

Fall of a Lost Sun

Caverns of Stelemia, prequel

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Published: 2018



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This is a work of fiction. Similarities to real people, places, or events are entirely coincidental.



*Dedicated to my son Kaleb.
I hope you grow up to be an honorable man. I love you.*

Chapter 1

The trap had worked. Better than Arden had expected.

Now they had an angry horde of bone-warriors charging back into the stalagmite-filled chamber. “Get ready,” Arden shouted to the scions around him.

The old warrior Wrynic hefted his shield. “Looks like the cave-in halved their numbers.”

Arden raised his hand and the archers readied their bows. “There’s still more than enough to go around.” He brought down his arm and a dozen arrows shot forth.

The front rank of the bone-scum reeled backward as the missiles buried themselves in their painted flesh. Their companions coming up behind them trampled right over them, in their panic to flee the collapsing tunnel.

Pern, the alchemist, came up beside Wrynic. Like the old warrior, Pern was one of the few non-scions who lived with them at Sunholm. The alchemist held a small satchel. Arden nodded at him, and Pern’s face spread into an evil grin. “Get down!” The alchemist screamed, then hurled the satchel at the approaching enemy.

Arden and Wrynic ducked behind their shields, as the scion archers hid behind a wall of stalagmites. Then the boom came, tearing through the air, pelting them with broken rock, shattered bones, and chunks of ragged flesh. Arden gritted his teeth at the ringing in his ears.

No doubt that explosion would be heard all the way back in Sunholm!

As dust engulfed them, Arden lowered his shield. “Everyone: form a shield wall.”

The scion warriors dropped their bows, raised their shields and locked them together. If any of the bone-scum had survived, they would be easy pickings for the warriors of Sunholm. So far his plan had worked brilliantly. Wait for the bone-

clan to enter the passage rigged with explosives, set them off, and force the enemy to withdraw right into the ambush Arden had set for them.

For two days Arden and his warriors had followed the group of encroaching clans-people, searching for a way to drive them out of this section of the Nether—the subterranean region beyond the bright lights of the Kingdom of Stelemia. And then the enemy had made their first mistake. Not knowing these caves, the enemy leader had unknowingly led his people into a bottleneck. Arden, and the other scions, had lived in these caves their whole lives. They knew every passage, every chamber and every stalagmite, and had gotten in front of their enemy and set the trap.

Arden rhythmically clenched and unclenched his grip on his sword as he waited for any sign of life within the blasted chamber. The billowing dust made it impossible to see more than ten feet and it would take some time for it to settle. Gritting his teeth, Arden grew impatient.

He hated waiting. He was a man of action.

So he took a step forward, and then another, shield raised, sword ready. Wrynric moved with him, as did six of the other warriors. They kept their shields locked, presenting a solid barrier. One carried a torch, the rest swords and spears.

Something moved in the murk in front of Arden. Headed toward it, he picked his way through the broken rubble. He stepped on something soft but was not foolish enough to look down to see what it was.

A moan came from somewhere in front of him, and a figure soon materialized within the murky gloom. As they cautiously approached, the figure took shape. A bone-man.

The enemy turned his bloody face to look at Arden, and stared with glazed eyes. He was clearly numb with shock and little threat to them. One of the female scions broke ranks with the others and hacked the enemy's head off with her sword.

A great bellowing cry sounded from close by. Seconds later, pounding feet raced toward them. Shouts erupted from the murk, and more feet joined the first. Arden knew what that meant. More of the bone-people were out there, coming their way.

"Here they come," he shouted over the stampede of feet. The chamber floor was awash with rubble and broken bodies, and sharp stalagmites jutted around them. Not an ideal place for a pitched battle, but it would have to do.

Out of the dust cloud emerged one of the largest bone-warriors Arden had ever seen. The man held a great two handed war axe. He shouted a deep-throated war cry, exposing his sharpened teeth, his white-painted face covered in old scars. Then he charged Arden's shield wall, bringing his axe down on Wrynric's shield. The old man almost buckled under the great blow, but somehow held his ground.

At least a dozen more of the enemy struck the shield wall, stabbing, bashing and hacking with their bone weapons. Arden thrust at them through the gap between his and Wrynric's shield, and screamed meaningless orders to his companions. They all knew what to do. Stand and fight. And Kill.

An enemy axe head arced over Arden's shield and clattered against his helmet. He ducked down and shoved forward with his shield. The giant bone-warrior shouldered into Arden's shield, almost breaking his guard. Somehow Arden managed to keep his feet and got a quick cut in before the other man could bring

his weapon to bear. Arden's attack had drawn blood, but it was not enough to slow the bone-warrior.

The giant man roared and lifted his axe over his head, his eyes bulging with battle lust. On instinct, Arden lunged forward and buried his sword deep in the man's guts, and then ripped it free. The enemy staggered back a step, dropped his weapon and backhanded Arden across the face.

Arden reeled away, head ringing with the blow. More enemy pressed forward through the gap in the shield wall. Still in a daze, Arden barely managed to parry a blow from a bone club. Then something struck him a glancing blow on his right ear. Sparks crossed his vision and he staggered about. Blood spurted from the female scion's head beside him, and she collapsed in a heap. A bone-woman stepped over her and raced at Arden, and all he could do was watch her come forward to kill him.

Wrynnic rammed her with his shield, sending her slamming into a stalagmite. It broke, and she fell to the ground. The old man kicked her in the face. But before he could finish her, he was attacked by the giant bone-warrior who held in his innards with one hand, wielding his axe with the other.

Arden moved to help his friend, his legs unsteady, head spinning.

Suddenly, a hand grabbed Arden's foot, sending him face-first into the ground. He was too dazed to get up, and waited for his attacker to finish him. Pain lanced his side, as he felt the bite of a red-hot blade.

The agony broke him from the daze and he pushed himself up on one elbow and spun to face his attacker. It was a bone-man, one eye missing, nose a broken mess, and an arm hanging by a thread. One of the survivors of the blast.

Arden punched the man in the face, then grasped around for his sword. The bone-man screamed in his savage language until Arden silenced him with a quick thrust to the neck.

