

The background of the cover is a detailed illustration of a forest. In the foreground, there are large, moss-covered rocks and ferns. A path leads through the forest towards a stone tower with a conical roof in the distance. The sky is filled with dramatic, grey and white clouds, with a bright light source breaking through the clouds, creating a hazy, ethereal atmosphere. The overall color palette is dominated by greens, browns, and greys.

Legends of Atalmon

Caryn Chronicle
Volume III

Jeff Stanhope

**Legends of Atalmor:
Caryn Chronicle, Volume Three**

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Prologue

Atalmor, a small island continent west of the mainland, was divided by rivers and mountains into four countries. Caryn, the largest, was in the northwest. This was the land where humans ruled. Many small towns and villages dotted the landscape, surrounded by fertile fields. In the city of Caryn, named for the country, was a small jeweler's shop situated in the middle of a long avenue. The unremarkable shop was in a narrow, drafty old building that was two stories tall, the shop occupying the first level with the jeweler's home neatly tucked away upstairs.

"But I am only a jeweler," said the tiny man. Standing before him was the imposing figure of a mage. The mage was one of the tallest people Jwas had ever seen. "Please, I beg you. I do not wish to be involved in this. Can you not make the rings yourself?"

"You will do as you are instructed, and if you do not," the wizard said with a menacing grin just before shooting a tiny lightning bolt into Jwas' long black hair, singeing the ends. "Horlarl will not be pleased, and we all know how elves are when they are not pleased."

The jeweler nodded, motioned for the wizard to leave him so that he may begin working on the four rings as they were commissioned. He worked endlessly for ten days without rest until all the rings were complete and perfect. Though Jwas wanted no part of the rings, he took pride in his work, noting how beautiful his creations were. He sent a street messenger to fetch the mage that had ordered him to make the rings once he had finished.

The next day, the mage returned. "I have been wondering, what is it that makes you waste so much time in crafting simple rings, hmm? Have you been dawdling while the kings wait? This is unacceptable!" The wizard lifted a wand, spoke a soft word, and Jwas was gone. The wizard then hurried out from the jeweler's shop, heading out of Caryn altogether.

High in the tower of the mage's master in Gumlor, the younger mage carefully brought out the four rings. Two of the rings were plain silver, as instructed, one had the designs of vines carved into it all around, and the final ring was made of gold with an emerald set into it. The mage went to work. With the help of his master, the wizard carefully imbued the rings with powerful magics.

Days later, once the rings were finished, imbued with the magic of the wizards and tied to the soul of an unfortunate jeweler, the wizards presented them to the rulers of the four kingdoms.

Chapter One

The dog guarding the room lay on the small bed and never looked up to regard its intruder. The man was short but stout with short, tidy, graying hair and a stubble beard. "Useless," the man scoffed at the hound as he began to rummage through the papers tucked away in a coffer beside the bed. The cottage was small, with but two rooms, a small room with a kettle hanging over a fireplace, and a bed chamber. The bed chamber was tiny and cramped, and smelled of dogs and sweat. The man had to strain his golden eyes, for the only light in the room came from a very small window. As the intruder was searching every crammed corner, he failed to notice the dog slowly rise and transfigure into the form of a woman.

"Now, what have we here?" asked the slender older woman with light brown hair who was suddenly filling the doorway. She was wearing a flowing blue and tan dress with glowing runes stitched onto both sleeves. Sword in hand, she quickly had the stunned man pinned to the back wall, her green eyes piercing his own. He frantically searched his mind for an excuse to be there, other than the obvious.

"Allow me to show my official papers?" he asked. The woman, looking as beautiful as she was deadly, nodded and kept the sword close enough to strike at him should he try any tricks. Slowly, he slid the strap off one shoulder and swung his pack around in front of him. He unbuckled the flap on top, and, still moving very slowly, but deliberately, brought forth a bundle.

Worn leather wrapped around several sheets of parchment paper, bound with a leather thong, tied very neatly. As he began to open the bundle, the woman noticed a symbol stamped on one side of the leather, and her green eyes widened as she recognized the crest. It was a shield, divided into quadrants, a river running through the top left to the bottom right, a mountain in the top right, and a tree in the bottom left. It had a knight's helm atop, and worn runes in the cross dividing the panels. It was an early version of the current royal crest.

When the intruder produced the paper he was seeking, she took it, eyeing it curiously. As she was reading his "official" papers, she left the sword floating in position in front of the man's nose. The papers this man held were required those days, in order to travel throughout the kingdom of Caryn. She read his name aloud, "Kryzzl".

"An odd name, even for a thief..." As she spoke, the floating sword crept closer to Kryzzl's face. Without pause or alarm, Kryzzl placed a finger on the tip of the blade and guided its sharp point, carefully, away to the side.

"I am no thief, Lady Lisann," he calmly replied, "I am a representative of the land of the dwarves called Jire. I seek the one named Wyrwood, and was told he could be found here."

