

Chapter 1

The Brotherhood Visits Grand Elm

The wine sloshed as Tarduk shoved the goblet and his dinner plates aside to examine the three envelopes before him. He had been assigned by the Temple of Light to deliver the letters to the Dwarven village of Grand Elm. They probably contained nothing of interest. Still, he owed it to his real Master to make certain.

Although he served as a Buyer for the Temple, his real allegiance was to the Brotherhood of the Web. He was the Brotherhood's most highly placed spy within the Temple.

He fingered one of the envelopes. It was from the older dwarf, Gannin, and addressed to his wife. The second was from the younger dwarf, Dally. It was addressed to someone named Jedda. The third letter, from High Acolyte Hozameen, was to Dunkin Elmore. Tarduk found that worth considering. Elmore, until just a few years ago, had been the so-called Dwarf King.

He heated a knife blade and slipped it under the edge of the wax seal. Like butter, the wax melted and he peeled the seal off the envelope, setting it aside for re-application when he was done. Smiling in satisfaction, he unfolded the crisp blue paper and began to read.

My dear Dunkin,

Greetings; may the Light bless you, your household and your people.

Your representatives arrived safely and we will do all we can to assist Gannin with the bathhouse project he proposes to construct in Grand Elm. It sounds like an intriguing project with considerable challenges. As we used to say in the old days, the secret always lies below the surface. Devising a pipe system to channel clear, clean water is the key.

You may also have heard of the recent fire that destroyed the Temple's Library. I wonder if you might find it in your heart to donate a few volumes from your own collection to help us rebuild.

Also, would you be willing to send a few of your best masons and tunnel experts to consult with the men who are charged with rebuilding the Library? Gannin has suggested that a thorough examination of the Temple's sub-structure and foundation is necessary. He says we need to carefully examine what's under the surface.

Perhaps you might accompany them yourself. It has been too many years since I have seen or spoken to you. Light bless you, my friend.

Hozameen, High Acolyte of the Light

Tarduk set the sheet aside and snorted. What mundane nonsense; bathhouses and libraries, indeed! The prattling of one weak old man to another. He eyed the other two letters and decided he might as well examine them, too.

The one from the old dwarf was a typical communication from an absent husband to his wife, explaining that the trip was going to take a little longer than he'd anticipated, but that he'd be home as soon as possible.

'Dally is growing into a fine young man,' he read, 'and has decided to join me in the business. He'll not be spending his life bent over in the tunnels anymore, he'll be up in the bright light with me. It's a joy to have the lad finally make the decision.'

Odd wording, Tarduk thought. But then, he'd never given dwarfs or the way they lived much thought. It did stand to reason that anyone in their right mind would choose any occupation rather than mining. He set the letter on top of Hozameen's and opened the final envelope. The writing was in a strong, albeit unpracticed hand.

My dear Jedda,

I hope you are fairing well and have recovered from your injuries.

Gannin and I have enjoyed our stay in Bealah. I thought we would be on our way home by now, but business is taking us up into the North Country. Your dogs are fine; Cayuse sends her love. Both Gannin and I think of you and Dunkin often and I look forward to seeing you when we return.

Dally

Tarduk smirked. Puppy love...pure puppy love. The boy couldn't even bring himself to say he sent *his* love; he resorted to using the dog to convey affection. As he started to reseal

the envelopes, some thought buried deep in the back of his brain began to wriggle its way to the surface. There was something about the dog, but what was it?

As he struggled to retrieve the memory, an officious knock broke the silence of the evening. He smiled with predatory anticipation. Delivering mail for the Temple was only one of his tasks. His more important mission for the Brotherhood had been to track down the wayward Roland and present him with an ultimatum. And since he hated Roland with all his being, he hoped the pompous twit would reject it so he could kill him.

Pushing back the chair, he covered the letters with a napkin; he'd finish with them later. Then he crossed the room to open the door.

Roland stood in the doorway, accompanied by the large brutish man known as 'the Giggler.' He had lost some weight but not an ounce of arrogance, Tarduk thought as he looked at Roland's belligerent face. He smiled, making no attempt to conceal the satisfaction he felt that Roland had been forced to obey his summons.

"Ah, you've come. A very wise choice on your part, my friends." He stood aside and motioned them in with one languid hand.

"Let's not start off on false pretense, Tarduk!" Roland snapped as he bustled past. "I'm not your friend, nor are you mine. Let us hear what you have to say."

Tarduk indicated the cushioned wing-chairs by the fireplace. "You've lost weight, Roland. That's good. It's unhealthy to carry more weight than one's frame is designed for." As he watched the fat man wedge himself into the chair, he thought of the woman he had recently met and how shocked he had been to discover that she was Roland's mistress. He had a brief mental picture of Roland on top of the woman and shuddered. How could any woman let such a pig of a man touch her?

"Get on with it, Tarduk," Roland hissed in impatience. "You mentioned amnesty and a change in the terms of employment. Explain yourself."

Tarduk pushed the woman from his thoughts and moved back to the desk where he seated himself. He reached into a soft leather satchel propped against the wall next to him and withdrew a small box that he placed carefully on the center of the desktop. He noted with satisfaction that Roland paled as he saw it.

"When I left Bealah, Master Aderin gave this to me with instructions to use the contents on the both of you."

