

The Girl Who Would Be King

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The Girl Who Would Be King

by [Drifter90](#)

Summary

"Where the Stories End" is a collection of short stories following the adventures of the human Nemo and various companions of his. The world of Vonarheim is one of swords & sorcery and gods & monsters. To help keep the peace, the Adventurers Guild acts as a job broker connecting people in need of help and adventuring groups looking for work. Vonarheim is a world governed by fate and prophecies, but Nemo himself is no chosen one or destined savior.

"The Girl Who Would be King" finds Nemo and his half-elf companion, Rayne, returning from a lackluster adventure when they come across Ri, a young girl running from a destiny she wants no part of. The fates are asking her to become a leader and hero, at the expense of those she loves.

Notes

This is an original work that I plan on being a part of a series of short stories. As a concept, this was actually meant to be a video game narrative, but I'm a long way from that becoming a reality/ So, I decided to change the medium. Any questions, comments, or concerns please talk to me. I'd love to hear them.

Chapter 1

Though there was still a few hours of daylight left, the raven haired girl with golden eyes decided to set up camp for the night. The clearing just off the crossroad looked like it hosted many travelers over the years. She placed her three stringed guitar down against a stump by the pre-dug fire pit, started a fire, and set out a kettle for tea.

When she heard the whistle, she prepared her tea, placed it off to the side on the stump, and sat cross legged next to it, her porcelain skin glowing in the fire light. She brought out of her bag a leather bound deck of cards and placed it on the makeshift table in front of her. Then unwrapped the bundle and smoothed it out in front of her with the deck in the center. She grabbed two hair sticks from her bag and closed her eyes. She took a deep breath as she put her hair in a bun, revealing her pointed ears, and exhaled staring at the cards. She rolled up the sleeves on her black kimono, shook out her arms to amp herself up, and picked up the deck.

The first card she flipped over and placed on the leather was the Magician. No surprise there she thought. Next was the Wheel of Fortune, again as expected; she placed it side by side with the first card. Her hand hovered over the deck for a moment while she waited to see if another card was needed; ultimately, she shook her head and moved on to the next row.

She placed the King of Wands and the Queen of Swords next to each other. She paused and pondered who this might be. The girl tapped the top of the deck with her fingers, lost in thought for a moment, looking at the two rows. The party and the client; now onto the adventure she told herself.

She flipped over four cards: Two of Cups, Three of Cups, Three of Swords, and Ten of Swords. She placed the deck down and had her tea as she meditated on the reading.

When finished, she turned herself around so her back was resting against the stump and stared off into the horizon, plucking at her guitar.

Mid day was turning to evening as the two adventurers traveled down the road. It had been a nice cool day that promised to be the same come nightfall. The road stretched beyond the horizon in front of them as well as behind and fields of lush grass did the same at their sides. The pair were returning to the city of Ivlon after completing a job for a small village called Saltmeadow, they took on a contract to clear out a camp of bandits that had set up shop not far from the village. When they got there, they found that “camp of bandits” meant five highwaymen with a single sword among them.

Rayne, the half-elf, picked up her pace to get ahead of her human companion. Spinning around, the orange sash that wrapped over her dark green pants and down her left side spun with her. She started dancing around the man like a boxer, throwing air punches as they walked. Her delicate looking white embroidered shirt hid its true nature. "I can't believe we were asked to trek out to the middle of nowhere to deal with a few moderately mean looking bums."

Nemo, the young man, shrugged his shoulders observing her. "You wanted the glamorous life of an adventurer." He adjusted the armor he had strapped over the arms of his brown leather jacket and tugged on its hood to make sure it wasn't caught under the sheathed sword. Where Rayne went for a deceptive elegant look, Nemo preferred a rugged practical look. At least that's what he liked to think, Rayne was always quick to point out how neat and clean he kept his armor and clothing. How his short brown hair was always fresh and kempt.

"No . You wanted to be an adventurer. I wanted to be a pirate."

"You hate the water."

"A forest pirate." She unsheathed the sickle-sword from her waist and pointed it at Nemo smiling. "I was one. I was a *great* one. Then I met *you* and you ruined all of that for me." she said squinting her bright hazel eyes at him.

"I ruined that life for you?" he laughed, "Are you sure that career wasn't ruined when your men betrayed you and tried to sell you out?"

"That was definitely a factor to be sure." she twirled the khopesh and resheathed it. She stopped walking and started stretching exaggeratedly as Nemo kept walking.

"You could always quit adventuring and go back to that life."

"And leave the farm boy all alone in the big scary world?" she called out after him.

Nemo walked a few more paces thinking about how it had been a few days since Saltmeadow and how there was another three, at least, in front of them before Ivlon, when he felt a fist tap his shoulder and heard the jangle of way too many bracelets, the half-elf was at his side.

"Hey, look at that." she said, gesturing ahead of them. Nemo looked at the dark olive skinned arm and hand. He could see the tattoo she had of a meditating Ilo, the goddess of the hunt, on her forearm. His eyes shifted in the direction she was pointing. There was a person laying in the grass, off the side of the road, about a hundred yards away near where their road forked.

"Think they're dead?" She tossed the black braid that had been resting on her shoulder behind her and it fell to her waist.

"Maybe. Could be more bandits." Nemo replied, scratching his scruffy beard. He drew his sword and scanned the field to the right of them, keeping an eye out for any place that could conceal someone. Synchronized, Rayne drew the bow from the scabbard on her back, readied an arrow, and scanned the left field. They approached the body, switching positions every few yards on alert for any sign of an ambush. When they reached their target, Nemo looked down and saw it was a girl lying on her side. She had amber skin and medium curly brown hair, dyed red at the ends, that was covering her face. She was wearing a Tyrian purple hoodie, as

well as long shorts and boots that looked made for hiking. There was a camping pack lying on the ground next to her. The pack had something roughly three feet long, wrapped up in a blanket tied to its side. Nemo tilted his head over his shoulder, "Don't think he was robbed, she still has her stuff." He bent down to check her pulse.

Nemo's hand made it halfway to the girl when she looked up and saw him standing over her. Their eyes met and she screamed, kicking her feet in his direction. Startled, he let out a small cry and fell over backwards shielding his face from her boots. Rayne whipped around and fired off an arrow narrowly missing the girl's head. The girl grabbed a handful of dirt and threw it in Rayne's face, picked her pack off the ground, and started swinging it at both of the adventurers, using the momentum to get herself on her feet. As Nemo was trying to get to his, she caught him on the side of his head. The girl spun around to look for Rayne when the half-elf was suddenly at her waist tackling her to the ground; pinning her arms. "Calm down! We're not robbing you. We were checking if you were alive."

The girl's demeanor instantly softened. "Oh wait, really?" she turned her head to Nemo.

He was lying on his back, one hand over his face pinching the bridge of his nose in between his eyes. "Yeah kid, we were looking to help." He groaned and sat up.

The girl looked back at Rayne. "Hey are you an elf?"

Rayne looked dumbfounded over at Nemo, then back at the girl and shook her head as she got up. "Half, what's it to you?"

"Not much to me but I have a friend who would love to meet you, she's a half-elf too, but she is the only anything elf where we live so she gets lonely a lot."

Nemo brushed himself off as he stood up. "Okay you really need to take a breath. What are you doing out here by yourself... sleeping by the side of the road?"

"I'm running away from home. I got tired. I decided to rest a little. What are you doing here?" she replied, taking a breath between each sentence.

"First off: no, don't do either of those things. Don't run away from home, what are you twelve? And if you do, don't take a nap right by the road where anyone can see you."

"*First*, I'm sixteen. And I was able to defend myself against you two." She shot back pointing at the two of them.

"Yeah, kid. You sure were able to handle yourself against two people who were trying to help you." Rayne replied.

"Can you two stop calling me kid? My name is Ri."

"Rayne."

"Nemo."

Ri picked up her pack, “Cool now we’re all friends. I’m going to get going. You just let me know which direction you’re heading so I can head the opposite way.”

Rayne threw up her hands and started back on the road towards Ilvoln. “Yeah, I’m good with that.”

Ri headed off in the opposite direction but Nemo grabbed the pack on her back. “Hold up. What are you running from?”

Rayne turned around. “What? No! Let her go. She’s not our problem. She—” gesturing towards Ri, “is not going to be paying us.”

“Wait... are you guys mercenaries?” Ri asked, wrenching herself free from Nemo.

“No.”, “Yes.” Nemo and Rayne said in sync.

Rayne looked at Nemo and shrugged.

“I mean... aren’t we?” she asked, eyebrows raised.

Nemo stared blankly at Rayne. “No. We’re adventurers. Part of the Adventurers Guild. When people need help, they reach out and we help them.”

Rayne and Ri looked at each other, then back at Nemo. “Buddy. For money.” Rayne said with a smirk.

“Yeah, it sounds like you’re hired muscle but with a fancy name to help you sleep at night.”

Nemo closed his eyes, breathed in deep, and exhaled heavily. “Okay. We’re leaving.” he started walking in Rayne’s direction.

Ri ran in front of Nemo with her hands out stopping him. “Wait, please. I know what the Adventurers Guild is. I’m fucking with you. Please.” she took a deep breath, “My friends and I have this secret place in the woods, there was a sword in the forest, and there’s a prophecy that comes with the sword, *and apparently*, I’m a part of the prophecy and part of that prophecy is all of my friends are going to be killed by—”

“No!” Rayne was standing behind Ri, pointing over the girl’s shoulder at Nemo, “No!” she moved to Ri’s, gesturing at her, “No, no, no. *No*.” She turned back towards Nemo, pointing a finger in his face, “No! We don’t fuck with prophecies, ancient evils, curses that can’t be stabbed to death, or mermaids.”

“—an ancient evil.” Ri finished

“Oh, well in that case: No! Tell me you’re not considering this, Nemo?”

Ri held up a hand. “I’m sorry, did you say mermaids?”

Nemo and Rayne both look at her, “Mermaids are dicks.”

Nemo turned to Rayne, “We can at least check it out. If it turns out to be too much we’ll walk away.”

Ri pleaded with Rayne, “I can pay.”

Rayne made several hand gestures to convey her frustration. “*Fine* . How far is your town kid?”

“Less than an hour’s walk.”

“You walked less than an hour and had to take a nap?”

“I haven't slept in like two days, leave me alone.” she replied and started down the branching road.