"Haven't seen 'SIR' Wyrwood in these woods in a decade. Ever since he lost his title, he has been in exile. Someone told you my name, but nothing of his absence?" She asked angrily.

"The last man I spoke to in search of Sir Wyrwood, told me he could be found here, and the lady of the house would be happy to show him to me" said Kryzzl.

"All I have of him is this." She held out a small gold chain with a silvery half-moon pendant.

Kryzzl held his hand out, and she dropped it into his dry, cracked palm. He carefully examined it, and it seemed attached to this chain was only one-half of a larger piece. On

one side was carved a scene of a mountain, no doubt the Great Hill in Jire, on the other was inscribed half of a message. Kryzzl read the pendant and asked, "What does the other half read?"

"Only Sir Wyrwood knows. He made this in exile and had it sent to me"

"I see. May I?" he produced a scrap of parchment and a small chunk of coal.

The woman nodded her agreement and he set about to make a rubbing of both sides of the pendant.

They sat for hours talking about the dwarf. She told him many tales of Wyrwood's various battles and exploits. After they had eaten a supper of stew and bread, Kryzzl departed. "Thank you, Lady Lisann, I shall remember you in my travels."

"Be safe, young man, and gods be with you on your quest. If you should find him, send him back to me, safely." Lisann allowed a single tear to fall from her eye.

Moments after leaving the cottage, Kryzzl remembered something else he had been told on his journey, and turned to ask Lisann of the matter. Yet when he turned, all he saw were ruins of a small cottage sitting on the knoll. Weeds and small trees were growing through the cracks of the old stone floor.

Was it all a dream? No, he still had a full belly and the taste of stew on his lips. Kryzzl reached into his pack, and yes, the parchment scrap with the rubbing on it was still there. He walked over to the rubble, to where the bed chamber had been just moments before, and saw the glint of metal through the weeds. Crouching down, he picked up the object. It was a plain silver ring with a scrap of papyrus rolled up inside. He carefully unrolled the minuscule scroll. It was blank, save for a single spot of what appeared to be dried blood in the center. Carefully, he placed the crumbling paper in a pocket of his pack, placed the ring in the inside pocket of his green coat, and turned south on the road between the cities of Caryn and Ravenwood.

The suns were setting and light was fast waning when Kryzzl decided to stop for the night. He found a meadow on the side of the road surrounded by a low wooden fence. Kryzzl stepped over the fence and laid down in the soft grass, using his pack as a pillow.

He was awakened the next morning to find a crossbow aimed squarely at his eye. "Just who in the flame are you?", bellowed an angry, growling voice. As Kryzzl's eyes adjusted to the brightness of the morning suns, he saw the man it belonged to. He was very tall and thin, blonde hair, with sun-darkened skin. He was dressed in blue cloth breeches, black leather boots, and chain mail under a tunic that had a familiar crest embroidered in its center.

Shaking off some of the sleep he replied, "Kryzzl, good sir."

"Papers", the man said coldly, crossbow ever still.

"Here," Kryzzl said as he handed his pack to the patrolman, "In the top of the pack, a bundle."

After finding and reading the papers, the patrolman said to Kryzzl, "Do you know not who owns these lands?"

"No."

"This field is part of Fael's territory, this and almost all others around here," the patrolman swept his free arm out wide. "He is not very welcoming to free-loaders who sleep in his fields, taking his rabbits and boars as they please." He went on to explain that Fael was an ancient man who worked cruel and dark magics, calling on the dark forces that were forbidden for most mages to use. He was given special permission by the king,

though some may say he used magic to “convince” the king to permit him to do so.

“My apologies,” said Kryzzl in a soft voice, “I will take my papers and be on my way.”

“You'll take care not to stray from the road, except for the marked areas for camping, lots of foul things out there.” As he handed back the bundle of papers, he noticed the crest stamped in the leather. “A friend of the king?” the patrolman asked.

Kryzzl gave a tight smile at this, but remained silent.

“Gods be with you, sir,” the patrolman said as he watched the short man stroll away down the ancient cobbled path.

Around midday, Kryzzl came into the city of Ravenwood. This was a grand city, not as large as the city Caryn, but large enough. Looking down its newly cobbled streets, one could see tall, colorful buildings. A large keep reached for the clouds in the town's center, with beautiful gardens and high iron fences surrounding it. Bards and minstrels lined both sides of most streets, singing praises to the king and of glorious battles of days and times long-forgotten. One street had ten or more taverns, countless merchant carts and carriages from which the traders peddled wares, and several inns to take in new visitors. Horses and ponies whinnied and stamped, this street was very busy indeed.

