

FATE OF EVANIA: BOOK 1

**SAMPLE**

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# DUNGEON LORDS

THE LOST DISCIPLE



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# PROLOGUE: TWISTED PROPHEESIES

The last thing he remembered was death and a flash of bright green light. It was a blinding light and then weightlessness as he hurled down the mountainside.

It had all gone wrong. The war wasn't supposed to end this way. Cosimir the Eternal had ruled over Evania for over three-hundred years. Everyone in the land feared him and his Dark Mage, Eldryn. They had taken the throne from the Evania family by killing every member that bore their name. The only family that history remembered ruling this great country.

Pain. He remembered the pain of smashing into rocks on his way down the mountainside. His vision was blurry. Things were dimming to gray.

The war. The first war had been waged by the kingdoms, rejecting Cosimir's rule. That was until a Scourge was unleashed upon the land and the twelve kingdoms had to dig their way underground to survive. The Scourge thrived in the sun, they'd said. Their once mighty rulers now mockingly deemed "Dungeon Lords" by the new, cruel tyrant Cosimir. All forced to live under the ground like rats.

Darkness. Darkness like the dungeon kingdom he had grown up in. For centuries, his people had been down there. Safer than the surface where Cosimir had ruled. Dark dungeons, lit only by the subfluore crystals of Mt. Fluore, the very mountain where Cosimir kept his rule.

Visions. Visions like the ones flashing before his eyes right now. He couldn't control them. His vision was getting dark. Eli. Eli's visions. Visions given to him by the god of the heavens, Solana. Visions that Cosimir would fall. Visions that Eli himself would be the one to do it.

Betrayal. Eli had betrayed them all. Eli's visions had convinced the kingdoms to provide their princes and princesses to follow Eli and rally the kingdoms. One noble from each kingdom to help lead the rebellion. Armies of brave men and women amassed to take back Evania. Battles. So many battles, all leading to taking Mt. Fluore and killing Cosimir.

Disgust. The conversation that he'd had with Eli on the eve of battle. How he was so scared to sacrifice himself for the

kingdom. How he hadn't gotten a choice to be the chosen one that Solana had blessed with the visions of hope. Outright disgust he felt as he watched Eli kill Cosimir with a strange spear, and then take the tyrant's place on the throne.

The magic. Something had hit them all once the spear had pierced the tyrant. He'd felt heavier after he'd picked himself up off the floor and saw the traitor on the throne, with no time to judge what had happened to himself. He just knew he'd been boiling with rage at the betrayal.

Death. Who died? Now, as he stumbled down the mountainside, he couldn't remember. Someone had died. Eli had thought they'd betrayed him. It was ironic because Eli was the real traitor.

The roar. He'd remembered roaring in anger and charging at Eli, ready to rip him limb from limb. Ready to kill him and send the bastard straight down to Baladan where they'd just sent Cosimir.

Falling. Pain. The green light had sent him through the opening of Cosimir's throne room and down the mountainside. The pain of walking was now almost too much for him to bear. Where was he going? He felt like he'd known for a moment, but now the thought was gone.

His hands were heavy. His vision was closing in on him. He lifted his hands to his face as he walked. Hands? Paws? Such an odd curse.

The ground gave way beneath him as his feet slipped on a loose rock that gave way.

Falling. His head smashed hard into the ground as he rolled down the hill, and he remembered no more.

## CHAPTER ONE

# WHISPERS OF WINDS AND WAR

The burning sun shone down on the sleepy little town of Graeton. It was a mostly unremarkable town as far as size goes, like much of the other surface towns throughout Evania. It was a close-knit town of few neighborhoods, and at its center, the bulk of the town was taken up by the main square.

The main square was a wide cobblestone square, but it was where all the activity of the town took place. A couple of small shops and the tavern owned by a local dwarf named Tobi made up the perimeter. The one thing that commanded attention in Graeton, though, was the church. It towered above the main square, its tall stone column reaching high towards the sky, bringing a feeling of peace to the town, a connection to their god, Solana.

It seemed peculiar that the main square was so large for such a small town, but the amount of commerce that took place within Graeton made it a necessity. For today, like most other days, stalls were set up throughout the large square filled with merchants selling their wares, and those who wished to purchase them. It wasn't only townspeople that would make purchases. Large covered wagons from out of town would come for entire shipments of items to take back to their underground kingdoms and small surface towns. The chatter in the town was loud as merchants worked their magic, trying to unload as much of their product as they could before the afternoon.

The fact was, afternoons were a pretty poor time to do business in Graeton. Just outside of town was a large, lush pine forest, the outlet of a very large valley of trees that ran all the way between the mountain range that rose high in the west. The nearby mountain was so large and ominous that it almost blocked out the entire western hemisphere of the sky, casting the early afternoon of Graeton into deep, chilly shadows until true dark set in. The street lamps powered by rare subfluore crystals helped light the streets after dark, but it still made for a gloomy atmosphere compared to the little daylight they received.

In the little tavern on the main square, Tobi the dwarf walked hurriedly back and forth behind the bar. He knew

that there would be a mad rush coming soon as all the potato farmers headed in from their fields (for potatoes were all that would grow well in bulk in their shadowy existence), and the other townsfolk either settled into their houses or headed to the warm, fire-lit tavern to pass the afternoon away. That's why Tobi had known Graeton was a good place to open a tavern: the townsfolk had a lot of downtime. When people were bored, they would drink.

Tobi was a young dwarf. Having lived over a hundred years, he was considered a young adult by any human standard. He had a neatly braided brown beard and a short, stalky build, much like his ancestors who used to mine subfluore crystals up in the mountains. Because he was a dwarf and a bit out of his element when he'd started the tavern, he had a subfloor installed behind the bar that brought him up to the height of everyone else who entered. He would go on and on to patrons about how this was the best way to serve them, but in reality, he just wanted to fit in. It also made it so none of his employees could go behind the bar easily, and that was just fine with him they keep out.

"Aye! Thora!" he yelled across the bar to his bar maid. "Three drinks here for them folks outside!"

Thora, a dark-skinned woman in her mid-twenties, looked up from the table where she was currently serving an ale to a dark stranger. "Catch you later, tall and broody," she said to



the hooded man sitting at the table as she made her way over to the bar. Her green skirt billowed around her ankles as she moved, her work smock following the motion of her dress. “I’ll get these right out to them, *Andre*.” She said to Tobi, using the endearing word that meant ‘father’ in her native tongue.

Thora started working for Tobi when he found her living on the street as a very young girl. Her family had been killed in a raid by Emperor Cosimir’s army, and Tobi brought her into his care after finding her on the streets of a nearby town where he was doing some business. She started by helping him clean the floors and restock the ale, but as she got old enough, she remembered orders and delivered beverages and food to customers with greater ease. Thora made it a habit to work every day of her life against Tobi’s suggestions to take some days off. Unfortunately for Thora, she knew nothing else but work.

Grabbing the drinks, Thora set them on her wooden tray and headed out the swinging tavern doors. The bright sun blinded her for a moment before she blinked the sunspots out of her eyes and headed to the tall standing table occupied by the only outside customers. They were three regulars she was used to serving often: Lena, Mathias, and Osric.

She could see they were in the middle of a heated discussion, so approached carefully so as not to disrupt them and began quietly serving the drinks around them as they spoke.

“We had just gotten some new dissertations in on a wagon from Baeville,” said Mathias, the town healer. His long, pointy nose and spectacles were unmistakable, making him a familiar sight in town. He often received good-natured jests about a possibility of goblin ancestry from friends. This always seemed to rile him up a bit, because the only goblins he knew of were simple of mind, and he always fancied himself as an intellect.

