

Excerpts from Runes & Realms: Gnome Legends

A story guide for the

Tales of Froghaven Contest

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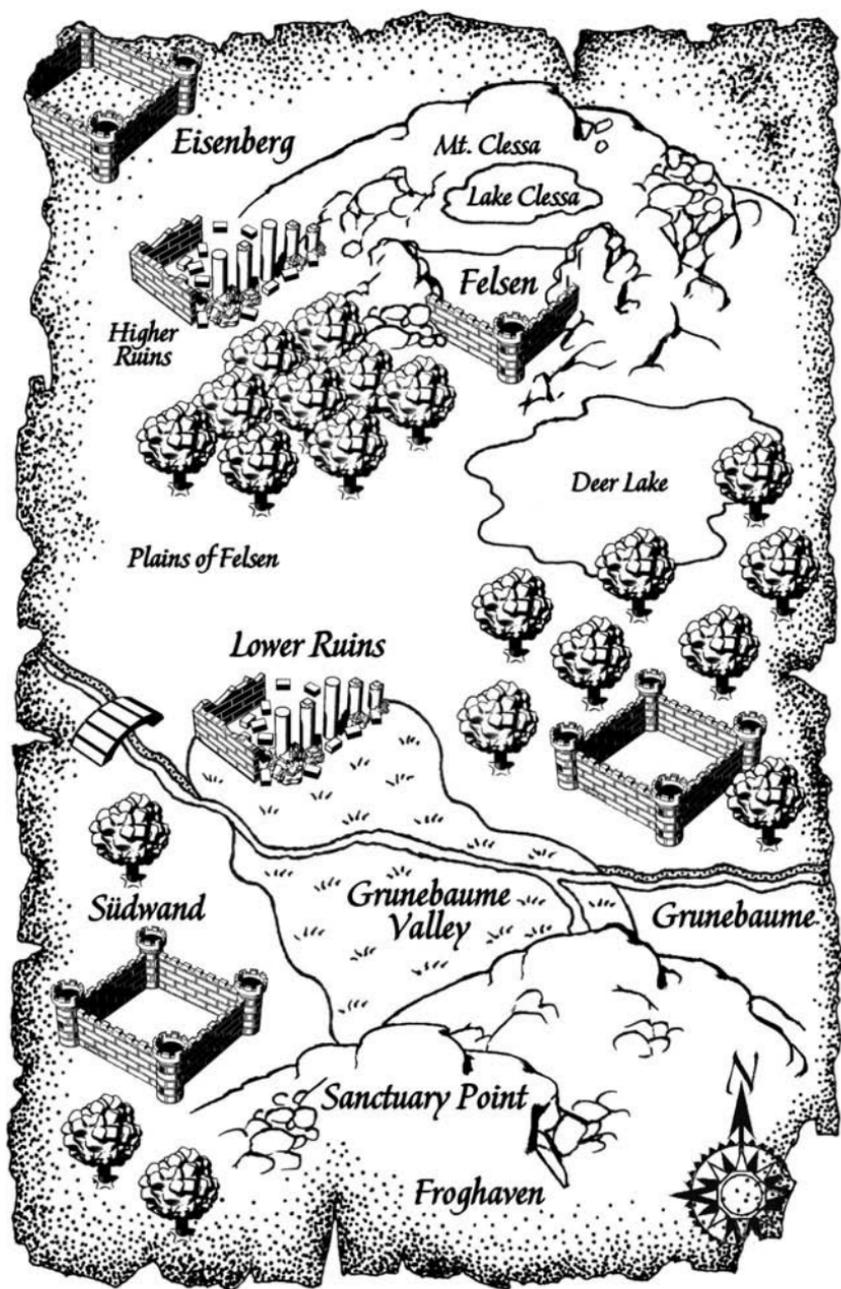
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Talla turned to Andilee. "Since we can't go anywhere until the weather clears a bit, how about another story? The wind is strong enough that I doubt anyone will hear us."

Andilee smiled. "I'd like that." She settled further into her furs. "I know King Logan regained his throne. Perhaps you could tell me about that."

Talla thought for a moment then lifted her hands, ready for a good storytelling. "More than two years had passed since Logan acquired the ancient crown and blood sword. The king and many of his followers who escaped the confines of the kingdom had established a fortress of small villages surrounded by a tall wooden wall in the mountains on the other side of the valley. Jeiyed and a large number of his best soldiers had joined Logan in the mountains, though many of his men also remained in Felsen to protect the people and help when the time came to retake the throne. Sanctuary Point, the oldest and largest of the seven villages, served as the capital of the mountain fortress. King Logan and his advisers worked and planned there. When ready, they would take back the kingdom."

Talla paused, making her face as serious as she could.

"Though many felt King Logan was still too young to lead his people into combat, Shellina's actions forced them to move their plans ahead." The historian formed balls of snow on the ground and pressed a valley between them to create a map. She used her first two fingers like legs and marched them from one snowball hill to another. "The queen had already taken Eisenberg through force and deceit. Enough time had passed that she was ready to move onto other kingdoms."

Talla's fingers marched toward the Grunebaume snowball hill ...

Not willing to wait and see if her assassins in Eisenberg were successful, Queen Shellina wasted no time setting into motion her plans to rid herself of the ever-present danger of her cousin Vance's offspring. The boy had acquired a notable following. She feared he might one day be capable of reclaiming his father's throne.

It was only a short trip down Mount Clessa to the ancient ruins, but Shellina approached the ruins slowly. Her bundled light brown hair seemed to glisten as sunlight struck the gems and gold woven into the braids. She was careful not to allow her embroidered red tunic to catch on the roots that seemed to litter the area.

The structure before her had obviously once been a beautifully ornate temple of some sort. Time, however, hadn't been kind to the architecture, leaving its well-crafted and carefully placed stones worn and disheveled. Etchings that had once covered the temple now showed only sporadically across its outer walls. Statues that had decorated the structure stood as disfigured shapes and crumbled stones. A knotted tree that grew from the building's stone tangled into the structure in a way that made it difficult to distinguish where the stone ended and where the tree's roots began. The ancient tree stood so tall that its roots framed the building's doorway. Vines covered the tree and temple.

Shellina stopped a safe distance from the doorway and studied the vines. They swayed slightly as though the wind subtly moved them back and forth. But a careful observation of the vines revealed that they moved independently to the direction of the wind.

"Captain." Shellina called to the group of men who followed nervously behind her. "Send me two men to scout this building."

She already knew which two men would be sent in. Rumor had marked the men as part of a movement to overthrow the queen and help Logan reclaim his father's throne. The queen always dealt quickly and effectively with those who might oppose her. She intended to make no exception with these soldiers. But she did hate to waste opportunity. If they were to die, she might as well benefit from their treason.

The two men moved slowly toward the ruins, their swords and shields drawn. Shellina pretended not to notice the scowls they traded with one another as they walked past her.

"On with it," she called to them. "I need to know if what I seek is still there."

They studied the tall grass that surrounded the old structure. Littered around its base were piles of bones ranging in size from small rodents to larger hoofed animals. All the bones were strewn near the base of the old temple, and many were entangled in the roots of the tree that grew from it. The men slowed their progress but continued forward, their fear evident in the way their weapons shook in their hands.

They never made it to the door. The vines that covered the structure moved quickly from the stone and entangled the two soldiers before they could repel the plants with their swords. They screamed as the vines cut into their exposed skin. More vines appeared from the

shadow of the doorway and ripped the soldiers' armor away then forced their way into the bodies of the men until their screams were silenced. The men went limp and died.

Shellina watched with fascination. After a moment, the vines released the bodies and moved back to the ruins.

A deep and broken voice echoed from the temple. "What business have you here?" Glowing red eyes slowly appeared from the shadows as the creature that resided within moved toward the doorway. "Returned to feed the caged animal?"

The queen heard gasps coming from the captain and his men as the large creature crouched and made his way out of the root-covered doorway. The creature was completely visible now. He stood nearly eight feet tall, his coarse gray skin stretched tightly over arms and legs so muscular that his arms looked more like tree limbs and his legs like the massive roots that covered the ruins. His eyes glowed red even in the light of day. His hair, streaked in various shades of red and orange, moved in the wind and gave the illusion of flames streaming from the back of his head. His nose had been transformed into a short trunk similar to those she'd once seen on the large creatures ridden in the distant kingdom of Associa. Also like those creatures, tusks protruded from the sides of his face, and his feet were nearly round and had large oval toenails.

His armor was in poor repair, but an armband he wore and the large axe he carried were in excellent condition and were obviously magical. The etchings on both glowed as the morning sun illuminated them. Mimic vines covered his entire body and flowed from him like the arms of some strange sea creature. The vines and he had become one entity.

Shellina smiled. "I need your services."

She stood still even though the large creature moved ever closer to her. Her smile grew when he stopped abruptly—pleased that the vines held him captive where she had estimated they would. Her gaze went directly to his.

"In return for your promise to do what I ask, I will release you from your prison."

He looked at the soldiers standing several yards behind her. "First"—he straightened his back—"I need to feed."

Vines shot from his body and passed so quickly and closely to the queen that her hair danced in the breeze they created. From behind her, she heard the screams of the soldiers—the men she'd brought along to protect her. The creature's reach was notably farther than it had been the first time she'd encountered him. She didn't flinch, nor did her face betray any fears she might've felt as he killed her men. She never turned to see them torn apart or the aftermath of the creature's feeding, even when the vines returned to his side.

She cleared her throat. "If you're done, we have business to conclude."

"Very well." He turned to her. "You have my attention."

Talla arched her back and held her arms in the air to make herself look as large as she could, sitting in the snow.

"Shellina had encountered the incredible behemoth years earlier, not long after it was first trapped in the ruins. She ran from the danger it presented then but later realized it could be used as a powerful weapon when needed."

"But what manner of creature was it?" Andilee asked. "I have never heard of such a thing."

Talla nodded. "Wraiths are rare."

"Wraiths?" Andilee's eyes widened.

"Wraiths." Talla repeated. "And as wraiths go, this was perhaps the most powerful to ever walk the earth." She sat back as a sincere expression moved across her face. "But he was not always such a creature. At one time, this monster was a warrior—and a gnome. Many years before Jeiyed took the post, Liam was Captain of the Guard ..."

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Talla heard snow crunching under slow-moving feet. She sat quietly and held her hand up to let the princess know they should be silent. The steps were barely audible. Their visitor either had very small feet or was exceptionally well trained.

Talla looked around the outcropping for a loose branch or stone. They were unarmed and she feared what might happen if their attackers found them defenseless. The snow covering the bushes in front of them fell to the ground from shaking leaves. Talla held her breath as a body moved out into the open. She exhaled with a gentle

giggle when she realized the eavesdropper was a large male deer.

Andilee was angered by the unnecessary anxiety and formed a snowball in her hands to throw at the beast.

"No." Talla held her hand over Andilee's. "I'm sure he didn't mean to frighten us." She smiled and looked at the deer. "Deer and unicorns are drawn to royalty." The historian gestured to their surroundings. "They can also sense when someone's in need of help. I think he's here to watch over us."

The buck was tall and its thick white-and-tan coat covered bristling muscles. Its antlers branched like a small tree resting on its head. Talla had not seen many deer or unicorn, but of the ones she had seen, this was the most impressive of them all.

The buck stood for several minutes and studied the ladies. Then it turned its back to them, watching and listening to its surroundings.

"You see." Talla covered herself again with her fur cloak. "Help has arrived."

Andilee raised an eyebrow. "Not exactly what we were hoping for."

Talla grinned. "I'll accept any help I'm offered."

The princess looked at Talla. "So how did Captain Liam become a wraith?"

Talla leaned forward and moved her hands free of cover again. "As is always true, eventually the student becomes the master and those we think will be with us forever must leave us. That day finally came for Jeiyed and Liam."

Jeiyed stood in the morning-lit courtyard and watched his old teacher climb onto the back of his massive black warhorse.

Liam's muscular arms and legs rivaled the power of his mount. He turned his horse and faced Jeiyed with a smile. "You'll make a fine Captain of the Guard. I know Felsen is safe with you protecting her."

Jeiyed struggled for a response. He had accepted the rank of Captain of the Guard reluctantly because he knew it meant the retirement of his old mentor. "We still need you here. You're the most skilled fighter we have. The absence of your guidance to our young soldiers will be gravely felt. Please reconsider."

Liam's smile held but he shook his head. "No, you are Felsen's most skilled fighter." His horse took several steps to the side and shook its head, as if it could feel the tension emanating from its rider. "I've

taught you everything I have to offer, and you've become a greater soldier than I ever was. I leave the training of future warriors in your very capable hands."

