

ASHES OF BRIGDARROW

CHAPTER 1: DAIN

No one was watching Dain as he went through his spear exercises. The Illian village of Brigdarrow was enjoying one of autumns last warm days and Dain seemed to be the only one that thought that weapons practice was a poor way to spend it.

Thegn Garon Ire was leading a few of the village boys through horseman training, an opportunity Dain had lost after a misadventure with a horse. Garon claimed that the role of horseman was suited only to young men who took themselves more seriously, so Dain was left to be trained as a simple spearman.

The only girl practicing in the village's open square was Kirien Birn. At thirteen she was a year younger than Dain and the only child in the village more likely to get into trouble. But unlike Dain her disarming smile got her out of the trouble her mischievous nature got her into. Today she had her curly hair tied back as her mother led her through archery practice. Only men were able to directly fight and die for the village, as Kirien's father had almost six years ago. Kirien hated that she couldn't use any weapon except a bow and frequently claimed she could best Dain in a spear fight, which was probably true.

A horse went thundering by, Caspian bounced unsteadily atop it as he navigated around the stone warhorse that formed the center of the village square. With a crash he managed to connect with the wooden shield set as a target for the boys practice. The resulting impact was a surprise to everyone, but most surprising to Caspian who went off the back of his horse, feet over his head and slammed into the ground. The horse seemed almost as jarred by the hit and continued his run all the way to the stables, where it slipped inside and returned to its stall.

As Garon and the others gathered around the fallen Caspian, Dain wandered to the square's edge. The village had no wall and the eastern side of the square was open to grasslands and a few fields. With a final glance to make sure no one was watching, Dain sprinted away from the village and past the few chickens that were the village's only active guards.

They must have been worried about Caspian because no one noticed him leaving. No one yelled for Dain to return, not that he would have. The dull

grinding boredom of the afternoon immediately slipped away and he felt the thrill of unknown adventures and freedom sweep over him, pushing his legs even faster. Suddenly the air seemed crisper, the sun brighter and the world a boy's paradise.

Dain slowed to a walk once he was safely away from Brigdarrow. He cut around Ulvin Farm to keep from running into any adults. The farm was home to Joshua and Harna Ulvin and their son Auric. He knew they wouldn't do anything about him being out here, they were all nice enough, but Dain didn't want to deal with any more adults today.

Past the farm Dain stopped briefly to look at Tarch's Tower, a three story stone tower which appeared to have no door and only a single window on its top floor. Earlier that summer Dain discovered the door to the tower, stairs led down to it at the towers base but the adults in his village had heaped enough dirt around the tower to bury it. Unable to reach the window, and noticing that even the hardest thrown rocks simply bounced off of the glass, Dain once dug up the door and attempted to pick the doors triangular lock with a thin knife. Just as he inserted the knife he was struck with a blast like lightning. Dain awoke to find himself flat on his back nearly 15 foot from the tower with one of his shoes knocked completely off. It was perhaps the most exciting event of his life. Still he hadn't been able to work up the courage to try it again. Not yet at least.

Dain watched the tower window. Some of the village boys claimed they once saw a figure pass by it, someone walking inside the tower. That and sightings of the monstrous Nuckelavee in the lake that borders Brigdarrow were common sources of rumors for the village boys. But Dain had never seen either of them.

A cloud rolled in front of the sun and Dain squinted to try to make out anything in the towers window. He was so intent on this that he didn't hear the grass rustling behind him, until it was too close. He heard running and spun to try to get his spear between him and whatever was bearing down on him, but he was too slow. The spear's length was jammed into his chest and the attacker's full weight fell on him, knocking him backwards. Dain's eyes were huge as he imagined one of the forests wild boars preparing to tear into his throat. His panic must have been visible because Kirien immediately started laughing uncontrollably. She sat on his stomach, her hands on his spear, holding it against him. She was enjoying her trick immensely. Determined not to look more foolish Dain pushed her aside and sat up. She didn't fight and easily rolled off into the grass still laughing.

"You're lucky I didn't stab you, you could have been killed." He said, trying to regain some respect. But it didn't help, she just laughed harder.

It wasn't until he began to stomp away that she got up, taking deep breaths as her laughter subsided. She jogged up beside him, and when he glanced over he could see a whole afternoon of teasing in her smile and green eyes. But she decided to be nice and let the teasing go, for now.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"Don't know, just exploring," Dain found it impossible to stay angry at her, although he fought to keep his look of indignation, "anything is better than that dull spear practice."

"I don't know if you are going to get into more trouble for skipping out of practice, heading out into the countryside alone or taking one of Garon's spears."

That was the first time Dain noticed that he brought the spear with him. Garon said that if he practiced with it enough it would begin to feel like a natural extension of him. During his first few lessons the spear felt so heavy and unnatural he couldn't imagine that happening. Now he had been carrying it for over a quarter of an hour and he hadn't even noticed.

Dain looked at his spear with a newfound respect and tried again to regain some of his lost composure. "If you are so worried then why don't you head back and save yourself from the switch, or whatever they dream up for me this time."

"Nah, I'm not going to miss the fun." Kirien untied the cord that was holding her hair back and let her hair fall around her face. She ran her hands through it, doing whatever girls do that's makes their hair look essentially unchanged but Dain found the process somehow mesmerizing. She had freckles along her nose from the summer spent outside, and round cheeks that dimpled when she smiled. Kirien noticed Dain watching her and replied only with a slight smile that made him feel suddenly shy.

"What are you worried about?" Dain asked, "Your mother isn't going to be nearly as mad as my dad."

Kirien started to argue but they both knew it was true. Kirien's mother, Jerra, and Dain's father, Havis, had very different ideas about discipline. Dain's mother had died giving birth to him, leaving Havis as a single parent. Since the goblin attack that killed Kirien's father, her mother raised her alone. It was obvious to the village that Jerra and Havis had become close. They spent a lot of time together talking or helping each other with tasks, Jerra made all of Dain's clothes and Havis built the shelving in Jerra's small store. But among the Illian's marriage was forever and a widow would never consider a new relationship, so they remained only friends.

Kirien and Dain talked about this as they walked. They both dreamed that their parents would someday take them to a wonderful city that didn't have such a closed minded view toward relationships. They had talked about these idea's for more than a year and at first it had been an uncomfortable subject because Kirien still loved and remembered her own father well, but over time she realized how much happier her mother was when spending time with Havis.

Dain's story about running off to another city had veered completely out of the range of reality. He was talking about giant frogs they would ride to their mansion when Kirien stopped him by putting a hand clumsily in front of his mouth. Dain was surprised to be interrupted and was about to complain when he noticed her other hand, pointing to a small copse of trees up ahead.

Not more than sixty feet ahead a pair of huge beetles sat. Easily larger than a dinner table both beetles were large enough to replace the frogs in Dain's story. One lay contentedly at the edge of the tree's, enjoying the sun, digesting some recently eaten meal, or doing whatever giant bugs do when they sitting unmoving. If it wasn't for the other one Dain and Kirien might not have noticed them. It couldn't be more different from the first. It dug frantically at the base of one of the trees. Both bugs had huge enameled horns growing out of their foreheads and this beetles horn occasionally caught on the tree, tearing deep grooves through the bark and wood underneath.

"What do you suppose it's looking for?" Kirien whispered as she crouched down in the grass.

"I don't know, maybe it just really hates trees." Then after a pause Dain added, "I guess there is only one way to find out"

Kirien looked skeptical, the accidental gouges in the tree showed that the beetles could cause considerable damage, even if they weren't particularly aggressive. But as in most things her curiosity got the best of her and she just waited to see what Dain would do.

Feeling the ground, eyes still focused on the beetles, Dain found a few decent sized rocks. Mustering his courage Dain jumped up and yelled at the beetles, running to within forty feet and hurling the stones at them. His shout sounded sincere and his aim was good, most of the rocks struck the beetles. But they bounced harmlessly off of the bugs thick exoskeleton. Neither bug seemed to notice Dain.

Dain looked back to see that Kirien's green eyes were even wider than normal. She seemed impressed with his daring and her look, more than any real interest in the beetles, gave him the courage to continue on. Gripping his spear tightly Dain started walking toward the beetle. He circled so that another tree was between him and the beetle and crept up to within fifteen feet of the

giant bug. At this distance if the beetle were to turn and lunge, if such a creature could lunge, Dain guessed he would still be out of reach of the beetles giant horn.

The lounging beetle's black eyes glanced emotionlessly at Dain. Since it was further away Dain wasn't too concerned with that one. His interest was focused on the beetle that was still tearing and digging at the base of one of the copse's trees. By this point the tree looked close to toppling with each strike of the beetles horn.

Dain crept so close that he was getting hit with the occasional clump of dirt the beetle threw into the air. Still the beetle was so fixated on its digging that it seemed oblivious to him. That was the moment most boys would have turned back, that moment his father had long lectured him about, when you must do the right thing. But the lectures and his father were a world away to Dain right now. Summoning his courage he ran toward the beetle and leapt onto its wide back.

For a second he stood triumphant on the powerful creature. Completely overwhelmed with the joy of the moment he didn't notice the beetles shaking attempt to dislodge the annoying weight on its back. Dain floundered at the sudden movement. Kirien finally found her voice and yelled for Dain to jump off. She was almost happy to see him beginning to fall off the beetles side, until Dain's unthinking reactions kicked in.

Garon was right, even with his simple training Dain was already starting to use the spear as an extension of his arm. Reflexively Dain thrust the point of the spear down hard into the beetles back. The sharp steel point must have found a seam between the thick plates and the beetles reaction was immediate, it spun so fast its head and dangerous horn were readied for Dain before Dain hit the ground. Forgetting its digging the beetle charged toward Dain as he scrambled away. Unable to get to his feet fast enough Dain's mind raced through every spear lesson Garon had given him. For the first time he wished he had paid closer attention.

He remembered enough to set the butt of his spear in the ground, putting his weight on it as he readied the point against the charging beetle. Unconcerned with the spear the beetle lowered its head and hit it full force. For a brief second everything stopped, then the spear splintered loudly. It had scored a deep gouge in the hard shell that covered the beetles forehead and a trickle of syrupy blood could be seen from the wound. But now Dain lay prostrate before the beetle as it tried to figure out what had happened and what to do next.

The decision was made for it. Kirien screamed so loud the lazy beetle, who had ignored everything up to this point, finally took notice and began

lumbering slowly away. She also hurled a fist sized stone at the beetle that stood over Dain, striking it in the side of its giant green face.

The beetle turned and charged Kirien. Without a spear Kirien dived behind the only cover she could find, the torn up tree the beetle had already wrecked. Confused and in pain the beetle slammed into the tree. Its horn stuck the exposed inner soft wood and with an incredible show of strength it lifted its head and tore the small tree out of the ground. The tree fell first on the beetles back, who used the same shake it had used on Dain to throw it off on one side. The trees upper branches landed squarely on Dain and Kirien quickly dove into the tangle of branches as well.

Turning to examine the toppled tree the beetle looked around for any sign of movement. Kirien held perfectly still, and with the trees weight on top of him Dain had no choice but to do the same. The only movement the angry beetle spotted was the slowly fleeing form of the other beetle. It nudged the fallen tree one last time with its horn, then satisfied that it had defeated whatever was bothering it, it fell in behind its companion.

With Kirien's help Dain managed to crawl out from beneath the tree and they both collapsed on the ground without speaking. Despite the terrifying encounter it was only a few minutes before Dain finally spoke up, "I didn't need your help, I had everything under control."

"I wasn't trying to save you, I just really hate tree's" she answered and they both laughed.

After being so scared laughing felt good and they continued to make jokes as they got up and checked the damage the falling tree had left on Dain. His left shoulder was bruised from the fall from the beetles back and he had dozens of scratches on his face and arms from the tree. Fortunately Dain's clothes were in good shape, he had got in so much trouble when the tower door had singed them, but a foot and a half of splintered wood was all that remained of the spear. Dain used that to poke at where the beetle had been digging.

"What is it?" Kirien asked, peering over his shoulder.

Dain uses the sharp edge of the stick to cut the dirt away and expose a dark green root.

"This isn't a part of the tree, I've never seen anything like it." he said yanking it out of the ground. He dusted the remaining dirt off of it as they examined it, both disappointed that their treasure looked to little more than an odd potato.

"It stinks." Kirien explained backing away from Dain. Dain sniffed at it and wrinkled his nose in disgust.

"You're right, but after fighting for it there is no way I'm leaving it behind." Dain shoved the root in his pocket and asked, "So, what's next?"

CHAPTER 2: LIVANNA

A few hours later Dain and Kirien were walking back towards Brigdarrow sharing increasingly exaggerated stories of the beetle battle. Dain described the treasure he wished they'd found, a chest overflowing with coins and a gleaming steel sword.

"You mean like that?" Kirien said pointing toward a silver glint in the long yellow grass.