That dealt with, Arden got to his knees and searched for Wrynnic. His heart kicked. The giant warrior had the old man on the ground and had wrapped his meaty hand around his neck. Arden staggered up, ignoring the headpins that threatened to topple him and charged.

The giant never saw him coming. Arden hacked into the man's back, the sharp edge of his blade burying deep into the muscled flesh. He brought it down a second and third time, cutting into the man's spine. The bone-warrior fell forward onto Wrynnic, roaring in agony.

Arden grabbed the man's blood and gore matted hair and swiped his sword across his throat. Shoving the man off Wrynnic with his boot, Arden helped his old friend up.

Wrynnic shook his head to regain focus. Then his eyes widened and Arden spun around as an intense scream split the air, drowning out the sounds of battle. In front of them were dozens of dead bones-people, covered in pulverized rock and blood. The scion warriors fought on, knee deep in corpses, faces haggard, weapons dripping red.

The scream slowly died away. Arden stomped forward toward the nearest enemy, a bone-woman, almost naked and duel-wielding hatchets. As he bore down on her, she got in a lucky hit on the scion she faced. She cut deep into his neck and he toppled forward.

"No!" Arden roared and lunged at her. Screaming, she brought her axes to bear, but she was too late. He slammed into her and she flew back and hit her head on the side of the chamber. He finished her before she could recover.

Then he saw who had screamed moments before. Pern's corpse lay smoldering several feet from him. The alchemist must have been mixing his regents and spilled them over himself. Whatever he had made, had burned through his flesh and into his organs. A grisly death. But not one unexpected for a man who created deadly substances and set off explosives.

Such was the way of things.

Soon, the battle was over. The enemy were dead, their corpses already fed on by carrion.

"How many?" Arden heaved a weary sigh.

Wrynric took in a deep breath through his nose. "Eight."

Arden's sword hand trembled. Eight good scions dead, each hardened veterans, each his friends. "And how many enemies did we kill?"

"At least forty here, but who knows how many in the collapsed tunnel."

Forty. How many more bone-scum would they need to kill before Sunholm was safe?

Arden let his tears fall as he trudged over to the line of bodies resting among the stalagmites. His companions had gathered up the scion dead, and now it was up to Arden—their leader—to gather their marker medallions, to take back with him to Sunholm.

As the survivors watched, he went to the first of the dead. A scion named Evan. A young man, one Arden had taught to fight. Now gone to live in the Light of the Lost Sun. He removed Evan's medallion and placed it in a pouch. *I should have done better. I should have found another way to kill our enemy. I'm sorry I failed you.*

Moving to the next corpse, he bit his lip. Julia. *I'm so sorry.* Her pale face brought back memories. Arden closed his eyes as the faces and the pains of the past came back to him.



ARDEN ENTERED THE DOORS of the Golden Keg Tavern and saw the love of his life at the bar and knew he had come to break her heart.

He walked slowly over to her, dreading every step. She had not seen him yet, but when she did, her eyes would light up, her lips spreading into the smile he loved so dearly.

Then she would see the grim look on his face and her smile would fade.

Arden was almost at the bar before Kristia noticed him. Just as he had feared, she gave him her precious smile, her beautiful blue eyes sparkling in the glow of the sacred light hanging above her. His heart withered.

"Arden, my love..." she began, then fell back against the bar. "What's wrong?"

Walking up to her, he took her soft hand in his. "We need to talk. Let's go to your room."

"But you have not been here for over a year. Let's have a drink, then we can—"

"No, Kristia. I must talk to you now."

She glanced over his shoulder and he followed her gaze. A young, fiery-haired woman entertained a group of mercenaries on the other side of the taproom floor. Kara. His bastard daughter.

"She's as beautiful as her mother," he said, his jaw tightening. "How long has she been working out here?"

Kristia brushed back her bangs. "Several months. She's following in my footsteps."

I feared as much. Arden put his arms through Kristia's and led her through the taproom toward the back rooms. Kara glanced their way, and Arden quickly turned away.

Better his daughter never met him. If she did, he'd have to break her heart too. She looked like a fine woman, and would make many a man happy. By the Lost Sun, he had wanted more for his beloved Kristia, and the daughter they had made together, but now that chance was gone. He thought of his wife, back home in Sunholm. *Curse you, Meridia. Why are you making me do this to them?*

No, he couldn't blame her. He had brought this upon them himself. Because of his infidelity, Kristia and Kara would pay for his sins by spending the rest of their days pleasuring undeserving men for a pittance of coin. He had promised Kristia a better life, and now he had come to break it.

Such was the way of things.



A HAND FELL ON ARDEN'S shoulder. "Are you alright?"

Snapping out of his memories, he glanced up at Wrynric. "Yes, sorry." Arden turned back to Julia and took her medallion and put it in the pouch with Evan's.

After taking the other dead scions medallions, Arden went and stood with the others. "May the Lost Sun watch over you all. My people, my friends."

They wrapped their dead in blankets, then placed them among the slain bone-people. Erecting a monument with the blades of the fallen scions, they each said their goodbyes. Then Arden took the torch and led the way back to Sunholm.

Chapter 2

"Father," Liana cried as Arden entered the gates of Sunholm.

"Liana, my dear." He embraced her and kissed the top of her head. Already he could feel his wife's eyes on him, even though she was nowhere to be seen. He let go of Liana. "How have things been back here?"

"Who cares about us; I want to know about you. How many battles did you fight? How many bone-scum did you kill? How—"

He laughed. "Slow down, I'm getting old and can't keep up with a long barrage of questions."

She rolled her eyes. "Well?"

Arden glanced at Wrynric and the scion warriors as they marched into town. They had set out on the campaign with two dozen hardened veterans, and only returned with sixteen. "Things went about as I expected." It hadn't really. He felt

personally responsible for the loss of eight good people. Men and woman he'd known his whole life. *Lost Sun watch over you all.*

Liana must have seen his grief as she hugged him again. "I'm sure you did the best you could."

I should have done better.

Wrynnic stopped. "He did more than any of us expected. We destroyed a whole clan of the bone-scum." He slapped Arden on the back. "Your father is a genius."

