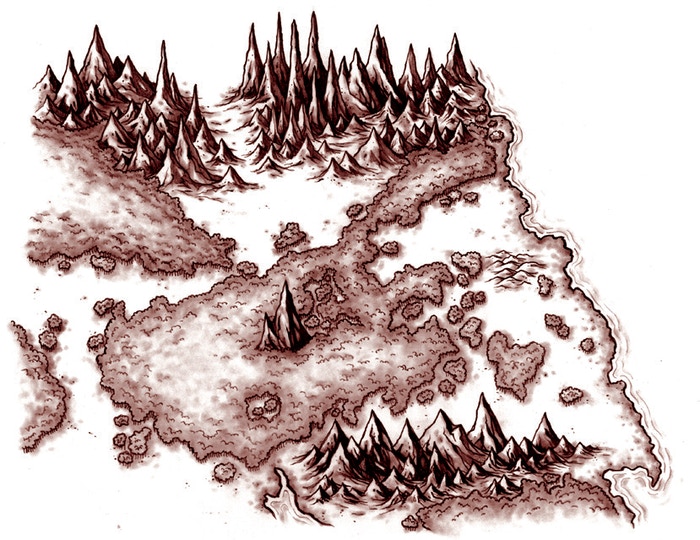
“What does it mean?”

Felerion could only shrug as he turned the spit. “Don’t know, don’t care to think on it further. It’s time to eat. We’ll put our heads together and decide on a course of action tonight, and set forth tomorrow. I’m not over-fond of finding these worshipers of dark powers that Ketil suggested, but I can’t see we have a choice.”



4





“So, you’ve lived here for years?” Lydana asked Kattly in a low voice. They were threading an ancient path through what seemed the darkest part of the vast Darkwood. For a week they’d traveled through the twilight world beneath the canopy led by Kattly’s knowledge and Maelling’s unerring sense of nature. The vast, thick trunks only seemed to crowd in further. Gnarled roots grasped at ankles and pantlegs, and sudden drop-offs and overhangs threatened to send an unwary wanderer plummeting for a dozen spans in some places.

“My tribe lives in a somewhat better area,” Kattly replied. “We’ve cleared a couple of acres for crops, and game is plentiful most of the year. Notice we’ve heard nothing, not even an owl.”

“Not for the last hour,” Lydana said. “I can’t help but wonder if we’re lost, but I trust your judgment.”

“I’m not worried about finding the creature,” said Kattly. “We’re near. This darkness is… unnatural. But, we come with a gift and only to speak, not make war. No, my worries lie with the Ten Stones.”

They had stopped in Kattly’s territory on their way through the Darkwood to take some rest and resupply. The news had been troubling. Goblins rousing rabble in the woods, and word of a forest troll that had taken to gathering a mighty warband. Not to mention the old rivalry between Kattly’s Tribe of the Ten Stones and the Darkbear Clan. There had been new claims on Ten Stone territory, old promises dug up and a suit forced in council. Kattly had taken some time to settle matters, and her warchiefs were not happy with her absence.

“Your warchiefs are wise and strong,” said Lydana.

“I know. They’ll handle it. Still, a leader’s place is with her people. Not wandering the boulder-strewn Darkwood in search of monsters.”

One of the boulders near the path rose up. “Well spoken, Chieftain of the Ten Stones,” it rumbled. The companions leaped away, startled by the sudden movement and grating voice from the darkness. It laughed at their sudden fright, the booming of boulders crushing gravel, a horrid sound of malevolence. They could see its shape in the dimness, taller than two men, with great curving tusks ornamented in silver and brass. It bore a shattered tree trunk for a staff, and skulls, human or otherwise, adorned its slipshod armor. “So, one wonders then: why seek you Yhtantoor rather than stay with your own kind? Is it death? But no, you said you bore a gift.” Its beady eyes glowed now with a pale light, pinpricks in the darkness as it looked them over. “Five of you? There were six—Ahh, there you are, my morsel.” It waved its hand and a shadow fell away from Briya, stalking around the base of a tree. “Did you think yourself safe in darkness from Yhtantoor? No, darkness is my ally, though you wear it as a pilfered cloak. How do you know the dark runes?”

“That’s my secret,” said Briya, dagger in hand. “If you wish to know it, name your bargain.”

The huge forest troll chuckled, rumbling like a young avalanche. “The morsel has manners and teeth. But, come, Yhtantoor hears you bring a gift, and wish to speak. You do not seek war, so perhaps you pass words with Yhtantoor in battle’s stead.”

“Your gift, mighty Yhtantoor, blessed of Vigan,” said Felerion as he gestured toward the three dead deer on the litter Volgr was hauling. “A feast to sate even your appetite.”

“Hmm,” the troll rumbled. It reared up and drove its sharp staff into one. Fresh blood spilled, the deer having been slain less than an hour before. It brought the tip to its black tongue and licked. “Not even poisoned. Hmm. You already do better than those who came before.”

“Before?” asked Maelling, bow out, arrow nocked, but not drawn.

“Supplicants, like yourselves. Very well, Yhtantoor accepts this gift. Speak your errand.”

Felerion spoke. “Greatest among trolls, Yhtantoor the wise, we wish to know of Jurgan’thun.”

Silence fell as the troll stared at Felerion, eyes twinkling. The laughing avalanche hit in full force now, booming between the trees for leagues, startling predators and prey, and sending all creatures bounding away. “Jurgan…,” Yhtantoor wheezed, eyes glistening with mirth. “Jurgan… Jurgan’thun! Oh, human,” it said wiping away tears of levity. “Oh, if you but knew what you sought. You would hide from the sun and lie in a hole, hoping for death.”

Felerion glanced sidelong at his companions, all equally puzzled. “Glad to have amused you. It’s a bard’s gift to entertain.”

“Indeed, you are a skillful bard,” said the troll. “You are not the first to ask Yhtantoor of ancient Jurgan’thun, though you shall be the last. I weary of the conversation, and treachery ever lurks in the hearts of those loyal to its Sign.”

“Others came before?”

“Yhtantoor granted audience twice. In both, the supplicants sought to betray Yhtantoor.” The great troll shrugged. “Poison tainted the gifts from the last. The first sought knowledge, then a test of battle. Some few escaped, more fools they, for they know not what dreadful curse the knowledge bears.”

“Would Yhtantoor the strong be willing to part with the knowledge one final time?”

“Yhtantoor will not, for the conversation grows repetitive and stale. Yhtantoor will tell you where to find those who possess Yhtantoor’s knowledge.” The troll paused. “But this fresh feast of venison was but to gain audience. What other gift do the supplicants offer?”

Art by Filipe Pagliuso.

Felerion spoke, fearing what would follow. “What would Yhtantoor the powerful ask of us?”

“That morsel there,” Yhtantoor said, pointing at Briya. “We would bandy words of her runes, then her might would add to my own. Failing that, a test of words or a test of war.”

“Absolutely not,” said Briya.

Felerion nodded. “We all would agree, for she is stringy and a poor meal. And a test of war would be counter to our peaceful purpose.”

“But not counter to Vigan’s mandate,” Yhtantoor said, speaking of his dark god. “Knowledge then? That of Haminges, the enduring faith, and of Vigan.” The troll raised a finger in warning. “Answer wrongly, and the test of war shall be upon you all.”

Felerion took a deep breath. “Who would take your test?”

“Who indeed?” Yhtantoor asked, eyes shrouded and scheming, falling on Kattly.

She stepped forward. “I am Kattly, chieftan of the Tribe of Ten Stones. Test your knowledge with me.”

“Yhtantoor, Faithful of Vigan and Heart of Darkness recognizes Kattly of the Ten Stones. What is a leader’s place?”

“With their people.”

“Yet Kattly wanders in a time of growing chaos. Kattly abandons her people to the oncoming storm.”

Kattly slammed her staff on the earth, bringing a fire from its tip. “Not true!”

“Ha! Yhtantoor quails not at Kattly’s paltry flame. Kattly the weak, Kattly whose Ten Stones shatter in the cold, Kattly who flees her duty!”

“My duty is here!” she roared back. “I lead my people by seeking our enemies to destroy them. I have chosen my warchiefs and couselors with care. They tend the tribe as I walk the world rooting out those that would cause us harm. This Jurgan’thun and its minions sow chaos and discord, stirring up old hates and entreating war. A leader’s place is not cowering on the throne. It is here in the dark, bandying words with a charlatan beast who plays at sagecraft!”

Yhtantoor growled and lashed out with its sharpened stave. Kattly’s fire flared into a barrier, deflecting the blow and blazing with light. Weapons out, shields raised, arrows nocked, and then all paused amid the grating laughter, low and rumbling. Yhtantoor stood, his stave charred and smoking. The huge troll nodded as it laughed. “Ha ha, good, yes, Vigan is pleased. Kattly proves her mettle, and the test is passed. It would be Yhtantoor’s honor to make war on Kattly’s Ten Stones in the future.”

Kattly’s fire subsided, though she did not lower her stave. “It would make us stronger. But do not rush on our account.”

“Kattly will know when it is time. Yhtantoor will speak now of those that sought Jurgan’thun. Find your answers with them.”

“Very well,” said Kattly. “Who were they, and where can we find them?”



“I don’t believe this,” Briya grumbled as they picked their way back through the Darkwood. Already the gloom had lightened to something closer to daylight, away from Yhtantoor’s dark influence. “The damn thing spoke in riddles the whole time.”

“We’re closer than we were. At least we know it’s a cult we’re dealing with,” said Volgr.

“We knew it was some kind of conspiracy before. We also knew about the blond man.”

“We didn’t know he was from Westmark like most of his co-conspirators, those the old troll spoke to first,” said Felerion.

“Well, looking for them is a waste of time. Other than the blond one, his descriptions could be anyone from Westmark.”

“I think our best bet are the prisoners he warred with, the ones that tried to poison him,” said Felerion.

“Yes, but he gave one to his ‘general in the west’ and another to the ‘general in the east’. Also, he told us right where to find his warlords, which just screams ‘trap’ at the top of its lungs.”

“No,” said Kattly. “It’s a test of their strength. If we attack and fail, it makes them stronger. If we attack and succeed, they were weak to begin with, and didn’t deserve to live. It’s part of the Haminges religion. Strength is everything.”