As promised, after less than an hour the trio were stepping foot into a decent sized mining town nestled at the base of a small mountain. As they entered the town Ri skipped ahead of them, spun around, and started walking backwards as she talked. “Welcome to Steepwick. A not quite small, not quite large town of no real significance more than what we mine from that mountain over yonder. If you’ll follow me, we can search for my friends and then head off.”

She started to turn back around when Rayne stopped her. “Wait. Why do we need your friends?”

“Well...” she trailed off for a second, “in order for me to take you where I need to, we need to get special permissions.”

Rayne glared at Nemo.

He sighed. “I know, I know.”

The group made it a bit farther into town when they heard someone calling out Ri’s name. “Where the hell have you been?” A girl about Ri’s age came running up to them. She had black hair cut as short as possible without her being completely bald. She was a bit shorter than Ri, pale, and was wearing tight black pants and a black hoodie cut into a tank top. Her ears made it apparent that this was the half-elf friend Ri had talked about. “We’ve been looking for you all day.” the light skin girl stated.

“Sorry I disappeared.” Ri replied sheepishly “Some stuff happened that I have to tell you guys about. But I brought some friends to help. Ace, this is Rayne and Nemo. Rayne, Nemo, this is Ace.”

“Why do we need...” Ace stopped and did a double take upon seeing Rayne. She looked her up and down but quickly realized she was staring. “Sorry, I’ve never met another non-human. Let alone anyone elvish.”

Rayne gave a half hearted shrug not knowing how to respond. “Well, I’m not full blooded. Only half, like you.” Rayne noticed that the girl’s right ear was covered in piercings while her left ear only had a single lobe piercing. She pointed to her own right ear; it too had several piercings including three helix and three dangling lobe piercings, and then her left that had a single tragus piercing. “Good to know you’re full badass though.” This comment made Ace beam, and Ri as well, seeing how happy her friend was.

The happiness on their faces was short lived however as a male voice called out to them. “Brianna, Chayse. What are you two doing here?” A man dressed in simple plate armor, chainmail, and a brimmed metal hat approached them. He was accompanied by two boys, around the same age as the girls, who were similarly dressed as he was. The man had a short sword on his belt while the boys carried spears.

Ri rolled her eyes and turned to greet them. “Lieutenant Seamus. Always a pleasure...” she looked at the two boys, “Gordie. Chris.” The boy, Chris, looked like he was about to reply when Seamus cut him off.

“What trouble are you girls running off too? You know you make your parents sick with worry when you disappear the way you do.”

A look of feigned excitement came over Ace’s face. “My parents? You say you found my parents good sir, and they say they’re worried about me?” she asked, hands clasped together. The Lieutenant became clearly uncomfortable and was at a loss of words. Ace looked back at Rayne and Nemo. “Have to love orphan jokes.”

Rayne smirked, “That’s more his department.” she said gesturing to Nemo.

“I do love a nicely timed orphan joke.” he said smiling.

They heard one of the boys clear their throat. It was Chris, he took a step towards them, apparently finding the words he lost a moment ago, “They’re probably running off into the woods again. They leave the path and into the deep woods where it’s forbidden to go.” The other boy, Gordie, shot him a look that, if Chris had been looking at him, would have clearly sent the message: *shut up*.

Ri stepped in front of Ace, “And how would you know that?” she asked, squinting her eyes at him.

Ace gently moved her aside and stepped forward. “He knows because he and his friends have tried following us several times. But everytime they do, at least one of them loses their nerve the second the path is out of sight, and they convince the others to turn around. I believe last time...” she glanced at Gordie, “one of you suddenly remembered they didn’t feed their family’s sheep and needed to go back immediately.”

Both Nemo and Rayne were surprised at the look of astonishment that cropped up on the boy’s face. “You could hear that?” Gordie asked.

Ace tapped the tip of one of her ears and smiled. “And it’s probably a good thing that happens.” She looked back at Chris, “We’ve all grown up on stories about the naughty boys

who wander into dark woods only to get gobbled up by a witch or two who live in them.”

Chris rolled his eyes. “Please. The closest thing Steepwick or its woods have to a witch is...”

“Is our good friend.” Ace took several steps forward and was now in Chris’s face. “So you might want to take care over who you spy on; lest Steepwick gain stories of its own about little boys going missing in its haunted woods.”

Nemo felt Rayne’s fist bump him on the shoulder. “O’, I fucking like *her* .” Rayne said quietly, trying not to ruin the girl’s moment.

It was Lieutenant Seamus’s turn to roll his eyes as Gordie let slip a chuckle. “Okay. Okay. Could you not scare off my recruits. Listen, you girls get a lot of leeway because of who your parents are, by birth or adoption. So, if you could...” he let out a heavy sigh, “If you could not be assholes that would be appreciated.”

Ace looked back at Ri as she took a few steps back. They both smiled as Ri nodded, “We can do that for you lawman.”

With Rayne now resting an arm on his shoulder as she watched this unfold, Nemo saw something down the street that caught his eye. He patted Rayne’s arm and pointed to what looked like the market square as three large wagons pulled by white horses crossed through the square. Each caravan had at least four guards on them and there was no way of knowing how many were inside. Every guard was uniformed with a khaki pea coat and matching dress pants; white armor that looked like it was made of porcelain was strapped on their chest, upper arms, forearms, knees, and shins; a round helm made of the same metal encased their heads, hiding their faces; they also had white gloves and a light grey hooded cloak. Red pentagon patches with a black sun adorned the shoulders of their cloaks and one was on either side of the front skirt of their coat.

Rayne saw them too, “Who are those pricks?”

Everyone else in the group turned to see who she was asking about. Seamus turned just in time to see the last of the wagons pass. “They would be soldiers from the Black Star corporation. Black Star owns the mine, they’re probably here with payroll and to pick up their shipments.”

Curious, Nemo asked, “What do you mine here?”

“Mostly coal but Black Star doesn’t really care about that. They only care about the crystals that form in the caves.”

Rayne perked up, “What kind of crystals? Are they valuable?”

Seamus shook his head, “Not to anyone other than whoever runs Black Star. When the town was first settled and the mines opened, we tried selling the crystal but we were told they were worthless. Whatever they are though, Black Star has such an interest in them, that even after buying the mine, they let the town keep the coal mined from it to be sold or used as we wish; that’s on top of the salaries they pay those working for the mine.”

Nemo was still staring off into the market square, “Interesting. Armor definitely stands out.”

“And their swords.” Rayne added. “Did you see them? They looked like broadswords but designed like rapiers.” she smirked, “Equal parts fancy and pretentious.”

“You should see their crossbows.” It was Gordie, as he said this both boys held up their hands mimicking lining up a shot with a crossbow. “They’re some kind of lever operated contraptions that can hold four bolts at a time and shoot rapidly.”

Ace was watching the boys but Ri was looking intently at Rayne. “Why did you call them pricks?” Gordie noticed Seamus waiting for an answer to Ri’s question and stopped goofing around, elbowing Chris to get his attention.

Rayne saw this and stopped leaning on Nemo. Nemo knew she was no stranger to speaking without thinking and ruffling some feathers, but the lieutenant didn’t look insulted. Instead he looked like he was noticing the two of them for the first time and was genuinely interested in any insights they might have.

“Well,” she started, “I might be biased from personal experiences, but based on those experiences, any group *that* uniformed are bound to be assholes. Add to that, the amount of money you’d need to outfit them as such...” she paused, “Look, just call it a gut feeling.” she was becoming uncomfortable with everyone looking at her. “Hey, Ri? Weren’t we supposed to be looking for your friends?”

Ri snapped back to reality. “Oh shit. Yeah.” she turned to Ace, “Where is everyone?”

“The others are still out in the woods. They’re waiting at the usual spot to see if you’d show up there while I came into town to look for you.”

“Okay. We need to go.” She gestured for Nemo and Rayne to follow, “Come on. This way.”

The two girls rushed on ahead ignoring Seamus as he held up his hands in protest. He looked at the two adventurers, “Go. Just please make sure they’re not in over their heads.”

The girls led Nemo and Rayne through the grid like streets and then into the woods a few miles from Steepwick. They traveled through the woods and just as the sun had fully set, they reached a clearing with four logs arranged around a campfire. Sitting on the makeshift benches were three girls, all of which looked similar in age to Ri and Ace. As the party entered the clearing, one of the girls was standing up to stretch when Ace ran up to her. “Heads up!” she screamed, tackling the girl with short blonde hair to the ground.

The two other girls barely reacted to this but upon seeing Nemo and Rayne walking out of the woods jumped to their feet startled. One girl, a long haired redhead in a sundress, dropped into a defensive stance. Seeing her do this Ri ran up waving her hands. “Wait. It’s just me. I brought some friends.”

The other, a girl with long black hair wearing a white tank top and dark pants, patted the redhead on the shoulder and walked up to Ri. "Where have you been? You vanished."

"I'm sorry. Some weird stuff happened last night and I didn't handle it well." Ri responded.

At this point, the blonde was pinning Ace to the ground with her arm behind her back. The girl's sleeveless red jacket showed off her muscular arms. "Give up?" she asked.

"No." Ace responded as she tried pushing herself up with one hand. She lifted herself up slightly but was slammed right back down. "Yes."

Hearing this, the blonde got up and put her hood up before extending a hand to help Ace up.

Nemo looked around at the group, Ri was being led off to the side by the black haired girl. The blonde and the redhead walked up to Nemo and Rayne.

"So who are you two?" The blonde asked.

"I'm Nemo, this is Rayne. Your friend is trying to hire us to protect you from something that she has yet to fully explain."

"Well that's nice of her." she said with a slight tone of sarcasm. "I'm Gwen and this is Mac." she stuck her thumb over her shoulder pointing at the redhead.

Mac was examining Rayne. "You look like a woodland pirate."

"Thank you, that's the vibe I was going for." she said earnestly. "I like the dress." Rayne added with a smile. She then whistled at Ri. "It's nice meeting your friends and all, but can we get on with this."

Ri and the black haired girl rejoined the group but before Ri could say anything the other girl blurted out: "So, Ri thinks we're all going to die horrible deaths in the near future and wants to bring these two to the beach house to save us."

Ace ran her hand over her head. "Em, what are you talking about? Ri?"

Ri let out a heavy sigh, "So, the other night when we were staying at the beach house I woke up in the forest."