"Yes... it was quite a slaughter." Arden could take no satisfaction in it, but he didn't allow his distaste to show, for he was their leader, and the others obeyed his every word and trusted in him. Always he had to present a façade of strength and assuredness—especially in dire times such as these. Once, that had been easy to do; he had always been confident and certain of his actions. But since his wife had humiliated him, his show of strength felt more an act than real. *And yet my people keep believing it.*

He sent Wrynnic on his way so he could speak with his daughter alone. "Have they prepared our equipment?" Liana didn't need to be told what he meant by the question. She had been having the same visiondreams he'd been having the last few months. One of an ancient artifact in the ruined city, deep within the Nether, the caves shrouded forever in unending darkness. Now the visions were becoming more urgent, more frequent, and they both knew it was time to act.

She nodded. "I have overseen everything. We should be ready to leave within the day."

"Excellent." He grimaced. "Where is your sister?"

"She's off sulking somewhere. Probably that weird place she always goes to and speaks to herself."

He sighed, "Alright. Go see to the equipment. I must speak with your mother; then I'll go find Semira."

Liana pecked him on the cheek. "I love you, Father."

Arden watched her until she went into the Repository, then he slowly turned and made his way home. Once he had found the idea that he'd rather face a clan of bone-people head-on, than his own wife, funny. Now it did nothing but fill him with loathing and revulsion.

Arriving home, Arden found Meridia sitting at the kitchen table drinking shroom tea.

They stared at one another for a long time, before he shifted uncomfortably and turned away. "We eliminated them. Some of us were lost, but I am unharmed."

Meridia took a sip of her tea and said nothing. He flicked his eyes back to her. "What else do you want? I need to see to our expedition."

Her eyes grew colder than the Mergen Sump. If that were possible. "Once again, you come home and have to leave again."

"You knew I had to do this. We've spoken about this before. My visiondreams—"

"You care nothing for any of us. Your children barely know their father; your wife sits by herself in the dark, spat on by those around her, treated like a vile husk by her own first-born daughter." Meridia stood, her pale face glistening. "And all you do is prance about, dealing with other people's problems. Helping them, caring for their needs... sleeping with whores!"

"Meridia." His anger burned in his guts. "I did everything you wanted, just like I always have. Why can it never be enough? Kristia can no longer be a part of my life, so why can't you let it be?"

"Because your disgusting bastard daughter is out there."

Arden balled his fist behind his back. Why did she always have to make him feel so wretched? She'd never been like this before they had wed. "Stop, please. I came here to say goodbye before we set out."

"You always have to leave me." His wife glared out the window with a curled lip. "Those people out there. They always *need* you, pathetic weaklings that they are."

"They are our kin and I am their leader. Of course they need me." Arden wanted to go, but this was his wife. She was hurting and he was the only one who could ease her pain. Reluctantly, he stepped forward and widened his arms to embrace her.

She let him hold her, but remained as rigid as a stalagmite. He kissed her on the forehead, more out of formality, than wanting it. As he held her, he saw Kristia's lovely face. Every time he had made what should have been love to his wife, he imagined it to be Kristia. It was the only way he could do it.

And Meridia knew it.

It was as much his fault as Meridia's that things had grown so icy between them. But there was nothing he could do about it now. They were bonded together in marriage, and in the Covenant of the Lost Sun—marriage was for life.

Such was the way of things.

"I need to check on Semira." He let his wife go and gave her a quick peck on her dry lips. "She won't like it very much, but I still need to say goodbye and leave her here with you."

Meridia pushed him away, more than a little roughly. "Then be gone." She began to head toward her bedroom. It had once been theirs, but he had long ago been exiled from it. "Tell her to come home. She has chores to do."



AS HE STRODE OUT OF Sunholm's gates, Arden's thoughts turned back to the last time he'd seen his beloved Kristia. He recalled walking into the Golden Keg, speaking to her at the bar, seeing his half-blood daughter Kara, and then leading Kristia to her room.

When they arrived at the room, he led Kristia over to the bed and sat her down. Hands shaking, he got on his knees before her. She took in a startled breath, her eyes glittering. "Arden..."

He lowered his face. "You know why I have come."

Sobbing, she raised a hand, like she was going to strike him across the face. He grabbed her wrist, and gently lowered her arm. "I'm sorry." He found it hard to speak, so great was the lump in his throat. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry." *Lost Sun help me.* "I can't bring you with me."

Her tears started to flow. "But you said... last time you were here, you said—"

"I know." Arden kept his face lowered. He couldn't bear to look her in eye. "I know. But things have changed. As much as I want to take you with me, I can't." *I should have never made the promise. What was I thinking? My people trusted me. Meridia trusted me. I failed them all.*

"That's it? You can't?"

He nodded grimly. There was no way he could tell Kristia the truth. She would not understand. No one outside the Covenant would.

Kristia's body was wracked by great sobs. "Why? You love me, you said you loved me. You promised."

"I know I did. I feel a wretched husk for having to do this." His wife's face filled his mind. Her angry, twisted snarl, her vicious tongue, her painted-on eyebrows. Meridia was hideous, on the inside and out. *And yet, I married her, bound myself to her forever, never dreaming of more... until I met Kristia.*

Then the memories faded as Arden found Semira in one of the passages near Sunholm. She sat in total darkness, staring into space, near the edge of a drop. "Semira, my love," he said, coming up behind her.

She squinted in the light of his torch. "Father." Her voice was taut. She knew why he was here.

Putting his torch down, he sat beside her and watched the light glitter on the surface of a nearby pool of water. They said nothing for a long time. Then Semira finally moved next to him and rested her head on his shoulder. He put his arm around her.

A few nights ago, he'd had another visiondream. It had come to him several times over the last few years. A dream in which his first-born daughter killed him and destroyed Sunholm. He didn't understand the vision. Semira's life had been hard, but she knew he loved her more than anything else in the world.

Yet every time he tried to spend time with her, father and daughter, something always came along and interrupted them. Like now. Time was running out and he had to get this over with quickly so he could journey to the city he'd seen in his visiondreams.

Swallowing a lump in his throat, he said, "I don't know how long I'll be gone."

