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**The University of Northern Colorado
Greeley, Colorado**

Elensa:

Finding the Heart of the Labyrinth

**An Honors Thesis
Submitted in Fulfillment for
Graduation with Honors Distinction and
Degree of Bachelor of English**

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Department of English
May 2018**

ELENSA: Finding the Heart of the Labyrinth

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**RECEIVED BY THE UNIVERSITY CAPSTONE
PROJECT COMMITTEE ON:**

MAY 8, 2018

Abstract

This creative research project undertakes the world-building and writing of the first part of a fiction novel with the goal of engaging the reader in a question of priorities. In the story, Elensa, daughter of the king of the dwarves, makes an offer to the dwarves of her father's kingdom: If they can find their way to the heart of an ancient labyrinth, they will be rewarded with riches, respect, and a chance at being chosen as her husband, the future king of Kulezim. Drawn by Elensa's promise, many dwarves pursue their desires for power, wealth, and meaning into the labyrinth. Each dwarf enters to gain what he values most, but the perils of the labyrinth may force them all to think twice. What do they treasure above all else? How much are they willing to lose for Elensa?

Like the dwarves in *Elensa*, humans often wrestle with and disagree over the question of what is most important in life. Are riches everything? Friendship? Vitality? The opinions of each person on this question will motivate their decisions and therefore the way they move in the world. *Elensa* endeavors to provide the reader with time for contemplating what they treasure most through the experiences of the characters in the story.

To reach the audience in this way, *Elensa* needed to be both engaging and meaningful. This required research into how elements of the fantasy world might behave (such as caves, molten rock, blades, etc.) as well as research into the symbolic meaning of certain figures (such as dwarves, jewels, and salamanders.) It also required multiple revisions and re-writings to capture the fantasy world in a way that might grab the reader. This thesis includes a literature review describing how some research was integrated into the project, a methods section overviewing the project process, a final timeline, a bibliography, and the first part of *Elensa*.

Acknowledgements

*To the UNC English Department,
To Michener Library,
To the honors director and staff,
To the professors who grew me,
To my honors advisor Loree Crow,
To the passing strangers who were kind,
To the lingering friends who were kinder,
To my thesis advisor Dr. Bovaird-Abbo,
To Mom, Dad, Bassem, Najy, Yousef,
Leila, Rania, & Aleena,
And to my God—*

Thank you.

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Topic: What do you treasure?

This project entailed the construction and writing of the first part of the fantasy novel *Elensa*. The premise for this novel is that Elensa, daughter of King Olethim of the dwarves, has opened up an ancient labyrinth and promised any dwarf who can traverse it before the spring that she will reward him with a principedom. Furthermore, from among those dwarves, Elensa promises to choose her husband and the future king of Kulezim. With these prizes set before them, dwarves throng to the maze to try their luck and win themselves future glory. They will soon discover, however, that the labyrinth is no game. Facing wonder and pain, life and death, the dwarves must examine what is most important to them and how much they are willing to suffer. The novel tells their story.

This story is important because it gives the reader an opportunity to meditate on the priorities which form the foundation for every decision they make. Each of the dwarves going into the danger of the labyrinth goes for the sake of something he treasures—whether wealth, power, Elensa herself, or something else. Through their adventures there, they will have many opportunities to consider how much they are willing to give up for that treasure, and whether it was as important as they thought. Therefore, the reader also will have a space to consider alongside the dwarves. This function is needed because people seldom designate time to ask themselves what they want to make most important in their life. As a result, they are left without a foundation to cling to or a compass to remind them of which direction they want to go. By engaging the reader in a story, this novel will hopefully allot time for the reader to consider what they value most, helping them to prioritize and therefore make decisions rewardingly and consistently.

To achieve this effect in the, the world-and-character-building elements of the story needed to be strong and specific. After all, if the reader was to experience questions of priority alongside characters, they needed to be transported into the world of the book successfully and find significance there. This needed to be executed primarily through a combination of engaging writing and deep research.

Literature Review: Searching for Treasure

Dwarves and labyrinths have been elements of fantasy stories for centuries. Long before dwarves appeared as battle-axe wielding heroes in modern fantasy, they starred as the maggot men of Norse mythology. Long before Jim Henson created his movie *The Labyrinth*, that structure created the spooky back-drop for the legend of Theseus and the Minotaur. This project combines both of these traditional pieces of fantasy literature in a story about dwarves in a labyrinth searching for what is most precious to them. Because of its fantastic atmosphere and also the core question of what is truly precious, research has become a “world-building with a purpose” process. The following research centers on the mythology of dwarves, underground elements, related crafts and skills, and the literary significance of the labyrinth. Furthermore, it asks how these may contribute to the idea of what is truly precious.

DWARVES: PEOPLE OF THE EARTH

Dwarves vs. Dwarfs. Before delving into dwarf research, it’s important to note that the plural of dwarves can be either “dwarves” or “dwarfs” and that both forms of plural have risen out of the body of research. According to a post entitled “Dwarves vs. Dwarfs” on *Language Log*, an online forum springing from the Institute for Research in Cognitive

Science at the University of Pennsylvania, the plural “dwarves” appears to correlate for the most part with fantasy (especially that of J.R.R. Tolkien), while “dwarfs” can apply to fantasy characters as well as people and stars of smaller stature (Lieberman). The dwarves of *Elensa* use the “v” plural, however, as many literary sources in the body of research use the “f” plural, the appropriate spelling will be used for whatever source is being discussed, beginning with “dwarves” and moving on to “dwarfs.”

What do dwarves look like? The “dwarf” goes back far in fantasy literature—all the way to roots in Norse Mythology. According to Snorri Sturluson’s collection of Norse Mythology, the thirteenth-century *Prose Edda*, dwarves began as maggots in the flesh of Ymir the giant, who was slain and became the earth. Eventually, the gods gave them both the intelligence and shape of humans, and they became interacting characters in the mythology (26). Later in the *Prose Edda*, Sturluson mentions Dark Elves who could have influenced the image of dwarves as they also lived in the earth. These characters were said to be unlike the fair Light Elves but instead blacker than pitch in appearance (31). These vague descriptions do not provide clarity about dwarves’ appearance outside of the human, ugly features suggested by their maggot origins and their “blacker than pitch” description. Centuries later, J.R.R. Tolkien based the dwarves of his Middle Earth on these and others that had transpired in the time between himself and the Norse legends. In *The Silmarillion*, he described the dwarves in his account of their creation as hard, tough as stone, unrelenting, and faithful (44). Furthermore, although the creation story of *Prose Edda* doesn’t set aside dwarves as necessarily short, Tolkien’s dwarves are smaller of stature—an attribute which the word “dwarf” had come to imply.

Many fantasy dwarves and dwarfs have their roots in Norse Mythology and Tolkien, however, there are other fantasy traditions including many variations on people of smaller stature called dwarfs (spelled with an “f”). For example, in Yuri Berezkin’s article on the mythological trope of dwarfs who fight birds, dwarfs turn up as characters without either mouths or anuses, and who require the help of humans in fighting off other creatures because of their physical stature (79, 74). These dwarfs appear to be incapable, primitive, and altogether less impressive than the human, a theme carried on in Emily Rebekah Huber’s article “‘Delyver Me My Dwarff!’: Gareth’s Dwarf and Chivalric Identity.” This article discusses the diminutive and feminine stature of dwarves in Arthurian romance, who are often used as a foil to make humans seem more brilliant (Huber 49). While neither of these dwarfs explicitly have beards, this is a common feature of Grimm Fairytale dwarfs (also sometimes referred to as dwarves), one example being when one dwarf repeatedly gets his beard stuck and must be freed by the kind heroines in *Snow White and Rose Red* (Grimm & Grimm 251). There is a great deal more variation even than this. However, the above examples exhibit some of the dwarf character range and explore sources that feed the creation of the dwarves for *Elensa*.

Good or Evil? Along with differences in appearance, dwarves also fill a broad spectrum of roles. In his academic article “Dwarves in German Fairytales and Legends,” Eniko Stringham outlines at least five different roles played by dwarves in German fairytales alone: 1) the unexpected helper, 2) the obedient servant, 3) the bargainer, 4) the child stealer, and 5) the dwarf who is black to his core (567-568). From this it is evident that dwarves have played helpful, hindering, and indifferent roles in stories throughout their

history. Another excellent example of this would be the dwarfs in C.S. Lewis's *Prince Caspian*: some, like Trumpkin, are supportive of the main characters, others don't wish to get involved, and still others, such as Nikabrik, are openly antagonistic. That there are no rules for what role dwarves play makes dwarves easy characters to give both faults and strengths as they are needed in the story. It also makes dwarves easier to identify with than absolute villains or pristine heroes would be because the reader is likely to not always play a single role either.

Cave Dwellers. Although dwarves are clearly diverse in their appearance and role, there are themes that translate to most dwarves. One of these is association to the earth. In the *Prose Edda*, the dwarves begin as maggots in the corpse that would later be formed into the earth. They never lose this connection to the earth, often residing in underground halls or storing treasure there. Unsurprisingly, Tolkien also associates his dwarves with the underground. In Tolkien's *The Silmarillion*, the dwarves' maker is the god of the earth, Aüle, who shapes them out of stone and puts them to sleep under the earth until the other creatures of the world have been made. Later in the stories, they create beautiful kingdoms in the mountains, showing their continuing connection to the earth. This theme even carries on into legends from the Americas examined by Yuri Berezkin, in which some of the dwarfs live in the underworld (74). It is worth noting that there are exceptions to this: for example, the dwarf of Arthurian legend studied in Huber's article does not seem connected to the earth in any way particularly. However, in most cases, if the dwarves are not living under the ground, they are at the very least storing treasure

there as is seen in *Sigurd and Gudrún* by Tolkien (based on the medieval *Volsunga Saga*) and *Snow White and Rose Red* by the Brothers Grimm.

Lovers of Treasure. Another aspect most dwarves share is their connection with treasure. In the *Prose Edda*, along with being associated with the earth, dwarves are linked to treasure through their excellent smith-work, which fashions the most beautiful relics of these fantastic tales. Skills in treasure-making also appear in many later mythologies. For example, the dwarf Regin forges Sigurd's sword in Tolkien's *Sigurd and Gudrún*, Rumpelstiltskin weaves straw into gold in the Grimm Brothers' fairytale, and we first meet some dwarfs blacksmithing in their cave in Lewis's *Prince Caspian*.

Dwarves do not only make treasures. They hoard them. This is seen in fairy tales such as *Snow White and Rose Red* in which the dwarf is constantly trying to hide away the treasure he has stolen from an enchanted bear. Unfortunately, this greedy hoarding instinct can cause many problems. In *Sigurd and Gudrún*, for example, a long history of betrayal and blood is revealed over a hoard of treasure. This culminates in the dwarf Regin charging Sigurd to use his sword to kill Regin's brother Fafnir for not sharing a certain hoard with him (105). This weakness resonates throughout much of dwarf mythology, so that even the noble Thorin Oakenshield from Tolkien's *The Hobbit* succumbs to it and selfishly tries to avoid sharing his wealth with the needy city of Laketown. It is this greed for precious things that makes the dwarves excellent main characters for a story questioning what is truly precious.

Dwarves in Elensa. The dwarves in *Elensa* span a wide gamut of the qualities listed above. For example, dwarves of the western part of the kingdom are taller, and dwarves from the southern kingdom deal with large noses and warts, while dwarves of the eastern kingdom have shorter, softer beards, and dwarves of the north have pale skin and coarse hair. These differences stem from each quadrant's culture and history. For example, the Westerner's height is in part due to a warrior culture in a large desert kingdom where the bigger and faster more often survive. The Easterlings, on the other hand, being on good terms with their neighbors as the merchants and craftsmen that travel between the dwarf kingdom and the human one, and also living in a region of the mountains where game and water is readily accessible and society is developed, do not need this height and strength. Rather they invest much more in symbols of social standing such as oiled beards and pocket watches and are not greatly disadvantaged if they become a little tubby so long as their fingers and minds remain clever. Southerners come out of a marshland at the foot of the mountains, where the air is foul, and one needs a stronger sense of smell to catch odors beyond the overall stench leading to larger noses. In addition, the marsh air makes the skin more susceptible to warts, which are spread there both by wart plants and wart winds, and the Southerners often travel to cities farther north to clear their complexions. Finally, the Northerners, spending most of their time underground in the dark, are very pale, and as the roots of the kingdom have the coarsest, oldest variety of dwarf hair. As a race, however, the dwarves of Kulezim are short, bearded, live under the ground, and deal with treasures frequently. They are, like Tolkien's dwarves, made of stone, and to stone they return when they die. Furthermore, when they die, their gem-like hearts arise to become stars. The differences that arise due to their personal history and

origins, therefore, do not change what it means to be a dwarf, rather contributing to the question of what's most precious the conflict of different cultural answers.

DWARF WIVES: THE JEWELS OF THE MOUNTAIN

A Mystery History. Throughout the stories and mythologies in which dwarves have been developed, one mystery has remained fairly unanswered. Did the dwarves have wives, and if so, what were they like? Although early dwarf literature such as Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda* might refer to dwarf sons or dwarf brothers, the parts of this mythology explored for this project made no mention of dwarf women. Sturluson did mention, however, a character called a *Norn*. Norns are described in *Prose Edda* as female beings who appoint life to different creatures and determine their fate. Some Norns are goddesses, some are of the Elf-people, and some are "Dvalinn's daughters," or dwarves (29). The life-giving quality of the Norn, as well as the impact she has on her dwarf's life, gives her the resemblance a wife or mother. Nevertheless, she is not specifically set up as the dwarf's mate, remaining more abstract and distant.

The absence of the female dwarf is also seen in Grimm fairytales, where the closest equivalent to dwarfs are little old women or hags. These witchy characters are similar to dwarfs in that they can be both hostile and helpful, not to mention powerful, and are often encountered at cross-roads or decision-making points in the story. Nothing is said, however, about there being any connection between these women and the dwarfs, and therefore it is more likely that they simply fulfill a similar role in the story than that they are related in other ways. In addition to playing similar roles to old women, dwarfs often interact with young women—as in tales such as *Snow White*, *Snow White and Rose*

Red, *Rumpelstiltskin*, and *The Gnome*. Nevertheless, these young women are decidedly human and portrayed as above a union with a dwarf.

Throughout the course of this research, the only clear reference to dwarf wives was found in Appendix A of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Return of the King*. Here dwarf wives are described as not more than a third of the dwarf population, staying mostly underground, and looking so much like dwarves that they are often mistaken for them (397). In Peter Jackson's blockbuster film rendition of Tolkien's *The Two Towers*, the ranger Aragorn is more explicit about the dwarf wives' appearance, telling the Lady Eowyn that dwarf wives have beards. Outside of Tolkien's dwarf wives, however, the presence of female dwarves in fantasy literature appears to have been left to speculation.

Beyond Treasure. Although the literature for dwarf wives is sparse, there is a connection between dwarves, females, and treasure in Norse, Grimm, and Tolkien stories. One example of this is a story told from varied fragments of the *Prose Edda* and the *Poetic Edda*. In this story, the four dwarf brothers Alfrigg, Dvalinn, Berling, and Grerr trade the stunning necklace of Brisngamen for the chance to sleep with Freyja, the beautiful goddess of love. As can be seen from this example, the dwarves are willing to give up valuable treasure for what Freyja can offer them. Similarly, in the Grimm Fairytale *Rumpelstiltskin*, the dwarf-like character of Rumpelstiltskin trades the spinning of straw into gold for the miller's daughter's first child. Once again, the dwarf is willing to give up treasure for something a woman can offer. Finally, the fact that Tolkien's dwarf wives are kept almost always under the ground shows that the dwarves treasure them as they might gold and jewels. All of this goes to say, significantly, that the female sometimes

influences dwarves even more than their treasure does. Therefore, when the dwarves go in search of what is most precious, the dwarf wives could certainly be a part of those things.

Dwarf Wives in Elensa. Although in dwarf history, dwarf wives have been seemingly unimportant, dwarf wives of *Elensa* are so central to the story that it is named after one of them: Elensa, the king's daughter. Called "dwaras" when unmarried and "dwarevnas" when married, these characters are meant to help form the dwarves' homes and children and to recall the dwarves' thoughts to higher, more beautiful things. Like the dwarves, they are short, are born out of and return to stone, and have stars for hearts.

Nevertheless—and unlike Tolkien's dwarf wives—their appearance differs greatly from that of the dwarves. They are short, but beardless, round-faced, and slim in a fashion more after a human girl than a dwarf. Furthermore, although they are physically tough like the dwarves, they are more crystalline and have less muscular power. This innocent, girlish appearance is meant to inspire admiration while avoiding sexual appeal, because dwaras are meant to inspire dwarves by raising their thoughts *above* their lusts, greed, and sulks.

In addition to their different appearance, dwaras have two special skills that dwarves do not: They come more naturally to reading runes, and they can direct water through their hands to polish, shift, and shape rock. These gifts were chosen to reflect the ability of the dwara to shape people and places, whether this be through their words or through their waters. Both words and water have a role in a society as sources of both life and power. To make the dwara a seat of lore and water makes tangible their importance

and reflects how, even as water can shape underground places, the dwaras shape the dwarves and their homes in a way that is unique from dwarves. This could connect them to the Norns from Sturluson's *Prose Edda*, who direct the fates of the dwarves they give life.

The appearance and skills of the dwaras could connect them more to the *Prose Edda* Norns who direct the fates of the dwarves they give life than to Tolkien's bearded dwarf wives. However, in one respect the dwaras are like Tolkien's female dwarves: they are rarely seen. Indeed, they are a carefully guarded secret—much more carefully-guarded than the dwarves' gold. Therefore, when it comes to asking what is most precious to the dwarves as a people, the dwarevns are high on the list. One might even say that they are channels that help the dwarves discover what they treasure for themselves.

TROLLS: NOT QUITE WHAT YOU'D THINK

Every story needs good villains. *Elensa* promised many opportunities for threats and obstacles posed by the labyrinth, but the truth was that the main battles would need to be fought by the dwarves against themselves as they struggled with terror, grief, anger, greed, and despair. One of these figures that arose out of research to exteriorize these internal battles was the troll.

When people think of trolls, they could think of anything from a Tolkien mountain troll that turns to stone in the sunlight to a Billy-Goats-Gruff Troll that hides under bridges to way-lay poor travelers to a *DreamWorks* troll with cutesy stature and big hair. At their roots, however, trolls were not so clear as any of these things. In the first

chapter of *Trolls: An Unnatural History*, John Lindow explores the earliest records of trolls in Scandinavian legend and folklore. In these stories, the physical appearance of these trolls is often left to the imagination, and the aura of ‘unknown’ and ‘danger’ collected around them is, by its very nature, vague. Some key themes that arose, however, were use of a troll’s voice in conflict with humans, the ability to shape-shift, and the reference to trolls collectively as spirit-like beings “associated with the Other: the mysterious, inexplicable and unknowable” (Lindow 15-16, 20-21, 21). These qualities lead to the creation of a demon-like troll in *Elensa* that uses its words to manipulate a victim’s emotions and must possess physical material to take shape.

THE EARTH: FOREIGN KINGDOM

Not only are the dwarves and dwaras well-suited to play main roles in a treasure-hunting quest, but the underground environment is an excellent location for such a journey. After all, regions under the ground have always held the possibility of treasure for those who search. According to Cedric E. Gregory’s *A Concise History of Mining*, the tradition of searching the earth for these treasures could go back for tens of thousands of years (50). Furthermore, caves have been used as storehouses for treasure in literature for a very long time. Whether the treasure is stored in the dragon’s cave in *Beowulf*, in a pirates’ cave in *Treasure Island*, or in Aladdin’s cave with the mystical lamp, caves seem the ideal place to look for precious, beautiful things. Furthermore, these places under the ground and the natural treasures they hold can be seen to enrich the backdrop of the dwarves in symbolic ways.

Cave Formation. The first symbolism that can be noted is the formation of the caves themselves, which metaphorically shows the change placed on objects under pressure. According to Erinn Banting's children's book *Caves*, caves are most often formed by water. The NOVA documentary *The Mysterious Life of Caves* concludes likewise, adding that caves can also be created through falling glaciers, lava flow, or the eating away of tiny organisms. Dr. Jay L. Wyle's science textbook *Exploring Creation with General Science* credits the formation of caves to eroding groundwater and further suggests through its catastrophist viewpoint that major earth structures like caves have changed in the past due to natural catastrophes such as earthquakes and volcanoes (150, 136). Whatever the method of cave formation may be, it is interesting that all of the above-mentioned methods involve either gradual or jarring pressure that creates an open space in the earth. As the dwarves' environment, caves are an appropriate symbol of how the dwarves themselves are shaped under pressure.

Cave Life. This idea of subterranean environments forming and shaping aspects of the underground world is nowhere plainer than in the diverse life present in caves. Some of these organisms are noted in the NOVA *Mysterious Life of Caves* documentary, where speleologists discover bacteria and small animal life abounding in places where humans cannot live without gas masks and protective gear. These spiders, bacteria, and fungi have adjusted themselves to survive high levels of gases and acidity without the light of the sun. This adaptation is one remarkable feature shared by many cave creatures. A. Vandel's book *Biospeleology* describes several aspects of adaptation often seen in creatures who live in the deepest parts of caves. These include larger size, exaggerated

slenderness in already slender creatures, either no wings or smaller-sized wings, loss of pigment, and a reduction of eyes (17-21). One example of this would be the blind cave fish mentioned by Banting, whose skin either covers their eyes or whose eyes simply do not exist (21). Another example would be creatures mentioned by Vandel which have learned to live both aerial and aquatic lives because of the inherent moisture of many caves (282-283). Significantly, Vandel notes that many cave species also occur above ground in different regions, showing that species can adjust to both environments (281). All of these facts point towards the great effect that an environment can have in forming its inhabitants.

Although some creatures always live in the darkest parts of caves, others either live in the lighter, shallower parts of caves or use caves for temporary shelter. According to Banting, some of these include plant life which gathers near the mouth of the cave to catch the sun (16). Others include bats and birds who wing their way into the cave for refuge and then wing their way out again at nightfall (16-17). The variety of animals spilling in and out of caves, therefore, shows a connection that is drawn between the surface of the earth and underground regions by those who walk between both. Dwarves would also be included in this number, as they can walk above the earth as well as below it. This having been said, dwarves who spend most of their lives underground will adjust to their environment just as many of the creatures above do.

Cave Treasures. Symbolism is found not only in the living elements of caves, but in the beautiful treasures of the earth whose hearts do not beat. One of these symbolic ideas is how gems and metals are formed under pressure. In Emma Foa's *Pockets Full of*

Knowledge book called “Gems,” she lists different gems and how they are formed. Although different gems form out of different circumstances (for example sapphires can form out of molten rock or out of shale in extreme temperatures), most gems are formed by heat and pressure (20-21). This makes gems a good metaphor for the development of character through subjugation to new pressures.

Metals also are found in tight places. Gregory discusses how metals collect in crevices and spaces called veins, lodes, and beds which condense the treasure into a smaller space (19-20). Therefore, if one desires to retrieve the metals, one must go into these tight spots to get them. Once again, this journey for precious metals can be used metaphorically to represent quests into unpleasant and difficult situations to find treasure of any kind.

CRAFTS: ART OF THE EARTH

Smelting and Melting. The concept of value being reached through pressure would be familiar to the dwarves, as they encounter it in their everyday work. One example of this is smelting, a process discussed both in Gregory’s *A Concise History of Mining* as well as in the BBC Documentary *Mastercrafts in Blacksmithing*. Smelting is the heating of metal to temperatures so high that impurities in the metal melt and can be pounded or rinsed out. Sometimes, as exhibited in the BBC documentary, this task can be tedious and repetitive. If the smithy attempts to hammer the impurities out, they must stop and reheat it periodically and the progress is not easily visible (*BBC*). Similarly, smelting can be used to temper metal with other types of minerals. This is exhibited in the NOVA documentary *Secrets of the Samurai Sword* in which the process for obtaining a special

steel for the swords from iron, sand, and charcoal is followed. The process takes three days and three nights at nearly 2500 degrees Fahrenheit, during which the fires must be constantly watched (NOVA). These processes show how important pressure is in getting the purified or mixed effect: pressure on the material, and pressure on the one working with it.

Smiths and Masons. Pressure as a force in creating treasure is not all that the dwarves as a people would understand. Particularly with arts such as blacksmithing and stonemasonry, delicacy, precision, and patience are just as key in coming out with something beautiful. The BBC Documentaries *Mastercrafts in Blacksmithing* and *Mastercrafts in Stonemasonry* introduce these crafts by taking people through an intensive workshop in the necessary skills. Blacksmithing is the craft of working to create things out of iron or steel. This could be anything from tiny nails to a sword. Throughout the documentary, the apprentices demonstrate how difficult it is to master both force (pressure) and the detail (precision). Stonemasonry is the craft of creating things out of stone, and requires even more delicacy than blacksmithing. Being the art of carving stone, the mason must be willing go slowly, often doing repetitive tasks like flattening surfaces before carefully chiseling in the stone's surface. The documentary on stonemasonry also shows how this grueling work is often done outside in the elements where the worker can be subject to cold and heat. If the dwarves understand such processes, then they will understand that it takes a great deal of listening and waiting and patience for treasure to be revealed. Over all, these documentaries have portrayed the results of these crafts, the skills to produce them, and the journey of creating together as

precious. All of these concepts will be considered as the question of what is precious is posed in *Elensa*.

LABYRINTHS: LOSING YOUR TREASURE TO FIND IT

The Labyrinth and the Psyche. Labyrinths are associated with impossible confusion, danger, and frustration. Nevertheless, there are several reasons why looking for treasure—particularly inner treasure--in these twisted paths might be a good idea. For one thing, labyrinths strip the wanderer of the familiar. In his essay “The Labyrinth in Myth, Reality, Modern Fiction,” Gutierrez suggests this stripping of identity by noticing the effect of the Marabar Caves in E.M. Forster’s *A Passage to India* (11). These labyrinthine caves have a dull echo that always comes back the same, causing characters to feel that nothing matters. When nothing matters, one is not compelled to be anything for any reason. This can lead to despair and belief in nothing, but it can also give a person a fresh plane to rebuild what they would like to be. Similarly, in Iulia Micu’s “Imaginary Worlds, Labyrinthine Journeys, Stories of Birth and Rebirth,” she picks out a pattern which also demands a change in order to find what is truly desired. This pattern traces that labyrinth wanderers first suffer torture, then death, and then rebirth, emphasizing that in order to transcend the limits of life, a journeyer must be separated from life itself first. Both of these sources suggest that people lose their sense of the familiar in the labyrinth and are therefore completely detached from their surroundings. While this may seem scary, it is also useful because it allows the wanderer to see things without preconceived prejudices and to determine from that perspective what is most important to them. Furthermore, these examples uphold the center of the labyrinth as a sacred place. This

suggests that whatever the dwarves' treasure may be, it will be found at the center of the labyrinth, and more importantly, that they will have to suffer, grow, and change to find it.

The Labyrinth in Fiction. Along with detaching a character through their foreign atmosphere, labyrinths have been used in many stories to grow a hero by presenting the hero with challenges that will teach them more about themselves. One of the most popular and well-known of these is the Greek myth of Theseus and the Minotaur, in which a young prince faces a monster inside the depth of the labyrinth to stop the villainy of King Minos. This step propels him into new challenges and levels, as it causes his father's death and forces him to assume the throne. Another poignant example is Jim Hansen's movie *The Labyrinth*. In Shiloh Carroll's article "The Heart of the Labyrinth: Reading Jim Hansen's *Labyrinth* as a Modern Dream Vision," this movie is examined for how the labyrinth supports the progression of the main character Sarah. It points out how many of the things in the Labyrinth reflect Sarah's own life, how the challenges she faces in the labyrinth reveal Sarah's strengths and weaknesses, and how her newly-made friends help her to discover a stronger version of herself and save her brother—what is really precious to her in the end—from the goblin king, Jareth. This is a beautiful and poignant example of how the labyrinth leads to the treasure of a fuller sense of self. Though in its passages one might become lost, eventually it frees the adventurer to truly find the most important treasure of all: Themselves.

CONCLUSION: SLOWLY ACCRUED HOARDS

The sources collected in this literature review provide valuable additions to a wealth of knowledge that will be used later to form characters, environment, culture, and psychological conflict. The mythologies and histories of dwarves and dwarf wives provide a foundation for constructing convincing and meaningful characters for this story. Understanding the geology and ecology of caves provides opportunities to make symbolic use of their natural elements in the settings of the story. Knowledge of tasks and crafts familiar to the dwarfs informs the culture and understanding of the characters. Finally, considering the possibilities associated with labyrinths can serve as a reminder of how the growth of the characters can be developed. For these reasons, along with the fact that this information will make world and character description considerably easier, this research is a precious foundation to a story that is beginning to take a clearer shape. The process has been slow and will continue to be slow as the correct research is overturned. Going forward from this thesis, there is still much to discover. Although language has faded into the background as a research concern as the focus shifted from the dwarf runes in the story, other needs—such as that of a deeper knowledge of mineral combinations and rock types to be used in describing the dwarves and their terrain—have presented themselves. This literature review, therefore, is complete only in its ability to give texture to the treasure collected: there are empty places between piles of treasure that cry out with all their bareness and brevity “Potential for more!”

Chronicle of Process: Finding the Way Through the Labyrinth

FALL 2015:

This semester opened my work on *Elensa* as an Upper Division Honors Project. My goals were broad research, a literature review, a project proposal, and a portfolio of three 500-word entries per week that explored my characters and world. All goals were met.

I researched broadly. The more I read into whatever I thought would be helpful—mining, dwarves, caves, etc.—the more ideas I got for symbolism and meaning within my story. These ideas were like jewels. They had a twinkle that made my pencil want to dance across the page and linger admiringly over each thought. It did so with gathering glee as I compiled my portfolio.

The portfolio was an especially helpful assignment because it allowed me to explore different aspects of my story without committing to anything. Seeing them concrete on the page helped me understand what I liked and didn't like—and maybe even what I was missing. Furthermore, it helped me integrate my research practically into the world of my story because it gave me the chance to write and research in tandem.

The Literature Review and Project Proposal were difficult and required many drafts and re-workings. In the end, however, and with the help of peers and professors, I was satisfied with the results.

Note: Part of completing HON 351 this semester was picking a Thesis Advisor. I chose Dr. Kristin Bovaird-Abbo.

WINTER BREAK:

I was hoping to map the Kingdom of Kulezim this semester and outline the adventures of the labyrinth. In the end, I did not do anything but preliminary sketches of a map. I did, however, outline what I thought could happen throughout the labyrinth based on my portfolio and turned these in to my advisor. Many of the events I outlined are in the part of the novel I have written already, and others are still in the plans to come.

SPRING 2016:

The goal for this semester was to build characters, and this I did. I began by working on a scene from the perspective of Agrev and Sorj, my western dwarves, because their story had been pulling at me to come fill it in. Very soon, however, I found myself focusing on my main character, Thron. I spent most of the semester exploring his home city of Smet, his work in the mines, and especially his home with his sisters and mother and how he felt about leaving them. Finally, I closed with a small glimpse into the life of Nin, the rune-dwarf. Understanding my characters did not go as fast as I had hoped and is still an unfinished process. Nevertheless, I met my goal of at least 1000 words per week and learned a lot.

SUMMER 2016:

This was the summer I studied abroad in Spain. I had intended to continue writing through this semester, but upon discovering how fully my adventures abroad absorbed my time, I let this plan slip to the way-side. The study-abroad was valuable not only because it exposed me to brilliant architecture, labyrinthine cities, and the caves of Nerja, but because it put me in a similar position to that of my characters. I was in an unknown place with unknown rules, separated from a home to which I have strong attachments, and

feeling for the first time the disorienting nature of myself apart from my origins and history. I considered what I would do if I could not return home. I considered what type of person I would want to be if I never had known who I had been before. Most of all, I felt my vulnerability as a lone being on my planet and struggled to find peace in the fear of this. Although this was difficult at the time, it gave me a window into some of the disorientation my dwarves might have experienced once trapped in a labyrinth. Therefore, I consider this summer an important event from which some of the deeper sentiments in my writing have flowed since.

FALL 2016:

Upon returning from Spain, I began writing in the hopes of getting my dwarves at least into the labyrinth. I had been considering what type of pre-amble my novel would need before actually getting to the labyrinth, and I was afraid that if I did not spend the first part of the book introducing characters and the dwarf world, it would be too much crashing down on my reader all at once. I soon found, however, that the more I wrote on this “pre-amble” section of the book, the more disgusted I was with it. What I wanted to write about was the adventure of the labyrinth itself—the rest of this seemed foreign and empty. So, about part way into the semester, I jumped into writing scenes from the labyrinth itself, which I worked on until the end of the semester.

This semester I could not write as much as I had in the spring. Perhaps it and the spring semester to follow are a tribute to the helpfulness of my advisor Dr. Bovaird-Abbo, because she took this year to go on sabbatical. We still communicated through email, but as I wasn't taking HON 451 and we never met in person, the pressure was off. In addition, I was preparing a reflection on my study abroad to connect it to my honors

project, and my classes were difficult and time consuming. I spent a large part of the semester feeling stuck: I would write, but I didn't feel like I was getting anywhere. Still, by the end of the semester, I had very nearly met my goal of 1000 words per week.

WINTER BREAK:

Nothing of note happened during this time.

SPRING 2017:

This semester was probably the most disappointing of all my semesters working on my project. I wrote another few feeble attempts at preamble to my story and fretted over the fact that the format wasn't falling out the way I wanted. In my original vision for the book I was not looking to write a stretched out epic, but rather a concise, rich story that somehow clicked together in just the right way to strike a chord in the reader but didn't need to be expansive to do so. I felt like I had too much writing and too little substance.

Despite my unhappiness with my writing, however, I did get the chance to deepen the character Nin by writing a short story about him in a course by contract. This story, called "The Crooked Star," developed clearly for the first time that my dwarves had stars for hearts. It also went about exploring Nin's personal conflicts in a style reminiscent of myths, a fact that proved very important later.

In the end, I spent a large part of the semester searching down editing internships for summer instead of writing. Fortunately, I was not accepted to the internship I applied to, because that allowed me to have the summer that made all the difference.

SUMMER 2017:

With only a year before my graduation, I was the perfect example of the frustrated artist. I had been writing on and thinking about this story for two years, and I still couldn't have given anyone anything that resembled a definitive narrative. Finally, my mother encouraged me to just write--and keep writing--even if it was awful.

What came out was not excellent, but it turned out not to be awful, either. Having my mom as an audience and having her request to read more made me realize this, and it inspired me. I cranked out seven chapters beginning with the dwarves right outside the labyrinth and following them into it. I told myself I could add a preamble later if I wanted.

Integral to this process was not only my mom, but an idea I received from the short story I'd written about Nin the semester before. I liked the myth structure of the story, and how quickly it could tell so much. Therefore, I decided to write myths from my dwarves' history and culture and insert these before each chapter. This turned out to be the type of format I had been looking for. It allowed me to tell the reader what they needed to know about the dwarves' world, but briefly and even mysteriously, giving them just enough information and withholding the rest for later parts in the story. The myth structure is part of what began to make these seven chapters come together for me and look like the beginning of a novel.

FALL 2017:

This semester was very busy, but my advisor was back and I knew what I needed to do. I wrote up Chapter 8 & 9, along with several myths, during this semester.

WINTER BREAK:

During this break I worked on Chapter 10. I had hoped to complete several more chapters, but this turned out to be unrealistic. I decided to end Part I after Chapter 10.

SPRING 2018:

Going into spring, it was time to wrap up the Part I of my story and go back and edit. I finished Chapter 10, which I'd begun during my winter break, and began at the beginning again. I had realized over the course of my writing that several things were missing. I wanted to add a chapter between Chapter 4 & 5 to develop relationships between Thron and the Westerners more. I also wanted to refine concepts such as the Dwara, troll fights, and over-all flow. Unsurprisingly, it took longer than I'd thought. Particularly the first chapter, which I knew would set the tone for the rest. I set about my work, though, resting in the knowledge that if all else failed I could just touch up the original draft and turn it in imperfect.

These workings and re-workings of the story continued right up to the printing deadline. In the process, several chapters were added to accommodate character and plot development. The end result is not perfect, but there is a lot to be said for it, and I'm proud to present it as my final Thesis project.

It is also worth noting that, thanks to my Honors advisor Loree Crow, who recommended I submit a short story to the honors *Scribendi* magazine, I got accepted for publication during this semester. The story I submitted was unrelated to my project, but

the publication really means a lot to me, because it gives me that much more hope for getting published in the future.

This concludes the chronicle of my work on *Elensa: Finding the Heart of the Labyrinth*. My thanks to my family, Dr. Bovaird-Abbo, and all my mentors and peers who gave guidance and encouragement. I also thank the honors department for the opportunity to make this creative project my thesis, and for supporting me through the work that went into it.

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ELENSA

By Tamara E. Faour

PART I

*Elensa, beyond all treasure best,
Elensa the fair; Elensa the true.
What pearl's soft sheen could be akin
To the soft luster of thy skin?
What path of gold could ever dare
Rival thy molten stream of hair?
What crystal nears thy clear; deep eyes?
What swiftlet's song more sweetly flies?
A dwarf could search one thousand years,
And still would find, for all his tears
No place so pure than where thou art,
No gem so lovely as thy heart.*

Hear ye, dwarves of Kulezim:
I, Elensa, seek a King
Of striking heart and tempered gleam
To rule with me fair Kulezim.

I take me to the ancient door:
The Labyrinth of Ancient Kings
And hide me at its secret core
'Neath darkened halls and molten springs,
And call ye, dwarves of Kulezim
To try your chance at wandering,
From life and living to depart
To seek me at the maze's heart
Where if you chance to find your way
Before spring's last moon and a day
I'll crown you princes for this thing,
And one of you shall be a King.

To rule with me you need no ring,
No noble rank, no high esteem,
Nor ask I of you skill or fame,
But only bring to me your name.

I wait you now under the door,
'Twill remain open one moon more
'Tis death for some, I will not hide,
For others, life, for one, a bride.

Myth 1:

It is told that Tulla called Im, father of dwarves, out of stone.

No one knows who or what Tulla is.

But at Tulla's call, Im appeared, a living creature out of the stuffs of the mountain.

And Im was alone in that twisting labyrinth of peak and valley.

At first, he lived very simply. He drank mineral water. He ate moss. And he delighted in gathering stones and lighting fires. Nevertheless, something drew him away from his birth place—down twisting passages, up steep mountain peaks, and onward into the folds of the mountain. And as he wandered, his head turned this way and that, as if he were looking for something.

Then, one evening, as Im walked alone with an armful of pretty stones down a valley to a trickling fall which he had taken to visiting in the red and gold of dusk, he was surprised to see that someone was there.

Beside the pool she sat, polishing a pile of stones, one by one. Round faced, she was, with long, streaming hair, and her skin glistened as if with the sheen of thousands of crystals. Her skin and garments steamed, and although her slim form was undoubtedly before Im, a gem of the most exquisite quality seemed to spangle quietly from her heart and right through her crystalline body.

Im dropped his stones. The beautiful creature stood, startled and seeing Im, fled. Im, who could neither run nor climb at her speed, followed her to the pool, and then stooped and picked up the stone which she had dropped. It was the most lustrous stone Im had ever caressed, and at the feel of it in his hands, his mind filled with new life and longing.

At length, as he was turning the stone over and over, he felt a warm, moist touch on his arm. He turned and found that that the creature had returned and set her hand on his arm, the gem within her pulsing quickly. For she, in all her sweetness, was lonely, too.

Im called the creature DWAR, or "beautiful," for her loveliness pierced cleanly right into his heart. She in her turn called him Im, or "true," for he made her feel that she was truly real. From that day forward, they lived for each other. He dedicated himself to protecting her. She dedicated herself to filling his days with joy. And together they walked the mountains of Kulezim. They awoke the dwarf children from the mountain sides. They found dark places and filled them with light. They found weak places and made them strong.

And always, Dwar's soft gem was beside Im, and its gentle light sustained him.

But there came a day that Dwar grew sick, and Im could not protect her anymore. Her frail bones crumbled away, and her visage faded. But her heart, her beautiful heart, flew from Im's arms up, high into dark expanse of the Cavern of Night.

And that was the first skool.

Chapter 1: Skools

The Skools were bright in the sky over the mountains of Kulezim. Their sharp rays forced their way through the narrow lips of the ravine, tangling in the sharp brown grasses along its edge, and fragmenting into tiny splinters that fell glittering into the shadows of frosted pools. Otherwise the ravine was quite dark, a deep slit into the rolling land, its walls leaning in as they rose up and casting the resounding crackle of ice and clatter of stone off of each other. It was a place of echoes, twists, and turns, witness only to itself and its own, had it not been for the Skools.

The furthest corner of this close-wound path opened into a space of sunken stone, lapped in shadow, out of which rose the face of a mountain. And there, in the face of the mountain, was a door.

Thronnd stopped, blinking through the mist of his own hurried breaths, one hand stiffly clenched over the wood of his pick axe. With his other he rubbed his dirty thumb over the glassy surface of a small crystal, which hung on a tough twine from his belt of rope. He was a tall dwarf with a short, patched cloak, a heavy, coarse tunic smeared with grime, and weather-worn boots, lined and cracked. His face was lined, too, with hunger and care. Nevertheless, his soft brown eyes—they were really a mixture of colors, including pale purple and gray—were young, and their expression held both uncertainty and fear. Underneath the rusty orange hood on his head, his hair was pulled unforgivingly back from his face and this, along with the dingy beard balled-up under his chin, set him aside for what he was: a miner.

Squeak-squick, went his lantern, still swinging with his momentum on the head of his pick-axe. *Squeak-squick*.

Silence.

It was a small door which had backed itself into the mountain as if reluctant to be seen. Or perhaps it was simply drawing the mountain in towards itself. There were dwarves already gathered—many dwarves. He did not see them all at once, but he felt their movement, their warmth, and motion. There was a group with colored lanterns to the side of the door, sitting by their packs like stones collected around bulgy mounds. One dwarf had settled up-high on a flat rise of stone, spewing snaking coils of smoke with his long, long pipe. And between him and the door, a little way down and to the left, there was a low fire with a circle of dwarves around it, too. Thronnd could feel those dwarves looking at him even before he stepped into the open. He caught the spark in their smoldering eyes and saw their glinting mail. Tall they were, and warrior-like, but without helmets or even sleeves against the frigid weather. Instead of the helmet, their thick black hair fell in wild manes down their shoulders and backs. Many of them sported jewels in their belt buckles, woven into their mail, or set in the pommels of knives and swords. One had a small red jewel in a circlet on his brow.

Could those be... Westerners?

Thronnd felt for the fire-salamander who was lopped comfortably over his shoulder to be sure he had at least one grip on it. The last thing he needed was to have Kunkizar scampering off to disturb a group of rebel warriors. Kunkizar liked jewels. He also liked fires. And artifacts that didn't belong to him. Thronnd pulled on the salamander's long tail as if to say "*Are you awake?*"

The tail curled up, tight, an offended and definitive "*No.*" Thronnd gathered the coils around two fingers and muttered,

“Good.”

He kept a grip on the salamander as he made his way past the strange dwarves, eyeing them warily. They had many weapons—cradled in their laps, hanging from belts, laid by their feet, or sticking up over their shoulders. The firelight glinted off these and then again off the mail and once more in their eyes. Passionate eyes, Thron thought, and handsome faces. His gaze lingered over the face of a dwarf with a long, slender, black beard and a thick, bejeweled ring through one nostril. The dwarf caught and met his glance so quickly and so boldly that Thron was obliged to nod, politely, and turn hastily away.

Though the pocket of this place was deep in night shadow, the Skools had managed to touch the rising ground beneath the door in the mountain, untangling the shadows from the wizened grass that brushed needle-like up to its feet. The door was iron, as Thron had guessed. Plain iron, with a serpent raised like an ugly welt along its perimeter. Moving on an instinct, Thron stretched out his pick, lantern squeaking, and touched the icy metal in its center.

“Krieeeeeek! Krieeeeeek, krieeeeeek!”

Thron started at the eruption of harsh clicks and screeches, plugging one ear with the finger that still had two coils of Kunkizar’s tail wrapped around it, and looked around. Practically at his shoulder, in the shadows on one side of the door, he realized that there was a dwarf. The dwarf was hooded and cloaked and leaned on a staff scratched with strange symbols and curled at the top to hold the stranger’s dead lantern. On the top of arching curl of this lantern hook sat a black cave swiftlet.

Thron started back again, sending the bird into another series of harsh cackles during which it also opened and closed its wings. Thron could feel other dwarves in the glade cringe. Someone muttered, “ill-omened bird,” rather loudly. The rune-dwarf, for that was undoubtedly what he was, paid these comments no heed. Instead he nodded from the mysterious cowl of his hood and looked away. Thron hastily returned the nod and backed into the shadows on the other side of the door, shuddering. How could the dwarf bear it? The bird was close enough for him to touch!

