

Prologue - Battle's Backside

Rottiger

ROTT gripped his black-lacquered pistol and grit his teeth. What was *supposed* to be an easy victory had turned to disarray. His unstoppable Outcast army, the largest armed force on the planet, was in shambles. Their impervious storm wall had fallen. Around him at the rear of the battlefield, a single air whale made constant dives at them. The spray of lead and rain of rubble had stopped their advance; their numbers were dwindling. He'd already lost multiple war machines before they'd fired the first volley. Things were grim, and Rott was stuck.

At the frontline, it was worse.

Proteus, the man to whom Rott pledged himself, was probably dead. It was hard to see across the chaos of war along the red, dusty plains. There were flashes of magic, amber lights, screams of pain and then... *Bastard got himself killed before we even hit Sedenza's doorstep!* Anger boiled in Rott's veins. Technically, as Proteus' second and the Outcasts' chief, he was now in full command. He considered the field.

The Storm is gone. Proteus? Down. He peered down the battlefield as the air whale made another dive. A huge chunk of stony rubble crashed into a rolling assault tower and sent splinters flying. Rott dove and rolled in the dirt to avoid serious injury. As he picked a sliver of wood from his cheek, he gazed at the frontline again. There was still a lot of commotion. A clear space had formed in the middle of the frontline. Around that space, the Outcasts continued their attacks on the bronze Sedenzan barrier. He thought he glimpsed two dark shapes. One was familiar. *Maej. I put you down once already.* His finger itched on the pistol trigger. *But that other one...* Rott gazed at the odd shape of a grey-skinned man. While not a mystic himself, he knew this had to be part of Proteus' magics. *All that power from the Storm, now it's that thing?*

Shouts rang out as the air whale came down; it again shot lead rounds in Rott's direction. He slammed his back up against the wooden planks of a ruined war machine for cover, grunting at the impact. *Dammit.* He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. *Time for a Plan B.*

Rott stood and dusted off his clothing. Keeping a weary eye to the sky, he climbed a nearby assault tower. "Spread wide! Fan out and advance! Advance,

you idiots! Go! Go! Go!” He waved his hands violently as he directed his armed forces. If they could put some distance between them, it’d be harder for the air whale’s attacks to lay waste to so many at once. The hordes of Outcasts did as their leader commanded. A few pockets of fighters and mowgul-keepers advanced. But the air whale and its riders were still keeping most of the siegecraft busy.

Rott gazed at the frontline again, hoping for some good news. The grey-man was in trouble. He was fighting a handful of mystics and a selahn; it wasn’t going well. CRACK-CRASH. Rott was thrown from his perch by another heavy stone that cracked the assault tower in half. He careened to the ground and slammed into the dirt. As he crawled to a stand, he took stock of the situation. *Storm and Proteus gone. That grey thing is the last ace in the hole. That’s not going to last either.* Rott did the only thing the leader of the Outcasts could do. He ran to a small steam-driven cart and grabbed a pack. As he slung it over his shoulder, he counted the number of pistol rounds he had left. *Seventeen. Good enough.* With a bellowing voice, he commanded his fighters, war-mechanics and beast masters. “Forward!” he screamed over and over until he was hoarse. “*FORWARD!*”

Then, when all his forces were set on their goal to conquer the largest city on the planet, Rott turned east and ran away from battle as fast as his legs could carry him.

Rott had spent years of his life preparing for this day. Years spent grooming an Outcast force unlike anything the world had ever seen. Years spent under Proteus’ thumb following his most inane whims. *Not any more. Deal’s off, bugger. This whole thing has gone tits-up and it’s not worth dying for.* Rott kept east across the plains, heading to the Outcasts’ last campsite. With any luck, he could hide out while the battle played on. In a day or two, he’d sneak into Sedenza and feel things out. He knew he’d have to give a report on how things went from his side. It’d been too long since he’d checked in with the Family, and certain members would be none-too happy about it. *Screw’em. Always going on about protocol, leaving the dirty work to someone else.* Rott spat as he ran. *It’s about time I set’em straight. This charade is over!*

As Rott arrived at the campsite remains, he spotted a single stray Outcast.

“R-Rott,” stammered the unkempt, bug-eyed Outcast. “The battle... How—”

BLAM. Rott shot him straight through the chest. “Sixteen left. Hardly worth it,” he sneered at the fresh corpse on the ground. He flung through a few leftover supplies and then set off to find a small nearby cave mouth. He settled in, took out some dried meat and tore off a big bite. “The longest role of my life,” he said to himself as he chewed. “And I’m sick of it. Time to be someone else for a change.”

Chapter 1

Langhorne

"HERE, let me pour you a drink." Marshal Langhorne sat a small corner table at the Charris pub. It was his local haunt and the first place he went after returning from Sedenza. It was a rustic place, simple handmade tables and chairs, some more rough-cut than others. The pub always seemed to be open when Langhorne needed it, like a reliable old friend.

Running into Mior had been a coincidence. It was timely, though. Langhorne didn't like being the bearer of bad news, but he felt he owed it to Mior. And Trede, too. *Somehow, he saved all of us. Mior might not be blood, but he's the closest thing to family Trede had.*

"Thank you, Marshal, you're very kind," said Mior, grinning so tightly his eyes all but disappeared behind his weathered wrinkles. He tugged the fold of his shirt and tucked it into his wide cloth belt before taking the drink in both hands. He took a sip with a twinkling gleam in his eye.

"Thanks for coming in with me, Mior," said Langhorne. "How's the neighborhood doing on the northeast side?"

"Oh, fine, fine," said Mior. "Past few days have been down right quiet. Things getting back to the way they were. It's... a real pleasant surprise."

Langhorne chuckled. "A surprise, huh?"

"Well..." Mior gestured around with his arms. "Things were pretty dark around here for a spell. I don't have to tell you. People are... *almost* acting normal again." He raised his wooden stein for another sip. "It feels good around Smisom again. Thanks to you."

Langhorne waved a hand to dismiss the idea. "There were a lot of other folks that put that Outcast threat down. You can be sure." *Here we go.* "Speaking of. I may have some... news."

Mior eyebrows raised. He wrapped both his hands around his stein and look down into it. He held there a moment. "I thought as much," he said with a slow nod, as if he already knew. "I knew he would be in the middle of it all. I just knew." Mior sniffed and dashed a hand under both eyes. "Was it the lights? Story

going around was there was a great light. Then..." Air escaped his throat, too baffled to finish the thought.

"Trede was in that light," said Langhorne. *Or he was the light. Something mystic and strange going on. Either way....* "He was right in the middle of the fight. You heard right, there was the brightest flash of white I ever saw. The battle was over. Outcasts, gone. We never saw Trede after that. He just... disappeared."

"I see, I see..." said Mior, staring back down at this stein.

"I met with some of the mystics before leaving Sedenza. There's... *a chance* Trede's out there somewhere. But we have no idea where to look. Maybe we'll get a clue sometime. See a sign. So, don't go giving up hope yet." Langhorne swigged back the last of his stein of ale with a three big gulps. The familiar flavor was soothing and a reminder that he was finally home again.

"You're right, Marshal. And I won't. Trede always did tend to travel far. But he always showed up home. Eventually."

Langhorne refilled his stein from the metal pitcher and offered a toast. "I hope he finds his way." He raised his stein. "To coming home."

Mior nodded and smiled, weakly. "To coming home. Eventually."

The two men had quiet conversation for a time, catching up on any bit of news Mior had heard while Langhorne was away. Eventually, Mior excused himself, saying he had errands to run before it got too dark. As he stood up from his chair, Langhorne said, "Don't be a stranger, now. I'll be sure to see you around."

Mior smiled, a painful kind of smile to be polite, and exited the Charris pub.

While Langhorne knew so many suffered losses during the conflict with the Outcasts, he felt for Mior. Losing family was hard on the soul. More than he'd like to admit it, Langhorne knew from experience. He still thought of his late wife Jaxilyn often. Though he never let himself dwell on the memory. His daughter, going by the nickname Jaxet, was her spitting image in a lot of ways. *Same blond hair, same strong spirit.* She was enough family for him. *Speaking of her...*

Jaxet entered the pub with Marshal Hildegras and the scouts Brek and Yui in tow. They gathered around Langhorne's table and ordered big bowls of noodles all around. All while making a huge racket. Word had gotten around about their exploits in the west; some of them were reveling in it.

"We're celebrities!" exclaimed Brek with a huge grin. He gestured his arms

wide, making a victorious motion.

"Is that so?" said Langhorne dryly.

"Dad, you should hear everyone talking. Word came in from Briar about *the marshals running the Outcasts out of town*. People keep going on about it!"

Langhorne watched her, eyes beaming, a broad smile. All the danger they went through and she made it through without a scratch. To see her carefree for a moment made the whole ordeal worth it.

The other scout, Yui, a lanky dark haired woman from nearby Oreshia chimed in. "We got stopped six times just on the way here. It's like we're big damn heroes or something!" She laughed.

Hildegas sat there with his arms folded and chuckling to himself. "Helluva thing, Langs. Word's spreading like wildfire." He shook his head, almost in disbelief.

"People need a good reason to celebrate around here," said Langhorne. "There's been too much destruction and fear for too long. If people want to swap stories, fine by me. As long as they're true." He squinted at his companions to size them up. "And don't any of you go stretching things too far, all right?" He chuckled at himself, catching some of their excitement and mirth.

"What? Us?" Hil gestured around the table with a smirk.

"I heard Marshal Langhorne led a fleet of air whale carriers," Brek jumped right in with a tall tale.

"I heard he called the sun itself down to *burn away his enemies!*" Yui burst out laughing in the middle of her jibe.

Langhorne pointed a stern finger right in her direction. "That's just the kind stories we don't need around here. Now. Do something useful and get this pitcher filled up, would ya?" He made a flailing gesture over towards the bar near the back of the room.

Brek and Yui got up together to gather another round of drinks for the table, laughing all the way.

After dinner, Langhorne was walking home in the dark. Winter was about to hit and a chill breeze filled the air. He was flanked by Hildegas. The scouts,

including Jaxet, had stayed behind to revel in their newfound fame. Langhorne breathed the air. The briskness of it was fresh and pleasing. It was maybe the one nice thing about winter in Smisom.

However, the cold, quiet and dark led Langhorne's mind to wandering. He wasn't the only one.

"What do we do about the Wastes, Langs?" Hildegras asked. He wore a puzzled look, visible even in the dark. "Who do you think is left down there? Anyone?"

It was a good question. One of the many things that had Langhorne feeling they weren't finished with this whole business yet. The Outcasts might not be fully gone. And then there was Wellborne, the grey-skinned creature that disappeared in Trede's light show back in Sedenza. *But the Wastes...* "We know the Outcasts pulled out of Mez entirely." He rubbed at his blond bearded chin while thinking it over. "Seems like if anyone is left at home, it'll be a skeleton crew. Don't forget the Trust either. Those guys aren't exactly the frontline fighting type."

Langhorne remembered being in the Wastes months ago. At the time, it surprised him to learn that the Outcasts were far more organized than anyone ever dreamed. They were supposed to be a band of tribal savages, but not so. While the only Outcasts people ever saw were the fighters, beast trainers and ravagers. *The Trust* was the brains of the operation deep in the Wastes. People in the Trust had nicknames like Logistics and Scenario. A name given to call out their unique purpose within the group. He had no idea just how big the Trust was, but he wouldn't be surprised if they were all still hiding out down there. Langhorne started to get an itch. A familiar itch. And he was pretty sure Hildegras had it too.

"We're going to have to go down there, Hil. I'm sure most, if not all, their fighting force is gone. But there's a bigger operation in the Wastes than even I saw. I heard it when they marched me through some buildings, blindfolded. There may still be some activity."

"Yep." Was all Hildegras said with barely more than an audible grunt.

He agrees. That was easy. They walked in quiet as they came to a fork in the dirt road. From here, Langhorne's home was to the right, Hil's was to the left. They stopped.

"So, when are we going?" asked Hil, sounding reluctant. There was a certain inevitability in his tone as well.

Langhorne felt heavy. He was glad to be home, to see his town at peace. But he knew there could still be danger out there. "It's cold. Getting too damn cold

and the Wastes are even farther away than Mez. When Smisom is back in order and the days get a little longer. We'll head down."

Hil nodded. "Good. I was hoping to lie low for a while. You ever think we're getting too old for this?" He smirked.

Langhorne laughed out loud on the otherwise silent dark dirt street. Hil joined in. "You know? By forty-three, I always thought life would have settled down by now." He shrugged.

"I'm right behind you on that," said Hil, who was just a few years his junior. Hil slapped Langhorne on the shoulder. "Back at it tomorrow."

"Yep," said Langhorne. The two marshals of Smisom went their separate ways to some much deserved rest.

Chapter 2

Yaladra

YALADRA rained down a fist across the assailant's arms. Once, twice, she dislodged the four-inch knife from his hand. "Tell me where he is!" Her fierce, dark brown eyes burned as she landed a kick on the man's chest, sending him reeling. The man bounced off a sandstone wall and landed in the dust. She sized him up, trying to determine if he'd run or fight. It didn't take long to find out.

Here he comes. Yaladra entered a crouch and prepared for the assault. She deflected two blows before taking a few knuckles to the jaw. She staggered back. *Enough.* She filled her lungs and drew upon a deeper power than mere fists or knives. It'd been days since she'd tapped into her Fire and used the Strength of Words. She was ready to let it out. If she desired, she could easily find the words to kill the man. Her creativity was the only boundary. But that wasn't what she was after. The scumbag needed to talk. "You're light as a feather." A spark rose from her eyes as irises blazed violet. It was a simple enough spell. She'd used it plenty of times before. Here, it felt more satisfying than normal. She'd already spent so much time chasing down leads, she was ready to take out a lot of frustration at the first available outlet.

The attacker in mid-stride lost his balance. He started falling feet over head, weightless. He waved his arms around, trying to grab hold of something, anything.

Yaladra ambled back a few steps, waiting for the man's face to come around to her again. As it did, he wore a panicked expression.

"H-hey! I didn't mean—!"

Yaladra was already winding up for a heavy right cross. WHAM. The man floated backwards, skimming off the ground a few times before again settling in the dust. She shook off her hand and released the incantation.

Thud. The man groaned from his spot on the cobblestone paved alleyway.

With a flutter of her white cloak, Yaladra came down on the man. She twisted his arm behind his back, pushing herself down on top of him. "I know *Tiberiak* has people in the city. I need to know if he's here. I suggest you talk." She pressed on the side of his head with her free palm with increasing pressure.

The man grunted, eyes rolling back in his head. He pushed off from the ground; Yaladra responded by crashing her full weight down on him. The man said *ooof* and then nothing else.

Great. Unconscious. Why do they always want to fight? She rose and dusted off, shaking out her white cloak. The late afternoon sun peered into the alley through two sandstone buildings. She took one more look at the man. *He knows something. I'm sure of it.* Yaladra had seen him earlier making a deal in the market with two merkant officers. She overheard *Tiberiak's* name as she passed and spent most of the day tailing the man, waiting for an opportunity. *Wasted. It's not like I can bring him back to the Haven.* She wouldn't risk *anyone* finding out where she was staying. As she considered, a couple of older women passed the alley. They pointed at the fallen man and began shouting for help.

"Yellow and tan, like sandstone," Yaladra spoke under her breath. Her white cloak shimmered and faded, blending in with the color of the surrounding walls. She turned and ran, losing herself in the narrow streets of the lower west side.

Later, when she was sure no one was following her, she slowed and began the long walk home. She found herself on a wider cobblestone street in a humble section of the city. It was a residential area; many people were filtering in from the busier city center. She sidestepped here and there to avoid running into the random spread of people.

It's been weeks and today's the first time I had something to go on. It wasn't the rousing campaign for which she'd hoped. Even with little result, it seemed for now she had to stay planted here and root out the influence *Tiberiak* had in the city. She needed to know the size of the tower before she could tear it down. *He's involved in something. With all the Merkant activity around here, there's no way he's not.* And history had shown her that wherever *Tiberiak* was involved, decent people got trampled underfoot. *Good people. Like my father.* She picked up her pace at the thought of Drayle. *He's likely worried.* Having Drayle back in her life had been an adjustment. Even though Yaladra was far from a child, he fretted over her, yet she did the same. She'd spent eight years trying to free him from capture. Almost her entire adult life. *I'm not about to let anything happen to him. But he needs to let me do this. Tiberiak can't be allowed to stand. Not if any mystic ever wants to be truly free.* She'd seen his work all over the continent. Mystics, often younger or less experienced, were captured and their abilities used for *Tiberiak's* gain. He was a man that lusted after power more than anything else. *But not for long, she*

thought while unknowingly clenching her jaw.

Yaladra continued her walk until she noticed a stiff-collared Merkant clerk coming home. Across the street, the young woman wore a pensive gaze and was tapping her fingertips together. Yaladra slowed to listen.

"Hi Leena, how was work?" A woman greeted her at the door. She looked maybe a few years older and was dressed plainly.

"I got transferred." Leena sounded confused.

"Will they pay more money?" She laughed.

"No... Probably not. You know how it is." Slumping, Leena rested her shoulder on the thick wooden doorframe of a stonework residence. "Some new initiative going on. Sweeping changes, I didn't really get all of it."

"There not moving you out of the city are they?"

"No, just a different office. I just got used to the one I was in. I'm tired, is there anything to eat..."

The voices faded as they entered the home and the door closed. Yaladra resumed her walk. A change in Merkant activity was interesting, but not enough to go on. *I wonder if I can make a friend in the Merkants. Get some inside information.* She thought for a moment of how she might get such a connection. Tons of people worked for the Merkants, but she didn't know any in Sedenza personally. *Maybe Cassidy knows someone.* She made a mental note to check in with the Cytechs soon. If she didn't have a connection to the Merkants, the Cytechs certainly did. Part of her was concerned for Cassidy, too. So many lost someone close during the great battle, her most of all. While Yaladra never knew Trede much, he seemed brave. It was a quality that, in Yaladra's experience, was in short supply in the world. Tenowon she knew even less, but his loss to the Cytechs was clear.

Her thoughts wandered until finally she reached home as the sun was setting. A faint blood red sky peaked over the buildings to the west. The first of the stars were coming out as she ascended the stone steps to the Haven. She reached the top and banged three times with her fist. Jonas had taken to locking the door at all hours. She couldn't really blame him.

After what seemed like minutes, a voice answered the door. "Who is it?"

"Yaladra." She stood sideways to the door, looking west.

"Yaladra wears a *white* cloak." It was clearly Jonas. She could never tell if he

was being facetious or not. He was kind in a funny way, nearly sixty, and had become fast friends with Drayle, so she put up with him.

She'd forgotten the corner of her mind holding the incantation in place. It was such a minor spell; the color of her cloak felt like an extension of her state of mind. She released it and her cloak faded to stark white in the blink of an eye. "Better?"

The left side of the heavy wooden double door opened. "Can't be too careful nowadays. Most of us are just waiting for a grey-skinned, omnipotent pseudo-man to return. And then it'll be the end of us all."

He is definitely being facetious. The dry smirk on Jonas' face was obvious. His long greying hair was tied back.

"Welcome back, Yaladra. Find anything today?"

"I was close. Nothing solid yet." She kept her answers brief.

"There's always tomorrow." Jonas swung the thick door closed and lowered the crossbeam. *Thud.*

It was evening. After a simple dinner with all the other mystics, Yaladra retired to her father's room. They would often chat in the evening. In the recent weeks, they'd share stories from the eight years they'd been separated. At first Yaladra had been very honest. A few times Drayle looked shocked at her brutal stories. Afraid, maybe even appalled. She hadn't had an easy life and had the scars to prove it. After a while, she couldn't take the silent looks anymore. Now, she filtered her tales, skipped the worst parts. Tried to focus on the bright parts, few as they may be. It wasn't the happy reunion she had envisioned. At least she had her father back.

"You never said if you found anything today?" Drayle sat down by the fireplace in his room, setting a blanket over his legs. Winter was set in and the Haven was drafty.

Yaladra pulled her white cloak around her a little tighter. "I heard the name *Tiberiak* today, but it came up short. Nobody's talking." She rubbed the knuckles of her right hand. *That's close enough to the truth.*

"Things have been quiet since the battle," said Drayle, deep in thought. "You know, it's possible Tiberiak isn't even in the city." The statement implied a question.

"I know. But he's got people here, I'm sure of it. If I can find one of them, I

can track him down."

"And stop him from abducting mystics? It's a noble effort, daughter. And... I can't say as I disagree. I've read about dozens of mystics coming through Tiberiak's operation. It seems to be a big part of their... *business*. If you can call it that. And having lived through it firsthand, I think it's fitting our family fight to stop it."

Yaladra only nodded. *At least he agrees.*

"If only we had more information. Some lead to help infiltrate his organization."

She took a deep, tired breath. "I'll find a clue. Something." There was no question in Yaladra's mind.

"You know, I did hear Celeste mention someone getting awfully ill at the market today. Strangely ill, just sort of collapsed. I wonder what's going on there..." Drayle made a puzzled face. "It's probably nothing."

"It's winter, father. People get sick during winter."

"Yes, you're right, of course," he said, nodding with a thoughtful, pursed lip.

The talk of sickness led her to another thought. "How is... Oudrine doing?" She hesitated even asking. Somehow, she felt responsible for Oudrine's sickness. She had felt the power of the Storm's mind during the battle. It seemed to flood her mind, something as big as the universe crammed inside her thoughts. When she lost consciousness, she was sure she was dying. It was the most vibrant, intense, painful thing she'd ever experienced. Somehow Oudrine had it ten times worse. *And she's still alive. Bedridden and asleep, but alive.*

Drayle perked up at the thought. "She's been stirring more the past couple days. Jonas and Celeste think she'll awake any day now." He smiled before a heaviness set in his expression. "She's been through a lot. Suffered enough... I hope she recovers."

I do too. She couldn't bring herself to say it out loud, but she meant it.

"Maybe tomorrow. That would be *nice to see*," Drayle said while yawning. "Maybe she'll be up tomorrow."

They sat in quiet, enjoying the fire's warmth. Drayle dozed off in his chair. Yaladra rose, holding her cloak together with both hands, and kissed him on the cheek. "Good night, father. Make sure to get in bed. The fur blankets are warm."

Bleary-eyed and groggy, Drayle nodded.

Yaladra exited the room and went down the hall. Tomorrow would be another day of looking for clues and chasing down ties to the man known as *Tiberiak*.

Chapter 3

Cassidy

A brisk wind perpetually blew over the Mountainside Labs. Further up the mountain the brown peak faded to white seemingly overnight. Cassidy ignored the change in seasons, keeping herself focused on her work. But that wasn't the only thing she was ignoring.

"Cassidy?" It was her friend, Nandiel. "Cassidy. You've barely touched your lunch."

Suddenly the quiet, Mountainside mess hall came rushing back into reality. "Oh... Sorry," said Cassidy. Her eyes were bleary, tired. "Just hard not to think about—" *The Project*. Working on fixing Tenowon with Bors had taken up all her days, and most of her nights as well. Attempting to repair a former mentor's disabled android body was taxing her emotions, so she referred to it as *The Project* just to keep grim thoughts from getting on top of her.

"I was asking if you've been sleeping all right?" asked Nandiel, her blond eyebrows arched and waiting for an answer.

"Sometimes..." Cassidy yawned.

Nandiel squinted at her sideways.

"Maybe not often. It's been... hard."

Nandiel half-smiled with empathy. "Yeah, I get that. I can't believe the work you're doing, though. It's brilliant stuff. Miles ahead of anything else going on."

"I have been learning a lot," Cassidy admitted. "But... I keep getting this feeling." Already her eyes welled up; she tried to shake it off.

"Cass, it's all right," Nandiel reached across the table and put her hand on her friend's arm. "No one would think twice of you for... at least taking a break. Something! You can't push too hard."

"You seem to be doing fine enough." Cassidy sniffed and dabbed her face with a napkin.

Nandiel rolled her eyes, flashing the slightest grin. "I'm working on my

dream project with Frezerick. Just another regular day, I guess. And I'm not the one working past dinner all the time. How many meals have you missed?"

It was Cassidy's turn to roll her eyes. Inside, though, she was thankful to have a concerned friend. "Some."

"Some?" Nandiel chided with a grin.

"Ok, more than some. But sometimes Bastir brings me a plate after hours."

Nandiel chuckled. "Well, *someone* has to look out for you."

"Yeah," said Cassidy. *Someone*. For a moment she lost her thoughts to those that were lost. *All those Cytech guards, people, Maej, Trede...* All those that fought to preserve the city, her home. Losing Trede, or at least his disappearance, had taken a toll. The only thing supporting her thin hopes of Trede's return was the distraction of work. Still, in the meantime she had dedicated herself to repairing Tenowon's body, hoping that he might come back to life. If such a thing was possible. Cassidy looked at her friend Nandiel. *She's the only person I can really talk to.* She felt a warm appreciation for having that one close friend when she needed it. "Thanks, Nandiel. Somehow you're managing to have a normal life right next to mine... which is more of a disaster. I guess you're my anchor." She laughed at herself never the one to be mushy. She sighed, "Listen to me. I sound delirious."

Nandiel tapped the side of her nose, making a facetious expression.

"Hey! Shut up!" Cassidy laughed. Once again, Nandiel dragged Cassidy out of a bleak state of mind. "Maybe you're right. Maybe I'm pushing too hard. You know, for an old guy, Bors is hard to keep up with. He knows *so much*. And half of it's never been written down, especially the stuff from when he helped repair Tenowon's arm."

"Bors the legend... The myth." Nandiel made a dramatic glare and sipped her drink.

"He *is* something else. When he's not griping about how much Lab One was rearranged, maybe."

Nandiel laughed. "He came over to the chem-lab once asking *why would someone alphabetize the mixtures by name instead of by component chemicals?!*"

Cassidy grinned and shook her head. "That sounds about right."

They continued their meal and chatted until it was time to return to Lab One. As they exited the hall, Nandiel said, "You know, we're do for a ground trip."

Tomorrow night let's head into the city. We'll get drinks, you always love the lights. K?"

Cassidy felt off balance for a moment. Doing something outside of working with Bors was somehow hard to fathom. But she hated to miss out. Back during Cassidy's first year with the Cytechs, they used to go out all the time. It was *always* a blast. "Yeah... Yes. I'm in. Maybe a break will be good." She smiled weakly.

"Great! It's definitely just the thing. Just like old times." Nandiel tucked her arm around Cassidy's and they walked back to Lab One together.

Later, Cassidy was a few more hours into her work with Bors. They had taken a break from the more intense facial damage and system power issues to work on the damaged knee. It was the most similar to the damaged arm Bors had helped fixed years prior. Cassidy supposed that should mean it would be easier, but it was proving otherwise.

"But I thought the actuator connected to the power coupler here?"

"Aaah, I said that's what the *elbow* joint looked like, this is a bigger limb," said Bors, who had taken a seat nearby. He was trying to guide Cassidy while resting his legs. "It's a bigger space, different shape, so the design is a little different."

Cassidy stared at the cavity in Tenowon's knee, trying not to feel overwhelmed. There were synthetic muscles in similar locations to a human, but there were so many other parts that were foreign. *That could be like a blood vessel... But Tenowon doesn't have blood? What does it carry?* She further examined the knee joint and thought she saw the actuator's power terminal. "Ok, I think this is it, but..."

Bors sighed, part in frustration and in fatigue. "What now?" He threw the rag he always carried into his lap.

"The joint itself looks damaged." Cassidy squinted as she examined the damage up close. "Even if we get the power on... and even if the power connects properly, I don't know if it can function."

"Still better to have all the loose power couplers reconnected," said Bors rubbing at his nose with the rag.

Cassidy looked at him, unsure at first, then a look of understanding dawned on her face. "Leaving stray power conduit would probably arc and cause further

damage when we power him on.” *Eventually*. That was the biggest task they had yet to complete. Cassidy wasn’t sure if it was even possible, but they hadn’t run out of ideas. *Not yet, anyway*.

“There’s a good Cytech,” said Bors as he exhaled and pushed back further into his chair.

Cassidy struggled to fit her fingers inside the knee cavity, gripped the power conduit and inched it towards the actuator until it clicked into place. “Whoa,” Cassidy startled at the firmness as the pieces snapped back together. “Just like that...” she said under her breath.

Bors leaned forward with his elbows on his knees, gesturing at Tenowon’s body. “That’s what makes me think it’s possible. That right there. He wants to be fixed. He wants to fix himself... and he would! If he could. But if we get him halfway there, something tells me Tenowon will give us a hand.” A gleam shone in his twinkling eyes right before he hacked a loud cough into his rag.

Cassidy looked at Tenowon’s broken form and instead of recoiling or feeling queasy, she smiled. Even though they’d spent weeks at work already, it was only now she felt she had a decent chance of bringing him back. She felt at peace in that inquisitive moment, analyzing Tenowon’s damaged form with fresh eyes.

Bors let out a single muted grunt. Whether it was one of appreciation or what, she couldn’t tell. “Let’s be done. Good work today.” Bors climbed to his feet, waved *bye*, and walked out the door, a slight shuffle in his step.

Cassidy watched him go for a moment. *I wonder what he’s thinking about?*

Just as Bors disappeared from sight, a shorter figure entered the impressive high-ceiling room of Lab One.

“Yo-ho, cy-friends! I have news from the ground... level. Office place. Anyway, here’re some papers from Gragus!”

“Traz!” A few voices spoke in unison from different corners of the room. Yeleng and Bastir cheered and waved from one of the above catwalks where they’d been working. Nandiel made straight for the door from her place in the chem-lab section. Cassidy came up behind.

“Hey Traz! Nice of you to visit,” said Nandiel as she retied her long blond hair. “Frezerick stepped out, but make sure you say *hi* before you leave!”

“Glad to! I’m sure I will. Uh— Here.” He handed over three folders of documents to Nandiel. “Don’t ask me what’s in there, I’m just the delivery selahn today. I’m sure it’s important science-things. But anyway.” He scratched his

whiskers before raising his hands in a victorious pose. "How are you! You haven't been down in a couple weeks." He gave Cassidy a quick wink.

"Busy," said Cassidy. "But... We're making progress. It's going to take some time, though. How are things down below?"

"Much the same," he said with a sideways look. "Quiet at least, compared to what we've all been through. I would guess it's business as usual?" He raised a confused eyebrow. "Not that I would know."

"That's good to hear," Nandiel chimed in. "Looks like some new proposals and... oh! They approved the material requests, that's great. Hey Bastir!" She called out over her shoulder. "We'll get that shipment of new steel after all!"

Bastir shouted back from the catwalk high above, "Finally! When?"

Nandiel shuffled the pages about. "About two weeks?"

Bastir shrugged agreeably as if to say *not bad*. His raised bushy eyebrows were easily visible at the distance.

"Ahem, so," Traz started. "There was one other news I had to pass along." He kicked at the ground, looking uncharacteristically uncomfortable.

"Oh?" said Cassidy, suddenly curious.

"My foot pads are itchy." He had a serious look and nodded as if expecting understanding from a profound statement.

Cassidy had confused eyes open wide; she glanced at Nandiel.

Nandiel asked, "Do... you need some balm?"

"No, why?" said Traz. He shook his head. "It's metaphorical. Don't you humans have a word for it? Oh yes. *Wanderlust*. Gragus told me. It's time I take to traveling. N-Not that I've given up on Trede. Or you lot." He waved his hands to shoo away any doubt. "He's still out there, I'm sure of it. But a selahn wasn't made for a sedentary life. I'm quite fond of you Cytechs, though. I'm sure I'll be back. Sooner if there's good news abroad."

Cassidy felt like someone had slugged her in the stomach. She'd worried about Traz after heading to the Mountainside Labs. At the time he said he was content to split his time between the Guildhouse and the Haven. But not having Traz around was just another reminder that Trede was really gone. *Those two were inseparable. Lose one, lose the other, I guess.* Cassidy tried not to let her thoughts grow more morose than that.

“Well, you can’t leave yet!” Nandiel’s chipper demeanor cut through the building tension. “We’re going down into the city tomorrow night. You’ll have to come! Frezerick will be there, maybe even Gragus. What do you say?”

“A good and proper send off.” He grinned with fangs exposed. “How could I resist! Where is ol’Frez? I’ll pop in.”

Nandiel grabbed her coat and offered to bring Traz around to the residential building where Frezerick stayed. “Hey, Cass, meet us all for dinner? It’s quitting time, anyway. Don’t work late, Ok?”

Traz clapped his hands. “To the mess hall!”

“First, we need to get Frezerick,” Nandiel reminded.

“To Frezerick’s room!” Traz turned and marched away. He paused at the broad double door and turned back to Cassidy with a slight grin. “Do come along, Cassidy.”

In that instance, Cassidy saw an entirely different side of Traz. He was loud, boisterous, downright silly, yet his expression as he stepped out of sight was different. He was tired. And grieving. To Cassidy, who had known him longer than most, it was obvious. *Wanderlust he says... I think he needs an escape. I guess I didn’t even think of that. At least I’ve had Bors and Tenowon to keep me occupied.* Her heart ached for a moment. He looked back at her workstation, tools and materials still strewn about. She considered resuming her work. It wouldn’t have been the first time she chose work over spending time with others. *I know it’s important... but that wouldn’t be fair to Traz. Trede would want me to check in on him too. That’s the least I could do.*

Chapter 4

Rottiger

ROTT had made it to Sedenza. He sat in an unmarked office building, one of his cousin's many properties. He'd barely got inside; his cousin's personal mystic guard stopped him at the door. It'd taken a great deal of convincing, ingratiating, a few lies and even the truth to get by. He shuddered at his confrontation with mystics. Having no idea what sort of power you were facing was unnerving.

He glanced around for distraction. Everything in the room looked expensive. The chairs were soft and luxurious. The desk had ornate hand-carved designs across the front face. Bookshelves were lined with rare and unobtainable texts. Rott didn't care for any of it. He'd spent years of his life in the Wastes living with much less and found it just fine. Except the chair. The more he sat in it, the more comfortable he found it. *I think I'll get one. After things settle down.*

The minutes went on and Rott brimmed with anger and impatience. Considering all he'd been through, the days of marching, the battles in Briar and Sedenza... *They could at least be prompt when I come to report.* His impatience was finally rewarded when the door cracked open. Only instead of the man he expected to see, there came a woman. A serving girl by the looks of her dress and bodice. *Pretty thing too... I like brunettes.* Rott straightened his back and turn on his charms.

"Hello, madam. I wasn't expecting a visit from such beauty. And you are?"

"Just bringing the service in," she said flatly. She approached the desk, set two cups and poured hot tea in each.

Rott was undaunted. He pushed his long black hair back behind his ears. "The name is Rottiger F. Tiberiak, madam." He grinned a believably kind expression and leaned forward. "That's right, I'm part of *the family*. Perhaps you've heard of me. Rottiger F.? The F. Is for fu—"

"That will be all, Judine, thank you."

Rott snapped his gaze back to the door to see the source of the new voice. *Finally.* The ingratiating smile washed from his face. Rott watched with keen eyes as the serving girl exited and his host sat down behind the elaborate desk. He

planned to play it smart. It'd been too long since he'd touched base with the family. He wasn't sure how he'd be received.

The man at the desk busied himself adding sugar and cream to his tea and didn't even bother to look up and acknowledge his guest. "And who are we today, cousin? Rott? Smythe? Shang-La? Someone new? I've forgotten some of your older names, perhaps you can bring them by for a visit sometime and refresh my memory."

Rott squinted at his host and older cousin. A man known to many as Fossvalor Tiberiak. The head of the Tiberiak estate, enterprises, Merkant holdings and who knows what else he did under the table. "You heard me just now." He puffed up his chest. "I thought I'd go by my given name for a change. It sure has been a while." He stared at Fossvalor's face, watching for any tell. The man was cold as ice, yet somehow calming, almost reassuring.

Fossvalor paused and looked up, finally making eye contact. "Is that so? Then you must have brought good news? The battle was weeks ago, I was beginning to think you were lost in the lights with everyone else."

"I should think you know me better than to get taken out like that," Rott said, waving his hand forward in a regal manner. "When I saw things turning sideways, I made other arrangements for myself. And here I am."

Fossvalor exhaled out his nose with a hint of briskness, clearly not convinced of the tale. He resumed puttering around this desk, sipping his tea, and reviewing a stack of papers with an elaborate quill pen in hand. "Meanwhile, I've just brokered the largest deal since the beginning of the Merkant guild. Business is booming."

"Glad to hear it," said Rott, who let a pregnant pause linger while thinking how to spin the news in his favor. "No doubt the commotion of the Great Sedenzan battle gave you leverage in the deal? I'm always happy assist. Just *how* booming do you think?"

Fossvalor stopped short between signing the different documents in hand. "My dear cousin," he began with words hard as steel, yet somehow still calming and genuine. "You will be rewarded handsomely for your part in recruiting the Outcasts to our purposes. A reward in proportion to your contribution."

Rott sat back in his chair, feeling the curved, polished arms of the lush chair. *Maybe I'll get two of these. Or six.* He could already feel the years of effort paying off.

"As soon as the job is done, of course," said Fossvalor, who had resumed

signing other documents.

What? Lost in shock, he almost forgot to respond out loud. “What? The job is done? Infiltrate the Outcasts ranks. Rise to power and make a deal with a psychotic mystic harbinger? Lead an attack on the city? Any of that sound familiar? The job *is* done, cousin. *No one* could have done it better.” He crossed his arms and stared the man down.

“You still have the personnel from the Trust, I take it?” Fossvalor barely acknowledged the previous claim.

“Of course, back in the Wastes,” said Rott, incredulous. “But what does that —”

“Go to them. We have a plan that needs their specific talents. I’ll expect regular reports back.” He paused to rap his knuckles on the desktop. “On a *timely* schedule. Hm?”

Rott felt his face go flush. *If he thinks for one second that I’m going back out into the field on some extended long-con...* He feigned politeness. “And what if I refuse?”

Fossvalor waved a dismissive hand and changed the subject. “You know, this could have been prevented had you finished the job. You were supposed to deliver Proteus’ creation to me. Had that happened, I would have granted you your own estate in some lesser wood in the northwest. But for now—” He looked up. “There’s work to do.” His final tone bordered on chiding and left no question.

Rott jumped to his feet and paced the room. Dealing with cousin Fossvalor always required strategy. He’d have to plan his next words carefully. Somehow there was always some trap of *protocol* and family responsibility that Rott got snared in. Thankfully, Fossvalor seemed content to busy himself with paperwork for a minute. “It was no small effort in forging the Trust, you know,” said Rott, waving a finger in the air. He’d rather be swinging his fists, but had enough tact to resist. If barely.

“They *have* proved lucrative in the past,” said Fossvalor, who sounded genuinely impressed. “What’s another single romp?”

Rott’s curiosity got the better of him. “Ok. What’s the job?”

Fossvalor motioned back to the chair.

Rott hesitated before sitting.

“The family needs you to venture to the northeast. Scarcely more than an

errand, really.”

That’s Marshal territory. Always makes things difficult. “You could hire a courier for that,” chided Rott. It would save me a lot of time and you a lot of money...

“Not for something this... sensitive,” said Fossvalor. He set the papers down and folded his hands neatly on top of them. “You recall the grey-skinned man seen during the battle?”

Rott nodded with a curious eyebrow cocked to one side.

“The Cytechs have been calling it *Wellborne*. It disappeared in the lights.”

Rott grew uncomfortable now that Fossvalor had finally given him full attention and piercing eye contact. He played off the discomfort with attitude. “Yes, I recall. Along with half my army. The living half, anyway. Hard to forget,” he sneered.

“We’ve found him.”

“You—” Rott stammered. “You found *Wellborne*?” This was the last thing he expected. There hadn’t been a shred found of anyone who disappeared in the lights.

Fossvalor replied with a knowing eyebrow raise.

This changes things. If we can get our hands on Wellborne and control him... Plan A might still be on the table. And now we don’t have to knock Proteus out of the way first. Convenient for him to go and die like that. Rott composed himself and straightened his plain grey shirt. “That’s inspiring news.”

Fossvalor briefly turned back to his papers and took out the third and fifth documents; he handed them over. “The details are here. Including the location of *Wellborne*’s body in the northeast. Reports say it’s half buried out in the Scorch. Anyone who gets near says they’re unable to remove it. It’s mystically locked in place, we can assume.”

Rott looked over the documents, forgetting his attempts to strategically one-up his elder cousin. “Of course, you know we’ve lost the entire Outcast army. Resources are slim.”

“But you still have the Trust. Those minds should be able to create a workable plan. Stealth will be key now, you may wish to leave your Outcast-chief title for now.”

"I'll handle the Trust," griped Rott. "I'll convince them." *Somehow. Just have to figure it out first.*

Fossvalor opened his folded hands in a successful gesture. "Then it's settled? I expect you'll want to head out within a day."

Rott grit his teeth. The last thing he wanted to do was go back east. Returning to the Wastes with no army in tow would not do him any favors. The people left behind were almost all part of the Trust. The brains behind the outfit Rott had crafted in recent years. They were smart, not easily snowed. But if this was what it would take to free himself from his wretched family, then he'd do it. He'd take his licks and get to work. "Always a pleasure doing business with you, cousin," he said with an expression between smile and sneer. He took his papers and left the room.

Chapter 5

Cassidy

SEDENZA at night was a marvel to behold. The largest human city, lit by the most advanced electric lighting found anywhere across the continent. Even after dusk, the central markets were bustling with life. Everywhere you turned there was another sound of people sharing a drink or the wafting smell from the latest shipment of exotic spices. This was why Cassidy loved Sedenza. *The lights, the sounds, smells... the people. This is home.* She smiled from the inside out, her brown eyes open wide to take it all in. Still, she couldn't help but feel cold, and not from the early winter winds. Even being with her friends, she still felt partially alone. Trede's abrupt disappearance during the battle had ripped something away from her. She hadn't even begun to recover. Lucky for her, she had more than one friendly hand outstretched and ready to pull her on.

"Ladies and Frezerick, where do we go first?!" Traz jumped a step ahead and darted his gaze left and right. He was a Selahn intent on merriment and there wasn't anything that could stop him.

"We've got to hit up a hunter's guild both and get smoked jivret," said Frezerick, who had easily become one of Traz's favorite Cytechs. Cassidy had seen them hit it off on multiple occasions with a similar abundant sense of humor. "It's your favorite! Who knows then you'll see it again outside of Sedenza."

"True-true!" Traz waved a clawed finger pointed at the night sky. "Something tells me there'll be no jivret left unturned tonight!"

Nandiel laughed at the heightened level of excitement in the air. "All right, all right. You two go get the food, we're going to grab a table at the center garden. The fires are lit tonight, so it shouldn't be *too* cold. Meet us there, k?" Traz and Frezerick scampered off in search of a delicious meal.

"Ooh, and drinks. We'll need drinks," chimed Traz.

"There will be drinks, my friend. Just wait!" said Frezerick.

As they left, Cassidy caught site of Nandiel looking at her. There was a hesitance in the look, maybe even a hint of pity. That was probably the last thing Cassidy wanted. It was exhausting to have people feel bad for you all the time.

She pushed through. "Let's get a table near one of the fire pits. It's damn cold out."

Nandiel laughed again. "You said it. At least winter isn't so long around here."

They found a space with four black metal chairs and a simple table. The bright orange flames from the nearby fire pit kept things well-lit and just barely warm enough. They wouldn't have to wait long before dinner arrived.

Nandiel sat back in her chair as if she were suddenly tired. "I can't believe we're doing this. It's been too long, you know?"

Cassidy nodded. She hadn't taken any time for herself since starting work with Bors. "We used to come here all the time, didn't we?" There was a fondness in her tone remembering simpler days. A time before there were such things as mystics, impossible powers, and massive global threats.

"We did! There's no place on earth like Sedenza," said Nandiel. "Do you think we'd still be with the Cytechs if it was in the middle of nowhere?"

Cassidy thought for a moment. *Was it really the guild that kept me here, or the city itself?* All it took was a single thought lapsing back to where she grew up near Garar. "Anything's better than the farming cooperatives back home. I'd stay with the Cytechs no matter where it went. Jonin and Fwee are nice too... I didn't get to see much of the Cytech operation in Jonin, though."

"That's right, Miss World-Traveler! You've been everywhere now, haven't you?" Nandiel giggled under her breath at her own joke.

Cassidy was about to roll her eyes at Nandiel's jape when she noticed an unexpected flash of white. *Wait, is that...*

The white-cloaked mystic, Yaladra, had just entered the fire-lit gardens. Her hood was up, her face impassive and eyes searching. After noticing Cassidy there, she approached the table.

"Yaladra, I— Is everything OK? Is Oudrine..." Cassidy half stood out of her chair.

Yaladra looked around the central garden in the market as if suspicious. "She's... the same, it's fine." She waved a hand at her to dismiss the concern.

"Do you want to sit? We have food coming?" Nandiel was quick to offer. Cassidy knew she'd met Yaladra once before, but was surprised at how inviting she was to the mystic.

Yaladra quickly took a seat and leaned in. "I was hoping you could connect me

with someone in the Merkants.” She was subtly on edge, like she was trying to avoid attention.

“Oh...” said Cassidy, somewhat confused. *I wonder what’s going on?* “I might be able to give you a name, but I don’t personally know—”

“I’m friends with Janice,” said Nandiel, chiming in. “She helps deliver raw materials to the textile house. It’s right next to my cabin on the ground level.”

Cassidy gestured to Nandiel and shrugged. “Does that help?”

Yaladra wore a pensive look before nodding. “Anyone in Merkant employ will do. How do I find her?”

Cassidy had to stop and ask. “Hold up, what’s going on? Did something happen? Are you ok?”

Yaladra settled back in her chair, avoiding eye contact.

Again, Cassidy thought she had this air about her. *She really looks like she’s hiding something.*

“Tiberiak is in the city. I’m looking for him.”

Cassidy’s jaw went slack for a split second. “Like *the* Tiberiak? From Tiberiak manor?”

Nandiel asked, “Isn’t that the place near Southern Fwee?”

Yaladra nodded.

“What is he doing in the Central Plains?” asked Cassidy. “It’s not exactly his backyard.”

“The Tiberiak family has business ties *all over*,” said Yaladra. “Mostly Merkant ties. And I’ve been getting wind of changes here in Sedenza. Someone’s pulling strings, trying to take advantage of the turmoil left after the Storm. I’ve heard his name once or twice around. But I need something more solid to find where he is.”

Cassidy reeled and blinked her eyes a few times. Here she thought life was maybe settling down after all the dangers and city-ending threats she’d faced recently. *What is this all about?* She had to know more. “Why the sudden urgency? Why not just let the Merkants handle their own stuff?” As a member of the Cytechs, Cassidy knew little of the inner workings of the Merkants, and honestly, cared little. The guilds were all autonomous and mostly kept out of each other’s way unless there was a mutual benefit involved.

Yaladra folded her hands on top of the table and leaned her head down. "Tiberiak is a power monger. He's always after whatever he thinks gives him that. Usually it's money, so he runs business with the Merkants. Sometimes it's people."

Nandiel's eyes widened in shocked silence. Cassidy, though, had seen some evidence of this firsthand at Tiberiak manor. They had held Trede hostage in vile conditions. Yaladra's own father was imprisoned at the manor for years. Cassidy's mind immediately wandered to the other mystics at the Haven. She leaned in and lowered her voice. "Are you safe? Do you think he's... after you? Or the others?"

A silent anger washed over Yaladra's face, like a violent storm cloud viewed on the horizon. Powerful, threatening, yet distant. "No mystic is ever safe with Tiberiak still around. He still has dozens of mystics stolen away. Maybe more. If my father and I ever want to be truly free, he needs to be stopped."

Nandiel blurted out, "Come by the guild house tomorrow." Her eyes still wide and growing tear-filled.

Cassidy and Yaladra looked back at her.

"Janice is due for another delivery. Nine AM."

A spark of hope dawned in Yaladra's serious visage. She nodded. "Thank you. With a little Merkant inside info, I'm sure I can find a trail leading back to Tiberiak."

Another burning question rose to the top of Cassidy's mind. "Yaladra, have you... or any of the mystics had any sign about Wellborne? Or..." She couldn't bring herself to ask about Trede, though the hope still lingered that he might still be out there somewhere.

Yaladra shook her head. "I have not. Father, Celeste, and Jonas have been studying for any clues. We're still not sure where they went."

Cassidy slunk into her chair but tried not to make her disappointment obvious. "Ok... Just thought I'd—"

"Dinner! Is on!" announced Traz as he approached. With his chest puffed out, he came to the table with three big platters of food. "See, Frez? And you said I got too much. We have another hungry friend joining us!"

Frezerick was just behind him with another two tin platters of some jivret and assorted vegetables. He laughed. "Right again, ol' Traz. I hope you're all hungry!"

Yaladra stood as if to excuse herself. "No, that's all right, I really—"

Cassidy's hand snapped out to grab Yaladra by the arm. Surprised by her own

instinctive movement, she gaped until she thought of what to say. “Stay! You should stay. Traz always buys too much food.”

Yaladra’s posture loosened as she sat down again. She nodded.

“One person’s *too much* is my *just the right amount!*” said Traz, laughing a loud belly laugh. Frezerick grabbed another chair from elsewhere in the fire-lit garden. They crowded around the table.

Cassidy looked around the table. She was surrounded by good people. Friends, companions and such. But she wasn’t sure why she was so adamant that Yaladra stay. She wondered. *Seems like the more I hang out with mystics, the more impossible things happen.* Then it hit her. Somewhere deep inside she felt Trede was a little closer, as long as someone like Yaladra was near. While her work with the Cytechs was ground-breaking, revolutionary even, none of that would ever bring Trede back. *But maybe... Just maybe the mystics could find a way. Some day.* And for the moment, that was enough. Cassidy snapped back to the present, a warm smile crossing her face.

They had a fantastic time, eating, swapping stories, and an awkward moment where, at Traz behest, they tried to make a human pyramid. It took a few attempts to the delight of dozens of passersby as they stopped to cheer, applaud, and laugh. Traz was in his element as he called out to all potential onlookers as he talked up the event like some kind of one-night only circus. The third attempt, they finally became stable for a few minutes before they all toppled to the ground. Raucous laughter erupted in the fire-lit gardens that filled the night air. Cassidy was pretty sure she was going to have a huge bruise across her back in the morning, but she didn’t mind.

Time wore on; the repartee wound down. While everyone was in their seats, Traz stood up on the table to deliver an address.

“My friends! All Cytechs and Mystic,” he nodded at each of them. “Alas, the night is nearly over. And tomorrow, I’m off again on travels anew.” Traz was waving his hands out in exaggerated and melancholic gestures. His shoulders sagged and his head bobbed from side to side as he spoke.

Cassidy placed a palm over her eyes at the florid spectacle, but couldn’t help but grin. *He’s a nutcase, but I guess he’s a lovable nutcase.*

“And so, friends, I formally bid you this painful farewell, though temporary as it may be.”

“You never said where you were off to,” said Frezerick. “Let’s have it, man!”

Traz inhaled a huge breath and pointed a single finger as if he were holding a thought in place. His face twisted with deep consideration. "I honestly have no idea. Isn't that the whole point of *wanderlust*? I don't think I'll know until I get there. It's a silly human word, anyway. Tonight, it means whatever I say it does!" He threw up his hands and jumped down off the table beside himself in laughter.

Traz addressed each of them individually and offered them a hearty hug, or in Yaladra's case, a stiff handshake. When he finally came to Cassidy, she felt her throat suddenly close up. Tears filled her eyes and breath escaped her. *It's not goodbye, it's not goodbye. Just... for now.* She told herself over and over, attempting to hold one shred of herself together.

"Cassidy, we met in Smisom. And I will. S'miss'em. S'miss you. Sorry, that didn't work out so well... But it's your language, not mine."

She laughed, grateful for the distraction, and wrapped her arms around Traz's shoulders. "Come back soon," she said, smiling through tears.

He leaned in close and gave her a knowing, sideways glance. "I think I just might." He tapped the side of his nose. Then he thrust his arms in the air again in a victorious gesture. "Farewell again, fair friends! Until we met anew!"

Cassidy watched him go, passing between the fire pits of the gardens' east side. She wasn't sure how long she was standing there when Nandiel grazed her arm.

"Hey, we're heading back... and it's getting freezing out. You coming?"

"Yeah, I'm coming," said Cassidy. Still watching the empty path where Traz had tread. She said goodnight to Yaladra and followed Nandiel and Frezerick.

The walk back to the guild house felt long. Cassidy's thoughts wandered to Bors, Tenowon and Trede.

She was making progress on Tenowon's repair bit by bit. And as long as the mystics were still around, there was just enough hope in the air that maybe, someday, Trede would return. While she was sad to see Traz leave, for that night, she had just enough hope for tomorrow.

Chapter 6

Oudrine

IT was the following morning at the Haven where two mystics found themselves in the underground hall.

"You don't have to do this. Not yet." Celeste spoke gently with her hand on the mausoleum door. "You've only just recovered. Perhaps—"

"No." Oudrine's usually melodic voice was flat, exhausted, monotone. "No. I've waited too long. I must see my husband." She shuffled forward, a grimace of pain hinting around her lips. She waved her former teacher to the side.

"As you wish." Celeste's eyes welled as she pressed the sturdy metal door open. It creaked mournfully as it crept open. An eerie light peered out from that ancient place. No one knew who built the Haven, nor who installed the mausoleum below. There were four main underground sections. Three were sealed off with stone. One lay empty and unused for many years. Until now. "Jonas laid him here after the battle..." Celeste explained, but trailed off as Oudrine crept past.

Oudrine approached the rough stone slab in the nearest alcove. A Palifax lantern had been lit and was less than a quarter burned down. *I've been asleep two weeks... And he's been here alone.* It was tradition for mystics to light a long-burning lantern for burial. It signified the Fire of the living, giving warmth to the air and body around it. Oudrine fought to stem the sudden heaving of her lungs.

"Now that you're awake, dear one..." Celeste spoke just above a whisper. "We can have the proper ceremony. When you're ready."

Oudrine nodded without turning around, then glided to the slab on which Maej's body lay. His body was wrapped in cloth as was tradition for those who remembered the older ways. She put her hand over his, which were folded at the waist. She was shocked at how cold he was. The cold was a stark contrast to his life. Maej was always fiery, determined, hot as a blazing summer sun. *Now... Every spark is spent.*

Oudrine's hand raised to cover her mouth. She knew as soon as she awoke that Maej was gone. She could *feel* that it was true. Seeing the body made her feel like she was drowning. The air became hard to breathe. Wracked with grief and

still weak of body, she stumbled down to her knees. Her body slumped onto the cold, heartless stone that made her husband's tomb.

Celeste took three steps into the mausoleum and knelt down, saying nothing. Her pained expression spoke volumes.

"We always knew the risks," said Oudrine with a cracked, wavering tone. "We knew the danger. Ever since that day at The Well when Proteus first planted that seed of evil... There was only ever one path for us. After enduring so much, I thought we'd see better days together. I guess my past was not deserving of such happiness." Her thoughts wandered to those three young men she'd killed years prior. Inadvertently with the first, in desperation with the others. These were the things she told herself. But the promise they'd made to Trede's father Vinn was absolute.

Don't let him find my son. Swear it. Take this vow, I beg you. No matter what. Proteus cannot find my son. Vinn's final words echoed in Oudrine's mind. She considered the lengths she went to find Trede before Proteus did. Surely, the fatal tests she administered to the first three candidates were what Vinn meant? *No matter what...*

Lost in grief, Oudrine succumbed to the nagging despair. After all, what's worse than a broken heart, but believing you deserved it?

Her soul cracked, face twisting in pain, tears pouring. Celeste reached out but was waved away. "Leave me," Oudrine sobbed. She wailed and cried, filling the spartan mausoleum with anguish.

Celeste removed herself from the room but lingered at the door. "You are not alone in your pain," she said somberly. "We are here for you. Always." She disappeared from the Palifax lantern's light.

Oudrine stayed there, crumpled in the dim, wailing at her loss. Time passed until her tears ran dry. Only then did she realize her incredible fatigue. Her ordeal with the Storm's mind weeks prior had left her diminished. Her body, Fire and Strength of Mind still required intense convalescence. She felt her hands slip on the cool stone floor. She collapsed and her head spun. The lantern's light grew farther away somehow. Then darkness...

Some time later, Oudrine awoke in bed. Jonas, Celeste's husband and another of Oudrine's former teachers, stood by the door, arms folded, with happy crow's feet

showing around his eyes.

"Glad to see you're up," he said. "Can we get you anything? You must be hungry." Jonas' long, greying locks were tied neatly back behind his ears.

Oudrine considered a meal briefly but could only feel pain at the thought. She shook her head as she sat upright.

"You were down there a few hours. It'll be sundown soon." Jonas' usual mirthful voice sounded more matter of fact. He paused. "Yaladra and Drayle are still with us. Perhaps you'll join us for dinner? We'd all like that very much."

Oudrine noticed Jonas' eyes misting, so she turned away. She couldn't bear to see such a bright man with sadness. *Not for my sake*, she thought, positive she didn't deserve such empathy. "Perhaps I will." She nodded while staring out the small window. "Perhaps I will."

"There'll be a space set for you. When you're ready." Jonas moved to exit the room.

"Jonas—" Oudrine gasped, unsure if her voice could would carry. Her eyes blurred with tears.

He paused at the door.

"What am I going to do?" Her voice cracked; the tears came again. Oudrine was a powerful woman, a learned woman. Were she to set her considerable Strength of Mind to any task, there was little she couldn't overcome. She had locked eyes with the sentient, corrupted Wellborne and was victorious. Yet the ordeal had left her fractured. Her Fire was dimmed. The loss of Maej stripped away her boundless resolve. In that moment she felt just like that scared little girl from Briar who found refuge at the Haven years before. Jonas had whisked her away from danger at the landing field in Sedenza and brought her here. The Haven. Home. A place that now held more grief and uncertainty than safety. Her quavering breath was the only sound other than the quiet pit-a-pat of tears landing in her lap.

Jonas glided to the bedside and sat on the corner. "Whatever you do. You won't do it alone." His voice was calming, though on the verge of cracking.

Oudrine still didn't dare to look him in the eyes. She closed her eyes and wore his words around herself like a warm, invisible shroud.

"The world is greedy, unkind... It takes, and it takes. But as long as we draw breath, we'll stand by you. We'll come alongside, hold you up. As often and as much as you need." He wiped one eye. "Someday you'll stand and feel strong

again. But you'll never forget. And that's ok. Some things run deep. A part of us forever. While it hurts, we treasure them. To forget would be a worse fate."

Oudrine turned away from the window. Her eyes fell upon Jonas. He suddenly looked more his own age. His own pain and grief were apparent in his eyes. She wanted to say thank you, and scream and decry fate itself over her loss. She wanted to melt into a puddle and drop down into the earth to hide from existence. But she couldn't do any of those things. She reached out a porcelain arm. Jonas took her hand. She squeezed with the faint trace of strength she had. She remembered what Celeste had said. *You're not alone in your pain.* She grabbed onto that thought like a raft lost in the Roiling Sea. "Would you help me get downstairs?" she said like a wispy breeze passing by. "I think... Maybe I am hungry."

"Of course," said Jonas as he helped her to her feet. "Anything you need. We're here."

Oudrine sat at the corner of the dinning room table, crooked and bent at the waist, arms holding up her tired body. She was in a stone-bricked interior room. Tapestries lined the walls, lit by several burning lanterns. She had only enough strength to breathe.

There was some scuffling about the room as the other mystics set the table and prepared for the meal. Oudrine scarcely noticed. Someone offered her a plate. A small piece of roast chicken and a few vegetables. She took it and nodded, as a reflex more than a conscious action. Looking at the plate, she found her eyes unfocused. She stayed locked in that fuzzy moment.

"We're so glad to see you up again, Oudrine," said Drayle. He sounded cheerful but reserved. Oudrine looked opposite her at the table. Their guests from the west had joined them. Drayle tipped his glass. "Thank you again, all. For your hospitality."

Celeste and Jonas chatted graciously with Drayle for a moment. But Oudrine noticed something off. Yaladra sat there next to her father, strangely quiet. Oudrine watched her without looking directly; Yaladra was clearly avoidant.

What does she have to grieve? An angry thought hissed through Oudrine's mind. But no, that wasn't it. She tried to let go of her knee-jerk anger; it dawned on her. *Not grief, but guilt. Guilt... But why?* Her tired mind couldn't fathom. Still, something about it irritated her. She wasn't sure why.

While the others talked about inconsequential matters, hunger eventually took over and Oudrine ate most of her meal in silence. It was the most substantial thing she'd eaten in weeks. Her stomach felt full of rocks. She paused and nudged her plate away. She stared at the table in a daze, taking slow labored breaths.

"Can I get you anything more to drink?" Celeste asked.

Oudrine heard her, but somehow it sounded miles away. *She can't be talking to me...* She rose from the table and left saying nothing. Something about the food or drink had made her feel off. She wandered, directionless. She came to a dark place when she heard a voice call out.

"Oudrine! Where are you going!?"

She felt a strong hand on her arm and turned.

"Come back home. Please."

Jonas. Oudrine shuddered with shock, or cold. Her wits returned in a flurry. She realized she was outside after dark, just down the cobblestone street from the Haven. She felt foolish for wandering off. And *exhausted*. "Jonas... Sorry, I'm—" She staggered to one side and was caught in Jonas' arms. A moment passed. She felt herself being carried inside. Somehow she landed in her bed. With a lantern lit on the bedside table, her mind slowly convalesced.

Something's wrong, she thought. *Something happened to me.* Her mind wandered to her moment of agony back during the Sedenzan battle. When Yaladra asserted the magic of the Strength of Words *through* Oudrine's telepathic connection. She'd been connected to the Storm. The living embodiment of The Well itself. She realized the damage in her mind. The coldness of her Fire. And with the grief-filled wound in her heart, she hadn't the strength to combat any of it.

She laid there in bed, faltering, cursing the events that lead her here. She'd endured hardship before. Surely, she could stand up to anything? *But Maej... he was always here.* The tears returned. She rolled over and pulled her arms and legs in tight. She dipped her head down underneath the covers. A lilting moan escaped from the back of her throat. She hid there in the dark, shuddering in quiet tears.

Somehow, amid the grief, she remembered she was not alone. Maybe it was Jonas' encouraging words earlier. Maybe it was something else. It was just enough distraction from the pain. Her tense body loosed. Her steady thoughts evaporated like a faint mist in the hot sun. Consciousness faded away. The bliss of forgetful sleep took hold.

the Light

She's hurting. I don't think I've ever seen such pain. I wish I could help.

...

That evil presence is coming back. I have to go. Too much to do.

Chapter 7

Yaladra

"ARE you going out again today?" Drayle asked. He was enjoying some breakfast of eggs and bacon in the large stone dining room at the Haven.

Yaladra nodded, her mouth still full.

Celeste came gliding around the table with another hot pot of tea. "Can I get anything else for anyone?"

"It's fine, dear! Please, come sit!" Jonas said, waving his wife to come sit at her chair.

"Really, Celeste, you've been too kind," Drayle added with a warm smile.

"I don't mind at all," she replied. She wiped off her hands with a kitchen towel as she sat. "We had thirty mystics here back at the peak. It's nice to have a few extra friends around." She pressed her shoulder close into Jonas.

He wrapped an arm around her and grinned with bright, shining eyes. "It was a busy time. Worth every minute."

Yaladra turned to her father. "I'll be heading into the market again. I'm meeting Janice today, she's a Merkant with a lot of Cytech ties."

Drayle nodded thoughtfully. "Hopefully she'll give you something helpful. You still think Tiberiak's influence is growing here?"

"I heard there's been some sweeping changes within the Merkants," said Yaladra, picking at her eggs with a fork. "If anyone is going to make a play after the city was nearly destroyed, it's him."

"Might be the richest man alive, from what you say," said Jonas. His long greying hair was still down and messy at that early hour. "Surprising, we don't hear

his name around more often.”

“When you’re that rich, it’s easier when no one knows your name,” said Yaladra, perhaps more morose than she intended. “He could be running the entire Merkant guild right now, and we’d never know it. Even people who know his name only use it when they think no one is listening.” She remembered her brief alleyway fight with that merkant. The thought of it sent her blood flowing. *He knew something... and I blew it.* Then she realized how tense she was and tried to take a deep breath.

“I’ll keep my eyes peeled when I’m at the market, too,” said Celeste. She served herself a helping of bacon and tossed another piece onto Jonas’ plate.

“You know me well,” he said, grinning.

Then the room snapped silent. A dark, wordless figure lurked in the doorway.

Yaladra flashed hot and tensed her legs as if to stand before realizing who it was.

“Oudrine!” Celeste rushed to stand. “I’m glad you’re up, here, come.” She aided Oudrine as they ambled around to an empty seat across from Yaladra. “Did you sleep well?”

“Fine,” Oudrine said, her voice hollow and far away.

Yaladra froze, suddenly very uncomfortable. She wanted to offer condolences. To say thanks for the impossible feat Oudrine accomplished. To apologize for... what? She wasn’t sure. Instead, she just looked at the forlorn shell of a once vibrant, powerful woman. Watching her was haunting somehow, setting her ill at ease. Yaladra picked at her meal while the others talked. She’d occasionally glance at Oudrine from the corner of her eye. The mind mystic never spoke.

As breakfast ended, Yaladra stood. She leaned over to kiss her father on the cheek. “I’ll be safe, don’t worry.”

“Leaving already?” asked Drayle.

"I'm sure you'll be fine with your new friends." Yaladra smiled. Despite life being turned on edge in recent months, she was glad they'd found other mystics to be around.

"In fact," Drayle perked up with an exciting thought. "We're heading to the Great Library today. It's been ages since I've gone. I'm sure they've accumulated several new finds. Jonas thinks they might even have more pre-cataclysm texts on display."

"Sounds right up your alley," said Yaladra with a rare smile. It did her heart a world of good to see her father living happy and free again.

"We'll keep our eyes peeled for anything about Tiberiak, as well. There's no reason we can't have fun with research and do some sniffing around at the same time." He laughed and was joined by Jonas, a deep, mirthful laugh that filled the room.

"Have fun, you guys," said Yaladra, still with a soft smile. As she exited the room, she caught sight of Oudrine one last time. She sat there at the table like a sickly flower, bent to one side. Staring down at nothing. A discomforting knot formed in Yaladra's belly. *Something about that woman...* She dismissed the thought and went outside.

It was cold outside. Sedenza, being in the central plains, was still north enough to feel winter's chill, though it rarely snowed. Yaladra pulled her white cloak closed as puffs of white breath escaped her nose. Her boots clacked on the cobblestone streets as she entered the market. She had a little time until her meeting with Janice, so she decided to listen around.

Where to begin. Her eyes wandered. It didn't take long before she noticed a small group of people between a cluster of small open-air stalls. Raised voices caught her ear. She moved closer to listen without being obvious.

"And I'm telling you, the Cytechs are holding out on us! They always have been!" said an older man with a huge cleft in his chin. He was heated, red-faced and waving his arms. "You just walk past that locked gate of theirs after dark and see! They've got lanterns twice as bright as these old smoky things!" He gestured

at an overhanging lamppost, still off since daylight.

“From what I’ve heard, that’s barely the start of it,” said a middle-aged woman wrapped in a huge coat with a furred hood. “Did you see all that tech they hauled out during the great battle? Why does an *inventor’s* guild stockpile so many deadly weapons, huh? How much more could they have? We’ll never know?!”

A few more voices echoed similar concerns until someone put up a hand to silence them. It was a low-ranking Merkant officer, no thick, long coat, but with the high collar showing a half-star pin. She was maybe mid-thirties. “The Sedenzan Merkant offices hear your concerns, really we do... You’ll be pleased to know, there are plenty in our ranks that share those concerns.”

“Yeah, so we’re all concerned, great!” said the cleft-chinned man from before. “But what are we going to *do* about it? I’ve been saying this for ages!”

The woman Merkant fought to damper the crowd’s temper. “The Merkants can only do so much. But we are doing something.”

“Pshaw! Like what?”

Looking flustered, she straightened her collar and cleared her throat. “I can only say so much. But things are in the works. The Merkants are working for the people to make sure Sedenza is safe from external threats... and from internal ones. That’s as much as I can tell you. Now if you’ll excuse me, I really have to get back.” She waved them off and picked up her crate of ledgers to walk away.

The crowd dispersed, moaning about the unlikelihood of any change.

Yaladra leaned back against the nearest lamppost. *First time I’ve heard people having complaints about the Cytechs. And what does that have to do with “internal threats”?* She wondered. Still, it was another piece of information. Any activity at all in the Merkants could be tied to Tiberiak. *I can’t be sure yet. Tiberiak has numerous dealings through the Merkants... Makes everything they do suspect.* Yaladra knew she couldn’t shake down every random Merkant employee in the city. *Good thing I have Janice.* She continued on through the market, her eyes peeled, her ears sharp.

While Yaladra knew little about Janice, she was hopeful. That Janice had a position that acted as a go-between for the Merkants and Cytechs was promising, especially considering what she’d just heard. *If anyone has heard of unrest between the guilds, it’ll be her.* She continued to the Cytech guild main gate.

Upon arrival, it surprised her to see Cytech guards showing arms just behind the gate. With the battle now weeks behind them, she wasn’t sure why the guild still

appeared on high alert. Yaladra stiffened as she approached the gate, now unsure they would let her enter. *They should recognize me, but...* “Good morning. I’m Yaladra. Here to see Nandiel Salastier.” She nodded and made a sort of half bow, wondering if she should smile and apply more pleasantries. At the moment, she couldn’t be bothered with such pretense.

The main guard she addressed stared back at her blankly. “I wasn’t aware of any mystic business today. How about you, Bob?” He turned to the next guard, who only shrugged with a confused expression.

“Yaladra! There you are!” A woman’s voice called out from behind. The guards turned back.

It’s Nandiel. Ok, time to play the part. Yaladra’s face lit up. “Hi! Sorry I’m late.”

“Oh, no worries,” said Nandiel. “Well, come on guys, let her in! She helped save the city, what’s the holdup?”

“Right, a’course, Miss Salastier. Just following the new rules,” said the guard. “We’re supposed to keep things tight here at the gates nowadays.”

Yaladra gave the guard a sideways glance as the heavy black gate swung open. *New rules, huh?* Considering what she’d just heard in the market center, maybe there really was some inter-guild conflict brewing. She wanted to ask the guard more, but thought better of it. *Don’t want to come off as suspicious.*

Once through the gate, Nandiel jumped forward and grabbed Yaladra by the arm. She bristled in response but tried to play it off as natural. “Thanks, Nandy. We should get going, huh?”

“You know it!” Nandiel said in usual chipper fashion. Yaladra didn’t know her well enough to tell if she was playing it up or acting natural; she went with it regardless.

Once they were out of earshot of the guards, and heading towards the Textile house, Nandiel finally spoke again. “Nobody really calls me *Nandy*, by the way.” She laughed under her breath.

“Sorry,” said Yaladra, her shoulders tensing again. “Just trying to play along.”

“Playing?” asked Nandiel, who looked pensive for a moment. “Oh. The *we’re old friends* bit. Yeah, the guards have been uptight lately. I’m surprised they didn’t call the Chief Inspector!”

Yaladra let that thought digest for a second. “The battle was weeks ago. Any

idea why the high alert?"

Nandiel let an exasperated air escape her lips. "Going on high alert because of the Storm was easy, but coming back down... Not so much. The way everything ended with the lights, the disappearances... Not everyone is sure it's over. So it's stress-town lock-down for now."

Yaladra nodded, mulling it over. She then grew uncomfortable and cleared her throat. *Why is Nandiel still holding on to my arm?*

"Oh! Sorry, didn't even realize." Nandiel laughed again to diffuse any tension. As they came to a crossroads in the path, she pointed left. "Textiles is this way. Janice will finish up soon, so we're right on time."

"Thank you," said Yaladra as she unconsciously rubbed at her freed arm. After a moment of quiet, she felt she should offer some kind of reasoning. "If I'm right, Janice could lead me right to Tiberiak. And then the whole continent will be a lot safer, so... Thanks for doing this, Nandiel."

"I'm glad to help," said Nandiel, now sounding serious. "The past few months around here have been crazy. To be honest, I'm glad to have a project up in Lab One. It keeps me away from the worst of it. But I heard what happened to you and your dad. And it's just not right. I know stuff like that happens way too often, so... If you ever need something from the Cytechs... I know you already have Cassidy, but I'm here too. A friend, an ally, someone to help sneak you in the gates, *whatever...*" She laughed again while straightening her blond ponytail.

Yaladra had precious few allies in her life and didn't take the offer lightly. Still, she wasn't sure how to respond. As the Textile house came closer into view, she reached out and wrapped her arm around Nandiel's. "I'll try not to take advantage of the offer," said Yaladra, her face still solemn and looking ahead. "But I'll plan on taking you up on it." From the corner of her eye, she should tell Nandiel smiled in return, content to continue the walk in silence.

That must be her. Yaladra watched a young twenty-something with a tall Merkant collar leaving a tall sandstone building with a sign labeled "TEXTILES" in black on white paint. While ingenious, the Cytechs lacked a bit in aesthetics.

"Janice, hey!" Nandiel called out and ran ahead.

Yaladra continued at walking pace, letting Nandiel setup the introduction.

"Oh. Hi, Nandiel. It's been a while. Where've you been?"

She's standoffish, Yaladra thought. The woman had long jet black hair, tied back without a hair out of place. Her typical Merkant garb was tight and fitted, the tall collar around the neck made her appear stiff.

"Oh, you know, big time Lab One project," said Nandiel, sounding more than pleased. "I'm almost always up the Mountainside these days."

"I see," said Janice, sounding drab.

Nandiel was quick to avoid an awkward pause. "We missed you in town last night. I was hoping to run into you at the fire-lit gardens again."

"No..." Janice's lip curled. "The gardens are too cold this time of year. Even the fires are cold."

Nandiel started to laugh, then cut herself short when Janice's face remained stone solemn. "Anyway— Janice, I wanted you to meet Yaladra. She helped to save the city from that Storm weeks back."

Yaladra had stopped within a handful of feet of Nandiel and Janice. *This one is hard to read*, Yaladra thought. *I'll have to take it slow. I doubt she's going to be agreeable. Not at first.* "Hi, Janice. It's always nice to meet a Merkant officer."

Janice gave Yaladra a worrying look, but at least nodded. Mystics, until recently, weren't something openly discussed in public. They were more like ghost stories than anything else. Still, with all that happened recently, no one could deny the mystical was real. The massive Storm dissipating in an instant, the bright flashes of light and disappearance of the Outcast army were part of common knowledge now. "Hello," was all she said in return.

Nandiel, with a pained smile on her face, tried to redirect the conversation. "Looks like you're already finished here, can we walk you back to the gate? Maybe hit a Teahouse on the way?"

Janice hesitated. "We're quite busy these days, I'm not sure—"

She'd like to, but doesn't think she should. Yaladra kept her eyes trained on Janice, watching for any detail that might help nudge things her own way. "We'll at least walk you out," said Yaladra. "Tea optional, your call."

One corner of Janice's mouth ticked up, the slightest hint of a smile. "Ok. Sure."

The three women walked together back towards the main gate.

Nandiel started. "So how are things in the Merkants these days? Still as uptight as they are around here?"

"I'll say," said Janice. "For one, the paperwork we have to file has doubled. Like there wasn't enough to do. It's been... very busy. To say the least."

Yaladra noticed Janice was comfortable talking about her guild. *That could be an easy in. Still, I'll need to take it slow.* "With everything that's happened, seems like a lot of people are still on edge. The guilds most of all, huh?"

Janice rolled her eyes in agreement. "Tell me about it," she said in a monotone. "The people that are nervous complain. And with no real government or monarchy around, the guilds are left to field the concerns. Occasionally someone gets named Mayor of Sedenza, but they're mostly for show. The guilds have to carry *everything*. It's ludicrous, if you want my opinion."

Yaladra raised her eyebrows at Janice's forthcoming opinions. "Sounds like you have your hands full," she said, keeping an eye on Janice's movements.

"And more every day," said Janice. "Just this week we had— Well, it's been busy. You can't ever be sure what they'll ask you to do these days."

We just hit the wall. There's something internal to the Merkants she doesn't want to talk about. Yaladra pondered how she might come at the subject sideways and avoid making Janice uncomfortable. But the main gate was already coming into view. *Not much time.* Luckily, Nandiel stepped in.

"So, what do you think, Janice? Got time for a drink? Yaladra and I were heading that way, anyway."

Yaladra caught a knowing glimpse from Nandiel behind Janice's back. *Thanks, Nandiel. That's just the nudge we need.* "Right. It's no problem either way. But I'm sure even Merkant officers take breaks now and then?"