“That’s how you passed his tests,” said Lydana. “Well done.”

“Thank you. But, we’re faced with a decision now, thanks to the old troll’s cunning. I can’t help but think I could’ve answered him better.”

“I doubt it,” said Felerion.

“Aye,” said Maelling. “We have a choice to make.”

“And what a choice,” said Briya. “The ‘one who rots’ is prisoner with the general in the east. The ‘one who thirsts’ is prisoner in the west. What does that even mean?”

“You could’ve stayed with him. Sweet-talked the answers out of him,” Felerion said.

“Yeah, I don’t think so,” said Briya.

“He described territory near the Ten Stones in the west. His ‘general’ and its forces are near my tribe.”

“Well, that’s settled then,” said Maelling. “We seek the one who rots.”

“Not necessarily,” said Kattly. “Yhtantoor is not ready to make war on my people. Also, I wasn’t lying when I said I trust my warchiefs. If they come, we’re prepared. In the east, he spoke of a place at the edge of the Wildland. The Grey Mark tribe was traveling to that area. They have no such protection. They number a quarter of my people, at best.”

“Well, then it’s the one who thirsts then?” asked Volgr.

They all paused, looking around the circle at each other.

“Should we just flip a coin?” Felerion asked.



“The one who rots,” Briya muttered for the fifth time as they trudged through the Darkwood under a canopy of both trees and rain. The water had so many layers of leaves to puddle in and filter through that it came down in thick, plopping drops or even sudden cascades, as if poured from a pitcher. Another freezing waterfall sought Briya’s hood, but she deftly stepped aside. “What does it even *mean?”*

“If you keep asking it, you’re certain to figure it out,” said Felerion, half-grinning.

“I’m in no mood for banter, bard,” she snapped.

“Why did you vote for this one then?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “Seemed as good as any. And Kattly’s people are nearby if we need the reinforcements.”

“Yes, good thing that,” Felerion said glancing over his shoulder. Two score warriors of the Ten Stones trailed the companions through the wet woods.

Maelling came trotting back through the rain. A light mist had begun to form, hazing the trees in faint, wispy light. “Fires up ahead. And goblin stench. Small tents mostly, but one big one in the center. Sentries. Most of them are asleep though. Daytime and all.”

“Sounds like the right place,” said Volgr.

“Did you see anything of this rotting one, or whatever?” asked Briya.

Maelling could only shake his head.

“Can you get us closer?” Kattly asked.

“Yes. They have guards, but they’re not alert.”

She motioned behind her for two of her warchiefs who came trotting up. She spoke in a low voice. “Divide the warriors between you. You, circle around to the west, and you take the east. We’ll catch them between two fires. Keep well-back and well-hidden. Kill anything that discovers you, but do it quietly! Wait for my signal. I’ll sound the horn three times.” She patted the carved ram’s horn hanging from her belt, one of the Ten Stones relics that had led them to war since ancient times.

The warchiefs nodded and went about their business. Kattly said to the companions, “We’ll get closer and assess. If we can sneak in and out without them becoming aware, so much the better. If not, their prisoner may not stand a chance.”

Maelling led them forward, crouched low and winding a path through the trees and boulders. They halted behind a dip in the landscape, slowly filling with runoff from the rain. They peered over the lip to see a sentry seated on a great stump, gnawing on something that might’ve been a recognizable body part. The goblin’s head was down as it worked at the tough meat. No others were nearby. Beyond lay the encampment, the large central tent apparent, two dozen other tents were scattered about in the woods. A few larger trees had been felled, their trunks providing ample fuel for the goblins’ fires. A stable of squalid reindeer were kept behind the great tent. Goblin lords sometimes used the poor beasts as mounts, turning them as vicious as their masters.

Of the goblins themselves, snoring was in evidence, and a few moved around the camp at odd intervals, though stumbling and tired. One relieved himself on his neighbors’ tent, then crawled back into his own. Typical goblins.

The companions lowered down. “Looks doable,” said Volgr. “If we get to the big tent, sneak under, find who we want, and get out, then so much the better. If not, we kill the leader and sound the charge. Sort it out after.”

“I agree,” said Kattly.

“Sentry first,” said Briya. “Lot of open ground to sneak past, though.”

“If he’d just look up for a moment, I can handle it,” said Maelling.

“Easily done,” said Felerion, reaching for his lute.

The goblin wrangling its tough supper paused in its gnawing, hearing a sound. It looked side to side, cocking its head at the music that flitted around its ears, teasing, tickling. It set aside the bloody haunch and stood, ear to the wind, stock still. The arrow took it full through the eye into its brain. It toppled straight backwards and lie still, dead before it hit the ground.

The companions hustled quietly across bent low and took cover behind a snoring tent that smelled of last month’s unwashed small clothes. Briya took the lead, edging around the tent, watching for any possible interruptions, then leading them forward to the next. Once she held up a hand for them to stay, slipped around, and returned a moment later dragging a corpse, fresh blood gushing from its throat. They rolled it over to make it appear sleeping, and continued leap-frogging towards the main tent.

The reindeer ruined the perfect approach.

The companions huddled at the back of the main tent. A reindeer tied up nearby honked at the companions, nuzzling its feed bucket. Felerion grabbed the bucket and slopped some mealy, half-sour feed from the nearby pot for the beast. It dug in readily.

Volgr lifted the heavy leather wall for Briya to get a quick look around. “A sort of throne,” she said. “Made of bones and wood. Braziers burning. No sign of the leader. A cage on the far end. One prisoner, leaning on the bars. An elf.”

“Elf?” Volgr asked.

“Unless those ears are fake,” she said.

The reindeer honked again, louder. Its other two, seeing the bucket began honking as well. Felerion went to his task again.

“I’ll slip through,” said Briya. “I can get that cage open, I’m sure. Felerion, keep those damn things quiet!”

The bard shrugged helplessly as the three began fighting over the same bucket. Maelling rushed over, making soothing sounds, but a loud curse from a nearby tent brought them up all standing.

“You louse-ridden, mangy beasts! When I get through with you—” the goblin began, emerging. His headdress bore a reindeer’s horn, and he was unlimbering a whip from his belt. He saw the companions. The companions saw him. “INTRUDERRHRRK—!!” he let scream before Bryia appeared behind him and slit his throat. Too late.

Roused, the goblins came swarming, groggy, shouting, cursing each other almost as much as the companions, but onward they came.

“Winter’s white heart!” cursed Kattly. She brought the horn to her mouth and lurched away as a throwing axe clove it from her grasp. A goblin in heavy armor, almost as large as a man, lowered its hand from the throw and roared, “Bring me their heads, lads! A bounty for any taken alive!”

A goblin alone isn’t much match for a trained human warrior. Goblins in threes are much more dangerous as they’ll distract and bait, keeping out of reach until one can rush in from behind. They fought like wolves in that manner. Goblins in dozens, hurling spears and firing shoddy arrows could be deadly.

Kattly’s fire kept one whole flank at bay. Maelling’s bow never stopped loosing deadly shafts into eyes, throats, and heart-shots. Felerion’s music staggered them by the half dozen, letting Volgr rampage through their ranks, hewing limbs and heads, teaming with Lydana to crush and bash their way towards the leader. Briya was a dancing ghost, appearing behind or above targets, doing her deadly work, then spinning away and disappearing in a mist or behind a tent.

But, there were just so many.

Felerion bled from a dozen minor wounds, a broken-off arrow shaft still lodged in his arm. Maelling could barely see for the blood gushing from his forehead. Volgr appeared unharmed, but heavy armor concealed more than one deep gash. Lydana’s axe blazed with every deflected blow, and her sword arm swung slower and slower. Kattly’s fire kept the worst of them away, goblins deathly afraid of her mighty power, but she could do little more than shield herself, striking rarely.

Briya saw the tide shifting, and the big goblin standing back, watching his endless minions whittle the companions down. The thing laughed, hands on hips, his sword still in its scabbard hanging beside—a warhorn!

Briya sprinted, hand-springing, vaulting, and tumbling past startled green faces. She flipped full over one, used another’s head as a springboard, and fell into a tumble to slash the strings holding the goblin warlord’s horn. It fell into her hand, and she whirled into a throw straight at Kattly. *“Horn!”*The warlord back-handed her across the face, as Briya sought to spin away. She staggered and fell, head swimming, legs scrambling.

Kattly’s fire dropped, and her upraised hand caught the horn. Three sharp blasts tore at the mists, and stunned the battle into silence. War cries erupted as men and women rose up from their hiding places in the deep woods, and pounding feet became a fast approaching avalanche of sound. Kattly’s warriors joined the fray.

It took only minutes to destroy the goblins to a man. The warlord was last to go, victim to a blast of fire in its face that charred flesh away to its blackened skull. It toppled at Kattly’s feet to a victory cry from her people that shook the trees to their tops.

Inside, the elf breathed a sigh of relief to see the humans and dwarf step into the tent. “I wondered what the war was about,” he said.

Briya unlocked the gate with the warlord’s own keys. “You’re why we came,” she said.

“Honored,” the elf said, bowing. “I am Yrvvi. Ranger and Korpikalli.”

“You’re far from home,” said Felerion.

“Yes. I’ll not hide it, I am afflicted.” He pulled down the scarf covering his neck to show rotting flesh, blackened and oozing pus. He tugged it back up at their revulsion. “Fear not, I was cursed by some malevolent spirit. It’s why I travel, to lift the curse. Why seek you me?”

Felerion said, “The old troll Yhtantoor told us he had given you knowledge of something called Jurgan’thun.”

Surprise crossed the elf’s face, then irritation. “Yes. That crafty old troll merely led to my capture, and sent my companions to their death. You didn’t find out the fate of the other prisoner did you?”

Felerion shrugged. “Sorry, no.”

“Ah, well,” said Yrvvi. “Not that I regret the others over-much. They were strange men, obsessed with power. Myself, I’d fallen in with them in their quest. It is said Jurgan’thun is a great power, sleeping and waiting its time to return. It brings ancient knowledge and boons for those that aid its coming.”

“But what is it?” asked Briya.

“I do not know. I only joined them in desperation. This rot will reach my heart or my head in time.”

They murmured condolences, but the elf waved it off. “No, no, it is what it is. I feel we’d have gotten something more from the ancient troll if we’d dealt with it more honestly. But we weren’t the first to find it, and it had grown weary of speaking of Jurgan’thun.”