Dressed in his usual bright-red, intricately detailed tunic, Mathias carried an assortment of herbs and remedies in pouches strapped to his belt, a true symbol of his role. Despite his larger stomach size, he often seemed out of place when standing next to others, his rugged features softened only by his kind eyes and the ever-present satchel on his back, brimming with plants and tools of his trade. “I was hoping to find something that could help me figure out what those strange bumps are that plague that poor little Meeko boy.”

Standing next to the man was the tall, slender potato farmer, Osríc. He was always in town around lunchtime to refuel for lunch and restock on oil for his torches. Being the owner of a few fields outside of town, he saw it as his duty to work through the shadowy evening and make sure his work for the day got finished. His face and hands covered in dirt, as they always were, he pulled nervously at the collar of his shirt at the sound of what Mathias was telling them. “Nothing like Cosimir’s Scourge, I hope?” He bent down a little so he was

closer to Mathias' height and whispered, "Knowing that old bastard, he'd love to bring that damn plague back and drive us all underground. Stop all the rebellion once and for all."

Mathias waved his hand. "Nah. Nothing like that. From what I read, it was some kind of dragmar pox. Boy has likely been wandering around the woods too much."

Across the table, the elf, Lena, threw him a dirty look. Her old, wrinkled face wrinkled even more as she glared at him. Mathias withdrew a bit, because she was a formidable form. Standing taller than even Osric, she towered above everyone else in town. She would often come into town to sell her goods that she hunted and gathered from the nearby forest where she lived. Her potions were a hot item, not just in town, but throughout the land. Much like everything in her life, her clothes were handmade, died a light lavender color from some flowers she had gathered in the woods. She was often found taking a break from her stall at the noon hour with Mathias and Osric, her two closest neighbors to the woods.

Glancing back at Lena nervously, Mathias continued. "The boy doesn't know what he's doing out there. You're an expert! Probably stuck his hand right inside a dragmar hole. Dirty little creatures." This seemed to lighten her expression, and she brushed strands of her white hair out of her face and continued to listen.

“Anyways,” Mathias kept on, “I was reading in my rooftop study, enjoying the weather, when a crazy light came down from the mountaintop. Seemed to light up the entire sky! It was an eerie green. Never seen anything like it before. Sent a chill right down my spine.”

Lena cleared her throat to speak in her slow, rhythmic tone. “The woods were full of a strange wind last night as well. Normally it comes from the valley, but last night it was coming through from the southeast. An icy chill that was not of this season.” Mathias nodded at her, indicating he had felt the change in temperature as well.

Osric straightened up to his full height. “The armies were meant to reach Fluore in the coming days. Perhaps they have reached the end of their mission? For better or for worse...” he trailed off.

Thora overheard this as she was walking away from the table, and her ears perked up. The rebel armies of the kingdoms had been waging war to free the land from Cosimir’s harsh reign for the last three years. It had finally come where they had freed the kingdoms and were making one final assault on Cosimir’s near-impenetrable stronghold of Mt. Floure.

“Could be,” said Mathias, cocking his head to the side. “I heard rumors they were still a week out. Hard to tell as they were approaching from Morgrid in the west. If they reached

the peak last night, they got blasted to hell by that damn dark mage. That light lit up the whole sky!”

Now Thora turned back around to face them and join in the conversation. “That crazy lightning last night? I didn’t see it direct, but it sure lit up the square while I was out here sweepin’ the deck. The whole place bathed in green. Never seen anything like it.”

Osric shook his head. “So one way or another, it’s likely over now. Hard to believe. Feels like it’s been thirteen years, not three. The war’s been hell on the farm. Cosimir’s goons raiding to feed that damn army of Dark Humans. It was a blessed day when Eli and the others drove them out and headed north to free the lumber mills.”

“It was a good day indeed,” Lena chimed in. “With the trade routes around the mills freed up, the Dungeon Lords were free to make their own decisions on shipments. My moonshade potion exports have been in such high demand, I can’t keep up. I keep raising my prices, but the demand just isn’t dying down. Guess that happens when you need a lot of healing due to the war.”

All of their heads turned as the tavern doors swung open. They all dropped their gaze as Tobi came out to greet them. It was rare that he would exit the tavern and his raised floor. He looked up at all of them and opened his arms. “How are the drinks, my friends? Gossiping about that crazy light last night?

It's all anyone inside can talk about." He turned to Thora. "People in here waiting on some drinks, Thora. I can't keep up all by myself!"

Thora gave a slight curtsy. "Yes, *Andre*. Right away." She headed back inside, and Tobi made his way over to the table that towered over his head.

He stood back so he could see his patrons as he spoke. "Bit of a shady fella in a gray cloak inside. Said he came from the mountains last night. Said he heard all kinds of weird noises after the light hit. Not natural, whatever happened up there. I fear we came out the worst on it."

Mathias held up his hands to calm him. "Don't be so negative, my young friend. Cosimir the Eternal was pretty old and held together by all sorts of dark spells. The light could have simply been the dark magic escaping as Eli blasted him to dust. We'll have to wait for official messengers to be sure."

Tobi nodded, but also said, "You always call me young, Good Healer, but you know I'm twice your age, yeah?"

Mathias narrowed his eyes behind his spectacles to focus in on Tobi closer. "Ahh, I always forget how dwarfs age so much slower than us humans. You're lucky you still look so young, next to an old wrinkled goblin-face like me!"

This sent a laugh across the four of them. It was rare that he would dare mention his goblin characteristics. It was obvious he was elated at the possibility of the war being over. Lena even

gave a slight chuckle. “Either way, I always want to think on the positive side of things. Even if Cosimir won, we still have the rest of the army as well as the Dungeon Lords to keep the campaign moving forward. The most that this should affect us is a minor flux in our economy until things get back in order again. Graeton is much too small to matter too much to either side, or to be involved in any serious way,” Mathias finished.

As he said this, a swell of birds rose into the sky from the forest a short ways away. They all looked at the trees, seeing an odd rustling.

“The army?” asked Osric, his body stark still, except for his slightly shaking hands.

“Which army?” asked Tobi, wishing he was back at his bar where his axe was strapped to the underside, waiting for trouble.

“Too small of a commotion to be an army,” Lena said simply.

“Then what the...” Mathias began, before he was cut off by screams of people on the outer edge of town.

People began running back towards them, away from the stirring in the woods. They turned and watched them fleeing towards the large church that towered over the square, running inside for sanctuary. The four all looked at each other, wondering if they should run, when the cause of the commotion burst out into the town square.

A large beast with a large furry head was charging towards people, anyone it could find. Mathias found it odd that it didn't appear to be trying to attack them. It was walking on two legs, reaching its arms out as if pleading to people. When it was close enough, they could hear it speak in the common tongue. "Help! What happened to me? Help me!"

As everyone cleared the square, the beast stopped its gaze on the four standing at the tall tavern table, the only ones who didn't seem to run away. It charged over towards them. Mathias adjusted his glasses to make sure he was seeing things correctly. It was the large head of a lion set atop a humanesque body. It was wearing a blue tunic and brown pants, all bursting at their seams. The four braced themselves as the creature drew closer.

"What the fuck is that?" Tobi screamed at the others as he pulled a dagger from his boot, bracing for impact.