Janice exhaled deeply from her nose twice, obviously conflicted about the idea. "You're right. I suppose. It couldn't hurt."

Later, Yaladra, Nandiel and the Merkant, Janice, stepped into a quaint little teahouse on the northern edge of the sprawling market. While many buildings in Sedenza were built of sandstone, this one was an older style with a stick-built facade more common in outskirt towns nearer to larger forests of the northwest and eastern regions. The inside was similar, with thick, bare-wooden crossbeams

running across the ceiling.

Within minutes, they had received their drinks and sat at a worn, grey-wood table near the front window. Yaladra and Nandiel on one side, and Janice on the other. Sitting down, her perfect posture was made even more apparent in the firm, wingback chair. The high Merkant collar became even more pronounced, reaching up to her jawline. Yaladra thought clothing like that had to be unconformable, but for someone like Janice, it suited her just fine.

After a few minutes of idle chatter and teas half-drunk, Nandiel flashed Yaladra a wide-eyed glance, almost as if to say *here goes*. “So, Janice. I was wondering if you could keep your eyes peeled for something... Kind of internal, Merkant stuff.”

Janice scrunched up her nose. “Like what? Most non-Merkants don’t care about what goes on unless shipments dry up.”

“I— We’ve been trying to find someone,” started Yaladra, giving Nandiel an obvious look. *Can’t hurt to leverage Nandiel if possible... Janice knows her better.* “Someone I’ve known for years, but he’s been hard to find lately. I’m sure he has Merkant ties here in Sedenza.”

Janice’s face still showed disbelief.

Maybe she’s not used to people making requests of her.

“I could ask around. I suppose. What’s the name?”

“My father did business with him out west for years,” said Yaladra, trying to build up to it. The statement was somewhat true, true enough for the task at hand. “He goes by *Tiberiak*—”

Janice coughed and cleared her throat three times. She scowled at the inside of her teacup as if something offensive were present. She pushed it aside. “Sorry, no. I don’t think— Sorry, I should really get back to work. I’ve been away too long.” She shuffled a few belongings into her satchel and rose from the table.

“Janice?” said Nandiel, also standing. “Everything ok?”

“I’m due back by now,” said Janice. Her usually stolid exterior was flushed.

She’s nervous, panicked almost. Yaladra observed without rising from her seat.

“Goodbye, Nandiel, Yaladra.” Without another word, Janice left the shop. The wooden door creaked open and slammed shut, ringing the tin bell attached to the frame.

Nandiel stood there by the table, arms raised in a confused shrug. She slumped

back to her seat and rested her elbows on the table. "What was that all about?" she said, gob smacked.

Yaladra didn't respond, not at first. While her best lead in weeks had just walked out in a hurry, something else had happened.

"Sorry, Yaladra," Nandiel sighed. "I thought I could help. What a mess this turned out to be."

"Don't be sorry," said Yaladra. She took the last sip of her tea and set it down on the grey-wood table with a soft *clunk*.

"What do you mean?"

"Janice just told me everything I needed to know. Tiberiak isn't just in Sedenza, he's in the middle of something big. And he's pulling all the Merkants' strings."

"You think so?" Nandiel sat back up straight in her chair.

"Janice's face wasn't just nervous, she was panicking. Almost terrified. Even the name *Tiberiak* is a secret that no one is supposed to know."

Nandiel nodded as the idea sank in. "Come to think of it, I've *never* seen her act like that... Not even the time a spider landed in her lap at the gardens. And she hates spiders! This... could be big."

"I'm thinking so, too," said Yaladra. "If even a mid-level officer like Janice has a direct tie to Tiberiak, then whatever he's planning is definitely big." *And if he's got the Merkants involved, it's not just Mystics that will have to watch out. Everyone is in danger.*

Chapter 8

Rottiger

WINTER set in deep. It took weeks for Rott to find his way back to the Wastes. He didn't have good news and hadn't exactly rushed. *Hullo, everyone. The entire army is dead or vanished. Now let's get back to work. I'm sure that'd go over swimmingly.*

He trudged over the Abandoned Lands, each step frozen and miserable. There were no landing towers in the Wastes. Air whales never flew this way; that made for a long walk. It was a desolate place, still technically part of the Scorch. But the Wastes were unique of their own. The burnt, rust-colored lands gave way to a fine mist. To someone who didn't know the way it'd be a death sentence. The mist grew into a dense fog, obscuring all but the nearest few feet. He kept his course holding dead east. *Another five-hundred steps until the big cliff.* Rott recalled his past journeys and the various pitfalls one would encounter. *East should keep me south of the acid lakes.* He remembered those places where the air alone would kill you. It was one of the main reasons more civilized folks had left the Wastes untouched by . *Five-hundred... —ish. Then around the cliffs and down. I'm sure I'll see it.*

With the long walk ahead of him, Rott's thoughts wandered to what he might say when he got there. He'd been wracking his brains to think of some reasonable ploy he could use to nudge the remaining Trust members in line. After weeks of thought, he had nothing. *I might just have to tell them the truth.* It was a horrible, unsettling thought. Still, the idea that the living embodiment of The Well was still out there, and that they could take control over it, might be incentive enough. The Trust, mostly, was full of opportunists. They were exceptional people, willing to do the unprecedented in order to change the world. *In exchange for a share of the profits, of course. Greed. Maybe if I talk up how much power is at our fingertips, that will be just enough. Of course, all that power will benefit the Tiberiak family first. But I'm sure cousin Fossvalor will make an allowance here or there.* Rott chuckled to himself.

Time passed and Rott lost the feeling in his last unfrozen toe. Eventually his boot skidded against flattened stone. He halted. *Looks like I'm here.* Besides the perpetual fog, the Wastes had one other unique feature. He bent down and felt the ground with his fingertips. *That's the road all right.* It wasn't like the cobblestone

streets of Sedenza, or the gravel paths of Briar. Unbeknownst to the outside world, the Wastes centered around an ancient site. A ruined city from before the great cataclysm over five-hundred years past. It was the only place on the planet where humans still lived among structures older than recorded history. The road was built of a material unlike anything else. It was grey and filled with small stones, yet smooth and as wide as a dozen carts. In many places it was crumbling and broken. He knew it road would lead him straight to where he needed to be.

Continuing on the road, Rott came to a clearing in the fog. There were a few five to ten-story buildings in suitable repair. They all had squared off edges and flat tops built with a mix of ancient brick and metal. Beyond this main settlement of the Trust, there was a sea of taller towers. Each with more caved-in sides and exposed rusted metal than the last. Just on the far edge of the fog, there was a single spire holding up a huge round metallic orb. It was an odd sight among the squared edges of the other buildings; it didn't seem to fit in.

Rott held there on the smooth paved road, surrounded by a ring of fog and puzzling ancient structures. *Never thought I'd see this crap-hole again.* He spat, none too pleased with the idea either. He half expected a mob of angry Trustees to swarm him on sight. So far it was quiet. He approached the door of the main building and hesitated. *The Rott they know is all bluster and uproar.* He composed himself and slipped on the familiar persona like an old worn-in jacket. Shoulders back, brow furrowed, a slight twitch of the upper lip showing a permanent sneer at the ready. He put his hand on the knob, inhaled, and shoved the door open.

"Someone mind telling me why there's not a single guard detail in the entire perimeter?!" he bellowed. Looking around, he realized he was alone. *The hell...* He stomped through the long hallway and found his way through a series of identical beige hallways. Having lived here for years, he still remembered the way despite everything looking the same. He recalled years back that one member having the idea that the sameness of the halls would force people's minds to stay sharp to find their way around. It would also confuse intruders. Or escapees.

He pushed open a door leading to the mess hall. A simple room with white walls and tiled floor. *Finally.* "And what the hell is this?!" he shouted, waving his arms in the air.

The small, odd Bregory nearly flipped out of his chair. The completely bald Logistics stood up in his chair, mouth agape. A handful of others looked shocked, and murmurs bounced around the room.

When no one responded, Rott grabbed a chair and slid it into the middle of the room, purposely making as much racket as possible. He stomped forward and sat down. Exhausted and with aching legs, he put on a face of bravado and

demanded their full attention. “*Someone...*” he said through gritted teeth. “Report!”

A few voices in a mix of alarm and confusion all broke out at once.

“One! At a time!” Rott shouted again.

The small Bregory gestured with a waved hand to calm the crowd. Rott remembered he was a cross between a bellboy, host and facilitator for the Trust. He still wore the same maroon suit with a short, flat collar. He scratched a few fingers through his short black hair. “Allow me. Forgive our shock, Mister Rott, you see... We all expected you were dead.”

Rott kept a stern look and scarcely raised an eyebrow, daring him to continue.

“But clearly you’re not,” continued Bregory. “Much to our... delight.” He looked around the room for agreement and found bobbing heads all around. “So— What, or how— How did you come to find your way back?” He shrugged, otherwise lost for words.

In the blink of an eye, Rott considered. He recalled his plan on how to motivate the Trustees back into action, but he had to be shrewd. *Too much too soon might put them off.* “I walked,” he said with a huff, leaving a pregnant pause. When sufficient tension built in the quiet room, he continued. “I barely escaped the battle with my life. The Cytechs had Mystical help. The army was decimated.”

“And... all the war machines we built?” said a curious voice from the back of the room.

“GONE!” snapped Rott. “It’s all gone, do you understand?!” *Best to keep them on their toes. Classic Rott style. It’s like I never left.* While a tinge of pride warmed his heart, a few more quiet murmurs rippled through the room. “The Outcast fighting force is gone. The conquest is over.”

Confused looks filled the room as people glanced at one another with many questions.

While they were on edge, Rott pushed. “So what are you all doing here! Get back TO WORK!”

A few people rose from their chairs and shuffled about, directionless.

The tall bald one, Logistics, spoke up. “Uh— Sir, what is it exactly we’re to do? The conquest is over. The plan is over.” He paused. “What’s left?”

Time to sell it to them. Rott slowly rose from his chair. He ambled the room, making a pontificating gesture with his hands. "The brightest minds we could assemble, and yet you're all still thinking so small. Aren't you?" He scanned the room, making sure he had everyone's full attention. "The *conquest* wasn't the end. It was a means. The goal was always *power*. Control. And those things are still very much within our grasp. Oh, what's the matter? You're all looking confused!" He sighed with exasperation. "Does *ANYONE* here remember what it was Proteus was after? Hm?" He left just enough time for a couple brave members to open their mouths, then talked over them. "The Well. All the power The Well has to offer. Proteus turned it into a storm, and now it's been turned into something else. And I know where it is."

"Sir," Gregory spoke up again in a timid voice. "And what happened to Proteus exactly? Wasn't he the key to this plan?"

"He was," said Rott, rolling his eyes. "He's dead. No matter. More for us."

"More of what?" a wispy, curious voice asked.

"Power." Rott let the word sink in. "People of the Trust. I've found the body of Wellborne. The Well made flesh. And in that body contains all the mystical power one could dream. And I, for one, can dream of a *lot*." He gave them all a slanting look. *That's true enough for them. No need to let on the Tiberiak family is actually calling the shots here.*

Rott always liked this part. After the grand performance, the bravado, the threats and manipulation. *The buy in. Here they come. Jumping aboard like it's the last carrier in town.* Rott drank in the hopeful expressions of lust, greed, desire and hunger. Over the course of thirty seconds, he knew the entire group was ready to jump into action. Postures straightened, eyes opened wider. The Trust, it seemed, and been waiting around wondering what came next. Now they had a purpose again, something for which to strive. They were all in the palm of his hand. *I might miss this. Someday, after I retire from charlatanism.* A smarmy grin took over his face. *But that's not today.*

"I need cartography to work up the best path for an expedition. To the north of Smisom. I'll need some creative minds to solve an interesting problem: the immovable body of Wellborne. We may need to camp out in the area while we decipher how to mobilize it. We're going to need to be well-stocked for the trip, so make ration preparation now."

Clearly in his element, the man known as Logistics stepped forward, his posture tinged with smugness. "Rott. Who will we send on this errand? We are short staffed, as you know." He bowed lightly from the waist.

Rott asserted his authority over the situation. "You are." He gestured around the room. "You're all going. And myself, of course. This is *too* important. We need not worry about leaving the Wastes unguarded. It's not like anyone dares come here with all the hidden cliffs and acid pools!" He paused. *That seems to have shut them up.* Rott preferred to keep tight reins on his people. He barked a few more orders; the group disbanded from the room. He stood by, arms folded, watching his underlings scurry to their new tasks.

When he was alone, he sauntered to the kitchen feeling full of victory. *After a performance like that, I should have cousin Fossvalor pay me double!* He rummaged around the kitchen looking for something to eat. Eventually he settled on some jerky and a semi-fresh apple. He sighed. *It'll have to do.* He dreamed of his rich manor estate he'd someday lounge in. *A year's time? Maybe less, if I'm lucky. Something on the coast, south, where it's warmer. With a huge deck and comfortable chairs. I'll sit and watch the Roiling Sea. Be served on hand and foot by those tan coastal girls.* His lascivious grin was only broken when he took a wide bite of apple. He spit it out immediately like it was poison. Looking at the fruit, he saw it was rotten at the core. Turning a lip in disgust, he dropped it. It bounced on the door three times before laying still. *"Let someone else clean that up,"* he sneered under his breath.

Rott stormed out of the kitchen and back down the beige hallway. *Time to check on my personal quarters. I'll freshen up before re-addressing the troops.* He stomped down the hall with loud, self-important steps.

Chapter 9

Langhorne

THE day Marshal Langhorne had been dreading was here. Winter was thawing out in the Northeast. Reluctant as he was, it was time to venture south into the Wastes. It was a bitter wasteland that made even the Scorch seem tame in comparison. It was always covered in a dense fog and was known for drastic, sharp and sudden cliffs. Acid pools dotted the landscape, rendering pockets of air unbreathable. It was the most unlivable hell-pit known to man, and it was exactly where he needed to go.

"Ya know, dad, I could just come along anyway," said Jaxet.

Langhorne's daughter was well-suited to the Marshal life out in the northeastern Scorch. *Maybe too well-suited.* Jaxet was a key part of the Marshal Corps that kept all the Northeastern towns safe. She was an excellent sharpshooter and had a keen mind and level head when things got tough. *She'll make an excellent marshal in a few years. But sometimes you have to know when to stay behind.* "Not this time, Jaxet. Sorry," said Langhorne. "This one is reconnaissance only. The fewer people involved the better."

"I know, I know," said Jaxet. Her smile and bright blue eyes conveyed she wasn't too serious in her belligerence. "I guess I'd just rather not see you go. Feels like life is just getting back to normal..." She shrugged a shoulder and looked away.

"Has to be done," said Langhorne, a heavy sense of duty in his voice. "Outcasts or no, we need to know if there's any activity left in the Wastes. I won't leave Smisom unprepared again."

"Yeah..." said Jaxet, reluctantly giving in. She stepped over and wrapped her arms around her father. "I just hate the idea of you going off again. The last time you went alone you were gone for over a month! Promise you won't go any further than you have to?"

Langhorne ran a hand over his daughter's blond hair, a few shades lighter than his own. "Promise."

Jaxet sighed and released the embrace. "Ok. Fine, I'll let you go."

"Oh, is that so?" he chuckled and walked back to his simple wooden desk. He picked up a pair of binoculars, a new item shipped from the Cytechs in Sedenza. He hefted it in his hand. *It's pretty light.* "And with these, maybe I won't need to get so close. I just need to lay eyes on the place. Hide and watch from a distance."

The front door to the marshal station rattled open. "What? You and Brek aren't going in guns blazing?" It was Marshal Hildegras just coming off his rounds. He chuckled to himself as he came in and set his rifle on a rack near the door. "The way he keeps going on about it, sounds like you and Brek are going to take on the entire Outcast remnant on your own, blade to blade, bullet to bullet."

Jaxet rolled her eyes and let out a single laugh.

Langhorne grinned and thumbed his blond beard. "Sounds like Brek. He's been riding pretty high all winter after coming back from Sedenza." Langhorne looked around the simple room, glancing at the various maps and memos nailed to the walls. "Speaking of Brek, should he be in by now?"

Hil stopped as he reached his roughhewn desk. "Yeah, come to think of it. He's usually on time, though he has been spending a lot of time with Yui lately."

Langhorne raised an eyebrow. He'd seen Brek and Yui pairing up more often than not; this only confirmed the thought.

Hil continued, "In fact, more than once I've had to tell Brek and Yui there's a difference between being on duty and *on duty*, if you follow."

Langhorne looked at Jaxet, then gave Hil a sideways glance. He cleared his throat to get the point across.

"Trust me, around here? The girl's heard a lot worse." Hil's chuckle crescendoed into a full laugh that filled the room.

Jaxet shrugged and scrunched up her lip. "He's not wrong. Sorry, dad."

Langhorne couldn't help but grin. Someone coming through the door cut the moment short.

"Hey... guys?" It was Yui. She was a tall, lithe young woman from Oreshia. She had a talent for firearms and had elected to stay in Smisom after the events of the Great Sedenzan Battle. At least in part, because she'd hit it off with Brek so well.

"Hey, Yui!" said Jaxet, still smiling from Hil's jest.

"Something's wrong with Brek. Like really wrong," said Yui, still short of breath from running. She buried her fingers in her short black hair.

Langhorne approached the door. "Where is he?"

"At home," said Yui, growing flustered and flush. "He's breathing... Like he's sleeping but he won't wake up. It's so strange!"

"Take us there," said Langhorne, walking out the door. "Jaxet, come on. Hil hold down the fort."

"You got it!" Hil called out from inside the door. As much as he loved to joke around, Hildegras was one of the most dependable people Langhorne had ever met. He knew he could count on him at any hour.

As they walked, Langhorne continued with Yui. "Has he been sick? Maybe a fever?" Winter was nearly over, but sickness wasn't uncommon in these parts.

"No, he's been fine," said Yui, tears filling her eyes. "He was fine yesterday... I guess he feels warm now. Sweaty or clammy, maybe?"

Jaxet put a hand on Yui's back. "It's all right, we'll get him fixed up. I'm sure."

They continued across Smisom's simple dirt streets in silence. As they passed through the alleyway between two stone and mortar buildings, Langhorne had a sinking feeling. *I've seen this kind of thing before. It was more common years ago.*

No one ever found the cause of that peculiar sickness; it usually went away on its own. A few times, someone never fully recovered, and the family moved out-of-town looking for aid in the larger cities. *Not sure what happened to those people.* Then his mind clicked the pieces into place. *Mior told me the story about how Trede came to Smisom... Some kind of Mystic power at play. Time lines up when Trede was growing up around here, though. Depending how this goes... sounds like I might need to pay Mior another visit.*

Minutes later, Langhorne and Jaxet arrived at Brek's place with Yui leading the way. Brek lived in the corner room of a rustic stone and mortar building shared by a handful of other residents. They entered through a faded red wooden door on one side.

"Brek!" Yui exclaimed and rushed to his bedside, a simple straw mattress. "He's

warmer now... And he wasn't moving around like this before—"

Jaxet cupped a hand over her mouth. She'd seen worse, but it wasn't usually someone so close. Langhorne gently placed a hand on her shoulder before approaching the bed. "He's hot," said Langhorne, removing his hand from Brek's forehead. "But it's not a bad fever." He watched Brek writhe and squirm, eyes lolling way back in his head.

Langhorne's mind flashed back into memory. *Saw plenty of these. People not waking for days. Stirring and sickly like this...* He knew the basics of Trede's Echowake events. He'd seen it firsthand during the battle outside the cave near The Well. *He saved our hides with that Mystic stuff before. But why now?* He tried to recall some conversations Trede had with the other Mystics in Sedenza before the Storm. There were bits and pieces he remembered, although little he could say he understood. Still, with what he knew, this shouldn't be possible.

"What's wrong with him, Marshal?" Yui's eyes were wide with fear. Being from Oreshia, she was much less likely to have encountered this kind of thing.

Langhorne rested a hand on Brek's chest to get a feel for his breathing. It was deep and long. "There's only one cause for this I've ever known. And he's supposed to be dead... or gone. Someplace faraway we can't get to." He stood and paced a few times. "The good news is, he'll probably recover just fine. Wake up in a few days, act confused for a while. Another couple weeks he'll be right as rain."

"Weeks?!" The explanation did little to assuage Yui's nerves.

"Dad?" Jaxet sounded puzzled. "How do know so much about this?"

Langhorne closed his eye and exhaled in frustration. "I've seen this condition for years. I didn't really learn what caused it until the Mystics in Sedenza filled me a while back."

"Mystics?" Jaxet raised an eyebrow. "I thought magic was good. How can it make people sick?"

Yui watched the conversation unfold with alarming concern.

"It's a long story," said Langhorne, suddenly feeling tired. "You remember Trede?"

"The local courier? Mior's... grandson, or something," said Jaxet. She knew the residents of Smisom well.

"Trede had... or has some mystic ties that the Mystics never fully understood.

Maybe they still don't. I sure as hell don't. But something about Trede's dreams was causing this kind of sickness. We never knew it but years back, when Trede was younger, before he was couriering, it was downright common. You would've been a bit young to notice. As Trede grew up, and was in town less and less, sickness faded away." He took another somber look at Brek, still writhing away. "Until now."

"But isn't Trede... gone. Like you said?" Yui asked. "How is this happening?"

Langhorne shook his head. "First, I'll talk to Mior. Maybe he can tell me something. Then we should send word to Sedenza. The Cytechs and Mystics there will want to know."

He gave some basic instruction to Yui to help care for Brek while he was incapacitated. Then he and Jaxet exited, heading back to the Marshal office.

Later on the road, the walk was quiet. Langhorne had a lot on his mind.

"So, Dad?" Jaxet spoke up about halfway there.

"Yeah?"

"You said Brek is out of commission for weeks."

"Yep," said Langhorne. "More than likely."

"So who's going with you to the Wastes now?"

The element of macabre humor in Jaxet's voice wasn't lost on Langhorne. He slapped a hand to his forehead and rubbed at his blond eyebrows.

"The job should probably fall to the next most senior scout," said Jaxet, her voice chimed; a notable skip entered her step.

He hated to admit it. *But she's right.* "Some things just never go to plan around here," grumbled Langhorne. "Make sure you're packed. We leave in the morning."

Later that day, Langhorne looked for Mior. He had little time with his impending trip south, so he went straight to the tannery. While mostly retired, Mior was still there often.

And as luck would have it.

As Langhorne reached the old stone-built tannery, Mior was just coming out

the door.

"Looking real good, everyone. I'll see you later." The older man with his dark, weather-beaten face exited the tannery and latched the door in place. "Ah! Marshal. No news to report on this end of town. Things have been nice and quiet. All thanks to you, I'm sure." He grinned with squinting, smiling eyes.

"Mior," Langhorne nodded. "You got time for a drink?"

Mior's eyebrows flashed up with concern. "Has there been any news?"

"Not exactly," said Langhorne. "But it's worth sitting down for a drink. What do you say?"

Mior agreed.

Later, at the Charris pub, Langhorne and Mior sat at a small table near the front window with ample sunlight coming in.

Langhorne sipped a simple ale. With the winter's chill hanging on by a thread, Mior had opted for a hot, green tea.

"So, the scout is... down and out, you say?" said Mior in a grave, low voice. "That does sound familiar." He wore a pained expression; Langhorne guessed it was regret.

"Do you recall when the first appearances of the Sick started? Or at least thereabouts?" asked Langhorne.

"I'm sorry, Langhorne... I should've said something before now. I just— I just didn't think it was possible. Or didn't want it to be true."

"I'm not here looking for blame, Mior. Far as I'm concerned, you and I will always be on the level. I just need to get a few facts sorted. Right now, I'm operating on a hunch."

Mior took a few sips of tea and could only nod his head occasionally.

Langhorne was fine to let him gather himself for a moment. He drank his ale and gazed out the window as people shuffled by in their thick winter coats and furs.

"I told you how I found Trede before." Mior started slowly. "It wasn't long before I heard about the Sick. Trede was three the first time."

Langhorne recalled Trede was in his early twenties. *The timeframe definitely*

matches up with what I remember.

"He had a nightmare. Woke up hours before sunrise, covered in sweat. I had to hold him for an hour before he calmed back down." He set his tea down and rubbed the cup's rim with a finger. "It was maybe two days later I heard about Trayss Miller falling ill. Asleep, but stirring. Never waking. Lasted a good two weeks... maybe more. Hard to remember."

That was all the confirmation Langhorne needed. "So we know this sickness is related to Trede. But ever since he started hanging out with those other Mystics, I'm told he had it under control. So that leaves one question. A big one."

Mior raised his chin, looking less forlorn for a moment. "How could the Sick return if Trede isn't here?" The smallest spark of hope dawned in his dark eyes.

"Course, this is just one case. It's... possible something else is causing this for Brek." Langhorne rubbed his blond, bearded chin. "But if it is him, how? You haven't had any sign of him, have you? Nothing odd happening in your neighborhood?"

Mior shrugged. "No, no. I wish there was something. You'd be the first to know, of course."

"Right, right," said Langhorne, nodding. He rested his elbows on the table. "If there's some kind of Mystic mumbo jumbo going on here... I'm going to need some help. If Trede is *nearby*... Somehow. Maybe Brek's sickness is a clue."

"A sign," said Mior. "That's what I'll hope for."

"Do me a favor and keep your eyes peeled," said Langhorne. "The second we have something more solid, I'm sending a message straight to Sedenza. A lot of people over there will want to know." His eyes wandered outside.

Mior responded with a single, solemn nod.

'Course, if Trede is around somewhere, it's possible Wellborne is too. And the whole Outcast army, for that matter. They all disappeared in the same light. The Cytechs will need to know right away. As for now, seems like it's a decent possibility. Ah... Who am I kidding? With my luck, it's as probable as tomorrow's sunrise.

Despite what omen Brek's sickness might portend, Langhorne spent the rest of the day preparing for his trip south to the Wastes. He left instructions with Hildegras to

keep an eye out for anything relating to Trede or Wellborne and went home for an early night's rest. After sunrise, he met Jaxet at the south end of town and they began the long walk south over the red, rusty Scorch. They both carried large packs of water, food and provisions. They spoke little, except about the pathfinding at hand.

Eventually, on the next morning, conversation picked up. They had camped in the empty meeting hall in the center of Mez, the same town razed by Outcasts months back. It was the same building in which he found Hil tied up. *Feels a lot longer ago*, thought Langhorne.

"I've never been south of Mez. Not this way," said Jaxet. She was taking some jerky and dried fruits out of her pack for a simple breakfast. "What's it like?"

"There's a reason they call it the Wastes," was all Langhorne could think to say for a moment. It was the most dangerous place on the planet, and yet he was taking his eighteen-year-old daughter right into the middle of it. "The one time I went *inside*... I was unconscious. Then after that, blindfolded. Can't say I know much about it."

"Is it really as foggy as they say?"

"I've seen it from the outside," said Langhorne. "There's a mist that surrounds the wastes. Year-round. When the weather's bad, the mist goes out further. You can almost see it from here in Mez."

Jaxet paused in thought, then resumed her meal.

"The way stories go, the Wastes are ten times more broken up than even the worst parts of the Scorch. We'll have to take it slow. The mist makes it hard to see."

"Good thing for you, I brought some blank grid paper," she nudged her pack on the floor with her foot. "I plan on being the first to map the Wastes." She grinned proudly.

Langhorne chuckled. "That'll be a claim to fame, no doubt. But I can't see anyone needing a map to the worst cesspool around."

"Well... Somebody will," she said, playing up a facetiously defeated tone.

Langhorne didn't let on, but her initiative impressed him. "Just so long as you keep your head up. Not even the best map will get you out of a half-mile deep crevasse."

Jaxet laughed. "You haven't even seen my map yet!"

Langhorne groaned in jest and rolled his eyes. Soon they set off for the day in high spirits.

The next morning, they found themselves on the far south of Mez. A wide, grey wall of mist stretched out before them.

Jaxet, who had been more energetic the night before, was now at a loss for words.

"High alert from here on out," said Langhorne, standing solid with arms folded. "I doubt they have Outcasts patrolling the Wastes these days, but we can't be too careful. Remember, the terrain will be the most dangerous part. And if you start coughing, back up. Don't hesitate, don't say anything, just back up until you can breathe easier."

"Yeah..." Jaxet groped at the wall of mist, still listening, but obviously caught up at the sight of it.

"And always watch your footing," added Langhorne.

"Ok, ok!" Jaxet snapped to the side to give her father a look. "It's dangerous. I get it. Let's just... get on with it. All right..." Her voice trailed off as she took a few hesitant steps into the mist.

Langhorne followed behind.

They traveled in quiet. Visibility was a dozen feet at best. *And this is still the outskirts.* Langhorne suspected that the fog would get thicker the further in they went. The ground was similar to the Scorch, but after a while, it changed.

"Is the ground getting... more gravelly?" Jaxet asked while crouching down with a hand on the ground.

"Would appear so—" Langhorne's foot slipped on the loose stone and he slid forward down an incline. The mist was thicker at ground level; he'd just missed a shallow pit. He kicked the ground to feel it out. "There's a big hole here, not too deep but easy to roll your ankle."

"And if there's one, there's probably more," said Jaxet, squinting through the mist.

My thoughts exactly. "How's that map coming?"

Jaxet sat down for half a minute and sketched a few lines. "Very small rocks.

Big hole in the ground. Got it. I think it's coming along nicely."

Langhorne caught her facetious tone and half smiled. He had too much on his mind to fully appreciate the jape.

They gathered at the far end of the gravelly pit and surveyed as much as the fog allowed. Langhorne considered a few paths forward. Beyond the first dozen steps, it was impossible to tell what the landscape might hold. He sniffed a musty tang in the air, felt the wind and, finally, wished for luck. "I guess it's this way."

Jaxet raised her blond eyebrows high. "Ok... If you're sure. What do you think is down this way?"

"You know, Jaxet?" said Langhorne. "I have absolutely no idea."

A pair of cautious footsteps sounded in the mists, forging a path into the unknown.

Chapter 10

Oudrine

A burst of light flooded Oudrine's bedroom at the Haven.

"Good morning," Celeste said, just above a whisper.

After just a few seconds of consciousness, Oudrine already felt a deep pang in her soul. Her chest heaved and eyes watered. *Why are the worst memories... the worst pains always so quick to return?* She wondered.

Celeste came and sat on the edge of the bed. She fixed her gaze out the window, her hands folded in her lap. "I thought we'd spend the day together."

Oudrine couldn't bear to move. She laid with her back against the window, the warm covers still pulled up to her chin. Her limbs felt weak; her mind, scattered. The once indomitable willpower she carried was now only a memory. For days and weeks she'd made little progress in her recovery. Despite her deep wounds, the lack of progress stung. She didn't have the heart to tell her mentor she didn't feel up for *cheering up* today. She didn't have to.

Celeste sat, waiting at the bedside. A few times Celeste rose and pattered around the room, always returning to her quiet seat at the bed's corner.

Somehow Celeste's lack of activity was just distracting enough to ground Oudrine's mind in the present. She swallowed, her throat dry and scratchy. "I think I'm hungry," she said. "And thirsty."

Celeste turned, a twinkle in her crow-footed eyes. "Let's get you up, then."

Later, Oudrine found herself in the dining room. Jonas and Drayle were there, sipping a mid-morning coffee and engaged in conversation. She sat at the opposite end of the table from them, listening. She expected to be addressed, to be forced to engage in basic pleasantries at the very least. But the two continued their conversation about elusive mystic knowledge. Somehow that made her feel like more of a person. Perhaps being ignored drew less attention to her grief. Whatever the reason, she was content to listen and eat the simple meal of cut fruits and bread Celeste had brought.

"Wasn't it the great Antiphony of house Cyprian who first penned the words, 'Tis

truly human to choose the path. But it's for the mystic to uncover hidden paths.'" Drayle had an impressive knowledge of mystic history.

"Hidden paths are difficult ones," added Jonas. "No one ever claimed studying the mystics arts led to an easier life."

"No," said Drayle, his subdued expression betraying a wealth of unspoken memory. "That is true."

Oudrine knew of Drayle's years imprisoned at Tiberiak Manor, if only in summary. He'd been warded off from the world, forced to study his fellow mystics. Their ancient ways, the limits of their power and more. Oudrine wasn't sure if her Strength of Mind was picking up on this, or if it was just obvious on Drayle's face. She didn't dare reflect on it any more than that. The idea of choosing to wield her Fire felt insurmountable.

After another minute of listening, Celeste returned to the room and sat across from Oudrine. Her long, wavy, blond locks were pulled up. She had dressed in long, flowing sleeves of a light material. "Spring's just arrived," she said. "I thought we'd take a walk through the markets today. Maybe see the gardens?"

Could it be spring already? Oudrine wondered. *Has it really been months since...*

Celeste was quick to avoid Oudrine's thoughts from going too far. "I've picked out a couple things for you to wear. They're laid out in your room. The breeze is still cool, but it's been much warmer lately."

"Oh— Ok," was all Oudrine could reply. In a daze, she went upstairs, dressed in a light blue blouse, and walked towards the front door as if by automatic. She noticed a tan shawl by the door and grabbed it.

"Good, you're ready." Celeste was waiting by the thick double doors that led to the broad stone porch. They set out together, walking the cobblestones in quiet.

It was a lot to take in. Oudrine felt dizzy as the bright sunlight and noise of other passersby invaded her senses. At several points, she nearly collapsed, overcome with more stimulation than she'd had in months. Until the gardens came into view. *The greens... So many colors.* The beauty of spring blossoms blocked out all other distractions. Oudrine's pace increased until she stood in front of a striking hibiscus bush. She reached out and touched a green leaf; its gentle edge grazed her hand. An odd sensation occurred. She felt a tension across her face. She lay a few graceful fingers on her cheek. *My face wants to smile.* It was a bizarre epiphany. Then she realized she hadn't smiled since *before*. She snapped her gaze over to Celeste, who was nearby and also admiring the same hibiscus.

Oudrine gave her a worried look with no words. Her thoughts could be summarized as, *should I be allowed to smile? Is that all right?* Part of her hated the idea. To smile would betray her grief. Belittle her loss.

She looked back at the plant. She touched the edge of the pink petals. A worried crease grew across her brow, lips pursed.

"It's ok," said Celeste, eyes bright and encouraging. "You can let it out."

"It's a *beautiful flower*." It came out in a cracked, muted sob. She felt foolish but couldn't be bothered to look around and see if anyone noticed. "It's really beautiful." The spoken words broke her icy visage. The tension in her cheeks burned as a small smile grew. She looked over the whole plant and opened her palms, touching multiple flowers. Her eyes darted from petal to petal as she absorbed the dynamic color.

"Yes, Oudrine. It really is. It's a sign of Spring and new life. There's some beauty left in the world." She rubbed Oudrine's arm with one hand.

Feeling awake for the first time in ages, Oudrine wrapped her arms around Celeste. She thought she might lose herself to tears, but not so. She took deep breaths. And for a moment was invigorated by a small appreciation for life itself.

Oudrine took her mentor's arm in hers. They wended the gardens together, stopping at each tree, bush and plant. Oudrine drank in the colors and aromas and fed her soul with the new spring life. She did not know how long they'd spent; she didn't care. She was caught up in natural beauty, and for a time, left all her pains behind.

Eventually, they rounded the entire garden. Oudrine faced the same hibiscus where they began.

Celeste spoke in a gentle voice. "Oudrine. I think it's time for us all to meditate together. I think you're ready for your Fire to mend. Or at least begin to."

Oudrine's breath became trapped in her throat. Her shoulders tensed. The idea of reaching into that place where her Inner Fire dwelt frightened her. The pain she'd endured the last time nearly ended her on the battlefield outside Sedenza.

"We'll be with you, of course. And support you, take things slow. We think it would help your recovery. It will help your mind... and your heart. Jonas and Drayle agree, though they wouldn't dare say it. You could draw strength from this."

The world spun around Oudrine's open eyes. Panic and memory gripped her like an iron vice. She staggered a step back; Celeste was there to steady her.

"Only as far as you're willing to go. It's your decision," said Celeste, then was silent.

They walked the cobblestones on the return to the Haven. *Home. It looks different now. Could this place also miss him?* Oudrine's thoughts wandered as the building grew closer. She lingered after placing one foot on the lowest, broad stone step. It was hard for her to discern her thoughts. Her Fire, mind and heart had all been ravaged. *Still, I smiled today. I felt something today. Maybe they are right. Maybe this hurt will never go away. But...* She decided. "Celeste... I think I'd like to try."

"Ok," was all she replied. They walked inside together.

It was evening when the remaining mystics of the Haven convened in the large library. A reddish hue lingered far out on the Scorch's horizon. The last of daylight hung on by a thread. Oudrine's resolve had a similar waning strength. She felt as if she were at the ridge of a great waterfall. The river churned violently in front of her and poured over the edge into an unknown oblivion. Despite being in a familiar setting with those she trusted, she froze in fear. She sat on a thin pillow, a window behind her glowing red, her breath stilted and uneven. *I've never been this nervous to release my Fire. Not even my first day at the Haven with Celeste as my guide.*

Oudrine's eyes snapped open. She glanced around the room and found her mentors, Celeste and Jonas, and their new friend Drayle. Yaladra was noticeably absent. Each of the other three mystics were sitting comfortably, absorbing some quiet in rest before attempting the mystic arts.

Jonas was the first to speak. "Thank you, Oudrine. For letting us be a part of this." His normally deep, jovial tone was gentle, exuding peace into the air.

"As always, if I can be of any help, I will try," added Drayle. He was several years younger than Jonas but still had a fair amount of grey creeping in above the ears.

After a brief quiet, Celeste spoke. "This is the first step of many. Let's keep things shallow for the beginning."

Oudrine swallowed hard and nodded. She hated herself for being so timid, so broken and afraid. She was a master of her art and now panicked at mere thoughts. Her eyes closed.

For several long moments, Oudrine felt nothing. She perceived nothing special,

nothing mystical.

“We’ll hold our Fires alongside you,” said Jonas. Then silence.

Oudrine focused on her controlled breathing. More time passed. She got the faintest hint of a sensation.

“Good,” said Celeste. “Stay in that place.”

A burning weight settled on Oudrine’s chest. It was a dark pressure; a discomforting and unwanted sensation. Her understanding of it slowly grew. It was like an invisible blade in her flesh. But her flesh would not let the weapon go. *Not in my flesh... in my Fire. My very essence.*

She stayed in the painful place, feeling the invasive weapon stuck inside a wound that would not let it go. Nearby, Jonas hummed something she couldn’t make out. Drayle vocalized an affirmation. Soon she felt the warmth of three other mystics lingering on all sides. Over what felt like an hour, the wound around the invisible blade loosened. More time passed; the blade was finally removed inch by inch. Upon leaving her body, her senses discerned no further sign of it.

Eyes still closed, Oudrine doubled over in pain. No one else moved. She cried out, agony, hatred, terror and despair. Then silence. Oudrine lost track of her physical body. She found herself in the void. A mystical construct only achieved through great focus and combined mystical ability.

She stood alone in front of a single object. An imposing door over a hundred feet high filled her eyes. She fell to her knees. The door was impossibly large; it overcame her senses. Its deep color, detailed knots and grooves, ornate ironwork around the hinges and lock were too much to consider at once. Exhaustion set in. Only the strength and glowing warmth of three other mystic Fires kept her affixed in this mystic void.

More time passed. Oudrine, or at least the projection of herself, looked upon the door again. It had shrunk slightly, though still taller than nearly any building in Sedenza.

A voice arose in her thoughts, a combination of the three guiding mystics. “Remember your strength.” The same words echoed in her thoughts.

In the vision, Oudrine’s back straightened. In the physical world, the same happened. She felt a slow heat build along her spine. Then finally in her belly.

She considered the door again. Though identical in every detail, it was nearly normal size. *Or have I grown?* In the empty void, it was difficult to tell.

Something urged her to stand. Before she knew it, she was on her feet and her hand on the black, polished handle. She knew she must open it. Something held her back. *I'm so weak.* She lilted to one side.

The trio of voices returned in perfect unison. "Remember your strength."

Oudrine straightened her shoulders, exhaled briskly through her nose. She turned the handle of the door and faltered. Before collapsing entirely, a pair of strong arms grabbed her.

"We're here to catch you. Should you fall." It was Jonas. And just as soon as he appeared in the void, he was gone like dry leaves caught in the wind.

"Remember your strength," came the familiar echo.

Oudrine set to try the door again. She turned the knob by half. Nothing happened. She tried pulling on the door and reeled backwards, just barely keeping her feet. She felt the task was impossible. For a brief second, her cloudy mind comprehended what the door actually was. She fixed her stance and stared at the door.

"Remember your strength."

She reached out her hand, still steps away from the door. Moving at an imperceptibly slow speed, the door cracked open. The faintest hint of a dim light came from inside. Oudrine inhaled with a gasp and the void disappeared from her mind. Silence ensued.

"Your Fire is opened to you," said Celeste with an empty, breathy voice, as if she daren't break the quiet.

She's right. Something has changed. Oudrine gathered her thoughts. A familiar warmth coursed through her body. It felt good. It felt *right*. Immediately, she wondered how she had lived without it for so many months. Her eyes gradually opened; she saw the world anew. The library she was in was full of books that had shaped her history. She'd spent countless hours of study here. Her mystic companions looked back at her with earnest expressions.

"Hello. My friends," said Oudrine, almost surprised at the sound of her own voice. Some of her warmth had returned. A hopeful sound of a small, bubbling brook intoned her words.

Celeste gasped and covered her mouth with a hand.

"Hello, Oudrine," said Jonas with a mist in his eyes. "How fare you?"

Oudrine made a forlorn smile. "I will heal. In time," she said. "I feel as if I've awakened after a very long sleep."

Drayle picked up his hands together and shook them with praise. "Good. Good! You have a remarkable Fire, Oudrine."

After a moment's pause, Oudrine faltered to one side, catching herself with a hand on the floor. "Please don't think me rude. I think I will retire for the night."

"Of course," the others said almost in unison. Jonas rose to offer Oudrine a hand.

Oudrine stood for a moment in the warm satisfaction that only comes from being with people you love and trust. She soaked it into her very bones. "Thank you all. Good night."

Oudrine left the library but didn't go to her bedroom as the others thought. She went underground, down into the catacombs. She had the strength for a few more words that night. Even if not for living ears. She came upon her husband's tomb. The Palifax lantern's light still glowed a dim red, like the setting sun earlier that night.

"Still your fire burns," she said to the empty tomb. Cautiously, she raised a hand near the stone sarcophagus. Her fingertips grazed it; she found it cold. *Of course it's cold*, she chastised her own thoughts. *Everything is cold down here*. Even the fading light of the Palifax felt cold here.

Before speaking again, she waited a long moment. She went down there with full intent to speak, to say the things she felt necessary, but she couldn't yet. Her hand on the stone, she waited. Some time passed.

"Maej..." she started slowly before the words came pouring out. "You are a part of me. My story and yours will be paired forever. But if I have to take these next steps alone, I will. Somehow, I will. I would draw strength from your hand if I could. Even... I would have stood with you at the end if I could... and made your fate my own. But here I am. Left behind. I take your memory with me in my heart, forever. Your Fire and life continue to burn with me. I love you. Always."

Oudrine lowered her hand from the cold stone, her fingers numb from having their warmth sapped away. She rubbed her thumb and fingers together to return the feeling.

She stepped back, remembering the vows they shared on their wedding day. Words written and rewritten by tradition since ages past and before the world had burned. "I love you as the fire is lit. As it burns. And as it gives way to only smoke, I still love you."

As she turned to leave, a spark flew out of the Palifax's light, then the dim red light settled again. This gave her pause. She watched for a moment, then nodded to herself, accepting the fate that Maej was truly gone. She turned and left the tomb; her awakened mind awash in memory and grief.

Chapter 11

Yaladra

EARLIER that same evening, Yaladra found herself on the city streets. It was time for another evening of eaves-dropping and hoping she got lucky. Any morsel of information would be a vast improvement.

She'd spent the final weeks of winter hunting down any possible Merkant tie that might lead her to Tiberiak. She'd cornered a few officers, asked nicely, and not so nicely, but one way or the other, all attempts came up empty. She even tried finding Janice again, under a purely social pretense. There wasn't a trace of her. Yaladra had heard from Nandiel that Janice stopped coming to the textile house altogether. At first, Yaladra considered perhaps Janice had been ill, or traveling abroad, but it'd been far too long.

Janice was replaced. For what? For hearing someone say the name Tiberiak? It left a unsettling feeling in Yaladra's gut. She hoped nothing untoward had befallen Janice but that fate was out of her hands. *Just another reminder that no one is safe while Tiberiak is around.*

She set to work. An odd side affect of spending so much time around Merkants and trying to look inconspicuous was, she was a very believable fake shopper. She'd thumb the edges of fabric, rap her knuckles on ripe fruit and leaned in for a whiff of exotic cheeses imported from the outskirts. All the while, her mind was completely elsewhere. Her ears strained to pick up pieces of conversation from shoppers, traders and Merkants alike. She watched out of the corner of her eye anytime someone came behind a shop's stall, assuming some deal or transaction was transpiring. If she caught sense of anything remotely suspicious, she'd move in closer. But that was *if* she heard anything suspicious. That task alone alone was daunting bordering on impossible. The Sedenza markets were huge. She could spend a full day there and barely make the rounds to each shop and open-air stand. That's often what she did. *Hopefully tonight is different.*

After an hour of her usual sniffing around, Yaladra came across some commotion.

From inside a growing crowd, someone was asking, "Some big announcement?"

"Word is the Merkants have some big news," another voice answered. A few dozen people had gathered on the west end of the markets. A pair of open-air shops had been cleared out and made into a makeshift stage.

A growing buzz filled the crowd, people of various age were all curiously waiting. Word must have spread throughout the city as Yaladra found herself cramped, jammed shoulder-to-shoulder with the swelling populace. Within fifteen minutes there were more than five hundred throng packed in front of the small stage. A few high-collared Merkant officials were milling about the stage. *Something's about to start.* Yaladra replayed what she knew in her mind, trying to prepare for what news the Merkants might have. *The Merkants have been shifting lately. And fielding complaints about the Cytechs... Then Janice vanished the day I asked her about Tiberiak. Is this what they've been working towards? What's their move?*

Another few minutes passed. *If one more shoulder hits me...* Yaladra disliked being trapped in the middle of so many people. *But this is exactly where I need to be.* She kept her eyes sharp and noticed two oddly dressed people on opposite sides of the stage. *Some hired muscle?* A dark-skinned man wrapped up in a deep blue sash was on the right. A tall woman with short dark brown hair was on the right. Both had the same dispassionate gaze. They stared unflinchingly into the crowd.

After some time, a woman Merkant official sounded off from the stage holding a brass bullhorn. She was maybe middle-aged, but her long, braided hair was completely snow-white.

"Citizens! The Merkants have an important announcement. Please stand by."

Laurel—! Yaladra flushed hot. This was the same woman she'd met in Briar and chased all the way to Smisom the previous autumn. This woman had a direct connection to *Tiberiak*, although she hadn't had enough proof to satisfy the local Smisom Marshals of it. *Still, if she's here...* Yaladra's fists clenched, her vision locked onto the woman. She was suddenly unaware of the crowd around her. *She's right there. Chatting with those other Merkants. If I can get my hands on her again, it'll lead me straight to Tiberiak.*

The white-haired woman raised a hand at the crowd. She was flanked by her fellow Merkants making similar gestures.

"Many of you have voiced concerns over recent events," Laurel began. "The great Storm that threatened our city, and the armed conflict that arose and shook our very understanding of the world."

A number of malcontent grumbles and shouts spread over the crowd.

Laurel quelled them with open palms and a validating look of understanding. “Before then, Sedenza has always been a peaceful place. One built on commerce, progress and improving the livelihood of all. The guilds and private benefactors have always taken care of us. Always seen to the safety of our streets. But the events surrounding the Storm have shown us this is not sufficient. We deserve to feel safe against threats small and large. But what can we, the guilds, do to provide that kind of support?”

A few shouts rang out in anger or desperation. More than one person demanded they seat a new active mayor.

“Sedenza has had a mayor from time to time, someone to oversee, but mostly to be the face of the city. Not to guide and nurture the grand society we humans have built. No, the needs of our people demand more than mayor. That’s why we at the Merkant council have unanimously approved this nomination. Today we install a great and learned man into the office of Regional Governor of the Central Plains. Ladies and gentlemen I give you Fossvalor Tiberiak.” She bowed aside and raised a hand to a man standing at the back of the stage. A well-dressed man in a navy waistcoat with golden buttons and embroidery took center stage.

It’s him... Yaladra stared, lost in time. Her feet felt unanchored, lost and kicking in some endless void. The feelings of hopelessness and fear she’d battled for years stood in human form. She’d fought for years to try and get face to face with this man, fulling planning on ending his life. For the moment, she was lost in shock, unable to move.

“Gentlemen, ladies,” Tiberiak began after taking hold of the brass megaphone. “One hundred-fifty years ago our fair city was nothing more than a tilted shack next to a shallow well. Not so, anymore. It’s only by the vigor and determination of people, like you all, that Sedenza has grown to its majestic status today.” His tone oozed genuine emotion. His words were well-chosen and polished, the cadence: perfect. After only a few lines, he had the crowds full and undivided attention, Yaladra included, though for a different reasons. Her fists tightened as her fingertips dug into her palms.

“I’m proud of this city, as I’m proud of you all.”

A few quiet cheers and affirmations rose from the bystanders.

“But I’m here, not to reflect on the good times, no. These are dangerous days we live in. The beginning of a tumultuous, changing age. We cannot leave so much to chance any longer. Imagine, if someone had dared to stand up to the

Outcasts *before* they led their charge on our city?"

This garnered a handful of angry shouts in response.

"But we did not. We, as a people, failed in that regard." He paused to look forlorn. If Yaladra wasn't filled with so much hatred for the man, she'd have sucked right in.

"I'm here to say, we need not make such mistakes again. We have the resources. We have the man power. We have the ability! The world does not need to allow such threats to exist! So why don't we do something about it?" He paused to glance the crowd. "Folks, I'm asking you? Why not?" The break in formal language was met with a winning smile, no doubt one he'd practiced for hours. It was a wholesome toothy smile, visible easily even by those in the back.

Dozens of shouted retorts came in reply. This went on for several seconds until silver-tongued Tiberiak quieted the crowd again.

"Good people of Sedenza. Here is my pledge to you, tonight. In a world full of anarchists, I'm a statist. I will go against the grain because I believe in order. Not chaos. I believe in safety and boundless opportunity for us all. Not fear and war. And I believe if we organize the power and resources of the guilds, there isn't anything that can stop us." His voice crescendoed. "So I'm here, on behalf of the Merkants, to say we are taking a stand. In the coming weeks and months, you'll start to see some real changes. Things may look different or strange for a time, but take it from me," he paused again placing his fingertips on his heart, his face exuding empathy. "As long Tiberiak is around, you'll have a voice among the highest ranks of the guilds. Let me tell you, real change is coming. I *promise* you that." He finished, eyes glimmering, with a single nod. "So be strong. Keep the order, and look forward to a grand future. For all of us. Thank you. And good night."

As soon as Tiberiak finished talking, he stepped back, bowed, and turned to leave. The crowd roared to life, milling about and turning to one another to exclaim their reaction to the news. Some onlookers approached the stage but were met with a throng of high ranking Merkant officers, and the two strange body guards on opposite ends.

Yaladra snapped to and forced her way through the throng. She stepped on a few feet and bumped a few shoulders. *No time to be nice*. Every precious second was another chance *Tiberiak* might get away. As she approached the edge of the stage, it was empty save a handful of Merkants. *Not the ones I want*. Yaladra bolted up onto the stage and jumped off the backside. She heard raised voices behind and ignored them. There was a narrow alleyway leaving the marketplace.

A small entourage of people filed through it, two by two. *There!* The fact that Tiberiak and Laurel were right there, just feet away, sent her heart racing up into her throat. *Never been so close. Never been— Wait.*

The final two people entering the alley stopped and turned; they stared Yaladra down.

The eyes of the woman with sharp, brown hair flashed a bright magenta. “Looks like a runner. You got this one?”

The man in the blue sash stepped forward. “Easy,” he spoke with an unfamiliar accent.

Before Yaladra could think of an incantation to speak, a sharp twang bled through her muscles like acid. Her arms and legs stiffened causing her to halt in place. She doubled over and barely kept herself from falling. Her hand skimmed over the cobblestones rubbing it raw. *They’re both mystics...* With gritted teeth, she fought to stand. *How is he doing this?* It was unlike any mystic power she’d encountered before. Still several feet away, she tried the only spell she could think of. She began to say, “Hidden from your eyes” but a second wave of pain shocked her every muscle. The words caught in her throat; she gasped for breath. Her every defense down, she looked towards the alleyway again and braced for the worst.

The man in the blue sash stood there, arms folded. He scratched the back of his head while pursing his lips in disgust.

“Let’s go!” called the other mystic woman already twenty steps away.

Without speaking, he spat, turned, and left.

Every inch of Yaladra’s being, ever iota of Fire in her wanted to sprint down the alley and get her hands on Tiberiak. As she rose, she stifled a cry of pain. *The more I move... the more it hurts.* Over the course of minutes, Yaladra sat down on the ground and slowly, painfully, inched her way back to the stage where she could rest against it.

Her eyes burned as she stared at the alley. *They were right there. Right there, and I lost them.* The agony of failure and regret hurt immeasurably more than her physical pain. Hidden from sight, she lingered there behind a market stall for hours, unable to move. She tried testing her Fire to see if she could remove the hex but to no avail. *I’ve never seen a mystic like that before. What did he do to me?*

The night drew on. She waited until the cramps in her limbs died down and

limped home to the Haven. All the way, her only thought was, *was this it? Has Tiberiak won?*

Chapter 12

Langhorne

"BACK! Get back!" Langhorne stumbled over a crag in the mist, his chest heaving with a hard cough. His throat and eyes burned. He took twenty paces back in the opposite direction waving his arms frantically to get Jaxet to follow. He collapsed on the ground and took a few clean breaths. He looked at the sky, thankful to be alive. *But I'm starting to wonder why they hell I came all the way out of here.*

Jaxet plopped down next to him on a large, flat, smooth stone. "Another acid pool?"

"A small field of them. That makes three. You might want to put that... on the map." He spoke between rasping breaths.

"Very funny." All the same, Jaxet took out her map and marked things out as clearly as possible. After a minute, she spoke again. "You ok to go?"

Feeling flushed, Langhorne ran a hand over his blond beard. "Still breathing." He cleared his throat a few times and shook his head, still in disbelief. "Of all the stupid things I've done... This is shaping up to be the big one."

Jaxet chuckled. "Well, your attitude checks out. You'll be fine. C'mon, dad." She stood and offered him hand. Within a moment, they were winding their way through the misty wastes once again.

The way forward continued much the same. They'd find narrow paths between boulders, fissures and ravines, sometimes they'd get blocked and have to trace their steps back. Luckily, however, they'd had their last run in with the deathly acid pools, even though an acrid smell was often in the air.

It was two hours past nightfall when the terrain finally evened out. The smooth ground under their feet unnerved Langhorne until he realized why. He crouched and ran his hand over flat stone. "I've felt this before." His voice was deep with memory.

"This smooth rock?" Jaxet asked. "My feet sure don't mind it. Makes walking easier, for sure." She lifted one leg and rolled her ankle around. "Almost sprained an ankle ten times on the way here."

"We're close," said Langhorne. He stood and surveyed what little he could in the mists. "This kind of broad, flat, stone terrain... I felt it under my feet when I was blindfolded." He paused with a squint as his strategic mind whirled to action. "I don't know how big this stone plain is, but it can't go on forever. We've got to be at least halfway into the Wastes now. And the fact that we're this close, and don't hear anything yet is good news." He remembered the hordes of war machines the Outcasts brought to Sedenza before winter. Preparation for another large-scale war definitely wasn't quiet. "Makes me hope no one is home." He took another step forward in the mist.

Jaxet followed. "It's... a good sign. At least." A sliver of nerves was in her voice and posture.

"Next best thing, though," Langhorne spoke as he waved his hand out in front of him chasing away a thick plume of fog. "There's not enough of them left here to make a racket."

"Here's hoping." Jaxet nodded and paused before getting her rifle off her back. "But I'd like to be ready all the same."

Langhorne chuckled once deep in the back of his throat. "No problem with that." *No problem at all.*

It was another several minutes before the scenery changed. Langhorne saw a fuzzy, grey rectangle a few hundred yards to the southeast. *Some kind of building...* He motioned for quiet as they approached. Once they grew close enough, they could see it was abandoned. Three stories tall, it was mostly made of a similar looking smooth stone, though portions of the structure was patched with wood.

"Nobody home?" Jaxet whispered while looking down the scope of her rifle.

"Doesn't look like it." Langhorne walked up to the front door and twisted the knob. "Locked. Whoever left was planning on coming back."

Jaxet's eyes furrowed. "Do you think Outcasts lived here? The ones we fought in Sedenza?"

"As good a guess as any." Langhorne considered breaking in for a moment. He eyed the building and squinted through the mist, trying to remember.

"Dad?"

Langhorne snapped to. "This isn't the place. Let's keep moving."

Jaxet followed in behind. "You said the place— The Trust place, it was big on

the inside, yeah?"

"That one's probably a barracks." He nodded back towards where they came. "The place we want is bigger. Multiple buildings. Let's keep heading east." He motioned forward.

After another thirty minutes of quiet walking, a hazy silhouette became visible on the horizon. Langhorne surveilled the area, and chose a path that kept them concealed behind a ridge. Or at least he thought it was a ridge. As they reached the low point and began to climb, he could see up close it was a huge mound of rubble. Cut stone and long cords of metal piled up more than fifty feet. He tested his feet under him to ensure it was stable to climb. He gestured for Jaxet to follow.

Her eyes flashed open wide at the site of all the debris. *"What happened here? What did all this?"* she whispered.

"Damned if I know. But this place is old." He looked around in the eerie quiet blanketed by unending mist. "Real old." Down between his feet he saw fractured relics, pieces of people's lives lost to history. A shattered glass window. A bleached and shredded tapestry. All of it was a bleak memento of a fallen society.

"This is a lost city," Jaxet continued whispering in awe. *"The Outcast live in one of the lost cities? Like those towers out in the Scorch? Everyone says those places are poisoned... or haunted. Or worse."*

"People say a lot of things," said Langhorne, his own voice staying low. "Never much cared for historical conjecture. Too much to focus on today that worry about the past." He fanned out his arms to stay balanced as he climbed the uneven rubble. He was never one to let himself be distracted from an important matter at hand. Despite his daughter's interest.

"Still though..." Jaxet continued with a sense of quiet wonder in her voice. Her blue eyes drank in the obscured scenery with every cautious step.

They reached the ridge of the detritus hill. In unison and without speaking, they both laid out on their bellies with rifles drawn. Langhorne took out his Cytech-gifted binoculars. They watched and waited.

After a minute of quiet, Jaxet started again. "Can you see anything?"

Langhorne handed over the binoculars. "Take a look. It's real quiet over there. Got a look at somebody walking between doors. They went straight ahead, didn't even look around." It made sense. Way out in the Wastes, there was practically zero chance of someone sneaking up on them. Until today.

"I don't see anyone," said Jaxet. She scanned the range of land visible to them.

A few broad, rectangular shadows reached up into the wall of mist. Taller, even more obscured structures, could be seen further to their left. That way was darker, shadowed by the large, ruined buildings.

"No, they went inside. The coast is clear near as I can tell." Langhorne took a heavy breath while glancing around. "And this is definitely the place. Looks right. Feels right." It was good news so far, no details of armed guards. There were no amassing troops or fighting forces of any kind. However, the near-emptiness and eerie quiet of it all set him ill at ease. Upon seeing that the outside of the Trust was barren, a cold realization came in. "We have to go inside."

"What?!" Jaxet dropped the binoculars and stared at her father with brow furrowed.

"Nothing to see out here. If we're going to learn anything, we have to go in." Langhorne stood to leave, dusting himself in the process.

Jaxet rose. "Inside? Inside *there*?" She pointed down the hill. "Dad, c'mon! Weren't you the one that taught me never to throw rocks at a hive?"

Langhorne made a flat smile. *The girl has sense.* He was proud in a way. *But we came all the way down here to see what's left of the Outcasts. I don't expect we'll see much unless we get closer. Maybe a lot closer.* He drew in breath to speak but didn't take his eyes off the buildings he'd come to know as the Trust. "We won't go any closer than we have to. But we're heading down that way, yes. Stay low, stay quiet." He tightened his left hand around his rifle and descended the hill.

Jaxet lingered a moment then followed in behind.

Langhorne pointed to a small rise in the debris. It was a good cover and a halfway point to the door he'd seen someone enter. Once there, he knelt and took out the binoculars again. To either side of him was a vast field of broken stone and rubble. It extended far off and faded away into the mists on both sides, making it seem like it went on forever. Straight ahead was a broad, flat road made of bleached, light grey stone, or so it seemed. It lined the frontside of a string of tall buildings, overshadowed only by the taller, dark, ominous towers further east. He could plainly see the door where the single Trust member had entered. Something then tickled his memory. He leaned left to speak to Jaxet in a hushed voice. "I bet that's the main building. The one they gave me a room in for a while." Gave wasn't the best word given that he was locked up against his will, but he glossed over certain details for brevity. "So that means, further down." He looked down the western street where a shorter building stood. "I think that's where I spoke to Rott. If I recall, the building has a few sub-basements. I heard machines there,

metallic noises. Construction... If there's much brewing around here, something tells me *that's* their workshop. That's where the action'll be."

Jaxet's head bobbed in agreement. She stood and took a tentative step.

Langhorne's hand snapped out and pulled her back down into the rubble and dust with a quiet thud. Heat flashed down Langhorne's back; all his senses heightened. He put a hand over his daughter's mouth as the front door of the Trust crashed open. Angry, raised voices filled the previously silent street. Langhorne caught Jaxet's eyes and gave her a fearful glare. *Don't say a word*, he thought. His sharp daughter received the silent message loud and clear.

The voices, though over a hundred paces off, could still be heard echoing around the vastly empty scene. "Did I not describe to you the importance? Did I not say we had mere days to set out? If anyone else gets to Wellborne before we do, THAT'S IT! It's over for us! No more Trust, no more you!"

Langhorne looked up just in time to see the bellicose man poke at someone's chest. He leaned back down to avoid being seen. He'd had just enough glimpse to recognize them. *Both of them...* He shook his head in dismay. "It's Rott, their leader. The bald one is Logistics."

Jaxet had heard all of Langhorne's story and recognized the names immediately. She gave a knowing, if still worried, look.

"Rott, I've told you. With the limited resources available, we're moving as fast as we can. Today's disembarkation just wasn't possible." The man named Logistics was still pleading his case as they continued walking west, towards the workshop.

"We are *heading up the coast* TOMORROW! No matter what. DO YOU HEAR ME?!" Rott's voice trailed off as they entered the building now more than two hundred paces from Langhorne's position.

Langhorne rested his back on the loose rocks behind him, careful not to get something lodged in his ribs. After the haunting quiet settled back in around them, he spoke. "You catch all that?"

Jaxet was still breathing heavy from the tense moment. Beads of sweat had formed around her temples. "He said *Wellborne*." A sense of shock rang in her words and posture. "Wellborne, the grey-skinned monster from..."

Langhorne had only to nod as Jaxet continued.

"But if he's still out there we're *all...*" The words caught in her throat.

That about sums it up. Langhorne rose. "Let's go."

"Go? Already? We just—"

"We got what we came for. We're going back north as fast as possible. Wellborne is alive out there somewhere, and last I checked, the only two mystics with a chance of handling him are gone. We're going to need as much time as we can to get ahead of Rott." He climbed back up the rubble-hill, straight back in the direction they came.

Jaxet followed a half-step behind. "We'll have to tell the Cytechs... They'll need to know!"

"Yep."

"And Yaladra and the other mystics... We're going to need—"

"Yep."

"We've gotta get Smisom on high alert!"

"That's about the size of it," said Langhorne taking long leaping strides down the backside of the hill. He was now much less worried about being seen. Speed was key now. They had to make it back to Smisom with haste.

Wellborne's alive. And the Outcasts have a beat on him. And here I thought we'd already been through the worst of it. Things are about to get real dirty.

Chapter 13

the Light

LOOKS like she slept well for a change. I'm glad.

Wish I could be there...

Feels like I'm holding back a tidal wave. I'm afraid of what might happen if I let go. I'll come see you when I can. Someday. I promise.

Cassidy

A bright Spring sun rose over the Mountainside Labs. The morning light cracked in thought the shades of Cassidy's room in the barracks. Lost in a blissful moment between sleep and waking, she felt content. Warm and satisfied from the inside out. She awoke with a smile on her face. The smile lasted all the way through the morning, in and out of an extra hot shower and while getting dressed. She garnered a few odd looks as she walked through the mess hall for a quick breakfast, and all the way to Lab One. She hardly noticed.

When Nandiel arrived shortly after, it became the topic of conversation. They did their normal check-in on various Lab One experiments before starting up on their primary projects.

"You look awfully happy today. What gives?" said Nandiel, a single blond eyebrow rose on the verge of teasing.

"Hah— What?" Cassidy shrugged with a single laugh escaping her.

"You're just... I haven't seen you this happy in a while. I mean, it's great, don't let me ruin it..." Nandiel waved a hand and looked back down at her checklist.

"I..." Cassidy reflected for a moment. She hadn't given it any thought. "Am

I... different today?" She absentmindedly touched her own cheeks.

Nandiel laughed. "Wow, you'd think it's the first time in your life, huh? Get a grip, girl."

Cassidy shrugged it off. Normally, that would have gotten a rise out of her. Not today. "I'm allowed to have a *good* day now and then." She pointed a haughty chin upwards in a facetious manner.

Nandiel grinned and shook her head. She changed the subject. "Project still coming along?"

Cassidy thought for a moment and her heart nearly skipped a beat. Not because this daunting, unprecedented task was getting the best of her, but because she was actually making progress. Structurally, Tenowon was looking better. The major parts of his frame that had broken were repaired. A good amount of the power supply connections had also been fixed. Every week through late winter it seemed she and Bors had another breakthrough. "Yes! Actually..." There was unexpected surprise in her voice. "We've been making great progress. Still a ways to go. I have *no idea* how to repair... skin. It's not even skin, you know what I mean."

Nandiel's face twisted in mild disgust. "I do. And I don't envy you." She deftly crossed off a few more items on her list.

"You guys are field-testing the chemcarts today, right?"

Nandiel's blue eyes went wide and she nodded emphatically.

Cassidy picked up on a bit of tension in the look. "Think it'll go all right?"

"Yeah, I'm sure. Frezerick says it's ready. Just a little nervous now that I think about it." She sighed. "Anyway, lots of prep work to do. See you at lunch?"

"Sure." Cassidy made a single nod.

Later, she was in her familiar surroundings. A work corner near the back of Lab One's main room. She and Bors had been working in a place with ample natural light, hoping that some of Tenowon's solar-receptive skin might produce enough power to activate him. It never did. Still, the light at least made things easier to work.

Bors knelt beside Cassidy as they both examined the damaged synthetic skin around the wound in Tenowon's knee. "Machines are one thing, but this..." He cursed under his breath as he ran his finger along the faux flesh. "We never did figure out the trick to this. It looks solid but you've seen the skin around his

shoulder morph and move. There's an element in his endoskeleton that causes the skin to react and reshape. Lucky for us, we never had to try and manufacture more — Errg." He grimaced and leaned to one side.

Cassidy jumped to attention. "You all right? Is it your knee again?" She helped him stumble back to his nearby chair.

He sat down with a thud, grunt and groan. "This damn leg. We should see about building me a replacement leg next." He ran his palm firmly down near his right knee.

Cassidy laughed. "That's actually not a bad idea!" She'd seen first hand how metal and actuators could make human-shaped appendages. The boundaries of what she thought possible with machines had grown by leagues.

"Hell, don't stop work on my account," said Bors still squinting with pain. He waved her on. "Go on, then."

Cassidy leaned in close to one of the flesh openings. This time near the face. She peered around and noticed a scorch mark on the cheek. "Can his skin burn?" she asked back over her shoulder.

"Can't say as we tried. Never dared to take a sample before."

Cassidy nodded. She rubbed at the scorch mark with her finger but nothing came off. She grabbed a thin, six-inch metal pick and scraped at the spot. To her surprise, tiny, black filings flaked off into her hand. She took them back to Bors who was sitting crooked in his chair, still nursing his leg. "What do you make of these?" She held up the filings.

Bors pinched a few filings in his fingers and gave them a rub, a sniff, then a very close look under the eyes. "Magnetite. It's been a while. I'm pretty sure."

Cassidy cocked her head to one side. "I wonder..." She dusted off her hands on the nearby counter, being sure to save the magnetite for later. Magnetic substances were always useful to a Cytech. She returned to the same spot and looked closer. She took the metal pick in hand and probed around the same area again. This time she jammed in under the skin and lifted. *Sure enough!* There were several groupings of the same metallic filings between the skin and endoskeleton. As she reached in with a bare hand to attempt to wipe the filings away, she said to Bors, "Do you think this metal could be affecting—" ZAP. Cassidy hit the floor like a dead weight.

When she came to, Bors was standing over her. He had a damp cloth in hand and was pressing it to her cheek. "What the hell happened?" he said,

seeming less concerned than he was confused.

Cassidy sat up and her right arm flinched. It was sore from the shoulder and her fingers were numb. "I—" She stammered, lost in the commotion. Her train of thought hadn't yet returned. She turned and looked back at Tenowon's inactive body. Something was different. Her left arm snapped up and grabbed Bors' hand. Her eyes went wide and her heart jumped into her throat. "Bors, look. Look!"

The two Cytechs, one a Junior rank, the other a retired legend, stared in awed silence. Tenowon's body hadn't moved. The gaping holes in his synthetic flesh hadn't disappeared. But something was different. Tenowon's eyelids were moving. Every few seconds, a slight flutter from Tenowon's in tact eyelids sent chills down Cassidy's spine. She wrapped her arms around Bors and squeezed.

"Did we... Did we do it?" She almost didn't dare to ask.

"I'll... be," said Bors in a deep, slow tone. "Damned." He stood, favoring his right knee, and leaned in close to Tenowon.

The eyelids kept twitching, slowly, softly. But steadily.

He turned. His eyes were wide open and watery. "Helluva good sign. Good job, kid. You just did the impossible." He stood back up straight, scratching at his thin white beard. "Must've restored connectivity to a backup cell. Not sure how much is left in there at this point but... Or is it—" He stormed off to a nearby counter and started leafing through old diagrams.

Cassidy, still lost in amazement, let her eyes wander over to him. "Which backup cell?" She'd become more familiar with the partial schematics Bors had helped Tenowon sketch years ago while doing other repairs. She knew there were a handful of backup power cells in different regions of the body. Some of them were small, for emergencies only and not able to power the entire android.

As Cassidy rose to get a closer look at Tenowon's first functioning actuator in months, a guard entered Lab One.

"Urgent news from the ground! Gragus needs you both immediately," the blue-garbed guard announced. He was a younger recruit and fresh faced. Cassidy didn't recognize him, meaning he likely joined recently.

Cassidy was incredulous "Are you kidding me?" She gestured back to Tenowon's still form.

The guard replied, "No, I'm not... not kidding, ma'am." The question seemed to throw him off. "It's top priority. Key members of the guild are gathering as we speak. We'll need to get on the cable carrier. Now... if we're to make it on

time. I've been told— Matters of the utmost importance. And all that. So if you —“ He gestured towards the door as his face twisted with a desperate wince. “Please?”

“Are you serious...” Bors muttered a few curses under his breath. “People always say these paper pushers are necessary to keep things running but...” He briskly gathered a few choice papers. “Here.” He jammed the papers in Cassidy’s hands. “We’ll review on the carrier.” He turned to leave saying, “Fine, *fine*, guardsmen. Here we come. Don’t wet your pants about it. I swear they get younger every year...” his voice trailed off as he exited the lab.

Cassidy took a step to follow and then stopped. Lingered, she looked back at Tenowon, his eyes still fluttering. She’d never felt so hopeful about her task until this moment. Now it was being ripped away. *It’s not like I have a choice... The guild calls.* With heavy steps, she left Lab One hoping she’d return as soon as possible. And that she wouldn’t lose what little progress she’d gained.

Riding down the mountainside in the cable carrier, Cassidy rode in virtual silence, save the occasional grunt or muttered curse from Bors. It was an uneventful ride except when she noticed her smile was gone. Whatever spring had been in her step all morning was now gone. It wasn’t that she minded going to ground level so much. She just had the feeling that things were getting out of hand again. Her thoughts wandered to some worst case scenarios. *Another attack on the city? Not likely, the Outcast army is gone... I hope Yaladra’s ok. Seems like Tiberiak could be making waves in the city. But how exactly?*

She distracted herself so thoroughly that when she came to, she and Bors had arrived at the large amphitheater room. The great room with dozens of rows of chairs climbed the sloping floor front to back. At the bottom, a long rounded stage built of stained wood contained three lecterns. Gragus stood to one side of the rightmost lectern. He was furiously polishing his round specs while talking to three other Cytech officials. Cassidy recognized them as people involved in the trade and commerce side of the guild’s business. One of them worked especially in the northeastern region, an aging woman with sun-baked skin named Jitheen.

As Cassidy walked the steps nearing the stage, Gragus broke off from his conversation and waved her over. “Cassidy, my girl! Ever the productive Cytech. Thank you for coming down on such late notice. And, Bors. Always an honor.” He bowed somewhat awkwardly to the legendary figure.

“Cut the crap, Gragus, we’re busy. Now what’s all this about?” The eighty-

something genius cleared his throat so loud Cassidy thought he might spit, but nothing happened. She recoiled for safety just in case.

“Yes, no time to lose at all. Let’s officially start this thing. Everyone? Everyone, the essential members are present. Let’s begin!”

All told, there were a few more than two dozen Cytechs in attendance. Some high-ranking officials were in attendance besides Jitheen. Also in attendance were some of the security staff including the portly Chief Inspector Gen and a few other senior inventors. Once everyone was sitting, Gragus began the informal address, standing in front of the stage rather than on it.

The *informal address* Cassidy quickly realized included a brief round of thank-yous and references to recent accomplishments in heightened security and breakthroughs in cutting-edge research from around the continent. With the informal formalities out of the way, Gragus got the crux of the matter.

“Friends and colleagues, there’s no easy way to say this. Wellborne, the grey creature of the Storm, has been found.”

That statement sucked the air right out of the room leaving everyone speechless. A few senior members nodded knowingly, no doubt having heard the news earlier as Gragus did.

“There’s been a report from the far northeast. A Merkant trader moving from Smisom towards the coastal towns saw a man collapsed in the Scorch, alone and miles from any town. Later, a search party was sent out to confirm. The man has dark grey skin, and to their surprise, was still breathing. After great effort, they abandoned the site when they realized they couldn’t rouse or even move the creature. His frame is impossibly heavy, it would seem. Though this is a mystical matter, we can’t be sure other forces aren’t making him immovable.”

Gragus continued describing the other details of trying to move Wellborne’s body while Cassidy reeled in shock. To her side, Bors only grunted in affirmation a few times during the speech. The dire announcement held the entire room in thrall. After several minutes, the topic changed to deciding a course of action.

“Are we going to send an envoy?” asked Gen from the third row.

“Not as of yet,” said Gragus, still standing in front of the stage. “There doesn’t appear to be anything we can do at this point. Short of sending out a team with heavy mining hardware. Our next step, besides setting up a regular letter relay with the marshals of Smisom, will be to inquire to the mystics here in Sedenza. It’s our hope they can lend some wisdom on the subject. Cassidy,” Gragus looked in her direction. “The board is asking that you be our liaison to the mystics. Of any of us,

I think you'd be best suited for it. We'll want to inform them right away."

The same worry and fear gripped Cassidy as it had when the Storm was bearing down on the city. She'd hoped the worst was over. *Wishful thinking, I guess.* She could only nod in response.

"Wonderful." Gragus continued doling out minor assignments of their preliminary plan. Before long, the meeting was adjourned and the attendees rose from their seats. Buzzing with conversation, they filed toward the exits.

Feeling a burning question inside, Cassidy went straight to Gragus, who was wiping his brow with a kerchief. "Gragus, has there been sign of anyone else? Anyone else who disappeared in the lights?"

A hint of breath escaped Gragus mouth. "Ah... I see, no Cassidy. I'm afraid not. Wellborne is the only person... if you can call him that, discovered out in the northeastern Scorch. Sorry, dear. I know we're all still hopeful."