Dain squinted, but even in the fading light he could see the bright metal pile in the grass ahead. And this wasn't metal like the dull grey metal of Dain's former spear point or the worn copper coins the peddlers used to buy wheat and sell farm tools and supplies. It looked like polished silver.

As they walked closer Dain was already speculating what it was. A knight's shield, a scale from a dragon that flew over, and all manner of even more unlikely things. But none of his guesses had been close.

"It's a dog." Kirien said as if it seemed so unlikely that she was trying to convince herself of what she was seeing by saying it out loud.

And it was a dog. Not an unusually sized one, with its head coming up to just above Dain's waist if it stood up. But it wasn't standing, it was laying on its side straining to take shallow, ragged breaths. There was a deep gash in its side and thick reddish brown blood matted in its metallic silver hair.

This time it was Kirien who acted impulsively and she reached for the injured animal. The dog snarled and bit at her with surprising speed, hobbling up on three legs before collapsing again. She stepped back, more concerned for the dog than for her own safety.

"What do you suppose hurt it?" Dain asked, looking around and not seeing anything more dangerous than a few crows in the sky.

"I don't know."

The dog's ears turned toward their voices. It turned its head toward Kirien, as if it was trying to recognize her, but its vision was dimmed by pain and exhaustion. Kirien reached for the dog again but she backed off after receiving another growl.

"We need to get Auric." Dain said. "He would be able to get close to her, and would know how to treat those wounds."

"We can't leave her! She could die out here, especially if whatever hurt her comes back"

"If whatever hurt her comes back, I don't think we want to be here." Dain said looking at the long cut in the animal's side. "That isn't a bite wound."

"Maybe it was another beetle?" She didn't sound convinced.

"Maybe."

"If we wait until she's unconscious we could treat the wound." Kirien suggested.

"With what, we don't know anything more than putting some clean wraps on it, which we don't have. We have to get Auric, and neither one of us is staying out here alone after dark." Dain was unaccustomed to being the voice of reason, but almost dying once in a day was enough, even for him.

"We are about 20 minutes from the village, it will probably take longer than that for her to fall unconscious. I could find my way back here. Let's go get Auric and see what he says."

Kirien reluctantly agreed, she told the dog to rest and promised they would return quickly. Then they took off jogging to Brigdarrow.

CHAPTER 3: AURIC

The once smooth marble top was broken into razor sharp fractures. These fractures cut into the boys hands and his blood drained into the stone. He could feel his life slipping from him, his warmth stolen. There was a rustle behind him, the sound of a great weight being set carefully on the marble floor. He didn't have to look back to know what it was, he had seen it many times before. A great dragon, even paler than the white marble, a dragon so immense his wings spread from one end of the horizon to the other. It stood over him, watched him die. When the dragon opened its mouth the boy screamed.

Auric was the only boy in the village exempted from weapons practice. He was 16 and most of the village thought he was cursed. He could often be found around the village, his brown hair refusing to obey any straightening or

gravity. His clothes, no matter how carefully tailored, always looked to be too small or too large for him. He rarely slept, sometimes going over a week without it. But Auric's quiet demeanor and likeable, never offensive, nature changed him from would have been a village pariah to a bit of local color. And people were frequently amazed at how much he knew about obscure topics, what plants will make a sore stomach go away, what the different star clusters are supposed to mean, how lake frogs seem to grow forever when away from the lake but never get much past cat sized if they stay.

It was almost dusk when Dain and Kirien arrived at Ulvin Farm. It was late autumn and the farm, which had been surrounded by orderly rows of wheat for the past few months, was now surrounded by bare land and dust. Tawny went to knock on the closed shutters of Auric's window but Dain stopped her and pulled her toward the barn instead.

After opening the barn door enough to squeeze inside Dain called out into the darkness for Auric. Longhaired cows chewed their dinner while staring at visitors. Goats ignored the confines of their pens and only stopped briefly to check out the pair before returning to their climbing and play fights.

Dain called out for Auric again and this time they heard movement in the barn's loft. Auric knocked some loose grain down onto the floor as he looked down and the goats scrambled greedily for it.

"What are you guys doing here?" Auric asked.

"There is a hurt dog out past the tower" Dain answered, "can you come check her out?"

"Tomorrow." Auric said rolling back out of sight.

Kirien spotted a ladder leading up into the loft and climbed up. Auric lay on a blanket in the hay looking typically disheveled, but even in the dim light of the loft Kirien could tell he was more exhausted than normal.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

"I'm fine," he said unconvincingly, "I'm just tired."

Kirien was about to give up, but Dain came up into the loft behind her and started explaining how hurt the dog was and how she could die before morning. He continued until Auric grudgingly agreed to go look at her.

A few minutes later, after Auric picked up a small satchel full of clean bandages and herbs, the three were off across the plains. The dog hadn't moved, and her breathing was growing more difficult. She was too weak to bite at Auric when he went to check the wound and just barred her teeth in silent warning.

“She already lost a lot of blood.” Auric said rooting through his satchel and laying out bandages and an ointment that smelled like rotten cabbage.

Tentatively Kirien began to pet the dogs head, then when she stopped snarling Kirien put the dogs head on her lap and held her so he wouldn’t turn and bite Auric. The dog had clear blue eyes. Within the nest of silver fur they looked like sapphires embedded in a silver crown.

“We should name her Livanna” Kirien suggested. Both of the boys ignored her. Auric began applying the bandages and Dain was staring wide-eyed at the wound.

Kirien’s grip on the head was unnecessary as Livanna lay helplessly and allowed Auric to bandage the wound. Livanna didn’t even react, except to whine painfully, when she was lifted to wrap the bandages around her body.

“Can we take her back to your farm?” Dain asked.

“No,” Auric said, “she shouldn’t be moved. I’ll sleep out here tonight, you two should go back to the village. I think she will be okay.”

Kirien bent down and kissed the dogs forehead. Then she and Dain started the walk back to Brigdarrow.

CHAPTER 4: GOSEA

Dain expected to get in trouble when he returned to the village. But he hadn’t expected search parties to be out looking for him. As they neared Brigdarrow they spotted a group with lantern’s out by Tarch’s Tower waving their lights around and calling for them. Both Dain and Kirien called back and went running toward the group.

While Dain and Kirien were gone a strange group had passed through the village. A woman with skin like moonlight and two escorts dressed in horse-hair cloaks, worn leather armor and thick, thirsty axes. It was unusual to see strangers in the remote village, but they were free with their coins so the village welcomed them. It wasn’t until Jerra realized Dain and Kirien were missing that the village grew suspicious, and although sneaking off wasn’t uncommon for the pair, they had never been gone so late before. Concerns quickly grew to fear and now most of the village was out looking for them.

Within the village the three strangers were being questioned by Thegn Garon Ire and a group of villagers, including Dain’s father, who watched suspiciously as the three repeated their claims of innocence. Both of the men

being accused stood protectively beside the unarmed woman, who looked to be the only calm one in the group.

“Dad!” Dain yelled as he ran toward them.

At his voice the group broke and although no one had drawn their weapons, muscles relaxed and hands resting dangerously close to hilts moved away. A flicker of relief flashed across Havis’s face at the sight of his son, then disappeared quickly, replaced by anger. Dain’s run faltered and he considered running back out to spend the night with Auric before realizing that he may deserve that anger.

“Is Kirien okay?” Garon asked.

“Yes, she is with her mother. We were just out exploring.” Dain answered.

“What happened?” Garon said noticing the broken spear shaft in Dain’s hand.

Dain considered telling them about the dog with the silver fur, but the strange woman made him nervous. She seemed equally interested in his story, and her dark eyes were beautiful, but they were also cold and hid her emotions. The wound in Livanna’s side could have been easily done by her escort’s axes, so Dain didn’t say anything about the dog.

“Nothing, we were just too far away when it started to get late. I’m so sorry.”

Left with the realization that their entire confrontation had been for nothing the group fell into uncomfortable silence until the strange woman spoke.

“Thegn, may I have the items you confiscated?”

“Of course,” Garon replied awkwardly, “I apologize for our alarm. Please understand that we are very protective of our children, no matter how poorly behaved they may be.”

She smiled, but there was no warmth in it.

Garon gave the three what looked to have been the contents of their saddlebags; tackle, bedrolls and some cooking supplies. The only unusual item was a faceted grey stone about the size of Dain’s fist. It had cuts in it like a gem, at odd sharp angles. But it didn’t look like anything a jeweler had made. The stone lay on a square of black cloth and Garon took care not to touch the stone as he handed it to the woman. She quickly wrapped the cloth around it and tied the top.

“Gosea, let’s get some sleep. We have to rise early.” One of the strange axe men said with an accent Dain didn’t recognize.

Gosea, the woman with the pale skin, ignored her companion and responded to Garon instead.

“I understand Thegn. You should not apologize for your vigilance, but be commended for it. I am glad that the children are unhurt, going too far from the village can be dangerous.”

They continued to talk but Dain’s father yanked him back out of the crowd and marched him to the small home they shared. There was a lecture on the way home, a whipping before bed and he was told he was going to spending the next day with Father Prespin, the villages doddering priest of Danalin.

Dain was sure Kirien wasn’t being punished as severely.

CHAPTER 5: FATHER PRESPIN

Dain was up so early the next morning that his butt was still sore from the previous nights whipping. Although his father avoided launching into another lecture Dain could tell that he was close to doing it. So Dain stayed quiet and did as he was told.

Just after dawn Dain’s father walked him to the small village temple to Danalin, god of water. Father Prespin was already prepared and greeted the two at the door.

“Come in, come in, I just put on some tea.”

Havis declined the offer, stating that he was a day behind because of the prior days chaos. He thanked Prespin for agreeing to work Dain for the day, told his son to behave, and headed back to his small woodworking shop.

Prespin invited Dain into the temple, which was little more than a single room with a few benches and religious artifacts hanging on the walls. There was a mural of bright city harbor, with people gathered in celebration along the water’s edge at what looked to be a woman tended by handmaidens giving birth into the sea. On the opposite side a spear hung on the wall. The spear may have once looked to be made of silver with deep green stone, but it was now dusty and dull.

"Many people think the gods are there to help us, that they will protect us from bad things." Prespin said as he sat down and offered a cup of tea to Dain.

Dain's butt wasn't quite ready for sitting so he stood as he sipped his tea. He waited quietly for Prespin to continue, but the priest didn't seem willing to continue unless Dain joined in the conversation.

"Yes father," Dain said, "You have told me many stories about the times Danalin has helped his heroes and loyal followers. And those that aren't really that loyal but are willing to respect the sea by making an offering to Danalin."

"There are times when we are blessed by the gods, that is true. I have told you of Trenton Majosi and the flooding of the Calabim city of Anaea. Certainly Danalin was with him then. But what of the other days of his life that we don't speak of? Was he blessed in those as well? Did Danalin help him avoid goblin raiders on the Grigi plains, keep him healthy if he ate rancid meat, make sure that if he fell from a horse that pillows would spring from the earth to cushion his fall?"

Dain and the old priest shared a smile.

"No father", Dain answered, "I don't think he would."

"So we must protect ourselves, and each other. We will not know when danger comes for us."

"Yes father", Dain answered dutifully.

Dain spent the rest of the morning cleaning the temple and talking with Father Prespin. Despite the fact that this was supposed to be a punishment Dain enjoyed his day. He even got to polish the old spear on the wall until it was once again bright and gleaming.

At lunch time Dain saw Kirien out by the well.

"Father Prespin, could I get some water for you?"

Prespin looked out and saw Kirien out in the yard and guessed why Dain was suddenly volunteering for more work. But he agreed with the condition that Dain hurry back.

Dain slid up beside Kirien and hooked his bucket up to the well rope.

"Have you heard anything from Auric?" he whispered.

"I went and saw him and Livanna this morning. Livanna looks much better. I took her some food and water and she gobbled it up."

"You left the village this morning?" Dain said, "Did you get punished at all?"

"Oh yeah, my mom yelled at me forever. Then I got the whole talk about how much I disappointed her. It was horrible."

"That sounds horrible," Dain replied sarcastically.

Kirien ignored his sarcasm.

"That strange woman and her two guards left the village early this morning. She came into my mother's store last night when I was getting yelled at and asked me where I had been all day."

"Did you tell her about Livanna?" Dain asked.

"No, I don't trust her."

"Me either." Then after a pause Dain added. "Do you think they attacked Livanna?"

"I don't know," Kirien said. "But I'm glad they're gone."

Dain agreed. Then noticing Father Prespin was watching him Dain drew back the bucket, said goodbye to Kirien and hurried back to the temple.

CHAPTER 6: LYRR

Dain wasn't able to slip away again until the following day. Dain's father decided that as irresponsible as Dain was he was much worse when Kirien was around. So when Dain was asked to deliver a pair of fence posts to Ulvin Farm his father made sure Kirien was working in her mother's store and unable to get away.

Dain delivered the posts to Auric's mother. She was a wonderfully nice woman and no one got away from her house without being fed. After a piece of black bottom pie Dain checked the barn to see if Auric was there, he wasn't.