He turned his horse toward the castle's open gate and rode away without looking back.

"Farewell, Captain Jeiyed."

Liam's first stop was the ancient ruins that stood just past the Dark Woods, not far from Felsen. Once he'd thoroughly searched the ruins, he would move on to the lower ruins near the valley. If he was to thrive on his own, he would need as much ancient magic as he could find, both for protection and to sell. The ruins were so filled with danger that few items were ever removed from them—a perilous venture but very much worth the risk.

He followed the cobblestone passage that ran from the castle's outer walls down the side of Mount Clessa. At the base of the mountain, he left the road and headed toward the ruins. He slowed his horse as they approached what appeared to be an old temple buried under a mass of vines and massive tree roots.

His horse staggered and fell, trapping the old warrior's leg under its weight. Vines had entangled the horse's legs and moved quickly around the creature and onto Liam. With no weapons accessible, he could only watch as the foliage surrounded him and dragged his horse and him toward the ruins.

Talla waved her arms and fingers in a manner that imitated the movements of a plant in the wind. "Liam was snared by mimic vines at the first temple he encountered. The vines wove into his body and attempted to take it over. Only the magic items he wore kept him alive. Though he was able to maintain his mind, his body was infused with the plant. He took on the vine's desire to feed on life essence as well as its bond to the temple's magic that had animated the plant. The temple became his prison."

The historian clasped her hands together to represent a cage.

"Liam was trapped in the ruins for years until Shellina freed him." She forced the sternest expression she could muster onto her face. "But he was free only if he first did her bidding."

Jeiyed watched quietly, as a young King Logan kneeled and prepared to fire his bow.

The boy had become one of the most skilled hunters in their mountain fortress. He'd always shown a natural ability for fighting and hunting, but in the two years since his parents' death, he'd pushed himself to be worthy of his people's loyalty. Jeiyed had known Logan since he was born, and he'd also known his father, King Vance, since he was a young man. Jeiyed had met many nobles in his travels, but of all the royalty he'd met, none had impressed him more than King Logan. For that matter, few soldiers impressed him more.

At the age of eleven, Logan looked more like a young soldier than royalty. His long golden-brown hair flowed over still-developing yet notable muscles. He was taller than most gnomes his age, but Jeiyed attributed that to his elven mother.

Adding to his soldier's air, Logan had picked up some of Jeiyed's bad habits. Like Jeiyed, the young king was uncomfortable wearing armor. Although armor could save your life in major combat, it also slowed one's reflexes and tired the fighter more quickly. In a world where magic could often flow through armor as though it weren't there, both Jeiyed and Logan felt it was better to avoid being hit than to don so much armor you couldn't swing a weapon effectively.

Typically, with Jeiyed's prompting, Logan wore leather armor. Occasionally Jeiyed was able to convince the king to wear chain mail, but that was rare and usually only during foreseeable combat. Today the boy wore light leather armor, and that was only after Jeiyed had threatened to cancel the hunting day.

Logan released his arrow. As it tore through the trees, leaves danced behind it until it met its final destination that stood nearly hidden behind the forest foliage. A large boar staggered from behind the bushes and fell dead.

Jeiyed smiled. "That's your third one today. Mayhap we should stop now and leave a few for the other hunters to find."

Logan stood and turned to the captain. A weak smile almost hid the distant look in his eyes. "Thanks, Jeiyed."

"What have I done? You're the one who has managed to provide this evening's dinner for everyone."

Logan's smile widened as he put his hand on Jeiyed's shoulder.

"This was a great distraction. It's obviously no coincidence that you chose today, the anniversary of my parents' death, to go hunting."

Jeiyed nodded. "Let's go gather the kills so they can be prepared for tonight."

The two headed toward the dead boar, but Logan stopped and looked at his feet. They'd become entangled in vines. As he tried to pull free, the vines climbed up his legs and tightened.

"Mimic vines!" He yelled as he was lifted into the air.

More vines shot from the woods and wrapped around Logan's neck and arms. He managed to get his left arm near his neck before the vines wrapped around him, keeping them from strangling him. He tried to pull free, but with his sword strapped to his back, he had no way of cutting the plants.

Jeiyed pulled his sword from the sheath at his side and swung at the leafy ropes before him, cutting the young king free. He watched as Logan, unable to roll with all the vines wrapped around him, drop to the ground with a thud. Logan pulled free and brought his sword in front of himself. More mimic vines were coming. In the distance behind the vines, from the shadows of the trees, a large shape moved toward them.

"I came to kill a king and found an even greater prize." A deep voice echoed from the woods. "Jeiyed, it's been too long since last we met."

Confused, Jeiyed stood silently as the swarm of vines moved slowly to the side and revealed a large gray monster. Jeiyed studied the strange features for recognition. Finally, he managed to find a glimmer of familiarity hidden in his memories.

"Liam?"

The creature smiled.

A shiver swept through Jeiyed's body. Years of training and experience had prepared him for nearly any type of encounter, but his mind struggled with the vision before him. The creature standing before him was his teacher Liam? He was so distorted by magic and time that he was barely recognizable.

Jeiyed gathered his strength and wits and moved slowly toward the beast. "It has been a long time, old man. And time doesn't appear to have been kind to you."

Liam stopped with his feet firmly in place, flexing his arm

muscles. The vines that surrounded his body flowed faster, then several of them flew toward Jeiyed.

Jeiyed jumped to the side and rolled. The vines missed him by only a few inches. He continued his roll until he was standing again and facing Liam. He swung his sword and its blade sliced through the mimic vines as they made another attempt to entangle him.



“I think you may find that time has been kinder to me than you realize!” Liam swung his arms in a fashion that made him appear to be swimming in the vines that surrounded him. They responded to his actions by parting and moving quickly in two large clumps—one toward Jeiyed and the other toward Logan.

Logan stood with his sword held firmly in front of him. The vines closed in but parted as they touched the sword.

Liam staggered back two steps and grunted in pain. “I felt that!”

With Jeiyed firmly entangled in his mimic vines, the beast took several halting steps forward and studied the boy. “That’s an interesting sword you carry, my young King.” His vines began to circle around both sides of Logan, though they avoided contact.

“It’s the sword of my ancestors,” Logan answered. Ready for another attack, his attention focused on the vines that swarmed around him. “Come a bit closer and I’ll gladly introduce you to its blade.”

“I have heard of the sword.” Liam moved cautiously toward Logan. “Many have died trying to claim it from the old ruins of the valley.” He stopped and clenched his fists as the vines closed in on Logan. “I’m impressed to find that you were able to retrieve it.”

Logan jumped and rolled to avoid the attacking vines. There were too many. He tried to swing his sword, but his arm was being pulled away from his body, and he had little control of his movements. He glanced to his side and saw Jeiyed equally immobilized. Logan studied his surroundings in hope of some means of escape.

“I’m sure you’re a fine king,” Liam said. The vines moved Logan slowly toward him. “I can certainly tell that Jeiyed has taught you to fight well.” He held Logan so that the king’s face was only inches from his. “Had I not promised to dispatch you, I might have let you live.”

The vines moved like a whip and released Logan. The boy flew through the air and disappeared over the nearby cliff.

With the king falling to his death, Liam turned back to Jeiyed and said, “But a promise is a promise.”

“No!” Jeiyed struggled to break free from the vines. After several futile attempts, he slumped beneath the blanket of foliage wrapped around him. He could do nothing to help Logan.

2

Logan watched the grassy floor of the mountain disappear below him, a thousand foot drop to the giant trees of Froghaven taking its place. He let his sword move free from his hand as he grabbed frantically with both hands for the limbs of the shrubs as he fell past them. His shoulder ached as he stretched it out of its socket, barely catching hold of a thin branch. He slammed into the side of the cliff and held his breath as he waited to see if the twig would hold.

It held.

He quickly grabbed another larger limb within reach to secure his grip as he started his climb up to the flatland above him. His heart skipped a beat as he realized some of the leaves he was holding on to were mimic vines.

3

"Now what to do with you?" Liam mused as he held Jeiyed before him. "That's not to say I don't plan to kill you." His smile showed broken and yellowed teeth. "I'm just not sure if I should do it quickly or enjoy your suffering for a little while."

Feeling something tugging on his vines, Liam turned his gaze away from his prisoner.

"Well, what have we here?" he said upon seeing Logan rising to his feet behind him. "Aren't you resourceful?" He looked back at Jeiyed and said, "Now I know what to do with you." He threw the captain at Logan. Jeiyed was helpless to stop him.

Logan wrapped the fingers of one hand tightly around a nearby bush, then he leaned to the side and grabbed Jeiyed as he went by. The momentum carried both of them over the side of the cliff, but the bush held.

Logan felt his arm pop as he and Jeiyed slammed into the side of the cliff. A wave of nausea moved through Logan. He tried to concentrate but could feel his mind losing its focus.

Jeiyed heard Logan's arm pop and could feel his own grip slipping. As he was battered against the grass and rock, he secured his hold on the vertical slope and pulled the king close. Logan barely managed to hold onto consciousness. As Jeiyed studied the ledge for a way back up the cliff, Logan moved to a nearby bush.

"You are a tough one to kill, aren't you?" Liam looked down at them from the grass and rock above.

Vines moved across the rocks like a river of snakes. Jeiyed and Logan braced for the attack, but it never arrived. Instead, arrows began to rain past them. They looked up to see the large creature sporting arrows in his back and sides.

4

"Whomever or whatever you are," a voice called from behind Liam, "move away from the king!"

Liam turned and studied the group of about twenty soldiers standing on the hill a short distance away. The area was devoid of magic and mimic vines, so he could only call on what he had brought with him. He had been in enough battles to know that twenty-to-one odds were not favorable for victory. He looked back over the cliff at the giant trees below and smiled as an alternative plan formed in his mind. They would fight, but it would be when and where he had the advantage.

Liam turned toward the trees and ran. Despite his size, he moved very quickly. His form disappeared in a swarm of leaves as he headed into the woods.

5

After being helped from the edge of the cliff, King Logan and Jeiyed traveled back to Sanctuary Point. Logan looked to the lieutenant that led the group. "How did you know we were under attack?"

"We didn't." He pointed toward the village. "Riders from Grunebaume have arrived with important information. We were sent to let you know the representatives were here."

6

King Logan walked into the village and watched as Prince Eppon leaned against a large boulder and carefully twisted his torso to stretch his muscles until a barely audible snap announced his body had realigned itself. Logan had done similar stretches himself. They were the exercises of a soldier who had been wounded and was working his body back into shape. The prince was surrounded by eight of his elite guards, but they stood at ease because they were on friendly ground.

"Greetings, Prince Eppon." Logan extended his hand. "To what do we owe this honor?"

Eppon moved past his guards and took the king's hand. "The honor is once again mine, old friend. But I'm afraid I bring bad news." His grip firmed slightly and his jaw tightened. "Shellina's army is amassed and moving toward this mountain."

Talla's hands moved as though they were telling the story along with her words.

"The queen had dispatched Liam to kill King Logan and as many

under his command as possible. Her army would prevent Logan and his mountain fortress—a notable thorn in her side—from any future interference in her plans. This included her immediate plans to take over Grunebaume. Though her men were unable to kill your grandfather King Dant and your father the prince, they were successful in killing many of Grunebaume's generals. Plus, in much the way she'd taken her brother's kingdom and Eisenberg, she had spies spreading rumors among Grunebaume's people and convincing them that it was time for new leadership."

Talla glanced at the deer for a moment. It continued its guard but also seemed to be listening to her story. She smiled at her new audience then turned back to Andilee and continued.

"It takes time to move a large army. Fortunately for those at Sanctuary Point, Grunebaume's people were angered after Shellina's attacks. Their king dispatched a delegation to form an alliance between King Logan and Grunebaume. Drachman was part of that delegation. Shortly after he became elven again, and as soon as he was able to travel, he journeyed to Grunebaume. Under the protection of the kingdom, he became a highly-prized though secret counselor to their king while he regained his strength and ability to wield magic."

The historian shifted to get more comfortable.

"Drachman asked Crissins to stay with King Logan and help protect him since soldiers and bounty hunters doing the bidding of Shellina constantly attacked the fortress. They were especially a threat to anyone who ventured outside of its walls, and the business of a king often requires him to leave the safety of his home. Young Logan insisted on being part of any defense against attackers as well as being a part of regular hunting parties. Drachman saw a great leader in the boy. He cared much for Crissins and hated to leave her behind in danger, but he knew she would protect Logan and make the old wizard proud."

Crissins sat near the top of the large oak tree that overlooked the main courtyard where King Logan was greeting Prince Eppon and his soldiers. Standing outside the group was Drachman, the elder elf who had instructed Crissins on how to wield magic.

