

“Who is this child?” Asked the imposing man as he scowled down at Twigg.

Twigg shrunk behind Julius, clinging to his arm.

“She's my assistant.” Replied Julius. The man scowled.

“You aren't getting more money.” He said, bluntly. “We asked for a single trapbreaker. We won't pay for two.”

“That's fine.” replied Julius blandly. “But we're a set, so she comes or neither of us do.” The man scowled for a long time, offering no answer.

“Oh for sky's sake, Gorham, it's fine!” Blurted Gorham's cloaked companion. “Let him bring the girl so we can get going!” Her voice seemed to startle the imposing man, who quickly turned to face his associate.

“We have to work out the pecking order...” He moped.

“The pecking order is I'm in charge and everyone else does as I say, and I say it's fine.” The hooded woman barked. Gorham seemed on the verge of tears, but sat down next to the wirey man who had remained silent so far.

“Chay.” Said the woman pointing to herself. “Gorham, Bund. We lost our last breaker, and two good men last time we tried looting the place we're going. If you're willing to put this girl in danger on your head be it.”

Julius nodded.

“Fine then,” said Chay. “into the cart. We'll be there by nightfall and get started at dawn.”

Twigg squeezed Julius's arm as the others walked away.

“Don't worry,” He said reassuringly. “We can take care of ourselves.”

The cart jostled down the road for a very long time before before Bund chose to speak. He alone rode in the back of the cart with Twigg and Julius.

“The girl,” He asked. “how old?” Julius hesitated, but couldn't see the harm in being truthful.

“Seventeen or so.” He replied.

“Both of you have the gift...” Bund mused.

“Magic?” said Julius. “Yes, a little.”

“The girl... Much stronger than you.” Bund continued.

“She had more teaching than I did.” replied Julius.

Bund was silent for a long moment. “Wasn't a question.”

Julius and Twigg look at one another. Not sure what to make of this.

“As strong as Chay... Stronger maybe. In one so young it's a danger. Needs to learn from a master.”

“It's not really an option for us.” Replied Julius. “We have to eat too.”

There was a long silence. Bund turned away to stare out the window flap. “Pity...”

Scene missing

Later on the group arrives at a forrest tavern run, and patronized almost exclusively by, elves. Havent written the bridging parts yet. Wrote this all in a go at 3AM one morning after waking up for no obvious reason.

“These aren't the polite city elves you're used to, city dweller.” Growled Chay. “They're wilod, like they used to be. A part of the wood and capable of savagery like all creatures of the wood.”

“Even deer?” Asked Julius.

“What?” Asked Chay.

“Are deer capable of savagery?” Aske Julius sarcastically. “They're creatures of the wood.”

Chay was awestruck by the rogue's impertinance. Gorham chimed in happily, as the conversation had turned to something he actually knew about for a change.

“A buck will gore you to death in a mate rage, and a doe will protect a foal with a fury just as dangerous.” He grinned over his ale.

“Never take a wild animal for tame, or safe. They ain't. They'll do you over as quick as you like if you let your guard down.”

“Interesting.” Replied Julius, turning toward Twigg. “We've learned something valuable today. Mark it, my friend.”

“Yes, master!” Chirped Twigg across her bowl of soup.

Distracted by the conversation none of them noticed the burly elf cross the room. He was suddenly there at the table glowering at them all. Julius and Twigg barely reacted, while the others stiffened and put hand to weapon handles discreetly. After a long moment he spoke to Julius.

“You, where did you steal that bow, human?” His sword hand was ready to draw. A fact Julius took notice of.

“I earned my bow, friend.” He replied calmly. The elf sharpened his gaze.

“You've come to a dangerous place to tell your lies.” The elf said sternly.

“I retrieved it from a forsaken hole in Dorelia.” Said Julius, reaching slowly behind himself. “A place where few would dare set foot in. It's previous owner hadn't need of it for well over a hundred years, I expect.”

Julius carefully handed the bow across the table. The elf looked

over the others before taking his hand off his sword. Julius noticed a few other elves taking an interest in the bow.

“No weapon of elven make would accept a human as a master.” The elf said, drawing one of his own arrows and aiming at a beam well across the hall. “It's wasted on your kind.”

He let the arrow slip. It spun wildly around, veering off course enough to scatter a table. Although the arrow arced away from anything living before lodging itself in a windowsill.

“Impossible...” Gaped the elf as several other came to inspect the bow. “I haven't missed a shot that easy since I was a boy.”

“Perhaps you don't know elven weapons as well as you think.” Said Julius, leaning back in his chair.

The elf wheeled on him in a rage and drew so quickly that none of his companions had time enough to do anything. Not that Twigg even tried. She casually ate her soup and watched the entire affair transpire without so much as flinching.

As soon as his fingers released the arrow it splintered with a resounding crack. Several pieces shot backwards, causing the elf to drop the bow and topple to the ground. The assembled crowd gasped, including Julius's employers.

A very old looking elf stepped forward and picked up the bow.

“I haven't seen such a thing since before most of these children were born...” He said, as he inspected the weapon. “A bow that can't be turned on its master. However did you find such a thing, boy?”

“I think it was lonely.” Smiled Julius.

The old elf looked shocked, then let out a long genuine laugh. “I think you might be right! May I test your weapon, child?”

Julius nodded.

“I think this weapon deserves a test under the light of the moon.”

A few minutes later nearly the entire hall had emptied onto the road.

“It may surprise you to hear this,

“ Said the old man. “But my son is actually one of the finest archers in the world, in spite of what happened inside.”

