

The journey lasted five days. Five long days of rain and violent wind. Alhuia and Oscar's horses were tired. The elf shared some of what she knew, mostly about the last few people who came to the temple. Oscar felt that she was just buying some time before telling him the most important secrets she had. He felt, by the way she looked at him, that she hesitated several times to reveal more aspects of their quest. Alhuia seemed more melancholic by the hour. As curious as he was, Oscar did not insist. He had to trust her, as her mother did, and others before her.

Mistcastle appeared on the horizon, shrouded by a freezing fog. Clouds grew darker. They quickened their pace, crossing guards on patrol. Peasants were working in the countryside around the high walls of the city. Mooing of cows and sounds of bells were echoing in the valley. The two travelers noticed more refugee caravans, vagrants and exhausted soldiers as they progressed towards the gates. A sea of tents was spreading at the foot of the south-west wall. Despite this vision of misery, they also witnessed lots of merchants coming and going on the muddy road. Mistcastle always were an important trading city, and war didn't changed that, quite the opposite. For some, these terrible times were a blessing in disguise.

The travelers joined a crowd pressed in front of the east gate. Snow started to fall. Guards were searching chariots and questioning strangers. As tension rose between some soldiers and a group of merchants a bit too impatient, two other men stood in front of Oscar, telling him to dismount.

— What are you doing here, you two ?

— I'm a mercenary, replied Oscar. This nun maid me to escort her safely on her pilgrimage.

— A nun ? growled a guard while looking at the weapon on her hip.

— Better have a weapon, even if you don't know what to do with it, right guys ? joked Oscar.

— Ah ! I guess that's true. Alright, come on in.

The young man nodded and invited Alhuia to move forward. Then, another guard came, preventing them to move. He spat in the mud, glancing at the woman.

— Can't she remove her hood ?

— Are you afraid she's a ghoul ?

— Shut up, lad. If she has nothing to hide, that should not be a problem, right ?

— Enough, concluded Alhuia. I know very well, what you want to see.

She uncovered her face, showing her pointy ears and non-human beauty to the soldiers. Two of them frowned, the mean one chuckled.

— I fucking knew it ! With that outfit, she had to be an elf filth.

— As far as I know, elves are allowed and welcome in this city, replied Oscar as he tried to keep his hand far from his sword.

— As far as I know, continued the guard, I'm the one deciding and I don't want them between these walls. Right guys ?

They agreed. Tension rose, drawing attention of more soldiers and travelers alike. Horses stomped in the mud, pulling on their reins. Oscar closed his fists, making the leather creak.

– Look, boys ! she got a nice sword, a nice outfit, a nice necklace, right ? While we fight against Dehest, these arrogant fucks wander around and steal our riches ! I'm sure they wait for the right time to stab us in the back.

Oscar took one step forward. Two men did the same, ready to draw their weapons. The officer displays a disgusting smile.

– Come on lad, are you sure you want to put you into trouble for an elven bitch ?

– You are exceeding your rights, growled the young man.

– Who said that ? You ? Your elf ?

– If she was to take her clothes off, we might find a way to negotiate, added another soldier.

They all busted out laughing. The officer wiped the saliva spilling out his lips cut by a large scar. Oscar gritted his teeth while holding his worried stead.

– If you are still alive, shouted Alhuia, it is only because my people is resisting to the western pirates ! While you spend your lonely days cowering behind your thick stone walls, elves are dying to prevent them to raid your coasts.

– What is she saying now ? Who told you to open you mouth ?

– We can not say that your fleet did wonders against Kuradalar, right ? she continued. I am sure you know what I am referring to. Fourteen ships waisted in one assault, trapped by six frigates. A disaster, a total lack of any form of strategy you are yet so proud of. If it was not for our help, you three would be licking some Dry Island Pirate king's ass by now.

The militiamen remained quiet. Alhuia stood straight, strong, supported by the approving crowd gathered around them. The officer became even more red as he already were. He stepped back. The elf was not done though.

– Did any of you witnessed a pirate raid ? Did you see your comrades shredded by a canon ball ? Or worse, took prisoner on their ship, never to be seen again ? I did.

Oscar stared at her. She made sure to avoid catching his gaze. The crowd shouted at the men and grew more and more agitated. The officer walked away and talked to a young guard. The later invited the two travelers to walk in. Satisfied, Alhuia proceed without looking at any soldier on her way. Oscar followed, a slight smile on his face.

– I feared you would do something stupid, she admitted.

– I was about to.

– Luckily, it is over.

– I am not so sure about that. We will see, added Oscar. Anyway, is it true ?

– What is ?

– Everything. The things you said about the pirates, the fights. Your fight.