But then rune-dwarfs have always been strange, reflected Thron, pressing himself into the stiff tufts of grass and icy lumps of stone, searching for the warmth of the mountain with his broad back.

But there is strange and then there is *strange*. This whole journey was *strange*, for Thron.

Thron crouched until he was sitting with his knees pulled sharply up, folded as small and flat as a stiff, large dwarf can make himself. It was cold. Thron could feel goose-bumps prickling up on his arms and shins, catching at the flurries of icy air like sandpaper might catch at wool. Gently, he pulled his salamander from his shoulder and cradled it between his chest and his knees, stroking its clammy nose. It was a long, wet looking creature the color of cold gray mud. But it was no mere mud-born. Its heavily lidded eyes blinked slowly open and then shut, revealing for an instant the inferno within. Amber-gold, their translucent membranes shimmering with flames of blue and green, orange and rose, purple and red, the eyes were windows into the seething ferocity and flickering quiet of the creature’s heart.

I come from the heart of the mountain, they seemed to say. *The very molten heart.*

Thronnd closed his eyes and pressed the salamander close, soaking-in the warmth that pulsed from the creature's belly. It should never have come with him. Not on a journey like this. He would never have allowed it had he known Sar had snuck the family treasure into his bag.

Sar. Little Sar.

But it was too late, now, Sar. Wasn't it?

Thronnd peered up into the deep height of the Cavern of Night, thinking of the small dwarf child. The Skools unfolded forever, going and going, galleries of gleaming bodies in space. Even where he sat in the shadows, it seemed as though their direct light pierced the old, coarse fabric of his cloak and tunic and made icy, clean incisions into his heart. Thronnd combed the skies for his father's Skool—wondering if he would recognize it if he saw it. His mother had always said that it was there, way up in the great cavern, watching. In the silence of the waiting before this door, Thronnd knew, somehow, that she was right. He could feel it.

Something deep and painful surged inside Thronnd as he looked up at the Skools again, and the tears slipped out from his gentle, wide eyes. He had so many questions to ask. So many.

She's dying, Alframí, he thought, numbly. Dying.

He waited for the thought to evaporate into the cavern of night.

What else can I do?

He had tried mining for the fire crystal. He had been so sure it was there. But day after day, all he had overturned was iron ore and more iron ore. He had begun to feel that he would never find anything of value—that he would be always dragging his feet into the mine but never walk out having accomplished anything. He would always be a slave to the darkness. A slave without hope of pay.

Still, this felt uncannily like running away.

Thronnd jabbed at the six tears on his cheeks with the side of his thumb, provoked by his own softness. What was it about the Skools that echoed in the empty vastness of his heart and brought the costly tears to his eyes? Old Shullum, the miner, had once told him,

“We are creatures of stone. If we shed tears we use up the small reserve of liquid that makes us alive. So, ache all you like, young Thronnd, but keep your tears to yourself. Tears inside are life. Tears outside are death.”

Thronnd knew that the loss of the tears weakened him—more than blood loss would have. But he wept in his wonder, just the same.

Thronnd took his hood off and began rummaging through it as if looking for something. Of course, he knew very well that there was nothing in it, but it provided a convenient hole in which to hide his head and inconspicuously wipe the tears off his nose. The salamander, who had not moved from Thronnd's chest, clambered now onto its friend's shoulder and then onto his head, wriggling down Thronnd's forehead into the obscurity of the hood. The creature's warm, white tongue flicked and traveled over Thronnd's tear-stained face until the young dwarf was obliged to sit back and laugh, removing the salamander from his head.

The laugh was quickly cut off by an answering cackle and a flutter of wings. Thronnd started. The swiftlet, which had been sitting out of sight on the rune-dwarf's staff

on the other side of the door had fluttered down to the ground and was staring at him. Thronnd pressed himself harder into the mountain.

“Go,” he said, in a low voice, gesturing with his hand.

The bird hopped closer.

“Go!”

Thronnd stomped one foot. The bird gave a sharp cry and retreated a couple feet but remained at the foot of the door, staring at Thronnd. On the other side of the door, the rune-dwarf shifted and Thronnd heard the click of his staff against the stone. Feeling conspicuous, Thronnd shrank back into his shoulders and angled himself away, determining between nervous glances to ignore the bird.

He fixed his attention instead on the other dwarves in the small clearing. Besides himself and the rune-dwarf on the other side of the door, Thronnd found that several other dwarves had taken refuge in the darkness at the foot of the mountain face. There was a small ledge of old grass and stone that dipped down before the wall, creating a convenient trough for the dwarves to conceal themselves among the hillocks and stones. Not three feet away to Thronnd’s left a pair of dwarves had settled against a large boulder set against the rock wall, one with a short, blunt pipe, and one with a flaming sulf-chip on his bare, blackened palm. They were short but burly dwarves, with large hammers sticking out of their belts and solid-looking boots sticking out of the shadows. The taller of the two—a bald fellow with watery-orange eyes and a very full beard—was eyeing Kunkizar over his pipe. He turned away, however, as soon as he perceived Thronnd was watching him, and relit his pipe with his companion’s sulf-chip.

Smiths, thought Thronnd. *Probably brothers.*

To the side of the two smiths, clumping sternly back and forth between the boulder and the rise of stone that reached out from the mountain side, was a dwarf in silver and sable mail. He moved sharply, cracking his knuckles as he walked and glancing frequently and impatiently towards the shadowed entrance to the ravine. In the darkness beneath his helm, his wild teal eyes were sharp, too, each sloping to a fine point at his nose.

Out of the path of the warrior’s heavy boots, a fourth dwarf sat on the brink of the dip in the earth with his back to the rise of stone. Even in the starlight, Thronnd could see the dark line of the dwarf’s brow and the unpleasant shift of his violet eyes. He was running his knuckles absently against his chin, a heavy brown cloak thrown over his crouched form. It was a trader cloak, not over-long, and with a respectable violet lining. Thronnd could see quite clearly in the light that he had many rings on his fingers. The dwarf also had a silver stud in his chin. Thronnd couldn’t see it, but he could hear the *click* of each ring as the dwarf ran his knuckles over it.

Thronnd swept his eyes over the dwarves in the shadows near the door again: The smiths, the warrior, the merchant, and the rune-dwarf to his right. All with pallid skin and coarse hair, seeking the shadows, reclusive and quiet. They might’ve thought of lighting a fire, but they were unlikely to do that now that the Westerners had already thought to. So they sat and stomped and clicked and slid sulf-chips from one calloused hand to another in the cold. Northern dwarves. Like Thronnd.

The other quadrant kingdoms were here, too. Thronnd’s eyes lighted on the collection of lanterns at the base of the rise of stone and immediately thought,

Easterlings.

If the colored lanterns hadn't identified them, the small size of the dwarfs and the large size of their bundles certainly would have done so. Most of the tiny, round dwarfs appeared to be dozing, using the giant packs as chairs and pillows, their lanterns going at full force.

What were Easterlings doing on a journey like this? Thron'd wondered.

They had situated themselves out of the path of the heavy smoke that still fell from the long, curved pipe of the solitary dwarf up on the top of the rise above. This dwarf was, of course, a Southerner. Only Southerners had profiles with noses as long and blobby as this dwarf's, quite beside the fact that "South Smoke" was not popular among any of the quadrants except the South.

Thron'd mused over the different groups. Northerners. Easterlings. Southerners. And of course, the Western rebels out in the open around their fire. Thron'd listened to the low lilt of the Western voices as they spoke to each other, the heavy snores of one of the Easterlings, and the *stump* of the Northern warrior's boots nearby. Then he listened to the *click-click, click-click-click* of the violet-eyed dwarf's rings against the stud in his chin. Gradually, Thron'd began to feel like there was another *click*, different than that of metal against metal, growing louder. He had just sat forward, sure of it, when the swiftlet, who was still sitting in the grass, gave a harsh cry and fluttered up to a hand-hold over the door. The rune-dwarf, who had remained silent and still for some minutes now, lifted his head and looked towards the entrance to the ravine. Thron'd also turned to look.

Something was moving there.

It was a dwarf, but Thron'd could not make it out well until it had come further into the light of the fires and lanterns. Perhaps there was little wonder in this, for the figure used crutches, and its hood was pulled low over its face. Slowly but steadily, the cripple picked his way between the watchful Westerners and the dozing Easterlings to the silvery threshold before the door. *Tick-tick. Tick-tack.* He was close enough for Thron'd to reach out and touch his worn boots, cloak, and gear. But he did not look at Thron'd.

The dwarf stood for a long moment before the door, so that Thron'd could almost feel his eyes running over its hard, cold surface and the glinting scales of the serpent that encircled it. He was breathing hard, as if he had been moving very quickly, and the air crystalized before the dark cowl of his hood. Slowly, he pulled his hood back and lifted his face to look at the swiftlet perched above the door.

Tulla!

Thron'd stifled the exclamation, but only with difficulty.

The entire right side of the dwarf's face was mottled and distorted as if with an old burn, his features stiff, his right eye swelled to a yellow-green slit. Over the lid of this eye and across the dwarf's nose to his opposite jaw ran a devastating scar that pulled at the dwarf's skin as it cut across his face, and from his left cheek bone to his chin ran another that disfigured the dwarf's mouth.

The intensity of Thron'd's stare caught the dwarf's attention, and he eyed Thron'd through the unmoving mask of his features. Thron'd instinctively dropped his eyes, frightened, and only his mother's deeply instilled lessons in extending respect to all dwarves unless they had shown themselves unworthy made him raise them again and nod a greeting. The dwarf nodded back, stiffly, and, pulling his hood back over his face, found his way across the lumpy ground towards a place where he could sit on a step of ground, his crutches leaned beside him.

Thronnd took a moment to relax back into the wall. One hand had instinctually closed over the pick-axe at his side. The other had tightened around Kunkizar. He looked away from the cripple, afraid of offending him with his stunned eyes. Instead he watched the shorter blacksmith sliding the sulf-chip from one hand to the other, letting the flames lick at the tough skin of one palm and then move it to the other. The warrior had sat not far from the smiths, leaning on one elbow, watching the ravine entrance. Thronnd thought he looked disgusted.

Suddenly, Kunkizar, who had wriggled out of Thronnd's anxious fingers, clambered up onto Thronnd's knee and lifted its nose. The salamander's nostrils were working furiously, and its head was turned so as to eye the place where the merchant had been sitting. The violet-eyed dwarf was gone.

Thronnd quickly scanned the assembled dwarves. Then he saw a creeping, cloaked figure crawling down the steps of stone behind the Easterlings. The hooded head of the stranger glanced sharply back and forth before he dropped to a crouch and Thronnd couldn't see him anymore. Thronnd also looked around. It didn't appear as though anyone had paid the sly-looking dwarf any heed. The rune-dwarf was turned towards the cripple in hooded contemplation. The Southerner couldn't have seen what happened at the foot of the stony rise he sat on even if he had been paying attention. The warrior was pacing again. And of course, the Easterlings were mostly asleep...

Before Thronnd had finished noting this, Kunkizar scrambled down Thronnd's shins and set off after the suspicious looking dwarf. Thronnd hastily reached for the salamander's waving tail, but too late. It was already creeping steadily, its little legs flapping, under the sickly-sweet coils of smoke that were still descending from the Southerner's pipe and over the brink of the stone step behind the Easterlings. With an inward groan and some uneasy curiosity, Thronnd picked up his pick-axe and followed under the smoke himself, stifling a cough on his forearm. He peered around the edge of the stone rise and down where the dwarf had dropped, most of his body still concealed behind the rise's protective shelter.

In the shadows below, four Easterlings sat huddled close together, all with their backs to their baggage. They were around a small fire, which Thronnd had not been able to see amid the lantern lights. All appeared to be resting except for a skinny dwarf with spectacles and a pointed nose that turned up at the end. He sat a few paces behind the other three with an abacus in his lap and a large bundle and covered lantern by his feet. He did not see, as Thronnd did, when the merchant crept like a shadow behind the nearest of the Easterlings, and fumble at the leather draw strings of one of the Easterling's packs. Thronnd watched with growing indignation as this shadow figure flipped the flap of the bag back and began to rummage through the contents.

The dwarf with the abacus now looked up, surprised. Then he slowly lifted his lantern cover to let out a ray of bright, yellow light. As it fell over the merchant, the thief stiffened and threw himself down, quickly hiding the objects within the shadow of his cloak. One of the objects glinted gold.

At first the spectacled Easterling did not seem to see him. At any rate, he dropped the cover over his lantern again and returned to his abacus. However, as the as the crafty dwarf returned to his crime, Thronnd saw the Easterling raise his spectacles and squint directly at the imposter through them.

He sees him! thought Thronnd, surprised by the passive observance of the dwarf.

And the Easterling certainly did. He was watching the thief remove several obscured items when his heavy-lidded eyes suddenly locked on Thron. Immediately, he dropped his eyes, retreated behind his abacus, and slid several glassy beads to different positions. Thron felt anger rising to a steam that made all his inside walls feel hot. Gripping his pick, fiercely, he slid down the step and landing with a bold *crunch*.

The thief turned at once, his cloak drawn over one arm and backed instinctively from the advancing Thron. Seeing who he was, however, the dwarf seemed to hesitate. He drew down his hood, revealing the violet eyes, which were fringed in curling lashes, and a messy mane of dark hair. Then he winked, pressed a silver-ringed finger to his lips, and offered one of objects in his cloak to Thron: a skin of lantern oil.

Thron gritted his teeth and slapped the skin to the ground.

“Thief!” he said.

The merchant’s face darkened and his legs tightened for a dash, but Thron was far too close and far too ready. He shoved the dwarf roughly with the handle of his pick and the thief stumbled loudly into one of the adjacent packs (which, apparently, had pans inside). At once, the three Easterlings dozing the cozy little fire leapt up and reached for their lanterns. The thief stood up, clearing his knife hand of his cloak. The hand held a small dagger.

“Tempting trolls, Fram,” he growled.¹ He dropped his armful of booty and darted towards Thron, dagger in hand extended. Thron frantically raised his pick to block the blow, but instead of striking out with the weapon, the thief drove his shoulder into Thron’s stomach, hard, and in the same moment thrust a round, heavy object into his hands.

“Hey now!” squeaked a frightened voice, as Thron toppled against the hard stones. It was the snoring Easterling—at least, he had been snoring—standing and staring shakily at them both. “What’s going on?”

“It’s this dwarf, here!” said the merchant, kicking Thron sharply before he could rise so that he had to regain his breath again. “He was stealing from your pack!”

Thron was on his feet, now, spluttering.

“I did not—it was him. I tried to stop him!”

“What a fine story,” sneered the thief, looking around and grinning. “And altogether backwards. Why, you’re holding the booty now!”

Thron looked down and realized he was. The thing which the dwarf had thrust into his hands was none other than the glinting, golden object Thron had seen him steal a moment before. Looking at it closely, Thron could now see that it was a snuff box.

“What’s going on, here?”

It was the Southerner’s thin, sniffly voice. He was peaking over the rock up above.

“A thief!” said the merchant, enthusiastically.

“I didn’t take this thing...” objected Thron, angrily. “He just stuffed it into my hands. Here, take it. It’s yours...”

Thron proffered the snuff-box to the affronted Easterling, who snatched it and backed away, suspiciously. Thron looked around for some kind of proof, and met the eyes of the dwarf with the abacus.

¹ “Fram” is the dwarf equivalent of “Sir” or “Mister.”

“You!” he said, quickly. “You saw what happened! Tell them—was it not as I said?”

One of the other Easterlings addressed the spectacled dwarf.

“What did you see Fram Oskil?”

‘Fram Oskil,’ who had once again avoided Thronð’s gaze, pushed his spectacles up his nose, set aside his work and uncovered his lantern as though examining the scene for the first time. The fresh, yellow light blasted blindingly into the face of the large bundle, who turned out to be a fifth Easterling curled up at Fram Oskil’s feet who now who sat up, squinting in bewilderment.

“I am sorry Fram Kurl,” said Fram Oskil, politely. “I was so absorbed in my figures. What’s all this about?”

Thronð stared at the Easterling in disbelief.

“Why you...!”

“What is afoot?” said a dark haired, bejeweled dwarf who had evidently left the Westerner’s camp-fire to investigate the noise. It was the dwarf with the red jewel on his brow, and he had one of his kinsman—a handsome young dwarf with a scar running across his brow and over the bridge of his nose.

“I would like to know much the same thing,” said the rune-dwarf, who had appeared quietly by Thronð’s elbow. Thronð had not heard him come. He spoke coolly and clearly, placing one hand on the arched top of his staff.

“That dwarf,” said the merchant, shaking his head and gesturing to Thonð. “He tried to rob this poor Easterling.” He was gathering the oil skin and a few other scattered oddments and handing them to the robbed Easterling with a foul smile. The Easterling took the things, leaning visibly away from the dwarf.

“I’m terribly sorry,” said the thief, still smiling. “It’s a pity the things a dwarf will do for the things he wants. Even if he is poor enough to need them.”

He cast a derogatory glance at Thronð and his worn tunic and hood. Everyone else looked at Thronð, too.

Suddenly a slurred but steady voice spoke.

“He’sh lying.”

Thronð turned surprised by the warmth and strength of the voice. He was even more surprised when he saw the crippled dwarf standing above the step, crutches in hand, Thronð’s salamander on one shoulder. His small, yellow-green eyes stared at the company from within the ugly mesh of his facial features, unwinkingly.

“I shaw this brave miner follow thish rogue and challenge him. He ish innoshent.”

Thronð heaved a grateful sigh and nodded deeply to the dwarf. The merchant’s face took on an ugly, strained expression.

“Hah!” he said. “You’re going to believe him? Look at him. He’s obviously a rogue. Probably in league with this scum.”

The dwarves gathered around looked from the terrible features of the cripple to the sneering ones of the merchant as if they weren’t sure who was more likely to be a rogue. The victimized Easterling, however, backed fearfully away.

“Just leave me alone,” he said. “All of you. I’m not alone. Don’t think you can cheat me.”

As the dwarf said this, there was an irritating screech and he dropped his goods to plug his ears. Thron, however, turned expectantly towards the rune-dwarf. Sure enough, it was the swiftlet, who landed with a grating rustle of feathers and screeched again.

“What’s this?” said the rune-dwarf to the bird, softly and looked towards the empty gate of the ravine. The other dwarves looked, too, suddenly still. There was a whisper of moving footsteps, coming closer and closer, louder and louder. Then, rumbling and low, there came the resonant beat of a drum.

Brrrrum, bum-bum-bum.

Thron was near enough to hear the rune-dwarf’s sharp in-take of breath.

“It is time,” he said, after breathing out again, calmly.

“They are coming.”

Myth 2:

It is told, and the skools have seen, how the dwarf children came into being.

It was a winter day, and Dwar and Im were angry with each other. They grew so angry, that Dwar left the cave which they had been sharing and wandered the mountain, giving rise to steam wherever she went. Im did not bother himself with her for some time, cooling off his anger by carving in the stone wall. He worked without thinking for many hours—so many that his fingers grew chilled and the sun's dim light was nearly gone. Then, stepping back, he suddenly realized that he'd created a creature like Dwar, but with her head thrown proudly back and a fierce flash in her eye. He caressed the carving with one hand, for even in the picture's anger, there was a warmth and sweetness to it. He began to look for Dwar to return. He wandered about the cave, listening to the rising howl of the wind. Yet night came and still there was no sign of her.

Im grew afraid.

He looked out into the blizzarding night and imagined the fragile Dwar lost, and weeping, perhaps, in the blowing snow. In that moment his heart nearly burst, and he ran for his lantern and sled and set out to find her.

Meanwhile, Dwar, who had steamed so long that she was weary, had grown calm in the sharp silver glitter of the whirling snow. She made her way slowly back to the cave, holding on to the mountain's rocking wall as she went. When she got to the cave, she quickly saw that Im was not there.

"He has gone to bring the firewood," she thought to herself. "I will wait for him."

Then she saw the carving he had made of her.

Her heart shivered. It was like her, but not like her. But oh! It was beloved.

Dwar tenderly picked up the chisel from where Im had left it, and began to make crude scratches in the stone beside the carving. Her skill was not so fine with the tool, but her steam was weary so she made it do. The scratches formed a hawkish nose (slightly slanted, it is true) and square, blunt eyes. They grew into a flowing bard and bristling brows (though not so hairy as Im's). And little by little, a face like Im's appeared, stubborn and scowling, but altogether so strong and with such a loving twinkle in its eyes that Dwar clapped her hands.

In the moment she clapped her hands, the sound reminded her that she was alone. And looking at the face she had scratched into the wall, she knew at once, somehow, that he was looking for her. She wasted not a moment then, but ran frantically into the cold, calling for her friend. Up and down the mountain she ran, and up again to the very top. By this time she had begun to grow dizzy, for the waters within her were evaporating away. Even as she knelt in the snow, however, she saw the light of a lantern approaching. Then through the swirling blizzard she saw Im, shuffling along, his sled dragging behind him and an icicle hanging from his nose. He had searched until his limbs were stiff and he felt his life blood growing thick. When he saw Dwar, however, he sprang forward and Dwar flung her arms around him.

"I was afraid you were lost," she cried, weeping in joy and fear.

"I was afraid you were frozen," answered Im, his voice low and halting.

And so saying, Im gathered Dwar to himself and carried her back to the cave, and she warmed him as he carried her so that he felt once again his full liveliness. And it is said that in that moment, as they loved and comforted each other, the warmth of their life stream bubbled through the very pores of their hands and collected into a crystal in the left palm of each. When they got to the cave they wondered at these gems greatly, for they were the most beautiful they had ever seen.

“I will put mine in my carving of you,” said Dwar, and set it at the carved Im’s heart.

“And I will put mine in my carving of you,” said Im, smiling and doing the same. And in the instant that the gems were set in the figures on the wall, each seemed to take on a life and beauty so entrancing that Dwar and Dwarf were more delighted than ever, and for many weeks did nothing but improve upon the pictures in the wall and develop them until they were so life like, you might have thought them real. Dwar and Im loved them so much that they named them—the dwara Ede and the dwarf Nrosp—and they never grew tired of adding to them. Even after Im turned to other things, however, Dwar could not. She returned to the pictures every-day, and loved them tenderly. One day, as she ran her hands over the hand of Ede, she suddenly felt the stone of the carving drawing out the water within her. Feeling instinctively that something great was going to happen, Dwar pressed the dwar-carving’s hand and allowed her life liquid to flow into the stone. When Im returned to their cave to find Dwar with both hands laid flat against the heart of Ede. She looked so pale and weak that Im dropped the wood he was carrying and ran to her.

“Stay!” said Dwar. “Stay! She is nearly come, stay!”

Then—wonder of wonders!—the picture of Ede blinked her eyes and then, fastening these upon Dwar and Im, she leapt out of the wall and threw her arms around Dwar’s neck, no longer a picture, but a living creature all unto herself.

Nrosp took longer than his sister, but he too came forth, some years later, and leapt onto his father’s knee beside Ede.

“I am here!” he said.

And he was.

Chapter 2: The Words of Uda

Silently, the rune-dwarf turned and strode back to his post by the labyrinth door.

His decisive motion, like a small crack that runs down a face of stone, travelled through the dwarves. The two Westerners looked at each other, their jaws grim, their brows set, and took measured steps back to their brothers. The Southerner climbed down from his lonely rise atop the rock, crushing the fire out of the inside of his pipe with one thumb. Vaguely, Thron was aware that he was holding out a hand for Kunkizar, still atop one of the crippled dwarf's shrugging shoulders, exchanging meaningless nods and murmured thanks, and watching the other dwarf move away, his swinging gait stuttering over the uneven stones. Most of the dwarves were returning things to their baggage and hoisting it onto their shoulders. The Easterlings, however, were taking things out--gold chains and pocket watches and brooches—and uncovering their lanterns. Thron heard the one called Oskil shout something at his young companion and hand him the abacus while he took out several twinkling rings from his pocket and jammed them down onto his fingers. And everywhere on the lips of everyone seemed to be the words,

The King comes. The King comes! The King comes...

“Lost, little Fram?”

Thron spun and faced the merchant who was leering at him with his white teeth and, strangely enough, taking his rings off.

Thron's jaw clenched and he turned away. The dwarf, however, seized him suddenly by the shoulder, turned him back, and drew him close by the collar of his tunic (and some of his chest hair, too) so he could hiss,

“You may think you're pretty fine, but you'll be one of the first to go. Along with them.”

The rogue flicked his eyes inconspicuously towards the Easterlings who, now fully respectable, were hefting their mountainous packs onto their backs.

“They come!” cried a voice, and the dwarf, turning his head with Thron to see the first dim figures march out of the ravine, let go of Thron and darted into the crowd of dwarves assembling before the door.

Rubbing his chest where the dwarf had grabbed him and picking up the quietly escaping Kunkizar by his tail, Thron unceremoniously stuffed his creature down the front of his tunic and also joined the other dwarves. He would not have liked to say it, but he did feel lost. Thron had often imagined what the King Olethim of Kulezim might be like. Sometimes he'd settled on a warrior of incredible stature and strength, his hair and beard pouring in youthful abundance down his chest and back. Other times he'd pictured an angry, gluttoned king, hung with jewels and bright fabrics, his eyes hard, his rod stained with blood. Still others, the King had been incomprehensively beautiful and ancient, with silver words or crystal silence on his tongue.

Most often, however, and almost unconsciously, he had pictured the King as a large dwarf with dusty colored hair pulled harshly out of his face and slipping rebelliously out of the knot under his chin. This version of the king had a hawk nose, and warm, honey-yellow eyes, and was mysteriously wearing a miner's coarse tunic and an old, dirty green cap. But Thron realized now that the real King couldn't be like this. And he had no idea what to expect instead. Or if he ought to expect anything at all.

Hot blooded and uneasy as he was, he was unexpectedly comforted to perceive that the first seven figures that had come out of the ravine where neither the King nor even dwarves, but rather, dwaras. The feverish tingling in his blood settled into a calm rush of warmth as he registered the slim, girlish figures. They were small in stature, like dwarves, and these were clad in long skirts of mail and burdened with many bundles over their shoulders. Nevertheless, dwaras they were, the inlaid crystals of their skin glimmering and occasionally twinkling, their thick, long hair cascading in uncontrollable abundance from beneath the scarves they wore tightly wrapped around their heads.

Four of the dwaras stationed themselves along one side of the mouth of the ravine and three along the other, forming a path into the clearing. Then, suddenly, and so piercing and lovely that it took Thron'd's breath, a light appeared in the waiting darkness between them. It was not the jailed light of a lantern, nor the orange light of a torch, but much more like a skool that had made its way down the mountain and gotten trapped in the narrow windings of stone. For a moment, its light stood out in suddenly sharp rays obscuring the darkness around it. Gradually, however, as the light dissipated into the open air of the clearing, Thron'd saw that it was the head of a scepter, and that the scepter was raised in the hand of a dwarf.

The dwarf walked past the waiting dwaras, nodding to them as he went, his grey beard curling like silver wire on his dark mail and his midnight-blue cloak gently swaying with every move. In silence he strode until he stood before the dwarves collected beneath the terrible door in the mountain face. There he stopped. He was much closer now, and Thron'd could see that he was a dwarf of unremarkable size with an end-heavy nose and curling eyebrows. True, his sharp, angular eyes were a singular blue that cut through his swarthy skin with their brightness, but in other respects, he might have been any dwarf.

Nevertheless, there was something about him that made Thron'd whip off his orange hood and drop to his knee in a wave of warm emotion. He might have called the emotion love, had it been in reference to one he knew better. Perhaps it was gratitude. Thron'd didn't know, but for a fleeting instant, looking at the figure standing alone and immovable before them, he realized that this dwarf *might* have been any dwarf, but he had chosen to be their leader and protector.

Brrrrrum, bum-bum-BOOM!

Behind the King, a party of warriors including a drum-beater whom Thron'd had scarcely marked in the shadow of the King came to a halt. All was quiet. All of the waiting dwarves but the Westerners had knelt, and even the Westerners made way for the King to pass through them up to the door. The rune-dwarf also, moved from his place beside the door to a lower position. The King took the path amid his subjects and when he had reached the circular portal, turned. Then he raised his scepter and spoke clearly in a rich, strong voice.

“Hail! Dwarves of Kulezim!”

“HAIL!” cried Thron'd with the other dwarves, raising an answering fist in greeting.

“Hail, indeed,” repeated the King, his voice falling to a steady, grave tone. He did not give the dwarves a chance to respond again, but pressed forward saying, “Dwarves of Kulezim--you stand on the threshold of Elensa's Labyrinth. This labyrinth is neither simple nor safe. For some of you, it might hold treasures beyond your wildest dreams.

For others, it will hold only death. Be sure that what you seek is worth dying for. If it is not, you still have time to turn back. Foolish is the dwarf who casts aside what is most precious for any other thing.”

The King gazed upon the assembled dwarves, keenly. The silence made Thron'd's stomach twist, painfully with fear.

What if I die?

He pictured Luthe straining her back to build fires in the smithy. He pictured Sar loose on the streets with no one to watch her. He pictured his mother, too, but...

No. Not this. We've been over this already.

Thron'd squeezed his eyes shut and gripped his pick-axe, hard, willing the King to keep going; to move on so he could think of something else. He could still see Omth, the young smith of Smet who brought all his washing and mending to Luthe and would often give Thron'd payments for her which she denied earning but which he would never take back. He had confronted Thron'd about the idea of the labyrinth at the first.

“How can you leave them now?” he had said. *“Your sisters need you Thron'd. Your mother is not well. Why would you leave now?”*

Thron'd shook his head as if to shake the voice from his head.

I—can't—stay, he thought.

Not to watch his mother die. Not if there was something he could do about it.

Thron'd opened his eyes. Kunkizar was ramming his head against his collar angrily. Thron'd pushed him mercilessly down and looked around. No one had stirred.

The King looked over the determined faces and breathed deeply in and then out again.

“Very well. Dwar Uda!”

The King had addressed this last comment to someone behind them where the warriors and dwaras stood. Thron'd turned and saw with surprise that one of the seven dwaras had followed the King to the front of the group of warriors and stood, wreathed in the mist of her own breath, apparently waiting to be called. She stepped forward now with quick, direct steps and a toss of her thick dark hair, which bushed out from a deep red scarf and brushed her mail skirt like a bunch of thick rushes. The hair had also escaped the scarf in a couple heavy locks around her face, and it curled limply in the warm steam that rose from her cheeks and then frosted over with glittering ice as the air touched it. She had ruddy cheeks, a good-humored, observant pair of eyes, and a small, laughing mouth, features that all seemed brought together by a prominent and rather practical nose. It was a comforting nose, very direct and strong, like the dwara's flickering gaze as she walked between the dwarves, her head erect and steady. Those sharp, thoughtful eyes caught Thron'd's for a moment as she passed and the small mouth and dark brows gave an gentle rise of humor. Thron'd looked down, confused. He had thought for a moment that there was something about the strength of this dwara that made him think of Luthe. But Luthe never laughed at him.

The grass glittered in the dwara's tracks where she'd passed, the warm mist about her falling in tiny needle-points of ice into the weathered tufts. She moved briskly but calmly, burdened by several rolls of what looked like blankets under one arm and a plain, box-like lantern in the other hand. When she reached the King, she set down both her bundles and her lantern, and without waiting for any introduction, turned and addressed them all:

“I am Uda, 22nd Handmaiden of Elensa, daughter of Kings. It is for her that I speak tonight, the 22nd night of the moon. She bid me give you words about what lies on the other side of this door.”

Several low conversations had broken out as she had walked up and begun to speak, but now they faded into stillness, encouraged by the direct eyes of the young dwara and her somber words. She continued in respectful silence.

“On the other side of this door lies a great and ancient labyrinth. Your task is to find the labyrinth’s heart. There, in a tower upon an isle in a lake, Elensa awaits you even now. Once you have found her and given her your name, you are deserving of your reward. But listen well”—here even Dwar Uda’s laughing gaze grew serious—“This labyrinth is vast and ancient. Although Elensa has reached into many parts of it, there are others known to neither her nor to our King, King Olethim of Kulezim, who walked there once long ago. Is it not so?”

She turned, respectfully to the King, who nodded, averting his eyes, and said, “It is so.”

“Then it is so,” said Uda, turning back with reaffirmed earnestness. “And in these unknown tangent regions, one could wander for years. You have only three months. So heed these clues I now give you.”

No lingering voice intruded on the silence this time as the dwara removed one glove and shook from it something that winked softly as it fell into her misty palm. She rubbed it with her thumb, and Thron drew a breath as whatever it was gave forth a subtle halo of light. She held it up for them to see. It was a simple crystal, fashioned into the winking likeness of a fish and giving off a faceted light of its own.

“This crystal,” said Dwar Uda, boldly, “is a Lumino. As many of you know, it captures light and sends it back stronger. It is one of many Luminos fashioned in the likeness of fish that have been set over various paths and doors within the labyrinth. They mark the shortest and most direct paths to Elensa. But be wary: They are more direct but not more safe. It could be that some of the most dangerous of the things within these paths lie just beneath their light. That is my first guidance for you.

“My second is this: You may trust the eyeless fish to guide you right.

“Finally, I give you this command: Whenever you have a choice in the path you must take, take that path that leads down and inward. These paths will guide you most surely and quickly to the labyrinth’s heart.”

Thron felt a tight coil of anxiety loosen a little in his chest as the dwara spoke. These were good, helpful instructions, like good, solid ground beneath the feet. He began to feel there may be some hope. Some hope for himself. Some hope for *her* whom he’d left behind. The other dwarves also seemed to stand with lighter hearts, for Thron could see by various shades of light emanating from their left breasts that their hearts were gathering courage. That was always what happened when a dwarf gathered courage—his heart would light up and shine right through him. Dwar Uda’s quick eyes jumped to each of the flares of light, and Thron was sure that she was taking in each dwarf’s rising courage in detail. She smiled, slowly, and continued.

“Every night of this moon, one of Elensa’s handmaidens have lead dwarves down into the labyrinth. Tonight I will lead you as far as the second gate. From there, you must make your own way. But not without some token of my lady’s blessing. A gift I have for

each of you, if you will bear it.” Here she took the collection of bundles from the King, who had stooped and gently lifted them up, and bent to pick up her lantern.

“I bid you be true-hearted and courageous,” she said. “On behalf of my lady.”

As Dwar Uda, 22nd handmaiden of Elensa stepped into the shadows beside the labyrinth door where the rune-dwarf had stood, the King raised his scepter again.

“Dwarves of Kulezim,” he said. “You have heard the words of my daughter through this good dwara. They are my words also, and it is my will that those who would compete for my daughter’s hand and kingdom should enter. What you seek is most beautiful: *Elensa, beyond all treasure best, Elensa the fair; Elensa the true*. What you seek is not lightly given, nor should it ever be.”

So saying, the King turned and fitted the end of his scepter into an impression in the serpent’s head upon the door and turned it. A series of clicks followed and the round door swung suddenly open. The King stepped aside.

“Those of you who would enter,” he said, “enter now.”

The hearts of many of the dwarves had begun to burn with the ardency of cherry-bright coals as the King had spoken. Even Thron was familiar with the verses about Elensa by now, and like many other dwarves, he found them alluring in a manner that had nothing to do with either his mother or sisters. They were verses that gave the adventure of the labyrinth value in itself. That other dwarves felt their enchanting pull, Thron doubted not. Now, however, in the face of a gaping hole of blackness, all hearts trembled and spattered out. The opening was ugly to see, and Thron was struck once again by the idea that the mountain did not like to rim it and was pulling away that it might not touch it. Thron had been waiting all evening in the cold for this moment: the chance to get inside the mountain and be warm. But something about the darkness waiting looked not warm and protective, but cold and hard.

At last, the Westerner with the flashing red jewel on his brow, who appeared to be a leader of some kind, strode boldly forward towards the entrance. He must have had to summon a great deal of courage, for his heart flashed forth with golden light. The King Olethim stepped up, and for a moment Thron thought it was to block the rebel dwarf’s path. However, the King’s intent was quite different. He raised his fist in salute to the dwarf, and held it there, waiting for the dwarf’s response. The dark-haired warrior slowly, but unhesitatingly raised his own fist to touch the old dwarf’s strong, prominent knuckles with his own. They both stood very tall, the Westerner even taller than the King. Nevertheless, as they stood so, Thron could imagine that if the King had had roots, they would’ve gone deeper. He held the stern Westerner’s unflinching gaze for a moment, then lowered his fist with a smile and allowed him to take a parcel from Uda and pass into the darkness.

One by one, each of the other dwarves saluted the King, received Elensa’s gift, and was swallowed up by the black hole in the wall. Thron felt himself shrinking back into his hunching shoulders. His heart was heavy to the bursting point with confusion, and his mind swam from images of his family to images of the door. Several times he glanced up at the Skools, beseeching their interference, trying to find a sign—any sign—that this was the right path. When it came down to it, however, Thron needed no sign. He was not turning back. Seeing that the Easterlings were speaking in low voices amongst themselves and the King was looking his way, Thron settled his pick-axe on

his shoulder, grasped frantically for the smooth crystal hanging from his belt, and stumbled awkwardly forward.

The King's knuckles brushed his mail as he raised them again. He was wearing several rings, not ornate, but of precious make all the same. One cupped a silver gem in white gold. Thron'd raised his own brassy fist in response and looking up was surprised to see that the King's grave face was smiling. His expression was almost...

Father-like.

Thron'd's heart gave a throb. Then the King lowered his fist and Thron'd stumbled hurriedly toward Uda.

Uda was smiling, too. Thron'd could feel her amusement projecting from under her judgmental brows and unabashed nose. She was studying him. Probably laughing at him. Thron'd stuffed Kunkizar's head, which was bumping against his chin, back down his shirt.

She really did laugh then, reaching back to select a bundle from the arms of a fellow dwara who had carried more to her and handing it to him. The small bundle seemed to comprise mostly of rolled-up blanket. Thron'd thought, however, as the gift's weight fell into his hands, that there was something hard and heavy at its center. He bowed, and stepped into the labyrinth after the others. As he knelt to attach the new bundle to his baggage, he watched the silhouette of the Easterlings, the Southerner, and the rune-dwarf slip tentatively across the bit of sky which he could see through the hole. He wondered if far away Luthe was awake and thinking of him. He wanted to tell her to forgive him. He wanted to tell her he would return soon. He could feel the Skools watching him through that narrowed eye of darkness.

Father protect me, Thron'd thought, as, last of all, Dwar Uda stepped into the dark passage pulling the door along behind her.

Then the iron clicked shut.

And the skools were gone.

Chapter 3: Into the Dark

Thronnd squinted through the sharp rays of light that flooded the tunnel from the Easterlings' lanterns. A little behind him, he saw that Uda was squinting, too.

"Dwarves of Kulezim," she called. "Save your oil. My lantern will give us what light we need."

Slowly, and reluctantly on the part of the Easterlings, most of the lanterns in the tunnel turned off. Uda ignored the purple and blue and yellow lights that remained stubbornly on (if covered) and lit her own lantern with a couple strikes of flint and steel. The lantern was plain and much the type of lantern any dwarf might carry, but its oil must have been of superior quality, for it gave off a soft, sweet light, and its grey rays only dimly illumined the tense faces and glowing eyes of the dwarves. Thronnd could see her shadow on the wall behind her—slim, not too tall, but very strong—edged in the fuzzy light. The shadow tossed its head with her as she looked over the assembled dwarves.

Many of the dwarves were kneeling, adding Elensa's gifts to their baggage, or simply touching the ground as a comfortable reminder that it was there. He spotted again the leader of the Westerners, still burning a bright gold from his heart. There was another dwarf, too, projecting rays of gold-hearted green. The dwarf with crutches. All other hearts in the tunnel were at a low ebb—if they gave any light at all.

"Follow the tunnel!" said Uda's steady, solid voice. "It will take you there."

Thronnd quickly straightened and moved to make room for the imperious dwara to pass. She walked quickly, and as she walked by Thronnd felt a light mist against his face. It was an earthy, sharp flavored mist. The mist of a dwara who felt with all toes what was under her feet.

Thronnd turned to follow her, but was suddenly knocked off balance by a passing dwarf. He put his hand out against the smooth, grainy stone of the tunnel wall to keep himself from falling into it and glanced angrily down the tunnel. As he did so there was a clatter of wood against stone, a couple objections from dwarves still sitting along the wall, and a crutch slid across the floor to touch his foot. The crippled dwarf had fallen against the Southerner, who backed away from the dwarf's strange, ugly face in disgust. A little further down the tunnel, just where it bent, Thronnd caught the shadow of a whirling cloak and two malicious, violet eyes squinting back at them. Then the rogue dwarf disappeared around the bend after the Westerners and Uda.

Thronnd hurried to the fallen dwarf with one crutch in hand. He had righted himself into a sitting position and was slowly untangling himself from his stained cloak. The warm green light of his heart had disappeared, as if sucked into his deformed body.

"Thronnd of Smet, at your service," said Thronnd, holding out a forearm to the dwarf. The dwarf's eyes flicked towards Thronnd and then flicked away. He took Thronnd's hand, pulled himself up, and stooped to pick up the other crutch.

"Kru," he said, taking the worn crutch from Thronnd. His eyes were down-cast, and he seemed eager to turn away. Thronnd, however, raised a fist to him.

"Thank you for speaking for me against that thief," he said.

The dwarf, who had already turned to move down the tunnel, paused.

"You are welcome," he said.

He made a gesture that was something like a salute in return and turned hastily down the tunnel. He did, however, leave a little space beside him for Thronnd to fall into step.

“I’ve been to Sh-S-met,” the strange dwarf said, when Thronnd had walked by him for a moment. “A good place.”

“What took you there?” Thronnd asked.

“I often sh-stop there on the way to Amalfram.”

“You have been to Amalfram?” queried Thronnd.

“A few timesh,” was the slurred response.

They had passed the couple dwarves still fixing their packs and come to the first bend in the tunnel. Thronnd could feel himself falling away from the surface of the mountain as he took it: plunging deep and deeper into the earth. Thronnd glanced at his companion’s strange, liling figure. His crutches moved like members of his body, propelling him gracefully forward at a pace that Thronnd found difficult to keep time with.

“You use the crutches well,” Thronnd commented.

“They are my old friends,” answered the dwarf. There was a glint of humor in his voice, although Thronnd couldn’t read the expression of his mask-like face in the dark. The tunnel wound as it descended, and it all too often obscured both the Easterlings’ light behind and Uda’s light before. Yet there was just enough light to examine some features of his companion for a second time. The dwarf’s stained cloak was tied close to his body so as to be out of the way of his crutches. His boots were light for a dwarf’s boots, and much worn. He reminded Thronnd of the Rogue dwarves which sometimes travelled through Smet. Rogues had no home. They usually had no decency either. Thronnd attributed most of this to the fact that the Rogues would not live with the dwar-kind. But whatever the reason, Rogues were not usually to be trusted.

Thronnd would’ve been warier of this dwarf, had he not spoken up for Thronnd against the thief under the silver light of the Skools. After that event, Thronnd was more curious about the dwarf than afraid. And there was something in the dwarf’s voice, slurred by his disfigurement, that made it difficult for Thronnd to imagine him evil. Even when the dwarf’s voice came through clear and suddenly strong, it did not seem dangerous or unfriendly. Still, the dwarf seemed hesitant to speak much or even to have Thronnd’s company. It was a puzzlement.

Kunkizar poked his head out of Thronnd’s tunic. This time, Thronnd allowed the salamander to slip out onto his shoulder. The strange amphibian gave off a faint, spidery glow as if its muddy skin had just fragmented into many pieces to show a molten river of blue underneath. Thronnd’s companion raised his head to gaze at the strange creature.

“He’s one of the finest salamanders I have sheen.”

“My sisters took good care of him.”

Again, Thronnd saw for an instant Sar’s warm, green-sliced brown eyes and mane of resplendent curls. She was so short that the salamander’s tail had dragged along the floor as she hugged it to herself. A dwar-child.

The crippled dwarf nodded.

“A s-salamander is a good comrade, they say.”

“They can be,” said Thronnd wryly. “Have you ever had one, Fram?”

The dwarf shook his head. But something about the question seemed to recall him as if from faraway thought. He looked again at Thronnd.

“You may call me Garn, if you wish.”

“Thank you, Fram Garn. I am pleased to meet you.”

“As am I to meet you. And your s-salamander,” he added.

They walked on in the dim light. Garn’s speed had caught them up to the back of the Westerners. Thronð knew they were the Westerners first by the height of their shadows. Then he knew it all over again when their accented voices began to sing:

*Beware ye children of the evil night
Craven and twisted with your wicked plight,
Beware, though great your cunning might,
For the dwarves of the west lands are we.*

*They say Timwuldan was a worm of fire,
With heart of hate and flaming ire
But the west killed him as they’d killed his sire
And the dwarves of the west lands are we.*

*Recall the singing of Bereg the Great
When pounding upon our enemies gate.
They’d fear at last—but fear too late,
For the dwarves of the west lands are we.*

When...