It had been almost two years since she had seen the wizard, and her anxiety at seeing him again was making it difficult to leave her perch. Although his wrinkled and worn skin gave some clues to Drachman's age, his strong build and youthful movements could easily

make a person forget how old he really was. When he traveled, he usually wore leather and chain mail, but his formal attire included his colorful cape. He was wearing the cape now, adding to his more youthful appearance.

Crissins ran her fingers through her hair and watched the strands fall free from her hand. The last time Drachman had seen his apprentice, she'd had much shorter blonde hair. After frequent exposure to magic use, her hair had gotten much longer and changed to a golden brown with dark brown stripes. And her fingers, although it was barely noticeable, were covered in a light golden-brown fur. She knew it was only a matter of time until her fingernails began to change. The mere fact that she'd gotten so comfortable at climbing trees was evidence of the magic's effect on her body.

She felt as though she'd let her old teacher down. He had taken great effort to train her in lesser magics that would allow her to cast with little or no change to her physical being. But the many battles required to maintain the protection of King Logan and his followers often made it necessary to tap into the more powerful magics. Crissins didn't look forward to seeing the disappointment on his face when he saw what she'd become.

She sighed as she gathered as much courage as she could muster and started her way down the tree. Despite the awkwardness of the meeting, she did look forward to seeing him again. When she was near the bottom of the tree, she noticed Drachman looking up at her. He moved quickly to greet her as she made her way to the ground and was there as she gently landed in a crouch then stood to face him.

He looked at her and smiled. "Crissins! It's wonderful to see you again." His gaze moved to her hair. "I like your new look. It suits you."

To her surprise, Crissins saw no disappointment in his eyes, only warm and friendly admiration.

"I've heard many reports on the work you've done here." Drachman put his hand on her shoulder. "You've been a major factor in keeping King Logan and his people safe." His eyes met hers. "I'm so proud of you."

Tears formed in her eyes as she threw her arms around his waist and pressed the side of her face against his chest. "I've missed you, you old wizard!" She loosened her grip a bit when she realized her strength

might be enough to bring harm to the old man's body.

He brought his arms around her in return. "I've missed you too." He smiled and was thankful she couldn't see the look of pain that was very likely on his face. Either the girl's embrace had grown stronger over the years, or his body was much more frail. Maybe both.

7

One of the first buildings constructed while Sanctuary Point was being established was the War Room—a misnomer since it was a structure rather than a single room. Its sole purpose was to provide a private location for planning battle strategies. Because of the age of the building, the lumber and rock that formed it was much rougher than other nearby structures. Its size and bulk added to the military essence of the War Room.

Logan unrolled a large map as he stood next to Prince Eppon. "I find it interesting that we were attacked just prior to the arrival of Shellina's army." He placed the map on a heavy wooden table.

Prince Eppon looked at the king in surprise. "Attacked?" He turned to Jeiyed. "By whom?"

Logan nodded at Jeiyed. "You seemed to know each other. Who—or what—was that?"

Jeiyed studied the map a moment longer then looked up at the prince. "We were attacked in the woods by the man who was the captain of the guard before I took over." He turned to Logan. "His appearance is due in part to years of magic exposure. However, the vines are something else." He looked back at the map. "I believe he is now a wraith."

"A wraith?" Logan looked at Drachman.

"An undead." Drachman moved from the other side of the room to the table. "Much like a mimic, but due to the properties of some magic item, the victim is able to retain their essence."

Drachman studied Jeiyed. The captain's jaw tightened, making it obvious that he was upset by the encounter.

"The flesh of the body is fused with the vines of the mimic plant," Drachman continued. "The person retains their mind but succumbs to the hunger of the plant." He paused a moment then said, "I seem to recall stories of a creature who resided in the lower ruins. It was trapped

as most undead are, unable to travel away from the magic item that keeps it alive." He looked at Logan. "It would take a fairly powerful magic item to free him from his restraints. Or several smaller but still powerful magic items."

Logan nodded. "I noticed a necklace of vines around his neck. I didn't think much of it at the time, but it had several small items woven into it. One looked like a fragment of a unicorn's horn."

"Then that's it." Jeiyed addressed the group. "Shellina must have gathered several magic items and brokered a deal. His services in exchange for his freedom."

"That witch!" Logan continued to study the map. "Not much she does these days surprises me." He moved his attention to the gnomes and elves in the room. "We have a battle to plan. Let's see if we can surprise her."

8

Logan looked past the cliff to the giant trees below, so lost in thought that he almost missed the sound of footstep behind him. He glanced over his shoulder to see Jeiyed approaching.

"We have several days before Shellina's troops reach the mountain," Logan said. "My sword is somewhere down there in Froghaven, though I didn't see where it fell when we were fighting the wraith. You're needed here to help plan our defense, but I'm not." He looked from the captain back down at the giant forest. "I'm going down there to find it."

Jeiyed frowned. The sword was important—both as a weapon and as a symbol of leadership—but Logan's safety was more important. But he knew the boy king would insist on being part of any search party.

"Very well," Jeiyed said with a sigh. "I'll put together a team. Please try not to get yourself killed."

9

The trip to the outer edge of Froghaven only took a few hours from the mountain fortress. Few people ventured into Froghaven intentionally, and fewer still ever returned. Despite its incredible beauty, it was equally dangerous. Its massive trees loomed in the distance long before Logan's group of travelers—Tearjon, V'rellis, Crissins, two royal guards, and King Logan—arrived. They approached the edge of a huge

stone bridge that led from a point near the bottom of the mountain and disappeared somewhere into the foliage on the other side. The chorus of the wood frogs and other exotic creatures could be heard from Sanctuary Point.

At the center of Froghaven was a lake that spanned nearly a mile across, its shore forming an almost perfect circle. The locals referred to it as The Pond because most of the foliage surrounding it, primarily giant ferns and water lilies, was better suited to a small pond than a lake, as were the frogs, which were usually about the size of a small horse.

The Pond was formed during the Great Wizards War, most likely from some long-forgotten explosion. Its water was saturated with magic affecting all life around it. Wizards frequented Froghaven, collecting the water from The Pond or slivers of wood from the trees for use in spells. However, it was unwise to remain in these woods for more than a few weeks. Over time, the magic permeating the plant life and water would cause mutations and eventually death. Only the creatures already living in Froghaven seemed unaffected by the environment.

And those creatures were magnificent. In addition to the giant frogs, Froghaven was filled with all forms of giant reptiles and insects. Birds with twenty-foot wingspans soared over the trees, many of them several hundred feet tall. Only a few mutated creatures survived and thrived in Froghaven. Among them were the winged horses and the branchers—the only people who lived in Froghaven.

The branchers' bodies had long ago become immune to the effects of magic. Of course, this meant they were also unable to wield its energies. No one knew the origin of these people. Historical accounts—unlike that of the gnomes, elves and such—made no mention of them.

Their appearance also provided no clues. They tended to be thin like the elves, yet shorter like the gnomes. Where a gnome's ear was large and round and an elf's was smaller and pointed, a brancher's ear was slightly smaller than a gnome's, rounded but ending in a point that made it resemble a bat's ear. Their skin was a natural armor of thick leather and nearly-invisible scales. Though their strength was about the same as an elf's or gnome's, their agility was legendary. Their preferred mount was the giant tree frogs that traveled via leaps through the tall trees. Additionally, branchers were able to spend long periods of time underwater where they did much of their hunting. To communicate

underwater, they developed a sophisticated language using their hands and head gestures.

Logan stopped at the edge of the stone bridge and looked across at Froghaven as he removed the last of his winter coverings. Though it was late fall—nearly winter—Froghaven was still summer like. Due to the magics that ran through its woods and waters, the temperature remained constantly warm, leading to patches of fog this time of the year at the woods' base where Froghaven met the outside world.



Logan studied the tree line. In one of the branches of a massive oak partly hidden by foliage, was a brancher wearing armor created from massive reptile scales. He carried a javelin and was watching them from the back of an armored tree frog.

Logan called up the path to Tearjon. "They know we're coming."

"Branchers," Tearjon replied. "Though some consider them to be rough and wild, they place great value on formalities and ceremony. An appearance in their court is an unavoidable detour in order to begin our search in Froghaven."

"Let's not keep their king waiting then." Logan started across the long stone bridge, and the rest of the party followed.

10

Escorted by six armed and armored brancher guards, Logan walked at the head of his party through the woven passageways of the giant trees. The paths had been created over centuries by training branches across one another. Smaller branches and vines wove across larger branches to create a solid floor.

The branchers' armor was constructed from reptile scales of various shades, ranging from green to blue to red. The shoulder guards and bracers on their armor were adorned with large ivory points, most likely the teeth and claws of enormous creatures. Logan noted that the armor must be very light, since the guards moved as though they wore nothing but cloth.

Logan admired the throne "room"—for want of a better word to describe it—as they approached it. The floor was formed in much the same manner as the walkways, but in more decorative cross patterns. There were no walls, but a labyrinth overhead of branches and vines ornately worked together to create an effective and very beautiful roof. At the far end of the large area was a throne, shaped from intricately carved pieces of ivory woven together with more branches and vines. Sprawled across the throne sat a young brancher who Logan guessed to be just a few years older than himself. He wore colorful hides and a thin silver crown woven together to simulate vines.

The brancher waved his hand casually in the air. "Greetings. I am Prince Frosch. What business do you have in Froghaven?"

"During an attack atop Sanctuary Point, I lost my sword over the cliffs. It fell somewhere here in your kingdom." He locked his gaze with the prince's. "Felsen has been friends with Froghaven for as long as I can remember. Our fathers hunted together. I was hoping King Wasser would grant us access and perhaps provide us with a guide."

"The king is on one of those hunting trips, so you'll have to deal

with me." Prince Frosch shifted from one side of the throne to the other and tilted his head to the side. "What's in it for Froghaven?"

Logan searched his mind for an answer. Their resources were limited compared to the riches found in Froghaven. He hoped Tearjon or V'rellis would take the lead. He hated negotiations.

"Friendship and honor are in it for Froghaven!" a strong voice rang out from behind them, and Logan turned to see King Wasser entering the throne room. "Heaven help Froghaven when that throne is actually yours, Frosch."

The king walked across the floor to the throne. As he did, the prince moved quickly from the chair to its side, looking every bit the part of a fox caught stealing chicken eggs.

Wasser wore armor similar to the soldiers around him, only his was blood red and somehow shinier. Logan realized that the king's armor, unlike the reptile scales of the other armor, was formed from dragon scales, larger than any he had ever seen before. Tearjon had once told Logan that as part of their rite of passage, branchers were sent into the woods alone to hunt down the creature that would be used to construct their armor. When they returned, their family worked together to build the suit. He could only imagine the battle the young prince had endured to acquire armor from a dragon.

King Wasser wore a crown much like the prince's but with gold, silver, and platinum vines with green gems forming their leaves. The man filled his royal armor with impressive muscles that showed at times where the scales overlapped as he moved.

"The people of Froghaven are honored to help you reclaim your sword, King Logan." King Wasser extended his hand to Logan, their firm grips shaking several times. "Though I fear your quest may be a bit more problematic than you realize."

The king sat on his throne and pointed to somewhere in the distance. "While hunting, we saw your battle with the wraith and watched your sword fall to Froghaven. I'm afraid it landed in the far end of The Pond." He leaned forward. "I currently have my soldiers searching, but I don't believe you are equipped to travel beneath the water."

Logan's heart sank. The king was right. With Crissins's help, he had been sure they could quickly find the sword. Branchers had the

ability to stay under water for long periods without having to surface for air—Crissins unfortunately was a gnome, not a brancher and couldn't stay underwater for more than a very few minutes. Without her leading the search, Logan worried that he would have to leave Froghaven without the weapon.

Crissins spoke from behind Logan. "We can breathe the water." Everyone's eyes turned to her. "We'll need a few things, but there is a way."

Talla stopped talking when the buck turned his head quickly and stared to their left. Something had obviously caught the creature's attention, but what? The two women sat quietly and watched the woods for some evidence of what the deer had seen or heard.

The buck shook his head back and forth, then up and down. His right front leg moved to push his hoof through the snow, then he bolted in the direction he had been watching. As he approached the woods, Talla noticed leaves moving a few yards to the left of where the deer was heading. Two men—elves from the looks of them—broke through the hedge just as the deer disappeared into them. Startled, the men turned to follow whatever had just sprinted past them.

The deer and the elves were gone. It was quiet again.