He chose the cleanest looking tavern, called “The Crow's Feather Tavern”. Kryzzl stepped through the doorway to find a circular bar, packed with patrons sitting elbow to elbow. In the center of the noisy tavern was a rolling fire with several kettles hanging above. The smells of fresh bread, roast boar, and spicy stew entered his nostrils, making his stomach grumble. All around, he looked at the tables scattered about, and found an empty table in a dark corner. When he sat down, he reached into his inside coat pocket and pulled out the ring he had retrieved from the cottage. Examining it, he noticed nothing remarkable, just a plain silver ring, so he slipped it on his first finger. Nothing seemed special about the ring, so he placed it back in his coat.

Soon after, a serving wench arrived at his table. “What'll you have?” she asked in a pleasant voice, smiling that fake smile that most servers have.

“One tankard of ale, please,” he said. He added, “and a small bowl of stew.”

“Right away, sir”, she replied. Moments later, she returned with the ale, stew, and a basket of fresh bread on her tray. As she set the bowl in front of him, a horrible crashing sound came from outside in the street. There was commotion as the tavern patrons rushed to the windows to see what was happening.

Out on the street, two men were standing over a very young boy who was unconscious and bleeding from his head. Laying on the road, the boy looked pitiful indeed, and outnumbered as more armed men arrived on scene.

Kryzzl pushed through the crowded doorway of the tavern, sword and dagger in hand. When he reached the men, he noticed they both had the same crest on their armored chests as the patrolman he encountered in the field earlier that day. Kryzzl quickly put his blades away, hailing the nearest armored man.

“What has happened here?” he asked calmly.

“This rat was trying to steal from that vegetable cart across the street,” the guard told him.

“And you killed him?!” Kryzzl exclaimed.

“If he dies, so be it,” the guard said. He then added after realizing Kryzzl was not from there, “Papers, please.”

As Kryzzl handed over his papers, the child began to twitch. Wincing in terrible pain from the gash in his head, the boy slowly sat up, dazed. Blood began streaming down his face, darkening and discoloring his short blonde hair. Kryzzl started to ask the boy if he was alright, when the second guard advanced with a mace in hand held high above his head, swinging at the child with all his might.

A moment before the mace would crush the boy's skull, the world stopped. Kryzzl saw everything stop. Birds hung in the air in mid-flight, drinks that were being poured froze in place. Citizens and guards alike were frozen mid-stride. Kryzzl found he could still move, and thought best to try to re-position the poor child away from the path of the mace. The man stepped over to the boy, picked him up from the ground, and moved him aside. As soon as he had the helpless body out of the way, the world started to move again.

The guardsman cursed as his mace struck nothing but thin air.

"Magic!!" the first guard cried. "Bind him immediately!!"

There was no struggle in tying the boy's hands. Kryzzl stepped forward and said "If this child is to go to the dungeon, take me as well. For I also worked magic"

The boy looked incredulously at Kryzzl as he was jerked up to his feet. Kryzzl gave him a smile and a wink as the first guardsman bound his hands with a chain made from crystal. The two were loaded onto a pony cart and were taken away from the bloody scene.

The dungeon was dark, dirty, and smelled of rotting flesh. Dim torches hung on the wall every fifty feet or so. Men chained to the cold stone walls screamed and spat curses at the guards escorting the two through the narrow passages. Kryzzl heard the sounds of torture coming from a side hallway. One prisoner managed to spit a wad of mucus onto the last guard, who returned the favor quickly with a thump from his club. The dungeon seemed to go on forever, sprawling in all directions deep beneath the keep. They eventually came to a cell with a heavy iron door that was bound by magical forces, reserved for those who illegally worked magic. The man and the boy were shackled tightly to the wall, side by side, in the darkest corner of the cell.

In the lit portion of the cell, a dwarf was chained to the wall, quietly spitting curses to gods unknown. After a few moments of looking at his newest cellmates, the dwarf barked, "Ye got yerself in a bloody mess, ain't ye? What'd the boy do, summon a demon?"

Kryzzl smiled at the dwarf, "I guess I somehow slowed time when the boy was about to be slain for stealing. The child has done nothing except for steal fruit."

"Funny, they normally let the little rats die in the street," the dwarf replied to the darkness.

"They thought he did some magic, so they brought him to this foul place. Why would they let him die for theft, but live for dealing magic?" Kryzzl asked

"Oh, they'll kill 'im, don't ye doubt, an' ye too, just takes different measures to kill a mage," the old dwarf replied.

"Never mind that," Kryzzl said, "What are you in for?"

"Me? Hah, well I had an axe enchanted and wouldn't give up the feller I had do it. So they'll kill me, I reckon. Never was one to follow the letter of the law anyhow. I reckon I deserve it somehow."

"That doesn't sound like any reason to die. What would you do if you got out?" Kryzzl asked

The dwarf looked toward the ceiling and replied, "I'd go back to Jire, where these dumb laws don't exist, and get me king to talk some sense into the damned king o' Caryn."

"What if I got you out?" Kryzzl asked, suddenly standing free of bonds in front of the dwarf.