The song continued. The words were brazen and boastful, but the tune was also sad. Thronð listened for a bit. Then, gradually, he realized that the dwarves in front of them were falling a little behind the others and the singing was not so loud. Finally, one of them spoke.

“Your arm?”

“I am fine.”

“You are in pain.”

“It will pass.”

“Curse them.”

“It will pass, I say.”

The first speaker, in front and to the left of Thronð, was very tall. The other was not so tall, but Thronð could see even by his shadow that he was burly, and he had a crossbow slung over one shoulder and a shield over the other. They walked silently for a long moment, and then the first speaker, the taller one, spoke again in a low, bitter tone.

“He disregards the call of Juma. He disregards the blood of his brothers in Wavela and Gvenga Pass. He tells us to run away. To forget. Two things which a dwarf must never do. And then he welcomes us like sons! He has no right.”

The dwarf on the right had turned and lowered his head, listening to his kinsman. Now he shook his head.

“That may be so, Agrev. Yet I am honored to meet eyes with such a dwarf as the one we touched fists with today.”

“Aye, Sorj. But there are some mighty dwarves who I would be honored to look in the eye and then after strike off their head.”

“Agrev.”

“You know our pain,” said Agrev, vehemently. “You know the laments sung without ceasing these five years.”

“I know,” said Sorj, gruffly.

Thronnd felt his curiosity and compassion aroused by the rawness of this dwarf’s words. He knew so little of the West. Or of anything, it seemed. He was grateful when Garn suddenly addressed them.

“Brothers,” he said. “I hear great unease in your voices. What have been the shorrows of the West these three years? I have been wandering broadly shince I was last there, and have heard few tidings.”

The Westerners glanced warily over their shoulders, and the one called Sorj moved his shield to his other shoulder to more easily speak to Garn.

“Our people have long been at war with the Tolumbron² of the desert. Year after year we have defended our strong places and our treasures. But though we fight with all our strength, it will not be long before they are too many for us and no help comes from East, North, or South.”

“I heard,” said Garn, frowning a little, “That Amalfram shent many dwarves last year during the sh-season of cold. Did they never come to you?”

Agrev restlessly pulled his knife half out of its sheath and then slammed it back twice before answering.

“We sent them back.”

“What?”

Garn’s smooth gait stuttered in astonishment. Agrev, however, did not even look back when he answered.

“They had orders not to advance past Belutha. As we would never abandon a quarter of our cities to pull back to Belutha, they were of no use to us. So we sent them back.”

“Surely,” said Garn, obviously troubled by this news, “their position was sh-strategic?”

“It’s a fool’s strategy,” said the dwarf, adjusting his huge axe to the opposite shoulder so as to more easily speak to Garn. “No, it’s no strategy at all, pulling back further into the mountains, giving up riches, resources and fortified places. It is cowardice that is happening in my Kingdom.”

“Take heart and hope all will be well,” said Garn, bracingly. “King Olethim has fought many wars and he approves of it, does he not?”

“I have little faith in King Olethim or his battle tactics,” said the dwarf, clearly and defiantly. “He has sent nothing but ambassadors to our city. Ambassadors and paltry soldiers who would try to sit and reason with their enemy before shooting him. Retreat. Retreat they say, all of them. I say that he does not know what to do. And I know that he knows nothing of the West.”

Thronnd felt his companion’s gait slow, this time heavily; intentionally. His voice was quiet when he spoke.

²“The Tolumbron” is the dwarf name for humans.

“If that is what you think, Fram Agrev, then I think I may shay that you know nothing of King Olethim either.”

“Perhaps,” said the dwarf, gruffly. “I do not need to know anything about the King to know if he acts wisely in the West.”

“It is foolish to call a dwarf a fool without knowing why he does what he does,” said Garn, his crutch tapping the floor at an accelerated pace to keep up with the dwarf’s long stride.

“I guess you can consider yourself a fool, then.”

“I am a fool. But I have paid for it dearly. Sh-someday you will, too.”

Thrond felt the dwarf stiffen and watched apprehensively as he slowed and turned to face Garn.

“Agrev...” said the dwarf’s companion in a low, warning voice as he also slowed to a stop. A couple of the Easterlings with bobbing lanterns swinging started walking around them along the wall. Fram Agrev ignored both him and them.

“Are you from the North?” he said, searching Garn’s eyes accusingly. Thrond could see now that he was the Westerner with a scar across his brow and nose and it bent fiercely over a scowl. Garn held the dwarf’s bright, fierce eyes coolly as if unaware or unaffected by the threat in his voice.

“I have wandered for many years and call no place my home. Nevertheless, I would be true to my King.”

“Ay,” said the dwarf, nodding slowly, his eyes still locked intensely on Garn’s face. His eyes flickered down to the dwarf’s twisted leg, a sneer playing at his lips.

“Much good may it do you,” he said.

Garn did not say anything. Instead, he let the two dwarves turn away and slowed to create distance between them. Thrond slowed with him, observing him keenly out of the corner of his eyes. He was astounded to realize that he was not, indeed, able to place the dwarf in any of the four quadrants. So distracted by his disfiguration had he been on his first sight of the dwarf that he had not tried. It made him even more curious...

They walked on in awkward silence for a couple minutes. Then Garn paused in his faltering gait and said,

“Go on if you wish, Fram Thrond. I am winded.”

“I will wait for you,” said Thrond, stepping to the side of the tunnel with the dwarf and leaning upon his pick-axe, easily. “A good comrade is hard to find.”

Garn looked after the two dwarves fading away down the tunnel as he leaned upon his crutch.

“Yes,” he said.

As if to emphasize this thought, there was a loud clang of empty tins behind them and a nasal, unpleasant voice commented,

“Loyk... do you need to have me tell you that they are not bouncing pig bladders? You seem under that impression...”

The pinched, red nose and ears of the small Easterling who had accompanied spectacled dwarf, Oskil, appeared around the corner, bumbling and fumbling with a couple scales which he was trying to balance by hanging them around his neck. The yellow light became suddenly very bright as the spectacled dwarf entered around the corner with it in one hand.

“You should put them in your bag, Loyk,” said Oskil, sternly.

Loyk mumbled something inaudible.

“You’ve said that already,” said Oskil, tugging at his nose. “And you would have room if you took out that absurd box...”

“It’s Grandmother’s,” said Loyk, in a small voice.

“Well, why didn’t you leave it with your grandmother, then?” snapped Oskil.

The cranky Easterling stood glaring down at Loyk, who was kneeling and feeling for the dropped set of scales with one hand. As he did so, the Southerner shuffled around behind him, his head hanging, his demeanor thoughtful but sad. He appeared to be speaking to himself as he walked, and Thron heard him murmur,

“A second gate? Why a second gate? Are there poisonous fumes below?”

“Well they weren’t going to leave a legendary labyrinth guarded by only one measly iron door, you know,” said the sharp-eared Oskil, as he strung one of the sets of scales around Loyk’s neck, impatiently. “Only a fool would do that.”

The Southerner started a little as if only just seeing the round, imposing Easterling.

“Oh, yes, right, only a fool,” he said, and shuffled on. Oskil followed, sedately, and Loyk, holding one of the scales to keep it from sliding down the other side of his shoulder, hurried after him. Before he’d gone six paces, there was a birdlike screech behind them and down the scales went clattering again.

“Loyk!” reprimanded Oskil.

“I’m sorry, Uncle!” squeaked Loyk.

Truth be told, Oskil looked rather disconcerted himself. Thron did not blame him. As the rune-dwarf stepped slowly around the bend behind them, the bird on his shoulder gave another odd click and screech and Thron felt his beard hairs bristle. The solemn, hooded figure turned towards the fiendish creature on his shoulder and spoke to it in what sounded like quick, clipped runes, one long, slender finger pressed to the bird’s sharp bill. Air hissed between Oskil’s teeth.

“Come on,” he said, turning abruptly with his teeth still clenched. Loyk shook clumsily as he began to pick the scales up. Thron quickly stooped and scooped up the awkward instruments.

“Here, Fram,” he said, grabbing Kunkizar to keep him from running down the length of his arm.

The Easterling looked surprised and possibly even more frightened than before.

“Oh...yes... thank you.”

Thron glanced distastefully after Oskil, who had already turned around the bend.

“I can carry one of those,” said Thron, pointing at the scales. He couldn’t help but notice that the little dwarf was already carrying a pack of things at least his size.

Loyk turned redder about the nose and ears than ever. He shook his head.

“I thank you, Fram... Probably for the best if I... yes, thank you.”

He balanced the scales squarely over each shoulder and bowed so hastily they almost slid off again. Then he was off after his kinsman, clattering as he went.

Thron turned back to Garn, who was sitting watching him with his quiet, labyrinthine face.

“You do not like the older one,” he said. Again, Thron heard the glimmer of humor in his words.

“He is a liar,” said Thronð, putting out a hand to help the dwarf up. “He saw the thief robbing his fellow Easterling and he didn’t do anything about it. Then, later, when I asked him to stand up for me, he pretended not to have seen anything. If you hadn’t seen everything, many might have believed I actually did the foul deed.”

“I didn’t see everything,” began Garn, taking the hand and pulling himself up. “What?”

But Garn had trailed off and was looking over Thronð’s shoulder. Thronð turned and realized that the rune-dwarf was still standing in the middle of the tunnel, watching them. The dwarf lowered his hood, revealing long dark hair, silvery-blue eyes, and surprisingly young, clear-cut features. He nodded, with a tight-lipped smile.

“Do not allow me to interrupt you. I was only resting.”

Thronð peered apprehensively at the bird. The rune-dwarf caught the look.

“Do not fear,” he said, stroking the bird’s breast with one slender, skilled finger. “*Troigan* will not hurt you. Please,” he added, coolly gesturing with one hand down the tunnel. “Continue.”

Looking back, Thronð thought the rune-dwarf appeared slightly amused as he and Garn plodded uncomfortably in the shadow of his solemn figure and his winged creature. He pulled his hood back up, and Thronð shivered, involuntarily.

Troigan. Troll. A fitting name for a winged creature like that. It seemed an unpleasant name, however, for a dwarf to use for a constant companion. Thronð could distinctly remember his mother taking his hand and turning him to look at her and saying,

“Though we hate trolls, too often we refuse to be parted with them. Learning to leave your troll behind is one of the great things you must learn.”

So why would a dwarf call something that rode with him everywhere “troll?”

Thronð glanced at the walls about him, his mind suddenly awakened to the possibility of trolls being present here. He had many times met these creatures in the mines. There was no telling where he would meet them here. Perhaps they waited even now, or followed them down the tunnel, looking for a chance to make an attack. They wouldn’t attack them now. Not with so many marching all together.

Not unless they were very, very strong, thought Thronð. He glanced around the bare, smooth-walled tunnel, nervously. There was no movement but his own and that of the dark-shelled trilobites that rolled occasionally across their path or wandered between Garns precise crutches. Nevertheless, Thronð shuddered again.

Up ahead, Oskil’s lantern and the sound of Loyk’s scales clanking grew gradually closer. Then, quite unexpectedly, the three dwarves rounded a bend and nearly fell on-top of the two Easterlings.

At first, Thronð thought they had stopped because Loyk had dropped the scales again (which he had). But almost at once he saw the greater reason:

The tunnel had come to an end in a small chamber in which the remainder of the dwarves were gathered around something, though all Thronð could see was Uda’s lantern.

“Enter and come all the way in,” called Uda’s steady, bright voice. “Let all gather around!”

Slowly, and not without considerable rattling and raucous, room was made for Loyk, Oskil, Thronð, Garn, and the rune-dwarf. Thronð found himself staring with the others at a round stone lid in the floor.

It was a trap door. It's face, like that of the portal through which they had already come, had a serpent engraved upon it, though this one had two handles of iron drilled into its rim on opposite sides. Uda knelt and wrapped her slim fingers around one of these handles.

"One of you grab the other handle and we shall lift it and set it to the side," she commanded.

Thronnd moved to help her, but the Westerner with the ring in his nose moved first and was closer. With a mighty heave, they just dislodged the lid from its place and shoved it, scraping the floor as it went, away from the mouth of a hole. As the empty air issued out of the black opening, most of the other dwarves took a couple steps back, too. Uda, however, set her lamp down and turned to where a large skein of rope hung upon a hook in the wall, and after shouldering it, boldly fed the rope down into the hole. When the rope had lowered itself completely and was attached to the hook only by a large, sturdy knot, she straightened, brushing her hands.

"Welcome," she said, "To the second labyrinth entrance. Now enter at will, and be strong of heart! Perhaps you will find what you seek."

Uda closed her mouth and passed softly to the back of the chamber. Thronnd watched her go. Her expression had given up its authority for an earnest glance of curiosity, and even, he was surprised to see, fear. The fear, however, was small and barely perceptible in the proud tilt of her head and the bold jab of her nose. What was more perceptible was the fear of the dwarves. They did not move. Even the sly, violet eyes of the merchant were scared. Everyone feared that black emptiness staring up out of the floor.

At last, the Prince of the Westerlings moved. Slowly but firmly, he stooped and took the rope in both hands, shoulders straight, eyes resolute.

"TULLA RULAITH!" he cried, and, hand over hand, began to descend into darkness.

As if his words sounded the breaking of a spell, the other Westerners leapt into action. Thronnd saw Agrev, the tall dwarf to whom Garn had spoken, leap to the hole and seize the rope. The others broke into song.

*Out of the fire that sits on the hill
Their voices were heard,
Their voices were known,
Children of Westernlands, mighty of will,
True to their word,
True to the bone...*

Down they slipped, one by one. Thronnd watched them, trying to forget that he, too, was about to do the same. Thronnd was not afraid of darkness. He had had his fill of it in the mines of Smet. But tricky ropes between floor and ceiling? That was something altogether different. Thronnd wondered how long the drop was and how long he would have to climb, dangling and tangling with his neighbor.

Even Oskil, with his turned-up nose and lowered-down eye-lids, looked afraid as he sat down on the edge of the hole and swung his legs in. His small companion, Loyk, was standing just over him.

“Mind you don’t drop anything,” muttered Oskil starting to lower himself hand-over-hand down.

Loyk’s eyes were round and wide.

“I don’t think I can carry everything down, Uncle” he said, as quietly as he could manage and still be heard by Oskil.

“Well take out that box then,” said Oskil mercilessly over the edge of gaping entrance.

The unkindly dwarf’s head disappeared, leaving Loyk trembling on the edge, looking after him. His face had gone granite white. It reminded Thron of the time when he had found his little sister, Sar, lost in Smet. She was searching for Luthe, and her hands had been shaking, too.

“Wait, Fram Loyk,” said Thron, stepping forward on an impulse. The Easterling looked up, surprised to be addressed by his name.

“Your load is a dangerous one. Let me carry something for you. It is safer for all.

The Easterling hesitated, but Thron could see the small dwarf’s terror getting the better of him. He stepped away from the hole, allowing the violet-eyed dwarf to slip impatiently down, and slipped out of his pack.

“If you could take these,” he said, holding out two of Elensa’s gifts. “It was not so hard before this extra...”

They looked, like Thron’s gift, as rolled blankets, but smaller, as if chosen to match the Easterling height. Thron felt a pang of anger to see that Loyk was carrying both his own gift and Oskil’s. He quickly took the rolls and held out a hand towards the scales.

“I’ll take one of those, too,” he said, stoutly. Loyk gratefully lifted one of the awkward metal objects off and handed it to Thron.

“Kru, Fram,” he said. “I am in your debt.”

“And I, Thron, am at your service. Go on. I will follow after.”

The small, round Easterling scurried to the hole and, quickly, before he could change his mind, slipped down into it. Thron glanced at the dwarf Garn, who was once again watching him.

“Tulla keep you,” Thron said to the crippled dwarf. “You are able to go?”

Garn nodded.

“Tulla keep you,” he replied.

Then, with a nimbleness that astounded Thron, he sat on the lip of the hole, slid his crutches under his blanket roll, and lowered himself down.

Everyone had entered the hole by the time Thron had bound the extra weight to his own pack. He stuffed Kunkizar down his shirt, picked up his pick, and took a step to regain his sense of balance with the new additions to his load. Then he approached the hole in the ground and sat on its brink, clinging desperately to the rope. He knew he had to go down. For one thing, he was carrying Loyk’s things. But looking down into the swirling darkness he couldn’t help an overwhelming sensation of terror raising itself like an anticipated blow.

Thron looked away from the hole, wanting to tuck his feet under his knees and scuttled backwards until he could feel the wall against his back and press himself into it. If he did this, however, Thron knew he would never go down. Instinctively, plaintively, his eyes sought out the only other person in the chamber.

Dwar Uda was still standing near the wall. Thronnd looked at her small figure, compact but powerful, her large feet planted squarely on the ground. Her stature was passive; unmoved. Her eyes, however, were watching him, were observing him with such compassion and steady good-will that Thronnd thought instantly of a similar expression he had often seen on his Mother or Luthe's face.

Yes, but I believe, the expression said. Like a beacon of protected, unyielding hope.

Dwar Uda raised an eye-brow, a questioning half-smile touching her face. Her hair, now wet and dark and devoid of sparkle, had plastered itself stickily to her face on one side, and despite her smile there was a faint circle of anxiety under her eyes and a smear of dirt across her chin. Thronnd suddenly saw her no longer as a spokes-person for Elensa, but as a young dwara about his sister Luthe's age. Thronnd looked away, at the hole, then at the dark chamber around them.

"It is not good for you to be left alone here," he said, suddenly.

The dwara's hand shifted as if to reach out to him, and a small sphere of tourmaline-green light suddenly sprang from her heart.

"I have chosen my peril, just as you have chosen yours," she said, the vulnerability gone. "Do not fear for me. Go now, so that may we meet again."

So that we may meet again.

Thronnd thought of his mother and sisters once more, thought of the harsh strength forced into Luthe's gentle voice at their farewell.

Go, so you can come again.

Thronnd nearly asked Uda to take him back up the tunnel: the fastest and surest way to his sister. But something desperate and vicious dragged the words back and trampled them deep in his stomach. What was he supposed to do there? Wait for his mother to die? What would Uda think of him if he turned back now? And what was he supposed to do with all Loyk's parcels, anyhow?

Thronnd gripped the rope and, unable to see whether dragons or water or nothing at all waited in the darkness down below, lowered himself before he could think anymore into he-knew-not-what.

Chapter 4: Strange and Strangers

The rope disappeared into the emptiness of a great cavern. Thronnd followed it, forcing himself to move through the unsettling nothingness that swirled sickeningly behind him and before him. He missed the earth beneath his feet already. He reached out to try to touch something, but felt nothing but emptiness between his fingers.

Somewhere down below, a dwarf slipped. Thronnd heard the cry and the jolt of the rope as the small weight caught itself. Probably Loyk, thought Thronnd, catching the sliding scale around his own neck and rebalancing it. The motion of the near fall sent the rune-dwarf's bird into a loud twitter of motion, and Thronnd crunched into as small a ball as he could, tucking his head to block out the swoosh of the creature's terrible wings.

The breeze of Troigan's widening circles in the emptiness around them filled Thronnd with a hollow of loneliness in his stomach even greater than before. He glanced hastily up at the diminishing lantern of Uda far above and paused, his heart sinking.

Kunkizar, who had been butting his head against the inside of Thronnd's shirt since he had been ruthlessly deposited there, finally poked his head out and looked up at the light, too.

Then he fearlessly pulled the rest of his long, squat body onto Thronnd's shoulder and jumped into the cup of one side of the scale. At once the metal instrument began to slide with the salamander inside. Thronnd caught it, clumsily, with one hand, and Kunkizar, rather taken off guard, clambered clumsily along Thronnd's arm and wrapped himself in terror around Thronnd's head.

"Get-omfff!" said Thronnd, equally irritable. "Can'—breath!"

To give him credit, Kunkizar *did* move off of Thronnd's mouth, but remained quite stubbornly plastered to the rest of his face. Thronnd inwardly groaned. He could see nothing, hearing only Troigan wheeling around in the stillness and feeling the jolts and tugs of the others moving down the rope.

Oh, Mother, thought Thronnd, breathing deeply. He could still remember hanging on a broken bridge over the dark of a mine shaft, looking up into his mother's face. All he had to do was climb, old Shullum had told him. Thronnd, however, was too terrified to pay the old miner any heed. Only his mother had been able to stir his terrified limbs. What had she said?

Why fear Empty?

Yes.

"Why fear Empty?" Thronnd began, his voice cracked and uneasy. It was a song. A lullaby. Thronnd began to feel his way down the rope.

Suddenly a new voice picked up his song, but a few feet below him. He was almost sure that it was the rune-dwarf, for his voice had the same cool, carrying ring.

"*Why fear Empty?*" it sang, sweet and sad.

"It can be filled

With greatness.

Why fear Empty?

It is like darkness.

Revealing.

It is like silence.

Speaking.

*Why fear Empty?
She is the roost
For even the Skools.*

Why fear Empty? ...”

The rune-dwarf began his chant again, and Thronð felt his arms move more quickly and steadily, as if the dwarf’s soft voice had polished all the edges of his limbs. The rune-dwarf seemed unperturbed and passive as the darkness grew cooler around them. His voice wove a duet with the calls of his bird, softening the bird’s harshness. Even as it did so, Thronð realized that the shape of the cavern had changed. The perimeter of the bird’s flight course was no longer distant. Rather, the walls wound and travelled like a vertical tunnel, sometimes drawing quite close to the rope, sometimes falling distantly away, all the while growing smaller and smaller. Kunkizar slowly unwrapped his tail. He had wormed his way under Thronð’s cap and was, no doubt, wearing it atop his own flat head, his feet tangled for stability in Thronð’s hair. Thronð opened his eyes as the tail moved and looked down. Below, the rune-dwarf’s heart was glowing, and it had a sad, blue color as the light gathered in a globule over his left breast. Thronð looked at his own hands. They were also edged in a dim but perceptible fuzz of purple light. As they continued to climb, Thronð could see the other dwarves emitting lights of their own, too, like beads of color upon the disappearing string below. Farthest of these, still glowing bright gold, Thronð recognized the leader of the Westerners and his heart gave a rushed beat of relief and joy. The Westerner’s light was straying from the string, obviously walking across something more solid than air.

The rest of Thronð’s descent passed untroubled until at last he heard the scramble of boots upon stone and the rope began to move freely beneath him. Thronð moved so quickly downward, that for a moment his extra sacks tipped him and he lost his grip. But then he was on the ground with the merciful earth gritting beneath his own thin boots.

He was still sitting, legs lopped out before him, when he came nose to nose with Fram Oskil. He could do this while sitting, for he was rather tall for a miner, and Oskil was rather small for a dwarf. This did not seem to intimidate him, however.

“So,” said Oskil, roundly. His arms were crossed and his heavy eye lids were lowered down to the irritated slits of his eyes. Behind him crouched Loyk, chattering nervously.

“I—I told you,” he was saying, but Oskil impatiently cut him off.

“So, he repeated, and his mouth was like a clamp. “You have bamboozled my nephew into giving you our packs. Our special gifts given us by the King’s daughter herself. What do you mean by it?”

“You misunderstand,” said Thronð, hastily, as several other Easterlings turned their heads towards them, drawn in by Oskil’s disdainful tones. Thronð could feel the acrid taste of dislike gathering on his tongue. “I was only offering to help. . . I am taller than your nephew and. . .”

“We don’t want your help,” cut in Oskil, coolly. “We want our packs.”

Silently, Thronð lowered the two small packs to the ground and slid them forward. Oskil shook his head.

“Forgive me Fram,” he said. “But how do I know you haven’t traded your pack for one of ours? I must ask to choose my packs from among the three.”

Thronnd felt his blood simmering beneath the thin strata of his skin.

“Do you distrust me Fram?”

“I distrust that which I do not know,” replied the dwarf, stoutly.

“You know as well as I”—Thronnd began to argue. Anyone could see that his pack was not the same as the other two. For one thing, it was considerably thicker than Oskil’s—probably because Uda had given bigger blankets to taller dwarves. Just at that moment, however, a nasty, carrying voice interrupted him.

“Oh ho,” said the violet-eyed dwarf, sidling slowly towards Thronnd and smiling, nastily. “Stealing again, are we?”

The three other Easterling’s full attention was attracted now as well as that of a couple Westerners. The dwarf who had been stolen from earlier strode a couple paces. He looked as though he might interfere.

“See here,” someone said. “What’s going on?”

Thronnd took a deep breath. He hated to be cheated by this infuriating little Easterling with the knowing eyes and the slightly flared, offended nostrils. Still, Thronnd didn’t want to make enemies so early in his journey. He gritted his teeth and slid his pack towards Oskil.

“I owe you nothing. But so that you may know I am honest, make your choice, Fram.”

“I think it was these two, Uncle,” said Loyk, timidly identifying the smaller packs. “I remember...”

“Quiet, Loyk,” said Oskil, who was feeling each blanket roll with an air of gravity. Unsurprisingly, he paused over Thronnd’s. “I’m quite sure mine was this one. I remember it well. There,” Oskil kicked his own smaller parcel towards Thronnd. “Take back what is yours. And I’ll thank you next time for keeping your hands off our goods.”

Thronnd did not reply. Instead, he stonily dusted himself off, slung his pack over his shoulder and turned away, pinching his nose in the common gesture of disdain.

The dwarves had gathered in a small semi-circle around three tunnel entrances in the walls of the cave into which they had climbed. It was a curious cave, big enough to hold shadows but small enough to be seen at a glance with a lantern. It bottle-necked into the opening through which they had climbed up above, and from that opening rolled drops of water. The drops had stained the ground and walls with splatters and streaks of red where the elements in the cave’s stone had made rust. In the dim gloom of their lanterns, the marks looked like blood.

Behind them, there was a soft hissing sound, and Thronnd realized with horror that the rope was ascending into the emptiness whence it had come. A moment later, there was no sign it had ever been there. There were only those red veined walls, and those tunnel entrances like three irregularly shaped sockets filled with shadows.

Thronnd shuddered and reached up to stroke Kunkizar. Then he remembered that the creature was still on his head and removed it to his shoulder. While he had argued with Oskil, the other dwarves had already fallen to discussing their path. Even the northern warrior had broken his untouchable silence to contemplate the three tunnels with the two blacksmith brothers. Over the rising babble, Thronnd suddenly heard a loud, clear voice. It was the leader of the Westerners.

“Brothers!” he said. “Hear me. Do not let your hearts falter in the face of dark paths. We are dwarves of the West. We have seen the jewels of Juma beneath the great Skool. We have seen the lakes of Ithrim. No darkness can touch us. Now, what are we to do?”

“We must take the road down and inward, my Lord,” volunteered one of the six other Westerners.

“Aye,” agreed a dwarf, who Thronnd was fairly certain was Sorj. “But they are on level ground. Agrev and I have checked already. It is quite smooth as far as I can see. Although there is more gravel before the tunnel on the left, so it is hard to tell.”

“Perhaps we should scout out the tunnels a few feet,” suggested the dwarf with the brilliant ring of gems through his nose.

“No, Orcruz,” said the leader, who had been walking from one entrance to another. “It is a good idea, but we mustn’t be separated. I recommend we take the path to the left. It seems evident that we may choose whatever path we like and this one will have more space for us. That is about all I can say for any of them, for the air is stale in all of them.”

The left-hand path was, indeed, the right shape for the Westerners: broad enough, and tall enough. The middle path, on the other hand, had plenty of space from side to side but would’ve obliged the tall Westerners to bend as they went. As for the right-hand tunnel, it was scarcely a crevice, tall, but only just wide enough to enter.

“For the West, then!” cried a dwarf who Thronnd immediately recognized as Agrev. “I need no other recommendation!”

Agrev drew his sword and began another refrain of a chorus which ended with “the dwarves of the West-lands are we!” It was quickly taken up by the other dwarves, and they would’ve picked up their packs and entered at once had not a sudden, shrill shriek erupted throughout the cave.

The Westerners slowed. The song died on their lips. Troigan, the rune-dwarf’s bird, swooped in a restless circle over their heads, now silent. Those who had not already at once stopped talking to listen to the Westerners fell silent and watched the bird as it returned to the rune-dwarf’s upstretched hand. He had taken down his hood, and his sharply etched face examined the Westerner’s disdainfully.

“You are altogether too loud,” he said. “You’ll have a tail of fearful echoes before fifteen minutes have passed.”

“We are not afraid,” retorted Agrev. “Are you, Northerner?”

Nin turned his glance coolly on the fiery-eyed dwarf, lip curled.

“I do not need to be afraid. *I* am quiet.”

The rune-dwarf returned his gaze to the Western leader.

“You are being rash, as usual, Vrgrayn, son of Vrgr. Just like your father.”

The tall, dark haired ‘Vrgrayn’ stiffened at this address and turned to face the rune-dwarf. Thronnd had a good view of his face in the moment—the best he’d seen yet. It was a face that stirred his heart. Well formed, strong, and even fierce, there was a stream of compassion that seemed to run just under the glow of his bright silver eyes. He was still glowing with an amber light from the climb into the cave, and in its light the eyes of his brethren seemed to shine all the fiercer and brighter. Nevertheless, those eyes landed with a weight and a fire upon the rune-dwarf that Thronnd would not have liked to see directed towards himself.

“Who are you, who seems to know my name and deems it his post to judge the actions of my father?” he said, his words even but bold.

“What rune-dwarf doesn’t know the son of the King of the Western Quadrant and all the follies of that stubborn house?” replied rune-dwarf, icily. “I am well justified in calling both you and your father rash. But as to who I am, I am Nin of Kriek—of Kriek, if that means anything to you. I have studied the histories of the histories of our fathers. I have studied tales of tales of these mountains. I know songs that have been sung in this very chamber. I know the names of dwarves who have died in this very spot. And I know that in the past the left-hand tunnel has most often lead to death, whereas the right hand has most often lead to life. That is why I strongly recommend that you reconsider and follow me. I will guide you down the safest paths that I know.”

Nin of Kriek stopped speaking and Thrond looked around. As the rune-dwarf had spoken, the two blacksmiths had moved towards him and the northern warrior, who had already been standing behind him, had stepped forward and crossed his arms, officiously. Now, however, all were still. Slowly, Vrgrayn stepped towards Nin, for the moment undaunted by the feathered creature between them. When he spoke, his voice was still measured, but it had dropped low and fierce.

“My brothers, you are free to follow who you choose,” he said, not taking his eyes from the rune-dwarf. “As for me, I do not follow dwarves who insult my father.”

Prince of the Westerlings turned and walked steadily toward the left-hand tunnel. In the entrance he paused once to look over his shoulder.

“I have chosen my path,” he said, his voice loud and clear again. “I will take the tunnel to the left. Maybe once a dwarf died on that path, but he is not me and I am not him. I will seek my own fate upon it. Any who follow me are welcome.”

Instantly the Westerners fell in behind him. The other dwarves looked at each other and the ground, or stared stonily at the disappearing backs of the noble, fierce dwarfs.

Thrond looked at Garn, but the traveler only shrugged, sadly.

“Well. It Is.”

“You will follow this rune-dwarf, then?”

“He’s a rank-two rune-dwarf, though he looks too young for it,” said Garn. “I shaw the inshignia on his shtaff. And when one has a rank two rune-dwarf, one should listen to him.”

The sounds of the dwarves faded away, and no one moved. Thrond felt depression pooling in his boots. He supposed that Garn was probably right. But he felt that something had gone wrong—that they ought to have been travelling alongside those brave dwarves who had disappeared into the dark without looking back once.

It didn’t take long for all the other dwarves to sort out their paths after that. Three Easterlings and the Southerner, evidently overwhelmed by the polarization of the room, had decided to take the middle path. Garn and the Northerners had sided almost at once with Nin. The only exception was the merchant. Thrond had caught his shadow slipping into the tunnel after the Easterlings. Thrond felt uneasy for the Easterlings when he noted this, but his attention was distracted from his apprehensions by the disappointing discovery that Oskil and Loyk had not gone with the others of their party.

“The other Easterlings went that way,” said the shorter of the two blacksmiths, who had a short, frizzy beard and thin, frizzy hair on his head. He gestured at the middle tunnel after the swaying bulks of the Easterlings’ baggage.

“Yes, they did,” said Oskil, unperturbed “With a sausage-nosed Southerner. Do you want to follow them?”

No one else suggested that Oskil was in the wrong place.

Nin stopped before the narrow right-hand opening, covered Troigan’s eyes, and slipped into the blackness without stopping to light his lantern or speak a word. The norther warrior instantly followed with a pinched “shing!” of metal followed closely by a determined Oskil and plodding Loyk. Oskil fit barely through with his gigantic store of luggage. Loyk had to be prodded impatiently by the blacksmith with the frizzy beard before he popped through. Thron and Garn entered last, with Garn taking up the rear. His crutches struggled in the tight place, but he must have been truly skillful with them, for he managed to keep pace as they squeezed down the path.

The only light was Oskil’s and it sent strange, dancing shadows over the black stone on either side. Almost at once, the harsh grate of metal—tipped boots began to fill the tunnel with echoes that ran, shuddering through the yards of silence before them. Thron knew by the sound that there must be a place where the tunnel opened up a bit. He had often heard such echoes when he was mining and was just about to break into such a wider space.

Thron could hear Oskil huffing and puffing a few paces ahead.

“So,” he said, his voice echoing. “You know the way through this place?”

“No.” Nin seemed nettled.

“But you said”—

“I am making an educated guess,” interrupted Nin, coldly.

“Aha,” said Oskil, awkwardly.

None of the Northerners—or Garn, for that matter—seemed to feel much need for speaking. They liked the companionable silence, and they sank into it comfortably. Oskil, however, had scarcely given time for a minute to pass when he piped up with the comment,

“Fwah, but this is a tight place.”

This was shortly followed by the announcement that the sapphire the King had been wearing in his ring was not nearly so valuable as the one that he, Oskil, had shaped for the Mayor of Bourne.

“You may be astonished to hear it, but it is certainly true. As the best Jeweler in the East Quadrant, I ought to know.”

The Easterling looked around and, receiving nothing but an unimpressed silence and a disinterested “really?” from Garn, turned over his shoulder to address the two blacksmiths.

“So, you are both blacksmiths, hmmm?” he said. “What are your names?”

Ward and Kurn were their names, Ward being the one with the frizzy, short beard, and Kurn being the bald one with a pipe, which he was still holding with his mouth. Oskil shook his head, dismissively.

“Haven’t heard of them. I have met Gnarl the Grey, however. You’ve heard of him, I have no doubt?”

The unfortunate blacksmith brothers responded as passively to these comments as they could, and Oskil had just had the audacity to comment on how artfully the glass in the warrior's pommel had been made to look like tourmaline when Nin suddenly turned and cut him off.

"Easterling," he said, "You are like a clattering stone in an empty room. Be quiet if you can. We are not so far from it now."

"From what?" asked Oskil, obviously annoyed in his turn.

"The Hall of Trolls," said Nin.

"What is that?"

It was the warrior who had spoken this time. Nin sighed.

"The Hall of Trolls, Fram Lgrn, is a long passage which many survivors of this labyrinth recalled and recorded. It should not be so long yet. Perhaps when we reach it we shall rest."

"They met many trolls, then?" demanded Oskil. He had lowered his voice a little. Collectively, Nin's trail of seven slowed and hung back, waiting for Nin's answer. Nin, a few paces ahead, also stopped and turned.

"You can meet a troll anywhere," he said, severely. "But yes, of course we might meet some there. What did you expect in a place like this?"

The whole group was very quiet over the next couple hours—even Oskil. Perhaps it was the mention of trolls that had so subdued the others. Thron did not know. As for himself, he had begun to feel uneasy long before.

Trolls, he thought as he stumbled after Ward's broad frame, listening to his heavy breathing as he stepped down and clambered over uneven steps in the windings of stone around them.

What was he doing here fighting trolls?

As if there weren't enough at home, said a part of him, bitterly. It was the same part of him which already had begun to say "*too late, too late*" and thought with regret of all the chances he'd had to go home instead of coming here but hadn't.

Fool, thought Thron. *You will be sorry before the end.*

Still, another part of Thron whispered that he wouldn't go back now even if he could.

I'll get through this labyrinth and get home, this part said.

I'm not waiting around for my mother to die.

Thron allowed Kunkizar to walk alongside him for a while. The path had widened but it had also developed an up and down course and many boulders and rough cut stones sticking out of its walls, and even the salamander, who moved in awkward bursts, could amble along without slowing them down. Watching the salamander made him feel for an instant that Sar, its little owner was quite close. When he looked up and see the gaping gate of the walls on either side before them, however, she was not there, and he remembered that he did not belong in this place and felt more lonely and guilty than before.

They had been walking for only nearly two hours (Thron could tell by the haze of moss growing on the back of his hands, which had reached the prickly stage it always did at the turn of a second hour) when Thron became aware of a growing sense that something was following in them. He almost thought he had first felt it when the three parties of dwarves had gone their separate ways. Perhaps even before. It was stronger

now, though, and distinctly malignant. Sometimes Thronnd turned suddenly and peered into the shadows behind Garn, feeling that he'd heard or seen something out of the corner of his eye. But it was always an echo, or one of the marching shadows that mingled together on the wall.

The last of these times, Garn glanced at him, curiously. He didn't say anything, however.

Not long after, by some silent agreement, the dwarves stopped in a place where the path widened and sat with their backs against the uneven tunnel walls. Kurn swigged some liquid from a skin and handed it to Ward.

"Group flame?" he asked, raising one bushy eyebrow as he sat. He dug into a large pouch on his belt with one hand.

"I'll do it," said Garn, tossing a sulf-chip into a bare place on the ground between their stretched-out boots.

Ward dropped his sulf-chip into the pile and yawned.

Thronnd weighed his frugal pouch of sulf-chips that hung across his shoulder. A group flame was the most efficient way to use sulf-chips, because when they were next to each other they expended more heat without using up so much energy. It was an aspect of the sulf-chips that miners seldom had the chance to use.

"For a little bit, then," he said, adding his sulf-chip to the others.

Lgrn sat forward, looking at Nin, Oskil, and Loyk.

"It's all or nothing from me," he growled.

"Yes," seconded Ward, "All or nothing."

"I really don't see the need," began Oskil, who was digging through his bag. He'd been turned, speaking to Loyk, a coarse but warm-looking blanket held up to the side, his arm in his bag. Now, however, he took that arm out tucked the blanket primly around his short legs.

"You might see a need when your lantern runs out of oil," pointed out Kurn in something close to a sneer.

"Even so," put in Nin, "I don't see the need, either. Not when we can sit easy in the dark. Anyhow, we must be starting again soon."

"Well, we'll just have to sit in the dark, then," said Lgrn, sitting back with a clink and crossing his thick forearms.

Thronnd retrieved his sulf-chip and slipped it into his pouch. Only Garn's stayed out.

"We could do it, Uncle," piped Loyk, looking at the lingering sulf-chip rather timidly. "We have the extra sulf-chips in our bundles, remember? From Elensa."

Oskil darted a "shut-up" glance at his nephew, but it was too late.

"From Elensa, huh?" Ward grabbed his blanket roll from Elensa with one hand and began unrolling it. Kurn also began searching.

"Say! So have I!"

"And I!"

"Great wonder!"

Ward lifted from the folds of the blanket a flashing belt-buckle set with garnets of a deep, pink red. Each garnet was set within hexagons of gold so that they looked like the red drops within a honey-comb.

"Well!" said Kurn. "That's got to be worth quite a bit."

He considered his own lap.

“And this...” he raised a small, crystal flask which came to a point at its cap and at its bottom so that it looked like a rounded diamond. Within the flask an iridescent liquid sloshed with shifting colors in the yellow light of Oskil’s lantern.

“Is jool juice,” said Oskil, adding rather grumpily, “Very valuable.”

Thronnd touched the flask at his own side. It was not crystal and silver, but solid brass after the fashion of most jool juice flasks carried by miners. Jool juice flasks were the only pieces of miner’s equipment of great value. The reviving powers of the drink were incredible, he’d heard.

“Jool juice,” said Kurn, turning the flask back and forth in his hand. “That will come handy.”

“What does this mean?” Ward wondered aloud, cradling the buckle in one palm.

“That Elensa means us well, it seems,” said Lgrn, holding up a pipe with a pearl mouth and admiring it with satisfied eyes.

“Maybe,” said Nin, a little doubtfully

“I’ll trade you,” said Kurn, his eyes gleaming enviously as they swept over the pearly pipe.

Thronnd reached impulsively for his own bundle from Elensa, but catching Oskil’s sharply observant eye on him, placed it behind his head as a pillow instead of opening it. He wasn’t about to have Oskil reclaim his bundle if whatever was inside was better than that within his own.

“A little bit of our prinedoms in advance, I see,” said Lgrn, now turning the Kurn’s flask back and forth in his palm while Kurn examined Lgrn’s pipe. Oskil, after watching Lgrn through narrowed eyes as he lifted the flask to eye-level, snuffed the lantern and enveloped them all in darkness.

“It’s time someone else used their lantern,” was his only explanation. Thronnd didn’t offer to light his. Lantern oil was precious, and the darkness was a relief after the Easterling’s blaring light. Furthermore, Thronnd figured he didn’t owe Oskil anything.

“If it’s all the same,” said Garn, after a moment of unhelpful silence, “I would sit in the dark a little.”

And so they did sit, with only the faint haze of light produced by themselves.

“I’ll have my pipe back,” said Lgrn.

“And I my flask. Best stick to what Elensa gives us, eh? Wouldn’t want her to be offended.”

The dwarves exchanged in the dark. Thronnd could just see their shadows outlined in fuzzy illumination.

“Well now,” said Ward. His voice was grinning in the darkness. “This is a grand adventure we’ve landed ourselves in, no?”

“Aye,” said Nin, flatly. “Grand.”

The quiet settled, and with it Thronnd sank back against the his blanket roll, listening to the sound of strange dwarves breathing near. He felt for the piece of quartz hanging from his belt and rubbed it convulsively. He had his doubts.

Myth 3:

It is told, and the skools have seen, how the trolls rose out of the darkness to frighten Im's children. They were bodiless, parasites of stone, stealing their form from the material of the inanimate and drawing their power from the fears of the living.

They had no power of their own. Their only feeling was one of desire to devour others. Bodiless, they drifted hither and thither through the mountains, causing harm where they could. When they came upon the dwarves, they eagerly latched onto their fears and doubts, and from these drew the power to battle with and often overcome these struggling creatures of the mountain. They were fearful to look upon when they took form—fear, greed, lust, anger, shame, guilt, despair—in all their twisted variations. What was more terrible, however, were their words. These words leached strength until the dwarf or dwara could no longer fight, and then the troll could do away with him or her altogether. Where a troll came, it was said, the feet grew cold and air was heavy with anxious breath and terrible words. Where a troll left, victorious, there was only silence, as there might have been had Tulla never been and had Im remained unborn in the lonely windings of the mountain.

The trolls had no body or power of their own, but they were cunning and relentless. They attacked not Im and Dwar first, both of whom had tasted fear and despair often by such times, but their inexperienced, tender children. Ede began to run to her parents, weeping, and Nrosp would call out to them, his feet frozen in fear. Im and Dwar were at their sides in a moment, whispering words of comfort and strengthening their hearts against the trolls' attacks. They soon found, however, that they could not fight these creatures for their beloved. Only the child from within whom the troll drew its power could conquer it, and then only by ceasing to give the troll a hold on their fear. Dwar noted this, and also noted how the troll's attack was levelled through words and half-truths. So she soon set about creating runes—sentences and words that captured all the hopeful truth in their lives, and taught them to her children.

"Memorize these and believe them," she said. "And if ever a troll tells you to give up hope, spit this into his face and watch him blink and disappear."

The children did their best, and, little by little, and with a deal of prompting from their parents for the right rune to use when under attack, the children won many battles. At last, there came a day when Im and Dwar heard the cry of their daughter Ede and ran to find that a silent troll with long fingers had seized her in a strangle hold and was twisting about her and digging its nails into her soft flesh.

"Say a rune," cried Dwar, frantically, for as the troll did not speak, she was not sure which rune her daughters should say.

"I don't know what to say," choked Ede.

Unexpectedly, however, in the moment the dwara's beseeching eyes looked to her mother, the troll disappeared.

Later Ede told her mother that the dwarf had spoken to her of her envy of her mother's beauty, but that it had disappeared as soon as she recalled how much she loved her. Dwar had never had another dwara to envy, and so she had never

experienced this emotion. It quickly became apparent that the trolls that drew on those emotions and weakness which Im and Dwar had never had, were incomprehensible to both. Their words were gibberish or silence.

Against such, Ede and Nrosp were completely alone.

Chapter 5: Fish

They did not rest long. It had not been two hours before Nin, who had stayed up watching, roused them and informed them that he was continuing. The blacksmiths got to their feet grumbling, all glee of the moments before their rest stagnant. Oskil sat up and positively glared at Nin.

“Is that what you call a respite?”

“We’re not resting yet,” said Nin, severely. “We can do more yet before that.”

“We?” said Garn, a glint of humor shining through his voice. But he obediently picked himself and his crutches up.