“It said much the same to us,” said Volgr.

“The mistake was my companions trying to poison the wretched monster. It grew angry, killed three outright, and set its goblins on my trail. I’m a ghost in the woods, but they had numbers.”

“Had,” said Kattly with satisfaction.

“Yes. Thank you. In return, I can only tell you that if you seek more on Jurgan’thun, we were to seek three other sources. The wisest of troll lords—”

Volgr spat.

“—Yhtantoor’s greatest rival, and the dead dragon.”

Silence. Then Felerion sighed. “Well, first, let us rest, then figure out what all that means. For one, I could sleep for a week.”



5





“Took us long enough to get here, and now I’m not certain it was a good idea,” said Kattly, studying the runestone in her hand. They’d ventured to southern Arji, across flat and wide Dranvelt, south of the twilight Darkwood. Almost two weeks, even by Maelling’s secret ways, all to find a dubious source of information.

“You picked exactly the right moment to speak up,” said Felerion. “Now is the perfect time, as we near the forest where the troll seer is said to live. Why, back in the Darkwood was far too early to say that maybe one of the other choices would have—”

“Okay, enough, I understand,” Kattly said. “We’re getting close. Watch.” She focused on the rune and vitner flowed through it, weaving into a familiar pattern of fire. But the rune sparked, the vitner fizzled, and she earned but a puff of foul-smelling smoke for her efforts. “Blasted trolls and their dark powers,” she groused.

“That’s why we brought blades,” said Volgr.

Maelling held up a hand, and they all stopped. “We’re not alone.”

A grating voice hissed through the woods. “Why seek you, so-armed and made for war? What seek you, a-wandering paths far foreign?” A troll, almost certainly.

Felerion addressed the woods around them. “We seek the seer, a troll of wisdom and power. We bring no war, but only questions. We would bargain for answers.”

“Bargain? A bargain brought at blade’s edge?”

“No,” said Felerion.

Briya pointed to a tree. “It’s there.”

The companions fanned out towards it, but no one drew a blade or raised a staff.

“Don’t hide,” said Briya. “I can see your shadow.”

“Clever, she thinks, clever, she is,” said the troll, sulking. The weaving dropped away, revealing a mid-sized forest troll, short of tusk, long of ear, but grizzled and worn. It draped itself in cloth woven with bones and skulls. Its staff was a gnarled branch, blackened with power and ill magic. “Why seek you the seer?”

“We wish knowledge. A path. We’re told you’ve aided those in search of… dark powers,” said Felerion.

The troll laughed. “Dark powers? Righteous powers, true powers! Not promising life when death is certain. Not bringing light when darkness is natural.”

“We’re not here to debate. Will you do us a seeing?”

The troll puzzled over them, a sly look crossing its wide features. “If a bargain you strike, then a seeing you have. I wish a thread of fate.”

Everyone looked at each other. “Fresh out of threads of fate, I’m afraid,” said Felerion. “Perhaps some twine? I’ve got some red, a nice blue—”

“Fate! Of yours! One of you. I would know the hour of your death and draw the thread hence. Your fate I would know, and gain power in the knowing.”

Kattly murmured to Felerion, “Effectively it wants to steal hours, days, or years from the end of your life in exchange for this seeing.”

Felerion looked at her, then at the leering dimwalker. “I accept.”

“Felerion!” Kattly exclaimed.

“No, no,” he said. “It’s fine. Just me though, and you’ll do our seeing first. Payment after, if we’re satisfied.”

The dimwalker danced from foot to foot. “A seeing it wants, a fate it gives! Yes, yes, a seeing it shall have. Come. Come!”

It led the way to a forest clearing, proscribed by darkened stones and reeking of discordant vitner. The sickly trees stood round the clearing, bare in places, thick with leaves in others, as if caught between summer and winter, with no intervening seasons.

The dimwalker stepped to the center of the ring. “Stand there, beyond, and speak your seeing.”

The companions did as told, and Felerion said, “We wish to know where to find Jurgan’thun.”

“Ooooohhhh,” said the troll, winking and knowing. “Jurgan’thun you seek? Jurgan’thun is hidden. Jurgan’thun lies dreaming.”

“That’s not an answer,” said Felerion.

“A warning. No charge.” The troll raised its staff, sickly white light ghosted up from the ground, twisting into threads and twining about the troll and staff like spiderwebs. “Jurgan’thun of old, Jurgan’thun of wrath, followers of the ancient one, seeking on your path.” The webs pulsed, an icy wind exhaled from the circle, and the companions shivered.

“Jurgan’thun if ye seek, the path of war, marched through great heat, a kingdom wrought of hate deep down, find the King of Trolls, and his great horned crown.”

The wind sighed harder, smelling of rot, sudden and unexpected. Felerion’s gorge rose, but he clapped a hand over his mouth and kept it down. The troll was not done:

“Jurgan’thun of horrid wrath, Jurgan’thun of stone-choked paths, Jurgan’thun behind hidden door, seek the undead wurm and death evermore.”

The wind ceased, the cold retreated, and the scents of the forest freshened the darkened glade once again. The troll exhaled, opened its great yellow eyes, and planted its staff, looking smug.

“That’s it?” Felerion asked.

The troll blinked. “What means?”

“That’s all? You didn’t tell us much.”

“Saw the seeing, spoke it!”

“Yeah, in rhymes. Bad ones!”

“Could do better its own self?” the troll demanded.

“Yes.”

“Bah!” The troll spat. “Payment! A bargain struck must be met! Payment!”

Felerion grumbled. “Fine, but we’re getting the shaft here.”

The troll’s smugness oozed from its voice. “Should bargain more closely. My thread I’ll have.”

“Just get on with it.”

“Step here.”

Felerion stepped into the circle in front of the troll.

“Bard—” Volgr began warningly, but Kattly put a hand on his shoulder.

“Go ahead,” Felerion told the troll.

It whipped the staff around Felerion, gathering wispy tendrils of vitner as it went. Felerion began to sweat, breathing heavy as his fate tangled in the stave’s twisted branches. Faster the troll went, then frantic the troll got, gathering more and more until the stave was like a vast spindle, bowing under the weight of too much thread.

A mighty crack shook the clearing, and Felerion’s fate wound back into him like an uncoiling spring.

The troll stood staring at its shorn staff, the sharp end tapered to a jagged point. “Cheated!”

“What do you mean?” Felerion asked, once more composed.

“An hour, a day! The end of your fate was mine!”

“What, you couldn’t find it?”

“Too much! Too much fate! Knew this it did! *Knew it!”*

Felerion shrugged. “Not really my problem.”

The troll pulled itself up to its full size. “Bargain not filled!”

“Should bargain more closely,” Felerion said, winking.

The troll chewed on its own lips for a long moment, glowering, then grumbled and shrugged. “Well played, oh timeless one. Go from this place, it does. Know though that a fate unending can be worse than death.”

The companions turned their backs and walked away. No one spoke until the forest had become much more its normal self. “Well, that was fun,” said Briya.

“Oh timeless one,” said Maelling. “You really are old.”

“Hey!” Felerion said, laughing. “Not my fault he didn’t ask the right questions about me.”

“Yes, but what did we really get? Find a king of trolls with a great horned helm, or seek the undead wurm to find the door?”

“I have no idea what to make of that,” Volgr said. “Except that neither sounds attractive. There’s a troll  spoken of in the Trollridge Mountains. Said to be the Lord of Horns or something. Might be the strongest of trolls anywhere. As like as to eat us as bandy words.”

“Wonderful,” said Briya.

“I know of an undead dragon said to lair on an island off the Sylvan coast,” said Kattly. “I also know about a hundred tales of those who sought its wisdom and perished for their troubles. Or worse.”

“Also wonderful,” said Briya.

“We’re equidistant between them from here,” said Maelling. “So? Which way do we go?”





“I don’t think this island has a formal name,” Felerion said as they paddled their boat away from the anchored ship. “The sailors called it ‘the shrouded island’ because of the mists always around it.”

“They had the right idea,” Volgr grumbled. “Have I mentioned that I hate boats?”

“Not about a hundred times,” said Felerion.

“And no here we are, getting out of one boat into a much smaller boat, heading for an island that rarely sees the sun, in search of a dead dragon.”

“’Nearly dead’ dragon,” Felerion said. “Not undead though. That would imply it died, which apparently it didn’t.”

Volgr blew out a dissatisfied breath. “You’re arguing taters and turnips. It’s the dragon part that’s at issue.”

“Well, Nifelfang is who we need. It’s usually willing to deal, even if it’s always unfair.”

“The very definition of ‘dragon’,” said Volgr.

“Yes, but this one is extremely cunning,” said Felerion. “It was old when—”

“If you say ‘when the world was young’, you’ll eat this oar, bard,” said Briya.

“—Er, it hails from the Age of Dreams. So, you know, pretty damn old. My hope is that it’s gotten bored with eating every intruder that seeks its lair.”

“You’re a great comfort to have along, you know that, yes?” Briya said, scowling.

They ran their boat ashore in briny sand giving way to gravel and loam. The mist had lessened with the sun’s rise, but thickened inland, leading up toward the lone mountain peak.

With Maelling’s skills and Felerion and Briya’s sense for vitner, they found the entrance easily enough, though scent alone might’ve led them there, a yawning cave mouth low on the mountain’s shoulder. It overlooked a fetid bog, rotten with time and slow decay. “Wisps,” Felerion said, pointing. “Don’t stare too long,” he advised.

“Why’d you point, then?” Volgr asked.

“This seems like what we want,” Felerion said of the cave.

“’Want’ is probably the wrong word,” Maelling said. His bow hadn’t left his hand since they ground ashore.

Kattly’s fire-tipped staff led the way. The burning flame, difficult to look at did little to push back the gloom. If she walked ahead, those in the rear walked in darkness. They resorted to carrying a torch apiece, even Volgr whose dwarven sight failed in the ancient darkness. The ground squelched with every other step. Waters sometimes flooded the cave in heavy rains, common along the Sylvan coast, but not enough to wash the reeking peat clear of the dead bog. They’d been tramping along, spiraling deeper into the mountain when Briya noticed her feet were crunching, not squelching. She lowered her torch, and gasped. “Look down,” she whispered.