"I want to come with you," she began, gripping his arm. "I always get left behind. No one ever needs me."

Semira always came out with this, every time he had to leave her behind. "We've already been through this. You have to remain here and help your mother. It will be dangerous out there."

"But you're taking Liana and Erinie. Why not me?" Her voice was strained and he knew her tears would follow.

"Liana is needed, for she has been having the same vision as I have. And Erinie is needed because she can decipher the map device. You know this."

Semira looked at him, her eyes glittering in the torchlight. "Mother will hurt me, as soon as you leave. They all will."

She bore more than a little resemblance to his late mother when she was like this. Nothing like Meridia, for which Arden was thankful for. "Semira, no one is going to hurt you, girl. Please." He brushed back her bangs, his heart sinking when he saw the pain in her eyes. *Why does she always make things so difficult?* "You have to stay here. I will return, and then we can spend some time together." He glanced at the dagger at her waist, finding something—anything—else to talk about. "Wrynic tells me you've become quite the fighter."

"Stop trying to change the subject, Father. I want to come."

He let her go and stood. "I'm not going to do this with you. I have more important things to do than argue with my stubborn daughter."

Semira got to her feet and tried to stare him down. She'd become so intense these last few years, and had started talking to herself. It had all began when she got sick. Arden had changed in small ways since then too, for Semira wasn't the only one who got sick that day. After he had recovered, he'd noticed his visiondreams became much more intense and sometimes during them he felt like his consciousness left his body and he became one with the dream. There wasn't anything like this recorded in the Covenant's records. But then, nor was there any record of a full-blood scion like Semira not being able to share in the visiondream either.

What had made them sick? What had caused the changes? Why were they different?

Suddenly, Semira took a step toward him, and he almost thought she was going to strike him.

But she didn't. Instead, she embraced him, as stiffly as Meridia might. Wrapping his arms around her, he buried his face in her damp red hair. "I love you."

She didn't say it back but she did put her arms around him for a few blessed moments. Then their time was done and he had to leave.



WRYNRIC STOOD WATCHING the final preparations of equipment. "Where are Liana and Erinie?" Arden asked, as he came up beside the old warrior.

He glanced at Arden, his aged and bearded face as grim as ever. "They are in the repository charging one of the map devices. They shouldn't be much longer." Wrynrlic grimaced. "How did they take it?"

Arden didn't have to ask who the old warrior meant. "Meridia was... her usual self. And Semira. Well, you know."

"I said goodbye to Semira already." He placed a mailed hand on Arden's shoulder. "She'll forgive you. She always does."

Arden nodded absently. He wasn't so sure. Not this time. Something felt off with Semira and he couldn't quite place what it was.

A crowd of people came to wish Arden luck and embrace him. These were his people and he had work to do to set them in good spirits before he left them on his long journey. As half the town gathered before him, he raised his hands in the air in reverence to the Lost Sun.

"I shall be thinking of you all as we head deep into the Nether," he said. "Deeper than any of us have ever been. But my visionsdreams and that of my daughter, Liana, are clear. This ancient artifact must be found."

There was a half-hearted cheer by some of the oldies. Most of the younger scions stared at him, with grim faces, hard eyes, all weathered and beaten by the many recent skirmishes with the marauding bone-people.

And now he had to leave them to battle on without him. But only for a time. When he returned, he would set things right.

The bone-people were being driven closer to Sunholm by something or they had decided these caves were better than their own and tried to force their way into

them. Either way, there had been some hard fighting of late, and Arden hated having to leave his people at such a difficult time for their community.

But there was no choice. The visiondreams had shown him the winning path. The artifact would save them all.

Arden stood tall and proud to project the courage and determination he felt his people needed. "I shall return in good time, and when I do, we will learn what this artifact is and use it against the bone-scum. This is the reason the visions are showing me this thing. It is some kind of weapon that will aid us in our war."

Finally, the young warrior scions were listening. Anything that could save lives and make their day-to-day existence easier was a welcome thing indeed. "But know this. When I return I will begin plans for another surprise attack on our enemies. Forge us more arrows, more swords, more shields, but most of all, forge your hearts into iron, for Sunholm will need brave warriors in the days ahead."

Now everyone was cheering and Arden reveled in it. He started waving his hands around in a display of eager energy, making sure to stand tall, with a straight back, flexed arm muscles and a raised chin. It almost began to feel natural to him again, and not the act it really was. "We shall drive them from our ancestral caves, burn them to ash, crush them under our boots, hack them to pieces and leave them for the carrion eaters."

Men roared their defiance, holding swords aloft. Women hugged one another, the warriors among them, joining the men in their shouts of defiance. "Death to the bone-scum." Came the communal cry. "Death to them. Death to them! May they burn under the Light of the Lost Sun."

His work done, Arden took Wrynric aside and said, "We need to get this journey over with as quickly as possible. I fear our respite from the bone-people attacks is temporary." He glanced at the cheering crowd. "If we're away too long, I worry they will be angry at me and that some of them might desert us and head to Stelemia. Maybe I should..."

Arden hated feeling so insecure. It hadn't always been this way. Once, nothing got him down, until, about five years back, Meridia had found out about his relationship with Kristia. By then, everyone in Sunholm had known, though Arden never learned how they came to find out. Meridia had overheard the gossip, and had waited for him to come home and made him grovel at her feet for forgiveness. He had shattered her heart, fathered a bastard half-blood, and had broken the Covenant's sacred oath.

And, oh had he groveled. She'd made him feel so worthless, he almost contemplated suicide. He'd never recovered from the shame she'd inflicted upon him, and ever since then he had sometimes started second-guessing himself. *Something no leader should do!*

Wrynric frowned. "You are doing the right thing. They believe you will find a way to help them and that this artifact is a weapon which will drive the enemy away for good. I believe that too, as do you."

Do I? Arden wasn't sure what to believe. He had just told his people it was a weapon, but in truth, he had no idea what it could be. In the end, as long as the other scions believed in it, did it matter what it was? It gave them hope, and hope was something in short supply of late.

Arden forced a grin. "I believe it, old friend. It will save us all."