## CHAPTER TWO

# A BEAST AMONG MEN

Drinks spilled, and the table shook as the lion-man ran into it and slammed his paws down hard on top. The trio at the table were knocked back a few steps, and Osric cowered down and started shaking. This left Tobi the dwarf to square off against the giant lion. You could see the fear in the young dwarf's eyes, but he gritted his teeth and took a step toward the towering beast, swinging his small blade.

"No! Stop!" the beast cried, sticking out his paw and placing it on Tobi's head. His reach was so long he could keep the dwarf at arm's length as he swung the knife. He turned to the others who were regaining their footing. "What am I?" he yelled at them. "I need help!"

Mathias adjusted his spectacles again to get a better look. "What *are* you?" he asked quizzically. "You don't know?"

The lion was still panting from his sprint, his eyes wide in horror. He opened his mouth to speak, but then Tobi changed tactics and drove his knife upward into the lion's forearm. The beast let out the roar of a lion as he screamed in pain and stepped back, holding onto his arm.

Tobi made as if to charge after his foe, but before he could, Lena stepped forward and grabbed him by the collar of his shirt. "What in the hell did you do *that* for?" she asked Tobi angrily, gesturing at the lion, who was now hunched over and staggering around in pain.

"Ain't ever seen anythin' like it!" Tobi yelled, trying to get her to let him go.

Lena sighed. "So we're attacking strangers now?"

"Well... yeah! When the stranger is a fuckin' lion!"

"He's speaking native, you imbecile. Calm down!" Mathias said sharply to Tobi as he stepped forward to calm the lion down enough to look at him. He held up his hands to show he meant no harm. "Friend!" he said, barely audible over the lion's roars. "Friend! I am a healer! Please, let me have a look."

The lion calmed down enough to let Mathias approach. "Ow! Ahh! Youch! Tell me you've got some magic in the dinky little satchel, old man!"

Mathias chuckled. "Not that kind of healer, friend. The magic kind tend to lurk in the dungeon kingdoms in the

service of the Dungeon Lords. Especially now with the war going on.”

The lion held out his arm for Mathias to look at, still groaning from the pain. “Service of the what?”

Mathias reached into his satchel for some silverbane sap and a bandage to fix up the wound. Though his head was down, he looked up questioningly at the lion-man. “Dungeon Lords. Those in charge of the underground kingdoms. You... you aren’t from around here?”

The lion winced as Mathias pulled the sleeve of his tunic back to reveal the wound. “I...uh...I’m not sure,” the lion answered half-heartedly.

“Interesting. And what’s your name?” Mathias asked as he popped open the vial and dipped out some sap to put on the wound.

The lion let out another roar, and Mathias pushed the sap into the wound. “I... don’t seem to know that either,” he said, wincing in pain. At this, Tobi calmed down from behind Mathias, and Lena set him down. Osric finally stood from his cowering position, and the three of them listened intently to the exchange happening before them.

A sad look fell over Mathias’ face. “Can you bend your head down real quick, friend?” As the lion got down into a kneeling position and leaned forward, Mathias ran his hand through the long, fluffy mane. He felt a clump of matted hair near the

back and felt a lump. The lion winced when he touched it. When Mathias pulled his hand away, it was covered in crimson. Mathias heard Osric whimper behind him.

“You’ve had quite a head injury, friend, which explains the memory loss. Obviously the least of your worries at the moment, being a lion and all,” Mathias quipped, half smiling. The lion didn’t seem to find this funny. “What should we call you?” he added as he went back to bandaging the lion’s forearm.

The lion just looked at him and shrugged, swaying a little from all the pain he was in. Mathias thought it to be a sad look on the creature’s face, though he couldn’t tell for certain. “Hmm, that’s better,” he said, finishing the bandage. “No more attacking our friend here!” he snapped, looking back at Tobi. “Our friend... Leo?”

The lion shrugged. “Not very original, but as good as anything else.

“Great!” exclaimed Mathias. “Now, if you would be so kind, my dear Leo, and come back to the office so we can get a look at that head of yours?”

Leo nodded and started to follow Mathias, when a loud yell rang out. There was a loud crash, and Leo collapsed to the ground.

“Ayyaaa!” screamed Thora.

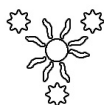
In all the commotion, they hadn't noticed her step back outside carrying a large metal cauldron they used to make soup. Hearing the commotion of people outside, she had glimpsed the creature bounding down on them and grabbed the cauldron to attack.

There was a gasp behind them. Looking back at the door, Thora spoke to the shocked patron in the gray cloak who had followed her out. "What's up, dark and broody? I just saved your life!" The man gave a wide-eyed look towards the lion and glanced at the others standing around him, before bolting off around the corner of the tavern.

"Thora! What the fuck was that?" Tobi yelled at her, gesturing towards the giant, unconscious Leo on the ground. Thora just stood there, looking every part of the daughter who has just been loudly scolded by her father.

"Like daughter, like father," said Lena. "You weren't any better, you big oaf!" Lena stepped forward and bent down to examine Leo. "This poor creature has no memory, Thora, and your father stabbed him in the arm. Doesn't look like his head will get better anytime soon."

"Aye," said Mathias, bending down to check on their new friend. "Now who wants to tell me how we're going to get a large, unconscious lion-man back to my office?"



Some time later, after quickly retrieving the death cart from Mathias' office and struggling to lift Leo up into it, the group snuck him across town. They had worked as quickly as they could to bring him back to the healer's office. The townspeople had come back out from the church with probing eyes wondering what had happened to the beast, so they were glad they had covered the cart with a tarp for the trek back.

After delivering the lion, Tobi had gone back to tending the tavern. Osric had gone back to his farm to catch what was left of the day's good light, and Lena had excused herself to go back to the woods and gather a more moonshade to make more of her famous healing potions; they worked wonders on physical wounds, and their new friend was sporting many. Thora stayed behind to assist Mathias. She had felt guilty for knocking the poor beast out and had volunteered to stay and help with his recovery.

In the office, three cots were spread out on which patients could sit or lie as Mathias ministered to them. A fire was roaring in the fireplace next to a long table full of cabinets and storage boxes where Mathias kept all of his herbs and medicines. Beyond this table was a staircase that led up to

Mathias' loft bedroom, and beyond that a ladder that led up to the rooftop study Mathias always bragged so much about.

Down in the first floor patient area, they had to push two cots together in order to lay Leo down as he was such a wide beast. Mathias directed Thora to tend the fire and get some water boiling so they could clean the lion's wounds.

"Where do you suppose he's from?" asked Thora. "I've seen nothing like him. Beasts are usually much...simpler."

Mathias was bustling about his herb drawers, trying to find a draught that would help wake Leo up so they could find out more about him. "No one has seen anything like him, Thora. Not in this lifetime. Magic like this hasn't existed for centuries. At least not out in the open." The healer glanced sideways at her to see how she reacted to this news. He could see she was looking concerned. "He came down by way of the mountain. No doubt related to that green flash last night. Magic," he said in a serious monotone. "And trouble," he added, shaking his head as if agreeing with himself.

Thora examined Leo closely for the first time as he lay there. He wore a splendid blue tunic with gold embroidery, and a brown fastening ribbon. His fluffy mane overflowed over the top of the tunic. Leather bracers were sported on each arm, and out of the bracers where there should have been paws were furry, beast-like claws that still seemed to function like a human hand. His brown pants led down to what used to be

boots. Now they had fur puffing out of the top of the boot, and the claws appeared to have forcefully pushed their way out the toe of the boot. Though he had lion paws for feet, his legs were still straight, like a person.