Dispirited, Cassidy took a step back almost knocking into Bors as he approached. "Oh... k."

"It occurred to me," said Gragus. "We may want to send word to Mr. Traz. He has just as much experience in this kind of thing as any of us. What do you think?"

Cassidy thought for a brief moment. "I would but I... I'm not sure where he is."

"I see," said Gragus. "I'm sure he'll turn up when we need him."

Bors took a step forward. "Cassidy, take your time; I'm heading back mountainside. I'll keep tabs on things until you're back. Gragus." He made a respectful nod before walking off while favoring one leg.

"Shall I send a security detail with you to the Haven? It's no trouble."

"No," she said. "It's fine. I'll check in on my way back." She excused herself and immediately made for the Cytech main gate. *No reasons to wait, I guess.*

The walk through the ground level cabins left her with busy thoughts. The day's news had really blindsided her. Somehow the breakthrough with Tenowon earlier that morning already felt like months ago. The late morning sun hung high overhead.

Wellborne is back.... Trede is still gone. So is Traz for that matter. She suddenly felt incredibly alone and ill-prepared. It was a feeling that echoed in her mind as she marched out of the guild house and through the city with almost no will of her own. *The guild needs me. I have to do my part.* While it left her feeling empty, it

was the only thing pushing her to put one foot in front of the other.

Chapter 14

TREDE

A billion sparkling lights flew overhead.

A thousand shimmering waves of light raced over the landscape. A hundred feet tall and five times as wide, these energy manifestations were a common fixture here. *Where ever here is.* Trede still wasn't exactly sure. The light-waves did bear striking resemblance to those in his many dreams, but that was where the similarities ended. The ground was mostly white, serene and sterile. Tall bleached grasses grew in patches on small hills that spread out forever in all directions. At least that was all he'd seen so far. *Crimus... How long has it been? A week? A year?* There was no sleeping in this place. No hunger. No day or night to mark the time. The only thing Trede had to occupy his time was the Enemy.

Somewhere in the Light, the entity known as Wellborne lurked. Trede hasn't seen his grey-skinned form since the battlefield outside Sedenza, but he was definitely here. Occasionally, Trede heard his voice or saw a trace of gleaming eyes off in the distance. More than this, the enemy always felt near. If Trede didn't keep his wits about him, that befouling presence would run amok. The white landscape would darken, the light-waves would bend around his location and an eerie breeze would blow. Trede could combat this by meditating. Only by pulling forth the deepest energies of his Inner Fire, and the deeper power of his Well-blessing could he withstand each onslaught.

For the first several attacks, he dispersed the threat easily. A mild concentration was all he needed. Each time since, the attack grew stronger, longer, harder. Now when he was beset, Trede struggled to breath. A spark of fear came to life deep inside. He was able to quell these distractions and press his energies out around the stark-white meadows. *But for how long?* Sometimes he felt that pieces of Wellborne were getting past him somehow. *Or through me...* He grew tired.

Trede laid down on a small bed of tall, bleached grass. He was grateful for the rest; there was no telling when Wellborne's influence might seep into his perception. Even though he had given up on sleeping, a brief time to reflect and rest the body did improve his energy. His mind wandered.

I wish I could check in on Cassidy again. It was a phenomenon he relished but couldn't control. In rare moments of peace, Trede found himself—or his astral self

at least—in other places beyond the meadows of the Light. He'd managed it a few times, each time visiting one of his friends. He could barely catch a glimpse of them, like watching from afar through a distant fog. Still, knowing that at least some of them were safe back in the regular world made his fight with Wellborne all the more worthwhile. *Some of them are ok... not all. I wonder if Maej had any idea this would happen when he told me to let it all out. This place is so surreal. Besides Wellborne's presence, it's so peaceful. Barren, yet beautiful. I wonder what this place is? Has it always been here? Did I somehow create it by tapping into The Well's energy?*

Trede had a thousand questions that he knew had no answer. Though sometimes speculation helped pass the time. *If time even exists here...* Something clicked for him. *In my last vision with Cassidy... It felt like springtime. And when I came here, it was...* His memory dulled. Remembering the exact conditions when he came here were too difficult to sift through. He thought of springtime. *At least I know what time it is where she is.* He breathed contentedly for a few minutes and even closed his eyes. Sleep never came.

After a time, Trede rose and surveyed the landscape. *Yep. Still endless white hills in all directions.* He picked a direction and walked. Part of him wondered, and wished, that somewhere in the Light he might find an answer. A building, a campsite, a path—*anything*. Any sign that someone else had been here. Or better yet, someone he could talk to or help in his struggle against Wellborne. He climbed hill after hill. Still the only feature in any direction was the white-colored hills and patches of tall, bleached-brown grass. The presence of Wellborne remained on his periphery at all times. Thankfully, the entity stayed its ground.

Should I talk to it? Surprise bubbled up in Trede's mind at the thought. *That's a stupid idea. Probably.* He considered. *It's not like there's anyone else here.* The faintest glimmer of eyes floating out beyond the hills stared back at Trede, ever watchful. "Heh," Trede laughed out loud. *Yeah, right.* He continued his walk in silence, hoping for some other sign of life in the Light.

Trede continued until Wellborne's presence began to surge again. He felt it in the air first. A hot sizzling that radiated on his on face, close by, never too close to actually burn. His pace halted as he had to widen his stance to stay on his feet. The heat of the air radiated around him; there was only one thing to do. He reached down into the bottom his Fire. Summoning all of his inner-most essence to combat this mystical abomination. Then he went deeper. And deeper still. He reached into that infinite void beneath himself, a place where the Well's energy dwelled. He'd been scarcely more than a babe when his mother took a portion of The Well's energy and poured it down his back. For most of his life, it had been more curse than blessing. Now, it was the only thing keeping him alive. He

reached into that vast place of torrential power, wrested it, and poured it out. From every pore of his body, the purest white light flooded around him.

A heavy weight pressed on Trede's chest as the light crescendoed. Slowly, painfully, the light subdued Wellborne's presence. The air, now scorching hot, was pushed back. His chest relaxed. In silence, Wellborne receded back to the periphery.

Trede touched his brow, beads of sweat had formed. It took several deep breaths to feel recovered from this latest onslaught. *That's new*, he thought. *He's really getting stronger... Or am I getting weaker?* It was a sobering thought of which he wasn't sure the answer. One thing was for sure, if he didn't change the current conflict, Wellborne would eventually overcome him. *I can't let that happen. I need help. I need... something, anything. And the only thing around here is empty white hills.* Desperation sank in.

Trede broke out into a sprint. He ran faster than he'd ever run in his life and somehow didn't feel an ounce of fatigue. Stark white hill after another passed under his feet. Still his muscles didn't tire. He didn't know if it was this place, or the Well-blessing fueling him beyond his limits. He ran and ran. Great wide strides grew into bounds. Soon he was leaping from hilltop to hilltop, jumping tens of yards at a go. Trede felt no loss of energy, only desperation and the lingering eyes of Wellborne far off in the distance. He pushed harder, felt the white featureless ground crush under his foot, and soared into the air. There was no telling how far he flew, the ground looked the same in all directions, but at his flight's apex, he saw something. A small detail in the landscape. *Finally, something that's not grass.* As he landed, he widened his feet to shift directions on the next jump. Aiming for this new find, he leaned left and let loose as hard as his legs could thrust. Dozens of feet in the air, he saw it again. *I'm getting close.*

Trede hit the ground and broke out into a steady run. There was something, not the stark white of the hills or the faded brown of tall grasses. After a moment, he came upon a small cluster of small objects. Dusted around it was a fine white powder. He puzzled and stared, reaching for the largest of the objects.

He picked it up and turned it over. The most prominent feature on this odd-shaped object was two empty eye sockets. *No...* He dropped it and staggered back. A skull with empty eyes toppled down onto the white ground, face up, staring back at him. The shape of the skull was most off-putting. *That's a selahn skull...* A panic threatened to choke off Trede's air. *That's not Traz... Right?* Half the bones had turned to powder, which might mean it'd been here for ages. But time didn't seem to work here. Not normally, anyway. *It couldn't be.* He tried to assure himself.

Trede sat down and stared at the bones; for the moment, he was distracted from Wellborne's persistent lurking. He stared waiting for some meaning to come from this. Was this a clue as to where he was? Or more importantly, how to get back home? Try as he might, no clue manifested.

The bones... What did it mean? Did it mean anything or was Wellborne just playing a trick on him? He thought finding *something* out here would be encouraging, but it left him unnerved and with even more questions.

In that moment, with his guard down, Wellborne was upon him again. Heat rippled on the horizon all round Trede. *No, not now!* He tensed, attempting to ravel his thoughts. Through gritted teeth, he yelled out in frustration at the air. He barely managed to access his Inner Fire and begin his defensive dispel. He reached deeper towards his Well-blessing, like many times before. His mystical grip was tenuous at best. He held on, fighting as best as he could. The oppressive heat beat down on him. The light swelled from inside him, but something was different. The knot in his chest didn't dissipate.

This isn't working. I... I need to go back. The realization stunned Trede to his core. He'd let loose all the energies he had. Every ounce of power from The Well was unleashed time after time, yet still Wellborne was gaining ground. He needed the other mystics' help. He needed the Cytechs' ingenuity. He needed his friends.

The idea paralyzed him. He felt trapped at the edge of some impossibly high cliff. An inch to the left or right was surely certain death. *I need to go back... But I don't know how.* He felt the oppressive power of his enemy. A suffocating energy escalated around him. If he gave up, what would happen back in the regular world? *What do I do? Cassidy, Traz, Oudrine...*

I need you. I can't do this alone. Find me. Help me come back.

Chapter 15

Oudrine

OUDRINE woke with a start, a strange voice ringing in her ears. Her Fire pulsed deep within. She swung her legs off the bed and attempted to steady her thoughts. Her mystic abilities was only beginning to come back under control in recent weeks. With difficulty, she'd had some success; this time was different. Someone had reached out to her from afar. A mystic skill that only those with well-attuned Fires could manage. She reflected on the voice.

Was it strange? No... A familiar voice, I think.

Oudrine had only used far-ranging telepathy with a few others. It was a difficult skill. Usually both parties had to be focused, aware and directed at each other which was difficult to plan at distance. She'd managed it with Maej before. His clairvoyance using the Words was sometimes enough warning for him to prepare and receive her thoughts. This was different. Whatever was attempting to contact her was so strong in accessed her sleeping mind. Once she composed herself, she rushed around the room to get dressed in a plain, off-white, embroidered dress.

Downstairs, she found Celeste, Jonas and Drayle sitting down for a late morning tea. Her expression spoke volumes and gathered notice. The other three mystics looked at her earnestly standing in the doorway to the stone-bricked room.

"Oudrine." Jonas was the first to speak. "Is everything ok?"

Oudrine came to the table and sat down at the closest corner. Her strange awakening had left her flustered. *Damn this fog... Why can't I think straight?* While she had made great strides in her recovery, not all her faculties were fully healed. "I— I heard a voice."

Celeste moved to the chair closest Oudrine. "While you were sleeping?" A worried crease formed in her brow.

Oudrine nodded. She made furtive glances around the room as she composed her thoughts. "A distant voice... Somehow powerful enough to reach me. It sounded familiar but—" Something about the memory was fading away. It was difficult to keep in mind.

From the far end of the table, Drayle leaned in. His dark eyes open wide with

concern and fascination. "What did it say? Did you hear the words?"

Oudrine fought the fog in her mind before something clicked into place. She tilted her head to one side, the epiphany now so clear she couldn't believe how hard it'd been. "It said, *I need you. I can't do this alone. Find me...*" She swallowed dryly. "*Help me come back.*"

The other mystics exchanged silent stares of wide-eye shock.

"It was Trede... Wasn't it?" Oudrine's voice ran cold with dire realization. No one had seen a trace of Trede since the battle. His body disappeared in a brilliant show of light. If he was still alive, this might help answer the pressing question. Was Wellborne also still alive?

Jonas stood up from the table. "We need to tell the Cytechs. Gragus needs to know." He tied back his long, greying hair. "I'll get a few things ready and we'll head over."

His wife Celeste stopped him. "Is that wise? So soon? We've only just—" She looked back to Oudrine. "How sure are you about the voice?"

Oudrine felt all eyes on her. Her resolve kept slipping through her fingers. One second she was sure as steel, the next lost in a fog. "I think so." She pressed her eyes closed. "No one else has ever reached out to my mind like this." *No one still alive*, she thought in somber silence. "The Well's energy entwined with his Fire *could* make him powerful enough to reach me from... wherever he is."

"This is big," said Drayle, wrapping his fingers on the table. "Unprecedented."

Celeste, still showing great concern said, "Are you sure you're up for this? It will be a long day with the Cytechs."

Oudrine pushed past the pain in her heart, she forced through the fog in her mind and straightened her shoulders. "Springtime has come and gone. I've hid away too long while there's still much good we can do." She swallowed a dry lump in her throat. "I am ready. I have to be."

The four mystics present exchanged glances amongst each other. Each wore a different shade of determination and solidarity.

"It's settled then," said Jonas, nodding. He slapped his leg. "I'll get ready."

As he left the room, a sound disturbed the quiet from the other end of the house.

Drayle shrugged with an honest look that said, *no, I wasn't expecting anyone.*

Celeste moved first. "I guess, I'll answer it."

As she left, Oudrine followed in behind. When they reached the door, the knocking came again. Firm but not too loud. Celeste opened half the large double door while Oudrine stayed a few steps behind.

"Hi," said a voice. It was Cassidy. "It's... been a while, huh?"

Celeste mouth gaped in surprise and she turned to Oudrine.

Oudrine's eyes were wide. It only took an instant to see that Cassidy was troubled. "What's happened?"

Cassidy hesitated, words trapped in her throat. "We heard from Langhorne. And... Wellborne's been spotted. In the Northeast."

A lightning strike of fear and memory ran along Oudrine's spine. She held still and listened with baited breath.

"There's a small group of leftover Outcasts searching for him in the Scorch north of Smisom. That's really all we know. But there's a strong possibility that Wellborne is alive. What he might do next... we don't know. But if he comes to Sedenza again," Cassidy shrugged. "That's kind of why I'm here. The Cytechs would like to talk with you. All of you. To see if there's anything we can figure out. Make some kind of plan? We're really grasping at straws here."

Oudrine and Celeste wordlessly exchanged concerned looks.

"Ah, come in, Cassidy. Can't forget our manners," said Celeste. "Would you like to come in and sit? I think..." She trailed off while giving Oudrine an urgent sidelong glance.

"We have news as well," Oudrine blurted out.

"Oh?" Cassidy looked at them, confused. There was a hesitation in her posture, almost as if she had other pressing business. "I can stay for a bit. This is pressing guild business after all."

Oudrine observed her with a sidelong glance. *She may be hiding something, but I don't think it's to do with Wellborne.* The mind mystic tossed the thought aside for now.

As Celeste led the three women back towards the dining room, Jonas voice rang out from down the stone hall. "Ready to go, dearest?"

Celeste paused. "Change of plans, dear! Cassidy's here. It looks like the

Cytechs came to us!"

Jonas popped his head out of a door down the hall. "What? Oh! Hi, Cassidy. I'll be just a moment." He disappeared again. The sound of Jonas tossing an assortment of items emanated down the hall.

After a few minutes, the mystics, minus Yaladra, and Cassidy were all sitting around the table. Cassidy reiterated the news about Wellborne in the east for the others' benefit. And Oudrine relayed the news of the voice she'd heard earlier that morning.

"I've never had a voice reach out to me like this..." She continued. "It was clear, such a..." She fought against her mental fog to recall the voice. "Such a bright voice. Clear. Resonate."

Drayle, sitting a few seats down, chimed in. "Knowing that Trede was Well-blessed opens up a vast realm of possibilities. All the fringe fields of the Uncanny Powers stem from *some* kind of interaction with the Well itself. In this case—" He motioned his hand upwards making a grand gesture. "There's no telling of what he might be capable."

Cassidy looked stunned, like a cracked glass statue just waiting to fall apart. The others let a quiet moment linger. Eventually, she mustered the courage to speak. "You think— The voice... He's *alive*?"

"It must be," Oudrine replied before allowing the chance to second guess herself.

"W— Where is he?" Cassidy's shoulders tensed with fear, her voice was hopeful but hesitant to trust.

Oudrine shook her head with a wandering expression. "I'm sorry. I don't know. The voice was strong in my mind, sent from a great distance..."

"If Trede is reaching out, however," said Drayle, excited and leaning forward on the edge of his seat. "It's likely, even probable, that'll he'll do so again."

Cassidy's eyes wandered the room. Nervousness and conflict apparent on her face. "Are you sure? It's been months, I just wondered... what if? What if he was really gone? Forever."

Oudrine squared her shoulders and straightened her back. In that moment she felt again like her old self. She felt her Fire swell inside her, the warmth gave her strength. "He's out there, Cassidy. I'm sure of it. And he needs our help." Without realizing it, her breaths came heavy, chest rising and falling like roiling waves.

"How do we find him?" Cassidy asked; the words escaped her mouth urgently.

Oudrine opened her mouth, even with her fleeting self-assurance, she realized: *I don't know. I don't know how to find him.*

Jonas tapped his knuckles on the thick, sturdy table. "Seems like we're not sure *where* he is. Other than *somewhere*." He chuckled to himself. "But I think Drayle is right. If he did it once, he'll do it again."

Cassidy collapsed into a resigned expression, her gaze dragging across the floor. "What if Wellborne comes back before then?"

"That's a big *if*, Cassidy," said Celeste. She put a hand on Jonas' shoulder, who met her fingers in kind. "Something tells me we're just at the beginning of this road. There's bound to be many bends along the way. I'm sure we'll have to keep our wits about us for weeks to come. That reminds me! What about this meeting at the guild house?"

"Oh— I almost forgot." Cassidy rubbed her eyes, looking tired. "The big meeting is next week. The day after Solstice. Ten in the morning. It's at the big amphitheater hall, same as before. I... I'm assuming you can all come?"

"Of course," said Jonas his voice firm and kind. "Tell Gragus and everyone you can count on us. We may not have all the answers..." He shrugged.

"But we'll definitely be there," said Celeste finishing her husband's sentence.

"Absolutely," added Drayle. "And I'm sure Yaladra, too. She's had her hands full lately. I'm sure she could spare the day. She's been quite concerned about Tiberiak's recent declaration as Governor. He appears to have the full backing of the Merkants. That might be a first for any Sedenzan leader I can recall."

Cassidy's brow furrowed. "There have been a couple strange things with the Merkants and us—" She shrugged. "Mostly seems like business as usual. I guess I've been up on the Mountainside so much I haven't paid much attention."

Drayle nodded, eyebrows bent in consideration. "Let's hope it's nothing. We'll be sure to send word if anything comes of it."

Cassidy thanked the Mystics and rose from the table.

Oudrine walked her out alone. "Thank you for coming, Cassidy."

"Yeah, it's nothing, really. Just the messenger." Cassidy's expression was awash in something.

It's grief. She still grieves for her loss. But now Trede can come back.

Somehow, I'm sure of it. Oudrine's own deep pangs of grief weighed in her belly like a thousand pound stone. For the moment, she stood strong in spite of it. For her, it was a familiar feeling by now. They reached the large double door and Oudrine opened one side.

Cassidy walked halfway out and paused, a single hand on the remaining closed door. "I want to hope..." she started. "It's harder than I thought. It's just been so long."

"If I can receive another message from Trede, you'll be the first to know."

Cassidy closed her misty eyes. Air escaped her nostrils. "And I'll tell you if we hear anything else from Langhorne. See you in a week?"

Oudrine nodded gently, her long, brown curls bobbing at her shoulder. She smiled as the two parted. Cassidy went down the cobblestone street heading west, and Oudrine headed to the library. Somehow all this commotion had her feeling like her old self again. Not knowing how long it would last, she decided to press her luck. *It's time I put my Strength of Mind to the test again. It's been too long... And something tells me, I'm going to need every ounce of strength. Very soon.*

Chapter 16

Yaladra

YALADRA woke from a late morning rest; a soreness lingered in her limbs. It'd been a few days since her encounter with the blue-sashed Mystic. She'd been forced to hold up at the Haven and recover. After two days of minimal improvement, she'd asked Celeste's help. The mystical healing had helped yet somehow the pain lingered.

Still, what hurt more was the lost opportunity. *Tiberiak was in my sights...* Her dark eyes rolled far back in her head and she exhaled in aggravation. She sat down in a high-back chair next to a tall window framed in smoothly cut stone. The paper full of notes she'd taken while talking to her father were on a round side table. Compulsively, she read them over again.

Sha'deeb. Originally from Northern Fwee area. Expertise: muscular manipulation at limited distance. Can cause intense muscular pain and limit mobility of multiple targets at once. Extended exposure results in severe bruising and internal bleeding. Related to the schools of the Strength of Body, though its effects are the direct inverse of that traditional art. Limitations include lack of power greater than thirty feet. Vulnerable to distractions of concentration. These greatly reduce the range and power of immobilization effects.

She shuddered at the fact that her father still recalled this much information on so many mystics. *Just off the top of his head... Tiberiak must have forced father to build dossiers on all of us. What does he have on me? Or the rest of us here at the Haven? All the more reason to dismantle his enterprise. And the sooner the better.*

Her thoughts wandered to another topic. *How do I deal with Sha'deeb?* No doubt this mystic on Tiberiak's payroll would cause her problems again. She considered the thirty foot range of her enemy's mystic abilities. She mulled the thought over. Before long, her blood raced, eager to get back on the streets and prove herself.

Slowed by soreness, Yaladra rose and stood by the window. She placed a hand on the stone. The late spring sun had warmed it from the outside in. "I can't stay in here," she spoke under her breath. "Time to get on with it. Tiberiak's Merkant influence is growing everyday." The spite and vitriol in her gut surpassed any of the lingering pain she felt. She walked to the center of the room with firm, determined

steps. After a moment to consider a variety of martial routines, she began the movement. Extending her limbs in graceful fashion, at first, it burned with pain. But soon the burning grew to satisfaction and her muscles loosened. *Good*, she thought. Her body finally agreed with her mind. *Time to get back into action.*

Less than an hour later, Yaladra was in the main hallway exiting the Haven. A voice from behind caught her off guard.

"I'd argue but I doubt you'd stay."

Father... She turned. "You know we won't be safe here forever. Not with *him* out there."

"And I could say, *but it's been months and he hasn't made a move on any mystics of which we know.* But then your'd say..." He half-smiled and gestured back to her.

"It's only a matter of time." Her words were adamant tinged by rote repetition. "Tiberiak will always lust for power. The power only we mystics carry."

Drayle, with his salted temples and dark beard, walked to his daughter with a loving, yet weary, expression. He placed a hand on her white-cloaked shoulder. "I understand. And... I hate saying this. I agree."

Yaladra felt her shoulders loosen with relief. She'd grown accustomed to these debates over the past months.

"Yaladra... There are many awful people in this world. I've seen them first hand and have been forced to measure their worth, success and failures. I won't rank one man's sins above another, but this man is..." He flustered, his face flashing red. "He's taken a thousand times more than he's had any right to. A million times. I just wish we could hideaway from him and his kind. Recent events, I think, have proven that impossible." He eyes wandered the barren stone hallway, heavy with doom.

"Father?" A sharp, chill fear ran down her spine. "What is it? What's happened?"

"The creature, Wellborne... He was spotted in the northeast. He's unconscious some how, something is holding him asleep it seems."

Yaladra's dark brown eyes went wide at the news. She unconsciously gripped the edge of her white cloak in hand, making a tight fist.

"There's a gathering at the Cytech guild house next week. It's time we discuss options now, before... His open hands floated in front of him as he searched for

words that wouldn't come.

"I'll be there," she replied, not needing him to ask. "We should stand together." She spoke firmly even though fear and memory shook her deep within. She'd faced Wellborne before, with Oudrine. It was terrifying, soul shaking, and nearly life ending. In that moment, she could think of nothing they could possibly do to stand against that foe. Suddenly, her fight against Tiberiak's plot and the Merkants seemed trite. She looked at the heavy, broad wooden double door that led outside. Some of her spark was extinguished; she hesitated.

"But don't think for a moment that gets you off the hook," said Drayle, taking off his glasses to polish them on this shirt. "There's a greater enemy farther off, yes. Tiberiak, though, is in our backyard." He replaced his glasses and gave his daughter a warm sizing up. "Something tells me too, if the Merkants have some big operation under wraps, the other guilds aren't going to like it. That impacts our friends at the Cytechs, too. You have your work cut out for you."

Yaladra was shocked. *He's never encouraged me in any of this. Have things really changed? Maybe he does trust me.*

"Just..." Drayle hesitated. "Be kind to your father. And be safe out there? Sha'deeb is useless beyond thirty feet. Remember that, ok?" He grinned, the crow's feet by his glasses growing pronounced.

"I'll be careful," she said.

Drayle leaned over and kissed her on the cheek.

As he walked further back inside, Yaladra spoke. "And keep me informed. About Wellborne."

"You'll be the first to know. As long as you get in at a *reasonable* hour."

Even from several steps away, she could see the smirk on his face. *Maybe things haven't changed that much. He's always been on me like that. And probably always will.* Even with the good-natured ribbing, Yaladra's heart was full to have her father in her life again. She placed her hands on the heavy doors and exited onto the Sedenzan streets.

Yaladra's boots scuffed and clacked on the hard cobblestone streets that led to the markets. The midday sun was high in the sky reminding everyone that summer was close.

She tried not to be discouraged that she'd been combing the city for months. *It takes time to take down a monster.* The wrath she carried towards Tiberiak hadn't cooled by any margin. Since her father had been safe at the Haven, there was nothing else she could consider doing. *He's going to pay. As soon as I can lay my hands on him.* Her thoughts turned dark for a moment, surprising herself. She stuffed her anger back down, swallowed the years of running, fear, struggle and disappointment. She hoped to have an outlet for all that aggression soon enough.

After a couple hours of milling about the marketplace, Yaladra slowed and rolled her shoulders. Her body was starting to revolt despite not hearing any new leads. *Less than a week since Tiberiak declared himself Governor. Someone has to be talking.* She pressed on to the west side of the markets, the area nearest the main Merkant offices. After haggling the price on a candelabra she had no intention of purchasing, buying a couple permissions, and feigning interest in a Cytech electric-torch, she ran into a familiar face. *Janice...* Yaladra hadn't seen sign of her since that day at a teahouse weeks earlier. At the time, the mere mention of *Tiberiak* had sent Janice running in a cold sweat.

Yaladra's eyes sharpened as she fell in behind a small group of market denizens. Hanging back by more than a dozen paces, Yaladra tailed Janice to the edge of the markets. *No where left to hide.* She hung back by the edge of one sandstone building. The adjacent structure was a Merkant office with a white plaster facade and darkwood cross slats. Janice walked alone between the two buildings.

Yaladra glanced at her before dashing out of sight in front of the sandstone wall. *She doesn't look well.* Janice's gait was off, her posture listing. It gave Yaladra a simple reason to approach. She contorted her face into an appropriate friendly smile. "Hi, Janice! I just saw you go by, are you doing ok?"

By that point, Janice was bracing herself with one hand on the alley wall. She slowed but didn't turn.

"Janice?" Yaladra spoke with genuine concern, dropping her forced-friendly mask. The white-cloaked mystic approached with caution.

Once a few steps away, Janice slipped backwards, barely catching herself on the wall. Then she sunk to the ground with a thud, her back still propped on the wall. The young Merkant woman's eyes lolled in the back of her head. A faint gurgle sounded in the back of her throat.

Yaladra recoiled in fear for a moment, then knelt closer. "Janice? Are you ok? What's wrong?"

"Isss... naa... na..." Janice's mouth worked lazily but no intelligible words

came.

Yaladra consider her options. A Mind Mystic might be able to pluck a few complete thoughts from a person's mind in this state. As a mystic with the Strength of Words, she'd have to be creative. Yaladra put her hand on the side of Janice's face. For a moment, she questioned what she was about to do. Clearly Janice was ill, but this might be only time she could question someone who knew about Tiberiak's operation. She grit her teeth and resolved herself. "Sorry, Janice." With a deep breath, she called upon the deep mystical Fire that dwelled within. Her dark eyes flashed violet. *"You tell me where you were going."*

Janice coughed at first; her head lolled to the other side. "B-big job... 'portant..."

Yaladra replaced her hand around Janice's left ear. *"You tell me, what is the big job? Why is it important?"* Her mystical words reverberated and hung in the air.

"Big plan... The city. A big..."

She's really out of it. That might be the best she can give. While Yaladra considered the next question, Janice hummed a dissonant note and collapsed. Yaladra released her spell. A wisp of violet mist flew from her eyes as they returned to their natural dark brown. In alarm, she leaned in close to confirm Janice was still breathing. *She's breathing. And out cold.* She gave the Merkant a guilty look and rose to her feet. She knew what she had to do next.

Pulling up her hood, she spoke. "Pale as moonlight." In an instant, her cloak took on a bleached, mottled grey similar to a homespun fabric. She ran down to the edge of the alley and called. "Help! There's a sick woman over here! She needs help! Call the Merkants, I think she's one of them!" The cries for help sparked movement in the market. A man in a blue long coat ran out from behind one open air stall and down the alley. By the decoration on his collar, Yaladra guessed he was a higher mid-rank Merkant officer.

As a few people gathered around Janice in the alley, Yaladra slipped away. Once she was far enough to avoid notice, she let her cloak revert to its natural pristine white. She slipped back into the market's east side and made her way towards the Haven. Slowed by stiffening muscles, she strolled by a long line of open air stalls just north of the gardens. A man and woman in front of a tool seller were already talking about Janice.

"Yah, just now! A Merkant lady just laid out flat on the west side. Out cold! They had to carry her off."

The woman replied, "Another one?! When are the guilds going to do

something? Diane fell off the loom at the rug mill last week. Hasn't woken up since! There's something going around, I'm sure of it!" The woman's voice was mixed with fear and anger.

"No, not Diane?!"

The woman nodded. "I'm telling you something's up. Just how many more of us will have to fall before somebody does something?"

"The Regional Governor has to step in. That's his job, isn't it?"

She scoffed. "We'll see about that."

Yaladra had slowed her steps as much as she could without being obvious. By that point, the conversation was drowned out by other shoppers and sellers hocking their wares. She pondered what she'd just heard.

Janice says the Merkants are working on something big, then falls ill. And she's not the first. She wracked her mind considering if the two things were connected but came up short. There just wasn't enough to go on. The idea of a sickness striking people down at random was unsettling. Diseases aren't exactly uncommon. And I doubt Tiberiak has the power for something like that. Even with the mystics on his payroll. She again thought of Sha'deeb; her shoulders tensed. Armed with the knowledge from her father, Yaladra was actually looking forward to a rematch. Once she'd fully recovered.

By the time Yaladra reached the Haven's broad stone steps, she was in agony. She hoped another session or two with Celeste's healing magic would do the trick. As she reached for the iron knocker, the door opened on its own.

"Welcome back, Yaladra." Jonas paused giving her a look. "You don't look so well."

She glared at him while hobbling inside the door. "Is Celeste free?"

"In the arboretum." He pointed down the stone-bricked hall.

"Thanks." Yaladra limped along thinking that, all in all, it was quite productive day. *Still a long ways to go.* Before reaching the arboretum, there was one thought could couldn't kick. *What if Tiberiak is connected to this disease going around?*

Chapter 17

TRAZ

It was the summer solstice. A bright, morning sun shone down on the landing fields of Sedenza. Traz stepped out of a recently landed carrier and took in a big whiff of air. "Ah... How I've missed this place." He set two large travel cases on the ramp; his eyes drank in the scene.

Everywhere, dozens of telaliam flew about overhead, waving their long, trailing wings and tails of myriad colors. Their songs filled the air with deep, bassy *brooons*. Reverberating calls rose and fell in harmony. A tear filled his eye. "Is it not as beautiful as I said? I'm so glad I could finally show you."

Another rusty-toned selahn, several inches shorter than Traz's five feet, followed him down the carrier ramp. Her eyes were nervous yet filled with awe. Two more dark brown selahns with stocky builds followed as well with huge grins on their faces.

A fifth selahn, this one tall, thin and lean with ash grey fur followed suit. She carried a large piece of luggage of her own. "Oi! 'Ow many cases you bring?" she asked.

"Just one for each of us!" Traz chimed without taking his eyes off the beautiful dance of great telaliam. "Plus two. Uh— three. Plus three."

A sixth selahn called out from the carrier door. He was darker grey in fur and appeared to be the elder of the group. "And this green one, here, hm?" He adjusted his square-framed specs.

"Right." Traz finally turned to face his traveling companions. "One for each of us— plus four." He shrugged. "Or more. Let's just bring them all out, shall we?" He smiled a toothy grin ear to ear.

Another selahn, the tallest of the group and with golden yellow color stepped out of the carrier. She held luggage stacked on her muscular arms so high it covered her face. From behind the luggage came a sound. "*Ahem.*"

Traz burst out laughing and everyone followed suit.

It took twenty minutes for the troop of selahns, seven in total, to get all their

things loaded across three rented carts. They made their way into the city.

"I really can't wait to introduce you all," said Traz as the first cobblestones came under his feet. The wide street was the main entry path to the city from the landing fields. "Of course there's some serious business at hand, but no one could begrudge me a few minutes for introductions." There was a joyous hop in Traz's step as he led his friends, almost all of which had never been to Sedenza, winding through the city.

It took Traz over an hour to wrangle his friends to the Cytech guild house on the north side. There were numerous distractions, stops and starts, and seven side-street detours. No one in Sedenza had likely seen so many Selahns in one place ever. It was the cause of great attention and ruckus, which pleased him to no end. Still, they had places to be. He did his best to placate the staring throng and keep the party moving.

Distractions aside, Traz was in good cheer the entire way. It'd only been a handful of months since he was last here, yet much had happened. *And... I have good news.* He pointed his chin and puffed out his chest and continued his march.

Eventually, at the Cytech main gate, Traz made a formal announcement. "It is I! Traz, of the Northern Selahns!" He glanced left and right at his party and nearly giggled to himself. "With guests!" He stretched his face this way and that trying to smooth out the permanent grin stuck in his cheeks. "Ahem. I've come with urgent news. Is... Is Gragus in?" He turned to speak aside to the other selahns. "Gragus is a good sort. He'll have a beat on things, I'm sure."

The group nodded their approval and mumbled a mix of appreciation and fascination.

After a moment's quiet, the heavy black iron gate swung open. Two guards in blue uniforms approached the party. Traz recognized one of them right away.

One of the guards carried a ledger and looked to be in charge. He wore a golden Cytech crest near one shoulder. "Mr. Traz, welcome!"

"I recognize you, Phillips!" Traz exclaimed. "How's the wife and littles? Still running ragged, I hope?"

The younger guard next to Phillips snorted under his breath.

"Oh, well, it's uh—" Phillips went red and glanced sideways at his subordinate. He stammered on. "Yes, well, Mr Traz— Your timing is truly astounding. There's a council today between the Cytechs and Mystics, we hoped you could come. But we had no idea where you were!"

"Aha!" Traz practically jumped with glee. "You don't say?! Well then, we should get going. Same place as usual?" He patted Phillips firmly on the shoulder as he passed through the gate. "Come along, all. Bring those carts right this way. I'm sure they'll have lodging for us all before sundown." Traz waved each of his seven companions through the gate. "Oh, Phillips, you'll send word along to the facilities coordinator about accommodations won't you? You're all so kind. Thank you so!"

Before even noticing Phillips wide-eyed and red-cheeked confusion, Traz was off. He jaunted his way back to the lead of his little troupe. They walked straight to the amphitheater meeting hall where, he knew, all the big important gatherings were held. Each step of the way, Traz spoke about the guild. His time with the Cytechs had been momentous and he didn't leave out a single detail, not even the kitchen's tendency to serve red meat on Thursdays.

Along the way, a group of Cytechs gathered and followed in behind them. All of Traz's companions were eager to shake hands and speak with anyone who showed the slightest interest. By the time the selahns reached the main hall, they had an ensemble of more than thirty, humans and selahns included.

Traz burst open the door to the amphitheater room. "Hello to all my friends!" He was beaming ear to ear, arms open wide in a victorious pose. He waited for a response. A hearty *here-here!* but there was nothing. His eyes scanned the room and found it completely empty. He cocked his head to one side and kicked the dirt under his feet with disappointment.

"The council starts at ten, today," said a voice, a middle-ranked Cytech woman back somewhere in the crowd. "You're... a little early," she said sheepishly.

Traz folded his arms and turned to look at his friends. "Hm. We'll be sure to get the best seats, then," he said wryly. He coaxed his friends to wheel their carts and luggage into the long back row of the great room. Next, he led them down to the very first row, front and center. The large stocky brown twins plopped down with great sighs of relief. The others quietly muttered to each other. It was clear they weren't used to being amongst such a large human populace. To them, everything was odd, fascinating, bewildering or some combination thereof.

Traz, however, didn't sit. As his friends murmured, he paced while scratching at his chin with thumb and forefinger. *Of course introductions first, then the gifts. Or should I... No, definitely introductions first. First for me and mine, then I should introduce all the Cytechs to the family. But... there's so many of them. Maybe just the highlights. Cassidy, of course, and Gragus too. That Bors fellow, a bit crotchety, but he's a friend to Tenowon and that goes same for me. Oh! Wait, I completely*

forgot about the Mystics! They should be here too!

Traz's thoughts continued in this fashion for some time, until finally, a side door banged open and a roar voices commenced.

Heading the group was Gragus attempting to raise his voice over the throng. "We'll launch an expedition as soon as we've had a chance to gather intelligence! That's what today is all about— Yes, and— Of course, of course. No, we don't have the exact location but it is in the northeastern region. Yes, of course! That's what I've been saying this whole—" It was at that moment Gragus noticed the group of selahns sitting there, plain as a sunrise, in the front row. The whole Cytech group shocked into silence.

Awash in pure joy, Traz puffed out his chest and raised a hand to gesture to his friends. Grinning and full of pride, he opened his mouth to begin his announcement.

"But are you *sure* Wellborne is in the northeast?" A voice from the crowd broke the brief silence. "We've only had one source allude to that, right? The marshal's letter?"

That one question reignited the entire group. Voices assaulted Gragus with all sorts of minutiae over and over. Traz watched Gragus's eyes roll as he hid his face in hand for a moment. He managed to say, "Great to see you, Traz. I'll be... just a moment." He turned back to face the other Cytechs, a group that was growing as people filed in from the side entrance.

Traz held his breath with wide eyes; he glanced to the other selahns.

The taller grey one, younger of look and voice, peeped in. "Is it time for presents yet?" She pointed back up to the three wheeled carts at the top of the room.

Traz gave her a flutter of the hand down below the belt as if to say, *no no, ssshhh, not yet*. He stood patiently by.

After a few minutes, Gragus finally dispersed the crowd. "Please, everyone. I assure you, we will have a full report on all known details presently. Take your seats, now. We'll begin as soon as the rest of the invitees arrive."

As the space around Gragus cleared, Traz inched closer to him.

"Again, Traz. Always great to see you. You have impeccable timing, as always." Gragus shook Traz's hand vigorously. "How were your travels?"

"Well," said Traz, puffing up again. "I've had the most stupendous time! A

thousand stories for sure!" He laughed mirthfully and raised an open hand gesturing to the front row. "But, please, allow me to introduce to you—"

Sounds of a dozen shocked gasps and a stifled yelp sounded from the back of the room.

But I didn't even say anything yet, thought Traz, confused.

"Oh!" said Gragus, stepping away. "Our friends from the Haven, please come down."

Standing just outside the large door at the top of the amphitheater room were the mystics. Traz knew them all by name, though some more than others. First down the stairs were Jonas and Celeste, mentors and teachers to the likes of Maej and Oudrine in their day. They were followed by Drayle and the white-cloaked Yaladra, mystics from the west, and a huge part of Sedenza's victory over the Storm. Last came Oudrine. She looked heartier than Traz had last seen her, but still not her full self. She wore a pale blue blouse with flowing sleeves.

Gragus welcomed them down at the floor in front of the stage and after a moment, their eyes— finally— turned back to Traz.

"Ladies and gentlemen, Cytech and Mystic," Traz began in his dramatic storyteller voice. *I've been waiting for this moment, why not make the most of it?* He stifled the laugh bubbling up from his stomach. "I've traveled to the very far... and back. I've gathered another thousand stories to tell, but all that can wait. May I please introduce to you my caravan of Selahnian excellence..." The row of selahns all stood, some looked nervous or uncomfortable, others more solemn and at attention. Traz gestured to the first in line. "Vlahn, of the western spines. Cousin to my good friend Sveld whom I first met in Southern Fwee."

Vlahn was a hair shorter than Traz's five feet, some years older, a dark charcoal grey in color and wearing glasses. He mumbled a few words of thanks and appreciation.

Traz stepped down the line with pomp and aplomb. "Next, if may I have the pleasure. Here is Vilagreá. A fellow traveler and all around free spirit. She once climbed the barrier mountains. But it was boring and cold so she turned around just before reaching the peak." He dotted the story with accentuated chin bobs for emphasis. This raised a few eyebrows from among the Cytechs as it was common knowledge that no one had ever managed to climb the barrier mountains, hence the name.

Vilagreá was noticeably taller than Traz, thinly built and with a youthful look.

Her fur was a light grey. "Hi. Hello..." she said with a low belt-high wave.

"Next, say hello to two brothers, twins in fact! From the mines of the Western Spines. Heartier kinfolk I've never met. This is..." He paused for effect. "Dragyst. And Staal." He bowed with a flourish.

Some of the Cytechs were getting caught up in Traz's presentation and had piled in around Gragus and the Mystics. A few *oohs* and *aahs* rang out and murmurs filled the growing group of onlookers.

"We're not actually twins, you know," Dragyst said flatly and crossed his arms. He was a tad shorter than Traz but was bigger in all other dimensions.

"We're not even brothers!" added Staal who did look remarkably like his counterpart with the same dark brown fur. They were both thick of arm and body with wide shoulders.

Gragus and a few others chuckled softly, but offhandedly, acting like they weren't sure who was being serious or not.

Traz ate up the attention. "Oh ho ho!" He laughed and winked to the crowd. "They'll tell you that but don't believe them. Not for a second."

Staal shrugged while Dragyst mumbled something aside to him.

Traz continued. "Next. My southern cousins rarely travel beyond their tribal lands, but here is a rare treat. May I present the illustrious Eesh'ahn." She bowed low and held there.

Eesh'ahn looked much different than the rest. She was as taller than even Vilagreá, with lithe, muscular, arms and legs. Her fur was a pale marigold, the color of dried grass at the desert's edge. Her nose and mouth were more pronounced, sure to be hiding large, sharp teeth. Her expression was straight and serious, her posture even more so. She bowed, wordlessly, from the waist. Upon rising, she spoke. "Greetings humankin. My father, Heesh sends his regards."

"Yes, oh," Traz hopped with excitement. "Did I mention her father is the tribal chief of the entire southern clan?" This garnered even more excited chatter from the crowd. Eagerly, Traz stepped down the line. "And finally." Traz slowed and inhaled like he was smelling an intoxicating bouquet of flowers. "Finally. May I please introduce, this crimson beauty... Svelina. Of the West."

From amongst the crowd, the white-cloaked Yaladra's eyebrows raised with familiarity.

Svelina was smaller than the rest, had unique rust-toned fur covered in a floral-

patterned, yellow frock. She had wide fiery hued eyes, showing more than a hint of timidity. Her elbows were pulled in nervously, but she managed a smile. "Thank you..." Was all she said while shrugging with one shoulder.

Traz stared at Svelina almost forgetting himself. He shook himself back together to address the crowd. "Now that we've all been introduced... I have an announcement." He puffed himself up even further and paced a few steps to the right and left. He made a sweeping gesture across the entire room, which was filling with more and more Cytechs by the minute. "While I have traveled to the very far, and met so many phenomenal selahns, with out further ado, may I just say, that this summit flower, this jewel of the evening sky..." Traz walked over to Svelina and took her hand. "This ray of sunshine and fire of my soul... Is my blushing bride."

"What—!" Cassidy's voice cut through the noise of the crowd.

Traz shook his head, his gaze darting around the room. "Cassidy? Oh, I wished you'd be here! You *are* here? I can't see you!?"

Cassidy cut through the throng and stumbled into the front between Gragus and Yaladra. Her eyes snapped back between Traz and Svelina. "You didn't—"

"I did," said Traz grinning and bouncing his chin up and down like a fool. "Well— We did. Technically." He looked at Svelina who flushed.

Cassidy let her mouth fall agape, all other words trapped in her throat. She ran forward and wrapped her arms around Traz, laughing with tears in her eyes. The entire selahnic ensemble cheered something joyful in their language. Soon the entire room was caught up giving the bride and groom three cheers.

After a minute, Traz stood there proudly, Svelina's hand in his. "I'm so glad to see you Cassidy."

"I can't believe you went off and got married! It hasn't even been six months!" she jibed at him as voices raised all around.

"Life can be an amazing adventure, if you go looking for it," said Traz, still beaming. "Trede taught me that."

The mention of Trede wore heavily on Cassidy's face, her smiled now looked forced.

"Which is half of why I'm here." He leaned up close to her and spoke softly in her ear. "I heard from Trede. He's alive. And I know where to find him."

Chapter 18

Cassidy

CASSIDY somehow found herself sitting in the front row as Gragus called the meeting to order. Despite the commotion from the selahnic contingent, there was a grave matter that needed attending. The room finally settled.

Traz, Svelina and the other selahns were to her right, Bors was on her left followed by a line of current and former board members. The whole scene was all too familiar. *I thought we were done with this... I guess the battle never really ended.* There had been some celebration after the victory over the Outcasts and the Storm, though many held concern close by. There were forces at play here no one truly understood, not even the mystics. Cassidy looked back over her shoulder and saw Yaladra in the row behind. *She's always so stoic,* Cassidy noticed. Yaladra gave her a gentle nod in acknowledgement; her serious, dark brown eyes were full of a thousand thoughts. Cassidy smiled, weakly, but with hope. She turned back to see her long-time mentor Gragus waving the de-crescendoing crowd to silence.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, honored guests, thank you for your attention," Gragus began while tucking a pocket watch into his slate grey waistcoat.

A *pip-pip!* and *whoop!* sounded from the selahns in the front row. This garnered a few laughs from around the room.

Gragus smiled but didn't miss a beat. "It's been some months since we've convened on the matter of the Storm. There'd always been some question about whether the entity known as Wellborne, or the Outcast army for that matter, would return. After months of listening across all our channels in the wide continent, we've finally heard... *something.*"

Murmurs and mumblings fanned across the crowd up and down the amphitheater. A discordant voice from the back questioned the validity of the report; no one else seemed to share the thought.

"We received word from Marshal Langhorne," Gragus continued. "Who's timely actions were paramount to our previous victory. The marshal recently mounted an expedition inside the Wastes, long thought to be the home of the Outcast society. I have here his letter that I can summarize."

Cassidy fought to keep her breathing steady and realized how tightly she was gripping the chair's arm in her right hand. She fought to let go and rubbed her palm down the length of her lap.

Traz leaned over to her. "Don't worry. Things have a way of working out, you'll see." He winked and flicked a whisker as he sat back in his seat.

Ever the optimist... Cassidy took a long breath as Gragus relayed the news.

From what Langhorne reported, it was believed that a small fraction of Outcast forces remained. In fact, the only Outcasts observed in the Wastes were part of the Trust. It was a kind of think-tank whose role in Outcast society was to plan their actions, manage resources, design and build war-machines and the like. It was this small contingent within the Wastes that had found trace of Wellborne. The grey-skinned man-creature had been spotted in the Scorch north beyond the Wastes, east of Smisom before the Roiling Sea. While Langhorne hadn't seen Wellborne himself, information had been gathered that Wellborne was alive, his body unmoving like in a deep sleep. As Gragus finished the report, the room fell into stunned silence.

Cassidy strained her ears, listening for any movement or start to speak.

Gragus lay his papers down on the podium and adjusted his round wireframe specs. "So. That's what we're contending with. Wellborne, as was reported from the frontlines, was a creature made out of energy from the mystical Well." He cleared his throat, someone uncomfortable with the thought. "As such, I've asked our friends from the Haven to weigh in here today. What might we expect from this... situation?" He extended a hand down to the mystics in the second row. After a moment of deliberating amongst themselves, Drayle rose and found his way down the row to approach the stage.

Cassidy watched with bated breath. *That thing... Wellborne. It killed Maej. And Trede...* Uncertainty and fear crowded her mind.

Almost sensing her distress, Traz leaned over again. "We'll need Trede back, for one thing. That's for sure. He went toe-to-toe with that fiend once. What's once more?"

Cassidy couldn't fathom Traz's unfettered hope. "How do you know? Is he really—"

At that moment, Drayle took the podium. Bors, to Cassidy's left, shushed her while leaning forward to ensure he heard every word.

"Everyone, here is Drayle, something of a scholar among mystics. I know I

certainly look forward to hear what she has to say.” Gragus bowed out taking a few steps away. He and Drayle and didn’t look too dissimilar. Of similar build and age, while Drayle’s skin was noticeably darker and he was dressed in a loose cotton-spun long shirt as opposed to Gragus’ waistcoat and slacks.

Drayle cleared his throat as he prepared to address the crowd. “The Well is a source of the most potent energies ever known. Stronger than steam machines or even the mystic Fire. What Proteus did with The Well’s energy, first formed as a storm, then as a human-like creature, is unprecedented. Not in any documented history has someone ever committed such an atrocity. Yet...” He paused to glance the room. “There are *some* things we can determine from what we’ve observed. Wellborne is an intelligent being, though he is nascent. Still learning, growing and adapting to his surroundings. From the stories I’ve gathered from the battlefield... He appeared to grow smarter, faster and stronger almost by the minute. However, since then, we assume, he’s been unconscious. We might assume his development has been halted in the meantime, but we don’t fully understand the nature of his disappearance. At the very least, we should assume that Wellborne is as much a threat now as he was before. Not only to Sedenza, but to the world at large as well.”

Drayle paused appearing to be in deep thought; the room stayed quiet as a morgue. “This isn’t to say we’re powerless. We’ve interacted with Wellborne on at least two axes, the mind and the body. Both to positive effect. However, in the end, the only thing that was able to dispatch Wellborne was, as I understand it, another source of The Well’s energy. Our disappeared friend, Trede, a Cytech and Mystic both, of sorts, was given a measure of The Well’s energy at a very young age. A term we’ve come to call *Well-blessed*. The effects of which aren’t fully understood. But in that flash of light during the height of the battle, Trede removed Wellborne as a threat. At least for the time being.”

A few dissenting words were muttered across the crowd; Cassidy squirmed in her seat. *How can they not believe what really happened? Yes it’s... magic or whatever. But still, some of them don’t get it?* Her fellow Cytechs’ doubts left her feeling nauseated.

Drayle ignored the quiet comments. “One might share the concern, that if Trede was our best weapon in the fight, we may be out of luck— given his disappearance. While some of you may have heard this news, I’ll recap. Trede may not be so unreachable as you might think.” Drayle explained of Oudrine’s recent encounter with Trede’s voice the week prior. While he had to admit this hadn’t shown them how or when Trede might return, it was promising to know at least this: he was alive.

An energy brewed amongst the listeners. Tension was hot and boiling

through the expressions of many. Here they were again, humanity facing a massive supernatural threat, with only the faintest hope of prevailing.

Cassidy found herself gripping her chair's arm again, her knuckles white.

Traz slapped his hands down in his lap. "That's my cue." He turned the other way to his bride, Svelina. "I'll just be a moment, darling." With a flash, Traz bolted up, turned and faced the room. "Friends! Fear not. I know *exactly* where Trede is." He folded his arms, chest puffed out and with a huge grin across his fanged face.

The room exploded with a thousand questions. On stage, it took Gragus and Drayle minutes to regain collective composure. Amidst the shuffling, Traz ended up on stage between them.

"Well—" An astonished Gragus tripped over his own words. "Traz— If you please?"

Traz pointed a clawed finger to the ceiling and began in his storytelling voice. "Our mystic mistress Oudrine isn't the only one who's received a sign from the lost Trede. I, too, have observed an inkling from the beyond. Or perhaps from further than that." He glanced the room with enigmatic eyes.

Cassidy, still in the front row, buried her face in her hands. Words escaped her mouth without thinking. "Traz, please get to the point." Her nerves were maxed and she ignored the fact it might be taken off color.

"I firmly believe, that Trede is on his way back. That was the sense I got. A sense of coming home. And no! Before you say it, not Smisom. I know he grew up there but he's not *from* there. No, no! Trede is going *home*. His birthplace."

The room buzzed again. Cassidy sat up straight, puzzled. *Even I don't know where he was born. Not exactly. I don't even think Trede knew. At least... He never mentioned it.*

"Mr. Traz," began Gragus. "How— Firstly, we're all assuming this source is accurate. And where exactly is Trede's birthplace?"

Traz laughed heartily. "Well, he's from that ruined village in Okishinren, right? He must be there."

Gragus strained between bewilderment and politeness. Cassidy could recognize it easily in her mentor. He said, "That's worth... investigating. Any thoughts from you, Drayle?" He took half a step back, removed his glasses and gave them a vigorous polish.

Drayle worked his mouth while overcoming a stunned expression. "Home... Home can be anywhere, as long as you're with the right people. For Trede, going back to the beginning, his beginning, is as plausible as anything. The fact that place is so near The Well itself would make sense. He's still infused with a portion of its power as far as we know. Which... There's another thing that's been puzzling me. While Trede wants to return to Okishinren, where is he now?"

Traz shrugged his shoulders in casual fashion. "He didn't say."

Drayle looked past Cassidy to the mystics in the row behind. Oudrine was there, she shook her head gently side to side.

Cassidy tensed. The room seemed to grow hot all the sudden. While it was comforting to have so many people interested in finding Trede and getting him back, it didn't seem like they had made much progress yet. *He wants to come back...* That thought alone filled her with excess emotion she couldn't begin to process. *But we don't know where he is. How are we supposed to help?*

Almost reading Cassidy's mind, Drayle turned aside to Gragus. "May we call up Oudrine? She's the only other person to receive direct word from Trede."

Cassidy wrestled herself at those words. Even though she felt she shouldn't, she was jealous that Trede would have contacted Oudrine instead of her. *Still... Probably some kind of mystic connection. But Traz isn't a mystic?* She mentally kicked herself for the petty thoughts; still they lingered.

After a moment, Oudrine joined the others on the stage. Drayle had her recount the exact words she heard from Trede again for the sake of the group. *"I need you. I can't do this alone. Find me. Help me come back."* Oudrine explained too the general limitations of such long-range telepathy and how extraordinary the experience was.

As if on queue, a few older Cytech board members mumbled in derision from their seats about the amphitheater. Phrases like *insubstantial evidence*, or *lacks corroboration* could be heard around the room

Cassidy rolled her eyes. *They'll believe whatever they want... or not.*

Gragus picked up on the dissent in the room; he led Oudrine with a related question. "Of any mystic present, it's my understanding you've had the greatest direct connection to the creature Wellborne. Would you say that's correct?"

Cassidy observed that Oudrine looked weakened for a moment. Her eyes fluttered and her shoulders sank just slightly. The mystic recovered to respond, "That is correct."

And it's these same Well-energies that Trede is using to contact you, is it not?" Gragus' tone was escalating, to be sure the room followed every word. It was an easy trick for an experienced orator like him.

"That is my understanding. No mystic with their own Fire could reach me across such distance... Even though the distance is not understood. It is beyond humankind."

"Drayle, do you concur?" Gragus turned to face the crowd even though Drayle was to his right.

"I've studied the limitations of mystics both living and dead. What she says is true. Trede must still have access to a portion of the Well's power."

A warm smile crept into Gragus' eyes. It was just the thing he needed to drive it home. "Wellborne's body is found, sleeping, but alive. At the same time, Trede has managed to send word he's alive too. What's more, he's attempting to return." He paced the stage with determined steps. "How advantageous for us that the one person we need to defeat Wellborne is *trying* to get back to us. Fellow Cytechs, this is where we come in. I propose an expedition. To the ruins in Okishinren in search of Trede. It's a fair bit to travel, but—"

"And I volunteer to lead this quest!" Traz bolted two steps forward to the edge of the stage with hands on his hips. His posture softened a moment; he looked down at his selahn friends. "But you all knew that. No surprises there. I've just been waiting for the right moment to announce my intentions. It's all about timing, you know!" He laughed to himself, a throaty chuckle that bubbled up and out.

Several voices shouted out around the room. Cassidy recognized some of them. *From the logistics team... inter-guildhouse planning department. Those are the people always worried about who's going where and how much it'll cost. Sigh...*

Gragus attempted to gather everyone's attention again. "Esteemed members, it seems we have a course of action!" His raised voice projected over the thrumming crowd. "Official plans to be released within two days!"

Cautious and alert voices accosted the stage. It became clear Gragus was trying to conclude the meeting, and now every last concern held in the room was being lashed out at the stage. Many were afraid that Wellborne might return before the mystics could assemble a countermeasure. Some went as far as demanding an increase of guard personnel to ten times of that before the previous Great Battle. Others had unrelated concerns. A supposed disease dubbed *the sickness* had apparently spread to a few dozen citizens. Others were concerned about a man

named Tiberiak who had pronounced himself Regional Governor recently. Other than the political fanfare, there hadn't been any visible changes in the city. Which was usually the way of all such declarations.

Cassidy felt bad for Gragus getting peppered with everything at once. It was the price he paid for being so prominent in the guild.

"Everyone! Everyone, other concerns will be addressed by committee at a later date. Our first attention goes to the expedition to return Trede and the mystic effort to defend against the possible return of Wellborne. It's the greatest threat to our city, and requires our greatest efforts." He continued assuaging fears and delaying final answers as best he could. The room's commotion stilled little.

Cassidy felt a hand on her shoulder. She spun back to see Yaladra with an emotionless gaze.

"I would watch out for the Merkants," she said. Her quiet voice cut through the noise only by proximity. With *Tiberiak* involved, it's only a matter of time before something goes down. We should be ready."

"We've had plenty of mayors before," said Cassidy. "None of them ever stuck around. Are you sure?"

"Trust me." Yaladra replied with a cold, hard look in her dark brown eyes. "It's just a matter of time. I'll be in touch if I hear anything... But keep alert."

The noise of the room crescendoed. Many had risen and were shuffling around, some towards the exits some towards the front. Yaladra followed the other mystics towards the stage to rejoin her father.

Cassidy sat there as three dozen people tried to get Gragus to weigh in on any one of a dozen urgent matters. The mystics and selahns stayed close, talking amongst themselves. *What is going on? We're never this disorganized. Even during the preparation for the Storm, it was never this bad.* She paused to reflect. *Maybe we never really recovered from the last one?*

"You ready to get out of here?" The voice to her left startled her out of her thoughts. It was Bors, staring straight ahead, a scowl on his face. He wasn't pleased with the current state of things either.

Cassidy couldn't help but feel she should stay. Traz was finally back... *And leaving again right away.* She felt so helpless, so lost in that moment. The buzzing hive of activity in the room just made her feel hopeless.

"Yeah," she said. "Let's get back to work on Tenowon." In truth, she wanted something to drown her worries and fears. She needed it. She told herself that if

anything else developed, she could get back to ground level in less than a couple hours. *If they need me... I'll come back. There's just... so much else to do.*

Chapter 19

Langhorne

DAMN summer heat. It was midday and the sun was fierce. Langhorne was jogging his way back to the marshal office. It'd been weeks since he and Jaxet returned from their surveillance in the Wastes. He'd had all the scouts keeping special attention around the Daemon cliffs and west. There hadn't been any sign of the Outcasts making a move on Wellborne's location. Until that morning. He'd regretted for days not staying in the Wastes longer to try and discern *where* exactly they were headed. At the same time he thought, *with my own daughter with me, it wasn't worth an extra second in that cesspit. Can't be much help to anyone if we're dead.*

All of this culminated in the fact that he was stuck hustling in the worst heat of the year. The Outcasts were on the move. *And I still have no idea where Wellborne's body is.* He'd hoped to get one step ahead of Rott and the Outcasts; it was proving impossible.

"Marshal! Marshal Langhorne!" A woman's voice came from behind.

Sounds urgent... He turned, though he was already exhausted and had a dozen other things he was rushing to do.

"It's my sister! My sister's gotten the Sick! She was working at the creamery and..."

Langhorne didn't know every single person in the town by name, but he recognized this one. One of two sisters who worked a small dairy farm at the edge of town. *Loreilei and Lanalei if I recall. Can't say which one she is, though.*

"She collapsed, marshal! I couldn't wake her! I couldn't—" Her voice cracked.

Langhorne put a firm but gentle hand on her shoulder; he looked her square in the eyes. "Your sister makes number six." *And she probably won't be the last,* he thought to himself. "Good news is, none of the others have gotten any worse. Best thing you can do now is keep close watch. Make sure she drinks water. And she might get up and wander from time to time, don't expect her to make any sense, though. The Sick has a way of... getting in your head."

The woman looked aghast. A frightened expression that seemed to say, *that's all you can do?*

"I've been sending word to the Cytechs in Sedenza. I expect they'll figure something out about this too." Langhorne's recent connections to Sedenza were well-known in town. *I just hope that gives her some hope to anchor on.*

The woman's fearful gaze changed to one of being daunted, shaken. "How can I... Lorelei is..."

"Lanalei," he said as softly as he could manage with droplets of sweat running down his brow. "You're going to need to hold on tight. We all are. For a while longer. Believe it or not, there's a lot going around here in the northeast. The Sick not withstanding. Smisom's done worse. We can get through." It may not *all* have been true, but he needed to tell her *something*. *What could be worse than Wellborne lost in the Scorch and the Outcasts on his trail?*

Thankfully, his kinds words worked. Lanalei nodded amidst a few sniffles. Langhorne kindly excused himself and continued his way.

Minutes later, at the office, Langhorne ran a damp, cool rag over his face and neck.

"Drink up, dad." Jaxet handed him a tall carved, wooden stein of water. She'd been inside for a bit but still looked peaked due to the heat.

"Thanks." He drank nearly the whole thing in a single draught. He wiped his blond beard and mouth with the back of his hand. He quickly relayed the news from the Lei sisters to the room, Jaxet, Yui and Hildegas were all ears.

"That makes six now," said Hil. He shook his head side to side slowly with an ominous expression in his eyes. "Brek's been down for weeks! No sign of *any* of them coming out of it."

Yui was servicing a couple rifles in the back of the room. She didn't look up, but her dour expression made it clear where her thoughts were. "Six and counting..." she muttered before the room sank into a quiet, melancholic moment

Jaxet snapped back to her father. "When are heading out to find Wellborne?"

Welcoming the subject change, Langhorne replied. "I've been trying to get here all day! It's been one thing after another. The heatwave alone's got people on edge. Merkants and Cytechs are at each others' throats more than normal. Next the Sick is spreading, and the Outcasts are finally making their move." He grabbed his favorite large scale map from a drawer and unrolled it on the rough-hewn desk. He traced his fingers from the Daemon Cliffs just to the south, then east and north

around the fringes of Smisom proper. He tapped a spot. "That's where they're headed. The hills here over a shallow valley. They'll have the best view of the area. If that's where they think Wellborne is, that's where they'll need to start."

Hil sidled beside Langhorne and clicked his teeth. "Yep. You can see for miles from Zanfer's knoll there." He pointed. "Easy pickings. That's where they'll need to go first to get their bearings."

"Yui! You got my piece ready?" Langhorne looked across the room to Yui's quiet corner.

"It's the only six-chamber rifle we got in here. Cleaned and ready. Uh—Sir." The lanky girl with short black hair had almost forgotten all decorum.

Langhorne was too busy to care at this point. "I'm leaving now. As soon as I can get a pack filled with enough water." He looked over to Jaxet, expecting argument. Instead, she didn't take her eyes off the map. *Things really must be serious.*

Hil was the one to offer an argument instead. "You sure about this, Langs? Alone with the Outcasts, again?"

Langhorne opened his mouth to speak but was cut off.

"He has to do it." It was Jaxet. There was an unshakeable matter-of-fact-ness in her voice. "There's way too much going on here, we can't spare a scout. And we can't send enough of us to take out the remaining Outcasts in a firefight. They'd still outnumber us anyway. Best thing to do is just keep tabs, and..." She shrugged and looked to her weary father.

Beaming with pride on the inside, Langhorne continued. "Send word back to Sedenza as soon as we get a beat on the whole Wellborne situation. The Cytechs and Mystics are dying for news. And if I'm lucky, maybe I can find him first. Not sure what good it'll do, but any lead we can get is something."

"And something is better than nothing," added Jaxet.

Hil raised his hands in defeat. "All right, all right, I know when I'm beat." He took a couple steps back and turned to pace the room.

Langhorne looked at his daughter with admiration, perhaps never being more proud. He half-smiled as a single voiceless chuckle made his chest rise and fall.

"Sometimes you gotta go solo and get dirty. I get it, Dad. But don't think this means I won't be joining you next time. Seems like there's never a shortage of

deadly, stupid errands to do around here.”

From across the room, Yui laughed which made Hildegras join right in.

Langhorne smiled. *What did I ever do to deserve such a good crew like this?* He relished the moment but knew there wasn't time to waste. “I'll come back with word as soon as I can. There's a lot riding on this.” He looked all three in the eye in turn. “I know we thought after the Storm things might calm down. But maybe... After this we can finally get back to normal.” He flailed his hands. “Whatever that is.”

Miles from Smisom, Langhorne spent the hot evening hours trekking east through the barren Scorch. When the sun finally set, he took a seat on a crumbling red boulder. He wiped his sweaty brow with a kerchief and took a swig from his canteen. As a gentle breeze came by, he closed his eyes and savored it. He also took the moment to slow his breathing and tune his ears for any foreign sounds. *No sign of the Outcasts yet. I'll beat them. If I hurry.* He looked east but couldn't see far because of the gradually increasing ridge.

Adjusting the straps of his pack, he rose from his seat and made up his mind to travel through the night. He needed to press every advantage. His thoughts wondered as climbed the ridge. *Another handful of hours until Zanfer's knoll.*

Langhorne's travel was uneventful as he walked into the hours of the early morning. His feet ached; his legs were stiff. He descended a final hill into a broader, flat plain. The normally rust-red landscape looked blue in the waxing moon's light. The dim light made it hard to find anything. *Torches are no good... Outcasts will be coming up from the south anytime now.* Knowing he was in the area of the Wellborne sighting, the marshal scanned his surroundings as best he could. He took slow steps, eyes straining looking for anything suspicious. After a while, he noticed there was a dark spot that looked *too* dark, even in the middle of the night. He recalled the reports of Wellborne's dark grey skin. Steeling his nerves, he set out for the patch of land that looked darker than night.

As he grew closer, he started to feel something. It was like faint nausea building up in the back of his mind. He shook it off, steeled himself, and took the final few steps. Kneeling down, he looked over the dark human-like shape under the starlight. Though hard to tell, it didn't look like it was breathing. He cleared his thoughts to combat the rank smell before looking closer.

Not even a twitch. After a moment to build up his courage, he placed a

hand on the thing's shoulder and recoiled. *Hot...* His brow furrowed. Langhorne knew he was the least suited to deal with this kind of mystical business. He didn't have the mystic gifting or the education of most Cytechs. Yet there he was.

Guess I'll give it a shot, he thought to himself. He took out a thin corded rope from his back. With a quick knot around Wellborne's ankle, Langhorne attempted to drag the creature across the Scorch. If he had any chance of hiding it from the Outcasts, it was worth it.

He started a march to the north west, rope firmly in hand, Wellborne at his back. Pulling mightily, he only made it as far as the taught rope would let him. He jerked on the rope, putting his whole body weight into it. No progress. He turned back an irritated sneer curled his lip. The marshal gripped the rope again, pulling like he was in a one-man tug of war. His boots kicked up a few loose rocks. Again, nothing.

He tossed the rope away and cursed under his breath. Pacing this way and that, he ran a hand over his blond beard. His thoughts struggled. *Not a lot of options here...* He considered the shovel in his pack. Not only would burying take time he didn't have, it'd be obvious to even an amateur that the ground had been disrupted. More and more, Langhorne found himself in a no-win scenario.

After pacing for several minutes, he crouched beside the sleeping creature. He took out his long knife and considered the grim task. *Seems like leaving one less part of this abomination for those Outcasts to find is about as good as I can do.* As blade touch skin on Wellborne's dark grey flesh, Langhorne dropped the blade in pain. The same oppressive heat he felt with his bare hand had instantly filled his knife to the handle. It seemed impossible for an instant, before he stopped to consider what lay before him. He reached for the knife, surprised to find it already cool. There was something about the strange heat that was bothering him.

He dashed his knife into the ground. The warmth from Wellborne's body didn't feel like heat at all. Not like fire or a stone baking in noonday sun. As he sat there, an ill wind passed over him. A thought came to him. A warning in the air.

Growing... I am knowing...

Langhorne shuffled to his feet and backed away, not taking his eyes off the dark man-shape for a single breath. It was that moment Marshal Langhorne realized he was in completely over his head. He muttered to himself while collecting his knife, rope and pack. "This thing's definitely alive. And not a thing I can do about it." He surveyed the ridge of Zanfer's knoll, recalling some caves nearby. After taking one last look at the mystical construct, he set off. He needed to be hidden from sight before the Outcasts arrived. *If they want to have at it... so*

be it. But I'll be watching.

Oudrine

Today's the day. I'm leaving the city. The wild songs of telaliam filled the airfields. Despite the flutter in her heart, the whale-song soothed her. Thankfully, she wasn't alone.

"Are you sure we can't send a Cytech representative with you? This is so important..." Gragus' fiddling hands took out his pocket watch again. "It's really no trouble. We could—"

Oudrine, though weary from the days of preparation already, laid a gentle hand on his shoulder. She didn't smile, but she gave him a long peaceful look, her blue eyes exuding a gentle determination. "We'll be fine, Gragus. Thank you for what you've done already."

"Yes!" chimed in Traz as he wheeled a crate to a stop. "We'll be well-supplied for weeks!" Some of his troupe followed behind carrying large packs. A large Cytech triple diamond was burned into the flap on each rucksack.

"We'll send word as soon as we can," said Oudrine, she lilted slightly to one side, trying to stave off her fatigue.

"As soon as we find, Trede, that is! Oh ho!" Traz kicked his heels and went back to his comrades who were gathering the last of their things for travel.

"Ah... yes." Gragus shoulders loosened as he acquiesced. "I'm sure it's all in very good hands." He fumbled his watch again. "I guess it's this whole business that has got me spooked. With the Storm, we could at least see it coming from miles away, but now... There's just as much at stake but we can't even..." He stumbled over his words mid-thought. "Do you think this Sickness is really related to Wellborne? Is that possible?"

She considered. She more than anyone knew the mind and capability of Wellborne. It was immense. As powerful and terrifying as the Roiling Sea during a gale. Inevitable like an avalanche in motion. She wondered just how far the limits of Wellborne's power might go. She couldn't reason to consider *anything* impossible. "Given the power at play... It seems likely, Gragus. All the more

reason we find Trede and begin mounting a defense. We'll do our part, and leave you and the Cytechs for yours."

Sated but not all that reassured, Gragus stepped aside and bid them good journey. As Traz and the other selahns settled their goods inside the carrier, Oudrine alone stood in the doorway as the deckhands drew it closed. She waved at Gragus and gave him an empty smile. It wasn't a malicious gesture. Joyless perhaps. Full of destiny and the grim knowledge of the difficult future they all shared.

From his place a dozen feet from the landing tower, Gragus nodded in solemn agreement. He glanced at his watch once more, turned, and made way back into the city.

As the door finally clanked closed, Oudrine was left with only a sliver of light coming through the cracks. Voices of the carrier crew shouted, *heave ho*, *heave ho*, and soon they were lifting upwards on the long rope and pulley.

She found Traz and a few companions in one room. There was an open cushion on the floor, so Oudrine sat. She was still learning the names of all of Traz's companions, so she glanced around the room. The older one, Vlahn, was dark grey and puttering around in his pack. Traz and Svelina were there, as well as the lanky, tall Vilagreá. After a few minutes of quiet, Oudrine spoke.

"Tell me, Traz. What was it that drew you to this location?" When Trede had reached out to Oudrine's mind, it was a familiar enough experience for a mystic to recognize. Selahns, to her knowledge, didn't practice such arts.

Traz had been quietly sitting next to Svelina, his left hand was entwined with hers and resting in her lap. He grinned. "I've traveled *all over* the very far with that young man. I'd like to think I know him quite well." A pained look crept into his eyes. "Since he's been gone, I think things just haven't been right. I know his story wasn't done. It can't be..." He cleared his throat. "Then, one day, an east wind blew. And I just knew it was him. It was like breathing in homesickness. But it wasn't mine, no. Something in the wind wanted to go home. Doesn't take a Cytech genius inventor to figure it out from there."

Svelina's shoulders tightened as she looked at her new husband with sweet admiration.

Oudrine was sure the selahn would be blushing, if selahns could even blush under all that fur. The muscles around her lips tightened but she didn't smile.

"And that's that," said Traz sounding very satisfied. "I rounded up anyone

that was set for travel and we came east!"

To think, Trede has been holding on to all this power his entire life. He could communicate with anyone, anywhere, with his thoughts alone. If only he'd understood. If he had... What might he have become instead? While disconcerting, Oudrine was encouraged too. *Could it be that he's as strong as Wellborne?* She considered some old writings she'd encountered about the Uncanny Powers. It was a branch of mystic study that dealt with the mysterious, the unexplainable, and in some cases, the dark and terrifying. One thing most users of the Uncanny Powers shared was a direct exposure to The Well. It gave them limits beyond their limits. It opened paths to new abilities beyond what a mystic's Fire might achieve. However, this experience was something all its own. Trede had already surpassed all that was known of the Uncanny Powers. She directed her thoughts back to the moment. "Thank you, Traz, for coming. And so soon after your wedding." She nodded to Svelina.

"Are you kidding?" said Traz, suddenly boisterous. "This is *the best* kind of honeymoon. Traveling! Seeing the world. A *real* adventure. This is the life. And with my summit flower? Perrfection."

Svelina giggled and leaned over, resting her head on Traz's shoulder. He kissed her rust-toned forehead.

"Cheers for th'happy couple!" Vlahn raised a wooden cup filled with something sparkling. "Anyone else want one?"

Vilegreá, who'd been quietly going through her climbing gear chimed in. "Oi! Here, here!"

A smile broke through the weariness on Oudrine's face. The happiness on their faces warmed her heart, but it made her loss and loneliness sting. She sat there as conversation wandered between the selahns. Holding on to her memories of Maej, she focused her still recovering willpower on the mission at hand. Wellborne still lived. And how the next days played out would determine all their fates.

Chapter 20

Cassidy

DAYS had passed since the first signs of life had returned to Tenowon's damaged form. Occasionally his eyelids would flutter, then stop for hours. Inexplicably, they'd start up again. There seemed to be no rhyme or reason to it.

Cassidy sat on a short stool in front of the chair Tenowon had been propped up into. To her left was Bors in another chair. They had fixed every damaged power conduit in Tenowon's body, at least the parts visible through open wounds, and were running out of ideas. She wasn't sure how long they'd been sitting there, just staring at their quarry.

"What are we doing..." She sounded almost drunk from fatigue and frustration.

Bors grunted. "Thinking."

"Can I at least take a break?"

He grunted again, unmoved, arms folded.

She sighed and stood.

"Sometimes the answer just comes to you." His voice was clipped, irritated. "That's how it works. Inspiration. You have to wait for it."

"I'll wait for it while I get a glass of water." She shuffled away, practically delirious from the lack of sleep. She found a faucet on the far side of Lab One and took a drink. While in mid-draught she almost dropped the glass at the sounding commotion.

"Holy hells!" There was a loud bang and Bors cursed, repeatedly.

Cassidy slammed her glass down, almost breaking it, and sprinted across the room. She barely avoiding crashing into several workbenches on the way. Her brown eyes flared at the scene. Bors was standing, his chair had fallen backwards. And Tenowon...

"Bors..." She felt herself swallow with disbelief. "Tenowon's arm moved."

His right arm had moved upwards, at least the shoulder actuator was functioning. His elbow was still bent at the crook.

"I can see that!" yelled Bors, still getting over the shock of it.

Tenowon's arm gently lowered again. The rest of him stayed completely motionless. Cassidy thought that may have been all they'd get. *Just a power surge? Still looks offline.* Then his mouth moved.