– Yes. Let us not talk about it now, would you ? These are painful memories.

– I hear you.

The central avenue was buzzing with life, stalls on each side of the paved road. Citizens and travelers strolled from one shop to the other, buying food, weapons, potions and much more goods. Bards and acrobats wandered across the noisy crowd. Pilgrims were doing their best to walk past and reach the cathedral of

Esphon.

— Our horses need rest, Oscar said.

— Indeed. Let us find an inn.

— I know someone in this city. She could help us and take care of our mounts.

— It would be wiser not to involve more people in our affairs here. If it goes wrong, they would be in just as much danger as we are.

Oscar sighed, rubbing his chin. He pointed to a nearby alley which led them to a narrow square. There stood the “Squeaky Rooster”, a modest establishment, renowned among adventurers and mercenaries. They dismounted and were finally able to relax. The surroundings were calm, no surly soldiers or thugs on the horizon.

— Alhuïa, he hesitated. I don't have a single coin left.

— Do not worry about it.

The Watcher entered while her companion led the animals to the stable. She paid for a meal, fodder and two beds. Oscar joined her as the food was served. She laughed when she saw his surprised look and added:

— I thought it would be good to take a little bit of everything. I thought you were hungry.

— Thank you. It has been a while since I had such a feast.

— Your journey to the temple was not easy, was it?

— Truth is, the young man continued as he sat down, it was the most pleasant time of the last eight years. There at least, I knew that I was reaching my goal, that I was on the verge of accomplishing something. Before that, I didn't even know why I tried so hard to survive.

He pulled himself back together, captivated by the tempting dishes. From time to time, glances turned towards them, but nothing alarming happened. Most backbiters were cowards, that seemed to go hand in hand.

He ate a lot, as the Watcher had predicted. She, on the other hand, was content with a few apples and a bowl of nuts. The elves' diet was light and restrained compared to that of humans. Once she had finished, well before her companion, she decided to tell him more:

— You should know that Mistcastle is one of the oldest cities in Laaria, right?

— And the more fortified too.

— Exact. But that's not all. It is one of the oldest in all of Mirh.

Oscar looked up from his plate, curious. He grabbed a still warm bun and invited the elf to continue her story.

— It was once an important elven stronghold. Some rumors say that giants participated in its construction. In any case, after the elves left to fight against a terrible enemy in the south, humans, nomadic clans at the time, took over the place. One day, earthquakes struck the area, causing much of the fortress to sink. The city was rebuilt from the rubble, before the same catastrophe occurred again. It was only long after, that Mistcastle became what it still is today.

— Not many people are aware of that, I reckon.

— Even rarer are those who know that the sunken ruins are still there, and still accessible, Alhuïa whispered, smiling. The catacombs of Mistcastle are vast, a veritable labyrinth, but it is nothing compared to what lies even deeper, in the

depths of the world.

— I have already walked the catacombs, continued the young man. I've never seen anything like what you're describing.

— What could you possibly be doing down there? Wait, let's move on, I prefer not to know. If you haven't seen anything, it's because the access points are walled up, hidden behind tombs. The caverns beneath our world are home to many creatures, and some occasionally make their way to the surface. These ruins were a clear path. It was too dangerous.

— What does this have to do with our presence here?

— The key you received from the statue opens a door somewhere in these ruins.

— Is it a joke ? the young man chuckled, putting down his bowl.

— I can not be more serious.

— Assuming it is true, how could you know such things? Elves live roughly three hundred years. The stories you are referring to are date way back in time.

— Whatever ? You seem to know some of it too, and you are not three hundred years old.

— I only learned the main events. You describe details that are unspoken of.

— You will know what you need to know in time. If you don't believe me today, you will never admit the rest. My silence risks making you doubt our goal, I am aware of that. However, my words could definitely prevent you from ever reaching it.

Oscar stayed quiet for a bit. His eyes stuck to Alhuia's. In his heart, he felt a spark, a call to trust her despite the shroud of mystery she wrapped her story in.

— Continue, he said.

The elf smiled. She slowly blinked while readjusting her necklace. A few thoughts tried to distract her, forbidden desires she had to push back down in her mind.

— Down there is an inviolable sanctuary. Only this key can help you enter it and claim its content.

— Was it necessary to hide this "content" so far away?

— Crucial, yes. If it was to fall into the wrong hands...

Oscar saw tears in her eyes. She put her hand on his for a moment. The young man kept his questions for himself, as she seemed lost in her memories. Then, she inhaled deeply and continued her story :

— Whatever you will find is yours personally, my child. This is why the statue entrusted the key to you and no one else.

— What ?

— Some of us have been waiting for this moment for a very long time. The heir's birth could not be foreseen. But you are here now, Oscar.