The angry elf stood, embarrassed looking, beside his father.

“Fire an illuminated arrow, Calen.” Ordered his father. The young elf obeyed without a word. He fired an arrow that glowed brightly as soon as it left his bow. It sped away at a steep angle, high into the sky. A moment later the elder elf drew Julius's bow, which instantly lengthened into a longbow, glowing a faint green as it did so. He let slip an arrow of his own which sped into the night as quietly as a sigh.

A second later the brightly glowing arrow split neatly into two halves and fell, light diminishing, from the air.

“Friend of elves,” Said the old man, turning to Julius. “I would know your name.”

“Julius Drywood, sir.” He replied, bowing.

“Bowen Featherfinger.” The old man bowed in return. “When you're as old as I am it's a rare blessing to see something you haven't seen before. And I've never seen a bow of the forgotten arts with a human master.”

“What do you call you weapon?” asked someone from the crowd.

“Sure Shot.” replied Julius sheepishly.

The elf, and old woman, took the bow and held it a moment. “It's name is here.” She said, pointing to some script on the handle. She chuckled as she handed it back. “Do you read our language as well, human?”

“Barely a letter.” Admitted Julius.

“Amazing...” The woman smiled. “The bow is called Elianth Ora Toge. In your tongue it would be Sure Of Shot.”

The crowd was suitably impressed by this seeming coincidence.

Twigg leaned in close to Julius, pulling down his ear. “Did you know that, master?”

“I had no idea.” He admitted. “It just came to me one day. I wasn't in the habit of naming weapons before that.”

A moment later Calen, the angry elf, stood stiffly before the pair. With a very pained expression he spoke. “I have judged you unfairly. Only a true hearted man could master a weapon this

excellent. For it to have chosen you is... Exceptional.”

“Chosen me?” Said Julius.

“old weapons, the ones of lost crafts, have powers unlike the crude weapons we make now.” Explained Calen. “Some are said to be infused with spirits, and magics unknown to us now. Craftsmen and smiths who fell in the days of tears took their secrets with them.”

“I knew it was old and rare, but its true value was unknown to me.” Said Julius, regarding his bow anew.

“None can wield that bow who you count as a foe.” Said Calen.

“Why it chose you none can tell, but legends say that only the true of vision and wise of heart carry weapons such as yours. They are qualities we rarely see in your kind.”

“Of that I'm sure, I'll do my best to live up to the legacy of this bow.” Said Julius. “But, just out of curiosity, why don't you take it from me? Surely someone among you is worthy of it.”

“That weapon will serve you till your death, Anyone who would claim it by force would find it no more use than any stick from the ground.” Said Calen. “no one worthy would take it from your hands until your body had returned to the earth. Or so it is said. In truth most of old weapon lore is just that. Stories passed down and mutated by time.”

“Good to know.” Said Julius. “I hope we remain a team for a good long while. It'd be a shame if Sureshot spent another hundred years or more laying in the dust again.”

The rest of the evening was spent in closer company with the elves. Stories of the local lore, warnings, and advice for surviving encounters with straggling creatures of all types.

“The forest is wild and alive.” Bowen cautioned. “It took back acre upon acre of land men once claimed in so few years it speaks to the presence of forces more powerful than mortals understand. Even we children of the land go with care through the deep places.”

“Would any of your number be interested in coming along as a guide?” Asked Julius. “I value my life above potential treasures.”

The others were within earshot of his question and visibly stiffened at the mention of further dividing any spoils. It didn't go unnoticed by the old one. Perhaps to spite them he suggested that there were adventurous elves in their company who might jump at the chance to improve their circumstances.

A little later Chay cornered Julius.

“Who told you it was okay to recruit these elves?” She asked quietly.

“I took the initiative myself.” He replied. “You three have already proven that travel in the forest is not your strong suit. Your woodsman has scarcely traveled 4 miles from his lands.”

Julius motioned casually towards Gorham. The burly oaf was loosing badly, but graciously at darts.

“And your... I don't even know what his function is. Creepy guy? Doesn't seem to have much skill beyond backstabbing and purse

cutting. We started this little venture with you questioning my pedigree, but I seem to be the only one with any actual experience in the world outside the walls!”

“I-” Chay replied, taken aback. “We've worked together on several jobs!”

“Robbing houses? Looting graves?” Julius shot back. “What exactly do you have experience doing?”

“Never you mind!” She replied. “But if you're going to lash out over the matter then have your mud covered guide! Their pay comes from your cut!”

“Maybe I should forgo the guide and wait for you to get yourselves killed! Then there will be plenty for me to spread around however I choose! I'm starting to think you needed my services a great deal more than you let on!”

Chay was speechless. For a few moments her harsh face melted into one of genuine worry and hesitation. Eventually she regained her composure.

“You're deluding yourself, child.” She replied shakily. “We can more than handle ourselves. See that you don't forget that.”

With that she excused herself and melted into the crowd.

“Your companions are ill chosen...” A voice commented as Julius watched Chay retreat.

Julius turned towards the speaker, an elven maiden with pale skin,

but dark hair. She was glancing at his associates with a calculating eye.

“Except the little one. A lover perhaps?” She asked.

“More like a sister.” He replied. “It's a long story.”

“Not as long as you think it is I suspect.” She smiled. “I am Coraphelia Skydark. You may call me Cora.”

“Thank goodness.” Joked Julius, taking her hand. “How much of that did you hear?”

“I think you'll find that almost everyone within three meters heard the entirety of your conversation.” She winced. “You forget where you are, I think.”

Julius closed his eyes and tapped two fingers between his brows.