Skulls. Of every race and description. Bones. Piles of them. And not just of any type. Kattly held up a delicate skull, easily fitting in her hand. “Children too.” She waved her staff around her, peering. “Many.” They moved forward, slowly now, wincing with every crack and snap beneath their tread. It was the rattling that warned them they were not alone.

“Behind!” Maelling said from the rear. He tossed his torch down the mouth and drew his bow. Skeletons followed, forming up from the floor. Ranks of them. Dozens. All stopped when the companions whirled. They stood, watching with empty eyes. Maelling fired, shattering a skull. The skeleton collapsed in a clattering pile, but another took its place and simply stood. A silent legion, watching, waiting.

“Let’s just press forward a bit,” said Felerion. As the companions moved, so too did the skeletons. When the companions stopped, so too did the legion. “Seems we’re expected.”

They didn’t have far to go.

The walls fell away into inky night, but the bone-covered floor remained. A sickly smell assailed them now, fetid and metallic. Blood pooled in recesses in the floor, ancient and thick. Dim red lights appeared in the far darkness. Eyes, wide apart, as wide as four men abreast. Something thudded, a heavy tread. Something slithered, a tail drawn across the ground. Something spoke. “Human. Dwarf—no. A dwarf that reeks of giant-kind. And something else. A whiff of vitner. Ancient. Not of your races. A waystone. Yes. But, come. Why seek you the lair of Nifelfang?”

The gloom lessened, but never lifted. The beast shifted towards them. It seemed to form most of the far wall, huge. The could make it out now, the palest of dragons, white as dead flesh, save the burning red eyes. An albino even before its life seeped from it, replaced with Dimhall’s pale energies.

“Oh mighty Nifelfang—” Felerion began.

“Spare me platitudes. I’ve heard them all. I grow bored already.” The skeletal legion advanced a pace.

“Ah. Yes, forgive us, great one. We come on an errand, seeking your wisdom.”

“Ha! This advice I offer freely: never seek a wurm’s lair.” It moved into the light, its huge head filling their vision. Every step trembled the bones in their bodies and beneath their feet.

“That is appreciated,” said Felerion. “Indeed, you speak truly. Yet, necessity drives us, ancient one. We seek knowledge that only you may hold.”

“A rare commodity then. Expensive. Beyond your means, I’m sure.”

“Possibly,” Felerion conceded.

The dragon looked at each in turn. When its gaze was upon them, it peered not just at their flesh, but bore into their eyes. An uncomfortable feeling, to say the least. Not just for its size. Not just for its unblinking, inhuman hunger. As if their every deed were laid bare, from greatest to lowest, most noble to most detestable. Felerion resisted the urge to squirm. His mouth went dry, and it took every ounce of effort to keep the tremble from his voice. “We would know of the thing called Jurgan’thun.”

The dragon’s eyes widened, surprised. “Again the name of old Jurgan’thun! You seek answers to questions already answered, Ageless Bard.” Silence for a long moment. “Yes, I know all of you. Your souls speak where your tongues lay still.” He named them in turn. “Lydana, Handmaiden of Old Stormi. Volgr, Giant-kin. Kattly Ten-Stones. Maelling of Trudvang, Wanderer and Guide. Briya of Shadow. So you wish to speak of Jurgan’thun. My, what illustrious attention my old ally warrants.”

“Ally?” Briya asked.

The pale wurm grumbled or growled, it was hard to tell which. “When occasion required.” It peered at them, thinking. “No. No, I have already exacted a price for this knowledge from those that came before.”

“The cultists?” Felerion asked.

The beast’s slithering tongue ran across its teeth. A draconic shrug. “Faithful, cultist… call them what you will. Silence was implicit in my pact, and I shall not break with it, for the price was fair and timely paid.”

Briya narrowed her eyes. “You say their silence was implicit, not explicit. They did not require your silence? It was not a condition.”

The dragon grinned. “It was not. I hold my tongue of my own free will.”

“So we could bargain that information from you.”

The dragon hissed, a long sound, impossibly alien. “I like you, Shadow. But no, I will raise no claw against Jurgan’thun.”

“What is Jurgan’thun? Can you tell us that much.”

Nifelfang snorted, swirling dust into the still cavern air. “You know not? Bah. No, you’ll not get even that, my regard notwithstanding.” It thought a moment. “I will bargain only this: where to seek your black-hooded friends.”

“That’s not much,” Felerion said. “It shouldn’t require a steep price.”

“Yet, more than you have now, so a price must be paid.”

“We would hear this price.”

“A favor,” the dragon said. “A deed. In a time and place of my choosing. A simple deed, done by one of you.” Its eyes fell on Briya. “The Shadow. What say you, tiny one? Will you accept my bargain?”

Briya shifted uncomfortably. “What sort of deed?”

“A simple one, as I say.”

“Why do I doubt that?”

“Why indeed?”

“Because nothing is ever simple when it comes to dragons and bargains, you in particular.”

The dragon smiled. “Are you not the least bit curious?”

Briya and the dragon stared at one another, her face considering, the beast still grinning its razor smile. “Deal.”

“Briya!” Felerion said.

“No, it’s done,” she told him. “A favor for the location of this cult. It has to be done.”

The dragon rumbled its approval, withdrawing back into darkness. “Fylges. A woodland hall beneath a frost-crowned peak.”

“Fylges is a big territory,” Maelling complained.

“Not when viewed from the right angle.”

“How will I know what deed you wish?” Briya called after the retreating eyes.

They paused. “Leave that to me. Now go, before my army grows hungry.” The glowing red eyes vanished into the dark.



6





“They’re going to know someone is out here,” Lydana said, wiping her blade clean of goblin blood.

They stood among the slashed and shattered corpses of half a dozen goblins, a woodland patrol that had wandered upon them as they approached the highest peak in the mountains of Fylges.

“Means we’re getting close,” said Maelling. “I thought it rang a bell. That first patrol bearing the cult’s mark was proof enough. We’re getting closer.”

“Should we hide the bodies?” Kattly asked.

“No, the forest will find them unless we bury them deep. Take all their valuables though. Let the goblins think it was raiders.”

“Way ahead of you,” Briya said, pocketing a pair of greasy, clinking purses.

“Do any of you smell that?” Volgr asked.

They all paused, sniffing. “Woodsmoke,” said Felerion.

“With the change in the breeze,” said Maelling turning south towards the distant peak. “I’ll go have a look.”

\*

“You wanted a woodland hall,” Maelling said in the near-darkness. “There it is.”

A great longhouse dominated a clearing backing on to a sheer cliff. The mountain rose up and up above them. The hall was of Mittlander design, but the goblins had been here for quite some time. Extra decorations of skulls, bones, and red-painted sigils clashed with stately runework and precise carvings.

“That mark there,” Kattly said, pointing. “These are no mere warbands like Yhtantoor’s ‘generals’ in the Darkwood. This is the hall of a true goblin warchief.”

“That explains all the tiny camps around here,” said Briya.

“Aye, different banners,” said Maelling. “See the sigils? The smaller ones are the little warbands in service beneath the big one for the warchief.”

“So, what’s the plan?” Lydana asked.

“We’re looking for cultist leadership,” said Felerion. “Specifically the name we were given: Waldkarl. He’s in the hierarchy. There’s also this blond man that tried to hit us with that tinker’s cart. But we don’t know his name, just what he looks like.”

“In a place such as this, any human is likely to be a captive or a cultist,” said Kattly. “Also, a growing army like this is held together by the strength of its leader. An opportunity to kill the goblin warchief should not be denied. Kill that one, and the others will fall to infighting and backstabbing soon enough.”

“Shh,” Volgr said. “Look.”

They peered over and around their boulder, seeing a half dozen cultists in dark hooded robes depart the longhouse and head into the woods.

The companions all looked at each other. “Surely it’s not that easy,” said Volgr.

\*

Half an hour and a few savage blows later, and Volgr was slicing the hem of his own robes to his size. “It was that easy.”

“May our luck hold,” said Briya, raising the hood and shrinking back. A solid disguise.

They’d tried taking at least a couple alive, but the cultists fought to their own deaths, the final one popping another vial of poison like those in the Trollridge had. True fanatics, the worst kind.

“Feh,” said Lydana. “Mine’s all bloody.”

“Rub some dirt on it. At least no one will notice against the black,” said Briya. “We just need to get inside and find the people we need.”

Maelling held up a hand. “Listen…. War drums.”

Low, dull, rhythmic booming sounded distantly in the woods. “No,” said Kattly. “A meeting.” She pointed to where a score of goblins emerged from the woods nearby and began marching in their own chaotic fashion towards the great hall. “Quick, stash these corpses in the undergrowth before someone finds them. Then we can test the strength of these disguises.”

\*

The goblins had made some modifications to the huge long house, not just in decor, but in architecture. There was already a balcony and high rafters, but the goblins had built risers on the main floor and dug out the central firepit into a fighting pit. Its walls were covered in sharpened spikes, and the sandy floor was stained with dark brown splashes. Dried blood.

Above the pit and dominating the high dais sat a great table whose central sit was nothing less than a skull throne. Dusk had given way to night beyond the windows, and the hall filled with goblins and the odd troll, banging for their suppers and roaring insults at one another. The odd scuffle broke out now and then, only to be resolved quickly by the combatants being pulled apart or a bright flash of steel and blood. Three corpses lay in the pit now, two goblins and one troll.

From the high riser, the companions watched the proceedings and kept to themselves. Other cultists were in the crowd here and there, in twos and threes. None did more than watch the raucous spectacle around them. The goblins and trolls left them generally alone, small mercy.

“There are wargs caged in the pit,” said Maelling, pointing. Indeed, the slavering beasts were caged in recesses in the pit walls. Half a dozen from their viewpoint with the cages attached to chains leading up to where the guards flanked the high table.

Great drums sounded suddenly from far back, booming through the longhouse. The fighting and roaring quieted to a dull roar, and the creatures took up the chant: “Griz-NAK! Griz-NAK! Griz-NAK! Griz-NAK!” They pounded their tables and chairs and stamped their feet in time to the drums. The long house thrummed and boomed and shook under their excitement.