Questions followed one another in the man's mind. Furthermore, he was seized by a sudden intuition. A familiar feeling mixed with a fiery urge. Something was "not right", but he wanted to proceed in this direction anyway. He hoped for a conclusion, but Alhuia only offered him the beginnings of an even more perilous adventure. He understood that all this was beyond what his mother could have known. He was entering unknown territory, with Alhuia as his only guide.

He could have left immediately. But what would he have done then ? Fighting

Dehest in vain ? Leave the north ? It made no sense to him. The adventure he yearned for had just found him, he only had to face the mystery and the forces that were beyond him. He sneered, grabbing the elf's hand back.

— How do you plan to get into the catacombs? he whispered.

Alhuia felt her heart beating harder and harder against her chest. She hid her heavy breathing as best she could. A fire seized her stomach. She knew that giving in to her thoughts was wrong, yet in that moment, it seemed like the only thing to do.

— We need to rest first. Come, I already paid for a room.

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Oscar walked ahead of Alhuia and entered the room first. When the elf followed him inside, he grabbed her by the waist and pushed her against the door, slamming it closed. He pressed himself against her belly, moving one leg between hers. She was taller than him, and her heels accentuated the difference even more. That said, in that moment, she seemed vulnerable and begging for him to take the reins. He lifted her by the rump and sat her on the table.

Immediately, she embraced him with her long legs. Oscar had no intention of leaving anyway, on the contrary, he leaned over and kissed her languorously. She was already panting, driven by a desire too great for her. It seemed as if she was trying to speak, but the man's kisses always plunged her back into an irresistible voluptuousness.

Her fingers ventured over his tunic, tracing his broad back and powerful shoulders. She began to undo the belts around his waist, as he buried his hands in her dark mane. Oscar's sword fell heavily to the ground. He moved his lips away from the elf's tender neck and looked at her intently.

— All of this feels oddly wrong.

— I know.

— Alhuia...

— Just shut up, she gasped. Let me undress you.

She moved closer and removed her companion's tunic, revealing his bust sculpted by combat and survival. She caressed his scars. Oscar was busy unlacing the elf's corset. Blood rushed to his cock, making him hard in anticipation of what was to come. Impatient, the elf took off her blouse on her own, revealing her voluptuous chest. The man noticed the mole at the base of her left breast and approached to place a kiss there. She let her nails run down the back of his neck as a moan escaped her trembling lips.

Oscar felt the elf's heart pounding as he explored her sweaty chest. Desire consumed him. He wanted more, he wanted her, all of her. With one quick movement, he picked her up again and threw her on the bed.

She giggled. Her flushed cheeks made her even more attractive. Oscar pulled on

her boots and almost ripped off her pants. There she was, clad only in lace panties, waiting for him to join her. The supernatural passion which animated them prevented any ceremony. He opened his own pants and revealed his cock to Alhuia's eager eyes. She spread her legs, her swollen, pink mound peeking beneath the lace.

— Crush me, she moaned.

She hadn't finished before he was already on top of her. He pushed her panties to the side and shoved his cock between her wet folds. She let out a cry before pressing herself against him, ensnaring him back between her thighs. He grabbed her mane with both hands, pulling her head back to better kiss the tense muscles of her neck.

His first thrusts seemed to cause pain to the elf, but quickly, her sobs turned into long moans of ecstasy. Oscar pounded her harder and harder, making the bed creak as it hit the wall. The elf's pussy offered him no resistance, so he pushed his entire shaft into her, smacking his balls against her anus. Alhuia was drenched in sweat, trembling. Her gaze was fixed on Oscar, sometimes on his face, sometimes on the rapid and abrupt movements of his thick dick.

— Go as hard as you can, she panted. Do not make it last, just fuck me !

Without saying a word, he complied, also feeling the urge to use her. He slammed his meat deep down her pussy, making sloppy noises and rough plaps. He clung to the headboard to place the last bestial thrusts deep between the elf's quivering thighs. He watched her breasts bounce to the rhythm of their primal fucking. She was in tears, make up running down her cheeks, yet she seemed drunk in overwhelming pleasure.

Suddenly, Alhuia gasped and shivered, reaffirming the embrace of her legs around Oscar. She let a long, sensual moan follow her intense orgasm. The walls of her vagina tightened around the man's cock, as if she was trying to make him cum and extract every drop of seed. He let the flow of hot sperm stuff her in one last hard thrust. A strong smell filled the air as she held him close, his cock plunged as deep as possible into her twitching pussy. With the tip of her fingers, she took a few droplets of cum that were spilling out her full cunt and eagerly swallowed them.