Thronnd got up, draping Kunkizar over his shoulder, heavily. Weary as he was, he hadn’t been able to do more than watch the inky darkness pooling around them as each of the dwarf’s inner lights faded into sleep. He could feel exhaustion raging in his head and behind his eyes, but it seemed useless to close them. He still had Uda’s words in the back of his head:

“Go now, so that we may meet again.”

It had made his blood race and his feet hot with eagerness to hurry onward.

Except by now Thronnd had had enough time to think on what Uda had said and listen to the other dwarves breathing that his feet were becoming cold again. He’d become a world distant from those dwarves while they slept and he was awake. He’d even been a world distant from Nin, wakeful and watchful, glowing faintly blue as he sat against the tunnel wall.

I’ve made a big mistake, Thronnd thought.

Still, hoisting on his bag felt good, and so did moving. Kurn and Ward still seemed cheerful about Elensa’s gifts, for they nudged each other as they walked and spoke in low voices about treasure and the quality of the smith work in each artifact. Once Thronnd heard Kurn mutter,

“Perhaps her soft, ringed fingers stoppered the bottle themselves.”

Lgrn said nothing, but he had a daring, brazen gait to his stride and walked nearly the whole time as close to alongside Nin as he could given the small space. Sometimes he placed his hand on the round crystal pommel of his sword in a way that gave Thronnd the feeling he was walking into a glorious combat.

Gradually, however, all the dwarves sank into a weary stupor. The path was uncanny, twisting and turning, and yet never getting anywhere. Thronnd started to hate the garish light of Oskil’s lantern, reflecting dizzily off facets of stone. Furthermore, he still felt a sense of impending danger coming up behind them—or perhaps waiting before them. It was impossible to tell.

It was about four hours later by Oskil’s pocket-watch when they came to a place where their path widened into a chamber and water trickled and gathered into a little pool in its center. Kunkizar at once took a running leap into the water and then back out again, steaming smugly. Kurn stooped and tasted the water, tentatively. He made a face.

“Bitter?” asked Ward, beside him.

“Nah,” said Kurn. “Bland.”

“What do you think of stopping to rest by this pool here, Fram Nin?” said the warrior, Lgrn, slinging his baggage half off. “There’s been no sign of that troll place yet, and may not be for some time.”

It wasn't really a question. Thron'd got the feeling that Lgrn didn't speak in questions.

"Unless you want to fall asleep and wake up a fish," Nin replied, his back to Lgrn, "I think it would be a bad idea."

"What do you mean 'wake up a fish'?" Thron'd suddenly found himself asking. "Do you mean with a fin and scales and all that?"

"And blowing bubbles, too," said Nin, turning for long enough to eye Thron'd and nod, seriously. "You can't know what kinds of things will happen if you roll into the water in your sleep. Fish transformation happens quite often—and at the most inconvenient times, too."

"Pah!" Lgrn said under his breath. "Dwar-tales."

Nin stopped and put up his hand.

"Well, well," he said.

They gathered around him and peered down a plunge in the path that they instantly knew stretched down into a very large corridor. Nin struck a flame into his lantern and held it aloft.

"Behold," he said, with a wry smile. "The Hall of Trolls."

It was too long to see the end of. A broad hall with a path down its center. It quickly became clear where it got its name, as well. On either side of the path there stood many boulders of the most grotesque and unique shapes and sizes, all staring at them out of the darkness. The boulders looked like trolls. They could easily have been trolls. Troigan suddenly dipped his tail up and jumped up into the air, winging through the larger space. Thron'd scrambled a couple steps down the path and seized Kunkizar, who had started to take the path down. He returned quickly, looking at the others. He didn't want to take that path. Not now, when he was so tired. Nin seemed to read the thought.

"Now, how about going back beyond the water to the smaller tunnel to rest as Fram Lgrn has suggested," he said.

They picked their way wearily back past the pool and into the comparative coziness of the tunnel behind it.

"This will do," said Nin, settling himself close to the mouth of the tunnel where he could look at the distant boulders and the water of the pool.

"Are we not likely to run into trolls here?" said Ward as the others plopped down in the mouth of the tunnel around Nin.

"If there were less of us, I would find it more likely," said Nin, coolly setting his silver lantern on the floor, "But as it is I don't think they will come near us yet. They'll probably wait until we're all in the middle of the hall. And as we don't want to be tired then, we'd better rest now."

Thron'd settled himself at the edge of the tunnel and dropped his blanket down.

"We'll want to set a watch," said Garn, suddenly. He'd laid his crutches to one side and was sitting at the edge of the tunnel where he wouldn't have to pick his way over the others. "Nin watched last time."

"Catch sparks, then?" said Kurn, taking out his flint and steel in a business-like manner.

For a response each of the dwarves fished out a sulf-chip and pushed it into a ring in the space between their feet. With the practiced hand of a dwarf who works with fire,

Kurn struck a single spark at once over the circle of sulf-chips. It landed and took root in Thrand's.

"Fram Thrand it is, then, and then Fram Garn and then Fram Lgrn," said Nin, counting off the dwarves to Thrand's right. "We'll take a solid rest."

Thrand nodded, silently, picked up his lantern and pick from where he'd set them, and moved out of the mouth of the cave closer to the pool, a couple meters from the others. He figured if there was any direction he'd want to watch, it would be towards the gloomy hall just below. He took advantage of his distance from the others to pull out a pumice stone, coarse and sharp, from his pouch of sulf-chips, and began scratching at the moss on his hands and face. It had about two days growth. He hadn't had time to groom himself in a while.

A long, inky silence swam by. Then:

"How about a story, rune-dwarf," said Lgrn, suddenly.

Thrand turned his head to look at Nin. Storytelling had always been his favorite thing about rune-dwarves. Sometimes they'd stopped in the Rhazembul, Smet's town square. He'd see dwarf-children gathered around an old figure in a cloak with a staff and sometimes was tempted to lose a few minutes lingering outside the crowd.

Nin had taken his hood down and was stroking the wing of Troigan on his lap. He wasn't old, like the rune-dwarves Thrand had seen with long, frizzy, white beards and little bushy clouds for brows. Indeed, Nin was quite possibly the youngest rune-dwarf Thrand had ever seen. But his hard, clear blue eyes looked as though he might know some tales for all that.

Nin considered for a moment. Then he spoke in a voice suddenly deliciously soft and clear.

"Listen, all of you," he began, "and I will tell you the story of the warrior Erg who rolled into a pool.

"Erg was a warrior renowned throughout Kulezim. His many-plated armor shone like variegated scales of silver and gold, and his sword was as sharp as sea winds from the north. And so strong and deadly did he become that he took to fearing no creature, dwarf or otherwise, and became very popular throughout the Kingdom. When at last it came time to pick the forthcoming King, Erg made his way to the palace along with the others, feeling he had a pretty good chance at the Kingship. As he was walking, however, he caught a wink and a gleam of motion in a pool a little way below his path, and, wearied with his journey, went to investigate. The wink and gleam turned out to be fish: the most beautiful fish that Erg had ever seen. And feeling suddenly overcome with hunger, Erg caught and ate a fish from the darkling pool.

"It was a fateful decision, for having once tasted the soft flesh of the silver carp; he could not imagine finding sustenance in anything else. He stayed by the pool and ate of it every day, while in the capital the candidates for Kingship arrived, and a King was chosen. As he lingered and ate, the fish oils slipped into his heart and corrupted it. He wandered the mountains no longer, neither did he protect their inmates. But only ate he fish and slept by the pool, unwilling to be more than a couple feet from its rim. So complete was his compulsion for fish, that he grew to envy the fish their perfect flesh and shining scales, and spent many days swimming in the water like them. Then, one day, after watching the mystic, gliding figures in the water for many hours, he fell into a deep sleep in which he rolled over into the water, and was never seen again. But they say that

the fish of that pool have plated armor and that if you catch one and ask it its name, it will say ‘erg.’”

Nin finished to a spooked silence. Lgrn cleared his throat several times, his scaly armor clinking as he shifted.

“A curious tale,” said Oskil, and pulled out his abacus.

“What do you think, Fram Thron?” said Nin, turning to where Thron was stroking Kunkizar over one knee, listening.

“It makes me wish to taste fish, Fram,” said Thron, honestly. He did not say that it also made him wish they were farther from the pool.

“They are very fine,” said Nin, his voice smiling a little.

“You’ve eaten fish?” said Kurn, surprised.

“Yes. A couple times. They are good, but sacred, and should not be touched unless one’s life depends upon it.”

“Nonsense,” said Oskil, lower his spectacles to peer over them, “I have eaten mountain trout on several special occasions and there’s nothing to it. The most I’ve ever suffered was indigestion.”

“But what does the story mean,” growled Ward, evidently unsatisfied. “It can’t mean that those who eat fish will become fish, that’s clear enough.”

“It’s a story, Ward. It doesn’t have to be real,” said Kurn, over a lit pipe. Oskil snorted.

“I don’t know about what the story means exactly,” said Nin, unfolding his blanket. “Certainly, I did not turn into a fish for eating one. But then he rolled into a pool. I did not.”

It took everyone a while to go to sleep. Something about Nin’s annunciation of words as he told his story made the words reverberate and replay in their heads over and over again. Thron drew the lot for first watch, but he couldn’t have slept anyway. Even after Thron was sure Garn had relaxed into fitful slumber, he remained wide awake. The darkness of the tunnel was of an oppressive type.

You cannot always wait for a light to come, his sister Luthe had once said. *You must carry it with you.*

Thron reached for his tiny lantern and set about lighting the heavy, green oil inside. The light it produced was also heavy and green, like that of the mines. For once, however, Thron did not mind. He picked up the blanket roll—the gift of Elensa to Oskil. Now to him. Slowly, wearily, he unrolled it. It was pathetically small, but inside was a pouch of sulf chips and a sack of rolled moss. There was also something else.

Thron took the short blade in his hand. It was sheathed in a worn, threadbare scabbard, yet even the green light of his lantern, the glint of its metal as he partly drew it seemed pure and somehow cleansing. Instinctively, Thron began to draw it all the way out. But, hearing Oskil shifting in his sleep, he slipped it back into its sheath and tied it within his dirty trousers.

Thron settled against a stubby stone just near the wall of the tunnel watching the ominous boulders standing around the silent pool. In the faint light of the lantern they seemed to advance forward upon the dwarves, their dark bulks squinting through

invisible eyes. For nearly two hours he watched them. Then, without knowing how, he began to dream.

Thronnd was collecting fish.

Elegantly shaped, luminous with blue light, they twinkled from all the nooks and crannies of his cave—which always turned out to hold the door to an exit he'd never seen before. Thronnd liked the clink of the glassy renditions as he gently picked them up and set them in the cradle of his arm or dropped them in his hood.

"Look at these fish, Luthe," he said. "Are they not beautiful?"

"They are sacred fish, Thronnd," said Luthe.

This troubled Thronnd, but he continued to collect the fascinating crystals until there were no more in the cave. Disappointed, he looked again in each door, to be sure he had not missed anything. At last, he looked through one that lead into a long, dark, winding tunnel, and saw at its first distant bend the radiant blue sheen of another fish. The tunnel was open, airy, and welcoming after the stuffiness of the cave. Thronnd stepped forward, eagerly.

"Thronnd?" said Luthe.

Thronnd turned and saw that his sister was bent double, her ashy hair scraping the floor, her lean shoulders and back braced against the roof of the cave. She was keeping it from falling in.

"Where are you going, Thronnd?"

Thronnd silently hugged the fish to his chest. He didn't think she'd like to know about them.

Under the weight of the cave—or perhaps the silence—Luthe shuddered.

"Help me, Thronnd," she said. "I can't bear this on my own."

Then Thronnd remembered with relief.

"These fish will lead me to Elensa," he said. "I will find her and bring her to help."

"You are all I want, Thronnd," said Luthe.

"I'm not enough," said Thronnd, a sinking feeling inside. "Elensa will help. She is stronger than me."

Luthe looked up at Thronnd with her dark, sapphire-blue eyes and blinked.

"Alright, Thronnd," she said. But she didn't sound convinced. "Hurry, then."

Thronnd was rushing down the tunnel to the fish. It was at his feet. But strange—it was no longer blue, but a familiar, sickly green.

Thronnd glanced behind him and then stumbled back. Where the tunnel had been there was a blank wall.

"Luthe!" he cried.

He pounded on the wall with both hands.

"Luthe!"

The impact of the wall created a burning sensation in his wrist.

With the hard, squat stone at his back, Thronnd clutched at his wrist in pain.

What he felt was a tail.

Kunkizar?

Thronð opened his eyes. Around one wrist the salamander had wrapped itself and was glowing with a pattern of painful blue flame. Thronð shook it angrily from his wrist. It hissed as it dropped, shimmering to the ground, but Thronð ignored it. He blinked his salamander-dazzled eyes. Like in his dream it was dark, but instead of the luminous green fish on the floor at his feet, he saw only his own lantern burning low with its cheap light. Where he'd left it for his watch. For his watch...

Thronð was still staring, dazed, at the pool of green light thrown by his lantern, when in that eerie sphere he suddenly saw a stump of a foot: Heavy and rounded like a metal ball with ugly yellow deposits for nails stuck on the end of a stony club. Thronð followed the stony legs up and beheld a hulking figure formed from broken boulders and fragments—a long armed figure with heavy fists as large as its blocky, dull head. A troll.

Thronð leapt to his feet, tensed. The troll, however, just grinned. It was close enough to kick over Thronð's lantern if he wished. Close enough for the green light to cast shadows upwards over its ghastly face. In the gloom behind it, Thronð thought he caught the motions of two other figures, different but equally menacing. The troll leaned over the lantern towards Thronð.

"Deserter," it said, softly.

Then it kicked the lantern and reached towards him.

Jolted out of a dream-like stupor, Thronð propelled himself to the side with a cry that aroused motion from the other dwarves. He raised fists, but before he could strike at the oncoming troll, a stone fist buried itself deep in his belly and cast him backwards. Thronð crashed into someone wearing mail and then fell onto the chamber floor, curling and gasping like a grounded fish. Vaguely he could hear shouts, and had the impression of something with a large, cool shadow stepping over him. Thronð opened his eyes. Not three meters away he could see his lantern on its side, the oil oozing stickily down the glass, still burning with a sputtering green flame. Then the troll stepped between it and him.

"So, you left her to bear the load by herself," the troll said, advancing.

A guilt troll.

Thronð scrambled back, trying to think of a rune—any rune for a guilt troll.

"Regret gets you no-where," he tried, feebly.

No. There are dozens better than that!

"Oh?" said the troll, a grin stretching his voice. "It seems to me your regret has gotten you plenty far from home."

Feeling the coolness of the troll's shadow drawing near, Thronð rolled to the side just in time to avoid another fist that crackled the ground into little surface lines like a spiny plant where his head had been.

"Of course, you told her it was all for your mother," continued the troll, raising his fist again. "Poor mother. Good son. But we know better, don't we"—the troll was hissing—"We know you were just running away."

Bad, bad, thought Thronð, as he turned to avoid the next fist. *A rune!*

"I'll fix it!" Thronð shouted, trying to look the troll in the eyes.

"It's too late to fix it."

"Well then it's too late!"

"Glad, aren't you?"

Thronnd tried to pick himself up, but got a glancing blow to his jaw. His head rang. He wanted to deny the troll's words, but a lump had risen in his throat.

"Just tell me this one thing," said the troll, gleefully, its acidic breath abrading Thronnd's deterring palms as it crouched low and pinned him to the ground by his shoulders.

"What are you going to say to your father?"

Thronnd tried to roll away, but he suddenly had no strength. The troll easily flipped him back and Thronnd lay stunned as it raised a fist to smash in his nose.

Then, suddenly, quite close, someone called for "help."

Help!

It was that cry that saved him. It was just desperate enough to distract him from what the troll had just said. Just as the troll's stony fist drew near Thronnd's head, the miner lifted his own to push it from him and the rocky limb burst as if along an invisible crack.

"I cannot do everything, but I can do my best," Thronnd cried, angrily. "I cannot do everything..." he didn't even watch the troll recede back into a stone column. He turned looking for who had called for help.

It was Loyk.

The small, round Easterling was shrinking down behind the sleeping bulk of Oskil, staring wide-eyed at a looming troll that filled the narrow tunnel.

"Wake up, Uncle!" he shouted, shaking Oskil, frantically. "Wake up!"

Vaguely, Thronnd saw another shadow moving to his left towards the pool and knew that the other dwarves were moving about it. His focus was taken, however, by this small Easterling who looked so alone and helpless as he backed away from the troll's long, spidery fingers.

"Fight him, Loyk!" Thronnd heard himself shouting. "Fight!"

He bounded towards the small Easterling and seized him with both hands by his rich purple vest and shoulders. The air was tense with combat, but Thronnd could hear none of the troll's words. They were not for him, it seemed. He gave Loyk a supportive shake and clenched up one of the younger dwarf's fists in his own.

"Don't let him get to you," Thronnd said, earnestly. "Fight him..."

But as it turned out, Loyk didn't have to do or say anything for right then Kunkizar slipped into his lap like a warm tongue of flame and the troll's features melted unaccountably into stone and fell silent.

Loyk sat, shivering. Kunkizar climbed awkwardly under his arm and into his lap. Loyk stroked the amphibian, shaken, but recovered.

"Look," he said, suddenly, standing with the salamander still in one arm. He pointed with the other to where the tunnel opened into the larger chamber with the pool. In the chamber beyond, they could see a terrible figure dragging something towards the pool. Grabbing Thronnd's lantern and pick, they hurried to the mouth of the tunnel. The chamber inside was bright with the dwarves' inner lights. All of them—Nin, blue, Ward, reddish purple, Kurn, deep orange—were running after the third troll, who was dragging something. At first Thronnd thought it was Garn, for he could see the crippled dwarf dragging along the ground, glowing dirty green. Then he realized that it was actually Lgrn the troll was dragging, that the warrior was unconscious, and that Garn was clinging crutchless to the warrior's beard in effort to wake or slow the troll's progress—maybe

both. The troll's purpose was clear. He was going to throw the warrior into the pool. He moved steadily, not heeding the hammer strokes of Ward and Kurn's heavy black-smith tools, slowed only a little by the dragging mangled Garn.

Nin followed quickly after them all, his voice chanting words:

*I am a warrior.
They look to me
When times are hard
And great storms come.
I am a warrior.
I meet the storm
When others hide.
It ravages face.
It tears skin.
But they will not know.
For I am a warrior
And I protect them.
They are the links
In my shining mail.
I wear it with pride.*

I am a warrior...

Lgrn was kicking now and shouting and Garn was obliged to let go of him. But the warrior was aroused. He began chanting with Nin and struggling to get his feet under him. Thron'd's feet felt cold. The troll slowed.

"Tulla help, help..." Thron'd mumbled, anxiously.

Loyk didn't speak at all.

Then, just at the last second, the warrior dwarf found a rock against which to stay his feet and the troll stopped, still gripping Lgrn's arm. For a moment, the stone figure swayed on the edge of the water. Then Lgrn snatched his wrist away and pushed the now life-less rock in with a disdainful boot.

Everyone watched the water swallow the boulder that had been the troll with a "galup!"

Then they looked at each other.

"Well," said Nin, with a grim smile. "I guess numbers weren't enough to keep them off, after-all."

Myth 4:

It is told, and the skools have seen, how a dwarf lost his heart for the first time.

Nenga, son of Gari, son Nrosp, loved jewels. In his youth he sought many of these fine stones deep in the mountains and brought them back to ornament Nub-Nubal, city of his fathers. As Nenga's mastery grew, these jewels, which he polished and set in stone or rings or crowns, could hold a dwarf spell-bound for days. Some of these he bought off other dwarves. Other's however, he travelled far and worked hard to find. As his collection grew, he became completely caught-up in his work. Sometimes he could go without eating or sleeping for months at a time, pursuing his goal with fevered fervor, living off the multi-colored glint of small facets. And he counted his gems as he might children, each as precious to him as fallen stars might have been.

Now Nenga's passion had given him mastery over many things. He was strong, daring, and clever in the underground world from his many adventures. He was also courteous and persuasive, at home in working social ranks to his advantage. Most importantly, he was relentless: Ever pressing onwards, ever working towards the next thing that would gain him another jewel, no matter the pain or the difficulty.

Because Nenga was all of these things, his family did not realize the danger that was also growing inside him. "Persistence" quickly became a cover-up for "ruthlessness." "Passion," was the name given to what was really "obsession." Everything in Nenga's life revolved around collecting more gems, never mind the pain it caused others. More and more, therefore, these clear crystals cut with a hard, cold edge into the happiness of others.

Now Nenga had a childhood friend named Guen. She was a dwara of surpassing beauty who also enjoyed gems and was skilled in working with them, and throughout the years she and Nenga had spent time together, at first collecting and beautifying stones as children, and then occasionally as adults. Nenga, who was generally careful not to foster relationships with anyone, especially dwaras, had allowed this one to grow because he enjoyed her usefulness and her beauty. She in her turn had long admired and loved Nenga, and her heart had been broken multiple times as her friend had grown distant in his world of work and still paid her no heed. The breaks, however, only made her heart cast distinctive patterns of light, for she was an affectionate heart, and her love was strong.

Because of this, when Nenga looked up at her from his work for the first time in many weeks, he found that her heart was glowing nearby, casting the most beautiful patterns of light over the walls of his cave. And suddenly he realized two things: First of all, that she loved him, and second of all, that the gem at her center must be of enchanting loveliness. Alas for the dwara, fair, sweet creature. But more, alas for Nenga. He could not rest until he had that heart in his possession. But did he seek to win it by love? No. For Nenga, love was almost out of reach. Instead he slayed his beautiful friend, and caught her heart in a box which he kept always.

They say that Nenga went mad after that. They say that he ran away, taking many of the jewels of Nub-Nubal with him. They say he collected many hearts of dwarves and dwaras in a large chest which he kept with him always.

So they ceased to call him "Nenga," but instead "Skul-nir," or "No-heart," because for all his many hearts, he had none himself. Little knew they how true it was, for when he was slain at last, all that they found where his heart ought to have been were spiny splinters and black dust.

Chapter 6: Deserters

They all knew what the trolls meant.

It meant they were afraid.

But nobody said this. In fact, nobody said anything for a couple minutes. Apparently, not only had Thron, Loyk, and Lgrn been visited by trolls, but Ward, Kurn, and Garn also, and they were exhausted. They stood and sat leaning on hammers or sitting back with their chests rising towards the cavern above, relieved. Lgrn, whose encounter had been the closest by far, sat for a full three minutes, warrior though he was, winded.

“What *was* that troll?” asked Ward, glancing at the stirring pool uneasily.

But Lgrn wouldn’t say.

Nin stood the while over them. Whether Nin had encountered a troll, Thron didn’t know. If he had, it seemed he’d been the first to recover, anyways, because no one seemed to know about it.

“Get your things together,” Nin instructed. “It’s no good staying here now.”

While everyone was gathering their things, Thron saw Lgrn approach Nin.

“Thank you for the runes, rune-master,” he said, respectfully. “I am lucky that rune-dwarfs study Salma’s Creed.”

“I did study Salma’s ‘Cry of the Warrior,’ and I know it well,” replied Nin, tartly. “But your thanks should be addressed to Fram Garn. It was he who first spoke the words. I only picked it up after.”

Lgrn looked surprised and not altogether pleased with this. Thron could tell by the way his wild eyes narrowed and his thick jaw convulsed as if he was swallowing something unpalatable. But he nodded at Garn, nonetheless.

“I did not know,” he said, slowly, “That you were a warrior.”

It seemed to Thron that both Lgrn and Nin had just learned something about Garn that fascinated and alarmed them, but which Thron had completely missed. He thought it must have something to do with “Salma’s Creed,”—which he assumed to be the rune Nin had been reciting. Thron watched Garn, curiously from the corner of his eye.

“You were not deceived,” said the dwarf, picking up his crutches, eyes down-cast. “I am not a warrior. But I have known some. I am glad I could help.”

Garn turned away to where Loyk and the two blacksmiths were trying to wake Oskil. They were some time about doing this, and when at last they succeeded he was sour, because Kurn had stomped on his finger with his metal boot tips.

“Trolls? Where?” he demanded. At first Thron thought he was bluffing again, as he had before about the robbery outside the labyrinth. The explanation of the attack was so unsatisfactory to Oskil, however, that even Thron began to think he really had simply been asleep.

“You’re telling me,” said Oskil, “That there have been three or four giant trolls thumping about my head without me waking up? Is this some kind of joke?”

Perhaps understandably, the old Easterling was deeply offended by the idea that all the Northerner’s were trying to scare him. After Loyk’s continued assurances that it had happened, however, Oskil crossed his arms and aroused his next objection:

“What were they doing here? We’re not even in the Hall of Troll’s yet.”

“I told you,” said Nin, sharply. “Troll’s can be found anywhere. I suspect most of us have been carrying them with us for quite some time.”

“This is going to be a long walk, isn’t it,” growled Ward.

He wasn’t the only one who was apprehensive about the Hall of Trolls. These apprehensions weren’t calmed as they entered, either. It was a spooky place, covered in dust and filled with watching stones on every side. As they passed along the path, the features of these stones loomed suddenly and hauntingly in and out of their halo of lantern light, and their shadows pursued them menacingly along the walls. Nin now lit his lantern—a curious grey lantern of a type that Thronnd had never seen fore, which cast silver light from a black flame. Oskil and Loyk, evidently feeling the darkness keenly, always had one lantern between them, and it was agreed that Garn should light his simple, red-lighted metal cage so long as he walked in the back of the group. Sometimes Thronnd walked with him and burnt his greasy miner’s oil instead. At such times, he would often turn back as if he heard something, but when he saw nothing but the blank stones watching from behind, he continued forward.

To Thronnd, the monumental boulders had faces. A line here, a dent there, a lumpy projection off the top of this or that one never quite made the mouth, eyes, and nose that they ought to have made. Nevertheless, Thronnd felt that the rocks had expressions. He even felt that they had the same expression—perhaps were different angles of the same face. Some were squat, some were tall, some lumpy, some flat. But all of them, if they had mouths would’ve been saying one word:

“Deserter.”

Deserter. Thronnd glanced uncomfortably down his tunic at Kunkizar, who had slipped into the front of his tunic and was, after the fashion of salamanders who don’t feel they’ve been properly thanked for their services, sulking.

Thronnd had been hesitant to even hold the salamander after the troll fight. Looking at his sister’s pet made the place where he had been hit in the stomach by the troll ache. It made him feel ugly and grungy inside. It made him angry—and that made him forget to say thank you when he’d pulled the amphibian off of Loyk; made him not want to look at the salamander anymore.

“We’re going, then,” he’d said, brusquely, and stuffed the salamander down the front of his shirt.

He’d been getting a quite literal cold shoulder ever since.

Something about the cold, slimy salamander skin against his own made him feel like his sisters and mother had become distant to him.

Deserter.

Had he deserted them?

Ahead of him and Garn but far enough away from Nin and Lgrn as to remain unheard, Ward and Kurn kept talking about the troll battle in low voices.

“It must have been a fear troll. It looked like a fear troll.”

“Anyone could see that, but what did it want to drown him for?”

“Maybe he’s afraid of water.”

“And what would Salma’s Creed have to do with that?”

“Don’t ask me... it wouldn’t have been so bad, anyway, if that miner hadn’t gone flying back into him and bowled him over.”

“It wouldn’t have been so bad if that miner had warned us a little sooner that a garkle of trolls was hanging around. Didn’t he see them arrive? Or was he dozing?”

Here Kurn cast a glare at Thron, and Thron pretended to be busy lighting his lantern. He felt small, though, and that didn’t help his mood much.

They stopped to eat along the path. They still hadn’t had a proper sleep, and most of them had sunk into a quiet crankiness. Nin was morose and quiet, and the others were not much better. Oskil and Loyk plopped down at once and began taking their baggage off and pulling out skins and cheeses and such. Thron didn’t have much. But what he had was more precious to him than anything anyone else could’ve given him. He pulled out the skin of moss soup and the little package of hardtack. Both tasted like Luthe, his sister. They tasted refreshingly like home, bringing that beautiful place suddenly very close. Thron offered some of the soup to Kunkizar as a peace offering. Kunkizar allowed the soup to be poured onto his tongue, and even gagged down a couple chunks of hard tack. This meager portion finished, however, Kunkizar lolloped around the solemn group, picking up crumbs. Oskil shewed it away, but the salamander must have known that the Easterlings had the best food in their baggage because he hung around the two dwarves like a fly. He seemed especially attracted to Loyk. Thron watched the salamander put its forepaw on Loyk’s leg.

“Kunkizar!” he said, sharply.

The salamander looked at him, blinked an amber eye, and crawled onto Loyk’s lap. Thron stood, irritated, but Loyk laughed.

“It’s the mead,” he said, raising the large skin he’d been drinking from.

“Mead?” said Kurn, interested.

Loyk managed to pour a small pool of thick, dark pink liquid onto the dusty floor beside him before Oskil could stop him. He gestured to it, looking at the salamander.

“Go ahead,” he said.

“If you’re expecting me to share later, forget it,” said Oskil. “Not if you’re going to waste yours like that.”

“What type of mead is it?” asked Ward, who was close enough to dab his finger in the small pool and try it on his tongue.

“Spices and blackberries,” said Loyk, watching Kunkizar lap it up with profound happiness.

“Mph. Too sweet.”

Loyk shrugged and continued watching the salamander.

“Time to move on, I think,” said Nin, abruptly. He stood with flourish of his staff, and drew his hood over his severe face. Thron picked up Kunkizar under one arm. The salamander squirmed, angrily.

“He’s beautiful,” Loyk said, appreciatively.

“He’s immensely conceited,” Thron retorted. “And he’s angry with me.”

“That’s salamanders for you.”

Thron half smiled at the Easterling. Loyk looked pleasant when he was thinking about salamanders. His cheeks had a healthy pink, and his round, green eyes and white lashes took on an intelligent, good-humored flick. It was funny how much he did and did not look like his Uncle, with his long turned up nose, round, sparkling eyes, and short, pale beard.

With the possible exception of Nin, everyone appeared to feel better for the brief rest. Even Thron didn't mind the shadows so much. His mind had been distracted by Loyk's interactions with Kunkizar, and his heart felt light. As for Oskil, he had recovered enough from being awoken with stories about trolls to talk again.

"So, tell us what you actually know about this place," he demanded, walking quickly to catch up with Nin. "Who put it here? What is it for? What makes you think this is the right path? After all, if we are going to follow you, we have a right to know something about the places you're taking us to."

Nin slowed. Troigan, who had been circling their heads in small loops landed on his shoulder.

"Of course it's your right," said Nin, at last. "It is also your responsibility to study where you are going before you go on a dangerous journey."

"Not all of us have time for reading stories," said Oskil, impatiently. "Now are you going to tell us about it or not?"

Nin turned and continued walking, edgily. After a long thoughtful moment, however, he began:

"Long ago," he began, his voice soft and articulate. "When Narthim was King in the Nubal heights, his brother Sarthim fled the Kingdom with his followers and travelled South. He was a bitter dwarf, jealous of his powerful brother and determined to be respected equally. When he stumbled across this cave and the passages beyond, he discovered that the earth here was incredibly rich. Gold, he found. Gems. Silver. Iron. Marble. Commanding his followers, he built a city that rivalled even the grandeur and extravagance of Nub-Nubal. He called the city Rigdlah. He grew wildly prosperous, and quietly began to lure select nobles and dwarves of the North to his small kingdom with his new found riches. He might have grown prosperous beyond any King before him in that city, had not Sarthim's hate for his brother Narthim remained unabated. Complacent over his success, he determined that he would be king of all the mountains, both North and South."

"Where was the East?" interrupted Oskil.

"The East didn't exist yet," replied Nin, primly. "In years the East is a child compared with the North."

"The East is many hundred years old," objected Oskil.

Nin ignored this comment and continued.

"Sarthim sent marauding parties into Narthim's borders, kidnapping dwarves and children and causing for a time much grief to the Northern kingdom. It proved to undo him, for these marauders were traced back to the Kingdom of Rigdlah and Narthim declared war upon the city. Even then Sarthim felt secure, for in his own swelling into power he had come to misjudge the strength of his brother. But although it was a long, bitter, war, there ought not to have been a doubt who was the stronger."

Nin trailed off, thoughtfully. Thron waited, eagerly.

"Narthim broke into Rigdlah and drove out its occupants and took Sarthim and his chief supporter's captive. He did not kill them, however. For two hundred thirty-nine years he kept them under lock and key, and in the meantime, he crafted Rigdlah into a terrible labyrinth, as cruel and vengeful as his feelings. Into this twisted engine of irony, Narthim returned his rebellious brother and his henchmen. There was a way out, Narthim informed his brother, but Sarthim would never find it. And for all anyone knows

he never did. And in the years after Narthim sent all deserters and traitors into the labyrinth as a punishment. It proved a great deterrent, for even of those who could bear the dark wanderings, few could abide the thought of being locked into a city with Sarthim's corpse in it." Nin laughed, chillingly. A perfectly ordinary laugh, but in the black, empty space what he'd said did not seem at all funny.

"So then," stammered Thron, "the King dropped deserters into this labyrinth."

"Yes. In fact, this has always been the deserter's labyrinth. First Sarthim entered as a deserter of his own Kingdom. Then other traitors and deserters were thrown in. Eventually even a young prince named Oleth deserted his throne and ran away into this very labyrinth."

"Olethim?" asked Kurn, astonished.

"But he's a King!" Even Lgrn was surprised.

"That's just the point," said Nin, a little testily. "He entered the labyrinth a deserter and left it a King. Nobody knows exactly what happened in-between. That's up to us to find out. If we ever get through it."

If they ever got through it.

They were the new deserters, Thron thought. Those who had abandoned their former lives for the adventures of the labyrinth.

But that isn't everything.

Thron thought of Olethim, the grey-haired king with whom he had touched knuckles with at the entrance to the labyrinth. Surely he would never have abandoned his position as heir to the throne without reason.

"Why didn't Olethim want to be King?"

He had asked the question before he could stop himself.

Nin cast a glance at him.

"Why does it matter?" he said.

"It seems strange to me," said Thron.

Nin smiled.

"There are too many reasons a dwarf might not want to be King. It is a kind of King's joke to create a labyrinth which dwarves can enter to *become* King when the King himself entered it to escape that very fate. A dwarf can feel trapped in any position, Fram Thron."

Thron walked on. He felt uneasy, and his heart was heavy again. After Nin's story, the word of the troll to him in the tunnel before the chamber with the pool were even more alarming than before. How had it known? How had he come to play that role? He thought again of its words again, and his head drooped lower on his chest, and his steps faltered.

Indeed, by the time they stopped again, all the dwarves were feeling the toll of the hall. Their faces were drawn, and a darkness had settled around their eyes.

"Stop here?" said Lgrn, disappointed. "Couldn't we go a little further and rest once we're out of this place?"

The blacksmiths grunted in agreement. But Nin sat on a convenient rock, calmly.

"Do you see the end of this hall?"

Everyone looked around. There were only their own turning shadows and the stony figures, poised, waiting, for them to go to sleep.

“I recommend we take watch in pairs tonight. I’ll take the first watch with Fram Garn, if he will. Who will take the second?”

Ward and Kurn raised their hands.

“And the third?”

Lgrn stepped forward. After a moment, Thron did, too.

“No,” said Nin, flatly. “You watched last time. You can go the next round. Oskil, you’d better take a watch with Lgrn.”

The Easterling didn’t refuse, and everyone got out their blankets and dimmed their lanterns. Thron set Kunkizar down, and unrolled his own blanket. It was, as he expected, too short to cover his feet and ankles. He cast a disgruntled glance at Oskil, who was snuggling in under a roomy blanket. He wondered what gift Elensa had given Oskil. Whatever it was, it had been meant for him.

The others silently began building a pile of sulf-chips. Thron contributed one, glad for the flame. When he looked up again, he was alarmed to find that Kunkizar had crawled a little off the path and climbed up one of the boulders—a tall boulder with crevices high above his head. Thron hurried to the foot of the boulder.

“Kunkizar!” he said. “Get down!”

The salamander pretended not to notice him, staring, pointedly at the wall.

“Kunkizar!”

Thron began to climb. He wasn’t about to leave his sister’s salamander atop a boulder that might spring to life at any moment.

Kunkizar, however, only climbed higher. Thron saw he was not improving things and dropped down again.

“Let me try…”

It was Loyk. His eyes were twinkling. He took off his cap and held it out towards the salamander.

“Please, come join me.”

Almost instantly, Kunkizar began to descend. Loyk kept his hat stretched out, smiling, and nodded encouragingly at the salamander. After a few seconds, Kunkizar jumped, flailing into the cap and swung back and forth there. Loyk grinned.

“How…?” Thron gaped. Loyk was cradling the salamander in his hood.

“I had a salamander, once,” he explained, holding Kunkizar out to Thron.

“Here.”

Thron took the salamander, but the creature squirmed uncomfortably in-between his fingers. Thron tried curling up with it. He tried giving it some of the precious moss soup. Kunkizar, however, was irreparably discontented and ended by running to curl up among Loyk’s things. Thron doggedly followed the pet and brought it back three times. Then he gave up, turned out his lantern, and tried sleep. His eyes were heavy from the long march and the disturbed rest of their last stop for sleep. But he couldn’t close them. The shadows melted into shadows, and Nin and Garn’s lanterns melded in a dizzying mixture of red and silver. He could see the two sitting without speaking in the dark.

Thron didn’t feel like he’d slept at all, when he was brought upright in the dark by the sound he had been dreading and waiting for.

“Scum. Dirt. Deserter.”

It was only a whisper, and Thron might have thought it a bad dream, except he saw that both Garn and Nin had stood and were staring at something directly behind him.

He turned and scrambled back and was just seizing his pick-axe when Garn put a firm hand on his shoulder. Thron'd paused, breathing hard. It was the same troll. The very same, with its heavy fists hanging low by his sides and its skin the texture of the peppered granite of the boulder which had stood behind where Thron'd had been sleeping. It advanced towards Thron'd.

"So... did your father give you permission to be here?" it said, quietly. Thron'd couldn't move. He felt Garn's hand tighten on his shoulder and knew that the crippled dwarf had understood the troll's words. But he couldn't think. All he could think of was his father's last request:

"Swear to me you'll guard your mother and sisters. There is nothing more precious for you or me. Swear to me, son. You'll guard them."

Thron'd bent his head, unable for a moment to respond as the troll seized him by the loose front of his tunic and wrenched him out of Garn's hand. Even as Thron'd fished frantically around in his head for a rebuttal, however, there came a hollow *thwack!* and one of Garn's crutches struck smartly over the troll's head.

"Get you gone!" said Garn, in a low, snarling voice. "We have a mission."

The intensity of Garn's anger washed over Thron'd in an arousing jolt. The troll's grip loosened.

"What mission?" it asked, the casual enjoyment gone from its voice.

"For her," said Garn, simply.

The words were so simple. Yet they saved Thron'd. For her. He *was* doing this for her. How had Garn known?

As Thron'd re-found his center, the troll retreated into itself and became once again a hulking pillar of granite at the head of where Thron'd had been sleeping.

Thron'd sank to his knees, weakly. Garn helped him back up.

"Are you alright, Fram Thron'd?"

His eyes in that moment betrayed an agony more present than that frozen forever in the scars of his face. The expression disappeared however as he turned a gaze of concern on Thron'd.

"You are wounded," he said, pointing to where one of the troll's cruel, sharp nails had dug between Thron'd's ribs.

Thron'd glanced down at the dirty wound. It was bleeding a little, but it was not alarmingly deep.

"I'll be alright, Fram,"

"Let me see."

It was Nin, who thus far had not spoken. He examined the flesh wound as well, but did not seem to find anything dangerous about it. He quietly washed it and gave Thron'd a clean cloth from within his pack to press against it. Once, Lgrn woke up, and another time, Loyk. Nin, however, waved them back to sleep.

"Did your father give you permission," he asked, after a while, quietly.

Thron'd started, surprised to hear his returning confusion so clearly articulated by this dwarf with clear, blue eyes.

"He is dead."

Nin nodded, expressionlessly.

"I am sorry."

"I too, Fram," said Garn, lowering his head.

Thron'd thanked them and returned to his blankets, his mind wakeful and wondering. How had Garn known so clearly what to say? He had not even raised his voice, and the troll had trembled. It had been a large, troll, too...

Then there was Nin's question. Why would he ask about his father?

Thron'd watched the two dwarves in the dark. They were the most mysterious of the dwarves he had met so far, and for the first time in the darkness he thought he could see their layers pulling away. He wondered. He wondered some more. At last, as the lanterns dimmed, Nin spoke.

"So," he said, softly but severely.

Garn did not reply. For that matter, he didn't look at Nin.

"Which captain were you?"

Garn did look at Nin this time.

"I told you, I am no warrior."

"Aren't you, though? Where did you get that scar? That leg? Where did you learn Salma's Creed so well you could recite it in a life-threatening moment?"

Nin was composed, a half smile on his lips.

"I have witnessed and experienced many painful things in my time," retorted Garn, his face impenetrable, his words shaped carefully with the part of his mouth that functioned well. "You hold no obligation over me to recite them here."

"Maybe not," said Nin. "But I guess more than you would like, I think. You were a leader. And you deserted your men."

The following silence prickled with tension, but Garn did not rise. Instead he stared, thoughtfully into the darkness.

"Either I did, or I did not," he said at last. "But let us pretend," he added wearily, "That I did. What of it?"

Nin's bird took off and caught the air on its wings. He watched it for a moment in the silver and red shadows.

"I watch deserters very carefully," he said.

Chapter 7: Something Old, Something New

Thronnd slept hard for a few hours, waking only twice. The first of these times, he found Oskil wrestling with a little troll who had seized his abacus and was trying to wrench it from his hands over the low burning pile of sulf-chips. The troll had evidently been strewing the contents of one of Oskil's bags over the ground, many of which glistened and twinkled. Thronnd even thought he saw a lumino—small, but bright—lying just beside a large, clicking pocket-watch. As the blacksmith brothers were watching, however, and Oskil seemed eager that they continue to mind their own business and not mind him as he shook the troll off with a kick and began gathering up the articles, Thronnd only laughed to himself, rolled over, and went to sleep. Not long afterward, he woke again, this time to the clanging of the blacksmiths' hammers, which they were using to pummel a stumpy looking troll with flat head. Ward and Kurn apologized to their blinking travelling companions, many of whom had grabbed their own hammers and one of whom had lit the knocked over lantern.

"We always take care of *that* one with our hammers," Ward explained. "It's gone now."

Nobody really blamed them. But no-one had slept uninterrupted, either, between their own fears and those of others. It was a haggard group that pressed onward again after some hours, and both the scratch he'd received from the troll and his heavy eyes blended in with the general aspect of the company.

"How is your wound," asked Garn to Thronnd, glancing sideways at him as they walked.

"It will mend," said Thronnd. Truth be told, it was very sore, and it had caused him some pain already in the last couple hours they had walked. But it was not a dangerous wound—only uncomfortable enough to irritate him as he walked alongside the others.

Thronnd glanced at the back of Kurn's head in front of him. He had done so many times in the last couple hours, because there was a new, especially brilliant purple lump on its side which had been getting progressively bigger. Ward had a cut on one arm, too. Thronnd wondered what they were thinking now of this "grand adventure."

Still, the rest had improved Thronnd considerably, and a little pain was welcome in the dizzying shadows of the hall. It was something real to hold onto. Something that convinced Thronnd he might actually be on this "grand adventure," and not just dreaming it.

Thronnd glanced at the strange dwarf beside him, swinging easily between his stilts, and wondered if Nin's guess was right. There could've been a quite well-known dwarf captain behind the contorted and stretched skin, and no-one would've ever known.

Perhaps he was burnt, thought Thronnd. Or trod under other dwarves' heels.

He wasn't sure what could do that kind of damage to a dwarf's face.

Strange enough, however, the idea that Garn might be a warrior and even a deserter did not lead Thronnd to trust him much less. There was something in his surly silence and sadness that amounted to kindness and more—authority. Though he took no initiative in leading, he seemed to come naturally by a bright, self-assured energy. It gave Thronnd strength, just as his words from the night before had.

"Let me light my lantern for a while, Fram," said Thronnd, when they stopped again. Garn nodded gratefully and opened his tiny, red-paned lantern to snuff the flame.

Thronnd brought his own more awkward lantern out. Miner lanterns were not chosen for their elegance, but for their ability to sustain light for a long time. There was no knowing when one would be stuck in the mines for hours--even days. Thronnd struck a spark into the oil and closed the iron door with a familiar creak.

"Where is your sh-salamander?" asked Garn, watching him as he hung his lantern from a hook below the harness that held his baggage. Thronnd pointed to Loyk's shoulder, where the wide mouthed amphibian was sitting, contentedly.

"He's deserted me."

Thronnd thought that Garn cast Thronnd a sharp look, and Thronnd quickly amended himself.

"I mean, he's angry with me."

"Besht, make it up to him quickly," said Garn, preparing his crutches to continue walking. His voice held no sign of the sharp look. It sounded like he was smiling. "A good companion ish hard to find."