"Booting up emergency diagnostic kernel... Automated system repair impossible. Failover to interactive diagnostics in tertiary data repository. Greetings, Technician. Please describe the extent of damage to this unit." His voice was flat and dull, with none of his usual inflection. His mouth barely moved when he spoke. It was off-putting.

"What is it talking about?" said Cassidy, horrified. She took two steps back.

Before Bors could answer, Tenowon, or the empty shell of him, replied. "Error. Advanced language lexicon is unavailable. Please describe the extent of damage to this unit."

Cassidy brought a hand up to her mouth. *I'm going to be sick.* She'd been working on a *dead* Tenowon for months, but this just felt wrong. This wasn't Tenowon. This wasn't anything, just some broken machine making jargon-filled sounds. "Just turn it off." She couldn't stomach any more.

"Error. Advanced language—"

Bors raised his voice to talk over the machine. "We made progress. We knew it would take time." He picked up his chair and sat down, too fatigued to hold up his typically grumpy nature. He tossed his dirty rag on the floor and made a tired-sounding exhale.

"Please describe the extent of damage to this unit," Tenowon's shell said again.

Cassidy buried her face in her hands, shaking her head. This strange parody of Tenowon was disturbing. *What am I even doing here? Why did I think I could fix something a million times more advanced than a steam machine? Sure, he's powered up finally... but this isn't Tenowon. It's not... maybe he really is gone for good.* She let her feet wander the lab. Echoing behind her every ten seconds or so, Tenowon repeated the same request. It was a grating, harsh reminder of her utter failure.

Cassidy found herself a couple dozen paces away. She rested her hands on the nearest workbench. To one side, she noticed a book jammed under a toolbox.

It was an older book, with a couple pages near the back almost falling out. She slid it out and dusted it off. *Field Mechanics Guide third edition... Hah, Bors' book. He'd get a kick out of this.* She picked it up and thumbed through it, stopping at the pages that were nearly falling out. *Troubleshooting guide. The first step to troubleshooting is to inspect the machine and make note of any problems, even minor damage or disrepair can lead to larger problems...* Her eyes trailed away from the book. *Troubleshooting... make note of any problems.* She repeated in her thoughts.

From across the vast space of Lab One, she heard. "Please describe the extent of damage to this unit."

Is he really asking—? She ran back to Bors who was working a kink out of the back of his neck with one hand. "Bors, look at this!"

"Whats that—" He put on his glasses and cleared his fatigued, raspy voice. "Oh... That's a good one. Third edition they finally added the expanded troubleshooting guide. Worked on that for months before they would put it in print."

"Exactly!" Cassidy said, a glimmer shone in her brown eyes. "Troubleshooting." She turned back to Tenowon.

"Please describe the extent of damage to this unit," Tenowon droned again.

Cassidy took a step forward, hands nervously floating at her waist. "Damage to... skin. On the right knee."

A kind of bell sounded from somewhere inside Tenowon's person. "Damaged logged."

Cassidy went wide eyed and was pretty sure she stopped breathing. She stared expectantly at Bors. He gave her a single eyebrow and gestured to *keep going.*

"Additional damage to facial exterior," Cassidy blurted out as the first thing she could think of.

"Damage logged."

"And..." She wracked her brain. They'd made progress fixing the knee actuator but it still seemed like most the body had no power. *No power...* She blurted out, "Lack of power to... *extremities!*"

"Damage logged." Tenowon's blank face, while at first off putting, was now encouraging. *The jaw is moving, barely. That means there's some power working*

in there. He's not completely gone. Cassidy's hands tightened into balled up fists. Maybe we are getting somewhere?

She recalled Tenowon's state when she first found him out in the Scorch. He'd been trampled by the Storm. His body had been brutalized by impossibly severe winds and stone and sand. After a moment collecting her thoughts, she spoke to Tenowon again, trying to ignore how odd it was to be telling Tenowon about the damage to his own body. *But it's not like talking to the real Tenowon, it's like... some kind of troubleshooting procedure inside of Tenowon.* Amazed at the idea, she prepared her next statement. "Multiple blunt force trauma across entire body. Possible sandstorm damage. Minor damage to..." It was hard to describe Tenowon's body parts in non-human terms, Cassidy tried her best. "Damage to metallic endoskeleton." After each piece of information was given, a similar chime sounded as before.

"Damage logged," said Tenowon.

Cassidy shrugged to Bors and let her hands fall down at her sides.

"That sums it up," said Bors. His posture had picked up and was looking less tired. "At least the damage we know about." He rose from his seat and leaned in close to Tenowon.

The android's eyes stared blankly ahead, oblivious to any stimuli.

Bors squinted at the android he'd called friend for decades. "Damage report... Complete."

Tenowon's eyes flashed shut. "Extrapolating from damage report. Preparing work instruction. Please wait."

Bors pulled back at the abrupt action and swore under his breath.

Cassidy stepped closer. "What... is it doing?"

Bors stood up straight, deep in thought. "Basic troubleshooting methodology. You get a list of all visible problems. All inferred problems based on undesired behaviors... Then you make a plan. Step by step, cycle through more and more invasive and difficult alterations until undesired behaviors are removed." Bors cleared his throat, sounding agitated. "You did read the troubleshooting guide didn't you?"

"Of course I did," she replied as if it were the most obvious fact. "So, You mean all that stuff you just said... is going on inside Tenowon's brain right now?"

"If the people that built him had any sense... Yes," said Bors, scratching at

his thin white beard.

Tenowon's eyes snapped open again. "Work instruction complete. Step one. The unit will need to be submerged into a solution of c-TPE-9 chemicals, including ionization additives to draw out possible debris. Acknowledge?"

The air cut off in Cassidy's throat as she exchanged blank looks with Bors. "What—? What's a CT—"

"Do you require formula definition for C-TPE-9 polymer?" In spite of his lifeless tone and lack of facial expression, Cassidy was sure Tenowon was mocking them.

"Yes?" Cassidy said, though completely unsure of herself. She rummaged nearby for a blank paper and pen.

"Solution consists of components in parts by weight: thirty parts of SEBS (styrene ethylene butylene styrene), thirty parts of SBS (styrene butadiene styrene), forty parts of rubber oil, twenty parts of polypropylene and point-five parts of zinc stearate."

Cassidy scrawled furiously over the paper. "What is all this stuff?! I've never heard of most of it!" Cassidy was familiar with the basic chemistry of the guild, but she was sure many of these materials had not been invented yet. *Or rediscovered at least... Tenowon is technically from our past.*

Bors threw up his hands and left the room at a shuffling pace without a word.

"Where are you going!?" Cassidy shouted at him while trying to capture the long string of ingredients Tenowon kept spouting.

"We need a better chemist than me!" he shouted back gruffly. "I'm going to see if Ghyut is around."

Cassidy fumed; she was sure her face went red hot. She moved to a third page of paper and was still writing down foreign-sounding ingredients. *I'm sure I'm not spelling any of this right! How are we ever going to fix Tenowon if we can't even understand the repair instructions?! And why did Bors have to leave me alone like that?!*

Finally, Tenowon stopped listing, but only to say, "Are you ready for Step Two, Technician?"

Cassidy collapsed on the desk, grumbling. She raised her head enough to say, "No! No I am not ready for Step Two!" Her tone was indignant but Tenowon

didn't seem to mind.

"Understood," said Tenowon. "Standing by on further repair instructions."

Cassidy wanted to stomp and scream and shout. She huffed and seared a gaze at Tenowon. Until it hit her. She realized the impossibility of the entire situation.

I'm sitting here, mad at a centuries old android... from before the cataclysm. The actual cataclysm. And I'm mad because we've repaired it enough for it to tell us how to finish repairs.

She let that sink in; a chill ran up her spine, invigorating her.

Whoa. We're actually doing it! Sure this isn't normal for Tenowon but... We're actually doing it. We've already helped fixed the most advanced piece of tech on the planet!

Suddenly, the impressiveness of the feat faded away; something stronger set in. She looked at Tenowon, not as a machine, but as a friend and mentor. As a person. Her heart panged to see someone so full of life, so generous and brilliant, frozen in place. She doubled her resolve.

"Hang in there, Tenowon. Your friends are going to get you back. I promised and I meant it." She felt a tear come to her eye just as Tenowon spoke again.

"Error. Advanced language lexicon is unavailable."

Cassidy collapsed back on the desk, burying her face in her folded arms. But instead of frustration a quiet, bittersweet laugh made her shoulders bounce up and down. She sighed. "Even if it kills me. We're going to get you back."

Chapter 21

Yaladra

TWO days had past since Oudrine and the selahns left Sedenza. It was weeks since Yaladra last saw Janice collapse on the street. The Merkants had been tightlipped about the whole ordeal, though a whisper or two could be heard from the market place. People were dropping with similar symptoms consistently. The reaction was all the same. They were whisked away by the Merkants and never spoken of again. The connection between the new Sickness and the Merkants only cemented in Yaladra's mind that *Tiberiak* was somewhere in the thick of it.

The cloaked mystic frequented certain corners of the city on a regular basis, hoping that at least one time, she'd get lucky. *Just need one person to slip up. Where are they taking the sick?* She loitered on a back street near two parallel alleyways. Sometimes she played the part of a shuffling drunk, or a wandering tourist. This time she was merely walking slow and hoping no one got curious. She'd spoken her cloak from its normal stark white to a mottled brown and black. It was less conspicuous this late after dark. The draw of magic from her Fire was minimal; it was her easiest and most used spell after all.

As she ambled the backstreet, her mind flared with anticipation. She was desperate for that final connection back to her target. The fact that the Merkants were in the middle of a huge upheaval just proved that *Tiberiak's* reach was growing stronger. *I have to take him down. With the entire Merkant guild on his side...* Taking down one of the richest men alive was a daunting task on it's own. The idea that his power was growing meant the clock was ticking. *No time to lose.*

Yaladra wandered in an area just beyond some major Merkant offices. Upon hearing voices, she peered around the corner and her stomach sank. She flung herself back out of sight. *Sha'Deeb...*

She hated that the mere sight of him caused her to freeze. The memory of being immobilized by his twisted Inner Fire was still fresh in her mind and muscles. She held back. Hoping some bit of information might slip, her ears tuned and muscled tensed. She had to be ready to jump at a moment's notice.

"I don't give a jivret's tail what they said! *Tiberiak* wrote this order, and that's what we're going to do!" A man wearing a long, blue coat was waiving a handful

of papers in front of a Merkant clerk's face.

The small middle-aged man was cowed, his postured showed he didn't have the willpower to stand up to such brow beating. "But that's... not how we do things. It's not within guild authority," he spoke in a small, concerned voice.

The blue coated man gripped the clerk's shoulder. "The *Regional Governor* said this is what we're going to do. And that's the end of it. Am I clear?!"

The small clerk shook with fear but didn't acquiesce.

That quiet courage spurred Yaladra to action. *I've got to move.* From around the corner, he eyed Sha'Deeb again. The grim mystic had been keeping back, letting the blue coat do all the talking. He then motioned to Sha'Deeb. Who responded with a mirthless grin, even more off-putting because of the milky patches covering half his face. Sha'Deeb raised a hand towards the clerk when another figure entered the scene. It was another person with a long blue overcoat, this one a woman.

That white hair. It's Laurel! Yaladra's hands balled into fists. Laurel was close to Tiberiak, maybe even part of his inner circle. *This might be working out in my favor.*

Laurel put a hand on Sha'Deeb's shoulder, holding him back. Without ceasing motion, she took strides and grabbed the black-lacquered pistol from inside her coat. She held it up to the clerk's head; with her other arm, she elbowed him by the neck and forced him down onto the ground. She reared her hand, anger twisting her face. A few strands of oddly snow-white hair covered her eyes. Odd because the color didn't match her apparent age at all.

"Have you even read the protocols?" she growled, not at the clerk, but at the man in the blue coat. "It's a simple matter. Get out here, enforce the new instructions, and deal with any *problems*." She waved her pistol at the clerk at the word *problems*. "We don't have time for jacking off!"

"We were handling it, Lieutenant," The blue coat man took a step back and folded his arms. "Weren't we?" He nodded to Sha'Deeb.

The mystic didn't respond in kind.

"Mystic support is a luxury," Laurel growled again. She kicked the clerk over who yelped and collapsed onto the cobblestones. "It's time to speed things up." He readied her pistol to fire.

Yaladra stepped out from her dark corner. "Laurel, stop!" He eyes were still brown, she didn't want to engage the Strength of Words until needed. *And I need*

to stay at least thirty paces from Sha'Deeb if I want stay alive. She placed one foot in front of the other, the beginnings of an aggressive martial stance. Her arms remained at her sides, waiting to see their reaction. She readied a few choice Words, her mind drawn tighter than a pulled bowstring.

Down the alley, the three aggressors startled. The clerk remained on the ground, covering his head with his arms.

"Who the—" the Laurel's male counterpart started.

"Sha'Deeb!" Laurel didn't waste a second. "Time to earn your keep, get her!"

Looks like she remembers me, thought Yaladra. The first time they'd run into each other in Briar, Yaladra had been an unknown. Now, she was a known mystic threat and Laurel wasn't taking any chances. Sha'Deeb was on Tiberiak's payroll, and it appeared this was *just* the kind of situation they kept him around for. Yaladra was wary of the shrinking distance between Sha'Deeb and herself. *That man is still in danger...* Laurel was readying her pistol again with intent to finish the job with the uncooperative Merkant clerk. Yaladra closed her eyes tightly, reaching deep into her Inner Fire. She'd need to use the Strength of Words, but not just anything would do. It had to fit the situation, work quickly, save the clerk, and keep her out of range of Sha'Deeb's power.

In her mind, just for a moment, she was a little girl again studying with her father. One time, years before Tiberiak entered their lives, she'd play hide and seek in garden. A simple game made nearly impossible when budding mystic powers were thrown in the mix. *That's it.* Yaladra's eyes burst open, violet energies flowing from her irises. "The three of you are... *alone!*"

Laurel, Sha'Deeb and the other man standing all flinched. Their eyelids fluttered a few times.

Laurel snapped her head this way and that trying to find sign of their quarry. "Sha'Deeb! Where'd they go?!"

The clerk and Yaladra hadn't gone anywhere, but for the moment, they couldn't be seen. Not by the other three in the alley. The Strength of Words had limited range as well, but the spell was just the diversion Yaladra needed. She knelt down and made eye contact with the clerk, who was still cowering on the ground. She gestured to him. *Get out of here, and be quiet about it.*

Sha'Deeb scowled. "She's still here." He stepped cautiously towards the end of the sandstone lined alley, arms raised and ready to grapple.

Once the clerk was clear of the alley, Yaladra lifted the illusion. It was a huge

strain to blank out partial vision of that many people over tens of feet. She was already feeling flushed. *Got to play it off. I need one of them to lead me back to Tiberiak.* She resisted the urge to wipe her brow and stood strong. "So you do talk." She stared down Sha'Deeb while her eyes faded from violet to brown.

Sha'Deeb reeled back two steps, then composing himself, stood straight again. He adjusted his blue sash almost casually. He grunted at her, making a scornful sound.

Realizing her mystic opponent wasn't going to supply a snappy comeback, she decided to gather all their attention again. "So which one of you is going to take me to *Tiberiak*? I owe him something. And I mean to see he gets it paid in full." Feeling her opponent's uncertainty, she let her confidence grow. She was hungry for vengeance and ready to carve her way through these three. Her blood rushed, breath quickened, knuckles whitened into fists. She took a stance, keeping her weight balanced, ready to rush or dodge in a split second. They knew her voice was her greatest weapon, so she continued using it to keep them off balance. "Hm? I didn't hear you? Which one of you gets to be the one? Laurel, how about for old times sake? Let's ditch these other two."

Laurel pointed her pistol at Yaladra but nervously glanced over to Sha'Deeb who was halfway down the alley. A burning, tense moment lingered in the air. "Take her down. And don't let her live this time." Laurel concealed her weapon, and dashed out the back side of the alley, dragging the other man in a blue coat.

Yaladra heard the sound of footsteps on cobblestones heading east. She made note of it for later. "Looks like they chose you, Sha'Deeb." She stood at the ready, knowing she was *at most* a few paces outside his maximum range. The fear was gone though, this was a moment of destiny. A rare opportunity that was only one step away from taking *Tiberiak* down himself.

What Sha'Deeb did next surprised her. His postured loosened and he sauntered across the alley. Not closer, but neither further away. She watched his every step.

"You make *Tiberiak* very mad, you know?" He had a very casual, matter-of-fact way of speaking, his accent tinted from a corner of the far southeast.

"The feeling is mutual."

"You took his *favorite* pet from him. His longest running servant."

He's trying to get under my skin. It won't work. She smiled a predatory grin on the inside. *I'll let him play.*

"And even *before* that, you were the first mystic to escape his employ." He

shrugged and let his hands slap down on his legs. His upper lip curled. "My boss... he doesn't like you so much."

Yaladra stood straight and placed one foot behind. She didn't think she had to worry about a surprise assault. Still she watched her opponent's feet move, skimming over the top of the cobblestones. "And what do you intend to do about it?"

He stopped, turned and faced her and shrugged. "Looks like you have to die."

Yaladra considered the man's lack of menacing demeanor. It was hard to take him seriously. She eyed his face, looking for a twitch, a tell or a bluff.

"These *normals* don't get us, whitecloak." He continued his stroll back and forth through the middle of the alley. He didn't even bother keep his eyes fixed on Yaladra's position. "They don't understand power. Understand what it's *like* to have this kind of power in your hands. They pull the strings, move the money, whatever. But that's not power. Not like what you and I have. It's a game to them."

What's his angle? Is he stalling? Still, she knew she couldn't safely cross the alley until he was dealt with. And as far as she was concerned, having a mystic under Tiberiak's employ in sight was just as good as having her hands on Tiberiak himself. "A game?" She played along.

"Yes! A game. Moving people, move resources. All this Merkant business... whatever. Just a game."

"Then why play? Bring me to Tiberiak, we end the game. We're the only ones with power. Why play?" *He's pushing it at thirty feet, just over. Have to be careful.* She took a half step back, trying not to be noticeable.

"That's the thing... That's just the thing." His head bobbed up and down in agreement. "The game is pointless. Who wins, who loses. Don't matter. Just gotta make a few coins now and then. Live to play another day."

Yaladra stepped back another half step. There was a heat in the air. A sick tug, like a slimy hand reached out at her body. *This is it.* Not wanting to play on that she felt the mystical attack coming, she kept the conversation going. "So, you're just doing a job, huh? You're playing the game, too?"

"What can I say?" Sha'Deeb shrugged and pursed his lips. Despite the milky patches of skin over his face, he looked like any other kind face in a crowd. "A job's a job!" He lunged forward and began running down the alley at Yaladra.

Already feeling the effects of the attack, Yaladra was backing up as he spoke.

She turned and ran. She recalled a rusted metal ladder on one sandstone building just outside the alleyway and made that way.

"Light as a feather!" she commanded that reality shift around her. Striking violet eyes lit up the night. She was at the top of the latter in three short leaps. She released the spell and lingered a moment, making sure her prey saw her. *He needs to follow.*

Sure enough, the blue-sashed mystic saw her and climbed the ladder with haste. Yaladra ran to the opposite side of the square roof and crouched on the farthest edge. The building was maybe thirty feet diagonally. *I just hope it's enough.*

Sha'Deeb reached the second to top rung of the ladder.

Time for an easy one. "Your feet, affixed!" Her eyes again blazed violet as she cast and held the spell.

The pursuer *oof'd* as his stomach slammed into the building's corner. He pulled at his feet to no avail. Yaladra sat on her perch, just outside of his range. She could feel the sickening pull of his magic, but it was far enough to avoid clawing into her muscles.

Sha'Deeb laughed. "Then we are at an impasse. I can't get to you. You can't get to me. This round of the game... a stalemate, no?"

"You'd like to think so." Yaladra grinned, her predacious instincts kicking in. It'd been a while since she'd set the perfect trap like this. She disappeared down the backside of the building, out of sight. She had to stay close to her target to avoid the painful repercussions of reality fighting back against her incantation. Thankfully, her mystic range was wider than Sha'deeb's. *By just enough.* She circle the building and came around to the far side opposite the ladder. She couldn't approach the corner where the ladder stood because it was inside his thirty-foot range.

"You know?" Sha'Deeb called out from his fixed location on the ladder. Yaladra didn't think he could see her, but he spoke like she was near. "Maybe you *do* understand the game. You're not so bad, whitecloak. Another lifetime? Maybe we work together. Who knows."

His casual tone was off-putting. *Sounds way too friendly for a mystic trying to murder me.* Her lip curled in anger. She stepped out into the alley in clear view. *Time to complete the trap.* She didn't want to relish this part so much, but much of her did. It wasn't that she really enjoyed inflicting pain. *Or do I? Anything to get back at Tiberiak is worth it, right?* The hard years she'd spent on the run clashing with the far edges of Tiberiak's organization came flooding back. The hopelessness,

the constant fear. Her jaw clenched. *It's worth it. All of it.* "The air is getting pretty thin up there. Isn't it?" She didn't need to ask for confirmation; sometimes distracting a target helped the spell take effect.

"What— What are you?" Sha'deeb peered along the dark alleyway.

He'll feel the affects soon. "Must be getting hard to breath. All the way up here." Her violet eyes, still glowing from the first spell flared in the dark. A familiar ripping sensation tore at her insides. Holding two spells simultaneously from that distance was a stretch. *Just need to hold it... for a minute.* She strained as her Inner Fire waxed and burned inside her.

"H— Hey!" Sha'deeb shook his head, trying to brush off a fog. "Not... part of the game. Play fair!"

It's all fair, bastard. She decided to amp it up. "Your legs must be getting weak." A third spell was her hard limit, at least all three spells were focused on the same person. She wasn't sure if trying three distinct spells at three different locations was possible. The Strength of Words had its limits after all.

Sha'deeb faltered, relying on his hands to keep from slipping back. He peered down the alley, an angry sneer on his face

Yaladra felt those invisible, slimy tentacles pulling at her muscles again, just barely lashing against her thighs and forearms. She took half a step back and felt her stomach heave. She had to brace to stop from retching. *Looks I'm at my range, too.* Sickly, invisible fingers still probed at her; though it wasn't enough for Sha'deeb's magic to fully take effect. The mystics stayed, locked in battle more than thirty feet apart. *He's not going down.* Yaladra was sweating now. A long, rolling growl of exertion escaped her throat unbidden. Suddenly she noticed herself taking half a step forward. She didn't want to move closer; *I can't control it. Is this part of his magic? Or is my body rejecting the pain?* She shouted in frustration, fighting against the pain and stress. Sha'Deeb's magic started to drill into her front calf. Agony crescendoed. She panicked. "Release!" she shouted. All three spells were gone in a flash. In desperation, she reached for a stronger spell, a single three word spell she'd perfected after years of running for her life. She fell down on a knee, most of her body now within Sha'deeb's range. As the pain flared, she screamed, "your bones break!"

Silence filled the alley as Sha'deeb fell; a sick lump of man flesh hit the cobblestones.

Furious, Yaladra shook off the pain, forcing herself to march down the alley, limping with an awkward gait. She knew she'd lost Laurel at this point. Her anger was pointed at herself as much as the fallen enemy. She fumed further realizing

she'd been pushed to use such extreme force. *He better still be alive.*

She came upon the body, more misshapen than any human ought to be. Her bone spell was a trump card, only used as a last resort and the effects were always severe. It wasn't all the bones that broke, and each time was different than the last. She wondered what it was about the mystic energies she commanded that led to those differences. Was it her emotional state that defined how bad the damage would be? Something deep in her subconscious guiding just how much pain the spell would inflict on its victim? She winced at the site of the broken Sha'deeb. She couldn't tell how much of his injury was from the spell or the two-story fall. She listened for a breath. And listened.

Nothing. She schooled a boiling rage and stormed a few paces this way and that around the alley in silent fury. There was no need to call any more attention from random passersby. She stopped to rub at her burning calf. Her right leg had taken the worst damage from Sha'deeb's twisted magic. Needing a moment's rest, she collapsed down on the cobblestones next to the corpse.

She closed her eyes, shook her head and asked herself over and over. *What am I going to do?* She allowed herself a minute to wallow in hopelessness. Incessantly, she dug her thumbs and knuckles into the muscles in her leg; it made little difference to the pain. With broken breaths, she gave up trying to alleviate the pain and set to searching the body. Perhaps some scrap or clue would still prove useful. Her fingers came across a ridge in her fallen opponent's back pocket.

A ledger? No. It felt too good to be true. Yaladra wasn't one to unnecessarily get her hopes up; this one was a challenge. *It's an appointment book.* With bated breath, she flipped through it to find today's date. *No... No, not now.* She slipped the book into her white cloak and ran into the night as fast as her aching legs could carry her.

Yaladra had known for weeks Tiberiak was throwing his new found influence around the guilds. She'd never considered he'd make such a bold move, not so soon. But it was exactly what Sha'deeb's book said. *Cytech guild house takeover, ten-thirty PM. Expect resistance, all mystics to be on hand.*

By her best estimate, she had only minutes. *Cassidy, Nandiel... I hope I'm not too late. For your sake.*

Chapter 22

Cassidy

BORS had sent Cassidy down to ground level for some chemical components of which they'd run short. It was late and she could have waited until morning but didn't. *I'd rather just get it done...* As usual of late, she was sleep deprived. Ever since Tenowon's diagnostic routine came online she and Bors, and anyone else they could grab to help, had been working furious on the repair plan. *Step one of the repair plan...* She didn't want to stop and think about how complicated step two could be. Step one already required a number of chemicals of which they didn't even know the name. The whole plan seemed impossible. *But here I am... almost ten-thirty at night and I'm filling out this requisition form.*

She handed over the paper to a woman she'd practically begged to open up the chemical supply. Despite the fact Cassidy was looking to resurrect Tenowon, the woman, Gertrude, was still not all that impressed. "Ok... Sorry. We need *all* of these. And the amounts are correct."

Gertrude's eyes buzzed down the list. Then flitted back to Cassidy. "Really?" She sounded disdainful.

Cassidy winced and shrugged an apology.

Gertrude sighed, her voice trailing off as she entered the supply room. "I'll get a hand truck..."

Cassidy considered offering to help track down all the jars of chemicals but thought better of it. Most cytechs in the supply division were overprotective when it came to dolling out goods. *And that's during regular working hours.* She had no choice but to engage in her least favorite past time. Waiting.

Several minutes on, voices came from down the hall. They crescendoed until it sounded like a severe argument was breaking out. With more than just two people. *One of them sounds familiar.* Gragus? She decided to check it out.

"Gertrude? I'm stepping away for minute. Be right back!" She ran off down the hall.

"Sure... Whatever," came a muffled reply from inside the chem-supply.

Cassidy came down the hall to the main entrance of the great hall. A split, winding staircase curved around both sides of the room leading up to the second and third floors. Dull, inoffensive beige rugs ran most of the stairs and the room's only decoration was a series of brass Cytech logos adorned in strategic places. Over the door, up the stairwells at each landing and on. But the commotion was coming from just in front of the main double door. *That's Gragus all right.*

"The board of directors will *never* stand for this!" He was heated, flushed in the face, waiving his arms emphatically and holding his round spectacles in hand. "This is a direct assault on the guild harmony that's stood for decades! It's outrageous!"

In front of Gragus stood a high ranking Merkant, very high ranking judging by the six gold badges on his collar. Along with him was a woman in a long blue overcoat with striking white hair, though she was barely middle aged by her looks. Behind them, a stream of merkant clerks had just started to pour into the lobby. They were of all different ages, but all had at least one Merkant star on their collar. Each carried a clean unused ledger.

"Now, Mr. Gragus," the Merkant chief spoke clipped and succinctly. "The Regional Governor has ordered it. The Cytechs must fall in line and give an accounting. And we Merkants are the people assigned to the job. There must be no more secrets. For the city's security."

"And I'm telling you, this *will not stand!*" Gragus took a step forward into the Merkant's personal space. "The Governor has no real authority, he's a spokesman at best! Each of the guilds has always had full autonomy!"

The white-haired woman stood between Gragus and the Merkant chief. She threw back her long blue coat revealing a black-lacquered pistol on her hip. "Governor Tiberiak has the full support of the people. If we Merkants don't step in now, the people will revolt. *Nobody* trusts the Cytechs anymore. Now step aside. We've got work to do." She shouldered into Gragus while turning her back on him. She waved in a seemingly endless stream of Merkant clerks. "Check every office, every closet, lab, lavatory, you name it! The Cytech's monopoly on secret technology ends tonight!"

Gragus stumbled back a few steps as he was lost in a sea of Merkant blues and starred collars. Cassidy fought the crowd and managed to get them both into a small alcove under a silver wall scone.

"Gragus!" She was nearly shouting to be heard over the foot traffic. "What's going on!?"

His eyes were furious, darting this way and that at the never-ending Merkant

throng. “The so-called Governor has called the Merkants to take over management of the entire Cytech guild. I’ve never— It’s the most inane thing I’ve ever heard of!” He was beside himself.

Another voice echoed over the large lobby to give direction. “Remember, all ongoing laboratory work is to be halted until such a time as approval has been given from the Governor’s office! Take note of every project, but no new developments will be tolerated until all accounts are complete!”

Cassidy couldn’t believe what she was hearing. It sounded like a bad dream, an impossible scenario that would evaporate as soon she awoke. “How can they do that? Politicians are a joke around here!”

“This one, Tiberiak, is different. He’s somehow already taken control of the entire Merkant operation. And with a continent of commerce in his back pocket, it was only a matter of time until he used that clout for... something. I just—” He stomped his foot in anger, unable to take any other meaningful action.

Is this really the end of the Cytechs? Can they just come in and take over? She watched in horror as more and more Merkant clerks filed into the building. Some went up the stairs, some down the halls, left, right and center. Then a sudden chill gripped her spine. “Gragus, what about Tenowon?” They were finally making progress bringing him back, would the Merkants stop that too?

Gragus went ashen. He leaned against the wall, trying to turn his back to the passing crowds. “Cassidy...” His voice grave and cold. “If the Merkants find out about Tenowon... About *what* he really is. I don’t know what they’ll do. But judging from all this—” He waved at the room. “They will not take it in stride.” He paused. “Go to Bors. Quick as you can, tell him what’s happened. He’ll know what to do.”

Cassidy’s eyes widened with fear. In the years she’d known Gragus, she’d never seen him so riled.

He put a hand on her shoulder. “I’ll distract them, if I can. Go, now! Go!”

Cassidy ran outside along the path to the cable carrier. *I have to get back to Lab One, now!* The thought that Tenowon might be taken, stuffed in a crate and tossed in a Merkant warehouse somewhere burned in her mind. *I can’t let that happen. I won’t lose him again!*

She ran until her chest heaved and throat burned. As she approached the broad stone platform where the cable carrier rested, she felt a slight relief. *The carrier is still here. Good.* As she got closer, however, she got a better look. A dozen and a half Merkant clerks were already filing onto the carrier. She didn’t

skip a beat and tried to just go in alongside them. *Maybe they won't notice me. I'm just one Junior Inventor.* She steadied her breath, no small feat given the sprinting she'd done, and walked to the carrier. As she approached the sliding glass-paneled door, it closed.

"Sorry," said a nearby three-star collared Merkant wearing too much blush. "This one's full. Send it up! Move along!"

The cable carrier crew set to starting the big steam machine that ran the cables. More than a shred of reluctance weighed on their faces.

Cassidy stuck out her chin and stood her ground. "Ok. I'll just wait for the next one."

"Mm-hm, yes—" The mid-rank Merkant actually looked up from her clipboard, giving Cassidy a once over with demeaning eyes. "Wait, you're not one of us."

"Yes, but I work up there. At Lab One. It's very important." *Please just let me get up there!*

The Merkant sighed with reluctance. "All secret lab projects have been suspended until further notice. So at best, you *worked* up there. Honestly, you'd be better off waiting on ground level for further instructions. Big changes are needed around here."

Cassidy's jaw clenched. She wanted nothing more than to scream the woman's head clean off; instead she tried to continue the bluff. "That can't be right. I'm on a special project. Very time sensitive. I'm sure you understand." She contorted her face into an ingratiating smile and tried to make a polite laugh.

It didn't work. "Nice try. The Cytechs are under new management. That is to say *any* management now. And we're cleaning things up around here. Find a place to lay low for a few days and await your next assignment. What was your name, again?"

Cassidy's spirits sunk. "Nandiel," she lied off the cuff. "Nandiel Salastier." She turned and walked away without another word. *Sorry Nandiel... I panicked.* She wondered where her friend was in all of this. *Probably out in the city with Frezerick on her arm living life to the fullest. She's in for a rude surprise when she gets back tonight.*

Cassidy wandered aimlessly through the Cytech grounds. She had her own private cabin on the ground level, but there's no way she could just go home. *What's happening around here!? What's going to happen to Bors and Tenowon?*

And Traz, Oudrine and Trede are still out there somewhere... I hope. Her whole world felt like it was falling apart. A lump formed in her throat. *What am I going to do?*

She continued walking in a panicked daze, eventually finding herself at the main gate. At least thirty Merkant security officers were on hand, questioning and berating the Cytech guardsmen on duty. She wanted to scream, she wanted to grab each Merkant by stupid blue collar and throw them out in the street. She took one step towards an officer with that thought in mind when a hand reached out from behind and pulled her back.

"There you are."

Cassidy spun, her hands went to her belt, even though she'd neglected to bring her stun baton that day. Words caught in her throat. *Yaladra.*

"Are you all right?" The white-cloaked mystic looked harried but whole. Her voice was winded.

"Y— Yes." Was the only thing she could reply. She stepped forward and wrapped her arms around Yaladra. She fought back tears even as the Merkants tried to ripped her life and livelihood away.

Yaladra went stiff in response. "Glad you're ok." Her voice was flat and unchanged. "We should get out of here."

Some of Cassidy's wits began to return. "How did you even get in? The place is crawling with hundreds of Merkants!"

Yaladra grabbed her by the arm and pulled her away from the lights surrounding the main gate. "Keep your voice down. I found my own way in. Wasn't that hard with everyone distracted."

Cassidy mouthed an "o" in response as she jogged behind the mystic. After a minute, Yaladra leaned up against the wall to catch her breath. They were in the dark between a couple unused Cytech cabins at the southwest wall.

"It's been a busy night. I need a minute before getting you out of here." She bent, resting her hands on her knees.

Cassidy wiped a few stray hairs from her eyes. "Well, how did you get in? Can't we just get out that way?"

Yaladra pointed up over the wall with a sardonic raised eyebrow. Then she sat down. "A minute. That's all."

Cassidy scowled and sat down opposite the mystic, her mind buzzing with a hundred questions. She did her best to hold off.

After what seemed like an hour, Yaladra spoke. "Ok. I think I've got just enough Fire left for one night."

Cassidy watched with a mix of curiosity and confusion as Yaladra knelt, ran her fingers along the tall, stone wall. The mystic's eyes flared violet. "There is a *door* here." A puff of violet light exploded from Yaladra's eyes.

Cassidy startled and crawled back a few feet as the stones twisted, moved, shaped and reshaped. *They're even changing color...* For a Cytech, it was unsettling to watch; though her eyes were glued to the spectacle in the low light.

After a moment, there was a rustic wooden door in place where only stone had been before. Yaladra opened it and walked through like it were the most normal thing in the world.

Cassidy peered through the gap in the wall. The city street was plainly viewable on the other side. It made completely no sense. She touched the wooden door, feeling its natural grain. *Except it's not natural at all, is it? How can stone feel like wood?!*

Grimacing, Yaladra called, "Come on! I can't hold it all day!"

Cassidy reflexively jumped through on command. As her feet hit the cobblestones, Yaladra exhaled and fell to her knees. The door morphed back to its original form. Stone and mortar, nearly a foot thick. She had to touch the stone again, just to make sure. It was cold on her fingers, rough. *Some kind of igneous rock, I think.* She looked down at Yaladra, who appeared exceptionally tired. "Are you... all right?"

She grit her teeth. "Fine. We're going back to the Haven. Might be the only safe place left for you."

To Cassidy, the bold statement was shocking like jumping into an early springtime lake. It was still sinking in just how bad everything was. "It's Tiberiak isn't it?"

Yaladra rubbed the back of her hand across her mouth. She stood, shoulders squared. "The Cytechs work for *Tiberiak* now. And there's nothing we can do about that tonight. At least at the Haven, we'll have a safe space. Come on, we shouldn't linger."

After a few steps, Cassidy stopped and turned to look back at the ground level facility and the mountainside Labs rising behind. *Home... Except it's not*

home anymore. Something else pained her even more. “Tenowon is still up there. And Bors. How am I going to get back to them?” When she turned, Yaladra was already several steps ahead with no signs of slowing down. Suddenly feeling chilled, Cassidy wrapped her arms in front of her chest and walked into the city. Sedenza. Her favorite place, now felt unwelcoming, ominous, even dangerous. She jogged a few steps to catch up. It was not a good night be found alone in the city.

Chapter 23

Rottiger

ROTT, leader of the once powerful and fearsome Outcast armies stood in the middle of the Scorch. His arms were crossed, brow furrowed. He looked down upon a grey-skinned creature at his feet. He needed to portray that he was deep in thought. The remnant of Outcasts, mostly members of the once great think tank called the Trust, had to believe he had some master plan in the works. Often Rott's plan involved stalling and waiting for an opportunity to present itself. Then he would claim such ingenuity as his own. However, this situation proved more difficult than anything to date. Despite the roadblock, Rott could always double down on what he did best. Theatrics. In the back of his mind, he counted the days until he could leave this *persona* behind. Just at that moment, he noticed a few gawkers standing around.

"I take it the entire campsite is ready? Guards posted at the ready? Are the fires lit? *Is the food going to cook itself?!*"

The tall, bald Logistics came behind Rott waving his arms and instructing the rest of the group on all the tasks yet to do.

Rott stared them all down with burning eyes; he puffed an irritated breath from his nose. As the first hints of sunrise peeked over the horizon, he knelt down over their quarry, pretending to have any idea what he was doing. As he got closer to Wellborne's still form, his senses started to overwhelm. He pulled back his head. It was like there was an incredibly foul odor in the air, yet it wasn't his nose being offended. He shook off the sickening feeling. In truth, he wanted nothing more than to bury this disgusting figure and be done with it. *Yet my cousin still pulls the strings...* He summoned his courage and grabbed Wellborne by the chin to better gaze its closed eyes. Immediately, he let go and shook his hand. *Blazes that thing is hot!* He didn't dare exclaim aloud and only rubbed his finger tips into his pant leg.

After a few minutes of fruitless observation, Logistics returned to his side. "The campsite is nearly complete, Rott. Shall we begin the official analysis?"

"Immediately!" Rott rose from his knee. "The entity is alarmingly heated. See to it with extreme care."

"Of course—"

Cutting Logistics off, Rott turned and left heading to a tall canopy tent. He went inside, found his first aid kit, and applied balm to his burnt fingers. *This is just great, Rottiger. And how are you going to turn this one around?* He recalled the precise direction given him by cousin Fossvalor Tiberiak. *To gather this monstrosity and bring it back Sedenza. Unharmd and hopefully still unconscious. Of all the stupid death marches I've been on, this is the worst!*

He sat down on his bedroll and considered his options. The Trust would gather what info they could. Perhaps they could find a way to move this burning hot immovable disaster-made-flesh. And if not? A rage boiled inside him. Failure was not an option. He could force Fossvalor to dole his portion of the family fortune no matter what. Even if it meant moving the immovable. Including jumping through the insanity that is his last task as the character Rott, Outcast Leader. Rott's teeth grit. The anger in him burned. Through grit and willpower he was determined to succeed. He rose, straightened his shirt, and took a deep breath. The remaining Outcasts were about to find out just how much fire he had left. He dashed the flap of his tent aside and stepped out into the thick of the busy campsite, commands on his lips and threats at the ready.

Langhorne

Down the hill from Zanfer's knoll, Marshal Langhorne heard the blustering voice of Rott. From his hiding place amongst the rocks and a few narrow caves, he'd been watching the Outcasts for hours. They were setting up camp to an almost ridiculous degree. While prevailing folklore of the Outcasts was that they were all savages and wild men, it appeared that, at least in recent years, there was a refined society at the core. Their camp had a dozen tall canopy tents, four cook fires and untold other supplies and gear.

Langhorne had also recognized one of the key members of the Trust from long distance. The completely bald head of Logistics was hard to miss, even during an early sunrise at more than a hundred paces. The marshal recalled how he narrowly got the jump on Logistics months ago in the great hall at an abandoned Caretaker settlement. *Rott might be in charge, but Logistics in the real brains here.*

While watching Rott berate Logistics and his other underlings, Langhorne tried

to piece together their plan. So far they seemed as clueless as he. Milling about, poking and prodding at their sleeping quarry. They hadn't been able to so much as get Wellborne to budge. *Just as well... The longer they do nothing the better. Might give me time to think of something.*

Langhorne continued watching through the early morning hours. By the time they'd cooked their morning meal, taken some general observations about Wellborne, they disappeared back to their tents to avoid the rising heat. The Scorch was a difficult place to thrive and any shade was welcomed. The marshal decided to follow suit. Quietly, he rose from his perch between some boulders. His right leg had gone numb from laying still so long. Staying as low as possible, he made his way back to the entrance to his cave. It was low to the ground, he had to lay flat and shimmy himself sideways into the opening. Once inside, he grabbed one of the spare canteens he'd left there and took a long swig.

Sitting in the dark with only narrow beam of light to see, his thoughts replayed the events of the past several hours. The good news was, it didn't seem like the Outcasts were an immediate threat. They didn't have some ace in the hole to suddenly recruit Wellborne to their side, or even move the mystical being at all. *That's good...* He shuffled around trying to stretch out his legs. His mind shuffled through some of the obvious courses of action. He could try to ambush them. He'd have the element of surprise and brought plenty of rounds for his rifle. Though, he'd already noticed the Outcasts had at least four people armed with scoped rifles at all times, usually in shifts. They didn't look like veterans, but the odds were strictly in the enemies' favor.

He hated to admit it, but the only option for now was to wait and watch. Inside the small cave, he had a little space to stretch and was out of the sun. He'd keep his ears trained for now and sneak back his perch at dusk. *It's time to play the waiting game. And if it's me versus Rott? I like my odds.*

Still, there was one thing that gave Langhorne a slight sinking feeling. He recalled that eerie sensation when getting close to Wellborne's body. That haunting voice that came over the wind. It was so foreign, so at the fringe of his perception he questioned hearing anything at all. The whole thing left him with the idea of *conflict. Struggle. Something tells me Wellborne isn't so inactive as he looks.*

TREDE

Days past in the Light. Trede had spent unending hours locked in conflict. He had to keep the channel open to the Well-blessing inside of him at all times. Wellborne's attacks had grown in frequency so much that it was impossible to let his guard down. He let the full light of mystic energies flood out through himself at all times. It was an exhausting state to maintain. Yet, it was his only defense against the asphyxiating and oppressive attacks. His only reprieve was when Wellborne's attack would wane, only for a few minutes. The pain was less then, but still his body remained filled with a searing tension.

In truth, Trede was beginning to lose himself. As the hours passed, his body seemed less and less a part of him. Occasionally, he'd catch a glimpse of his own hand and be reminded. *Right... I'm still me. Still here.* For the previous two hours, he'd given up moving entirely. He was kneeling in a slump, there on top of a great white hill, crowned with bleach-brown, tall grass. Lost to his thoughts, the sensation of the Well omnipotent coursing through him, and Wellborne's hatred and despair ever circling him.

A shadow fluttered over Trede's eyes. He flinched backwards. His gaze darted around to find the source. *Is the sun finally moving?* He looked around to find everything in the Light exactly like it'd always been. The only thing different was, somehow, Wellborne had grown more distant. Out of sight but not out of feeling. *He's still closer than I'd like.*

Before Trede had a chance to wonder why his enemy would retreat, a new voice spoke to him from behind. It was an old voice with a dry creek in its deep tone. "You should not be here."

Trede stumbled forward. In effort to try and turn and stand, he fell and rolled onto his back, propping himself up with both arms. Shock and exhaustion left him unable to reply.

"You should not be able to travel here. It has not been agreed."

Before Trede stood a massive figure over eight feet tall. It had wide boney shoulders, long limbs and was encased in some kind of thick off-white material. On its head was a strange-shaped helmet made of a smooth dark substance. It obscured the creature's face entirely. The unfamiliar shape, though, was enough for Trede to rule out it being human or selahn.

"You must leave here. It has been agreed." The towering figure sounded displeased.

"I... I can't." A simple, honest response.

The creature's large, malformed helmet twisted to one side, perhaps in

thought. "You traveled here. You must return. Now."

"How? How can I leave?" Trede rose to his feet and dusted himself off. Even standing, this new creature towered over him. The novice mystic braced one foot behind, ready to run at a moment's notice. He wasn't sure how safe he was in this thing's presence.

The being's neck twitched again, perhaps puzzled. "You have access to the Conduit. Use it."

With open palms, Trede rubbed his eyes in exasperation. "If I knew how to leave, I would." Even in that moment, he could sense Wellborne's burning eyes looking on. At least the break in the unrelenting attract had given his mind a rest.

"Use the Conduit." The dry, deep voice boarded on chiding. Trede wondered if he should be insulted.

"What is the Conduit?!" Trede through up his hands and began pacing with his back turned to the creature. "I don't know where I am. Or how I got here!" After several steps, the creature still hadn't responded. Trede turned and looked. The creature stared at him, or at least appeared to through the dark armor covering its head. The face with a long protrusion in the front darted left and right.

"You have its marker on you. Clearly you have come through the Conduit, unbidden." The great creature knelt down on its two massive yet slender legs. It looked to be getting comfortable and made a motion with one long hand as if to sit. "Come. We will speak of the Conduit. Though, I cannot stay long. A face watches us."

Trede considered his options and decided that if this creature could offer any insight in how to get home, he would take it. Somehow Wellborne was forced to hold back for the time being; that alone made Trede more trusting. He straightened out a few long stalks of dry brown grass and sat.

"It is clear. You traveled here via the Conduit. It is your only hope of returning. Yet you claim not to know of it."

Trede tried to focus at the creature's face, though completely obscured. Now that he was closer, he realized the helmet substance was mostly black, with dim stars scattered about. At certain angles, it was nearly opalescent. A thought dawned on him. "Where I'm from... we have The Well. It's... powerful." He almost laughed at himself by the understatement. "Could this be the Conduit?"

The creature stiffened. "I have never been to your land. It has not been agreed."

By the reaction, Trede wondered if he should apologize.

"Although, this is likely. The marker is on you. You have been through the Conduit."

"Then how do I return? I only got here by accident." Trede's eyes wandered the bleak horizon. Nothing but rolling white hills and bleached brown grass. Somewhere hidden, a bodiless Wellborne watched and waited.

The creature straightened its gaze upon Trede, saying nothing. He felt something, like a tense place in his mind begin to loosen. Seconds passed. Then a minute. Then two. As Trede felt himself relax, he convulsed and coughed, unable to breath. His skin flashed hot, suddenly the sun beaming down felt tenfold radiant.

The creature stretched and rotated its shoulders. Suddenly Trede could breath again. The weight of The Well's power in him settled back into his very essence. "What—" he heaved. "What did you do?"

"I have confirmed your connection with the Conduit. It appears to be the only thing sustaining your brittle form in this land."

Still catching his breath, Trede felt the burning in his lungs and exposed skin fade. *The Well is keeping me alive here.... No wonder it's so desolate. Life is impossible here.*

The creature angled its head like it was hearing a far-off voice. "It has been agreed. I will answer your questions, then I must go."

"Why is Wellborne staying away from you?" Trede had a growing nervousness. He expected another attack any moment, yet Wellborne stayed.

"My suit protects me from certain energies. But I must leave soon."

Trede's eyes went wide. "What is it made off? Can I find the same material back home?"

"It has been found in ancient records. There is evidence of once great crafters of this element in your realm."

"What... is it called? How can I find it?"

"The name of it would be different in your land, otherwise I would tell you. It is rare, to be certain. Found only in places with special importance. You would do well to find this material in defense against..." The creature's hidden eyes appeared to pan across the horizon. "Against this face that watches us. I have time

for one more question.”

Trede winced. He could barely believe he was face-to-helmet with some larger-than-life creature in a barren world of white. His mind blended together all the unknown and seemingly impossible. He blurted out, “How do I use the Conduit?”

“Your connection is the key. Do not pull energy out of it, but put yourself into it... That is the best way we can describe it. I must go.” The great creature rose with its black opalescent helmet and pearl-colored suit. “The face that watches will return. You should return through the Conduit at once. It has been agreed.”

Trede watched in alarm as great metallic wings came out of the creature’s suit. It jumped a dozen feet in the air and flew off at blinding speed. In an instant, it was gone. *I’m alone again...*

Immediately, Trede was struck by Wellborne’s attack. It burned at his skin, pulled at his insides and attempted to dull his mind. Breathing became harder, his limbs heavier. He reeled.

I need to get out. Can’t stay... The brief reprieve while talking to the tall creature had only reminded him just how diminished he was. *Maybe the Conduit is just The Well by another name.* He considered the cryptic advice. *Instead of pulling from it... I need to put myself into it?* Trede found himself wanting. His experience in the Mystic arts was still that of a novice, at best. Pulling energies from his Well-blessing was the only thing keeping him alive. *I need help...*

He summoned a little corner of his mind to send another message. Oudrine seemed to be the most receptive to his messages. Fitting given her expertise with the Strength of Mind. He reached out to her with his waning strength. Trede still had no idea where this place he called *the Light* was. That should have made it impossible to communicate, but somehow, he could focus on certain people and reach them.

Oudrine, please. If there’s any way... Wellborne is getting stronger. I’m not sure how long I can hold. I can feel pieces of him slipping by me, slipping into...

Epiphany. Trede stopped his message as a surge of wakefulness covered him. Without realizing it, Wellborne may have shown Trede the way. For some time, Trede had considered himself the target of his enemy’s attacks. Now he perceived that he was holding Wellborne back, acting as a barrier, preventing Wellborne from going where he wished.

Where else would he be trying to go... but home? He’s trying to go back!

His realization grew. *So if I go back... there's nothing to stop him at all. He'll be loose in the world again.*

Waves of heat pressed in all around Trede, sapping his strength, fogging his mind. Just on the edge of the horizon was a set of pale, gleaming eyes. Hate-filled things that screamed at him wordlessly. *Die, die, die.*

Trede held on. He hoped his cutoff message got through to Oudrine. His only chance was if she and the other mystics could help him return home. And then, another hope against hope, was that they could find a way to defeat Wellborne once and for all. For all the strength of his Well-blessing, a piece of The Well omnipotent, it didn't seem to match up against power incarnate. Especially when that incarnation was bent on malice and death.

Chapter 24

Oudrine

OUDRINE stepped through verdant greens into a familiar setting. It was the same place held by the late Proteus back when Wellborne was awakened as a living storm. And years before that, it was the same place the Caretakers of The Well lived and thrived. She knew some of the old histories. Many years prior, all schools of the Mystic Arts held prominence in this place. Though those exalted days were long past. Mystics now were left to shadow and rumor. Everpresent but never in the spotlight. She peered through the gloaming scene and thought it fitting. *The sun set on our kind years ago.* Still, a bright ridge of the sun hung just over the canopy line.

Traz came up behind. "Here we are again, hm?" He was his chipper self; Oudrine was grateful for the encouragement.

She nodded, wordless. Something about this felt right; *this is the place*, but she was disturbed by Trede's last partial message. *If there's any way... Wellborne is getting stronger.* Since then, it was like Trede was still calling out to her; she just couldn't hear him. It was like reading a letter underwater as the ink washed away in the current.

Somehow, Trede and Wellborne were still locked in unseen in battle. *Only... Wellborne is winning.* A shiver went through her. She couldn't bring herself to consider how they might face Wellborne once retrieving Trede from whatever mystical realm he fell into.

Unbeknownst to Oudrine, several minutes must have passed, the selahns were nearly finishing making camp in the clearing in front of the great hall. It was the only building still standing in this area, and one Oudrine had helped rescue Traz and Tenowon from several months ago. It was a stark building, weather-worn, but still sturdy. Thick beams set the front roofline; bare, nearly bleached, logs lined the sides. A great double door stood on the front at large stone steps. *Mystics use to gather here for council and study. It was a place of learning.* Her thoughts could not get out of the past. She wondered, hoped, that somehow the answers to their present danger might lay in the past. *Surely, the old Caretakers had greater knowledge than we?*

It was Traz again that brought Oudrine into the present with a gentle hand

upon her shoulder. "Hello, friend." He wore a wide, toothy grin; though his eyes perceived a lot more than he let on. "The family has the camp handled. Shall we... explore the environs? Trede is waiting. I'm sure of it."

"Traz..." Oudrine shivered again. Something had left her cold and shaken. "Would you take my hand?"

He bowed low, flourishing one hand off behind. "Milady." He rose and offered her a hand.

Oudrine took it, surprised at how warm the pads on his palm and fingers were. The fur around his hand was soft, not at all scratchy. "It's this way." Oudrine pointed with her eyes, looking down the path between old ruined homes of the village.

As they set off together, Traz turned to the others. "Lady-love, stay with uncle dear, ok? We'll be back before all-dark!"

A few cheerful voices rose from camp, the lilting Svelina waved emphatically. Even she, the quiet one of the group, was visibly excited to finally make camp at their desired location.

Oudrine and Traz set down a side way, off the main path that led to The Well, and waked amongst the ancient village. Some buildings were just a few cross beams amongst overgrown vine and tree. Others still held their basic shape, a memory of their former function, despite broken down doors and missing windows.

Traz broke the silence. "When you... get a signal. Anything. Just say the word. I'm *sure* this is it." His arms tensed as he spoke.

"I'd be lying if I said I understood what we are doing." She kept moving forward, gracefully, one foot after the other. Her eyes glided across the path right and left.

Traz leaned in to reply, "That makes two of us." His eyes sharpened, darting too and fro as they continued together.

Along the walking path, Oudrine's thoughts scattered into mystery, pain and hope. Bits of history, recent and ancient, washed over her mind. She'd spent little time here, and yet somehow, always at times of extreme importance. The fate of humanity, of life itself, seemed intertwined with this place. "This is a land of destiny..." Her vocalized epiphany barely escaped her breath.

Traz paid the comment no mind and kept his eyes sharp.

They passed the broken remnant of many cottages, lifeless places, with no

memory of their former glory. Until the faintest hint of a structure, almost blocked from view, caught her attention. Even from the farthest corner of her eye, it stood out to her like a porch-hanged lantern on a moonless night. She froze midstep.

Traz's whiskers twitched but he remained silent.

Oudrine felt his hand tighten around hers. "It's this way." Before she realized, her breath quickened and heart raced. They walked through overgrown grass as the sun loomed lower in the sky painting the world in reddish tones. Trepidatiously, they rounded a half-rotted circular cottage and came around to other side. There was a small structure, barely more than a shed. Its timbers were aged and grey but still standing. She guessed it was a simple single-room cabin nestled on the back lot of the larger cottage. The only door had gone missing years ago; in its stead was an open maw filled with black. Inside it, she could see nothing.

After a moment of tense staring, Traz spoke. "That's it then. Isn't it?" His eyes didn't move an inch; his feet stood firm.

In silence, Oudrine nodded, paying no mind that he wasn't even looking at her. Her thoughts and Fire were gearing up for the task at hand.

Finally, the selahn turned to look at her. "Should I go in there and check? I could—"

"No. He's in there. And... not in there. I have to pull it him out. It has to be me." Her normally flowing tone had turned dreary, stone-like.

Traz let go of her hand and stepped back; he bowed again. "If I may be of any aid, I'm ever-present."

Oudrine wanted to smile at him but could not. She could only stare ahead. A fraction of a thought, a fleeting distant voice spoke to her. *Into it... Help me reach...* There was nothing to see with her eyes, but her Fire reacted and burned hot as the sun. Something truly mystical rested in this simple derelict cabin. A confluence of power that felt different than anything she'd ever experienced. It called to her, beckoned her. It needed her and she needed it. "This is a land of destiny," she repeated under her breath. Another thought, too, crossed her mind as she involuntary stepped forward. *This is going to hurt.*

With surprising speed, she crossed the grass into the cabin. She leaped into the black threshold of the building. When her bare feet touched down, it wasn't the cabin's floorboards she felt under her. It was something wholly different. Dry, coarse and unfamiliar. She wasn't inside the cabin at all. This was somewhere

new.

TRAZ

"Oh... Oh bother!" Traz glared at the empty cabin where Oudrine had entered. "Ou— Oudrine?" he stammered as his thoughts eluded him.

Prowling low to the ground, Traz approached the black maw of the cabin's doorway. His eyes sharpened; whiskers twitched as he inhaled. *Not even a scent.* Once within reach of the cabin, he gave the threshold a quick slap. He jumped inside and kicked at the greyed floorboards. *Nothing.*

The sun was now all but set. He plopped down in the doorway staring back the way he'd come.

"Well, this is rubbish. I've been gone half an hour and already lost Oudrine!"

That ubiquitous phrase from his youth kept creeping into his mind. *Those chasing fire may catch aflame... More mystic nonsense, no doubt. There's always some kind of unspeakable magic with them. She must have gone through some kind of... doorway to a Well-realm. That must be it. Just a quick jaunt. She'll be back. Soon... Right? Yes, of course. With Trede in tow, I'm sure of it.*

Traz shook off his doubts and waited patiently for some signal. Before he realized it, he was pacing in front of the door way like some kind of guardsmen. Not wanting to worry his new bride or his other companions, he kept his thoughts to himself. He muttered under his breath, "Anytime, Oudrine. *Anytime...* Now would be *spectacular.*" He paused mid-stride staring at the black doorway where she'd vanished. The sun disappeared from sight. Traz was alone in dark.

TREDE

The sound of a woman's screams filled Trede's ears ripping him back to sentience. Wellborne's endless attack of fire and suffocation had worn him down. The only

thing keeping him alive was the Well-blessing inside. While it once was powerful enough to ward off Wellborne's dark energies to great distance, his enemy's strength was such that now it was merely a thin lifeline.

His eyes flashed open, bleary and stinging. He took a deep breath just to make sure he remembered how. He felt strange in his own skin, the longer he spent in the Light, the less he was certain who Trede was.

That voice. A woman's voice. Another cry made him forget Wellborne's assault. He could feel invisible fingers clawing at his body, malice and torment thickened the air around him like a haze.

"It's Oudrine!" He spoke aloud as the attack around him quickened. Resolved, he tensed his muscles. *I'm not... letting her down.* Gritting his teeth, he gathered his legs under him and readied a mighty leap. He could only guess the exact location where the voice was coming from. *It's not far...* Trede let go all the physical and mystical strength he had into a downward thrust. In a split second, he was yards in the air, the all-too-familiar white landscape spread out in all directions.

As he reached the apex of his flight, he spotted a shape. Something he hadn't seen since coming to the Light. *That's definitely a human!*

He landed a dozen paces from the writhing form. While previously screaming, she appeared to be out of breath, heaving and coughing. He dashed and slid in next to her, trying to cradle her head in his arms. It was Oudrine all right; she didn't look well. Her eyes were darkened and bloodshot, her fair skin red and swollen. Her arms kept waving wildly between gasps. *She can barely breath.* Trede looked her over with a barely lucid detachment.

"N— No!" She stammered and screamed in a manic stupor.

It took Trede only a second to realize what she meant. She was trying to point behind them. Trede was so used to the burning presence of Wellborne, he hadn't noticed it right away. *No. I'm leaving this place. And you won't hurt her.* He placed her down gently in the white sands. Bearing up everything he had, the young mystic blasted a beam of crackling yellow and white-hot energy a dozen feet wide. At the speed of light itself, the blast overtook the shadowy form of Wellborne, as well as a huge swath of soil that continued on for over a mile.

Trede stumbled-stepped forward. Before, one fraction of that much release of power would have knocked him unconscious. Now, he stood, looked at his own hands still warm and crackling with electricity, as if they belonged to someone else. He dismissed the thought.

He sprinted back to Oudrine and picked her up. He was ready to flee, before Wellborne came back. There was one problem. "How did you get here? How do we get out?!" He ran a few steps this way and that looking for a path. He froze and looked to Oudrine. "How?"

"I— came through a doorway..." she managed to choke out the words.

"How do we get back? Oudrine?!"

Her eyes lolled back in her head.

"No! Oudrine!" Trede felt Wellborne returning, though still distant. They didn't have much time. He touched the side of her face, trying to wake her. "Please, Oudrine! We have to go now! How do we leave?!"

Her faced churned in a painful grimace, her eyes remained closed. "The same path... your message took to find me." Her words were broken and stilted.

"But I don't where my message went! I just sent it everywhere and hoped you'd get it!" Truth be known, Trede didn't even half understand the Strength of Mind and how Mystics might convey thoughts through the ethers. And here in the Light, with his Fire magnified one-hundred fold by the Well-blessing, he understood it even less.

Breath escaped Oudrine as she appeared to lose consciousness.

Trede panicked as the shadow of Wellborne came into view. It lurched in the great trough of land Trede's blast had just rendered. "Oudrine! Please!" He fell to his knees, jostling the woman mystic in his arms.

One of her deep blue eyes opened, catching his glance. "Follow me. Don't let go." A spark of blue light shone from her eyes.

Trede lost total sensation of his body. Somewhere incorporeal, his own Fire fell deeper into the immense chasm that was the Well's energy inside him. Somehow, a blue flame flew alongside as they traveled at blinding speed. Sight, sound and feeling were gone like they never existed. Just as quickly, they returned. Only now instead of endless white, everything was dark. But the smells he recognized. *Trees... And grass. Where am I?* He tried to squint through the dark.

Then he was met by a familiar voice.

TRAZ

"Trede?" Traz was wide-eyed in the dark. "Is that you, old friend?" A quiver shook his voice.

"Traz?" came the reply.

"By juv, *it is you!*" Traz bounded towards the cabin door. With the sun having set, he didn't realize until he was right upon him, that he was actually right upon *them*. Oudrine was asleep in Trede's arms, or at least he hoped it was just sleep. "Is she..."

"She saved me." Trede started to sound distant as he summarized the event. "She came all that way... I don't know how."

Traz helped Oudrine out of his arms and to the ground. He gave her a once over. "Breathing, check. Heartbeat, check. Skin is rather damp, where exactly were you? Was it underwater?" Traz chuckled to himself as he moved long curly strands of brown hair off Oudrine's face.

"No, it was hot... The sun was shining. All the time. Like a white desert."

"A— Are you ok, man?" While overjoyed to see his friend alive again, Trede did look peaked. So much so, it was unnerving. Trede's eyes had deep dark shadows under them. His face was gaunt and his eyes had a hard time staying in one place.

"The air here—" Trede stammered. "Different someho— Ooooo..." Just like that Trede hit the dirt, thankfully falling forward and missing Oudrine entirely.

Traz's eyebrows arched to the skies as he considered the situation. He laughed to himself, rolling his eyes. "Yes, great to see you, Traz. Thank you for holding down the fort, Traz. What a friend you are to have come all this way, Traz." He sighed. "I guess there'll be time for all that later. But now... How am I going to carry *two* full grown humans all the way back to camp?" He crossed his arms and tapped his foot on the dewy grass.

He knelt for a moment and checked Trede out much the same way he'd just done with Oudrine.

"Ok, then. I can carry one of you at a time. At best." He got to his knees and

grunted as he lifted Oudrine up onto his shoulders. Even though he was barely five feet in height, his selahnic musculature made him surprisingly strong for his size.

He called back to an unconscious Trede. "We'll see if I rush back! There's only so much heroic work I can do in a single day!" He paused and chuckled to himself again. "Aw, who am I kidding. I'll sprint the whole way! I love my human friends!" He made a fang-filled grin as he returned to camp.

Later that night, the humans still slept and the selahns ran the campsite. They maintained a couple fires, one for the humans to sleep by, and another for cooking. Tents had been posted and an impressive meal was in-progress.

Vlahn, the eldest and Svelina's uncle, at least by selahnic reckoning, was tendering the vittles. He had two large pots going and an oversize skillet on the wide fire pit. "My, yes! It'll be a good batch. Just in time to celebrate!"

Cheers rang out from around the camp. None of them were that concerned with waking the mystics, considering they seemed exhausted beyond any kind of natural rousing.

"Are you hungry, dearest desert flower?" Traz sat on a log between the two fires next to his new wife, the petite and rust-toned Svelina.

She nodded, a hint of embarrassment in her tensing shoulders.

"That's good." Traz grinned ear to ear, his white fangs shining in the firelight. "Tonight is a *great* night for feasting."

Svelina leaned into Traz's shoulder. "You really missed your friend... Didn't you?" Her voice was gentle like morning dew clinging to a flower petal.

Traz inhaled, puffing out his chest. A mist formed in his eyes. "I did. A friend like that doesn't come around too often. Literally dropped out of the sky one day!" He laughed.

"I remember..." She giggled. "You told me story ten times on the way here. And ten times before that on the way to Sedenza. And several more times before the wedding—"

Traz guffawed with a sound that filled the whole camp.

Vilagreá, who was fulfilling her insatiable urge to climb, called down from up a

tall tree, “What you on about now?!”

Vlahn, still manning the cook fire, called back. “Like usual! Traz is getting called out on his obsessive storytelling again!” A few more laughs filled the camp.

Traz hummed a few more laughs before squeezing Svelina in the crook in his arm. He lowered his voice and spoke only for her. “The truth, though, dear one... It wasn’t just for me that I came back to lead the march for Trede. He’s my dear friend, and the things I’ve seen traveling with him... One day, a human lad is falling out of the sky and before I know it... I’m standing before The Well itself. And then facing the greatest evil of the age! And even though our enemy may be the corruption of life itself... I trust my friends. And I’ll stand with them for the good. Until whatever end takes us.”

“I know,” she said softly.

“Ah— I told you all this before, too?” He chimed, a flash of mirth ran across his eyes.

“No, never,” she said. “But I read it on your face the day we met. You’re the bravest, stout-hearted selahn I’ve ever known. And I’m overjoyed to stand beside you through anything, too.” Svelina pushed out her chin, beaming pride over her new groom.

A breath caught in Traz’s throat. His heart melted as Svelina’s arm crossed his chest and pulled him tightly. For once, he was speechless.

Svelina looked up at his eyes, playfully. “Chin up, husband, dear. You’re gawking again.”

His wit snapped back into place. “Only at the fact that I am so loved, dear wife.” A slight chuckle rumbled from his chest.

At that moment, Dragyst and Staal came back to camp, each with a full armload of firewood. “All right!” said Dragyst. “Works done for the night, we eating yet?”

“Walking these woods is a lot of effort,” added Staal. “Builds up an appetite.” He padded his round belly, his dark brown fur already sticking out from between his clothing at the waistline.

“Hey, now, all right!” retorted Vlahn. “The best meals aren’t rushed, just a minute. But here. The stew should be done by now. Vilagreá, get down from that tree and do something useful! Grab the bowls, will you?”

“Oi! Just say so, I’m coming. No harm in looking out, is there?!” The other selahns laughed filling the whole site with mirth and the smell of an impending

delicious meal.

The party greatly enjoyed Vlahn's cooking and some good-natured ribbing at Vilagreá's expense. Soon enough it was late and they retired to their respective tents. But not before Traz and Svelina checked in on the humans. Oudrine appeared to be resting peacefully, but Trede brow still dripped with sweat. Traz wiped Trede's brow with a cold, wet cloth. Using a ladle from Vlahn's cooking stash, he administered some fresh water.

Traz knelt, his chin resting in the crook of his thumb and forefinger. He look over his friend laying still on a simple bedroll. *Not moving... but still tense somehow.* "I wonder what's bothering him..." he spoke under his breath.

Svelina glided in behind him, her hands raised near her mouth. "He's still struggling. Or recovering... I think." Traz's young bride new little about the world outside of the Western Spines, but she was always a sharp read on people. Still, being around such intense people as human mystics did put her just a tad on edge.

"Do you think so?" Traz squinted looking for clues. His human friend's sickly pallor was fading, if slightly. "I just wish I knew where he's been... And the only other one that knows," he nodded in Oudrine's direction in the next tent over. He sighed. "Well. There's nothing much for it. In the morning we breaking camp and heading straight back to Sedenza. Though I'd much prefer these mystics to be on their feet! There's not much we can do..." He placed a palm on Trede's head once more. "I expect a few stories from you, friend. As soon as you're able, right? And I'm betting they'll be some great whoppers too!"

Traz rose and exited the tent. Taking Svelina on his arm, they walked down the line of tents. For a brief moment Traz was lost in thought considering a hundred what-ifs.

"I'm sure they'll be fine, husband," Svelina said gripping his arm more tightly.

"Mm?"

"You're friends, I mean. I'm sure they'll both be just fine. I think so."

"Ah," he paused and looked at the moon high in the sky. "I hope you're right, dear wife. I do hope you're right."

Chapter 25

Cassidy

IT'D been two days since Cassidy arrived at the Haven. She'd kept mostly to herself in a spare room on the second level at the end of the hall. The promising inventor felt especially out of place in a mystic's residence. From what little she knew, the Haven was founded by Jonas and Celeste decades prior as a safe place for young mystics. Oudrine, and perhaps Maej too, studied here in years past. What Cassidy found most odd was that the building looked much older than that story might suggest. *How long was it here before Jonas and Celeste arrived? And who built it?* Remembering her history, Cassidy knew Sedenza had only been settled about one-hundred and fifty years ago. This building looked like it might nearly be that old. Thick cut stones stacked with mortar, heavy dark wood doors, a central arboretum and more than a dozen rooms to spare. All the unknown had Cassidy on edge. Despite how welcoming the mystics had been, she was uncomfortable. *I don't think I ever will be. I need to get back to the guild house... If that's even possible now.* She didn't want to consider that everything she'd come to love about living in Sedenza, including being a Cytech, might be gone. She tried to remind herself, *just a little more time. If things settle down, I'll find a way to get to Tenowon. Surely someone in the Merkants will understand!*

A knock came at the door.

"Hey." Yaladra's muffled voice came through the thick wooden door. "Celeste made lunch. You should eat."

Cassidy rose from her place at the foot of the bed and made for the door. She opened it and was half surprised to see Yaladra still standing there, waiting. The woman mystic, several years Cassidy's senior, had been scarce since the Merkant takeover. Her placid exterior had discouraged Cassidy from prying even slightly. Taken aback, Cassidy hesitated.

"Are you... all right?" Yaladra made a pensive sideways glance.

No, I'm not all right. This sucks. I'm stuck here while everything I've ever worked for, anyone I've ever cared about is in some kind of danger out there! And I can't even bring myself to step outside because Tiberiak's Merkant enforcers might conscript me back into the guild house under lock and key! "I'm... fine," she lied, arms hanging limp by her sides. "I just hate waiting." The second part was at least

true.

Yaladra nodded, seemingly in agreement. As they walked the spartan hallway, Jonas called out from downstairs.

“Cassidy, is that you? There’s someone at the door!” His resonant baritone carried the distance around corners and up the stairs easily.

Cassidy’s brown eyes went wide; her heart skipped a beat. She wasn’t even sure who or what she was most frantically wanting to hear news about. Anything at this point felt miraculous. Unsure how to feel, she looked to Yaladra who seemed curious but not emoting excitement.

“Who else knows you’re here?” the white-cloaked mystic asked.

“I didn’t tell anyone, I swear.” Cassidy touched her brow, already sure she was sweating bullets, and not because of the summer heat. “Jonas wouldn’t let just anybody in, would he?”

Yaladra responded with an unworried shrug.

Unsure if she wanted to run and hide or sprint to the door, Cassidy continued down the stairs with pensive steps. Without even realizing how nervous she was, her breathing labored, her muscles tensed and readied to run. She came around the corner leading to a long entryway lined with two daytime torches. Jonas stood at the double door. Only the left side was hanging open. His greying hair was tied up and he wore a thin smile. The afternoon sun coming in obscured his full expression; Cassidy didn’t dare to guess his mood.

“I sent you to the chem-supply two days ago!” said a voice. Its source obscured by a ray of sunshine. “That’s extreme lallygagging even for a Junior Inventor.” The man’s voice had a harshness to it but didn’t feel all that serious.

Cassidy walked closer to the familiar voice, squinting in the sunlight.

“Left me with all the hard work to do. I was supposed to be retired! If you recall.”

“Bors!” Cassidy’s hands flashed up over her mouth. She could scarcely believe it. “Come in! Uh—” She looked at Jonas. “Can he come in?”

Jonas laughed a deep throaty laugh. “Of course! Any friend of yours.”

Bors cleared his throat, scratching at his thin white beard. “There’s the matter of...” He stepped back out onto the stone steps and gestured down the stairs.

Cassidy had to step outside to see what he meant. Yaladra stayed behind, arms folded. At the foot of the stairs sat a huge basket, three feet in diameter at the top and bottom, wider at the middle. It was strapped to a two-wheeled cart.

"I had to haul this thing myself. Merkants have about ruined the place. I had to sneak out alone! Only way to avoid questions."

Cassidy saw the size of the basket and could think of only one thing. "You didn't... You actually—" She skipped sideways and hugged Bors, nearly knocking him over. *He did it! He got Tenowon away from the Merkants!*

"Hey now!" He grumbled as his tall, square-shouldered frame regained its balance. "You know this thing won't pick itself up the stairs!"

Jonas could be heard laughing just indoors as Yaladra walked out past him, pulling up her white hood. "I'll do it. Cassidy, come help. Make it look normal, we shouldn't flaunt mystic powers around here."

As Cassidy and Yaladra bent down to pick up the basket and cart, she counted down from three. Before *one*, Yaladra spoke, "Light as a feather." Her eyes flamed a now familiar violet. With scarcely any effort, the two carried the basket inside. Jonas, glancing up and down the street one last time, closed the door behind them.

The group gathered in the spacious, interior dining room. It was lit with an array of candles and plenty of natural light coming in the wide-open doorway. The table was already set for lunch, and the mystic hosts graciously insisted Bors stay for a meal. They began dining on various aged cheeses and cured meats. There was even fresh bread from Cassidy's favorite bakeshop. She smiled on the inside; the taste of bread reminded her not everything she loved about Sedenza was gone.

Filling out the rest of the table to her left was Yaladra, Celeste sitting on one table's end, on the far side was Jonas and Drayle. To her right was Bors at the table's foot who directed the course of conversation. It seemed he had his mind set on a specific course of action. "I'll need a spare room to continue repairs. I'm assuming you have one, the place looks big enough. You know, I always wondered what was in here. The building's been here for ages, way before my time." He grabbed another chunk of fresh bread and took a large bite.

"There's always room to spare for a friend," Celeste answered after exchanging a few raised eyebrows with the other mystics.

Bors remained oblivious. "That's good. Cassidy and I have a lot of work to do. We'll need to start right away." He looked up from his meal to give Cassidy a

look.

A stunned Cassidy played it off like this was all business as usual. "I couldn't get the order from the chem-lab.... How are we going to—"

"I talked to Gertrude into letting go of the stock. Not like they'll be using any of it any time soon. Not properly anyway. Damn Merkants are just going to catalog and stamp everything until the Great Plains aquifer dries up." He grunted, partially in frustration, partially to acknowledge his facetiousness.

Cassidy was in shock. Months prior, Bors had stepped out of Cytech legend to accomplish an insurmountable task. Now he'd outdone himself again, somehow outwitting the entire Merkant guild to steal Tenowon's damaged body out from under their noses. It had her wondering, "How did you get out with all those guards? The front gate must be mobbed."

"There's a couple other paths out. Off-book. The board said I was paranoid when I wanted to build undocumented points of egress. Hah! Sucks to them."

Drayle interjected. "Quite the story, Bors! Amazing work. Any idea how long it might take to repair Tenowon?" Drayle reminded Cassidy of Tenowon in a funny way. They both were kind and learned, scholarly sorts. Although Drayle's expertise was in the mystic arts, not tech.

"Certainly slowed down the past few days..." Bors grunted with disdain. "But with Tenowon's diagnostic routine running, it's only a matter of effort until he's back on his feet. Good timing too! He'd be furious with what's going on at the guild house. If he was the type to get furious, that is." He cleared his throat as if to spit but didn't. "I still say he'd be pissed though."

Cassidy broke the brief awkward silence that followed. "I can start on the chemical mixtures right after lunch." She sat up straight, eyes wide open in attention. *I can't believe he did it. If we can get Tenowon working, I'm sure he'll help us get Trede back and deal with Wellborne.*

"That's good," said Bors between mouthfuls of bread and cheese. "I'll be joining you. No time to waste! Not around here."

The group continued the meal and made small talk to distract from the multiple crises they faced. Several minutes later as the table was being cleared, Drayle caught Celeste's attention. "No word from Oudrine and the others, I suppose?"