Talla and Andilee had lowered themselves into their white furs in the hope that the men would not notice them in the outcropping. The wind had died down a bit and was replaced by a light mist. With luck, the furs combined with the snow and mist had concealed them. Talla took a deep breath and forced herself to stop shaking. It was safe again, if only for the moment.

"I bet you're glad now that you didn't run him off," she whispered.

Andilee's eyes were filled with imminent tears. Talla put her arm around the princess and held her.

"I think we'll be okay for a while. And I'm sure our new friend has made it to safety." Andilee gave no response. Talla looked around them at the mist that was growing denser. She could no longer see farther than a few yards away. She decided it was probably safe to continue with her story, hoping it would calm the young princess.

"Would you like me to tell you more?" she asked.

Andilee nodded.

"Because of the magic-saturated properties of the waters filling The Pond, mimic vines near the water's edge often bloomed with a purple flower not seen on plants anywhere else."

She continued the story without the use of her right hand. She felt she could tell the rest of the story well enough with just the one hand, since her other hand was more useful calming Andilee. Talla spoke in a tone only a little louder than a whisper.

"The lavender-purple flowers resembled tropical hibiscus, only with long jagged petals instead of the smoother rounded ones on a typical hibiscus. Plus, the mimic vine petals were thin and much stiffer, able to draw blood when they raked across exposed skin."

While she talked, Talla continued to study the mist for signs of movement. She paused for a moment as Andilee repositioned herself to get comfortable.

"Crissins needed the special flowers in order for her spell to work."

An hour later, Crissins found herself swinging a sword at vines as they attempted to wrap themselves around her arms, legs and neck. Beside her, the other party members and several brancher soldiers cut through patches of mimic vines. Everyone in her group had replaced their clothing with brancher armor, since the armor they normally wore was not suited for swimming. She was amazed at how comfortable the reptilian-scaled armor was.

Crissins smiled to see that V'rellis cut nearly as many vines away from Tearjon as he did from himself. The historian was definitely not a fighter, but he was always at the king's side, no matter what the danger.

"Remember to get as many of the ones with purple flowers as you can," Crissins called out to the group. "We almost have enough." After a few more minutes of battling the vines, she called, "Okay, that should be plenty." She started moving away from The Pond. "Let's get out of here before someone gets hurt."

The brancher king had provided them with a table at the edge of the woods to prepare the flowers. On it was a mortar and pestle surrounded by a variety of herbs that Crissins had requested.

"Drachman taught me this once when he needed me to gather plants from the bottom of The Pond. Don't ask me what he needed them for." She tore the petals from the flowers, piled them in the mortar and started grinding them with the pestle. "I was just a kid at the time, but I think I've got this right."

She pinched a small amount of a powder between her fingers and

drizzled it over the shredded petals, then she scooped several leafy herbs together and placed them on top, grinding them all together. Careful not to let anything spill or blow away, she carefully scooped the contents of the mortar into a stone pitcher and mixed it with a wooden spoon. Finally, the concoction was carefully measured out and poured into six metal cups.

"Because the blooms are grown on mimic vines and are derived from Pond water, they have special properties." Crissins handed a cup to each of the party members. "If I've gotten it right, we should be able to breathe The Pond's water for about four hours." She paused with a wry smile. "If not, we'll know pretty quickly after going under the water."

11

Tearjon realized he was holding his breath even though the others around him were obviously breathing in the water. Crissins was smiling and spinning, kicking and waving her arms in fish-like motions. He could hear the members of his group speaking to one another, the sound muffled as it traveled through The Pond.

Despite Crissins's obvious success, Tearjon subconsciously struggled with the thought of the cold water rushing into his lungs. With no small effort, he released the breath he'd been holding and breathed in. To his surprise, there was no sensation of water in his lungs at all. Instead, the magics transformed the liquid to air before it entered his mouth, and not just any air. It reminded him of the crisp coolness of a fall afternoon following a short rain, clean and refreshing.

A smile stretched across his face. Being the court historian was a dangerous job, but at times like this, it was equally rewarding. He moved to catch up with the rest of the party as they headed into the deeper waters.

The elation of the moment was short lived. From somewhere to the side, a spear streaked through the water across the front of the group. Logan's party members stopped while the four brancher soldiers with them drifted forward, motioning a message to the unseen aggressors. From the darkness of the depths below them, exiting the grassy plants that waved in the water, a group of ten men and women rose.

In many ways they looked much like the branchers, the most obvious difference being their webbed hands and the long fins that

flowed from their feet. The man and woman leading the group wore clothing created from the scaled hides of large fish, sewn together with colorful cloth woven from plants. The soldiers surrounding them wore armor very similar to the branchers' armor. Tearjon's father had told him stories about the meremi, but this was his first encounter with them.

The female leading the meremi addressed one of the brancher soldiers. "You know our truce prohibits you from allowing outsiders access to these waters." She turned her gaze to Logan. "Yet you guide these people into our home. Why?" She looked back at the brancher soldiers. "And what of the large creature that entered our waters and killed several of our soldiers? Is he with you also?"

"We apologize for trespassing." Logan, still getting used to traveling through the water, waved his feet and hands so he could move to the front of the group. "We are searching for an item that was dropped into your lake during my battle with that same creature."

Tearjon realized he was again holding his breath, watching the faces of the meremi as they listened to the boy.

Logan continued. "Please direct us to where you encountered him. It's very important to us."

The female regarded Logan with a tilted head and questioning brows. "And who are you?"

He did his best attempt to bow in the water. "I am King Logan of Felsen. The item I seek is blood tied to my people."

Her stern expression softened. "The creature exited our waters and fled to the ruins with a sword carried by the mimic vines that accompanied him." She addressed the entire group. "We will bring you to where my soldiers encountered the beast and show you where he entered the ruins." The stern look returned to her face. "Please try to keep your business with the creature out of our Pond."

12

There was a great deal unknown about Froghaven. Tearjon was surprised to hear that there were ruins located somewhere close to The Pond—surprised and a little excited for the chance to explore them. The male and female meremi who led the group left with two of their soldiers, leaving six soldiers to guide Logan's group to where they had encountered the wraith. Tearjon watched as they described to V'rellis

their fight with the creature. After several minutes of talking and pointing at different areas of the rocks and grasses around them, they directed his attention to the rocky wall in the distance.

"He fled into the ruins at the base of those rocks," one of the soldiers said. "And his vines carried several of my men with him."

The meremi soldiers led V'rellis and the party to the edge of The Pond. Closing in on what looked like a mountain of stone and moss, Tearjon noticed an opening at its base. Near the mouth of the cave he realized the rocks around it were actually the worn remains of an old temple entrance that must have slid down into the hole that later became The Pond.

"This is where the wraith escaped as we fought his vines," the soldier said. "That's the last we saw of—" The meremi's eyes suddenly widened. His words would not form, so he pointed.

From the shadows, mimic vines were moving toward them. Behind the vines swam a group of meremi soldiers, their clothing and armor torn with vines woven through and around their bodies. They swam with stiff, jerky movements, carrying their weapons into battle.

V'rellis was the first to react. He held his sword at an angle before him and swam to meet the attackers. "I've never done combat in water before." He landed softly on the ground and readied his weapon as he faced the leading mimic. "This should prove challenging."

Tearjon readied his sword and struggled to steady himself in the water. "I'm not sure *challenging* is serious enough to describe the situation."

13

The combat went on for several minutes. Although there were only seven mimics, the vines easily leveled the battlefield against their twelve opponents. After a few swings of his sword, Tearjon managed to adapt his fighting to the awkward environment. On the occasion that someone cut him free from the vines, he was quick to thank them.

The historian moved away from the fighting and studied the battle at a safe distance. Something troubled him and he needed a moment to focus. *I've never heard of a meremi being taken by mimic vines.*

His mind wandered. Though mimic vines were plentiful in Froghaven, he knew the branchers were unaffected by magic. It would

stand to reason that mimic vines could kill branchers but not be able to take over their bodies. *Are all creatures in Froghaven immune to magic?* It made sense that they would need to be in order to survive there. *So, how are the mimic vines manipulating the meremi?* He turned his attention to the shadows of the ruins' entrance. There he saw the outline of the wraith's large form swinging its arms, working the meremi soldiers like puppets.

"V'rellis!" Tearjon called to the elf. "It's him! The wraith is controlling them!"

V'rellis looked at the cave where Tearjon was pointing, then he cut free from the vines around him and swam toward the ruins. Seeing him, the wraith turned and disappeared into the darkness. As Liam fled, the vines released the slain meremi soldiers, and their bodies drifted to the ground. The mimic vines continued their attack, but without the control of the wraith, the vines lost organization, so the fight was over quickly. The twelve members of Logan's group—branchers, meremi, gnomes and elf—headed into the old temple.

Tearjon heard Crissins mumbling behind him and turned in time to see her release what looked like a large bubble filled with glowing gasses swirling inside. The bubble left her hands and drifted through the water to the front of the group, staying in front of them as they worked their way into the ruins. The new source of light revealed a mass of stones and fallen pillars that formed a tunnel spiraling upward. The murky waters in the ruins created an eerie fog that became denser as the group stirred the sands covering everything around them. They cautiously moved through the passage.

After a considerable swim through the happenstance tunnel, they made it to the water's surface. Crissins's bubble released the gas, which retained its spherical shape and glow. The rectangular pool they stood in opened into more ruins. The square and cylindrically cut stones that made up the old temple were more obvious here. In the center of the chamber overlooking the pool, the wraith waited.

Tearjon felt himself being pushed back into the water by an invisible hand. Around him, the other party members were also falling into the water. Still standing above them, Crissins swept her hands backward, using her magic to drive them to safety. As Tearjon watched, she pulled a palm full of powder from a pouch and rubbed her hands

together. Throwing her hands open toward the wraith, a ball of fire flew at the creature. Crissins fell backward into the pool as the blast filled the small area.

The water around them grew very warm, and Tearjon heard a deep voice from above screaming in pain. The flames lit the water, clearly revealing the twelve faces all watching anxiously. Then everything was dark again.

Crissins created another ball of light, and the group moved out of the water. On the far side of the room, the wraith was on his hands and knees. The few mimic vines that had survived the blast slowly moved away from his body. He sat quietly with his head down for a moment, then he looked at the group and smiled.

The rough, blistering patches of burns that covered Liam's body slowly smoothed out and disappeared. Age-old cuts, previously held open by the vines, healed before their eyes. Rotted flesh mended itself. The wizard's fireball had destroyed and driven out the mimic vines, allowing the magic item that sustained him to finally heal the wounds that had been constantly inflicted on him by the vines. Tearjon noticed that the etchings on Liam's gauntlets had begun to glow, and the massive axe he carried also emitted a new luminosity. One or both had allowed him to survive the mimic vines all these years and were now healing him.

Liam slowly rose to his feet. He was so tall that he had to bend his head to avoid the rafters of the ceiling. His smooth gray muscles bulged clearly from the few parts of his body where chain mail and armor were missing. His hair was restored to a long red-and-orange mane. The tusks flowing from his face glistened as though polished to a gleam. In his right hand he held his axe, and in his left hand was Logan's sword.

Tearjon watched the creature's eyes. They studied the people before him, but his face hid his thoughts, making it impossible to guess what he was thinking. When the beast finally spoke, a chill washed over Tearjon's skin.

"You continue to impress me, young king." Liam looked directly at Logan, and Tearjon swore he saw warmth in the creature's eyes as he tossed the sword, hilt first, to the ground at Logan's feet. "I suspect Felsen would benefit far greater with you ruling over her instead of that hag Shellina. Tell Jeiyed I said 'bygones' and all that drivel." His gaze

drifted to the brancher soldiers. "I am truly sorry for what I did to your people."

Before anyone could fully process his words, Liam turned quickly and disappeared down a partially collapsed hallway. Despite his massive size and the narrowness of the opening, he navigated the passage with incredible speed.

Logan and his group watched him in stunned silence.

"They just stood there," Talla concluded, "as this massive gray man disappeared into the ruins. The danger had ended so quickly, no one knew how to react. Later, they made their final appearance before the brancher king and returned home."

"So they made it out of Froghaven safely?" Andilee asked from under her furs, shivering slightly from the cold.

"Not without injuries, but yes, they all lived," Talla answered. She had also retreated under her furs and had given up on using her hands to help tell the story.

The mists were still heavy and it was difficult to see much beyond the alcove. The winds had almost completely stopped, so sound carried well now. Talla listened and thought she heard something working its way through the woods. At first it was so faint that she doubted it was anything but her imagination. But as the sound grew louder, she was able to tell that whatever it was, it was larger than the deer they had seen earlier.

The two women held each other for comfort and buried themselves so deeply into their furs that their eyes could barely see over them. Gradually, a shape formed as it moved closer through the mist. It appeared to be a large horse with a rider.