Wrynric had always helped Arden set his mind straight. How could anyone have a better and more loyal friend than the old warrior? Arden embraced Wrynric, who hugged him back. It was hard for the old man. Only once, many years ago, had he revealed his true feelings for Arden. How it must hurt him to embrace the one he longed for, while knowing it was the embrace of old friends, kindred spirits, and not that of a lover. Arden could never return Wrynric's love the way he could that of a woman.

Kristia, I'm sorry. I will always love you.

Chapter 3

They were two days out of Sunholm when they had their first run-in with a group of bone-people. With a bellowing war cry, the savages burst from a side passage, wielding their bone clubs, bone swords and one of them firing bone arrows.

Arden shouted orders to the three scion warriors, Kalisha, Etrian and Perren, then to Wrynric who were all only now waking from sleep and drawing their swords. "Liana, draw your dagger and keep down and stay under your blanket. Erinie—" The librarian was already mixing reagents. Arden raised his shield and positioned himself between the two young women and the enemy archer. "Everyone, take cover."

The bone-scum charged through the chamber, roaring like a pack of jamalganas. Their chief ran at the front, a big man with a bald head, many scars and barely any clothes. Arden moved to meet him. Leader versus leader.

Moments later, the bone-people were on them, thrusting and stabbing, cutting and tearing, kicking and punching. Arden sidestepped a mighty downward swing of the bone-chief's great club. The weapon struck the ground with a resounding thud. Spinning around, Arden cut a long gash out of the chief's leg, slicing through muscle and vein. The giant man bellowed a vile curse in his own guttural language and fell back.

A bearded bone-man leapt in front of Arden, screaming incoherent threats as he swung his blade in an arc. Suddenly, a blade came from the side and sliced his face off. Blood gushed out of the front of his skull; the gurgled scream that followed died quickly. Another bone-person came for Arden, and he spilled her guts with his sword, spilling them across the ground, turning it into a spongy mush. The chief was coming at him again, kicking and shoving his own people aside to get through them.

Wrynric took down a bone-man, and the savage toppled into Arden, making him lose his balance and fall. The chief leapt forward, raised his huge club, and roared, his jagged teeth bared. Arden raised his shield, but knew it would not be enough to stop the blow. When it came, it would crush him.

Then, a clump of white powder struck the bone-chief on the arm and he screamed in agony as it ate away at his scarred skin. Arden leaned forward and brought his sword up from below, sinking it almost hilt deep into the man's

abdomen and up the center of his ribcage. The bone-chief puked red, his body stiffening, head lolling to the side. Then he toppled forward onto Arden, pinning him down in the spilled guts and pooling blood.

Shoving the man off, Arden dragged himself to his feet and kicked the leader in the side. The man tried to get up. Arden shoved the chief onto his back with his boot, ripped out his sword, then drove it down into the chief's forehead until the point struck the ground on the other side. The giant man's body jerked in a death-spasm, then went still.

Then another bone-woman was on Arden, cutting a deep gash through his leather armor. Arden backed up, almost falling over a severed leg. He parried a thrust of a dagger, and then in a backward arc, cut the bone-woman's arm off at the elbow. The woman screamed, staring at her gushing stump with wide eyes.

Arden cut her head off, ending her pitiful screeching.

Gasping in air, he searched for his next target. Bone-scum deserved the most violent, gore-splattered deaths one could devise. Their kind were murderous vermin. A blight on all who considered themselves civilized. The sooner they were driven from these caves and back into whatever vile pit they once inhabited, the better.

The enemy archer hung back, firing arrows at Kalisha, who cowered behind her shield. Arden charged the archer who tried to swing his bow around to fire at him. But he was too late. Arden shouldered into him, sending him flying backward. He landed atop a stalagmite and became impaled. The man wailed, grasping at the sharp stone protruding from his guts, clawing at it, pleading with it, trying to tear it out in a madness of pain.

Arden left him there to scream.

The fight was over. The enemies were dead.

As he fought for breath, Arden checked over his companions. Perren had taken an arrow to the shoulder and Kalisha had been stabbed in the leg. Wrynric had a gash on his forehead and Erinie had a small cut on her arm.

Liana poked her head out from under the blanket, staring at the carnage around her in shock. He knelt beside her. "Are you alright?"

She looked up at him and nodded. He went to put his arms around her, then remembered he was covered in blood and probably worse. She gestured at something on his boot and he saw part of someone's intestines had stuck to it and had trailed behind him. Following the grisly rope, he saw it belonged to the first bone-woman he'd killed.

He used his sword to scoop it off his boot and flicked it away. Arden was used to things like this. Fighting in confined spaces was always a grizzly business. If only he could have spared his daughter the horror of it. But no one who lived in the Nether could escape violence for long. She was only seventeen, but had already seen more than her fair share of blood.

Arden glanced at Wrynric as the old man pulled the arrow shaft from Perren's shoulder. The young scion warrior groaned, clutching at the wound as blood trickled down his arm. Erinie pried open his fingers and treated the wound with one of her healing poultices. "You're going to be alright," she said, grinning. "Now you won't lose your arm. You can thank me later."

Perren's face had gone as pale as bone.

Arden helped Liana up. "We need to move out."

They all nodded, and quickly gathered their things. All of them were veterans in their own way and understood the way of the Nether. The blood and screams would attract predators. And those predators would not care if their meal was living or dead. Such was the way of things.



WHEN THEY WERE ABOUT a mile from the battleground, Arden stopped them and they took a closer look at their wounds. Perren's injured shoulder was in a bad way. Though far from fatal, it would stop him from scaling a rope and he'd be unable to wield his weapon. The bone-people had fallen on them by chance, but there were predators out here that would stalk them—waiting for the right moment to pounce on them unawares.

They had to be ready at all times. That made Perren a liability to the group, and he'd have to return home on his own, as they couldn't spare anyone to escort him back. When Arden approached him, the scion lowered his head. "I have failed you."

Arden placed a hand on his uninjured shoulder. "No, you fought well. Don't feel you failed. It was unfortunate we ran into the bone-scum so close to Sunholm, but now that we know they're active in this area, someone must warn our people."

Perren nodded. "Then I will return and tell them what happened."