Celeste smiled but a graveness lingered in her eyes. "Not as of yet. I listen after sunset every night, just in case she tries to contact. I think the distance might

be too far."

Cassidy saw the exchange and her stomach, though now comfortably full, dropped at the news. Oudrine, Traz and his kin were probably in Okishinren by now. *They'll be back at The Well site. Or near it.* Truthfully, she had no idea if Oudrine could possibly bring Trede back from wherever it was he was lost to in the light. *But it's the only chance I have.* Even still, there was no time to linger on *ifs* and *magic* while there was work to be done.

As if on queue, Bors put a heavy hand on her shoulder. "Enough lollygagging, huh?" He laughed a short, gravelly laugh. "Time to get Tenowon working!"

Chapter 26

Langhorne

LANGHORNE had spent days hiding under rocks. During the day, he'd been forced to hide small cave mostly obscured sheet of red shale. This kept him out of the worst of the sun and any prying Outcast eyes. He'd been forced to lay still to avoid the occasional Outcast patrol. Their camp was barely a half mile down a slight rise. Dead in the center of their circle of tents was the living body of Wellborne. The grey husk of a man hadn't moved an inch, and thankfully the Outcasts, led by Rott, hadn't been able to carry him off either. *I hope they got plenty of burns for trying.* Langhorne recalled how heat from Wellborne's body made his dagger glowing hot in an instant.

For the past couple nights, Langhorne had ventured closer to camp. He was careful, silent, and knew where to step on the rough rocky Scorch to avoid leaving bootprints. From what he could observe, the Outcasts seemed to be at a loss on what to do with the immovable Wellborne.

So he waited, sweated and kept his ears peeled for any commotion that might let him know what they wanted. By late afternoon on the third day, Langhorne's last canteen was getting low. *There's no spring around here for miles.* His time was running out. He'd have to either make a move into the camp, or sneak back to Smisom come nightfall. He hated the idea of going home empty handed but the trip wasn't entirely wasted. *Wellborne is out here. Even if he's an immovable rock. I'd like to throttle Rott for some solid answers...* He sighed, knowing that being outnumbered more than ten-to-one was too much for any rifleman, marshal or not.

With nothing else to do, he considered the enemy. There was something distinct about this group that set them apart from the typical wildmen he'd met on more than one occasion. These were more civilized in appearance. Experience told Langhorne one thing. *If these aren't the fighters and ravagers, I'd bet they're all part of the Trust. Probably all that stayed behind from their march against Sedenza.* He reconsidered the odds. *At least three of them are armed and on patrol.* With a well-placed shot, he could take out the nearest patroller, rush the camp and maybe... *No, too risky.* His thoughts wandered to his daughter, Jaxet. *And even if I got all the way into their camp alive, what could I do?* He relished the thought of seeing Rott put down, the man was responsible for so much death and destruction. Langhorne was too calculating to be that brash and vindictive. No matter how he

sliced it, there was only one thing to do. Wait for dark and hope to sneak away alive.

Hours passed. Night fell. After a hazy red sky faded to black, Langhorne crawled out from hiding. He spent a few minutes stretching and begrudging his sore muscles. He took the final swig from his last canteen. *That's gonna have to do it until sunrise back in Smisom.* He turned to face the Outcast camp. He'd have to get some idea where the patrollers were before heading out in open territory. *Last thing I need is a bullet in the back.* He spent a few minutes scanning north and south to the edges of the camp with little progress. *Quiet night. Maybe they're keeping the patrollers in tonight.* He sighed again, regretting being so close to the enemy without causing any damage. He turned west to Smisom, home, and set to walking, bent at the waist to stay low. After a hundred yards or so he paused halfway up a rocky crest to give the Outcast camp one last look. Nearly a dozen tall parasol-shaped tents stood in a ring, the spark of a few campfires could just be seen between them. The wind changed for a moment, and Langhorne felt a sudden chill biting at his skin. It was a stark change from being in a hot cave in the ground. As he turned to go, he heard raised voices. He snapped his gaze back to the camp, staring intently. From the distance and with obstruction, he couldn't see anything changed. More voices shouted, some of the Outcasts ran from their tents. But he couldn't tell what they were saying.

Taking the rifle off his back, Langhorne slunk down low and approached the camp. *Hell of a time for commotion. What the blazes is going on down there?* With every few steps, the sounds crescendoed, still he couldn't make out anything intelligible. *Something about sleep? Or sick?* In a minute's time he was back to the large shale that covered his hideout. He crept the fingers of his free hand onto the stone's edge, keeping one hand on his six-chamber rifle. He pulled himself up, slowly.

A chaotic scene unfolded in front of him. Three tents were already torn down and trampled, one was aflame from falling across the nearest campfire. He placed a few Outcast voices out beyond the periphery of the campsite; they were distant and still shouting warnings as they ran. Two Outcasts were laid out flat on the ground, alive or dead, he couldn't tell. He could just make out the huddle of a few more Outcasts in the shadow of one of the larger tents. They were crouched, possibly hiding, just out of sight of any campfire. Then the catalyst of commotion came into view.

He's awake.

Even from Zanfer's knoll with only scattered campfire light, Langhorne recognized the broad-shouldered, grey-skinned man.

Wellborne's alive. Langhorne mulled over the situation. *Damn. And here I almost thought things were winding down.*

He observed the scene as three armed Outcasts jumped from the shadows to confront Wellborne. Langhorne listened to their panicked voices.

"Hold it there, beast! I am Proteus' second in command. Do you remember him?"

Wellborne's bassy voice rolled through the air like a distant avalanche. "Proteus... My master."

"Yes! Very good." Rott's posture grew in confidence, he lowered his pistol just slightly. "And as Proteus' second, you must now answer to me. Are we agreed?" His voice was pitched and projected, filling the whole area.

Trying to assert dominance on a force of nature? Langhorne mused. *Even I'm not that dumb.*

Wellborne seemed to think things over for a moment before replying. "Master... Is dead. Killed by dangerous man."

"Yes, yes that's right." Rott softened, appearing compassionate. It would have fooled most, but Langhorne knew the man too well.

Wellborne grunted and rubbed the side of his head. "Master gone..." He staggered two steps to the left and fell on one knee. "Master's voice gone. In this world..."

Rott took a step forward making a gentle and placating hand gesture. "Yes, but now I am here. I am your new master. Just as Proteus planned all along." Rott's voice trailed off below where Langhorne could hear.

I'm sure he's trying to seal the deal. Langhorne's hands instinctively tightened around his rifle; the stock found its way to his shoulder all its own. He wasn't the type that looked for these kinds of conflicts; he just wanted to make the Northeast a safer place to live. Yet here he was again, front row at a turning point of history. His strategic mind burned at the two options. *Kill Rott and keep the Outcasts from claiming Wellborne or... Let Wellborne go free?* Which was worse, a hurricane on or off a leash? An unchained Wellborne might be a random force of nature, he might destroy a settlement here or there, but if the Outcasts controlled him? His darkest imaginings held a grim picture.

Langhorne peered down the hill as Rott offered Wellborne a hand and helped him up. They appeared to be looking each other in the eyes. In that instant, his mind was made up. The rifle was already aimed; he looked down the barrel

straight at Rott's neck. He exhaled and his finger tensed. The *blam* of the gun echoed deep in the Scorch.

Yet Rott didn't fall. The bullet sunk into the back of Wellborne's hand, but that didn't mean it missed its mark. Wellborne had grabbed Rott by the throat. His inhumanly deep voice echoed like a thunderclap. "I remember now. I alone survived the Light. I need no master." His voice had changed, less primal, more calculating. Almost as if he was groggy or half asleep before. With a flick of his wrist, the grey being flung Rott more than a dozen yards away.

Langhorne stared, wide-eyed. Not because of how easily Wellborne discarded Rott, but because it turned and began bounding up the ridge with ten-foot strides. Langhorne had only taken a handful of running steps away by the time Wellborne's voice stopped him. It was a thick voice, strangely powerful and resonating to the bone. He was frozen in his tracks.

"Rifle-man."

Langhorne waited but didn't turn. His thoughts flashed, *five shots in the chamber, close quarters. I don't like my odds.*

Wellborne walked closer, his heavy steps cracking loose stone underneath. He passed Langhorne's shoulder on the left, all he could do was tighten his grip on his rifle. Wellborne stood in front of the marshal and stopped. His upper body was bare grey, dark as late dusk, his muscles thick with untold strength. He stood a little shorter than Langhorne, but his very presence was dominating. His breathing alone reverberated the air with a tone deeper than the lowest air whale song.

"I am free, now. No master commands me."

Langhorne felt sick hearing the voice so close up. He grimaced. "Congratulations."

"I have conquered the Light and this land is next. Yet, I have need of a guide." Wellborne's eyes were black as a starless night, yet they peered at Langhorne searing right through him.

"I did just shoot you. Are you sure I'm the right guy for the job?" Langhorne didn't choose sarcasm deliberately but standing before a near-omnipotent being nudged him towards flippancy. *Ah— hell with it, anyway. If he really wanted to grind me to dust there's not much I could do.*

Wellborne's head cocked to one side like a confused animal. "Your bullet aimed for my former master's Second. Your simple weapon cannot harm me. You are my guide. This place is devoid. Take me to a place with life."

Doesn't seem like I have much choice... Langhorne gestured behind the grey man-creature. "We'll need to go west." Surprisingly, Wellborne stepped aside. Langhorne walked forward, wincing at the mere proximity of Wellborne's form. It overwhelmed his senses in a way he couldn't put his finger on. *What the hell have I got into now?*

Rottiger

Yards away from the nearest campfire, Rott lay on the ground too afraid to move. When the panicked voices and screams subsided, he checked himself over. Amazingly, his neck wasn't broken. His shoulder was sore from the landing and he definitely had multiple cuts and scrapes all over. *Crashlanding out in the Scorch will do that to you...* With a grunt, he managed to work himself up into a sitting position. There were a couple campfires lit but no sign of the remaining Outcasts. He recalled those who had run south at the first sign of Wellborne springing to life and cursed them under his breath. Rott rose to his feet and approached the camp with limping steps.

After several minutes, he'd gathered his personal belongings, strapped his thunderclap pistol to his hip, and confirmed just who was left. All three patrolmen were dead, scattered about with limbs splayed this way and that. They'd been the first to try and confront Wellborne and failed instantly. Two more broken bodies were twisted up in a fallen tent, Rott didn't bother look close enough to see who they were. Three more bodies lay on the ground near the campfires, but they weren't dead. Rott checked close enough to realize they were asleep. Deeply asleep in some unnatural way. The occasional flutter of an eyelid was their only response even after being slapped across the face several times. Rott gave up trying after his hand went numb.

"That's just great. All this work and nothing to show for it!" Rott lifted his back on to his shoulders. He made one last look at the destroyed campsite. "You're all useless!" He shouted at the sleeping and dead alike.

As he turned to leave, an uncertain voice spoke. "Rott, sir. I'm still here. Ready for orders—"

Rott snatched the pistol off his leg, turned and pointed it straight at the voice's source. "Bregory." The small, overly formal man stood there, a gash over his eye.

He listed to one side perhaps denoting a leg injury.

“Rott? I...” He raised his hands in alarm.

Rott snarled. His thumb ran along the back of his gun. Rage and frustration poured through him. But something about the sad, injured, little man stayed his wrath. He recalled the years of loyal service. The running around and speedily completing even the most contrived request. He replaced the gun to its holster, turned, and walked away.

“But... sir? What shall I—”

“Go home, Bregory!” Rott shouted without turning.

There was a sound of muffled confusion. “What will I tell the Trust?”

“I don’t care!” Rott stomped away a little harder.

“But, sir, where are you going?”

Rott growled and turned back again. He was already yards away. “I’m leaving, you imbecile! What does it look like?!”

“But where—”

“I DON’T KNOW! And if you ask me again you’ll find the business end of my thunderclap quicker than you can say *dead from asking too many questions!*” It was a terrible made-up idiom. Rott couldn’t tell if he was still playing the part of dominating Outcast chief or if it was just his own natural irritability coming through.

Bregory raised a finger in pause as words caught in his throat.

“That’s better!” Rott snapped around and resumed his westbound walk. As far as Rottiger F. Tiberiak was concerned, the Outcasts were over. Half of what remained of the Trust was now dead or just as close to it. There was no reason to be Rott anymore. Still, he had to somehow play cousin Fossvalor’s game if he wanted his share of the family fortune. This was a colder calculation. Fossvalor was one of the only people still alive that knew the name Rottiger. There was no guise, no identity to hide behind. *I’ll have to think of something... Some reason or tale that makes me out to be a hero. Or I’ll have to somehow single-handedly conscript Wellborne to my service and present him to my cousin as an early solstice gift. Yeah... right.*

Rott stomped through the Scorch towards the nearest town. The pesky little outpost of Smisom and home of the Marshal Corp. He’d sneak his way through

with no problem. Then, it'd be at least five days before he could get to Sedenza. The thought burned him. *What will I tell Fossvalor?*

If Wellborne eventually makes it to Sedenza, I'll claim credit for the delivery. Simple as that. Right, cousin? I hope you've got coin on hand, because Rottiger is coming to collect!

Langhorne

Langhorne saw the outskirt homes of Smisom on the horizon. The morning sun washed the already rust-toned Scorch in deeper reds. He paused to look things over. *Still standing. That's good.* His senses drew behind himself. The presence of Wellborne, even from a dozen feet away, felt like having your worst enemy and his three best friends breathing down your neck. Or like having a mowgul wrap its long fangs around your shoulder without biting down... yet. Langhorne pushed past the illness crowding his mind and stomach.

"Rifleman. I sense life here. We have arrived." The voice pulsed out in waves.

Langhorne groaned silently. *It's always worse when he speaks.* "There is life here, all right. Let's try to keep it that way." He tensed at the sound of approaching footsteps. He didn't bother moving, knowing this foe was beyond him.

Wellborne walked right by Langhorne heading straight into town.

Langhorne watched in disbelief for a moment. He made a long grunt of exasperation and grabbed the rifle off his back. *I must be the stupidest man alive... At least I won't be alive much longer to complain about it.* He dashed to catch up with Wellborne, staying several feet away, pointing his rifle directly at Wellborne's empty black eyes. The creature didn't flinch and continued its pace. "I can't let you hurt anyone. This is my town."

Wellborne's voice reverberated in the wind. "Your role as guide is complete. You may leave." It continued marching without a trace of emotion on its face.

Langhorne kept pace with Wellborne, glaring down the rifle barrel. "Are you listening? I won't stand here and allow you to harm anyone. Do you understand?!"

Wellborne paid no notice. "Individual lives are meaningless. But life must

persist. I am life that persists.”

Blam! Langhorne fired a shot skyward. It wasn’t a warning shot but an alarm of incoming danger to the other Marshals. Wellborne didn’t notice. “And now that you’ve found a place with life, what do you plan to do with it?”

Wellborne paused, taking a deep breath through flared nostrils. “How many live here?”

Langhorne squinted, though the sun was at his back. He considered that every statement might just fuel this monster’s dark plans. “Six to seven hundred. Why?”

Wellborne’s posture grew pensive; his powerful voice softened to a dull rumble. “I am growing, I am knowing. I am learning...”

“And...?” Langhorne felt bold and took a single step forward.

“This is life of six hundred...” The thought kept Wellborne in pause. “There are more. More life-places. North... And east.” The monster’s black eyes peered out into the Scorch, seemingly looking beyond the horizon into the other distant Northeast towns.

Langhorne’s lips curled in disgust watching the black-eyed Wellborne’s dark curiosity. He kept his rifle pointed at the oblivious creature.

Nearly a minute passed before Wellborne turned his gaze back to Langhorne and the town behind. “There are more life-places... in all directions. More—” It tensed and crouched like a predator spotting prey. “*Still out there.*” Growling, it took off running into town.

Langhorne stood in his way but was brushed aside with ease. He landed on his backside, kicking up a cloud of red dust. After a suitable amount of cursing and grunting in pain, Langhorne was on his feet. He ran into town as fast as his legs could carry him, rifle in hand.

The marshal pushed past his worst fears as he came to the outskirt homes. He knew Wellborne was a creature of untold power; yet the only think that mattered to him was keeping the townspeople safe. He pushed against the burning in his lungs and the ache of his muscles. As he approached the marketplace, the roughshod cabin homes gave way to larger buildings of thick beam and stone.

“Marshal!” A middle-aged man in the market exclaimed. He was still picking himself up and dusting off. “What was that thing! It was a grey... man, but—”

“Which way did he go!” Langhorne shouted. The flummoxed man shuffled for a second before pointing towards the eastern-most path. The marshal kept up his

sprint undaunted. In the back of his mind, thoughts wandered. *Hil and Jaxet would have heard that shot minutes ago. I just hope they don't do anything stupid. Which is funny because I guess that's exactly what I'm doing right now. All this might depend on just where Wellborne ends up.* Langhorne still knew exactly zero about what the creature wanted. It desired to find places where life gathered, but to what end?

With heaving breaths, Langhorne passed the Marshal office. "Wellborne's here! Wellborne's here! All hands, look alive! All hands!" He had no idea who might be inside to hear his cry; there was no time to stop and check.

With no sign of the threat, Langhorne continued his exhausting sprint to the eastern edge of town. Where the last buildings ended, a long red hill rose gradually leading back to the barren Scorch. At the top of the hill was the grey figure down on one knee. The *thing* appeared to be looking or sniffing this way and that. Langhorne hands tightened around his rifle as he took a step up the hill.

"If that thing wants out of town, why not just let it? Heh." Marshal Hildegas stepped in behind Langhorne wearing a wide grin. The impending threat hadn't diminished his good humor.

Langhorne however wasn't in the mood for japes. His gaze narrowed as he stared at the brooding Wellborne. "You recognize that thing? We shouldn't let it go anywhere except in the ground."

Hildegas shrugged in nonchalance before stepping in to stand shoulder to shoulder. "If that's who I think it is, what are we gonna do about it?" All the same, he took the rifle off his back and readied it.

Langhorne grit his teeth watching the grey-man up the hill. Wellborne sniffed the air, its gaze snapping this way and that. The peculiar way he moved made it obvious he wasn't seeing with just his eyes.

"What's it doing?" said Hildegas, his voice growing quiet and grim.

"He's after something. *Or someone...*" There was one person in particular that seemed likely; Langhorne wasn't sure he was even alive anymore. *Trede... Trede and Maej were the only ones able to go toe-to-toe with that thing. Maej is definitely dead.* He recalled the moment he saw the mystic Jonas carry Maej's body back to the Haven and his mood turned dour. *Trede at least might be out there somewhere.* He recalled the blinding lights that ended the great battle on the Sedenzan Plains. He quarter-turned to Hil, but kept his eyes straight on their foe. "Some of our friends from the city are out there looking for Trede right now. I can't explain it but that kind of mystic power might be our only chance against this kind of thing. Odds are, that's just where it's headed too. It's the law of the jungle,

right?"

Hil nodded, butting his rifle stock up to his arm. "Take out your biggest threat first, sure. Again, if Trede's the only guy that can wrestle this thing, why not let them at it?"

Langhorne broke his lock on Wellborne give his friend a chastising look.

"Right, right. Duty, honor. Doing the right thing when you friends need you." Hil sighed. "Ok, you want the left or right?"

Langhorne climbed the hill towards Wellborne's right side.

"Ok... I'll take the left." Hil climbed the rust-stained rocks low and slow.

As the two marshals crested the hill, Wellborne paid them no notice. They closed the gap at angles, careful not to align with a direct crossfire. They waited, rifles trained for long moment. Hil broke his intensity for a moment to give Langhorne a shrug as if to say *what now?*

Langhorne's thoughts mulled. *Maybe we can't stop this thing, but if Trede is on his way back, they'll need time. Maybe time is all we can hope for.* He raised all is courage, straightened his shoulders and spoke. "What do you want, Wellborne?"

An ill wind swirled around the beast; it was all Langhorne could do not to turn away in disgust. "I've tasted life here. It's not... right. I want more. I *need* it." His voice reverberated the rusty stone and portrayed a dim ecstasy, or at least a complicated satisfaction. Somehow being near so many living beings fed into Wellborne.

"Still looking for the one that got away, huh?" Langhorne's face twisted as the air around Wellborne became more stale and rancid.

Wellborne's obsidian eyes snapped towards Langhorne. His grey, muscular form rose and took five steps closer. "The one. The one that was with me in the Light." He turned to look out beyond the horizon.

Langhorne gauged his foe, discerning curiosity, but mostly fear and hatred. "If you're looking for Trede, I'm betting you're too late. Friends of mine are out there getting him back—"

A rumble in Wellborne's throat grew to a low growl. He lunged the gap of several steps in a flash and grabbed Langhorne but the throat. By instinct, Langhorne railed his heavy six-chamber rifle across the enemy's face. A black crack formed over one brow but it phased him not.

Hil stepped in, holding his rifle up for a point blank shot. Langhorne, unable to breath or talk, shot him a dead-eye look. *Don't!*

Wellborne pulled Langhorne in, inhaling a deep breath. "This life-place has nothing of interest for me. I will find the one from the Light." He threw Langhorne down in the dirt, a cloud of red dust kicked up around his near-unconscious form. It beat its chest with a heavy, stone-like fist. *"I will be the life that persists! Me!"* He bolted away into the Scorch, making long running strides and bounding several meters at a time.

Langhorne could barely see straight; he struggled to rise but couldn't. Hil was by his side in an instant.

"Langs! Langs, what the hell, man."

Langhorne heard the voice of his friend; it sounded far away. Growing farther. The world grew dim around him. *That's funny... Isn't it daytime?* The darkness around him grew until the world he knew was left behind. Around him in the far periphery, was a sea of lights and a the pattern of crashing waves. He last lucid thought was one of confusion. Then came the darkness.

Chapter 27

Cassidy

"I'M sure it's this one, just let me... Here, it's definitely—" BZZRT. "Ouch!" Cassidy recoiled in pain as a jolt of energy ran through her body. She bent herself in half, jumping up and down. "Ow, ow, ow!"

Bors cursed under his breath and reached out a hand. "Let's see that. Did it burn? Naw, looks ok. Stings like a thousand-year sunburn, though don't it?"

Cassidy crossed the room finding the nearest chair to collapse into. She reeled back and forth. "This is so hopeless!" She exclaimed in frustration. It'd been two days of solid work on Tenowon at the Haven and they'd only managed to make minor cosmetic improvements. While the android's exterior looked better, she had a feeling they'd never get Tenowon back to his old self.

"Hello, Technician. Are you ready for step two?" The hollow shell of Tenowon's voice asked them the same question that came like clockwork four times a day.

"Stand by. Technician not ready for step two," said Bors, suddenly sounding very tired. He shuffled around replacing a few dropped tools back on a makeshift bench. "Things take time, kid. How about a drink? Mystics must have something around here."

Cassidy only shrugged but Bors took it as confirmation. He made his way out of the room and down the long stone hall. The lone Cytech left in the room wrapped a damp rag around her sore hand and buried her face in her palms.

She tried to hold back her worst thoughts. The near impossibility of what she was trying to do. The fact that even if Tenowon was repaired, was there even going to be a Cytech guild to return to? If Wellborne ever came back to the city, would Sedenza itself even exist much longer? Feeling the weight of the world on her shoulders, Cassidy stifled a few sobs. Which only served to make her feel worse for letting the stress get to her. "It's like I can't even win at failing!" She sat back in the chair and stared at the ceiling. A few tears ran down her cheeks.

"Cass—idy." A strained, metallic voice came from Tenowon's broken body. "Cassidy, I've just remembered something."

Cassidy fell out of her chair and jumped back; her breath caught in her throat.

"It's oh— Ok," said the broken Tenowon. His chin stuttered to the right before he could speak again as something clicked into place. "You've been trying to repair me. Thank you." He attempted a smile but it looked like half the actuators in his face weren't receiving power.

Cassidy stared, mouth agape. "You're alive." Her eyes welled with tears.

"Yes, again, thanks to you. Brilliant work by the way. Not to be a downer, but I think I've just realized something urgent." He looked around the room in an awkward fashion given that his neck and shoulders couldn't move. If he noticed he wasn't at the guild house, he didn't show it. "I've somehow regained access to an old damaged memory core. It's a very old one... The *first* one, in fact." Some of the genuine gleam in his grey eyes returned.

Cassidy grabbed a stool and pulled it close, grinding against the stone floor. "That's amazing but... can it wait? How are you functioning? What changed? Can I check you out?" She wiped a tear from her eye. *He's alive... He's actually alive! Bors will flip when he comes back!* The curious Cytech moved in closer to examine Tenowon's power conduits.

"If you would. Just a moment." Tenowon's hand jerked but couldn't seem to move yet.

"What could be so important? You're alive again!" She stepped back, raising her hands with joy.

"I know what caused the cataclysm. And I don't think it's what any of us thought—" *BZZRT*. The android's voice caught as his body jerked slightly.

"Sorry. Oh, so sorry," Cassidy resumed her examination. "We're... obviously not done with repairs. Still having trouble getting sustained power to all the actuators."

"That's quite all right," said Tenowon sounding strained.

Cassidy set to work checking things out. "I can't understand how you just came online again? We've barely had time to *start* step one of the diagnostic routine. Pretty ingenious to build in a system that helps repair itself. Oh! Bors is here! Did you know that? He's been teaching me to repair your systems. Man, what a time we've had even getting this far!"

The android's neck managed to jerk one inch to the left, his pensive grey

eyes held a warning. "We're all in grave danger."

The young Cytech's enthusiasm waned for a moment. She stepped back; her shoulders slunk. "What do you mean?"

"The thing that caused the great cataclysm over five hundred years ago. It was The Well. Or... not exactly. It was men's use of it. Humankind spent years trying to tap into The Well's power. It changed the world, propelled science to new unbelievable heights. But it was never enough. We... I say we, because I guess I was there at the time. *Somewhere*... That part is still cloudy. But we had a crack in The Well. We widened it, deepened it again and again. Eventually... Everything was lost. The world twisted and burned." The faint echo of memory dawned on Tenowon's face as he spoke.

"That's terrible..." Cassidy reflected in a moment of silence. "You always dreamed about finding out what caused the cataclysm."

"Indeed, I've spent years searching. And I never thought it would have brought me to face The Well's energy made into a living storm."

"Oh... About that. While you were... *out*, the Storm became Wellborne. Oh, crimus. You missed a lot." Cassidy shifted on her feet and sat down on the stool behind her. For a few minutes, she filled him in on the details of the great battle, Maej's death, Trede's disappearance in the blinding light, and Wellborne's recent physical reappearance.

"Wellborne... Incredible," Tenowon's eyes fluttered as he consider the many repercussions. "Obvious monicker by the way, I won't ask who came up with it." An actuator in his cheek twitched. "To think such potent force could be condensed into the shape of a man. I may have underestimated Proteus' mystical ability. To create such an entity from raw power baffles me. Such a construct is sure to lead this entire world to destruction. He represents the *same* thing that caused the Cataclysm. Back then, people pulled from The Well too deeply. They tried to tap it for all it had. Proteus has done the same with Wellborne. It's only a matter of time before there are repercussions. We're dealing with energies at a cosmic scale!"

Cassidy went ashen as she recalled recent events. "There have been reports of people falling ill. Strange comas, different kinds of fugue states... We started calling it the Sickness."

Tenowon's eyes darted as he processed. "Then it's already started. I hate to say it. And while I'm grateful to be alive again, if we don't find Wellborne and send his energies back *into* The Well... The entire world will burn a second time."

Cassidy's eyes closed as Tenowon's revelation sunk in. She knew Wellborne

was a threat, but to be on par with the great cataclysm, it was impossible for things to get anymore dire. Suddenly the victory of Tenowon's return paled into meaninglessness.

Bors entered the room with two drinks in hand and was stunned motionless in the arched stone doorway.

"Hello, old friend. It's good to see you."

Bors shuffled forward, haphazardly set the drinks on the edge of the makeshift workbench and approached.

Cassidy, still reeling, managed to say, "He just sort of came online a few minutes ago. I'm not even sure how—"

"Well that's..." Bors' voice cracked. He looked his android friend up and down. "Ahem. That's great progress, good work. You know, Tenowon, there's only a handful of people I'd come out of retirement for. Count yourself lucky."

"Indeed, I do. And I'm told I have you two to thank for getting me this far. I am once again in your debt." A few more actuators twitched into a smile.

Bors placed a hand on Tenowon's shoulder. Cassidy couldn't be sure how much of it was affection or if he was making a mental list of remaining repairs. "Now that you're back... sort of. I don't suppose you know how to formulate styrene-ethylene-butylene-styrene from scratch?"

"I... do." Tenowon seemed surprised at his own memory. "As I was just telling Cassidy, I've recovered some of my oldest memories. Including some technical details. I think they'll be of help. However..." His grey eyes wandered to Cassidy. "There are a few things we should discuss first. I'll need help relaying this information to our allies." His eyes glanced the room, as if suddenly realizing where he was for the first time. "Whoever they may be. Bors, you may want to take a seat. I have the feeling there's a lot to talk about."

Cassidy settled in as Tenowon repeated with expanded detail the very real dangers of messing with the raw cosmic force of The Well. The threat of Wellborne's return was now infinitely deadlier than expected. The mystical construct wasn't just a city-wide threat, but an existential one for all life. By the time Tenowon finished, Bors rose and slowly went to the workbench. His eyes panned over the available tools and instruments; his hands didn't move.

"Are you ok, Bors?" Cassidy asked. She wondered how he'd take such news. Hearing it a second time certainly did nothing to settle her nerves.

After a moment, the old Cytech swore under his breath. "All the more

reason to get back to work.” He turned and handed Cassidy a spanner. “Wouldn’t you say? We’ve got a helluva lot to do. And about no time to do it in.”

Cassidy gripped her fingers around the cool metal. Shocked, she turned back to Tenowon, her eyes asking if it was ok to proceed.

“We do have to start somewhere,” said Tenowon. “Let’s discuss that formula, shall we?”

Cassidy set to work bearing a heavy burden of knowledge. A moment later, she found herself near Tenowon’s cheek testing some actuators. “We do have some allies left. Mostly the mystics, and... Traz and the others should return soon. We’ll think of something. When we’re all back together.”

Tenowon nodded in silence. He seemed distracted. Which was understandable given his current condition.

Cassidy’s thoughts wandered. *Traz and Oudrine should be back soon...* She didn’t think further beyond that. Would their expedition bring Trede home? Was that even possible? The thought was too overwhelming; entertaining it threatened to break her. She tried to set hopes and fears aside for the time being. Tenowon needed her help.

After another busy day at the Haven, Cassidy wasn’t sure who was more exhausting to work with. *Bors or Tenowon? Don’t get me wrong, having Tenowon alive again is... It’s such a relief, and the biggest tech achievement of my life! But, crimus! Between these two, I never seem to be doing the right thing at the right time.*

“Hey!” It was Bors this time. “Grab that micro spanner and loosen the knee actuator. We need to get at the leg power conduit again.”

“I just did that twice this morning!” She threw up her hands.

“Indeed,” said Tenowon who was just barely able to turn his neck to face her. “The lack of power to the knee leads me to believe there’s still an issue we need to diagnose.”

She huffed. Then shrugged to acquiesce. “Ok...” She looked down at the make-shift worktable she’d been using. There were several beakers, jugs and buckets of different chemical components. It was a modest setup by any stretch of the imagination; especially after being in Lab One for so long. *How am I ever going to figure out this synthetic skin if I get interrupted every five minutes?! Ghuyt*

could figure this out way better than I could... Of course, he's on lockdown with the Merkants. She grabbed a spanner, an insulated pick and a few odds and ends from one of the toolkits Bors had snuck out during his escape.

She set to work on dismantling Tenowon's knee again. After a minute there was a loud *click*. Tenowon's head lilted to one side. She startled back. "Oh— Sorry!"

"It's... *ok*." Tenowon's voice droned; his jaw barely moved. "Keep... *going*."

She buckled down and set again to work. She'd taken this same actuator out so many times it should be easy, but legacy technology from before the Cataclysm wasn't exactly your run of the mill tech. In the background, Bors grunted and cursed as he stoked an old fire stove in attempts to melt down some metal for making some replacement parts.

There was another loud *click*. The actuator came free and Tenowon jerked his head back up straight.

"Ah, that's much better," said Tenowon now sounding fully alert but still unable to move his neck or jaw very much. "Bors, how's that replacement conduit section coming?!"

"Give me a damn forge and I'd be done!" The old Cytech kicked the side of the cast-iron fire stove. "If I get this thing as hot as I need it, the whole tank'll melt!"

Tenowon quarter-turned to the back corner where Bors was working. "The melting point of cast-iron is a few hundred degrees higher than bronze and silver. As long as you monitor the temp closely, you should be fine."

Bors cursed under his breath. "You think I don't know a few things about melting points and heat coefficients!? I wrote most of those books, if you recall." He kicked the makeshift furnace again in spite and turned his back on the rest of the room.

Tenowon turned back to Cassidy with a knowing look. "Don't worry, that's normal for him."

Cassidy rolled her eyes; she smiled too. "Oh, I know. Believe me." She'd spent months now getting used to Bors general way of working in a lab. She rose to head back to her chemical bench.

"Good work so far. I think you're close." Tenowon added. "I do recall the

formula but the exact process is proving more difficult.”

Cassidy stepped up to the bench. She picked up one of the beakers. “We had good results with three parts of the one the smelled highly-flammable right?”

Tenowon nodded, an odd jerking motion. Cassidy noticed one side of his mouth go up in a smile.

That’s good! That means he’s receiving power to more of his facial actuators. When Bors finishes that replacement conduit, I bet he’ll be fully powered! She looked down at the chemical components. Now if I can just get a sample mixture right... Tenowon will look fully repaired too. Consumed by her work, Cassidy didn’t notice someone else come in. She startled at the new voice.

“You should come upstairs.” It was Yaladra, as ever, in her white cloak. She had that serious look in her eyes again.

“Is everything... Ok?” Her shoulders tensed. The thought that there might be more bad news was already crushing in on her from all sides. She gulped a hard lump in her throat.

“Oudrine’s back and... Trede’s with her.”

By sheer luck, Cassidy had nothing in her hands at the moment, for she surely would have dropped it. A strange panic took her and the world went dim. She braced herself, slapping a hand down on the work bench. Her legs went weak; she struggled to breathe at all. *What’s wrong with me?*

“Are you... coming?”

Cassidy could hear Yaladra’s voice but she couldn’t respond. *This is what I hoped for... isn’t it?* Her eyes welled up despite her resolve. She ran past Yaladra, up the stairs, but not to the entry hall. She was on the far side of the Haven and entered the arboretum from the east door. She collapsed on her knees underneath a large bush of purple flowers. *What is wrong with me?!* Her thoughts were alight and buzzing with a thousand feelings. She’d spent months mourning Trede. She had thought about him obsessively, knowing that he could still return. She had always wanted to believe that he was still alive. It was a belief she needed to have. It was something to hold on to. But now... Trede was really back. Suddenly she didn’t know if she could face him again. She wasn’t even sure why. In the arboretum, she hid, stifling sob after sob. She wanted to be alone. Needed it. At the same time she hoped he’d come in and find her and somehow make these feelings go away.

I can’t— I can’t face him. What is wrong with me?

A lonely hour passed in the arboretum. The soft click of the west door opening shook her from her tears.

She heard someone swallow. "C— Cassidy? I thought you might be in here..."

That's him, oh god, it's him. I can't—

Trede took soft steps through the greenery and flowers. When he came to the opposite side of the tall bush he stopped. He didn't say anything for a long minute. "Hey... I'm sorry."

"For what?!" she blurted out too loudly followed by a long sniff. *Guh, I'm such a mess.*

"I... said I wouldn't go running off again. Hah—" He paused. "I guess I kinda did."

"I'm not mad, you know," she blurted again.

"That's ok." His feet shifted over a stone in the garden path. "I can come back, if you—"

"No!" She rubbed her bleary eyes with her palms, rose and walked around the bush. There he was. She had a hard time looking at him. Part of her was so afraid he'd just up and disappear again, or... *What if he doesn't care about me anymore? What if he—* She had to say something; she swallowed a sob. "Are you back?" She mustered her courage and looked him straight in the eyes. It was definitely him. He barely looked any different. A clean set of clothes, hair the same tussled chestnut, his skin was more tan. The thought echoed in her mind. She had to ask it again. Simple words that meant so much more than she could express. "Are... you back?"

"Yeah... It's me." He smiled. His own eyes growing misty. He opened his arms slightly, not exactly asking for an embrace, but perhaps ready.

"Ok, then." She nodded sharply and swallowed again. "Good." Was the only other word she could choke out of her tightened voice. She looked away and found herself staring at the purple flowers. It was the only thing she could manage. Trede took a few steps and came shoulder to shoulder with her. They didn't say anything, didn't even move for minutes. Inside Cassidy was in tumult. She wanted to grab hold of him for dear life, wanted to shout against the doubt in her mind that said he was never coming back. But the past several months had left her with hurts too painful to express, questions too big to ask.

It was Trede who finally broke the silence. "I've been thinking about you

every day from... where I was." He shuffled his feet.

"Where were you?" The question escaped from quivering lips.

"I..." He sounded pained, hesitant. "I just called it the Light. I don't really know where it is. Or if it's really anywhere... If that makes sense. I tried to reach out to you several times. To make sure you were Ok. I was never sure if I got through."

Cassidy considered a day recently when she woke up from a pleasant dream she couldn't remember. She wondered if that was him. The thought was both endearing and yet she also felt betrayed. *Why can't I say anything? Why can't I just be happy?*

"I heard a little from Traz and Oudrine about what's been going on. It's... a lot. I'm sorry I couldn't be there to help. But I'm here now."

The more he talks the more different he seems. Why is that killing me on the inside? Cassidy held on to every shred of strength to keep from sobbing again.

After another minute Trede spoke again. "The others are gathering in the main library. There's a lot to discuss. Do you want to come—" He reached a hand towards her shoulder.

Cassidy recoiled with half a step back. Somehow, a reflex kicked in as if Trede's hand was fire itself. Full of danger and pain. At war with herself, she managed to reply. "I'll come. In a minute."

"Ok... See you there." He nodded three times, hesitated, then stepped away.

"Trede—" She couldn't bear to see him disappointed. She rushed him, wrapping her arms around his body and squeezed hard. She sank into his shoulders and held on for dear life. *Stay. Stay forever. Please never leave me again. I was so worried. I wanted to believe you'd come back... people kept saying you wouldn't. Maybe you didn't want to come back...* Her thoughts tumbled on and on in silence, the only thing she could do was squeeze him in her arms.

Eventually, she had to let go.

"I'll see you in there." He repeated, looking her in the eyes. Then, without saying another word, he walked away. The arboretum door opened and closed. He and was gone.

After she was sure he had really left, Cassidy went back around the bush

with purple flowers and knelt down. Her cracks grew to crevices; her resolve and determination dissolved. The tears didn't come. She wiped her eyes dry and took a deep breath. The young Cytech had just faced her greatest fear, the looming dread that she'd tried to bury for months on end. *He's really back.* The thought settled in giving her a little warmth in her heart. Despite how impossible it seemed, her hope had come true. *Trede came back to me.* Her confidence growing, she rose and made way to the library.

Chapter 28

TREDE

TREDE looked around the library inside the Haven. There were so many familiar faces he could barely keep his thoughts in order. It'd been so long since he'd seen anyone, felt anyone's presence except his enemy's. Amazed at himself, instead of feeling overwhelm, he smiled. *Friends. This is where I'm supposed to be.* It felt right. Even though Cassidy was still grieving his return, he still felt at home again. *I can't believe how much I missed her... Still. It feels good.*

Traz rummaged a couple of large bottles out of his knapsack and held them high over head. "Who's for a good drink?! It's not everyday a friend comes back from beyond!" The room erupted into cheers and agreements as drinks were poured and passed.

"To friends returned," said Drayle. The waning daylight coming in through the library window glinted off his specs. A few more cheers filled the room.

"So! Man of the hour!" Traz plopped back down into his seat between Trede and Svelina. "I've heard some of your tale. I'm sure the others would like to be clued in. Where exactly did you go? How *did* you stop Wellborne?" He peered mysteriously around the room waving one hand.

All eyes on him, Trede swallowed. "There's a lot to tell."

As he began, Bors and Cassidy entered rolling Tenowon in on a small two-wheeled cart.

Traz shouted, "Tenowon! Great sacred air, you're alive!" The room erupted in praise even though all the selahns except Traz had never met Tenowon before.

It took several minutes before the Cytechs of the group got settled and Trede resumed his story. Before he began, Trede caught a glimpse of Cassidy. She was sitting on the floor behind Tenowon's cart between two great bookshelves. She looked weary and had the faintest trace of a worried smile. It was an expression showing just how harrowing the past several months had been. Yet, she persevered. That little spark was all Trede needed to be encouraged forward.

"I'm glad to see you all..." he began slowly. "The Light was a lonely place. I'm not sure how I got there. Or even how I got back, honestly. But Wellborne was

there, alive and well. Here's what I can tell you."

He described to the group of selahns, mystics and cytechs his tarrying in the Light. The endless white desert, virtually empty, except for the wrathful presence of Wellborne attacking him at every turn. Day after timeless day he endured, never sleeping, never eating. Only the power of his Well-blessing kept him alive. Day after day that strange power, though never waning, ceased being enough. Or perhaps his wielding of it could not match his enemy's ability. Wellborne grew stronger until Trede was forced to seek retreat. He mentioned, too, the strange creature that visited him briefly. He summarized the shockingly tall creature's cryptic advice about the Conduit and a strange material that could somehow hold Wellborne at bay. The last bit caused a great deal of curiosity, and hope, in the expressions of the group.

Trede continued, "I knew that if I left The Light... Wellborne could leave too. But I couldn't hold up against him. Not alone. That's when I reached out for help." He looked to Oudrine. She was graceful as ever, though she had a new wariness about her.

"The Light is not a place of this world," she said while a quiet moment lingered. A few gasps escaped some of the selahns. The other mystics watched her with serious intent. "I can't say where it lies... Only that there was a thread leading me there. Trede's message left a path through the ethers. Using the Strength of Mind, I was able to pull on the thread... walk the path. What I saw there," her strained expression grew. "It's exactly as Trede describes. A white void. Inhospitable to human life. I do not doubt I would have died within minutes if Trede had not taken me back."

"Amazing." Drayle leaned forward in earnest. He was a scholar in many mystic matters. "A separate realm from our own. Trede, how did you find it in the first place?"

"I thought about that for while..." He was lost in thought and memory for a brief moment. "The only thing I can think is The Well's energy led me there. Maybe that's where it lives... Or that's where it used to live. I don't think I'll ever know." *And I don't really want to know.* Thinking about The Light made him ill; the remotest chance he might end up there again was unbearable.

The mystic Jonas was the next to speak. His long, greying locks were tied back, giving him a regal almost lion-like appearance. "So what do we do now? If Trede's presence in the Light was the only thing keeping Wellborne at bay... Doesn't that mean he's free now?"

A mix of hush and murmur ran around the room.

"If I may," Tenowon spoke and rose his left arm a foot or so. He was still clearly damaged and unable to walk but his familiar, kind voice was a warm welcome to Trede. "As I've discussed with Cassidy and Bors earlier... Wellborne might be an even bigger threat than we realize."

Trede leaned back in his chair as the heavy statement sunk in. To his side, Traz took Svelina under his arm.

"As most of you know, I'm a created being. I was manufactured sometime before the great Cataclysm though I only have more recent memories. A few decades ago I woke up in a mountain cave in the Western Spines."

"Oi, that's my old haunt!" The climbing selahn Vilagr a chimed in faintly, happy to hear of a familiar place during so much serious talk.

"Recently, and in great thanks to the months of tireless efforts of my Cytech cohorts, I've somehow regained a portion of my original memory. It was many lifetimes ago, and the details are incomplete. But I'm sure I can recognize the cause of the Cataclysm. It's the same thing that Wellborne, and Trede for that matter, carry with them. The power of The Well itself.

"In those days, I don't recall the use of magic, but there was a great technological empire. And the fuel for that incredible revolution was a mysterious source of energy. In a few points around the globe, scientists discovered they could siphon off highly potent energy from great cracks within the planet. No matter how much power they drew from the cracks, it never ran dry. There was a steady rate of power that never seemed to vary. And still, the humans of that time were greedy. They widened the cracks to increase the flow. The technology boom increased beyond measure as did the race for more energy. Soon the desire for energy was so great that wars erupted. At any location where this energy could be taken, countries lined up and tensions mounted. Until one fateful day, the cracks were opened so wide that... The world twisted and burned. And everything of that advanced society was lost. In the past five hundred years, the remnant of life on this planet has struggled to survive. But it is threatened again."

This story shook the room, Trede most of all. He had been in constant conflict with Wellborne for months and only now did he understand the full potential of The Well's energy put to destructive use. He cupped a hand over his mouth and stared at the middle of the floor, eyes wide. He knew they'd have to deal with Wellborne; he knew the conflict was coming. *I just hoped for a little more respite before...* His eyes closed; his shoulders sunk in defeat. He knew the course before them. "We have to get Wellborne's energy back into The Well." He knew this power, carried a spark of it himself. He knew its weight, its terror. The urgency of this task fell on him like a ten-thousand pound weight. He wanted to

look to Cassidy for encouragement but couldn't bare the thought of fear on her face.

"I believe you're precisely right," said Tenowon. "I hate to be the bearer of such news... especially in my current condition. There's not much I can do to help. But Wellborne poses an existential threat to all life on this planet. If those energies aren't returned to where they belong... the world will burn."

The mystics, cytechs and selahns talked amongst themselves for a moment. Trepidation hung in the room. All voices remained barely above a murmur.

Yaladra was the first to raise her voice slightly; she was taking to Drayle and drew notice. But it was he that addressed the room. "It seems clear that we need a way to subdue Wellborne. Contain him somehow. Then return him to The Well and..." He adjusted his glasses. "Well, we'll have to figure out the final step when the time comes."

Yaladra leaned forward in her chair, half cutting off her father from the rest of the room. "You're a fool if you think you can stop this kind of power. Anyone getting in Wellborne's way is asking for death. How could you ask this of us?" Her tone was grim but not incensed.

Tenowon moved to speak but held back, looking regretful. Trede sat forward and held up a hand asking for everyone's ear. "No one knows the risks more than I." His words lingered; all eyes rested on him. In the past, Trede would have shrunk from such attention. Having now survived the Light, he felt different. More than purpose, he felt destiny had gripped hold of him, for better or worse. He knew the path laid out before them. He also knew he couldn't do it alone. *How can I convince them? How can I possibly succeed even with their help?* He rubbed his brow; then rose from his chair.

"I was fighting Wellborne the entire time I was... away. He's relentless and never tires. Everyday he grew stronger. It felt like a hundred lifetimes... By the end, I could barely hold him back. Even though I have a piece of The Well in me, I wasn't strong enough to contain him. Not indefinitely. I called out to you all." He glanced at Oudrine, Traz and Cassidy. "Because I needed help. Not help for myself but for all of us. Tenowon's right. Wellborne has the power to wipe out all life on this planet. And there's no one outside of this room that has a chance at stopping him. We need each other. We have the most powerful Mystics, the brightest Cytechs and the bravest Selahns the world has to offer. We're it. So if we won't take a stand... who will?"

Traz jumped to his feet. "Here-here! I'll be damned if I let the world end during my honeymoon! Isn't that right, my desert flower?" He looked back over

his shoulder at his new bride.

She appeared to blush through her rusty whiskers. "I will help, too. If I can."

Trede scanned the room to gauge everyone's reactions. Yaladra remained reserved. Drayle looked pensive, deep in thought. Celeste and Jonas wore a quiet resolve, Trede didn't doubt their commitment for a moment. The final mystic, Oudrine, was quiet, her face like still water but an intensity came from her eyes. The selahns ranged from fear to excitement. Tenowon and Bors faces read that they understood this as inevitable. *Cassidy...* Trede's heart turned to her. She was afraid and hurting. *She lost her entire guild and now the world's coming to an end. Oh, Cassidy... I wish I could just take you away from all this. Maybe once it's safe again. I will.*

Trede stood and opened his hands. "I think you all know the cost of what I'm asking. And you're probably going to do it anyway... But I can't ask anyone to stay longer than they wish." He gestured at the door. He waited. No one so much as flinched. He nodded, a faint smile growing on his face. *I knew my friends would help. Now, we just need a plan.* Trede's mind revved up. "It's just a matter of time before Wellborne attacks. And the Sickness is already spreading! Now that I'm out of the Light, we can assume that Wellborne is awake and free. And with no Proteus to guide him, there's no telling what he'll do first. So... where do we start. Any ideas?"

Drayle and Tenowon both started talking at once with ideas on containing Wellborne as the first step. They were both excited over the idea of this mysterious material that could somehow affect Well energies. Vlahn had a few things to say about the different kinds of minerals he'd seen come from the Western Spines; every clue was helpful. Celeste and Traz both raised their hands for attention and chimed in. Everyone was ready to help. While all the plans were being tossed around, Trede relished being around the right people. *His people. His friends.* He smiled again and caught Cassidy's eye. She still looked shocked but gave him a long look. After a moment, one corner of her mouth curled up into a smile. *She's with me. I knew she would be. Now... looks like this is going to be a long night.* The young mystic-turned-leader tuned his ears into the nearest conversation. *At least we're all together.*

Chapter 29

Oudrine

LATER that night, after the meeting had adjourned, Oudrine found herself walking the halls near the Haven's entryway. She was exhausted after the long travel but had too much on her mind to retire for the night. *The greatest threat to all our lives. Wellborne...* Her last encounter with that entity nearly broke her. The months of recovery were still fresh in her memory. And some things she lost from that battle would never be recovered. *Maej... My love.* She considered going down into the catacombs to see his lantern burning. *No... I don't have the heart to grieve tonight.*

Down the hall at the entrance, Jonas' voice was rising. *He's... arguing with someone. Who?* She stepped along the cold stones until she could see the encounter by torchlight.

"The Merkants have no authority at a private residence!" Jonas' commanding voice gave no space for argument and still the other pressed on. Oudrine drew closer and saw the collar of a Merkant officer just over Jonas' shoulder.

"Sir, the Merkants are operating under direct supervision of Governor Tiberiak. Times have changed under this *real* leadership. And for the safety of our citizens, I must ask you again to comply."

Oudrine walked closer; already noticing Jonas' shoulders widening and chest raising. *They always did call him The Lion.*

"There is *no* way I'm letting any of you Bluecoats inside. I don't care how many stars are on your collar!"

The Merkant tried to shove past the door. "Well, there's nothing to it, I'll just have to—"

In a flash of golden light, Jonas back stepped and lunged. His strike sent the assailant reeling all the way through the doors and landing smack on the cobblestones at the foot of the steps. "Never. This home is defended. Now go back to where you came from!"

The Merkant, groaning intensely, rose and limped away down the street.

Jonas slammed the heavy door and shut the crossbeam. As he finished the task he was surprised to see Oudrine standing there. It wasn't the first time she'd seen Jonas remove someone from the Haven. However, with recent events, she knew this time was much different.

"And how long were you standing there?" he asked still bristling.

"Only a minute, teacher." Oudrine smiled, she had many memories in this place as a student. And Jonas was a key figure in many of them.

He grunted dismissively with a waved hand. "They're getting more persistent. That's the second one today. And the fifth one this week. The Merkants know something about this place... Whether it's because Bors and Cassidy are here, or just because it's the only place in the city where mystics dwell. They're consolidating all power in the city and leaving no stone unturned."

Oudrine's warm feelings of nostalgia faded quickly. "Does Yaladra know? If Tiberiak is behind this..."

"Oh, trust me," he laughed. "She knows. The first one to come around left with a broken arm. And some sore ribs. Since then, I've tried to be the one keeping an eye out for... *guests*." He laughed again, deeply and with mirth even amidst such trial. "You must be tired after the trip. Shouldn't you rest?"

"I don't think I could sleep. Not yet."

Jonas nodded while trying to hide a sympathetic expression. It didn't take her mystic Strength of Mind to know he was concerned. On the one hand, it wasn't long ago that she was convalescing as a shut-in. Her mind, Fire and heart were indeed still all on the mend. All the same, she had to remain strong. Not to face Wellborne, not even to help the other people of the Haven or Sedenza, but for herself. *I need to be on my feet, using my Fire. It's who I am, no matter the conflict.* She would not wilt and wither under any oppression.

Another knock came at the door. Jonas' shoulders bristled and tensed. "Here we go." He opened the door slowly at first before it burst open. Six brawlers wearing Merkant blues rushed into the entryway. They ran past the two mystics before they even had a chance to blink. Four disbursed further into the house. Two of them carrying steel clubs stood by the door as the freshly-injured clerk came up the steps.

Jonas shouted into the house with booming voice, "Alarum! Intruders!"

Oudrine's head swirled in panic. She realized just how depleted she was as her body surged with nervous energy.

The Merkant clerk puffed up his chest. “I *told* you, *no one* is exempt from the governor’s authority. You will be subject to search just like anyone else.”

Jonas’ lip curled and sneered. “And I told you this place is defended.” He took a fighting stance, his hands flared with golden Fire. “You boys are going to wish you stayed home tonight.” He flashed a quick gaze at Oudrine. “See to the others. I’ll watch the door.” A satisfied smile grew on his face like a predator moving in for the kill.

Oudrine didn’t say a word, didn’t need to. She turned and ran. *We fight. They want to assail our home... no. Not tonight, not ever.* She sprinted over the stone floors, turned the corner and immediately saw two more Merkant brawlers assailing Drayle. While a powerful mystic of the Strength of Words, Drayle’s study was academic, not martial. The larger of the two assailants had him in a hold, a burly forearm covering his mouth. Oudrine summoned a cloud of mystical blue energy around her right hand. If she could get close enough, she could put these attackers to sleep in an instant. Oudrine made a defensive stance and closed in on the two men holding Drayle in thrall.

“Your arms, dead and limp!” Yaladra shouted from down the hall, running down from the opposite side as Oudrine. Both attackers miraculously lost use of the arms for the moment—Drayle went free and staggered away. In a flash, Yaladra was upon them unloading severe blow after blow across their unguarded faces. Within a few seconds, they rejoined the fray by using wild kicks and jumps to keep Yaladra at bay. Yaladra had her hands full fighting these two experienced brawlers in close quarters. Still she managed to shout, “Behind you!”

Sensing the danger behind, Oudrine flared her blue Fire around her hands. *There are more than six fighters in the house. More must have entered... Jonas!* Fear for her mentor sparked but she held it at bay. She turned, hands at that ready to see a steel club flying at her. She palmed the weapon to one side and reached for the face of her attacker. An uncouth man, not exactly Merkant material, with strangely beard and rotten teeth. No doubt Tiberiak had hired a great deal of strong-arms to help him subjugate the city.

Oudrine grabbed hold of his face; she squeezed her fingers around his templates. Within a few seconds, his legs went limp and he fell. She had no time to appreciate the small victory. Behind her, Yaladra battled on; before her, two more club-bearing assailants were rushing in. Behind them, another taller, more serious looking fellow stood. He had a long dark blue Merkant coat and held a broad sword. His face held no empathy; he only looked like he wondered where to strike first.

Oudrine dispatched her next two attackers, ducking away from their blows

and pressing the advantage to use her blue magic. She escaped the encounter with only a bruised shoulder from a single club-strike. *Some of these are faster than they look.* She stared down the sword-bearing Merkant lieutenant. He was wiping the last drop of blood from the edge of his sword with a dark kerchief.

“No.” Her heart sank. *Whose blood...* Oudrine stepped forward, building up to a run. “No!” She wasn’t about to lose another loved one today. “You shall go no further!” Her voice burned like fire as she spoke. She had much less fighting experience than her late husband Maej, but this was the feeling he had described to her so many times. A dangerous place of mind that took him in battle. *Rage.* She let recklessness take her in to the fight. Instinct for self perseverance was set aside. *I have to stop them. Stop them at all costs.*

She knew she could take the swordsman alone with a powerful psychic attack; *that might leave me vulnerable.* She had to use her powers subtly, keeping her other senses fully alert. Now within two body lengths of the swordsman, she glanced back to see Yaladra and Drayle fighting off five assailants. *How are they getting in here?* There were now more than two dozen intruders, possibly more. She brought her attention to the one before her, focusing a distracting attack.

Behind you! Behind you! Over here! She whispered to his mind over and over hoping he would let down his guard. It almost worked. After the first whisper, he snapped his gaze around, but then calmed.

He turned to face Oudrine, sword raised to strike. “Excellent Strength of Mind usage. Usually I can smell it right away. An obvious trick nonetheless.” His blade swirled forward sending Oudrine back.

She paused, seeing another runner, steel club in hand, coming up behind him. This new attacker raced in front of the lieutenant. She could barely manage to stay just out of the way of the new attacker’s furious swings. He was smart and made careful lunges and strikes, never allowing an opening for her to get close. She readied more Fire at her hands. If she couldn’t get close enough to put this one to sleep, she’d have to project the energy at a distance. It was monumentally more difficult to do, a hybrid of the Strength of Words and Strength of Light, but on rare occasions she found it necessary to stretch herself to the limit. When her attack was ready, she gasped. The sword-wielding lieutenant was now upon her; he had darted in a deft pattern and was now within reach. The sword swung down at her shoulder.

“Cloth like stone!” Yaladra shouted from down the hall. CLANG! In an instant, Oudrine’s blouse became hard as a rock, the sword bounced off. Just as fast, her garment returned to its normal cloth.

Shaken and fazed for a moment, the swordsman stepped back, then readied another blow. As his sword rose... an arm from behind came around his neck. The swordsman was dragged backwards, sword clanging off the hard stone, but still in his grip.

"Traz! Over here! Help!" Trede struggled to hold down the lieutenant as they writhed on the floor in struggle. Amidst the shouts and chaos, two Merkant intruders broke off from Yaladra and Drayle's position down the hall and came to their lieutenant's aid.

Oudrine froze for moment in the din. Not because of the chaos of battle in her own home, but because of what she sensed coming from the entryway. *There's more. Many more, flooding in the door.*

Somehow Traz, flanked by the powerful Eesh'ahn and the lanky Vilegreá entered the fray just in time. They joined Yaladra and Drayle and dispatched the remaining foes at that the far end of the hall. With surprising speed, Eesh'ahn prowled low and lunged towards Oudrine's position. She slammed her muscular frame into the body of one attacker, ran sharp claws across his shoulder and chest, then shoved him into the stone wall, swinging her elbow into his temple for good measure.

The mystics and selahns fought and cleared the room, downing each and every assailant, except the lieutenant swordsman whom had gotten away from Trede. This senior Merkant had run back towards the entryway, and now returned with two dozen more fighters. Some with steel clubs, some with swords, all with the expression of someone looking to do harm.

"Consider this house fallen!" the swordsman declared. "In the name of justice handed down from the Regional Governor Tiberiak. Everyone in this building will come under his rule and authority." He pointed his sword directly towards Oudrine. "You are the lady of the house, I presume. Tell your guard to stand down." He had oddly flowery speech for someone so bent on malice.

Surrounded by mystic power and selahnic might, Oudrine wasn't ready to give up. There was one thing that bothered her though. She reached out to Trede with her thoughts. *Why haven't you used your Fire?*

I... I don't think I can. Or at least I shouldn't.

She bristled, careful not to give away any tell to her enemies. *Why not? You could disburse half this group with a single blast?*

It's different now. The Well... That piece inside me is so strong. So near the

surface... I'm not sure what will happen. It might be like last time... or worse.

We need you, Trede. If Tiberiak wins tonight... Then tomorrow, Wellborne could destroy us all. She wanted to apologize for her harsh thoughts but there was no time. There's too much at stake.

I can't...

Oudrine sensed Trede's thoughts wander to Cassidy. She wanted to chastise him further but hadn't the heart to do it. "So be it." Oudrine's hands flashed blue with a great light. "The Haven stands defended until the last. Let all the Merkants come. Let them be turned away in our wrath." The rage that sparked before returned, now greater. As she spoke threats against their enemies, she felt it wasn't even her voice uttering them. *Maej... if you were here, you would fight for us no matter the cost. As you always did.*

"Merkants for justice! Merkants for Tiberiak!" the swordsman shouted raising his blade. More than twenty armed men thundered across the entryway.

TREDE

Trede watched the attackers clamoring across the entryway. He looked left and right. Traz was there, jaw set, grim and proud; his two blades spinning readily in his hands. The other selahns Eesh'ahn and Vilegreá took low positions, ready to spring for attack. The mystic Yaladra held her father back from harm with a single arm, her eyes already glowing deep violet. And then there was Oudrine. His teacher, along with Maej, the people that introduced him into the world of mystics and the hidden conflicts of this world. Within seconds they would be set to battle. Could he really allow his friends to come to harm? With access to the great power of The Well within, did he dare risk their fate while he held back their greatest advantage?

Oudrine... He called out to her in thought. If I... If I start to fade again... can you pull me back?

She didn't respond right away. I do not know. But I will try.

Good enough, he thought. He closed his eyes in a frozen moment. He barely had to twitch to feel that coursing power of The Well omnipotent. His eyes opened, not to see the room at the Haven, but the lights. An endless field of starry

lights, with waves of shimmering energy crashing over them.

All these lights... I only have to reach out and grab them. His head tilted to one side. *The power of life itself within me. It's the power of their lives too.* He observed and inspected each light, knowing for sure he had each and every one he required. *Including the swordsman.*

He thrust out a hand; in his mind he was grabbing hold of each enemy light inside the Haven. He opened his physical eyes to find himself back with his friends. He gripped his fist like iron, the Well-blessing inside him roared to life and he knew his control was absolute. He held them all there, frozen in mid stride. One by one, each of his enemy's eyes filled with a haunting white light and their feet lifted off the ground. Even the swordsman, a moment before so proud and haughty, was listless and hung there in the air, arms at his side. His sword dropped to the stone with a loud CLANG.

Unable to speak, Trede glanced at his friends. They looked on in shock and horror. In the group, he made contact to Oudrine with an expression of fear. No longer for the enemies they faced, but for himself. *Don't let me go... too far. I don't know if I can stop it.*

Even the first wave of Merkant brawlers that were wounded and unconscious floated into the entry way. Trede's feet lifted off the ground as he hovered towards the street. One by one they all followed him outside. A few shrieks of terror came from some passersby at the alarming sight. Dozens of men floating in midair, eyes glowing with light, filling up the night sky.

In the darkness of night, Trede's eyes were useless. The white energies of the Well-blessing flowed out of his eyes— all he could see was light. He felt cracks forming in his skin, energy bursting forth in plumes of white. *Ok... I've got them outside, now what?* These people had attacked the Haven unprovoked. *What do they deserve?* An anger grew in his heart and he felt for an instant that if he tried hard enough he could end their lives. Turns their bodies to dust or worse. His fists tightened in wrath and the screams of his enemies filled the night.

"Trede!" a cracked, screaming voice broke his thoughts. "Trede, no!"

"Cassidy?" The words escaped him. He felt ashamed. His grip loosened and the shrieks of pain subsided. Gathering his wits, he sent a commanding thought to all the attackers. "Go home." He let them fall to the ground. He himself landed on the cobblestones, barely able to stand. "Go home!" he shouted to them, bent at the waist and staggering forward. Those that could rise did and stumbled away in the darkness. Their steps lurching and drunk.

Trede felt a body crash into his. Arms squeezed him. "What the hell do you

think you're doing! You've been back for a day! Not even a day!"

"I'm sorry," was all he could say. He couldn't tell if she was crying or if he was. He was still blinded by the light, still felt disturbed by the great power that lurked within. Disturbed even more by what he almost did with it. *Is that what I did to all those Outcasts at the battle?* He honestly couldn't remember. His legs were weak. Soon he couldn't even tell if his eyes were open or closed. The only thing left was Cassidy's voice.

"Trede? Trede, hey! Don't leave me!" She shouted between sobs. "Don't leave!"

Chapter 30

Rottiger

ROTT tapped his foot at a violent pace. After Wellborne's escape, he abandoned the tiny remnant of the Outcasts and flew straight to Sedenza. He'd made up another assumed name for the Merkant registry in Smisom so no one would track him. It was just another one of dozens of personas he'd had in a lifetime. He'd already forgotten most of his past names and was tired of the game.

I'm done with the charades. I'm done with the Outcasts. I'm done with this entire bloody family! Time to cash out and move south, out of harm's way. Now if Fossvalor will hurry up and get in here, I'll—

Rott got his wish. The patriarch of the Tiberiak family entered the room wearing a bespoke white collared shirt and silver waistcoat. "Ah. You're early. And who are we today, cousin?"

"You bloody well know who I am, *cousin*," Rott snapped, then recoiled. He'd have to downplay his true feelings if he intended to get out of that opulent office with every coin he deserved.

Rott sat down at his great mahogany desk and motioned for Rott to join him at one of the chairs in front. Rott did rise from the sitting area of high back chairs, walked to the desk and sat. Already Fossvalor was shuffling a tall stack of papers, more than triple the amount of documents he'd played with during their last meeting.

"A governor's work is never done it seems. I just cleared my desk last night." He spoke in nonchalance while thumbing through the many papers.

"Yes, yes," Rott played along. "Congratulations on your *election* into leadership. Regional Governor of the Central Plains... has a nice ring."

"Indeed," was his only reply. He continued sorting the documents for almost a full minute without saying another word.

Rott grit his teeth to keep from screaming. "I suppose you'll be wanting a report on my recent exploits abroad... If you're not too busy."

"Of course, cousin. Just one moment. I *am* running a whole city here." The

endless sound of shuffling papers filled the room.

Rott covered his face with a hand and rubbed his temples. He was ready to explode. *Yet, I need his signature...* There was no hope in accessing a portion of the family fortune without Fossvalor's approval. Without that money Rott was as good as broke. He decided to gently force the issue. "Of course, I understand. Though I did think you should know... Wellborne is awake."

In the middle of signing his name on a single large document, Fossvalor's pen went a shade too wide on the final K. One corner of his mouth betrayed him and twitched. "You don't say."

Indeed I do say, you twat. "Yes, he's very much alive." The memory of that grey-skinned monster with black-as-death eyes made his insides shudder. To Rott's great surprise, Fossvalor Tiberiak set down his pen.

"And where is he now? Not with you currently, I can see." Fossvalor waved an open hand at the empty room.

Rott fought to contain his seething anger. "He killed five of my troupe. The remnant of the Trust barely remains."

"Didn't you try and contain him?" Fossvalor's disapproving eyes narrowed.

"Yes, of course. Hence the sizable death count. He was not so... accommodating to the family wishes. An omnipotent being made of energy... *I can't imagine why.*"

Fossvalor didn't take notice of the sarcasm and remained serene. "So the creature is free?" he said with an unwavering stare.

"He went west. As far Smisom. Then disappeared into the Scorch." Rott glanced the eyes of his demanding cousin whose gaze was somehow both icy and burning. "Word is he continued west until out of sight. No one knows where he is." Rott had fully intended on spinning or at least obscuring some of the worst details of his abject failure but Fossvalor had a way of demanding the full story.

"And yet you came here because..." Fossvalor's head turned slightly as his eyes moved down to his documents.

Rott cleared his throat; his eyes froze wide open. *He's not going to pay me. That bastard! He won't give me a coin until I've turned myself to dust running his impossible errands.* He had no choice but to continue to play the game. He made an ingratiating smile, proffering a single hand in the air. "As you know, cousin. I've had plans to move south. I thought I might get out of your hair for a while.

Remove myself from your trouble, as it were.”

With wide flourishes, Governor Tiberiak signed the next document in the pile. “With a job less than complete?”

It was hard to argue with someone who barely paid you any attention. “I see no reason to be killed needlessly, cousin. Surely, we can let Wellborne be free? What might such an uplifted Governor need with such a creature?”

Fossvalor finished another signature, set the pen down and rose from his desk. “You lack vision. My vision.” He ambled to a nearby ornate hutch; he filled two small glasses from a decanter holding a dark brown liquid. He returned, offered one drink to Rott and sat. Spinning the drink in his glass, he spoke almost absently. “The name Tiberiak is a force in this world. Our ancestors started with nothing but twigs and rocks and we’ve built all this. He gestured around his opulent office, filled with nothing but the finest hand-crafted furniture, silver, gold, art, everything that screamed *wealth* and *class*.

Rott wanted to fume but held his tongue.

“We have the chance to build a dynasty, cousin. To build an empire that will last *generations*. We do this with money, yes. But power, true power is what will sustain us for years to come. Proteus served his role and gave us Wellborne. But without something to rival and exceed the mystics in this world, we’ll never truly be the strongest. Wellborne is the key to that. Do you understand?”

So that’s it. He’s taken over the Merkants, our largest city, and he still fears the Mystics. Fool. “Of course, cousin. You have my regret.” He nodded with quiet respect, took up the glass and sipped the drink. It had a strong burn, a rich woody flavor and probably cost a fortune. “Still, Wellborne is a force of nature.” *With the disposition of a flaming cactus.* “I don’t believe it’s possible to bend him. Not with a hundred men. Not a thousand.”

“Rottiger, you surprise me.” A rare playfulness entered the mayor’s expression. “We have the entire city at our disposal.” Wearing a sick smile, he handed Rott a single document, freshly signed.

Rott scanned the page. *Special task force... All resources to be available... Immediate action required, acquisition of the entity known as Wellborne at all costs. Primary responsible party: Rottiger F. Tiberiak.* It was off-putting to see his given name on any sort of legally-binding paperwork. What was even more off-putting was the sinking feeling in his gut. The page read like a certain death sentence. Suddenly the game paled, all that was left was a cold, harsh reality. *Did he already know Wellborne was on the loose? Was he playing me this whole time?* Rott stared at the freshly-inked name written on the document for minutes.

Fossvalor continued reviewing and signing other papers as if he were alone in the room. When it had fully sunk in, Rott spoke. It was in a low voice, sounding defeated, destitute. "If I do this, can I... Can I finally leave? Will you give me what I've earned and let me go?"

"Should you succeed." The governor replied too quickly. "You'll have a small fortune annexed in your name exclusively. Or whatever name you choose, cousin. I know these games you like to play."

Rott sank back in his seat. He moved one hand inside his long coat and thumbed the handle of his black-lacquered pistol. *I could end it. I could end him right now and be free of this. This cursed family, this life in chains...* A finger twitched then returned idle. He knew there was no way to access the vast family holdings without the signature of this one man. *Still... would it be worth it? I'd be free.*

Behind him, a door opened; a woman's voice came. "Sir, is everything agreeable in here?"

Rott fumed and dashed his coat closed. He'd heard of this trick. Fossvalor kept a few choice mystics on payroll. This one must've been of the Strength of Mind. *He's been tracking my thoughts this entire time!* He composed himself. "You'll get no worries from me, cousin governor." Rott rose with a brisk movement and made for the door, assignment in hand. As he passed through the door, he eyed the mystic woman. She was tall for a woman, with sharply cut short brown hair. He leered at her just to throw off her perceptions as he exited. *"I wouldn't mind climbing that mountain,"* he spoke under his breath knowing she was close enough to hear.

She recoiled with a disgusted sneer.

Rott continued, "You always keep such lovely help on hand, cousin. It's a wonder you get anything done."

Fossvalor barely noticed the comment, "I look forward to your good report." He waved dismissively.

Rott stomped his way out of the large Merkant compound. A clerk or two tried to gather his attention as he left but he shoved them all out of the way. He had an impossible mission that was likely to mean certain death for any number of Sedenzans. If he was smart, and just lucky enough, he wouldn't be one of the dead. *And Wellborne will be under Tiberiak rule.*

Yaladra

"Yaladra... You can't go, not now!"

"Tiberiak won't stop coming for us until The Haven's been torn down brick by brick.

"Daughter... I can't let you go out there alone—"

"No, stay here. Help the others prepare for Wellborne. And I'll make sure Tiberiak leaves us alone. *For good.*"

Those were the last words she'd said to her father upon leaving The Haven that morning. She found herself prowling the streets, much like she'd done for months prior. This time, though, *Tiberiak* had brought her to a point of ultimatum. Here it was, now less than two days after the attack. The harrowing event on her new home was vivid in memory and still sent shocks down her spine. The Haven, a place of refuge and safety for mystics had been violated.

After the attack, she'd spent a full day watching the streets around the Haven while the others prepared for the confrontation with Wellborne. Several times she spotted a small grouping of Merkant officers down the street. They stood at a distant alleyway between two sandstone buildings occasionally gesturing at the old building. At least until Yaladra would step out on the broad stone steps. That had been enough to deter them, but the constant activity was a reminder. *Tiberiak will never let a group of mystics alone. He knows we threaten him. They'll be back as soon as they figure a way to subjugate us safely. Or kill us outright.* Yaladra's jaw clenched as she meandered about the marketplace with her white cloak, magically turned to a soft grey-blue.

It's not going to stop. It's not going to stop until somebody puts Tiberiak in his place. It has to end now. She didn't dare think of what might happen if the Haven was set upon by both Tiberiak's forces *and* Wellborne at the same time. All her fellow mystics, the Cytechs too, would be in deadly trouble.

In the days leading up to the attack, Yaladra had noticed an uptick in activity around a specific set of Merkant offices on the northwest corner of the marketplace. There was a small complex of buildings with colorfully painted roofs, some of which had been built-in together to form a single larger structure. It wasn't as big as the Cytech main hall but it did seem to be the center of city-wide activity; it was

definitely her best lead. Knowing that Tiberiak, and all Merkant staff for that matter, wouldn't be around after dark, she'd taken the time to case the joint. She had a decent layout of the building built up in her mind, as well as multiple easy paths for ingress and egress. She kept track of any advantage she might press. A loose window in the east hallway. An older looking door on the west wing. That part of the facility looked to be part of an original building and later incorporated into the larger structure. She watched and waited, trying not to look obvious. By that hour, she'd seen several clerks and officers enter and leave the building. Something, however, told her to wait. It might be easiest to wait until a more expected hour when they would regularly receive guests and appointments. She considered walking in under friendly pretense, until she confirmed where Tiberiak was hiding. *Then I'll do what I have to do.* A fire still burned in her gut after the attack night before last. She was angered to bursting and ready to lash out. She considered the long, hard paths she'd traveled to get to where she was today. Each and every one was marred by the influence of that one man. Inside her cloak, she clenched her fists until knuckles whitened.

A man came bursting out of the main entrance, cursing and yelling. A few clerks followed him, scrambling to take notes, loose papers falling in a trail behind them. He had long black hair, roughly forty and fit; Yaladra didn't recognize him. There was only one thing that stood out. *His pistol...* A black lacquered handle reflected the sunlight from inside his long coat. The pistol was just the confirmation she needed.

Sensing the disarray this man had left behind, she figured it was the perfect time to kindly force her way in. Resolved in dark destiny, she set across the cobblestones and made way for the open doors. Step, *clack*. Step, *clack*. Her mind was set to the task, her face still, emotionless. She'd waited too many years for this day. Once within a dozen steps, she put on a faux-friendly smile. It was a simple con, the young girl looking for her uncle. She'd used it a dozens of times and worked more often than not. It might've worked this time too if not for the woman standing in the door's shadow. The obscured woman pulled her pistol's trigger.

BANG.

A sharp biting pain hit Yaladra's right hand. No time to call out, she crouched and rolled to the side, using her left hand to clutch her other at the wrist. Standing in the doorway were two women. The white-haired Laurel, wearing her long blue Merkant officer coat. She stood there holding the smoking gun. Behind Laurel was the tall woman that was with Sha'deeb on the day of Tiberiak's first speech. Her eyes flashed magenta; she wore a wry smile.

Dammit! Stupid, sloppy, dammit! She's a mind mystic— heard me coming!

Yaladra was an expert at looking unimportant to passersby; fooling a psychic was another thing entirely. Gasping in pain, Yaladra rose and ran for the nearest alleyway that ran alongside the Merkant complex. By her third step into the alley, she heard footsteps behind. A certain doom pressed on her. Only her panicked attempt to escape kept it from overwhelming her. She didn't look back and focused on running straight and true. The pain in her hand throbbed. She knew she could run faster with both hands swinging, but couldn't bear to lose her grip around her right wrist. Blood splashed and dripped on the cobblestones under her sprinting feet. Shouts came from behind. Her head spun. *I can't... I can't keep running.* It was a deadening realization. She stumbled around a corner and slowed for a moment. She found a small shed sticking out from the back of a rustic stick-built tenement house. She collapsed in its farthest corner and waited. Heart racing, lungs heaving, she reached into the pocket of her Inner Fire. She had an idea for a spell. It was a long shot and her only chance.