This clearly troubled the three girls. "Were you sleepwalking?" asked Ace.

"I don't know. I woke up in a part of the forest I hadn't seen before. It—"

Mac cut her off, "Wait, you were past the scarecrow?" Hearing this question made the other two girls' eyes go wide with fear.

"Yeah. I didn't realize it at the time. I woke up in a clearing that had a boulder in the center and five paths leading away from it. And laying against the boulder was this sword. It was glowing."

Gwen crossed her arms. “You found a glowing sword?”

“I did. Her name is Aotrom. She’s the one who brought me out there.”

Mac took both of Ri’s hands in hers, eyes now full of excitement. “The sword talks?”

“It does. *She* does. Kind of, after I picked up the sword—”

Rayne sighed loudly. “You picked up the glowing sword?”

“How could you not?”

All of the girls, minus Em, looked at Rayne and each other muttered agreements; Em had wandered away from the group and was sitting on a log, staring into the fire.

“Anyway, I picked up the sword and a voice told me her name was Aotrom. She couldn’t remember where she came from and she was having trouble forming words, but she wanted to warn me of something. I then started having all of these visions. Flashes of kings holding the sword, leading armies and killing monsters. Flashes of the forest by the beach house, creatures coming from somewhere deep within. And then me wielding the sword.”

Gwen leaned on Ace. “That doesn’t sound too bad.”

“Sounds kind of generic.” Ace chimed in.

Ri sighed, “I also saw Steepwick burning and all of you dying.”

Gwen straightened up. “That sounds bad.”

“On top of that, holding the sword, I had this feeling that something was going to be coming for the sword. I don’t know if it’s the same evil she was warning me about or something else entirely. I asked Aotrom and she said she had the same feeling but also couldn’t tell if they were the same threats. I ran away because I wanted to lead whatever is coming as far away from you guys as possible. I know you’re probably mad that I didn’t say anything before leaving.”

Em was suddenly behind her, spinning her around. “I’m mad because you didn’t take me with you. I’m furious that after all this time, you could just walk away from all of us. Good intentions or not.”

Ri put her arms around Em’s shoulders and pressed her forehead against hers whispering: “I’m sorry. I panicked and ran.”

Ace turned to Nemo and Rayne as if to explain something but stopped when she realized they were missing someone. “Hey guys. Where did Mac go?”

Nemo cleared his throat and pointed over to the tree Ri had but her pack against. Mac was sitting next to the pack and it looked like she was whispering to whatever was rolled up in the blanket. She noticed people were staring at her, “I was just telling her everything was going to be okay. That she didn’t need to be afraid, we’d help however we could.”

Em lifted her head off of Ri's and looked over her shoulder to Mac, "Who were you telling that too?"

Ri released Em and walked over her pack. She unstrapped the rolled up blanket from the pack and started unwrapping it, producing a sword that appeared to be made of light. Everyone gathered around her. The sword was a curious item. Despite appearing to be made of pure light, you could easily look at the weapon without fear of damaging your eyes. In fact, it didn't seem to radiate light but rather gave off a soft glow. On top of that there was grey shadowing on the hilt showing the details of the crossguard, the leather of the grip, and the pommel.

"Everyone, this is Aotrom. Aotrom, meet my friends."

Chapter 2

The group stood huddled around Ri and the sword Aotrom. All of the girls' hands at one point or another reached out to touch the sword but would pull away at the last second as if afraid of being burned. Em was the first to conquer the fear and touch the blade.

"That's so weird. I expected it to be hot but it's not even warm. It's not cold... it... it doesn't have a temperature."

Hearing this the other three girls joined in. Gwen and Ace both uttered agreements while Mac simply tilted her head like a confused puppy. Seeing the confusion on her friends' faces Ri asked: "Want to see something else really weird?". Everyone pulled their hands back as Ri held the sword vertically in her right hand by the grip and with her left, clasped down as hard as she could onto the blade. Ace and Em flinched. Ri's knuckles turned white as she clenched tighter and her hand, along with her fingers, glowed red. But to everyone's surprise, there was no blood.

Ace ran her finger down the edge of the blade for less than a second before pulling it away, blood dripping down her hand. She stared at the cut in shock as Mac wrapped her hand around the finger, muttered something under her breath, and removed her hand from a woundless finger. She then wiped her hand on Ace's shoulder; the entire time never taking her eyes off the sword.

Ri spoke again, "I *think* because the sword is mine it can't hurt me. Or maybe it's choosing not to hurt me? She. She's choosing. I don't know, I'm thinking out loud." She released the blade and laid it to rest on her shoulder as everyone took a few steps back for breathing room. "Anyway, that's enough gawking. If some prophesied fate and or destiny is in motion, I for one don't plan on playing by it's rules. That's why I'm asking to take these two to the beach house." she said gesturing to Nemo and Rayne.

Gwen looked startled at the sudden shift of topics. "You want to bring them to the beach house?"

"That's where everything is supposed to start." Ri replied.

Ace looked Nemo and Rayne up and down. "I guess rules can be bent in times of foretold demise."

Rayne shook her head. "I'm sorry, but any chance you could talk to us like we're complete strangers missing vital information about what's going on?"

Gwen turned to her and crossed her arms, "We have strict policies when it comes to who we bring to the beach house. Under normal circumstances, you might be allowed in but he never would be." she tossed a thumb in Nemo's direction.

Nemo looked hurt, "Wait, why not—?"

Rayne cut him off, “Also, you keep saying beach house. We’re in the middle of the woods, in a landlocked region, and I’ve seen maps of the area; there’s not so much as a lake nearby, let alone any other body of water that would warrant attaching a house to.”

Mac walked over to Nemo, “We have a no boys rule for the beach house,” seemingly ignoring Rayne, “So, if you want to see it you’re gonna need to answer a few questions so we can determine your character.” She stood on the tips of her toes as she said this and poked Nemo in the forehead before resting back on the soles of her feet. “The vote must be unanimous.”

“Why no boys?” Nemo asked.

As a chorus, “Boys ruin everything.” sang the girls, including Rayne.

“Mac, we can probably skip the interrogation.” Gwen said, with Em and Ri agreeing.

“Silence!” Mac bellowed with her finger in the air. “What is your favorite color?”

Rayne groaned and rolled her eyes. Nemo smirked. “Orange.”

Mac stared at him as if she wanted more.

“The orangey red you get sometimes when the sun sets.”

Mac nodded in serious agreement. She then squinted at him. “What—” she paused dramatically, “is your favorite animal?”

“Do you know what a glass leopard is?”

Mac’s eyes widened in pure delight. “No! What is that?”

“Think a big cat, yay high,” Nemo held his hand slightly above his waist, “with fur made of iridescent glass threads.”

Eyes still wide, now with her hands clasped over her mouth, “That sounds adorable.”

“I know a tattoo artist in Ivlon who has one.”

Mac shook her head as if refocusing and clapped her hands, “Okay, back to business. Last question.” she said poking Nemo in the nose. But a question didn’t come immediately, instead she paused for a moment lost in thought. “Ah ha! Why did you become an adventurer?”

Where previously the faces of the group ranged from mild amusement to reluctant tolerance, everyone’s face turned to genuine interest. Rayne included, Nemo noticed.

“You know why I joined.”

“O’, I know. I just want to see if you’ll say it out loud.” she said with a smirk.

“I joined because I wanted to help people.”

Gwen rolled her eyes, Ri and Em nodded their heads in acceptance, and Mac squinted her eyes again, analysing Nemo.

Rayne laughed, “Nope!” she yelled exaggeratedly.

The girls looked at her and then back to him.

Nemo sighed, “For a girl.”

Expressions of curiosity swept over the faces of the girls.

“Tell me you didn’t join to impress some farmer’s daughter?” asked Gwen, grinning.

“No. Well, yes and no. She is a farmer’s daughter, her name is Jade. We’ve known each other since we were small children and she left Dustgate to join the Guild about six months before I did.”

“Why didn’t you join with her?” Em asked, with Ri intently waiting for a response.

Nemo looked at Mac, “I thought the first ‘why?’ was the last question?”

Mac rolled her head side to side, “Technically it was. But it might speak to your character more if you answered it.” she said, slightly pleadingly.

Rayne cupped her mouth with one hand, “Answer the question, loser.”

Nemo closed his eyes and sighed again, “I was afraid,” he opened them, “I’d never stepped foot outside of Dustgate and the thought of doing so scared me. But after six months of letters from her, I decided to leave despite the fear and follow in her footsteps.”

Mac looked over her shoulder to the other girls, eyebrows raised questioningly.

The Em, Gwen, and Ace nodded in response. Mac gave Ri two thumbs up with a big smile on her face. “Alright then, off to the beach house.” Ri said, slightly tired.

“ *What beach house?* ” Rayne screamed.

The girls shook their heads with a look of almost disbelief on their faces and started gathering their things.

Ri rolled Aotrom back up into the blanket and tied it onto her pack.

Nemo looked on as Gwen smothered the fire, “I have a question,” he stated as everything went dark.

“Don’t worry I got this.” A silhouette, outlined by moonlight, knelt down by the firepit, grabbed a handful of ash, whispered to it, and threw it into the air. It was Mac and the second

her hand opened, seven butterflies that glowed like flames, flew upwards from her hand and danced around her, illuminating the area.

Rayne's jaw dropped. "You know magic?"

Nemo nodded his head in realization. "I did notice the finger thing you did."

Mac gave them both a thousand yard stare. "You sound like you've never seen magic before."

Nemo looked to Ace, "Wait, is she the witch of the darks woods you were talking about in town?"

Ace chuckled, "Yeah."

"I've seen magic before, but users are usually a bit older than you. Where did you study?" Rayne asked.

"Study?" Mac continued to stare blankly.

"You can't tell me you've learned healing and illusion magic, or whatever the butterflies are, on your own."

"Why not?" she tilted her head as she stared at Rayne. "You make it sound like magic is hard." Upon saying this, Mac spun around on her heels and started skipping off into the woods with her butterflies still orbiting her.

Everyone scrambled to follow. As they caught up, Mac twirled a finger in the air and whispered something. As she did this, six of the butterflies broke off from their orbit and flew just above a shoulder of each party member, while one stayed behind and flew above one of hers.

As the party walked through the woods, Nemo wondered how the girls were able to navigate; the path they had entered the woods on had stopped at the campgrounds. Seemingly having read his mind, Rayne tapped him on the shoulder and pointed to a tree. About eight feet up the tree was a burn mark in the shape of a butterfly. "We've been following them since we went off path."