Roland rose, the pretense of anger not quite masking the deeper fear within him. "You lied!" he snarled. "There is no *amnesty*. You thought you could trap us, but there are two of us to one of you, Tarduk!"

"Oh, do sit down, Roland," Tarduk said in amusement, making no attempt to reach for poison-tipped darts inside the box. "No one is going to die tonight. Not here, at least. Although it would not have been my choice, *amnesty is* offered. There have been some changes since you, ah...*departed* from the city. Aderin is gone; he left Bealah to go south. Miram now heads the Bealah operation. It is he who has offered you a second chance."

Roland's eyes narrowed at this news. Miram promoted over Tarduk? This was indeed wonderful news. His shoulders relaxed and with a cold smile he said, "Aderin left Miram in charge and not you? My, my, my, but that must have wounded you, Tarduk."

Tarduk shook his head as though saddened by the comment. "Unlike you, Roland, I place the good of the Brotherhood before my own concerns. I do not question nor make futile attempts to second-guess anything the Master does. I simply do as I'm told to the best of my ability...including distasteful things such as offering you a second lease on life. If you

return to Bealah and provide restitution for the men you killed, you may re-establish your standing in the Brotherhood. Miram has indicated that there is a specific job that he feels you and your friend here would be suitable for. Do you accept or not?"

"I do," Roland replied without hesitation. "We both do."

The Giggler frowned, but nodded in agreement.

Roland continued. "Now what's this job?"

"The dwarfs have gone north; you're to follow them and find out what they're up to."

The Giggler grinned, then began to laugh aloud. Tarduk grimaced at the high-pitched sound. The man was clearly crazy. But then, so was Roland.

The fat man touch a cavalier finger to his forehead in mock salute, then rose unbidden to leave the room. His brutish companion shot a quick glance at the darts still lying in the box upon the table. Then he too rose and followed Roland from the room.

Watching the door close behind them, Tarduk had a disturbing thought. Anything Roland was involved in would require watching. He had the most unpleasant foreboding that this undesirable task would fall to him.

Chapter Two

Jasper Returns to Bealah

"The boy has returned," Oliver curtly notified Hozameen.

"Which boy?" the High Acolyte asked his Guard Master.

"Jasper O'Reiley—Aderin's little pet. Quillshoots dumped him outside the city gates and left without a word to anyone."

"Really?" Hozameen raised an eyebrow. Oliver seemed to relish the circumstances surrounding the boy's return to Bealah. "Was the healing successful or not?" he asked after a thoughtful pause.

Oliver grimaced. "It did. Walked into the grounds like he owned the place."

"Was he alone, or was Gannin or any of the others with him?"

"Alone."

Hozameen leaned back in his chair, closed his eyes and massaged his eyelids, trying to make the scratchy feeling of fatigue go away. Although he was pleased at the successful healing of the boy's partial paralysis, he hadn't expected him to return so soon. Or alone. This was another demand upon his time and energy that he did not need right now.

"Have Danien and Essex report to me as soon as they can," he said abruptly. "And direct your men keep an eye on our little Jasper. Nothing obvious, mind you, but let's just see who he makes contact with now that he's back and mobile."

Oliver grunted in agreement and waited to see if Hozameen was done issuing orders. When no more were forthcoming, he bowed slightly and left the room, gently closing the door behind him. The next stop he would make, he decided, was the Healer's domicile. He would ask Leinah to have someone look in on Hozameen; the Acolyte was looking haggard. The man constantly burned both ends of the candle and wouldn't allow anyone to comment on it. But even he would have to obey the Healer once Oliver enlisted her help.

Back in his Library, Hozameen studied the maps spread out on the desk before him while he waited for Danien, and the Librarian. A small group of Oliver's hand-chosen men were continuing to map the tunnels beneath the Temple, a project begun earlier by Oliver and Dally. The maps he now studied were part of the daily updates sent to him.

It had been less than a full week since Gannin and company had left to go North. He sighed heavily. How time compacted and accelerated. There were never enough hours in the day to do the things he needed to do. He glanced back down at the maps and shook his head at the myriad of tunnels penciled in over an outline of the Temple's floor plan. What a labyrinth! There were so many tunnels, all appearing to go nowhere. Who had built them and why? Some had likely been constructed back in the earliest days of the Temple, when escape routes were necessary to flee from invaders. Many were false trails and dead-ends to confuse invaders so the Temple's inhabitants could escape to safety. But there was no obvious explanation for the tunnel Dally had discovered, the one that was blocked with the mysterious substance that even Gannin could not identify.

Unable to answer any of his own questions, he pushed back the chair and stood, stretching his lean frame until his back cracked. Sighing in contentment as the tension-knot between his shoulders began to disappear, he moved to the window. The days had lengthened with the changing season; the beautiful late-afternoon golden lighting was still a few hours away. Now sunset took place while he was tied up in the dinner ceremonies each night. He missed the comfort of watching the brilliant colors turn into darkening sky from this window. Oh, well. The seasons would all cycle back around soon enough.

Thinking of cycles caused a wry smile to appear on his tired face. Would Dunkin come? Would he find the hidden message written below the letter's text? Surely he would understand the line, 'As we used to say in the old days, the secret is in what lies below the surface.' The real message was written in a colorless ink that darkened when exposed to heat. In that message, he had told Dunkin of Dally's tunnel, and his own speculation that it was a door left there by the Ancients, or their descendants, to protect something very important.