A group of Merkant enforcers came around the corner. Each with a long, thin club in one hand. *Five in all...* Five was a lot. This kind of spell required a great amount of Fire. With a shudder from her inner-most being, she sent out a wave of invisible magic to detect other assailants. *Just five. This has to work.* Her eyes lit aflame with burning violet energies.

"You're alone!" she shouted, pain catching the words in her throat. Her camouflaged cloak faded to a perfect stark white.

The closest two assailants slowed and looked confused. They exchanged incredulous looks while the three behind them pushed past.

"No tricks!" The lead man grumbled, brandishing his club. "No one comes at the governor's office without paying for it!"

Not strong enough! The lead attacker only feet away, she gathered her Fire to try again. She honed the words in her mind. It had to ring true, be an obvious statement like *water is wet* or *fire is hot*. It was bending those words into reality that taxed even a master of the Strength of Words. Reality itself fought against her. Coming around the alley corner was a sixth Merkant. *Laurel, no...*

The white-haired Laurel, pistol at the ready, shouldered herself between the two guards still confused by Yaladra's spell.

"If I had known your history with my employer when we first met," venom dripped from Laurel's words. "I would have shot you first and skipped the formalities. The protocol does have its drawbacks. From time to time." She sneered and pointed the gun at Yaladra's head from ten paces off. She waved the other enforcers out of the way. "You can't fight progress, honey..." she chided

derisively. "Time to get out of the way and leave the governor to his work."

No... No! In that instant, Yaladra knew she would draw her last breath. She sank into her Fire; the spell was held alive by invisible threads from her into reality. She redoubled herself and called onto the same spell. She staggered to her feet as Laurel fixed her aim. With a cry of pain crescendoing, she yelled, "You're alone!" A burst of wind tinted with the violet from her eyes flared out from her body. The club-wielding enforcers took a step back, eyes alarmed and confused. She'd snared two more, but one enforcer and Laurel remained.

"No more!" shouted Laurel; the sound of her thunderclap's hammer began clicking into place.

"There's no one here! You're alone!" Plumes of violet fire screamed from Yaladra's eyes into the air. Her head was forced back and cracked off the sandstone wall. She slumped over, eyes closed. By the smallest thread, she held onto consciousness. *Can't... lose it. Spell... will break.* With her stone-laden eyes heavy and closed, she held onto the magical thread. Her head reeled. Somewhere she felt the sticky warm blood still flowing from the gunshot wound to her right hand. She held that tenuous place of near-sleep with her Fire fully extended. *Six targets...* Her thoughts slowly became fluid again.

The spell worked... Otherwise I'd be dead. She slowly peeled her eyes open. The five enforcers and Laurel ambled around, lost and undirected. Calls of "hello?!" and "where is everybody?" bounced between them but none of them heard. The pain of holding such a powerful spell in place taxed her, but Yaladra rose to her feet. She knew she couldn't stay there. Soon enough the spell would break. Then she'd truly be dead.

Gripping her injured hand to her chest, she took staggered steps out of the alley. *Almost free, almost—*

The tall, magenta-eyed mystic stepped out of the alley and blocked Yaladra's path. "Pretty good spell white-cloak. But that kind of thing won't work on me." A pinkish light flooded to life around the mind-mystic's hands. "It's not often I see action being Tiberiak's office dog. So why don't you come here and let me finish you off?" She crouched and jumped into a run.

Yaladra froze. *A mind-mystic. Too strong for this kind of spell.* Still, she kept the spell flowing. There was no way she could handle five club-wielding Merkants and Laurel with... *her gun!* Without thinking, Yaladra dashed behind, grabbed Laurel's pistol, turned, and fired. The magenta light surrounding the mind-mystic's hands was barely a foot away. She fell and spun to the ground; immediately her light was diminished. She looked at the gun in her hand. *Four more rounds... I'm*

so close. Despite her intense pain, despite the strain of keeping six humans mind-locked with a disorientation spell, she resolved to finish what she came to do.

Tiberiak. I'm ending this.

She worked her way, with determined steps, back to the front of the Merkant facility. The place was in chaos; she just walked in. A couple clerks attempted to stop her but she dispatched them with a few swift blows from her good hand and a spinning kick with her heel.

She found the largest office, one decorated with a disgusting level of wealth. *No one here. But this has to be him.* She closed the door behind her and sat down on a claw-foot couch in the center of the room. She released her previous spell and took a few easy breaths. She had one special spell, one she'd been saving for years. She thought of it as her *waiting* spell; but really it was a short-range invisibility. The trick was that it had shorter range than the disorientation spell, but it didn't have a limit of targets. Anyone within range would think her completely invisible. A dozen feet or so was more than enough to fill the space of Tiberiak's mayoral office. She slid into a meditative state, Laurel's pistol on her lap, and waited. She had practiced this state for years; hoping that one day she'd use it just like this. In perfect health, she could hold the spell for at least eight hours. Even in her current wounded state, she expected to last at least a few hours yet.

I'm in Governor Tiberiak's office... It was an alarming thought yet it held an amount of pride too. She would lay in wait. Soon enough Tiberiak would come back to his ill-earned office. She'd be ready. *For everything he's done... Tiberiak dies today.*

Rottiger

Later that same day, Rottiger F. Tiberiak slammed down the heavy, empty glass. He was hunched over at a bar drinking the hardest liquor he could find this early in the afternoon.

"'Nother one?" asked the strategically distant barkeep.

"Didn't say stop, did I?" Rott nudged the glass aside with a jerking movement. When the man hesitated, Rott grumbled and sighed. He leaned to one side, grabbed a few more coins out of his pocket and slapped them down on the

counter. Within a few seconds his glass was refilled; he gripped it.

Damn you, cousin. Damn your stupid plans! Damn you being governor! Damn you for being the oldest son of the oldest son and running away with the family's fortune!

Rott's thoughts and mood spiraled. His last hope for freedom from Fossvalor's thumb was an impossible task. *Rally all the city's resources and prepare for Wellborne's arrival. He might be here in days. Or hours for all I know! Blast it!* He pounded the table with a tightly clenched fist.

The barkeep, several feet away, paused but didn't look up. After a breath, he continued busying himself.

There has to be a way... Some way to do what Fossy asked for and get out of it alive. But if I don't give him a good report, he'll know I'm lying. That damn mind mystic on his payroll! Aargg! He swigged half his glass. The burn of it was satisfying, though not nearly as potent as the expensive stuff in his cousin's office.

Rott considered half a dozen ideas. In the end, they all found him leading a group of expendable nobodies to their death against Wellborne. Succeed or not, he had try. If he died, that was it. If he succeeded, he'd get his wish. Endless riches and an early retirement away from the endless madness that seemed to surround the Tiberiak name. If he failed, and lived... *That bastard probably won't even pay me! He'll weasel out of it again!* Rott finished his drink. As a devious plan grew in his mind, he smiled. He took out the paper that contained his orders, eyes scanning the page. *Capture Wellborne. All resources to be available...*

Maybe it only needs to look like I'm rallying the troops. I'll put up a front, gather his forces on the city's edge. Ready them for Wellborne's return. But it doesn't matter what they do; there's no hope of actually winning... Which means I can put resources to my interests. The diabolical wheels of his mind churned. He rose, looked around the room. There were a handful of unsavories in the bar, unemployables, deplorables and the like. *Time for another show.* He puffed up his chest, deepened his voice and addressed the room. "Gentlemen and... lady." He gestured to an angry looking woman in the back. "Who here among you would like to save the world? I'm looking for people with real mettle, and grit. There's a job that needs doing and you'll all be praised as heroes upon our success. That is, *if you have what it takes.*" Inside he was smiling, so pleased with his plan. Outwardly, he put on a brave, stern face. It was time for his grandest performance, time to become an honorable general. The most courageous hero the city of Sedenza had never heard of. He would rally the troops and ready for battle on not one but two fronts.

You should have known, cousin, that putting me at impossible odds was a bad idea. I only play games I can win. And you've just given me all the pieces I need to do just that.

Chapter 31

TREDE

TREDE was in a deep meditation in his room at the Haven. Oudrine had recommended he attune his body and Fire in preparation for a showdown with Wellborne. The previous day and a half had been focused on that impending doom. Trede knew that Wellborne's hatred would lead him to Sedenza. Straight towards the only other being that carried The Well's power. As the coalition of mystics, cytechs and selahns readied a plan for action, Trede readied himself. He was the fulcrum of their defense. He would need to stand toe to toe with their enemy for as long as possible for the plan to succeed. And so he plunged deep into his mind, his Fire burning, until he lost nearly all sense of the room about him. The only thing Trede sensed was the warmth of his mystical Fire permeating his body down to his bones. His body and Fire were one, knit together by the untold powers of The Well omnipotent.

Some time passed.

Somewhere near, Trede heard breathing. He thought it was his own at first until the breath sharply inhaled and his own chest didn't rise. His bleary eyes opened to the bright, afternoon sunlight coming in the window. Cassidy was at the door and about to open it. In this heightened state, he could smell the flowery scent of her hair from twenty paces.

"Come in," he said, a faint smile already forming in his cheeks.

A gasp caught in Cassidy's throat; she opened the door and entered with hesitation. "You're still... How are you?" Her quick words ran together with an obvious fatigue.

"I'm ok." He stretched and brought up his knees to lean against. "Honestly, I'd rather be helping you and the others. But Oudrine said—"

"Yeah... She asked me to check on you. And you haven't *disappeared* or anything yet, so that's good." There was a certain grim factiousness to her manner.

Trede recalled the previous day when he woke up in Cassidy's arms. There had been some concern about Trede again being lost to the Light after accessing so much of The Well's power. Oudrine managed to speak into Trede's mind and close

the channels before it was too late. Still, the lingering possibility of disappearing from the known world was all too real. Cassidy was holding up remarkably well, despite the pressure they all faced. Still though, she was remaining more distant than Trede would have liked. *But I understand. I can't ask her for anything more. Not now.*

"There's some other news. We should talk." She abruptly straightened her tunic and went to the edge of the bed and sat. "Yaladra ran off this morning. Everyone's getting pretty concerned. Especially, Drayle, of course. Celeste got news from a courier. Turns out there was a fight in the market this morning, some *gunfire*. It's just... it's too much." She shook her head and buried her hands in her face. "Wellborne's not even here and *already* there's too much to handle!" With an exasperated sigh, she let her hands fall down into her lap.

She's right... There was no point in arguing and he knew it. *Wellborne is coming; Tiberiak's taken over the city and the Cytech guild... Even The Haven isn't safe anymore.* Trede didn't want to let the silence linger. *What do I say?* He recalled his time in The Light, remembering how much it changed him. He stood up, took a step forward. "It might seem impossible, but I'm not done fighting. Not by a long shot. Things are... bad right now. I know that. But I believe..." He turned to her.

Cassidy's head had stopped shaking; she slowly raised her gaze. "Believe in what?" Her voice was tired and drained.

"I believe in us. You and me. All of us. Together we can stop Wellborne. We'll contain him, send him back inside The Well. And after that, we'll take back the city and the guild house!" While Trede was still foggy on the specifics, there was no doubt in his mind they could succeed. *As long as we don't give up.*

Cassidy's hazel-tinged brown eyes watered. There were a thousand words on her face but she couldn't give them voice.

Trede, surprised at how energized he felt, was undaunted. He knelt down in front of her, placed a hand on her knee. "It's ok. I'm here. We have friends here. We'll keep the Haven safe and deal with Wellborne when he comes. Just stay close. We'll be ok. Together."

Cassidy's head lolled to one side, her expression still dour. She rose from her seat; Trede stood next to her. "I'm not going to sit around and do nothing." She walked for the door.

He stepped after her. "Where are you going?"

She paused by the door but didn't turn. "I'm going to work on Tenowon. With

everything going on... If all I can do is help a friend walk again, that's what I'll do."

Trede knew from her tone she'd be alright. There was a determination, a certain tenacity in her voice, even if she was fatigued. "I'm going to check in with Oudrine. I'll come down and see you soon."

She nodded and continued through the door. Trede watched her go with conflicting emotions. It hadn't been quite the happy reunion he'd hoped for. *There's no time for it now...* Still, the fact that Cassidy had stayed this close encouraged him. *I promise, Cassidy. When this is over, things will be better. I'll keep you safe until then however I can.*

Trede found his way to the old library and was somewhat chagrined to see all the other mystics, save Yaladra, present and hard at work. It was step one of their plan, to combine their mystic ability to sense Wellborne's location. If they were to be ready for his eventual arrival, they would need to have some idea when that was. And that meant keeping watch.

Careful not to disturb their focus, Trede sat down and joined them. He glanced the many bookshelves surrounding the walls, wondering for a moment what mystic secrets they may hold. His eyes closed, he called upon his Fire and immediately his range of perception grew for miles beyond the city. It amazed him what a group of mystics could do in synchronicity.

As his mind calmed and focused, the group's view expanded, now several miles from the city limits. He was at once both relieved and disappointed. *No sign of him.* The thought made him second guess. When in the Light, there was no doubt of Wellborne's hatred, his mad desire to see Trede dead. He felt that dark entity's malice *and fear* during each and every attack. As much as the young mystic could discern, Wellborne perceived Trede as the only real threat to his existence. In the Light, Trede was the only thing that kept Wellborne's power from escaping that mysterious realm. Yet, Wellborne never took physical form; he only ever attacked from distant shadows. This enemy's dark energy had constantly assailed Trede trying to wear him down. Even with vast stores of power from his Well-blessing, Trede had been whittled to a shred of his total strength. Through that months-long struggle, Wellborne's hatred of him never diminished. *So where is he now?* Trede's thoughts wandered to The Well's power hidden within himself.

"Save your strength, Trede," said Oudrine. Her voice was like gentle, rolling waters, barely covering a surging riptide of strength beneath. Her Fire was focused and taxed; she remained perfectly alert. "I have no doubt your Well-blessing could

help our search. But we'll need that power for when our enemy arrives."

"And we'll need our strength to keep you grounded in this world," added Celeste.

"Fine by me," said Jonas, a hint of mirth breaking through his deep concentration. "Let's save the light show for last. Something tells me we'll need it."

Oudrine nodded in agreement with her former mentors, eyes still closed.

Trede wasn't sure he entirely agreed. He forced his tense fingers to loosen and fell back into concentration using his Fire only. *I hope they're right. I hope they can... keep me from leaving again.* He was oblivious to the fact his distraction was reducing the range of their search. He knew at some point he would face Wellborne again. Would he again lose himself to the Light? Or would he finally succumb?

"Young Mr. Trede, if you wouldn't mind rejoining us?" Drayle spoke up, soft and polite, though the prod to attention was obvious.

Jonas chuckled softly to himself. "Thanks Drayle, I was thinking the same thing."

"Right... Sorry." Trede flicked his eyes open, shook off his distractions and dove back into the collective Fire. He pressed his senses to the furthest reach, catapulted by the strength of those around him. Searching the farthest east and north he could, he waited to see if there was even the slightest hint of Wellborne's massive, dark energies. *Still nothing.* He waited.

After several minutes of still and quiet, Trede's nose began to itch. He tried to ignore it; it persisted. He swiped a hand across his face to dull the itch. Then his eyes began to burn. He felt flush all the sudden. A pressing heat surrounded him on all sides; this was alarming enough on its own but this was all too familiar. Trede moved to spring up from his seat and stumbled. He gasped, struggling to contain his Fire. He fought to rescind his mystical senses to their natural state. "He's close. He's... maybe ten miles out. And sprinting straight towards us."

Oudrine confirmed. "I sense it too." The ill-memory of that presence was obvious on her face. She dabbed a drop of blood from the corner of one eye.

"Oudrine..." Celeste exclaimed, incredulous. "Are you..."

"I am fine." She cleaned her cheek with a kerchief and rose to her feet. "It's time for the final preparations. I have one thing left to do before Wellborne's arrival. If you'll excuse me." Not waiting for any response, she left the room,

closing it behind.

Trede looked around at this fellow mystics, each of them with years more study than he. Yet some how he was the one they would look to for the coming battle. He knew he should say something. "I'll need you all. My friends and teachers." His throat clenched, eyes watered. "I can't do this alone." The long, enduring memories of facing off against Wellborne in the Light wearied him.

Jonas rose, offered Trede a hand. "We're here for you, son. This Haven has always been a place where mystics stand together. It's still that place today." He pulled Trede to this feet.

"Thanks," said Trede. It was the only word he could make.

"And Trede," Drayle was acting pensive. "If I might have a word. I believe we should... review exactly how we can support you when Wellborne arrives. There are many Strengths represented here. I believe our strategy will be key between success and..." His gesticulating hands wove in circles.

Trede only nodded. "Just tell me what you need to know."

Oudrine

Oudrine pressed against the heavy, cold mausoleum door. It creaked open, slow and dreary. Inside, the only light came from the occasional spark from Maej's Palifax lantern. Being too dim to see, Oudrine waved a hand and created a small orb of blue light hovering over the center hall. She looked at the three walled-off sections, each seeming older, dustier and more crumbling than the last. Her eyes finally rested on the barely burning Palifax. Under her own blue light, she saw a steady line of smoke leaving the lantern's wavy, tapered neck. Every few seconds, an orange spark flew out. It followed the stream of smoke, lazily, up to the stone ceiling.

We always knew the risks, my love. You and I. She couldn't help but feel the same fear from the day the Storm first approached. Now, a flesh-made Wellborne loomed closer by the minute. *Last time... you gave till your last breath. Now, I fear I must do the same.* She lingered in the quiet, mesmerized by streams of smoke and fading sparks. It felt obvious to her now. The diminishing of Maej's lantern marked her time as well. *Your final sparks, husband, are joined with mine. There is*

no way such a mortal power as mine could survive against The Well incarnate. Not twice.

Oudrine traced her fingers across the brutal sarcophagus. *Our lives are still linked, loved one. There is no need of me withholding Fire in this conflict. I will honor your memory, act as you would, and give to the very last til Fire is spent.* In this small way, Oudrine felt assured that Maej was with her. His life inspired her to let her Fire burn its hottest for the good of others. *And for better days.* It was a phrase they had used so many times. Together, they had dreamed so often of some bright future where they wouldn't carry such burdensome oaths. *Perhaps we fought only to provide a future for others. In death then, you and I may find our peace.*

Her hand still upon the cold stone, she let her eyes close. She stayed in the quiet, let her thoughts run. She readied herself; her Fire stoked and burned. She knew the conflict coming and considered it her final act. She poised herself to unleash a psychic attack upon Wellborne unlike anything she'd ever attempted. It would surely kill a mortal, but to Wellborne in his current form... Perhaps it'd merely slow him down. She hoped it'd be enough. Still, she forced her Fire to flow and burn; she had to be prepared to release every spark of energy in a single attack. It was her gift. The only thing she could do to help the others defeat this impossible foe.

As she focused, her orb of blue light, floating above, began to dim. Her face and neck flushed hot, her breathing slow and deep. *This is the true power of a mystic. I will no longer hold back.* After several minutes of this intense preparation, she could only see occasional orange spark fly from the Palifax. Each spark came more slowly than the last. All her power was at the surface, buzzing through her body. Her mind was like lightning; her body an avalanche ready to crumble. She lost all track of time.

A voice came from behind her.

"Oudrine..." It was Trede. "Wellborne is at the city limits." A hesitation lingered in his voice.

She took one last look upon her husband's tomb, and turned away. "I know. I am ready."

cassidy

Cassidy's hands shook as she set the springs and gears of a newly assembled contraption. She was moving as fast as she could and it never seemed enough. First, Tenowon still couldn't walk. She'd hoped to have his legs fully repaired by this point, but even with Bor's and hers best efforts, they came up short on time. Tenowon was propped up in a small two-wheeled cart; Cassidy was stuck being his hands for things he couldn't reach. Now they struggled to finish the necessary trap for the group's plan. Knowing that Wellborne was already somewhere within the city, the three Cytechs worked at full tilt to get everything in place. *Shaking hands or not... can't stop moving! Everyone is counting on us.*

The sound of sliding metal followed by a loud bang rang out in the alley. Bors cursed and fumbled around looking for a dropped tool.

Cassidy made a strained vocalization as she shouldered the last gear into place. She couldn't quite get it flush.

"It's all right," said Tenowon, sensing her frustration. He handed her a lever to help place the gear. "I think we'll have just enough time. The mystic's plan to delay Wellborne should also provide a small buffer. Ah, you've done it. Now, let's take a look..."

Following the master inventor's gestures and instruction, Cassidy ran around fastening the last few bolts into place. "Ok," she said, almost panting. "Besides coiling the cable, I think that's it?"

Bors came and stood next to her, wiping off his hands with a dirty rag. "Nice going, kid. Not a lot of Cytechs can take this kind of pressure."

Cassidy's mind was stretched taught as a drum. All the danger and anticipation kept her eyes wide; her legs were ready to jump at a moment's notice. Still, they *had* made a pretty solid piece of tech in record time. "Thanks. I guess we just have to hope it holds... I really wish we could have found some of that material Trede talked about, though. I don't understand who *or what* it was that told him about it in the Light, but... it did seem to know a lot more than we do."

"Yes, I've been having the same thoughts." Tenowon, who's facial actuators were now all functional, took on a curious look. "Really, the small cryptic clue we were given just isn't enough. There are some technological components we know

can store, channel and release Well energy, but nothing like the stranger in the Light described.” The partially paralyzed android looked to his long-time companion, Bors.”

“Hell, don’t look at me, you too. I’m happy to be useful with the tech. The mystic stuff, *bah...*” He clanged the wrench in his hand off the contraption they’d just finished. “At my age, I’ll stick to my strengths.”

Cassidy smiled at Bors’ prickly nature that somehow still managed to be charming. “This thing is as strong as we can make it, given the materials... How strong do you think Wellborne is, anyway?”

Tenowon considered while straightening his place in the cart with two functioning arms. “There should be *some* limitations to his physical power based on his finite mass. But we all know how physics goes out the window when anything mystical gets involved.”

Bors scoffed in jest, clearly not wanting to indulge in such fantastic talk. “I’d feel a lot better if we at least got the thing wheeled into place.”

“Right.” Cassidy jumped into action. With Bors’ help, she put their new machine in place with perfect line of sight out of the alley. “It’ll be up to the others to get the shot lined up...” With her part of the preparation complete, her mind was free to consider every possible way the plan could fail. *Trede, be careful... You’ll have to bring Wellborne right to us.* Even with everyone they had enlisted to help, the task at hand was unbelievably daunting. Unable to fathom the mystical part of the incoming battle, she walked back to the machine and put her hand on the main lever. Staring down the alley, she watched and waited. The young Cytech knew the plan; it was sound. For each long second that passed, she was sure the waiting was going to kill her.

“Ready to make history? Again?” Tenowon remained surprisingly positive. Perhaps coming back from the dead once already had that affect on androids.

Bors sighed as he took his place, standing on the opposite side of the machine from Cassidy. “You know what, Tenowon? I blame you for this. This isn’t how I planned on spending my retirement. Still, it’s been a while since I made anything *new*.” He wrapped his knuckles against the tall contraption with a certain sense of pride. As much as he might protest, it was clear the old Cytech was enjoying himself.

“Fair enough,” said Tenowon with a chuckle. “This will be the last time, I promise.”

Cassidy looked at her two mentors, two master inventors both brilliant in their

own right. She was proud to stand with them and do her part. And a little proud of herself too for keeping up with such genius. She wondered for a moment what Nandiel and the other Cytechs were up to. Once Wellborne was dealt with, that was the first thing she wanted to do. But for now, she waited and watched. On the edge of her hearing, she thought she heard shouting voices from afar...

Chapter 32

Rottiger

ROTTIGER F. Tiberiak stood at the Sedenzan outskirt. The last stray cobblestone of any marked street lay several feet behind. Scattered homes of piecemeal construction created an odd backdrop at this soon-to-be battlefield. All around the former Outcast chief was every last spare Merkant enforcer, Cytech guard, and a number of other unsavory folk that he'd rallied from dive bars and dark alleys. Some were well-armed with rifles, others with thick, broad shields. Most were left with batons and clubs, the occasional sword or throwing knives. It was the best he could do on short notice, and since his plan was only to make the best *showing* possible, he knew it *looked* the part. *No one will doubt my resolve. Everything is in place and my allegiances will never be in doubt. To close the deal, all I'll need to do is lead that grey wretch to Fossvalor! Tensions will mount, someone with an itchy trigger finger will fire a round. In the heat of the ensuing chaos, it will be so easy for the governor to accidentally get caught in a cross fire.* He recalled having paid off a few marksmen to, by chance, create such a crossfire at the perfect moment. A faint smile curled his thin lips.

"And what do you have to be so happy about?" The white-haired merkant officer, Laurel, was at his side. She resisted when asked to be here on the front line, claiming she had more pressing matters to follow up on.

However, my cousin said all resources to be available. He wore a devilish grin, at least on the inside. "We're here on behalf of the governor, and about to make history," he said, sneering. "You know, I'm surprised you didn't *volunteer*."

She muttered under her breath and thumbed at something just inside her long, dark blue Merkant coat.

Rott glanced downward without making it obvious. *An empty holster? Where is her pistol?* He decided not to mention it. Something else took his complete attention.

"Enemy sighted! Inbound on foot! Moving fast!" A conscripted Cytech guard shouted from the front of the line. All the city's defenders were spread out in a grid covering a wide area a hundred feet across.

Rott, just behind the group by several paces, stepped forward. He waved a

hand, shouting, "Part! Half on each side!" Each half of the grid took several paces away, leaving him with a clear view down the center line. He took a brass speaking-trumpet and held it up to his lips. "Hail, Wellborne! And welcome to our city!" Brimming with played-up confidence, he stepped forward. He flipped his chin back over one shoulder to Laurel. "Come along, Laurel. You'll want to see this up close."

She bristled, and after a long pause, followed him though several steps behind.

Once arriving at the front line, Rott turned, his shoulders back and squared off. "Stay firm, troops. The last thing you want to do is show fear. He'll respect us for that, I know this for certain." It was all hogwash and trash-water, but for his plan to work, he needed them to believe it.

Wellborne's sprinting pace slowed as he grew close. Rott again brought the speaking-trumpet to his mouth. "The noble governor of this city sends his envoy, that we may treat with you!"

The mystical man-shaped creature made no response. Instead, it came to a full stop when twenty or so paces away.

"What is it you seek, friend?" Rott continued bellowing into the horn. "The city is prepared to offer it to you. Under full authority of the regional governor of the central plains."

The construct's black eyes peered across the gathered force on display. It shook its head and exhaled sending a rush of wind in their direction. "Where is the thief?" Wellborne's voice boomed as a low growl.

Rott stepped back to brace himself. The thing's voice made his insides feel like hot, queasy mud. On the outside he doubled down on his brave facade. Showing no emotion on his face, he spoke again. "And what thief could steal anything from you, one so powerful and mighty and... strong?" *Laying it on a bit thick... just have to stick this out for another moment.* He didn't move his gaze from the terrifying black-eyed man-shaped monster.

Wordless, Wellborne paced forward with slow, heavy steps.

"We will find this thief, by your order, magnificent guest." Glancing left and right to ensure the others were watching, Rott puffed out his chest. "You have only but name what was stolen."

Rott watched Wellborne come closer and closer. Now just feet away, the creature inhaled causing half the assembled troops to stagger a step forward. Its black eyes lolled closed as it appeared to taste the air. After a moment's pause, he

spoke, voice like the low rumble of a distant thunderclap. "I will find him myself." As the creature's eyes flashed open, an invisible shockwave pounded through the air and into the city beyond. Every single member of Rott's ragtag group fell backwards into the red dust of the Scorch.

As Rott groaned and crawled to his feet, he saw the beast already past him and heading towards the city limits. *Bastards had to go and make this more difficult!* He did the only thing he could think of. "Attack! Attack, now! Protect the city!"

While half the troops struggled to rise, a handful of fighters with clubs and swords swarmed on the grey figure. It slowed him for a second and then human bodies were tossed screaming through the air, one by one.

No, no, NO! What am I supposed to do with this chaos? Rott was beginning to think he might actually have to stay and fight this thing just like his cousin had intended. *I'll bring Wellborne to you one way or the other, damned cousin!* He gripped his black-lacquered pistol, pulled back the hammer and surveyed the battlefield. For a group of mostly untrained miscreants, they were keeping order fairly well. A handful of shieldsmen had formed a barrier, four across and three rows deep. They were attempting to halt Wellborne's progress. Seeing the first wave of fighters already decimated, Rott called for heavy arms. "Fire! Fire the bombs, NOW!"

Several demolitionists in heavy gear flung metallic objects at their enemy. Some let fly smaller incendiaries by slingshot, others shot larger explosives from crude metallic tubes. Wellborne disappeared in a wash of fire and smoke. The grey figure roared from inside the burning plumes, jumping two dozen feet in the air. It landed outside the flames and peered directly at Rott. The former Outcast leader choked in fear. The obsidian eyes of the creature somehow darkened further. It was like they were absorbing all nearby light. Though what happened next terrified Rott to his core.

Tentacles of darkness oozed out of Wellborne's growing black aura and found human targets. The dark energies whipped around nearly half of Rott's remaining brigade. Sickly tendrils made them stop and stagger, then without hesitation, they turned and began attacking the unaffected fighters.

Just like that, Rott's fighting force was defeated. His plan to use Wellborne to remove Fossvalor was over.

Panicked and cursing repeatedly under his breath, Rott desperately stumbled and ran to the line of shieldsmen. He fell in behind them, stood tall and pointed his pistol at the enemy. Then he thought twice and brought the speaking-trumpet up to his mouth with his other hand. "Honored guest—!" He flinched as an

explosion flared mere paces in front of the front line of shields. “Our city’s leader would still seek peace with you! It’s not too late to parley with the greatest of human cities! We could be allies—” In the space of time it took Rott to think of this next words, Rott’s world spun out of control. He saw abandoned shields flying through the air, human shapes flailing amidst darkness.

Unable to stand, Rott’s vision dimmed. The darkness came upon him and soon it filled him. His last thoughts were of surprise. He was still in his body, but could see nothing. Far in the distant black, there were little spots of lights flashing, too far to offer any hope or comfort. Slowly his thoughts were rendered inert as he succumbed to the overwhelming strength of Wellborne’s dark influence.

Yaladra

As the battle was fought on the city’s edge, Yaladra sat in Tiberiak’s office. Her injured hand was wrapped with strips of cloth she’d torn from a hanging tapestry. She kept her arm braced up against herself, wrist touching her collar bone. Sweat dripped from her brow, her breathing beleaguered by throbbing pain.

It has to be today. She kept telling herself. *Wellborne’s coming and if Tiberiak keeps attacking the Haven... we’ll never win two battles at once. It has to be today.*

Her short-range invisibility spell was holding; the strain was a slow grind on her mind. Several times in the past hours, some clerk or other had come in, rummaged around the papers on Tiberiak’s desk, and left. They made no indication to even suspect someone watching them.

This spell is solid, she told herself to assuage any doubt. *Just like I always planned.* She laid in wait for her prey. Until a surprising, yet familiar, face entered the room.

“Tiberiak, sir, Wellborne has decimated the special defense team. It was a total rout. You should be evacuating!” The door slammed open revealing the white-haired Merchant officer, Laurel.

“And I told you, a man of my position doesn’t run off at the first sign of trouble!” Tiberiak was uncharacteristically flushed.

Yaladra couldn't help but wonder what obstacles he'd been facing so far today. Her jaw clenched as she realized she was only feet away from finally getting her revenge.

"Governor. As your advisor, I must formally recommend that you—" WHAM. Laurel's head jerked to one side and she slumped onto the floor in mid-phrase.

Tiberiak's eyes flashed wide with terror. His eyes darted around the room; he took pensive steps backwards. "Who's there!" Distant panicked cries from outside began to crescendo. "Ah— Wellborne? Have you come to—"

Yaladra released her invisibility spell, revealing her white cloak with hood up. One bloody bandaged hand was braced against her chest. Laurel's own black-lacquered pistol was in her good hand. She didn't say anything at first, only watched and waited for a reaction.

Fosvalor Tiberiak pulled on his waistcoat and straightened his shoulders. Yaladra read his face as someone schooling their fear, though barely. "Ms. Venseer. Face to face again at last. How is your father?"

Without thinking, her fingers tightened around the pistol. "Don't you *dare* mention him." Her voice dripped with venom.

He made a placating gesture and took a few steps to stand behind his desk. "Then what is it you've come here for then, hm? If not to remember old times. You practically grew up under my charge."

More screams came from outside. Yaladra, her hands shaking, glanced out the window. *Wellborne... here already? I have to get back to the others but... I'm not done here yet.* "I think you know why I'm here." She readied the thunderclap pistol at her target.

"And why would you do such a thing? What value is there adding *assassination* to your list of crimes?"

Yaladra's upper lip curled at his insinuation. "Is it a crime to punish criminals? To stop murderers?"

He scoffed at her. "I'm sure I have no idea what you mean. My family oversees a great many business opportunities all over the continent. It's a vast operation. One that will continue even if, say... I were no longer able to sit as the family head." The man eyed Yaladra carefully, a burning gaze watching for the slightest twitch or tell.

As the white-cloaked mystic paused to consider the unspoken words from

her target, panicked screams crescendoed again from the nearby street. The attack on the city was escalating. She kept her thoughts on Tiberiak, though the gun loosened in her hand. "Who's to say seeing you dead isn't still worth it?"

"It will change nothing." He defied her, lowering his hands and standing firm and proud. "To make matters worse for you, there will be no place on the planet you could hide from my enforcers. The Merkants have eyes everywhere."

"I'm the one holding the gun! You're trying to threaten me?" Her voice rose in anger as she tightened her point-blank aim again.

"Not just you, Ms. Venseer. Your father was an invaluable property when in my employ. My posthumous legacy will be to reclaim anything you've taken. The family has limitless resources dedicated to the acquisition of mystics. I believe you've become familiar with our methods over the years."

Still holding the gun tight, Yaladra was stuck. *This wasn't how it's supposed to be!* She pulled back the gun's hammer. Shouts and sounds of struggle rang out just beyond the exterior wall.

"You fool! You'd hasten your own end? And for what? Think of your father —"

A body crashed into the room through the nearby window. It careened off the desk and fell off the back. Both Yaladra and Tiberiak turned to face the broken entry point. To their horror, they saw an average Sedenzan citizen with perfectly black eyes and a grim purple aura bust through the breaking wall. The person, a middle-aged man moved like a wild animal. Arms hanging low, lumbering more than walking. The man jumped into the office. With a single swat of the hand, this thrall smacked Tiberiak and sent him flying to the other end of the room. Then he turned and eyed Yaladra.

BLAM, BLAM. BLAM. Yaladra unloaded all but one round from the pistol before realizing what she'd done. The man fell and the blackness around him flickered and left. As the body rolled to a stop on the floor, she thought she recognized the face from her many hours searching the market in recent months. Though for some reason, she didn't think she'd seen him recently.

Just outside, she could still see streams of people evacuating to the west end. *I have to get back to the others, but...* How would she deal with Tiberiak?

She stormed across the room and found him groaning while trying to upright himself. Short on time, she got to the floor. Ignoring the pain in her injured hand, she pinned him down by the shoulders and jammed a knee into his abdomen. She let her anger flare and the words poured out. "Here's my offer, you miserable sod.

You lay another finger on a mystic, any mystic, anywhere. And you're dead. And not just you, I'll burn your entire family to the ground. I'll take away everything you ever had and turn it to ash. And you know why? Because the world needs us. You need us. Wellborne's killing people all over the city and honestly? I hope you're next. There's only one chance to stop this, and it's us. We mystics have the power required. Power you'll *never* have. Ever again." She jerked him up by the collar. "Am I clear?"

Tiberiak struggled and fought. He shuffled to one side and slipped an ornate pistol out from his pocket. As he raised it, she struck him across the temple with an elbow, threw him down and tossed the gun away. She then cracked the handle of her gun off the cap of his skull and slammed down one knee onto his chest. Knowing time was short, she reached deep into her Fire. The perfect spell came to mind. In a swell of power, her brown eyes flared violet. She spoke simple words, something that sounded as true as calling the sun, bright or fire, hot. "Your mouth, *full of stone.*" A reverberation shook through reality itself.

Tiberiak's mouth gradually filled with solid, mottled stone. It held his mouth open and wrapped around his teeth. She leaned down into his face and pressed the gun into his neck. "You and your people will leave us alone. That's the deal. And the second you come for one of us, I'll dismantle anything remotely tied to your name. We're not going to live in fear of you any more, got it? You're going to live in fear *of us.*"

Writhing in panic, Tiberiak clawed at his covered mouth; the stone couldn't be moved. He groaned and grunted as Yaladra drove the pistol further into his neck. Finally, he acquiesced, turned his head away and nodded, whimpering.

Yaladra rose. She released the air-to-stone spell; her eyes flickered from violet to dark brown. Then she shot him in the leg with her last bullet. Tiberiak cried out in agony, just another voice calling out in a city gone mad. The white-cloaked mystic threw her hood back, snatched her fallen foe's pistol and tucked it inside her cloak. *That makes two of these.* The thought of making a collection of rare Thunderclap pistols crossed her mind. *That will have to wait. I have to get back to the others.*

Ignoring the man's cries of pain, she rose her voice for one last statement. "If we ever meet again, it's because you've lost everything. You'll see me. And know that I'm the one who took it all. Then it's over for you. That's the deal. Understand?" She took the governor's cries and whimpers as agreement, turned, and left down the hall.

As she exited the merkant complex, the world seemed blurry. She stepped onto the cobblestone street and was met with a sea of noise. People screamed as

they fled across the marketplace. Most seemed normal enough, despite the panic. Others wore a similar dark aura as the man that attacked her earlier. There was a similar grim feature in all of them. *Their eyes are all black. It has to be Wellborne*

Something slammed into Yaladra's shoulders pinning her to the ground. She threw an elbow behind and hit another grim figure in the temple. Rolling, she jumped to her feet and turned only to be surprised at the face that met her. "Janice?"

The entranced figure didn't even respond to her own name. *The last time I saw her... the Sickness knocked her down in the middle of the city.* It dawned on her. She'd long surmised that the unprecedented *Sickness* was somehow connected to Wellborne. This was all the confirmation she needed. Janice lunged forward, ready to grapple. Moved by pity, Yaladra only tried to dodge her attacks. She didn't want to hurt Janice, or worse, unless there was no other choice. After several, rabid swipes from the young textile Merkant, Yaladra realized she'd need to create her own means of escape. The martially adept mystic waited for a clean opening and unloaded a strong kick to the side of Janice's head. It was just enough to knock her down and provide a chance to escape.

Yaladra took off running towards the Haven, hoping she'd return in time. She came across several more groups of black-cursed citizens. They were rioting, tearing off doors, chasing down innocents, brutalizing anyone that dared stand in their way. All the while, each was expressionless as they proceeded to tear the city in half. She avoided them as best she could, until she came within sight of the Haven. Several enemies came upon her at once, grappling her arms and legs, pulling at her cloak, dragging her to the ground before she could even react. Blows rained down on her. *Need to get to the others!* She fought mightily until something freed her; she rolled clear.

"Yo ho! Not this one!" shouted a brave, familiar voice. Traz, with two more selahns, landed nearby and quickly routed the seven black-cursed. The tall Eesh'Ahn lifted one clean over her head and threw the unsuspecting fighter into a nearby sandstone wall. The sheer force of it caused part of the wall to crumble and sent yellow dust flying.

"Yaladra!" said Traz with a twinkle in his eyes. "You're just in time." He offered her a hand and pulled her up. She was surprised at how strong his grip was being only five feet tall.

"I'll say," said the lanky, dark grey Viligréa. On high alert, her sharp eyes flashed left and right. In her hands were two knives at the ready. "Things are

getting... interesting."

"Traz!" Esh'ahn pointed back towards the Haven while a whistle rang down the street. Her short golden fur accented her tall, muscular frame. "The signal. We must get in position."

Traz turned to Yaladra, grinning. "Think you can get the rest of the way yourself? We've got our own places to be!"

Yaladra nodded, barely able to think straight.

"Right oh! Selahns, this way!" Traz led his trio into a nearby alley and disappeared.

Moments later, Yaladra found herself climbing the Haven's steps. Inside she saw all the other mystics, her father included, standing in the entry hall. "He's here..." She voiced what was visible on all their faces.

Standing nearest the door, Trede spoke first. "We know. And we're ready."

While still catching her breath, Yaladra winced. The pain in her injured hand couldn't be ignored anymore.

"My dear girl!" Drayle came over, leading her further inside the hall. "Celeste, could you possibly?"

Celeste took Yaladra's wounded hand in hers. A healing glow of magic permeated her entire forearm. It eased the pain, closed the wound, but didn't clear the blood dried on her wrist.

As the magic took effect, Drayle spoke. "You ran into some trouble?" His face read of grave concern, though he did his best to mask it.

"Tiberiak shouldn't be bothering us anymore. At the Haven, or anywhere. Looks like we have more pressing matters." Her eyes flitted towards the window.

"Sooner than we hoped," said Jonas, standing next to them. "Wellborne is in the city. We expect he'll be on our doorstep before too long. Did you see the selahns out there?"

Yaladra nodded. "They said... they were getting into place." Celeste released her grip; Yaladra stretched her hand and wrist and found it practically good as new. "Thank you."

Drayle put a concerned hand on his daughter's shoulder. "Are you all right? When Wellborne arrives, we'll... I'm not sure what will be required of us. But if

we mystics don't find a way to stop him—"

"I'll do whatever I can." A lightning strike of fear ran down Yaladra's spine when she remembered facing down Wellborne the first time. Now he'd be smarter, matured and stronger. *This entire city may burn before the day is out. And Wellborne will walk over our corpses to do it.*

A louder thought interrupted Yaladra's own. *Do not cast such a doubt. He is coming. Be ready.*

Yaladra kicked herself for letting such rampant thoughts near a Mind Mystic. Oudrine was standing near Trede by the barred door. Her gaze faced outwards, but her thoughts were everywhere. She looked tense. Gone was her normal soothing aura, or even her fragile broken spirit from her months of recovery. She stood bravely, ready for war. Her Fire thrumming and at the ready.

"Guys," said Trede, his voice low. His feet shifted under him as the air around the Haven changed. "He's here."

Chapter 33

TREDE

OUTSIDE the Haven stood the mystical entity known as Wellborne. A being of pure energy, called into existence after decades of influence by the renegade mystic, Proteus. This being, a blight on the world, represented the end. Its existence was the culmination of life itself, the very power that held existence together, twisted and formed by evil desire. Now made flesh by its own sheer resolve, Wellborne had hunted down the single perceived threat to its existence.

"I have come for the Thief." Its eyes were full of black lightning; its voice like earth-cracking thunder.

Behind the strong double door at the Haven's entrance, Trede winced at the oppressive sound of his enemy's voice. He'd felt that awful presence since it hit the city limits. He looked around the room and saw a line of serious faces. Jonas rubbed his knuckles in preparation. Yaladra pulled down her white hood. Everyone was in place.

Oudrine, standing to his flank, said quietly just to him, "Maej held nothing back in battle... We shall do no less against this greatest foe."

The young mystic nodded and looked back to the door. He opened the heavy cross bar, opened both halves of the double door and stepped out on the stone steps. The sound of his allies paces followed behind. Fifty paces away, standing on the cobblestones with a look of glowing black evil, was Wellborne. Trede walked down the steps. *No looking back.*

"I haven't stolen anything," Trede called with raised voice to cover the distance.

A growl formed in the wind; it blew past Trede's ears, rumbling. "*Liar... Thief!* I know what you have. I will take it back. Only when you are dust then can I be complete."

Trede took a different tack. This was a familiar enemy. Though he'd spent months enduring its great anger and malice, rarely had he been able to speak to it. He made the ploy as Drayle had suggested earlier. "You're still Proteus' puppet, Wellborne! You're still just doing what he instructed you to do! What's the point of

power when you have no will of your own!”

“I am power and life itself!” Wellborne shouted and stomped forward once. “I am *no one’s thrall!*”

Drayle stepped forward to Trede’s left on the stone stair. “You still are! Your very existence was contrived by one man. A selfish man who wanted you as his pet, to be under his control. Even with Proteus dead, you’re still doing what he destined you to do! You weren’t meant for this... chaos... or violence!”

Wellborne’s oppressive magical aura, the invisible shadow that surrounded him, seemed to recede slightly. Trede pushed further. “Your power was meant for life, to give *the world* life. You can still do that. You can still fulfill your *true* purpose.”

The onyx-black eyes of the mystical creature looked pensive for a moment. His gaze fell away as his face betrayed a torment of thought. “Purpose...” His words deeply reverberated in the air.

All around, Trede could sense his friends were ready to jump into action. It was a distant hope to think Wellborne might be swayed with words, but it was worth chancing it. He only hoped they held back long enough to avoid revealing the extent of their plan prematurely.

“My true purpose,” Wellborne continued, his thundering voice now forlorn. “To be a source. To keep The Well fulfilled...”

This might be working... Trede thought knowing Oudrine must be listening.

The grey-skinned creature staggered back a step. “With no will of my own. No shape. No... *existence* of my own.” A grit returned to Wellborne’s voice. “No... No. Why should I cease to exist? I am the only being deserving of this power. No one else!” The mystical abomination moved into a crouch, ready to move. “Especially *not you!*”

There was a split second where everything set to motion. In a fraction of time, Trede realized he’d failed. And in that same instant, he mentally gave word to Oudrine who in turn signaled their entire group.

It’s time.

Trede tapped into his Fire, the mystical energy that let him surpass physical limitation. Then he went deeper. Into the deep magic of the Well-blessing inside him. As a babe, his mother had taken a portion of The Well’s energies, saved them away in the only hiding place left, her son. And now it was the only thing holding back a second cataclysm. He thought of his parents in a flash of memory,

wondering if they had any idea the trials he'd face. In the space of time it takes for a thought to come and go, he was grateful for them. Trede took a defensive stance, opened his inner gate and let the power pour forth. Yet, he channeled the Well-blessing in smaller streams. He didn't want to risk letting loose too much at once. Not until he knew he could deal with Wellborne once and for all.

As Wellborne sprinted forward with inhuman speed, Trede was surprised at being awash in emotion. Not fear, not doubt. *Anger.* The memory of long months locked away in the Light facing this hateful entity came rushing back. He seethed. *This time I'm not alone. And we're taking you down!*

Trede was ready for the first attack. He blocked a hammering fist with an open palm and grabbed Wellborne's other wrist. They grappled while the grey creature bellowed hateful cries. Trede had been wise to call upon the Well-blessing, even Fire-infused bones may have shattered from such stress.

It didn't take long for Wellborne to break free. He flipped back several feet before charging forward with reckless haste. His enemy moved so fast, Trede relied on the mystical energies around him to sense when to deflect, dodge and parry. Stoney grey fists thundered against him, though he was able to block most blows with his hands and forearms. Trede cautiously took one step back after another. *Just a little farther. I hope you guys are ready.*

After enduring several heavy blows from Wellborne, Trede heard a jovial whistle come from the next alleyway. The plan was in place. *It's now or never!* In a flash, Trede charged his fists with crackling white and yellow energy. In the split second between Wellborne's assaults, Trede countered with a heavy uppercut to his enemy's jaw. The mystical energies clung to Wellborne's grey skin, searing and burning. It was enough to cause Wellborne to hesitate; Trede responded in kind by unloading a rapid series of crescendoing blows. The first few landed squarely across Wellborne's jaw, but gradually the monster regained itself and started blocking the attacks. Expecting this, Trede channeled a stream of Well-blessing power into his body. He summoned it into his muscles and bones; he leaped and thrust a kick squarely at his enemy's eyes. It was easily enough strength to crush solid stone; Wellborne staggered back three steps, seething.

Breathing heavily, Trede bent over. He made a show of fatigue and walk backwards, carefully lining up his position with the same dark alleyway he'd heard the whistle come from. Trede flared up the magical Fire around his fists and beat them together. Wellborne's onyx eyes stared back at him. *I've got to make him mad.* "You'll never win! You've had a hundred chances and you've never beaten me!" He beat his fists together again creating bright flashes of lightning.

That was all the provocation the mystical entity needed. It growled,

crouched low as a dark sickly aura absorbed all nearby light and sprinted at Trede.

“Cassidy, Traz, NOW!” Trede bellowed. In the span of a heartbeat, Trede crushed his heels into the cobblestones; he heard Cassidy yelling and the clank of machinery from the nearby alley. Leaning to one side, Trede avoided Wellborne’s first fist and grabbed his arm. Holding the force of nature in place felt impossible. *Oh no...*

Cassidy shouted from the alley, “We need a clear shot!”

Wellborne’s free fist was screaming straight for Trede’s unprotected head; Traz flew onto the scene at break-neck speed. Flipping through the air with two curved selahnics blades, Traz crashed into the grey-skinned monster. Each blade embedded into Wellborne’s body several inches, one below the neck and the other below the ribs. Traz kicked off his prey, leaping into the air and landed on the cobblestone streets, bowing low for balance. “Selahns, *ho!*”

The fighting members of Traz’s traveling troupe rushed out of the alley screaming battle cries in their native tongue. Trede wasted no time. He lit his fists with Fire and continued his rapid assault. With the enemy reeling, Trede could afford to take slower heavy blows. Each time he thundered a mystical fist into Wellborne, two or more selahns jumped in to action, slashing at dark grey flesh. The overwhelming speed of the constant attacks from multiple sources kept Wellborne from regaining its footing. It reeled one way and the other, unable to balance and counterattack.

In the midst of the chaotic action, the rest of the Haven alliance sprung to action. While charging up a white-hot beam of crackling energy, Trede saw Cassidy run behind him. She jumped around and thrust her latest invention in-between Wellborne’s ribs. The blade sliced into Wellborne with ease; the battery pack built into the thing’s rectangular handle let loose a flood of burning electricity. Cassidy was already three steps away before Wellborne bellowed in hateful anguish.

Trede fired the blast of energy he’d readied, sending Wellborne reeling further. The wide stream of explosive energy forced the enemy to hunker down, arms covering its head. *I just hope we’re close enough!*

As if on queue, a lasso of metal cable flew out of the opposite alley, snagging Wellborne firmly around the arms. Tenowon called out. “The trap is ready, bring him this way!”

Trede and the selahns continued their rapid assault on Wellborne. In every passing second at least two mystical blows or selahnics slashes came at the enemy. To avoid a stray kick from Wellborne, a selahn would flip backwards out of harms way, and another would take their place. Trede jumped in and out using his

mystically-charged fists as his primary weapons. By appearance, Wellborne should have been on its last legs. It had dozens of gashes and cuts, oozing a thick, black substance. But Trede knew better. It would take a lot more than this to stop a creature of such power.

They Cytech lasso pulled Wellborne towards the alley, while the melee crew continued herding in the same direction. Despite the constant attack, Wellborne regained its footing. It flung a heavy kick up into Trede's chest, only the strength of his Fire prevented his bones from shattering. Still, he stumbled to his knees while trying to catch his breath. Traz and Eesh'ahn jumped in to fill the gap in the assault line, but Wellborne was already reading another lethal kick. Trede, dazed, could only witness via blurred vision for a moment. He drew upon the Well-blessing inside him; in the heat of battle it was still too slow. He braced for what might be the final attack of his life.

With a roar, Jonas leaped into the fray, clearing Trede's head by a foot or more. His hands were covered with majestic lion claws formed of the purest yellow energy. He swiped down into Wellborne further distracting it from any further attack.

The lanky Viligréa knelt and helped Trede to his feet. She wore a concerned look but her voice never changed. "Oi! No time to rest."

With Jonas joining the battle, Trede, Traz, Eesh'ahn and Viligréa redoubled their efforts herding Wellborne towards the alley where Tenowon, Cassidy and Bors waited. Even with the lasso pulling their enemy along, and the endless attacks they made, their pace was slow.

"We need help, here!" Jonas yelled between making vicious slashes in turn with his compatriots.

"We're ready." Drayle and Yaladra ran onto the scene with Oudrine just behind.

As Yaladra approached, her eyes burst forth a violet energy. "Grey flesh, solid as stone!" She stopped ten paces shy of the battle, arms raised struggling her mystic energies against reality itself, and Wellborne's own immense power.

The grey creature's limbs stiffened but he did not stop. He swatted Traz's next aerial attack out of the air, sending the selahn rolling across the cobblestones.

Trede raised two burning fists overhead and leaped into the air. He came crashing down at Wellborne's grim visage, only to be blocked by raised arms as the enemy fell to one knee. Trede pressed down with crackling energy shooting in all directions. Traz led the other two selahns in immediate attack. From all sides they

ran their blades into grey flesh. Still, Wellborne didn't yield. He growled in anger flexing his shoulders; Yaladra's voice cried in pain from mere steps away. The lasso ceased its slow pull of Wellborne across the street.

"It's not enough!" Trede shouted as Wellborne pushed from its legs. The stones underneath the monster's feet cracked and split. Out of the corner of Trede's eye, he caught a flash of a deep green light.

"Grey flesh. Solid as stone!" Drayle added his magic to that of his daughter's.

Wellborne's rise to his feet slowed and eventually stopped. His already dark, grey skin roughened, taking on the texture of coarse, dry stone. Trede wound up for a heavy Fire-infused attack only somehow found his wrist caught in Wellborne's fingers. He struggled but couldn't remove himself.

Wellborne, unable to move his body, still spoke in a low, disquieting rumble. "You can't stop me... None of you can. This single body is only my beginning..." Grey, stoney fingers gripped around Trede's wrist tighter and tighter.

Trede roared in pain as the vice-like grip became more complete. Even as the selahns and Jonas continued their wild attacks, Wellborne couldn't be stopped. Out of the corner of his eye, Trede caught glimpse of the deepest blue light he'd ever seen. Deeper than a cloudless summer sky or the cold winter seas of Oreshia.

"Everyone, step away! Get back!" Oudrine approached Wellborne with immense blue energy streaming from her hands. All the other fighters from the Haven stumbled back as the Mind Mystic approached. Partially for the brightness of the blue light in their eyes, but too, for the oppressive psychic wave screaming out from her every step. She grabbed Wellborne's awful head in both hands. Torrents of blue lightning flew out in broad circles covering the street. Her voice rose; a cry of anger and pain against the dark world-rumbling of Wellborne's deep resistant hum.

Trede, still stuck right next to the mental blast, felt Wellborne's grip loosen just enough and he pulled away. He tried to back away but found the blue, mystical energies flowing from Oudrine's mental force stall him. He stumbled to the ground as she pressed her unrelenting attack.

A massive subsonic hum shook the entire ground. Trede's perception retreated to a safe place deep within. For a brief moment, he lost all track of the city and battle around him. His vision blurred back to reality. He saw Oudrine slumping to the ground; next to her, Wellborne followed suit. The grey creature, still caught by the metal lasso, collapsed onto the cobblestones.

Pulling himself from a stupor, Trede worked his jaw and yelled. "Now!"

Cassidy pulled the lever on a mechanical winch and dragged the now limp Wellborne across the cobblestones. The winch led it into the trap. The grey body slammed into inches-thick, black iron restraints. Bors, Cassidy and Celeste closed the trap. There were so many metal straps of coarse black iron across Wellborne's limbs and torso, even across his jaw, there was barely anything left visible of him. The iron frame the rig was affixed to was made of four-inch thick cross bars. Quickly, Cassidy set to work spot welding the seams of over a dozen restraints.

"Hurry, he's just asleep, remember!" called Trede who was the only one outside the alley back on his feet. Oudrine's attack had knocked out the selahns and even the other mystics. Trede went first to Oudrine. *Still breathing.* He couldn't fathom the intensity of such an over-amplified mental attack. He worried for a moment if she might ever recover, but remembered what she said. *Maej held nothing back in battle. We shall do no less.*

Trede went to check each of the others in turn while the Cytechs finished welding Wellborne into place. *Everyone's completely out cold.*

He ran to Cassidy. She spoke without looking up from her work, her eyes wide with fear and focus. "Wellborne's really out... whatever she did worked."

Trede stepped back and ran his hands up into his hair. "It worked?" He staggered back three more steps. "It really worked?" Despite his disbelief, a smile began to tighten in his cheeks.

Cassidy turned and looked at him. "I— I think it..." For a brief moment, the relief in Cassidy's eyes was the most beautiful thing Trede had ever seen. In a flash, the hopeful light in them was doused. Her jaw slacked as fear rekindled in her expression. "Trede... What... what is that?"

Trede snapped around. Dozens of Sedenzan citizens were prowling in the opposite alley. They moved with haunted, unnatural steps. At first, Trede wasn't sure what to think until he noticed a single feature in common with all of them. "Their eyes... Black eyes just like Wellborne's." Trede watched as the growing crowd sped up, all heading directly towards him.

Somewhere behind, an alarmed Tenowon said. "Wellborne is using them somehow—"

"Trede! What do we do?!" Cassidy screamed.

We didn't think of this. I didn't plan on... What can I do?

"Trede, they're getting closer!"

There was only seconds before they were descended upon by a growing tide. Trede turned back, his eyes glancing across Tenowon and Bors before landing on Cassidy. The only words he could muster were, "Cassidy, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

Trede felt that all too familiar energy inside him. It's deepness defied geometry; it's vastness couldn't be explained, only felt. His skin went hot; immediately he started to lose track of his physical senses. Sight and hearing gave way to a greater overall sense of *feeling*.

"Trede, what do you mean?!" Cassidy grabbed hold of him; she pulled against him as he went to leave the alley. "What are you doing?!"

"Keeping you safe. Anyway I can." He leaned down and kissed her. "Stay with Tenowon." He turned and walked out into the open street. Dozens of black-eyed sickened fill the area, dozens more were streaming in from every street and alley.

We stopped Wellborne's body, but his essence is still everywhere. Every person with the Sickness is being controlled by Wellborne. That's what he meant... this single body is the beginning. He has more than one at his disposal. It was in that moment it dawned on Trede that there were likely Sickened people all over the continent in this same state. If the reach of Wellborne's affliction could span thousands of miles, it was likely his Well-blessing could too. As the first black-eyed Sickened approached, Trede's thoughts flashed to his home town of Smisom. The faces of Mior, Marshal Langhorne, Jaxet and others flashed across his mind's eye. He balled his fists and readied for the fight. It was the sound of Cassidy's struggling cries from behind him that made him resolute. He knew what he had to do. He would push himself beyond his limits, beyond the incredible power of The Well at his disposal by a hundredfold, a thousandfold. Trede gave himself over to the raw strength within and transcended it.

He opened his eyes and saw not the city of Sedenza, but a vast, endless field of shimmering lights. There were millions now, many more than he'd seen in any past dream. The lights spanned off in all directions, with broad waves of energy flying over them. As the wave touched each light, its spark grew brighter for just an instant, then returned to its original state.

Trede reached out with his essence and became the light-wave. He became the thing that touched and connected hundreds of thousands of lights at a time. He

was still in Sedenza but he was in Jonin too. He was on a fishing boat off the coast of Northern Fwee, in the south near Azuden with Eesh'ahn's tribe. Inside a tavern in Briar, on a farm near Garar, and all at once, he was back home, in Smisom.

Langhorne

Langhorne's consciousness snapped back into place. Somehow he found himself in the market, a place lost in total bedlam. Shrieks of terror from those seeking escape filled his ears. It took a moment to realize what they were running from. A mob of two dozen black-eyed raiders. There was a sickening haze around the darkness in their eyes.

Those are... those are all locals. All the ones with the Sickness!

"Langhorne! It's me, Trede!" The disembodied voice echoed in Langhorne's mind.

Langhorne shook it off, not sure what to make of it.

"Langhorne! Can you hear me? I broke you free of Wellborne's control but I don't know how long it'll last. I need you to protect everyone from the Sickened. At least until we can deal with the root problem. Can you do that?" A pause. *"Are you there?"*

Langhorne staggered back, suddenly becoming more aware of his own body. He looked at his own hands that were already red and raw. He had no idea. *"What... What have I done?"* The marshal felt ill when he considered how long he wasn't in control of his own body.

"There's no time for that now! Just subdue everyone you can with glowing black eyes, can you do that?"

The marshal rubbed his hands over his face and down across his blond beard. *"I'll rally the marshals. You can count on that."* He spoke loud unsure how Trede was hearing him.

"Great! I'll help you as much as I can. And remember, these are your townspeople. Try not to hurt them if you can."

Before Langhorne could wonder what Trede meant by *help* he felt his body flush

with power. He saw a white glow around the frame of his vision. His sore, red hands soothed before his very eyes.

"You're going to be a lot stronger than normal. And faster. So be careful!" As Trede's voice spoke, Langhorne was sure he heard the sound of rushing waves, foot steps in an overgrown jungle but also across stone streetways. The muddled cacophony of sound distracted him for a moment, until he caught the eye of a black-eyed Sickened grabbing hold of an elderly man.

Langhorne lunged into a run, surprised at how fast the wind was across his face. In a split-second, he was grappling with a familiar townspeople that'd spent the past week unconscious in a coma. Managing to grab hold of both wrists, he spun and flung the attacker away. He couldn't believe how little effort it took.

"That's good! Keep it up!" Somewhere in the background was the sound of a ship crashing into a dock.

Langhorne shook it off and helped the older man to his feet and sent him off running. When the attacker closed in again, the marshal wound up and threw the heaviest right-cross of this life. The Sickened staggered and was sent reeling backwards, crashing into an open air market stall. The awnings collapsed on top, dust flying everywhere.

Without thinking, Langhorne made straightaway for the marshal office. "Marshals! Marshals, alert! Full alert!" He shouted the entire way there.

"Jaxet's at the office arming up. Grab her and head to the southend. Hildegas needs your help!"

Still sprinting with surprising speed, Langhorne shook off the spacey feeling that came every time Trede spoke. "How do you know that?"

Before Trede could even answer, the door of the marshal office kicked open. "Dad!" Jaxet stood there, eyes glowing white. Her hands were full of three rifles and a backpack full of ammo and gear. She set the guns down and ran to her father. "You're back! You're yourself again, how?!" She gave him a hard squeeze then backed up, noticing his eyes. "Your eyes are glowing!"

Langhorne's brow furrowed. "Speak for yourself." *Hell, kid, what are you doing with us?*

"Nice work so far, you two. Now go help Hil on the south—arrgg!" Trede's cry of pain sent shocks through Langhorne's body, bending him over.

Wincing in pain, Jaxet shouted, "Trede! What's happening!?"

"Sorry, everyone. One of Heesh's kin just took a bad hit from the Sickened. I'll try to be more careful. I didn't realize we were so... connected right now."

"What are you going on about?!" Langhorne was losing his wits. After waking up from a total blackout, nothing had made sense. Trede was here, but not here. Someone was talking to him and Jaxet and calling the shots for an organized counterattack. The last thing Langhorne remembered was Wellborne leaving Smisom; that's when the blackout started.

"Dad, there's no time. We need to help Hil before he's overrun!" She ran back to grab the rifles, threw one to her father and motioned south.

"Hil's in a bad way, guys. I'm going to give you a boost. Hang on tight!"

Langhorne ran off behind his daughter toward the south of town. Moving with alarming speed, he felt his knees bend on their own. He crouched down, sliding on the dirt path, and extended his legs sending him dozens of feet in the air. "A little warning?!" Langhorne shouted through gritting teeth.

"I said I'd give you a boost!"

"This is a boost?!" Careening through the sky, Langhorne leaned back and braced for impact. *Thud!* He landed with skitting feet sliding across the last road in the small town of Smisom.

Jaxet landed right behind him with a dazed expression. "Trede... can you... leave us on the ground from now on?"

"Sorry, guys. We were running out of time. Look!"

Langhorne took a knee to help regain his equilibrium. Looking straight on, he saw Marshal Hildegras at the top of a torn down shack. There were easily twenty or more black-eyed Sickened surrounding the roof. As the mob climbed and clawed at him, Hil fought them off with nothing more than the butt of his rifle. He kicked and swiped, only just keeping the enemies at bay.

Despite the chaos, Langhorne's strategic mind kicked in. "Just how strong am I right now?"

"Dad?" Jaxet gave him a puzzled look.

"Honestly? I have no idea."

Dammit. Against any sane judgement, Langhorne took off running straight into the crowd of Sickened. *I'm either gonna be a hero or really, really dead by the end of this.* With Jaxet at his heel, Langhorne threw himself at the mob. He plowed

through their ranks with raw power. He slammed his fists into jaws, he shoved people away and trampled the rest. Once through the enemy crowd, he jumped up and kicked out the beams holding up a tin roof awning of a nearby building. "Jaxet, up and over!" As the long, wavy sheet of metal came down over his head, he gripped the bottom edge and hoisted it up.

Seeing his plan in action, Jaxet ducked, caught the roof in her hands and threw it up over her head down onto crowd of disbursing Sickened, flattening them.

Hil jumped off his perch and landed on the metal roof with a loud clang. "About time you showed up! Hell, Langs, what kind of mess have you got us into?"

Langhorne pointed at himself. "Me?!"

Hildegas doubled over in laughter. "Well, you did bring Wellborne here for starters. Good to see you up and about, captain."

I wonder how much I missed. Langhorne didn't want to tarry at that dark thought.

"Hold on guys. There's another wave of Sickened attacking the tannery! We need you there, fast!"

"Whoa, whoa. Trede." Langhorne had enough chaos. "If you freed me from Wellborne's sickness, why can't you just do that for everyone?"

"Sorry, it doesn't work like that. I only got you free because you were already fighting the control. I think knowing you personally helps somehow, too. Look I..."

Jaxet took a step toward her father. "Trede?"

"There's no time. The fight is heating up everywhere. Wellborne is taking more Sickened by the minute. I'll stay connected as long as I can but I don't know how long I can keep talking."

"Will we be... stronger as long as we're connected?"

"Yes. I'll keep the power flowing to you as long as I can."

In the span of a blink, Langhorne took stock in the situation. An all powerful entity bent on destruction was running rampant around the world. A nomadic courier with access to mystic power beyond all reason was fighting the entity by lending power to willing fighters from thousands of miles away. *And to top it all off, they're attacking the tannery. Clock's ticking.* "Alright, marshals, let's round up. We've got places to be!"

"Right!" Jaxet threw Hil a spare rifle.

"I'm ready if you are," said Hil, looking around at the splayed bodies sticking out from the metal roof that crashed on them. "Looks like we're done here anyway."

Langhorne set west with grim determination. He was in the fight of his life and wouldn't have it any other way. Smisom was his home, and regardless of the threat, he was there to meet it. "Ok, Trede. Give us everything you've got! This is your home, too, you know."

"Ok! Get ready, I'll give you another boost."

TREDE

Trede felt a heavy thud into his brow. Where was it coming from? Tiberiak manor? A fish market in Jonin?

Sedenza. I'm still in Sedenza. Trede was so busy helping battle Wellborne's forces, he'd lost track of his own body in Sedenza. He looked around with his physical eyes, an act that now felt so foreign. He was surrounded by countless faces of Sedenzan citizens with haunting black eyes sucking in all nearby light.

His thoughts wandered to hundreds of bodies all around the continent. *Langhorne, look out behind you! Tryphena, they need help at the smithy! Balog, the clock tower is overrun! Darick, the river crossing is failing, hurry!*

Trede steeled himself. The Well-blessing was running through wide channels inside him. He was already calling on magnitudes more power than he thought possible. Only perhaps because of Oudrine's recent training, he maintained his consciousness. The conflict around his physical body refocused his mind in Sedenza. Luckily, his friends were back on their feet. The cytechs, mystics and selahns banded together holding their own against the unrelenting mob. After trading heavy blows with an endless stream of Sickened, Trede realized he was barely holding his own. He was pushed to a further limit than ever before, and barely kept up with Wellborne's ever-growing army.

Maybe Langhorne is right... Maybe the only way to win is to try take control back of all the Sickened. While distracted by looking through the eyes of hundreds of allies, Trede left his back open to attack. He felt the weight of several Sickened

gripping him, clawing at him, pulling him off his feet. He opened another channel to the Well-blessing within, directing it *through* his body and into his attackers. In his mind's eye, he saw the crashing wave covering a large group of sparkling lights. The small lights resisted him. He felt every drop of Wellborne's malice fight against him as he wrested control.

It wasn't until Trede reached out to the humanity of each Sickened that he finally made progress. *"Hey! I can help you, but you'll have to reach out to me! Reach out! Fight against the darkness! Fight it!"*

One by one, each of the several Sickened restraining Trede loosened their grip. At first slowly and not even completely. It was enough for Trede to jump up and gain his freedom. He leaped into the sky, calling about the flowing channels of Well energy that radiated out of him. Trede was relying on a massive amount of Well energy. It was getting harder and harder to use his physical eyes as they became fuller with resplendent white light. His mind was still split across a hundred locations. As he flew up into the sky, he relinquished his physical sight entirely. He was a crashing wave of pure light. He was inside the energies that connected all living things. The Well-Blessing burned inside him pushing to the limits of consciousness.

His body held aloft by untold mystical power, Trede beheld nothing but the field of lights. He shifted his perceptions until each light infected by Wellborne's Sickness pulsed with dark purple and blues. He let loose the wave of energy in this ether-realm and connected to each Sickened. He channeled as much mystical energy as he could into each light. He was astounded how many there were. *Thousands in Sedenza now... Tens of thousands more all over the continent! I have to try.*

In similar fashion to the handful of Sickened he'd just wrested from Wellborne's control, Trede reached out to the humanity and compassion of each. He couldn't process the thoughts and feelings of so many at once. However, one thing was in common with all of them. *Struggle*. Despite their intentions, Wellborne's grip was strong. None could be freed so easily. The first few trickled away from Wellborne's Sickness. Trede watched their light return to sparkling white, their darkness fading away.

Faster and faster, more Sickened lights returned to their normal color. He heard voices from afar.

"Trede, you still out there?" Langhorne's voice called through the void.
 "They're dropping like flies over here. Whatever you're doing, keep it up!"

Trede's mind quieted as he let seemingly endless Light and power pour through

him from his Well-Blessing. He couldn't push anymore and just focused on keeping a connection open. *I think... it's working. If I can just... h-hold on.* He was barely conscious at this point. Each and every one of his senses were overloaded and numb.

Voices below him on the cobblestone streets called out. He couldn't make out what they were saying or even who was saying it.

It was Cassidy's voice that finally broke through. "Wellborne's awake!"

"Friend! Lookout!" shouted Traz.

Before Trede could open his physical eyes, a stoney hand was at his throat. "No more. Thief." A growling, thunder-filled voice shook the air. Somehow, Wellborne hovered in midair next to Trede.

Trede struggled to breath. *No, not now!* He felt his connection to the ether-realm loosen. He felt pain in his body and knew Wellborne was striking him with sky-rending fists. Knowing he'd never get a chance to focus and reconnect with all the Sickened, he tried one last tactic.

His entire life, Trede thought he was cursed. In his dreams, he'd connect to another person in duress. He'd see through their eyes, witness their fear and panic, then awaken. When he awoke, the person on the other end of the connection would fall into a deep sleep. This could last for days and they often had other side effects of the astral experience. They might awake in a fugue state, or endure some great mental damage. Some might not awake at all. This was the Echowake event. And before he was able to control his mystical abilities, he'd harmed countless lives all over the continent. It was a snap decision, but before losing his connection with the remaining Sickened, he flared his own Inner Fire, pressed upon them the great fear in his own heart. Upon severing the connection, something like the world has never experience happened. Several thousand Echowake events occurred simultaneously from Garar to Fwee, to Smisom and Jonin and beyond to the islands of the Roiling Sea. The sky shimmered like the desert Scorch at high summer. The bursting mystical energy could be felt even by those with no training in the hidden arts.

Each and every face impacted by this ether-realm connection flashed in front of Trede's mind's eye; each fell into a deep slumber. He hoped they'd all have a chance to wake again. It was a desperate cost paid by someone at the end of all strength. Reeling from the shock of the global Echowake and Wellborne's relentless attack, Trede plummeted through the air. His global connection darkened and was cut off.

As Trede fell, Wellborne's voice roared behind him. "Now, you will suffer!"

You'll all suffer and die!"

With a massive strike, Wellborne pounded on Trede's body with a double-fist. The attack cracked across Trede's brow sending him reeling downward. He tumbled faster, and faster. An old, familiar thought came to mind.

Not exactly how I thought it'd end... I alway imagined myself... a famous Merkant... Or a daring carrier captain sailing the blue sky. With a Sky Princess on my arm. Cassidy...

It was his final thought before crashing into the Haven. The flat, stone roof collapsed inward after him, the walls crumbled around sending plumes of dust and debris in the air. A crater, half the size of the original building, had demolished the Haven. Somewhere, in a tangled, broken mess of splayed limbs lay Trede.

Meanwhile overhead, Wellborne reached out towards the horizons of the rust-toned Scorch in all directions. From Wellborne's eyes came a field of black. It grew and grew, while deathly dark purples and blues colored the darkening sky in the form of lightning strikes. Now left unchallenged, Wellborne's final darkness was consuming the world.

Chapter 34

Cassidy

CASSIDY watched Trede fall. A primal scream escaped her until her breath gave out. When the Haven collapsed around him she choked for lack of air. The growing darkness in the sky was the only thing that distracted her, replacing one terror with another.

Oudrine, stumbling with an injury from the Sickened, grabbed her arm. "Come. He may not dead. The fight isn't over." Her normal lyrical voice was gone, replaced by a beleaguered yet fiercely determined tone.

Cassidy watched Oudrine pace towards the ruined building. Her eyes panned across the street. Amidst the many broken buildings and fallen Sickened, she looked for any others who remained. Bors was helping Tenowon onto a cart. A haggard Drayle sat next to an unconscious Yaladra in front of piles of stone rubble. At least, Cassidy hoped she was only unconscious.

"There's no time!" Oudrine shouted from up ahead.

The young Cytech inventor picked up her feet and ran after Oudrine. Even while Wellborne's darkness grew overhead and the late summer sun faded, she could make out the ruins. *He must've crashed through the first floor into the basement.* She followed Oudrine's lead, carefully jumping from stone to stone down into the former cellar.

"He's here," Oudrine announced, sounding quiet and grim.

"There's thousands of pounds of stone down here." Cassidy's fears escaped her lips before she had a chance to think. "How do we..."

A blue cloud burst into being around Oudrine's hand, she reached towards the fallen stone and rubble. "Trede..." She called out to him in a haunted, reverberating voice. "Trede, Wellborne lives. The battle isn't over." The mind mystic implored him though no response came.

"Trede?!" Cassidy called. Still no response. Oudrine grabbed her hand, mystic energy shining, and gestured to try again. The blue light enveloped the young Cytech's hand and forearm. It was warm, tingly, crackling like fire but without the burn. "Trede, please tell me you're ok. Wellborne's... blotting out the sun. We

need your help! I need you!" She felt her words echo in her own mind, somehow Oudrine was projecting her thoughts.

A faint murmur came from under their feet.

Cassidy fell to her knees, looking through the gaps, though still unable to see him. "Trede? Trede are you there?"

"I... I can't." Trede's voice came through the rocks as a broken whimper. A bloodied hand reached up from between a crack of stone. Cassidy and Oudrine pulled him out as he spoke. Large chunks of rubble fell aside as they pulled him up. Once his upper half was free, he said, "I can't do any more. Everything I do... he undoes it. He's taking back all the Sickened right now." Once wrested free, he stumbled and collapsed to his knees. His entire body was covered in cuts and scraps, clothing ripped and shredded. "I— I can't stop him."

"Maybe you don't have too!" Tenowon's voice called down into the gully of broken stone and debris. "Even if we can't trap him mechanically, there must be a way to return him to The Well. Wellborne *must* return to The Well! All life depends on it!"

Feeling the urgency of Tenowon's words, Cassidy turned back to Trede. He looked on death's door already, yet he was only one of them with the power to face Wellborne. *It takes Well energy to fight Well energy... I wish there was more I could do.*

"How. How could I possibly..." Trede's shoulders fell limp. The sky overhead darkened. Lightning and deep, rumbling thunder filled the air.

"Come on, Trede. Let's help you out of here." *I can do that at least.* Cassidy braced Trede under the shoulders and helped him up. She and Oudrine led Trede up and out of the rubble-filled pit. Trede collapsed again next to Tenowon's cart. At the sight of Trede's condition, Bors swore under his breath but remained ominously quiet.

All the abled-bodied members of this last alliance gathered around the pit that was once the Haven. Traz arrived with his two fighting cousins looking pensive.

Eesh'ahn said, "I am sure our our kin are safe. Dragyst and Staal are strong to defend them." She folded her thick arms

"Oi, better be for the kind of accommodations you got them all on the west end! Price-ee!" added Viligréa.

Drayle was there too; Yaladra looked more unconscious than fit to fight. "She's

not Sickened, I've made sure of that much," he said.