Arden patted him once on the shoulder. "Thank you, brother. Take what supplies you need and make haste."

Walking over to the supply bags, Perren took a small ration of food and some torches. Glancing around at the rest of the group with red-rimmed eyes, he said his farewells and left.

Wrynric passed Arden a water skin. After taking a long drink, Arden said, "I'm surprised we ran into our enemy this close to home. We're lucky they ran into us, otherwise they might have gotten a lot closer to Sunholm and raided one of our supply caves."

"At least we got em all." Wrynric grimaced. "And it didn't cost us a single life."

Arden shoved the cork back into the water skin, thinking of all the scions who had died in the battles with the bone-people. Twenty two—and all in the last year. In that time, only eight scions had been born to replace them, along with another six non-scions who would one day fight alongside them. But it would take years for them to be old enough to fight. If these losses kept up, Sunholm was doomed.

There were other civilized groups of people out in the Nether, but most stuck to their own kind. Arden wiped the blood from his sword. Perhaps once he returned with the artifact, he should seek out the Knives of Dwaycar and ask for their help. They would certainly be more reliable as allies than the Stelemian exiles. Their kind consisted of thieves, murderers and simple peasants who somehow got on the wrong side of the Priest King's thugs and were banished out here into the Nether.

But the thought of being in debt to the Knives of Dwaycar, was enough to give Arden a bad case of stomach cramps. The way they looked at you when you spoke to them, the way they reviled the technologies of the old world. They were insane zealots, much like the Order of Ibilirith, but they had no love for the bone-scum

and would slaughter them without a moment's thought. That made them potential friends in Arden's eyes.

Leaning in close to Wrynric, so no one else would hear, Arden said, "I pray to the Lost Sun this artifact will deliver us, because if it doesn't we're going to have to ask some unsavory people for aid."

"It will save us." The old man's eyes blazed. "And you will be the one to wield it."

Arden tried to conjure an image of the artifact in his mind. He had seen it dozens of times in his visiondreams, and yet when he was awake, it was hard to remember what it looked like. Sighing, he gave up trying to picture it. "I'll converse with Liana and we will decide what way to go from here."

The old man took a sip of water. "Have you had another visiondream? You've said nothing of them since we left home."

Arden glanced at Liana, who was helping Erinie bandage Kalisha's leg. "I haven't had one since we left. But don't worry. The images and the feelings Liana and I experienced, are burned into both our minds, so we shouldn't have any trouble finding the right path."

"No trouble?" Wrynric chuckled. "I find that unlikely."

Wrynric knew as well as Arden that nothing in the Nether could be considered easy. Even with visiondreams to guide them, their journey would be long, hard and dangerous.

When Liana had finished helping Erinie, Arden conversed with her as the librarian studied the map device. "I think we head that way." Liana pointed toward a cave opening a little up the wall from the floor of the chamber.

Arden studied the opening. It did indeed seem familiar, though he had never seen it before, at least, not while awake. "I think you're right."

Erinie followed it on her map. "None of you are going to like this, but that passage seems to be one long belly crawl."

Grimacing, Arden motioned them to gather their things. Just what they needed. More belly crawls.



AS ARDEN PULLED HIMSELF through the dripping passages, he let his thoughts wander back to Kristia. He recalled her tears when he had told her he'd come to break his promise. The pain on her face, the grief. The hatred he felt for his own wife.

"I have duties to my covenant. I have duties to my people." He had sobbed so hard his ribs ached. *I have a duty to my wife.* He had pulled away from Kristia, not wanting to, but knowing he needed to, otherwise he might give in to his heart, and never let her go.

"Duty," Kristia said, tears running ragged streaks down her face. "What about your duty to me and *your* daughter? You've never once spoken to Kara. I told her you would take us away with you to a better place. She's been looking forward to meeting you, to leaving here and having a family—like she always wanted." Kristia was almost hysterical.

Arden stood, his chain armor jingling. "I know this is hard for you." If it was so painful for him, it must be unbearable for her. "But I can't take you. My home region out in the Nether has become dangerous of late, and I must focus my

energies on defending my people." He sighed, knowing how hollow his excuse must sound. "I may—No I *will* never return."

That was not the reason he had to do this. It was a convenient excuse. He could not tell her the truth. *Curse you, Meridia, you spiteful, wretched husk. I should never have begged for your forgiveness. I should have cast you out into the darkness, where you belong. Our people would understand.*

Kristia fell to her knees and tried to reach for him. "Arden," she cried, in a small, taut voice. "Please... please. Don't leave me."

It ripped apart his heart looking at her like this. All he wanted to do was take her in his arms and hold her tight, and say it was all a bad joke. He would take her and Kara away with him, and they would be with him always. Happy and protected, loved and cared for.

But that was not why he'd come.

Turning his back to her, he said, "I love you, Kristia, and that is why I do what I do now. Please take care of yourself. Be happy, find someone who will love and care for you far better than I ever could."

He started toward the door, one step leading into the next, each more painful than the last. *I have to get out of here, otherwise I'll turn around and take her in my arms and all this pain will have been for naught.*

"Arden. No. Please."

Reaching the door, he paused. "Goodbye, Kristia." With that, he strode out and never looked back.

When he was outside, he headed down the street, avoiding the glow of the sacred lights. He veered off the road and into a stalagmite garden, the stone points lit by the phosphorescent bacteria growing on the cavern roof. The monolithic Capital Spire towered above him, its sides glowing with bacterial light. He wanted to scream at it, wanted to grasp it in his hands and shatter it to pieces. But it was bigger than him, bigger than anything in his wretched, miserable life.

I hope you're happy, Meridia.

"Is it done?"

Arden didn't turn around. "It is done, my friend."

Wrynric came to stand beside him, and gazed out over Crystal Lake. "Then let us return home so we can plan our war."

Sighing, Arden glanced at the tavern one last time. He saw Kristia through her window, weeping, while her old madam consoled her. Wrynric saw her too, and shook his head sadly.

Such was the way of things.

The memory faded, as did Kristia's beloved face. She was gone now. She could no longer be part of his life.