A soft knock broke his reverie and he focused his attention back to the matters at hand. "Enter."

Essex, the Temple's Head Librarian, timidly poked his head into the room. "You wanted to see me, Holiness?"

"I did. Please come in and seat yourself. Have you seen Danien?"

A smile appeared on the Librarian's wide brown face "We breakfasted together, Holiness."

Hozameen nodded. He was aware that Danien and Essex had been spending a great deal of their personal time together. Others had noticed as well, and rumors and speculations as to the extent of their relationship had begun to fly like little birds throughout the temple. He

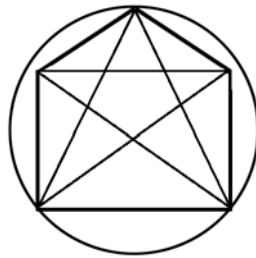
didn't involve himself in the gossip or the personal lives of the priests serving below him; as long as they served the Light with a pure heart and selfless dedication, that was good enough for him. And he had no doubts whatsoever regarding the quality of Danien's character...or Essex's, for that matter.

"Take a look at these maps, Essex. Tell me what you see."

The Librarian leaned over the desk. Pushing his thick glasses back up to the bridge of his blunt nose, he scrutinized the maps. "Well, Holiness, they're certainly incomplete. The area where the curious pattern is hasn't been mapped at all yet."

Hozameen's fatigue vanished. "What pattern? Where...can you pencil it in?"

"Well, I don't know how accurate it would be in scale or detail." Essex hesitated as he ran the computations through his facile mind. "But if I remember correctly, it was situated in this general area and looked something like this." He bent closer to the paper and drew a symbol, then looked up at Hozameen. "I'm not an artist, I'm afraid, but that's fairly representative of the pattern I remember."



The High Acolyte scratched his chin and studied the drawing. "It's so...geometric. What do you make of it, Essex?"

The Librarian took off his glasses and began polishing the lenses with a soft cloth. "I thought, when I first saw it, that it bore a certain resemblance to a design I remember seeing

when I was researching Tak Makan. But I can't quite remember exactly where or in what context I ran across it."

"Tak Makan?" Hozameen stared at him with both eyebrows raised high. "The southern pagan city?"

"Yes, Holiness. It is a very ancient city with some most interesting architecture and history. If I remember correctly, the pattern had something to do with the central tower the city is built around..."

A sharp rap interrupted him. He stopped as the High Acolyte barked out an impatient command to enter. Danien and Oliver stepped into the room, the smaller man bowing to Hozameen and smiling at Essex.

Hozameen turned back to Essex, a troubled expression on his gaunt face. "I know something of this Tak Makan and its people...they have multiple gods and practice strange rituals. They do not believe in the Light."

"No," Essex agreed. "Their beliefs are quite different from ours."

Oliver scowled. "What are you talking about?"

The Acolyte flashed him a look of irritation. "We are talking about the tunnels your men are mapping, and the strange design of an area they haven't gotten around to yet."

Oliver stiffened, surprised by the brusqueness of Hozameen's response. Danien, a smile appearing on his gentle face, walked over to look at the drawing. "So, you think there's a connection between this," he pointed to the symbol Essex had drawn, "and what?"

"Tak Makan," the Librarian answered promptly. "It resembles the great tower at the center of the city. The Tak Makans, that's what the people call themselves, believe that the world began at that very spot. It's, uh, quite sacred to them."

"What's that got to do with Bealah?" Oliver demanded.

"I don't know," Essex admitted. "It may just be a coincidence."

"I doubt it," the Guard Master grunted. "Nothing seems to be 'coincidence' anymore."

"Prepare a report on this tower and Tak Makan as a whole, Essex," Hozameen ordered.

"How soon can you have it done?"

Essex blinked rapidly. "With the Library gone, I'll have to research the city's archives. I don't know what they have. I can reconstruct some things from memory, but not much."

Hozameen drummed his fingertips on the desk. "*When*, Essex?"

"Two days?"

"Make it one. Danien, you help him."

The Conciliator bowed. "Yes, Holiness. At once."

"Wait! Before you go, Jasper O'Rieley has returned to the Temple. I want everyone to be aware of where that young man is at all times, what he does and who he talks to."

"Why?" Essex reddened as Hozameen turned to glare at him. "I mean, it would help to know what you're looking for, Holiness."

Hozameen blew out a long breath and pondered how much to reveal of his own suspicions. His trusted advisors could not be expected to detect trouble signs he hadn't warned them of. "The boy's mind was touched by Aderin. There was some...scarring."

Oliver snorted. "The boy's a spoiled, self-centered brat. Exactly the kind to leap into the Web."

"Perhaps." Hozameen thought back to the night Jasper had been attacked. After gently entering the boy's mind, he had been surprised to find that, except for minimal scarring, Aderin had done no harm. That could only mean one thing: the boy had not resisted Aderin,

nor found his mental touch unwelcome. His suspicions had been confirmed later when he questioned Jasper about the incident. The boy had been evasive and refused further healing.

As a true believer in the Light, he hated to abandon any soul, but he feared Oliver was correct in this case. He looked up. The others were patiently waiting for him to say something. He sighed. "In any event, we should accept it as a given that there are still Web Brothers inside the Temple. One of them will try to approach the boy."

Oliver nodded. "I'll brief the men. Maybe the boy can do our work for us and lead us right to the traitors."