Leo let out a groan as Mathias pried his mouth open and dumped the draught he had found down his throat.

“Poor thing,” Thora said, reaching out and grabbing his paw, stroking the soft fur. “I feel so bad for him.”

Mathias chuckled. “You, of all people, should. You’re the one who gave him a second lump on the head.” She frowned at this, looking sad and guilty. Mathias glanced over at the fire to check on the water. “Thora, the water, dear. Can you grab it?”

Thora turned and grabbed the cauldron of water by the handle and lifted it off the hook, bringing it closer to the bed. Mathias readied his rags as he waited for the water to cool enough to touch and watched as Leo came around. Finally, when the lion opened his eyes to look around, Mathias tested the temperature and could dip the rag into the water without burning himself.

“Stay still, my friend. I need to clean your head wound,” Mathias said as he pulled the dripping rag out and walked around to the head of the cots.

“Wha... What happened now?” Leo asked, looking around the room, dazed.



“Well,” said Mathias, “our dear Thora over here thought you were a hideous beast and clobbered you upside the head with a cauldron, much like the one she has right over there on the ground. So better be on your best behavior right now.” Mathias smiled at his own joke.

“Thought I was a hideous beast?” Leo jested lightly. “Wonder what gave her that idea?”

Thora leaned into Leo’s line of sight. “I’m so sorry, Sir. I thought I was protecting my *andre* and his friends. We’ve never seen anything like you.”

“Imagine my panic when I saw myself,” Leo said, letting out a half laugh, half slight roar. “What is this place? Ouch!”

Leo winced, and Mathias dug the rag in deeper to clean out the bloody head wound. “My office,” Mathias said as he worked. “As I stated before your last unfortunate incident, I am a healer. And by the way, you don’t happen to remember your name or where you’re from now, do you?”

The lion paused for a second before he answered. “I...uhh... no, nothing.”

“Hmm... hoped that second jolt to the head would have at least jogged something, but apparently, brute force isn’t the cure for your amnesia,” said Mathias.

There was a creaking noise from the stairs and they all turned to look, but nothing was there. “Ahh,” said Mathias,

“those valley winds have this old place creaking all the time. Nothing new.”

Thora nodded in agreement, as the bar always gave off eerie creaking sounds at night when she was closing it down for the day, and she was there all alone. “Mathias says you came from the mountain. Did you see the green light last night? Is that why you’re like this?” she felt his mane as she spoke.

Again, Leo took a pause. His head hurt something fierce and trying to think about what he remembered hurt it more. “I... the only thing I remember is waking up next to a tree. There was a rock slide nearby, so I assumed I’d slid down the mountain. Imagine my surprise when I held my hands out and saw these giant claws.” He held them up to show them. “I bolted to a nearby creek and looked in the water... the beast was staring back at me... I was staring back at me.”

“So you weren’t always a beast?” asked Thora. “You remember that?”

“Yeah. I’m definitely supposed to be human, or at least my mind thinks so. Otherwise, it wouldn’t have been such a shock, right?” Leo looked as though he was lost, and Thora felt bad for him.

“Almost done here,” Mathias interjected, reaching for a bandage for Leo’s head wounds. “Thora, dear, a little more water before I stitch him shut, please.”

Thora quickly raised the cauldron, and then dropped it in shock as something metal zinged off the side. The cauldron hit the ground with a loud thunk, and water splashed up into the air. They all looked down and saw a dagger laying next to the cauldron on the stone floor. They all looked in the direction it came from and saw a shadowy figure standing on the stairs.

In an instant, the figure jumped over the railing and bolted towards Mathias, another dagger already in hand. Mathias yelped as he dodged too slowly, and the dagger made a cut across his right cheek. Leo made to get out of the bed, but by the time he made a move, the water cauldron went sailing through the air and down on top of the assailant's head. The figure didn't even utter a sound as he dropped to the ground, but his dagger did as it fell from his hand and clattered across the stone floor.

"Assassin!" Mathias hissed, spitting on the man's body, and standing up. He reached up and felt the red, fresh blood pouring down from his cheek. "That dagger was aimed at you, my friend," Mathias said, pointing at Leo with his reddened finger.

Leo sat up on the cot and slowly made his way over to the figure sprawled out on the ground. He didn't recognize who it was, but even if he'd known him in the past, he wouldn't know who he was now either way.

“Oh no,” said Thora, setting down the cauldron and examining the man on the ground. “Dark and broody! How could you?” she asked, recognizing the patron in the gray cloak from the bar earlier.

“Apparently our friend Leo here isn’t the only newcomer to town,” said Mathias. “And you,” he said, pointing at Thora. “If we ever find ourselves in a war, dear, remind me to make sure you have a cauldron to fight with.”

## CHAPTER THREE

# THE CHURCH OF SOLANA

The afternoon following the assassination attempt found Leo and Mathias feeling much better from their inflicted wounds. Lena had returned to them shortly after the assassin had been thwarted, an uncharacteristic look of shock on her face. She had almost dropped the Moonshade Potion she was carrying when she opened the door to the healer's parlor.

After the initial shock, she became all business again, administering the potion to Leo and Mathias. The warm sensation of the potion comforted them, and by the next morning their physical wounds started to heal. The seemingly magical properties of the potion sped up the natural healing process within most living species, though for reasons unknown to Lena, it still didn't seem to work on pigs.

By the afternoon, Leo's head wounds were mostly closed shut. His memory hadn't recovered even a bit from the potion, as Lena had warned him it wouldn't. The gash on Mathias' cheek was mostly just a scar, which Lena assured him would mostly fade within the next three days. Impressed by the results of her potion, which he had previously dismissed as snake oil as there was no research to back up the healing properties of the moonshade plant, Mathias agreed to be Lena's regular customer when she had her new stock at market.

With physical wounds on the mend, Mathias released Leo from his care the following afternoon. Though he was free to go, the pair still had some business to tend to. The night of the assassination attempt they had dragged their would-be assassin out to the front of the healer's office where the lawman, Jareth, took him to the Graeton dungeon in the Church of Solana. Now they needed to go and question him.

The towering stone building of the church served many functions for the small town, being the focal point, and the main functioning structure for anything that wasn't a tavern, store, home, or merchant stall. The mayor had an office on the upper floors, the small academy for young students was held within the middle levels, and Jareth had an office near the church dungeon.

Leo was determined to find out why the assassin was after him, and Mathias wanted answers as well, having been

attacked in his own home and place of business. The only problem was, the entire town was hunting for a humanoid beast, so Mathias had to go ahead of Leo and do some damage control. The merchants weren't at their stalls today for fear of the beast, and everyone was walking around meekly in the shadows, whispering rumors to each other, ready to dash back inside at a moment's notice.

Going out into the square, Mathias began shouting at anyone that could hear, "People! Citizens! Good people of Graeton! Please gather round!" The people in the square stared at him and slowly gathered in closer. "I would like to address the issue of the lion..."

"Is that what it was?" shouted an old lady from the crowd. "Looked like a damned beast from hell, it did!" Several others around her nodded.

Mathias knew this would not be easy. "No. Not from hell. From the mountain," he said, pointing up at Mt. Fluore behind them in the distance. "We're not sure how, but this beast used to be a man..."

"That what it told you?" screamed another panicked villager, this time a younger man whom Mathias recognized as the mayor's messenger, Idon. "On good terms with this lion then? Best of pals?"

The old healer rubbed at his temples. "I know, the likes of this lion-man have not been seen before, but he is the victim

here. A victim of memory loss. And a victim of..." Mathias knew this next part wouldn't go over well, "the victim of an assassination attempt."