“Wood elves...” He muttered.

“Our hearing is known to be... exceptional.” Cora smiled. “Your friend didn't do herself any favors by calling us mud covered.”

“She's no friend of mine.” He replied. “She's an employer, nothing more.”

“You should choose your employers with more care then, I should think.” Cora offered.

“I keep telling the guildmaster that but he keeps giving me these offers.” Explained Julius. “I think he's trying to get me killed...”

“You're an odd man, even for a human.” Cora laughed. “But I think I'd like to join your party if you would have me.”

“Really?” Julius replied incredulously.

“Indeed!” She replied. “The elders think you travel under a unique star. I'd like to see where it takes me.”

The woman seemed trustworthy and earnest and, as no other elves seemed interested in joining the group, Julius essentially hired her as his assistant. Chay was adamant that any pay the elf received would come from the cut he was already splitting with Twigg. Julius reckoned that treasure had little value to a dead man anyway.

Cora had extensive knowledge of the elf paths and a better understanding of what lay off of them than most. The Skydarks were named thus for staying in places where leaves were so dense the sun never reached the ground.

When the sun rose the party set out, afoot, since no roads past the inn would accommodate the cart. They left it in the care of Bowen, fully assured that no one would dare put finger to it under the watch of his family.

The trek inward was pleasant enough. The trees kept the sun off of them, but weren't so dense as to make things unnerving. Cora led, Julius and Twigg came near after and the three others lagged behind. Gorham in particular made a point to voice his displeasure with walking loudly, which caused Chay to scold him for agreeing to something he apparently didn't understand. Bund loped along in near total silence.

After a very long day of, increasingly difficult terrain, even the elf

was ready to set up camp. Gorham continued to grumble to the point that Julius set his tent up for him just to shut him up for a moment. Chay lit a fire and Twigg helped make some food. They were sitting down to it when Julius realized Cora was missing. He was about to say something when she strode into view.

“We're within the hunting range of at least two groups of something.” She declared grimly.

“What kind of somethings?” Asked Gorham.

“My best guess is Kobolds.” She replied. “Deep forest tribes are very good at keeping themselves obscured. It's possible they're already aware of us.”

“Don't they usually avoid humans and elves?” Asked Julius.

“Aye, but if they think they have an advantage they have been known to raid.” Cora nodded. “We'll need to set a watch.”

“I can cast a scream charm around the camp.” Said Chay. “That should be enough to put fear back in their little hearts if they get curious.”

“Excuse some animals are drawn to noises like that. Can you make it more of a bellow, or roar?” Asked Julius.

Chay looked embarrassed. “No, I can manage a range of shrieks, but they all sound artificial.”

“I'll take first watch. Four hour shifts.” Said Bund, emotionlessly.

“It's better if we do it in pairs.” Said Cora. Her words hung a moment.

“Fine!” Exclaimed Gorham. “I'll take first too.”

“I'll take second.” Said Julius. “I usually don't sleep well in the wild anyway. “

“Then I'll take second as well.” Added Cora. “Chay and Twigg can rest properly since they're mages.” She looked at Twigg for a moment and added. “Right?”

“Sort of.” Replied Twigg.

“That's settled then.” Concluded Chay. I suggest you two turn in early. We need keen senses in the dark.”

Night was already falling. After finishing their meal Twigg, Julius and Cora retired to Julius's tent.

“I don't usually sleep inside anything.” Cora mused. “I suppose I should if I'm, going to take a watch. Can I sleep here? There's room enough for three, don't you think?”

There was, but not much more.

“We can manage that. Can't we Twigg?” Asked Julius. She nodded energetically.

“I'd feel more... comfortable if I could...” Cora mumbled.

“Come again?” Asked Julius.

“I have a little magic.” Said Cora. “It makes me feel better in the forest. Would you mind if I cast it on the tent?”

“I don't see a problem with that.” Said Julius. “Do you need anything for it?”

“A few sticks laid along the walls is all.” She replied.

In a few moments a few branches were braced against the outside of the tent. Cora made a few gestures and spoke a few words. The limbs suddenly planted themselves and wove new branches along the sides of the tent. In a few moments it was hard to tell a tent had been set there at all.

“It's a wall spell.” Explained Cora. “But I was never good enough to do it properly. All I can manage is a little bit of camouflage and armor. It's saved me from harm on more than one occasion though.”

Twigg bounded inside gleefully. Their little tent had been turned into a tiny cabin as far as she was concerned. As he slid himself in Julius had to admit it felt much safer than a canvas strung over some poles.

They could still hear the fire crackling and the others talking as they settled in to sleep. It came easily.

The sound of footsteps woke Julius a number of hours later. Slow methodical plodding steps. Bund. The dour man leaned down and tugged on Julius's foot.

“Your watch is next.” He said evenly. The sound was enough to wake Cora, but Twigg remained asleep. She had been wedged

snuggly between the two and couldn't have been happier about it. They slipped carefully out of the tent to avoid rousing her. Bund was already slipping into his tent when they stepped into the fire light. It was smaller than when they left. A few more branches were added and soon it was much larger than it was before. Its light stabbed forcefully into the darkness. Julius could see a few pairs of eyes react to it in surprise.

“They're out there.” commented Cora.

“A handful maybe.” Julius agreed. “Few enough that they could move in close in the dark...”

“Don't let on that we know.” Said Cora. “if they think we don't notice we can get a better count.”

Julius sat down casually by the fire, looking past it into the trees beyond. Cora did the same roughly opposing him.

“About twenty behind you.” He said quietly.