— By the Goddess, you gave me exactly what I wanted. This is so good... Rest a little while I clean myself up. We need to discuss the plan before round two.

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— Most of the underground accesses are sealed nowadays, Alhuia said. We will have to force passage. I fear the remaining doors are out of our reach.

— Where are they ?

— One is in the castle's crypt, the other in the cathedral of Esphon... Unfortunately they too do not like elves. We will not cross the main hall.

— Besides, our equipment will draw attention.

— True.

She walked around the screen separating the bathtub from the room. Her naked silhouette was mesmerizing. Her hips swaying from left to right as she walk towards Oscar.

— You already have a plan I guess, continued the man.

— Yes. There is an old tunnel we could use if we manage to breach in. This entrance is hidden, more than sealed up. Though, I have to warn you. I heard that the court mages put a spell on all passageways. They would be alerted of our trespassing.

— How can you know such things ?

She smiled and leaned forward, offering him a marvelous sight of her dangling round tits. She put a hand on his chest and kissed him, making her tongue dance with hes. In the meantime, her other hand ventured down his crotch.

— I have connections, she answered while biting his lip.

— Well, this spell surely is a problem.

— One we can not avoid. We will have to be ready for some company.

— This will also prevent us for getting back out by the same door.

She nodded, a malicious smile on her face as her fingers reached his dick.

— You are right, guards could ambush us.

— Let's not think too much about this. First thing is to find the entrance and survive the underground... Aaa...

She grabbed his shaft and started stroking it. Her hand slowly moved up and down. He barely had time to recover, but the idea of fucking the elf a second time was enough to make him hard in no time. A couple of minutes more, and his dick was pointing up, ready to serve.

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Alhuia let a stream of saliva flow onto Oscar's glans. She continued to jerk him off slowly while looking into his gaze. She knelt on the carpet, resting her large breasts on his thighs. Oscar grabbed her neck and leaned in for a kiss. Their tongues intertwined back and forth, muffling their moans of desire. With her thumb, the elf made small circles on Oscar's frenulum. She felt the first twitches of his fat cock.

— Lie down, human, she purred. Let me take care of you.

He leaned back, crossing his hands behind his head, keeping an eye on her every move. She was sensual in many ways, arousing and beautiful. She had a glint of shyness and innocence on her face, even as she shoved his dick between her breasts. The elf spat again in order to make his rod slide easily in the warm alcove of her chest. With her delicate hands, she pressed her tits together, leaving only Oscar's glans sticking out. Then, with a mischievous smile, she began to raise and lower her globes of soft flesh against his hard shaft. Oscar exhaled deeply, pleasure rushing in his entire body.

Sawing the first stream of precum spilling out, she slowed down. The elf relived the throbbing meat and bent, getting her face close to his groin. She kissed his balls, softly, enjoying his scent as she let his cock rest on her cheek.

- Fuck... he growled.

- I am glad you enjoy my kisses. Let us not rush this moment tough.

She straighten and shoved his cock back between her tits, this time moving them in opposite directions. It did not take long before a sudden stream of thick cum burst out and splattered Alhuia's neck. She gasped and chuckled, looking up at Oscar.

- Is it too much ?

- You are very good at it, elf. But everything is fine, I can hold for longer.

- I am pleased to hear that. You will love what comes next.

She grabbed his hips as she lowered herself. Oscar's cock left the hollow of the elf's breasts and fell onto his stomach as she let her tongue slide over his balls. He felt her hot breath on his wet skin and shivered with pleasure. She licked his balls as well as the base of his cock. She moaned, lust clouding her mind. Finally, she sucked a ball between her luscious lips. Oscar gapsed, feeling an electrical surge in his spine. Alhuia sucked his other ball as she grabbed his dick, starting to stroke him again. They exchanged a lustful stare, each desiring to fuck the other. She wanted more of him down her throat, and he was ready to give her exactly that. He invited her to step back and got up. He grabbed his cock and rubbed it on the elf's chin and cheeks.

- Your smile is adorable, Alhuia.

- I hope you will like it with your cum covering it then...

He guided her head with one hand, helping her getting use to his size. He felt her teeth scraping against his glans, but seeing her lips wrapped around his shaft and her begging eyes easily made up for the slight pain. She started bobbing her head, only sucking and licking the head of his thick cock. Clearly, she struggled to take more of it, despite her desire to do so. She seemed embarrassed and looked away as he stared at her with want. So, he pulled his cock out of her mouth, and kissed her deeply.

- You have nothing to fear. This moment is already more than I could have wished for. Do what you can, as long as you enjoy every second of it.

- I can not believe what is happening, human. Especially because...

- Do not say it.

- Do you have any idea of...

- I think I do, and I can not care less.