A hushed murmur ran through the crowd as the panic grew. Mathias could hear some whispers as they grew louder, and the common thing his old ears picked up was "...the war...". He knew he needed to address this.

"We do not know if this has to do with the war," Mathias yelled out, louder than before, to drive the point home. "We have not seen the brunt of the war here in Graeton. The odd bit of raiding here and there, but compared to the rest of Evania, we've come out on top. All I know, is that Leo, this lion-man, wishes to question his assassin, who is currently being held in the dungeon. We need everyone to remain calm, and give him passage from my office to the dungeon. After he gets his answers, he will be on his way, and we can all get back to our normal lives. This is just a blip in our normal routines, and everything will be back to business as normal within the week."

Everyone nodded. One person could be heard clapping, and Mathias was surprised to hear the sound coming from the grand church behind him. He turned to see who it was, and was surprised to see Mayor Merrik Thornvale approaching him at a slow gait. His head bobbed up and down as he walked, caused by a hunch in his back, and a limp in his step. No one



in town knew what had disfigured the man, but there were rumors that his own mother had thrown him down a well as a child. Given his experience with the man, Mathias didn't blame her. He could see Thornvale's beady little eyes fixed on him, zeroing in on his prey.

Once he reached the spot next to Mathias, he turned to him to whisper so no one else could hear, "I knew you were aiming for my post, you old swindler. Trying to gain the favor of the people? No one addresses them like this but me!"

Mathias chuckled out loud. "I have no want of politics, my good man. I leave that to the people of... diminished morals, such as yourself."

Thornvale shot back a crooked smile and turned to address the crowd. "Yes! Yes, good people. Our *town healer* here is correct." He said the words 'town healer' with a sharp, acidic undertone, as if to drive home the point that was all Mathias would ever be.

"Though close to the stronghold of the Forever King, we are hiding in plain sight, and war will not be upon us." It seemed to calm the people down as Mayor Thornvale spoke these words. "As for our new friend, let us let him pass, shall we?" he asked, throwing his arms out wide and gesturing towards the crowd.

A look of panic came over everyone as they all turned in horror to look. Coming from the direction of Mathias' office,

Leo was walking towards the crowd timidly, looking as though he expected any one of them to attack at any second. The crowd slowly parted to let him through, and he made his way to towards the church where Mathias stood next to the crooked old man.

The hunched mayor stared up in awe as Leo stood next to him. Leo smiled back and stuck out his paw to shake hands with the man in charge of the town. After doing so he realized it was probably a bad move. Something in his brain was telling him he wasn't used to having menacing claws and fur where his hand had been, though he couldn't even remember what his hand had looked like.

The mayor took the paw daintily and gave it a small shake. He leaned in close, his head only coming up to the mid of Leo's chest. He beckoned him to lean closer with a gnarly finger. Leo bent down to listen.

"You go into that dungeon, you talk to that trash, and you leave, understand? We don't need freaks and abnormalities such as yourself here. You're bad for business." Standing tall the mayor gave the crowd a smile and gestured Leo towards the church doors.

Leo gave a look to Mathias, who shrugged and also gestured to the church, suggesting they get out of this situation as soon as possible. They turned and made their way towards the large wooden front doors of the church. Mathias turned to look at

the crowd one last time before going inside. He could see Idon, the mayor's messenger, scurrying up to stand beside his boss. The two of them were whispering and glanced towards him and Leo.

Mathias knew their conspiring couldn't mean anything good for them, but also knew he and his new friend had pressing matters they needed to attend to inside the church.

Leo marveled at the inside of the church. From the moment they entered, it was too much to take in all at once. Stepping inside, they were in a small vestibule area. Beyond this small hallway were pillars that held up the main walls of the circular atrium, at the center of which sat an ornate golden altar.

Curious, Leo stepped into the main area and glanced up. From the outside of the church it looked like the height of the church helped support many levels of rooms. Leo could now see that most of the space was, in fact, one large room that appeared to go up forever. Along the endlessly upward ceiling there were paintings of the heavens, and beings that supposedly dwelt there.

At the very top, hanging from the ceiling was a statue. It was impossible to imagine the actual size of the statue if it still appeared so large from such a long way down. The statue was a majestic figure clothed in radiant robes of sunlit gold and sapphire blue. His eyes gleamed with a warm, golden light and his skin glowed with an otherworldly luminescence.

“You remember our God, Solana, yeah?” Mathias threw him an elbow and smiled, knowing the lion remembered little.

“I... no... can’t say that I do,” Leo stammered back.

“Ahh, well, I’m sure you’ll be forgiven. Your state of mind is not your fault after all,” said Mathias, only half joking. “This way!” he started walking and waved Leo on.

They walked through the side of the vestibule and down a flight of stone steps. Even though they were going down to the dungeon, everything still seemed very ornate, almost too perfect in its craftsmanship. At the bottom of the stairs they stepped out onto a large landing.

As Leo looked around, he could see that the large landing also served as an office. A wooden desk sat to one side, behind which were many bookshelves loaded with old tomes. Beyond the office was another flight of stairs that went down deep into the dungeons.

Mathias walked right up to the man sitting behind the desk. The lawman Jareth sat there, his face buried in a book. He looked almost annoyed as the old healer approached him. “What can I do for you, Mathias?” he asked. Then he looked past Mathias and his jaw dropped. “And your... friend?” he asked, trying not to sound nervous.

“That’s Leo, he’s fine,” said Mathias, waving off Jareth’s shock. “Are we able to go down and talk to the prisoner? We

have some questions about why he was trying to kill my friend over there.”

“Which prisoner?” Jareth laughed, as if they ever had more than one at a time in the small town. They occasionally had a drunk farmer in that needed to cool off for the night, but as far as big crimes went, Graeton was a pretty dry place. “Yeah, yeah,” he continued, catching the glare Mathias gave him. “Head on down.”

Mathias nodded his thanks and motioned for Leo to follow him down the stairs. Another intricately carved flight of stairs later and they found themselves in a long stone hallway filled with many sets of iron bars. This dungeon was set up to hold a dozen prisoners, but the place looked spotless, a sign that there was never very much activity down here.

The pair walked past several empty cells before they found the one occupied by the assassin. They approached slowly. They could barely see his face in the dim lighting of the dungeon. He had been stripped of his cloak, and they could now see a head of shocking, long white hair. He pushed his hooked nose out through the bars to greet them.

“You two are lucky to be alive,” he said with a smirk. They could hear a bit of laughter in his voice. “Especially you, Faro.”

The word hung in the air. Mathias looked at Leo, whose mouth had fallen open, shocked at hearing his real name for the first time since his accident.

## CHAPTER FOUR

# PIECES OF THE PUZZLE

The air hung thick with the silence that followed. The assassin continued to grin at them through the bars, relishing the fact that he knew things they didn't.

Leo's...or rather Faro's...mind was spinning. The name rang true to him. He couldn't remember much, but somehow he knew the assassin was telling the truth. His name was Faro, and he used to be human. Having two pieces to the puzzle strengthened his resolve to fully restore his memory and figure out the rest of his past. He felt a hole inside himself, knowing that he had a purpose to fulfill here. He just still wasn't sure what it was.

Mathias threw his lion friend a look to see if he was alright. Faro took a step towards the bars and puffed out his big, barrel chest to appear larger and more menacing. "Tell me everything

you know, *assassin*,” the last word hung in the air, dripping with anger.