It was too hard to resist. Although Dain fully intended to return to the Brigdarrow after delivering the posts he now found himself running away from Ulvin Farm and out across the plains towards the place he left Livanna.

Nearly 20 minutes later he was greeted by a silver head popping up out of the tall yellow grass. Livanna gave a short bark, more of a greeting than anything aggressive and Auric sat up to see Dain running toward them.

"Did you bring any food?" Auric asked as Dain got close.

"No," Dain panted, "I just wanted to see how Livanna was doing."

Dain let Livanna sniff his hand before petting her. Although her side was still very tender she was able to walk and even run with some stiffness.

"She is doing better," Auric said. "Now the hard part now is getting her to rest, she wants to leave."

Just as he said it Livanna started walking away, giving another short happy bark. Auric called her back, but a few minutes later she was heading off in the same direction.

"Does she always want to go that way?" Dain asked.

"Yes."

"Maybe she's trying to go home?"

"Or back to whatever attacked her," Auric replied "The trail of her blood also comes from that direction."

Livanna starting trotting off again, then turned to look back at the two boys.

"There is only one way to find out." Dain said with a grin, walking after the dog.

Auric followed him, "Now I know why you get in so much trouble."

They walked for almost two hours. Livanna stopped occasionally to sniff the ground but largely kept walking as fast as the boys would allow. The terrain gradually turned hilly, and they saw numerous rabbits playing in the shadows of the hills. Livanna perked up each time she spotted a rabbit, but didn't chase them.

Just as Auric and Dain where talking about turning back they were surprised by a low growl from Livanna. Noticing that Livanna was hunched low to the ground both of the boys dropped down too.

"I guess she's not leading us to her home" Auric whispered.

After the initial growl Livanna started creeping forward as quietly as possible. Afraid to be left alone both of the boys scrambled after her.

As they rounded the hill Dain saw what Livanna was growling at. There was a burrow in the hill and a squat, brutish creature sat in front of it. The creature was a few inches shorter than Dain though its head was much larger and covered in thick green ridges. He looked like someone had dumped a vat of green mud on him and it had just dried there in loose folds. His arms

were thin and scraggily, but he had long, pointed yellow teeth. And a club decorated with crow feathers sat beside him.

“What is it?” Dain whispered.

“I think it’s a goblin.” Auric said, “They aren’t usually alone.”

A cacophony of screeches went up from a nearby hill. Two more of the grotesque creatures came charging down the hill towards the boys shouting “Die! Die!” and the one in front of the burrow grabbed his club. Dain desperately wished he had brought a spear.

Livanna charged forward toward the one in front of the burrow, moving so quickly she looked like a silver blur.

Dain looked around for something to use as a weapon. Auric grabbed Dain’s hand and gave him the small knife Auric used to cut the bandages. Dain didn’t have time to question taking Auric’s only weapon as the goblin was on him.

Dain’s first thought was to block the goblins club so that he could get close enough to stab it. He intended to use his arm to knock it aside but the Goblin swung low under Dain’s raised arm and caught him right in the ribs. The blow knocked the air out of Dain’s lungs and left him gasping. Fortunately Dain’s plan had been somewhat successful as he was able to drop his arm over the trapped club. The goblin simply let go of the club and moved in to bite.

After giving Dain the knife Auric turned toward the goblin that was charging at him. The world felt alive to Auric, it always had. He could hear the hum and pulse of people, animals and sometimes plants. It exhausted him and it was one of the reasons he spent so much time alone. But, as the goblin charged, Auric welcomed that pulse. He reached out searching for a particular pulse, well past the hills, past the yellowed grasslands, almost to Brigdarrow he could feel the erratic, crackling energy of Tarch’s Tower.

Auric’s mass of wild hair started to stand on end. The goblin was nearly on him, swinging his crude sword right toward Auric’s unguarded stomach. And then the air popped and for an instant white hot bolts of lightning connected Auric and the goblin. The goblin went flying back with a howl. The goblins skin boiled and blackened and by the time the goblin hit the ground he was dead.

Dain and the goblin he was fighting were so stunned by the display that they both froze in their middle of their battle and stared at Auric, who stood weak but uninjured. Fortunately Dain came to his senses first and stabbed the goblin right under his huge jaw. Warm, sickening blood sprayed down over Dain’s hand and the goblin lurched backwards. His death was

longer than his companions, and for long minutes he thrashed in the dirt screaming until finally falling into a timid, gurgling death.

Both boys stared as the goblin died, unable to look away. Livanna's bark brought them out of their trance and turning they saw that Livanna had killed the third goblin and she rushed into the burrow. The boys could hear her barking excitedly from inside.

Dain entered the burrow first, knife at the ready.

"How did you do that?" Dain asked.

"I don't know." Auric answered honestly, "I've experimented with channeling that lightning before. But that's the first time I've ever used it on anyone."

There wasn't any treasure inside the burrow, but a slender boy with wide, green eyes and long, pointed ears. It was hard to place his age as his features were so gentle that they looked like those of child, but he was nearly as tall as Auric. He wore a soft leather shirt, boots and leggings decorated with small blue river stones. He was tied with thick sinewy cord, some sort of animal intestine, and dark bruises on his face and arms showed where he had been beaten.

Livanna licked his face happily and jumped on him despite the pain that caused when she touched his bruises. The boy smiled and talked to her in a language neither of the boys recognized.

"Do you speak patrian?" Auric asked.

He stopped talking to Livanna and looked at Dain and Auric with a mixture of hope and fear.

"Yes." He answered.

"Are you an elf?" Auric continued.

"Yes. My name is Lyrr, son of Adulin. I was exploring these hills with Lanthora-sheil-dur when the goblins attacked us."

"Lant... do you mean Livanna?" Dain asked pointing to the dog.

"Yes, her name is Lanthora-sheil-dur. She is my amicus." Noticing Dain's look of confusion Lyrr translated, "my spirit friend."

"Cut him free." Auric ordered.

As Dain cut through the sinews Auric continued asking questions. He found out that Lyrr was, much like them, out exploring well beyond the boundaries of his peoples lands. Lyrr was trying to find an elven settlement that was supposed to be at the heart of the Whispering Wood. But by the time

he encountered the three goblins he was lost and in they quickly overwhelmed him. Though Lyrr dreamed of one day becoming a warden in Amelanchier's royal guard, the realities of combat were much different than his imagination.

Once he was free Lyrr uncovered two thin bone knives the goblins had taken from him. Though beautiful, the knives were for skinning, not combat, and one had shattered in his brief battle. He slipped both into sheaths on his belt, gave his dog a hug and followed the boys out of the burrow.

"Are you from Brigdarrow?" Lyrr asked.

Dain nodded, surprised that the elf knew of their tiny village.

"I saw it on the maps that showed the elven settlement. That means I'm far away from where I thought I was. The Whispering Wood got me twisted around. It was a strange place." After a pause Lyrr added, "Could I come back with you? We may be safer together and I can send a message from your village for one of our rangers to come get me."

"Yes, as long as we can keep calling her Livanna, instead of that long elven name." Dain replied.

Lyrr agreed and the three boys began the walk back to Brigdarrow with Livanna trotting along behind.

CHAPTER 7: LOSS

The boys were having fun telling stories. Some of Dain's were even true. But he was in the middle of another tale about riding frogs when Auric stopped him. Auric look confused, then panicked, and without a word he began running toward his farm.

Dain struggled to keep up, all the while asking why they were running. But when he saw the smoke rising into the sky he stopped questioning. Ulvin farm was on fire.

Their fear gave their legs strength and the two boys outran the injured Lyrr and Livanna. Auric immediately rushed into the ashy remains of his house, the fire had burnt itself out hours ago and both the house and barn were only black shells.

His parents were inside, nothing more than charred corpses, and Auric fell down to his knees beside them and wept.

Dain could feel the heat coming off of the house, it kept him from going to close. Instead he looked toward Brigdarrow, where a pillar of smoke much larger than that coming from the farm rose up into the sky. Dain could see buzzards circling the village, or the place where the village had been.

Lyrr and Livanna caught up and began searching the ground around the farm.

“Goblins” Lyrr said, “hundreds of them.”

“Auric!” Dain yelled, working up the strength to do what he didn’t want to do, “the village is on fire. We need to go see if anyone needs help.”

Auric closed his eyes. He could feel the fire still smoldering in the remains of the house, embers eager to ignite and consume. Auric reached out until he could feel every hungry spark in the house, and he squashed it. In one instant the smoke stopped, the crackling sound ended and the heat was replaced with an unnatural cold. There was nothing left but ash and charred remains.

Auric walked out of the house, and if the fire was gone it was as if he swallowed it. His eyes, normally calm and passive, were focused and angry. It scared Dain, but he was more worried about the village and his father.

As they ran to Brigdarrow Dain couldn’t help but think about his last few days in the village. The village he was always trying to sneak out of was now the only place he wanted to be.

It was horrible. Some people were dead in their homes, others in the village square. A few goblin bodies lay among those of the villagers. But each corpse was a new tragedy, a lifetime of memories lost. Thegn Garon Ire died leading a defense against the attacking goblins. Dain’s father lay beside him, spear in hand. They found the body of Kirien’s mother among the other archers who were defending the city.

They had even killed doddering old Father Prespin, his burnt corpse was in his church. Dain stood in the middle of the burnt shell that had been the temple the day before. There was little left now. But as he turned to go he noticed the glint of silver in the ashes. Brushing away a section of the collapsed ceiling he found the spear that used to hang on the temple wall. It was relatively undamaged and the silver ornamentation and the polished green stone looked as it had yesterday when he polished it. Dain took it with him as he walked back into the village square.

Dain wanted to lie down beside his father and stop being. He felt an illogical anger at being one of the few people left alive, and guilt for having been off playing rather than here where he should have been. He wanted to

ask Auric, who was going through the bodies and the remains of the homes, if anyone was still alive. But he was afraid of the answer.

“Kirien” Auric said, and Dain’s heart dropped at the thought that she was caught here too, but instead he said “she’s not here.”

“Could she be in the store? She probably would have hidden there.” Dain replied.

They searched the remains of the store again, but there weren’t any bodies in it. Then they spread out and searched the rest of the village. They found the remains of other children. The goblins looked to have swarmed the stables early as no one got to horses before the attack. Several children and adults were dead outside of it, they were probably trying to get the children to the horses so they could escape.

But there was no sign of Kirien. And in the entire village there was only one other thing missing, one of the small rowboats from the dock.

The village only had three rowboats, and they were rarely used. Father Prespin wouldn’t let anyone go beyond the shallow fishing waters that bordered the village. According to him there was a water spirit in the lake which is why the temple to Danalin was originally built here.

“Do you think she got away?” Dain asked.

Livanna sniffed along the end of the docs where the rowboat had been moored and barked excitedly.

“Yeah, I think she got away.” Auric said, “but now she is out there alone. I’m surprised she didn’t come back to the village after the goblins left, to see if anyone survived.”

“We could go after her.” Lyrr offered looking out across the lake, “Where would she have gone?”

“Probably as far away from the goblins as possible.” Auric replied, “But a creature is supposed to live in the lake, the Nuckelavee, we have never taken a boat past the shallows.”

But after losing everyone they knew the boys couldn’t accept that Kirien was gone too. They needed someone they could save. Dain climbed into one of the remaining rowboats and began untying it. Auric and Lyrr climbed in beside him. Lyrr called for Livanna who jumped uncertainly into the center of the boat.

They were in Brigdarrow until well past dusk, and now they rowed out across the lake under starlight. All four of them were covered in ash, though Livanna had shaken most of it off. Livanna spent the boat ride admiring herself

in the reflection of the water. There was no moon in the sky, and the boys rowed across the lake in silence.

They rowed until something large bumped the boat. They were nearly across the lake and it felt like a log floating on the water struck the boat. But when they checked the sides there was nothing but water on all sides. The boys stopped rowing and Livanna jumped from side to side in the rowboat looking into the water.

A few minutes passed and the boys began rowing again. They pretended they had imagined the bump. But the next one was impossible to ignore. Something struck the underside of the boat and lifted it up out of the water, carrying it nearly thirty feet to the east before settling down again in the water's surface. It was as if they had taken a small ride on the back of a great creature.

Livanna began whining until Lyrr ordered her to be quiet in elven.

"We had best go quickly," Auric whispered.

And with that the boys began rowing as fast as they could. They had only two oars and when one boy became tired he switched with whoever was waiting. Splashing loudly they pointed toward the nearest piece of land, a tangled beach nearly opposite the village.

Livanna sat in the back of the boat staring into the water. Then she barked and ran to the front of the boat with her ears down against her head.

The boys tried to turn but they were too slow. A pillar of green scales rose out of the lake, all sleek muscle and bluish-white horns. The creature roared, its gaping mouth was big enough to easily swallow any of the boys whole, if they could make it past the many rows of sickle shaped teeth.