Danien started to move towards the door, but Essex remained seated. Hozameen cocked one eyebrow in the Librarian's direction. "You have something else relevant to this discussion, Essex?"

Essex squirmed, uncomfortable under the High Acolyte's scrutiny. "I'm not certain, but I think so." He flushed as he realized how awkward the words sounded. "I believe we should also research the background of the Brotherhood—how it started, when and by whom."

"Why?" Oliver demanded. "We've got enough on our hands just trying to expose the ones in our own nest."

"Because it stays in the back of my mind..." The flustered Librarian looked towards Danien for support and was rewarded with a gentle smile and encouraging nod. He turned back to the glowering Guard Master. "Because I'm *certain* I remember reading somewhere that the modern Brotherhood originated in an area north of Tak Makan known as Stingers' Swamp. I remember that name because I'm allergic to mosquito bites."

Hozameen frowned. He hadn't considered the possibility that the Brotherhood could have spread beyond Bealah. If they had managed to establish a stronghold in Tak Makan,

that would be very bad news, indeed. Especially given the bad blood between the Temple and the Tak Makans. This new possibility complicated matters greatly.

“You have twenty-four hours to do your research and the clock is ticking as you sit here,” he reminded the Librarian. He regretted the sharpness of his tone when he saw the man flinch, as though he had just received a physical blow. “I am grateful for both your aid and your knowledge, Essex. It’s just that the avenue you have now opened was so unexpected, and I sense we have little time to do what needs to be done. Please accept my apology.”

Essex nodded. “Of course, Holiness. I quite understand.” He rose and bent from the waist in a clumsy bow. “Come, Danien. Let us make full use of our remaining time.”

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After Essex and Danien had left, Oliver turned to Hozameen. He too was concerned at the possibility of Tak Makan being involved with the Brotherhood, but he had more immediate thoughts on his mind. “What do you plan to do about naming a Master of Studies?” he demanded.

Hozameen looked at him in exasperation. “Oliver, you are most belligerent these days!”

“My apologies, Holiness. But if I’m to monitor the intrigue raging around here, it would help to know if you’ve made any decisions.”

“And what intrigues might you be referring to?”

Oliver ran a hand through his short hair and yawned. “Sorry; haven’t been getting much sleep lately. There’s talk about Danien and Essex—their closeness, you know—and speculation as to Danien’s clout with you on appointments. I wouldn’t quite say there’s a pro-Aderin candidate, but there are plenty of others positioning themselves for the appointment. Including Barton Hestor.”

Hozameen smiled in amusement. "Hestor? The man who believes the Before Times never happened and the Ancients never existed?"

Oliver grunted. "That's him. He also thinks Mind Speech is an abomination. Says Aderin's ability is clear evidence that it's spawned from Darkness."

Hozameen laughed. "The last sort of man I'd want to elevate to Master of Studies!" He shook his head and added, "To tell the truth, I haven't thought much about it. Classes are suspended for the Festival break, so there isn't any urgent need to fill the vacancy. I *am* considering Essex as a candidate; he does have excellent administrative skills."

Oliver grunted again and Hozameen smiled. "What? Do you have a candidate to put forth, too?"

"Nope."

"Good. Although, I don't know whether to be grateful for the lack of meddling, or disappointed for the lack of advise. Well, let's go take a short walk and visit young master Jasper. I'd like to see for myself how healed the boy really is."

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Jasper was holding court in the Apprentice Quarters, regaling his eager listeners with his version of the journey to the Quillshoot village. His best friend Pyotor, sat near, prompting him with a steady stream of questions.

"What about the spider, Jaz? The one that crawled onto the dwarf? What did it look like?"

Despite the fact that he hadn't actually seen the Scorpion Spider himself, Jasper shuddered at the descriptions he remembered hearing from Dally and Myrna. "It was as big as your head, Pyotor and almost as ugly." The surrounding circle of boys laughed and Jasper

beamed at being the center of everyone's attention. "Just joking, of course. Anyway, it had a big wicked-looking stinger on its butt and fangs as long as your thumb. It would make the piss drain from your bladder if you saw one raise its butt and wave that stinger around."

"How'd you get it off the old dwarf?" one boy called from the back of the circle.

Jasper thought rapidly; he didn't want to give *all* the credit to the Quillshoot warrior who had placated and removed the spider. "Our guide was a savage named Ivory. I called him back and told him to use his native mumbo-jumbo on it. He ran right back and used his little pipe to lull it into submission; then I knocked it off Gannin's head."

"It was on his head? I'd just *die* if that happened to me!"

Pyotor looked reverently at Jasper. "That was so brave of you, Jaz! He owes you his life!"

Jasper nodded and laughed. "I'm just the savior type, I guess." They didn't need to know that he'd been further up the trail and totally unaware of the entire episode until it was over. His version was better, anyhow.

Oliver and Hozameen had chosen this very moment to enter the room and the Guard Master's snort of derision was heard clearly by everyone. The laughter and chatter abruptly stopped. Jasper glared around in irritation, trying to see who was spoiling his moment in the sun. When he recognized the Acolyte and his dour bodyguard, he swallowed. "Holiness! I didn't expect you to hear I was back so soon."

"That's obvious," Oliver grunted in irritation. "Clear out boys, you can listen to his lies later."