As Thronnd considered this advice while looking over the line of dwarves, Lgrn, who was walking ahead of Nin, suddenly stiffened and took one step back.

"Dah!" he exclaimed in a voice both surprised and afraid. Kurn, coming up alongside him and Nin, sprang back.

"What? What is it?" asked Oskil, both disconcerted and irritated.

The two dwarves didn't answer, only lifting their fingers to point.

"Wha"—

Oskil fell silent.

It was a statue. The statue of a small dwarf with his hands over his head as if he were trying to block out his senses. A curved, bejeweled knife protruded from his stony chest. It had passed all the way through to appear glinting from his back, thrust deep while the dwarf with his face in his hands could not see.

Thronnd's feet went cold, and he wished quite suddenly that he was holding Kunkizar.

"Who is it?" asked Oskil, shakily. It looked about the size of an Easterling.

"Who knows" replied Nin. His voice was soft, and he had knelt beside the figure. "But the stone is new, and his pack is still in good shape. So is this."

Nin lifted a small, round paned lantern.

"I would guess no more than four days."

"You mean..." Thronnd's voice was unstable. "He was attempting the labyrinth and he died here?"

Nin met his eyes.

"We all knew we were taking risks. Certainly this poor fellow was not the first dwarf to die here. I thought you must have noticed the others like this among the boulders, but it appears not. They were older, and most of their features were gone."

Lgrn cleared his throat, but even so his voice had to force itself through gravelly halts.

"Who are they?"

"Deserters," said Nin, opening the dead dwarf's pack and peering inside. "Many came this way in the past."

"And the trolls over-came them?" pressed Lgrn.

“I think that was the case for this one, replied Nin, touching the curled-up figure’s head. “But most of the others killed themselves.”

“Why?” Ward and Oskil spoke in unison with Thron.

“They were deserters,” said Nin, standing and handing a small bag of cram and a couple skins of some drink to Lgrn. “They had no choice in coming here. Death, rather than wandering the passages where the King Surthim’s evil spirit dwelt. They had little hope of coming out.”

The dwarves were solemn as stood around the little figure. They could not see its face with its hands thrown up before it. The stone was new—bright and clean, unweathered by the many years. Perhaps a couple days before it had been a dwarf.

“We should split the provisions among ourselves,” said Nin. “At least by his death he can help his fellows.”

Oskil at once began to pry up a couple juicy garnets from the hilt of the knife, while the others passed his discarded bags around. Thron, however, passed the bag and skins to Garn without taking anything from them. He could not. Garn smiled at him, understandingly. Thron could actually see a hint of the expression on his face—the small lift about the mouth did not go far enough to distort, and the sad kindness emanating from his eyes.

“It is not dishrespect, Fram. Would you not be glad to know he’d taken the same of you, had you been in his place and he in yours?” Garn said.

He put his hand on the stone head, said a few words, and walked on.

To the relief of all, they reached the end of the hall before a couple hours had passed. Yet there was little rejoicing. Too fresh was the image of the stony dwarf, given over to despair but a couple hours walk from his destination. They walked until they felt the Hall of Troll’s to be sufficiently left behind. Then they solemnly sat down and got out their food.

Thron curled up apart from the others, munching dusty hard-tack. He was a miner. He had seen death before. Indeed, death was never very far in a mine. But he’d never been able to understand why.

Why?

Thron bent his head, not meeting Garn’s eyes, which were examining him a meter away. The crippled dwarf lowered his own head, then, with halting words, began to sing.

*Gemsh of light they found and wrought,
On harpsh of gold they left their mark,
And it was they who took the roadsh
That none had took into the dark...”*

Thron looked up now, surprised. Through still inhibited by his heavy lips, Garn’s voice was younger than he had expected, a husky, green contrast to harsh, stony face. He trailed off, and cast something like a self-conscious eye up towards Nin.

“Do you know it?” he asked. “I do not remember very much.”

Nin eyed Garn, his brow thoughtfully furrowed. Yet a small smile had touched his lips. For answer, he began to sing, continue after the fashion and tune that Garn had chosen.

*“And there they found Arthenynim,
Old walls of stone that naught could shake,
A fortress born of rock and steel
To make dwarf kingdom’s foes to quake.*

*And there they staid and tempered steel,
They fashioned blades, mighty and sharp,
And after many lonely years
They turned once more into the dark.*

*And there found healing springs of life
Where Yonen, wrym of cruel delight,
Bathing there her ravaged flesh
Was forced by dwarven swords to flight.*

*And brought they all their mortal wounds
To wash and heal in river bed,
Which to this day runs dark with blood
That Yonen lost before she fled.*

*They called the place Ilkne Yonen³
And gathered once more to embark
And seek the secrets that had sunk
Long, long ago into the dark.*

*They found pillars of fallen stone
And crystal gardens walked among.
They lit with life the deadest lakes
Where long had no voice spoke or sung.*

*They lingered in each dark they found,
Through time constant, through danger, bold.
They found their path shadowed in gloom
And left it gilt in laughing gold.*

*Then came a place, deep under stone.
They dragged themselves, dying of thirst,
Over chasm and under arch
Across cold stone, through colder dark.*

*There rose a marvel strange to see!
In their beleaguered eyes it gleamed:
A fountain glowing, clear and cool
Under an earthborn sun, it seemed.*

³ Blood of Yonen

*That sight no dwarf could see unstirred.
All thirst forgot, they stood as stone,
Caught by the water's peaceful song
Under showers of light, there shown*

*And would as statues stand there still
Had not good Lenth, great heart, come near
To cup the water in his hands
That was, far more than silver, dear.*

*And seeing, shivering on his palm,
The water glowed with golden light,
He looked up to the cavern's sun
And found it but a crystal, bright.*

*Then bid he his kin "Come! Drink!
This water is a gift to those
Who wander hopeless in the dark:
A fount where hopeful light still grows!"*

*They called it Kelithbul, or blessed,
A gift of to those who've lost their way,
And raised a city round its feet:
The glory of a timeless day.*

*When Amalfram had stood in peace
For many years, the father city,
And dwarves grew rich in strength and might,
Their hands grew skilled, their tongues, witty,*

*Yes, after many stagnant years
With many a king as patriarch,
Dwarf hearts once more learned not to fear
But take the roads into the dark."*

Nin's voice was excellent. It's clear, smooth tones filled the tunnel with a soft, listening silence. Thron opened his eyes and looked at the thoughtfully bent heads of the others, listening, still listening to the receding silence of the song.

"What story is that?" he asked. Lgrn sniggered in surprise.

"Why, surely even the miners know the Lay of Lenth! Every child knows it," he said, incredulous.

Thron shook his head. His mother knew many old tales. But he had never heard that song.

“It is the story of Lenth and his comrades,” said Nin, with a sigh of learned despair. “But only the short version. It goes like this:

“Lenth was the right-hand man to the King Arthenynim. He explored the unknown mountains. He chased away great dangers. He was everywhere the King needed a brave and resourceful dwarf. But as he became beloved by the people, the King grew jealous of him. After he felt his Kingdom to be stable, Arthenynim falsely accused Lenth of treachery and threw him and his comrades into the deserter’s labyrinth, expecting that they would die there. But they did not. They sought their way through dark passages and hidden chambers that no living dwarf had seen. At last, they came up in a chamber with a natural fountain topped by an incredible crystal. There was a crack in the stony ceiling, and the light of the sun caught the many facets of the crystal and shown out anew underground. And so they found their way at last out of the labyrinth, and Lenth built a city on that spot and called it Amalfram. Eventually it would become the center of Kulethim, and Lenth would be Lenthim, King of a new kingdom.”

Nin stopped speaking, and his voice trailed into the quiet.

“So,” said Oskil, a bit sharply, “This isn’t just the Deserter’s Labyrinth.”

“No. Of course not,” replied Nin, giving the Easterling a weary look. “But it does not much matter. In that age it was the deserter’s labyrinth. In the next, the King’s. Now it is Elensa’s labyrinth. Still, it is the same labyrinth which Narthim made long ago. But come. We’ve sat long enough. Let us move on.”

They had now been in the labyrinth more than three days. Thronk knew not only by calculating the growth of moss on the back of his hands, but by the changing pull of the moon. Three days, and not more than ten hours of sleep among them. Nevertheless, no-one objected to moving on and leaving the Hall of Trolls as far behind them as they could. There was a stirring to the air that told them change was coming, and after the still dust of their long walk so far, change was welcome.

They had not been walking long when they came to the first adjoining tunnel they had encountered yet. It wandered up from the path they were on: Up and into the darkness. Then these tunnels began to multiply, all wandering up and away from the path, twinkles of crystal or echoing drops of water calling out of their recesses. They took none of these, for they still intended to go in and down, as Uda had recommended. But the tunnels were there, and Thronk felt them with increasing alertness and sometimes uneasiness. After-all, he knew that anything might come down from one of those tunnels and follow them from the strategic position of above and behind. The likelihood of this increased as they began to see signs of other dwarves passing recently along the same track of themselves. Once, treading through intersections of tunnels, they found each marked with a symbol of some kind. Another time, they walked by a projection of rock on which sat a dead lantern, mysteriously abandoned. Oskil emptied it of its oil and began using it to collect pieces of minor crystal from along the path. They were knubbly crystals, yellow or sometimes blue, like something had secreted itself over the earth and dried. In some places, though, it congealed into resinous chunks streaked and flecked with metallic glitter. Oskil knelt by the first of these and examined it through a glass, before taking out a narrow, flat-edged chisel and carefully cracking the piece of crystal away from the cave floor.

“Osphore,” said the jeweler, rubbing the piece with his thumb as he held it up for examination, “Not the finest pieces I’ve seen, but fairly decent.”

“Valuable, eh?” Kurn wanted to know.

“Not really, unless you know what to do with them. Here,” said Oksil, shrilly, handing the chisel to Loyk and dropping the chunk into the empty extra lantern, which Loyk was now carrying. “I’ll tell you where to pick them up. Some of them have come nearly loose already.”

Oskil had sharp eyes, but he had to look quickly, for Kunkizar kept sending exceptional pieces of the Osphore clattering across the floor and then gleefully chasing and swallowing them up.

“I didn’t think salamanders ate stone,” said Ward, in a low voice to Kurn after Kunkizar did this the first time.

“They don’t. Watch,” said Thron, eyeing the salamander expectantly.

Kunkizar sat for a moment, lines of orange fire patterning his muddy skin as if a fire were being awakened within. Then he spasmed and *pop!* Out came the piece of Osphore, glowing and hot by another way.

Kurn looked puzzled.

“A game,” explained Thron. “They just go straight through. He likes the way it feels, I guess.”

“Fascinating,” said Oskil, who had fallen behind them and was examining the steaming crystal through his glass. “The creature has changed the distribution of the minerals. Never seen osphore like it before. Here, Loyk, if he makes anymore, collect them in that lantern of yours.”

Loyk, who had been leaning over his uncle’s head to see glanced at Thron.

“May I?” he asked.

“If you wish,” said Thron, surprised that the Easterling would ask him. He himself didn’t consider them either his own or of any real value. He knew Osphore well enough.

But Loyk seemed so delighted with his collection that Thron at last stooped to pick up two of the discharged lumps, curious. They had been dense, uneven, and striped with a clear grain. Now, however, they were smooth to the touch, glassy, the glittering metallic bits suspended in their liquid hearts. He tucked two away in his pouch, with a small stirring of his heart. Tokens for Sar, he told himself

The air was certainly changing now. It had moisture and, barely perceptible, waves of heat. They came to a place where water seeped down the wall in a dribbling sheet and then twisted into a rivulet that ran along the tunnel beside them. As Thron washed his hands and cupped the water to drink, he noticed several strange, spidery creatures clinging to the dampened stone with splayed, limpid legs. His approaching boot had sent one of these scampering away down the path ahead of them. The other two, spotted by Kunkizar, were less fortunate. Thron felt sorry for the large, stringy creatures as their limbs were drawn with a snap into the salamander’s flat mouth. But he also felt, suddenly, like he could speak to the salamander as normal again.

This turned out fortuitous, because soon Thron was obliged to catch the salamander and stuff him down his shirt again. This was partly because the passing of the crystals was producing an unflattering smell, but for another, the path was branching so much he was afraid he’d lose the salamander down the wrong route if he was running

free. Where there had only been a couple turns here and there, the path now split off so often it was hard to tell where the path itself ended and where the off shoots of the path began. They were also having to pay closer attention to which paths lead more directly down, for they no longer all joined the main-way from above. Nin began to stoop, examining the ground by the little tributary of water which still followed them, his sharp nostrils quivering sensitively.

It was Lgrn, however, who first declared a discovery.

“There have been other dwarves here,” he said.

“Yes,” agreed Nin. “I started noticing a few turns back.”

“But these dwarves were here recently,” pressed Lgrn. “And they were using weapons.”

“You are sure?” said Nin, stopping to look at the dwarf.

“Postive,” said Lgrn. “Your lore is in letters, Fram, but mine is in signs such as these. See how the stone is heavily compacted here at the heel? And the scrapes along the wall?”

They went on more cautiously now, and Thronnd began holding his pick by its neck instead of over his shoulder. It was but a few minutes later when Lgrn gestured up a trail leading into another tunnel.

“Some went up there.”

“And the others?” asked Nin.

“They kept going.”

“How many?”

“More than five.”

“Why would they go up?” Thronnd wondered aloud. “They’re supposed to go down.”

“Maybe they are idiots,” suggested Oskil.

“Likely,” said Kurn.

“Fram Lgrn?” It was Garn’s voice, this time. “What would you say this is?”

Garn was stooping over his crutches beside Thronnd, lantern raised. Thronnd saw now that there were streaks of translucent, stringy ooze stretched along the ridges in the floor. It reminded Thronnd of spittal. Or spider web.

Lgrn fingered a course braid of his beard in silence as he examined the spot.

“It’s not blood, anyway,” he said at last.

“It doesn’t look as though it is made by a dwarf,” said Nin, also looking. “We must be careful.”

They all had weapons out now except Garn, even Oskil with his dagger and Loyk with the chisel which his uncle had handed him earlier. Lgrn walked ahead with Nin and Kurn. The others slowly filed after.

A curious thing had happened to Thronnd’s perception of the life and motion of this place. Whereas before it had been a relief, now it was frightening. He thought several times he caught a motion up one of the tunnels from where they were and once was certain he heard an gargling sound, but nothing came of it.

“Look,” said Nin, at length.

“Blood,” said Lgrn, at once, stooping.

Before the rest could catch up to see or inquire more, however, there was a whirl of motion and six figures suddenly flew out of the nearest tunnel and tackled Lgrn and Kurn. Troigan, flew up as Nin raised his staff, and Ward leapt forward, roaring,

“Oye! Oye!”

But before anything else could be done, the four strangers had taken both Lgrn and Kurn down and had a knife at Nin’s throat. One of these, a dark haired, tall dwarf rose to his feet and cast both Ward and his blow to the side with a thick parry and placed a booted foot on Lgrn’s chest.

“Don’t move, any of you!” he said, in a rolling, accented voice. “At your comrades’ peril.”

“Wait,” said another of the strangers, smaller and paler, holding Kurn down. “This isn’t the one. He’s a rune dwarf.”

The dark-haired dwarf turned and glared irritably at Nin.

He had been moving quickly, but now he was still, and Thrond could see him clear enough to recognize a long thin scar running through one brow.

“More trouble,” the dark-haired dwarf muttered, his expression darkening with dislike.

“Fram Agrev, cousin to Vrgrayn, Prince of the West, I presume?” said Nin, coolly. “I might say much the same.”

Chapter 8: Against the Grain

The two groups of dwarves blinked at each other, surprised and not over-friendly. Along with Agrev, Thron saw that the dwarf sitting on Lgrn (who looked to be in a dark rage) was the Westerner Sorj, and that the dwarf standing by was another of the Westerners, a warrior with a younger face, bright green eyes, and a short, curling beard. The other three attackers, however, looked much more like Northerners—two decked out in mail like a warrior, the other in indistinct brown and brandishing a shoe-maker's hammer in one hand and a small, foldable knife in the other.

"What's the trouble," asked one of the Northerners in mail, a stern, lean dwarf with heavy, salty creases around his eyes and scarred, grey hands. He was addressing Agrev.

"This one was with the other," said Agrev, darkly. "With that rogue trader. We left them behind us together."

The Northerner, who had Kurn on his belly with his arm locked behind his back handed the arm to the rather nervous looking shoemaker, and stepped near to examine Nin. His eye was doubtful, but cold.

"This rune-dwarf?" he said.

Troigan swooped down and alighted on the Nin's shoulder.

"Yes. This rune-dwarf," replied Agrev.

The Northerner, who had stepped away, now stepped forward again, and Thron thought his face had hardened.

"Where have they taken my comrade?" he demanded. His voice was thick, gritty.

"What comrade?" said Kurn, angrily. He had gotten out of the shoe maker's feebler arm-lock and sat up.

At once Agrev extended his knife steadily and placed it on the dwarf's chest.

"Don't move," he growled.

"Forgive me," said Nin, with surprising calmness, "But would someone please explain? I'm afraid I can't, for I haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about."

The Northerner surveyed him with hard eyes. They were very pale, Thron noticed, and his skin was hoary and red. It was the complexion of the dwarves farthest north. Thron also noticed that the buckle of his belt was large and that a bar of iron was engraved across it. A city warden.

"Have you not been in company with the dark-haired trader of Sasz?"

"Describe him," said Nin.

"Merchant with strong nose, violet eyes, assortment of rings...."

Thron recognized instantly the description of the merchant who had tried to rob the Easterlings outside the labyrinth.

"Yes, I have," said Nin. "He descended into the labyrinth with us. But at the first parting of ways, he took the middle path, and we the right. We have not seen nor know we anything of him since. What is it that he has done?"

"He is leading a band of riff-raff that loot and kidnap travelers throughout this part of the labyrinth."

"Kidnap? For what purpose?"

"I don't know," said the dwarf, brusquely. Then added, his voice lowering a little,

"They kidnapped one of my comrades."

He turned his head away and stepped back.

“Let them go, Fram Agrev,” he said. “I don’t believe they are with the other lot. It would be dastardly to keep upright dwarves along their path.”

“I’m not so sure...” began Agrev.

“But we should not hold them for naught, Agrev.” This was Sorj. Agrev looked towards Sorj, and then slowly moved his blade from Kurn’s chest. The other dwarves at once released their holds on Lgrn, Kurn, and Nin as well. Nin breathed a little deeper. Kurn got to his feet and dusted himself off. Lgrn leapt up and gave Sorj an offended shove. Then they collected together with the others.

Agrev and his group stood still in their path.

“I do not like,” said Agrev, “That you should pass this way until we know you are not with the looters. It seems all too likely.”

“Nevertheless, this way we must go,” said Nin. “And how could we convince you that we are not robbers if you are determined to think of us as such? Has it not already occurred to you that if we had been hunting you, we would not have kept only to this path, as the higher ones offer better opportunity for ambush? That we might simply be on this path because Dwar Uda told us to go in and down?”

“It has,” said Agrev, angrily, “Along with many other good reasons why you may be treacherous and liars. You were with that rogue Northerner when I last saw you. How am I to know what has happened since?”

“Accompany us, then, to Vrgrayn,” interrupted Garn, suddenly. “I assume,” he added, “that he is not far, and down this path. We cannot avoid meeting now, not if either one of us wishes to take this route, and if there are numerous opponents about, we might as well journey together as apart. Let us travel together, and then you will know exactly what we are about.”

The group of Westerners and Northerners exchanged only a couple words. The northern warden’s voice was firm, but low. He turned.

“You may come with us.”

“You may,” agreed Agrev, “but if any one of you attempt treachery...”

Here Agrev’s knife swiveled and executed a series of twirling butchery on the air before slamming emphatically into his sheath.

“Danaan,” added Agrev to the younger Westerner. “Run ahead with Fram Gringa and tell Vrgrayn we are coming. Sorj, you will take the back?”

Danaan trotted ahead with the Fram Gringa, the shoemaker. Sorj fell behind the group. Agrev took up the lead with the warden and Lgrn, who drove forward, muttering darkly. The rest followed.

It was a tense procession onwards. There was no talk. Instead, the two Westerners and the two northern strangers glanced anxiously from side to side, their eyes alert and the smallest noises turning their heads. Thron could see now in the light of Oskil’s lantern that they looked badly worn. Their faces were hollowed by lack of sleep, and he marked more than one place where it looked as though sharp claws had been drawn across the material of the tunics over their mail. In a couple places these rips were stained with streaks of red that ran up onto the skin of a shoulder or wrist. The northern warrior had an ugly bruise on his face.

It was clear that they had faced some serious conflict and were waiting for more. Not two turns downward down the path, they got what they were waiting for. It came

with in a burbling rush from the shadows of an adjoining tunnel: A long, round, leggy body with a opened mouth of dark green. It gave an ugly screech as it leapt into the path. Almost before Thron had seen it, however, Agrev smashed an elbow into the creature's head and then cut its mouth open with an outward stroke of his blade. As it spasmed and flopped its blood dribbling head, Agrev drove his stained blade into its screaming mouth, and then withdrew it with a business-like jerk. The creature fell to the ground with a thump, and Agrev stepped over it without a second glance or comment.

The rest of the group hung back.

"What *was* that?" demanded Oskil, who had backed behind Kurn in genuine terror.

"An Iul," said Nin.

"Haven't you seen one yet?" asked the northern warden. "They're all over these tunnels."

"No," said Nin. "We have not. Our path came by a different way."

"Lucky fortune, Fram," said the warden, without looking at Nin.

Thron glanced at the creature's body as he passed. Cylindrical and slimy like an earth worm, the creature nevertheless was barbed, the barbs sometimes growing to terrible, tough ridges. Its legs were short, but powerful and its feet reminded Thron strangely of dwarf hands, with a thumb-like digit higher up. But dwarf hands discolored and barbed along their pads, coming down to long, wild claws. Thron shuddered. But it was not the claws that made him shudder. It was the two blind spots where the Iul's eyes ought to have been, like the shallow depressions of a skull over its grinning teeth.

As it turned out, the rest of the Westerners were but a couple turns away from this point. They had built a fire of sulf chips, and behind it sat a couple Westerners with their backs against the wall. There was also an Easterling cooking something in a little pot over the glowing heap of sulf, although when he saw them he turned away from his work and drew his knife with the weary resignation of one who has been pursued by unexpected danger for some time. Vrgrayn, also was there, sitting, waiting. When they appeared, he stood, the red gem in his crown glinting in the light of the sulf-chips. The others did, too, with the exception of one of the Westerners, who remained sitting with his back against the wall. He skin was yellow toned, and he looked unwell.

"Well, rune-dwarf," he said.

"Well, Vrgrayn son of Vrgr," replied Nin. "It seems danger is not far. Shall we not trust one another?"

"No," said Vrgrayn. "Not yet. But perhaps we will be obliged to travel together."

There was something like dislike in the firm hold of the Western Prince's brow, but he spoke clearly and calmly, all the same.

"Can you at least tell us of our peril?" put in Garn. "What has happened? Clearly all is not well."

He looked at the dwarf leaning against the wall and the scuffs and scratches on the other dwarves.

Vrgrayn glanced at Garn and then Nin, but did not answer at once. Instead he asked:

"You know of the marauders, I presume?"

"We were mistaken for them. We have not encountered them."

"One of their leaders we left with you," said Vrgrayn, severely.

“He took the middle path with some others,” replied Nin.

Vrgrayn considered a moment. Then his eyes lighted, without warning, on Thron.

“Fram,” he said, apparently to Thron, for he was still looking at him, “Quickly, if you would: Can you tell me your name, who set out with you, and what your adventures have been?”

Thron glanced around in astonishment. The rest of his company as well as that of the Westerners and strangers were looking at him, expectantly. Kunkizar coiled in unhelpful excitement down the front of his tunic. He stammered,

“Nin has said...”

“I know,” broke in Vrgrayn. “But I do not trust him. Go on, if you would.”

Thron took a breath and felt the strong line of the twine on which swung the crystal Luthe had polished for him from his belt. He kept himself from grabbing it now, though.

“My name is Thron of Smet, Fram.”

Vrgrayn nodded. His glance was stern, but Thron was relieved to see a listening calm in the grey of the warrior’s eyes. He took a deep breath.

“I set out from the first chamber with those you see here in the company of Nin, and we took the path to the right. The merchant with the violet eyes took the other path—the middle one—along with the Southerner and the three other Easterlings. After entering the right path, we walked for some time without incident, rested, and came at last to the Hall of Trolls.”

“The Hall of Trolls?” Vrgrayn cut him off.

“Yes. A great long hall full of boulders. We were all attacked by trolls various times and we rested ourselves once before entering that place and once within it.

“When we came at last to its end and had travelled far enough to leave it behind—for we liked it not—we rested once more. Since then we have travelled and come to this terrain, where, after a couple hours, we were ambushed by six dwarves, who we discovered to be in your company.”

“And you met no dwarf before meeting us?”

Thron thought.

“One,” he said. “In the Hall of Trolls. But he was dead.”

There was uncomfortable quiet. Vrgrayn pressed on, however, unshaken.

“And you met no other creatures?”

“Fram Agrev killed a creature I have never seen before shortly before coming here. And we’ve seen typical underground life.” Thron thought of the beetles and spidery creatures that had become Kunkizar’s sustenance. He doubted Vrgrayn, Prince of the West, would be concerned with those.

Nor did he seem to be. Vrgrayn had turned to Agrev.

“Another?” he said, in a low voice.

Agrev nodded.

“That makes seven,” said Vrgrayn. He sighed, wearily, and turned back to Nin.

“It seems your adventures have been more fortunate than our own,” he said. “Sit. I will give you what information I may.

“We set out down our tunnel and have had nothing but trouble since. The Iuls run freely in this area. I suspect there is a nest quite close. Either that or something else draws

them to this region. They are still small, but their skin has layers that makes it tough and slippery even for blades. We've had a hard fight of it, and in the last encounter one of my brethren was gravely injured. In the time since, we have been ambushed twice by a group of dwarves lead by the trader with violet eyes and a brass knuckle. In one of these we met with Fram Kelsa," (here he gestured to the warden), "who had had a comrade kidnapped by the trader's rabble. The others with us we encountered along our way."

"Always they've been lying in wait for us along the path," said Vrgrayn. "We've had to force our way through to continue along our path. But we heard your approach and figured they were trying to surprise us from behind. So, we'd determined to kidnap their leader and demand that he desist and return all kidnapped dwarves. You must forgive my suspicion of you, for I last saw you in that dwarf's company, and he has proved completely unworthy of trust. But as our paths have crossed, and you are now also likely to share in these dangers, I recommend we go together and find strength in numbers."

"Of course," snapped Nin, a little edgily. "That was what I'd suggested in the first place you know, and if you'd listened and come with us onto the path we chose then you might not have suffered so much loss."

"I have chosen what I have chosen," said Vrgrayn, with surprising calm. "Now, if we are to walk together, we must continue on soon. We are likely to have attracted Iuls while we've been still, and this roving band of robbers and kidnappers has likely not been idle either. Take what refreshment you need quickly, and let us move from this place."

The pause was mercifully brief. The tension between the two groups, and even between the Northerners and Westerners in the other group, was uncomfortably real. They did not like each other, that much was plain. Thronnd had never really encountered the Westerners before, so he was completely taken off guard by the animosity born towards him in many of their eyes and the answering shunning offered by his fellow Northerners. Even Oskil and Loyk spoke mostly to the other Easterling, Olso, and appeared to look down on the warrior Westerners (a considerable feat, considering their comparatively small stature). Thronnd was rather disturbed to find that most of the Northerners who had been travelling with the Westerners up to this moment, now situated themselves near Nin's group and looked much more as though they were the comrades of Nin than of the Westerners.

But what is to be expected? Thronnd thought, heavily. Everyone knew that the dwarves of a quadrant grew along the same grain. Dwarves from other quadrants went against that grain.

When they were ready to go, the sulf-chips were gathered up and Vrgrayn set Sorj and Agrev as rear guard again. Thronnd stuffed Kunkizar into his tunic after chasing him down and into the Easterling's nearly empty pot over the fire and over the knees of the sick Westerner, who did not look as though he took very kindly to it. In the end it was Loyk who retrieved him, and returned him to Thronnd, and Kunkizar was not at all pleased about it. But Thronnd was determined. Somehow he didn't doubt a Iul might try a salamander.

Though, he reflected, If they have as much trouble catching one as I do, I shouldn't be worried.

"Those who can wield weapons at all, walk in pairs with those who cannot," said Vrgrayn, loudly over the stir of dwarves. Counting the eight dwarves in Nin's group, there were now nineteen dwarves altogether and they made a considerable crowd. "If you

can place yourselves on either side of them, do so. By this, perhaps we can avoid having anyone snatched and dragged off. Ocruz, Murla, come and support Noran between you. Danaan, stay near Fram Gringa with Fram Olso.”

The Westerners responded quickly to orders, taking up their sick and wounded comrade, their faces already turned forward. The Northerners of Vrgrayn’s group met his mandates with impatience, but obeyed. When he met outright defiance, however, in Lgrn, the blacksmiths, and even Oskil, his quiet gray eyes flashed impatiently, but he allowed Nin to arrange them instead. Nin placed Lgrn with Garn and a blacksmith with each Easterling. Thronde invited to accompany himself, just behind Vrgrayn. So paired, and with Sorj and Agrev taking up their rear, they strode quickly after the Western Leader.

Vrgrayn set a quick pace that was only broken a couple times when Nin demanded a halt so he could examine the path. Thronde could feel the impatience of the Westerners directed at them—at Nin, but also at himself as Nin’s companion—as the rune-dwarf knelt to examine the earth. Nin, however, took his time, and was soon joined by Lgrn. The first time this happened Thronde noticed that the rune-dwarf was examining the long carving of a snaky figure along one wall. The second time, he knelt to examine smears and strings of the mysterious spittle substance Garn had observed earlier. These had grown thicker and more frequent, and the earth beneath them, although usually smooth, seemed abraded and torn up and moist. He touched it with the base of his staff and the wood gave a hiss.

“It burns,” said Nin, stepping back in surprise and examining the shallow but visible scar on the bottom of his staff.

“Iuls,” said Vrgrayn, grimly, and pressed on.

The third time Nin stopped, however, Vrgrayn also stopped. There were many patterns of claws by the stream of water, which was still following them, and the rock seemed eaten away in several places. In the quiet of the halt, Thronde heard with uncomfortable clarity the burbling of a creature. Vrgrayn raised his head from its examination of the ground.

“It’s close.”

Thronde felt a thrill of ready tension—the energy of listening and waiting—go through many of the warriors around them. With a quiet *hiss* a sword slid out of its sheath. Vrgrayn, however, did not draw yet. He turned quietly, facing into the dark mouths of the tunnels splitting in all directions around them. The sound of the burbling, which had drawn closer, paused, and Vrgrayn also paused, suddenly completely taut, staring into a tunnel slightly to their left. His hand inched slowly towards his blade. Then, suddenly and terrifyingly, an eyeless face appeared out of the darkness.

Vrgrayn drew his sword in one quick motion, slashing across the on-coming face. A line of red appeared horizontally over a blunt nose and the iul recoiled away from Vrgrayn. It was long and multi-jointed, with ten legs that angled up over its body like a spiders and a round, lolling body that glided with the sickening fluidity of centipedes and the slimy fleshiness of worms. Thronde saw also that it was bigger than the one Agrev had killed. It stood as high above the ground as Thronde himself, and at least for times Thronde’s height in length.

It slid around Vrgrayn, giving him as wide a berth as it could, head along the sides of the group.

“Get your weapons ready,” said Vrgrayn. “Get it to scream and then go for the softness of its mouth. Let us make short work of this.”

Even as Vrgrayn met the creature with a couple quick slices and his western followers scrambled to back him, however, a second iul oozed out of the same tunnel and ventured like a slinking coil along the other side of the group. Vrgrayn’s head turned with alarm even as he beat the first iul back.

“Sorj! Agrev! Help Ocruz. Keep it at blade length and watch for claws.”

The Western Prince paused in his commands to execute a graceful run of strokes that went so quickly Thronnd could hardly see it. Yet it only cut a mesh of crisscrossed scratches along the creature’s neck. It coiled away from Vrgrayn, throwing out its front claws so that they caught the warrior across the shoulder. It left a tear of cloth and a line of red. Vrgrayn gritted his teeth but remained where he was, sword ready.

“Arm yourselves,” he said, between breaths. “Make room for fighters to do their work, but be ready to do your own. Get them--”

He paused to dodge another vicious swipe of claws. Kelsa was at his side now, and Nin had drawn his own sword and thrown back his cloak. Vrgrayn rebutted with another slash across the creature’s face, this one deeper than the last. The iul recoiled and gave an ugly, green-mouthed scream.

“Go!” shouted Kelsa. Vrgrayn needed no instruction. He was already twisting his sword up with both hands to plunge it into the creature’s mouth, when Loyk and Ward suddenly shouted,

“Look out!”

Vrgrayn’s blade struck low against the teeth of the monster. He looked away, drawn by the call. A third iul was spilling out of the tunnel entrance.

“Fram Lgrn, Rune-dwarf!” he said, hastily, before falling back into engagement with the first creature.

Thronnd, who had been staring in awe at the flashing, shrieking handiwork of Vrgrayn on one side and the dwarves of the west on the other, now found himself face to face with one of the worms himself. Its eyeless grin held him transfixed for a moment. Then Lgrn bore down upon the creature with a hard over cut. The iul was shaken, but the stroke scarcely left a mark. Lgrn cursed and backed up as the creature advanced.

Nin’s strokes were not much more effective as he followed the beast. Clearly, he could use a sword, but the strokes were slower, more meditated, less a part of his body. Troigan circled over their heads in anxious circles.

Receiving smacks from both Lgrn and Nin, the creature turned towards Thronnd.

“Look out, Thronnd,” said both Nin and Garn, who stood behind Thronnd.

Thronnd gripped his pick and swung it wildly in front of him, more to put something between himself and the creature than anything else. Lgrn hit it again and it rounded on him, pushing him back towards one of the other tunnels. Nin followed the beast as it cornered Lgrn against the wall. Thronnd followed as best as he could, whacking at the creature’s tail with his pick, but he mostly missed and hit the ground. He soon realized that the blacksmiths had joined them and were trying to hammer the creature’s sides. Ward cried out and backed away as one of the creatures side legs clawed him. Thronnd himself felt a sharp cut whip across his jaw at one point, but he scarcely noted the sting.

“Hit him with your fists, Lgrn,” said Garn, following up quickly on crutches.

“The slime burns,” replied the warrior, with some anguish.

Vrgrayn must have heard this instruction and noted their lack of success, for Thron heard his voice say,

“Ocruz! Help the inexperienced ones!”

Then Garn shouted “Get down, Thron!” and ducking Thron could just see some bright objects pelt over his head and strike the creature hard on the back of the head. They bounced off and skittered to the floor. Osphore chunks. Then the lantern flew and hit the creature, too.

It couldn’t have hurt very much, but it served to turn its head so that Lgrn could escape from the wall. Then Ocruz had arrived with a burst of sword strokes, sweat dripping from his bejeweled nose.

“Hit him,” he called, his sword snaking back and forth like a living thing. “Make him mad!”

Thron finally got a good hit at the creature’s tail, the sharp part of his pick denting the layered flesh inwards. It hissed and turned on Thron.

“Good, Thron,” said the voice of Vrgrayn. “Again! At the head, though!”

Thron realized suddenly that the Western Prince was beside him, sword drawn. As the iul approached, however, he did not leap forward. He waited for Thron to strike. Thron did, crashing his pick into the side of the creature’s face.

“Well done!” said Vrgrayn, leaping forward to add two quick slices of his blade. The iul opened its mouth to scream, and received three death pangs at once: One from Ocruz, one from Lgrn, and one from a throwing knife buried deep in the back of its throat.

The scream intensified and then slowly whined to silence as the creature slumped to the floor. Vrgrayn, still beside Thron, pushed him out of the way of the slimy front claws as they stretched forth in dying combat. Then the stillness fell.

“Well then, well done,” said Vrgrayn, breathing hard, and patting Thron with a heavy, strong hand on the shoulder.

Stabbing the dead creature’s nose, he opened the mouth and retrieved from its depths the throwing knife that had disappeared there and dropped it quickly, smoking on the ground.

“Whose knife?” he asked.

“Mine,” said Garn, quickly, moving to retrieve it.

Vrgrayn eyed the crippled dwarf with respect.

“A good throw,” he said. “Though you should not have made it with so many of us near. It might have struck a comrade.”

Garn grunted in reply to this, and looked, for the first time since they’d met the Westerners, rather taciturn.

“At least the knife was his!” put in Oskil, passionately. “Unlike some other objects I just had swiped from me...”

“I’m getting them, Uncle,” said Loyk. “No harm done.”

“That’s right,” Vrgrayn muttered. Then he turned quickly to look at Noran and Murla.

“You are well? You are all unharmed?”

Noran did not look well, but he nodded, leaning on Murla’s arm.

“You fought, didn’t you?”

“Just a little.”

Vrgrayn looked very serious, but instead of rebuking his kinsman, he addressed all the others.

“If we are all well, we must move on. There may be more iuls on the way.”

The company was ready quickly. Nobody wanted to meet more iuls. Nin looked at Lgrn’s scratch briefly and those of the blacksmiths. Then he stopped before Thron and turned his face to side.

“Ugly scratch,” he commented. “But shallow. We will have to attend to all these. But not yet. Let’s move on.”

Vrgrayn also had been speaking in a low voice with Noran and then Kelsa, but he soon returned to the front of the group and set them at another quick stride forward.

Nin walked especially quickly to catch up with him.

“You are familiar with iuls, I think?”

“We sometimes get them in the west.”

“Yes. But their home is mostly the south, is it not?”

“I believe so.”

“Then this is very strange, for I have heard nothing of any iuls between here and the west or south, yet here they have sprung up. It is as though someone brought eggs and hatched them here on purpose.”

“Northerner, if you are having the incivility and imbecility to propose I did that, I should think it would be fairly obvious...”

“Of course not,” said Nin. “What good would it do you? And besides, these creatures are too old to be brought here by you. But someone must have brought them. Iuls don’t just appear.”

“Perhaps Elensa...” began Vrgrayn, but he was cut off, rather sharply by Garn, who although behind Thron, had evidently heard their discourse.

“That,” said Garn, with an anger that Thron had never heard in his voice before, “Is a slanderous and foul thought, and you should not complete it, Fram Vrgrayn.”

Vrgrayn paused in his tracks and looked back at Garn. Danaan, who was walking just behind Garn, looked furious. Vrgrayn however only said,

“Very well. I will not, then.”

Myth 5:

It's been heard said, and the skools have seen, how once there was a dwarf called Vrgr, and he was to be King of the West. Vrgr was a strong dwarf—valiant in battle, wise in strategy, and ardent for his people. He was the perfect dwarf to lead his people, and he loved them as he might his closest kin. There were two, however, whom he loved more than any others. They were his brothers, Jars the Laughing and Agr, the Listening. Agr was the youngest, and though neither so intelligent nor so strong as his brothers, he was sweet: Sweet like the honey of the desert bees. Now it so happened that as Vrgr and his brothers were tracking the savage Tolumbron of the Desert, they came to a cave where there had once been a sentinel, but which now appeared empty. Vrgr made to enter, but Jars and Agr stopped him.

“Let me go first, brother,” joked Jars, “For maybe there will be an ambush, and it is better I die than our future King.”

“Nay,” said Agr. “Let me go first, brothers. For in testing the darkness I can be of greatest use to you. My skill at arms is not yet ripe.”

“I will not let you,” said Vrgr to Agr, “For you will be killed much quicker for that.”

But Agr pleaded with him so earnestly that at last Vrgr agreed.

As they had feared, an ambush was prepared, and almost at once Agr was struck down. Jars, after him received a terrible blow to one leg. Vrgr, however, managed to drag his brothers away from the cave, himself unscathed.

The incident took a terrible toll. For Agr was weak, and died before they could return to their city. As for Jars, he was forever crippled, and never again could go out to battle.

From that day forward, Vrgr swore he would never let any dwarf he loved go before himself into danger. He was ever in the front of his own lines, ever first into danger, ever first to a challenge. Even this, however, could never clear away the shame he felt for what he had done or heal the pain of losing his brother.

There came a day when Vrgr had a son of his own—a strong, good-hearted dwarf, with both the sweet patience of Agr and the wisdom and heartiness of his father and uncle in his eyes. His father loved him more than anything in the whole world, and when he was still very young he began to instruct him how to live and to lead. The first lesson he ever gave him, he looked him in the eyes and said,

“Do you love the Dwarves of the West?”

“Yes, you know I love them more than anything, Father,” the son replied.

“I know you do, also,” replied the King. “So heed me well: Never let that which you love go before you into danger, or trade the treasure of your love for so small a thing as your own life. You must always go first—in the fight, in the unknown, in the fearful. Promise me son, that you will always do this. Promise me that you will always be The First Dwarf.

The son promised that he always would.

Chapter 9: Important Information

They could not have travelled more than half-an-hour down the tunnel before they stopped, but even so they were very weary.

They settled at a place where the trickle of water, which had been weaving in and out of their path, collected into a shallow puddle and overflowed into several lower paths. The trickle had now become a small stream.

“I would not drink here, though,” said Nin. “If the iul slime is in it, it could burn.”

They used their skins of water and wine to clean their wounds, and Thron used his moss soup, thinking as he spread the liquid along his jaw with messy fingers of how Luthe and his mother had dressed many hurts he’d received in the mine with the moss concoction. It smelled like home. But he was a long way from there. He had fought with iuls. He had fought alongside dwarves like Vrgrayn. A thrill of pleasure hummed inside him.

But the thrill sunk into gloom as the company settled into rest. The Westerner settled apart from the others—or maybe the others settled apart from the Westerners—and the two groups seldom spoke to or looked at each other. When Thron did catch a Westerner’s eye, their expression often went blank, unwilling that he should see into their thoughts, hard eyed and silent though they might have been speaking with fervor and passion of something to a comrade before. Ocruz nodded to Thron upon catching his eye, as did Sorj. But for the most part he was ignored or glared at. Both groups set a watch of two people. Mistrust filled the air.

Why? wondered Thron, as he moved to the far side of his group, out of the crossfire of unfriendly glances.

Why, after all we’ve been through?

It had felt like a lot—the fight with the iuls. He’d certainly never experienced anything like that before, and for a moment after it had ended, they had seemed to give each other warmth—all of them—much as sulf-chips might borrow warmth from each other to create a fire.

He sighed and sat down. Loyk settled across from him, on the other side of an off-shooting tunnel. It was their turn to watch. Thron looked at the watch set by the Westerners’ group. Danaan and Jeth, the other northern warrior. They were sitting apart, and when they accidentally looked at each other, their glance was distant and cool.

Thron sighed again, his hand wandering down to rub the quartz crystal hanging from his belt.

Loyk looked up from pouring some of the purplish mead for Kunkizar, who still hadn’t returned to Thron’s shoulder.

“You Northerners really don’t like the Westerners, do you?” he said.

“Don’t ask me about it,” said Thron, smiling, ruefully. “I never even met a Westerner until this journey. They don’t seem so very bad to me.”

“They’re brave, aren’t they?” said Loyk.

Thron looked back towards the fire. He could just see Vrgrayn’s shadow, crouched by Murla, speaking to the dwarf in a low voice.

“I think so.”

“And they have nice jewels in their mail.”

Thron'd hadn't thought much about that.

"Too bad they're rebels," Loyk finished, and took a small gulp from his skin.

Thron'd looked at the pale, blond haired dwarf, leaning back, his hands over his ample stomach.

"Where in the East are you from, Fram Loyk?"

"Bourn," said Loyk, watching Kunkizar lap up the sweet-smelling liquid out of the stones.

"What is Bourn like?" asked Thron'd, curiously.

"Oh, very different from these central and northern cities. Much brighter, most of it, and much closer to the surface of the earth. There are lots of animals there, too. And Tolumbron. They are always visiting for something."

"What do you do there?"

Loyk's smile faded a little.

"I'm an apprentice to my Uncle. I hope to be a great jeweler like him."

Thron'd nodded politely, although he didn't particularly see why Loyk would want to be like his Uncle in any respect. Loyk seemed to sense this in his silence, for his cheeks and nose took on a pinched, pink look.

"What about you?" he asked, quickly. "You're a miner, aren't you?"

Thron'd nodded.

"I don't know anything about that," said Loyk, bluntly.

"There's not much to tell," said Thron'd, thinking of the never-ending passages, and the darkness, and the silence. "It's a lot like this, actually. Only you tap at the walls."

Loyk laughed. Thron'd smiled, sheepishly.

"I guess I don't know much about being a jeweler, either."

"It's the most beautiful craft in the whole world," said Loyk, absently, snapping his fingers so that Kunkizar followed them in a circle.

Thron'd watched Loyk, jealously.