In one movement the creature came down on the rowboat and the boat flipped out from underneath the creature's weight, sending everyone inside flying through the air and into the cold lake water.

Dain was lost under the water's surface. He still had the temple spear in his hand, but he couldn't tell which way was up or down. Though he couldn't see anything he felt the movement of something massive beside him, it was impossibly large, like a house swimming by.

Swimming frantically, and in no particular direction, Dain found the surface and came up to see the overturned rowboat still floating and Lyrr swimming toward it. Livanna's silver head was all that was visible as she swam and she was looking anxiously into the water.

Auric yelled for Dain, and Dain yelled back. They were on opposite sides of the rowboat and both began swimming towards it. Lyrr reached it first but couldn't right the boat by himself.

Then the Nuckelavee came out of the water again. It had three sets of eyes and short, clawed arms. It was long and serpentine with patches of green scales and sections of molted skin that hung open and exposed bare muscle and thick greasy veins beneath. This time the creature was silent, rising slowly out of the water and regarding Lyrr carefully with all of its eyes, trying to decide if he was food or some sort of debris from the boat. Deciding he was worth a taste the creature lifted its head and reached out toward Lyrr.

Livanna swam up along the creature's side and climbed onto his back. Then she raced up along the creature's neck to his head and bit down on the creature's nose just before the Nuckelavee reached Lyrr. The creature howled again and shook its head with Livanna attached like a hairy silver mole on its nose.

Auric and Dain reached the boat in time to flip it over, just as the creature lowered its nose enough to let one giant claw swipe at Livanna and knock her off into the water with a pained cry. The boys clambered back into the boat and Auric and Dain began rowing, while Lyrr looked for Livanna.

The creature dropped under the surface of the water again, then repeated its first attack, rising like a pillar in front of the boat. Ready for it Dain stood up and braced his spear before him. The creature stared at the spear as if entranced, then quietly dropped back into the water. The boys watched stunned as the Nuckelavee slipped away, its toothy head followed by the long coil of its body until finally a great molted tail slipped up and then down into the water.

Splashing and a bark came from the other side of the boat, where Livanna was swimming to meet them. The boys pulled her up into the boat where she received hugs from each of them before continuing to row on toward the other shore.

"Do you think Kirien got past the monster?" Dain asked.

"Yes" Lyrr replied, pointing to an overgrown cove ahead, where firefly's played in the branches and made strange blinking reflections in the water. Within the tangle of branches there was a discarded rowboat.

CHAPTER 8: KIRIEN

The boys pulled their rowboat up alongside the discarded one. They were all freezing and soaked, but dumping them in the lake had cleaned off all of the ashes of Brigdarrow. The other rowboat was empty. Lyrr and Livanna quickly found what they believed to be Kirien's trail.

"She looks to be alone." Lyrr said as he examined the broken branches where Kirien had pushed through into the forest.

Once through the brush at the forest's edge the forest was clear of undergrowth. Large trees didn't allow much starlight to get through and it took a few minutes for the boys' eyes to adjust to the darkness. Even then Auric and Dain had a hard time seeing the massive trees, let alone following a trail.

Fortunately Livanna seemed to know what she was looking for and, nose to the ground, she began walking through the forest. The boys followed.

Dain was just starting to be able to make out the looming figures of the trees when he ran into something so pitch black he was sure it must have been empty air. It was smooth and hard, like a polished stone. And it shuddered unhappily when Dain hit it. The giant form turned and Dain found himself face to face with a giant beetle and another giant, enameled horn.

Knowing how much damage those horns could do Dain backed slowly away. The beetle seemed to decide Dain was of no concern and settled back down where it had been resting.

Auric grabbed Dain by the scruff of the neck, "Haven't we fought enough monsters today?"

Dain only offered a weak apology.

They hadn't walked far into the dark forest when they saw the flickering of a campfire ahead. They crept quietly closer, but had little chance of being heard because there was crude singing coming from the camp.

"Bite off her nose,
pickle her toes,
that is what we'll do
stuff her with cheese
chew on her knees
make pudding inside of her shoes"

And on and on they went in coarse screechy voices. Long before they were close enough to see them, the boys knew they were goblins.

Dain snuck closer, signaling for the others to stay back. There were nearly twenty goblins in the camp, singing, arguing and sitting around a large bonfire they had prepared at the center of the clearing. As Dain watched, three goblins ganged up on a smaller one and pulled off his ragged, dirty pants. Then they ran around the fire with the pants, threatening to throw them in. The small goblin, naked and humiliated chased after them and eventually got his pants back only slightly singed.

Kirien hung above the goblin camp, tied to a tree branch. She was alive, and looked to be uninjured, but all she could do was watch the goblins and listen to their song in horror. Dain snuck back to where Auric, Lyrr and Livanna were waiting. He told them everything he had seen.

"Do you think we could sneak in and cut Kirien free?" Lyrr asked.

"I don't think so," Dain answered, "with that many goblins at least one of them will see us."

"Maybe they will go to sleep." Auric said. But from the voices in the camp that didn't seem likely to happen anytime soon.

As they talked about a plan they heard Kirien scream and threaten the goblins. One of them had poked her with a stick, all of the goblins laughed at Kirien's response.

"We can't just sit here." Dain said, then turning toward Auric he asked, "Do you think you could lightning them?"

Auric shook his head, "No, not twenty of them."

Lyrr looked confused by the mention of lightning, but decided not to ask. Instead he studied the weave of branches above them. Following it through the camp he said, "I think we can get to Kirien just by climbing across the branches, maybe we could cut her free and then run back to the boats?"

"The goblins see better in the dark than we do." Auric said, "We won't be able to outrun them through this forest. Not at night."

"I can see fine," Lyrr said "you and Dain could wait by the boats and I could cut her free."

"She won't be able to see." Auric said, "and after cutting her free she will fall right into the camp."

The boys considered their options. Then Dain smiled so wide Auric knew they were in trouble. He quickly explained his plan and they agreed to it.

Dain gave Auric's knife back to him and waited until Auric and Lyrr were in the trees. Once in the trees they climbed as close as they could to the camp without being spotted by the goblins. Then Dain and Livanna headed back toward the boat.

But he wasn't going to the boat. He was looking for the giant beetle, and he found the beetle resting where he had last bumped into it. Dain poked it with his spear. The beetle turned slightly, opening its small black eyes to regard Dain. Then deciding Dain was no threat it closed its eyes again.

Backing up Dain took the root out of his pocket. The same root a beetle had been tearing apart a tree to get at a few days before. The root still seemed to be a stinky green potato to Dain, and he didn't understand why the other beetle had been so interested in it. But the reaction from this beetle was the same. As soon as Dain waved the root at the beetle its eyes flashed open and it lurched toward Dain.

Dain didn't wait to see what the beetle did next, he just ran toward the goblin camp, Livanna leading the way. He didn't have to wonder long as the sound of the beetle crashing through the forest came right behind him.

Dain didn't have far to run until he could see the flickering light from the goblin camp. Hearing something crashing towards them the goblins had stopped singing. The only sound in the forest was the thuds of the enraged beetle against the ground, splintered branches that it ran into and even one medium sized tree it knocked over entirely.

The goblins were gathered into two tight groups on each side of the fire with weapons ready in their trembling hands. They had no idea what they were going to see come crashing into their camp. But the last thing they expected to see was a boy with a spear in one hand and a greenish potato in the other.

The goblins surprised to see Dain didn't compare to Kirien's. Dain smiled up at her and her face was a mixture of horror, delight and awe.

Kirien always inspired thoughtless bravery in Dain, and this time was no different. With goblins on either side of the campfire Dain charged toward the tall bonfire and leapt right through it. Disappearing briefly in the flames he landed easily on the other side. The goblins were so confused and focused on Dain that when the beetle charged into the camp the first three goblins were trampled before they even saw it.

Livanna ran about the camp barking and biting at the goblins. She was creating more chaos and having fun chasing them. A few of the goblins tried to fight off the beetle, but their crude clubs and axes simply bounced off the beetle's thick black shell harmlessly. One swipe of the beetle's massive horn

sent two goblins into the bonfire, but unlike Dain, they came out on fire yelling in pain as they ran about the camp.

Most of the goblins were running away from the camp, but two came after Dain. Dain ran around a tree, stopping halfway around to drop low and stick his spear out at ankle level. Both goblins hit the spear at full speed and fell, skidding across the ground. Dain jumped on one, crushed the root in his hand and shoved it down the back of the goblins grimy shirt.

By the time the goblin got back up the beetle was almost on top of them. Dain hid in the shadow of the tree while the beetle chased both of the goblins off into the forest.

Back in the camp Lyrr and Auric were almost done cutting Kirien free. Livanna danced excitedly under the spot where she was about to drop and Dain ran to catch her. She fell right into his arms and squeezed him so tightly he could hardly breathe, but he didn't complain.

"We had better go before the goblins return." Lyrr said dropping out of the tree.

Dain reluctantly let Kirien go. After all the losses they had suffered today, this victory felt incredible. A small part of life regained.

Unable to figure out the right question Kirien only said, "How?"

"I told you I didn't need your help to fight beetles." Dain shouted back at her as he followed Lyrr and Auric into the forest.

CHAPTER 9: THE WHISPERING WOOD

They decided to sleep in the rowboat. They stayed close to the shore, where the water was too shallow for the Nuckelavee to come, but far enough out that they hoped the creatures in the forest couldn't reach them.

Lyrr and Kirien were introduced to each other. And though it was a tight fit getting all five together in one rowboat, after their long day they all fell quickly asleep.

Despite saving Kirien, Dain's dreams were dark and troubled. He dreamed of his father, who he would never see again, and Father Prespin. Prespin's words echoed through Dain's dreams, "So we must protect ourselves, and each other. We will not know when danger comes for us."

Dain dreamed of goblins. They chased him through Brigdarrow setting fire to the buildings as they went. And every place Dain tried to hide he would find the burnt corpses of his friends.

The sound of Livanna licking Lyrr's face woke Dain up. It was nearly noon, they had all been so exhausted from the prior day that they had slept through the morning. Dain shook Auric and Kirien and they all gradually sat up and looked around.

The forest looked less intimidating in the daylight. The lake was passive and calm, though they could still see the smoke rising from where Brigdarrow had been. They all sat and watched it, it seemed like the destruction had been a dream, and their hearts sank again when they realized it was real.

"Did anyone else escape?" Kirien asked.

"No," Auric said gravely.

"What do we do now?" Dain asked, quick to change the subject.

They all had ideas. Kirien wanted to go back to Brigdarrow to see what had happened. The boys insisted that she didn't want to see that. Auric wanted to start traveling to Gelu, the closest Illian city, though it would take them at least twelve days to walk to it.

"We could return to my home, the elven city of Cerrolan." Lyrr offered, "Cerrolan is only about eight days away. You could travel with a caravan from there to Gelu, or stay with my family."

None of the options were appealing, and each day would get a little colder and more difficult to find food.

"The whispering wood is only about two days away." Auric said, "Did you say there was an elven settlement there?"

"Yes." Lyrr answered, "According to my people's maps. But it is rarely visited, and the elves from the settlement never leave the wood. I don't think they are dangerous, they are supposed to be very ancient. But they aren't a true part of the elven nation. The map called them Once Elves, and the place where they live is called the Well of Shadows."

Two days sounded a lot better than their other options.

"Okay," Dain said, "What about the forest you got lost in?"

"I can help with that." Auric said, "I always know the direction to Tarch's Tower. I should be able to use it as a bearing to get through the Whispering Wood."

They agreed to go to the elven settlement, docked the boat and began following Lyrr south along the lakes edge.

"Auric always knows the direction to Tarch's tower?" Kirien whispered to Dain, when they were far enough back that no one else would hear.

"We are pretty much heroes now." Dain answered. "I take out goblin hordes, Auric shoots lightning. Even Livanna runs up giant lake serpents and bites them on the nose. You have a lot of work to do to keep up."

Kirien smiled, unsure if Dain was teasing or not.

"I'm glad you came for me." Kirien said quietly. The mornings sunlight caused the freckles on her nose to stand out even more than normal. She was looking at him, but when he looked back she turned her head shyly away.

Speaking loud enough for everyone to hear Kirien said, "I know why the goblins attacked Brigdarrow."

Auric stopped and turned, eyes wide.

"It was that woman and her two guards. They paid three different goblin tribes to attack the village at once."

"Why?" Auric asked.

"I don't know." Kirien answered, "I heard the goblins talking about it. They called her Gosea the Dwindling."

"What else did they say?"

Kirien tried to remember, "That she gave all the tribes maps of our village, and exact orders of where to strike first. To make sure the stables were taken so no one got away. She demanded that everyone be killed and that the village be burnt to the ground to make sure no one was hiding in it."

They all began walking again. The smoke from Brigdarrow could still be seen behind them. And although they asked many more question about why anyone would want to hire goblins to attack Brigdarrow, they didn't have any answers.