“twelve or so...” Replied Cora. “Ever fought them before?”

“No, but I've seen them fight.” Said Julius. “Alone they aren't much, but they overwhelm you with numbers.”

“Exactly.” Said Cora. “And if there are this many we can see there are twice that many we can't...”

“Hopefully, if we look alert, they'll move on.” Said Julius. “I hate fighting them.”

“They can be very dangerous in large groups.” Observed Cora.

“Yeah, but I just don't like killing them...” Said Julius.

“You don't?” Said Caora quizically. “Most humans jump at the chance to exterminate a colony of Kobold.”

“Well, most humans have never seen a Kobold village.” Replied Julius. “They may not be as smart a people, but they have families. I've seen them mourn their dead. It's pitiful. Little dog like families wailing at the sky.”

“I've heard rumors, but never seen a Kobold village with my own eyes. How did you manage it?” She asked.

“I... got lost in the woods.” He replied sheepishly. “I only found my way out by following a group of females and pups to a river I recognized. It took 3 days, so I saw a lot of their little encampment. Keeping them from smelling me was no easy task.”

“No, I expect not. She smiled. “An unwashed human becomes offensive quickly... Although I'm inclined to think you have a little elf in you.”

“i assure you, I'm completely human.” Julius grinned. “Just a strange one who doesn't like killing needlessly.”

“I'm not sure if I would call you strange. Interesting maybe, possibly exceptional... I think I might like to have a little human in me when this is over.” She smiled wickedly.

Julius chuckled uncomfortably, smiled, and went very red. Cora

giggled.

“I think,” Julius said, after a long pause. “That I can scare them off.”

“How can you do that?” She asked.

“They have a particular call they make when something dangerous is near. I think I can mimic it. They would scatter if they heard it when I was observing them.”

“By all means, learned human,” She smiled. “If it keeps us out of a fight I'm all for it.” Julius nodded.

Cupping his hands to his mouth he let out a shrill bark like noise. Something like a dog in distress or afraid. He did it quickly twice then once long and slow.

A call came back. A series of yips. Here and there, all around the camp they echoed. Then silence. Julius made his call again. This time the sound of the yipping came from further away, an in one direction.

“They've left...” Gaped Cora.

“I expect they left a scout or two. We shouldn't let down our guard till morning.” Julius replied seriously. “They'll be curious about this encounter now.”

“I suppose so.” She replied. “They seem much smarter than my kind has ever given them credit for.”

“Elves have never been short on arrogance...” Said Julius. “Present

company excluded.”

“No, you should include me.” Cora laughed. “I was very arrogant in my youth, and still have bouts of it even now.”

“I know it's impolite... but can I ask you your age?” Julius said awkwardly.

“I am approaching my one hundred and third year.” Cora said matter of factly. “By human reckoning I am considered middle aged.” To his eyes she looked no older than twenty, if that. “I'm impressed that you've managed to educate yourself so well in your short time.”

“You're almost four times older than me.” Julius marveled.

“And I've rarely strayed from the forest.” She added. “I must admit, from time to time I've thought about seeing more of the world. It was more dangerous when I was young, but it's settled a lot since then.”

“Did you... see the rise of the necromancers?” He asked.

“We rarely had dealings with the world outside these mountains in those days.” She said, seeming to look back in time. “By the time we realized how much danger there was it was almost too late. They wanted fresh bodies and were too scattered and few to suit their foul plans.”

“I was too young when the call to arms was raised, but I lost friends and family in the years that followed. Not a pleasant time to come of age in. Of course there hasn't been a necromancy in a very long

time. And no major attacks except for the assault on the walled city, but that was put down, as even you are old enough to know.”

Julius nodded grimly.

“My father was in the city that day. Helped defend it. Saw the red maiden repel the horde at the gates. I wish I had chosen to go with him. It breaks my heart to think of those poor people attacked without warning.”

“I'm sure you would have been a great help.” Julius offered.

“I tried to be after the word reached us.” Cora continued. “I spent a year felling trees to help rebuild. Even rode in with the shipments a few times. Human settlements are beautiful, even if they do seem a bit cold sometimes.”

“Some of us have minds of stone.” Said Julius.

“And they've infected the city elves.” Scowled Cora. “Distasteful, creatures. It seems like they only live in the cities to spend their time heaping scorn on other people.”

“The old families at least.” Offered Julius. “I know some very decent elves who've never set foot in a forest.”

“I find that hard to believe.” She laughed.

“I like to give everyone the benefit of the doubt.” Said Julius. “Of course I've nearly been knifed in the back more times than I can count, so maybe the one with the problem is me.”

Cora laughed heartily, then pulled Julius into a very long kiss.

The sun seemed, very kindly, to take its time rising the next morning. Julius was up before anyone else and made a sweep around the camp. There was evidence of the kobold, but they hadn't been a large number. By the looks of it the party had already passed the settlement and wouldn't be bothered by them again most likely. He sat down on a mossy stump and gazed out into the hazy forest.

“You had sex with the elf, didn't you.”

The sound of another being speaking casually into his ear caused Julius to yelp and skitter across the ground, even as his mind was recognizing the voice.

“TWIGG!” He gasped. “What have I told you about that!?”

“You did...” She replied slyly from her perch on the stump.

“Naughty master will bring ruin upon us.”

“I will not...” He replied standoffishly. “It just happened. I can't help it if there's chemistry between she and I.”

“Chemistry causes explosions...” Twigg retorted with cocked eyebrows.

“Oh what do you care anyway?” Said Julius, as he picked himself up from the dirt.