"What're ye goin' to do, turn us into mist an' hope we float outta this forsaken prison? Nay, I'd rather die in this cesspit than be helped out of it by a damned wizard!" the dwarf exclaimed.

"My friend, I am no wizard," Kryzzl replied. In moments, he had the dwarf and boy free of their bonds, and was working on the magical forces keeping the door locked. The boy had found a small length of wire on the floor, a component to an earlier mage's spell, grasped it with his toes, lifted the wire to his hands, and was working the pins and tumblers with a skill that was far beyond his years. Soon, the lock was open and the door swung open silently. A quick search down each direction of the hallway revealed no immediate guards, so Kryzzl swiftly led the other two in the direction they came from. All along the corridors, prisoners spat and cursed the free men, but they had not run into any guards yet. Retracing their steps was a challenge, as the dungeon was dark and every turn looked the same, but Kryzzl somehow prevailed.

At last finding the room where their belongings were held, Kryzzl blew on the lock, melting it with his breath.

"I knew ye was a damned wizard!" the dwarf exclaimed. Kryzzl gave a hateful look, but had no reply, he simply stepped into the room and retrieved his personal effects and bade the dwarf to do the same. The dwarf grudgingly rummaged through the items in the room until he found his pack and his boots. He also grabbed a cloak that obviously belonged to someone else, but Kryzzl held his tongue and said nothing.

At this late hour, only one guard was keeping the entrance. When the sleepy man saw the escapees, he quickly went for the spear he had leaning against the door. The dwarf launched himself up the three stairs leading to the guard, throwing his weight into the man's belly, knocking him off balance. The guard let out a loud grunt as the wind was forced from his chest. Kryzzl and the boy slipped past as the dwarf was pummeling the guard with a bare fist, denting the man's breastplate and breaking his jaw. He found himself on top of the man's chest, punching his face over and over. The dwarf finally came out of his fit of rage when the man went limp beneath him.

The dwarf rose from his victim, covered in blood, and ran out through the door and into the streets of Ravenwood, looking for the man who let him out of the dungeon. After an hour of searching the alleys and streets, he gave up and rushed out of town, lest he be caught.

Chapter Two

The king of Caryn sat in his study, deep in thought. The room was full of scrolls and books from the far corners of the Mainland, books of knowledge and of histories concerning the migrations to Atalmor and the beginnings of the land known as Caryn. The king was studying one such tome when a servant burst through the tall arched doors. "Your Majesty, pardon the intrusion, but the High Mage beckons you. Urgently," the elf servant huffed as he doubled over, hands on his knees, trying to catch his breath.

The king smiled softly as he said, "I will be in the throne room in a moment. Thank you, Myrad." The king stretched as he rose from his comfortable chair, placed the gold bejeweled crown back on his head, adjusted it, sighed hard, then left the study.

The tall, muscular king stood a full head above any other man in Caryn. Today, he was dressed in his favorite cloak, an old, tattered cloak worn long ago by his birth father, the colors of which had long faded to a pale red-brown. He had his customary garb underneath; a dark purple shirt embroidered with his crest, black cloth pants without pockets, and black leather boots. Around his neck was an old pendant that his mother had given him when he was a baby, and on one finger he wore a gold ring. He had neat, dark hair, a full trimmed beard, and many well earned battle scars on his cheeks and neck. His eyes were deep-set and emerald green, steady, and ever determined under his thick brow.

As he entered the throne room, everyone in the room bowed or knelt until the king sat on the large marble throne. "King Tystyl," the shriveling old mage's voice cracked out, "there is a very urgent matter we must tend to."

King Tystyl waved a hand in dismissal at the other occupants of the room, "Leave us to talk privately", he said to the many servants and guardsmen there. When the room was empty, he blew a long sigh and said, "Now, what is it, Fael?"

"Sir Wyrnwood's Elder Ring has been used," said the decrepit old man.

Tystyl's stern discontented expression washed away instantly into a wide smile. Excited, he asked, "He lives? My dear old friend lives?"

"It certainly appears so, my King. I know not where, but I have a general idea and have already sent out a search party for him. We cannot let him go. Not this time," said the gray-eyed old man as his purple robe faded to blue, then green, now orange, and back to purple.

"How far out is the party?" inquired Tystyl.

"An hour sir, going south," was Fael's reply.

"I must join them, I cannot let him remain lost to me." At this, the king quickly stood up, hurried to a large chest hidden behind the throne. Opening the chest, Tystyl smiled as he always did when he saw its contents; a full suit of plate armor, a great axe, and two bastard swords sheathed in elven made leather scabbards. He removed his cloak and crown, setting them reverently on the seat of the throne. He then donned his armor, strapped the axe to his back, and buckled his sword belt securely around his waist. Fael bowed and left the room, smiling wickedly as soon as his back was turned to the king.