Emerging into a chamber, Arden stood and stretched. He waited for the others, and they ate and drank, then set out once more. Soon they arrived at another chamber, which was almost as dangerous as the battle with the bone-people. All over the ground were deep pits filled with long, pointy, spear-like stalagmites with only a narrow path between them.

One wrong step, and they could fall and be impaled.

Though the chamber was no more than two hundred feet across, it took over an hour for them to reach the far end. The next chamber was no better than the last

and had the added complication of stalactites, some so low they had to go prone and slide under them, while at the same time, trying to avoid falling into the spike-filled pits.

In the next chamber, the ground became a steep slope. The exertion of their journey had worn them down, each of them as exhausted as the others. Then one of them made their first mistake.

Erinie hadn't gotten a good grip on the rock and she slid down the slope toward a pit of indeterminate depth. Her robes got caught on a jutting piece of rock just before went over the edge.

Screaming, she cried out for someone to grab her. Arden tried to get back to her, but there was no way he could reach her without being imperiled himself. The others were in the same situation. Erinie hunted for a finger hold, but there was little for her to grab. Her robe would not hold long.

Arden rolled onto his back, using one hand to grip a small stalactite on the roof. "Liana, can you reach the rope at my waist?"

She peered at him through the flickering light of his torch. "I—I will try."

"Then hurry."

He felt her tugging at the rope, trying to unhook it from his belt. *Come on, girl.*

Finally, she got it.

Both Arden and his daughter gripped the rope one-handed and let the end slide down to Erinie. "Grab it," Arden said, bracing himself for the extra weight.

Crying, Erinie reached for the rope then took it. "Make sure you have a good grip," Liana said, her voice edged with panic.

Wrynic let one of his legs slide down for Erinie to grab. Slowly, the librarian made her way up, her face ashen and glistening with sweat. When she reached Wrynic's leg she grabbed hold of it. The old warrior grunted as he pulled her up.

When the librarian was beside the old man, she clutched at him so tight, he begged her to let go. She did, and they listened to her ragged breathing. Arden reached over and brushed her wet hair from her face. "You're alright, you're alright."

They let her adrenaline settle for a few minutes, then Arden moved them on. They would only be safe again once they were back on level ground.

An hour later, they made it to another chamber, this one filled with stalagmites with little room to sit. "I think on our return journey, we try to find another way to get back to Sunholm," Liana said, hugging Erinie close. They were best friends, and it was hard to imagine one without the other.

Erinie had her face buried in Liana's long dark hair. "I'm never coming this way again."

Arden embraced them both. "Then we'll find another way home."

Chapter 4

A day later, they encountered something none of them had ever seen before. A glowing phosphorescent limestone arch, in the middle of a chamber, that shone like the bacterial lights in Stelemia.

Erinie ran her fingers over the glowing film coating the arch. "It feels like slimy, sticky fluid."

"It's probably not going to come off now." Liana giggled, her tired eyes filled with green light. "Then what are you going to do?"

The librarian shrugged. "I guess I'll walk around with a glowing hand. At least I won't need torches anymore."

Kalisha drew her sword. "Silence, I think I heard something."

The rest of them grabbed their weapons and listened. Arden heard nothing but the drip of water away off to their left. But he knew better than to ignore Kalisha's warning. She had good ears, and had been on countless scouting missions and fought many a time.

Then Arden heard a soft thump.

He stiffened, holding his breath. *Thump*. There it was again. But where was it coming from?

He dared not have Wrynric douse the torch, as it would draw attention to whatever was out there and leave them blind. With luck, it was some passing beast who wanted to avoid them as much as they wanted to avoid it. But you never knew out here. Death could come at anytime, from any direction. Such was the way of things.

The noise came several more times, and at one point, they heard grunting sounds. But then the noises moved off and they all breathed again. Arden kept his sword drawn. "Let's go, before it comes back."

He got no argument, and they set out, weapons at the ready. It didn't take them long to reach the edge of the chamber. "I think we need to head up here," Liana said. "I remember a vision of a bright light, then climbing."

"I remember too." Arden started preparing a rope. "I feel the next leg of our journey is high above us."

While Wrynric, Kalisha and Etrian kept guard, Arden and the two young women set to work preparing for the climb. Arden put on a pair of gloves, then donned a specially-made vest for climbing and Liana placed a torch in the holder high up his back. It was dangerous carrying a torch right above your head, but it beat scaling a rock face in the dark.

Arden clambered up the water-slick rock. The ascent wasn't too difficult; he'd certainly climbed worse in his time. When he reached the summit, he scanned for danger, then when he was satisfied he was alone, he tied the rope to a thick stalagmite. Throwing it over the edge, he waited for the others.

An hour later, they made camp and ate a cold meal. The two scion warriors took turns on watch, while Wrynric would take the last. Arden felt bad leaving them to guard their sleep, but he and Liana had work to do.



THE VISIONDREAM CAME to Arden. A dream of caves, of a river and of broken concrete passages. Feelings came with the images, feelings which told him the way he must head. The images ended at a metal door, pitted with rust, and dented by

war. What he needed to find was in that room. An artifact of unimaginable age and power.

Liana was with him. He saw fleeting glimpses of her, traveling beside him through the same series of images. He projected love at her and she projected it back. Nothing compared to a shared visiondream. Journeying together, feeling each other in ways that couldn't be described with words. It was a linking of spirits, of each other, that normal people could never experience.

Arden wished Semira could have been with them, bonding in a way one could never do while waking. His wayward daughter would have been so happy, her face lit up in wonder, her frown replaced by a contented grin. She would have been part of something greater than all of them, an ancient force that came from the time when the human ancestors and those of the scions, lived under the Lost Sun.

His heart sunk. If he could fix Semira, he would.

Then the vision was over and he woke with a hungry sigh. It was always hard to be pulled out of the dreams, to return to the stresses and fears of reality. Liana sat up and rubbed her eyes next to him. Wrynric was still on watch, which meant they still had several hours before they needed to head off again. Arden whispered for Liana to try to get some more sleep and then made his way over to the old man.

"How goes it?" he asked.

"Nothing is out there, as best I can tell." The old man shifted his weight "Did you have another vision?"

"Yes, the way is clear to me now."