“Well,” the man said, “one thing for sure was that I was shocked when I saw a damned lion. I thought they were the ones ‘lion’,” he said, and Faro was confused until he realized the man was telling a joke. The man cackled.

“Enough!” Faro growled. “Who are *they*? Who sent you?”

“Only the elite hire Gnu,” the man said. Faro assumed the man was talking about himself. “It was the big man on the mountain, of course!”

Mathias gasped. “Cosimir is still alive? What happened to the invading rebels?”

“Oh, you don’t know much yet, do you?” Gnu said, snickering again. He paused, enjoying his momentary upper hand. “Cosimir is dead.” This sentence hung between them. Mathias raised his eyes, shocked. Faro searched his thoughts to see if the name rang any bells, but frustratingly it didn’t cause any revelation.

“So who is ruling now?” asked Mathias, confused. He had been so consumed with the news of the upcoming battle that he hadn’t really thought about who would be in charge once it was all over, much less why they would want Faro dead.

Gnu sneered his smarmy sneer. “Seems to me like I’m giving you a lot of information for free. What’s in it for me, old man?”

“Maybe not gettin’ eaten by an angry fucking lion!” Faro growled, lunging forward and grabbing the bars with a loud clank. Gnu backed off slightly, but still not out of Faro’s reach, showing he wasn’t afraid.

“I’m sentenced for death either way, Beast. May as well get it over with,” he said.

Mathias put a gentle hand on his friend’s middle back, the highest he could comfortably reach, and guided him back away from the bars. “I am a good, upstanding citizen here in town,” Mathias said. “The town healer. Perhaps I can speak with the mayor on your behalf. Get a reduced sentence. Maybe even an exile to the Outwoods.”

Gnu raised his fingers up to his mouth, as if thinking it over. “Shoot for the exile, or I’ll escape this place eventually and come after you.”

Mathias chuckled. “Solid stone rumored to have been crafted by the greatest artisans in the land. Sure, I’ll take my chances. Now tell me, who is the new ruler on the mountain?”

“Some fella named Eli,” said Gnu. The name Cosimir meant nothing, but this name, Eli, seemed to gnaw at Faro. Why did that name mean something to him? He looked over at Mathias to see if that name meant anything to him. He could tell that it did by the way the old healer’s mouth hung open wide.



“Eli the Prophet?” he asked, dumbfounded. “Was... was that the plan?” he asked, looking at Faro. “Ahh, of course you wouldn’t know.” He turned back to Gnu. “Eli hired you?”

“Big bastard. Wore a horned helmet,” said Gnu, but then looked Faro up and down. “Or maybe he got cursed like this fella and the horns were real, come to think of it. Anyways, yeah, he hired me. Told me he had a rogue that got away. He called in a handful of us. Those not so skilled as me hung around the mountains looking for a trace. Others went west. I saw the broken foliage and headed down to town here.”

Mathias looked like he had a headache. His hand was raised up to his head, a finger pressed hard against each temple. “And you were sent to kill Leo...err, Faro?”

“Yeah,” said Gnu, shrugging his shoulders. “Didn’t think I’d be hunting a fuckin’ lion-man, but Eli said we’d know him when we seen him. Said it was a lion. I didn’t believe him. Coming out of that bar, I sure knew I’d found my mark. Thought the dwarf was going to do my job for me for a minute!” Gnu sounded excited.

“So, you didn’t disappear after seeing him,” said Mathias, piecing it together. “You waited in the shadows and watched until Thora knocked him out. Then you followed us back to my office and...”

“Yeah. That rooftop with all the books and parchment had pretty easy access from the trees, Doc. If it wasn’t for bad

timing from that gal you had with ya, I'd have hit my mark and you all would be dead! That horny bastard on the hill would be paying me pretty right now!" Gnu smiled at the thought, then his face fell, realizing his pay would never come.

Faro's head was spinning as he blankly stared into the dim, torch-lit dungeon. Someone was ruling. Then someone named Eli killed him. He had to have been with them there somehow, because now he was a cursed animal human like the new ruler on the mountain. He now knew for sure that his part in this was pretty big, but he still wasn't sure how he fit into the puzzle.

"What else do you know about me?" Faro asked him sharply.

Gnu thought for a minute. "Not much. Fella said we were hunting a colossal beast of a man that betrayed him. Said he'd pay a pretty fee in gold. Also said he was angry that your body wasn't found dashed on the side of the mountain as you were blasted out of the chamber opening. So that's why he had to call in the professionals. That's about it."

Blasted out? Opening? A flash of green light crept across Faro's memory. Yelling. Cold air. Was it him that had been yelling? Someone died. Who died? What else? Unfortunately nothing else came to his mind.

"Thank you for your cooperation," said Mathias. "And for your terrible timing and aim," he added with a smile.

Gnu waved him off. "Like I said, you're lucky to be alive. Dumb luck. Work on getting me out of that execution, Doc. We have a deal."

"Yes, yes, I'm a man of my word," Mathias waved him off as he turned to leave, motioning for Faro to follow him. "I will head up to see Mayor Thornvale right now."

Faro hesitated for a moment. He wanted to know more. He knew that Gnu likely didn't have anymore information, but he didn't know if he should try to press him for more details. Thinking better of it, he turned and followed Mathias up the perfectly carved stone staircase. He caught up to Mathias halfway up.

"I was there!" he said, exasperated. "And this... this Eli? He isn't meant to be in charge now?"

Mathias took a few more steps and then paused. He slowly turned on the stair to face Faro. Being a few stairs higher than him he was about eye level to the giant lion man. "Not that I'm aware of. Not that I was in on any of the plans, but I tried to stay apprised of the war. Something isn't sitting quite right with me. You all were cursed somehow..."

"And it doesn't surprise you I was with this Eli on the mountain?"

Mathias took his spectacles down from his eyes and polished them with his shirt, apparently stalling for a moment to think.

Finally, when he placed them back on his nose, he said “No, according to the stories you were his closest disciple.”

Faro had been dying to know more about what Mathias knew about the war party he was apparently leading with this Eli to the top of the mountain, but Mathias became hushed and distracted. He told him they could sit down later and have a proper talk on the matter, and that he had to go speak with the mayor at once.

Choking down his anger, Faro agreed to meet him at his office that night so they could talk. Not wanting to talk with the greasy mayor again, nor feeling very invited, Faro headed outside to see if there was any sunlight left in the day to enjoy. After the dingy dungeon, he felt the need for light and silent thought to see if he could remember any more details about himself.

Stepping out of the church the light hit him square in the eyes and he threw up his hand to block it until he became used to the change. He could hear hushed whispers and hurried footsteps as people around him dashed off to get some distance away from him.

After his eyes finally adjusted to the light, he saw the dwarf that had attacked him over by the tavern where he had first met Mathias and the other citizens of Graeton who seemed to be okay with his existence. The dwarf was standing on a stool and clearing pints off of a table that had presumably been occupied

by the elf and the other human who had been there when he'd arrived. Likely a daily ritual they kept.

"Hello, friend!" Faro called as he approached, not wanting to startle him during his work. The dwarf looked up to see him approaching and threw his rag down on the table.

"Friends, are we, Lion? That's good to know considering I stabbed you and all."

Faro just smiled. "Aye. It wasn't a good start, but I think at this point I need all the friends I can get, Dwarf."

He smiled back from atop his stool. "Please, Leo, call me Tobi."

Faro cocked his head a bit. "And you can call me Faro. According to my would-be-assassin, that's my real name."