They didn't stop until the sun was low and heavy in the sky. Lyrr asked Livanna to catch a few rabbits and she happily hunted and brought back three. They made a small fire that they huddled around for warmth, watched the rabbits cook and then greedily ate them. Dain thought it may have been the best meal he ever had.

"Why do the goblins speak patrian?" Dain asked to no one in particular.

“They used to be men.” Lyrr answered, a bit surprised this wasn’t widely known.

Dain looked at Auric for confirmation, but Auric was already asleep.

Lyrr continued, “In the age of magic the Bannor empire was the most fanatical of the shattered empires of men. They revered Bhall, the queen of fire and passion, and in her name they waged war against the demons and archmages of that age.”

“That part we know,” Dain said, “but Bhall fell, becoming a consort of Agares, and ending the age of magic.”

“Yes, when a god falls it impacts the world. Her capital and home to Bhall’s greatest temple was pulled down into hell, with the citizens along with it. The Bannor that were left in creation were maddened and transformed by the fall of their goddess. They became goblins, orcs and ogres.”

As if it wasn’t hard enough to sleep before, now Dain imagined that the goblins he had killed were men transformed into their horrible forms. He tried to push the thought out of his head, but he still couldn’t sleep.

Instead he sat by Kirien and watched over the others as they slept. Just past midnight, with a tiny sliver of a moon above them Livanna noticed he was awake she came over and laid her head in his lap. He fell asleep petting her.

Dain awoke to the smell of cooking rabbits. Livanna had gathered another pair and they didn’t smell nearly as good now that Dain wasn’t starving. Still knowing they had a long day of walking ahead they all ate and set off again.

Dain practiced with his spear as they walked, and Auric gave his small bandage knife to Kirien. Though they hoped that by evening they would be sitting at a proper table eating an elven dinner with friends, they tried to stay alert for the many dangers of the wilderness. Secretly Dain imagined what he would do if he came across Gosea and her two escorts.

It was just after noon when they came across a shallow stream. Beyond the stream the foliage changed and thin trees with white bark became more common. There were few leaves left on the trees, and their bare branches seemed prone to scratch at those brushing by them. It was especially dangerous to follow someone too closely as the branches another pushed back would go for the eyes of the person following them when they were let go. The group began to spread out farther from each other to keep that from happening.

An hour beyond the stream it was rare to see any foliage besides the thin white trees. The ground began to slope gently down and a pale fog gathered in many of the depressions, obscuring the ground. At first everyone avoided the mist covered depressions but the farther they walked, the farther down the ground sloped, the more common they became. Until eventually they stood on what looked to be a sea of mist with a forest of white trees growing out of it.

The crunch of dried leaves was heard from every step, so they knew the ground was unchanged. But not knowing exactly where they were stepping, and the occasional depression or twisted root that would trip one of them, made them uneasy. Only Livanna seemed to enjoy the fog, and she barked at, chased and bit at the tails and swirls of fog that they kicked up as they walked. She seemed confused when her mouth closed over a particularly thick wave of fog only to find nothing there.

Auric, who had been following the group, looked up to see each person heading off in a different direction. Dain turned abruptly right, Lyrr began circling a tree for no apparent reason and Kirien spun and began walking back in the direction they came. Even Livanna seemed confused, and in trying to chase a particular piece of fog started running in odd circles without reaching the curl she was barking at.

Kirien stopped when she noticed Auric ahead of her. "How did you get in front of me?" she asked.

"Stop!" Auric yelled, and everyone stopped and looked at him. Even Livanna, who was growing increasingly annoyed at the fog cloud that had been evading her stopped moving and looked at Auric.

"I'm not in front of you Kirien, I was behind you." Auric said, "You turned around."

Kirien gave Dain a look that suggested Auric was going crazy.

Auric placed his satchel on the ground and pulled some rope out of it. Then he tie the end of the rope around his waist. "Everyone come here" he said.

At that Kirien, who had been facing Auric, turned right and began walking away from him. Dain turned left again and began walking back toward the way they came, but he was going to miss Auric by at least forty feet. Lyrr continued to walk around the same tree. Livanna simply sat and watched everyone, not understanding, but enjoying the confusion.

Auric shook his head in frustration before again calling for everyone to stop.

"Stay right where you are," Auric commanded, "I will come to you."

"If you want us to walk to you, you have to stay in one place." Kirien said also frustrated. "How are you jumping around like that?"

"I'm not moving," Auric argued. But he stopped to consider the tree's and where he was standing. He was fairly certain he hadn't been moving.

"I don't know how this tree got between us." Lyrr called from the other side of the tree he had been circling.

Auric carefully walked toward Dain. As he started there was a buzzing in his head, much like the pulse's and feelings he was used to. But this one irritated him and made his head throb painfully.

"Hold on Dain, don't move." Auric called. As Auric continued walking toward Dain the buzzing got louder. It was voices, dozens of them, and they were telling him directions.

"Don't you see, round the tree, straight isn't where it used to be," one said.

"Turn left now to reach your friend, then left and left and left again," sang another.

Auric tried to block out the voices. His feet wanted to follow them, but he was able to ignore them and keep his eyes on Dain. Reaching Dain he lopped the rope through Dain's belt.

"Do the rest of you hear those voices?" Auric said, straining to be heard above all them.

"No". They all answered in unison.

"Why are you yelling?" Kirien asked.

"Follow me," Auric told Dain, pulling on the rope and starting to walk toward Kirien.

After a few steps Dain complained, "Why are we walking around in circles?"

Auric ignored him. Reaching Kirien he looped the rope through her belt. Then he walked around the tree to Lyrr and did the same. Lastly he went to Livanna and tied the end of the rope around her neck.

"Okay, everyone follow me." Auric said, again speaking over the voices that were pounding in his head.

"So we are following the guy that is shouting and hearing voices." Dain said, "I can't see how this could go wrong."

But despite Dain's joke they quickly realized that Kirien, Dain, Lyrr and even Livanna all thought straight ahead was dramatically different directions. And though it seemed to them that Auric was walking in circles, they did make progress as they followed him. The ground sloped ever down, and the fog got slowly higher.

Occasionally Auric would stop and concentrate, reaching out to feel Tarch's Tower way out beyond the Whispering Wood, the stream and the grass lands. Making sure it stayed at his back kept him going the right direction. The forest was confusing even beyond the misleading voices.

Tarch's Tower was more distant than it had even been for him, and Auric wondered if he would be able to channel the lighting from the tower at this distance. It was a painful reminder that he was getting farther from home.

They walked for another few hours. Auric ignored their occasional complaints about going the wrong direction and even Livanna whined occasionally at having to wear the collar. The ground fog became high enough that only the top of Livanna's head and her silver tail stuck out of it.

Then the forest opened to a smooth sea of fog. Auric walked forward and fell into the fog with a scream. The rope pulled taut and Dain fell to the ground, rolling forward. Kirien grabbed her rope only to have it ripped out her hands painfully and she was pulled forward after Auric and Dain's weight.

Lyrr yelled in Elvish for Livanna to come. And exactly as he hoped when Livanna tried to run to Lyrr she ended up running directly to the left instead and wrapping around a nearby tree. Livanna was pulled back painfully against the tree, but the rope stopped moving. Everyone froze with Auric and Dain obscured by the fog while Kirien and Lyrr tried to regain their footing. Livanna simply looked confused that a tree had suddenly popped up between her and Lyrr.

"Is everyone okay?" Dain called from beneath the fog, "Auric, are you there?"

"I think so." Auric yelled back, still far louder than he needed to, "I stepped over the edge of some sort of pit."

Together everyone pulled back and Auric was able to pull himself up over the edge of the pit and stand back up. The ground fog was perfectly smooth across the ground and the surface of the pit, there was no indication that it was there except that there were no trees ahead, just a smooth sea of fog.

After making sure Livanna was okay Lyrr cut a long branch from the tree and handed it to Auric. "To tap the ground," he offered.

Carefully, and more slowly than before, the group began walking along the edge of the pit. It was massive and when night came they were still walking along it. Then Auric noticed that the ground began sloping down at a much greater rate. And though the pit was on his right side, on his left the ground stayed even.

"It's a path down into the pit." Auric called back, "Do we go down?"

"I think this is the Well of Shadows," Lyrr said. "The once elves probably live down there."

Then after taking one more look around at the night sky and each other, Auric headed down into the mist.

CHAPTER 10: THE WELL OF SHADOWS

They all walked down the path with careful hands on the moist earthen wall on their left side. The path was wide enough for wagons to ride down it but on the right side it fell away. The fog was so thick that they couldn't see each other even though they moved forward slowly, and with their hands on each other's shoulders.

Then the fog simply ended, it floated and rolled in rippling waves above them as if forming a thin veil between the Whispering Wood and the pit they were descending into. The wall and the ground were formed from moist earth and occasional branches of pale white fungus grew on the walls making beautiful, branching shapes. It reminded everyone of the white barked trees from the forest.

A tiny amount of sunlight filtered down through the layer of fog above them, just enough to cast the world in a deep gray. The fungus produced enough light to highlight the path so they could see slightly further ahead. They untied the rope as they began walking down the path.

"The voices stopped," Auric said, "But I can't feel anything. I can't find Tarch's Tower. And there were more things I could feel that I didn't even know were things until now that I can't feel them anymore."

They all looked at Auric in confusion. He looked tired and empty.

"I don't think we are in the world anymore." Auric said.

"Is this what elven settlements are like?" Kirien asked.

“No” Lyrr answered “Not any I know of. But these elves are supposed to be friendly, even if they aren’t very open. We have traded with them and some of our people have visited here. They are said to have an incredible library.”

“As long as they have real food I will be happy.” said Dain trying to be optimistic.

They continued walking down the path until stone columns began to appear on the right side of the path and the glowing fungus became less and less frequent. The dim light filtered through the fog made it a world trapped in perpetual twilight.

Eventually the sloping path ended at the bare ground of the pit floor, though it was too big to be a pit. They had walked for hours down the path, and if it had curved at all it had been slight. They laughed when Dain suggested that the Well could hold all of Brigdarrow, and Auric correctly said that it could hold Brigdarrow, the surrounding farms and the lake as well.

The ground was the same moist earth as the path and the walls. There was no grass, but occasional collections of fungus, toadstools that grew as tall as Dain’s waist and strange fleshy columns that grew much taller. Many were covered by what they first assumed were spider webs, but they were wet and solid, like translucent sheets of gossamer strung between any two points. They were tinted green or violet and were smooth to the touch. Livanna sniffed at everything suspiciously, sad that there were no rabbits to chase.

“Where do we go from here?” Dain asked.

“That way,” Auric said pointing toward the center of the Well of Shadows. “There is a fire burning there, it watches over a city.” Trying to listen and understand what he was feeling Auric added, “There is something else, a doorway to another place. I don’t know what is beyond it, but it is ancient and eternal.”

“Anything dangerous?” Kirien asked.

“I don’t think so.” Auric answered.

As if to prove him wrong, a line of chariots appeared from the direction Auric had pointed. They were onyx and grey and pulled by ghostly stag’s with tall, ethereal horns. Each chariot had two riders, one controlling the reins and the other with a long pike. They were coming forward at full speed, and as they neared the pikes were lowered and readied.

“Run!” Auric yelled.

They all began running back up the path. Livanna waited until last, growling at the rapidly closing chariots, and then sprinted up behind Lyrr.

They didn't get more than a few dozen feet up the patch before the darkness welled in front of them, forming a shadow on the wall that an elf stepped out of. He was tall, with long grey hair and black robes inscribed with silver. His skin may have once been white but was now an ashen grey that made him look like he was sick, or his blood had been drained from him. He carried a twisted black staff covered with the glowing white fungus.

He pointed the staff at them and shouted "Sluagh!"

Spirits flooded out of the staff. The ghosts of men long dead and now forced to serve this mage for all eternity. They were bound inside the twisted staff until these brief moments when they could escape and channel their misery into the living. They rushed out with eager force and fell upon the children.

Kirien screamed as one touched her, a spectral man with great swollen folds of flesh under his eyes and large calloused hands. It dragged her along the ground and pushed her up against the soft dirt wall. She felt like it was trying to bury her alive, to grant her the rest it couldn't have.

Dain set his spear to impale one that came at him, but it passed through it as if it wasn't there, then grabbed Dain's throat with hands that were suddenly very real and began choking him.

The other's were doing as badly. Auric fell down and was trying to concentrate on the ghost that was attacking him. It was the wispy form of a pudgy man with deep scars in his face, so deep one eye was gone, and a thick mustache that hung down low over his upper lip. The ghost grabbed Auric's hair and pulled his head back. Auric met his gaze and said simply "Be free!" and the ghost stopped in confusion.

No longer held thrall to the twisted staff the ghost silently mouthed "thank you" and fled toward the center of the Well. Auric had only a brief moment to be proud, when he looked up he saw the robed elf standing over him with his staff raised. With a thud the staff came down on Auric's head and Auric fell into darkness.