"You always could tell a good story." A male voice drifted to them through the fog. "I guess it runs in your family."

As the mist cleared around the rider, Talla found herself looking up at a beautiful brown-and-white unicorn with King Logan gazing down at them over its mane. Talla and Andilee stood quickly and drew their furs around their shoulders.

"You found us," Talla said as she reached up and patted the unicorn's nose. "I never doubted you would."

"I believe you," Logan said with a smile. "Why else would you have sat here in the middle of the woods, yelling your story out for all to hear?" He held his hand out to Talla.

"I was whispering." She slapped his leg in a playful jest but took the hand he offered and climbed up behind him.

Other riders on horseback joined them. Several were scouts and

several were soldiers. Andilee took the offer of one of the soldiers and rode with him.

"What about our owls?" she asked.

"I'm afraid they were both killed," he replied. "We have soldiers tracking your attackers."

Their trip back to the safety of the castle was short and silent. The women were tired, and their rescuers kept their focus on the woods and the possible dangers around them. Andilee's mind was filled with thoughts of the young boy who had later become king. Talla's story left her eager for the story's conclusion.

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20

Across the valley, Liam stood on the edge of an outcropping of rocks watching Felsen's army amass near the fortress walls. He paid close attention to the commanders as they moved their troops and equipment into place. Wistfully, Liam tried to remember the sense of completeness that came with directing men and inspiring them in combat.

He wished he could reclaim the fond memories of being the Captain of the Guard, but his mind was too flooded with images from the century of torture he'd suffered from the mimic vines that had torn through his flesh and muscles every moment that they possessed him. His only reprieve had come on the rare occasion that an animal approached close enough for the vines to catch them. As they fed on the hapless animal, he was able to heal briefly, only to be cut into again when they finished feeding. The larger the animal, the longer the vines left him alone. He hated himself for enjoying the torture and death of elves and gnomes who fell into the vines' trap, but the plants would feast on their essence longer, and he sometimes managed as much as an hour's rest after their death before the vines resumed their consumption of his energies.

His physical form had finally healed with his body rid of the mimics. He doubted the scars in his mind would ever allow him to be free of the nightmare he had lived for so long.

21

Logan's forces at Sanctuary Point were faring much worse than those at Felsen. Shellina's army had managed to move several catapults up the mountain and position them close to the fortress's wooden wall. After archers from both sides aimed their arrows at one another, the large weapons were used. In a short time a portion of the wall had fallen to a barrage of flaming boulders doused in oils and set afire to make the projectiles even more deadly.

Prince Eppon had moved his men away from the wall during its attack and readied his troops when the enemy soldiers headed for the opening. He grew curious when they stopped far short of entering. Before he could investigate, a large form stepped into the breach with its back to the prince.

Liam blocked their entrance with his gauntlets and massive axe glowing, challenging the attackers. He took a second to glance over his shoulder and smile at Eppon, then he returned his attention to the soldiers in front of him and charged.

His massive size and unexpected speed caught them unprepared. He cleared several men at a time with each swing of his battleaxe, plowing his way through the crowd. The thrill of the moment overcame the warrior and he released a thunderous growl, further unnerving the unlucky soldiers in his path.

Gathering his wits, Prince Eppon instructed two groups of his men to flank Liam's attack on both sides so that Shellina's soldiers were hit from three directions. He held back the remainder of his men to watch how things unfolded and see where they were most needed.

With a wry smile, Eppon pondered the course of the battle. He'd known it was quite possible that he would die alongside these soldiers this day, but now the winds of victory blew in their favor, and from the most unlikely of allies.

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Liam surveyed the battlefield, barely able to stand. His wounds were probably not life threatening but would take a while to heal, even with the magic of his gauntlets. Without them, he would have died halfway through the conflict.

When he felt a hand rest on his back, his pain lessened. He turned

to see Drachman casting a healing spell.

"Use your magic to help the others" Liam said. "My trinkets will heal my wounds eventually."

"No doubt," Drachman answered. "Those are some impressive artifacts you carry. Still, I can ease a little of your pain. I have already helped everyone else as much as I can. I wish I could do more, but I'm a bit limited these days."

Liam motioned toward the fallen soldiers in front of them with his battleaxe. "There are more of their dead than ours. I suppose that means we won." He looked from the wizard standing beside him to the bodies, then he turned and slowly walked away. "Be well, old man."

Prince Eppon moved to the wizard's side and watched the massive warrior as he left. "Our casualties would have been much worse without his help. I'm glad he rejoined the living."

"I'm sure he is as well." Drachman nodded. "But I suspect there's a part of him that wishes he had perished today." He stretched his back slightly until it produced an audible snap. "It is possible to have lived too long and seen too much."

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1

Falin stood with his back hunched, his hand tingling from the glowing crystal stone he extended toward his enemy. His body trembled as much from fear as from the magical energies that surged through him from the crystal. This was the first time he had used his family's power stone. Under other circumstances, he might have been elated by the connection he was feeling with the crystal, but facing an unknown wizard whose mutations clearly marked him as much more experienced than a young gnome like himself left Falin only frightened.

"What... what do you want?" Falin did his best to appear strong.

"Why, that beautiful crystalline jewel you're holding there," the wizard said in a playful tone.

"It won't work for you. It's... blood tied." Falin held the rock tighter. "It will only work for me."

"Not a problem. I can fix that." The wizard walked slowly toward Falin. "Bring the item to me."

"No!" Falin didn't cast a spell, but his desire to keep the other wizard away activated the stone. His energy focused through it and projected a blast of wind at the aggressor.

The older wizard was thrown several feet across rocks and roots to slam against the stone wall of the ancient ruins that surrounded them. He staggered slightly as he regained his footing.

"Impressive." The wizard moved toward the young mage again.

"Stay back! Don't come any closer." Falin reached into the small pouch at his side—hidden from the wizard's view because of his outstretched hand that held the stone—and removed a pinch of powder.

The older wizard raised his right hand and dropped it quickly to his side, causing the rocks surrounding Falin to rise. The young gnome jumped away but not before a group of small boulders slammed into him from all sides. He fell to the ground and the other wizard moved forward to stand over him.

Falin tried to move but stopped when he was stunned by severe pain—most likely from several broken bones. He thought of his wife and daughter and was no longer afraid. He knew he was going to die and only regretted that he would not get to see his family again. He held the stone up for the older wizard to take.

"Here. It's yours."

Falin knew a fireball was one of the easiest spells to cast, and he could only guess how casting one through the magic-etched crystal would increase its damage. He suspected it would certainly kill him, but he hoped it would kill the other wizard as well. He rubbed the powder between his thumb and fingers to ignite it as he cast his spell.

Despite the searing pain that consumed him before he died, Falin smiled. The fireball had been everything he had hoped it would be.

Talla pulled gently on her horse's reins until he came to a stop.

She allowed herself a moment to enjoy the warm sun on her face as she scanned the land before her. From where she sat, she could see across the entire valley, clear to the mountains that lay beyond. It was a beautiful day for riding, and there was no finer country to ride through. She closed her eyes and breathed in the

wonderful scent of the lavender that lined the edge of the plateau overlooking the dale.

"Are we there yet?" Dhayli's voice broke the silence from behind her.

Talla opened her eyes at the sound of her daughter's voice. With a sigh and a smile, the historian turned her horse to face the four gnome children traveling with the group. Behind young Dhayli were King Logan's two sons—fourteen-year-old Warren and eleven-year-old Jon—followed by their nine-year-old sister, Laura. As the oldest, Warren was most likely to someday sit on his father's throne. Talla was more than a little proud that Dhayli already rode nearly as well as Jon or Laura despite being only five years old. Traveling with them were six of the king's best soldiers to ensure the safety of the gnome historian and the children on their outing.

"As a matter of fact," Talla answered Dhayli, "yes, we are *there*."

"Where?" Warren leaned forward in his saddle and scanned the horizon, his long brownish-blond hair blowing gently in the wind.

Talla pointed. "Look over along the edge of the valley. Do you see those shapes in the distance?" The children all looked and nodded. "Those are the Lower Ruins."

Their horses began to shift restlessly as the offspring strained to see as much of the ruins as possible. They had been told many tales about the Lower Ruins, but this was the first time they had been allowed to be anywhere near them.

"Today's history lesson starts right here," Talla said. "The story begins many years ago with a battle between two wizards." She let the words hang in the air a moment while she enjoyed the rapt attention of the wide-eyed children, all of them completely focused on her now. "Although one wizard wielded a powerful magical stone made of quartz, the other possessed much greater skill." She looked toward the ruins as she envisioned the confrontation in her mind. "In the end, skill won out over raw power. The more experienced wizard—although severely injured and drained—managed to take the gem from the other mage. But it was a hollow victory, because the magic item was blood tied."

"You mean like my father's sword?" Warren asked.

"Exactly." Talla nodded her approval. "The stone had been made for the younger wizard's family, so only those from their bloodline could use it. Any other wizard would have very little success using the gem and could even be injured if they tried to focus their energies through the crystal."

Warren sat back in his saddle. "So he couldn't use the stone."

"The older wizard knew of a way to transfer the bind of the item to his own bloodline. Unfortunately, the younger wizard died before he could cast the spell."

Talla leaned toward the children to speak in a hushed voice and add intrigue to the story.

"But the wizard was cunning and quickly formed another plan—a plan that would take years to come to fruition. Wizards are patient by nature, and the prize was worth the wait."

The gnome girl clenched her seven-year-old fists as she stood next to the bloodied body of her mother, tears blurring her vision. She kept her mother between herself and the three elven men who were toying with her by slowly circling her mother's body.

"Now, little girly, come to your papa," the unkempt man said as he held his hand out to the girl.

"My father's dead, and you're not even fit to wear his boots!" She reached to her side and pulled out a small dagger. "You'll be dead too if you don't leave me alone!" She swung the blade several times at the men.

The man who'd spoken laughed at her actions, but all three men moved a couple steps back to avoid accidental contact with the dagger.

"Come now, dearie," he said. "Put that away and come to papa." All three men laughed.

The girl moved back and was surprised when the men didn't follow. Instead, they fell silent with blank expressions on their faces. One by one, they fell to the ground. The child moved farther away and looked behind her for what had caused them to drop. A cloaked figure emerged from the woods.

"Are you okay, child?" the man said. "May I see to your mother?"

She stood still and watched as he approached, not sure what to do. He dropped to one knee and studied the woman.

"I'm sorry. I can't do anything to help her." He looked up at the girl. "I'm afraid she's gone."

She studied the man, her mind numb from everything that had happened. She struggled to make sense of it all. When the man removed his hood, she took a step back—not so much from fear as from surprise at what she saw. Although she could tell he was an elf, his hair looked

more like fur or a lion's mane. His face was scarred on one side and had many catlike features. She could see fur on his hands, and claws replaced his fingernails.

Her father was killed when she was only five, but she had memories of him and those her family had traveled with when he was alive, so she was accustomed to seeing people who looked like animals. She continued to study the cloaked man and wait to see what he would do.

"Hi, I'm Maison," he said with a sad smile. "What's your name?"

"Crissins." She dropped her dagger and began to cry.

The man moved slowly to her side, kneeling to put his arm around her. "I'm sorry this happened to you. I heard you say your father was also gone. Do you have any family I can take you to?"

Crissins shook her head.

"Then you'll come with me." He stood up and held out his hand to her. "I'll take care of you. And I'll train you to make sure no one will ever hurt you again."

Talla swung her leg over her horse and slid off her saddle. The children followed her lead and dismounted too. Talla tied her horse's reins to the limb of a tree, and the children again followed suit. The soldiers looked to their commander and got off their horses after he nodded.

"Crissins trained for three years under Maison," Talla said, running her hand along her arms and across her face. "As you know, the use of magic changes those who use it. Their skin, hair, eyes—everything slowly transforms. The more powerful the magic, the faster and more pronounced are the changes."

She picked up a limb without branches that was straight enough to look like a staff. She twirled it from side to side as Jeiyed had trained her to do. She wasn't a soldier by any means, but she had gained enough skill from the captain of the guard to hold back a common thief.

"Wizardry requires great mental and physical discipline. If an apprentice is exposed to magic too soon, the changes can occur too quickly and be disruptive to their training." She turned to the children and leaned on the staff as though it were a walking stick. "So, like many wizard apprentices, Crissins was taught to focus her training on a non-magical weapon—the staff—in order to sharpen her mind

without the dangers of magic." Talla waved her hand back and forth. "She still learned magic, but only simple spells that would get her comfortable with controlling the energies in her body and around her. Training with the staff gave her the control she would need to be a wizard."