“We never work for people I can mix with.” She stated bluntly.

“Twigg wants to mix herself chemically.”

“You- You, young lady, are too... Young for that sort of thing.”
Stuttered Julius.

“Elf is older than you by four.” She replied dryly.

“That's different.” he stammered. “We're both old enough to make choices about who we... mingle with. She's just been of age much, much, longer than me.”

Twigg scowled. “UN-FAIR.”

“Well, next time I'll try and get a job from someone with a cute son. Maybe you can hold hands, or whatever it is you do at that age.”

“Do whatever I want...” She muttered.

“What was that?” He asked.

“I'll do whatever I want, Master!” She said clearly.

“Calling me master isn't what I had a problem with, Twigg...” Julius said as his eyes rolled so hard you could almost hear it.

“Twigg can do what she wants.” she replied, nose in the air.

“I'm not saying you can't, it's just...” Julius was nearing territory he wasn't comfortable with. “At your age you don't... Understand things the same way as... Older times.”

“Master is not much older than Twigg...”

“Yes. Yes... But I am older and have made mistakes-”

“Twigg was there. She knows.”

This wasn't going to end in his favor. He'd known that the moment he started. The dynamic of their relationship was nebulous at best, and he feared sometimes that she was considerably smarter than he. He knew that it was a bad idea to bed party members, but when faced with a tunic full of plump elf breast reason seemed to flee.

“Let's not fight over this.” He sighed heavily “I'm sure when your time comes you'll be wise enough to make the right choices.”

“Yes.” Twigg smiled. “Twigg is very wise. Much more than master.”

“Yeah, well don't rub it in.”

“Twigg will leave the rubbing it in to master.” She grinned widely. “He loves to rub IT in.” With that she bounded back toward camp. Great peals of laughter trailing along behind her.

“This is going to make things much more awkward...” He muttered, rubbing his temples.

Back at camp no one seemed concerned with anything that had happened the night before. Cora shot him a few coy glances, but was otherwise completely normal. Her looks made it easy to forget that she was experienced in the ways of things far beyond his years. Julius tried to go about his business in a way that looked like he didn't feel out of his depth. Twigg, who would look at Cora, then at him and giggle, wasn't helping.

The terrain was annoying. Slabs of cracked stone, barely held in place by crumbling sod, were becoming more and more prevalent.

The trees were more sporadic, the air thinner. Pine needles punished anyone who slipped and put a hand down to steady themselves. As the day wore on the veneer of civility began to thin. All but Cora were scraped and sore. Luckily Twigg spied the remains of a road. After an hour or so they were at the base of a ruined structure. The cobbles gradually improved, until they were simply strolling down a path.

“This stonework isn't dwarven.” Remarked Julius, inspecting a mile marker. “I don't recognize the style.”

“This is elvish, this is dwarven...” Said Cora, pointing to markings on the stone. “But the one on top isn't something I recognize. An old human language perhaps? Your languages have changed a lot over time, and you do like to separate yourselves from one another.”

“It's Cenrotic.” Said Chay. “A human language, as you've guessed. Almost no one speaks it now, let alone reads it.”

“Do you?” Asked Julius.

“I can read a little, and speak conversationally, not that there's anyone to speak to it in.” She replied.

“I've never heard the word before.” Said Cora. “Not even from elders.”

“It's all but forgotten, and the places where it was spoken are thought to be cursed now. Haunted by a people brought low and scattered to the winds.” Said Chay. “My mother used to tell me stories about the fall. Elves, Dwarves, men, creatures of all kinds, banding together to wipe out the Cenrotians.”

“Why did they wipe them out?” Asked Twigg.

“They thought they were too powerful, and they weren't wrong.” Chay replied. “They had magics all other races feared, skill at crafting even the dwarves were envious of, and a connection to the world Elves despised.”

“That doesn't sound right...” Muttered Cora.

“All people, even the Elves in their tall trees, fear power, and will turn violent in the face of it.” Remarked Chay coldly. “Even the oldest fear to speak the name Cenrotia. They remember though. That's how I came to know of this place. We'll all walk away with wealth beyond measure if we can open the vault.”

“I've heard that before.” Said Julius. “And yet here I am...”

“That's a sad sentiment coming from someone who carries a legendary elven bow.” Laughed Cora.

“The bow was an incremental improvement.” Replied Julius. “I keep being promised a life of idle comfort and not getting it is all I'm saying.”

“Humans wither without purpose, why would you want that?” She smiled.

“I'd at least like to try it...” Frowned Julius.

“So would Twigg!” Exclaimed Twigg.

“Then we'd better forge ahead!” Laughed Cora.

“Indeed.” Said Chay.

With that they strode down the path after the rest of the party, leaving Twigg and Julius gazing at the stone marker.

“What's wrong, Master?” She asked.

“This writing... It seems familiar somehow.” He relied grimly.

“It looks mean.” Remarked Twigg.

“Yeah... Keep your guard up, kid. I think we've fallen in with a bad crowd.”

The path continued sloping slowly upwards for a long time. The entire group was beginning to feel the effects of the terrain, even the light footed elf. As the sun began to dip near the mountain tops they crested a hill and looked down. Golden rays of setting sunlight passed slowly across a valley sunken, and hidden, by the tall hills and peaks. In the valley sat a city of stone, polished, but overgrown with mounds of deposited dirt and plants strong enough to survive the climate. Evidence of conflict was spattered across the streets. Walls broken, crumbling, where projectiles had made gaping holes.

“Amazing...” whispered Twigg.