"Here, let me," he said after a moment. He put out his own hand and tried to snap his fingers. He'd never been particularly good at that, however, and even if he had been, Kunkizar seemed intent on ignoring him. Loyk shook his head.

"I would try apologizing," he suggested, when the salamander had turned its back on Thron'd and looked distantly off down the tunnel whence they had come.

"But I don't even know *why* he's upset!"

"Just apologize for offending him, then," said Loyk, practically. "Explain that you miss him."

Thron'd took a deep breath. He felt grimy and tired, and he didn't feel like apologizing. Especially since it was Loyk's idea and not his. But he didn't want Kunkizar to stay angry at him, either.

"Alright then."

Thron'd moved around to where he could see the salamander's eyes. He got on his knees.

"Kunkizar, I'm sorry I offended you. I am doing my best. Now please. Sar would miss you if you didn't stick with me."

The salamander, who had cocked its head to look at him, turned away again.

"I would miss you, too," said Thron'd, quickly. It sounded like a hasty add on, but it was the truth.

Loyk mouthed the word “please” to Thron, and Thron used it. But it wasn’t until Thron had given up for the time being and settled into a rough crevice of the wall for his watch that he felt the light weight of the salamander’s webbed feet on his boot. There the creature was, staring attentively up at Thron with his amber eyes. Thron sat up and reached for the skin of moss soup under his arm.

“Welcome back,” he whispered, softly, pouring a little of the green mixture on the floor. Kunkizar lapped up half of it and curled up beside Thron’s feet. Loyk cast Thron a laughing glance from across the tunnel. Thron smiled, satisfied in spite of himself.

Loyk looked back over their group to the Westerners. Most of them were rolled up in their blankets, seizing the opportunity for rest, although Thron could tell that a couple at least were still awake. Kelsa, the warden, was sitting thoughtfully by the sulphur fire. Vrgrayn was crouching and exchanging words with Nin. The words were few and blunt, but evidently perfectly respectful. Nin responded with equal brevity and politeness and Vrgrayn stood and moved purposefully to Noran, who was one of those feverishly awake. He unhooked his water and, dampening a piece of cloth that was likely a bandage, set it across the warrior’s brow. He spoke again, and Thron saw Noran’s posture, which had been tense and unhappy under his captain’s service, relax. Then, after passing a couple words with Danaan and laughing, the Prince Vrgrayn sat himself against the wall, humming softly. Oskil sat up to glare at him. Nin also seemed to tense a little. But the Western Prince didn’t break into further song, but after a stanza of sad and beautiful melody, allowed the deep tones to trail off.

“I like him,” said Loyk, sitting back again.

Thron also sat back, stroking the salamander.

“So do I.”

The rest was not long. Only two shifts. Whenever Thron was awake he would find Vrgrayn or Nin also awake. The leaders were uneasy—whether about one another or the rest of the world made little difference. Once, when Thron awoke from his rest during the second shift, he saw Garn, also awake, puffing a bitter smoke from a short little pipe he hadn’t seen before. It struck Thron as moody, somehow.

All too soon, however, Vrgrayn and Nin rallied the groups awake again. The sun must have been rising on a fifth day outside the mountain. Thron could feel the strange pull of it, energized and new, its vibrations quick. It made his eyes feel bright and cool on the inside, even when he closed them. But around his eyes his skin was thick and heavy.

“Find your pairs,” demanded Vrgrayn, shortly. Thron joined Nin. Behind him, Kelsa walked on the other side of Garn.

“I should’ve guessed,” Thron heard him say to Garn. “The lawlessness here... but it is disappointing. I didn’t come here to keep order like I do in my own mountain.”

Garn looked improved by his rest. His pipe was put away.

“I don’t like the kidnapping. It doesn’t make sense,” said Garn. “What are they doing it for?”

“I fear to think,” said Kelsa, hesitantly. “But they have my companion, and if they kill him, they’ll pay with tears.”

“But it is much easier to kill a dwarf than to kidnap him,” pressed Garn. “If that was all they wanted—to kill the opposition—they could probably pick us off pretty

quickly, and we mustn't be surprised if they decide to. But they must need the dwarf for something."

"Ransom?"

"That seems superfluous down here."

It appeared to be a mystery not only for Kelsa and Garn, but for Vrgrayn and Nin.

"Where are they?" Vrgrayn muttered once, anxiously. "I do not like this long silence."

Nin said nothing, but Thron could see he was concerned. His sharp eyes examined the tunnel entrances.

Thron thought of the violet-eyed dwarf. It was strange how one could be almost more uncomfortable not knowing where he was than knowing he was quite close. But at least he had the consolation of Kunkizar, riding on his shoulder. He stroked the salamander's tail, and it instantly moved to his other shoulder, tail slipping out of Thron's grasp. Then, suddenly, he heard motions in the tunnel ahead of them. He stopped. Almost at the same moment, Vrgrayn and Nin stopped also.

Nin lifted his lantern. Vrgrayn took a couple steps forward.

"Halt!" he said. "Who goes there?"

The company stopped. The motions down the tunnel paused and then shuffled on: two pairs of feet. Thron was on the verge of stuffing Kunkizar down his shirt again, when into the sphere of Nin's light inched two tentative, rather frightened-looking dwarves.

"Name yourselves," said Vrgrayn, harshly.

"Hoy, now hoy," said one of the dwarves, a warrior with a great, bushy beard and portly stature. "We're just searching the path for something we lost. We mean no harm."

As the two came further into Nin's lantern, Thron recognized the second dwarf by his lumpy nose and the long, curved pipe hanging out of his belt. It was the very Southerner who had descended into the labyrinth with them.

"Stop. Do not come nearer," said Vrgrayn.

Behind him, Sorj unswung his cross bow and knelt with it, drawing it back.

The strange dwarves stopped.

"Wait," said the warrior dwarf, nervously. "Don't be unfriendly."

"I've seen one of you," said Vrgrayn, ignoring this comment, "But I do not know the other. What fortune takes you walking along this path in this direction?"

The warrior nudged the Southerner so that the skinny dwarf winced. He obediently stepped forward, however.

"Please, O Prince of the Westerlings..." the warrior nudged him again and Ward coughed, sarcastically. "Fram Vrgrayn, that is," said the Southerner. "My comrade and I have just found a new set of paths up that way," (the Southerner pointed) "and are now backtracking to find something I dropped before taking them."

Thron had only heard the Southerner speak a little. He had a whiny, muddy voice and a sallow, nervous countenance. He glanced up at Vrgrayn, uncomfortably.

"If you've found the way you wish to take," said Nin, who was standing near the tunnel wall, "It seems to me foolish to abandon it in search of any small article."

"Quite right, quite right," muttered the Southerner in his high, wheebling voice. "As a matter of fact, I was just thinking we ought to turn around."

“They are, after all, the most promising paths we’ve seen yet. Far more interesting than the others,” put in the strange dwarf with the thick beard.

“Yes, yes, you are right. We’ll go back now,” said the Southerner, still examining the ground.

“Wait,” said Vrgrayn. “Will you tell us more of these tunnels? What about them is so interesting?”

The portly dwarf’s face animated.

“Why,” he said, enthusiastically, “They’re not just a big net of holes like this place. Real walls. Real tunnels that go straight in. So many of these here tunnels lead in circles. But these can’t, I think. Not for a long while, at any rate. Do you want to see them? They’re quite close.”

Thrond noticed that though he spoke forcefully, this dwarf, too, had a curious fidgetiness that manifested mostly in a constant yanking of his beard. Perhaps Vrgrayn noticed it, too, for he glanced suspiciously at the two dwarves.

“Where is this place with the tunnel entrances?” he asked.

“Up the tunnel,” said the Southerner. “Just up the tunnel with one quick route down a smaller tunnel. We can show you if you like.”

Vrgrayn looked at the others.

“It sounds like a trap,” said the Westerner called Sorj, although he undrew the cross-bow and rested it on his shoulder.

“I agree,” said Vrgrayn. “But we are going this way, anyhow.”

After some discussion, it was agreed that they should follow the two dwarves down the tunnel, and they began walking again.

“It is not far,” the Southerner kept saying.

He turned out to be right. They had hardly walked an hour when they came to an off-shooting tunnel and turned down it.

“Just right here,” said the portly warrior. “Excuse me a moment, and I’ll see if our other comrades are still waiting. There have been some hostile dwarves around after-all, and I’d hate for them to shoot us.” He gave his thick, straight beard a final yank and hurried down the tunnel before anyone could stop him.

“Where is he going,” said Lgrn, angrily, to the Southerner.

“To seek our comrades,” repeated the dwarf, scratching his back, wearily.

“We will follow him,” said Vrgrayn. “After all, the path he takes angles upwards more sharply.”

“But wait—wait!” the Southerner said, earnestly.

“What?” said several dwarves. The Southerner seemed to consider a moment.

“They might shoot you,” he said at last. “At any rate, let me go first.”

They let the Southerner go first. (“No harm in that, I suppose,” Ward had grumbled.) The Southerner shuffled, his thin shoulders hunched. Thrond thought he looked shaky. He looked at Garn.

“Something’s wrong,” he said, softly. Garn nodded. But at that point they heard voices. Vrgrayn stopped and held up a hand to hold the others. They could distinctly hear the strange warrior’s voice arguing with another voice of a very deep and hollow-sounding tone. The warrior was saying:

“Come on, Gull! Give them a chance!”

“But I told Bulgri I wouldn’t let anyone in. Anyone at all. He’s testing his fancy mechanism, you know.”

“Now Gul, you don’t honestly believe that shale head is going to help us? What do you go about helping him for?”

“He’s queer, there’s no doubt. But at least his idea is honest.”

“And what’s dishonest about this? These travelers are fearsome warriors, and they want to try facing the beast for themselves. They have a right, don’t they?”

“They’ll lose,” said the other voice, balefully. “I’ve seen it a couple times now. Down it plunges and steals one away before anyone can do anything. Now Bulgri says...”

“Bulgri doesn’t take a thing seriously, Gul. And you ought to take this very seriously. You’re like Calver, after all. You have a family to return to.”

“What does Calver have to do with this?” demanded the other dwarf, a little suspiciously.

The Southerner, who had been fidgeting from one foot to another and checking his nails in what seemed an aguish of confusion, suddenly rounded the corner.

“Ah!” said the warrior, with over-enthused tones. “Speak of the dwarf, here he is! What brings you here, Fram Calver?”

“I was—ah—I’ve brought our company. You’ve settled that they won’t be shot, I take it?”

Gul spoke up at once.

“Of course they won’t be shot. Not unless they’re more of that riff-raff that’s been plaguing this place. As if this situation isn’t bad enough. Tell them to come along, at once.”

The Southerner reappeared. His eyes were looking more and more frantic, but he silently waved for them to come. Thrond felt Kunkizar growing hot by his ear.

“I know,” he whispered. “I think something stinks about this, too.”

But he followed the rest carefully around the corner into what looked like a very small chamber bubbling off a larger space which he could only just see through a large opening to his left. Before this opening stood by far the largest dwarf Thrond had ever seen. He must have been nearly five feet, with very red skin and very pale eyes, and a hunched back. His hair, like that of the Northerner who Thrond had noticed among the Westerners’ ranks, was coarse and grainy and smelled like salt. He eyed them in the light of his ice-blue lantern.

“Well, now,” he said. “Fine warriors you look. You didn’t tell me just how many of them there were, Dolnir.”

“See!” said the warrior, whose name was evidently Dolnir.

“Where are the entrances you spoke of?” demanded Vrgrayn at once.

“Just here,” said Dolnir, gesturing hastily towards the opening beyond Gul with one hand and tugging twice on his beard with the other. “I was just explaining who you are and seeing to it you aren’t treated like riff-raff. So that’s all settled. They can go on and look if they’d like, then, yes?”

Gul looked as if he was considering.

“I ought to ask Bulgri,” he said. “Like I said, he’s testing the mechanism, and I don’t know”—

“Ask me what?”

Everyone turned. In an adjoining tunnel to their right, a dwarf had appeared. And queer he certainly was. He had a soft-green tunic, large, amythest buttons, a dark green cloak, and silver trimmed boots. He also had a pointy cap of a type which Thron had never seen before: purple, with a large, green feather in it. His beard was blue.

“Ask me what?” he repeated, walking forward and puffing leisurely on a pipe. He was obviously a Southerner, for his nose was like a large, warty sausage. But if they’d had any doubt, the foul-smelling fumes from his pipe would’ve quenched it.

Gul recovered from his surprise and cleared his throat.

“Ahem. Bulgri--these here dwarves want to fight the beast.”

“What beast?” said several of the dwarves, including Vrgrayn and Nin.

Gul looked confused.

“The one guarding the entrances. The one you’d like to challenge.”

Nin stepped forward.

“We did not agree to challenge anything. We were only told that this was the way to some promising entrances, which these two were going to take themselves. We know nothing of any beast, whatsoever.”

Gul took this in for a moment, and then turned, angrily, on Dolnir. Dolnir shrank back, hands buried in his beard, but not fast enough. Gul picked him up by his mail collar so that his feet were hanging a foot off the ground.

“You were going to *trick* them? You were going to drive them ahead to distract the beast while you made your way into the entrances? Slimy eel!”

“Well they can’t, anyway,” said Bulgri. “I’m testing my mechanism.”

“That’s what I told them,” said Gul. “But I’ve got a lot more to say to them now. You too!” –he grabbed Calver by the back of his old tunic. Thron heard something tear. “You both ought to be ashamed. Come along,” he said to everyone else. “I suppose you’re going to need this explained to you, and it takes some explaining.”

“We can explain it to you in the upper level,” said Bulgri. “I was just coming down for Gul’s help, anyhow. Bring those two rascals with you, won’t you?”

“Cock,” said Calver, sullenly.

Bulgri seemed un-stung by this insult. In fact, he whistled.

“It’s the wrong direction,” said Nin, disapprovingly. “In all truth, we ought to go into the chamber here.”

Vrgrayn looked back at his Western brethren. Thron could see him weighing their strength. Two of them were supporting Noran. They looked exhausted.

“My people are tired,” he said. “Is it far?”

“It’s a half a minute if you run. About two if you walk. Maybe five if you’re hopping on one foot,” came the disappeared Bulgri’s trailing voice as he turned up the right-hand tunnel from whence he’d come.

Gul gave them a kindly smile.

“Go along. You can rest at the top and then come back down. It’s really no good going in until you have a better idea of what’s going on.

Some following Vrgrayn, some following Nin, they hurried after Bulgri. He was more or less correct in his estimates of time, for the tunnel was not long. It was very steep, however, and when they came out in another little chamber, most were breathless.

“Careful,” said Bulgri, who was fixing his lantern on a make shift hook made from a pick and a rock shelf. “This side of the room over here opens to a nasty drop. You can look if you’d like.”

Tentatively, the Thrond crept towards the open space which he could feel quite well in the coolness of the air without the use of lanterns. Bulgri got out what looked like a cup, but which had a tiny lantern in its corner. He lit it, and then held it so the funneled light poured out into the empty cavern outside their cave.

“See,” he said, pointing the light along the wall. “The entrances are right there.”

He indicated several yawning black holes in the grey of the wall.

“And see,” he added, indicating a gaping hole in the floor, round in nature, and into which several streams of water were pouring with his beam of light. “That is where the beast comes from. Lots of people have tried to enter down there”—he pointed with his light to a spot below them—“and made their way through the boulders to one of the entrances”—he indicated the highest of these, over to their right—“But whenever someone comes, WHOOSH!” Bulgri snapped his fingers very loudly before Nin’s nose. “The beast comes burbling up!”

Troigan screeched, disturbed by Bulgri’s snapping. Nin, pushed his hand out of his face, a little impatiently.

“What are all the lights,” he asked, pointing. For on nearly every boulder in the room a small flame was kindled.

“I put those there,” said Bulgri. “I used up my sulf chip ration to do it. But you see, I can’t fight the slimy-worm-thing if I can’t see it, so I took a risk and put the sulf-chips on the rocks. And returned unscathed,” he added, raising his blue-dyed eyebrows, expressively.

“A slimy-worm-thing?” said Oskil, incredulously. “Do you mean a iul?”

“I won’t say there aren’t similarities between the thing and a iul,” said Bulgri, handing the light funnel to a curious Ward and walking back into the room. “But it doesn’t seem quite the same to me. For one thing, it’s a lot bigger, and for another...”

Here even the carefree Bulgri shuddered.

“It has eyes.”

“Oh is that all?” said Jeth, sarcastically.

“A giant iul with eyes,” said Nin, grimly.

“Fantastic, isn’t it,” said Bulgri, grinning at him over a large pile of stones.

Thrond didn’t think this news was funny. Vrgrayn didn’t seem to think so either.

“How long have you been here?” he demanded, rather brusquely.

“Well,” said Bulgri, busying himself about the piles of rock around the room.

“I’m no monster-slayer. I entered the labyrinth on the second day of the month, and I’ve pretty much been here ever since.”

“What are you doing, then?” asked Garn. Thrond was surprised to hear a glimmer of a smile in his voice.

“I’ve *been* making a mechanism,” said Bulgri, winking mysteriously. “It’s nearly finished now. Come here and I’ll show you.”

Everyone but Ward and Gul drew near. Ward was still handling the funnel light, and Gul was busily wrapping his two captives in his own gigantic cloak so that everything but their heads was demobilized.

“Look,” said Bulgri. “Nothing functions so well with stones being thrown at it. So, I tore up my old cloak into strips and strung them through a torn-open wine skin. Then I managed to bend a couple belt buckles into stakes to hold those down. And now I’m going to try volleying stones with it.”

“Stones against a giant iul?” said Ocruz, his eye-brows raised high. “You’ll be lucky to hit it.”

“So, you’re a seasoned monster fighter, too,” said Bulgri, a little stiffly. “Everyone is. Look, at least I’m trying something. And not kidnapping poor souls to throw out to distract the monster while I make my escape.”

“Is that what they were doing?” demanded Lgrn, casting a fiery glance from his teal eyes at the two miserable heads of Dolnir and Calver poking out of their restraint.

“Oh yes,” said Bulgri, loading some stones into the torn open wine-skin. “You were lucky, actually. You had a fighting chance. Usually they tie the dwarves up and throw them out where the beast is sure to see them. Then the cowards run for the tunnels while the beast is carrying the handicapped ones to its lair.”

“Gurzhan!⁴” said Sorj, angrily. “They don’t!”

“They do!” said Bulgri. “Surely you’ve seen their bands. They’ve been looting and kidnapping all over the place. You know who they are?”

“Yes,” said Kelsa, darkly.

“Well anyhow, there are many of us opposing the bandit scum here. We’ve been collecting stones, and we throw them down on any bandits who attempt to enter. The others we’ve been piling up, as you can see here.”

He gestured to the pile of stones.

“Who’s ‘we’?” Nin wanted to know.

“The other dwarves. I call them Bulgri’s Army. They are stationed in other high vantage points, like this. We’d station a guard, too, but if we did they’d probably…”

Bulgri was interrupted by an exclamation from Ward.

“What are they doing?” he said, pointing, suddenly frantic towards the cavern below.

Everyone pushed to the opening. Everyone stared. Down below, about eleven dark shapes were darting through the boulders around towards the entrance most to the right—the lowest entrance. A couple more dragged two bundles which cried out loudly.

“Oh no,” intoned Bulgri.

“What will they do,” said Loyk, quaveringly.

“They’re going to leave them in that open space in the cavern. That’s where the monster always strikes first,” said Bulgri. He was running one hand through his blue hair, his eyes anxious. Thron could feel Gul approach slowly behind him to look over their heads.

“They don’t stand a chance,” he said, angrily. “Oh Tulla! Tulla for what?”

Then the first wail began. It started small and then grew to a terrifying shriek. Looking down at the hole broken into the ground, Thron saw a loose piece of rubble shake and fall in, as if moved by a sudden and intense motion.

“Come!” said Vrgrayn, leaping back down the way they had come. “We cannot stand and do nothing! It may not yet be too late!”

⁴ “For shame!”

Myth 6:

It has been told, and the Skools have seen, how once a shower of shining stones fell down from the skools. It fell upon the wreckage of a battlefield in many silver pieces. The pieces smoked and gleamed like streaking flames and falling Skools amid the tinkling rain. As it rained on, the water collected in the stone's porous cavities and glittered with the striking mineral grains of that mysterious stone. And not far away, missed and forgotten by his departed comrades, a dwarf lay stretched, dying.

Now, when the rain had stopped, a passing raven noticed the suffering dwarf. He was moved with great pity, for the dwarf was all alone and thirsty and had no one to comfort him in his pain. So the gentle bird gathered up a globule of the glittering water from a dip in a glowing rock beside him, and dropped it into the dwarf's open mouth. Instantly, the dwarf felt a wondrous life stirring in him and spreading through his body. His bones mended. His wounds closed. And presently he leapt up, breathing deeply and feeling more whole than he had in his whole life.

The dwarf's name was Sucor, and when he perceived that the bird had dawn the water from the stone he suspected its healing properties. He carried the stone to the King in the faraway center of the Kingdom, whose mother was dying, and offered its services.

"If this stone can do all you say," said the King, "I will reward you richly for healing my mother."

The stone could. The great dwara became better, and Sucor became rich.

Almost immediately after this, the King sent dwarves to collect the other fallen stones from the battlefield, for he realized that the healing properties may not be unique to the one. However, when they arrived, they found that the notorious dragon, Yonen, had looted the battlefield and eaten the stones herself. Because of this, all dwarves with grave maladies came to Sucor to taste the "Liquor of the Skools." As the years passed, he sold the drops of healing dearly and watched as they brought even those closest to death back to the fullness of health. He became proud and greedy, and bragged about his new power to all he met. At last, a crafty rune-dwarf, thinking it a shame to have so great a treasure in the hands of so small a simpleton, challenged Sucor to a bet.

"If this stone is so very great as you say," he said, "I suppose it could easily bring back the dead."

"Yes," said Sucor, at once. "Easily!" (Though he'd never seen it do any such thing.)

"Let us make a test of it," said the rune dwarf. "Jump off this cliff here, and when you have fallen to the bottom and died, I will give you some of the Skool Liquor. If you revive, then I will also give you the Ruby of Ecstar. If you do not, I will keep the Liquor myself."

Sucor, of course, ought not to have agreed. But the Ruby of Ecstar was so beautiful that he had it arranged with some witnesses and strode, quite confidently, off the cliff, sure that his draft could repair whatever damage was done.

Alas for Sucor! But as the rune dwarf suspected, the Skool Liquor had no power over death. The liquid splashed upon stony lips and dripped down a stony chin.

“See, all of you,” said the rune dwarf to the witnesses. “Take every opportunity you have to equip yourselves. For there is no medicine that can restore your chance at life once it is gone. It cannot help, you see. For after death, the dwarf is no longer there.”

And he took the flask and kept it.

Chapter 10: The First Dwarf

It took, according to Bulgri, thirty-seconds to run up the tunnel that led up to his over-look. It took even less to run down. Nevertheless, by the time Thron'd reached the entrance to the cavern where Gul had stood, he could see the beast was spewing from the hole in the ground. Repulsive it was, with long trailing ropes of the abrasive spittle streaming from its body. Its ugly feet found their hold on the surface and it circled around to the side with a disgusting, many-legged grace. It was searching out its prey.

It would've been too late for the two bound dwarves if Thron'd had been the first dwarf to run to their aid. But he was not.

Vrgrayn, Prince of the West, leapt around and over all obstacles, his voice issuing forth in a wordless roar, rays of light issuing from within his heart. On his heels leapt the ever eager Agrev, his two knives drawn, and Sorj had already paused to draw back his bow. The other Westerners were there, too—even the wounded dwarf.

“*Stay back, Noran!*” Thron'd had heard Vrgrayn call over one shoulder. But how could the command of even their beloved leader keep any of these fiery eyed dwarves from going into danger with him? Nay. They could not stay back with that bright-hearted dwarf running before them any more than Thron'd could.

Vrgrayn reached the two bound dwarves just before the beast, crawling like a long, lithe spider, did. The Westerner sliced horizontally, and the burbling head recoiled with a scream, an extra slit opening across the soft skin between the slits of its nostrils.

“Vrgrayn!” Thron'd found himself cheering. He removed Kunkizar from his shoulder and set him beside a stone, whispering, “Stay safe!” Then he charged forward, pick raised. He soon stopped, however, his breath caught in fear as the monster stamped one set of enraged claws down to try to crush the warrior. Now that Thron'd was closer, he could measure more accurately the creature's size. It must have been three times the height of a dwarf, and many more times long. Nevertheless, Agrev evaded the death strikes. With a fighter's strength and grace, he rolled into a run around towards the side of the cavern on the other side of the hole, away from the bound dwarves. The creature's bleeding nose followed him, and it stomped again, and clenched its teeth with a click. Vrgrayn tripped back and fell. Then a round, Western shield hit the iul-like creature from the other side—a battle challenge from the oncoming Westerners.

“Come on,” said Garn, suddenly at his elbow. “Help me cut their bondsh!”

Thron'd started and realized he'd stopped just outside the ring of stones where the beast was, his attention stolen by the terrible battle raging within. He forced his limbs back to life and ran after Garn to the two bound dwarves. He crouched and clumsily got out his pick.

“Hurry,” the bound dwarf said in a surprisingly young, urgent voice. He was already struggling madly with his bonds, and where his tourmaline green cloak bubbled open, the light from his heart shown forth in strong, green rays across his silver mail. Thron'd could hear Garn already cutting through the bonds of the other dwarf.

“Look out!”

A blast of rancid air was swept by the monster's tail towards them, bending Thron'd like a reed. He winced as he heard Garn's crutches hit the stone. Looking up, he could see that the dwarf had rolled several feet. Thron'd turned his attention hastily back to the bound dwarf, feeling for his pick.

“No!” said the bound dwarf beside him, impatiently. “A knife! Don’t you have a knife?”

It was then that Thrond remembered the knife he had found in his blanket roll the watch before the first troll. He had not thought of it much since except as a reason not to sleep on that side. He dug into his breeches, pulled it out, and tried it on the bonds at the dwarf’s hands. It sliced easily through them, and the dwarf sat up and drew his own small knife.

“I can do my legs,” he said, with an air of assurance that seemed strange to Thrond on the high, light voice that wore it. “Go! Help them!”

Thrond turned towards the desperate fight behind him. It was a muddle of confusion: dwarves were yelling, the beast, hissing and roaring, its tail swishing back and forth. Through the action, Thrond thought he saw several Westerners beating uselessly at the creature’s sides and legs. Lgrn, too, approached once and took a couple swipes with his sword. He fell frantically back towards the boulders, however, dismayed. The swords didn’t seem to be working on the slippery skin of the creature’s legs and back as they had on the creature’s soft nose. Agrev attempted to climb up the barbs in the creature’s skin, but quickly fell back, with a cry and rubbed his hands on the floor as though they were burning. Another roll of air made by the motions of the creature as it whipped its tail towards them sent Thrond skidding uncontrollably backward. He picked himself up, feeling like a small part of a giant wave beating on an immovable stone.

“It’s eyesh!” Thrond heard Garn bellowing. His crutches had been scattered far, and he dragged himself forward on his hands.

“Pry under the barbs,” suggested the dwarf Thrond had cut free in a high, strained voice. He was on his feet, and stumbling towards the beast. At that moment, however, there came a sharp “twang!” of Sorj’s cross-bow and a terrible roar. The creature writhed up into the air, its claws and shoulders contorting, a cross-bow bolt penetrating one wing. Thrond fell on his face, anticipating the force of the wave of power crashing down on them.

Every dwarf in the room was taken off his feet and scattered. Thrond felt the dwarf he had cut free from bonds crash into him. His mail cut into Thrond’s skin and hurt, but he was less heavy than Thrond had expected.

“Look out!” cried Garn. Thrond pushed the green cloaked dwarf off him, roughly, and looked over his shoulder. The creature was crawling, elbows sticking up at an angle above its shoulders, towards Agrev, who was slowly dragging himself up, shaking his head as if to clear it.

What happened next was almost too quick for Thrond to see, and yet he caught it all, unable to tear away his eyes; unable to move. As the spluttering mass of fetid flesh bore down on the dazed warrior, Vrgrayn stumbled up between them. His hair was blowing in the gust of the monster’s fury, and his sword arm hung low, bleeding from a gash that split the flesh of the upper arm deeply where Thrond could see. Even if he’d been able to use the arm, he wouldn’t have had time to do anything—no dwarf would have. Nevertheless, he reached for his sword with his other hand, rays of golden light radiating from his chest.

The sword was flicked away and broken in one angry swipe, and with the next the beast batted the brave warrior like a pebble across the clearing. He splayed limply onto one of the spectating boulders, clanged to the ground, and rolled unconsciously onto his

back. The golden light that suffused his body winked once, twice. Then, with a sudden spike of brilliance, it went out.

“NO!”

Was it Thronð’s own voice? The green cloaked dwarf’s? Or was it Agrev’s prolonged wail as he bounded towards his fallen captain. The green cloaked dwarf scrambled to his feet and began to awkwardly run as well. His companion, now free and on his feet, followed, crying,

“Uthor! Wait!”

But Thronð out-ran both dwarves. He saw first Agrev and then one of the other Westerners brushed aside by the creature’s tail, saw the beast grip Vrgrayn in both claws. Desperate, he dug his knife into the closest thing he could reach: a leg. To his surprise, the knife slid easily through the tough scales and into the black flesh beneath. The creature screamed and rounded on Thronð, angrily. Thronð scrambled to the side, gripping his bloodied knife in terror. Behind him he could hear the creature’s heavy claw punch the ground. Thronð flattened himself just in time to miss the vengeful tail, but he was too slow getting up. He felt a set of sharp back claws kick him over and descend to crush him. But the sharp of the creature’s foot descended on Thronð’s upright sword and it recoiled with a howl. Then it opened its began to circle away and Thronð was afraid that it would retreat with the with the rigid Vrgrayn still hanging from its claws. At that moment, however, the creature stumbled as if in confusion and Thronð heard and saw small pieces of rubble bouncing off its huge body. The creature, evidently forgetting Thronð, folded its head under its wing to escape the volley of stones set off by Bulgri and Gul. And in that whirl of confusion, Thronð suddenly found himself beside the dwarf called Ocruz (he could see the ring in his nose gleaming with sweat) and the creatures huge, bright eye.

“The eye!” Thronð shouted. “The eye!”

Ocruz, who had evidently been hurt and looked a bad shade of green, drew up his sword and plunged it with the unhesitating hand of a practiced warrior deep into the heart of that eye. Though his blade had been unable to pierce the creature’s layered skin, it succeeded this time, sinking deeply into the black center and beyond.

The creature dropped Vrgrayn. With a terrible scream recoiled and rose on its hind legs and flailed, bringing its head side to side and up and down. In the sweeping whirl of mist and dust it left behind, Thronð could vaguely see stones falling. He could see them ricochet off the creatures’ back. He could feel a couple hit his own body. The monster swerved in agony, crashing twice into the cavern wall, shaking more stones and rubble down. Then, at last, it turned with a motion like thunder and disappeared, sucked up into the twisting hole in the ground. The sound of it retreated deep, until Thronð could hear it no more and knew that it was far away.

He stumbled blindly up. Then he saw Nin’s silver lantern moving quickly through the clearing and followed it towards the group of dwarves which he could just see. As he drew close enough to see clearly, he stopped, dismayed.

Vrgrayn lay across the ground, and Agrev knelt beside him. The green-cloaked dwarf, also had just thrown himself down beside the unconscious dwarf, his hood thrown back, his green eyes wild and breath catching.

“I have Skool Liquor,” he said, holding forth a flask in a shaky hand.

Nin, who had stooped to touch the dwarf’s brow, shook his head.

“It’s no good, Fram,” he said.

“You might be mistaken,” said the dwarf, un-stopping a flask. “We must try.”

Nin put out a hand to stop him from pouring the precious liquid into the Western Prince’s mouth.

“Do not waste what could save another dwarf’s life on one who is no longer here.”

The green cloaked dwarf looked stricken.

“Uthor,” said his companion staggering through the dust, another small dwarf in a deep blue cloak. Uthor did not look at him. His head had sunk onto his chest, and Thron suddenly saw that he was weeping. He rammed the stopper back into the flask and clenched it in one fist, moaning deeply. Slowly the other dwarves collected around him. Bulgri and Gul appeared with a blue lantern. Sorj joined Agrev, tears streaming down his face, dragging the stone-dead Ocruz. Uthor wept all the while, and in the lantern light Thron could for the first time see his face well. He had dark hair and beard, but his features—his features were the finest Thron had ever seen on a dwarf. They sparkled like crystal, wet with his own tears. Someone drew Noran and Murla to lay beside Vrgrayn and Ocruz. Thron thought perhaps it was Gul. Still Uthor wept, and continued to weep as Lgrn and the other Northerners gathered around. At length, Agrev, who had been staring blankly at his dead leader, his eyes wild, his brows bunched in anger, suddenly put out a hand and placed it on Uthor’s shoulder. Sorj and the other remaining Westerner also put out their hands to brace one another so that they were a ring bent over the dead warrior. Uthor’s sobs quieted and after a long moment of heaving shoulders, and he looked up with his strange, sweet, wild tourmaline green eyes. He began to sing.

*“Great wonder... oh great wonder, Tulla⁵!
And how could such a terrible sweetness be
Than that this dwarf should die and I should live,
Than that this dwarf should die defending me.
Oh mighty warrior, you are--Tulla!
I knew you not and yet now here you lie,
And in the light of all that you have done
I am so glad to live that I could die.”*

Several others in the ring had wet eyes. Gul blinked and let the tears run. Even Nin lowered his head, sadly. Thron wondered to see it as he stood there, his own vision blurred: How it was that one dwarf who they knew so little of could make such stony faces cry? But there is a power in the dwarf who does not hesitate. There is a power in the dwarf who sees through eyes of love. It is the power of The First Dwarf.

⁵ Tulla is a complicated term that refers in some cases to a personal deity but in others to mere existence. In this context, its most direct translation is “It is so.”

Myth 7:

It has been told, and the Skools have seen, how when Onorim of Kulethim died, his son Oleth disappeared and the Skulnir broke out of hiding.

What darkness there was in those days! They say that there was great fire in the North and it spread, daily towards the heart of the Kingdom. Trolls roamed unchecked, the unknown dark was perilous, and the Skulnir's forces grew like a curtain of ash between the dwarf-kind and the Great Cavern above.

The four kings of the four quadrants of Kulezim drew together to take council as to what they should do. The King of the West believed that the quadrants should break apart and be ruled by their own Kings. The other Kings, however, believed that a new King should be sought.

Many looked to Ram, the young Captain of the King's forces, for he was a strong dwarf, full of light, and he had been a friend to both Onorim and Oleth. Ram, however, shook his head.

"It does not fit into the old tales to pick a King other than he chosen by the scepter and the stone within. I will hold the Skulnir back as long as I can," he said. "But Oleth must be found."

Nobody seemed willing to put great effort to this, however, and it fell in large part to Ram to send out search parties and consider where the heir to the throne might have gone. Oleth had been his comrade through many adventures and trials, and though he was saddened by his friend's desertion, he was eager for his return. He sent search parties to all of the remote places he had ever felt Oleth to take interest in. If they found anything, however, it was but more Skulnir. Ram began to be overwhelmed in the fight that was amassing before him. Still, however, as he rode over and under the mountains, bringing light and relief wherever he went, he was always trying to think where Oleth, son of the King, might have gone.

At last, one day, as he passed through Kriek⁶, he stopped to ask Alfram Coryn, the head of the rune dwarves there for advice.

Fayfin listened to what he said in silence, and continued in silence for a long while longer while the restless warrior paced back and forth over the long, dusty hall of records.

"Consider, Elifet.⁷ What would fit into the old tales?"

Ram shook his head.

"I do not know," he said.

"Do you not?" replied Fayfin. "Is there no home for the restless thoughts of Kings?"

Ram's mother had taught him his runes and tales, and he sifted through them, carefully. It was some minutes, however, before he looked up, a light in his eyes.

"The Deserter's Labyrinth!" he cried.

And he knew, as sure as sure, that that was precisely where Oleth had gone.

⁶ This is the city of one of the oldest guilds of rune dwarfs.

⁷⁷ "My son."

Chapter 11: Understanding

Vrgrayn, son of Vrgr, was dead.

His amber heart had departed and left the cavern in swirling darkness.

Soon after, others had departed as well, and taken the right-hand entrance deeper into the labyrinth. Dwarves from hidden crannies and outlooks like that which Bulgri had been staying in slowly appeared, and made for the path onward. Some stopped to nod deeply to the Westerners and their fallen. Some did not.

Uthor and his companion had been of the first of these. They had lifted their heads and wiped the tears out of their beards. Uthor had taken a gold streaked green stone from about his own neck and fastened it around the dead Vrgrayn's stone one. Then, without a word or explanation more, they had stood and turned away, taking a path away to the left.

Nin had made an effort to stop them.

"It doesn't go down," he reminded them.

"We see this," replied the silver-haired dwarf, the one with the blue cloak. Uthor did not speak.

"What cause have you to take it, then?"

"This is our path, rune-dwarf," replied the silver-haired dwarf, calmly. "Choose the path you deem best."

Then they were gone.

Thron'd looked down from Bulgri's outlook, using the funnel light to identify the three different tunnels. The left-hand one definitely didn't go down.

It had not been Thron'd's turn to watch, but he could not sleep. His body hurt from his falls and rolls in the fight, and his heart was troubled. Anything was better than just sitting—even watching the cavern with Oskil for signs of the creature.

"Tell Bulgri to ready his mechanism if you see anything," Nin had said, once they all stood gathered in Bulgri's outlook. "I'm going down to think."

Bulgri, however, soon announced that he was going down to collect his sulf-chips.

"Just pull it back like this if anything comes," he said, talking around his pipe and demonstrating for him. "Really, I don't know what the rune-dwarf expects, though, if he's going to walk so close to that opening in the ground. I for one am counting on my legs running me away, not some odd collection of rocks raining at random through the air. Besides, the two dwarves who leant me belt buckles came to take them back a few minutes ago. There won't be a mechanism soon."

So Thron'd now sat near the edge of the outlook, with his back to the small fire of sulf-chips within, uneasily watching the rune-dwarf's pale lantern pace back and forth in the cavern. He could also see the broken pike with the dragon's head, braced up by Agrev so that it cast light on his fallen kindred. The Westerners' had refused to come up to the outlook—not even for safety.

"They are our brothers," Agrev had said, angrily. "They deserve all the respect we can give them."

And so they sat, while around them Bulgri's sulf chips were smothered one by one and collected in the dark.

"Anything?" demanded Ward, who was sitting against one wall, examining the belt buckle he'd received from Elensa in the firelight.

Thron'd shook his head. Oskil, who was pushing beads around on his abacus, didn't reply.

"What exactly are we waiting for?" Ward wanted to know.

Thron'd shrugged.

"Surely not the Westerners?"

Thron'd shrugged again. He wasn't sure why Nin hadn't already lead them down the right-hand passage that lead down, any more than anyone else was.

"Because if we're going to wait for them, we might as well give up this quest."

Thron'd almost had a feeling Ward was right, but he didn't want to answer one way or another. Ward glowered at the belt-buckle in his hand, unhappily, then stowed it away, got up, and left.

Thron'd knew he was going to the neighboring outlook—a similar chamber opening to the cavern where some other dwarves had been staying. The warden Kelsa had discovered his companion there, it seemed, and Lgrn, Kurn, Ward, and Gul had been going back and forth between this outlook and that, sharing information.

Mostly, they had spent time in the other outlook. After all, a Warden and his comrade would be much more respectable company for warriors and smiths than a miner, a cripple, and a stuffy Easterling.

Thron'd glanced at the crack in the middle of the cavern into which the creature had disappeared. Sometimes he'd thought he saw a glint of movement as he ran Bulgri's funnel light over it, but when he returned to it with haste, the opening was quiet, gaping, black. Thron'd set the funnel light down and bowed his head, watching the firelight from behind him reflect in whispers of red along a little knife in his hands. He turned it over, thoughtfully: Elensa's gift.

"Where did you get that?" said Oskil, looking over the rim of his spectacles at Thron'd from where he sat by the fire.

"It was a gift," said Thron'd, simply.

"A gift..." Oskil got up, abacus under one arm, and settled beside Thron'd, looking out into the dark. Behind him, against the wall, Loyk was curled up, snoring. There was no one else in the strange little alcove except Kunkizar, who lay at Thron'd's feet. Thron'd wondered vaguely where Garn had gone.

"It's a good blade, if a little plain," decided Oskil, bending over and peering at the knife through his spectacles. "I hear you used it well."

"I stabbed wildly in the dark and managed to cut something."

"Ah! Yes," said Oskil, his eyes twinkling. "But that's just the thing. No one else could cut into that monster, could they?"

Thron'd didn't reply. He knew already that the knife was sharp—sharper even than the Westerners' blades. He did not want to encourage Oskil to ask questions about how he got it. Next thing he knew, he'd be being accused of stealing that from the old liar, too.

"Bring it into my shop someday," said Oskil, his eyes boring hard into the side of Thron'd's face. "A knife like that deserves a better face than what it has. A jeweler would know what to do with it."

"Thank you, but I don't see anything wrong with it."

Thron'd sheathed the knife and tucked it away into his vest with an air of closure. Oskil's hard little eyes followed it into its place and then rose to meet Thron'd's distant, wary gaze. He stood, eye-lids heavy with condescension, lip just slightly curled.

“The offer still stands.”

Oskil returned to the fire, and Thronb bent down and stroked the warm body of Kunkizar, who was laying like a puddle of coals over his cold feet. He waited for the cool clicking of the beads on Oskil’s abacus to resume. When it did not, Thronb looked over his shoulder and found that the dwarf had curled up against the wall near his nephew, his abacus clamped tightly in his short arms. Thronb sat back onto the rubble behind him, relieved. He felt Kunkizar’s warm paw through his thick trousers and looked down. The salamander was looking up at him with glowing eyes.

“Welcome, friend,” said Thronb, holding out his hand for the salamander to climb onto. He knew the salamander understood. It stayed with him instead of wandering over to Loyk, wrapping itself tightly around Thronb’s chilled feet. It hadn’t left him since he’d found it tucked away under a boulder after the battle. It knew.

“Kru,” mouthed Thronb, quietly, as the creature slid back down his leg and curled around his dirty boots.

He pulled the knife out again, brushing it with his thumb. It was an intriguing item for all it was so plain. Thronb felt intrinsically that it was of the best quality and perhaps that was why it comforted him to hold it and to look at it. Even if he did not understand what made it what it was.

There were many things that Thronb did not understand. He did not, for example, understand why the seasoned warrior Ocruz had died, and yet he had not. He did not understand why the rascals who had sacrificed their brothers to buy themselves time for escape had lived, while Vrgrayn, leaping to protect the helpless had died. Most of all, he did not understand why some dwarves were chosen to live and others to die. And while it didn’t surprise him, it opened old wounds in his heart.

Behind him, Thronb heard the slow, steady “tick” of Garn’s crutches enter the small chamber and then stop.

“The watch ish up,” he said, in a low voice.

“You rest if you’d like,” said Thronb, not looking at him. “I can’t sleep.”

The soft tick of the crutch drew closer, and Thronb heard a low grunt as his comrade lowered himself down onto the rough, stony floor.

“Ishn’t Fram Oskil supposed to be on watch with you?” he asked, setting his crutches to the side as Kunkizar clambered spontaneously into his lap.

“Yes. But don’t wake him, please,” said Thronb. “Where have you been?”

“Talking with Fram Kelsa and his comrade, Fram Kol,” said Garn, stroking Kunkizar’s head with a gentle, calloused hand. “I wanted to learn more about the merchant with the violet eyes. A couple dwarves saw him and a few others slip into the right-hand tunnel among others. They say he calls himself Shad.”

Thronb glared down at his knife.

“Curse him,” he muttered.

Garn looked up at him, his observant yellow-green eyes watching, quietly.

“Your sh-sadness weighs heavily on you, Fram,” he said at length. His hand had paused, resting on the salamander’s back.

“Yes.”

Garn nodded and closed his eyes. He opened them again.

“Fram Vrgrayn was a sh-strong hearted dwarf. He will always be sho, now.”

“Why do we hate the Westerners so much?” the question that had been on the edge of Thronð’s tongue for so long suddenly slipped out. Garn considered.

“Well,” he said at length, beginning to stroke the salamander again. “It’s not so clear, really. The Westerners and the Northerners live very different lifestyles. In the past this has created misunderstandings between them, and Northerners have often shunned the West for its lack of lore while the Westerners scorned the North for its lack of heart. These things have fostered deep, meaningless prejudices. They have, however, also begun more serious clamors for succession from the dwarves of the West. They do not believe that a high King like Olethim, whose ancestor came out of the North, could understand how their affairs are run. They want to cut their allegiance to him, and this makes other dwarves—from all the quadrants—angry.”

“Do you think they are wrong?” asked Thronð, curiously.