CHAPTER 11: TALIA

Auric awoke in a jail. The building looked to be a large room divided by a row of bars and a single locked gate. On the opposite side of the bars there was a table, a few chairs, a water barrel and a single lantern hanging from a hook in the ceiling.

On Auric's side of the bars there were nothing but smooth stone walls, a single bench, a water basin, Dain, Kirien, Lyrr, Livanna and a woman Auric didn't recognize. She was beautiful and earthy, with black hair, smooth tanned skin, and a lush rounded figure. She was tending to the wound on Auric's head. She dabbed the wound with a wet bandage and it sent a flash of pain through Auric. He groaned in pain.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

Auric sat up, the room seemed to lurch and roll at his sudden movement.

"I'm okay." Auric answered, "Where are we?"

"In the elven settlement," Dain answered, "They locked us away until their leader could talk to us, someone named Haerlond."

"Why did they attack us?" Auric asked.

Dain shrugged.

"Someone stole from them." The beautiful woman answered, "They are frantic trying to find it."

"Who are you?" Auric asked.

"My name is Talia." She answered, "I'm a druidess" Then when Auric looked confused she added, "A witch. I was studying in their library when they arrested me and accused me of stealing from them. But I haven't taken anything."

Auric introduced himself, though Dain had already told Talia all about them. Pretending to want to stretch his legs Auric got up and walked around the cell, sitting down by Dain.

"Do you trust her?" Auric whispered.

"I don't know." Dain said. "Maybe, but if the elves think she stole from them it's probably best not to get too friendly with her."

Auric nodded. As he watched, Livanna rolled onto her back and let Talia rub her stomach.

"So much for not appearing friendly." Auric said.

"Lyrr," Auric said, this time loud enough that Talia could hear. "can't you talk to them and get us released?"

"I tried." Lyrr said, "They speak patrian instead of elven. I think they just want to search our stuff to make sure we didn't have anything of theirs. They thought we were leaving the Well, not entering it."

Kirien added, "The old one with the staff really wanted to know how you got through the Whispering Wood, he called it the widdershins curse. We told him you would explain it when you woke up."

A few hours later an elf brought food. He looked to be only a few years older than Lyrr with black hair and Lyrr's same gentle features. But his skin was white, almost porcelain in appearance, compared to Lyrr's chestnut tan. He carried several trays and he slid them one at a time under the bars.

The food consisted of flatbread, a sweet cream to spread on it and fruits none of them recognized. The fruit had thick, red, watery seeds contained in a sticky white membrane. The seeds were sweet but the white peel of the fruit was too bitter to eat. Only Livanna avoided eating, sniffing suspiciously at everything the elf brought them. Eventually Lyrr convinced her to eat some of the bread.

Dain tried asking questions to the elf that delivered the food, but once he had refilled their water basin he left without speaking.

They ate ravenously, then in better spirits than their situation would indicate they fell asleep with full stomachs. Only Talia and Auric stayed awake.

"Waldrun said you dismissed one of the spirits from his staff." Talia started.

"Yes, to keep it from killing me. I wasn't trying to free it." Auric said.

"How did you do it?"

"I don't know," Auric said, it seemed a common answer for him, "I could sense the spirit, sense the staff and the chain between them. I tried to break that link, I thought the ghost was created by the staff. I didn't know that with the link gone the ghost would be able to wander off."

"Have you been trained as a mage?" Talia asked.

"No, I'm a farmer's son from the Illian village of Brigdarrow. I'm not a mage."

"You should be," Talia said, "talent like yours is rare. I've heard stories of it, but I've never met anyone who can do the sorts of things you can without a lot of training. What else have you done?"

They talked through the evening. Auric told her about Tarch's tower, the voices in the Whispering Wood and squelching the fire in the ashes of his home. He told her he could sense the fire that lit the city they were in and the gate that went to an ancient place.

"The fire is called the Tower of Calling, and burns atop a watchtower here in the city. It burns gold and provides the only real light in the city,

outside of the lanterns the elves build from fungus. The gate is a portal atop the Malachite Palace, the highest point of the city. It leads to the Otherworld, the land of the dead, which is where these elves came from.”

“The elves are dead?” Auric said in disbelief.

“No,” Talia said, “I think they were trapped in the land of the dead for centuries. Held by a human archmage that was battling Arawn. The elves escaped into this place where they have been living for the past few decades.”

“But,” Talia continued, “right now I’m more interested in your talents. Would you like to learn to use them?”

Auric nodded. Talia got a piece of uneaten flatbread and, saying a quick incantation, caused it to smolder, sending up a small trail of smoke. Concentrating she caused the smoke to waver one way and then the other, then loop back in on itself in clumsy circles.

“Focus on the smoke, see if you can make it move.” Talia said.

Auric tried without success. “I can’t feel it, there isn’t any pulse in the smoke.”

“There is a song in all things,” Talia said, “It may not scream as loud as Waldrun’s staff or Tarch’s Tower, but it is there if you listen closely enough.”

They spent much of the night practicing, and by the end Auric was able to move the smoke, though only by a tiny amount. Talia claimed that was amazing progress, and it had taken her months to get that far, even though she was considered a prodigy during her training. Contented and exhausted they both fell asleep.

CHAPTER 12: HAERLOND

In the morning they were offered another meal of flatbread, cream and fruit. Dain and Kirien were discussing more and more improbable plans of escape, and even Lyrr was beginning to fear for their safety. Although since being captured the elves hadn’t harmed them.

Only Auric seemed in good spirits, which was unusual for him. For the first time he understood some part of why he was odd. Talia was not only a kindred spirit, but a guide. Instead of being a victim to the things he heard and felt he was able to exert some control over them.

Shortly after eating a pair of elven guards entered the jail. They carried long pikes that bent back on themselves, and wore smoke grey iron breastplates. Waldrun, the ancient elf with the twisted staff, came after them. Then two elves followed, one with long black hair and another with hair like bright gold. It was easy to see that they were brothers, their features were so similar. But the features on the darker elf seemed severe and angular, while on the younger blond they seemed more yielding. The older brothers white skin wrinkled on the edges of his eyes and on his brow, and on the blond younger brother the wrinkles were at the edge of his mouth from smiles and laughter. But neither laughed now.

The dark haired older brother spoke first, "I am Haerlond, son of Arak the Erkling and prince of the elves of the Well of Shadows. Why do you trespass on our lands?"

Dain answered, "We are the only survivors from the Illian village of Brigdarrow, it was destroyed by goblins. This was the closest settlement to our village, we came to find shelter and help."

The blond elf spoke, "We saw the procession of your people and the goblins that fell in the attack as they drifted from your world, through this luminal place and into Arawn's realm. Know that they went without impediment and doubtless have found their peaceful rest."

"Forgive me," Haerlond added quickly, annoyed to have his questioning interrupted, "this is my brother Varn." He gestured non-committally to the blond elf then held a hand toward Waldrun, "And you have already met Waldrun, he leads the Ostaurii, guardians of our home."

Dain nodded dumbly, still trying to understand what sort of procession Varn spoke of.

"We had an item stolen," Haerlond continued, "that has not yet been recovered. Have you taken anything from our lands?"

"No." Dain said, then thinking quickly he added, "Only what we have been given, the food and water."

"Have you seen this woman before being imprisoned here?" Haerlond asked, looking at Talia.

"No." Dain answered, Kirien, Lyrr and Auric shook their heads along with his answer.

"How did you get past the widdershins curse without a charm?" Haerlond asked.

This time it was Auric that answered, "My friends were confused by it, even Livanna got lost. But instead of being turned around, I heard the curse as

voices. They were speaking to me and trying to get me lost, but I ignored them and kept going straight through the Whispering Wood.”

“Impossible.” Waldrun muttered beneath his breath.

“Are you the one that feed the sluagh bound to Waldrun’s staff?” Haerlond asked.

“Yes.” Auric answered, “Though I didn’t mean to. I just wanted to get the ghost off of me. I don’t understand what I’m doing when it comes to magic.”

Haerlond considered them all carefully before making his decision.

“I find little evidence that you have the talent or desire to steal from us.” Haerlond started, “Because we know what it means to lose our people, we will offer you the sanctuary you seek. We sent a divided soul to question the people of your village about our theft, and he saw the results of the goblins attack. Rest here, when the next traveler from Cerrolan comes to the Well we will see if you can return with him. From there you can travel to any of the human cities.”

Waldrun grew more annoyed with each word Haerlond spoke. Finally unable to contain himself he interrupted, “My prince, certainly it cannot be coincidence that days after the theft we find men fleeing the Well. Are we to simply free them to run to whatever companions await them in Erebus?”

“They are only clay.” Haerlond said, his sharp features becoming even more so, “Your men reported seeing this women near the oubliette, they made no mention of children. Are we to believe that these weak, starving, dirty wretches have the guile to sneak by the best of the Ostaurii? Are your soldiers that feeble?”

“No my prince.” Waldrun said, though his lips twitched like he had just bitten into something sour he managed to remain quiet.

Haerlond pulled a key from his dark robes and unlocked the cell. Both of the elven guards kept a close eye on Talia as everyone else exited the cell. After everyone but Talia was out Haerlond closed and relocked it.

“We should release Talia as well,” Varn said, “we have no real evidence against her. She was accepted into the Well by your own order, and she doesn’t have the Heartstone.”

Waldrun immediately started arguing against that. He and Varn began bitterly condemning each other while Haerlond listened.

Dain was following Lyr out of the room. They were nearly out of the jail, ready to enjoy the comforts of the elven city and relax until they could

travel to Cerrolan. But the mention of the Heartstone reminded him of the strange stone that Garon Ire had handed Gosea the Dwindling two days before the goblin attack. Dain knew he should stay quiet, that this was an argument he didn't want to become a part of. But he had never been good at staying quiet.

"Is the Heartstone a fist sized grey rock with strange sharp facets cut into it?" Dain asked.

Everyone stopped talking and looked at Dain. At a motion from Haerlond one of the guards blocked the door. Kirien glared at Dain.

"What do you know about the Heartstone?" Haerlond asked, his voice was even but each word was enunciated completely as if a sentence to itself.

"A woman came through our village with two guards, her name was Gosea the Dwindling. The Thegn of our village searched her belongings when they thought she may have been the reason for our disappearance. One of the things she had was a stone that looked like it was cut by a drunk jeweler."

"Where did she go?" Haerlond asked in the same even tones.

"I don't know." Dain answered, "She hired the goblins to attack Brigdarrow. She even gave them instructions on how to attack it so no one would get away."

"I saw her and her companions leave Brigdarrow the day before the goblin attack." Kirien added, "They headed west into the forest."

"The procession was four days ago." Haerlond said, mostly to himself. "They are five days ahead of our hunters?"

Then thinking Haerlond asked, "Is there anything else you remember about them?" Looking at Auric he added, "What was your impression of them?"

"I never saw them." Auric said.

After making sure that no one knew anything more about Gosea Haerlond asked Varn to find lodging for the children and then he turned to leave.

He was stopped by Varn, "What of Talia, certainly this proves her innocence?"

Waldrun interjected, "These children are too guileless to be a threat, but we should believe their account over those of our own guards?"

"Are you sure it was this woman and not another that you saw?" Haerlond asked.

“Yes.” Waldrun said without pausing, “and if you allow me to perform a simple taghairm I can prove it and find the Heartstone.”

Haerlond considered it briefly, obviously more concerned with sending scouts to investigate Gosea. Looking at Talia he said, “Leave her jailed, we may need more information.”

CHAPTER 13: BARATHRUM

The elven city was odd and beautiful. It was dominated by the Malachite Palace, a large moss green ziggurat with a dark archway at its top. The Ostaurii, elven pike men, were on constant vigilant guard around the archway, and two stood guard outside the jail.

The rest of the city was built from grey stone, though occasional quartz crystals or pale glowing fungus were used to decorate the elegant buildings. The grey stone was without visible seams, making them look like they weren’t constructed, but simply grew out of the damp ground. The city was so dark that what little light did exist only made more shadows, making the city appear to be varying degrees of darkness to human eyes.

The brightest light in the city came from the Tower of Calling. A stone tower set directly before the Malachite Palace. It had a golden fire burning atop it at exactly the height of the archway. There weren’t any reds or oranges in the fire, just a pure yellow gold that gave some faint color to the city.

“We have a few rooms for guests at the library.” Varn said, obviously still concerned about his argument with Waldrun. “Most visitors that come to Barathrum come to study, so that’s where we keep open rooms. We will bring you food and you are free to explore the city. You will be safe within the Well.”

They stopped in front of the library, a round stone building with a single set of wide doors and no windows. The top of the library was a dome fitted with pieces of clear quartz, and a diffuse light radiated out from inside the building.

Varn squinted before opening the door and warned everyone to shield their eyes. Inside a massive silver chandelier hung. The chandelier was covered with the glowing fungus and it bathed the entire library in a dim white light. Mirrors were set in the walls at the height of the chandelier and reflected the light down into the library. The clear quartz dome allowed some of the light from the sky and the city to slip through.