“Unbelievable.” Said Julius. “A city hidden in plain sight...”

“It- It's untouched...” Gaped Chay. “Exactly like my mother said...”

The sun began to dip down further and further. The rays of light

drifted across the city, leaving more and more shrouded in darkness.

“We need a fire.” Said Corra. “It's going to be cold”

“That house looks to be in decent shape.” Said Gorham, pointing to a structure not too far from their position. “If we're quick we can have a warm night, and safe too.”

With the sunlight quickly ebbing away the troupe hustled down the valley slope. The path had been destroyed completely in places. Evidence of wooden structures, likely razed, lined the edges of the road.

In some places they could see bones, some with flesh still visible, preserved by the cold, dry, conditions. As they drew closer it became more frequent, and the remains more varied.

“They... they just left them, master...” Whispered Twigg as she clung to Julius's sleeve.

Julius grunted a reply. Chay hadn't been lied to. These people had been decimated and left to rot.

“This is brutal...” He muttered under his breath.

All save for Bund seemed disturbed by the evidence of massacre. Eventually they all began to focus on the road and nothing more. A slow wind moved through the valley, and for a few moments a sound not unlike slow breathing echoed all around. The entire city seemed to sigh. The last few rays of light slipped away as they reached the door of the intact stone house . A wooden door once occupied a wooden frame set in the stone, but it had been apparently blown

apart. Charred splinters and chunks were all that remained; blown in by some sort of explosion. Chay conjured a light with her staff. A skeleton lay in tatters across a stone table. Under it a smaller one. Twigg choked down a sob. Even Gorham was taken aback. While the others stood in disgusted awe Bund gathered some ancient tarps from further in and set about clearing the bodies away. His stoic actions seemed to break the spell on the others and they began helping. In a few moments the remains had been set outside. Julius set a fire in the stone fireplace using a cantrip he knew; carefull not to let anyone see him use it. Chay found candles and lit them in sconces set in the walls. Gorham swept away an age of dust with Twigg tidying up behind him.

In time they realized Corra and Bund weren't accounted for. They looked around for a moment before noticing the sound of singing drifting quietly in from outside. A short distance from the home Bund and Corra had set the bones and tarp alight. To the surprise of the others they were singing a common funeral song together.

“He's got a pretty voice...” Remarked Twigg.

Apart from Chay they all gathered around and joined in. After they had all sung a verse together Bund passed his hand slowly through the flame. It came out unscathed.

“They won't trouble us...” He said in his empty tone. “They've gone on, if they hadn't before.”

He grasped a handful of dirt and tossed it into the fire. Gorham tossed down two copper coins. Corra tossed in two arrows. Twigg wasn't familiar with the custom and looked up at Julius quizzically. “It's a local custom.” He answered. “Gifts at a parting.” Twigg

rummaged around in her pockets and produced two candies, then tossed them to the flames. Julius poked around in his and found a fish hook and a small incense cone. He gave them to the flames.

Bund and Gorham had wandered inside, so Twigg felt safer asking her next question aloud.

“Why did the scary one not give them anything?”

“His gift was the fire, Twigg.” Answered Julius. “Fire and rest.”

“The quiet one is strange.” Remarked Corra. “I wouldn't have guessed he would follow the old ceremonies. He said he didn't want bad blood between our houses...”

“Well, we are using their house, I guess.” Said Julius. “Although it's not like they were using it...”

“They lay there a long time, with no rituals. That's a recipe for unquiet spirits.” Replied Corra.

“I suppose so, but if I die in a horrible way I don't intend to linger.” Said Julius.

“That's good news for whoever finds your bones.” Said Corra, turning to the house. “It'll save them a lot of trouble as they pack up your things.”

“And welcome to them they will be.” Said Julius. “If I die on a job, and not in my bed, in my mansion, then all this stuff wasn't worth the bother of lugging it around anyway.”

“Fair enough.” Laughed Corra. “Come inside and leave these to their doom. We've done all we can for them.”

“Indeed...” He replied. “C'mon Twigg.”

She didn't stir right away.

“Are you okay, kid?” He asked. After a long pause she replied.

“Did my parents get presents when they died, or grandma and grandpa?” She asked. Julius was stunned momentarily.

“We don't usually do that where we're from, Twigg. It's just an old superstition the people in the outer places have.”

Twigg made no move.

“We didn't have anything to give up anyway...”

“I remember...” She sighed.

“Without any proof of who we were I couldn't even get your inheritance...”

“I know...”

“Your family were heroes all... I lost your legacy...”

“You saved Twigg's life.”

“I've tried to make it worth living.”

“Master does.”

With that she took his hand and led him inside.

The cold spiked into the structure at every edge. Twigg, who was uncharacteristically solemn now, sat near the fireplace gazing into the middle distance. Bund seemed on edge, but was relatively still. Chay nervously nursed a mug of broth, while periodically looking around at sounds no one else seemed to hear. Gorham paced until he was banished to another part of the house. His footfalls counted out the minutes as the group waited, hopefully, for sleep to claim them. Julius was somewhat distracted by the blue mood Twigg had fallen into. He couldn't help but muse about the many ways he may have failed her since they'd been thrown together. Of the entire company only Corra seemed at ease. Perhaps, at her advanced age, something like a city of corpses was simply old hat. She volunteered for the first watch, although no one slept deeply.

Julius was the first to notice the sound. He sat up and Corra smiled at him from the table.

“Can't sleep?” She asked in a hushed tone.

“Do you hear that?” Whispered Julius.