Tystyl rang a bell, and seconds later Myrad appeared in the throne room. "Myrad, make ready my black horse and arrange provisions enough for a week," Tystyl ordered. Myrad, an elf who had been the king's personal servant for a decade or more, smiled and bowed, and in a moment was gone. Tystyl glanced around the ornate throne room, looked at all the colorful and intricate tapestries, mostly images of the last battle Caryn suffered, at the beautiful stained glass windows, and the granite floor, and sighed. It had been three

years since he last stepped out of the great city of Caryn, the one that he had rebuilt atop the ruins of the old city some fifteen years before, and on a similar mission, no less. Wyrwood had been rumored to have been seen somewhere near Strungvali, just on the north side of the border. Tystyl had himself gone to investigate, only to find not his precious Wyrwood, but a younger blue-bearded dwarf, whose name escaped Tystyl's thoughts now. "Why did I let them take his title? I should have listened to Father and Lisann, and not that damned Fael," he thought to himself.

When he reached the stables just outside the castle, his favorite horse stood ready. "Old friend, are you ready to go find our father?" he asked the steed. As if in reply to the king's question, the horse stamped his mighty hoof then gave a snort as he lowered and raised his head. "Well, then, we should be off."

At first light, Kryzzl stopped for a rest after the long night of walking. Kryzzl brought out some smoked meat and cheese from his pack. Sitting on the grass beside the road, he considered where he should try next. If Wyrwood had been this far south, perhaps he could be in Strungvali, which was only a few more miles down this road. Kryzzl could go to Strungvali, however the elves may not welcome him. He could try to get more information, but the only town this far south in Caryn was Ravenwood, and he certainly wasn't going back there. The only option it seemed was to carry on into the land of the elves and take his chances.

As he walked along the road, he was thoroughly enjoying the crisp, spring morning. The suns were both up, the birds were singing their songs, and the early wildflowers were in full bloom. The smell of the morning dew was thick in the air. As he topped the ridge of a hill, a beautiful sight laid out before him. From this vantage, one could see the northern parts of Strungvali, trees and streams as far as the eye could see. There were rolling hills, serene valleys, and meadows all about the forests. The leaves on the trees were of all hues of the rainbow. He paused for a long moment to take in the majestic view before continuing down the path for the last mile of the road leading into the land of the elves.

Upon entering Strungvali, an elf in a greenish tunic and brown leggings dropped from the nearest tree. With an arrow resting on his front hand, the elf drew his bowstring taut as he demanded, "Either state your business quickly, turn back, or die where you stand."

From behind the elf, a gruff voice said, "That be the feller I told ye about, the one 'twas to be meetin' me." To Kryzzl's surprise, the dwarf from Ravenwood stepped into view.

"I- I have papers," the man stammered as he reached for his pack.

"Those are not necessary here. I will repeat only once more, either state your business, turn back, or die where you stand," the elf stated flatly.

Kryzzl swallowed hard, trying to get the lump out of his throat and said, "I am a representative from Jire, in search of King Bareet's brother, Wyrwood. He is a blue-bearded-"

The elf cut him off, "I know what Wyrwood looks like, he needs no description here, but I am afraid you will not find your dwarf here. Seems he slipped off to the east into Gumlor," was the elf's response. "You may find him in or near Wels." He then turned to the dwarf as he lowered his bow and said, "Take the east road when you reach the

valley.”

“Many thanks, good sir,” said Kryzzl. As they walked away from the elf, Kryzzl regarded the dwarf, looked at him for the first time in sunlight. He was quite tall for a dwarf, with black hair and beard. He had many scars along his cheeks and crossing his large round nose. The bare arms of the dwarf revealed corded muscles, veins winding through them like vines choking a tree.

“I ne’er thanked ye,” the dwarf finally said at length.

“Why did you help me back there?” asked Kryzzl.

“Why’d ye help meself in the dungeon? I felt ye needed it. Ye would ne’er woulda’ got past the elf without me.” The dwarf looked hard at Kryzzl. Something seemed off about the man. He could not put his finger on it, but something was definitely different about this man. “What be yer name?”

“Kryzzl, and yourself?”

“William. Yer eyes, they be a little distinct. Not sure I seen any like ‘em,” the dwarf stated.

“Well, I’ve had them all my life,” Kryzzl replied, and they continued in silence for a long stretch.

“Well, we need to make the valley before the moon rises,” William replied.

The road to the valley curved, climbed, fell, and seemed to sometimes shift in several directions at once. Kryzzl had never been to this land before, had never seen anything so beautiful. Under the colorful canopy reaching out from the trees, he stared at the bright sunlight shining in tiny rays through the leaves. All manner of creatures scurried out of the way as the strangers passed. Kryzzl watched vividly-colored birds take flight as the dwarf and he approached. William stopped at an enormous oak marked by a single rune on a stone in front of it and said, “I left something here last time I was through, I need to get it.” He stepped behind the ancient tree. Kryzzl heard some scratching and digging noises from the tree, and William returned with what looked to be a newly forged double bit axe. The head of the axe was as broad as the dwarf who held it, with cruel sharp edges on either side. It had gold inlaid into the silvery steel in intricate patterns. Kryzzl stared at the fine weapon. He had never seen anything like it.