She offered him her best smile before shoving his dick back into her wanting mouth. This time, his cock head slide right back her teeth and ended up against her palate. Her tongue swirled below his shaft caressing it and pressing against it. She was making noises with each bob of her head, like she was making efforts to go deeper down the shaft. She made progress, as he noticed his glans touching further back her gullet. Though, he felt that she wasn't confident enough. She



wanted to do more, even though it was already enough for him. She almost jumped as he grabbed her hand with both hands. Oscar guided her movements, only allowing her to suck on the first inches of his shaft, no more. Her tongue did wonders in the meantime. He smiled at her as she looked up.

- No need to stress yourself. Besides, keep looking at me like that and you will make me cum in no time... Aaa, fuck yes.

She chuckled and got back at it, letting her tongue play with his meatus, gathering sticky precum. Drool ran down her chin, forming long strands and covering her chest. She moaned more and more, enjoying the feeling of his hands in her dark mane, guiding her. She played with his balls as he fucked her face faster.

- Gods... Show me your face, he growled.

- Cover me with your seed, the elf purred.

She stuck her tongue out, revealing it to be quite long. Her wanting gaze was enough for Oscar to cross the point of no return. Streams of hot semen burst out, covering her nose and cheeks. The man bent his cock to release the following flow on her pink muscle eager to experience his strong taste. She moaned and closed her eyes as her mouth got full of thick cum and saliva. Oscar caressed her cheeks, pushing jizz towards her lips.

He sat and pulled her closer to him. While she walked on her knees, she swallowed his cum and wiped her face. He made her lie down, get on top of her and kissed her passionately. She laughed, again, tears running down her face. Oscar kept quiet even though he wanted to know more about her. She noticed his troubled thoughts, and wrapped her arms around him to pressed his chest against hers.

- This might be wrong in our mortal mind, but I feel the Goddess' love upon us.

- Let us hope you are right.

They geared up. Before leaving, Alhuia gave a small vial to her lover. He took it, before addressing her a suspicious look.

— This is of my making. Something, to give you back your vigor after our play time. Now more than ever, we need to stay alert.

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Back out the inn, they had to move quickly. Sun was still up, but not for long. They climbed a long stairway and avoided a patrol by jumping between two houses. No need to draw attention before entering the catacombs. They then went around a small square, following a path winding between the tiny courtyards of flower district's houses. Finally, they arrived under a low arch in front of the Orchid Pavilion, the most famous brothel in the city and probably in the kingdom. As night was falling, this part of the city was getting more and more alive. Private clubs and gambling bars were opening.

Oscar and Alhuia entered an abandoned building which served as a storage room for the people of the neighborhood. From there they were able to reach the alley leading to the back of the brothel. They quickly scaled a wall and landed in an ivy overgrown dead end. They hastened to cut down the plants and remove debris in order to discover an old ornamented fountain against the wall.

— This is our way in, the elf whispered.

Oscar peered at the windows above their heads. Most were closed, except for the brothel side. Silence reigned. The young man got into position and delivered a first kick which made the bricks move. He repeated the operation until the opening appeared and they were able to clear the passage by hand. As soon as they could, they rushed into the hole. When she entered Alhuia stopped and looked around her.

— What is happening ? Oscar asked.

— A whistle. Don't you hear?

— No.

— This might be the detection spell.

— No time to loose.

They lit their torches and plunged into darkness.

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They progressed at a steady pace, paying close attention to every corners and treacherous steps. The tunnels were irregular and had low ceilings, which did not facilitate the exploration. The cold was more bitter than outside. They emerged into what looked like a death chamber. Massive blocks of stone served as tables on which dozens of vases and jars rested. Most were sealed. Some, on the other hand, were broken after their fall, releasing a whitish powder littered with bone fragments. The same vases cluttered the neighboring alcoves and blocked access to the rest of the maze. The intruders removed the obstacle and cleared the door opening onto a long corridor.

In places, the collapsed walls revealed arrangements of skulls at surprising heights. After a long wandering, they arrived in front of an iron gate eaten away by rust and covered with cobwebs heavy with dust. After repeated efforts, they managed to crack the fragile hinges, revealing a vault filled with pots and rotten boxes. While they were clearing a passage, Oscar heard a strange noise. Water was flowing nearby, behind one of the walls.

— I do not see any door, sighed the man.

— Could there be another way?

— I did not see any crossway, at least not one we could follow.

— We should keep looking then.

Finally, they discovered a hole hidden at the bottom of a gutted vault. They removed the remains of its ancient occupant and struck the crumbling wall with the tip of the torch. The hole opened onto nothingness from where the sound of

water came to them.

— This is it ! Alhuïa affirmed. On of the hidden way down.