\*

A rather ordinary goblin dressed in fur-lined armor and carrying a shining silver spear emerged from the double-doors behind the high table. The crowd roared to see him lifting his spear high. He looked in every way unremarkable, not even large for his kind. But the companions yelled and applauded along, keeping up appearances.

He took his time, sauntering across the stage, raising his spear and pointing out the other chiefs in the crowd. Their people roared back, keen for his attention. Finally he took center-stage before the great table, and raised his arms for silence.

He let them sit in an expectant hush for a long moment, then said, “Warriors of the night! True kings of Fylges! Blessed of Jurgan’thun! We’re here tonight… for a feast!”

The resulting roar almost deafened Felerion. He clapped along and hollered, sharing a glance with Maelling.

Silence again. “But first, my friends, first… we got some punishment that needs meting out!” More roaring approval. “Against fools!” Roars! “Scoundrels!” Roars! “Traitors in our very midst!” He finished with his spear tip sweeping through the hall, lingering on the group. Felerion resisted the urge to shrink down away from the railing. “Bring him out!” the goblin warchief ordered.

Doors slammed open on either side of the high table. A human was led in, bound by the wrists in thick ropes.

“What do we got here, eh?” the goblin warchief asked. “You all know Waldkarl of Mittland, eh? You all know what he did? Hmm? You know why he's going in the pit tonight? Well, I’ll tell you. Incompetence!” Boos and yells, as if most of the goblins knew the word. “Dereliction of duty!” More hissing and yelling. “Raw ineptitude! See here?” the goblin warchief held up a parchment written in a scrawling hand. “I have here a letter from our erstwhile ally out in the Trollridge. Says he’s not making war when he said he would. Said he didn’t find our payment or terms ‘acceptable’!”

Through the jeering and raucous cacophony, the companions shared glances at each other. It seemed the Troll King thought it his duty to inform the cult of his change of plans.

“Now, who’s fault would that be, eh?”

The human merely glowered, saying nothing.

The chieftan motioned and his guards dropped their spears and hauled on the heavy chains. The wargs below rushed forth to tear into the corpses already below. “Positions!” The guards on the prisoner dragged him to the pit’s edge.

“Doesn’t he get weapons?” someone yelled.

The human nodded agreement, still glowering death at the chieftain.

The crowd seemed to love that idea, and the warchief’s eyes twinkled. He tossed his own spear into the pit. “There. Just the one. Guards, make ready! Soon as our puppies have had a good taste of blood!”

Maelling said to the companions in a stage whisper loud enough to break through the expectant din. “We need him alive!”

“And we need the warchief dead,” said Kattly.

“We can rush one side,” said Briya, pointing to either side of the grand balcony around the hall. “Leap down and rush the stage. The chief is no longer armed.”

“We can’t split up though,” warned Volgr. Not with that many goblins liable to rush us.

“Maelling, can you kill the prisoner’s guards from here?”

“One way to find out,” he told her.



7





Felerion pointed to a position on the balcony to one side of the dais. “We’ll attack from there. Let’s move. Maelling, fire when we get there, join us when you can.”

The ranger nodded, nocking an arrow. He held it low, behind the railing, waiting for the very last moment as his friends pushed and shoved their way through the crowded balcony, Volgr’s impossible strength leading the way like a dwarven battering ram.

The moment came just before his friends were in position above the human. The goblin warchief raised his arms, and yelled, “Make ready, boys!”

Maelling fired. Two arrows sprouted in the trolls guarding the human Waldkarl. They went down gurgling and clutching at their necks.

The companions leaped to the floor, using tables and goblins to break their fall. “Get him!” shouted Felerion, pointing at the goblin warchief. “Long live Jurgan’thun! Arise, friends! Arise and kill this faithless filth!”

The disguised bard’s words left every cultist in the hall stunned, but the goblins, already frothing with bloodthirst, needed little prodding. Axes and blades came out, hacking towards the nearest black robes, and in no time at all, blood flowed freely in the risers and balconies.

The warchief instantly saw what was happening and shouted for his people to stand down, but it was no good. Blood had been spilled, and now five companions with weapons drawn advanced on his position.

Arrows flew from the far balcony as Maelling took his shots. Goblins closed rapidly on his position, but Maelling leaped forward across the chasm to seize the chandelier and swing away.

Kattly’s fire blasted one goblin guard off his feet, Volgr’s blade gutted another. Lydana charged the warchief himself, bashing the green brute to the ground. “Assassins!” the goblin warchief squealed. “Stop! I’ve got gold! I’ve got HRRKK—” he ended as Lydana’s blade found his flesh.

“You!” Volgr shouted, pointing at Waldkarl. “We saved your hide, now show us the way out of here!” The big human had a guard’s spear in hand, and nodded fervently, motioning for them to follow.

The fighting had spread outside, but it had devolved into goblin against goblin as much as cultist against the green horde. In the chaos and the panic, someone had set fire to the long house, and flames licked eagerly towards the thatch, itself dry from the long summer and ready to catch.

They got cleanly away, with only a few scratches and one big bruise on Maelling’s backside from his fall off the chandelier. “I’d have landed fine, but the damn goblins jostled the table,” he complained. They’d come to rest a mile distant, near a small stream coming off the mountain. A good site to pause for the night, easily guarded.

“So, what of you, friend?” Felerion asked the human. “Waldkarl is it?”

The big Wildlander nodded.

“What, no words?”

He shook his head, tapping his voicebox, then moving a hand in negative.

“Great. Two prisoners, and we get the mute,” said Volgr.

Waldkarl glowered at the dwarf.

“Presumably he’s used to his condition and can still aid us,” said Briya. “If not, there’s a shallow grave right here, no?”

Waldkarl appraised the young woman a moment, then grinned and winked knowingly. He tapped his chest then gestured from them to him. Ask your questions.

“What *is* Jurgan’thun?” Felerion began. “An old god? Something out of the Age of Dreams, we know that much.”

The big man shrugged. He swelled up, flexing, then bent double, miming an old man doddering with a cane.

“Yeah, very old and very powerful, we’ve got that part. Does the cult even know?”

He shook his head and pointed to their purses, mimed rain.

“Just that he promises great gifts. The fabled Bounty of Jurgan’thun, right?”

Again, a nod.

“Where do we find it? Behind some great door, we know that much.”

Waldkarl knelt in the mud and used a stick to draw a map. It took some time, but Maelling eventually identified Wealdsfyrd at the southern edge of the Great Iron Tooth. From there it was a matter of scale.

“So, somewhere north of Wealdsfyrd there’s a hidden path up the mountains into the Tooth?”

A nod.

“You’ve seen it?”

A nod. Miming for an enormous door.

“Think you can find it?” Felerion asked Maelling.

“Should be easy enough.”

“Then we know where we’re going.”

Waldkarl held up a hand to stay them. He added to his map. The Wildland. He mimed fighting. Much fighting. A war. He tapped his chest, and fingered one of the cultist robes.

Felerion got it. “The cult is fomenting war in the Wildland even now?”

A nod.

“You hate them that much? Your former companions?”

Waldkarl spat, anger genuine. He made throat slitting gestures, helplessness, and indecision.

“I see. They’d have killed you over nothing, and so you owe them nothing. Fine, can you tell us their plan?”

It took time, but fifteen minutes of guessing and miming brought out that the Queen of Wolves would begin slaughtering humans while one of the Wildlander Warlords would be assassinated in his bed, the murder blamed on their closest allies.

“Can you tell us who’s doing all this?”

Waldkarl mimed a crown and scepter, and held up the cult robe.

“The cult leader?”

Yes.

“Can you describe him?”

He pointed at Briya and made fast, running legs with his fingers.

“A quick-legged woman?” Felerion asked.

He shook his head, tapped his chest, then slimmed his hands down from his shoulders to Maelling’s slender build.

“Oh, a fleet-footed man?”

A nod. He ruffled his dark hair, and pointed to Volgr’s blond beard.

“A blond man! Quick footed! Who was probably in Dranvelt not long ago?”

Surprise, but then a nod.

“We know him.”

Waldkarl’s scowl could have seared flesh, such was his obvious hatred.

“Well,” said Felerion. “We have a choice. And so do you. You’re free to leave.”

Waldkarl hefted his spear and looked into the woods back the way they’d come, a wicked gleam in his eye.

“Vengeance, is it? Well, kill a few more for us while you’re there.”

The big man put a hand on Felerion’s shoulder by way of thanks, then trudged off into the darkness.

“So,” said Lydana. “Wealdsfyrd or the Wildland.”

“I don’t see much choice,” said Briya. “We can’t let the Wildland fall to chaos. It’ll just make the cult that much harder to root out.”

“And give Jurgan’thun a base of power, if whatever it is comes out of the mountains,” said Felerion. “Do you know this warlord that’s being targeted?” he asked Briya.

“Yes. And I’ve heard of the Queen of Wolves, but it’s just a legend.”

“No, she’s real enough,” said Maelling. “I know her signs, but have never met her. She prefers the wilds to civilized lands. Very sensible, if you ask me.”

“Well then,” said Felerion. “Let’s take some rest and set out at first light. Time grows short, but we have fewer leagues ahead than behind.”



8





“We’re in the right area,” Maelling told Felerion. They’d been in the deep wilderness of Wildland for nearly a week, seeking any trace of the Queen of Wolves. They’d found plenty of wolf sign, tracks, scat, remnants of prey, but little of the elusive ranger herself.

Over time Maelling had left his own marks along with gifts in the form of taken prey; a brace of conies and a pair of meaty bucks, good feeding for even a large pack. They’d even killed a pair of trolls and a half dozen goblins, the creatures intent on building bonfires out of only the biggest trees. Their looted gold and treasure had been left along with Maelling’s sign.

“The right area,” Felerion repeated flatly. “The woods and foothills we’ve been in for a week? Two days ago wasn’t the right area, but this is?”

“Something like that. She’s been watching us. Trying to figure what we’re about. And there’ve been more and more wolves.”

“I haven’t seen any.”

“That’s because they’re not bearing tankards of ale.”

“Are you implying I have a one-track mind?”

“Who me? Hush. We’re being watched.”

“What, even now?” Felerion said, glancing around, self-conscious. He saw only woodlands, wild and beautiful, but filled with danger for the unwary.

“Probably figuring out how many days your carcass would feed the pack,” Maelling murmured.