“That is a mighty axe, William, is that the same one you were put in the dungeon for?” Kryzzl asked as the dwarf strapped it to his back.

“No, this one be me own. The other I had made for a friend o’ mine,” he said. With that, they made haste to get to the valley before nightfall. The suns were already going down, and the two could not afford to be on the road after dark, not without an elven escort.

They arrived at the head of the valley just as the last light of day was giving way to the darkness of night. An elf guarding the entrance recognized William and allowed the pair of travelers to pass. “I will set ye up with me old friend, Jak, and I meself will stay with another friend this night,” said William as they reached one of many small huts scattered just outside the elven city. William bade him, “Stay, whilst I explain to Jak what we be doing.”

“As you wish,” came Kryzzl’s answer. William walked into the hut, and Kryzzl heard much whispering and hushed tones coming from inside. Kryzzl took in the layout of the lively village. He saw several huts gathered around the wall that protected the elven city. There were gardens and stables tucked away in almost every corner, and a large fire pit

that appeared to be for religious gatherings, for it had stones with ancient runes carved in them and spaced evenly around it, right in the center of it all. Moments after he went into the hut, the dwarf emerged with a smile on his face, beckoning Kryzzl to come.

“Jak has a straw bed set for ye, an' a fire. 'Twill be a cool night here in the valley.” As William was speaking, Jak, a tall elderly elf wearing the same garb as all the other elves they had seen that day, appeared in the door of the hut. He silently showed Kryzzl the way in.

“Do you think he is truthful?” the elf sitting across from William a little while later in a different hut asked.

“Nay, Emir, he shows kindness from his right eye, while I see deceit in his left, he's not to be trusted. 'Twas why I gave 'im a fake name ” answered the dwarf. “I think he has me ring. Lisann would ne'er let it out o' her sight, unless...” He trailed off for a moment and a look of pure dread and profound sadness crossed his weathered face.

“Jak will find out soon enough, Sir Wyrnwood,” said Emir after some thought. “Worry not for Lisann, for even if your fears are realized, she will have passed to a far better place.”

On the trail south, King Tystyl easily caught up with his men, and after another hour or so of riding, they settled in a flat spot to camp that night. Fifteen knights, most in dirty armor, sat around the fire as their king played on his lute and sang a song of glorious wars waged long ago. When the king had finished, the closest of his men and Captain of the Guard, Omarus, asked why he was with them.

“To find our father,” he said simply. “I will not stop this time until I do. I wish to ensure his safe return to the kingdom, and to show him how I have missed him all these years. I rue the day that he was dismissed from my court, forced out by that damned mage. Fael has something else up his sleeve as we speak, I can feel it.” When he was finished, King Tystyl put his bedroll down on the ground and laid down to sleep. The other men followed suit and soon there was a chorus of loud snoring echoing through the forest.

The king was soon awakened by the sound of thunder. Quickly, he roused the rest of the party and they all started gathering up their campsite. He told them after studying the movements and scent of the wind, “We should make our way to Lightwood before the rain comes in.”

Mounting their horses, all the men eagerly agreed, and set off quickly to the small town in which many of them were raised. Omarus, riding beside King Tystyl behind the rest of the men, asked, “Why do you want that damned dwarf back so badly? He is a traitor and a threat to the throne itself.”

“So says Fael,” the king snapped, “do you not remember how he took us in, raised us as his own? We were all brothers under his care. I love that dwarf as should you. Every man here owes his station and his very life to Wyrnwood. We all have good reason to return him to Caryn alive.”

“True, but we all have a thousand golden reasons to return only his head,” Omarus sneered as he aimed a tiny hand-crossbow hidden under his cloak, “and even you, The Great King Tystyl cannot quench our thirst for gold.” He pulled the trigger, the bolt tore through his cloak, hitting King Tystyl squarely in the neck, knocking him of his steed, slumping lifeless to the ground. “Eternal sleep is yours, 'brother'...”

Chapter Three

The first rays of the early morning suns were creeping into the valley, elves all around were setting about to do the day's work. Wyrwood had crept into the hut where Kryzzl was still snoring to search for his ring. He looked through the man's pack, found only papers, fruit, and hard bread. He reached into a pocket of the pack, pulled out two scraps of parchment. On one was the rubbing of Lisann's pendant, the other a reddish-brown drop of blood. "She lives, thank the gods, else the bastard would o' taken the whole pendant" he thought, and quietly returned the parchment to its place.

"I have to find me ring," he thought to himself. The sunlight was now shining through the small doorway of the hut, and Kryzzl stopped snoring. Wyrwood quickly and quietly returned the pack to its place. The man looked up and found his new dwarf friend standing above him, as if patiently waiting for the man to wake up.