Tobi smiled at this new information and nodded his head slightly. "Well then, Faro, not sure what a lion drinks, but how about one on the house?" Tobi said, climbing down from his stool.

"I'm not even sure how a lion drinks," Faro answered. So far he'd just lapped water awkwardly from his paws with his tongue. They both burst out in laughter at this. The laughter was short-lived, however, as screams from people at the edge of the town rang out. Both of them looked that way, alarmed.

"Not another giant lion-man, I hope," said Tobi, only half joking. He wasn't sure what to expect anymore.

They both made their way into the center of the square, looking at the commotion that was coming from the trees that sprung from the mountain valley, the same place where Faro had burst into town the day before.

They soon wished it was just another lost beast-creature looking for help. Instead, what came out of the woods was a marching nightmare. The sun had just dipped back behind the mountain, and the town was cast in shadow. A group of creatures the likes of which neither of them had ever seen walked in a steady pace directly towards the center of town. They couldn't quite make out what they were, but they could see their grayish, scaly skin and horrible, gaunt eyes as they approached.

The sight of the hideous, large creatures made them almost miss the short creature that was leading them. It was a creature almost as short as Tobi himself, and from what Tobi could tell looked like a tiny wolverine-man that had been afflicted with the same curse that had beset Faro.

Tobi nudged Faro's leg. "I think I should just pop inside the tavern and grab my axe," he said.

Faro didn't take his eyes off the approaching group. "Yeah, that's not a bad idea. Grab me something if you've got it."

"Aye," said Tobi as he slipped off into his tavern with as much haste as his legs would allow.

The town square had cleared out as Faro braced himself. He squared his shoulders to show them he wasn't afraid of what was to come. The wolverine creature and his crew stopped on the other end of the square, just within shouting distance. The creature spoke.

"Faro Envato!" the creature hissed. His silky voice echoed across the empty square.

Envato? Faro felt like he was slowly finding pieces to the riddle of his identity that were drawing a picture that would eventually, hopefully, come into focus once he had the right piece of the puzzle.

"Obviously," he roared back.

The creature had a look of pure malice on his face. "The High Ruler has put a price on your head. He's sent us to complete the task that others could not. Come forward now, and we won't tear this town to shreds after we finish you."

Faro glanced towards the tavern door. It was completely still. What he wouldn't give just to have even the dwarf's dagger that he'd been stabbed in the arm with, or even the barmaid's cauldron. Anything to defend himself, as it looked like there was no way out of this fight.

## CHAPTER FIVE

# THE BATTLE OF GRAETON

Faro stared hard into the waning light to see what he was up against as the moment before attack hung in the air. The tiny wolverine man stood at the front of the pack. He was wearing a small leather outfit with fur shoulder pads. His extremely fluffy head and pointy ears would almost be cute if not for the glowing yellow eyes narrowed in such malice, along with the insanely long claws that were braced for attack, his lips curled back in a terrifying snarl.

Surrounding the wolverine were at least a dozen of the most horrific beasts Faro ever remembered seeing, though that wasn't saying much. Their faces appeared to be ribbed skulls, with beady blue inset eyes and a gapping hole with razer sharp teeth where a mouth should be. Their bodies almost appeared to be made of stone, save their razer sharp claws that



rivaled that of their wolverine leader. They had huge spikes protruding from their back, and Faro noted it would be hard to get his hands - paws - around them to toss them out of his way.

The wolverine's sneer turned into a slight smile, and in a snap he lurched forward to get down on all fours and close the gap in short order, running at full speed towards Faro. The lion had just enough time to glance at the tavern one more time to see that help wouldn't arrive in time before the wolverine lunged forward, its claws spread out, aiming for his throat.

Faro swiped his paw wide, trying to catch the little creature in the air and knock him out of the way before he reached him. Instead, all he managed was to knock his aim off slightly, and the claws sank into his left shoulder instead of his neck. Faro let out a roar of pain. The wolverine was fast. Faster than Faro could combat. Being barely the size of his torso, Faro was having a hard time pulling the raging animal off of him.

The creature was clawing his way around him and all Faro could do was scramble to use his own claws to catch the assailant. The wolverine paused for a second and drew his head back to sink his sharp teeth into Faro's neck, but before he could a long wooden stick came out from below and knocked the creature back.

Faro glanced down to see Tobi had arrived and had used the handle of his axe to butt the creature away from him,

apparently fearing the sharp end might catch Faro if someone moved too suddenly. Faro nodded his thanks and glanced at the other object in the dwarf's hands. It looked similar to a battle hammer, one blunt end for smashing, the other end sharp for piercing. The only thing was, that it was more sized for a dwarf, and when Faro grabbed it from his new friend, it looked more like a club hammer than a full war hammer.

Still grateful for the weapon, he gave it a quick swing to test its weight, and something in his brain told him he'd used a hammer before. It felt so familiar.

Bracing himself, he squared off against the strange creatures that were about to clash with them. With all the strength his new, bulky lion body could muster, Faro gave the hammer a huge swing, and it came crashing hard into the tall creature's chest.

A tingle of reverberation shot up Faro's hand as hitting the creature felt like he had smashed his hammer into a solid mountainside. The tingle ran up to his shoulder, and he took a step back to recover from the shock. He looked at the beast and could see a decent sized crack in the thing's chest where his hammer had landed. Other than the crack, the creature seemed unfazed and quickly advanced again.

Next to Faro, Tobi had his axe swinging at the wolverine who had gotten angry at the dwarf for getting between him and his target. The axe clinked against to cobblestone of

the town square with each swing as Tobi missed the quick Wolverine. Whenever the creature would move it to attack, Tobi would bunt him away with the axe handle to keep him at bay, and then move to strike him with the blade when there was an opening. The similarity in size made the foe a little easier to handle for Tobi than for Faro.

The rock creatures were almost surrounding them now, and Faro's smashing attacks didn't seem to deter them as he only smashed little bits of them away. Though they were overwhelming him, Faro felt like he was in some kind of gear he didn't know he had, yet still seemed familiar, like he was used to fighting. He was taking on three at once now and holding his own, but could feel the others pushing in. He heard one creature roar from behind him as it went in for the kill, and before he could turn he heard a quick swishing sound through the air.

*Thbht...* Faro turned to face his new foe, only to see an arrow sticking out of the creature's beady eye hole. The other blue eye flickered in and out for a second, and then the light of the eye went out completely and the creature fell to its knees before doing a face plant right next to the lion. The thud of stone on stone echoed through the town square.

Glancing up Faro followed the arrow's only possible trajectory and saw the elf lady, Lena, standing atop Tobi's bar, her bow and arrow in hand. Realizing the eye was the weak

point, Faro flipped the mini war hammer quickly around in his paw and drove the point directly into the eye socket of the next approaching creature. It too dropped to the ground, the light in its eyes put out.

“Go for the eyes!” he yelled to Tobi. Tobi grunted in understanding, but was too occupied with the swift little wolverine to care about the big rock monsters. The wolverine, however, turned to look at Faro and saw now that a few of his creatures were on the ground. Malice returned to his face, his eyes went wide, and a hiss like nothing they had ever heard before left his mouth.

The wolverine, hate still filling his eyes, stopped pursuing Tobi and started swirling his arms through the air, speaking in a foreign tongue so loudly that it could be heard over the ongoing fight. Black flames surrounded the wolverine. Tobi lunged forward with his axe blade, but was too late. With one last scream, the wolverine cast a deep black fireball into the nearest structure, which was the Graeton General Store. The magic quickly caught the building on fire, and it went up in flames at an astonishing rate.