It took Varn several seconds to adjust to the light in the library. For the rest it was the first time since entering the Well of Shadows that they could almost see. The library could hardly be considered bright, but it was enough to read by, barely.

Beneath the quartz dome and the circle of mirrors, shelves full of books filled the room. To Auric, Kirien and Dain it seemed like an amazing collection. Lyrr wasn't as impressed.

"This is small compared to the library at Cerrolan, and Cerrolan isn't a large elven city. Why do people come to study here?" Lyrr asked.

Varn lead them to two small bedrooms right off of the libraries main chamber while answering, "These tomes are from the land of the dead, many of Erebus's most important writers died before finishing their greatest works. Here we have those works, finished in Arawn's realm, and available for study."

"Can we read them?" Auric asked.

Varn nodded, "It may be months before the next traveler arrives, we will ask that you work in the orchards and help fetch water while you are here. But outside of that you can read what you like. There is a washroom and I will see if I can find you some clean clothes."

Varn left and everyone settled into the two rooms. Kirien insisted that she get a room to herself and forced all three boys to share the other. They complained but after washing up and changing into the clothes Varn brought back for them, they gave in and let her have the room. Varn had also returned their weapons and Dain picked up his spear, running his hand over the inlaid silver and green stone, it was a reminder of his home and he felt safer when he held it.

Auric settled into one of the great chairs in the library with a pile of books beside him. He was the most interested in a history written by a priest of Mulcarn, god of winter. The priest lived during the last age, when Mulcarn lived on Erebus, and it also chronicled Mulcarn's death at the hands of Kylorin and the Godslayer.

Lyrr and Livanna both went to sleep, claiming the only bed in the boys room. They were happy to be finally safe and to spend a night on a soft bed with warm blankets.

But Dain was restless. He walked along the bookshelves, reading the titles of those in languages he understood, but he never enjoyed reading. When Auric ignored his attempts at conversation he knocked at Kirien's door.

"Want to go exploring?" Dain asked as she opened it.

Kirien was wearing a thin grey elven dress edged in deep purple. Her hair was still wet from her bath and she was currently barefoot, although Varn had brought sandals with the clothes. It was the first time Dain had ever seen her wearing anything feminine, as she typically wore the same sorts of ragged pants and shirts as he did in Brigdarrow. He found himself at a loss for words.

Kirien punched him, "Don't laugh!"

He hadn't even thought of laughing, but he mumbled an agreement and looked away.

"Yeah, I'll go." Kirien said, slipping into her sandals.

After telling Auric they were leaving they opened the main door out of the library and went out into Barathrum. It took a few minutes for their eyes to adjust to the darkness of the city. Once they did they started to wander back toward the jail.

The city felt deserted. Though elves were out, they were rare and they traveled so quietly they often weren't noticed. The first inhabitant Dain saw was an elven woman stirring a purplish black liquid in large barrels. She was small enough to be the woman Kirien got the dress from. As Dain walked by the woman smiled sweetly at him.

Two of the Ostaurii still stood watch outside the jail. Dain and Kirien approached carefully, still haunted by the memory of the elven warriors charging for them on their chariots.

"Let's check out the portal," Dain said pointing at the top of the Malachite Palace.

Kirien looked nervous, but she nodded.

The green stone of the malachite palace was different than the stone of the city. It was formed of thick blocks easily the size of a house, and though they fit perfectly together all the edges had been smoothed by the passage of time. There weren't any doors or visible ways to enter the palace, only a long set of stairs on each of its four sides that lead to the top. As Dain and Kirien climbed they noticed that the palace was without decoration or inscriptions except for a symbol of a moth carved just over the looping archway at the top of the palace.

There were easily a dozen of the Ostaurii atop the palace, and several others positioned midway up the stairs on each side. They watched Dain and Kirien climb the palace without comment, and Dain had the impression they weren't here to guard anyone from going into the archway, but to protect against anything that might come out.

Waldrun was also atop the palace speaking to the Ostaurii, but they grew quiet when Dain and Kirien got close. The palace was the highest point in the city, matched only by the flame from the Tower of Calling that was close enough to where they stood that it cast the entire top of the palace in yellow hues. They could see the pale white glow from the library from here, but the rest of the city was shrouded in darkness.

“Were you looking for something?” Waldrun asked.

“No,” Dain answered nervously “Varn said that we were free to explore the city and it’s very... beautiful. We have only seen our village before, never anything like this.”

Kirien was even more nervous and didn’t like the way Waldrun was regarding the two of them. He seemed to be thinking, but his eyes had no warmth in them. He reminded her of a butcher considering slaughtering either the chicken or the pig for Beltane dinner. Waldrun noticed her nervousness and smiled, though it only made him look more sinister.

Dain turned to go back down the stairs, but Waldrun stopped him with a comment.

“Your father is on the other side of that archway.”

Dain froze, Kirien found herself suddenly afraid, but she wasn’t sure what she was afraid of. She grabbed Dain’s sleeve to force him to continue walking down the stairs with her, but he wouldn’t move.

“Is the Otherworld through that portal?” Dain asked turning to look at the archway.

“Yes,” Waldrun answered again with that creepy smile, “It leads to Arawn’s realm and to the spirit’s of all men who are unclaimed by the gods.”

“Do you have to be dead to enter the Otherworld?”

Waldrun laughed, it was hollow raspy sound. Kirien’s tugs became more urgent, but Dain continued to ignore her.

“Of course not, that is where we all came from.” Waldrun said, “We entered the Otherworld many centuries ago, before the rise and fall of Mulcarn, before the shattering of the human nations. We lived unaging and undying in the Otherworld. Varn and Haerlond were boys, younger even than you, when we entered and they remained so until we came here and started aging again. I fear they may forever remain as boys in spirit.”

Dain walked over to the archway. It was a simple green arch atop the palace with the moth symbol inscribed in it. There wasn’t any indication that it

was special or that stepping through it would lead you anywhere but on the other side of the palace's top.

"Why did you leave the Otherworld?" Dain asked.

Waldrun shrugged, "We were unable to have children inside the Otherworld. And as pleasant as life was there, it was muted compared to normal life. The Otherworld is a place of relaxing and calm, a place to dream and allow the centuries to slip by unnoticed. But there was little passion either in sadness or joy. We came here so that we might truly live."

Dain nodded absently, straining to see anything through the empty air of the portal.

"You may go through if you want..." Waldrun said, almost at a whisper.

The Ostaurii exchanged alarmed glances at this. As casually as Waldrun tried to make it sound it was obvious from their looks that this was never done.

"Dain," Kirien pleaded, "we have to get back. Let's go talk to Varn and see if we can help get Talia out of jail."

But when Dain turned to look at her Kirien already knew it was hopeless.

"Go back to Auric," Dain said somberly, "I have to see my father again. I will ask him what we should do. And I will tell your mother that you love her."

Tears welled up in Kirien's eyes. "No..." she sobbed.

But it was useless. Dain turned and walked through the archway. As he stepped through he disappeared. A low whining sound, like two stones grinding together, accompanied his disappearance and the fire atop the Tower of Calling flickered dangerously.

Kirien briefly considered chasing after him, but as non-descript as the simple stone archway was it radiated such a presence of antiquity and ending that it terrified her. Waldrun turned his creepy smile on Kirien, but she ran down the stairs in tears.

CHAPTER 14: THE OTHERWORLD

Dain seemed to be back in the dry yellow grasslands that surrounded Brigdarrow. There was a grey haze over everything, like a fog on a cool spring night, but the air was dry and warm. The haze blocked anything beyond a few

hundred yards and made it impossible for Dain to see the low mountains that would have told him which way Brigdarrow was, or if this was the land around his home.

Turning around he saw the archway behind him. It stood simply on the plains with the same moth symbol carved into its top. Just as within the Well of Shadows it appeared to simply be a stone arch and there wasn't anything on the other side but more yellow grass.

Without knowing where to go Dain started walking in the direction he exited the arch from. As he walked he searched the grey haze for anything he recognized. Everything seemed both familiar and foreign.

A group of fat crows were disturbed as Dain came close and they took off into the air, cawing loudly. Their beaks and legs were more red than yellow and when Dain got close he saw what they had been doing. A corpse lay in the dirt, torn apart by beaks and claws. Dain wasn't sure if it was the corpse of a man or that of large animal. It looked to have been dead for weeks and there wasn't much left but bones and shriveled skin. The crows had picked away all the meat.

Dain hurried on, very conscious of the black eyes of the crows on him. Once he passed they quickly settled back to their meal.

He walked for a time that could have been minutes, hours or days. The haze remained and the sunlight filtered through it reminded Dain of the light of the Well of Shadows, filtered through grey, though here it was brighter. Except for the crows there was nothing alive on the grasslands. Even when he examined the ground he couldn't find any evidence of bugs. And there were no worms in the scoops of rich brown dirt he dug up.

Dain considered turning back, assuming that was even possible. But then he spotted a dim outline in the haze, a outline to square to be natural. Shapes he recognized as those of Brigdarrow. And they were not those of the ruins of Brigdarrow, but the buildings still standing, just as he left them before the goblin attack occurred. Dain began running toward the village shouting for his father.

There was a man standing in the grasslands. At first Dain thought it may be his father, but he was pudgy and not nearly as tall. As Dain got closer he could see the man had deep scars on his face, and was missing his left eye. He also had a grey moustache so thick that his entire mouth disappeared underneath it when his mouth was closed.

Dain recognized the man as the ghost from Waldrun's staff that attacked Auric. The one Auric had freed. But he wasn't a ghost any longer. He stood in the grasslands looking as real as Dain was.

"Heading home?" the man asked.

Dain stopped running. He was eager to get closer to Brigdarrow, to get past the vague shapes he could see now, to run past the chickens that undoubtedly still guarded the village square, to see everyone again, to find his father. But the man looked very solemn and wise, and Dain found himself trusting the man despite his rugged appearance.

"Yes, I want to see my father again. Is he in the village?" Dain asked breathing hard.

"Yes," the man said as he nodded, "he is there, and he would be happy to see you. Most of your village lives here in gentle comfort. But..." we warned seeing Dain's smile, "you cannot simply go to him. He is in a dream and if you enter it with him, you can never leave."

Dain thought about the world behind him, about Kirien and Auric, about the Well of Souls and traveling to Cerrolan or wherever they would end up. But nothing compared to the thought of seeing his father again.

"That's okay, I want to see him." Dain said.

If the man judged Dain based on his response he didn't show it.

"They will make you return to spear practice again. Your eternity will be spent in those tasks you fled in life." The man warned.

Dain smiled, "I would love that."

"One more thing." The man added, "In the world you came from Haerlond will allow Waldrun to perform the taghairm ritual on Talia."

"What is the taghairm ritual?" Dain asked.

"It is a way for a necromancer to question a victim without worrying about deception. He will kill her and trap her soul. The ritual forces her soul to answer his questions honestly. He will have his answers, but she will die."

"Did she help Gosea steal the Heartstone?"

"No, she is innocent" the man said simply.

"Why are you telling me this?" Dain asked, becoming annoyed that issues from his life were being brought up. It was starting to seem as if his time in the Well of Shadows had been a dream. He couldn't even really remember what Talia looked like and it seemed like months or years since he had been locked in the cell with her.

"If you return you may be able to save her." He answered.

Dain was becoming angry, “Why don’t you go back and save her? Why does it have to be me?”

“I am no longer a part of that world, you are...” the man paused, looking for the right word, “between.”

The man didn’t stand in Dain’s way. The village was right ahead, he could see the outline of Kirien’s mothers shop and he was anxious to replace the images of the blacked ashes of the city with the way it used to be. The way it was here.

But he couldn’t go on. He couldn’t let Talia die, even if he didn’t really know her. And he knew that if Kirien found out they were going to kill Talia she would try to stop it herself, alone if she had too.

Without asking anymore questions Dain turned and started running back toward the archway.

CHAPTER 15: RETURN

Varn was back at the library when Kirien burst in, still in tears. She quickly explained that Dain had gone through the archway and was only soothed when Varn took hold of her quivering shoulders and promised that he would do everything he could to get Dain back. But his eyes were full of fear.

They all rushed to the Malachite Palace, Kirien’s tear streaked face was now set and determined. And once at the Palace they bounded up the stairs to the top. By the time they reached the top Auric’s head was spinning from the exertion, and even Livanna was panting heavily.

Waldrun stood among the Ostaurii around the archway.

“Hello my prince,” Waldrun said, “is there a problem?”

“The boy,” Varn said through clenched teeth, “did you send him into Arawn’s realm?”

“Send him? No...” Waldrun answered with a thin smile, “he went to be with his father. I fear he was overcome by his grief.”

Auric closed his eyes and reached out, trying to learn what Talia taught him, trying to feel something through that archway. To him it felt like a bottomless pit, anything that went into it was caught and echoed against its walls forever. He couldn’t feel Dain, he couldn’t feel anything until a sudden presence turned on him.