"Tis late in the morn' fer a young man like yerself to be rising," the dwarf said with false impatience. "I must find Jak an' get some answers an' supplies, ye get yerself ready for the day. Boar sausage an' cheese are by the hearth."

"Thank you," the man said as he pulled his tan shirt over his hairless chest. Wyrwood then saw it.

"Me ring," he thought. "I'll get it back soon, even if'n I have to chop his finger off with me axe."

"He cannot be trusted, he speaks of the death of your brother, yet our scouts report otherwise." Jak was sitting on a fallen tree far enough away from the huts that he could not be heard by anyone but the dwarf standing before him. "The man holds papers, obviously forged, and the coat of arms of King Tystyl's father. He claims to be from Jire, but we both know that's a lie."

"Aye. So what is he about, can ye read his thoughts?" asked Wyrwood, puzzled.

"A strange magic surrounds him, no, his thoughts are not to be read. I believe he may have an Elder Ring," answered Jak.

"Aye, he holds me own ring," Wyrwood said regretfully, "an' he will give it up, one way or the other. I'll take him to Gumlor, to let him die by the hands o' the stinkin' orcs," the dwarf said grimly. He stood up and walked back to Jak's hut to find Kryzzl finishing his breakfast, already dressed in his brown trousers, tan shirt, and green coat. His pack was laying on the dirt floor beside him.

"Are we ready to head out? It is very important that I find Sir Wyrwood this day," Kryzzl said politely.

"Aye, but I fear ye won't find him this day. We'll set out. The elves have offered ponies for us to ride," said the dwarf as they left the hut, "'tis a hard road from here, an' we need all the help we can get."

As they mounted the ponies, Wyrwood said to Jak, "Take care, me friend."

"May your gods go with you 'William'," replied Jak, "we will keep watch over you until you reach the mountain pass."

"Thank you for your hospitality, it is much appreciated," Kryzzl said.

Nodding, Jak swept a hand out in front of them as if showing them the way.

Peering into the large crystal in the center of the room, the ancient wizard was softly

uttering the words of a continuous spell. He was pleased with what he saw. He had seen what transpired the night before, that his new lackey had done the deed.

“It played out beautifully,” Fael thought to himself, “Now all there is to do is get his ring, and find that damned dwarf, and I shall have all the Elder Rings I need. Nobody will be able to stop me then...”

What he did not see in the crystal was what happened after Omarus and his crew rode off. Lisann had gotten news from a squirrel that a man was in danger on the road. She had hurried off to find him, and to help any way she could. The night sky was beginning to open up in a full rain by then, and visibility was low. After an hour of searching, she finally found the man, and seeing who it was, her heart sank deep into her chest.

“Tystyl...” she whispered. Her king was already dead. She rolled his lifeless body onto his large shield and dragged him to a nearby chapel to get him out of the rain.

The woman stood over the broken man on the altar. Her light brown hair curled around her ears and down into her deep green eyes. She stood straight and beautiful, tears welling up as she performed the ceremony of last rites for her fallen king, before preparing his body for public display. When she had finished with her ceremony, she bent over him and softly cried, “Oh, my king, my king. My dear, sweet Tystyl. First I lose my dearest friend Wyrwood, now his adopted son, the kindest soul anyone could meet. You saved this great kingdom, and built your city back up from the ashes. My dear Tystyl, may all the gods be sad this day, for their realm has lost the greatest king it has ever known.”

As she spoke, tears fell like a water fall. A teardrop landed on Tystyl's hand, running along his finger until it reached his ring. It was a plain gold ring with an emerald set deep into the gold. When the tear touched the ring, the emerald began to shimmer. Within an instant, lights of all colors shot forth from the ring and darted about in the air like hummingbirds. The lights swarmed about the fallen Tystyl as flies would swarm around a honey pot. She watched in awe as his chest began to move, ever so slightly, up. His chest then fell with a jerk. The lights vanished. Her heart sank once more.

After a few moments, Tystyl's arms and legs began to jerk, a light twitch at first, but after a minute or so, his entire body was convulsing violently. She rushed to get a cushion under his head to prevent further damage to the king's skull. A minute later, the convulsing stopped. He breathed.

He breathed!

She was ecstatic, hurrying to hold him in her arms. As he drew another ragged breath, she gave him a soft kiss on the forehead and laid him back down so he could sleep.

Lisann sat by the stone altar all night, and when morning came, Tystyl woke up to find he was looking at the familiar vaulted ceiling of an old chapel near Lightwood. “Good morning, my king,” Lisann's voice might as well have been that of an angel. He looked deep into her green eyes, then threw his arms around her in a weakened, loving embrace.

“I live?” the king questioned. “I was in a place of great darkness, then lights of so many colors surrounded me, entered my soul. I have never had so much pain.”