Bowing low to Hozameen before they exited, the boys quietly filed out of the room until just the two men and Jasper remained. The boy spent the time calming himself and preparing for the inquisition that he felt certain was to come.

"I am pleased to see you healed, Jasper." Even though Hozameen was smiling, his eyes were sharp and piercing. "Did you talk to the Quillshoot Schakhier about Aderin's intrusion into your mind?"

Jasper forced himself to look back into those demanding hazel eyes. Hozameen wasn't beating around the bush, that was for sure. "No. There wasn't time. The old woman did her little ceremony and sent me home."

"I've never witnessed a Quillshoot healing ceremony before, Jasper. What did it consist of?"

The boy tried to think of how to say that it had been a bunch of superstitious mumbo-jumbo crap. He was conscious of both Hozameen and Oliver staring at him. Blazes, but he disliked the arrogance of the Guard Master! "She laid hands on me, spoke some gibberish, and made the paralysis go away," he answered.

Hozameen appeared genuinely interested. "There was no antidote or potion? I thought you said Aderin mentioned an antidote."

"He did, but she didn't use one. She said something about the poison hadn't finished it's work. I don't know how she did what she did."

"Weren't you the tiniest bit curious, Jasper? What a marvelous thing it must be to heal someone instantaneously like that. I should be so curious as to how it was done. Was the poison flushed from your system? If so, where did it go?"

Jasper shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know. I was just happy to be able to move my legs again. I guess I just paid attention to that."

"Well, that's certainly understandable," Hozameen nodded. Jasper hadn't looked beyond his own immediate needs. It saddened him; the boy had a gift that few others in the Temple had. Was it Aderin's influence or the boy's own innate laziness that was corrupting it?

He wanted desperately to search the boy's mind, to find the memory of that moment of healing, but he would not allow himself to break the rules of conduct he had spent his whole life following. No matter what justification he could put forth regarding Aderin's influence on the boy, or the possible threat to the Temple itself, he would *not* compromise his own integrity. He gazed at the boy, studying the facial twitches and the evasive eyes. He would learn more by talking to Gannin when he returned. He changed the subject, hoping to put the boy at ease.

"How was the trip back? Did Benjie come with you?"

Jasper smirked without being aware that he was doing it. "That little urchin boy? No, he stayed there with the rest of them." Oblivious to Oliver's disapproving stare, he continued to speak, switching the conversation to a topic he'd thought long and hard about on the journey back to Bealah. He had spent hours bouncing around on the clumsy horse, contemplating how he was going to get the Temple to teach him the things he wanted to learn. He'd decided it would be best to play the fawning, eager student. He launched into the role now.

"I'm *so* happy to be back, Holiness! I can't wait to get started with the studies you mentioned earlier, about shielding and using my mind's gift."

Hozameen looked at him with a mixture of skepticism and surprise. "Really? You feel strong enough to do this so soon?"

Jasper shrugged, "I won't know until I try, Holiness."

"I expect that is true. Very well...we are still on Festival Break, as you know, but I will assign you to one of our special groups as soon as classes start again."

Jasper nodded in enthusiastic agreement; he liked the concept of being in a "special" group. "Thank you so much, Holiness. I'll make the most of it, I promise you."

"That's what I'm afraid of," Oliver muttered under his breath. Jasper didn't hear it, but Hozameen did. His lips twitched as he fought a smile.

"I know you will, Jasper," he said solemnly to the boy. "I would expect no less. Come, Oliver; let's go to the dining hall and lift our glasses so the others may eat."

Chapter Three

Badger and Ferret

On the morning of the third day out from the Quillshoot village, Dally began to notice a change in the land around them. The forest they traveled through was changing, as was the scent and the very weight of the air itself. Maybe he was just imagining that last part, but the sunlight filtering through the forest canopy had chased away the gloom and Dally felt his spirits begin to lift. The huge, towering trees of the lower forest, so dear to Ivory and his people, were now being replaced by smaller coniferous trees. And he was seeing shrubbery and occasional wildflowers instead of the moss and fungal growth so prominent on the lower slopes.

For two miserable days, they had followed the narrow muddy trail that roughly paralleled the Lost River. The rain had been unrelenting. It found its way down his neck and into every fiber of his clothing. The foliage lining the trail hung down, burdened with more rain that splashed onto them as they forced their way through. The flat sections were bogs that threatened to suck the boots off your feet, while the hills were treacherous mudslides.

But now the sun was out, the footing was better, and his clothes were beginning to dry out. The boots would take a few days, but he could live with that.

Occasionally the trail dropped down to touch the river's edge, but most of the time it stayed high, traversing the hillsides above the roaring river. Now and then, they passed through small clearings and Dally could see the cliff bands below and above them. No wonder Ivory had insisted they leave the horses behind; the trail was treacherously steep and

slick at times. One misstep, and an inattentive horse—or person—would plunge to an almost certain death.

Myrna had argued against leaving the horses at the village, but Ivory had explained that there was absolutely no way the horses could negotiate the higher reaches. "Besides," he had added, "the Cheawa would most likely free them. They do not believe in harnessing other creatures to serve human needs."

"Unless it suites *their* needs, I reckon," Dally had joked. Ivory did not seem to find this attempt at humor amusing, for he launched into a short lecture on the Oneness and mankind's all too frequent abuses of it. Dally threw up both of his hands in mock surrender and retreated to the back of the party, content to follow Gannin and think about things other than the great Oneness.