For a brief moment he felt someone as if they stood right in front of him. It was man, an evangelist, a general, an archmage, a king, maybe even a god. And he was powerful and evil. If that world was a pit he was at its center. The man and Auric stared at each other from across worlds, and then Auric lost any connection to him. Auric fell trembling to his knees.

Lyrr grabbed Auric and at first they all thought the Ostaurii were going to attack. Every guard around the archway wheeled and brought their pike's to bare in one smooth, deadly movement. Even Varn reacted, pushing in front of the children with his sword instantly out and ready. Only Waldrun was surprised and stumbled away from the archway clumsily.

Where once there had been only empty air within the archway, now Dain stood there with spear in hand. He slowly lowered his spear.

"It's okay," Dain said sheepishly, "it's just me."

CHAPTER 16: FLIGHT

Waldrun was visibly angry at Dain's return. He quoted their laws about not allowing anyone to enter from the Otherworld and threatened to have them all arrested but Varn took the children and quickly rushed down the palace stairs and away from the Ostaurii.

Once they were far enough away that they couldn't be overheard Dain stopped him.

"Haerlond is going to allow Waldrun to perform the taghairm ritual on Talia." Dain said.

Varn started to deny it, but he could see that Dain was certain. He had returned from the land of the dead with this message, and Varn wasn't going to question it. Varn called for the children to follow him and ran towards the center of the elven city.

Haerlond's home was similar to the others. He didn't allow himself a different lifestyle just because he was the cities ruler. Varn told the children to wait outside and he went in alone.

Haerlond was relaxing in a deep scarlet chair. The Otherworld had always muted their emotions, keeping them in a comfortable stupor, but Haerlond found it difficult to control his emotions here. His anger and concerns ate away at him. Sitting in this chair was one of the few things that relaxed him.

But Varn burst in, obviously on the verge of a fight. Before Varn had even spoken Haerlond already found himself wondering how much better life would be without his idealistic brother hounding him. It wasn't the first time he had that thought.

"Did you give Waldrun the right to perform the taghairm ritual on Talia?" Varn asked, daring Haerlond to deny it.

Haerlond took a deep breath, he knew this fight was coming but hadn't expected it this soon.

"Yes," Haerlond answered, "We sent hunters after the woman the children described. But with that much of a lead we will likely never find her. And we still don't know how Gosea got the Heartstone to begin with. If Talia gave it to her, if they were working together, then Talia may know where Gosea is going. We cannot give up that opportunity."

"You would kill a woman on the chance that she may know something, with no evidence that she has done anything wrong?" Varn asked, his voice rising so loud that the children could hear him outside.

"To recover the Heartstone and to protect our people. Yes I would." Haerlond said trying to remain calm.

Varn stormed out of the room and back outside to where the children waited.

"What do we do now?" Dain asked.

Varn opened his hand to show the jail key he had taken from Haerlond's house.

"You cannot stay here." Varn said, "I am going to free Talia, I cannot let her be killed by my people. But it will be difficult, maybe impossible, to get her out of the Well without the Ostaurii stopping us. And after coming from the Otherworld, they won't let you leave. You should run now for the Well's exit. The Ostaurii will be after Talia and I. At the very least that should distract them from your escape."

"No." Dain said, "we stay together."

Kirien was just as adamant, as were Auric and Lyrr. Seeing there was little use in arguing with them, and that it was wasting valuable time, Varn ran toward the jail and the children followed.

Arriving at the jail they found two of the Ostaurii still standing guard. Varn brushed past them and entered the jail with the children behind him.

Inside Talia looked surprised to see them.

"The children shouldn't be here," she began. But Varn interrupted her.

"We are all leaving," he said, "This cannot continue."

But he paused with the key in the cell's lock. Dain understood exactly what he was thinking. He was considering giving up his home, his family, to save the life of someone he didn't even really know. He would be sacrificing everything to do the right thing. It was the same choice Dain made in the Otherworld.

Then he turned the key and the cell door opened.

"Auric, can you distract the guards?" Varn asked, taking Talia's hand and leading her out of the cell.

Auric opened the door just enough to see the guards standing outside. He looked around and listened for anything he could use as a weapon. There was the portal, though he was scared to make contact with the spirit beyond it again. And there was the fire on the top of the Tower of Calling. As with all fire it was eager and ready to consume. Auric could feel its hunger, its hatred of the metal grill that confined it and he had a plan.

"Are we ready?" Auric asked, looking back at everyone. They nodded in response.

Reaching out Auric felt the fire and pulled it toward him, willed it jump off of the tower and into the yard before the jail like a meteor. The fire flickered dangerously as he reached out to it, he could feel it being pulled toward him. The guards noticed the fire's movements and looked up at it in alarm.

Then as Auric focused, with one great mental pull the flame simply disappeared. The light was gone and Auric lost any connection he had with it. He had destroyed the fire.

Though that wasn't what he had planned the effect on the guards was even better than he had hoped for. The yard outside of the jail darkened and the guards rushed the top of the Malachite Palace, believing the extinguishing of the fire to be some sort of attack.

It would be as good of a distraction as they could get and they all ran out of the jail and away from Barathrum, toward the path along the Well's rim that would lead out.

And they ran as hard as they could, though their muscles ached and their lungs burned, past the limits of their endurance, they ran. But the Well of Shadows was huge and they weren't even halfway across to the path when they heard the chariots coming for them.

As before two of the Ostaurii manned each chariot, and each was pulled by an ethereal stag. They raced easily across the soft ground. And as they got closer, when it became obvious that they would never get away Varn turned and ordered the others to continue running.

But they all stopped and readied weapons.

Kirien's mother had forced her onto the rowboat during Brigdarrow's attack. She still felt guilty that she hadn't stayed to help fight the goblins. She would not run away again, and she drew her knife and stood beside Dain.

Talia reached down into the soft earth. She prayed, asking for favors from the world she worshipped. This place was so unlike the natural world that existed outside the Well, she was almost powerless here. But there was some spirit of Erebus even here, and her prayers caused sharp stones to poke up through the soil between them and the charging chariots.

Waldrun and Haerlond were with the Ostaurii. And Haerlond's orders were clear, they were to be killed, even Varn. An order Waldrun happily passed on to his men.

The chariots struck the stone spikes first. They did no damage to the ghostly stags, but the chariots rocked dangerously, one of the Ostaurii fell off the back and hit the ground hard. But then they were through and onto Varn, Talia and the children.

Varn was hit first by a pike being used as a lance. His thin chain shirt deflected most of the blow but it sent Varn spinning out away from the rest of the group. Talia rushed to him, ducking under another pike that charged by her.

Dain set his spear to receive the charge and as the chariot closed he found that the pike was longer than his spear. The Ostaurii aimed carefully and the pike hit Dain right under his left shoulder, nearly tearing his shoulder off and leaving his arm dangling by thin meaty sinews.

Kirien shrieked in horror, and stood close enough to Dain that his blood splattered her, but she wasn't attacked as the chariot raced by.

Lyrr ducked under the pike of another and leapt onto the back of the chariot where he stabbed at the driver with his dagger. But the other Ostaurii grabbed his arm and, picking Lyrr up, tossed him easily out of the chariot where he hit the ground and rolled helplessly. Livanna stood over him protectively, angry and barking at the mass of attacks going on around her that she couldn't prevent.

The chariots circled, reading for their next charge. Varn and Lyrr picked themselves up slowly. Kirien was standing over Dain in horror. Even

though Auric couldn't see Dain well he knew that the blow was fatal, Dain's blood was pouring out onto the ground and Kirien was screaming for everything to stop.

Then Talia grabbed Auric and forced him to meet her gaze.

"You can channel something to save us. Something from outside of this world, the barrier is not solid. Reach out and find it."

These were not requests, she was not pleading, these were demands as if she knew Auric could do it. But as the chariots circled and started their next charge Auric reached out. He could feel the grey haze of the fog above him, but there was so little beyond it. He couldn't feel the erratic energy of Tarch's tower. Auric stretched and searched for anything.

There wasn't anything erratic, anything he would normally associate with power, but there was constant warm force that he hadn't realized existed until he came here. It was one of those pulses that, because he had known it his entire life, he hadn't known it was a thing at all. Auric reached out and pulled it toward him.

But it was bigger than anything he had touched before, and to channel its power he had to forget everything else. His fear melted away, his desires were forgotten, memories disappeared as he was consumed by the power flooding through him. Above the grey fog that formed the ceiling of the Well of Shadows buckled and rolled like a sea during a storm. The Ostaurii paused in confusion and panic at what was happening. Even those without any affinity for magic could feel the power in the air, that the barrier between this world and Erebus was being torn apart. Then it broke and perfect, white sunlight flooded through.

The once elves were blinded, it had been centuries since they had been exposed to sunlight and this was so bright even the children were stunned by it. The ghostly stags disappeared, their magic only worked within the Well of Shadows, and that boundary had been destroyed.

Of the once elves only Varn wasn't blinded. From within the sunlight he saw a figure standing, with a body of radiant gold. Varn knew that this was a god, Lugus god of the sun, and Varn fell to his knees in supplication.

"Because you valued truth above all things, because you showed wisdom when lost in darkness, because you valued these things above your own life, I have called you. You will remind the world of the virtues that you already possess."

Varn stared at god in the halo of light. He felt all his doubt and fear disappear. And then Lugus disappeared.

Looking around Varn was lost. After a moment of pure joy he had to remind himself where he was. Without the stags the chariots had dumped the riders on the ground where they lay blinded and dazed, Waldrun and Haerlond were among them. Kirien was crying over Dain, Talia was trying to help Auric up onto his feet and Lyrr and Livanna were running to Kirien.

“Go, run!” Varn yelled, pointing in the direction of the path. Then Varn added, “I will get her”, when he noticed Lyrr ignored him and kept running to Kirien.

Varn ran to Kirien and grabbed her, beginning to pull her up off of her knees. But he stopped when he saw the body she was huddled over. Blood soaked the ground and Kirien’s grey elven dress, Dain’s eyes were closed. He was already dead.

Taking a deep breath Varn whispered, “Kirien, we have to go.”

Kirien wouldn’t let go, but when Varn pulled her away she turned and latched onto Varn instead, burying her head in his shoulder, her tears turned to ragged, trembling breaths.

So Varn carried her, and he ran after the others. Talia and Auric, Lyrr and Livanna ran ahead. The witch, the silver dog, the two elves and the two children fled from the Shadow Well and escaped.

EPILOGUE

Dain stood and watched his friends run away. He knew they would be safe and that Varn and Talia would get them to Cerrolan without any trouble. Even the once elves were okay. None had died in the fight, though most were bruised and sore from the attack, and it would be days before their eyesight returned to normal.

Above, the sunlight continued to pour into the Shadow Well. The ground was a rich brown and the fungi were gray and white. The purple and green gossamer strands that covered the fungi were more beautiful in the light.

As much as Dain wanted to chase after his friends he could feel the portal to the Otherworld called for him. It was as if he stood in a pool being drained of water, a constant gentle force pulled him back toward the center of the Well. Rather than fight it Dain turned and began walking to the Malachite Palace.

The closer Dain got the faster he moved. His walking became a slow jog and then he raced up the steps of the Malachite Palace and passed the Ostaurii that stood guard.

Passing through the archway Dain was once again in the hazy yellow grasslands and he ran faster, noticing that separated from his body his legs never tired and his lungs never burned. He could run forever.

If there were crows or even an archway behind him Dain didn't notice. He did see the old man that warned him Talia was going to die. But the man didn't try to stop him this time, he simply waved and smiled as Dain ran by.

The hazy outline of the village became a real village. The chickens were just as Dain remembered and they fluttered off in annoyance as Dain went rushing by, clucking angrily at him. He finally stopped running in the village yard. Garon Ire was trying to teach Caspian to direct his horse with his feet only. The lesson wasn't going well and they both yelled for Dain to watch out as Caspian and his horse went charging by.

Kirien's mother swept off the front porch of her store and smiled warmly at Dain. For a heartbeat he remembered seeing her body burnt and broken in the village yard. But the memory melted away and the only memories that remained were those of her here like this.

"Where is my father?" Dain asked.

"I believe he is at the docks," she answered unsure.

Dain walked through the village, saying hello to everyone and allowing the memories of the past few days to drift away. Even the time before that became foggy, as if this place, this moment, was all that truly existed.

And he saw his father, sitting at the end of the docks beside a woman with dark, curly hair. She was younger than Dain's father and beautiful, but Dain didn't recognize her.

"Dad." Dain said, though the word got caught in his throat.

His father turned around. Dain was so afraid he would be different than he remembered, that he would be mad, or injured, or not himself. But he was exactly as Dain remembered and with a smile all Dain's concerns were gone.

The woman turned too, and when she smiled small tears formed in her eyes.

"My baby." She said standing and taking Dain in her arms.