— We have to crawl.

— Head or Feet first ? I guess it depends on what we want to be devoured first...

— Is that your first joke, elf ?

Despite their intent to release tension, they were both anxious about delving that deep into the world. Oscar shuddered as he lay down in the vault. He held the torch in front of him, ready to strike whatever came his way. He reached the other side without any problem and without any sudden encounters. Alhuïa handed him their packs, then she joined him. The architecture here seemed unreal. They were in the oldest section of the ossuary where portions of elven buildings were already visible. The further they advanced, the more significant the dilapidation became. The walls and ceiling were dangerously collapsed, mounds of earth, sand and rock obstructed access and greatly slowed their progress. Blocks of granite pierced the ceiling and seemed to be balanced above them.

Water infiltration quickly became frequent and little puddles formed between the sunken slabs of the sloping floor. Unlike the beginning of their exploration, they had to make a number of detours and turn back very often. It was an endless maze. Their first torches died out. Alhuïa decided to turn on her storm lantern. Arriving at the end of the tunnel, a new obstacle stood before them. A large scree blocked the road leading to a double iron gate. In the flickering light of the lantern, Oscar and Alhuïa worked together to remove the smallest stones. Despite this, huge blocks remained unmovable. They had to crawl, walk along the wall, throwing their bags in front of them, twist and pull themselves up to reach the door which, fortunately, was unlocked.

What was their surprise when, opening it, they came out onto a promontory surrounded by darkness. They could not see the ceiling or the floor, their only landmark was the gate they just used. The explorers shivered and decided to make a short stop.

They had no idea how long they had spent underground. Oscar ate part of his rations. Meanwhile, Alhuïa readjusted her equipment. She had a scratch on her left cheekbone and her sleeves were damaged. Oscar cursed, noticing the wear and tear of his own gloves.

After inspection, they discover a path along the wall. It was a steep and slippery slope, bordered by the void on their left. They tied a rope to a rock before starting the descent. They progressed smoothly to a solid platform. From there they discovered what lay beneath their feet. They were on the edge of a huge underground lake.

— Look, she whispered. A bridge.

Oscar grunted. The said bridge was barely two feet wide and appeared to be in bad shape. Having no other path available, they embarked on it, mustering all

their courage. Oscar, in the lead, could not hide his intense discomfort. Alhuia, for her part, was startled when she noticed that from where they were at that moment, she could not see any shore.

– Are we still in the catacombs? Oscar finally asked.

– I do not know, this place is so strange.

Suddenly they heard a noise. their reason tried to assure them otherwise, but the sound rang out again, twice. A scraping sound coming from the darkness that resonated under the immense vault of the ceiling. Suddenly, a liquid noise made their blood run cold. Something just fell into the lake. Fell, or dived.

They noticed the ripples on the surface of the water wrapping around the pillars of their frail walkway. The bridge suddenly shook. Oscar almost slipped. He caught himself at the last minute, but his pack sank into the depths. The elf was drenched in sweat, betraying her deep anguish. She pulled the young man by the arm as he looked around, a hand on his sword.

– We need to reach the shore ! We can not fight here !

– It is close...

They turned pale as they heard breathing accompanied by the lapping of water. They ran as fast as they could. A new hit shook the bridge and a dull crack followed. The water was getting more and more agitated. A third shock propelled them to the ground. They held on as best as they could, Alhuia carefully watching over the lantern. Calm then returned. They stood up slowly.

– Are you hurt ? Oscar asked.

– I am... fine, she panted. We have to... Watch out !

She brandished her saber and struck the flat of the blade with her other hand. A blinding flash passed over Oscar and struck the emaciated, gleaming figure who was about to grab him with its long bony arms.

Alhuia recited a powerful incantation, creating a wave that struck the creature head on. It hissed as it took refuge under the water. Overwhelmed by extraordinary panic, the adventurers rushed forward. They finally reached the bank, climbed randomly over the uneven terrain and plunged into a crack in the wall facing them. Far from the cave and its horrors, they collapsed, gasping for air. They stood still for a few minutes before examining their surroundings.

Alhuia stood up and cleaned the lantern panes, noticing that one of them was broken. A lot of oil spilled out during their escape. They were in an empty circular room. Clumps of dirt had spilled from the collapsed ceiling, allowing a colony of pale, soft fungi to proliferate. A rusty ladder led to an arcuate walkway far above them. Fearing it was a dead end, however, they discovered a slab of smooth, shiny volcanic rock embedded beneath an arch. Examining it more closely, Alhuia discerned finely engraved inscriptions.

– Look, she whispered. "This stone prevents access to Proudspire, for death resides in its depths. None shall enter this cursed ruins for the sake of our people.