Felerion opened his mouth to reply, but Maelling held up his hand, halting the group. Up the game path they were on, twenty paces away, a great gray wolf sat, eyes intent. The group halted and kept silent.

Maelling put his bow away and crouched down, hands idle, and watched. They stared at one another a long moment, before the wolf turned and loped away along the game trail.

“What was that?” Lydana asked.

“An invitation,” said Maelling. “We follow, but don’t chase. Keep your weapons stowed. It’s not alone. Fjorna, come walk beside me,” he called back.

A young woman, short, powerfully built, with the gray markings of a Gray Mark Tribe noble trotted forward on light feet. “She is near?”

“I think so. Are you ready?”

She was young, but as Chieftan Uthnag’s daughter, she was deemed best suited to negotiate for her tribe. Her bright green eyes were a trifle wider than normal, but her nod was resolute.

Maelling followed the game trail, catching the odd glimpse of a retreated bushy tail up ahead. His companions were tense, as they became aware of shadowy presences ghosting between the trees; bright eyes in the underbrush, suddenly vanishing; a silhouette gliding behind a rock; a golden eye and a cocked ear, moving back behind a tree.

“They’re behind us,” Briya said from the rear. “There’s no leaving now.”

“Honor guard?” Felerion wondered. “Or armed escort?”

“Those are the same thing,” Volgr said.

“Slightly different intent,” said Felerion.

“Quiet,” Maelling said. “I hear water.”

It was true. The sound of water gurgling to itself in a slow moving brook grew louder as they approached a natural clearing.

On the opposite side stood a woman that made Maelling’s eyes widen and heart quicken. She stood tall, clad in wolf furs and a great bearskin cloak. She was young, her tanned skin smooth and flawless. Her hair was black as a raven crossing the moon. She watched them with eyes blue as a pure glacier. And she was not alone.

Wolves. Everywhere. Suddenly. As the companions moved into the clearing, wolves filled the trail behind them. Wolves padded from the trees to watch. An enormous pair moved up to flank the woman, one gray as mist, the other black as sin. No fangs were barred, no hackles raised, yet the tension grew. Blood or peace, seemed to be the question.

For a long minute, no one spoke. Felerion glanced between the woman and Maelling more than once. He cleared his throat. “Um. Maelling?”

Shaken from his stupefied study, Maelling began, his mouth suddenly bone dry, “I am Maelling, ranger. I thank you for the meeting.”

The Wolf Queen cocked her head at the words, thought a moment, then said hesitantly, “Your words are strange to me. You bring gifts. Why?”

Maelling searched his suddenly vacant mind for a response when Felerion stepped forward, “If I may? Hjordis, Woodland Queen and Mother of Wolves, we have left gifts to beg an audience.”

“What is ‘odd-eence’?”

“A meeting between leaders,” Felerion said. “Word has come that you plan war against mankind. We would beg peace instead.”

“Peace!” she spat. “Is this why you bring the gray-faced one? An offering of flesh and blood for peace?”

Maelling felt the girl to his left stiffen, her breathing quickened, but she stood firm.

“No, you misunderstand, I’m sorry to say,” said Felerion. “Fjorna of the Gray Mark Tribe comes to parlay for peace with your people. We would know your grievances.”

Hjordis’s eyes narrowed at the alien words, her scowl deepened. “Pahrl-ay? Greevintzes? Speak plainly!”

“Let me,” Maelling said, finally finding his voice.

“About time,” Felerion grumbled.

“You gather your packs for war. You would kill every human walking this land. Why?”

“Why?” she asked, puzzled. “Why!” she yelled, incensed. “You kill my kind! You leave the bodies to rot! Not just those that take from your cattle, but hunting us! Stalking us! Leaving us dead as warning! You kill prey for us to find, but poison the meat! My kind dies choking, mouths gushing white!”

“That is not my people!” said Fjorna.

“They are the gray-faced! I have seen them! I have killed many with my own blade!” She brandished a long, wicked bone dagger. Snarls began in the wolves around them, low growls full of death barely restrained.

“A trick,” said Maelling. “A lie played on you from those that want you to fight the Gray Marks and any other people you find.”

She crossed her arms. “Trick? Lie? Where is the lie? They have the gray marks, they dress as she does.”

“Did they also carry these? Or signs like it?” Maelling brought out the waystone and held it up.

Hjordis held out her hand. Maelling tossed it across the swirling waters, and she caught it deftly. She studied it for a moment, eyes narrowing. “Some, yes. What of it?” She tossed it back.

“That is the sign of an ancient, evil power. Those who carry it wish it to return to these lands. They would have you do their work for them by killing those who can stand together against it. They seek to divide us, weaken us. Would you play into their hands?”

She considered a long moment, eyes falling on each of them in turn, and settling on Fjorna, the chieftan’s daughter. “You speak for the gray-faced? Then speak.”

Fjorna drew a deep breath. “My father is chieftan. We do not hunt wolves unless they hunt us. It has always been this way. We will be in your territory until the signs say we must move on. In that time, we will leave a dozen bucks for you and yours every season for as long as we remain. If there is a battle, then it will not be the Gray Mark Tribe that starts it.”

She thought this over for a time, blade in hand, absently testing the edge. “Words,” she concluded in a growl. “Deeds have been done. Words will not heal!” Her shout stirred the packs into a growling, snarling mass. The enormous gray and black beasts at her side lowered their heads, hackles up, and bared their fangs.

“Wait!” Maelling called. “Wait!” he dropped his bow and threw off his coat. He strode to the stream’s edge and sat, leaning back, arms wide. “Take me then! An offer of flesh as proof!”

“Maelling!” Felerion shouted, but the black and gray wolves bounded across the stream. The gray one barred their way, pacing before them, snarling. The great black wolf’s jaws found Maellings throat and closed. But they did not pierce flesh.

The beast’s breath stank of old food and old blood, its breath that of a wet southern wind. Maelling couldn’t help swallowing hard, but he lay still as a stone.

Hjordis skipped across the water, her feet finding hidden stones just below the surface. She was above him, blade in hand, now lowered to his jugular. Her eyes bore into his, curious, considering, fierce.

“It’s not them,” he said for her ears only. “It’s not the Gray Marks. On my life, it’s the cult. They want this war. They’re clever, but you are of the forest, and the forest knows the truth.”

It took her only a moment to decide. She put a hand on the black brute’s shaggy head. The great wolf released its death vice on Maelling’s throat and paced away, licking its chops.

Hjorids gave Maelling a hand up. Her grip was strong, her arm powerful. The growling and snarling subsided as their Queen made her pronouncement. “It was not these. It was not the gray faces. There will be no war.”

“Thank you,” Maelling said.

She knelt by the bank and dabbed her finger in the mud. She took his hand, palm down and drew a rune on its back. She held his hand up for all to see. “Have your people wear this mark on their hands until the new moon. Those marked will not be hunted. For the rest, they are our prey. We will kill the evil ones and drive them from the wild.”

“It will be done,” said Fjorna. “Expect our offering soon.”

Hjordis nodded and skipped back across the pond.

And as quickly as they’d emerged, the wolves melted away into the forest. Maelling blinked in the suddenly empty clearing. Only Hjordis and the big black wolf lingered on the far side, sharing a long look with Maelling.

Briya came up, looked at his hand and his neck. “Nice. You’re insane, of course.”

“Yeah,” he said, still looking at the Mother of Wolves.

“Let’s get back to the Gray Marks.”

“Yeah,” he said, not moving.

“Maybe let you cool off under a cold waterfall first?”

“Yeah,” he said. Then looked at her. “What?”

She grinned and elbowed him in the ribs, turning away. “Let’s go, you moonstruck woodsman.”

When Maelling looked up, Hjordis had gone.



9





“This place looks secure enough,” Volgr said as they entered through the great wooden gates of the Hagtorn Clan’s holdfast. Nothing less than a small village lay inside, with a couple dozen thatch and wattle dwellings surrounding a huge round great house.

“Assassins are used to getting into places like this,” Briya said. “Sure, they’ve got guards atop the walls and plenty at the gates, but you can’t watch everywhere forever.”

“Is that the voice of experience?”

She shrugged. “Practicality.”

Volgr chuckled. “Well, at least we’re in time—”

The great house doors boomed open and a panic-stricken guardsman ran out shouting, “Seal the gates! Seal the gates! The Jarl has been assassinated! Seal the gates!”

Chaos. Panic. Running citizens and guards. Suddenly weapons were drawn and the companions surrounded. “You there!” a massive warrior shouted. “Explain your business here!”

“An errand,” said Felerion. “To see your lord.”

“He’s been attacked! Did you have a hand in this?”

“How could we? We’ve just arrived.”

“Take their weapons,” the captain told his warriors. “We’ll see what the prince has to say.”

An hour later, in the great house they were led in before a large young man, his beard not yet long, sitting the high seat with fury on his brow. “These are the strangers?”

“Yes, lord,” said the captain. “There were here when it happened.”

“Just arrived, lord,” said Felerion. “I’m the bard Felerion. These are my companions. We’d not been inside the walls five minutes when the cry went up.”

“I don’t trust it!” said the captain.

“It’s true, lord,” said another guard. “I was at the gate when they came in. Like they said, but a span of minutes.”

The prince stared hard at his captain. “You waste my time!”

“Lord, you said to round up all strangers—”

“Strangers that might’ve had a hand! My father lies dying in the next room, and you bring me nothing! Tell me of actual progress!”

The captain glowered at the companions as he said, “Every house is being gone through. Should be done soon.”

“If it pleases you, lord,” said Briya. “I know something of alchemy and cures.”

He looked at her, then up and down. “Do you, now? You seem young to have such knowledge.”

“You seem young to be so wise,” said Briya.

He blinked, then snorted. “Well. I see no harm, if she can prove her skills. Go get Thordin. He’ll be with father.”

A guard hurried off while the young prince addressed them.

“I am Balgrun, son of Ulf. You say you came hence to speak with my father?”

“A warning, Balgrun, son of Ulf,” said Felerion. “We pursue a cult that would see the Wildland descend into chaos. We had it on good authority that an assassination was planned. Alas, we seem to have arrived too late.”

Balgrun crossed his thick arms. “Yes. Alas.”