His sense of direction had been turned topsy-turvy by all the bends and twists the river trail had taken, but Dally believed they were continuing to penetrate eastward into the interior. As the day wore on, Ivory had led the way with unwavering certainty, even through confusing intersections and occasional bogs where the trail disappeared completely. Blazes, but he was glad that those stinking bogs were behind them!

"Ivory!" Gannin called out, "Is it my imagination, or are we climbing quite a bit?" His legs were getting tired and his breath shorter. He wondered how much farther they had to go.

"It is not your imagination, friend Gannin. We have ascended almost halfway to the pass which leads down to Wormwood."

"Wormwood?" Myrna panted, swiping the sweat away from her eyes with a damp kerchief. The sun was burning through the cloud cover, raising the temperature, and the

exertion of the steady climb had caused all of them, including Myrna, to loosen collars and roll up shirtsleeves.

"Heard of it, but never been," Gannin commented.

"What kind of a name is *Wormwood*?" Dally asked. "Makes it sound like the place is built of rotting timbers."

"The Cheawa have superb log dwellings, the finest you will ever see," Ivory answered. "They do not use living trees, but salvage those that have fallen in the surrounding woodlands. But the village is not named for wood or for worms, but for an ancient legend."

"And that is?" Gannin prompted.

"It is part of their creation history and I do not know fully know it," Ivory admitted. "It is a Cheawa legend not shared in common with our people."

"Do you know how much further we're marching today?" Gannin shot back with a sour look. "I'm about to walk my legs off if we have to go too much further." He was a little dismayed by the Quillshoot's estimation that they were less than halfway to the pass. "We're not going to hike all the way to the village today are we?"

Ivory smiled at the red-faced old miner. "No. We will camp at the Three Rivers camp tonight. If all goes well, we will meet our Cheawa guides there—perhaps tonight, but tomorrow at the latest."

"What are they like?" Dally asked. "You said they were your cousins, but that doesn't tell us much."

Ivory slowed his pace as he pondered the question. "They are like us, yet very unlike us," he said finally. "Many generations ago, our people warred on each other. The Cheawa were a more aggressive people than we. They lived between the mountains and the great Inner

Basin, moving on a seasonal basis to follow game and gather food. We have always lived in our homeland year-round; when they sought to win control of our lands, we fought them."

"And you won," Myrna said flatly. "How? You don't seem to have any weapons, so to speak. And the Cheawa can be a ferocious bunch."

Dally shot a quick glance at the woman, wondering how she knew that.

Ivory allowed himself a mischievous smile. "We have the forest around us to use as a weapon, should we need it. The Scorpion Spider's venom is not the only poison we have access to, but it is the most deadly. The Cheawa did not know our forest, nor appreciate the bond we share with it. They were defeated and the elders from both peoples sat down and devised a compact that has held to this day."

He dropped to one knee and examined a tiny white-flower nestled alongside the trail. "Ah, the strawberries are blossoming! In a few weeks, we will have fresh berries each day in our cereals and grains."

Gannin guffawed and gave Myrna's shoulder an affectionate pat. "You'll be able to sweeten up that cock-a-roach concoction you seem to like so well!"

Dally grinned, but Myrna pretended to not be annoyed by the comment. Maybe it just to annoy Gannin, but she was continuing to eat the dried grubs every morning with a perverse persistence that Dally found fascinating.

"Tonight," Ivory continued, "with any luck, we will feast on succulent tubers and fresh river trout!" His smile broadened. "And there is a water plant that grows near the conflux of the Three Rivers that makes a most wonderful salad."

"Sounds delectable," Myrna said with sincerity.

"That it does," Gannin agreed, smacking his lips in a show of anticipation. "Haven't had any sort of meat for too long. No offense to your hospitality meant, Ivory."

"None taken. I sometimes forget that you and your people are such meat eaters."

"What about the Cheawa?" Dally asked. "Do they have any food or other taboos we should know about?"

"They've got several customs you'd be better off knowing about now, rather than later," Myrna said dryly.

Dally looked at her with questioning eyes. She twitched a smile to her lips. "It's been a few years, lad, but I've dealt with the Chewa before. I can tell you that most of them are honorable warriors who live by their peoples' codes. You'll do fine, so long as you understand those rules. Then there are a handful of them who are just lying skunks and bend the rules to suit their own purposes."

"No different than any other folks," Gannin said quietly.

"Aye," Myrna agreed in a terse voice.

She had a funny expression on her face that Dally couldn't quite interpret. He looked to Ivory, but the Quillshoot seemed to have no more idea what Myrna was referring to than he did. "So," Dally prompted, "what do we need to know?"

"They hunt for food," Ivory offered. "Meat, not just fish."

This seemed to be an important distinction between the two peoples, one with which Ivory clearly wasn't comfortable.

"They hunt with bows," Ivory added. "But at least they honor the prey after the fact, praying to help usher the creature's Essence into the Oneness beyond. It is the balance of their life; I do not share it, but I do not dishonor it." He paused to consider his own words,

then added philosophically, "There is not so much plenty in their country as is found in ours; life is harder. Whereas we are able to go a few steps into our forests and gather what we need, they must often search long and hard for their dinner. Thus, they have a more predatory nature than ours. It is how they have survived."

"There's a lot to be said for survival, lad," Gannin noted. "I'm a might bit partial to it myself."