Ace was walking in pace with her. "They're kind of obvious if you know to look for them, but when looking for trail marks most people keep their eyes on the ground." Em looked back at Ace with raised eyebrows, her olive grey skin highlighted by the butterflies. Ace shook her head. "No one's following us."

Rayne wrapped her arm around Ace's shoulders and leaned close to her ear, "So, that Gordie boy got awfully flustered when you looked at him." she whispered, rubbing a hand over the girl's fuzzy head.

The smaller half-elf blushed and tried to push off the taller one, “Shut up,” she said as they both giggled.

“We’re here.” said Ri, who had been leading the pack. She reached her hand over the shoulder that the butterfly was hovering over and extended a finger. The glowing bug landed on her. Nemo looked around, they were in a small clearing encircled by trees. The clearing’s shape was oddly perfect. He looked back to Ri, she was kneeling down with a pool of water in front of her. The circular pool looked to be about six feet in diameter and two feet deep with crystal clear water; it was bordered by a ring of stone bricks. The hand with the butterfly was outstretched over the water, while the other was just coming out of her pocket, coin in hand. She flicked it in the air, caught it, and then skipped it across the pool. The coin reached the center of the pool and stopped dead. For a brief moment it hung in the air just above the water before plunging down. When it hit the bottom of the pool, the coin went right through and the floor fell away into darkness. The water started to rise up from the center like a giant glass marble. Soon, the sphere was floating in the air about an inch from where the ground was. The water was no longer clear but looked frosted like a frozen over window.

“What the absolute fuck is that?” Rayne asked, amazed.

“The gateway to the beach.” replied Em.

Nemo walked up to it and poked the water. The surface rippled a bit.

“Watch out!” Mac came running by and jumped into the sphere disappearing, sending ripples around the orb.

One by one, each of the girls jumped into the gateway until it was just Nemo and Rayne. Rayne walked up to Nemo and rested an elbow on his shoulder. “It’s too late to turn around and walk away right?”

“Yeah... I think it is. Also, wasn’t a main selling point for keeping you around your unparalleled knowledge of the world?”

“It was.”

“Then where did ‘What the absolute fuck is that?’ come from?” Nemo asked, smiling. Rayne patted him on the back and shoved him through the portal.

Nemo stumbled forward and landed on his knees on a field of grass. The grass was wine red. Startled, he got to his feet and looked around. The sea of red grass stretched out all around him. He turned around just as Rayne was stepping through the portal and the sphere collapsed in on itself revealing a massive tree line in the distance. The world he now stood in was muted of color, the sky was grey and the sun, which was hovering over the horizon, barely broke through the cloud cover. Whether the sun was setting or rising, there were no magnificent colors, only a dull white glow. A white glow that reminded Nemo of Aotrom. The world looked gloomy.

At least initially. After a moment, Nemo realized certain colors popped through the gloom; the red of the grass was vibrant and Rayne's tattoos glowed, a fact she was just noticing. She was lifting up the collar of her shirt with a look of amazement, she saw Nemo looking at her and angled herself so he could see the flower tattoo that wrapped around her shoulder. "Look at this. It's glowing under the clothing, what is it reacting to?"

"Welcome tourists." They looked around for whoever said that. Em and Ri were standing with an arm resting on either side of a wooden sign. The sign read:

"This World of Ours"

"Claimed and Protected by Ri, Em, Gwen, Mac, and Ace."

Rayne was about to say something when Mac grabbed her arm and started examining her tattoo. "Guys look at this. Her tattoo glows like my magic." Ace and Gwen huddled around them.

"Can you tell us where we are?" Rayne asked.

Gwen looked up from the forearm. "To be honest we're not entirely sure. We found that portal in the woods one day and wound up here. Mac thinks we're in another realm."

Nemo was staring at the sun in the distance. "It's not hard to jump to that conclusion, just on the visuals alone."

The girls examining Rayne stepped back. "That and time gets weird here." said Ace. The statement caught both Nemo and Rayne's attention. She continued, "We can be here days but when we go back it'll have only been a few hours. And we can kind of choose when we want to go back. When you open the portal, you think about how long you want time to have passed and when you step through it, that's when you'll arrive."

Mac, who had started dancing around them in the field, chimed in, "This is a place where time overlaps. In my professional, magical, expertise," she tossed herself on the ground and stared up at the sky, "I've categorized this place as... *weird*."

Ri sturred. "We should get going. Follow us to the house." She turned around and headed off into the field as everyone followed.

After a short time they reached the edge of the field and Nemo was surprised to see that where the grass ended, the ground turned to sand, and sloped down into a beach. To add to the interesting visuals of this world, the sand was white like bleached bone and met a jet black ocean. Situated on the beach was a house of a design Nemo had never seen before. It appeared to be a two story house with a wooden deck that wrapped around it. The entrance seemed to be on the second floor and the house was pink with a light brown roof. The girls led them up the wooden stairs and up to the house. Nemo ran his hand over the side of the house, it was made of a material he had never seen before and found it hard to describe. Inside of the house was just as alien to Nemo and Rayne. They wandered around and marveled at everything they saw, from the furnishings to the strange devices around the house, none of which seemed to function.

Ri put her pack down on one of the couches in the sitting area as Em walked up and hugged her from behind, “Since we have guests, how about we camp out on the beach tonight?” Em asked.

“Sounds like a plan.” Ri replied, leaning back and kissing Em on the cheek. “That sound good to you guys?”

“I’ll start the fire,” Mac said, grabbing Nemo and Rayne’s hands, leading them through the house, “I can show you my *fire dancing*. Those killjoys banned me from doing it in the house.” Her eyes gleamed with excitement.

While Ri and Em grabbed everyone’s bags, Gwen and Ace grabbed supplies from the kitchen, and they all went down to a spot on the beach not far from the water; Nemo noted that the spot looked well worn. It had a fire pit dug out, around which were four log benches similar to the ones at the campsite in the woods, and encircling the site were eight poles about five feet high, each with glass jars tied to the tops of them. Mac and Nemo had gathered firewood from a small shed at the base of the deck on the way down and got the fire going.

Nemo was fascinated with the fire for a moment. It glowed as it should but didn’t radiate light like you’d expect. The distance illuminated by the light seemed to be cut drastically short of what it should be. It was like the light of the fire couldn’t cut through whatever veil covered this world. Nemo moved his hand around the fire, feeling the heat; testing and marveling at the change in illumination of his hand depending on how close or far it was from the fire. About three feet from the fire, the reflection of light was completely gone. Mac leaned over his shoulder, “*Weird*.”

Rayne was examining one of the jars on a pole, “What are these for?”

Mac looked over to see what she was asking about and jumped with excitement. “Oh, those are mine.” She stoked the fire until some ashes fell onto the sand near her, she scooped up a handful of sand that had several glowing embers in it, and ran to the jar Rayne was standing next to. Mac whispered into the sand, plucked out a glowing butterfly, and then dropped it into the jar before closing the lid. She then proceeded to do this for the rest of the jars. Nemo was shocked to realize that the butterflies radiated light just as they had in their world. “Like I said, *weird*.” Mac was behind Nemo again, startling him. “Normal light sources are muted, but magic and for some reason certain colors pop through the veil of this realm.”

“Any idea why your tattoos would glow, Rayne?” Ace asked. She and the other girls had situated themselves around the fire.

“Well, they are magical. Nothing too special, they just shift colors depending on the lighting.” Rayne along with the other two joined in around the campfire. “It’s a Ivloln specialty.”

“What is Ivloln like?” Ace asked “Are there a lot of elves there?”.

“It’s a large coastal city, they like their stone work. You’d be hard pressed to find a pureblood elf there. You’ll really only find High Elves in the richest cities like Aurum and for Ash Elves you’d have to travel out west. Plenty of half elves though.”

“Is there a lot of magic there? What about one of those schools you mentioned?” asked Mac.

“As far as I know there aren’t any traditional magic schools but there are plenty of ways to learn and practice magic in Ivloln. The city is famous for its magical artistry. Whether it’s painting, sculpting, or tattooing, if it’s an art someone in Ivloln has found a way of incorporating magic into it. Even the theatre and music are infused with it.” The girls looked at the travelers with wide eyes wonder.

“How did you two meet?” asked Gwen.

“Well,” started Rayne, “this one was taking his first steps out of Dustvale—”

“Dustgate.”

“Right, that’s what I said, Dustgate. Anyway, first steps out and our dear friend here, *immediately* gets captured by bandits. Now I see this and what is a heroic half-elf like myself supposed to do in a situation like that? Nemo was tied up and therefore would be no use in a fight and they had me outnumbered seven to one.” The girls looked on with excitement, Mac had grabbed a hand from both Gwen and Ace, Ri was curled up under an arm of Em’s. “Well, I decided to be the adventurer—,” she paused, “no. The *hero*, I had always dreamed of being when I was young and selflessly rushed to his aid.”

Nemo burst out laughing. “*You* were one of the bandits who ambushed me.” He turned to the girls, “She was their leader. Part way through monologuing, she was interrupted by her right hand man, who let her know they were going to be selling her out to their old boss. Luckily for us, a bit after nightfall the camp was ambushed by a pack of gnolls and we managed to get away.”

Ri picked her head up, “What’s a gnoll?”

Gwen looked over at her, “Hyena people.”

“Ah,” she said with a nod, “You guys have any good adventuring stories?”

For the next hour or so, the companions told the girls stories of places they’ve seen and quests they’ve been on. They regaled them with the story defending a town from a goblin attack, refused to talk about the incident with the mermaids, and horrified them with their tale of the Hanged Man.

When the stories ended the group fell into a comfortable silence until a realization hit Em. “Ace! We’re going to miss it!” she jumped to her feet and ran to the edge of the water as Ri fell into the sand.

“Your right!” Ace exclaimed as she jumped to her own feet, ran to Nemo and Rayne and led them by the hand to the edge of the water. “Guys check this out.”

The sun had set and there was no moon. The motionless jet black water melded perfectly with the obsidian sky. “We’re standing on the edge of everything.” said Em softly. It did indeed look like that Nemo thought. Where the white sand ended, it looked like an endless

abyss stretched out not only in front of them but also above and below. They were soon joined by the rest of the girls and they all stood there for a moment lost in thought.