Felerion explained about the Cult of Jurgan’thun, showed the prince the waystone, and detailed some of their journey. He left out the more unbelievable bits, particularly bartering with the dead dragon and bribing the troll king.

And still Balgrun listened, brows migrating into a skeptical line. “And now, you are here, just *after* the nick of time.”

“Convenient,” said a third voice, entering. A tall man, thin as a sapling, aged but unbowed. He wore a bear cloak sewn with bones and carried a staff topped with a raven’s skull. He and Kattly exchanged a long glance. “You are of the Ten Stones,” he said.

“Kattly. Chieftan. And you are of the Hagtorn.”

“Thordin. Shaman. It is said the Tribe of the Ten Stones deals with goblins and steals its neighbors cattle.”

Kattly didn’t take the bait. “And of the Hagtorn that your emissaries burn new trails to the Trollridge Mountains, and plumb the depths in search of dark magics.”

Prince Balgrun stood at this, “You dare—”

But the old shaman was laughing. “Such stories we hear,” he said. “But I would judge by deeds rather than words. Which of you has knowledge of poisons?”

“I do,” said Briya.

“What is the effect of hensbane and brimstone?”

“Ingested or injected?”

“Either.”

“Ingested for a good vomit. Injected for a corpse. Ingest too much and it’s a corpse either way.”

“And how much is too much?”

“Above three grains would be lethal in one as small as me. Five for someone like your prince. Is it hensbane and brimstone you suspect?”

“Not necessarily,” said the shaman. “Simply a test. She’ll do. With your permission, lord, we’ll go see your father. He rests, but there is no change.”

In the warlord’s chambers a huge man only a little taller than Balgrun lay sweating such to drench the furs. His ancient servant wet a rag to keep the warlord’s lips moist and get what water he could down the lord’s gullet. Briya got permission to touch the warlord, though the captain of the guard watched her under a heavy scowl.

“How did it happen?” she asked, feeling his brow.

“A man in a dark cloak, hood pulled low,” said the prince. “Entered the hall, raised a tube, and spat this thing at my father. He took it in the neck, there.”

“Awfully direct,” Volgr muttered.

“Spectacle,” Briya said, inspecting the wound. “He wanted no question that this was an assassination.”

The wound was tiny, but inflamed and oozing.

Briya sucked in a hissing breath. “Could be one of a number of things. Mostly, I think we need a sample of the poison.”

“Have they been found?” Volgr asked the captain.

“I don’t answer to—”

“Have they been found?” the prince repeated, his patience thin.

The captain shook his head. “Not yet.”

“This is not a large hold,” said the prince. “How long until—”

“My lords!” a guard called rushing in. “We’ve found a body.”

In a tiny house set aside for storage, a beak-nosed man lay staring at the rafters, his mouth oozing white foam. His corpse was still warm, but rigid as a board.

“This is the same poison they use when they don’t want to be caught,” said Lydana.

“I know him!” said the prince. “He’s our hostage’s cook!”

“Hostage?”

“Yes, of the Wolf Fangs. We’ve had mutual hostages since… well, forever. It’s more of a fosterage now than a real undertaking, but…,” the prince trailed off, shaken. He drew himself up after a moment. “Bring Balfric to the great hall,” he told the guard. “I want answers.”

In the great hall, before the high seat, a dark-haired man as big as Balgrun was led in. “Balgrun, what is this?” the young man demanded.

“I could ask the same! Your cook is dead by his own hand, and my father lies dying in the next room!”

“Then Ulf still lives? Thank the stones! I’d heard—”

“You ignore what has happened! Your cook tried to kill him!”

“Sugin? What—?”

The shaman threw back a cloak covering the dead cook’s hawk-nosed face. The dead man stared back, unseeing.

“This must be a mistake!” Balfric declared. “Our clans are friends, Balgrun! Sugin is—was a loyal man! You and I were born in the same moon, named together, raised together! You are my brother! Your own sister lives with my father—”

“I know all that! This stings all the worse!”

“If I may,” said Felerion stepping in. “This is exactly what our enemies want.”

*“Your* enemies,” said the captain.

“Enemies that have me in a corner,” said the prince. “If father dies, then….” He looked at his foster brother, eyes guarded. “The clan will not be satisfied without blood of its own.”

“Balgrun…,” Balfric began with a warning.

“There’s no need for any of this,” Briya said. “There’s a panacea—a cure-all—at hand. It’s incredibly rare, but I can get it tonight,” she said.

“What is this?” the shaman asked.

“Moonroot,” said Briya. “It grows, lives, and dies but three nights a month under the full moon,” she said.

“I’ve never heard of it,” the shaman said, his doubt plain.

“It has to be prepared perfectly or it is mortal,” she said. “And it’s only useful three nights a month, so no one stocks it. But I can find it at the base of great boulders near running water under the shade of a mighty pine. There’s a place near here in the woods. We passed it coming in.”

The prince considered, and glanced at the shaman.

The shaman looked skeptical, but could only shrug.

“Well. If there’s a chance,” said the prince.

“Excellent. Let it be known that Briya of Mittland leaves tonight to gather the cure for your lord. Pass the word that the people should pray for a clear sky. Your father depends on it.”

The companions were watching her curiously. She shared a wink that only they could see.



After dusk, the witching hour approaching, Briya was allowed to depart the holdfast. Doubled guards patrolled the palisades, mere watchers over a locked barn whose horses had already bolted. But their gaze was turned outward, and as such missed the departing dark-cloaked shape going over the wall.

Briya carried a bright torch on her meandering journey into the dark. It didn’t take her long to find the boulder she wanted by the stream. She planted the torch then got to work digging with a loaned shovel.

A shadow detached itself from the surrounding dark and moved to the light’s edge. A tube was raised to the figure’s shrouded lips and it puffed a dart at Briya’s head. She ducked lazily, easily avoiding the projectile.

“Too easy,” she said. “The shadows and I have an understanding.” She grinned and drew her dagger.

“Better for you if you’d simply let the poison work,” said her assailant. He produced a wicked dagger, its edge glistening with black ichor. “This way is much messier.”

“Better if you’d used the right amount on Warlord Ulf. The bigger the man, the bigger the dose.”

“Oh, I’ve got the right dose now, bet on it.”

“Or not,” came Kattly’s voice.

The shadows fell away as the torch flared to incandescence. A circle of fire inscribed itself around the assassin as Volgr and Lydana emerged, weapons ready and advancing. Maelling completed the ambush, his bow knocked and ready.

The assassin, a wild-eyed man with a scraggly beard, took them all in, set his mouth in a line, and pulled a black vial from his belt. “For Jurgan’thun!” he toasted, popping the cork.

Briya reversed her grip and hurled her dagger spinning end over end. Its grip shattered the man’s hand, knocking the vial away.

*“No!”* he screamed, reaching for it, but the flames roared up.

“Volgr,” said Briya. “Truss him up. But search his packs first for the poison he used.”



They returned to the hall as conquering heroes. Briya’s plan had come off without a hitch. She handed the poison vial to the shaman, who was confident he could brew an antidote. “’Moonroot’,” he said, laughing and shaking his head. “I spent three hours poring over texts looking for mention of it in vain. ‘Moonroot’,” he said again, chuckling and shaking his head.

The cultist, deprived of his permanent silence and subjected to gruesome threats and the captain’s hammer-like fists, had come clean. Close questioning revealed that the cook had been subdued earlier in the day and stashed unconscious in the storehouse. After the attempted assassination, disposing of the cook was simple, and it was an easy matter to stay ahead of the loud-mouthed and frantic guards. Word of Briya’s ‘panacea’ had brought him out of hiding, however, and squarely into her trap.

When Ulf’s eyes opened two days later, it was to his son’s broad grin. “Father.”

“Balgrun. What has happened?”

The tale took some time to tell, but Ulf’s features hardened as it went. “War. And yet more troubles are brewing. We know it to be true.”

“None from this cult though,” said the prince.

“True. You have my thanks, companions, and that of my house. Now, I beg my leave. I must speak with my son. There are hard decisions to make, but his handling of this matter has made making them easier.”

Over the next two days, as the companions made ready to return to Wealdsfyrd and the final confrontation, word came down that Ulf of Hagtorn was stepping aside and leaving his son as warlord.

“Not sure what to make of that,” said Felerion.

Briya could only shrug. “I’ll let you know if I hear anything. After we’re done with this cult business, I’ll be coming back.”

“Oh?”

“Standing invitation,” she said mysteriously. She shouldered her pack and led the way into the wild.



10





Cold. Cold wind from a cold sky, itself deadened and gray. They hadn’t even paused at Wealdsfyrd, such was their haste. With the last of the issues in the Wildland handled, the companions trekked up and up by stony paths and steep inclines to the resting place of Jurgan’thun.

“We still don’t even know what we’re facing,” Volgr grunted. “God? Giant? Some other elder power?”

“Nothing I haven’t asked myself a thousand times since we started so long ago,” said Felerion.

“Hmph. The mountains. Bah. Give me a nice flat plain any day.”

“I am a choir to your sermon, dwarf,” said Felerion. No small amount of climbing had been involved to get so far up the path. “And we still don’t know how much farther to go.”

“Are you two still complaining?” Briya called from the back.

“Grousing,” said Volgr.

“Commentary,” said Felerion.

“I’ll give the both of you some commentary to grouse about,” she warned.

In the lead, Maelling halted, a hand up. “Quiet. Do you smell something?”

They all halted, sniffing.

Kattly nodded. “Cooking food? Meat, I think.”

“A nice pork roast,” said Volgr.

A voice screamed from overhead, *“Now!”*

The mountain rumbled and boulders began falling behind them.

“Avalanche!” Felerion yelled, but the boulders merely fell along the path in their wake, completely blocking them in.

“Up ahead!” the voice called again. *“Now!”*

More shaking, more rumbling. The companions rushed forward, suddenly understanding the trap. It was of no use.

Standing on the winding path above, a giant’s height upward or more, was a blond man in black robes. He laughed, long and loud, cavorting at his victory. Others joined him, humans mostly with the odd dwarf or two all with drawn bows, arrows nocked and ready. “Caught you!” he exulted. “After so long, hounding my steps, fouling my designs, and here you are! We need only have waited!”

“Okay, so you’ve got us,” Felerion called. “Who are you?”