– Lovely, growled Oscar.

– This is our destination.

— I know, but this is not a door. We will not be able to move it.

Alhuia put the lantern down and unsheathed her blade. She pressed the tip of the saber against the stone.

— I can do something, though it might consume most of my strengths. Whatever lies behind, we will have to face it without magic.

— Do what you need to. I am watching your back.

The elf in the black outfit remained motionless, whispering formula after formula. If something was happening, Oscar didn't see it. Minutes passed, the intensity of the lantern weakened, the flame flickered. The man added oil without making the slightest noise and, as he put the canister back into the elf's pack, a wave startled him. Barely had he raised his head when the monolith split with a deafening crash. Alhuia jumped back to avoid the massive fragments that fell one after the other. The shock caused a curtain of dust to rise which obscured their field of vision. Oscar rushed to help the staggering elf and helped her sit up. He offered her his waterskin and wiped her sweaty forehead.

— This was more difficult than expected. I have... I am exhausted.

— Do you want to rest ?

— I can not right now, we have to continue.

A drop of blood fell from her nose, she wiped it with the back of her sleeve without paying attention. Back on her feet, she collected her weapon and equipment before crossing the opening alongside Oscar.

After a short crumbled hallway, they emerged into an immense cavern lit by a fault in the top of the dome. Before their eyes stretched a pile of elven ruins. The elf pointed to a raised building that was leaning dangerously.

— This is our destination. I hope you still have the key.

— I do.

— Very good.

The bridge in front of them was impassable. Thus, they went down along a pillar to a narrow ledge. From there they were able to reach the field of ruins and head towards the sanctuary. The companions redoubled their caution and ingenuity to survey the old fortress, avoiding holes and unstable structures. They climbed the wall of a fallen tower before finding themselves inside what appeared to be a theater. Nothing made sense anymore, the various buildings had found themselves upside down after being buried.

The temple was very close, but a natural crevice still stood in their way. They had to go around it. Alhuia approached a building sunk in the ground and did not notice until too late the cobblestones giving way under her feet. With a gasp of surprise, she fell and dropped the lantern. Oscar turned and rushed after her. The landslide brought larger debris in its wake. The man grabbed the Watcher by the arm a second before she was thrown into the yawning chasm. He dug his heels into the dirt and tucked his head down, taking in the debris in the elf stead.

She took the opportunity to hang on to the edge but she was too tired to climb back up. Then, once the last stone had fallen into the ravine, Oscar lifted his comrade with surprising force. The chaos of the rubble resonated for a long time in the bowels of the world.

Back on stable ground, Alhuia fell into Oscar's arms. Then, they resumed their arduous adventure. It was at this moment that they heard a rustling below. This distant sound gradually became a concert of screeching, scratching and rapid growls. Things were coming, many things. They were coming back from the abyss, attracted by an agitation that had not occurred for centuries. Were the creatures curious, or hungry? Oscar drew his sword, Alhuia did the same and cursed.

— Run to the sanctuary! she shouted. I will hold them back, go!

The porch of the building was huge and overlooked the chasm. When they set foot on the first step, a swarm of humped beasts returned to the surface and invaded the ruins. It was not long before the presence of the intruders was discovered. Some creatures alerted the others and very quickly, the horde charged, claws out. There was no pursuit. The beasts were so fast that Alhuia could not outrun them.

The elf twirled her saber and began to cut down her increasingly numerous attackers. Oscar mowed down the monsters that tried to surround him. They prevented him from reaching the temple, thus, he jumped to his ally's side. They struck all around them, but the hunchbacks continued to pour out from the ledges, crannies and cracks.

More came again and again, more furious than the last. The smell of blood fueled their hunger. The adventurers bellowed and puffed with each blow given. A carpet of stocky, gnarled bodies formed before them. However, for a handful of monsters killed, they received blows, wounds and bites. Oscar's arms were dripping with blood. His blood. Alhuia bent slowly, one leg bruised by sinister fang marks.

The intruders backed away, and behind them rose the facade of the sanctuary. They would quickly find themselves with no escape. The hunchbacks were dying by the dozens. Some corpses slid into the pit from which they had emerged, colliding with those who were climbing.

The outcome of the confrontation was becoming clearer to the adventurers, but that was without taking into account the din of the combat. This chaos of screams and blades did not go unnoticed for long. So, as the wounded warrior pushed back the creatures that overwhelmed the Watcher, a growl rose to their ears. The hunchbacks flinched and regrouped. Freed from the incessant assault, the adventurers collapsed and crawled to the shelter of the columns at the top of the steps.