Both Myrna and Dally smiled, while Ivory nodded in serious agreement. "That is true. We cannot take part in the Oneness of the here and now, contribute to our families and our people, if we elect to go on too soon."

Gannin grunted. The conversation was turning too esoteric for his tastes. "Speaking of going on, let's get back at it, lad. The sooner we get there, the sooner we can stop."

"Don't want to waste your breath talking?" Myrna asked with a twinkle in her eye as they continued to toil up the narrow trail.

"I barely want to waste it by breathing," he shot back.

Wiener padded comfortably behind Cayuse, ears extended to catch the forest's sounds, and nostrils flared to savor the delicious new scents. *"It will be much drier tonight,"* he pronounced. *"There's less and less water vapor in the air the farther east we go."*

"That is true, Weasel Nose," Ivory agreed. **"But the air will be chill tonight; it may even freeze. We are higher than you might think."**

"Do the Cheawa Mind Speak, Ivory?" Cayuse asked.

"Some do, Sister Golden Eyes. But most do not."

"What do you think they'll make of us?" Wiener asked. *"We're a pretty odd bunch. I imagine they don't have dwarfs with dogs entering their lands every day."*

The Quillshoot shrugged his bare shoulders. **"What they will be most concerned with is your role in their legends and our conduct during the time we cross their lands."**

"You said our role, as though you were sure we had one in their legends. Do you know more than you're telling us?" Cayuse asked

"No," Ivory replied. **"But Ermine Dawnslight believes it to be so; therefore it must be."**

"You have a great deal of faith in Ermine's talents and knowledge," Wiener observed.

"Of course; she is our Schakhier. And my Grandmother." The flat tone of Ivory's mental voice indicated that, as far as he was concerned, there was no question or debate to be indulged in regarding this subject. The two dogs bobbed their heads in acceptance.

"How did she get to be Schakhier?" Cayuse asked. *"Is it a role she inherited, or was she appointed by the tribe?"*

Ivory seemed to either not like the question or have difficulty in finding words to respond. He parted his lips as though to speak, but no sound came out. Finally he said, **"I do not think the others would understand, but it may be that you two will. Ermine was chosen by the Grandmother Tree that stands at the center of our village."**

"Is that the tree she lives in?" Wiener asked.

Ivory smiled. *"You are quick, Weasel Nose. Yes, that is the Grandmother Tree—matriarch to almost all the other trees you see within and around our village. She is very old and communes only with a select few—usually one member of the tribe each generation. Ermine was the last chosen by the Grandmother."*

Just as Wiener started to ask how one spoke to a tree, Cayuse knocked up against him and shot him a warning look. *"I don't think it would be offensive,"* he protested.

“What?” Ivory inquired.

“*What do you suppose Myrna was talking about when she said she’d dealt with some of the Cheawa before?*” Cayuse asked before Wiener could phrase his question. He looked at her and flicked an ear in annoyance.

Ivory smiled at the two dogs with amusement. **“I would not be offended by the question that has gone unasked, but I would not know how to answer it. Only Ermine could tell you—or show you. But to answer your last question, mayhaps Myrna met a small delegation at a trade-feast. The Cheawa barter outside of their villages at times.”**

He jerked his head up and stared anxiously down the trail behind them. Gannin was shouting something at the top of his lungs. The Quillshoot sprinted away from the dogs towards the panicked dwarf. To everyone’s relief, it turned out to be a false sighting of a Scorpion Spider. After the ruckus had died down and the spooked old miner was reassured, the party continued the climb towards Wormwood.

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Before the warmth of the early summer day had fled the lightly forested hillsides, Ivory led them down a steep spur trail to a neat, clean campsite of moderate dimensions. There were no other humans visible or otherwise discernible to human or dogs.

"Looks like we got here first," Gannin offered.

Ivory walked to the fire ring, squatted and examined the soot-blackened rocks. "No," he disagreed. "They have already been here. See; they have left their mark." He pointed to a design consisting of curving lines that resembled the ears and muzzle of a cat. "They will be back when they choose." He stood and glanced around. "For now, let us make camp and prepare our meal. If they choose to join us tonight, that will be good."

"And if they don't?" Myrna asked.

"Then we wait until they choose to show themselves."

The indigo shadows of deep twilight fell upon the campsite before the two Cheawa warriors stepped into the flickering ring of light thrown by the crackling fire. If Ivory heard them coming, he gave no indication to the others. Only Wiener raised a lazy ear in question before the two leather-clad men revealed themselves.

Myrna started as she saw them and reached for her sword. Ivory seized her wrist in mid-air. "No," he cautioned in a low voice. "They are those for whom we have waited." He rose, holding both hands raised with open palms forward. "Greetings, cousins. I am Ivory of the Whitedeer clan. Will you share our fire and our meal?"

The two men looked impassively at him before the older one responded in a deep voice. "Good hunting, cousin. I am Badger. We will share your fire." He turned to the younger, thinner man next to him and said something in a guttural language Dally did not understand. Studying the two men across the fire's flames, the young miner thought he saw a family resemblance, a speculation soon proven correct when the man added, "This is my firstborn son, Ferret."

Dally saw Gannin glance towards Ivory and raise one of his heavy white eyebrows. The young Quillshoot nodded, and Gannin rose. "I'm Gannin and this here's my boy Dally."

Badger looked at him and asked, "Who is the woman? Is she yours?"