“I suppose I can say, now that my victory is assured. You may call me Venfir. Or ‘master’, if you like. Soon all you see around you will bow to me!”

Felerion looked around, seeing only the Great Iron Tooth and its surrounding peaks. “Is that so?”

“Scoff if you wish. You’re ours, and I want you all alive to witness my triumph. Move to the upper boulder. Throw your weapons over, and we’ll throw you a line. The weaver’s staff and all your bows first.”

There was little choice. The companions complied, coming up one after the other to have their hands bound behind them in thick, scratchy coils.

“So,” he said standing before them. “Where is it?”

“Where’s what?” Felerion asked.

“My waystone. The one you stole.”

“Waystone?” Felerion asked. “What waystone?”

“Oh, the shiny rune thing?” Briya asked. “I sold it. Needed the coin.”

“Oh, that’s a shame,” said Felerion. “Inns are so expensive these days.”

“Yep. It’s criminal—”

“Shut up!” Venfir yelled.

“Master,” said one of the cultists searching Briya’s pack. He handed over the waystone.

Fanatical fire lit the blond man’s eyes as he grasped the heavy stone in his fist. “At last. The final piece! And you who sought to thwart me brought it! Oh, the delight. Oh, the irony!” He bashed Felerion across the face with a backhand given weight with the stone. “You know, that felt good,” he remarked, and did it again.

Felerion spat blood and a tooth. “That's all?”

Venfir smirked. “Bring them. It’s time, my faithful. Jurgan’thun awaits!”



A wide stony plateau lay before the door, perhaps two acres square. A central pavilion dominated, with a table set for a massive feast. The smell of roasting food became more apparent, with cook tents surrounding them and beasts on spits and grills sizzling away. Soups and breads and cheeses were laid out, stews steaming, and keg upon keg of ale.

“Must’ve taken months to get all that up here,” muttered Volgr.

“And without spoilage,” said Maelling.

“Quiet!” the cultist guarding them shouted.

Dominating it all were the great stone doors, the height of a giant, wide enough for a war column, emblazoned with the great curving runes that Felerion had seen when he first grasped the waystone so long ago.

Debris had once half-covered the door, long since cleared away. Small concave indentions lined the base, six of them, three per half, cleverly worked into the runes. Five of them held identical waystones. Venfir the blond leader held the last aloft. “Gather, my faithful!” he shouted in a great voice. “Our time of ascendance is at hand! Bind them to the stakes!”

The companions were seized and wrestled towards six thick wooden stakes, as big around as tree trunks. Volgr was immovable until a dagger threatened to take his eyes. He sighed, irritated, and let himself be led to his stake and bound.

The cultists, three dozen, all hooded in black with eyes alive with fanatical light, formed a ring around the doors. Venfir took the center, held up the waystone, and addressed them. “It has come. This day, at long last. Our bounty awaits behind the door. Our moment to bring Trudvang to its knees! Those who scoffed are dead! Those who doubted are buried! Those who hounded us are our captives!” Laughter rippled around the ring at the helpless companions. *“Let all who doubted and strayed the path now witness our triumph!!”* he screamed, spittle flecking his lips.

He lofted the waystone high, ran to the door, and shoved it into the final socket.

For a long moment, nothing happened. Then light streamed from stone to stone, filling the runework and scrollwork like silvery water. It flowed, brightening, connecting, and growing, until the entire door’s sigil blazed like a second sun.

The final sign appeared in shimmering azure, completing the rune: The Sign of Jurgan’thun.

“Jurgan-Thun!” they chanted. “Jurgan-Thun! Jurgan-Thun! Jurgan-Thun!” as the doors creaked in protest, ground like boulders, and tore open. “Jurgan-Thun! Jurgan-Thun! Jurgan-Thun!” Two pinpricks of liquid gold appeared in the absolute darkness of the tunnel beyond. A heavy thump rippled through the earth. Then another, and another. The pinpricks grew. Eyes. Great, glowing, golden eyes.

The cultists whipped into a frenzy. *“Jurgan-Thun! Jurgan-Thun! Jurgan-Thun!”* Smoke and ash puffed from the tunnel, the reek of brimstone and death. The beast’s head emerged.

A dragon. A Jarnwurm of ancient legend. One of the great iron beasts not seen in the world since the elves and gods banished them millennia ago.

Jurgan’thun heaved its vast bulk from the cavern, the largest dragon Felerion had ever seen. It surveyed the bowing cultists, the bound prisoners, the pavilion and feast. Its vast wings stretched to their utmost. It raised its head skyward and roared—such a terrible sound! It shook the mountain and sky. It echoed across the land for hundreds of leagues, a greeting and warning to the world that had not heard his like since the Age of Dreams.

Felerion’s ears rang from the onslaught, and for several minutes after. The cultists had lain prone and some grasped their ears, stunned into senselessness.

“It is not time,” said a great, vast voice. When the dragon spoke it was as a volcano rumbling, distant thunder warning of a storm. “It is *not* time,” it said again, accusing. “Who brings forth Jurgan’thun?”

“It is I, oh mighty god, greatest of your kind,” said Venfir from his knees. “Your legend has but grown with age! The offerings are brought, and the world stands ready to bow before your splendor!”

The great dragon’s eyes watched the priest unmoving. It sat still as the mountain, smoke trailing from its nostrils. “Indeed?”

“Yes,” said Venfir. “Yes!” he said getting to his feet, gesturing. “The lands are all primed for your coming, oh great one! The Wildland tears itself apart in civil war. Fylges is crushed beneath a goblin horde! A troll king rides to war under your banner from the Trollridge Mountains! The seers of Arji know your terrible wings shall darken the moon! All is laid ready for you! Done by us, your humble, faithful servants. All we ask is to share the smallest amount of your power. To aid you in ruling your vast empire.”

Felerion could hardly believe his ears.

Jurgan’thun considered the tiny prattling thing before him. He lowered down, putting his eye at head height. “Hmm,” it said, thinking.

“Ah,” said Felerion. “Excuse me, but might the offering say something?”

The dragon blinked, his gaze full on Felerion. Felerion felt a tremble begin in his spine, but stilled it.

*“Silence!”* Venfir shouted.

Jurgan’thun hissed at the cultist. “Know your place, insect.”

Venfir threw himself to the ground, groveling. “A thousand and one apologies, oh great one.”

Jurgan’thun studied Felerion like something it had found wriggling in the dirt. “Speak.”

“With all respect to your immense being, Jurgan’thun, this man here is lying through his teeth.”

Venfir shot to his feet, face mottled with rage, “You—”

Jurgan’thun hissed, and Venfir instantly shut his mouth.

“You see,” Felerion said. “Everything he set in motion, we put a stop to.”

“That’s the truth of it,” said Maelling. “The Wolf Queen in the Wildland will not war on mankind.”

“And the civil war was stillborn when their assassins failed,” said Briya.

“The troll king sits idle in his hall, fat on their bribe, but doing nothing. He has no respect for the cult,” said Felerion.

“The goblin warlord died with my blade in its throat,” said Lydana. “His own kind now war among themselves, and human lands are untouched.”

“The Arji seer didn’t even remark your coming,” said Volgr. “Like you said yourself, it’s not time. Can’t see how something as mighty and world-ending as yourself wouldn’t plague the world with visions of its imminent doom.”

Jurgan’thun leaned close, and drew in a deep, windy breath. It took in their scent as its lungs expanded, eyeing them in turn. It exhaled slowly, and turned towards Venfir. “They do not smell of lies.”

“No! No, oh powerful lord! It’s not true! At least, not as they say it! I could prove it, but… it would take time!”

“Time to clean up your mistakes?” Kattly asked. She scoffed. “You expect Jurgan’thun to do the work for you. Even old Nifelfang thought your errand foolish.”

Jurgan’thun’s eyes flared at mention of the undead dragon. A deep growl rumbled the mountainside.

“My lord! She lies! Nifelfang was but a tool in our belt! The blind old wurm told us exactly what we needed! A great feast! The waystones! All of it!”

“Nifelfang spoke no lie,” said Jurgan’thun. “A feast indeed, and a liar’s hide for seasoning.”

*“What!”* Venfir leaped to his feet, but to naught.

Jurgan’thun’s bite came suddenly, swift as a viper. In one snap the cultist Venfir was in two halves, and one quick gulp later he became part of his ancient god. The cultists rose, stunned, horrified, and then died in droves as Jurgan’thun’s molten breath bathed them in magma. The dragon roared, stunning all within hearing and charged, wings a squall, breath hot as a thousand suns, its jaws the crack of doom.

The dragon smashed the pavilion, devoured what food it wished, shattered every structure and buffeted the lot off the mountainside.

Its rampage finished, the dragon surveyed the shattered ruins on the stony plateau, satisfied. It stalked past the bound companions. “Leave this place. Trouble me not. Such is the will of Jurgan’thun.”

The dragon rumbled as it turned and stalked into its mountain, its footsteps receding like distant thunder in fall.

No one spoke for several long minutes after the last faint thud vanished.

“Well,” said Volgr. He flexed and his ropes snapped. “I guess that worked.”



Wealdsfyrd. Felerion’s appearance along with his companions had set the town abuzz and children running.

“Where have you been, Felerion? Did you hear the sound? Who are these people with you? Is that a real dwarf? Was that sound a giant? No, silly, my father said it’s a mountain that throws fire!”

The scurrying kids and their ceaseless questions put a smile on the weary bard’s face. “Come to the tavern, children, and I’ll introduce all my companions. We have a tale for you. One of dragons!”

That stunned them for only a moment. “Oooooohh!! Dragons! I knew it! You saw a dragon, didn’t you! Didn’t you?!”

The tow-headed boy looked puzzled. “But you said if you saw a dragon, you’d be first at its feast. Was there a feast?”

Briya was first to start laughing, followed shortly by Volgr. Maelling felt his sides would burst as he leaned on Kattly supported by her staff. Even Lydana, usually stern of face, couldn’t stop tears streaming down her cheeks as she laughed. Felerion wiped at his eyes, still grinning. “Yes, children, there was indeed a feast. Come gather around, and let me tell you the tale….”



And now that this tale is concluded, we'd like to ask: what did you think of this novella, dear adventurers? We hope you enjoyed following the adventures of the intrepid Heroes of the core box and look forward to hearing from you!

The legend goes on.