The children's eyes followed her every move.

"Maison was a powerful wizard with years of experience, so most of his body had transformed. If it hadn't been for the fact that his hands and feet were still those of an elf and he continued to walk upright, he might have been mistaken for a lion." Talla paused to smile. "Well, and of course the fact that he wore clothes was a bit of a clue."

She waited a moment for the children's chuckles to subside.

"Because of his appearance, Maison—like many wizards—relied on his apprentice to do those errands that required being around large groups of people."

"Like shopping in town?" Dhayli broke in.

"Like shopping in town." Talla nodded. "And it was during one of Crissins's trips into town that she met the great wizard Drachman."

More than a dozen children lined the dirt-and-stone streets, eagerly watching for signs of the wizard. They knew to stay out of the streets in case a rider on horseback or a cart needed to pass through.

"There he is!" one of the children cried.

As soon as the wizard was spotted, the children no longer worried about the traffic around them and rushed into the street in front of the tall, hooded figure.

"Who dares block the path of the great and powerful wizard Drachman?" he called out to the young crowd.

"We do!" they all shouted back.

The elven wizard removed his hood and laughed so hard that he bent forward slightly. The scene might have been confusing to those who had never met Drachman. Most would be at least a little nervous at his appearance. His face was slightly elongated and covered in small scales that disappeared into the white cotton-like hair on the back of his head and the long beard flowing from his chin. His pointed ears were longer than most elves' and his eyes were dark with slits like those of a dragon. Two short horns gently rode backward off the top of his head.

The hands he put forward to hold back the children were covered in scales and ended in black claws, yet the children pulled on his cloak and ran around him as though they didn't notice his unusual form.

"Let's see here..." Drachman dug through the pouch at his side. "What do we have today?" He pulled out a handful of beer root he had gathered from the woods. When sucked on, its natural flavor was pleasantly sweet and much like candy. The root quickly disappeared from his hand.

"All right now, I have things to do." He smiled and waved his hand, a stream of light and sparkles trailing from it. "It's time to vanish."

The children all ran away, laughing and enjoying their treats. Most wizards hid under their cloaks and flowing garments to hide the mutations that came with years of practicing magic, but Drachman wore colorful clothing that called attention to him and kept his head exposed more often than he covered it. Those who had never met the wizard had most likely heard of him. If he wasn't the most powerful living wizard, he certainly wasn't bested by many.

The stories of his epic battles, though sometimes exaggerated by storytellers over the years, left no doubt that he was to be respected and even feared. But his friendly demeanor quickly dismissed those feelings in most people. Only his enemies needed to fear him.

He continued down the street, giving the occasional nod hello to passersby. When he reached his destination—a small shop that supplied many of the items magic users needed in their spells—Drachman gently pushed aside the cloth that covered the building's entrance and stepped inside. But before he crossed the threshold, he was nudged aside by a young gnomish girl of about nine or ten as she moved quickly out the door.

"Sorry. Excuse me." She hurried away, waving a hand to the wizard without looking back. She carried a small pouch that she appeared to have just purchased.

"Adryel?" Drachman turned from the shop and followed the girl.

Falin was a wizard who had been a friend of Drachman's. He and his wife Adryel had been killed years earlier, and their young daughter was also rumored to be dead. Drachman now doubted those rumors at the sight of the young girl who looked just like Adryel.

For years, magic had been slowly changing Drachman into the

form of a dragon. He had a long way to go before the final transformation, but he already possessed some of the advantages of the beasts. His eyes could see marks in the dirt that matched the curve of the girl's shoes, and he could smell her scent even though she was nowhere to be seen. Unconcerned about losing her trail, Drachman strolled leisurely as he pursued the young gnome girl.

2

Maison opened the small pouch and removed six small crystals. "Good. These will work well. We can begin your lessons on simple illusions."

"So you finally mastered illusion, Maison. Can you cast a fireball, or do I need to teach her that one?" A cloaked figure stepped from behind a large tree and removed his hood.

"Drac—Drachman?" Maison's face grew pale for a moment. After regaining his composure, he forced a nervous smile and motioned the wizard into their campsite. "Welcome. Please join us."

He placed a hand on the young girl's shoulder and turned her to face the older wizard. "Crissins, this is the great wizard Drachman. Drachman, I present my apprentice Crissins."

"Crissins." When Drachman heard the name, he remembered it from years past. "So this is Falin and Adryel's daughter."

"You knew my parents?" The girl stepped forward with her eyes wide.

"Yes, I did. You and I have met once or twice, but I wouldn't expect you to remember. You were only a baby." Drachman smiled. "I'm pleased to see you are well. You look just like your mother. Perhaps after you're done practicing, I could tell you a story or two about my adventures with your parents." He leaned against a nearby boulder and folded his arms.

"Yes!" she said, then thought better of her rashness. She turned to her teacher for approval. "Can he stay for supper?"

Maison gave her a strained smile. "Of course. Please stay and eat with us."

"Very well, thank you." Drachman reached into the larger pouch at his side and pulled out a bundle of parchment. He unfolded it to reveal several fish that had been prepared for cooking. "I picked these up in town today. Perhaps you will allow me to add them to our meal."

Maison managed—with some effort—to produce another smile. "Of course. That would be nice."

3

Drachman watched Crissins practice while he prepared their meal. She held the small crystals in her open palm, her eyes focused on them and her lower lip caught between her teeth as she concentrated. A soft light formed across her hand, and the crystals started to glow.

"Very good," Maison said as he watched over her shoulder. "Now project that light through the crystals. Form a picture in your mind and project it."

A spectrum of colors shimmered in front of the girl. She concentrated harder, and the colors moved around but never turned into anything recognizable.

"That's enough for today." Maison put a hand on her shoulder. "You did fine for your first lesson."

"I'll say." Drachman, who had remained silent throughout her training, finally cut in. "For one so young, your skills are quite impressive."

Her face flushed and she smiled. "Thank you."

"Now, let's eat." Drachman readied the smooth planks of wood holding their supper.

4

The first part of their meal held very little conversation. Not only was everyone hungry, but their servings were well-prepared too. It was common for wizards—because of their knowledge of plants and herbs—to be good cooks, and Drachman's culinary skills were better than most. The three ate quietly, enjoying their food.

"Can you tell me about my parents?" Crissins was the first to break the silence.

Drachman smiled and nodded. "I actually knew your grandfather before your father. He and I were good friends."

Crissins's head tilted slightly as she realized the wizard might be considerably older than he appeared.

"Like me," Drachman continued, "your grandfather came from

lands far away from here. And like most wizards, we were both drawn here because the magic in these lands is the oldest. The origin of magic comes from the ruins that reside here. There were times when we traveled together."

Drachman poured some water into a cup and took a sip before going on.

"But for the most part, our paths went in different directions." His face, though still showing warmth, grew serious as he looked at Crissins. "Your grandfather was a great wizard. Although he died when your father was barely an adult, Falin learned quite a lot while apprenticing under him." He looked at Maison for a moment and then back to the girl. "Had your father lived longer, I know he'd have become a very impressive wizard."

"And my mother?" Crissins asked.

"She was a beautiful woman, and quite the warrior as well." Drachman smiled as he took his final bite of food and placed the empty wooden plank on the ground. "She picked up a few simple spells from your father, but she wasn't a mage. She left the magic to him. Their skills complemented each other well, and together they were quite formidable in a fight." He thought for a moment before continuing. "I was told they were apart when they were killed. I suspect things might have turned out differently if they had been together. Until today, I thought you were killed with them. I'm quite pleased to see that you're not only alive but doing well."

Maison studied Drachman for a moment as their eyes made contact, then he smiled. "I'm glad I found her before she was harmed. She has become a respectable apprentice."

Drachman nodded. "That she has. I'm sure you'll keep her safe until she's ready to be a wizard on her own."

"We start my quest tomorrow," Crissins said with a broad smile.

Her statement surprised Drachman and he was silent for a moment before saying, "Your quest?"

"Yes. Maison says I'm ready. My family has a blood-tied power stone that was lost when my father died." She pulled out a map and pointed at a spot on it. "We have new information about where it might be."

Drachman turned to Maison. "Really? I'm intrigued."

Maison's face was emotionless when he met Drachman's gaze. "Yes, I had learned of its existence years ago, but I didn't have any clue as to where it might be until now. Crissins is still a little young to channel its powers, but she should soon be old enough to start learning to use it." He looked at the campfire then back at Drachman. "There are rumors that a mage found the stone in the lower ruins and died after attempting to use it. As you know, it's dangerous for anyone other than Crissins." He looked to Drachman for confirmation, but the older wizard just stood silently and listened. "Anyway, I now have clues where we may find it."

"Might I join you on this quest?" Drachman asked.

Maison stood quietly for a moment looking at Drachman before turning to Crissins, who was shaking with excitement.

"Of course you may join us." With his back to the Drachman, Maison's eyes narrowed and his smile flattened. "That would be nice."

Warren looked up from the blade of grass he had been playing with while listening to Talla's lesson. "Did Drachman want the stone?"

"Did Drachman kill Crissins's parents?" Laura asked.

"No, he's a good wizard!" Dhayli protested.

"Dhayli's right," Jon said, then a look of doubt crossed his face. "She's right, isn't she?"

The children all turned to Talla for her reply, their faces rapt with eagerness.

Talla smiled. "You'll have to wait until the end of the story to find out."

"Well, how much of a quest could it be if they knew where the stone was located?" Warren asked.

"They knew the area where it was located," Talla answered, "but they didn't know exactly where it was." She sat on the ground near a large tree and rested her back against it. "And the area was very dangerous. Even with two wizards, they needed help."

Anna moved slowly along the round edge of the coned rooftop while scanning the tall stone walls and courtyard that surrounded the cylindrical, castle-like building below her. Her thin boyish frame aided her in both climbing and hiding.

Her father was a brancher, another reason she was such a good

climber. Most branchers lived their entire lives in the giant trees of Froghaven, and their children can often climb before they can walk. The elf blood Anna got from her mother took away a little of her natural climbing ability, but it also allowed her to use magic and magical artifacts. Anna felt she had gained the best of both worlds from her parents. Branchers couldn't manipulate magic but also weren't affected by it, so she had that advantage over gnomes and elves. And she hoped that would help her now to bypass the keep's defenses.

Her hair was streaked in stripes of black and brown—light striped hair was common among branchers and dark hair common for elves. Her skin was a medium brown, characteristic of both sides of her ancestry. Her dark hair and the black clothing she wore also allowed her to easily merge with the shadows when needed.

As keeps went, this one wasn't exceptionally large, but it was as well guarded as any castle Anna had ever broken into—and that was a large number. Magic and traps instead of guards protected this structure, and she would have preferred the guards. They were easier to notice and less dangerous.

Though the people of the small town that surrounded the structure still referred to it as "The Keep," it had long ago ceased being used as a military or royal stronghold. Instead, it held several magical items placed there by the town's wizard for safekeeping. At the tower's base was a dungeon the town used as their jail. Anna had no intention of visiting that part of the keep.

She made the difficult transition from the wooden rooftop to the stone walls. Using special leather gloves and shoes lined with tiny metal teeth to improve her foothold, she carefully worked her way to the nearest window, only to find that wooden shutters secured by a metal latch blocked her entrance. She worked a thin wire into the opening between the shutters and lifted the latch, then she made her way through the window and worked her way up the spiraling stairs to the room at the top of the tower.

As soon as she touched the door, a spark flew from the handle and sent her tumbling down several stairs before she was able to find a handhold and stop her fall. After making her way slowly back to the door, she moved her shoulder back and forth to work out the ache, inwardly thanking her father for being a brancher. She was sure the

magical charge would have killed most others.

She studied the iron door handle and saw that it had etchings filled with very small amounts of gold. Cursing the wizard who'd placed the magical trap on the door, she also cursed herself for missing it.

The etchings—called runes—were a minor spell. Anna was thankful for that. If it had been too difficult to get past, she would've had to find another way in. For a simple rune, she could carefully scratch out the gold using a sliver of deer antler. A unicorn's horn was one of the most powerful natural sources of magic to be found, but a deer's antlers were the opposite. Deer were the natural enemy of unicorns—not because they couldn't get along, only that they cancelled each other out. The antlers of a deer easily parried the single-horned attacks of a unicorn and also negated the magic in its horn.

Anna caught the flakes of gold as she scratched them free from the handle. The small quantity of gold wasn't terribly valuable, but she didn't like to waste anything. With the runes gone, she examined the door again. Where the door met the doorframe she saw a coiled piece of metal—a trigger!