“You caught a crossbow bolt in your neck, I fear it was poisoned.” She told him to rest this day, and she would take him back to her cottage in the morning. “I will stay with you as much as I can, dear Tystyl. You must need food, so I will go out and gather some

fruit, unless you would prefer a hare or some stew..."

"No, I will be fine," said he in a weakened voice, "I must find Father before Omarus and the rest of my men do."

"You mean?" she asked him with hope in her eyes.

"Yes, he is alive, but I fear we will lose him forever if my knights find him. Fael has put a price upon his head. I was a fool to trust that damned mage. Now he has my own men rising against me. I must reach Strungvali by the morrow."

"Rest today, young king, and in the morning I will send you to the valley. The elves should know where Sir Wyrnwood is, and aid you in finding him," Before she finished her half-whispered sentence, Tystyl had fallen fast asleep.

All that night, Lisann prayed over his wounds, healing him with her powerful magic. When morning came, her king was almost as good as new. She was growing weary, having not slept in almost three days, when Tystyl finally woke up. "Take this," she said as she poured a vial of potion into his mouth, "it should help with the pain from that bolt."

"I thank you, Lady Lisann," Tystyl said once he swallowed the bitter elixir, "I owe you my life. Anything you desire from the kingdom is yours," said the king.

"All I desire is that you find our dear Wyrnwood and bring him home." She then added, "When you are ready, come outside so that I can send you to the valley."

Tystyl quickly pulled his boots on, fastened his armor, and walked outside to his weapons. He strapped the axe across his back, and buckled his sword belt tightly. Standing in front of the chapel, Lisann quietly began the words of a spell. She reached into a pouch around her neck, taking a pinch of the fine powder within, sprinkling it over the king. She knew her spell was working when he closed his eyes, mist swirling about him, and started to fade out of the material plane. A moment later, Tystyl was gone.

Chapter Four

The sky was nearly black at midday, relentlessly pouring rain on the dwarf and his companion as the storm worked its way south and toward the east. Wyrwood grumbled a curse as his pony struggled chest-deep in pools of rainwater, soaking the dwarf's feet through his worn boots. Terrible winds squealed and howled through the mountains as the man and dwarf turned a bend on their road of mud. "Me thinks we should find higher ground, er me pony'll drown an' meself with it."

"Try riding a pony smaller than you, my feet have been dragging on the rocks, and have been in the water most of the trip, I now know how my younger brother's fat wife feels," Kryzzl chuckled to him as they rounded another bend.

"Aye, an' yer backside be getting wet, too!" They shared a laugh, even though what Wyrwood truly had in his mind no laughing matter. The dwarf was struggling with the vow he silently made before leaving the elves. This man did save him from death, though his motives could not be clear. Wyrwood would only kill him if necessary, as he knew that men could easily be persuaded in those times. Perhaps the right words would change this man's course of action. As they rode the path along side the river, the water was rising rapidly. "We'll head up to that there ridge," he yelled over the sound of the growing storm, pointing to an outcrop high above, but not very far down the road.

"How?" Kryzzl asked him as he saw no easy way to make ponies climb the sheer rock cliff looming over the road.

"There be a pass up the road here, easier for the ponies, and may give us a way to shelter."

As they reached the pass, the man and dwarf saw that it would not be usable. Large rocks and boulders had fallen across the entrance. The rain was a little lighter now, but the river was still rising fast. Wyrwood splashed as he dropped down from his pony and waded over to the rocks, surveying the scene. If he could split one of the boulders, if he could find the strength, they could pass. He looked up and saw that the sides of the cliff were fast crumbling inward toward the pass. He would need to work fast, or else his effort would be in vain. Beckoning Kryzzl, Wyrwood unstrapped his axe. "When I split this boulder with me axe, I need ye to get the ponies through as quickly as ye can, we'll nay have much time."

Kryzzl nodded his accord, dismounted and took the reins of both ponies in his hand. Wyrwood gathered his strength, spoke a few quick words in a tongue unfamiliar to Kryzzl, most likely dwarvish, and his axe began to hum with magic. He raised it high above his head with both hands. Calling on the might of his ancestors, the dwarf brought the axe down with as much strength as he could bring forth, and lightning shot from it. The axe struck the gray stone of the boulder, cleaving it cleanly in two. Kryzzl ran through, practically dragging the ponies, and soon he and the ponies were safely out of harm. The sides of the cliff were steadily dropping more rock and mud into the pass. Wyrwood, weakened considerably, tried to hurry through right behind. When he was almost through the fast shrinking opening, he stumbled. Face down in the mud, he could feel himself being buried. He struggled to get to his feet, and fell again. With his axe, he punched through the mud and gravel ahead of him. The hole he had made was rapidly closing. The dwarf spat a curse as he lurched forward, dragging his feet through just seconds before the hole closed again.

Pulling himself to his feet, the muddy dwarf looked around, saw Kryzzl frantically

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