She listened for a long moment. The sound of the fire was all there was to hear. The sound of the fire and... something. She stood carefully and moved, without making a sound of her own, to the window. A sickly green light oozed across the curtains, almost imperceptible versus the warm light of the fire. Gently she made to part the fabric enough to peer into the night. Julius noticed her stiffen as she saw whatever there was to see. The heat of the fire failed in combat with the chill that ran through him as she leaned back against the wall, ashen faced. He slunk over to the window and deftly parted the curtains for himself. It took nearly all his will to

stifle a gasp. The streets were alight, and alive, with weakly glowing phantoms, presumably of the victims of the slaughter that had taken place ages ago. He was rooted to the floor by the spectacle of it. It was not the first time he'd seen evidence of spirits, not by a handful of encounters in fact, but a city of clearly visible apparitions was something altogether different. Should they harbor any kind of ill intent this adventure would end with the party joining that ghastly parade.

He slid to the floor and looked up at Corra. She looked back as if to say "What do we do?" He shook his head and turned up his palms. If this was beyond her years of experience it was well outside of his. They had waited in the silence for several long minutes when the tapping started. The first one almost made them both scream. Tap... tap... tap... a fingernail on glass; as clear as you imagine it. Slowly, methodically, then silence.

A minute or so later it repeated.

Twigg sat up and noticed Julius and Corra's obvious tension before she spoke. Instinctively she armed herself and moved into the shadows beside the fireplace. Julius noticed and motioned to her the awkward shuffling movements of a zombie. She narrowed her eyes and nodded, but began shaking noticeably. Carefully Julius woke Chay, covering her mouth so she wouldn't start talking. He pointed at Gorham and tried to indicate that he needed to be woken up carefully. Chay noticed the tapping and looked between the source of the sound and Gorham several times before making a move. She bade Julius get clear of them and drew her hand over his mouth. She then shook him slightly and the great lummox jerked to life. He was clearly attempting to curse and bellow, but no sound was forthcoming apart from the gentle sighs of his bedroll. When he realised he wasn't making any noise he stopped faffing about and looked at Chay. Then he noticed the tapping and a look of complete terror took his face. The silence was broken when Bund spoke.

How long he'd already been awake was unclear.

"The house is sealed." He said. The sound of his voice startled everyone.

"something's trying to get in." Julius said quietly.

"The house is sealed." He replied, and walked to the window. He seemed disturbed as he did it, but he opened the curtains. A withered corpse stood in the night air tapping a finger on the glass. The faint hint of a spectral form glowed faintly from inside and around it.

"We didn't cleanse the whole family..." He said ominously.

The thought that other family members might try to return to the house at night had not occurred to anyone before. Tattered evidence of a merchant's attire still clung to the body. The dry, cold, climate had mummified whoever's body this thing had been.

"What do we do?" Asked Julius. There was a very long pause.

"I don't know." Bund replied.

Chay Corra and Julius peered into the darkness with Bund. The procession of the dead went on unabated beyond the yard, but whenever the zombie tapped the glass of the house a few heads would turn. Some were little more than vapor, others were corpses in various states of decay, but they all marched through the streets as if bidden to, except for this one as far as any of them knew.

"We've upset the machine..." Chay muttered.

"What?" Asked Julius.

"This is a mechanism, possibly the entire city..." Replied Chay.

"These spirits are held here to power something, but we removed this one from its path..."

"What does that mean?"

"Maybe nothing, or possibly that the system will try to right itself and we'll be in the path when it does."

Gorham stood up and stumbled backwards. He was clearly yelling but Chay's silence held.

"Calm down, you fool." She commanded. "Panic isn't going to help

us.” Still clearly terrified he stopped gesticulating. Chay made a breaking motion with her hand and his voice carried across the room.

“We gotta get out of this place! You can't fight spirits with steel! They'll have us all!”

“You have instantly made me regret letting you speak, as usual...” Chay quipped. “Be silent if you're not going to say anything useful, or I'll make it impossible for you to interrupt again.”

For a moment his temper overrode his fear and he made to yell, but thought better of it when Chay shot him a cold glance.

“Let it inside.” Came a voice from the shadows. Everyone turned towards the place where Twigg was standing, nearly invisible, near the fireplace.

“Let it inside?!” Blurted Gorham. “That's mad! Why would we do that!?”

“No, I think she's right.” Said Corra. “The house is sealed, right? If it steps past the threshold it should be cleansed.”

“Yes... Yes, I think the child is right!” Agreed Chay. “The funeral rites may dispel this spirit since this is part of its ritual.”

“May?” Emphasised Julius. “What if it doesn't?”

“We die either way.” Replied Bund.

“Great... So what do we do?” Asked Julius.

“Open the door.” Replied Corra. “It should be able to see the house again and I expect it will try to do whatever it usually does. Once it comes in we shut the door and anything else is stuck outside again.”

“This sounds unpleasantly theoretical.” Said Julius.

“Even if it doesn't work we can take a single revenant.” Said Chay.

“But if this one can't complete it's ritual it might release others from theirs and we'd really be in danger.”

“We don't have time to debate this. He's drawing more attention.”

Said Corra. More and more specters were glancing toward the tapping the longer it went on.

“She's right. We need to do this now.” Chay ordered. “Ready yourselves. Bund, get the door.”

Bund hesitantly obeyed. As soon as the door opened the last lingering feeling of safety fell away, but the tapping stopped. The zombie seemed to recognize where it was and turned toward the door. The frigid night air poured into the room as the creature took it's plodding steps. As soon as its head passed through the doorway it slumped and the body crumpled into a dusty heap on the floor. The misty form of a man hovered over it for a moment then smiled and evaporated away with an audible sigh of relief.