She looked at the walls next to the door. Small holes ran up both sides. After securing a piece of rope to the handle, she stepped back and pulled. Darts—most likely poisoned—shot from the holes and bounced off the opposing walls before falling harmlessly to the ground.

A final look indicated it was safe to open the door. Anna pushed it open and looked inside. The room was large and covered the entire circumference of the tower. Lit torches lined the walls and cast a moving glow across the floor. Two wizards and a young gnomish girl sat at a table in the middle of the room, eating bread and cheese and drinking ale.

"Welcome, young lady." The wizard that looked like a giant cat motioned her in. "You've passed our little test."

The other wizard, the one with horns and scales, stood and slid a chair from the table for her to sit on. "Please join us."

"They set a trap for her?" Jon said with a smile.

"Not really a trap," Talla answered. "More like an invitation and a test."

The children all sat quietly in front of Talla as she continued her

story.

"Maison spread word of a bounty on a weapon rumored to be in the keep. His plan was to pay the bounty to the first thief who managed to get past the traps he had set, then ask them to join their quest. They needed someone capable of getting past the traps that would be found in the ruins." She nodded. "Anna was very capable."

"But a thief?" Laura asked. "They wanted to hire a thief?"

"I'm sure they would have preferred not working with a thief," Talla said. "But they needed her."

"So, they went on their quest?" Dhayli fidgeted on the ground.

"Not yet. They needed one more person." Talla repositioned herself on the grass and leaned forward. "They needed someone who was both a warrior and experienced in tracking relics."

Otto swung his axe with every bit of strength he had. Its blade—made from the mandible of a giant reptile—cut vines, branches and bone with equal ease as it worked back and forth like a pendulum through the attacking creatures.

Otto—a citizen of the tropical jungle-like forests of Froghaven—was unusually large and strongly built for a brancher. Otherwise, he had the obvious appearance of the tree dwellers, with large rounded ears that came to a gentle point, color-streaked hair, scale-covered skin, and armor he'd made from the massive scales and hides of various reptiles.

A brancher's natural immunity to magic protected Otto at least a bit from the mimic vines that continued to slash at him while also attempting to tangle his arms and legs. Mimic vines are born of magic and use that magic to feed off the life force of animals, most often large ones like deer, but occasionally intelligent creatures like gnomes and elves. Though they couldn't feed off Otto's life force, the extremely tough and sharp leaves that covered the vines could still cut through any exposed skin and—over time—parts of his armor.

And then there were the Mimics. When a mimic vine fed off an animal, it would gather a part of its essence. If it acquired enough essence from the fallen animal, it sometimes reanimated the creature to help it find and feed off other victims. The vines and branches of the mimic vines worked their way through the body until they were able to move the limbs like a puppet. These animated dead creatures were called Mimics.

Otto and four other brancher soldiers had found themselves swimming through waves of mimic vines while attempting to destroy several Mimics. The soldiers were slowly losing to the overwhelming number of vines. Each swing of their weapons grew increasingly difficult as the vines wrapped around them.

"Now there's a **sight** you don't see every day," Drachman commented as he stood with Maison and Crissins on an outcropping just above Otto's battle. Anna had told the group she had business to take care of and would join them later. "Perhaps we should lend them some assistance."

Maison looked at Crissins and motioned with his hand toward the soldiers. "Stay clear of the vines and help the gentlemen if you would."

Without a word in reply, Crissins nodded and jumped from the grassy ledge to the root-covered ground below, stopping a few yards away from the closest vine. Maison and Drachman looked at each other.

"We've encountered our share of mimic vines in the past," Maison said. "She knows how to deal with them. And since they're so close to the water, she can use fire without worrying about it getting out of hand and endangering the rest of the woods."

The two wizards watched as Crissins pulled a handful of powder from her pouch and removed a pinch with her other hand. After rubbing her fingers together, she tossed a small fireball at the roots of one of the mimic vines. She repeated the action until most of the vines were burning.

The vines quickly pulled away, abandoning the bodies they had been using as weapons. Two horses, four gnomes and an elf—what was left of their bodies—dropped to the thick grasses and large roots below them. The soldiers worked loose from the vines and moved the bodies one at a time to an area devoid of shrubs and vines.

Otto looked at Crissins and said, "Thank you."

Crissins smiled. "Glad I could help."

5

Anna made her way through the jungle-like woods of Froghaven. She had liberated herself from the rest of the group by saying she was uncomfortable around branchers because she was half brancher herself, and that she had personal things to do anyway.

Although the statement about judgmental branchers was true, she could have easily withstood the discomfort of prejudiced eyes. It was the alone time she needed. She used the opportunity to find special wizard's ingredients that could only be found in parts of Froghaven. She knew where most were and had been given instructions on where to find the rest. Anna would receive a nice collection of coins if she successfully filled the order. She decided to start with the most difficult to acquire—scrapings from a Meremi Tree—found only in the large "Pond" of Froghaven.

Anna suspected that the underwater meremi Tree probably wasn't actually a tree at all, but since she didn't care to waste time finding its proper categorization and the plant did look like a tree, she was perfectly satisfied with the name. She was much more interested in finding a stealthy path into the watery world.

Anna hoped to avoid any encounters with the meremi soldiers patrolling the rim of the lake. She had no desire to explain her business there to them.

6

Otto and the four other brancher soldiers escorted Maison, Drachman and Crissins into the tree city of Froghaven to the branchers' throne room. They crossed its woven floors until they were near the throne.

"So, what have we here?" Although it had been a while since Maison had been to Froghaven, he recognized the king immediately.

"Captain Otto, I understand there was some trouble near The Pond?" The king positioned himself on the brightly-colored, padded seat of his throne.

"Yes, my King." Otto stepped forward. "A group of trespassers were searching Froghaven for magical components. They were taken by mimic vines and turned into Mimics." He motioned toward Crissins. "This young wizard girl helped free my men and me from the vines."

The king looked at Crissins and then to the wizards at her side. "You've changed a bit since I saw you last. Maison— isn't it?"

"Yes. And this is my apprentice, Crissins." Maison motioned toward Drachman. "And this is—"

"Lord Drachman." The king smiled. "I believe you have more

scales on your face every time I see you."

"And you have more wrinkles," Drachman replied with a grin.

Maison looked at Drachman then back at the king. "We apologize for not seeking your council before entering Froghaven, but we heard the commotion in the woods and thought we might be able to help."

"Your help is greatly appreciated, Wizard Maison," the king replied. "But Lord Drachman has free run of Froghaven. He and those with him are always welcome."

Maison glared at Drachman. The title of Lord the king had used with the wizard's name was one that very few in Froghaven were given, and Maison had never known the title to be given to anyone other than a brancher. He was irritated that Drachman had neglected to mention that they didn't need to get the king's approval to enter Froghaven.

Drachman took several steps toward the throne. "I'm afraid we did need to see you this time, King Wasser. We need to borrow the services of your Captain for a bit."

Wasser stood and placed his hand on Drachman's shoulder. "Well, let's discuss this over some ale."

7

Anna watched the edge of The Pond from the branch of a tree. The meremi patrols were so frequent that she was ready to give up hopes of entering undetected and simply attempt to explain why she was trespassing. But before she could leave the branch, she noticed movement below.

A frog rider approached the water near where she was hiding. The huge frog jumped from plant to plant until it landed on the grassy bank of the lake. The rider climbed off his mount, tossed his spear to the ground next to him and held one hand in the air—a formal request to enter the meremi territory. Within moments, the upper body of a soldier popped to the surface. They exchanged pleasantries, then the frog rider was escorted into the water.

Anna used the diversion to sneak past the guards. The foliage both above and below the water was thick enough to give plenty of cover, and with the distraction of the brancher, she easily made her way past the patrols. She would worry about her exit later.

8

Thanks to the potion she had derived from the flowers of the mimic vines that fed directly from The Pond, Anna breathed under the water easily. The potion turned the water into cool air as it passed her lips. Since she was half brancher, she could stay underwater for hours without the aid of the potion, but she didn't like the stress on her lungs of holding the air in them when she submerged without the aid of magic. In addition to allowing her to breathe, the potion also controlled the pressure.

She carefully navigated around a patch of tall plants that swayed gently in the water, contrary to the water's currents. She had no desire to add fighting mimic vines to her list of activities for the day. The intensity with which she watched the plants effectively blinded her to the creature approaching from the dark waters below her until it grabbed her leg, but she managed to suppress the urge to scream. Unless the danger was too great for her to handle herself, she didn't want to call unwanted attention to her presence.

The monster looked like a giant spider. Its body and parts of its eight legs were covered in a fur so short that it barely moved as the creature traveled through the water. The fur ended a quarter of the way down its legs. From there the legs were tentacles—smooth and covered in small scales. One of them was wrapped around her left leg.

Anna gave in to a moment of panic and froze. As the creature dragged her into the darker water, she regained her focus and pulled her knife from its sheath. Bending to bring her body closer to her foot, she cut the tentacle with the precision of a master archer releasing an arrow. Her blade slashed back and forth—occasionally brushing against her skin but never cutting it. The creature released her leg but grabbed her arms with two more tentacles before she could swim away.

Just as a third tentacle wrapped around her body, a large mimic vine floated past within reach of Anna's trapped arms. She still had a little control over them and managed to clutch as much of the plant as she could with both hands. Just as she hoped, the vine attacked in response.

Anna's brancher body protected her somewhat from the sharp edges of the leaves that brushed against her and so did the scales on the spider's tentacles. But the rest of its body wasn't armored. It hissed loudly and was forced to release Anna to defend itself from the new

danger. She wasted no time swimming rapidly away.

9

Anna rested on one of the massive crystals that were common in Froghaven and The Pond. It rose from the depths like a small glass mountain whose base was hidden in the darkness below. One of the crystal's faces was level and flat enough to make a comfortable resting place.

Anna was thankful that she was underwater. She wasn't big on crying, and although no one was there to see it, she was sure tears would be streaking across her cheeks were it not for the water. It took her several minutes to stop shaking and gather the courage to continue her search for a Meremi Tree.

She finally found one anchored to another crystal. Its roots spread across the huge crystal—nearly encompassing it in a tight hug. The "bark" of the tree looked more like scales. Unsure of what exactly was needed in the "scrapings" of a Meremi Tree, Anna dug at its exterior with her knife until she had removed a pouch full of scales and slivers of wood.

Grateful that the remaining items on her shopping list could be found on dry land, Anna swam quickly to the rim of the lake, welcoming the familiar dangers of Froghaven over the seemingly endless unknown dangers of The Pond.

10

Otto pulled his leather cloak over his arms as he looked at the ruins in the distance. The cooler air away from the tropical forest of Froghaven chilled him. It had been years since he had ventured outside his home, but the ruins looked just as he remembered them. He unshouldered his backpack and removed a four-inch wooden cube, five of its sides adorned with simple etchings delicately filled with gold. The top of the wooden box had thin, straight sticks across it—about a quarter of an inch apart—creating bars for a tiny cage. Inside it were several very small pieces of vine.

"What's that?" Maison asked, trying to get a closer look at the device.

"A finder box," Otto replied.

"A what?" Maison stepped closer.

Drachman smiled. "It's a finder box. Though I've never actually seen one, I had heard that Otto had been given one while adventuring with a wizard friend of mine."

"How does it work?" Crissins studied the box from behind Maison, a broad smile on her face. "Are those mimic vines inside?"

"Very impressive," Drachman said. "Yes, they are."

Otto held the box toward Maison and Crissins. "The magic runes on the box hold the plants inside and also sustains them. If you have a small sampling of a magic item you wish to find—say maybe the sliver of a unicorn horn—you drop it into the vines. After a few minutes, if there are any unicorn horns nearby, the vines will move to the side of the box closest to the horn. If you move in the direction they lean, you can track down and find the item you're looking for." He looked at Crissins. "It works with blood too."

Her eyes widened.

"One drop of blood into the vines and they'll search for any item blood-tied to that bloodline." Otto looked at Maison. "For a few hours, that is. Until they're finished feeding. Then you have to add another drop of blood."

Crissins quickly removed her dagger.

"Hold on, missy." Otto waved his hand at her. "Let's wait until we're a little closer. I don't think we'd get a reading from here."

With a sigh, Crissins sheathed her dagger. Otto shook the box gently and studied the plants, then he turned a few steps to his left and pointed.

"It looks like there's a higher concentration of magic coming from that area." He looked at Drachman. "We should stay here for now. Anna said she'd meet us near the ruins. We might as well begin our search over there when she returns."

"Then let's get going," Anna said, climbing over the remains of a fallen stone wall to join the group. "I imagine the kid's eager to get her stone."