Celeste came and tended after the white-cloaked mystic while Wellborne's final darkness filled the sky above them. Its grey form was barely visible in the dark, but for the flashes of sickly blue and purple glows. No one was sure what to say. There was no clear plan to offer.

After a long silence, Oudrine spoke. Her blue eyes were locked in a gaze at something far away. She began slow. "Trede, we must use the Conduit. The portal that opened up to the Light-realm... It's what I passed through to find you. And the same portal we returned through from the Light. It led directly to the encampment near The Well. If you can again open this Conduit of which the creature spoke. I believe I can guide you back to The Well."

"And from there..." The lights in Drayle's eyes flared. "We can return Wellborne's energy back to where it's meant to be. I have to believe that the forces that sustain Wellborne's consciousness *want* to be returned. Though unpredictable, mystical forces do seek balance. In their own way." He turned to the android.

"That's my hope," said Tenowon. It was still strange to see Tenowon balanced in the small, two-wheeled cart. Thanks to his borrowed loose-cotton shirt and black trousers, his remaining damage was concealed. "We don't need to beat him, just connect him with The Well. Life energy... must behave like other natural forces. And nature abhors a vacuum!"

The same light of hope dawned on Cassidy's face. "The Well... being empty is like a vacuum?"

Drayle puzzled the thought for a moment. "The Well is old, ancient beyond count. It's *meant* to hold Wellborne's energies. Now that it's empty... Maybe the mystical balance itself will aid us."

For a moment, the group discussed this point further. While Trede could scarcely lift his head.

Cassidy saw him looking so beleaguered and her heart sank. She got down on her knees in front of him. "Can you try? Take Wellborne back to The Well? Take all of us, if you can. We'll help you."

For a long moment Trede didn't respond. He looked up at Cassidy. His eyes bleary, pained and forlorn. His voice was a tired rasp. "You'll come with me?"

Cassidy's eyes welled seeing him in so much pain. To have so much asked of you, she couldn't imagine. She threw his arms around him and squeezed. "I'm here. I'll stay with you as long as I possibly can. You're not going to be alone."

She leaned in close, resting her forehead on his, forgetting the others around them for a moment.

“The Light...” His dry, whisper of a voice was barely audible. “It’s deadly. I don’t want to risk getting stuck... getting anyone stuck—”

Cassidy summoned all her courage. If she could stand and bear this burden herself, she would have, without a blink. But to ask someone who’d already endured so much to risk life and limb again... it was heartbreaking. In that moment, she bound her destiny with Trede’s to the end. Whatever Trede would do, she’d be right there until her strength failed. She spoke, her brow still pressed to his. “We have to do this. But we can do it together this time. Ok?” She stifled the growing lump in her throat. A few tears ran down her cheeks. “Ok, Trede? Together this time. Everyone needs us. Through the Light, or anywhere.”

If asked, Cassidy couldn’t explain what happened next. Trede didn’t move; his breathing didn’t alter, but something inside him changed. He felt more solid to the touch, a warmth irradiated from his body. His eyes opened and stared back at her. “Ok,” he whispered. “Together.”

Trede rose to his feet. Jonas and Celeste came to each side of him and used their Mystical Fire to heal some of his physical wounds. The deep turmoil in his mind and Fire, ravaged by unexplainable forces was another matter. His grave expression displayed an inevitable *knowing*. “Everyone stay close. Oudrine... try to keep all our minds linked. I’m going to open the last of the Well-blessing. I’m not sure what will happen. I don’t want to get anyone trapped in the Light... They’ll die.”

“I will do my part,” said the blue mystic as her eyes flared with Fire and light.

Yaladra, now standing on her own, though still appearing ill said, “We stand with you.” Her eyes were already glowing a deep violet.

“That’s it then...” said Trede. An uncertainty still slung to his voice. “Everybody stand back.”

Cassidy clung to Trede’s hand, squeezing it. “If there’s anything I can do, I’ll do it. I won’t let you leave me. Not this time.” She could barely fathom the mystical forces at play in this conflict, but she knew she was in good company to see it through. *The best company*. She took hope in being surrounded by brilliant Cytechs, powerful mystics, and brave selahns.

Trede looked at her with eyes that said, *Thank you*. She nodded in silence and let go of his hand.

TREDE

Recharged by the healing magics of his mystic friends, Trede let loose his strength once more. The Well-blessing within was fully open in a single wide stream. It coursed through his core, his limbs and mind. Immediately his vision was blurred by the white light filling his eyes. He could sense Wellborne's presence hovering more than fifty feet in the air. With each passing second, the evil entity was reclaiming the Sickened one by one.

I'm running out of time... In more ways than one. Trede felt himself being overcome by raw power. It might be only minutes before he lost consciousness. It might be less than that before his friends in Sedenza, Smisom and everywhere were overrun again by violent Sickened.

Trede looked back at his friends as a vortex of wind gathered at his feet. With the light surrounding him, he could only make out their silhouettes.

"We're ready!" Cassidy said, hands tightly clutched at her chest.

He turned to his enemy. *It's time.* With strained, heaving breaths, Trede poured energy into his body. He felt the ground under his feet slip away. Immeasurable mystic power at his control, he flung himself through the air at Wellborne. A wordless battle cry escaped his throat as he approached the enemy.

I have to do it... I have to reopen the Conduit to the Light and travel to The Well. I have to! His thoughts burned with this single objective. His resolve and will affixed like iron.

A thunderous clap rumbled through the air as Trede's mortal body collided with the thick, grey-skinned creature. He let go of any care for his physical body and recalled how he felt when he unknowingly opened the Conduit for the first time. *This time I'm sending you back where you belong!*

Floating dozens of feet in the air, enveloped in light, Trede struggled arm in arm with Wellborne until... *nothing happened.* He continued the physical struggle until Wellborne shoved him off. Trede felt the crack of a heavy back first across his jaw. He was sent reeling through the air for dozens of feet. He braced himself against the wind itself and held his position in midair. *It's not working.* The thought paralyzed him. *What do I do?*

Trede's airborne attack had at least prevented Wellborne from continuing his reclamation of the Sickened. Now he had the creature's full attention.

Wellborne dashed through the air at Trede, swinging wildly with a ferocity more than before. Trede was locked into a defense posture, barely keeping ahead of the wild and savage blows and maintaining the flow of energy needed to keep himself aloft.

Oudrine's voice came into his mind. *Trede... Trede you must try again. You must open the portal.*

I tried! I don't know how! I've never done it on purpose before.

Drayle's voice came through, with an echo of Oudrine's voice in the background. She must've been channeling his voice to Trede. *Remember, Trede, Wellborne's life-force belongs inside The Well. That's where it was always meant to be. The Well's own energy should help you return it to its natural place.*

Trede let his guard slip while thinking about how to open the Conduit and took two quick blows from Wellborne followed by a heavy kick. He spun head over feet, careening towards the ground. He had just enough time to cushion his fall with a burst of white and yellow energy from his hands. Snapping his gaze back to the sky, he was almost relieved to see that Wellborne hadn't followed him. Then his stomach dropped as he realized the creature was continuing to darken the skies and reclaim more and more Sickened.

Haunted, angry voices filled the streets around them on all sides. "Look alive, friends!" Traz shouted from somewhere behind Trede. "Quite the group of unpleasant citizens coming our way! *Let's give them what ho!*"

Trede glanced left and right. Hordes of onyx-eyed attackers were amassing on all sides. *There's even more than before... He's trying to take all of them. Everybody. The whole world!* He froze in panic. His body still thrummed with unimaginable power, yet he could find no recourse against Wellborne.

"Trede!" It was Yaladra's voice shouting to him. Something about her voice made his bones vibrate. Her voice was all around him and inside him at the same time. *"Remember! Remember what the Conduit feels like!"*

Trede felt a strange sensation in his body. It was mystical in nature, but different from his own Fire or the Well-blessing inside him. His thoughts coalesced. Suddenly the abstract nature of the Conduit made sense to him. It wasn't a concrete idea. He could never explain it, but he *did* know how to open it. *I... remember!*

"Trede, hurry!" Cassidy shouted from behind. "There's too many of them!" The sound of clashing weapons was crescendoing all around Trede's friends. Ill winds gusted and howled among them, voices nearly lost in the throng.

"Hang on, everyone!" Trede saw the Conduit in his mind. He remembered the sensation of it; it was unlike anything else. He leapt into the air, flying at Wellborne with all the speed he could muster. In only a split second, he was upon the enemy. In less time than that, Trede had a plan.

The Well-blessed mystic grabbed Wellborne from the back, locking its arms behind. Trede rushed downward through the air towards the open street where his friends were in battle with countless Sickened. The Light covered his sight entirely; his other senses evaporated.

A massive ball of light flashed into being over the east side of Sedenza. It lingered there, filling the city with the sound of a great fire caught on the wind. The ground shook. Then nothing.

Trede's perception slowly pieced itself together. He heard voices all around him.

"B— Bors... Something might be wrong... with my systems."

"Father... Are you all right?"

Not too far off, a woman was sobbing.

"Rraaah!" Traz fought to regain his feet. He stood and surveyed the scene. "What... it— it worked?! Everyone, rouse and rabble! We're here!" In earnest, Traz ran to each in their group. Some were alert, some unconscious.

The light invading Trede's eyes was gone, but he could still feel the Well-blessing thrumming within. His body felt burnt, inside and out. Muscles ached, bones were bruised. Despite this, he let himself feel relief. *We made it through the Conduit... Traz is right.* All around him was a familiar sight. The ancient vine-covered stonework and moss-covered glen surrounding The Well, source of all life. *At least it used to be.* Before Trede finished accounting for all his friends, an all too sickeningly familiar voice rumbled through the glen.

"Thief... Fool." The muscular, grey-skinned form of Wellborne rose from the opposite side of The Well where Trede and his friends lay.

Trede jumped to his feet, then winced as the aches in his body swelled. *I don't think I've ever hurt so bad...* He locked his eyes on Wellborne. The creature

looked surprisingly calm. Its dead, black eyes somehow stared Trede down.

"Tell me, fool. Can you put lighting back in the sky? Can an earthquake be replaced underground from where it came? You think what I am today... what I've become, can be undone?" His voice was a low rumble that echoed in Trede's bones.

"Clearly, you've grown in wisdom and knowledge." It was Drayle who dared first speak to Wellborne.

Trede tensed. He was surprised at Wellborne's lack of aggression so far. He waited, ready to jump into action in a split second.

Drayle continued. "For twenty years you gestated in the seed that Proteus planted. As the Storm, your consciousness grew. Until you became what we see today."

"I am without bound, mortal. Your words and tricks are no match." Wellborne took a step forward.

"But are you a creature of reason?" Tenowon spoke up this time. His cart was overturned; Bors, who had a gash over one eye, was propping him up amidst other broken rubble that came through the Conduit with them. "Do you remember me? As the Storm, you crushed me into the Scorch. Yet here I am, alive."

Wellborne growled, sending a vibration through the air; its lip curled.

"I'm much older than I look." Tenowon leaned off Bors onto a tall fragment of the Haven's old exterior wall. "And I remember the last time The Well was emptied. Can you recall it? Do you remember anything before Proteus?"

"I did not exist before Proteus! I am power made sentient. *Before was...*" Wellborne's stolid gaze panned away from the group that stood in front of the ancient altar.

"I was there, Wellborne!" Tenowon shouted. "Your power must be placed back in The Well or the world will burn a second time. You, your essence, belong in The Well. It's only a matter of time before the world breaks again and you'll have no choice."

While Tenowon was talking, Cassidy ran over to Trede. Relieved to see her in tact, he ran fingers through her hair. "Stay back if you can. I don't know what's coming next."

She gave him a wide look and squeezed his hand. "I'll be close. No matter

what. I promised."

Not able to send her away, he only nodded and squeezed her hand back.

Tenowon continued, "Wellborne, surely as a child of The Well itself, you must have value for life. You don't want to see the world destroyed do you?"

The entity's facial features twisted and churned. A conflict was clear on its face. "Life... must persist." The rumble had left its voice; it sounded almost human. It approached the ancient stone altar of The Well; its movements pensive.

"Help me," Tenowon called to his friends. "Help me to The Well." The young couple, Trede and Cassidy, each propped Tenowon up under a shoulder. With Traz and Drayle, the five approached the altar. The others were either still unconscious or struggling to rouse.

Trede beheld The Well and was shocked to see it vastly different than before. Instead of the deep point in the center, there was only a shallow stone indentation, forming a simple bowl. *The last time I was here... it defied explanation. It was deep and my eyes couldn't look directly at it. The Well really is empty now.*

Wellborne rested his hands on the opalescent stonework. Its expression showed a deep reflection of thought. The malice, for now, was gone. "The power of life has always come from here. I..." He cocked his grey head to one side. "I wish I could remember."

"I remember," said Tenowon. "And it can be that way again. What Proteus has done can be *undone*. For the sake of life on this planet. Can you refill The Well?"

Wellborne looked to Trede. "You still have a piece. Will you return what you have stolen?"

Trede swallowed hard. "Gladly. I never wanted it to begin with."

The creature extended a hand over the altar. It stared at Trede with eyes darker than a starless night.

"Can I trust you?" said Trede, staring into the abyss. A moment passed. A familiar grey wind howled through the glen chilling everyone to the core. Everyone except the one who caused it. As Trede stumbled-stepped forward to brace against the wind, Wellborne reached over the altar and latched on to his hand. Trede was wrested out from under Tenowon's shoulder and overtop The Well.

"To arms!" In a flash, Traz was bounding up on Tenowon's shoulders, leaped into the air, and came down blades first on Wellborne's neck. The creature swatted

the selahn away with ease, sending him reeling far and wide into the grey stone arches surrounding the glen.

“Your grip loosens!” Drayle shouted; his eyes glowed with green fire. Wellborne turned his black gaze to him, sucking and absorbing the green light into his own onyx eyes.

“Silence!” The creature shouted with a shockwave so firece it sent Drayle reeling back a dozen feet. Wordlessly, he gripped at his throat in vain and fell unconscious.

“Cassidy, get back!” Trede did what he could to brace his legs on top of The Well and swing a mystically infused punch into the enemy’s black eyes. When it had no effect, he rallied again and again, all the while, Wellborne would not let go of Trede’s arm and held him over the altar.

As Cassidy stumbled backwards, Tenowon lost his balance and fell. She shouted, “Trede! The sky is darkening! It looks just like Sedenza!”

Despite being locked in combat, Trede’s stomach sunk. *That cold wind... It’s still taking the Sickened. It never stopped; it was just stalling us!* As Trede wrestled left and right, Wellborne was there forcing him to stay on top of the altar.

“Now, Thief!” The rumble in its voice was so potent Trede nearly cried out in pain and terror. “Give back what was stolen!” It took up a jagged, opalescent fragment of altar-stone and plummeted it into Trede’s belly.

Trede gasped. He experienced a rush of warmth. Cries and shrieks of terror all around dulled in his ears as he struggled. It wasn’t until Tenowon, pushing himself up with his arms, grappled with Wellborne that Trede could finally roll off the stone. He landed hard on the ground with a painful *thud*.

Cassidy was there to pull him away. She screamed for help, dragging Trede to safety.

Several feet out from the altar, Trede landed with Cassidy. He twisted himself around to keep eyes on the enemy. Tenowon had somehow locked Wellborne’s arms behind and held him to the ground. His mechanical body was many times more powerful than a human. *Still, he can only hold on so long— ah, uuuggn!* Trede writhed in agonizing pain. The makeshift stone dagger was only a few inches into his flesh; it felt like something else was wrong. He just couldn’t put his finger on what.

It was only then the other mystics had strength to rise. Oudrine and Celeste came to Trede and Cassidy’s aid. Jonas and Yaladra went on ahead to help

Tenowon.

Celeste watched Trede writhe for a moment before noticing something in the air. "Look now, in the air. Here!" She squinted at a tiny imperceptible thread of white light that was flowing from Trede's wound back to The Well.

"Wellborne is taking Trede's Well-blessing," said Oudrine, looking towards her old teacher. "He's being emptied. Can we still heal him?"

"Of course you can still heal him!" Cassidy shouted over the din. "Why wouldn't you?"

Trede looked and saw the thread. *She's right.* He turned over the piece of opalescent altar-stone in his hand, he remembered the words of his strange visitor in the Light. There was a material that can hinder Wellborne.

It is rare, to be certain. Found only in places with special importance...

It dawned on him. "Guys!" Trede shouted in pain. "Use the altar stone! It will drain him!"

As if on queue, Wellborne jumped a dozen feet, away from the battle, and landed at Trede and the others' feet. It reached down and grabbed Trede's neck with a single hand. "No, Thief," its voice a violent rumble. "I will take it all. And be complete!"

Oudrine

Wellborne stood feet away from Oudrine. The grey construct still held Trede with one muscular hand. With the other, it made a fist and railed at Trede's stomach wound where the altar-stone had bled him. Trede was stunned and offered little in defense.

The mind mystic summoned a great bolt of blue Fire and channeled it at Wellborne's head. It was enough to stagger, but she hadn't nearly enough time to prepare a full blast like before. Wellborne remained on its feet, Trede in hand, summoning a fierce ill wind. It blew against Cassidy, Oudrine and Celeste until their feet slipped out from under them.

"You shall not subdue me again, blue witch!" it bellowed over the typhoon

winds.

Oudrine stumbled to her knees but remained close. She knew what they needed to do. Not only was The Well the only place that could contain Wellborne, but the opalescent altar-stone itself was their final answer. She just had to coordinate an attack with her allies. Something a mind mystic was perfect for. She called to someone she knew had a steady arm.

Everyone, stay back a moment. Traz... break off a piece of the altar. Quietly. Have Tenowon use his strength if you have to. Throw it to me when I'm ready.

As a ploy, Oudrine flared a huge burst of blue Fire from her hands and eyes. The bright display dazzled her for a split second. This gathered Wellborne's interest fully, though he still gripped Trede by the neck. The menacing creature took slow steps forward, bent low and ready to attack.

Right oh! I've got just the piece, came Traz's mental reply. Seemingly, Wellborne was none the wiser to their communication.

Oudrine raised her burning blue hands overhead. "You *will* go back into The Well! The mystic forces demand it!"

This was the last prodding Wellborne needed. The grey creature lunged forward with its free arm, swiping wide at Oudrine. She rolled to the side calling out to Traz telepathically. *Now!* Right on cue, Traz threw the stone to her; she caught it. An eight inch shard easy to grasp. Oudrine twisted, and reached back to scratch at Wellborne's grey skin at her arm's full extension. As she did, a thin white thread of light lingered at the stone blade's tip. The wispy white thread then trailed towards its original source: The Well.

Oudrine sent out a mental message to everyone in the party. *Everyone! Grab more stones, make quick attacks and get clear. If you can't get close, be ready to throw altar-stones to the others. Now is our time! Fight! Fight!*

First came Eesh'ahn and Viligréa, instead of their selahn blades, they held shivs of opalescent altar-stone. The lanky Viligréa was up on Wellborne's shoulders in a flash, jabbed a pointed stone into its shoulder and flipped off with ease. Eesh'ahn was next, she grappled the creature's arm that still held Trede, sending a stone fragment jutting into the grey shoulder. Trede took the distraction to flip a few kicks towards Wellborne's face to no avail. A black wind flew from its mouth and sent Eesh'ahn rolling and tumbling back. Traz took her place in the fray, hacking at the arm that held Trede with makeshift altar-stone daggers.

Jonas and Cassidy took advantage of the selahns aggressive attack and ran behind Wellborne, altar-stones in hand. They both made long cuts down the

creature's back. Wellborne finally dropped Trede —on top of Traz— and turned. He kicked Jonas yards away, crashing him into the stone arches built around the ancient glen. Wellborne then turned its attention on Cassidy, and readied a pounding strike that would surely end her life.

Oudrine leapt into action, taking her stone dagger and jamming in the side of Wellborne's ribs. This only seemed to shift its ire as Wellborne grabbed her leg as she tried to escape. Before she could even call for help, multiple gun shots ran out in the glen.

Yaladra was there at point blank range unloading rounds from two ornate black pistols. Somehow, she had added small fragments to the nozzles of the guns as shrapnel.

Wellborne cried out with intense guttural pain. Oudrine was freed and rolled away on her feet. The sound was shocking, it almost made her eyes go dark. She stumbled from overload before being able to take stock in the battle.

Wellborne's full fury was focused on Yaladra. The white-cloak mystic deftly moved side to side avoiding strikes. She was able to fire a few more rounds into its chest before running out of ammunition. This resulted in more mind-shredding shouts ripping through the glen. Despite this, Yaladra kept up her defense. She was quick, somehow dodging each rapid blow.

Oudrine observed thicker streams of nearly-invisible white energy lingering from Wellborne's wounds. Every time they injured him with the altar-stone, the more he was drained. *But how much do we have to drain him before we end this threat?* Far to her left, Trede and Traz were back on their feet, ready to rejoin the fray. Victory seemed assured. They just had to keep up this ploy. Wellborne, ever so slowly, was being drained of power. And when that terrible strength was gone, there'd be nothing left.

Wellborne, however, had other ideas. He jumped high in the sky beyond their reach. Then slowly, each fighter stumbled. Oudrine watched in horror as the face of her mentor, while kneeling to check on an injured Jonas, went dark. Her eyes went black. She stood stiff as a board, looked to the sky, then crumped and fell. Jonas cried out, reached for his wife before also becoming struck. He shouted as Wellborne's mystical grip took hold. His eyes darkened, he listed to one side and collapsed.

"No! Unhand me— *Raarrh!* Selahns ho!" Traz fought bravely, shouting until finally his eyes turned black. He too, fell.

Yaladra glanced back Oudrine with a look of that spoke volumes. *We're so*

close... but I can't stop this. The white-cloaked mystic tumbled to the ground.

Everywhere Oudrine looked, another one of their friends and allies succumbed to Wellborne's darkness. Everyone but Trede. As Cassidy fell out of his arms, her eyes black as night, Trede turned to his teacher of the mystic arts. A panic shone in his face. Oudrine had no wisdom, no advice. No battle plan or hope to share.

She felt the attack on her. It came in her mind; she wrestled it. It was a black nightmare that screamed to fill her waking thoughts. It was the inexorable tide of time and death. It was a burden impossible to carry. She fought a roiling battle in her mind, staggering to one side, barely on her feet. She came closer to Trede, put one hand on his shoulder. Her vision was starting to fade. "Trede, I'm sorry. I wasn't enough..." In her thoughts, she pictured Maej. *You were the always the warrior, not me. I couldn't... I couldn't...* Consciousness was wrest from her. The mighty Oudrine fell just paces away from The Well omnipotent.

TREDE

Trede stood, gasping with pain. Cassidy, Oudrine, Traz and the others all lay strewn about the glen. Knocked down. Defeated. The inhuman, thick-muscled, Wellborne landed like an earthquake. The grey creature actually looked winded as he pulled the two altar-stone daggers out of his shoulders. Wispy streams of white light strung from his many open wounds. The streams grouped together looking like a growing fog growing around him. Each barely visible thread led straight back to The Well. Trede and his friends' plan had nearly worked. Now they had fallen. He was alone. He gripped an altar-stone dagger in one hand and fought despair.

There's no way. Everyone's gone... I can't do this. Not alone. Trede waited, fighting against the pain in his abdomen. He could feel the Well-blessing seeping out of him bit by bit. *It won't be long before... there's nothing left.*

Trede wasn't sure how it happened, but Wellborne rushed him. He felt a strike against his upper body which sent him flying up the path. He landed outside the cave tunnel entrance. The only entrance or exit to The Well. Around him lay some rubble but it wasn't from the glen. Large pieces of the Haven lay around him. Strewn about it were the bodies of some of the fallen Sickened who were close enough to the Conduit to be taken when everyone was swept up. Something else amidst the rubble caught his eye. A single faint orange spark flew up between the

rocks and building fragments. Is that... *the Palifax lantern?*

Alone... Wellborne's thundering footprints came closer. *I can't do this.* His enemy was less than a short stone's throw away. He looked back at the remnants of the Haven. *Maybe... I don't have to be alone.* With an outstretched hand, Trede poured what Well energy remained in him. It wracked his body with an intense pain, but he didn't relent. *The power of life itself...* It was his only thought as the diminishing flow of eternal power left him.

After he could bare no more, he tried to seal off his inner gate. He would still need his Fire, and traces of the Well-blessing if this long-shot of a hope would work. He rose to his feet, still gripping the stone dagger.

"Thief!" Wellborne growled. "Fool! You are now alone. Soon after, I will be all that remains." The creature rushed him and Trede was locked in combat. The many injuries had weakened Wellborne some, but he was still an inhuman force to reckon with.

Trede was nearly spent; still he pushed himself to the limit. For ever few blocks he managed a single counterattack. Even after a heavy jumping kick across Wellborne's jaw, it only served to stun him for a split second. Feeling desperate, he lunged with the stone dagger with both hands. It scratched across the grey chest before a stoney fist pounded him down into the ground.

With surpassing speed, Wellborne grabbed Trede by the throat and rested the stone dagger from his hand. "Now Thief... you will die alone." The stone dagger inched towards Trede's exposed neck.

Trede knew it was now or never. *Did it work...* His thoughts wandered to the fragments and ruins of the Haven behind. A single spark from the buried Palifax lantern rose from the rubble. An eternity seemed to pass as the stone blade approached Trede's throat. Two more orange sparks. Then twenty. A breath caught in Trede's throat.

A beacon of white light a dozen feet across exploded into the sky sending huge stone bricks flying. Even though it was several feet behind, Trede was blinded. Wellborne lost his grip and took several stagger steps backwards.

"He is not alone." A deep baritone voice rang out from the light. "He never was."

Ignoring the new voice, Wellborne roared and ran to finish the job on Trede who was still stunned. A hand reached out of the light and grabbed the dagger-wielding fist. A figure cloaked in black and red stepped out of the light and unleashed a flurry of attacks. Each blow sounded like a massive crack in solid

stone. There was a flash of red Fire and Wellborne was sent reeling back. The figure offered a hand down to Trede; he pulled him up.

"Maej... You're alive—" Trede could scarcely believe it worked. *The power of life itself... That's what The Well really is. It worked. He's alive!*

Maej surveyed the scene, seeing the fallen bodies of many familiar faces. And Wellborne rising to his feet in rage. "The fight continues," he said through gritted teeth. It wasn't a question, more of an observation.

How do I explain, there's no time!? "Wellborne's alive. If we can make him bleed enough, his power will refill The Well. It's already started, see?" Trede pointed with one hand while holding his stomach wound with the other.

Maej paused, his eyes lingering on a fallen Oudrine. A growl came from deep inside. Maej set himself like a wild jungle cat about to lunge on its prey. His chest expanded with a deep inhale as a blazing red runic scimitar formed in each hand. "Then we end this. *Now!*" In a blur of red and black Maej was on the attack.

Trede collapsed back on the ground, mind scrambling. *If I can... use the life energy to heal myself I can fight again.* Summoning the last shreds of his mental focus, he tried to pour the diminished Well-blessing within himself to heal his severe wound. He only managed to stop the bleeding; but the flesh wouldn't mend. He saw glowing opalescent specs around the open cut. *Something about the altar stones prevent the Well energy from mending.* It dawned on him in that moment. *Of course... The altar-stone blocks and directs Well energy. At least this means Wellborne can't heal either.*

Trede looked up as his formerly deceased mentor fought with abandoned rage against the grey creature. Somehow his Fire and determination hadn't cooled in the slightest. He took a moment of awe in just how powerful The Well really was. *I've got to get in there and help.* His insides were turning cold which gave him pause. *I'm pretty sure... I've got some left.* There was the faintest wisp of white light swirling out of his stomach wound; it lead straight back to The Well. *Have to try.*

As Trede ran up to join the fray, another howling, grey wind blew through the glen. It sent both Maej and Trede back three steps. As soon as he caught his balance, Trede lunged forward only to be railed down into the ground by Wellborne's heavy fists. Maej came up behind, wielding his glowing scimitars and traded a few blows. It was clear that Wellborne was growing fatigued from the slow draw of The Well's pull. Yet Maej, Fire burning hot and infused with new life, still barely held his ground. As Trede climbed to his feet, he caught a fiery look

from Maej's eye. The black and red mystic was on the defensive, leading Wellborne away.

He's letting me get behind. Gotta move, now! Trede jumped and grabbed at Wellborne's arms. The creature spun just in time and back-fisted Trede through the air, slamming him into the side of the mystic altar.

In a split second, Maej took the distraction. In whirls of mystic Fire, he was upon Wellborne thrusting two Fire-swords into the opponent's chest. The black and red mystic pressed harder, pushing the fiery blades deeper into grey flesh. The move left Maej's head unguarded; Wellborne took full advantage with a brutal headbutt to send Maej staggering.

Trede jumped up and wrapped an arm around Wellborne's neck. Before the enemy could balance, Trede kicked out its knees from behind; he dragged him on top of The Well, back first. The struggle cracked Trede's bones and nearly pulled his shoulders out of socket. Wrestling this way forced Wellborne to drop his altar-stone knife. "*Maej, the dagger!*" Trede shouted as loud as he could, there was no point in secrecy now. Trede and Maej were all that stood in front of the threat to end all life. He knew, too, that their chances diminished the longer time went on.

With all speed, Maej was upon the two locked in a mighty grapple. Fleet-footed, he kicked up the altar-stone with a single boot, flipping it into his hand. With both hands, he thrust down the opalescent weapon towards Wellborne's abdomen, just below where the two Fire-swords still set embedded in grey flesh.

"NooOOO!" As the blow drew close, Wellborne roared with a voice that shook the entire glen. Trede's bones quivered. He loosened his grip and fell away. Maej's legs buckled under him, sending him to one knee. The grey creature, bleeding onyx-black from many wounds, staggered up from The Well. "You would take it all..." he growled like a wounded animal. "All my power! You would take it for yourself. You are no better! I see your... *jealousy!*" His shoulders heaved as he spoke; his own voice working him up into a fervor.

Maej gave him no quarter. Using his innate mystical Fire, he summoned his runic scimitars out of Wellborne's body from several feet. A gush of onyx blood and streams of white light flooded from the open wounds.

Trede saw the light flow into The Well, just like he saw it flow into his younger self from the vision of his parents' final moments. He looked to Maej who, without asking, threw him the altar-stone dagger. He spoke, "No, Wellborne. If killing you means saving everyone else, I'll do it. I'd do it a hundred times and seal up The Well forever. Never let another living person come within a hundred miles of this place. I don't want this kind of power. And you won't have it either."

The creature roared as more of the mist of white Well energy left its hulking grey body.

He's actually in pain. The thought sparked hope. "If you won't refill The Well, we'll make you." Trede widened his stance and prepared for another fight. His insides were getting cold, feeling frozen even, yet a small spark of energy still sustained him.

"You're outmatched, Wellborne!" Maej shouted, spinning his runic blades. "You've caused enough harm. It's over."

"Mortals... *Thieves... FOOLS!*" Wellborne's ire sparked into a rage once again. It gripped its hands into stoney fists and came first at Trede.

His strength failing, Trede avoided the blows rather than block as they came. He ducked left, jumped right and rolled to the side to avoid heavy strikes. A few times he was able to swipe with the opalescent dagger, though only managed a few long scratches across Wellborne's arms.

Maej sliced into the air releasing ribbons of red energy from invisible gateways into the ether. The bands of magic wrapped around Wellborne, slowing him and eventually pulling the beast away from Trede. The younger mystic jumped in the air; he came down with the altar-stone dagger in his left hand at Wellborne's neck. Maej's mystic bonds were not strong enough, and Wellborne caught Trede at the wrist. Trede twisted his body and unleashed his last physical strength into the enemy's jaw. He felt his hand and wrist crack as Wellborne flew back, careening off the side of the altar with his head. The look in the creature's nightmarish eyes was of surprise and disbelief. Trede fell to the ground on his knees as he brought his broken hand to his chest, yelling in pain.

Wellborne caught a hold of Maej's last energy ribbon and ripped it away. As the black and red mystic approached with another flurry of blade strikes, the beast accepted the hits cutting deep into his arms to leave space for a heavy kick that cracked into Maej's ribs sending him reeling and staggering backwards.

Trede was scarcely able to breath. *Have to do something... can barely move.* He looked at Maej who struggled to rise. *And I'm down to one hand...* Then he saw movement from a place unexpected. The arms of the android, Tenowon, who still lay on the ground near The Well, lashed out and grabbed Wellborne's ankles, putting him off balance. The creature fell to the ground with a roar. With only his arms functional, Tenowon grappled as best he could. He managed to hold Wellborne in place despite its fury.

"We're still with you!" Tenowon shouted amidst the struggles and cries of the enemy. "But I don't know for how long!" His mechanical muscles were nearly a

match for the mystical construct, yet Wellborne was on the edge of breaking free.

In pained Trede to see a damaged Tenowon still in the fight. *I feel so weak...* He glanced at Maej who winced through pain as he prepared another attack. Trede tightened the altar-stone dagger in his good hand. He sensed deep inside himself, pressing for any last piece of the Well-blessing that remained. He recalled the tragic story of how he acquired this strange gift. How it haunted him for twenty years and alienated him for all those he cared about or might love. Then he remembered the past year. How the path he was on had brought him greater friendship and love than he'd ever thought possible. And the strength of a purpose as noble as any. He focused his resolve. Then he felt it. In a small hidden corner of his being. A tiny overlooked recess of his essence, there was a drop of Well-blessing left. Then he remembered his own past epiphany. *A piece of the infinite... is still infinite.* A plan came to mind.

Calling upon this final spark gave him pause. It felt like a deadly frost infected his insides; Trede took one step forward. *Not alone... Not alone...* he repeated to himself. He called upon the last drop of The Well's power in him. *I'm not alone...* He looked left and right. Traz was the first to jump to his feet. He shook himself off, wriggled his ears. Then Cassidy stirred as Oudrine and Celeste stood together. Jonas was next followed by the selahns, Villigréa and Eesh'ahn. Last came Yaladra and Drayle, their eyes already alight with mystic power.

The white-cloak mystic threw back her hood revealing a grim determination. "Blood flows from blackened wounds." Violet fire burst from her eyes as the incantation took effect.

Wellborne's voice went wild with pain and wrath. It ripped itself away from Tenowon and moved in for a killstroke. Traz and Maej flew in with blades gleaming and repelled the attack.

From his place on the opposite side of The Well, Drayle spoke, his eyes aflame with deep green. "Vines grow and subdue!" In a blink, green plants streamed from the stone arches surrounding the glen and wrapped themselves around Wellborne's four limbs. Even with such heavy hindrance, Wellborne continued to hold his own against Maej and Traz in battle.

Oudrine's thoughts entered Trede's mind. There was confusion and panic reverberating around her psychic words. *Trede, what have you done? How is Maej...*

I'll explain later. Trede took a weak, stumbling step towards the fray with Wellborne at the center. *Have Jonas pull Wellborne onto the altar... This is our last chance.* Trede took another step forward and felt something in his ankle give; he

stumbled to a knee. The last of the Well-blessing had left him and his body was paying the price. He felt on death's door. His abdomen was still bleeding and his right hand was broken. In his left hand was the altar-stone dagger gripped with desperate fingers. He struggled to his feet; every inch of movement felt impossible.

With a roar of yellow Fire, Jonas lunged overtop The Well, his long greying hair waving in the wind. He gripped Wellborne under the arms and hoisted it up back onto the altar. A wild stoney fist knocked him away with a loud crack. Drayle controlled the vines and tightened them around Wellborne's limbs. Still the creature kicked violently. Its sickening, shadowy voice rose shaking the entire glen once more.

Oudrine was there before the crescendo downed them all. From the far side of The Well, she let loose a focused blast of psychic, blue Fire and grabbed hold of Wellborne's temples. The hate-filled voice continued but with less power.

Cassidy ran up to Trede with wide brown eyes. "What happened to you!?"

"Hey..." Trede smiled weakly. "I can barely stand. Help me walk?"

She came beside him and braced under his right arm. "I can do that..." she said in a hushed tone. "But what are we going to do?"

"We're going to end it." Trede wasn't lying when he said he could barely stand. He leaned on Cassidy for each step as they came closer to the raging Wellborne. He knew he had no strength remaining. No omnipotent Well-blessing, barely a shred of his own Inner-Fire keeping him alive. His body was broken and worn. Still, arm in arm with his love, he walked towards the enemy that would destroy life itself.

Despite the group's amazing effort, Wellborne's legs thrashed free of the vines. He slowly gained leverage to push himself off the altar.

Trede paused, now only a few feet away. "Keep him held down!"

Tenowon, crawled closer and grabbed hold of one leg and held on for dear life. Maej and Traz jumped in to hold down the other. Eesh'ahn and Viligréa grabbed hold of the vines holding the right arm and braced themselves with wide stances. Jonas, Drayle and Yaladra did the same while holding the left vines in place. As Wellborne's hateful voice rose again, Oudrine cried out in pain. She began fading to one side when Celeste joined in. Her own white Fire burst into being around her hands as she put them next to Oudrine's at Wellborne's temples. The haggard, brutish voice finally quelled.

Trede and Cassidy passed Tenowon, Maej and Traz locked in epic struggle as

they approached The Well. "Help me up," he said with a quiver in his voice. Cassidy helped him climb. As Trede stood over the subdued Wellborne, his one knee nearly buckled. He looked at the grey man-shaped creation. A being that should have never existed but for the power-lust of a single Harbinger. Its features were a hate-filled, twisted version of humanity.

"No more," Trede spoke as he lifted the altar-stone dagger high in the air. "You won't hurt anyone ever again."

The grey-skinned abomination continued spewing unintelligible curses as it writhed and fought against the rag tag group of mystics, cytechs and selahns.

"Good bye, brother." Trede let his arm fall with the little strength he had. The altar-stone dagger plunged into Wellborne's flesh just below the left shoulder. He dragged the blade down and across the torso.

Wellborne's cries were so loud, Trede felt his mind and body crumble. The air around him luminesced until it was brighter than the sun over the Scorch on a hot summer day. The world around him was enveloped by the brightness, by the Light. As Wellborne's monstrous voice faded away, everything disappeared.

Chapter 35

TREDE

WELCOME... Children of the fourth.

Trede awoke inside a field of white. This single thought reverberating through his mind.

Welcome... Children of the fifth...

He gasped, thinking he might be trapped again inside the Light with Wellborne. But not so. This was a different place. It felt different. He managed to get to his feet. He still felt exhausted but by some miracle, his injuries were gone. He placed a hand on the place where his stomach wound had been. He felt under his simple cotton shirt. *There's a scar.* Upon closer inspection, he saw that there were still opalescent flecks amidst the scar tissue. "Am I dreaming?" he wondered out loud.

"Trede!" A nearby voice called.

"Cassidy?" Out of nowhere, she collided with him and wrapped her arms around him tightly.

"Where are we?!" She sounded relieved to be away from Wellborne, but concerned.

Before Trede could think of a response, a voice returned.

"Welcome, children of the fourth. Children of the fifth." The disembodied voice rang through the entire area. It sounded like a hundred voices speaking in perfect unison. Somehow the white void receded revealing all those who had fought against Wellborne at the ancient glen.

"Is everyone all right?" Trede called out. The band of mystics, cytechs and selahns all looked whole. And they all wore a similar confusion on their faces.

"Whole and hearty!" cried Traz with a skip in his legs. "All things considering... It was touch and go for a bit."

"We call upon you, Trede." The myriad voices filled Trede's ears and mind. He looked left and right to his friends. Everyone appeared to be listening, though each hearing something different. "You who have opened doorways not meant for your

kind. What have you to say?"

Trede wanted to hold onto Cassidy, to check on each of his friends, but the voice was overpowering. He had to give it his attention and respond. "I... I only did what I had to do. I wanted to save my friends." He couldn't tell if the voice was angry or wanted to thank him.

The white void continued to disburse further out from a single, central point. On all sides, there were groupings of other people. Humans that Trede had never met. Some were dressed strangely with colorful, long garments. Others wore strange suits with unknown technology attached to their bodies. More were plainly dressed or in rags. They were all human but looked somehow strange and foreign to him. Each of them appeared to be having a conversation with this disembodied voice.

The last of the white void disappeared revealing this entire gathering was on top of a massive high circular plateau. They were high up in the sky, the waves of a cerulean ocean far, far below licking at the black coastal rocks. The ground was architected with shining, ornate stone, a colorful collage of blues, reds, purples, silvers and golds. The air was fresh, the salty scent of the ocean made it feel vibrant and alive.

Trede waited for a response; he glanced again at his friends each seeming to be in deep conversation.

"You held the greatest power in the universe. Yet you gave it up. Do you relinquish this power willingly?"

Trede stepped forward. He pressed the fingers of his right hand into a fist; it was no longer broken. Somehow he already felt tears in his eyes. "Yes. I never wanted that kind of power, though... I'm glad for what it brought me, in the end." He looked left and saw Traz, Oudrine and Maej. Then right and smiled at Cassidy, oblivious though she was during her own conversation.

"Many who wield such power lust for more. Will you stay your hand from The Well, mortal? What is your heart?"

Trede considered the exhilaration he felt when wielding such power beyond any human or mystical limit. *I've flown through the sky... I've reached across the continent to help those in trouble. Langhorne, Darrick, Tryphena, Balog.* He recalled the myriad faces and voices he'd encountered during his astral experience during the battle. He searched himself now that the power was finally gone. For the first time in his life, he was just *Trede*. Just a man, still a Mystic perhaps, and an honorary Cytech too. That was more than enough for him. He remembered the

words he'd shouted at Wellborne. *"I don't want this kind of power. Not any more."*

"And The Well omnipotent? Will it tempt you?" The disembodied voice came from all about the sky-high, circular plateau.

"No. I never asked for this burden. While I'm glad I had it for a time, I don't think any of us should keep it. Not like I or Wellborne did."

"Your answer is accepted. Though, that decision doesn't belong to you, child of the fifth."

"You keep saying that... What does it mean, the fifth?"

"You are a child of the fifth great adoption, Trede." The myriad voice spoke plainly, as if it were an obvious statement.

"Adoption? Into what?" Trede took a few strides closer to the center of the ornately-floored plateau. He looked around the circle and noticed some of the strange looking other humans doing the same. In the flash of a thought, he wondered from how far they'd come. His mind had traveled over every inch of the known world that day and he didn't recognize them. *Did they come here the same way?* He asked the voice again. "What do you mean *adoption*?"

A mirthful laugh rang out over the plateau in tune with the sound of waves far below.

"Ok... Well, who are you then?"

"Human, be careful what knowledge you seek. The universe is much bigger than you know. Someday, when you are ready for such things, you will hear and understand."

"So why bring us here, then?" Trede threw up his hands. "Have we done something wrong?"

"All who come so close to The Well Omnipotent are brought here so that we may question them. We ensure the preservation of The Well."

"So... do we pass?"

"You have done well, Trede. Indeed, you have passed. None before have opened the Conduit as you have. This concerned us. However, with The Well restored, we believe you. So yes, child of the fifth, you have passed." The sound of children's laughter echoed in the background of the disembodied voice. "In a moment, when all is complete here, you will return."

"So that's... it? We go home?" He looked around at his friends. Cassidy

appeared to be done speaking too, she came over to Trede and grabbed his hand.

"You won't believe what they just told me!" Cassidy looked excited to the point of giddiness. Trede felt the stress of the recent months melt away just at the sight of her genuine happiness. He took in her hazel-tinged brown eyes and for a moment felt complete.

He squeezed her hand and turned back to the unknown voice. "You won't tell me who you are? Or who any of those other people are? How did we all get here?!"

"My final words to you, Trede. All answers have been given amongst you." A light flashed at the center of the platform. When it faded, fifteen peculiar figures had appeared. They were humanoid, except each was over eight feet tall. They had long bird-like beaks and huge brown wings as arms. The voice from the light came louder. "Children of the second, please return our guests to their homes."

Wordlessly, the massive eagle-people broke up and approached each group individually. As the huge, imposing figure came near, Traz spoke up. "A second? That's amazing! I'm a forth. Does that make us... related somehow? Maybe a very distant cousin?"

Trede exchanged grins with his friend while the stoic bird-figure turned to answer.

"In a way." The bird-man's voice was at the same time deep and hollow. The lines around his eyes were deep with age and wisdom. "Though our story is much different than yours." Without a pause, his great golden-brown wings unfurled. The creature, oddly, looked Trede in the eyes and winked. "It seems you found your way, after all. It was decided correctly."

Trede's jaw dropped. "Wait— Are you—" He felt the air around him change. In the span of a blink they were back in Sedenza. The familiar feel of cobblestones were under his feet. The ruins of the Haven and other damaged buildings surrounded them.

"We're back!" Cassidy exclaimed, practically jumping for joy.

Trede looked around and saw everyone standing nearby. Jonas and Celeste were locked in embrace. Yaladra was dusting off her white cloak while Drayle look around in disbelief; wonder filled his eyes. Eesh'ahn and Viligréa broke out into a joyful dance; their gleeful shouts filled the whole street. Tenowon was somehow standing on his own legs and was talking to Bors.

"We did it!" Traz shouted. "We chased the flame and lived to tell the tale!"

Haha!"

Trede, still holding Cassidy's hand, squeezed it. She turned to him and crushed him in her arms for a long moment. When she pulled back, the smile of joy on her face was so complete, Trede was speechless. He kissed her long while celebration crescendoed in the streets. He pulled away and saw joyous tears streaming down her cheeks.

"Crimus, wait a sec— Look at Tenowon!" she shouted. The young couple ran over to him.

"I appear to have taken a bit of a detour... somehow. From what Bors tells me you all were in the that... ocean plateau for a matter of minutes. But these kind of repairs would have taken days!" He ran a hand through a quaff of messy hair, pointing it out at an odd angle. "I can't explain it yet... Well, that's interesting. I appear to have acquired a great deal of new information."

"I thought you said your old memory cores came online already?" said Bors, grinning ear to ear through his years of wrinkles. He kept a hand on his old friend's shoulder.

"My oldest memory core is active but these... these are new. A completely new core of memories!"

"That's amazing!" Cassidy exclaimed and took Tenowon's hand. "I think we were all told something in that place. It was like they was talking to each of us!" As she spoke, her face was alight with curiosity and intrigue, just the kind of thing to excite a keen-minded Cytech.

"Indeed, friends," said Tenowon, a happy gleam in his grey eyes. "I think we have a *lot* to talk about!"

Around the heroes of Sedenza, people up and down the street came gathering. A great deal of celebration broke out. With Trede, Cassidy and their friends right in the middle of it. However, as Trede's eyes glanced the growing throng, there were some faces not accounted for.

Oudrine

When Oudrine was mystically transported back to Sedenza, she didn't join in

celebration with the others. Something uncanny had happened while at The Well. *Maej... Is he?* She'd seen him after Wellborne was defeated and the light faded at the ocean plateau. They'd been separated, and the voice that spoke to her had captivated her attention and made her unable to run to him. Now, back in the city, finding Maej was her only thought. Her worst fears threatened to consume her. Despite seeing her late husband returned with her own eyes, she considered that Maej was unable to make the return journey. *Or... was he really there at all? Was it... temporary?*

Her eyes teared as she scanned the open street looking for any sign of him. All the others were appeared accounted for. Even Tenowon was present and looking like his legs were fully repaired. Try as she might, Oudrine could find no sign of her husband. *Please...* Her thoughts wandered to The Well, to the beings from the Ocean Plateau who appeared to have untold power. *Please don't let him be gone... not again.* Her fingers curled up in front of her lips; she turned from the others. She made slow steady steps away even as shouts of joy erupted behind her. In her heart, she stood on the edge of cliff. Her emotions looked down into a bottomless void. She was on the verge of hopelessness.

Please... If there's any way... Powers that be, don't let me lose him again.

There was only silence, save her footfalls clacking over the cobblestones. In a few minutes, she found herself staring over the ruins of her home. The front half of the Haven was razed to the ground. Piles of broken stone filled the deep cellars built by unknown people in centuries past. Oudrine's fingers tightened around her mouth. She stifled her sobs, knowing that if she fell into that place, this time, she would be lost to it forever.

"Hello... My love," A soft baritone voice came from behind.

Oudrine's throat closed choking off all air. She froze not daring to hope, not daring to turn and see what might be true.

"Will you not turn and see me?"

Somehow Oudrine fell to her knees. Her graceful arms laid across her lap, her sobs came harsh and hard. A strong hand laid on her shoulder. He knelt before her and she collapsed into him. She felt his muscular shoulders in her arms; she squeezed him for dear life.

"I thought..." Her words came brokenly. "I thought... I lost you again." Her mind reeled from the past several months. The grief that consumed her, how Wellborne nearly broke her mind utterly, and how she'd lived in fear of Wellborne's eventual return. And now after standing at death's door herself, her love was returned to her. It was impossible, even for a lifelong student of the Mystical. All

Oudrine could do was hold on tight and hope that somehow this wasn't too good to be true.

The warrior Maej remained silent and tightened his arms around her. He ran a few fingers through her long, curly brown locks. "I cannot explain what uncanny powers brought me back. There's... much we need to discuss. But I do know this: our fight... is finally over."

They held each other as the moon rose higher into the night sky. Sedenza was finally at peace.

Oudrine and Maej sat for hours under the moon and stars staring out at the ruins of their home. The rear half of the structure was still standing but its many stones were loose and threatening to crumble. For them, it was enough to sit in silence and remember.

By her surprise, it was Maej who broke the silence.

"While I was... at the ocean plateau." His voice was low, deep and thoughtful. "I was given something. An idea."

She wasn't used to her husband sounding so soft. Maej was a proud warrior, bent on fulfilling his vow at all costs. Oudrine waited and listened.

"They offered me a new charge. A new destiny. To be a guardian of The Well. A... Caretaker for The Well itself, and the generations of mystics to come." He looked at her, tears growing in his eyes. "A new path. Not without challenges to overcome, but free. A free life to live as I choose. No longer bound to vows of revenge for the fallen. No longer lost in the conflict Proteus created." These words and the very thoughts they represented had visibly shaken him to his very core.

Oudrine replied, a voice as soft as a spring morning's breeze. "And I... Am I?"

"We stand together," he said with pride. "Caretakers, walking hand in hand."

She turned back to look at the ruins of their home. "This is a new charge... I don't take lightly."

"Neither do I." They sat in silence for several long minutes. "Perhaps this is why I was allowed a second chance. To find a path, not of blood, but of mending.

Of teaching and defending. Someone must look after The Well again. Like those of old.”

In her heart, Oudrine knew this to be their course. The voices at the ocean plateau had told her something similar, secret things she daren’t speak aloud. *Not yet.* “The Caretakers have a long history in this world... A millennia or more. ¹ and Sheila were the last of that council. And even Proteus, for a time.”

Maej’s eyes sharpened at her words. “You’ve been given insight?”

“Some... The story of the Caretakers is long but somehow I know a part of it. To be counted in their number is a great honor. And greater responsibility.”

Maej’s chest heaved and fell. “You are true. Yet, this path seems to be set before us. It seems we are meant for it, and it for us.”

They waited in quiet until the moon was high overhead.

She finally broke the silence. “I will miss this city. This place was our home.” Tears filled her eyes.

Maej reached over and took her hand. “We go together. For any charge, I will gratefully take with you at my side.”

Oudrine rested her head on Maej’s shoulder. “And I’d follow you anywhere, my love,” she whispered as a breeze carrying the first hint of autumn came blowing over the city.

¹ Vinn

Chapter 36

Langhorne

LANGHORNE rose from the dirt streets of Smisom and dusted himself off. He looked around and saw bodies strewn about. *Jaxet...* was his first panicked thought. He ran to his daughter and found her partially covered in wooden debris and two of the fallen Sickened. Muttering under his breath, he reached down and took her up into her arms. *Still breathing. Damn mystics... curses, sickened...* He was ready to leave it all behind, recalling that he pioneered out to the distant northeast for that very reason. *To get away from this kind of thing...*

The lead marshal of Smisom picked up his daughter and began a slow walk. He felt a twinge of guilt as he passed all the other fallen citizens. He couldn't be sure who was alive or dead. Each one was his responsibility, yet for the moment there was only one thing that mattered.

"It's all right, Jaxilyn," he spoke aloud. "You'll be all right." Langhorne walked in silence back to the Marshal office. Occasionally, he glanced down at the wide bruise across her brow. *This should never have happened... but what more could I've done?*

In the hours following, after Jaxet was safe, Langhorne walked the streets of Smisom to assess the damage. Most buildings in the market area were still in tact but the damage was everywhere. At its peak, half the town was afflicted. Family against family, friend and friend, widespread violence unlike anything the marshal corp had ever seen.

As Langhorne ran into more and more citizens up and about, he organized clean up and search crews. He sent people to all corners of his small town to help the living find a safe place to recover in case their homes were damaged. By the time the first rays of sunlight appeared in the east, Langhorne felt he an account of the toll that Wellborne had taken on his people. The death toll was thankfully lower than he expected. Thirty-six people lost their lives, compared to the hundreds that were taken as Sickened at the peak of battle. It was still unclear if all the Sickened would recover, most were hopeful. On top of that, there were too many damaged buildings yet to count. Still, Langhorne counted Smisom as lucky.

Sometime after sun up, he found himself in the Charis pub.

Forgetting how completely parched he was, Langhorne gulped half his wooden ale-stein right away. The thought was burning in his mind that he couldn't bear to say. He finished the ale in a second gulp.

Hil took a long draught of his own drink. "Langs... how do we know this is really over?"

Langhorne had never seen his best friend and man-at-arms so serious, on the brink of being distraught. His face twisted and he ran his tongue over his teeth. *We don't... Not for sure.* He let the pregnant pause linger a moment longer. "Something tells me we're due for another trip to the big city. Someone's got to know what the hell just happened."

"Do you think they did it? Killed Wellborne?" The usually jovial Hildegras looked haunted as the words escaped him.

Langhorne wasn't sure if that was even possible. The being Proteus called out of The Well defied all reason. "Sure as hell hope so. There's only one way to find out." Langhorne's thoughts wandered back to Jaxet. The local doc expected her to make a full recovery but Langhorne wouldn't rest easy until his daughter awoke. Even still, he knew getting news from Sedenza was vital. "Hil, I'm sorry to ask you this... but I'm—"

Hil interjected, "Me and the scouts can handle things while you're gone. We'll get the people patched up first, then the homes and market buildings. It's covered, don't worry."

Words got trapped in Langhorne's throat.

The waiter came round. "Another ale marshal? Everyone's drinking free today."

Langhorne nodded and the waiter poured another around from a large metal pitcher dripping with condensation. The head marshal turned back to his friend. "I can't leave until—"

"Jaxet will be up soon, I'm sure of it. If I were you, I'd get packed now." Hil turned to the waiter as his own wooden stein was refilled. "Thanks."

The waiter nodded, turned and left.

Langhorne felt a deep burning pang in his heart. If he knew Jaxet was safe

he would've run straight to the next carrier south. It took a moment but it finally dawned on him why. "Hil... this needs to be over. Seeing the townspeople turning on each other like that... the whole town ripping itself apart..." He shook his head; a worried line creased his brow. It would be ages before people felt safe again in their little town.

Hil raised his stein. "To surviving. And hopefully... a better tomorrow." The two marshals clacked their steins together.

It was hours after dark when Langhorne found his way home. Some generous volunteers had moved Jaxet there some time earlier. By candlelight, he checked on his daughter laying in the front bedroom. He was happy to see the wound on her brow was wrapped cleanly. Her breathing was calm, restful. With any luck, she'd wake in the morning feeling better. He was proud at how valiantly she fought, yet disturbed that she had to see such horrific times.

That's the way it goes... Can't protect them forever. Jaxet was in her late teens now and well on to becoming a marshal in her own right. He wondered if she'd stay here in Smisom or venture somewhere else to continue on this tradition he started. *Most the world doesn't have a marshal corp looking after people...* He day dreamed for a moment that she might form a new marshal corp in one of the major cities like Jonin. He grinned to himself, embarrassed at his own sappy thoughts. *Either it's late or I've been drinking too much ale today...*

Langhorne found his way to his small room tucked in the back of the simple, one-story home. It barely had enough room for a bed, which was fine by him given how little time he was ever home. He kicked off his boots, changed into his night pants and collapsed on the bed. It'd been the hardest day of his life. Finally, the Sickened were disbursed, but until he could be sure Wellborne was defeated, he wasn't sure he'd ever feel safe again. He drifted off into a fitful sleep.

Yaladra

It was early the following day after Wellborne's final destruction. Yaladra and her father, Drayle, had found a small room with two beds on the east side of the city's markets that was mostly untouched by destruction. Feeling restless, she was already putting on her boots. So much had happened yesterday; it left her disquieted.

As she rose from the edge of bed and stepped to the door, her father woke. "And where are you going so early?" He groaned as he stretched and propped himself up on one elbow.

She paused there in the middle of room. *Where am I going...* There was an anger inside her that wouldn't be quelled, even with Tiberiak and Wellborne's defeat. "I need to make sure the Merkants relinquish control of the Cytech guild."

Drayle replied while fumbling for his glasses on the nearby stand. "I thought you said Tiberiak was... dealt with?"

Yaladra shifted her weight to one side, then moved to sit at a small two-seated chair, at an unstained table near the door. "Yes. In some very certain terms. If he's half as smart as he thinks he is, he'll leave us mystics alone. For good." Her eyes blurred as she looked out the window; the early sun was shining into the room.

"He lives then?"

The thought made her uncomfortable; she wasn't sure why. She thought back to the moment in the mayor's office. She had every chance to kill Tiberiak. He was defeated, powerless, alone. *It would've been easy... Why didn't I?* Sure he'd made impressive threats; she still wondered how much of it was a bluff. She considered, if Tiberiak could be bested, perhaps he wasn't worth the blood on her hands. In those thoughts, maybe, she found the answer. She nodded to affirm her father's question.

"I'm proud of you, daughter." Drayle sat up and stretched his back.

Her eyes flashed over to him. "Why?"

"You showed a greater strength in staying your hand then in vanquishing him."

She folded her arms. "I'm still not sure I did the right thing. He's a wretched creature and deserves worse pain than I gave him." Her jaw clenched at the memory.

"Something tells me the city will wake up to Tiberiak's true intent. It seems that he and his cohorts were directly involved in bringing Wellborne into this world to begin with. I shouldn't be surprised... In my years under his control, he was always a man looking to consolidate power under the family name. He always had a need to be in control... or feel he could assert control when necessary."

"His grip on the city has certainly taken a hit..." Yaladra's thoughts wandered to the two mystics under his employ that she'd killed in the heat of

conflict. *What's so different about them?* A lifetime of desperate deeds suddenly wore heavier than before. She stashed it all aside. "Still. I won't risk the Merkants thinking they can maintain their takeover of the other guilds." She rose from her chair, turned, and put her hand on the door. "That's why I'm still going."

"Yes... Yes, of course you are," said Drayle. Yaladra heard him stand behind her. "And so am I."

It was mid morning when Yaladra and Drayle crossed the market center. It was a dreary sight, no shops were open and the only citizens milling about were still taking stock in the damage. Doors were being rehung; broken glass was being swept; torn awnings were being taken down for replacement. The mood on the city streets was grim as people assessed the destruction in daylight for the first time.

"The Sickened came farther into the city than I imagined," Drayle mused quietly to his daughter as they walked.

"They were all through here," said Yaladra, the memory far too fresh to dwell on.

As they strolled near the city gardens, which survived but weren't unscathed from damage, a news-caller ran by. A young boy with heavy freckles was shouting. "Governor gone! Tiberiak missing since attack on city! Governor gone!"

Drayle grinned at the lad as he past. "I wasn't above taking a coin or two to call the news at his age. Though, that was a long time ago."

Yaladra kept walking straight ahead. "The governor's office is up ahead. Let's find out how *gone* he is." Inside the Merkant building where Tiberiak's office had been located, the place was completely ransacked. She recalled the ferocious citizens turned Sickened that assailed the place en masse less than a day ago. With no one manning the front desk, the two mystics continued further in. Down the hall and to the left, they entered the once opulent office. Parts of the wall and ceiling were in shambles with a clear blue sky beyond. The finery of the room was now barely recognizable. Shreds of tapestries, shards of splintered wood and broken plaster now outshined any feature in the once prestigious room.

"I suppose we look for clues?" Drayle adjusted his glasses.

Wordlessly, Yaladra went to the great mahogany desk at the far end of the room. *Nothing...* She stepped to the far corner of the room, staring down at the place she'd last seen Tiberiak. There was a blood stain across the carpet, nothing more.

"He's not here."

"Did he leave under his own power or... was he carried away with the dead?" Drayle paced the room looking for further clues.

After a minute, a disheveled figure with long, black hair appeared at the door. "Where is he?! The *bastard*, I'm tired of waiting!"

By instinct, Yaladra threw her white cloak open wide and raised her hands, ready to fight. Her father took a more indirect approach. "If you're looking for Tiberiak, you won't find him here. Perhaps we can help you?"

The dirt-covered, bloodied man shambled into the room with an injured gait. Immediately he tore into every cabinet door, ripped open every closed drawer. He muttered and cursed with every step.

More than once, Yaladra and Drayle had to duck and dodge from all the detritus being thrown over their heads.

"This!" He muttered unintelligibly as he read a random document he picked up from the floor. The man's countenance changed in an instant. His shoulders straightened; he pushed his long, dark hair back. He pulled at this collar and cleared his throat. "If anyone asks, tell them Rottiger F. Tiberiak has collected on his debts. And then tell them to piss right off! I've taken what's mine and will never be seen again." His eyes sharpened with a clever grin as he read the large document in hand.

"A genuine Tiberiak family member, did you hear that?" Drayle was surprisingly quick on the up take; Yaladra wasn't sure what line he was playing.

Rottiger cleared his throat again and continued straightening his torn and soiled garments. "That's right. A *senior* member of the Tiberiak family, I might add. One of the *most* senior, really. *What of it?*" He gave both mystics a suspicious, sideways glance.

"I take it you and your... cousin, is it? Are not in the best standing?" Drayle continued his odd ploy.

Rottiger flicked the paper in hand. "After I cash this out, good ol' Fossy-boy can *pound sand* for all I care!" He made way for the door.

"So, you wouldn't mind tipping us off perhaps with some info? I believe he has some additional mystics in his employ. People that would rather be... *off* his payroll. If you follow?"

Rottiger stopped. He turned and walked a straight line back to Drayle. He

leaned forward, getting into his face. "Do you mean to tell me that you two would seek ill against the Tiberiak family? You would seek to disrupt our enterprise and otherwise wreak havoc and trouble for my cousin, Fossvalor?"

Yaladra side-stepped closer to her father, fists clenched, ready to jump into action should this Rottiger get physical.

Drayle, keeping cool, replied. "That does about sum it up."

Rottiger stared Drayle down, nose wrinkled, anger in his eyes. Then his expression cracked like glass. He bent over in hysterical laughter. He continued laughing all the way back to the door. "Are you kidding me? This is too sweet. The mystic file is in the third cabinet there." He pointed to the far wall. "Have at it! And tell them *Rottiger sent you* while you're at it! You're welcome!" His laughter faded to a chuckle. He straightened himself out again, despite his haggard clothing making him look somewhat ridiculous. Without another word, he puffed himself up and left the room walking tall, proud and stiff legged.

Drayle and Yaladra exchanged a confused glance.

"Seems he found what *he* needed," said Drayle. "Should I assume our business is concluded as well?"

Yaladra was already at the third cabinet. She pulled out a thick dossier overflowing with documents. She glanced at the first document. *Jonin... multiple mystics enslaved at the docks*. She looked back up at her father. "How did you know?"

"What? That he'd talk or that the mystic file was somewhere in this room?"

Yaladra walked over with a crease in her brow. She was stunned by the great find they'd just made. She handed him the dossier. "Both?"

Drayle took it and put it under his arm making a knowing smile. "Did you forget where I've been the past several years? I know a great deal about this organization and many of the people in it."

Yaladra thought it over. *With that dossier... We can force the Tiberiak family to give up all their mystics. Assuming they haven't begun the process already.* She rolled her eyes knowing how unlikely it was that *Tiberiak* would fully make good on their deal. Perhaps that was why her parting gift to him was a bullet in the leg at their last meeting. The white-cloaked mystic looked at her father in a new light. Ever since rescuing him, Yaladra had been so protective of her only living relative. Seeing him today, she was reminded just how savvy and capable he was. "Let's do it." Yaladra's eyes narrowed; she made for the exit.

"Ah— Do what, daughter?" Drayle stepped up to keep pace behind her.

Yaladra paused as she reached the street. She paused to look left and right. "Are you up for traveling again? We have a lot of places to visit."

Drayle caught up and gave her a quizzical look.

"After thing settle here in the city. We're going to free all these mystics. Every last one." A beam of joy flashed across her face. She couldn't remember the last time she smiled so fully. This was beyond revenge against *Tiberiak*. *It's time to set things right. For the people like me and father that need it.*

Drayle, taken aback by her sudden change of mood was wordless for a moment. Finally, her smile became infectious and he returned it with a proud gleam in his eye. "You know," he glanced around the cobblestone street. It was a beautiful summer morning; the sun shone down across the sandstone buildings across the way. "I think I *do* I feel up for traveling."

Wearing a cunning smile, Yaladra grabbed her father's hand and led him through the city.

Chapter 37

TREDE

IN the days that followed, life in Sedenza slowly returned to normal. It took nearly a week for the worst of the rubble to be cleared from broken buildings. People cautiously ventured out and resumed their normal lives. Soon after, the first of the central market's shops opened. The buzz of citizenry, smells of spices and smoked meats, the voices of Merkants, now free of Tiberiak's influence, hocked their wares. It would be months, or longer, before the effects of Wellborne's siege on the city fully mended.

Trede passed through the market that morning with Cassidy in hand. "You excited?"

"You have no idea!" Cassidy squeezed his hand. "The official reopening of the Cytech guild house! I've been dying to hear what the plan is. And now that Tenowon's back, it's going to be fantastic! I just know it." She practically skipped in her steps.

Trede was thrilled for her. They'd spent practically every moment of every day together and she talked about it often. Tenowon rejoining the guild was a momentous event as it was. But the fact they were finally, officially, free of any Merkant or Tiberiak influence was a real reason to celebrate. Even more, the Cytechs had decided to hold their first Open City Announcement. Anyone in the city was invited to an outdoor announcement on the guild grounds. The usually secretive guild was beginning a new era of open communication to the citizenry. In light of recent events, it only seemed fitting. It was Cassidy's long-time mentor, Gragus, that led this charge. The board members of the guild, usually quite slow to adapt to changes, were unanimous in this new effort. A historic moment of its own! It really seemed like Sedenza was on the verge of a second golden age of progress and expansion. Gone were the threats of Proteus, the harbingers, the Outcasts and their army *and* the mystical entity, Wellborne. Trede's imagination was full of all the possibilities tomorrow held.

"Hey? You still there?" Cassidy nudged into him and laughed.

"Yeah! Sorry. It's just hard to believe all that's happened... Now it's over? Just like that? It's almost..."

"Too good to be true?" she finished his thought, smiling from her hazel-brown eyes.

Trede stopped and rested his hand on a nearby sandstone building just outside the markets. "Yeah... I can't unsee everything I've seen. *Impossible* things..." He recalled being trapped in the Light, his constant months-long battle with Wellborne. The pain, the fear. Yet the future held none of that struggle. "I'm excited for the future but it feels like... I've missed something." A fear coursed through his mind. *Am I just missing that power? That exhilarating feeling? Can I still feel like myself without an enemy to fight? Without a curse to bear?* The single guiding influence of his life, energy from The Well sealed in his body, was now gone. It had marred him, making him a pariah for years. Then it led him to a greater, more turbulent destiny than he could have imagined. That part of his life was over. *I should feel free, but...*

Cassidy stepped to stand directly in front of him. "Hey..." Her face was as honest as he'd ever seen it. "Whatever it is, we'll figure it out, together."

Cassidy... The sight of her gave him strength. "I guess I'm afraid," he said sheepishly, then smiled, rolling his eyes at himself. "I spent so long fighting... I think I forgot what just living is like. You might need to remind me once in a while."

"That's what I'm here for." Her smile was the second sunrise he'd seen that day.

Trede took her hand; they walked towards the guild house, together.

As they reached the Cytech main gate, they were astonished to see the volume of people filing into the grounds. They slowed to navigate the crowd.

"He-ey, Cassidy! Trede!" A voice from beyond the gate called to them.

It took Trede a second to recognize the voice, but Cassidy didn't hesitate. "Nandiel! Hey!" The two best friends laughed from fifty paces apart, a sea of people between them.

After squeezing through the gate, Nandiel grabbed Cassidy's hand and led them around the crowd on a small path between some inventor's private cabins. "You two need to get in there! This is historic! Everyone's showed up from all over. The labs in Jonin and Garar are here. Half the city is already inside!"

The three arrived at the quad in front of the large amphitheater building. A place built to hold these kinds of gatherings, but today it was woefully too small. Instead, a small, wooden stage had been erected at the edge of the green. As they

approached, more familiar faces stood out of the crowd.

“Cassidy, dear girl!” Gragus gasped, holding on to his round specs.

Cassidy ran up to him and wrapped her arms around him tightly.

“And Trede... I thought it impossible to you see again and yet here you are. Well done, lad. Well done! You and your friends saved the city, saved us all!” He grabbed Trede’s hand and shook it vigorously.

“I couldn’t have done it alone,” Trede replied, a somber note in his voice. Nearby, he made eye contact with some mystics from the Haven. Yaladra stepped closer; her father Drayle was still talking with Jonas and Celeste mere paces away.

“We all did whatever part we’re able,” said the white-cloaked mystic. “I’m glad our paths crossed as they did. I don’t know if we could have succeeded apart.”

“Here-here, and succeed we did!” said Gragus.

Just beyond Yaladra’s shoulder, Trede caught a glimpse of Oudrine in a blue dress. *And Maej...* It was surreal to see the fierce, mystic warrior alive again. He was dressed in familiar black and red garb, but he’d been different in his return. Once the battle with Wellborne was over, his countenance began to change. The usually grim and serious man wore a thin smile. His eyes, though a thin veil to great power, had a new kinder shine to them. Linked arm in arm, the mystic couple approached the growing circle.

“Hello, Gragus,” said Maej offering a hand. Gone were his typical leather gauntlets. It was somehow shocking to seem him bare-handed.

“Maej... and Oudrine,” Gragus took on an awed reverence. “As I was just saying, we are forever in your debt. A thousand times thank you. And many more to come, I’m sure of it!”

“We are glad to have been able to help,” said Oudrine, her voice a soothing melody. Trede had seen Oudrine return to her normal self in recent days. In Maej’s absence, she had taken to kindling a warriors heart within. Her fierceness in the battle was awe-inspiring. Now, her tranquil aura had returned. “We look forward a great time of peace. I’m happy to see the Cytechs taking such leadership here in the city. Sedenza will be better for it.”

“Oh, well— We’re only doing what needs to be done as well. But, thank you,” said Gragus, a bit flummoxed at hearing such praise.

They spent the next several minutes connecting with all the other Cytechs

from Lab One, friends from the Haven and more. Trede was shocked when he bumped into Marshal Langhorne.

"Hey, kid. Looks like you pulled us through in the end. Smisom thanks you... And so do I."

"Marshal? I—" Seeing someone from home felt like a huge weight standing on his chest. The entire world had been in turmoil. He'd only begun to fathom what might've happened in the outskirts beyond the Scorch after he lost contact during the global Echowake event. "In Smisom... is everybody...?"

"We had our share of losses, but the town'll pull through." Langhorne sounded weary. No doubt he'd only just arrived in Sedenza given the short amount of time passed since Wellborne's defeat. "And Mior says hello."

Trede exhaled a held breathe, not realizing his chest was frozen in place. "That's good. I'm... sorry I couldn't have done more."

"More than half of what you did I don't even understand. And honestly I don't *want* to." Langhorne scratched at his blond beard. "We pulled through and it looks like, finally, things will calm down and stay that way. Even the last of the Outcasts are dead or disbanded. We have Wellborne to thank for that, oddly enough."

Trede took some hope in that. He reminded himself that things could be ok. *From here on out... maybe we can really have peace.*

"Hello, dear friends! One and all, and all again!" Traz bounded onto the scene appearing from somewhere out of the growing crowd that surrounded them. At his right hand was his blushing bride, the rust-toned Svelina. Coming in behind was the tall brown twins, Dragyst and Staal. One of them carried a large drum, the other a curled horn of some kind. They were immediately flanked by the tall, lanky Vilagreá and the even taller, golden Eesh'ahn.

Vlahn, Svelina's uncle, brought up the rear holding a large, rounded lute. "Ok, troupe! *Ahem*. One, two, one, two!" The musical trio sent up a happy tune that immediately put smiles on everyone's faces.

Traz came up and punched Trede in the arm. "What wonderful day! Can you smell it?" His feline nose pointed up into the air. "We did it!" He threw his arms in the air with a wild, unabashed grin on his face.

Svelina came over dancing and took Trede's hand. "We're celebrating! Come on, come on!"

"Oh—" Trede glanced to Cassidy who promptly shoved him at the petite

Svelina.

Traz practically laughed himself off his feet, then grabbed Cassidy's hand. "Miss Cytech, would you mind celebrating with me for a moment?" The selahn pulled her forward into a merry jig. Soon more and more of the human citizenry came under the spell of music. They bobbed, twisted and jumped trying to keep up with traditional Selahnian dances. Feelings of pure mirth came over the crowd. The people of Sedenza were caught up in a grand jubilation, glad to forget the recent disasters.

After several minutes, the band's song came to a satisfying end. Everyone laughed, clapped and cheered. Gragus, laughing merrily, took of his specs to dab his face with a kerchief. "Oh! I guess, that's my cue!"

Some minutes later, Gragus found his way to the stage after working through the crowd. A group of ranking Cytechs shouted for the massive assemblage to quiet down. The seasoned Cytech, Gragus, straightened his shoulders, inhaled and addressed the crowd with his clearest, loudest orator's voice.

"Citizens, Cytechs, friends and guests! I bid you greetings!"

Loud cheers rang out, especially from the Selahn contingent.

Trede laughed and grinned at his friends, though motioning for them to put the instruments down for a moment.

"Today marks a momentous day in our history. Our city has endured not one, but multiple devastating attacks in less than a year's time. We know that these attacks were orchestrated by those intent on the end of civilized life as we know it. And it is with confidence that I can say, with a great deal of effort, sacrifice and loss, the people of Sedenza *and beyond* are safe again!" Even louder cheers sounded.

"While we will mourn those lost in the attacks on our fair city, we will not lose hope. We will rebuild. And I speak now for the entire guild when I say, the Cytech guild will be opening its doors to help the reconstruction, not only of Sedenza, but in *all* of our great cities across the map! We promise to be a more transparent guild in the future, to share our knowledge for the benefit of all!"

Gragus continued outlining a hopeful future where the guilds and non-guild citizens would work together hand-in-hand. It was the first step to a new golden age for the city of Sedenza and beyond. After the speech was concluded, and several minutes of explosive applause and excited chatter began to wain, it was Traz who called together the major players of Wellborne's defeat.

"Friends! Trede, Cassidy, altogether! Langhorne, I see you there, come on! Tenowon, of course! And where's Bors?"

A few shouts and swears about not liking large crowds from somewhere in the throng identified Bor's location.

"Ah, yes, you too, sir! Everyone from the Haven, you know where to be, let's go, let's go!"

Trede came aside Traz wearing a big grin. It was hard not to smile when Traz was around. "Hey, Traz... What's going on?"

"There's a final touch-base for those with more *frontline* experience in the final battle! There are *many things* to discuss." He leaned in close, looking left and right in clandestine fashion. "A certain conversation about the Light, the Conduit and... the *ocean plateau*." He winked, then nodded once.

Trede felt an uneasiness at the mention of that place. The whole ordeal had left him uncertain.

Cassidy grabbed his hands and led him forward. "I've been waiting for this, come on, Trede!"

The heroic group of friends entered the Cytech main building and found a suitable place to gather. Traz was right, there were still matters of great importance to discuss.

Chapter 38

Tenowon

TENOWON looked around the large meeting room. It was the first time he'd returned to the main Cytech halls since before the Storm's arrival several months ago. The room was a little worse for wear. Everything from overturned bookshelves, torn drapery, broken wall sconces reminded him of just how much he'd missed during his *time away*. Despite the beleaguered surroundings, he was encouraged to see such kind, hearty faces. From his left around the table was Bors, followed by Gragus. Then Trede, Cassidy and Traz. Packed behind them in extra chairs were the remainder of Traz's selahnlic troupe. Rounding the rear of the table was Oudrine and the resurrected Maej. Tenowon had witnessed Maej's return first hand and it still stunned him to his core. *Proof of what power The Well truly holds...* On the opposite side of the table was Celeste, Jonas, followed by Drayle and Yaladra. Then came the Marshal Langhorne from Smisom. To Tenowon's immediate right was Gen, who'd retaken his role as Chief Inspector once the Merkant takeover had been reversed.