Gorham quickly made to kick the body back out the door, but Julius stopped him.

“What are you doing, fool?” He growled. “I don't want that thing inside with me!”

“The boy is right, you dimwitt!” Snarled Chay. “If we throw the body out the seal will fail! It's part of the family, we need to burn it.”

“Inside!?” Gorham whined.

“We can probably just put it in a blanket in another room until daybreak...” She replied. “But if it looks like the seal is dissapating then yes.”

Gorham and Julius carefully transported the remains to a bedroom and covered it with the tattered blankets therein. Chay inspected the seal.

“I think it will hold. Hopefully that's the last member of the family, or we may have to do this again...”

If it had been hard to fall asleep before it was as close to impossible as it could get now. Chay volunteered to take the watch, although no one fell very deeply asleep. Gorham jammed a chair under the door handle to the bedroom, just to be on the safe side.

The dawn came none too soon for the party. As soon as the first ray

of light broke upon the peaks surrounding the city Gorham was out disposing of the body that had shambled in that night. Inside Twigg and Corra made a simple breakfast while Chay, Julius, and to a lesser degree, Bund, argued over what to do with the day.

“We can't risk multiple days here.” Said Julius. “This place is some kind of runaway machine that runs on death. Every moment we stay here the chances of us ending up as fuel increase.”

“Leave if it so pleases you.” replied Chay. “But you'll get no payment for a job half done.”

“The dead have little need of money. At least usually... Around here, who knows!?” Julius threw his hands up and turned from the table. Chay's expression softened.

“The center of the city is a few hours from here. We can be in and out before the sun sets.” She suggested calmly.

“Even with whatever it is you want us to remove?” He asked.

“Easily.” She replied.

Julius looked at Bund. He'd become an unsuspected ally in the last few hours, and was clearly hesitant about how things could go.

“We must move fast.” He said.

Julius looked out the window. The sun hadn't crested the peaks yet. Twigg and Corra presented the group their meal as Gorham reentered.

“Fine.” He said. “But the second we're halfway to sundown we scramble.” Bund turned to Chay and nodded. Gorham looked agasht.

“You're not sayin' we're gonna go deeper into this deathpit, are you!?” He sputtered.

“Make your way back down the mountain on your own if you're too scared to join us.” Said Chay coldly. Gorham mad as if to speak, then remained silent; fuming into his slab of bacon.

He was easily the largest and strongest of the group, and his fear was infectious. The others ate in silence as each mulled over the grim possibilities the day held.

On Chay's instruction they set out for the dead center of the city. A slight rise was visible with a taller building, perhaps a temple, in the general direction of their goal. Skeletal remains littered the dusty stone streets. Julius now noticed that around many of them there were clear signs that they had moved from their resting places. The dust had marks of gloves, boots, and knees swept through it. Dusty hand prints marked walls where corpses had been collapsing, over and over, for decades.

Twigg kept close by his side, and Corra never more than a few steps ahead. Chay was the only one who marched with purpose down the streets, pausing only to get her bearings from time to time. Bund and Gorham kept up the rear. Although Gorham appeared ready to flee at a moment's notice. The blustery bully had lost all confidence after the night of spirits and seemed little more than a shell of his former self.

A slow wind moved along the empty streets with them. It seemed to moan through open doors and windows, and through cavernous alleys. Sometimes one could almost believe the sound of voices was somewhere long behind it. Even in the light of the morning it was hard not to feel afraid.

The further in they went the more deserted the city was. When it fell the citizens must have fled the center. Perhaps they did so in a bid to escape. What they were escaping from was up for debate. Julius had a suspicion that they may have known what the city itself was capable of doing to them in death.

Shortly before noon the party reached a walled complex. The once distant spire was now towering over them. It had the same angular construction as the rest of the city, but built up over many layers. Each section slightly smaller than the one upon which it sat. The stone was clearly once polished, but now showed the wearing of many storms. Julius glanced up at it several times as they marched around the perimeter looking for a gate. The tower made a decent sun dial. He could guess the time of day with more accuracy than he might normally have done by the relative position of the sun. It would be directly in line with the tower soon. They would need to start back out soon.

It wasn't too long before a large stone gate came into view. It was the same polished stone as everything else, but looked as though it hadn't been operated in a very long time.

Chay beckoned to Julius. "Can you open it?" she said, pointing to the outside controls. Julius looked over the mechanism.

"This hasn't been maintained... I might be able to get it open, but it's

delicate. This was made to be serviced regularly.”

“Can you open it or not?” Asked Chay indignantly.

“Just stand back...” Sighed Julius.

After a few long moments Twigg lent down near Julius and whispered. “Can you do it?”

“No. The mechanism is broken on this side. Maybe if we went to the other side.”

Twigg nodded then quietly slipped away from the group. A few moments later the gate began to rise. It screeched and whined as the stone slid up the rails.

“Excellent!” Exclaimed Chay. “You're as good as they said after all!”

Julius nodded knowingly as Twigg appeared from around the corner.

“We need to hurry.” said Bund, looking skyward. The party swept through the gate while Julius hung back to look over the lock.

“wait!” He exclaimed. “We need to brace this with something. I don't think it will hold.”

“Brace it with what?” asked Gorham. “There's nothing around.”

it was just so. Julius stood looking up and down the street for a moment.

“Well, we need to find something. If this lock fails we'll-”

A rush of wind and noise blew up behind him, blowing his cape forward as the gate failed and smashed shut behind him.

“Be trapped here...”