The group followed Otto as he led them toward the remains of an ancient building, everyone intently watching the box he held. Anna quietly slid the pouch of recently acquired items into Maison's hand and moved away from him, hoping no one had noticed the transaction.

"So that's why they needed the brancher soldier," Warren said. "He could find the stone."

"That's right." Talla nodded. "But they also needed his fighting skills and experience with archaic items and structures. The ruins are a very dangerous place." Her expression grew stern. "And the area they were going to was among the most dangerous."

"Did the finder box work?" Dhayli asked.

"Yes," Talla replied. "Although Crissins had to cut her palm several times to add her blood to the plants in the box, the mimic vines did finally direct them to the blood-tied stone. But it wasn't easy. There were still many obstacles between them and the stone."

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"*But the bloodline of the stone was transferred to Maison,*" Otto said. "How is the finder box supposed to help us?"

"He stole the magical energies from Crissins and mingled her bloodline with his," Drachman said. "This allowed him to take control of the stone. Eventually, all traces of her bloodline in the stone will be replaced with his. But for now, both bloodlines are present."

Otto frowned. "But the box only works if the item is close enough to detect. Maison's been running for several days now. It's useless."

"It doesn't have to find him," Drachman said. "It just has to let us know when we're close."

15

Drachman, Crissins and Otto neared the large stone bridge leading into Froghaven. Into their second day of travel, they were close to returning the brancher to his people.

Otto held up the finder box in his hand for Drachman to see. "He's nearby."

"I suspected he'd be here," Drachman said without turning. "As long as I'm alive, he sees me as a threat. The energies of Froghaven will give him unlimited power to pull from." The wizard smiled. "Depending on that power to help him is his fatal mistake."

The trio made it to the bridge and continued across. Its support was formed from massive trees that had been grown and trained around stone columns, weaving a beautiful lattice pattern that continued on the

bottom side of the stone bridge. Its path led from a point near the bottom of the mountain and disappeared somewhere into the foliage on the other side.

Standing at the opposing end of the bridge—blocking their way into Froghaven—was Maison.

"You stay here," Drachman said as he moved past Otto and continued toward the other wizard. "See to Crissins's safety."

"No!" the girl protested. "It's my family's stone. This is my fight." She held her staff tightly in front of her. "I'm not letting you face him alone." Tears began to form in her eyes. "He killed my parents!"

"I'm with her," Otto said with a shrug. "He had the thief try to kill me."

Drachman sighed. "Very well, you can cover me. Let me fight first and enter the battle only when opportunity presents itself."

"Agreed," Otto conceded.

Crissins didn't take her wrathful gaze off Maison, but she nodded her agreement.

16

Drachman stopped several yards from the other mage. Maison smiled, the blood-tied stone glowing in his right hand.

"Well, old wizard," Maison said playfully. "I can't wait to show you my new stone."

"I see your arm has healed well," Drachman said, attempting to appear calm.

"You'd be amazed at how much more powerful my spells are now." Maison's smile grew into a full grin. "Why don't I just show you?"

It had been years since Drachman had seen Maison cast a spell—other than the transference spell with Crissins—and then only on a few occasions. He had no gauge of what the wizard's power had been before he'd acquired the stone. But he did know that in the hands of a well-skilled wizard, such a stone could easily make the mage much more powerful than he was himself.

Drachman knew he could cast a simple illusion to distract Maison in an attempt to disrupt his attack, but he decided to wait. He needed to get an idea of the power the other wizard wielded. He didn't have to

wait long for the answer.

Lightning streamed from all around Maison—the bridge and the ground below it, the trees, even the clouds above all sent bolts of lightning into the wizard's hand, striking the stone. A blinding flash of light pulled all the streams together into one massive bolt that shot from the stone toward Drachman.

The dragon wizard jumped into the air with all the power his mutated form could muster. The bridge below him disintegrated into a cloud of dust and rock, but thin fingers of lightning still sprung from the explosion and scorched Drachman's foot while he was still in the air. He fought a wave of nausea and just managed to grab the edge of the hole blasted into the bridge as he fell into it.

Fighting to catch his breath, he allowed himself to dangle for just a moment then pulled himself back onto the rock path of the remaining bridge. Thankful for the scales that covered his body and his dragon form in general, he knew his mutations had allowed him to survive an attack that would have killed most anyone else.

When a wizard changes over time through the use of magic, it's common practice to etch magical runes into any new or different appendages that form. As the mage changes—as their hands change to claws or hooves—it becomes more difficult to cast complex spells. The runes allow them to keep more powerful spells ready whenever needed. Drachman felt they were definitely needed now. He rubbed both sides of the claw on his left forefinger and activated the etchings. He aimed his hand toward Maison and concentrated.

Nothing happened.

Maison laughed until he bent forward. "I guess that attack took more out of you than it appeared."

"Or not," Drachman replied.

The bridge under Maison's feet began to shake, and cracks formed in the stone and wood directly under him. Before he could run, a section of the bridge dropped to the ground below, taking Maison with it.

"I'll have to write a formal apology to the branchers for destroying their beautiful bridge," Drachman said as he watched the mage drop into the foliage below. He turned to shout to Otto and Crissins. "I believe I'll be needing your help after all. The stone has made him more powerful

than I anticipated. Join me as quickly as you can." He spun to the edge of the bridge and jumped.

The pair ran several steps toward Drachman and stopped, gawking as the dragon wizard vanished in the distance. They looked at each other briefly before turning to run back to the end of the path and work their way to the bottom of the bridge.

17

Drachman held out his arms, his mind pushing against the approaching ground. The energy he released slowed his decent until he landed hard on the rock and grass under his feet. Though it hurt a bit, there was no real damage to him from the fall.

As he listened for movement, he put his thumb over another claw, preparing a protection rune. He heard a twig snap and hid behind one of the tree trunks that supported the bridge. A moment later, Maison appeared from the bushes.

"Nice moves, old man." All humor was gone from his voice. "I saw you drop over here. Now let me show you what I can do."

He stepped quickly around the tree trunk and released a fireball. The wood and leaves burst into flames, but Drachman wasn't there. The fire abruptly turned to smoke as a gust of freezing wind blew past Maison. Ice formed across all surfaces in the area, and flakes of snow danced in the air. Maison turned to face Drachman, who was standing close behind him.

The dragon wizard slashed the claws of his right hand across his enemy's chest, taking a handful of cloth and flesh with it. But his second attack with his left hand missed.

Maison jumped out of the way and rolled across the ground, holding out the blood-tied stone as he crouched. With no time to work a spell, he simply pushed with his mind. The resulting force threw Drachman into the nearby woods, and Maison followed quickly.

18

Otto and Crissins made it to level ground and ran toward the sounds of fighting. They stopped when they reached the two wizards.

"Drachman!" Crissins shouted. "No!"

It looked as if the wizard had been thrown against a tree and one of its branches had impaled his chest. Maison was walking slowly

toward the dangling body with a smile on his face. When he heard Crissins cry out, he turned toward her.

"Ah, my apprentice." He wore a sincere expression like a mask. "You have no idea how surprised and pleased I am to see that you're alive." His facial features hardened with menace. "I still have so much more to teach you."

"I don't know about the girl, but I'm always open to a little education." Otto stepped in front of Crissins. "How about you start with me first?"

"It would be my pleasure." Maison gripped the stone tightly. With a simple nod, he focused his blast at the fighter.

The force pushed Otto back only a step, and he smiled. "Sorry, but magic doesn't work much on branchers. You're going to have to try a little harder."

"Again—my pleasure." The wizard released a massive fireball, its heat so intense that leaves several feet away from its path burst into flame.

Otto held the flat of his massive axe in front of his face and positioned himself between the approaching fireball and Crissins, cursing himself for not bringing a shield. He braced himself for the impact, but the fireball exploded against an invisible wall before it reached him. The heat was almost more than Otto could take, but he stood unharmed.

It was Crissins's turn to smile at Maison as she stepped out from behind Otto. "Fireballs were one of the first spells you taught me. Well, that and shields against fireballs."

"You wouldn't be mocking me if it weren't for your friend's immunity to the magic in that fireball." He raised his right hand, the stone beginning to glow again. "Still, as I said before, you were a good apprentice."

Otto noticed Drachman's body disappear from the tree then reappear behind Maison. The dragon wizard moved toward him with his arms and hands swaying. Light formed at his fingertips, and a blast of energy struck the other wizard.

"It was an illusion!" Crissins shouted, watching Maison drop to his knees. But her joyful expression quickly turned to anger. "You let me think you were dead."

"Sorry about that," Drachman replied. "Bad timing."

Stunned, Maison rubbed his fingers across the stone in his right hand. The spell he had been casting before Drachman's attack still held its charge in the stone. Unable to focus, he simply released the spell without direction. Lightning danced all around. Everyone, including Maison, was struck.

Otto watched as Drachman and Crissins fell to the ground while Maison staggered to his feet. The stone had channeled most of the electricity away from his body, and the brancher was unaffected. The wizard's lack of control over the lighting spell and Otto's natural immunity to magic had spared them.

19

Crissins forced her eyes open. Otto was still standing. In the distance, she saw Drachman was down but starting to stir. Maison was standing and starting to cast another spell. Her body ached and she could barely move, but Crissins welcomed the pain. It meant she was still alive.

Her gaze was on the stone as Maison cast his spell, and she could feel the power from the magic item even from a distance. She knew that meant she was still blood-tied to it. She reached out to the stone with her mind.

Concentrating as hard as she could, she pushed and the stone released a flare of light that sent Maison backpedaling several steps before falling. Crissins sat up and focused on the stone again. She could still feel it with her mind.

Maison's eyes locked with hers while he worked his way up from the ground. He gripped the stone and focused on the girl, his arms swaying as he prepared a spell.

Otto tried to grasp what was happening. It appeared there was some unseen battle taking place between the wizard and the apprentice. He didn't know what exactly was happening, but he knew it presented an opportunity for him to attack. The fighter sprinted toward Maison.

Drachman opened his eyes as his senses slowly returned just in time to see Otto charging at Maison. "The stone..." The words were rough and not loud enough. He cleared his throat and yelled. "The stone! Destroy it!"

Otto heard and moved his focus from Maison to the stone. He had

an equal chance of missing such a small target as he did of hitting it, but he took his swing in hopes that luck was on his side.

It was.

Typically, it takes magic to destroy a magic item, but Otto's axe had been formed from the bones of a giant reptile of Froghaven. Its natural saturation with magic—in addition to the brancher's immunity to magic—made it possible for its blade to pierce the stone.

Otto's aim was true. The axe found its mark, cutting through part of Maison's hand before shattering the blood-tied stone into multiple fragments.

20

Upon its destruction, the stone erupted into a blinding light. Crissins turned her head in reflex then fought to look back. Otto stood over Maison—lying on his back and holding his injured right hand with his left while he pushed with his legs to distance himself from the fighter. Otto walked slowly to keep up with the wizard. Drachman had managed to stand and was watching from a few yards away.

When Maison managed to get to his feet, he reached into a pouch at his side and removed a handful of red powder that he threw at Otto.

"No!" Drachman reacted without thought, his mind pushing in the other wizard's direction.

A gust of wind blew the powder back into Maison's face. He staggered and fell to his knees, resting there a moment before dropping to the ground.

Drachman walked slowly over to Maison and studied him a moment, then he knelt next to him and touched his neck. Wiping his hand across the grass to clean it of any powder it might have picked up, he stood and looked at his companions.

"He's dead."

Everyone looked at the body in silence. Crissins began to cry as her mind allowed her to release the emotions she had been keeping inside for so long.

21

Otto, Drachman and Crissins worked their way through the thick shrubs and massive roots of Froghaven's giant trees. When they reached the bridge, Drachman motioned to Otto and the group stopped. The missing

section of rock and wood from the wizards' earlier battle blocked their path across it, so they would be forced to go through the woods. When Drachman saw Crissins looking at the remains of her family's blood-tied stone in her hand, he put a consoling hand on her shoulder.

"I'm very sorry that we had to destroy your stone to stop Maison. If you will allow me to continue your training, I'll help you construct another blood-tied weapon—perhaps a staff—to replace it."

Crissins smiled and nodded.

"It will take several years to complete," Drachman said. "But Froghaven has some of the finest wood to start such a project."

Talla climbed onto her horse, the guards and the children doing the same. The historian made herself comfortable in her saddle and turned her horse toward her small class.

"Crissins became Drachman's apprentice and went on to become a skilled wizard." Talla turned her horse away from the ruins and led the group homeward. "Perhaps your next lesson could be how Drachman and Crissins met King Logan."

The children followed closely, eagerly waiting for the next story to begin. Talla smiled as she noticed that the guards were also riding a bit closer than usual.