A few minutes passed and the tide started up again. They could see bits of silver light reflecting off the waves. Nemo looked behind them and could see a full moon rising. The moon seemed to shine brighter than the sun, he looked around and saw that while the vibrant grass up at the field was now dulled, the white of the sand popped out more than it had. Everything else not in the light of Mac's butterflies seemed to have shifted to a black and white scale with shades of grey.

Mac stood on the tips of her toes and leaned over Nemo's shoulder and whispered: “ *Weird.* ”

“You need to stop doing that.” He said after a slight jump.

Laughing, they all settled back in around the fire. Before he drifted off to sleep he saw Em reach into her bag and place something on Ri's head. “You left this behind.” It was a crown made of young saplings and bridle twigs. Ri adjusted it a little and then placed her head on Em's lap.

Nemo woke up with the moon directly above them. At some point the fire had died out and the butterflies with it. He had no problem seeing though, the full moon illuminated everything in sight. He sat up and looked around. He noticed that Ri was missing. Nemo got up, grabbed his sword, and went to go check if she was in the beach house. He got to the deck and was about to enter the house when something far off at the treeline of the forest caught his eye. It was a tiny light. It wasn't a steady light, but blinked in and out a few times before stopping completely. Nemo debated waking someone, at the very least Rayne, but decided against it and headed off to where he saw the light.

The trek across the field took a decent amount of time, a little less than an hour Nemo guessed, based on the movement of the moon. Though, this being a different realm, he realized he might not be able to judge time based on the movements of the sun or moon. And that's ignoring this place being *weird* , he thought to himself.

Nemo made it to the treeline and found a path leading into the forest. It was a pine forest with some of the tallest pine trees he had ever seen. The trees were blocking out the light of the moon and the path looked like it was consumed by darkness not too far in. Nemo started to take a step onto the path when he noticed someone sitting beneath a tree just to the side of the path.

“Hi,” said Ri, sleepily.

“Hi, yourself. What are you doing out here?”

“Don't know. Woke up here.” she said, rubbing her eyes. She got up and looked around. She looked back at the tree she was sleeping against and picked up something that was laying out of Nemo's view. It was the rolled up blanket. Ri unwrapped it, revealing Aotrom's light. It looked like the same light Nemo saw from the beach house.

“So was that you...?” he started to ask.

“Did you bring me out here?”

“I just got here.”

Ri waved her hand at him, gesturing that she wasn't talking to him. “You could've just asked me to bring him out here... I'm trying to explain... no, no, I know you're frustrated too.” she was staring at the sword. “Okay I'll tell him.” Ri looked up at Nemo, “Aotrom wants to speak to you.”

“Your sword wants to speak to me?”

“Well, the best she can. It's going to be mostly feelings and impressions, but you should be able to get the intent of the message. Though just a warning, if there are any visions—” she looked concerned, “they can be intense.” Ri held out the sword, still partially wrapped in the blanket, with both hands for Nemo. He reached out his hand and the second it touched the hilt his world went black.

Suddenly he was floating above the beach. Below him was the beach house and the girls, in front of him the red field and the forest in the distance. A feeling of dread washed over him. Then a sense of foreboding, like a warning. He heard, or rather felt, the name Anntra.

His vision dimmed and came back with him on the beach looking at Ri holding the sword of light out over the ocean. Again he felt a name, this time Aotrom.

Suddenly he's standing in the middle of a neighborhood. All of the houses look like they were constructed by the same people who built the beach house. The houses spiraled out along a street from the center where he stood. He could hear the waves of an ocean beyond the houses in one direction but felt an urge to walk the opposite way. Cutting in between houses, he made it past three rings of houses, and found himself standing in another field of wine red grass, looking out at a treeline.

As he looked out over the field, he could start to hear a faint and distant pounding of a war drum. Without warning, dark shapes started emerging from the forest and rushing in his direction. They had cleared half the distance to him in the time it took Nemo to reach for his sword and feel nothing but air. He looked over his shoulder and saw he was weaponless. He also saw that the houses were gone and he was back at the girls' beach with the top of the beach house peaking above the grass a bit away.

The beating of the war drum sped up and Nemo turned back around to see nothing. There were no dark shapes rushing towards him. The drum held steady and Nemo became transfixed on the forest in front of him. Then underneath the drumming he heard a voice chanting. He couldn't understand what it was saying but everytime it started over it got a bit louder. The voice started out soft and young but as the chanting intensified, it turned into a guttural, almost demonic, voice. As it did, the world around him started to shake with the chanting and the drumming; Nemo fell to his knees and looked up to see the forest itself rush towards him.

Nemo opened his eyes and saw he was in a clearing surrounded by pine trees, the drumming and chanting were still there but had abated somewhat. In the center of the clearing was a woman, her features were shrouded in darkness but it looked like she was leaning on a cane or a stick. The chanting was coming from her. Just as Nemo was about to get to his feet the drumming and chanting burst with renewed vigor and the forest around him erupted in flames. He threw up his arms to protect his face from the heat and could hear and feel things, people maybe, stampeding past him.

He forced himself to his feet and the moment he did so, the heat of the inferno dropped away completely. Nemo lowered his arms and saw that he was standing again on the edge of a red grassed field. But instead of looking out over an ocean, he saw an endless salt flat. Where the sand met salt, a figure sat. They looked to be wearing a black cloak and a chainmail headdress, on top of which sat a black iron crown with six large spiked prongs. Several swords stood in the ground encircling her. She stood up and the world went silent.

Nemo blinked and when his eyes opened, he was looking at Ri and the girls walking towards the portal. Past them the remnants of the burnt down forest still smoked. Just as they were about to reach the portal, they stopped and turned to look at him with a look of absolute sadness.

Nemo snapped back to reality with Ri looking down at him. It took him a second to realize he was on the ground. "I told you the visions were intense."

"You did," he said with a groan and got to his feet. "Does the name Anntra mean anything to you?"

"I think it's the name of the world we're in. Did you see the scary chick with the swords?"

"The one chanting? Yeah. Do you know where that clearing is?"

"Possibly. If you follow this path you get to a clearing with a scarecrow. It might be that clearing. If not, I've only been past that spot once and hadn't really planned on doing it again."

"Why not?"

"I'll show you." Ri fully unwrapped Aotrom from the blanket and started off along the path. She held the sword aloft and as the darkness of the forest enveloped them, Aotrom shone brighter. It got to the point where the area around them was illuminated as if the moon was directly overhead, but even at its brightest, the light from the sword was never harsh on the eyes.

Ri led Nemo through the forest and out into a clearing. In the center of the clearing was a skeletal scarecrow wearing a black mourner's gown. On its head was a black veil and a crown made of twigs and vines with large thorns. Perched on its outstretched arms were four skulls carved out of a matte black stone. The scarecrow was surrounded by a circle of five swords.

Nemo focused on the figure for a moment, "Hey, Ri?" he asked, pointing to its head.

“Yeah, I see it.” she fiddled with the crown on her own head.

Nemo examined the area around them. In the trees were several crows that looked like they were carved out of the same black stone as the skulls.

“What’s even creepier,” said Ri, seeing Nemo looking into the trees, “is that they’re never in the same spots when you come back.”

Nemo turned back to the scarecrow and noticed a sign around its neck. He walked up to it and read it out loud, “No Further.”

“And we’ve never gone any further. Until the other night when I woke up in the next clearing past here.”

“You know we’re going to have to go there if we’re going to figure this out right?”

“I do.” she answered somberly.

They continued on the path and reached the second clearing. Just as Ri had described, there was the waist high boulder in the center and five paths leading further into the forest. There was one blatant difference between her description and what he was seeing, thought Nemo.

Sitting on the boulder was a skeleton. The skeleton was wearing a tan raincoat with a large hood and black jeans. It sat with its knees pulled up under its chin and appeared to be resting its face on its folded arms. Through its back was a spear pinning it to the rock. Five other spears were wedged into the top of the boulder at different angles, one running through the skeleton’s right shoulder and another through its left thigh.

Encircling the clearing and the boulder were five more skeletons, each pinned to a tree by a single sword up to its hilt. The skeletons were dressed in various combinations of casual wear, similar to what teenagers would wear, and bits of armor.

Ri took a couple of steps into the clearing. “This is new.”

Chapter 3

After a long day of running drills with the guards, followed by a long evening doing chores, Teddy was happy to fall into his bed and go to sleep. Unfortunately for him, the second he entered his room and closed the door, he heard a tap on the window. He looked over and saw a small rock hit the glass. Teddy sighed and opened the window. "I'm tired and want to go to bed guys," he told the two boys standing outside. They were cloaked in shadow but he had a good idea who they were.

"We're all tired. But Gordie wants us all to meet on the edge of town." Teddie recognized Chris's voice.

"Did he say why?" Teddy asked.

"Nope. Just to meet him." It was the other boy. His name was Vern. Teddy and him had been friends for as long as they could remember; they joined the guardsmen together. Actually, Teddy, Vern, Chris, & Gordie had all been friends since childhood and all decided to join the guards together. Vern was the same height as Teddy and they both shared the same brown hair and green eyes. Many people thought they were brothers. Chris was a few inches taller than them and had short red hair.

"Okay. Give me a sec." Teddy put on the black hooded jacket with white lining the boys were given when they joined the guard. He climbed out the window and followed the two other boys to the meet up spot. Both of them were also in their jackets and were wearing the same olive green pants.

When they reached the edge of town no one was there. "Are you sure this is the spot?" Teddy asked.

"Edge of town leading to the woods. That's what he said," answered Vern.

"They're here." said Chris pointing behind them. Gordie and two other boys were walking towards them fairly quickly. The three of them were in their armor.

"Hey guys," Gordie said coolly, as he tossed two heavy bags on the ground, "armor up. Hopefully we can be back before anyone notices this stuff is missing," Gordie was the tallest among the boys and looked several years older than he was thanks to his physique. He had his brown hair shaved down at the sides. Gordie was the only one not wearing his trainee jacket, instead he just had a t-shirt under his armor.

Teddy and the two with him sorted through the bag and got their armor on as the two boys who came with Gordie handed out spears and short swords. Teddy could see now that it was Michael and Sam, two brothers who had moved to town recently. While Teddy and Vern looked like they could be brothers, Michael and Sam couldn't look further apart. Michael was short and stocky with dark black hair and a round face. While Sam was tall, lanky, and had blonde hair down to his shoulders.