Such a small but invaluable group, Tenowon mused silently as the room settled in. He felt a surpassing pang of sadness in the back of his mind as he watched the group all together. *But first things first, time to call things to order.* "Everyone! Everyone. It's wonderful to see you all. I'm glad we could find a quiet space away to... discuss a few things."

"Here-here!" More energetic than usual, Traz leaned forward and slapped the long, broad table. "I can't wait to hear what you all heard at the Ocean place! The Plateau! What are we calling it?"

"An interesting place to start!" Tenowon thumbed his smooth chin. "With our machinery, we use *fittings* as a thing to connect multiple conduits... But that hardly seems right. What about—"

"The Nexus," said Maej, his deep voice filled the room for a split second. "A place of coming together. Of intersection."

"I like that," added Trede. "The Conduit is what they kept calling the place we go when traveling... between worlds. It's part of The Well... I think. I didn't have a lot of time to ask questions when I met that stranger in the Light."

The tan-skinned Drayle leaned forward. "You're right. I'm beginning to think our understanding of The Well is, perhaps, *too small*. The Conduit... other worlds, entire new races we've never dreamed of! Perhaps The Well itself is... only a beginning."

Tenowon watched the sagely mystic speak, consuming his words with great curiosity. "That is a wise line of thinking, Drayle. I think after this whole ordeal, it's clear there are a great many more connections to The Well than we ever dreamed. From the Nexus, I've been given a glimpse of the road humans and selahns are on. Things that could be. It seems we ourselves are still at a grand intersection. But I don't want to get ahead of ourselves. Does anyone have something poignant to share from the Nexus?"

"Don't look at me," the Marshal Langhorne held up his palms. "I'm barely up to speed on whatever mystics nonsense you've been up to..."

"I was told my work here at the guild will be revolutionary!" Cassidy chimed in right away.

Tenowon saw her and smiled. *Such a brave, talented young woman.*

"It's a dream come true! I always wished my work with the Cytechs would make a difference. And now that the guild is expanding its doors," she nodded to Gragus on her right, "it seems like it's coming true! We're going to make the world a better place. Help people, maybe even populate the Scorch someday! Rebuild those ancient cities! Anything's possible now." Her starry eyes became infectious around the room as people caught her enthusiasm.

"Well said, my dear girl," Gragus added with small chuckle. "With our closer connection to the local citizenry, I foresee a *great* new era."

"With my kin as well!" Traz practically shouted. "The friendly Nexus-people told me that my family and I would be at the center of Human-Selahn relations for a great many years! So don't think you've rid of us yet! Hah!" This caused a great, joyous uproar from the other selahns sitting behind. Vlahn speedily plucked a few notes on his lute just for good measure causing even more laughter.

Tenowon noticed Yaladra's shoulders stiffen. He turned to her and Drayle. "And what about you two?"

"Nothing much," said Yaladra, looking uncomfortable for a moment. She gave her father a sideways glance. "But I think we've found a new path on our own. There's still a great deal to be done for the mystics trapped in the Tiberiak family's operation. That's where we're going next."

"That's right," said Drayle who looked regretful. "For years I assisted Tiberiak in studying, understanding and managing his mystic slaves. It's time to undue all that hurt." He gave a proud glance to his daughter next to him. "And I couldn't think of better company to complete that mission with. Though I do wonder... What will become of The Well? Who else may know of its location?"

A breath of quiet took the room; Tenowon sat back in his chair, puzzling.

Oudrine spoke. "Maej and I have been given this charge. And we have accepted it."

"The Well will once again be guarded," said Maej. "While at the Nexus, it was said to me... that I could re-found the Order of the Caretakers. It was once the pinnacle of all the mystic arts. There were many schools in all studies of magic. It was also a society built around the protection of The Well. It will be so again. We will stand watch to prevent those like Proteus from ever gaining such power again."

"Well said, friend," said Jonas. The grey-haired mystic turned to Celeste, but spoke to the whole room. "It looks like we may need to dust off our teaching skills, eh, dear?"

Celeste smiled, a mist forming in her eyes. "When we left the Haven years ago, I wondered if we'd ever take such roles again. Yes. I couldn't think of a better thing to do." Her eyes crossed the table and met with Oudrine.

"And we are so glad for the help," said Oudrine. "We don't take the task lightly, and know it will not be an easy road."

"That does put a number of my concerns to rest," said Tenowon, looking relieved. "And of The Well, do you plan on studying it further? Or merely teach others to revere it from afar?"

Traz laughed once with a half-serious, half-jovial tone. "I for one would *not* like to *chase the fire* a second time..."

"Here, hear.." added his wife Svelina sounding timid.

Maej took to answer the question. "It's long thought that it was The Well itself that awoke the Inner Fire in humans. In a time lost to history."

"Before the cataclysm, then?" asked Tenowon.

"Indeed," said Maej. "The Well exists. This will always be so. But under our care, no one will access its strength again."

"I concur," said Oudrine, somberly.

"We... are in agreement," said Jonas as he held his wife's hand on the tabletop. "The study of Fire, and the protection of The Well will be our focus. Nothing more."

"That's for the best." Trede's speaking up surprised some of the group. "Part of what I heard at the Nexus... they wanted to make sure I would leave The Well alone. They wanted to make sure no one used its power like that again. To access the Conduit, or... anything else. And I agree. It's too dangerous. For a brief moment during the final battle, I saw through the eyes of thousands across the continent." Trede paused, clearing a lump in his throat. "I realized just how brittle life is. And how precious." He glanced down the table at Maej. "I'm sure we're meant to leave The Well be. It's mere existence is *why* it exists. I don't know *why* I know that, but I'm sure of it. We shouldn't try to draw on it again. That's not what it's *for*. Beyond that... I don't really know what I'm going to do next."

"Oh..." Cassidy's shoulders slunk down, appearing chagrined. "There was one other thing that I didn't really understand... I guess it slipped my mind. Trede... you're supposed to rebuild the Haven. And I'm supposed to help."

The young mystic's eyes flashed open, stunned. "Did— did they say why?"

"Not really? Something about... you'll discover why as go you. But they seemed to think it was important. And, actually, I have a bunch of great ideas to spruce up the place. First of all, *electric lighting*! Then—" Some laughter came around the table causing Cassidy to slow down for a moment. "What?" Then she rolled her eyes, blushed and smiled.

"Spoken like a *true* Cytech, Miss Cassidy," said Tenowon, grey eyes gleaming.

Trede continued, "Rebuild the Haven... Are you guys Ok with that? It was your home for so long."

"I, for one, would be honored to know such a brave mystic kept our traditions going," said Celeste with more than a hint of pride in her voice.

"She speaks for all of us, Trede," said Oudrine. "You have our blessing."

Trede exhaled long and hard and sat back in his chair. "Ok... I guess I know what I'm doing next, but..." He turned to Tenowon.

Cassidy picked up the thought for him. "What about you Tenowon? You said the Nexus gave you another *entire* memory core... Amazing! What did they tell you?"

“Yes! Great thoughts of things portending!” said Traz. “Do tell!”

Here we are. I hate to disappoint such a happy gathering after such an impossible victory... But I can't protect them forever. As he mulled over his thoughts, Tenowon's silence put the group on edge.

“Come on, the news can't be that bad, can it?” said Langhorne breaking the silence. He leaned forward scratching at his blond beard, leveling his gaze at the android. “Or can it?”

“No, marshal, nothing that bad. Sorry. Where to begin...” Tenowon tapped his fingers on the blemished table. He'd had many meetings at this place, indeed, in every public building at the guild compound. “Perhaps I should start at the beginning. My beginning.” As he looked again around the damaged room, he rose from his chair and paced as all eyes followed him.

“When I was first activated, technology was ages more advanced than now. It was ubiquitous, embedded in every part of human life in ways you can't imagine. Indeed, it was one of the byproducts of my kind, myself and other androids like me, that perpetuated this deep technical age. As I've told some of you before, the fuel of this century of advancement was energy taken from The Well. At that time, Well-energy was found in pockets deep within the earth. It flowed from cracks in space itself, in a few key areas around the globe. By earliest memories, I am sure it was this lust for more of this cosmic power that caused the world to burn. This is known today as the Great Cataclysm of more than five hundred years ago. However, my additional memories given from the Nexus have shown me just how destructive this event was. It didn't result in the near destruction of our world... but of two worlds.”

A collective gasp took the room. Svelina reached for Traz's hand. Trede put a hand on his neck, looking flushed. Langhorne sat back and folded his arms, looking skeptical. The other mystics only watched and waited.

Tenowon continued, “Humans and Selahns were never meant to live on the same planet. They aren't even *from* the same world. When the humans of my ancient home widened the cracks to access The Well's power, they broke the bonds between worlds. The human world, and the home of selahns, fused to become one. Entire cities were lost inside mountain ranges, rivers and lakes were cut in half by great forested plateaus. Two worlds twisted, brought together by untold cosmic forces, forever merged into a new whole. All because of those who sought to draw on The Well too deeply.”

Trede, looking peaked, said, “The Conduit... It really is part of The Well. The two worlds came together through the Conduit...”

Astonished, Drayle said, "Truly, The Well is something even greater than we can fathom... If there were two worlds connected by it, who's to say there aren't more?"

"Children of the fifth..." said Oudrine looking over to Traz and Svelina.

"Children of the fourth!" replied Traz, his excitement a touch somber.

"Tenowon," Drayle continued. "Are you sure of this? Does this mean there are five worlds connected to The Well? Could there be more?"

A very clever crew... I knew it would be hard to hide too much from them. "There are many untold mysteries raised from our trip to the Nexus. Things of which I am too uncertain to speculate. Though... what you say is plausible." Tenowon paused, retook his seat and laid his hands down flat on the table.

"So, what does this mean for us? For the future you mentioned?" Cassidy looked at him with earnest, worried eyes.

Tenowon closed his eyes and took a deep simulated breath. "I'm afraid, even with Wellborne defeated, there is still one other force on this planet that could send humanity, and the selahnic race, back to the brink of extinction." He opened his eyes. "It's me."

"What? Come now," said Gragus, gripping his specs.

"Tenowon, no!" Cassidy exclaimed. "There's no way!" The whole room spoke at once.

The ancient android let them talk, hearing all their concerns and reassurances. He only smiled, shrugged his shoulders, and eventually waved a hand to quiet the room.

"My dear friends... Thank you. It's... not easy for me to say this." His perfect grey eyes took on a shiny gleam. "I have enjoyed my decades with the Cytechs like nothing else. I've seen the best and brightest of humanity at their peak. I've marveled, been challenged and have made greater friendships than I thought possible." He paused, glancing Bors from the corner of his eye.

The old, legendary Cytech cleared his throat and restlessly adjusted his seat. Out of nowhere, a dirty rag was in his hand wiping at his nose.

"What I've come to understand from my new Nexus memories is that... Without realizing it, I was perpetuating us all down a very familiar road. I was accelerating this world *back* to the point that nearly brought life to its end. A relentless pursuit of *more*. In the past age, freedom and human conscious became

less important. Instead, all that mattered was the next great advancement. The kind of ingenuity that created such technology *is* a boon... I still think that. But that kind of rapid advancement nearly ended us all. It might even do so again. But if it does, it will be naturally. Organically. The races of this world must be free to choose their own path. And so must I. Alone."

As the last word rang, a heavy silence fell around the room. Barely a hand moved, not a head turned.

"The races of men and selahns," Maej spoke in a low, quiet tone. "Where does that leave you, friend? A race of one?"

One edge of Tenowon's mouth flicked mimicking a hidden smile. "Yes... For now. What other choice have I?"

The room was stunned. Mouths gaped; brows furrowed.

"Are you sure about this?" Gragus was aghast. "All your work. Lab One... There's so much you're leaving behind."

"I know, Gragus. This isn't something I've considered lightly. However, I can't ignore all the warnings of my recovered memories. I think whoever is in control of the Nexus needed me to do this. For the good of us all."

Cassidy, becoming bleary-eyed said, "Where will you go?"

"I have a few thoughts, though honestly, I'm not sure." Tenowon rapped his fingers on the damaged table. "Perhaps I'll take a walkabout. It's been years since I've seen the Western Spines where I first awoke in this age. Seems as fitting a place as any."

"I... understand," said Traz. He was nodding his head in approval, though misty eyed. "We selahns know the value of the open road. Keep the dust fresh under your feet! And all that."

"My family lives in those mountains. You should visit!" added Svelina. A few selahns cheered from behind as well in agreement.

"Hah... I just may. Thank you, all."

Bors cleared his throat again. "My place down south is always open... if you need a place to lay up."

"Thank you." The android glanced appreciatively at the friend that gifted him his name so many years before. "I won't be leaving the city right away; I promise to visit each of you before I go. But for now... I think it's safe to say this part of our

journey is over. We've all had a hand in doing the impossible. And thanks to you all," his grey eyes scanned the room looking over each of the remarkable people in the room. "Life will go on. And you know? I think there are better days coming. For all of us."

Oudrine's blue eyes subtly brightened at this. She turned to Maej and squeezed his hand.

"With any luck," Tenowon concluded his thoughts. "I'll see you around."

The room adjourned. Somewhat somber, but still joyful. Tenowon watched them mingle with a gleam in his eye. After a moment, he was surprised to see Maej and Oudrine approach. The red and black mystic outstretched a hand. Tenowon accepted, though was unsure why the gesture.

"Something on your mind?" the android asked.

Maej looked away with a deep breath before leveling his gaze at Tenowon's eye. "You've done well to accept this calling. A calling away, so it is. These people of the Nexus know a great deal of our past, present *and* future. It is wise to heed their advice."

Tenowon considered. *What else may they have told Maej that was hidden even from me?*

Maej continued, "Call it a sense. But that moment at the ocean plateau will have untold repercussions. Our future is still unwritten. Though our course has been altered." He paused to look at Oudrine next to him. "For the better, I believe."

"Certainly our destinies, intertwined, have been shaped by that event," said Oudrine. "It still relies on us to walk them out."

Tenowon nodded, pondering their words deeply. "Maej, are you still able to access the Words?" Truth be told, Tenowon remained baffled by mystic study. But he recalled the term mentioned by them before. Maej, at certain times, could access glimpses of the future by revealing a word or phrase that his future self would eventually say. It had proven help in preparation against the Storm months prior.

The warrior mystic's shoulders tightened. "I've yet to encounter the Words since... my return."

Oudrine placed a graceful hand on his back. "Those words only came about from an exposure to The Well. It was many years ago. Fate will tell, but perhaps...

the need for such a gift is over.”

“Indeed,” said Maej in a low voice. “Should they ever return... perhaps I will send word to you.”

Tenowon’s thoughts buzzed at the potential the future might hold. He turned to each of them in kind. “Thank you, Maej, Oudrine. I have no doubt The Well be safe under your care. Certainly, wherever I am, I’ll be looking out for any other great dangers. Though... with Proteus and Wellborne gone, and even Tiberiak having gone underground, I think we are heading for a time of great peace.”

Tenowon excused himself and made small talk around the room, making a point to shake everyone’s hand, at least once. For Traz it ended up being five times for a full minute each. To Cassidy, he gave a long hug and wished her and Trede all the best.

Sometime later, he found himself outside the main halls, standing at the edge of the quad. The grass was just at the edge of his toes. He looked around at the trampled grass and saw the makeshift stage was already being dismantled by a team hired from the craftsmen district of the city.

“One thing ends...” he said to himself. “And another begins. I suppose I’ll have to get packing right away.”

Epilogue - Better Days

Rottiger

ROTTIGER F. Tiberiak sat on the beach. Warm in the sun, a cool drink by his side, he finally had everything he wanted. An elaborate beach house estate, hired help to handle all the cooking and cleaning, and hours and hours to sit in the sun and remember his victories. *I'm finally free of my wretched awful family. Years of toil, sacrifice, several roles of a lifetime later, I have arrived.* He breathed in the salty sea air. *And I've never been happier.* He looked at the drink in his hand and realized it was the same thing he'd drank this morning. And the afternoon before that. And the day before that.

Rott swatted the cup off the chair's arm. *Alright, I'm bored... Blast it. Who knew a life of luxury would be so monotonous!?*

He decided to get dressed and go to the Jonin markets. *That should at least pass the time.* He enjoyed haggling and might get a good deal on some tapestry or jewelry he could up-sell to an unsuspecting mark later on. He didn't need the money by any stretch of the imagination, but it was one of the few things that kept him entertained. Part of him, too, liked the idea of keeping his *skills* sharp. For someone who had spent most of his life pretending to be *someone else*, just being Rottiger day in and day out felt rather *plain*.

Yes, to the market. There's sure to be some diversion. His mind cycled through a few old personas as he walked into his expansive closets. *Outcast chieftain? No, that carrier has sailed... A huntsman down on his luck? No, I don't feel like dressing down. A time-pressed Merkant officer? Hmm...* He came across a familiar old shirt, white with flowing sleeves, a loose collar and a few oversized buttons. Feeling the role coming on, he tied back his long black hair tightly. *A successful mercenary and veteran workman? This'll do.* It was an easy mid-range character for Rottiger. Well-traveled, knowledgeable, affable, a distinct dialect that wasn't really from anywhere. It had it all.

"Detsun? I'm going out. Tell the chef to have dinner by seven." Rottiger called out as he left the sandy-bricked patio and veranda at the front entrance to his home.

"As you say, Mr. Rottiger. Travel carefully, now!" Detsun was an elderly chap, cheap to hire but capable. Rottiger had at first planned to staff out his estate with nothing but gorgeous bikini-clad women, yet so far, there wasn't a single woman in

all of Jonin who would consider working for him. Bikini-clad or otherwise. And it wasn't for lack of his trying.

No matter, he thought. *Limited staff aside, I have everything I need. And an easy means to drum up a little excitement from time to time.* His eyes flared like a predator stalking prey as he left his beach-side estate. He found the main path that led to a small road that would take him to Jonin's southeast side. Jonin was much different than Sedenza or the other smaller cities. Its roads were made of broad flat stones, squared off by hard curbs of cut rock. The city had an abundant coral color scheme accented with vibrant greens and blues. Paired with the iconic terra-cotta roofs that were ubiquitous throughout, it certainly had a distinct personality.

As Rottiger reached the market, he stopped to take in the bustling scene. He hid his mischievous grin by dabbing at his brow with a plain white kerchief. *So much opportunity, ripe for the taking. Only question is...* He narrowed his eyes, glancing left and right. *Where to begin?*

The first stop was a brass dealer. He had multiple pieces ranging from small lanterns to larger bowls and cisterns. The pieces were pleasing to the eye, however, the artisan had the personality of a drab horse. *Not much fun to haggle here.* Keeping in character, he nodded to the man. "Some good stuff here, for sure. I'll be sending some friends by later. This is just the thing they're looking for." He received merely a questioning scowl in return. *No matter*, he thought before moving on.

Smythe was supposed to be gregarious and kind, which Rottiger actually thought to be foolish. *People are foolish, or at best selfish. Why be nice, when you can take what you want?* Still, when it came to Smythe's false-kindness, most people seemed to eat it right up. Which is why he was such a useful persona to keep around.

The next stop was group of middle-aged women selling large hand-knotted carpets. They were beautiful to behold. Rottiger eyed them, thinking he'd like to have one in his parlor. He sized up the women at this particular open-air stand, considering which one might give a good challenge at his negotiation of price. He worked up a respectful, but not overly friendly smile. He took a step forward with intent to grab one of the seller's attention.

CRASH. To his left, a large wine bottle had just been obliterated all over the pavement. There was large man with broad shoulders holding two large crates standing in front of the mess. A simply-dressed woman stood next to him wearing an expression of total shock. She had plain straight brown hair down her shoulders.

"No! Oh, goodness! Oh— Oh no!" The woman appeared roughly thirty and was fretting about. She got down on her knees picking at one of the largest pieces of glass as if it were someone salvageable. "I was supposed to bring this to my employer.... Didn't you see me there? Oh... Those crates you're carrying are so tall— All this wine..." She worked herself up to the point tears in her eyes. "What am I supposed to do now?"

Rottiger watched the scene go down. The woman worried and complained so loudly until the man that had bumped into her agreed to give her some money to cover the cost.

She sniffed and rubbed tears from her eyes. "Oh... Goodness, thank you. I'll have to buy a cheaper vintage but, thank you. Thank you so much. You've really saved me!"

Rottiger stepped out of the market path and watched the commotion calm. Eventually the stall owner produced a wide push broom. The woman apologized repeatedly and profusely until the mess, all but a thin trace of spilled wine, was clear. His eyes narrowed. Something wasn't right. When the woman took her new coin and made her way down the street, Rottiger stepped into action. He *accidentally* dropped a coin from his pocket and leaned down to pick up near the spot the wine had spilled. He dabbed his finger at the liquid and smelled it while itching the side of his nose. A wave of disgust came over him, though he didn't show a trace of it on the outside. *This is barely more than rancid grape juice.* He caught sight of the woman, nearly thirty paces away and picked up his pace to follow suit. *Did she just run a broken bottle scam right here in front of me?* Rottiger was disgusted that so common a trick was played out in such a sloppy fashion. *In my own backyard? What a common stunt!* He fumed as he walked and pulled at this white flowing collar. After a life time of such high-level cons and games, this simple game she'd pulled was offensive to a man of his caliber. *Surely I can't allow such low brow charlatanism in my own city?*

Rottiger followed the woman at a distance. They'd passed two wine sellers already, so apparently her con was over. He thought about taking it slow, waiting and watching to see what she intended to do with the ill-gotten money, but ran out of patience as they neared the northern edge of the market. Besides, he was tired of walking.

"Excuse me, miss," he said. "I saw what happened back there with your wine. It's a real shame."

"What?" she said flatly before turning. Then her brow softened back into her hardluck character. "Oh... yeah, it's really a shame. It was such a good vintage."

"Yeah, too bad to waste so fine a drink." He played along as the affable Smythe. "You know, I've got a friend on the other end of the market. Has great supply from a vineyard out past Garar. Top notch stuff, if you're interested. Won't break the bank either." This was classic Smythe, always well-connected, always willing to help.

"Oh, that sounds perfect. I've just—" She stammered a bit, looking nervous and glancing away down the street. A consternated look furrowed her brow. "I have some *other things* to do."

Pssh! She's already breaking. Can't even maintain character for five minutes! He maintained a honest look. "I understand. Well, the offer stands." Rottiger took out a small note card from his pocket with a charcoal pencil. Part of his normal kit for these kinds of errands. He wrote down some info and handed it to her. "He's always open, so stop in whenever. It's probably just the thing you need after losing such a nice, old port."

"Oh... K, thank you." She nodded, somewhat confusedly, took the note then turned and left.

Rottiger folded his arms and watched her go, waiting for her to read what was on the card.

Rottiger F. Tiberiak - *A man of elite confidence*

If you're still running broken bottle as a means to get by, you need my help. If you don't believe me, come see my house. The Southwest Beach Villa.

Once a few steps away, she glanced over her shoulder. Then picked up to a run. When she glanced back again and saw he hadn't moved, she slowed, stopped and turned. She looked at him like a mouse trapped in the corner by a large, hungry cat.

Rottiger cleared his throat as he got ready to drop character. He loosed all traces of Smythe's endearing but fake accent. "Rancid grape juice, really? We can do *so much better* than that."

Wide-eyed, she started, "I don't—"

Rottiger waved a hand to stop her. "When you're ready to make some *real* money, come see me. I could really make something out of you." He stopped to think, sizing her up and perching his chin on his knuckle and thumb. "Maybe an

heiress of a mining industry at the Western Spines. Or maybe the Barrier Mountains? Some potential anyway."

"You're a confidence man?" she blurted out.

"I am *so much more* than that. But if you want to know, you're going to have to come to dinner. Seven o'clock sharp. And wear something nicer than that errand-girl attire you have on. It's that, or keep running these small short-term games. And how's that been going for you?"

She tucked her long brown hair behind an ear and looked back at the note card in hand "Rottiger?" She gazed back at him, a kind of surprised awe on her face.

"Today, I'm Smythe," he put on the old persona like a well-worn cloak. He walked up to her, adjusting his gait just a tad to denote a man who'd held active labor for years. He winked, and offered her a hand and hearty handshake. "But that's just today, friend. Tomorrow, who knows?" He turned to leave, leaving the woman alone on the street, mouth agape, utterly flabbergasted. "Dinner at seven. Don't forget!"

Rottiger walked down the street, not giving the young woman a second look. This kind of bravado was necessary to really sell the deal. *Presence. It's all about presence.* Which led him to think. Was this Smythe's bravado or Rottiger's? He chuckled to himself as he greeted a few passersby on the street. They responded in kind, genuine smiles brightening their faces. *I guess it doesn't really matter. I am whoever I say I am. Whoever I chose to be. This is the life I always wanted! And things are looking up.*

Yaladra

"We'll need to make an entrance here." Yaladra hurriedly summoned forth the power of her Inner Fire. "The guards will be back any moment. Help me." The white-cloaked mystic waved her father close to the tall grey wall of a seedy warehouse somewhere on the coast of Jonin. There was a strong scent of fish this close to the docks and danger was in the air. "Hurry, father."

"Yes, yes, I'm coming." Drayle came jogging over as he pushed back his glasses and adjusted his simple waistcoat. He grabbed his daughter's hand, closed

his eyes and took a deep breath.

"You don't have to hold my hand." She glared at him sideways.

"Ah, yes. Sorry. Just caught up in the moment." Drayle rubbed his hands together and gestured to the broad wall before them. "Shall we?"

Yaladra nodded. She touched the wall, sensing its dimensions and properties with etherial energies. "Ready. You know the words." The two mystics prepared themselves. A convergence of two Fires met in the space across that simple wall. Reality fought against the mystical. With two masters of the Strength of Words, reality quickly gave way.

"There is a *door* here..." they said in unison. Yaladra's brown eyes flashed an impressive violet, while Drayle's emanated a deep forest green. The plain warehouse facade twisted and turned into a simple paneled door with black-iron hinges.

"This way," said Yaladra as she dashed inside. Drayle followed in silence. Once in, they released the incantation and the door morphed back to a plain grey wall. The book they'd been *gifted* from Fossvalor Tiberiak's cousin had proven invaluable so far. It led them straight to part of Tiberiak's coastal operation where at least three mystics were enslaved. *And this is just the start*, she thought. *There are so many more yet to help*. Knowing there were mystics in pain out there made her thoughts grind, but the current day's opportunity would have to do for the moment.

The two made quiet paces down a long hallway towards the rear of the building. It'd been recorded that there was a small onsite *apartment* for people of certain special abilities here at the warehouse. As they reached a turn in the hall, Yaladra pressed them both back. "Someone's there," she whispered barely audible.

"We watched the guards leave minutes ago," Drayle replied quiet as possible.

Yaladra's brow furrowed; she shook her head. "The others will be back soon. We have no choice."

"No choice but to what?" Drayle asked as his daughter dashed away around the corner.

As luck would have it, the man on patrol had his back turned. Yaladra rushed him at a full sprint. She jumped and kicked the man square in the shoulders knocking him flat. She jammed one of his arms behind his back, held it in place with her knee, and made three quick blows to the head. A quiet groan was the man's only counter before he passed out.

"I do wish you wouldn't be so rough." Drayle came around the corner with a worried look.

"Time was short. This was effective." She pulled her hood back over her head. "Let's keep going."

A dozen steps away was a wide metal door. It was a solid industrial looking thing, not a trace of light came around its narrow casing. Drayle put his hands on it and pulled. He winced, saying, "It's locked."

Yaladra glanced left and right down the hall, keeping her ears strained for any sound. "Can you open it?"

Drayle breathed deep, a burst of green coming from his eyes. "*Locks... release.*" The mystical scholar's voice echoed faintly in the hall, resonating and rewriting reality itself. Three metallic shifts sounded from inside the door which loosened from its frame. Drayle exhaled. "There. Let's look inside, shall we?" Drayle stepped aside and pushed the door open.

Yaladra stood at the ready, bent at the knees, hands primed for whatever they might encounter. She peered into a dark, musty room. Not catching eye of any movement, she went inside, eyes already glowing violet. "My cloak, bright as the moon." Her cloak shone like the full moon, filling the room with an eerie magical light. They examined the place. It was definitely a crude living quarters, though barely more than a jail cell. A few cots lined the moldy walls; the floors were covered in muddy beach sand; there was no natural light at all. A simple oil lantern hung from the middle of the ceiling, though it was currently doused. "*Damn...*"

"The good news is, we do seem to be in the right place. But if they're not here, where could they be?"

Yaladra didn't take much heart in her father's positivity. Something in her gut sunk. She'd been hoping for an easy-in easy-out scenario. Things just got complicated. And the only person in the building who might know where the mystic slaves were was now unconscious just outside the room. "We'll have to keep searching the building." She stormed out of the room. Not hearing sign of any other guards, she continued down the hall.

Drayle came in behind walking softly. "Could they still be at sea?"

"Not according to the ledger. Wait—" She heard something, but it didn't seem to be coming from inside the warehouse.

"I hear it too..." Drayle craned his neck, listening. "Something outside?"

The duo completed the circuit of the hallway which led to an exterior door nearest the sea. As they approached the door, they confirmed the sound was outside. *Raised voices...* Yaladra turned to her father and motioned for him to stay low and quiet. He did just so and followed in behind her, though with a worried crease in his brow. They reached the door. Through a crack in the loose-fitting frame, they could see three people wearing weather-beaten rags, on their knees. Three men and one woman, stern in face and posture stood around them. They seemed to be berating the three waifs with all sorts of questions.

"Who's coming for you? Huh?! I heard you muttering. Who would possibly come to save you!?"

Yaladra turned from the door wearing a confused look. "How could they have known we were coming?"

An epiphany dawned on Drayle. "Mind Mystics... The ledger said these were low-powered Mind Mystics. Usually only capable of minor influence on animals. But maybe one of them has greater telepathic ability. They could have heard our thoughts earlier while we planned our ingress."

Yaladra tensed and looked back outside. "Certainly complicates things..." The two sat in quiet for a long moment while the interrogation outside escalated.

"I have an idea." Drayle stood up and straightened out his clothing, adjusted his specs and ran a few fingers through his salt and pepper hair. "I'm going to distract them for a bit. I know the lingo of the Tiberiak business, that should give you enough time to get into place, in case I can't just talk them down entirely."

"Get into place? For what?"

"For..." Drayle made a grasping gesture. "For whatever it takes to make sure those three escape tonight."

Yaladra's eyes narrowed. "I thought you didn't want me to be so rough?"

"Time and a place, dear one." He winked. "Time and a place. Don't be long, though. Those four out there seem pretty agitated as it is." His eyes went wide; he took a quick breath to settle himself, then walked straight out the door, head held high.

Yaladra hid out of sight as the door opened and closed. Her father, fearless at all the right times, had put himself in harm's way. Which left her alone to figure out the second half to the plan and the span of a few minutes to see it done. She looked around the filthy, fish-smelling hallway. The only thing of use was a rusty pry bar with a foot broken off at one end. It was a simple, blunt instrument. *I can*

think of a few uses for this. She grabbed it and made for the roof.

It took her a full minute to find a rotting wooden ladder that led topside. She dashed across the roof to the far end to get eyes on her father. *Sure enough...* She shook her head for a moment, surprised at how well he had kept four revved up miscreants distracted. Then she played out the steps of her plan mentally. It would require a few spells spoken in succession. Or else total failure and Tiberiak would gain *two more* mystics lives at his disposal. She pulled up her hood and set to work.

First she closed her eyes. The first spell was the most uncertain. She focused on one of the mystics on the ground. "Hear me... hear my thoughts. Please, hear me." She fought against reality, hoping a Mind Mystic below would be receptive. The response came clearly. Perhaps this mystic was more advanced than anyone knew.

It's you, isn't it? You've come to take us?

Yes, Yaladra replied. *That's my father there creating a distraction. We're going to get you out of here, but we need help.*

Through the etherial mind-connection, Yaladra felt feelings of joy, relief but also danger. It was a strange sensation. She was not truly a Mind Mystic at all, but the Strength of Words afforded her some ability in almost any other mystic art. She shook off the mental fog that threatened to distract.

What can we do? The voice replied.

Count to five, point up here to the roof. Scream. Then close your eyes. Tight. And tell my father to do the same. Quietly. Can you do it?

The other mystic voice delayed a moment. *I've already told the others. We are ready.*

Yaladra stood up on the edge of the warehouse roof. Her right arm extended wide out to the side holding a simple pry bar. She called upon her Inner Fire, ready to tax herself to whatever limit necessary and beyond. Down below there came a scream. Her four targets looked up at her and shouted. The white-cloaked mystic jumped off the roof. *"Metal... bright as the sun!"* She shouted as a wave of mystical energy reverberated out from her voice. The simple rod in her hand became a second sun. Cosmic light streamed out in all directions lighting up the dusky sky anew. Falling with rapid speed, Yaladra kept one hand holding her hood closed so that she wouldn't get blinded herself. Next, with only a dozen feet left to the ground she shouted again. *"Light as a feather!"* A burst of violet shone in her eyes. Just in time, she landed on the ground with a light touch. She let both spells

lapse. Dusk fell over the warehouse and nearby docks again. Her four assailants were staggering. Thankfully, it looked like the others had avoided the worst of the brightness.

Time to go to work...

She quickly dispatched the first two, using the pry bar with wide swipes across their heads. Two of Tiberiak's men slumped to the ground in a heap.

Meanwhile, Drayle called out to the other three mystics and herded them away to safety around the corner. "Come on, now! All three of you, let's go!"

The woman assailant, holding one hand near her eyes, pulled out a gun. It was a Thunderclap pistol, though it lacked the shine and lacquer of other models she'd seen. Being now overly familiar with that model, it was even easier for Yaladra to assert her magics over it. "*Your gun jams!*"

Yaladra's attacker clicked the pistol, once, twice, then rapidly to no avail. She stopped again to rub at her eyes with both hands.

The last enemy had made use of the commotion and was already twenty paces away. Yaladra wasn't about to let him get away. She swung the pry bar wide while speaking, "*Fly back to me...*" The words seemed to reverberate from the object itself as it flew end over end. The metal tool found its mark careening off the back of the head of the would-be escapee, then flying just as fast back to Yaladra's hand.

The woman attacker had shaken off the sun-blindness and attempted to pistol whip Yaladra across the brow. The mystic stepped back to dodge, then knocked the gun from her attacker's hand with the pry bar. In a fluid motion, she retuned the bar across for a strike to the temple. It almost missed, but still grazed. The woman fell backward. Not wasting a second, Yaladra stormed down atop her prey. She tightened her grip around the makeshift weapon.

"Those three mystics no longer belong to you, or Tiberiak. If I ever catch you trying to take them again..." With a mighty strike, she jammed the pry bar into the ground, inches from her target's ear. Yaladra stared the other woman down with a look that could stop a mowgul in its tracks.

Breathing erratically, the terrified woman nodded just slightly, chin bobbing up and down.

Without another word, Yaladra ran off to follow her father's footsteps. She found them just at the edge of the salty-smelling warehouse district.

"I was just about to go back and look for you." Drayle's face was alert; it

looked like his heart was still racing.

"No need," said Yaladra. She turned to the three freed mystics. "Ready for a trip?"

The three huddled together. Now able to get better eyes on them, they appeared to be a mother and two near-adult children. They all had similar thin, black hair and a light tan complexion. "Thank you," said the mother, a desperate relief in her eyes. "But we have no where to go. If there's anything else you can do..."

"I know just the place," said Drayle. He produced five air whale carrier tickets from his pocket. "There's a safe place for mystics, up north and hidden away. You'll be safe there. Although, first... we'll need to head through the market and buy you all a change of clothes. And new cloaks! It gets cold during the air travel, even in summer."

The mother and her two children smiled, tears filling their eyes. "Thank you..." Was all they could say. It was more than enough.

Many hours later, Yaladra and Drayle sat on their cots in a small, private room on the air whale carrier. Yaladra was still rubbing her sore knuckles from the day's pugilistic efforts.

Drayle must have noticed. "That must hurt... though you did good work today, daughter. Very good work. People are free because of you."

"Because of *us*. You did more than your share."

He nodded three times. "I try... I try." He sighed and looked out the porthole window into the dark. "There are a lot of names in that book. Are you sure you're up for the challenge? It could take... *years*, maybe *months*."

"Will you keep coming with me?" A softer tone entered Yaladra's voice with the thought. For a moment, she remembered what it was like being a young girl. How she looked up to her doting father as they traveled together for his mystical research. So much had happened since then. Yet, now things were perhaps not so different. Besides the sore hands from vigorous fighting.

"Me?" Drayle pointed to himself. "Yes, of course. There isn't another thing on this entire planet I'd rather be doing. I just thought you might want to invest in some gloves. Or those gauntlet's that Maej used to wear. I can't imagine what that does to your poor hands."

Yaladra smirked and covered her face with one hand. Perhaps her father was not getting as sentimental as she thought. She considered the suggestion.

“Gauntlet’s, huh?”

“I’m sure we could ask Maej where he got his. Somewhere in Sedenza, I imagine. I bet we could even find them in white.”

Though Drayle was being completely sincere, Yaladra couldn’t help but laugh. This wasn’t at all the life she ever imagined. *But I wouldn’t trade it for anything.*

Tenowon

The sun was low in the sky. Tenowon took one last look at the landing towers of Galena. It was a small city far to the south of Sedenza. Not far to the north were three large, snow-capped mountains. On the west side ran a long river. And to the south, the Roiling Sea stretched out for miles. Somewhere nearby was Bors’ retirement villa. Tenowon had visited before, years ago, but this time his thoughts were much different. The ancient android had left behind his entire life and livelihood at Lab One and the Cytech guild. It was time to break new ground and find a new path. The only problem with that being, he had no idea yet what that was. And so, he began to set a somewhat random course in his mind. *I’ll only ever find my way if I stumble over it, at this rate. I think it’s time I explore new horizons. Somewhere...*

Bors’ dry voice called him out of his deep future-minded thoughts. “Hey, now. Don’t get lost already, we just got here.”

“Sorry, Bors. I guess there’s a lot on my mind.” Tenowon smiled to himself. “Does that remind you of anything?”

Bors made a raspy laugh. “I had a *helluva time* getting you to follow me all the way to Sedenza years back. Back then, it was that inflated sense wonder you’ve always had. Distracted you by every little thing.”

“I still wonder...” said Tenowon, sounding unusually pensive as he caught up to his friend. “Perhaps about different things these days.”

Bors nodded. They continued on in silence for a time until they passed a local watering hole. They were within sight of the ocean. The small place was barely more than a thatched roof, a long bar and a handful of tables and chairs on

an outdoor deck; it had very laid back feel. "I've been dying of thirst, you mind?"

Tenowon agreed and was surprised to see the spring in Bors' step as he leaped up to the deck and ordered a couple drinks. The two retired Cytechs found their way a table at the farthest corner of the deck. The sound of the oceans waves filled their ears, the salty ocean spray breeze touched at their lips.

"It's good to be home," said Bors looking around the beach with a very satisfied, thin-lipped grin. There was something about his eyes that looked energized.

"Glad to be home, old friend?" asked Tenowon. He took a sip of the drink, and for the life of him, couldn't place the flavor or even what it might be called.

"Yep." Bors let out a contented sigh followed by a long drink. "I always loved the big city. But you can't beat the ocean." A change in posture and a certain sparkle in his eyes drew a further question.

"This is more than just being glad to be home, isn't it?" Tenowon had known Bors for years; it was clear something was up.

Bors took another long gulp of the tropical beach-pub drink. He set the cup down with a clack. He laughed. A quiet chest laugh the grew up and out. "Yep. I guess so."

Somehow, the smile lines around Bors eyes had softened. Tenowon observed him a little closer. The whiteness of his hair was starting to give way; a hint of the former dark color peaked out over his ears. Incredulous he asked, "Bors. What is going on?"

"You know, I wasn't going to say anything? Mostly because I didn't believe it. The Nexus they, uhh... They're holding me in reserve. Or something like that. They said you'd need my help someday, so..." The old man, somehow looking less old, looked down at his hands and flexed his fingers all at once, closed and open. "Seems like my inventing days aren't over. And *can't* be over. Not yet." He shrugged and downed the last of his drink. "They gave me a little extra time."

In the span of this conversation, Bors did indeed look at least a decade younger. Tenowon had seen the impossible more than once in his many years, but this was *unbelievable*. "The Nexus is extending your life?"

Bors nodded.

"Because of some invention you've yet to make?"

Bors nodded again.

"Preposterous!" Tenowon was in shock.

"Yep!" He knocked his knuckles on the table top. "I'm getting another drink, hold that thought." Bors sprung up from his chair back to the bar leaving Tenowon a moment with his thoughts.

What sort of destiny could they have in mind? What sort of invention could be so vital, so important?

Bors returned with his drink in hand, a smile on his face. "Hell, I feel sixty again. Or younger! Even that's a ways off, I can't really remember what sixty felt like." He chuckled to himself.

"And when did you first notice?"

"As soon as I touch ground at the landing field... Started to feel a little lighter in my steps. These drinks are sure hitting the spot. So that's helping things from a different angle, I imagine. I tell you what, though, I didn't believe them for a second. You can't turn back time! Hah! Those crazy bastards! Anyway, that's why I never said anything before now."

"This is astounding," said Tenowon. Even with his lightning quick mind, it was hard to keep up with such a development. "And this invention, what is it? What do they want you to build?"

Bors waved a finger back at his android friend. "Ahh, that's it. You haven't told me what it is yet."

Tenowon raised his drink and gave it a sniff trying to analyze its chemical makeup. Reality had been turned on its head yet again. *Surely, these drinks have been poisoned? But... no.* "The Nexus gave me a great deal of new information, but... they didn't tell me anything of this!"

"No, I thought not. They're a tight lipped crew. Just giving us all a piece of pie separately. Pretty smart of them, I say."

"How am I supposed to tell you to build something? I don't even know what it would be!! What could it possibly be? Something that only you could help me with; something important for the future of the human race?"

Bors nodded in agreement as Tenowon prattled on with rapid fire questions. "That's exactly what you're going to find out, old friend." He set down his drink, already half empty, and grinned ear to ear. Already he was looking more like the

Bors that Tenowon had first met in the Western Spines decades ago.

"This is too impossible." Tenowon shook his head. "Why would they leave me in the dark?"

"I'm sure they have their reasons. But the good news is, I'll be here waiting for you once you figure it out." Bors raised his cup in toast. "To the... *perplexing* future?"

"I am *most* perplexed," he replied and clacked his cup off the other.

"Then it's all settled! You'll come stay with me for a while, get your bearings. We'll get out some maps, plan the journey. The first part anyway, then I'll send you off. You're welcome to stop back in for a visit anytime. And plenty of supplies to set you up with too."

Tenowon took a moment to gather his thoughts. Here was wondering what lonely, quiet road he would find to bide his time. Now, he was on an impossible errand. Thrown out into the wilderness, so to speak, without so much as a map. He mulled it over and over, a thousand ideas a second and always came to the same question. "But what is they want me to do?"

Bors eyes gleamed as he looked at his android friend. "They want you to find that out. That's the fun part! Isn't it?"

Tenowon smiled despite himself, and a peculiar laugh bubbled up in him that shook his shoulders. Instead of living in quiet exile, he'd just been given the assignment of a lifetime in a most impossible way. "This is mad, you know."

"Yep," Bors agreed. "You're right on that. Keeps it fun though."

Tenowon looked out over the sea. He had no knowing how many years his android body would last. And while that caused some internal disquiet, he looked across the table at this longest friend. He was not alone today, and that heartened him. And for tomorrow, Tenowon knew that his destiny, at the very least, would not be boring. The android flexed and loosened his shoulders and rose from his chair. "Bors. I'm going back for another drink. I think I'll need it."

"Atta boy," said Bors. "Drink up! And let's enjoy the sunset."

And that's just what they did.

Langhorne

The afternoon was drawing on. The sun was getting low in the skies around Smisom. Marshal wiped the sweat from his brow with the blue sleeve of his marshal uniform. He stood outside the new town hall in Smisom, his shoulder leaning against the backdoor's unfinished frame. The old hall had been lost in a fire months ago during an Outcast raid. It wasn't until recently things had calmed down enough to rebuild. It was a hair bigger than the old one, and was maybe just the sign the marshal needed that life could finally get back to normal.

"What do you think, Hil?" said Langhorne without turning back.

Marshal Hildegras stepped out from behind. "Place is looking better than ever! Should be done just in time for the next marshal council session." He was pleased as could be, an honest, wide grin covered his face.

"Yep. That's good." Langhorne didn't change his gaze out at the horizon.

"Something on your mind, Langs?"

"Nothing important." Langhorne leaned forward and stepped away, motioning for Hil to follow. "Come on. Let's head back."

Hildegras called out some encouragement to the carpenters inside then took a few quick steps to catch up. "I know you've only been back a couple days but... man, what gives? It's over right? You said it's all over. No more storms, no more grey-people controlling people's minds... Right? Don't hold out on me, now!"

"I got no secrets. Don't worry about that..." Langhorne paused for a few strides. He considered the past year. How from the time Trede delivered a shipment of rifles to Smisom, things just went from bad to worse to worst. Before coming home, he'd spoken to everyone in Sedenza. Gragus and Tenowon at the Cytechs, all the mystics of the Haven. Everything pointed to the same conclusion. The Outcasts were gone. For good. So was anyone that seemed to be pulling their strings, although he never did figure out what happened to Rott. The Well, which he never really understood, and never really *wanted to*, was safe again. Besides the whole unbelievable explanation of the final battle with Wellborne, something just didn't sit right with the founder of the Northeast Marshal Corp. *The Nexus* for one left him scratching his head. Maybe he didn't need to understand it all. Still, something about the whole situation ate away at him. "I don't know, Hil. Maybe

it's just going to take some time to feel *normal* again."

Hildegas tipped his head to one side. "I can understand that. You know what?" He knuckled Langhorne in the shoulder. "Let's skip the office and go to the pub. It's getting late anyway, right?" The jovial marshal chuckled to himself.

"Can't think of a reason not to." Langhorne agreed with a shrug and they made their way to the Charris Pub.

Around the time Langhorne and Hildegas had their second round of ales, another wave of people entered the pub. Among them was Mior, Trede's adopted grandfather. The friendly older man waved and walked over to the table.

"Hello again, marshals," he said while adjusting his wide cloth belt. "Got a letter from Trede today."

"Oh, is that so?" said Langhorne. His spirits had improved since about halfway through his first ale.

"Yes, seems like they're already making good progress on that reconstruction project. It's nice he'll have a safe place to live and work for a while."

Langhorne smiled. "That's good to hear, Mior. And how are things with you?"

"Oh, me? Just fine. Came in for dinner with the boys from the tannery. It's kind of a weekly tradition. Anyway, I won't keep you. Always happy to see our marshals out and about!" He smiled deeply, making pronounced the weathered crow's feet around his eyes. Then he excused himself and found a table across the room with the tannery workers.

"So what's next for you?" Hildegas continued the conversation where they had left off. "Just today, now... so don't go getting all sentimental on me again."

Langhorne took a deep breath, then grinned. "In the short term? Heading up to the counter for a third ale. Be right back." Something about the Charris Pub made Smisom really feel like home.

"Hey, now! Look who's back?!" Hil slapped the table and laughed.

Langhorne rose from his seat and only made it two steps. By chance, the loops of his boot laces hooked the raised corner of an old floorboard. He tripped forward and tried to balance sideways twisting his ankle. The floorboard lifted a little further sending him even more off balance. He crashed forward onto an empty chair and nearly broke it in half as he tumbled to the ground.

Hil was there in a flash with a hand to offer and a jape to follow it up. "Whoa,

whoa. That was only two ales so far, right?"

Langhorne took the hand and began to pull himself up when a sharp pain shot through his lower leg. He let go of Hil's hand and fell back on the ground. He looked down at the freshly sprained ankle, then back at Hil. Closing his eyes, he shook his head from side to side. *Of all the things...* "Well, Hil? Looks like I may have to hit up the Doc's and skip that third ale after all."

The next day, Langhorne found himself at the marshal office with a fresh splint and pair of wooden crutches in tow. It'd been a terror getting across town that morning, even with Jaxet's help. He'd spent the next hour just catching his breath and trying to get comfortable in his chair. Finding comfort was made harder while being forced to keep his foot elevated on the desk.

"Hey dad, I'm heading out for the rounds at the south end soon. Can I get you anything while I'm out?" Jaxet called out from the back of the room as she rifled through a pile of recent letters.

"No, I'm fine, Jaxet. Thanks."

Yui, who's short black hair was getting a little longer these days, was nearby polishing a rack of rifles and counting the remaining ammunition. There'd not been much need to fire a single shot in recent days, but it was still part of the regular work to be done. "Need a glass of water, marshal?"

"No... But thank you." The room was quiet for a spell. Langhorne glanced the duty roster on the far corner of the desk and decided to reach for it. He stretched across his body length and came up short. With a combination of his good leg and two healthy arms, he awkwardly shuffled his chair several inches to the left. He sucked his teeth in pain at the jostling this sent down his leg. Finally, he had the roster and set it in his lap, resting his head back against the chair for a moment.

Jaxet came by and set down a small metal cup. "Pretty sure Doc said every four hours to keep the pain and swelling down. Drink up!"

"Mm-hm..." he replied. The medicine tasted awful but Langhorne supposed it was better than the alternative.

"C'mon, Yui! Let's head out for rounds." The two young women filed to the door, rifles slung over their shoulders. Yui still carried a second rifle in her off hand, for *just in case*, she always said. "You sure you don't need anything, dad? I can

send Hil back to give you a hand?"

"No... no, that's fine. I'll be fine," Langhorne said waving one hand and grumbling. He reassured them both and soon found himself alone in the marshal office. He read and re-read the duty roster for the next few shifts and found it was just fine. The whole marshal operation seemed to be running smoothly enough. This was despite the fact that he'd abandoned his post on more than one occasion as of late. Rather than ponder that gloomy epiphany, he wracked his brain to think of *anything else* to pass the time. As the morning went on and Doc's medicine kicked in, he decided his ankle was feeling a lot better. He eyed the crutches off to the side and thought it was time for short walk. *Even Doc couldn't argue getting some sun wouldn't do me good*, he told himself.

He got outside, left the front door partially open, and hooked a left toward the market. It was the third time around for Langhorne with the crutches and he found he was finally getting the hang of it. Heading down the dusty road between a mix of roughshod wood and stone buildings, he ran into some familiar faces. The Lei sisters were a pair of blond thirty-somethings that ran the local creamery.

"Lorelei, Lanalei, how are you two today?" Lorelei had been one of the lucky ones after the Sick had passed, having made a full recovery. Their business was far enough outside town that it had escaped mostly unharmed. All that good news showed on their faces, as the nearly identical twins wore beaming smiles accented by their rosy cheeks and golden braids.

"Marshal! Oh my!" said Lorelei, blue eyes going wide.

"What happened to your leg!?" asked Lanalei, genuine concern taking over her expression.

"Oh, it's nothing..." Langhorne tried to downplay it as the two woman fretted over him. "Doc's got me halfway fixed up already. I'll be back to normal real soon."

"Oh goodness, you poor thing!" said Lorelei. "Do you need anything? We'd be more than glad to pitch in."

"Loré, let's bring him a meat pie tonight. Can we do that marshal?"

Langhorne tried to politely decline but after a minute it was clear they were *not* going to take *no* for an answer. "Ok, ok... That's real kind of you. Thank you."

"After all you've done for the town? And us in particular? It's the least we can do! We'll be by around six, ok?" said Lorelei.

"And be ready to eat. It's best while it's hot! Ok?" said Lanalei.

"Will do. Thank you, ladies." Feeling flush, and not just from the midday sun, Langhorne wiped his brow with his sleeve. Once he caught his breath, he made way for the market and the kebab food stall. More than once, a passing citizen offered their thanks and offered any help they could. Langhorne politely thanked all of them while trying to ensure them that *he was fine*. When he got to the kebab stand, the vendor refused to let him pay for the meal.

"Come on now, the town is still rebuilding. I'm sure you could use the money," Langhorne said while trying to balance on the crutches and get a few coins from his pocket.

"Oh no! Marshal, I insist! Hero's special today," said the vendor. "Save that coin for next time!" It was hard to argue with such an enthusiastic smile.

Langhorne eventually acquiesced. He took his meal and found a bench that had a good view of the Smisom markets. He collapsed onto the seat with a groan as his crutches fell to the wayside. Another passerby wearing a brown hat and carrying a large pack noticed and set the crutches back within the marshal's reach.

"Fine day for a market lunch, eh marshal?" said the man. Langhorne thought he recognized him from the local chemist but the name escaped him.

"Thank you, and yes. Good too day to be out."

"Say..." The chemist set down his pack and took out a brown bottle. "Got a fresh batch of fizzy gentia here. Why you don't take one for your lunch? It's still cold, too!"

Before Langhorne could refuse, the chemist set down the bottle, tipped his cap, and was off.

Marshal Langhorne looked down at the wrapped food in his lap, the drink to his right and his busted ankle extended out in front. "Helluva thing," he said to himself and shook his head. He looked at his town with a new appreciation. It wasn't the biggest or most impressive human settlement by any stretch, but it'd been through a lot and still managed to put its best foot forward. There was something honorable and satisfying about it that suited him just right. He took a great deep breath and felt, for the first time in a while, that just about everything was right in the world.

Langhorne settled in with his free lunch and drink without another care in the world. Until another familiar figure came briskly walking through the market. This wasn't one of the locals though. The Merkant officer Laurel with her snow-white hair passed by. She looked haggard. Her tall Merkant blue coat was soiled and her

collar hung limp by her shoulders. Langhorne recalled what the mystic Yaladra had said about Laurel. *She plays the Merkant game, but she's in Tiberiak's pocket. No question.* Instinctively, Langhorne started to rise out of his seat; a flare of pain changed his plans. He watched Laurel go making note of which building she was headed. Scanning the market, he checked to see if any other scout or marshal might be nearby he could call on. *Not this time...* He settled back onto the bench, opened his lunch and took a bite of juicy kabab.

Ordinarily, he'd be upset to miss such an opportunity, but not that day.

Today's a good day, he thought to himself while popping open the fizzy gentia. *Smisom made it through a rough patch... and if Laurel is any indication, there's still plenty of work for us marshals to do around here.* He took a sip as his thoughts wandered to his daughter Jaxet, Hildegras, Yui, Brek and the others. *And there isn't another crew I'd rather do it with.* He held up the bottle to toast the moment even though he sat alone.

A nearby market-goer must have seen the gesture and replied. "Hello, marshal! Great day, isn't it?"

"It is," Langhorne replied. "It really is."

Oudrine

In days that followed, a group of four mystics found themselves on an air whale carrier traveling north. So much had happened; so much had changed. Oudrine sat on a simple bedroll staring out a porthole window. Her hand was to one side holding her husband's hand. Maej had been quiet, perhaps meditating or even asleep after the long hours of travel. Oudrine had fought with disbelief by the hour since Maej had returned. It seemed so impossible. Yet, they had played with the cosmic energies of The Well, the power of life itself, and prevailed. With the occasional dark thought, she wondered how many in their party had truly been killed by Wellborne's reckless destruction. They had all taken terrible wounds and fallen during the battle. Had more than one of them been brought back from death?

Beside her, Maej stirred, squeezing her hand. "Your thoughts trouble you, my love?"

Oudrine pursed her lips. "With all that's happened..." A great emotion rose up in her; against her will, her eyes began to tear. "It's hard to believe we can simply move forward." She squeezed his hand in return. "I want to. But I can never forget all we've endured." She watched a wisp of cloud stream past the carrier window.

"Your thoughts would be my own but for what I learned at the Nexus," said Maej, his voice deep and quiet. "There is a new path to walk. What has driven us these past years... is complete."

"I want it to be so," said Oudrine, leaning over onto her husband's shoulder. She wrapped an arm tightly around his, making sure he was truly still there.

"It will be so. In time. Before we left the Nexus, there was one thing they made sure I learned." Maej took a contemplative breath. "I had to learn... how to give up. How to set things aside. How live a *new* life. Some things are worth dying for. Some things are worth leaving behind to live for."

Maej's words rang true in Oudrine's heart; she knew he was right. She considered the thought for the rest of the travel to Okishinren. When she finally arrived, her heart felt lighter.

Within hours of their landing at the northern most landing tower, Oudrine with Maej, Celeste and Jonas came to the clearing at the old Caretakers settlement. Oudrine had been there just weeks earlier in search of Trede. The summer growth had left the place even greener with vines and overgrowth threatening to take over even the great hall where Traz and Tenowon had been held captive nearly a year before.

Jonas took a step forward from the clearing, slapped his hands and rubbed them together. Then he tied back his long greying locks looking ready to get to work. "Gragus said he'll have a contingent of engineers and builders here in about a week. Looks like it's up to us to make this *home* until then." He turned back to the group and offered a hand to Celeste. "Let's go see if any cabins are livable for now, shall we?"

"We shall," said Celeste taking her husband's hand. "You two going to do any exploring?"

"I think we will," said Oudrine. She reached aside and took Maej's hand tightly in hers.

"Better days are at hand," said Maej quietly. "Our vows of vengeance over. Do you believe it?"

"I do," said Oudrine in a cracked whisper. They walked forward into the Caretakers grounds, together. There was much to be done before beginning their new life.

The next few weeks passed. The Cytechs delivered on their word and construction around the settlement grew by leaps and bounds every day. The great hall was being refurbished, many cabins had been rebuilt, or torn down and built from scratch. Running water was in process of reaching many of the homes so far, soothing their thirst during the long working days. In the evenings, light-generating steam machines filled the area with a happy glow.

It was on one such late summer night they were met with an unexpected visitor. The four resident mystics and a contingent of Cytech engineers were sitting about sharing a drink outside the great hall. The hall was covered in scaffolding and a partially replaced roof. The grounds were alight with strings of lights running from canopy tent to canopy. One of the leaders among the Cytechs, a mustachioed man named Gerard, spoke up. "Hey— Who's that through the woods there?" As he stood up, two cytechs among the group reached for a nearby rifle. Up to this point, they'd only needed them for hunting, but considering this group was tasked with protecting The Well, they wouldn't take any chances.

Oudrine put a hand on Maej's knee, then rose and walked towards the sound.

"Uh, ma'am?" Gerard called out, voice full of concern. "I'm not sure that's a good idea! We're on strict orders to—"

"Tryphena? Is that you? By the fates..." Oudrine spoke into the near-total blackness.

A woman of similar age and stature to Oudrine stepped out of the woods into the dim light. She had a healthy glow about her darker skin with near-black eyes and long shiny black hair. "Oudrine? I've found you at last." The two women came and met just at the edge of the encampment's light and embraced. "After everything that happened... I came looking for you in Sedenza but you were gone. I heard word that you had traveled north. And... here you are." Her dark eyes shimmered as she took in the impressive spectacle of the Cytech reconstruction effort.

"You've found us," said Oudrine, a combination of relief and joy flooded her heart. "Come, come see the others." She gestured back to the tents and lights.

"I... didn't come alone. If that's ok." Tryphena turned and waved someone else out of the bush. A small boy of maybe five years old came trotting along. He had a similar look to his mother, but his brow showed great concern.

"This is your son!" Oudrine exclaimed.

"Yes, we've traveled a long way. It's not been easy, but—" As the boy's mother ran fingers through his short dark curls, he ripped away, scowling. He glared again at the men and women of the Cytechs.

Oudrine bent at the waist and offered him a hand. "Hello, little one. Come with me, we have plenty of food and drink."

The boy slipped behind his mother, and turned his back on the group.

For a moment, a great fatigue showed on Tryphena's face. "Ever since... Wellborne's attack on the world." She struggled for words. "He isn't too keen on strangers... or even old friends. It was hard seeing so many familiar faces with those horrible black eyes. Friends and neighbors turning on each other... I hoped finding a new place might help him. Among people I trust."

"You are most welcome here, of course, you and your son," Oudrine smiled, keeping a concerned eye on the boy. "Will you come join us?" The boy didn't move.

Maej had walked in behind Oudrine, he nodded at Tryphena. "Glad to see you again."

"Thank you, Maej, I—" There was surprise in Tryphena's voice, though Oudrine watched her husband pay it no mind. The mystic in black and red garb got down on one knee, turning his head at an angle to get a look at Tryphena's son. "Boy." His voice was always the same deep baritone. "What is your name?"

He cowered further behind his mother for a moment, then to everyone's surprise, he peaked out saying with a small voice, "Tyrol..."

"Tyrol," said Maej, seeming to test the name with his voice. "A strong name. A warrior's name." He peered at the boy, perceiving not just with his eyes. "You've seen a great many hardships for a little one."

The little boy braved a fleeting glance at Maej, before looking away again off into the woods.

"Hear me now, Tyrol. The battle is over. The fighting is done. This is a safe place for mystics to live free from prying eyes."

The boy glanced back at Maej, this time holding his gaze. Tears filled his dark eyes. Maej and Oudrine knew a fair amount of what it was like living as a mystic abroad. There was a great worry requiring shadow and secrecy. Especially in areas controlled by the Tiberiak family and his Mystic Hunters.

"Come. And know you are safe here among friends." Maej reached out a bare hand to the boy.

Tyrol looked up at his mother for a moment, her smile giving him all the blessing he needed. The boy ran to Maej, not only taking his hand but practically jumping up in his arms. Maej rose to his feet, holding the boy in arms. He gave Oudrine and Tryphena a somewhat surprised look. Then nodded once in approval. He turned and walked back to the tents, with Tyrol in arms.

"He's so tired, we've been walking for hours," said Tryphena stifling a laugh with single hand in front of her face.

"We understand," said Oudrine, mirth glowing from her bright blue eyes. "Please, do come and have a seat."

As the evening wore on, Tyrol ended up fast asleep in his mother's arms. Most of the Cytechs had wandered off to their bunks or tents elsewhere, and now five adult mystics sat around in a relaxing glow of light.

Jonas was chuckling to himself, a quiet deep-chested laugh. "Tryphena, it's been years. I still can't believe you came and found us."

"We are so thrilled!" Celeste chimed in. "It does my heart good to see you again. And your boy... he is so *adorable*."

Tryphena ran her hands through Tyrol's curls again, soothing him in sleep. "I'm just glad we found the *right place*. I'd heard rumors about this place, but had never come searching. There was a young Cytech inventor at the old Haven. She said you'd traveled far north into Okishinren."

"Cassidy..." said Oudrine. "I'm glad you saw a familiar face while in the city. And how is the Haven coming along?"

"It... looks a lot like this, last I was there," said Tryphena gesturing around to all the construction equipment and in-process work.

Oudrine smiled with melancholy, still saddened at the loss of their previous home. Still, the Haven was in their past now. *And it's in good hands for the future. I know it.*

"So, I'm wondering..." Tryphena began softly. "Why did you all come here?"

I only have a glimpse of what's happened. Why are you here?"

The other four mystics convened with a few shared glances. Maej then turned to speak. "We've been given a charge. To protect The Well from ever being misused again. A creature like Wellborne must never be allowed to exist. And those like the fallen Proteus will never be allowed to gather such knowledge of Uncanny Powers."

Celeste continued, "We are reforming one of the oldest mystical traditions. To be Caretakers of The Well."

Jonas added, nodding at the sleeping Tyrol, "And to teach the next generation how to do the same."

"The Caretakers..." Tryphena's face showed a hint of memory. "Like that old book you used to read us?"

Celeste's eyes brightened. "Yes, the very one. I never thought our destiny would be to take such a path. Fate, it seems, has been bringing us to this point all along." She glanced to her husband with a look of true appreciation and deep joy.

"You never know where you might end up!" said Jonas, laughing again.

"You and Tyrol are most welcome to stay and join us," said Oudrine. She never thought for a moment their number would grow so soon, yet having an old friend return had sparked an even greater hope for the future. "For as long as you wish."

The mother looked down at her sleeping son. She smiled. "I think we just found our new home, little one."

Jonas clapped his hands together and grinned wide. "I'll get us another bottle, what do you say?" Not waiting for a response, he was already up and off rummaging through a large crate looking for more drink.

Celeste and Oudrine laughed. While Maej took the conversation elsewhere. "The boy. He has the Fire, doesn't he?"

Tryphena nodded. "He does. I've not had much luck instructing him yet... All the better to stay near *my* old teachers."

By then, Jonas had returned. He popped off a cork and poured everyone another half glass. "We'll be glad to do our part. Speaking of that old book, I bet there's still a lot of great lessons there. That's how you and I learned way back at the beginning!"

Celeste nodded. "I'm anxious to get in that old study in the great hall, too. As soon as the Cytechs clear the way. Who knows what other lessons the previous Caretakers left for us?"

Jonas gestured a finger emphatically pointing in the air. "Now there's a thing. We'll definitely need to built up the library around here. I mean, I love the woods and all. But a home is not a home without *books!*"

Oudrine smiled from her heart. Both her former teachers were as excited by the mystic arts now as they had been for decades. "I'm sure we'll have to write a few of our own, as well."

Jonas' eyes lit up even further. He sat back in his chair, pushed back his long greying locks. "Yes, of course! It's been a while since I've done any writing." He grinned and took another sip of his drink. "That's just the thing!" he said pointing his glass in the air.

The evening went on. Many dreams were discussed. Some plans were made. And a resolute hope settled in. On that day, six mystics, across three generations, made a pact to officially begin anew, the Order of the Caretakers of The Well.

Later, once Tryphena and Tyrol had been giving lodging, Jonas and Celeste had gone to bed, Oudrine and Maej stood out in the moonlight. They held hands and glanced at the stars.

"The stars here are different than the city," said Maej, almost sounding like he missed their previous home.

"These are our stars," said Oudrine. "The stars of better days."

"Better days," said Maej in a deeply quiet voice. "At last."

TREDE

Trede wiped the sweat from his brow. Even in the shade, the late summer heat was in full force throughout Sedenza. He looked around the broken remains that was once the cellar of the Haven. There was still a great deal of broken, grey stone and debris that needed to be moved topside. Undaunted, he called upon his Inner Fire, and *only* his Fire. A task that was becoming more and more second nature. He

occasionally found the floor of the Fire's limits and was shocked at how it paled next to the strength of The Well omnipotent. He would sometimes grasp a single fist to his chest and remember what it felt like. The exhilaration of unfathomable power left its mark on his mind. He was certain, in hindsight, that the only limits when wielding the Well-blessing, were his own. His own creativity and ability to channel that cosmic force was perhaps the only thing preventing him from becoming something like Wellborne. An unhinged entity of untold power. *No more*, he thought. Life was simpler now. But some things hadn't changed.

"Hey there, blows-holes-in-things man! Plenty more broken rocks to clear, wouldn't you say?" Traz stood up at ground level looking down. The selahn, with his young bride, had opted to stay in Sedenza for some time after the battle. The cleanup and rebuilding of the Haven had tweaked both of their curiosity. And what selahn couple would object to an extended honeymoon in the greatest and most exotic human city?

Trede exhaled and felt the rush of his Fire strengthen his muscles. "Coming right for you, buddy!" Reaching down, he hefted a large chunk of broken stone. It was easily half his weight, but he tossed it twenty feet in the air with ease. It landed with a great clack on the cobblestones.

"Haha! I'm pretty sure that was showing off!" said Traz with a wink. "But honestly, we'll make better progress this way. So keep it coming!"

Trede chuckled as he hurled the next handful of cracked stones topside.

Traz busied himself, sorting them into two groups. One pile for decent cut stones that could be reused, and for the ones too broken, a large wooden cart stood at the ready to haul them away. As he hefted one such crumbling stone into the cart, he called down below. "I imagine our ladies will return with a fine midday meal soon. And! I believe the hunter's guild smokers were lit this morning. You know what that means? *Huah!*" The selahn tossed the last stone from his arms.

"Smoked jivret for lunch?" Trede grinned while throwing two hunks of grey stone out from the open cellar, one from each hand.

Traz rolled to the side, popped up and caught the stones, one after the other. "I hope they have those fried pickles today, too. A selahn can dream! Haha!"

"Your dreams come true, darling!" From just down the cobblestone road, Svelina called out, her gentle voice carried sweetly on the wind.

"They gave us so much food!" Cassidy was next to her. "They wouldn't even let us pay, because, well... *everything*. I guess we're kind of famous now! Can you

believe it?"

Trede climbed up the crumbling foundation of broken stones to street level; he dusted his hands off his filthy denims. "Famous?!" He turned to Traz with an incredulous grin and they both burst out laughing.

"It's nothing any coalition of selahns, mystics and science-men wouldn't have done!" said Traz.

As the two young women came closer, they joined in the laughter. "At any rate," said Cassidy. "Lunch is here!"

"Darling, smell these fried *picklings*, they're amazing!"

Traz grabbed an oversized old blanket from the debris cart and threw it out on the edge of the road nearest the Haven's ruins. They laid out the copious amounts of food. There would easily be enough for dinner again that night. Partway through the meal, Traz began to wax poetic.

"A lovely sunny day. A stupendously lovely meal. My true love," he glanced sideways at Svelina by tipping his head to one side. "And our dearest friends! What could possibly be better? This is quite the honeymoon! Wouldn't you say, dearest?"

"I would! I really, really would. I never thought a human city could be so enthralling! I'm loving our time here." Svelina's dark eyes shone with true excitement. She had every bit the sense of wonder and joy as her new husband, though she might be quieter about it most of the time. "And what about you two? When will you go on *your* honeymoon?"

Cassidy's eyes went wide at the direct question; she pursed her lips with slight embarrassment.

Trede stepped in, stammering, "We're not married. Not— Well..."

In came Traz to the rescue, "All things in time! I'm sure." He winked at the young human couple. "Though it's hard to ignore the real *chemistry* between you two. Am I saying that science word right? *Chemistry*?"

Cassidy eyes rolled back in her head and they had a good laugh.

"But seriously, it's *your* language, I'm just borrowing it," quipped Traz, grinning from ear to ear, fangs shining.

The small gathering of friends finished out their lunch and set back to the hard work. Later when it came time for construction, they knew the Cytechs would

lend them some machinery to help in the process. But for now, there was so much unstable, loose debris to be cleared, they continued by hand. Mostly thanks to Trede's Fire-infused strength and Traz's seemingly tireless supply of energy.

They made great progress through the afternoon until the open cellar hall floor was now clear. The now-visible stone brick floor actually showed a hint of the Haven's former glory. Around that area was a fallen metal door on the ground. To Trede's front, he saw two stoned-in archways. He'd heard Oudrine mention them briefly in days past. For as long as anyone living had stayed at the Haven, those two archways had been bricked shut. Seeing as how the rest of this portion of the cellar was clearly a mausoleum, all the mystics had left it in peace. Now, a few of the bricks had fallen out, and more were loose to the point of crumbling. Taken by curiosity, the young mystic went first to the archway on the left. He lit his hands alight with Fire, reached into the gaps between the stone and pulled great chunks away from a pathway forgotten to history.

"Hey, guys? I'm going to check out this hall. See how stable it is. Take five, ok?"

"Fine by me!" the jovial selahn replied from topside.

"Be safe!" Cassidy called.

Trede lit a small spark of white and yellow Fire, floating in midair. He sent it on ahead as he entered the first unexplored mausoleum hall. He sent his mystical lightsource near the ceiling and saw the stones still firmly in place. "Well that's good," he spoke to himself. "Won't have to tear the whole place down." Satisfied with the structural repair of this old area, his gaze turned to the walls. There wasn't much to speak of at first, but it was a longer hall than he expected. He took slow steps in the dark, his spark of light leading the way.

Something caught under his foot and nearly tripped him. It was mostly flat, but certainly not part of the stone floor. In his hands, it felt impossibly smooth. He summoned his light-spark down closer. A breath caught in his throat as he recognized the sparkling black and blue material. The opalescent stone was unforgettable. "This is Well-stone..." For nearly a full minute he stared at the object. In his hand was a six inch dagger of pure Well-stone. Perfectly crafted, even balanced from handle to tip. He glanced towards the back of the long narrow room. "What else is in here?"

He breathed a few more times sending more Fire into his mystical light. The little spark grew by ten times in size, giving him a dim view of the entire place. The back of the room continued on for twenty feet, well beyond the dimensions of the Haven on this side of the building. The place wasn't nearly so empty as first

appeared, either. At the back of the room was a weapons wrack holding a handful of tall spears; he approached them with wonder. They looked impossibly sharp given how long they'd sat idle. Just being near them, he felt a gentle heat emanating from each. He considered just how little he knew about the history of the mystics, and their seemingly everlasting connection with The Well.

Around the walls nearby, multiple paintings were hung, though most were tragically faded. The one with the most discernible details was a large ship at sea. It looked bigger and strangely foreign compared to any of the fishing vessels Trede had ever seen from the coasts of the Roiling Sea. As he stared at the strange, ancient ship, something else caught the corner of his eye. Alone in the corner, was a small chest. It sat on the floor covered in thick dust.

Before he realized it, Trede was already on his knees in front of the chest. He set the knife down and opened the chest carefully. By its age, it looked like it might fall apart from the slightest movement. The chest creaked open. Inside were three more daggers, identical to the one in his hand. There was a book also, though he dare not touch it. There was a shimmering, clear aura around it. The cover was written on, ancient black ink on dry leather. However, he could not make out the words. Perhaps a forgotten language of long ago.

He tapped the shimmering aura around the book; it tingled but didn't hurt. He picked it up, and the aura warmed his hand. The sound of three distinct clinks filled his ears. He held the book aside and looked at the bottom of the chest. *Three rings?* Puzzled, he cocked his head to one side. While the book's aura did him no harm, it also wouldn't let itself be opened. Wondering if the rings had any connection to it, he grabbed them. There were two plain bands, and another with an ornate mounting bracket that held a single large pearl. Miraculously, they were all made out of the same Well-stone. It dawned on him. "Wedding bands, and..." He knew just what the pearl ring was for, but didn't say it, not even to himself. Trede grabbed the rings in his free hand and sat back. His eyes poured over these forgotten wonders. Suddenly things fell into place. Why the Nexus told Cassidy to help Trede rebuild the Haven. He was just beginning to understand. This was a place important to mystics for untold generations. And it was never held alone. *Maej and Oudrine. Jonas and Celeste before them.* His eyes wandered back to the painting of an ancient ship. *And others so long ago.* He glanced the rings in his hand as a new destiny took hold in his heart.

Cassidy... was his only thought. He placed the book away, along with the two simple bands. *For now.* He rose and pocketed the pearl ring. As he walked back towards the sunlight, Trede knew he'd never been more sure. His time as a bearer of The Well was over; his time as a mystic was just beginning. The city would need someone to keep watch, to ensure the mystic forces of the world were

used for good. And he would need someone at his side.

Trede stepped out and shielded his eyes from the sun as they adjusted.

"Darling, he's back!" said Svelina clapping her hands together.

"You were gone a while! Find anything *interesting* in there?" From up on street level, Traz gave Trede a mysterious sideways glance.

Trede didn't say anything and found his fingers involuntarily flicking at the newly found object in his pocket.

"Come on, Trede, don't hold out." Cassidy laughed. "Find anything good?"

"Yeah." He grinned. A satisfied breath made his shoulders rise and fall. "The future."

"Oh, really?" said Cassidy, she laughed at such a grand thought.

"Ah ha!" said Traz. "I knew you were destined for greatness! Only you, my friend, could find the entire future in a hole in the ground!" This got everyone laughing.

Trede winked at Traz and Svelina, then turned back to his love. He bound up the rocks making great leaps until he was standing face-to-face with her.

"Trede?" Cassidy's hazel-tinged brown eyes opened a little wider.

"I found the whole future. And I realized I have so much more to learn. So many more steps to take. And I can't think of anyone I'd want to do that with than you, Cassidy." Trede reached into his pocket and pulled out the ring.

Cassidy gasped; then placed her hands on her chest.

Traz shouted in celebration for the whole city to hear. "Yes! Yes! I've been waiting for this!"

"So, what do you say?" said Trede, quietly just for her.

Cassidy collapsed forward, wrapping her arms around Trede. She held him for a long time while Traz and Svelina cheered the moment. A few passersby stopped, distracted by the selahns excitement and found themselves clapping and cheering along, even if they didn't know why. She replied, quietly, "Yes. Yes, I will."

"It's our future," the young mystic said, squeezing his new fiancé closer. "And it's going to be amazing."

HERE ENDS THE ECHOWAKE SAGA

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