“No! Thora!” Tobi screamed. The store was right next to his tavern, and they could see Lena struggling to find a way off before that building, too, was consumed. Tobi quickly bolted towards his tavern as fast as his legs would carry, leaving Faro alone.

The wolverine howled with laughter. “Vorath Shadruul!” He screamed into the fray. “Surround him! Kill him!”

Faro turned from the scene and smashed the tip of his war hammer into another rock creature, the thing the wolverine had just addressed as a Vorath, killing it, and creating an opening that he could retreat from. Lena and Tobi spilled out of the tavern as Faro ran past. The building was now being overtaken by the magic, black flames. Between the pair they were dragging Thora out with them. The young girl had obviously been told to stay inside by Tobi, which Faro now knew had caused the delay in getting the weapons.

“To the church!” Lena yelled at them, pushing Thora away from the advancing Vorath. They all took off in a dead sprint towards the towering structure. Faro’s long stride got him there first, and he yanked open the large wooden doors, ushering the other three in past him. The Vorath were hot on their tail, but he stepped inside and slam the door shut before they thudded into the other side. He dropped the lock bar across the door, locking them out, at least for the moment.

Being as strong as they were, Faro knew it wouldn’t be long before they reduced the door to splinters and overtook their position in the church. They didn’t have much time.

As they all entered, hurried steps came from the nearby stairs, and Mathias came barreling down. Seeing the party of familiar faces, he waved his arms frantically at them. “We’ve

been betrayed!” he screamed at them. “The mayor sold us out! The people who sent the assassin know Faro is here!”

“You think?” asked Faro raising a furry brow, pointing to the door that was shaking from the impact of the stone creatures on the other side.

“Faro?” asked Lena and Thora at the same time.

Faro threw his hands up and stared pointedly at them, as if asking if this was the proper time to question his name change.

“Right,” said Lena, snapping out of it. “Everyone get into the auditorium!” she yelled over the clanging of the door, gesturing to the ornately decorated nave. They all rushed in, but Faro was unsure how the open, circular room would be of any strategical advantage to them. To him it just seemed like they could be easily surrounded. Taking the stairs and narrowing their formation seemed to be the better strategy. That would allow them to take them on one-by-one. That he could do. Still, he trusted the resolve in the elf’s voice and did what she said.

They all moved to the center. Mathias was shaking with rage. “In front of his own granddaughter! That son-of-a-bitch Thornvale sat there in his office, right in front of his little granddaughter, smuggest fucking smile on his face, and told me he’d sent his little messenger to sell us out to Eli. Said he was getting a pretty payment and protection under the new regime!”

“We don’t have time to dwell on that,” said Lena. “Everyone get to the side furthest from the door. Stay here in the center chamber so we can lure them in. Don’t go out the other side until I say!”

Faro looked at Lena, the spindly looking, aged elf standing before him. Sure she could shoot a bow, but she seemed to think she could take on the remaining Vorath, and the feisty little wolverine, by herself.

“With all due respect...” Faro started, but he was quickly cut off.

“Do as I say! Now!” the old elf barked back with the ferocity of an elf half her age.

Faro, seeing her resolve, nodded and used his wide arm span to herd the rest of the group to the side of the chamber furthest from the front door. No sooner had they taken position then the doors burst open, splinters of wood flying. What was left of the doors was now swinging inward, weak on their hinges.

The Vorath ran into the circular center chamber where Lena stood in front of the others. They formed two ranks of four in a semi-circle, standing as tall as Faro; nearly immovable walls. One remained by the door to prevent any chance of a simple escape. The wolverine came up to the archway of the main chamber and assessed the situation.

“You cannot protect the lion, *Elf*,” this last word seemed to hold some disdain as he spoke. “Give us Faro, and we’ll be on

our way. The High King still needs subjects to serve him. No sense in more bloodshed here today.”

Lena put one leg behind her and raised her arms. Her hands were empty as she had strung her bow back across her back. She held them up in a fighting stance, as if she was going to knock the wolverine and the rock creatures out with her fists.

The wolverine just smiled. “You just met this... *thing*,” he said, gesturing behind her towards Faro. “You would give your life for him?”

Lena narrowed her eyes as she stared back at him through her clenched fists. “I will always give my life to do the right thing,” she said tartly at him. “Move! Now!” she screamed. Faro pushed Thora, Tobi, and Mathias back out of the nave as Lena began waving her arms and speaking in tongues similar to what the wolverine was spouting out in the square.

The party watched as their friend’s hands started glowing bright white. They watched until they couldn’t anymore for how bright the light was. They heard the wolverine yelling “Attack! Kill her!” as the Vorath sprung forward to tear her apart.

The building shook, and a glow from the ceiling caught Faro’s eyes. He glanced up and saw the radiant, golden eyes of the god, Solana, come to life in a brilliant bright light that matched that of Lena’s hands. The light built until it shot downwards and filled the circular chamber. They could



hear sizzling and falling rock as the light burnt through their adversaries and reduced them to rubble.

When the light finally subsided, smoke filled the room. Piles of rock surrounded the center of the chamber, where Lena still stood, unscathed. Out by the entrance stood the wolverine, his jaw agape. Before he could say anything, a shriek rang out over by the stairs. Everyone turned to look and saw a small, blonde girl standing in the stairway. She had obviously been roused from her grandfather's office by the shaking of the building and had rushed to evacuate with him. She was screaming in shock at the site of the wolverine and the one remaining Shadruul that blocked her and her grandfather's path outside. Mayor Thornvale could be heard whimpering and cowering behind her.

"Seize the girl and kill the man!" the wolverine snarled at his one remaining soldier. The Vorath Shadruul lunged for the stairs and grabbed the girl with one arm, smashing a rock fist into Thornvale's head, sending him crumpling to the ground on the stairs.

No one in the party dared move for fear they would cause the monster to hurt the little girl. The wolverine snarled at them. "Meet me at Umbra's Veil, Faro. Alone. Or the girl dies."

With one last demonic hiss, the wolverine and the Vorath ran out of the church, their captive in tow, through the

splintered door. Lena made a move to run after them, but Faro had come up behind her and grabbed her by her cloak.

“Don’t,” he growled. “That thing will squeeze her to death if we pursue now.”

She nodded, and he loosened his grip. Mathias, Tobi, and Thora all moved to the center of the room, looking around themselves in amazement.

Finally, Mathias was the one to speak. “How, in the Maker’s Realm, did you know it could do that?” he asked egregiously, pointing up at the hanging statue that still looked as beautiful and pristine as ever.

Lena took a moment to straighten her cloak that Faro had wrinkled when he grabbed it. “How do I know? I should know! I built the damn thing.”

Mathias’ mouth dropped open. “What? How?”

Lena opened her mouth to answer, but a noise from the doorway cut her off. They all turned to look. The sound came again, a faint whimper echoing through the church. Faro nodded at Lena, signaling to move. Together, they rushed to the broken doorway.

As they stepped outside, Thora let out a cry. Lying in the town square was their farmer friend, Osrice, blood seeping through his fingers as he clutched his chest. They hurried over, and Mathias dropped to his knees beside his old friend.

“Tried... tried to stop... them,” Osric wheezed, his voice barely a whisper.

A tear rolled down Mathias’ cheek. He looked up at Lena with desperation in his eyes. “Do something!” he shouted.

Lena’s expression faltered, her hands trembling as she shook her head slowly. “I can’t... I’m sorry.”

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