“I thought you said this was a training drill?” Sam asked Gordie.

“No, I said it was a team building exercise.” Gordie responded as he opened the second bag and handed out lanterns.

“Stealing, breaking curfew, and scheming are team building exercises with you guys?” asked Michael.

“Pretty much,” said Teddy and Vern in unison. Sam looked at Michael who gave a nod of acceptance.

“Can you tell us *why* we’re here?” asked Chris bluntly.

Gordie opened his mouth to speak but a voice from the darkness cut him off. “Yes please tell us why you boys aren’t home and then why I shouldn’t run you tomorrow until you puke for breaking curfew.” Gordie lit his lantern and spun around, casting light on Lieutenant Seamus and, even more to the boys’ chagrin, Captain Gawain. Where Lieutenant Seamus looked like a tough old bulldog with mutton chops, Captain Gawain looked like the statue of a legendary king come to life. He had shoulder length light brown hair, a well kempt beard, and piercing blue eyes. He stood a foot taller than Gordie.

“I can explain—” Gordie started.

“Oh please do,” the Captain said in a commanding voice.

“I’m worried about Gwen and Ace, and the others. I think they might be in over their heads with something.” Gordie paused and waited. Captain Gawain nodded for him to continue.

“When we were shadowing Lieutenant Seamus today, we ran into Ri, Ace, and two other people. A man and a half-elf. Ri was bringing them to meet the others.”

“Why does this make you worry?” Gawain asked. The Captain’s voice never faltered from his commanding tone when he spoke to those under his command. But at the same time it was never the voice of a superior talking down to a subordinate.

“The Lieutenant can back me up, these two were either mercenaries or adventurers. Either way, people who should have no business being in Steepwick, because there is no business for them in Steepwick.” Gordie took a breath, “Don’t get me wrong, everyone seemed friendly with each other, so no worry there. I don’t think the trouble is with them. I’m thinking Ri hired them for something. I wanted to get the boys together and find out what’s going on before anything bad happened or anyone got into any trouble.”

Captain and Lieutenant shared a look and a nod. “The Lieutenant can indeed back up your story. In fact he was telling me about the encounter when we saw three of you sneaking out of the guardpost, loot in hand.” The Captain looked the boys over. “Why are you so sure they need *your* help? There’s a reason I bring my Gwendolynn in when you new recruits need humbling. Also, from the Lieutenant’s description, these newcomers don’t sound like they’d go down easy in a fight.”

“That’s my point though,” Gordie pleaded, “instead of coming to us, or you, they went and got outside help. Professional help. Did they do that because they did something they’d get in trouble for and need cleaned up, or are they afraid of something and don’t want anyone they care about getting hurt?”

Captain Gawain thought for a moment, “Where do you think they are, the campsite?”

“Probably not. They...” Gordie paused, uncertain, “they don’t actually stay at the campsite. They have some kind of secret spot deeper into the woods.”

Captain Gawain stepped closer to Gordie. “And how do you know this?”

Gordie looked down at his feet, “Umm, just based on things I’ve overheard them say.”

“He has a crush on Ace and—” everyone’s head snapped towards Chris, “what? He does. There was a night where we went to *accidentally* bump into them in the woods but when we got to the campsite they were just leaving. We’ve tried following them a few times but always lose the trail.”

Gawain was looking down at Gordie again. “How much do you trust this feeling that something is wrong? Enough to do drills until your feet bleed if you’re wrong?”

Gordie looked up at him, “Sure enough to do it even if we’re right.”

“Good enough for me. Go make sure my daughters and their friends are safe. If this is serious, come find us *immediately*. When this is all done, we can have a conversation about,” Gawain leaned in closer to Gordie, and smiled. Teddy couldn’t remember the last time he saw the Captain smile, “certain *intentions*.” Gordie nodded and rushed off towards the woods, the rest of the boys in tow.

As they walked, Teddy was flanked by Michael and Sam. Michael had waited until they were well out of earshot of the adults before speaking, “Isn’t Ace the elf? How is she related to the Captain?”

“She’s a half-elf, otherwise she’d be gold, stupid.” Sam said childishly.

“What? That’s not a thing,” shot back Michael.

“Well,” Teddy cut in, “I don’t know about the gold skin, but Ace is a half-elf. And she’s the Captain’s adopted daughter. Him and her father were war buddies or something.”

“What about her—” Michael was cut off by Gordie dropping into a crouch and gesturing for them to do the same.

“Quiet. Lights out.” he instructed. Everyone extinguished their lanterns. Teddy scanned the darkness for what caused the alarm. A little ways away, near the border of Steepwick Woods, was a campsite. The group crept forward trying to get a look at whose camp it was. As they

did, Teddy could make out six figures, five in white armor and grey cloaks, and the sixth in black clothing, sitting around the fire. “We should go around—”

“How about you boys come sit by the fire for a moment?” a female voice from the camp called out. The boys looked to Gordie for instructions. He stayed crouched, seemingly frozen in place. “I’m not going to ask a second time,” she said, her voice a bit harsher now. Gordie stood up and made the walk over to the camp. Everyone else followed.

As the boys entered the light of the campsite, the eyes of the Black Star guards were trained on them. None of them moved to stop them, but they all looked ready to pounce. Teddy took note that, along with the swords on their belts, they all had crossbows within arms reach. He looked towards the fire and saw the woman in black stand up as they approached. She was as tall as Gordie and looked just as fit, dark umber skin with short dark blonde hair. She wore black trousers and a black combat jacket. Her imposing image was topped off by the red skull painted over her face. “Hello boys,” her voice was falsely sweet, “what are we doing out so late tonight?”

“We were on our way to do some wilderness training.” Gordie said.

“Oh, you’re strapping.” She said running a finger over his chestplate. “Awfully late to be starting that now, don’t you think?”

“It’s survival training. We need to be able to set up a camp without the benefit of daylight, should the need ever arise.”

“You know, Steepwick doesn’t have much. But I have always been impressed with the level of training they give their guards. I know militias who don’t go into as much detail as you folks.”

Chris scoffed under his breath, “Black Star needs their investments protected.”

The woman put one hand on Gordie’s shoulder and the other on Vern’s, who was standing next to him, and parted the boys, looking for who spoke. She leaned forward, the boys on either side of her blocking the light of the fire, and to Teddy’s shock, her eyes gleamed in the moonlight like an animal’s. “That they do,” she said flatly, “you boys should probably be on your way. Don’t want to miss valuable training time.” She leaned back, took her hands off Gordie and Teddy, and shooed them away like an annoyed parent.

All of the boys except Gordie started to leave. “What are *you* doing out here? Black Star has never shown an interest in Steepwick other than the mine.”

“Like your friend said,” the honeyed tone was back, “Black Star protects its investments; there are stories older than either of us about people disappearing in this forest and something dark living within. And for *some* reason, my boss decided now was a good time to look into it. You boys wouldn’t know about anything interesting going on in there, would you?” A giant grin spread across her face.

“We never got your name.”

“No. No you didn’t,” she said, lightly tapping him on the cheek, “run along boys.”

The boys reached the campsite without any issue but like Gordie had said, the girls were nowhere to be found. Gordie stopped everyone just before they entered the clearing. “Everyone wait here. Teddy, figure out which direction they headed out.”

“Why him?” Chris asked.

“Because he’s the only one who pays attention during the tracking lessons.”

He wasn’t wrong Teddy thought as he looked over the footprints at the sight. He actually enjoyed the tracking and survival lessons more than anything else. He walked over to the extinguished fire pit, found a spot where it looked like a struggle took place, then over to a spot near where the boys entered the clearing, and then to the opposite side of the site. “They went into the woods here,” he pointed.

“That’s great but how do we follow them from here?” Chris asked smugly. “We’re not going to be able to see their tracks in the dark or find whatever markers they use, if they even use any.”

“Actually,” Teddy replied, “the last time we tried following them I noticed—”

“Shhh,” Gordie shushed Teddy while looking around. “Do you think you can follow them?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

“Good. You lead, but keep quiet about how you’re doing it.”

Confused, Teddy started into the woods followed by Chris, then Vern and Gordie, with Michael and Sam bringing up the rear. They walked in silence for a while until Teddy led the group into a clearing. The clearing was perfectly circular and in the center was a giant orb floating above a stone ring. Teddy pointed out to Gordie the footprints leading to the object. The boys approached and circled around the curious site.

“Anyone have any ideas on what this is?” Vern asked.

Chris poked the orb with his spear sending ripples across its surface. The boys jumped back. “Hold on,” he looked at the boys to his left and his right, “everyone step back. Michael, Sam, you’re on the other side right? Move to either side.” Everyone followed along. Chris took a few steps back, readied his spear, and launched it into the orb. It went in with no resistance, ripples spread out like before, but to the shock of the boys, the spear didn’t come out the other side.

“Well that’s interesting,” said Gordie. He walked up to the orb and gently tapped it, quickly pulling his finger away he felt it with his thumb. “It’s wet. I think it’s water.”

“How is that water?” Chris asked.

“No clue. But, Teddy, do you see any tracks leading away from here?”

Teddy did a quick check of the area. “No.”

“Okay then.” As Gordie said this, he walked a bit away from the floating orb, he pulled a tan raincoat out of his pack, put it on, and spun around. He took a deep breath and exhaled as he put up the large hood on the coat. “Okay then,” he said again, this time more to himself, and took off running towards the orb, jumping into it.

Chapter 4

Nemo brought the lantern out from his bag and walked around the clearing, taking everything in as Ri stared horrified at the macabre art display in front of her. He stopped and looked up at one of the five skeletons pinned to a tree. Like the others, the skeleton was lifted a few feet off the ground so that the pommel of the sword embedded in its chest was at eye level. He cautiously moved his hand to the grip to test how firmly in place it was. His eyes went to the black jacket with white lining the skeleton was wearing. It was a nice jacket, he thought. Nemo looked around the circle and stopped on a skeleton wearing the same jacket. He walked over to it while calling out to Ri. “Do these jackets mean anything to you?”

“What?” she asked, startled out of her trance. “They look like the ones the guards get when they join.” Ri looked around, “I was here a day ago. The only thing here was the boulder and the sword.”