Suddenly, a tentacle appeared and slammed the steps, the beasts still present were reduced to mush. A second limb struck and wreaked even more havoc, taking down a brick wall in the process. A guttural gurgling vibrated from the darkness, finishing dispersing the panicked hunchbacks. The intruders held their breath until the colossal monster retreated for good.

Their strengths were draining away through their innumerable wounds. Alhuia pulled on the cord hanging from her neck, revealing a small disk of clay. What happened next, Oscar did not see. When he awoke, his most serious wounds were healed. Only purplish marks remained. The pain, on the other hand, was still tormenting him and manifested itself at his every move. Struck by great anguish, the man set out in search of the elf. He found her a little further away, near the door of the sanctuary. She was leaning against the wall, exhausted but alive, the broken clay talisman in her hand.

- A gift from Judith. It has a single use though.
- You used it on me !
- You have to stay alive. I will be fine...

He examined the mark on her neck. She grimaced when he ran his fingers over it. She had come close to death. He gave her a worried look.

- I have had worse.
- It does not mean that you are safe and sound.
- Please, open the door, I will wait for you here.

Oscar grabbed the key carefully kept in his bag and stood up in silence. Entering the imposing shrine, he discovered a clear block at its center. It was a polished marble cube covered with refined carvings. At the back was a door made of an unknown metal with a blue sheen. He turned the key in the lock which clicked discreetly. The door slid, revealing a small room, and a chest.

From it, the man grabbed a simple, sturdy and elegant sword in a resplendent sheath. covered with an azure fabric with leaves motifs embroidered in gold thread. An ornate belt with intact hardware was wrapped around the scabbard, waiting to be fitted to the waist of a new bearer. Oscar ran his hand over the handle and felt a strange energy vibrate through his mind. Revealing a few inches of the blade, he discerned the typical patterns of its alloy, combining strength and flexibility. It was a splendid weapon, certainly having belonged to a noble warrior.

- A sword ? said Oscar when he came back to Alhuia.
- One with extraordinary powers. You must not brandish it without restraint. Its use implies more wisdom than strength. Do not forget that.
- You knew what was held behind that door.
- Yes.
- Tell me how.
- I put this weapon here myself. It was the safest place and I made sure no one would reach it. I have many enemies and they were closing on me. I decided to

leave the sword in a forgotten place. I came a long time ago, by another way, before I made it collapse.

— I really do not want to, but my heart tell me to trust you.

— You inherited a terrible quest. I am here to guide you on its path, even if we both know that you will not like it.

— Can I turn back ?

— Do you want to ?

— No.

— Finding the sword was the easy part, right ?

— Absolutely. Do you feel its power ?

— Hard not to.

— No priest or sorcerer in this world knows this magic. It is a strength as well as a danger. You will have to resist it or it will consume you.

— Why taking such a risk for a weapon ?

— It is the only artifact capable of changing the course of events. All it needed was a bearer. It has not known one for two millennia. At every moment, a guardian watched over it, waiting for the mortal who would be able to handle it. And I found him.

She exhaled a long breath, as if a weight had just been lifted from her chest.

— Why me though ? he asked. I am no sorcerer, not even the best swordsman.

— Do you know what a prophecy is ?

— No.

— Beside being an enigma, it is a spell. One of the most dangerous, because it is the only kind of magic that does not require knowledge, not even understanding of the Immaterial. Faith is enough to create a prophecy. It happened time and time again in the past, despite the perpetrators' ignorance of their own actions. You have been designated by a prophecy before your birth.

— How is that possible ?

— You were not chosen in person. Though, the wording pointed at a specific child in your lineage... It happens to be you. A prophecy is so powerful that it acts as a new rule of our very existence.

— I think I understand. If the subject of the prophecy would have been different, it would have changed the bearer.

— Exactly. The only thing we knew was that it would be someone from your lineage. That is why all members of your family came to the temple before you.

— What would happen if you handled the sword in my place?

— I would die after a few days. Someone less powerful than me would not last more than an hour.

— Something tells me that you know the prophecy by heart.

— I do, and I will tell you more about it when we get out of this cave.

— Right. Time to move.

The way back was easier. They did not suffer any trouble running back across the bridge of the lake but fatigue and pain made each step heavier than the previous one. Oscar still had questions and doubts. The context of it all was beyond his understanding, only Alhuia's explanations made a bit of sense. He kept the sword



on his back.

They made it back into Mistcastle's catacombs. Leaving the depths of Proudspire behind them. None of them wanted to talk about the door they left open for the creatures. They found another way leading to a few steps and a wooden door. A faint glow emanated from the other side. Alhuia abandoned her pack and her battered lantern.

- This is the cathedral of Esphon. We will not go unnoticed.
- Be ready.