“Not exactly. But I do not respect dwarves who make blatant statements about what they know so little of. Too often the Westerners assume that high King Olethim will be wrong without looking deeper into his reasons and even his personality. But the same goes the other way, and if we are not careful, these arguments based on hatred and prejudice will get us into a lot of trouble. Quite soon, I should guess.”

Garn spoke knowledgeably, as one who had seen much and knew how things would turn out. Thronð longed to know more.

“Have you visited the West?” he asked, looking at Garn.

“Yes. Several times. They are headstrong and some are close-minded—but they are the finest warriors you’ll find in Kulezim, and the bravest hearts.”

Thronð turned over his knife again, thoughtfully. He wondered what it might have done in the hands of a Westerner. He wished for a different ending to the battle with the creature.

“Where did you get that?” said Garn, nodding towards the knife.

“It was a gift—Elensa’s gift,” said Thronð, almost before he realized what he was saying.

Garn’s eyes lit with renewed interest. He examined it more closely.

“It looks as though it is made of Kavrak.”

“What is that?” asked Thronð, interested.

“The finest metal in Kulezim. It was once mined under Kavrak in the far north, but is no longer. That is why it is so valuable and rare. A queenly gift, indeed.”

“Why is it not mined? Are there no more veins?”

“It falls into the shadow region now.”

Thronð knew the shadow region. But a few years before, a war had been fought with the Skulnir, the goblinish counterparts of the dwarves. The King had not managed to completely obliterate the evil beings, but he had pushed them back into the mountains of a certain valley in the north. This valley, called by some the Northern Rift and by others the Shadow Region, had become known as home to dwarves’ darkest thoughts. His mother had seldom spoken of it, but when she had, Thronð had felt instinctively from the tone of her voice and the fear in her eyes that it was terrible.

“Here,” said Garn, reaching for Bulgri’s funnel light. Thronð could tell by the setting of his face and the hardness of his eyes that he did not want to talk anymore about the shadow region. “May I look?”

As Garn ran the light over the hole again, Thronð glanced at the knife with renewed respect and put it away—this time the inside of his breeches. As he did so, Kunkizar rolled off of Garn’s lap and climbed patiently up onto Thronð’s. Garn watched him with interest.

“That’sh a fine shalamander,” he said.

Thronð realized it was the second time he’d said it.

“It is one of my sister’s.”

“How many shishsters do you have?” asked Garn, curious.

“Two.”

“The friend of this s-salamander must be a shtunning dwara.”

Thronð laughed.

“She is a gaufní.”⁸

“And her shishter?”

Thronð pictured Luthe, her long, ashy hair braided long down her back, her dark blue eyes lifted with such gladness to see him.

“She is a skool.”

Thronð could feel Garn watching his face. Then the grave dwarf looked out into the darkness.

“I wonder that you left them to come here.”

The comment slit deep into Thronð’s heart with reproach. He closed his eyes and focused on the warmth of Kunkizar in the hollow underneath his ribs.

“My mother is sick in her bones. I need the reward of the labyrinth to buy her Skool Liquor. It is her only hope.”

Garn nodded. He looked grave and his eyes were sad.

“That is a costly hope.”

“You know Skool Liquor?”

“Yes.”

“Does it work?”

“Yes. If it is really Sh-skool Liquor.”

“Skool Liquor again,” interrupted Bulgri, suddenly appearing in the tunnel entrance with an armful of sulf-chips. “What is all this talk of Skool Liquor?”

The blue-bearded dwarf crossed the room, deposited his sulf-chips messily on a flattened handkerchief in one corner, and brushed off his hands. He continued talking.

“Why—I once spent a whole ruby on a mug of Skool Liquor in a Tavern in Shully expecting great things, and was so disappointed I haven’t tried it since.”

Against the wall, Loyk shifted and Oskil twitched. Thronð was surprised they didn’t both wake to Bulgri’s boisterous tones. Garn frowned just a little with the eyebrow he could still move.

“Is it a common item in this tavern?”

“Well, I don’t know about common,” said Bulgri, sitting down on a piece of rubble by the fire and blowing a smoke ring. “Most of my friends don’t carry rubies in their pockets. But they serve it to the occasional traveler who does.”

He slipped one arm behind his head and leaned back on the air, as if admiring himself for being the type of fellow who carried rubies in his pocket. He blew another smoke ring.

⁸ A dragon like creature which, although unpredictable and sometimes fierce, has positive connotations.

“And you drank it from a mug, you shay?” pressed Garn.

“Of course. They serve everything in mugs. I’ve tried to convince them to invest in bowls, but they’re a little behind the times.”

“That can’t have been Shkool Liquor, then,” said Garn. “For one thing, Sh-skool Liquor would cost a fortune more than that, and it would never be served in mugs—or, I think, in a tavern. There is a limited shupply and no one knows when it will be replenished. And when you have something which can heal almost anything but death in limited shupply, it’s not to be used lightly. That’s what I mean when I say that it works *if* it’s really Shkool Liquor.”

Bulgri sucked on the inside of his cheek, thinking.

“Well, that would explain why that Uthor dwarf wanted to give the poor Western captain Skool Liquor. At the time I wondered that he bothered. But I don’t suppose he had real Skool Liquor either—probably just Jool Juice.”

Garn, shook his head.

“Many counterfeits are Jool Juice, Fram Bulgri, but I do not think Fram Uthor’s was. Do you recall the bottle?”

“It was bound in leather, but the bottle itself was a soft, glistening ore,” put in Throd. He had, of course, examined the bottle quite closely as soon as he’d known what it was.

“Yes,” said Garn. “It looked like Hesshmr ore, and that is almost always used to hold Shkool Juice because most other liquids burn away the material, but Shkool Liquor does not. Also, Fram Nin stopped Fram Uthor from using it. A rune-dwarf would know if it was real or not. Indeed, Fram Uthor was making himself very vulnerable by revealing that he had it at all. It marked him for a dwarf of extreme status who had either done great deeds or inherited the fruit of another’s great deeds. Very few living dwarves possess Shkool Liquor. Of those that do, the majority are rune dwarves.”

Bulgri looked mildly impressed.

“Maybe we ought to follow that fellow,” he said. “He sounds like the fellow to have great adventures with.”

“He took the path up,” objected Garn. “I don’t know what he was thinking, but unless he knows something we do not, it would be foolish to take that path. In truth, he and his companion were strange altogether. In all my wanderings, I have never heard of them among the great, yet I cannot imagine where else one would find them.”

Garn looked out into the darkness of the cavern with a keen glance that suggested to Throd that he would’ve liked to know this. Throd felt just the same way. He had never seen such a puzzling dwarf as Uthor before: small, but fierce; soft, but tough; young, but experienced. The other dwarf, also, was strange—small like an Easterling, but unlike an Easterling in features and hair.

Suddenly, Garn sat forward and grabbed the funnel light.

“What is it?” asked Throd.

“Nin,” said Garn. “He is gone. He must be coming.”

A moment later, Garn’s prediction was affirmed.

Nin entered with a brisk step, his cloak billowing, Troigan following him up the tunnel-way. His blue eyes were bright, and his hood was down. Nevertheless, he paused, calmly, and waited for his bird to perch on his staff.

“Where are the others?” he said.

“In the other outlook,” said Garn. “Have you decided to go on, Fram Nin?”

“Yes, but not by the right-hand path,” said Nin, walking steadily passed Bulgri.

“Not by that tunnel!”

Loyk sat up, blearily.

Oskil stretched and yawned loudly.

“Well, where do you propose to go, then,” asked Garn, a little impatiently as Nin took the funnel light from him and examined the cavern.

“I knew that something wasn’t quite right with the right-hand path. It didn’t fit into the tales, somehow. Now I understand. Look there and tell me, what path leads most surely down and inward?”

Bulgri crowded to look over Garn’s shoulder.

“The right-hand tunnel, shertainly.”

“Look again.”

Garn looked, and then suddenly, as he looked down with them, Thrond knew what the rune-dwarf was indicating.

“The hole,” he said.

Garn and Oskil and Loyk and Bulgri looked at him, blankly. A shiver of excitement streaked unexpectedly through Thrond’s body.

“The hole the monster went down,” expanded Thrond. “It goes down.”

“Yes,” said Nin, smiling his placid smile. “It does.”

Myth 8:

It is told, and the Skools have seen, how Oleth, Prince of Kulezim, had a friend.

This dwarf had attended Oleth since he was old enough to bear arms and to travel between one city and another. Indeed, though others might have received the greater part of Oleth's energies and attentions, none had accompanied him through greater and more trials than this, his loyal companion.

His name was Doln, and he loved Oleth tenderly. Quiet, simple, and older than Oleth himself, he had been assigned to serve the King's son from a young age, and nothing had delighted him more than watching the dwarf child grow in arms and runes and reason. Oleth was a compelling dwarf—deep in thought and mighty of arms. Doln had been touched by the gentleness of his eyes and then astonished by the subtle deadliness of his combat in the same day. More than anything, though, Doln had grown to love the generosity of Oleth's spirit—his eager love of all things.

As Oleth grew, he did not always turn to Doln, but Doln was there. Even when Oleth rode off with Ram or with another of the noble dwarves and spent nearly days without speaking with his loyal shadow, Doln was there. Doln felt every thrill of Oleth's joy and every pang of Oleth's pain. And when at last the scepter chose Oleth as the next King of Kulezim, Oleth fled not to Ram, nor to any other person, but to Doln.

"I cannot do this thing," he told Doln. "I cannot do it. I do not want it."

Doln was pained by his lord's distress, and though he urged Oleth to stay, in the end he swore secrecy regarding his departure.

"But if you will go," said the loyal servant, at last, "Then take me with you."

Oleth gladly agreed, for indeed, imagining a long journey without his trusty servant was like imagining a journey without one hand.

So Oleth and Doln entered the King's Labyrinth together. Long and weary days did they travel there, protecting each other from trolls and wyrms and cheering the empty silence and darkness with their voices. Then one day they came to a large, rounded cavern.

Doln did not like the feel of the cavern, but Oleth was curious.

"It is as if the walls are the spectators of some strange and terrible thing," he told his companion. "Let us see what it is!"

Oleth went before Doln, and so intensely did they both examine the ground and their immediate surrounding, that they did not see the terrible creature until it was upon them: A monster that looked as though it had come of all the grizzle and retch of the world. It knocked Oleth down with one quick bat of its long claws. Before it could pounce on the winded young dwarf, however, Doln stood between them with his sword and split the creature's nose down the middle. The terrible creature screeched, knocked the sword from his hand and shattered it under one foot. Then it seized the faithful Doln and dragged him down through a crack in the ground to his lair.

Determined to save his friend if he could, Oleth did the only thing that was left to him:

He climbed.

Chapter 12: Down

“Are you mad?” Lgrn wanted to know.

Kelsa and his comrade, Kol, remained silent, but they eyed the crack with absolute incredulity. It was big enough for a dwarf, true. But into its guzzling mouth slid the opaque stream of water that had accompanied them to this point and it splashed the smooth diagonal wall and made it slippery. They couldn’t see the bottom of the drop, but they could well imagine what might be there. The running water made an oily sound as it slithered and dripped.

“We can’t go down there!” objected Lgrn.

Thronð swallowed. He would not have liked climbing down something like this under ordinary circumstances with a ladder and no terrifying monsters waiting at the bottom. This way, though, with nothing to hold onto and the rotten vapors of a monster’s lair rising up into his face?

“Is it not the lowest path?” asked Nin, sternly.

“What path?” demanded Oskil, angrily.

“I don’t know that something like this should count as a path,” said Fram Kelsa, politely.

“No?” said Nin. With a satisfied half-smile, the young rune-dwarf knocked to the side a stone that was lying at the edge of the broken hole. “Look,” he said.

Beneath the stone, the shape of a fish shone out, luminous and blue. Thronð recognized it at once. It was a lumino: the sign of a path that ran directly towards Elensa.

“What do you say now?” asked Nin.

The line of Northerners—which comprised of Kelsa, Kol, Jeth, Kurn, Ward, and Lgrn—looked uncomfortable. Garn spoke, however, and his voice seemed convulsed, although whether with excitement or anxiety, Thronð couldn’t tell.

“If thish is the way Elensha wants us to go then we musht go thish way. I go with Nin.”

“That’s all very well,” said Kelsa, “But the King—the handmaiden—they didn’t say Elensa wanted us to take this route. They only said that it was the quickest way to her. They even said that it might be more dangerous than other ways. I say it is foolish.”

“And I say that it fits!” pressed Nin, bring his staff down with emphasis. “There are tales of how young Oleth encountered a fearsome monster not far from the Hall of Trolls. He did not take any tunnel. He followed the creature down into its lair to rescue a comrade.”

“You must forgive me, Fram Nin,” said Kelsa, still politely, but unenthused. “I am not a rune-dwarf. But supposing that our king Olethim did wander here, of which I am not certain, that ought not change our own courses. We are not young Oleth. We were not told to follow tales, old or new. We were told to go down and inward, which the right-hand path could do.”

“But this is not so different from how we entered this very labyrinth,” reasoned Nin, making a sweeping gesture to them all with his staff. “We all did that once. We could certainly do it again.”

“With no rope?” demanded Ward.

“Oh come,” said Bulgri, with a puff of smoke. “We’ve got ropes in a group like this.”

He spoke easily, but Thron'd noticed that his arms were crossed tightly, and his fingers were jittering against one arm.

"And the monster?" asked Fram Kelsa. "What if it returns?"

"That's a risk I am willing to take," said Nin. "I can't afford to take another road than the one that I know will take me where I want to go."

The Northerners looked dubious at best. Kurn shifted back and forth. Lgrn ran his thick fingers through his hair. His helm was off, and he looked frustrated.

"Does anyone else have rope?" asked Bulgri, taking a length of cord out of his baggage.

"I do," said Thron'd. Along with jool juice, rope was another thing that the miners of Smet always carried. He had had no opportunity to use it, thus far.

"Excellent!" said Bulgri, his eyes brightening. "May I see it?"

While Thron'd knelt and got the rope out, Bulgri strung out his own tightly wound rope.

"By the by," he said with busy anxiety. "What about the Westerners? Will they also come?"

"They will come," said Nin. "They said so at once. They are merely waiting for us to be ready."

The Warden walked up closer to the hole. The sour air stirred his coarse beard and hair. He wrinkled his nose.

"For revenge no doubt," he muttered. He looked displeased and thoughtful.

"No," he said, at length. "I respect rune-dwarves, Fram Nin. But I will not do it. It would be better to wander a couple more days than to climb straight into a monster's mouth."

"Those words might soon come to haunt you," replied Nin, looking unhappy. "But I will not press anyone anymore to come with me. We are all free to go where we choose."

"Farewell, then," said Kelsa. "May your journey take you as speedily as you hope."

"Farewell," said Nin, his excitement dampened and his sharp features serious once again.

The Warden turned, and began to walk away. His comrades, Kol and Jeth followed. After a moment, Kurn and Ward, with hasty and abashed nods to the company, turned and followed. Lgrn watched the small party stop before the Westerners and exchange a few words. Then he looked at the gaping hole in the ground.

"I don't like it," he growled, and then hurried to catch the others.

"Why don't we just take the right-hand path like everyone else," said Oskil, approaching Nin and pointing angrily after the others.

"Why don't you do that, if you want to," replied Garn, a little sharply.

Why indeed, thought Thron'd. But though Oskil bit his lip and looked particularly agitated, he watched the Northerners disappear one by one into the tunnel without joining them. Thron'd wondered why, and he wondered, too, whether he oughtn't to go with Lgrn and Kurn and Ward himself. The uncomfortable itch of panic prickled under his skin, and his feet grew icy as he was seized with sudden fear. But almost without being aware of it, Thron'd knew he would stay where he was. The part of him that protested at sitting at home and watching his mother die equally protested taking any but the shortest route

through the labyrinth. Besides, as a miner, he had never received much notice from the higher status blacksmiths and warrior. He had connected, in many ways, much better with the Westerners, and Loyk and Garn...

Thronnd watched until he saw the crystal flask of jool juice which Elensa had given Kurn catch the light of Ward's lantern one last time before his bald head disappeared into the darkness. Then he turned and looked at his remaining companions. They were mostly looking at the crack in the ground with sick looks on their faces. Bulgri was making an angle out of his finger and thumb and eyeing the falling darkness through it. Thronnd approached the edge beside him and peered down. The air was moist, cold and sour.

"How will we get down?" he said, a little weakly.

Nin, who was staring moodily not at the pit, but at his pale hand clasped around his staff, stirred.

"Fram Bulgri?" he said. "Will the ropes work?"

"Maybe," said Bulgri, who had stretched out Thronnd's rope beside his own and was measuring it with his feet. "I'd like more, though. We need the Westerners' help, too,--everyone who's coming. Where's Gul?"

Thronnd glanced around. He didn't know how he could've missed him, but the giant dwarf was among those present.

"Maybe he's still in the outlook. Gul!"

"Coming," rumbled Gul's deep voice. Thronnd turned. He was crossing the cavern towards them with angular blue lantern, not from the direction of Bulgri's outlook, but from the tunnel openings nearest the three tunnels leading on.

"Coming," repeated Gul, as he drew nearer.

"Where have you been?" demanded Bulgri.

"Letting those two weasels go," said Gul in a low voice. "You can never tell with Westerners, you know, and I didn't want any vengeance blood. They're gone now."

"Lucky," commented Bulgri.

"I thought I saw those other Northerners leave," said Gul. "Was there a quarrel?"

"No," said Bulgri, drawing in on his pipe and blowing a long, heavy stream of Southerner smoke. "They got cold feet."

"From what?" asked Gul, stepping out of the way of the rolling coil.

"Well..."

As Bulgri began to explain, Thronnd noticed Nin moving away from them towards the Westerners. Thronnd followed, quietly, and at a distance. He hadn't been able to approach the warriors since the fight and the deaths. But he wanted to see those brave stone faces again.

The Westerners had piled some of the loose rubble from the fight, and laid the stone figures of Vrgrayn and their three other comrades, Ocruz, Murla, and Noran, upon it. Sorj stood with his back to them, gazing at the statues. Young Danaan, with his dark, woolly hair and beard, knelt across from Sorj, supporting the dragon pike lantern, his eyes distant and sad. Agrev stood at the end by Vrgrayn's head, leaning with his hands braced on the piled stones, his head down.

Nin came to a stop at Agrev's shoulder.

"It is time," he said, quietly.

Danaan glanced slowly up with solemn eyes. Then looked down again. Sorj remained still, head bowed. Agrev raised his head, but not to look at Nin: To look down at his fallen cousin's face. All was still.

At length, Agrev's voice broke out, not in words, but in a low, strained sound that became words:

*"Our shoulders touched.
Our swords rang out together.
Our voices were one—challenging darkness, challenging darkness.
Our beards tangled.
We watched each other's backs.
We were a wall—against the wind, against the wind.
Now, my true friend,
There is a weight on my chest,
And the air is too heavy—almost, to breath; almost, to breath.
But our shoulders will touch.
Our voices will be one again.
And so I breath and say—till then, brother; till then."*

Agrev's voice was too bitter to be rich. Instead it bit, sharp. He began alone, but one at a time both Sorj and Danaan joined him. The music was like moaning. Thron drew tentatively nearer, desiring to be part of the dwarves' pain. It made his feet thaw, somehow, made him forget the fear of the deep, dark hole. Sorrow was altogether different from fear.

Now he watched the light upheld by Danaan glow softly in the face of the green, gold-laced stone that the dwarf Uthor had left on Vrgrayn's chest. The gem seemed to pulse, like a living thing—altogether unfitting for a lifeless body of stone. Still, it reminded Thron of the golden glow that he had seen resting over the dwarf's chest in the moment before he died. Thron looked up at the sad Westerners. Agrev had straightened, and was holding Vrgrayn's sword in both hands, bared and glinting. He sheathed the sword with an angry shriek and turned away, scowling. Danaan rose, taking the sword laid beside Murla in one hand and leaning the dragon head lantern against the stones to shine over the four dwarves. As the younger dwarf followed Agrev, Sorj stood and touched the pile of rubble briefly with one hand.

"Till then, brother," he whispered, hoarsely. Then he turned away, leaving behind a smooth, polished piece of orange amber carnelian where his hand had been.

Thron could look now at their faces. He picked out Vrgrayn's features, handsome and still, and Ocruz's jeweled nose ring.

Turning away with a heavy heart, he found Garn not so far behind him, leaning forward onto his crutches, his head bowed. The weary-looking dwarf turned without speaking and walked beside Thron his crutches marking each step sadly.

The others were still gathered around the crack. Gul was standing and looking down into it, his huge hands hanging loosely at his sides. Bulgri was laying and dangling a rope with a lantern at its end down into the gap. Oskil and Loyk were sitting, watching, skeptically.

Agrev paused before the plunging tunnel, and gestured to Sorj to come.

"You have the rope, right, brother?"

For answer, Sorj slid his cross-bow and his baggage from his broad shoulders and retrieved a coil of white-fibered rope.

“Wait,” said Bulgri. “I want to measure how deep this drop is.”

He handed his pipe to Gul, who took it between one finger and thumb and held it as far away as he could. Then he lifted the piece of rubble which Nin had moved to reveal the lumino and dropped it down.

Crack—cality-lack! Cality-lack! Lack! Lack! Lup!

“Hesh!” said Nin, Garn, and Sorj all at once.

“Do you want to bring the creature on us?” demanded Oskil.

Bulgri looked a little sulky, but said nothing, his ear turned towards the tunnel mouth. Thron also listened. Having worked for so long in the mines, he was accustomed to hearing and sensing motion, sometimes quite distant from him. He didn’t hear anything.

“Well then,” said Bulgri, sitting up and beginning to draw up the lantern.

“Perhaps not my finest idea, but no harm done, evidently.”

“Let’s wait to say that until we see what’s waiting for us at the bottom,” mumbled Garn.

“Good news is,” continued Bulgri, “I now have a pretty good idea now how far down we have to go. There’s water down there, but I don’t think it’s deep. The drop though—it’s no jumping matter. How much rope do you have there, Fram?”

He was speaking to Sorj. Sorj examined the rope.

“20 Ls, maybe,” he replied at last, gruffly.

“Mmm. That makes for 53 Ls with mine and Fram Thron’s. Not quite enough, unless I’m mistaken.”

Bulgri turned on Oskil and Loyk.

“Don’t either of you have a coil of rope in your mountain of stuff?” he demanded.

“What do you want it for?” asked Oskil, raising an eye-brow.

“Ah, so you do,” said Bulgri. “Splendid.”

“*What do you want it for?*” repeated Oskil.

Bulgri, who was making knots in his own string of rope, didn’t seem to hear this question.

“See, I would guess it’s only about forty Ls down,” he said, in a low voice, as though talking to himself. “But if we knot the rope, that will decrease it by almost half.”

“Explain,” said Agrev, harshly. “You are not clear, Southerner.”

Bulgri finished a knot and held up his knobby rope.

“The rope is going to become slippery near the water. I want to make knots in it for us to hold onto, but if we do that, we will use up a great deal of our length. We will have to knot our ropes together.”

“Let ush do it, then,” said Garn. “There is no time to lose.”

“And what will happen to the ropes when we get to the bottom?” demanded Oskil.

“We’ll leave them for the next person, I guess,” said Bulgri, absent-mindedly.

“Then I think I’ll keep mine, thank you very much,” said Oskil. Thron didn’t like to say it, but he had an impulse to grab his rope himself. A miner took his rope with him everywhere. He did not want to leave it hanging somewhere.

“Well,” said Bulgri, “Do you want to get down, or don’t you? You could climb, I guess.”

“We’ll have to leave some rope here,” agreed Nin. “But could we make three work?” Nin asked. He didn’t seem to like the idea of using them all, either.

“We could start with a couple and see how far they go. But I doubt it will be enough.”

“Well I guess you’d better try. I’m going to need my rope later,” said Oskil, coarsely.

Bulgri did his best, knotting the ropes at intervals, and then having Gul, who was accustomed to the use of ropes in fishing boats, tie his rope and Thron’d’s and the Westerners’ together.

“The real question,” said Nin, “Is how are you going to anchor it?”

“I was thinking about that,” said Gul, scratching his ruddy cheek with one finger. “We’d lose most of the length of the rope if we tied it to one of those boulders. I have one of the stakes we use to anchor boats to cliffs with me, though.”

The large dwarf drew out wedge of iron.

“Clear the way,” he said.

They all gave him a wide berth. Gul stooped, his watery eyes examining the stone. He found a crack and set the wedge in it. Then he took out his hammer—a fearsome object four times as big as Thron’d’s head, and drove the wedge part way into the stone.

“That should work,” he said, barely winded. “But I’ll hold it for all of you to go down, just in case. It always helps to have a little muscle behind a rope.”

Gul chuckled to himself.

“Who will hold it for you?”

“It will have to hold for me,” said Gul. “Besides, I don’t know that any of you are up to a task like that, anyway.”

He chuckled again.

“Well hurry,” said Garn. “We’d better send someone down to try it. We’ve been here too long, I think.”

“Who will go?” said Bulgri, stepping politely back.

“Don’t you want to try it?” said Oskil, who had sat down and was leaning against his back. “It’s *your* rope, after-all.”

“I’ll go,” said Nin, sparing Bulgri the need to answer.

The rune-dwarf stuck his staff through the rolled curl of his blanket and cast his cloak back.

“Hurry,” repeated Garn, uneasily sitting beside the rune-dwarf and slinging his crutches over his back. “I have a sense we haven’t much time.”

Nin nodded, looked at Gul, who was sitting, holding the rope in his commodious hands, and then began his descent with careful, methodical movements. Thron’d watched the steady, unhurried progression anxiously. As Nin descended, the chilly blue light of his heart shivered faintly on the damp walls.

“Well now,” said Bulgri. “He may be a snob, but I must say, he’s got some pluck, anyway.”

Thron’d involuntarily shivered.

Yes, Nin had pluck. It was the kind of unyielding, cold daring that hurt to watch. He jumped, startled, as Nin slipped once. Then he he breathed evenly again as the rune-dwarf continued.

Thron'd could still see the blue light, though far down, when it stopped.

"All clear," said the rune-dwarf. "Come down."

Bulgri did a little hop of victory and then moved as if to sit down.

"No, let me go down," said Agrev, his voice sharp with distrust. He looked at his comrades. "I want one of us in control at the other end. For safety."

He knelt and climbed quickly over the edge.

Thron'd watched the warrior's agile figure.

In case what?

Agrev's motions were restless and angular. He slipped once or twice, but continued on with impressive speed.

"Who is next?" pressed Garn, urgently. "Go!"

Bulgri, teeth gritted down on his pipe, seized the rope, doffed his hat to them, and falteringly began the descent.

"Now you, Thron'd," said Garn. "Hurry!"

Thron'd took hold of the rope obediently, although he waited for Bulgri to make a little more distance between them. Then he turned to clamber down, glancing up at Gul. The giant winked and grinned. Thron'd lowered himself down.

As Bulgri had anticipated, the tough fibers of the rope were already wet. The walls were wet, too, and Thron'd found that his feet kept slipping, knocking his forearms and knuckles against the damp stone. The water, he noticed, had a corrosiveness to it. Not biting, but irritating enough to start making his hands sting. He thought of what Nin had said about not drinking the water where the iuls had been.

Climb faster, he thought.

Up above, he could hear Garn's voice speak impatiently, and Oskil's sharp voice reply. Then he felt the rope shift down a fragment as added weight suddenly hung from it.

Looking up he could see the golden green light of Garn as he descended. Indeed, he could see his own light, glinting purple in the water running down the wall, and the other dwarves, lighting the way down. Thron'd slipped down a length to the next knot. He clung to the knot, watching as Luth's crystal knocked with a clicking noise against the hard stone. Kunkizar, crushed between Thron'd's chest and the wall for a moment, hissed and grew hot.

"Alright, Thron'd?" asked Garn, hesitating above and looking down.

"Fine," said Thron'd, gritting his teeth and reaching down his shirt to let the salamander out onto his shoulder. He continued climbing.

The descent was as hard as Thron'd had expected. Climbing alongside the dampness, he got wet, but the knots in the ropes kept him from slipping too far. It was better, anyway, than hanging in the middle of nothingness, as he had in the first descent into the labyrinth. The rope, whether due to Bulgri's expertise or some other benevolent force ran all the way to a place where Thron'd could stand. It even trailed into the shallow pool of water which Thron'd splashed into, and gratefully stepping back alongside Nin, Agrev, and Bulgri to make sure Garn had room.

Watching Garn descend the last few feet, Thron'd could help but note with admiration that the crippled dwarf was in no way crippled in his arms. They were strong

and controlled, even young. Indeed, with his horrible face turned towards the wall and his legs scarcely useful on the slippery stone anyway, Thronnd suddenly had the impression that Garn wasn't a cripple at all, but rather a dwarf in the prime of his life. As Garn came to the end of the rope, however, and turned, his face was still a mask of frightening irregularity, and he faltered as he took Thronnd's offered shoulder.

"Where are the others?" asked Agrev, sharply.

"Arguing over who will go down first," said Garn, his voice irritated. "They're each afraid the other might cut the rope while they're on it or some such nonsense."

"Of course they are," said Agrev. "I wouldn't trust those Easterlings the length of my finger."

"Well they should hurry," said Nin.

As they all waited, looking up, Thronnd stole a quick glance at their surroundings. Behind them, the water streamed into the darkness of a low-roofed passage, slanting down. Thronnd could hear water dripping.

"There's that younger Westerner. What's his name—Danaan?"

"And Oskil and Loyk are right behind," noted Garn gesturing to the two bright balls of green light following Danaan's deeper green glow. "A compromise, it seems."

They were coming. Danaan, Loyk, Oskil, and finally, Sorj. Each landed with a splash and slowly straightened, gazing into the yawning darkness before them. As Loyk landed, a scale slide into the water with a loud *clang*. Thronnd stooped and picked it up and handed it to him.

"Kru," said Loyk.

"Where's Gul?" said Bulgri.

They had all splished their way onto the drier bank. Now Thronnd turned and looked up the rope. He saw no sign of Gul's huge bulk.

"GUL!" shouted Bulgri, moving back towards the rope and looking up.

His voice reverberated up.

"*CAN'T!*" came the distant response.

"OF COURSE YOU CAN!" bawled Bulgri back up. "YOU'VE GOT TO!"

"*CAN'T!*" repeated Gul's voice.

"Blast him," said Bulgri. "He told me himself he didn't do well with heights. Why did we leave him up there last? TRY!" he added, calling up.

"We can't keep shouting like this," said Nin. "I'M COMING UP!" he added, setting his handing his staff to Thronnd and grabbing the rope. He had gotten only a few knots up when Gul's voice came down to them again.

"*WAIT!*" he called.

Then:

"*DOWN!*" or maybe "*GET DOWN!*" and then "*GO!*"

Nin paused and looked up, but before he could reply there came a terrible scream from above. Thronnd froze, shaken. It was not the voice of Gul. It was a high, impersonal, bestial shriek.

"Iuls!" said Sorj, stepping towards the rope. Even as he did so, however, it shuddered once, twice, and then with a sudden jerk, came down, throwing Nin back to land with a clatter and splash back nearly fifteen feet down.

Thronnd crowded around the rune-dwarf with the others Garn pushed between Oskil and Danaan.

“Broken bones?” he said, lowering himself down beside the dwarf. Nin, however, shook his head, clutching at his right hand which appeared to have been cut.

“Never-mind,” he said. “Never-mind.”

They all paused, listening for noises from above. Thron heard two more screams, each fainter than the last. Then nothing.

“What happened?” said Bulgri.

“Fram Gul cut the rope. He cut it and fled to the tunnels, I think,” said Nin, breath hissing between clenched teeth.

“Well what did he do that for?” demanded Bulgri, rather angrily.

“He was under attack,” said Garn. “Didn’t you hear? He did what he could to help us by cutting the rope and leading the creature another way.”

Thron looked up the way that they had come. His thoughts were spoken by Agrev.

“He would’ve done better to climb down here where we could all have fought it together.”

The warrior, who had been pacing at the bottom of the wall, made a frustrated gesture with his fist.

“It’s his dratted fear of heights,” said Bulgri, very ill-temperedly.

“Whatever it was,” said Nin, slowly pulling himself up. “Let us wish him well for we cannot help him now. We’d best move on. The iul might return.”

“It won’t come down here,” said Sorj. “Not with the smell of the big one coming out of this hole. Iuls eat each other when they can.”

“But nevertheless, the rune-dwarf is right in this case. He has chosen his path. Now we must choose ours.”

He was gazing into the grey tunnel, still illumined by Nin’s lantern. They could all see the water running in a small stream down between damp, stony banks. The water stirred slowly, barely moving. Silver drops of water hung from the tunnel roof. Further in, the tunnel was dark.

“Look,” said Danaan. “The creature’s blood is here.”

He was stooping over a spot on the bank. Agrev leapt from one stone to another to join him.

“Curse it,” he said. “Let us go on!”

“Gather the rope and go,” said Nin. “I am coming.”

Sorj coiled the heavy rope over his shoulder. Then they all started moving, hesitantly, into the dark. Kunkizar leapt from Thron’s shoulder into the water, wading playfully after them. Thron, however, remained beside Nin and Garn, still holding Nin’s staff.

“How bad is it?” Garn asked, reaching for a pouch on his belt.

“Not bad, not bad,” said Nin, hastily, though he was still breathing through his teeth. “Only painful. Thron can help me wrap it. Go on. See to it those Westerners don’t do something foolish.”

Garn hesitated, and then moved slowly after the others. Thron stayed, watching as Nin examined the inside of his hand. It was only a cut, but blood ran from it and pooled in Nin’s palm, dripping into the water. With his free hand, Nin unstopped his skin, sloshed water over the wound, and then handed the skin to Thron with a brief, “kru.” Then he hastily threw back his cloak and opened a pouch which turned out to hold a wad

of bandages. Thron'd watching, he hastily wrapped the hand and cut the piece of material off, sticking the remainder back into his pouch. As he did so, Thron'd saw him hesitate over an empty loop in his belt. He looked up, his eyes suddenly searching the rocks around them in alarm.

“Did you lose something, Fram?” asked Thron'd, also examining the rocks.

Nin eyed him quickly, and then shook his head.

“Never-mind, Fram. Never-mind. I'll take that, now.”

He held out a hand for his staff, took it in the hurt hand, using it to press the bandage to his palm. Then he looked around again and froze, his eyes locking on Kunkizar.

The salamander was chasing something round and silver through the water. It bounced irregularly, not completely round. Thron'd moved quickly after it, and picked it up in one hand, scooping up the salamander in the other. He turned towards Nin and held the item out, intending to ask him if he had dropped it. Then he saw what it was.

A flask, round and glimmering softly, bound in leather, hung from a broken loop. Skool Liquor.

Without meaning to, Thron'd drew his hand back. The flask was identical to Uthor's.

“That is mine, Fram Thron'd,” said Nin, frowning and reaching out with his left hand to catch the item from him. Thron'd quickly recollected himself and pushed it into the dwarf's pale fingers. Nin then tucked it quickly into his bandage pouch, glancing at the other dwarves. Agrev, Danaan, and Sorj had already begun to examine the ground leading onwards into the tunnel and Garn was walking with them, saying something. Bulgri was moodily puffing smoke everywhere, just behind. Loyk and Oskil, however, were looking back at them. They showed no sign of recognizing the interchange, but they could have seen it. Thron'd lowered his head.

“Forgive me, Fram,” said Thron'd. “I... found it beautiful.”

Nin's face softened a little but his mouth remained a firm line. He glanced at Kunkizar.

“A smart salamander,” he said. Then:

“Tell no one please.”

Myth 9:

It is told, and the skools have seen, how Rhea the Wild tried to save her husband, Ram the Brave, from the clutches of the Skulnir. When she found him at last, they had shut the captain into a cavity in the earth and left him there to die. Rhea killed his guards and then dropped her sword and pressed herself against the wall behind which he was kept. She knew it was him, for even through the thick stone, she could feel the warmth of his gentle, honest heart emanating. She longed to weep, but she would not permit her tears to be wasted. Instead, she directed them through her fingers and into the stone of the enclosure, searching for any weakness—any crevice or crack or soft place—which she might force inward and begin a crumbling of the wall from within.

Rhea was, of all the dwaras of the Kingdom, one of the strongest. It was not for nothing that she was one of the King's knights and that she had played an instrumental part in many rescue and sabotage missions. Nevertheless, and alas, there were those among the Skulnir with power to change the configuration of stone, and these lost hearts had left not a space in the dense stone through which fresh air might come to their prisoner.

Rhea was tormented by the suffering she knew her husband must be undergoing, but she would not give up. She knew that the Skulnir always left the spot open which they might have filled had they hearts, and she would not cease to look for that spot. Grain by grain, like pieces in a puzzle, her tears wove deeper into the stone. And at last, they found the weakness they were looking for.

Ram's cruel captors, not content that he should starve to death, had permitted a tiny trickle of acid to fall, drop by drop, into the enclosure where he lay and where it would collect and make him most uncomfortable. It was a very small opening, but it was all Rhea needed. As soon as she understood the use of this opening, she steamed with indignance and a few precious tears slipped useless onto her face. But she knew what to do. Shifting the grains of earth just the tiniest bit, she slowly formed a wall to redirect the acidic trickle. Then, in its place, she sent her own passionate tears to plink, hot and heart-broken, on Ram's feet.

Ram recognized the tears at once, much as one might recognize the voice of one they know very well. Just as the voice pulls on something within you as if it means to pull it right out of you—or perhaps is both inside and outside you at once—the tears awoke something in Ram with a jolt. They fell hot, but they grew hotter with the wife's anger and love, and as they evaporated into steam, Ram smelled all the passions and hopes and dreams of Rhea's heart. These gathered in droplets that clung to the ceiling of the cavity in which he was trapped and pulled the sediments away from the ceiling as they fell. Indeed, the acid which had collected already in the bottom of the cavity mixed strangely with the tears so as to burn Ram less but to eat at the rock more, and the very floor fizzed with the activity of the waters. Even the trickle which Rhea had redirected away from Ram she used against the enclosure, creating the crevices she could not find before with its corrosive liquid. Indeed, had she had but a little more time, and was she not a dwara of passion and feeling, she might have soon broken Ram out with her clever tears.

But the steaming passions of dwaras are telling. They filled the cavern as she grew nearer and nearer to her goal and trailed down the passages adjoining. And then the Skulnir knew of her, and they came in mobs and killed her.

Chapter 13: What He Lost

The dwarves had followed the passage alongside the stream of water for over two hours when Thronnd sensed a change up ahead. He had spent enough time in the mines that he could almost always tell when passages were changing—sometimes even in what way. He was almost sure now that either the tunnel was changing direction or splitting off into two paths.

Bulgri affirmed this but a coupled minutes later:

“There is a tunnel up ahead,” he said. “A big tunnel. More like an extended passage. This tunnel runs past it only a little way and then comes to a stop.”

Nin paused in his progress, flexing and clenching his hurt hand to keep the skin stretching. It reopened the bleeding.

“A big tunnel?” he asked, frowning.

“Big,” repeated Bulgri. “It has a presence.”

Within an hour, they came to the place. Thronnd instantly saw what Bulgri had meant by a “presence.”

“Tulla,” said Loyk, quietly. “What happened here?”

The wall of the passage in which they’d been walking had been ravaged open—torn by some twisting force—to drive a tunnel up into the mountain. Around its large mouth was a rim of broken lime-stone and crumbled rock. Thronnd half expected the mountain to bleed from the awful hole. A violence had been done.

Though it was not bleeding, however, there was blood.

“It is the creature,” said Agrev, his eyes brightening as he stooped and examined the ground. He was already in the tunnel, and he glanced up, eager and fierce.

“What did it do, rip the mountain apart as it went?” asked Oskil, who had fallen behind the rest of them.

“Yes,” said Agrev, impatiently. His eyes said he did not like Oskil. “That is what iuls do.”

“They’re common pests in some places,” put in Bulgri. “Where I come from, for example, they can take down whole neighborhoods weakening the infrastructure with their tunneling. Of course, “pest” isn’t quite the word for something of this scale...”

Bulgri examined the circumference of the hole and shook his head. Thronnd tried to imagine the giant iul boring into the stone. He discovered he didn’t like to think about it. It felt like a violation of some kind—powerful and wrong.

All three Westerners were in the tunnel now, first Agrev, then Danaan, then Sorj, following the trail of blood.

“Wait!” said Nin. “Where are you going? This path goes up.”

Agrev stiffened and did not turn.

“We know,” said Sorj, putting out a hand and touching Agrev’s shoulder.

“Curse it,” muttered Agrev. “Perhaps it is not so far. Did not the Southerner say that the other tunnel came to an end?”

“Yes,” said Bulgri, who had followed the Westerners a small ways into the tunnel, eyeing it curiously and puffing blue smoke. “I am surer of it now.”

“But it would be folly to turn aside from the path assigned us without first seeing what is at the end of it,” said Nin, sternly.

“It would be folly to follow the creature in the first place,” said Oskil, his voice a little high-pitched.

“Think what your quest is,” pressed Nin, his face hard. “Would you give it up to pursue vengeance on a mere creature—and one, furthermore, that would probably kill you?”

Nin turned to the side and added, exasperated.

“Even you must see this.”

The last comment had a bad effect on the Westerners. Sorj frowned. Danaan glared. Agrev turned, eyes flashing. It was Sorj who spoke first.

“We are not idiots, Northerner. Is that what you are suggesting?”

“I am saying what is true: That it would be foolish to take this path. That is all,” said Nin, abruptly.

Agrev retraced his steps until he stood close enough to loom over Nin.

“Listen, rune-dwarf. You speak of foolishness. Well let me speak of the unnatural. It is not unnatural that I should wish to avenge the death of my brothers. I’ll tell you what is unnatural: Cold, grim dwarves who make sport of those who would respect the fallen who got them where they are. You, Northerner,” said Agrev, spitting in the ferocity of his words, “are unnatural.”

Agrev turned from Nin without waiting for him to answer. But he did abandon the ceatures passage into the mountain. Sorj and Danaan followed, Sorj’s eyes distant and Danaan’s resentful.

Nin waited for them to pass.

“Call it what you’d like,” he said, at last, under his breath. “It’s wisdom to me. Bulgri?” he added, in a louder voice.

“Yes?” asked Bulgri, raising his blue eye-brows.

“A quick question about the end of this tunnel. Can you make it out to be a chamber?”

Bulgri nodded.

“I was having such thoughts.”

“Because,” said Nin, “If so, I think I may know where we are.”

They soon came to the end of the passage which Bulgri had foretold. Here, the stream of water fell in a small fall down into a dark space. Troigan, perched on Nin’s shoulder, spread wings and rose, melting into the darkness. Then he reappeared with a shrill cry and landed on Nin’s shoulder again.

The Westerners were the nearest to the opening. They had observed stung silence since they came from the tunnel behind. Now, however, Sorj spoke as he lifted his silver lantern and examined the wall inside.

“We can climb in,” he said to Agrev and Danaan. “Along the bank, here. But some of us may need a rope and it will be hard for the dwarf with the crutches.”

“Garn,” corrected Thron.

“Garn,” said Sorj, abruptly.

He handed the other end of the rope to Agrev.

“Wait for my signal, Danaan,” he said.

Carefully, the large, thick-set Westerner made his way around the corner of the fall, pressing against the rock wall. Thron couldn’t see well enough to know more, but

Sorj called to Danaan, and Danaan also rounded the corner, and then Nin, holding the rope. Bulgri, Thron, Garn, and finally Loyk and Oskil followed, using the rope to steady themselves. Thron was relieved to find that he didn't really have to climb. Sorj had walked along the wall of the inside chamber and then descended down to its floor by way of a slant gradual enough that Thron could crawl the whole way if he wished. Garn sat and inched down.

When they were all safely on the ground, Agrev followed, coiling the rope as he came. He slapped the coil on the ground, loudly at the bottom and looked around. Nin had lit his lantern, and they could now all see the room into which they had climbed. The small fall of water gathered in a small, shallow pool which ran along a paved gutter and into a culvert in the wall. Between it and the opposite wall was a stretch of floor, including a fire pit and another deeper pool to one side. In the wall itself were two doors: One on the same level as themselves, and one on a small, raised level. Clearly it had been made by dwarf hands. Even the stone edging the door had been carved into a design of licking flame.

“What is this place?” asked Bulgri, wandering into it.

“A guard room of Rigdlah, if it is what I think,” said Nin.

“Rigdlah?”

Nin waved away the question, moving slowly but steadily around the pool in the corner to their right. As Thron followed, he gradually realized the dwarf was making for a strange boulder resting against the wall beside the water. A couple more steps and Thron suddenly recoiled.

The boulder had a face.

It was old and worn, but there could be no doubt. The frozen features and body of a dwarf still claimed that stone.

Nin approached the figure, his staff tapping quietly and calmly against the ancient paving stones of the floor. Thron and the others followed, somewhat hesitatingly. Kunkizar, who had been riding languidly over Thron's shoulders, jumped down and waddled ahead of Thron. Thron allowed his pet to go, and did not even grudge Loyk the creature's comfort when the salamander found the young Easterling's feet. He thought he knew well enough what the stone object was, and he was pretty sure Loyk needed the comfort even more than he did. He had seen dead dwarves even before the labyrinth.