“I’m not doubting you, but these guys look like they’ve been here awhile.” He examined the sword sticking out of one of the skeletons, trying to touch it as little as possible. “The blade on this sword is rusting, and I’m not the tracker Rayne is but I’d expect a display like this, whether done by one person or a few, would require a bit of foot traffic. I don’t see any tracks other than our own.”

Ri walked forward to the skeleton sitting on the boulder at the center of the clearing. “This looks like the raincoat—” she stopped dead.

Nemo turned around, Ri was staring down one of the forest paths. He was about to ask what was wrong when he heard them. Voices headed their way. Ri’s face had gone pale at the sound of the voices. “There shouldn’t be people here.” she said quietly.

Nemo grabbed her by the arm and led her into the trees, crouching down and extinguishing his lantern. “Cover the sword.”

Ri quickly got the blanket out of her bag and loosely wrapped Aotrom up in it. After a few seconds of waiting, two hooded figures holding torches and spears, with swords on their belts, emerged from the dark path.

“See?” The first figure said, vindictively. “I wasn’t making stuff up. I did my patrol this morning and nothing. Evening patrol, this.” He gestured around the clearing. Nemo couldn’t see their faces but their voices sounded young.

The second figure walked up to one of the skeletons wearing a guard jacket and started examining it. “This looks like one of ours. Is anyone missing their jacket?”

“I don’t think so. I don’t remember seeing anyone without theirs.” said the first.

The one doing the investigating walked over to the center display and looked over the spears. “These look like our spears but those aren’t our swords.” As he said this, he lightly touched the tan raincoat the center skeleton was wearing.

“Is this a warning?” His companion asked, he sounded scared.

“*Yeah*, I think we can say it is,” the second figure said disparagingly. He paused for a moment. “They don’t usually give warnings though.” He looked around the circle, as he did the torch light reflected off the white liner of his hood. “Unless—” he was cut off by Ri bursting from their hiding spot.

“Chris? What the fuck are you guys doing here?” she asked, gesturing with the covered Aotrom. The two boys whipped around to face her, both pulling back their hoods.

“Briana, what the hell? We’ve been looking for you guys for months.” replied the ginger, angrily.

“First off, Bri- *anna* you piece of shit. We’ve known each other since we were six, get it right. Second, what do you mean *months*? We’ve been here less than a day.” Chris scoffed and rolled his eyes annoyed.

“Hi, Ri.” the other boy said, waving awkwardly with his torch hand.

“Hey Teddy.” she looked around and noticed Nemo wasn’t with her. Seeing the worried look on her face he stepped out of the trees with his hands slightly raised. The noise and his sudden appearance startled the boys. They planted the torches into the ground and quickly moved between him and Ri; spears at the ready. “Wait, wait. Stop it!” she said smacking both boys on the shoulder. “He’s with me. Teddy, what did this jerk mean you’ve been looking for us for months?” Both boys relaxed, Chris started pacing around the clearing.

“It’s like he said. Gordie led us into the woods to find you guys. Girls. He thought you were in trouble—”

“Why would he think that?”

Teddy eyed Nemo nervously. “I mean...” he sheepishly gestured to the adventurer. “Why else would you be hanging out with someone like him?”

“Someone like me?” Nemo asked, smirking.

Before Teddy could answer, Chris was back in the group, gesturing with his spear. “This was months ago! We think. We lost track of the days a long time ago. We followed you through the portal and have been stuck here ever since.” He was trying to sound angry but Nemo heard his voice shake a couple of times.

Ri brushed the spear away from her face. “Listen, no one told you to follow us—”

“Gwen’s father did.”

At this point Nemo noticed that the boy Teddy wasn’t paying attention to the argument. Rather he was standing with his weapon ready, glancing into the forest. “Chris.” he said nervously. Chris ignored him but in the torch light Nemo could see that a thick fog had suddenly covered the forest. The fog was so dense that the paths and all but the closest trees had completely vanished. As if it had intelligently encircled them while they were distracted,

it was now steadily creeping into the clearing. "Chris!" he said more desperately. Chris finally stopped glaring at Ri and looked around.

"Shit, they're here. Circle up." Chris moved to Teddy's side and readied his spear. The fog was already upon them.

Ri looked to Nemo. "What's going on?"

"I don't know." He replied, gripping his sheathed sword. "But be ready and stay close."

Ri gripped the wrapped sword close to her chest and took a deep breath. The silence of the darkness was broken by the crunching of forest debris from several directions around them. "Okay," she said exhaling. She unfurled Aotrom and the moment it touched the air, the fog shot back from around her and most of the clearing, startling both boys.

Teddy turned around and saw Ri holding the glowing sword. "That's new."

Ri smirked at him as Chris looked to see what he was talking about. "Do you know how to use that?" he snarked.

"Do you still have that scar from when I tagged you in training?"

The sounds of footsteps in the forest converged at a point to the left of them just outside the clearing, still cloaked in fog. The group repositioned themselves to face whatever was in the forest. Chris and Teddy in the front with their spears ready, Nemo and Rayne behind them. Rayne and Aotrom at the ready. Nemo drew his own sword with one hand and with the other, he palmed a glass marble from inside of the leather satchel at his side. Nemo had barely readied his sword with both hands when three figures engulfed in pitch black shadow emerged from the forest.

They were tall; their heights varied slightly but Nemo guessed that even the shortest one stood three to four inches taller than him. The darkness drifted off of them like thick steam vapor. Their silhouettes resembled men or elves but appeared to have large horns.

After a moment of the two groups staring at each other, the figures drew weapons of their own from places unseen. The two flanking shadows had swords while the middle one held two axes. It leaned back, face to the sky, and from it a sound like the crack of thunder emerged. Nemo's vision shook with the noise and he fell to one knee; steadying himself with his sword. He looked to his right, Ri was on her knees with her hands over her ears, forehead pressed against the ground, and Aotrom laying just in front of her; dimmer than it had been. He looked up as the fog rushed back towards them. As it passed through the figures, their forms puffed out like a cloud of smoke; their silhouette now a swirling mass of pitch black mist.

To Nemo's surprise it was the boys who made the first move. Teddy and Chris charged the left and right masses; who moved forward steadily in kind. A second before they clashed, Chris stopped, hurled his spear at Teddy's target and without seeing the result, unsheathed his short sword and engaged his target. The one creature dodged the thrown spear but in doing so was unprepared when Teddy ran his own through its chest. A thunderous roar, similar to the

one before, echoed through the clearing. Nemo's vision shook again but he recovered quickly.

The impaled creature grabbed Teddy by the jacket and whipped around. Teddy went flying through the air and disappeared into the fog. The shadow dropped the tattered jacket half that tore off Teddy's body and gave chase into the mist. It was at that moment that Nemo realized the boys didn't know he and Ri didn't charge with them.

Nemo launched himself forward like a runner at the starting line; he charged towards the third and biggest of the creatures. As he did, the fog around them rushed back again, almost like he had startled it. To his left Chris was holding his own against his target but not gaining any ground as the dark figure's attacks became more and more aggressive. Ahead and to the right, Teddy was on the ground, struggling against his adversary who was standing over him; evidently the creature had ripped the spear from its chest because it was now trying to impale Teddy with it. As Nemo shifted his focus back to his own target, Ri came rushing past him to help Teddy. As she did, Aotrom gripped in both hands shining brightly; the fog continued to run further from them, from her. The creatures' forms snapped back into focus as the fog passed by them again. In front of him, his foe waiting for him.

He was about twelve feet away from it when the black silhouette launched itself forward, axes held high above its head, smoke like darkness trailing behind it. Vibrations shook Nemo's bones as their weapons clashed. He quickly found himself on the defensive. He peddled backwards parrying and dodging. Rushing in was reckless Nemo thought to himself. He didn't know what this was or how to fight it. Was this a beast or was there intelligence in the darkness.

Nemo got his answer as they clashed again, locking weapons. The figure pressed its weight against Nemo's sword and brought its face close to his. No features could be made out from the darkness but from the abyss a chuckle like rolling thunder emerged. Intelligence, it was enjoying the fight. Good, Nemo thought.

With all of his strength, Nemo pushed the interlocked weapons upwards exposing both his and the figure's chests. Take the bait, he silently pleaded.

Crunch. Nemo felt his sternum crack as the figure kicked him in the chest, sending him tumbling backwards. He used the momentum to roll backwards and create distance. As his feet touched the ground he sprang up and backwards, widening the gap even more. The figure reared back and let out another thunderous laugh as Nemo flung the palmed marble forward. It struck the shadow in the chest and the sound of actual thunder echoed through the forest. Lightning ripped through the figure hitting a tree behind it; charred splinters and sparks exploded from the trunk.

The forest fell dead silent as the figure crumpled down dead. It hit the ground and evaporated in a puff of smoke. The two other figures froze in place, seemingly stunned. Chris was the first to take advantage of the lull. His adversary had him pressed up against a tree with a skeleton hanging from it. One of its hands was around his neck, the other holding his sword hand at bay. Chris reached above him and grabbed the sword holding the body in place. The creature screamed as he brought it down on its collar bone. It loosened its grip on Chris's wrist and then went silent as he drove the freed sword up through its chin.

Chris stumbled forward through the smoke, skeleton following, as Nemo shifted his attention to Ri and Teddy. Their foe had regained its faculties and was holding its ground against the pair. It lashed out with its sword in one hand and twirled its stolen spear around with the other when it needed to drive them back. It was all Teddy could do to keep out of its reach. Where Nemo's adversary moved and fought like a warrior powered by adrenaline, this one moved like a nimble fighter he observed.

Unlike Teddy, Ri parried and evaded the figure with ease. Nemo was about to rush in to help when something about Aotrom made him pause. Just before any movement Ri made, Aotrom's light pulsed slightly. It pulsed, she knocked the figure's sword away from her. Pulse, she brought her sword down on the creature who only barely managed to block with its spear. Pulse, she spun away from its counter attack. Mid spin Aotrom pulsed again, this time brighter than before. Ri moved and repositioned herself with unnatural speed, striking down again against the figure; this time slicing through the spear and the creature's arm. It reeled back in pain but, with a pulse, Ri was right there driving Aotrom into its chest. The figure blew away in a puff of smoke before Aotrom's hilt made contact.

The fight was over and the group had a moment to breath. Nemo chuckled to himself watching Chris struggle with the skeleton he was now entangled with as Ri broke the silence.

"You can do magic?!" she exclaimed.

"Not exactly."