Gannin expected Myrna to bristle with her normal thin-skinned irritation at the question, but she answered the Cheawa's question with calm, icy deliberation, "I belong to no one but myself. Do you dare contest my right?"

Badger's eyes widened in surprise. "Do you know what you say, woman?"

Myrna stood, graceful and powerful at once. "I do. I have born the challenge before...and won. It was some years ago, a warrior by the name of Lichen Sharpstick."

Badger threw back his head and roared in delight, while Ivory, Dally and Ferret stared in confusion.

"You are the Silver Woman!" Badger laughed. "Nay, I challenge you not. Nor will any of my warriors. We have heard of your prowess in the contest ring." He looked slyly at her through the drifting strands of smoke from the fire pit. "But you must agree to tell me the tale sometime before we part company."

She shrugged. "Sure. Why not?"

Dally turned to Gannin. "What on earth are they talking about?" he whispered.

The old dwarf shook his shaggy white head. "It's a story best forgotten, boy. It happened a long time ago."

Wiener sneezed from his place near the warm rocks of the fire ring. ***"Those are the best stories to hear."***

Ferret whipped his head around to scrutinize the area where Wiener and Cayuse lay.

"They are here, father!"

"Who?" Wiener asked.

"I think he means us," Cayuse answered, rising to stand in the firelight. ***"He is a Mind Speaker, Wiener. Although I don't think his father is."*** She gazed solemnly at the young warrior, a thinner and younger version of his sinewy, dark-hair father. ***"Good evening, Ferret. Welcome. I am Cayuse and this is my dear friend Wiener."***

He nodded, almost a bow in the little brown dog's direction. **"We are honored to meet the one known as 'Sister Golden Eyes.' May you never know hunger or the fear of the chase."**

As both Wiener and Cayuse considered how to react to this odd salutation, Ivory silently Mind Spoke them a private explanation that this was a ritualistic greeting of respect to one not of the Cheawa people, but considered to be of equal stature. As the two Cheawa stepped further into the inner circle of the camp, Wiener cocked a questioning ear. *"Excuse me, Ferret. But are those remaining outside in the darkness your people or not?"*

"They are. They will guard the camp this night."

"Do you feel there is such a need?" Cayuse asked in concern.

"There is always a need to watch," the young warrior answered. He turned to his father and said in his native tongue, "She asks about the others and I have explained."

"Use their speech, Ferret," Badger ordered. "It will not hurt you to practice."

Slightly red-faced, the young man murmured in agreement.

Badger nodded in approval and chose a seat on the log near Myrna. His craggy features remained impassive as he studied her, but a twinkle was visible in his dark brown eyes. "It was feared that Lichen would never father children," he said conversationally.

Myrna shrugged. "The challenge was by his choice. He's lucky that I was feeling generous that night, or his singing voice would have been forever altered."

Badger grinned in approval. Myrna saw the skin pucker at one end of his lips and realized that the line of his mouth line unnaturally extended by a thin scar. "Did he?" she asked after a moment. "Father children, I mean?"

"He has seeded two girl children," Badger replied.

"Then I did him more of a favor than I intended," Myrna grunted. Ferret's eyes opened wide in surprise and he looked at his father again, waiting for a reaction to this outrageous statement. Badger just nodded and looked at Gannin and Dally, studying the two with open curiosity.

"You are different," he said. "You look different from the city men we sometimes see. And you smell different. You smell of the earth."

While Dally frowned, not sure if they'd just been insulted or not, Gannin nodded. "Aye," he said. "We are dwarven men from the village of Grand Elm. We are chosen by the Light as players in the battle, Badger. We seek to cut the strands of the Web."

"Gets right to it, doesn't he?" Wiener said in admiration.

"This is so?" Ferret asked Ivory. "Your Schakhier says this is to be?"

"It is," Ivory affirmed. "They are spoken of in prophecy."

"Besides," Gannin was continuing with a sly grin on his bearded face. "I was there the night Myrna took her silver blade to scrape the Lichen off the rock; if she won't tell you the whole story, I will."

"Gannin!" Myrna protested, but not without a small smile. "I'd appreciate hearing your version before you go public with it."

He shook his head. "No way, Myrna. You'd be wanting to cut out all my best stuff and leave the story dry as a week-old corn husk."

"And here he told us it was a story best left untold," Wiener complained to Cayuse while the two young native men, one blond and the other dark, looked at each other in amusement.

"He did," Cayuse agreed. *"But I think, for some reason, he would enjoy telling it now.*

Do you know what this is about, Ferret?"

The youthful Cheawa shook his head, clearly as much in the dark as were they.

Ivory nodded sagely. **"This woman is full of surprises. Even Ermine Dawnslight says it is so."**

"Well, Gannin...we can tell it together I suppose." Myrna yawned and ran her fingers through her short silver hair. "Right now, though, I'm bushed. Badger, if those sentries out there in the night are your men, then I take it the camp will be secure without my having to take a watch. That being the case, I'm turning in."

Badger nodded and watched as she wrapped herself in a blanket, lay down and turned her back upon them and the fire. Looking back at Gannin, he winked. "She is a fine woman."

Much to Dally's surprise, Gannin winked back. "Aye. Proud and independent. Not to mention stubborn and cantankerous to boot. A fine woman."

Dally wasn't certain, but he thought he heard a soft chuckle escape from the blanket draped woman.