There was a deep silence as all stood, gathered around the figure, absorbing it in the light of Nin's lantern. Several soft, sad plinks dropped into the pool. It was, as has been mentioned, leaning as if in repose, against the wall: the statue of a dwarf.

“Who is it?” asked Loyk, stroking Kunkizar and gazing in quiet awe at the countenance of the statue which, though smoothed by the polish of many years, was both peaceful and kind. The dead dwarf's arms were outstretched as if offering some gift, his eyes, tender. He did not seem to mind as the curious Troigan alighted gently on his head. Nin helped the bird onto his own fingers and gazed on the face, sadly.

“He was a true and loyal heart, and his death was generous. Let us rest here for some hours. Why don't we make a fire and I will tell you the story.”

Quietly and respectfully, the dwarves wandered to the middle of the chamber, set down their luggage, and built a fire. They built it in the fire-pit between the pool and the

lower tunnel entrance, and gathered around it in their various fashions. Westerners settled right near the fire. Loyk set his back against his luggage, knees drawn up like a small dwarf, salamander against his chest. Oskil got out his abacus. Bulgri leaned back against the wall and smoked. Thronnd settled himself across from Nin, where he could see the statue of the dwarf and also Nin's face. Nin waited, as the quiet settled. Then he began.

"It is told, and the skools have seen, that once young Oleth had a friend named Doln," he said. "And when young Oleth ran, overwhelmed, from the inheritance of his Kingdom into the Labyrinth of Kings, Doln was the friend who loved him enough to accompany him.

"No one knows all the adventures the two friends had together, but this much is told: That no friend loved Oleth so much as this, his old servant, and when the life of the young heir to the throne was endangered by the beast of the labyrinth, Doln stood between his beloved Master and a beast far beyond his strength of arms. The beast—perhaps the very same which we have but recently seen to our own loss, though I think not—stunned and seized Doln and dragged him down into Sarthim's city of Rigdlah. Oleth, horrified and enraged, followed the beast into his labyrinth of caves and found his friend. By that time, however, Doln was very weak, and Oleth could only drag him into the safety of an old guard house on the edge of the labyrinth city. There, with his last breath, Doln gave up his belt to his liege Lord, and so doing, died. Great was Oleth's sorrow, and his loneliness burdened him as he continued into the dark."

Nin ended, gazing into the darkness of the passage above the fall. Agrev stirred, restlessly.

"This story of Oleth," he said. "Is it true?"

"To the best of my knowledge," replied Nin.

"In that case," said Agrev, "I like this dwarf, Doln, well. But not so much Oleth. True, he showed courage in pursuing his comrade, but it was cowardly to run from the responsibility of his throne."

"Was it?" said Nin, lifting an eyebrow. "Would you have done any different?"

"Yes," said Agrev. "In my Kingdom, to abandon one's Kingdom in the hour of its need is grave indeed."

"As it should be," said Nin, nodding, "Though I'm surprised you adhere to such ideas."

"Why do you say that?" said Agrev, sitting up, his eyes narrowing.

"Why indeed?" said Nin, and Thronnd thought by the press of his lips that he was more angry than usual. "Answer me this first: If the West believes it cowardice to abandon one's Kingdom in its need, why did they abandon theirs in the War of the Skulnir?"

"Nin," warned Garn. He had settled on the edge of the fire pit and was leaning on his crutches for support. He raised his head now, one mutilated eyebrow just lifted in concern.

Danaan and Sorj were sitting up now, too.

"We did fight," said Sorj, calmly but distantly. "I was a boy still, but I remember it well. My father lead our warriors away—away to the North. We were present at the final battle."

"That was but a fraction of your troops, though," said Nin, coolly. "And they were too late to save the lives already lost or win the battles already lost. Do you not

remember? Or did you never learn? -How the troops of King Olethim laid down their lives in raid after raid. The Skirmish of Whiplash. The Battle of Bloodride. The Battle of No Survivors. Garn knows the battles of which I speak.”

The rune-dwarf looked at Garn. But Garn looked into his lap and didn't answer. His body was tensed, and his yellow-green eyes were downcast, his hands rested helplessly palm up upon his knees.

“I know the battles of which you speak,” said Sorj, commanding Nin's attention back to himself. “But they were spontaneous, and carried out without our consent. Indeed, if I recall correctly, the Battle of No Survivors wasn't even approved by King Olethim. Some young, arrogant captain lead the troops into peril against the King's orders. I cannot regret not being under such foul leadership.”

“You are not mistaken,” said Nin, still fiery cold. “The Battle of No Survivors is entirely due to the folly of the young Rym, son of Ram. What a son to shame the greatest captain in living memory! To weigh the lives of his men so lightly against his own glory! He thought he knew better than his King. He thought he could best the Skulnir on his own. But he was mistaken. His troops fell into a trap. And because of his foolishness, not one dwarf who set out under his command returned.”

Nin's finished angrily and his eyes directed themselves to the passage above the fall again. When they shifted back to Sorj's listening face, they were so hard and clear that Thron thought he could almost see a small fire in their depths.

“But,” he said, “There were many other battles. There were decades of battles where the West could've stood by her Kingdom and made a difference. And even those who marched under Rym to their deaths did so because their Kingdom needed them, and they would not abandon it. If the West held any such value, perhaps they would've died with those noble hearts and I would not now sit and mock you.”

Agrev stood with a the ring of his metal armor against the edge of the fire-pit.

“You shouldn't mock us even now!” he growled. “You aren't the only ones who have been abandoned in need—if so you call it. The West has little responsibility to a Kingdom that will not help it in return. Trust goes two ways, Master Rune-dwarf.”

“You were sent troops in your need, but you didn't want them,” replied Nin, looking up at Agrev without moving his head.

“They were useless. They would not listen to our real needs. It was a façade. A meaningless token.”

“You would not listen yourselves,” retorted Nin, striking the ground angrily with his staff. “That's part of why you're in this mess with the Tolumbron! Small wonder the King has not sent you help again.”

Agrev moved towards Nin, fists clenched.

“Bring out your fists and learn the respect of the Warriors of the West who have suffered more than you know!” he said, his ruddy brown eyes flashing red.

Nin eyed the angry Westerner, placidly.

“I think I won't,” he said. “It's high time we all got some rest, and unless you want to fight a one-sided match, you'll have to find a different way to earn my respect. Indeed, perhaps using your head instead of your weapon would do that best, anyway.”

Nin stood abruptly and walked over to the edge of the pool where the statue of Doln sat with Troigan circling over his head. He sat down—rather sulkily, Thron thought, for Nin, and said,

“I’ll take the watch.”

Then he was silent.

Agrev, with eyes still smoldering and a disgusted curl to his lip, sheathed his knife.

“Come,” he said. “Let us leave this coward to his rest and go to ours.”

The Westerners silently retreated to the base of the upper-level and leaned themselves against it, covering themselves with blankets. Bulgri, Oskil, Loyk, and Thronnd stared at each other in surprised silence. Then Bulgri gave a long, low whistle, turned over in his blanket, and put out his lantern. Oskil and Loyk immediately followed his example, unpacking their things and wrapping their small, round bodies deep in the folds of their blankets. Loyk poured out some mead for Kunkizar, who was still following him devotedly. Thronnd slowly unrolled his own blanket and slipped into it. He did not go to sleep, however. He lay in the dimness of Nin’s silver lantern watching Garn sitting alone by the diminishing fire and Nin by the dark-faced pool. Garn sat many minutes, head still down-cast. The fire grew low. Garn stared intently at it, lowering his head once to coax the flame awake again with a breath. At length, however, he added a new sulf chip to the fire, laid his head down beside his stretched-out crutches, and sank slumber.

The fire was quiet. Along the fringe of its light, Thronnd caught a glimpse of Kunkizar, curled up along Loyk’s side. The creature was hiccupping, its sides periodically expanding with a sound like a gargle. The sounds soon only contributed to the silence, like the droning of a rhythmic snore or the soft distant throb of the mountain. In this silence sat Nin. Troigan was on one hand, and that hand wrested on one knee, while the other hand stroked the creature, restlessly. Thronnd tried to close his eyes, but opened them again, examining the rune-dwarf’s face. The strong face was emanating bitterness. Thronnd wondered what had made him so angry with Agrev. He also wondered, suddenly, what Nin had suffered, and what his name had been before it was “Nin.”

Nin.

Nothing.

No parent would name their child that.

Soon enough, however, Thronnd’s thoughts wandered from Nin to the image of Doln, the friend of Oleth, with his eyes so tender and his hands outstretched. It reminded Thronnd of something—something he couldn’t remember. Thronnd searched his mind vainly for the resembling memory, but it was not until sleep had nearly claimed him that he found it.

His mother. It was the expression on his mother’s face when she’d said goodbye to him. She’d taken both his hands in hers, and so her arms had been stretched out, just like Doln’s. The memory, precious in and of itself, disturbed Thronnd. For a moment it brought him completely awake. No, his mother did not really look like Doln. No. He would not allow it.

Thronnd felt the movement of a body slip smooth and warm slip under one arm. Kunkizar hiccupped twice. Thronnd held the creature close, and lay blinking and waiting for sleep to claim him.

Sleep had scarcely crept over Thronnd when he was quite suddenly completely awake, his senses tense with the assurance of approaching peril. Kunkizar had grown hot

in his arms, but it was not this that had brought him so fully and instantaneously into his waking senses. He had heard a voice: a low gleeful voice speaking wicked words.

Thronð opened his eyes and, without moving, glanced around the guardroom for the troll. It was an old troll, one which had followed him for many years. He had grown so accustomed to fighting it that the rune he wished to say was already in his mouth, but always the sight of the troll brought him fresh terror. Thronð's eyes moved quickly, glancing over the walls, the mist, over Nin, sitting with his back to them, gazing down into the inky darkness. Then he heard it again:

"You will lose them all, you know. Every single one."

At last, with a shudder of recognition, Thronð saw him—a crooked backed, one eyed creature with only one ear. He was stooping over Agrev, and his hands were about the warrior's neck.

"See, you've lost your kin. Your captain. Next it will be Sorj."

Agrev was now fully awake, pulling at the troll's choking hands with his own. The troll laughed and, drawing a knife from Agrev's own belt with one hand, raised it over Sorj. Agrev's eyes filled with horror and he kicked and strained.

"Nin!" shouted Thronð, leaping up and drawing his own knife. Bounding across the room, he caught the troll's strike upon the small blade, and instantly felt how unequal he was to the plummeting power of the downward motion. It was enough, however. Sorj woke with the clash of steel and, with keen edged instincts of a warrior, rolled out of the danger of the descending knives and to his feet. He angrily drew his sword and knocked the knife from the troll's hand, and in the same moment Agrev forced the troll's other hand open and dropped to the ground. Meanwhile, Nin had come running at Thronð's cry, his staff lifted to strike at the troll, his demeanor unusually ruffled. The troll turned and caught the raised staff and, before Thronð could anticipate anything, kicked the rune-dwarf backwards towards the wall. The troll limped forward after Nin, grinning. Thronð couldn't understand everything it said, but he caught the words "all," "fear," and "loss." Nin's staff slid away into the gutter of water and began moving slowly towards the culvert. Nin forced himself to his feet to retrieve it, but the Troll knocked him down again. Thronð thought he heard the metallic skitter of some not quite round object across the floor. This time, Nin stayed, stunned.

"Your father died. Your mother died. Your brother also, they all are lost. You cannot stop the loss," the troll said, relentlessly. *"No matter what you do, it comes in the end..."*

Thronð felt anger rising in his heart. The words were terrible. They would've been terrible addressed to him. But to see Nin stricken down by them, of all people... Thronð took a leaping run at the troll and threw himself onto its back, pulling himself up onto its shoulders.

*No wrong in pain of loss, Thronð began.
Nor fear, nor bitterness
My heart beats true, it is no fool,
It tells my father is a skool,
And I shall not then fear.*

The troll tried to shake Thronð off, but Thronð was too angry.

“*You are afraid of loss, too,*” it said, grasping for Thronnd with its terrible hand. “*You know it will come. Just like it did for your father.*”

“I may miss them, but I will never lose them!” growled Thronnd. “My father is a Skool, and someday I will see him.”

The troll began to lose its form. It was receding into a stone. Suddenly, however, Thronnd felt a different current of energy wash over him, and the boulder came to life beneath him again and spoke in a new voice: A second troll.

“*And when you see your father,*” leered the voice, “*Will your father be proud of his son—Deserter?*”

The troll’s twisted shape was changing, evolving, growing heavy, heavy fists. It threw him down on the ground and turned on him. It was the guilt troll. The same Thronnd had met in the Hall of Trolls. It had entered the room with fear of loss. Or perhaps it had been here already.

“I cannot do everything but I can do my best!...” fumbled Thronnd, unprepared, grasping for the first rune he could find.

“Deserter!” said the troll, spitting the word out at Thronnd, lifting his heavy, spiked fists. Thronnd slipped back, terror and regret rising in his heart. Then he heard Garn’s voice.

“The Shkools forgive the flawsh of a heart mended with tearsh,” he said, his voice thick, but perceptible.

The Skools forgive the flaws of a heart mended with tears. Thronnd felt a flood of relief run over him and suddenly he was strong again.

“Be still,” he said. “I have a mission.”

The heavy-fisted troll was still, and a moment later there was nothing but a lonely boulder in the center of the guardroom.

Thronnd got up and went to help Nin to his feet. Loyk, who had been struggling to keep the rune-dwarf’s staff from floating into the culvert, managed to pull it out now and handed it to him. The rest of the dwarves gathered around.

“Thank you,” said the rune-dwarf, still breathing hard. “There was another thing that fell—but no, I will find it myself. Thank you all. You may go back to your rest.”

“What happened?” said Bulgri. “What was the troll about?”

His eyes—usually bright and nonchalant, were bleary and scared.

“Never-mind that. It’s over now. Get some rest. I will pick up my watch where I left it.”

“Nay,” said Agrev, who was also breathing hard. “We are not done speaking.”

He was standing with Sorj and Danaan, and for once seemed to have found a cold space for his anger.

“What—do you want—to say,” said Nin, between deep breaths.

“You are afraid of loss, are you not?” said Agrev.

“Who isn’t afraid of loss?” said Nin, angry in his turn.

“Well if you are, you should’ve heard the troll attack me. Yet you did nothing.”

“You do not suppose,” said Nin, his anger escalating. “That I was about to let the troll murder you and your cousin on purpose?” he gestured to Sorj.

“You heard the words of the troll when he spoke to you,” put in Danaan, quite angry. “The very same words. How could you not have heard them when he addressed

my cousin? And if you did hear them, why would you not turn at once to help him? You only did anything after Fram Thron'd cried out."

The young Westerner's sword was out, and his dark green eyes were flashing.

The sharpness of Nin's eyes softened and he put out his left hand as a deterrent.

"Put your sword away," he said, at last catching his breath. "I am not the kind of dwarf who abandons another dwarf to a troll if there is something I can do about it. When the troll addressed Fram Agrev, I happened to be very angry with him—among other things. It is hard to understand a dwarf's troll when you are angry with him or filled with a strong emotion yourself. Therefore, no, I didn't hear him. Be assured I would've done something much quicker if I had."

Danaan didn't look convinced. Agrev, however, brushed over the argument.

"Very well. So you say. I cannot trust you, though. We will have to rotate watches, brothers, from here on out."

The dwarves walked to the fire, withdrew their sulf-chips and settled again in the corner with a little fire of their own. Garn also moved towards the fire-pit, but stopped, his eyes suddenly on Oskil.

"Isn't that Fram Thron'd's knife?"

Oskil was kneeling by the pool, the fine blade Elensa had given Thron'd in one hand. He looked up guiltily from an intent examination, stood, and handed it to Thron'd with a shrug of disdain.

"You dropped this when you fell, Fram Thron'd," he said.

Thron'd snatched the knife.

"Thank you," he said, coldly.

"You are welcome," said Oskil, with a condescending "what are you so angry for" expression.

Thron'd turned disgustedly away.

Nin was still leaning on his staff, his face too weary to look angry with Oskil or Agrev or anyone. He put out a hand for Troigan to land on and stroked the bird, thoughtfully.

"Will you rest now?" Thron'd asked, gesturing to the fire-pit.

"No. I have dropped something valuable in my fall. Something very valuable of which you know. I will search for it now."

Thron'd's heart sank as he thought of the Skool Liquor.

"I will help you look for it," he said, alarmed. He had been comforted to know the Skool Liquor was near. He didn't like to lose it now.

"No," said Nin. "There is no need. I will seek it myself. You rest."

Thron'd reluctantly turned to obey. However, swelling suddenly with emotion, he turned back again.

"Fram Nin," he said, quietly. "I'm sorry you lost your father."

Nin stared, surprised, and then his eyes softened into a sadness deeper and warmer than anything he had ever seen on the dwarf's handsome face. He stroked his bird, and looked down.

"Me, too," he said. "Thank you, Fram Thron'd."

Chapter 14: Breaking Bone

Nin couldn't find the Skool Liquor.

Over the next restless hour, Thron (and probably the others, too) listened to his quick, precise motions gather frustration and urgency. When, by unspoken agreement, they all arose not much more rested than they had lain down an hour before and began to pack their things, Nin was still searching. He checked every corner of the room. He dived into the pool, reappearing with grey drops dripping from his long dark hair. He even went so far as to describe the object and its contents and demand if anyone had seen or taken it.

"Skool Liquor?" said Bulgri, lighting his pipe with a worn down sulf chip, and then shaking it out as the flames bit at his finger and thumb. "Real Skool Liquor? The kind worth more than rubies?"

"How much is it worth, really?" Oskil wanted to know, distracted for a moment from a small conflict with Kunkizar, who had been playfully taking items out of his bundle as he put them in, and who Thron had been pretending not to notice.

"Describe it again," said Garn, looking around the small, bare room, a concerned indent over the brow on the side of his face with more function.

The Westerner's said they hadn't seen or taken anything of Nin's, and it was about time to start again.

"Well it can't just have disappeared," said Nin, visibly frustrated. "And it's very important. It could save one of your lives."

Thron, Garn, and Loyk looked around the chamber one more time. Oskil threw Kunkizar out of his bag and began gathering it up only to find the salamander had run off with one of his snuff-boxes. The Westerners knelt and refilled their water-skins at the pool beside Doln. Thron felt his heart sinking lower and lower. It wasn't there, they all affirmed. It wasn't there.

In the end, Nin had no choice but to pick up his staff (which he had thrown on the ground to dive into the pool), and prepare to move on.

"You should all stop at the pool and drink and fill your water skins like the Westerners," he growled, distempered. "The water is clean, and we may not have clean water for some time. If I were you, I would water down whatever drinks you do have with the water."

"Loyk," shouted Oskil, his arms full of salamander and his nose and ears a pinched white and pink with anger. "Come and fill these skins. And Fram Thron! Come get this infernal creature!"

Thron collected Kunkizar, who remained squirming and unhelpfully uninterested in the moss soup that Thron poured out for him, while Loyk hurried to the fire-pit and back with the skins hanging from his arms.

"Here," he said as he knelt beside Thron to fill the skins. He lifted the skin of mead and poured out a small pool of purplish liquid. Kunkizar approached it, tentatively.

"Come along, friend," said Loyk. "It won't be much good for anything watered down."

Kunkizar lapped up the pool of mead and then sprang away towards Oskil again.

Thron, let the salamander run. He couldn't think. He was tired, and the Skool Liquor was gone.

He watered down the moss soup and refilled his water. Then he joined Westerners and Bulgri beside the lower tunnel entrance. Fram Bulgri was smoking again, and Thron'd thought it had an even stronger scent than usual. He seemed calm, however.

"I hope we may safely assume Fram Nin isn't planning to take the culvert?" he said, in-between two puffs.

"Of course not," snapped Oskil, joining them. "There's no lumino fish over the culvert. Besides, it's not really lower than the tunnel."

"A joke," said Bulgri, a little deflated.

Nin at last came. He was holding Troigan on the wrist of his lantern hand, and he looked a grim being with his solemn expression and that strange feathered creature preening itself in the up=cast light.

"Listen, all of you. If any of you have taken the Skool Liquor, they will certainly regret it. I advise him to give it back at the earliest opportunity."

That was all. Nin stepped passed them with a swish of his cloak towards the left entrance. As he passed, however, Thron'd caught an uneasy glance from the rune-dwarf directed at himself. It was only an instant, but Thron'd was rooted to the spot, unsettled.

Did Nin suspect him?

"Fram Thron'd," yowled Oskil. "Would you call of this disrespectful nuisance!"

Thron'd looked back. Loyk was holding the salamander, but moving his hands rapidly to keep the salamander from slipping out of his grip.

"Oh... yes. Kunkizar! Come! We're going."

Thron'd had to go over and forcefully retrieve the salamander. His head had turned red, and it burnt a little as Thron'd stuffed the squirming creature down his shirt.

"Come on, Kunkizar," mumbled Thron'd, too dispirited to be angry. "He makes my head hot, too. Let's go."

With both mind and salamander churning, Thron'd entered the new darkness of the tunnel after the others. He wasn't sure why, but his feet felt heavy, and the idea that they were leaving behind the Skool Liquor—probably in the depths of the pool, weighed uncomfortably on his heart. Not that the Skool Liquor was his, of course. Not his. But it had been comforting to have it near at hand, a promise and reminder of what might come.

He wouldn't have taken the Skool Liquor for himself. Would he?

A little way ahead, Garn had paused, waiting for him to pass. There was a still a dent on the left side of his forehead, just decipherable out of the scribble of lines and folds and scars, but persistent and preoccupied. He didn't look at Thron'd, but silently waited for him to pass and then took up his typical position of rear guard. Thron'd cast an extra glance back but he couldn't determine much from the dwarf's expression except that the subject matter of his thoughts was solemn. He wondered if Nin and Garn were wondering if he *had* taken the Skool Liquor. After all, for all he knew he was the only dwarf who Nin told about it in the company, and he'd told Garn how much he desired it himself. Imagining their suspicions of him made Thron'd feel suddenly alone at the end of the small company of dwarves, even with Garn behind him.

The tunnel was now clean-cut and evidently fashioned by dwarves. It also quickly became wide and airy, as if it were the main way for other paths. Sure enough, they soon came to a series of small tunnels. These off-shoots appeared gracefully in the walls of each tunnel, rising discreet and black under natural arcs of stone formed by strong, elegant lines of stone. As they pursued the tunnel further in, Thron'd noticed more and

more the attention given to the motion of the stone in the architecture of the hall. Thron had often observed such motion in the stone walls of the mine. It was the way the grains of sediment fell and settled and held together. Of course, in the mine, the miners just delved their way into it, cutting across such flow with their unrefined, direct tunnels. Here, though, the architect had been able to follow them, so that every line of stone was set off to its best advantage. Thron heard Bulgri sigh.

“A fine place, this,” he said, more to himself than anyone. “They did an excellent job finding the bones of the earth here.”

The bones of the earth... Thron nodded. That was what they were. Those smooth, varied, but tenacious places where the minerals held up the very earth above them. But these were polished and artful. Not like the raw, rough places he'd encountered in the mines where the stone turned his pick-axe away. He traced the stone up its lines of power with admiration, and sometimes with his hands when he walked near enough the wall to touch it. It was like running his finger and thumb over the soft sides of his pick-axe. It felt right.

They had not gotten very far, however, when they came to a place where the beauty was marred. Here, the hole had been torn in the wall by a twisting force, chunks of granite and piles of dust and debris crushed forcefully into the paved floor. Thron slowed, looking at the cracks which reached out across the broken stone from this forcibly made tunnel. The thing which had made such a cut through the bones of the mountain must have been strong.

“It's the creature again,” said Danaan, in a low but carrying voice as the three Westerners stood and looked down into the mouth of hole.

Nin said nothing, but walked steadily through the damaged section of the tunnel. Oskil and Bulgri cast fearful glances at the hole before quietly picking their way over the broken and cracked floor after Nin, leaning away from the tentacles of mist that reached out, curiously, towards them. The Westerners, after staring up into the hole, also passed. Thron paused to gaze up the rugged path. It seemed to him that it was even more violent and ugly than before, broken into the fine architecture of the hall they were following. He turned away, Loyk at his side, Garn breathing harder than usual as he picked his way around some pieces of rubble behind them.

Thron wondered if the creature had passed up into that tunnel or if he'd come down from the tunnel into the corridor. He didn't like to think of meeting with it again. A creature that could rip through the bones of the mountain like the creature that had killed Vrgrayn could easily crush them here. It ought to have crushed them before.

“Look,” said Loyk, suddenly stooping and picking up a small scrap of powdered stone. “Isn't this stone lovely.”

Thron looked at the piece of rubble curiously, and saw that Loyk was right. The stone was powdered over with twinkling flakes of mica that winked softly or even swirled dazzlingly in some places.

“Worthless,” said Oskil, who had caught Loyk's softly spoken words and hung back to see what he was looking at.

“I know,” said Loyk, unaffected. “But pretty.”

“Nobody will pay for “pretty,” nephew. Dwarves see “pretty” things every day. It's the *stunning* things, the *brehtaking* things that we must work with. You ought to learn that right now.”

“I don’t know,” said Loyk, unexpectedly. “There are some very simple things that I would pay for. My grandmother has a necklace with mica so smooth in the pendant that she can use it as a mirror.”

“Your grandmother has decidedly...unique tastes. I hope she hasn’t transferred all of them to you, or they’ll be no hope for you.”

Loyk’s face went red and swung his hood off, irritated, as Oskil turned and hurried to catch up with Nin and Bulgri.

“He’s always like that,” he said to Thron, conversationally as he peered into his hat and then flipped it back on. “But brilliant. Really brilliant. You should see him in his shop.”

“Have you seen him?” asked Thron, casting a dubious glance at the stocky, stuck-up figure mincing his way ahead.

“Once,” said Loyk. “It was amazing.”

Oskil could’ve been the best jeweler since the beginning of dwarfdom and Thron didn’t think he would like him any better. Loyk probably read Thron’s expression.

“You aren’t used to dwarves like Oskil, are you,” ventured Loyk.

“I never talked with jewelers in Smet, if that’s what you mean,” said Thron.

“No,” said Loyk. “I mean that you aren’t used to heartless competitors.”

“Are you?” asked Thron, eyeing the young dwarf with his short, curled beard and his blond-lashed eyes.

“I don’t live with any. But my grandmother has worked with a few. They’re like tempered steel, you know: when they get something into their head, they can cut their way to it, and they don’t break. The trouble is, they usually manage to break something else.”

“You think your Uncle is like that?”

Loyk blanched and he looked towards Oskil, who was, fortunately, talking angrily with Bulgri.

“Well he’s certainly not worried about stepping on people’s toes if he has to go somewhere. But he sure gets there. That’s what’s so impressive about him.”

Thron nodded, uneasily. He wondered if Loyk really found Oskil impressive.

“Do you know, Fram Thron,” continued Loyk, thoughtfully. “I don’t know but though I like this place. It’s a little spooky, but there’s also something very...real about it. It’s as though I was in a dream before this and had woken up.”

Again, Thron looked at Loyk, surprised. Despite his bags and the absurd scales, which the poor little dwarf was still carrying, he moved freely and he had an air of alertness and observance which Thron had not noticed in him before. Loyk caught his look and became immediately slightly abashed.

“Do you not feel the same?” he asked.

“I...I don’t know,” said Thron.

Truth be told, he had sometimes felt over last three days as if his mother and sisters were a dream. Rather like a very old, faded picture carved into one of the walls of a hall or city square. He put his hand to the lump where Kunkizar was. The creature was breathing deeply, his inner warmth pulsing rhythmically.

“How is Kunkizar?” said Loyk watching Thron.

“Sleeping, I think,” he said. “Although he was wriggling around a minute ago.”

It was true. Although Thron had felt the salamander stirring even as he looked into the terrible tunnel they'd just left behind, the salamander was relaxed and still now.

"I must say, I think he took rather too much enjoyment of digging through our stuff."

"Yes. I'm sorry about that."

"So tell me more about the mines. What are they like?"

Thron blinked.

"They're...dark. And dusty. And there is a lot of silence."

Loyk tried to look interested. Thron tried to think of something more interesting to say.

"There are lots of passages, and you never know what you will find. Sometimes animals wander in. Often trolls. You have to be on your guard. And you're always looking for something worth digging for. Sometimes if you press yourself to the stone you can almost feel where it is."

"Really?" said Loyk, now impressed. "That sounds very beautiful."

Thron felt his spirits deflate a little, although he wasn't sure why.

"It is...when you feel anything."

"What if you don't find anything?"

"You stay longer or go home hungry."

"Oh."

They didn't say anything else for a good long while. It wasn't long before they came to another ravaged wall on the other side of the tunnel where the creature had, presumably, decided to take a short-cut. This one was different, however, because this one went down.

"Well, now," said Bulgri, "Here's the chance for you Westerners. You may get your revenge yet."

"I'm not going down there," said Oskil.

"Suit yourself," said Garn.

Nin was silent, looking down into the ravaged passage.

"Troigan," he said, holding up his hand. The bird landed on his fist.

Then he walked forward into the dark, misty tunnel.

The rest followed, Oskil included, biting his lip in anger. The tunnel was brutal and abrupt, completely bereft of the elegance of the hall they had left. Chunks of granite littered the space, and in some places the path plunged down so that they had to use both hands and feet to lower themselves. A couple times it broke into other passages—many elaborately carved or beautifully structured—and then plunged further down. After an hour, however, they had still not found another path down. Nin stopped as they came to a dip in the tunnel where it fell and then rose again.

"I am resting here," he announced, tersely. "You all do as you'd like."

Nin was still in a sour temper. Thron had not heard him speak a word since they'd left the guardroom three hours before, and even now the severe line of his mouth seemed hesitant to open. He turned and found a corner of the chamber and sat down.

Thron also found a place to sit, feeling numb. The Westerners had settled on the opposite side of the tunnel with their own fire again, and the atmosphere was gloomy. Bulgri sat with them, smoking away at his pipe.

At least they can smell the smoke for a change, thought Thron. But he wished the Westerners would trust Nin. Thron pulled Kunkizar out from inside his shirt to give him some moss stew. Kunkizar, however, also seemed rather irritated at having been kept down Thron's shirt and slipped over to Loyk. Thron pretended to be asleep as he heard the salamander scurrying up onto one of Loyk and Oskil's baggage rolls and the ensuing tussle that followed. It wasn't long, however, before he thought of Sar, and how puzzled she would be by Thron's letting her salamander irritate others in this way, and he rolled over and went to retrieve the amphibian. He instantly felt bad, for Loyk was holding an ornate box in one hand and the salamander in the other, and he looked pale and upset.

"I'm sorry, Fram," said Thron, concerned.

"Never-mind," said Loyk, in a small voice, and turned quickly away. Feeling once again alone, Thron lay down to rest.

The rest was short, and Nin was up again. By this time, however, Nin looked more collected.

"Follow me, all of you," he said, shortly, leading them onward down the tunnel up over a hump in the ground and plunging down again. Soon after they stepped into a gallery larger than any they had yet come across. Here the tunnel also appeared to end, for there was no continuance of it on the other side of the gallery. Like the rest of the region they'd wandered into, the architecture was beautiful, shaped to fit the mountain. Here, however, the beauty had been often demolished by the wanderings of the creature. Every few steps, it seemed revealed some part of the wall taken out by a mighty jump or an actual hole creating a path from this gallery to some other place. What was worse was that this had evidently once been a beautiful gallery—ornate and full of the most graceful shapes of all. Sometimes you could see these carvings and windings of stone, their intricate growth rudely cut off by rubble and ruin. Thron could even make out carvings on the floor in some places, although for the most part these had been worn away. Several times he wanted to ask for more information about the place, but he still did not like to ask Nin, as out-of-sorts as the rune-dwarf had been. Several other times he looked around for Loyk, but whether because of Kunkizar's botherance as they'd rested or some other factor, Loyk was hanging close to Oskil and neither looked at nor spoke to him. So Thron walked along in silence, with Garn's crutches clicking nearby, and Kunkizar squirming and sleeping by turns down his tunic.

Thron could feel from the tension of Nin, Garn, and the Westerners, that they didn't like this gallery. At one point Sorj actually said this to Agrev.

"It's too much used by the creature," he said. "I don't like it."

At first this seemed strange to Thron, who had been of the understanding the Westerners would like to take a stab at meeting the creature. It was not until he was passing under a deteriorating arch alongside Bulgri when the real issue became clear. As they passed beneath it, some stone and dust crumbled down on them. Bulgri looked up, and Thron realized for the first time that the architect's eyes were wide and afraid.

"If that creature comes through one more time," he said, "He could bring this whole gallery down." He was staring up at the two pillars on either side of the arch. One of them had scattered in chunks along the floor. A little further on, another set lay tilted over each other. "Just a couple more of these pillars and we will wish we were in a different tunnel, up or down."

So Thrond realized that the problem was not the creature himself. It was the stability of the gallery. The only mishap they encountered, however, was a broken stair which Nin set out to climb. Fortunately, it had not been completely bored-through by the creature, but the right-hand part of the stair seemed to have slid off along a crack. As Thrond had turned to offer a hand to Garn, he had placed his foot badly and found it sliding down the broken right-hand face of the stair. Before he completely lost balance, however, he was steadied and straightened by the quick, strong arm of Sorj, who had been walking ahead of him. Thrond caught his breath.

“Thank you---Fram Sorj. Thank you.”

“It was an easy thing to do for a comrade,” said Sorj, smiling a little as he put out a hand to Garn.

Sorj did not speak again to Thrond during the next few hours, but Thrond seemed to swell inside as he contemplated his words. “For a comrade,” he had said. Thrond wondered if the incident with the trolls had raised him in the Westerner’s esteem. The idea pleased him. He would like to be a friend of a dwarf like Sorj.

After a couple more hours, Nin stopped again.

“Get a drink,” he said, “Refresh yourselves. We will sit down for a bit.”

Thrond sat down under an over-hang of stone that still seemed fairly well-supported. It was beside another of the creature’s holes. This passage, however, ran up, the opposite direction of where they wanted to go. Thrond wasn’t sure if he was glad or not. He didn’t like walking in the tracks of the creature, but he was beginning to feel as nervous as Bulgri about the condition of the structures around them. No one needed to tell him the danger of stone collapses. He knew that quite well.

He sat back against the wall, rubbing Luthe’s crystal, anxiously. Oskil set his things down not far away, but he didn’t sit.

“See here,” he began, walking up to Nin. “You owe us some explanations. What is this place you’ve taken us to?”

Nin looked up. He didn’t seem so rigidly displeased anymore, but he did look tired.

“My apologies, everyone. I was not disposed to tell you before, but I will tell you now. We are in Rigdlah, Kingdom of Sarthim.”

“What now?” said Bulgri. The Westerners looked equally blank.

“Rigdlah,” began Nin, patiently, “Is a huge city that Sarthim, brother of Narthim, King of Kulezim, built. He made a kingdom out of it and waged war from it on his brother. Then later, when Narthim defeated the rebel Sarthim, he turned it into a labyrinth.”

“Is Elensa at the heart of Rigdlah, then?” asked Loyk, unexpectedly.

“That is not clear to me. But we will have to go through it. My hope is that we may get out of it as soon as may be. There are evil tales of this place. It is truly huge—one could be lost here all their life.”

Thrond glanced around, the prickly itch of panic rising under his skin again.

“There is one poem,” continued Nin, “That says there is darkness at the heart of Rigdlah. But for us, the danger is more likely to be the expansive edges. I have a feeling if we found the heart of Rigdlah, we might find what we were looking for.”

“We have heard of a great city in the center of the mountains in the West,” said Sorj, suddenly. “We call it Klyt, but it is like your Rigdlah in that it is a Kingdom large,

mysterious, and beautiful. It is not like this place though. It is a city of noise and lights. A city with a just and good King.”

“Oh yes. King Thar. I know the tale,” said Nin, sounding, for some reason, more irritated. “Is that not about the rebel dwarf who starts a new Kingdom under the old?”

“Yes,” said Sorj, shortly.

Bulgri and Oskil suddenly sat up. Garn looked wary.

“Hang on,” said Oskil. “You’re telling me you have a story about a rebel King starting a new Kingdom in a city like the one we’re in now?”

Sorj nodded.

“So I suppose that’s why you all are here.”

“What do you mean?” said Sorj, carefully.

“Why, to start a new Kingdom. You’ll win your way to the top and then once you’re there, change everything from the top down.”

“All Kings change their Kingdoms, Easterling,” grunted Sorj. “What’s that to you?”

“But you wouldn’t really rule for the whole kingdom,” put in Nin. “You’d rule for the West.”

“Maybe in our Kingdom there wouldn’t be a North, South, East, and West. Only a people,” suggested Sorj.

“That holds Western values,” continued Nin. “You don’t care to know what else there might be that you can’t see.”

“Now listen, Northerner,” began Agrev, standing again. Before he could continue, however, he stopped short, listening.

Thrond also listened, suddenly frozen. Sorj and Bulgri leapt to their feet. A distant rumble was approaching. It crashed and smashed and gritted stones together and uprooted things. And then it rose to a roar, rapidly travelling down the hall.

“It’s the creature,” cried Nin.

Thrond threw himself down and covered his face. The tunnel had begun to shake. It was shaking little pieces of stone on them.

“Into the tunnel!” cried Bulgri. “Quick!”

“But not this tunnel,” said Nin. “It’s the wrong type. We could get locked in.”

“There isn’t another option,” said Garn.

The crashing drew nearer. Oskil and Loyk were already in the tunnel mouth with Bulgri. The Westerners, however, hesitated. Sorj knelt, drawing his cross-bow. Thrond guided Garn, unsteady on his crutches into the tunnel. He turned.

Pillars were falling. The beast was weaving over and through them, like the guts of the stone spilling out. Thrond heard a twang, and then an infuriated scream.

“Agrev! Sorj! Get back!” said Garn.

Sorj was fitting another arrow to the string when the rubble began coming down. Agrev and Sorj turned. Danaan, however, stayed his sword uplifted to challenge the creature.

Sorj turned and saw too late. Just as he entered the tunnel, the nearest pillars fell and the weakened ceiling caved in.

Then for a while the earth shook and world rumbled.

When the crumbling stopped, there was stunned silence. Then Thrond heard Agrev’s voice:

“Danaan? Danaan!”

There was no answer. Thronnd heard the sound of frantic scrabbling against stone and rubble. The scrabbling stopped for Agrev to say,

“Sorj, brother, listen to me. Listen!” said Agrev’s voice, again, desperately. It ended in a dry sob.

Any light given by the dwarves’ hearts seemed to fade as the dust cleared. Nin’s lantern flickered on. Then Garn’s.

“Don’t move him,” said Nin’s voice, urgently. “He may have multiple broken bones.”

Thronnd looked and saw that Nin and Garn were standing over Agrev and Sorj. Agrev was kneeling, his light completely dark, a sort of stupor over his attitude. Sorj was splayed out over the tunnel floor. Danaan was nowhere to be seen.

“It’s his arm,” said Agrev, hoarsely. “He broke it not long before this..”

“Let Nin look at it,” said Garn, hastily taking off his cloak and setting it over Sorj. “The rune dwarves have much skill in healing.”

“I don’t trust him.”

“Then you may lose the only chance you have of saving your friend’s life,” said Nin, kneeling brusquely beside Sorj and running his hands over the dwarf’s arm. “He is badly hurt,” said Nin. “Thronnd, make a fire. Loyk, a pot. Bulgri, some water.”

Agrev stared at Nin a moment then looked away as if pained.

“If you hurt him...” he muttered.

“I’m not trying to hurt him,” snapped Nin. “Now, do you have another cloak to wrap him in? He is cold.”

To Thronnd’s surprise, Agrev moved to the side, taking off his cloak.

“The fire, Thronnd,” prompted Garn, gravely. “Hurry.”

Thronnd gathered sulf-chips together in a large pile, and got them lit. Loyk had produced a pot from his bulging bag, and Bulgri put a little water from his water skin in the bottom. Garn contributed more, and Thronnd, after his example, took his out.

As the water began to simmer, all became very quiet, and Thronnd could hear Nin whispering something rhythmic to himself. After a couple moments, he paused and looked up.

“Bulgri,” said Nin, gravely. “Are we trapped in here?”

“Yes,” replied Bulgri at once. “The hall must have collapsed outside the tunnel.”

“But this is the wrong way!” said Loyk, setting the pot down beside Nin, his face white. “This tunnel goes up!”

“There’s nothing we can do about that now,” said Garn, wearily.

Thronnd looked at Agrev, who had his face in his hands. He thought of Danaan, some meters from the tunnel entrance, his sword drawn to face the monster. The young Westerner must be dead, then.

Thronnd poured out his sulf-chips and got out his flint and steel with clumsy fingers. He managed to strike a spark after a few heavy-handed tries.

Even as warm flames began to rise from the sulf-chips, however, Thronnd felt numb.

Everything had gone wrong.

END PART I

Glossary of Characters

Agrev—*Westerner with a scar running over his brow and nose who enters the labyrinth on the same night as Thron in the company of Vrgrayn. Cousin to Vrgrayn and Sorj.*

Bulgri—*Southern architect with blue beard who Thron encounters while creating a mechanism to defeat the giant iul.*

Calver—*Southerner with long, curved pipe who enters the labyrinth on the same night as Thron.*

Danaan—*Young westerner with green eyes who enters labyrinth on the same night as Thron in the company of Vrgrayn.*

Dolnir—*Northern warrior with a bushy beard who Thron meets in the company of Calver after his first rest with the Westerners.*

Doln—*Faithful friend and servant who accompanied young Oleth into the labyrinth.*

Dwar—*First female dwarf.*

Ede—*First daughter of Im and Dwar.*

Erg—*Warrior dwarf who rolls into a pool and becomes a fish.*

Garn—*Crippled dwarf with the mutilated face who enters the labyrinth on the same night as Thron.*

Guen—*Childhood friend of Nenga.*

Gul—*Giant northern cliff dwarf who Thron meets guarding the entrance to the cavern to which Calver and Dolnir lead him and his companions.*

Im—*First dwarf.*

Jeth—*Northern warrior who Thron encounters in the company of Vrgrayn and his Westerners.*

Kelsa—*Northern warden who Thron encounters in the company of Vrgrayn and his Westerners.*

Kol—*Recovered comrade of Kelsa.*

Kurn—*Bald northern blacksmith who enters labyrinth on the same night as Thron. Brother to Ward.*

Lenth—*A dwarf cast into the deserter's labyrinth wrongfully who finds his way out, builds the city of Amalfram, and becomes the next King.*

Loyk—*Small, young Easterling apprentice who enters the labyrinth on the same night as Thron. Nephew of Oskil.*

Luthe—*Thron's older little sister.*

Murla—*Westerner who enters the labyrinth on the same night as Thron in the company of Vrgrayn.*

Narthim—*King of Kulezim who created the labyrinth out of the ruins of the city his brother, Sarthim, had built.*

Nin—*Rune dwarf of Kriek who enters the labyrinth on the same night as Thron. Has Troigan, the bird, for a companion.*

Nenga—*The first dwarf to go Skulnir.*

Noran—*Westerner who enters the labyrinth on the same night as Thron in the company of Vrgrayn. Wounded by iuls.*

Nrosp—*First son of Im and Dwar.*

Ocruz—*Westerner with a jeweled nose ring who enters labyrinth on the same night as Thron.*

Oleth (Olethim)—*Father of Elensa, King of Kulezim.*

Oskil—*Eastern jeweler with spectacles and an abacus who enters the labyrinth on the same night as Thron.*

Rame the Brave—*Great captain and friend of Oleth.*

Rhea the Wild—*Wife of Ram the brave and knight to King Olethim.*

Rim—*Son of Ram who leads his troop of men into a trap of the Skulnir.*

Sar—*Thron's younger little sister.*

Sarthim—*Brother to the King Narthim who built the city of Rigdlah in the south and waged war with his brother from there.*

Shad—*Northern merchant with violet eyes who enters labyrinth on the same night as Thron.*

Sorj—*Westerner with a crossbow who enters the labyrinth on the same night as Thron in the company of Vrgrayn. Cousin to Vrgrayn and Agrev.*

Sucor—*Dwarf who first discovers Skool Liquor.*

Thron—*Northern miner who enters Elensa's labyrinth in search of the riches to heal his mother's illness.*

Uda--*Twenty-second handmaiden of Elensa who guides the dwarves into the labyrinth.*

Uthor—*Mysterious dwarf who is captured with his companion and offered to distract the giant iul while others escape.*

Vrgr—*King of the Western Quadrant of Kulezim and father of Vrgrayn.*

Vrgrayn—*Leader of the group of Westerners who enter the labyrinth on the same night as Thron. Where's a red gem on his brow. Cousin to Agrev and Sorj.*

Ward—*Frizzy-haired northern blacksmith who enters the labyrinth on the same night as Thron. Brother to Kurn.*