"Looked like magic to me." she said, approaching with Teddy.

"Same." Teddy agreed, looking hesitant to get close to Nemo.

"Just a bag of tricks, no magic talent here." He looked to Chris. "What were those things?"

"We don't know. We've been calling them shadow people... because why not?"

"Scathanna." It was Ri. "They're called scathanna." Aotrom pulsed when she said the name.

"How...how do you know what they're called?" Teddy asked.

"I don't—"

"Aotrom is telling you isn't it?" asked Nemo.

Ri looked at the sword as it pulsed again. "I think she is."

"Great the glowy sword talks to you..." Chris cut in. He looked at Teddy, "You in one piece?" Teddy looked himself over, removed the jacket half that was still hanging on to him, and nodded sheepishly. "Good. We need to get going before more come. The fog is gone. We need to *move* ." He looked around to get his bearings and started towards one of the paths.

"This is the way to the beach." Ri said, pointing down a different path.

“Your beach maybe. We’re going back to ours.” he looked to Teddy. “We said we’d be back before nightfall.”

“Hold up.” Ri shook her head in confusion. “It was the middle of the night when we entered the forest.”

Chris rolled his eyes. “When you entered the forest, *your* beach was in the middle of the night. Each path leads to a different beach. Each beach is on a different time schedule.” He started to walk away but turned back. “How have you guys not figured that out yet?”

“*I’m sorry* . When we came across a scarecrow made from a skeleton, with a creepy sign telling us not to go any further, we didn’t!”

“Wait. You guys got a warning not to go further into the forest?” Teddy asked.

“Yeah, about halfway between here and our beach is another clearing.”

The two boys looked at each other. “Ours comes straight here. And the others we’ve been to are also straight shots.” said Teddy.

“Look. We can tell you guys everything we know about this place but we need to leave now.” Chris said, almost pleadingly.

Ri looked at Nemo. “Should we go with them?”

“You guys were sent here to look for the girls right?” he asked Chris.

“We were.”

“If we go with you, will your group come back with us to their beach? To consolidate the groups.”

“Yeah. We’d do that. Gordie would probably suggest the same anyway.”

“Then yeah. We go with them.” Nemo said to Ri.

The group was walking for a bit, with Chris and Teddy in the lead when Nemo put his hand on Ri’s shoulder slowing her pace. “How are you feeling?”

“I’m good. Wasn’t hurt in the fight.”

“That’s...not exactly what I meant.” He paused trying to find the best way to ask his question. “Was Aotrom giving you instructions in the fight?”

“She was. Kind of. But not really.” She was speaking quickly, still hyped up on adrenaline. “Wait how did you know?”

“The sword would glow just before you acted. Like when it talks to you.”

“She wasn’t talking to me and I’m not even sure it was her.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’ve experienced it. When she talks to you there is a presence. You feel her. This... something was guiding me, not talking to me, and it wasn’t always female. In fact most of the time it was male, different males and once or twice the presence was female. But not Aotrom.” She thought for a second. “Should I be worried?”

“I don’t know. We don’t really know what that sword is. Just be careful, okay?”

She nodded as Teddy called out to them. “Guys catch up, we’re here.”

The group stepped out of the forest and onto a familiar looking field of red grass. Ri ran ahead a few feet and stared wide eyed into the distance. “Are those houses?” Nemo looked ahead and sure enough, roughly two miles ahead of them was a cluster of houses. He also took note of an odd shaped structure about halfway between them and the houses.

“Yeah, there’s fourteen of them.” Teddy answered. “They’re arranged in a spiral along a street. A bit past them is our beach. What about your beach?”

“We just have the one house on the beach.” Ri shielded her eyes from the sun that was setting in front of them. “Who is that?” She was pointing at the structure that now had someone under it waving a torch back and forth.

Chris stepped ahead of her and raised his torch in the air. “That’s our guard post.” He mimicked the other light’s movement as he said this. “Those creatures haven’t attacked us here yet but we’re still being careful. Come on.” He led them to the structure and Nemo couldn’t be anymore confused at what he saw. The structure, which he was now thinking is the wrong word, was a cylindrical object roughly the size of a carriage lying on the ground. Extending from the cylinder, at an angle upwards, was a large slab of metal at least the length of the main section. This gave the appearance that the object was lying slightly on its side. Nemo walked to what he presumed to be the front and ran his hand over the surface. At the front and along the sides, someone painted a black mouth with sharp white teeth. He crouched down and tried looking through the oval, bubble-like glass window that sat on top of the object. Years of dirt and grime made it almost impossible to see through. As Nemo circled to the back he saw that it looked like the object was originally larger, it looked like a chunk of it had been ripped off. He was so enamored by the object that he hadn’t noticed Ri was following him until he was back with the boys and was startled for a second that she wasn’t there.

“What is this thing?” Ri asked from behind Nemo.

“We have no idea.” said a tall boy with long blonde hair, he was the one who signaled them. “My brother thinks it's some kind of dwarven machine.”

“It’s fascinating but not why we’re here.” said Chris. “Sam, grab your stuff.”

“But my shift isn’t over.”

“Gordie is going to be calling a meeting and I don’t feel like trekking back out here to get you. Come on.”

Chris led the group to the center of the neighborhood and it was only then that Nemo realized he’d been here before. Ri must have had the same thought. “Nemo—”

“I know.” he replied.

“Does this mean—” she looked back to the forest nervously.

“I don’t know. In my vision the sun was above the forest. Not the ocean.”

“Same. So no attack yet?”

“What attack?” asked Teddy. He was standing beside them with Sam. Nemo looked around and Chris was gone.

“My sword gave us visions. One of them was this place being attacked by those shadow creatures.”

“Your sword gives you visions?” Sam asked.

“Apparently it also talks to her,” it was Chris coming back with several other boys. “She also says they’ve been here less than a day.”

“Chris, shut up for a second.” said the tallest of the boys. He looked to be wearing the same outfit as the others but wore a tan raincoat instead of the black jacket. “Ri, it’s good to see you.”

“Gordie, you guys keep talking like we didn’t see you just yesterday.”

“Ri, we’ve been here months. We’ve searched almost all of the beaches but never found any sign of you guys.”

“Almost?” Nemo asked.

The lead boy looked him over. “A few of the paths are blocked to us. When we first got here we searched this beach and three others. One was completely empty. One had a few dozen broken and decaying long ships that look hundreds of years old. And the third is an endless salt flat where the ocean should be.”

“What about the last one? There are five paths at the clearing.” Nemo asked.

“We haven’t had a chance to search there. Traveling back from the salt flat was the first time we were attacked by the shadows. Ever since then, if we enter on to a path it fills with fog and we’re attacked. Their attack parties are usually between two and four but even with a full group it takes everything we have to fight them off.” he sighed heavily. “We never tried

pushing into the last beach. The second we stepped foot on that path, they were upon us. We thought that was the one they were coming from. I'm sorry."

Ri looked at Nemo and then back to Gordie. "You have nothing to apologize for. We've been coming here for over a year and have never been attacked."

Gordie nodded his head understandingly, "I still don't understand the time difference though."

"I had a thought on that," said Nemo, "Bri, you and the girls said you can choose when you go back? You can choose how long you've been gone?"

"Yeah?" she responded questioningly, clearing not following his thought process.

"What if the same thing can happen when entering the portal? Have you girls ever entered the portal separately or is it always as a group?"

"A group. It was part of our pact; we could only come here as a group."

"So your theory..." Gordie cut in, "your theory is that this place is...?"

"That this place is *weird* ." said Nemo, mimicking Mac. "Also, how did you guys figure out how to open the portal?"

"We didn't..." he trailed off for a second, "it was already open when we got there, I thought you guys left it open."

"The portal closed behind us. Someone else must be coming and going from this place."

"Great. Now that, that is cleared up. What is this about an attack?"

Ri took a deep breath, "Okay, so long story short. Found this glowing sword in the woods, picked it up, turns out the sword is a she named Aotrom, she started talking to me and giving me visions. I'm part of some prophecy about defeating a great evil at the expense of those I love."

"That's... a lot. Do you have specifics on what this 'great evil' is? Could it be the shadow creatures?"

"They're actually called Scathanna. And I don't think so. They're definitely involved but I don't think they're Aotrom's main focus."

"Gordie, it could also be the queen." Chris interjected.

"What queen?" Ri asked.

Gordie took a deep breath, "At the salt flat. We traveled a decent way across the dead ocean and came upon a field of swords sticking out of the ground. Almost like grave markers. At the center of the field was a woman. She was kneeling on the ground, maybe praying. She was wearing a black gown with long sleeves, it looked like a mourners gown. Her head and

face are covered by a silver chainmail veil that came down to her torso. On her head was an iron crown with long spiked prongs. When we called out to her the entire field of swords started shaking. The closest to her lifted into the air and started circling her.”

“What did you guys do?” Ri asked.

Chris shook his head, “We fucking ran.”

“We did,” confirmed Gordie, “we ran back to the clearing where we were attacked for the first time by the shadow people. The Scathanna.” He looked at Aotrom wrapped up and tied to Ri’s pack. “Could you ask your sword about her? We’ve been calling her the Queen of Swords.”

“I came up with that.” said the short dark haired boy standing next to Sam.

“It’s really hard to ask Aotrom about specific things,” started Ri, “we don’t have full conversations. They’re fragmented. I actually get the feeling like she’s hurt; not whole and struggling.”

“Oh.” Gordie thought for a second. “Have you tried healing her?”

“How would I even start to go about that? My mom is the blacksmith and even then she’s not physically damaged.”

“Actually, I was thinking Mac. I know she has some healing spells up her sleeve, have you tried asking her to heal Aotrom?”

“I have not.” She looked stunned. “That’s actually a really good idea.”

“Well, no time to waste. BOYS!” The other five boys who had been standing at the ready rushed to Gordie. “Pack up. We’re leaving in ten.” The boys ran off into several houses; presumably to gather their things. As Teddy turned to leave Gordie grabbed his shoulder. “Where is your jacket, guardsman?”

“We ran into some of the Scath... Scathanna?” he looked to Ri for reassurance and she nodded in response. “It got torn in half in the fight. I’m sorry.” he stared at the ground as he apologized.

Gordie playfully nudged him on the shoulder. “I’m sure you gave them hell for it.” He took off his raincoat and tossed it to him. “Take it, give it back to me when we get home.”

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