They stared out into the darkness, listening to the quiet breathing of their companions. He and Wrynric had spent many nights like this, side-by-side, keeping watch. Sitting beside him, Arden could almost feel the older man's love. Wrynric wasn't like the other men Arden knew, for the old warrior had one love in life, and that was Arden.

And yet, he could never return Wrynric's affection in that way. It hurt him that he wasn't like Wrynric, for no man could have as loyal a companion. But the Lost Sun had made Arden one way, and the old warrior another and there was nothing either of them could do about it.

Such was the way of things.

After everyone had eaten breakfast, they moved out. Following the path laid down to them in their visiondreams and using the map device, they came to what appeared to be a perfectly formed square-shaped passage. They all stared at the smooth surface of the ground and walls in wonder. "This isn't natural," Erinie said. "I think someone carved this."

Kalisha ran her fingers along the wall. "Maybe it's chiseled out of the rock like the roads in Stelemia."

Arden had to agree. "Then who carved it and why?"

Erinie sighed wistfully, as she often did when she found something new to study. Liana watched the other young woman's face and grinned. "Great, now we're going to be forced into becoming Erinie's research assistants. She won't let us leave here until she knows who built this road and why."

"Let's see where that way goes first." Erinie started off down the road.

Arden raced after her. "No, wait. That is not the direction we need to head."

The librarian stopped and glanced over her shoulder at him. "Can't we go this way for a few miles? It won't take long." She almost bounced with excitement. "I think it heads toward Stelemia if my bearings are correct. Maybe we can find a shortcut back, or at least an alternate route like you suggested earlier."

While the thought of finding an easier path back enticed Arden, he didn't see the point in searching for one now. "It can wait for our return journey. Once we're back here, we will follow this road and see where it leads." He thought of what he just said and added, "as long as we go no farther than ten miles." He knew she would want to keep walking to see where it ended and they didn't have time for that.

Erinie's shoulders slumped and she pouted her lips like she had as a child. Laughing, he took her by the arm and led her over to the others. "Don't be upset. At least you get to find out where the other direction leads."

She perked up at that. "Yes! Maybe it leads to the city you saw in your visiondreams."

Arden pictured the route before them. He didn't even remember the road in the dream. Perhaps it had passed by in one fleeting image. That meant they wouldn't be walking it long before they would return to the natural caves. "I think we should enjoy this respite while we can, for I think we'll be back to belly crawls and climbing before long."

Surprisingly, it was Etrian and Wrynric who groaned at that. Both were getting on in years, and had really started to show their age. Crawling around on hands and knees, or sliding on their bellies was much easier when you were young. *I should know. I'm not much younger than they are!*

That night, they spent in a building that stood beside the road. It contained nothing but a few rooms and a rusting pipe sticking out of one wall. Still, before settling down for the night, Erinie had searched every inch of it, looking for artifacts or anything else that could give her insight on who had built it and why.

But she found nothing and soon grew bored.

The night passed uneventfully, and they resumed their march down the road. Eventually, they reached a cave-in and could go no further. They retreated back the way they'd come and found an opening high above them. Arden made the climb, then tossed down a rope so the others could follow him up.

Hours later, they arrived at another huge chamber. Passing through it, they came to a rock face. "We have to go up again?" Liana kicked a stalagmite. "Why can't we ever go down? It's much easier."

"Look on the shiny side of the coin." Etrian massaged his back. "When we head back this way, it will all be down. By then, we'll be more tired than we are now and thankful for it."

"Let's get a move on," Wrynric growled. Gearing up, he started the climb.

It took them hours to scale the next series of cliffs, each more difficult than the last. Reaching the summit of one, the group found yet another huge rock face to climb. Etrian headed up first, and it took him the better part of an hour to reach the top. When he was up, he tossed a rope down and the others made the climb.

Then they came to the most imposing one of all. A sheer wall stretching well beyond the reach of their torches.

"Alright, we leave a good one hundred feet between us when we make this climb," Arden said. "Liana, you go up first, then you Erinie, then Wrynric." He nodded at Kalisha. "You next."

Kalisha nodded once. "When I'm at the top, I'll have Etrian help me haul you up."

"Thank you, sister. I will remain here until you are half way up, then I will follow. By then, the other two should have already finished climbing."

Arden kept guard as they made their ascent. A good hour had passed before he saw Kalisha was halfway up and went to grab the rope. He froze as he heard a terrible scream. Looking up, he saw something big plummeting toward him.

On instinct, he dived to the side, landing heavily on his stomach, and spilling the torch from the holder on his back. Half a second later, something struck the ground where he had been standing with a great crunch.

Sitting up, he saw a brown mane of bloody hair. Kalisha. He closed his eyes, the image of her broken body freezing his blood. *At least it was quick.*

Alone, he carried her dripping remains and wrapped them in his blanket that quickly became sodden with blood. Nearby, he found a garden of stalagmites and placed her among them. He took the now scratched and warped medallion from her neck and kissed it once. "Sleep now, with the Lost Sun, my sister, my friend. I will keep your medallion safe until we return home, then I will forge it in the Cauldron and place it with those of our ancestors."

Arden spent a moment more, remembering her life, her contributions to the Covenant and the heroic deeds she had performed during the war with the bone-people. Then he turned and began the arduous climb.

When he neared the halfway point, he began to hear fighting above him. *Liana...* Recklessly, he hauled himself up, arms burning with fatigue, breath racing. Soon he climbed over the top of the cliff and found Wrynric, Erinie, Liana and Etrian fighting for their lives against a scaly two legged creature. Arden had never seen its like before.

Wrynric parried a vicious swipe of the beast's clawed hand with his sword, as Etrian came at the creature from the side. Liana threw rocks at it, while Erinie mixed reagents in a pouch. Arden staggered forward, drawing his sword with an arm shaky with fatigue. He needed a few minutes to rest, but his people needed him.

Coming up behind the creature, trying to keep his breathing steady, he drove his sword into the its back. To his horror, the point glanced off to the side, not even leaving a mark on its tough hide. The beast swung its head around and snapped at him with its long snout full of triangle shaped teeth. A long fin, like that of a fish, ran down its spine and along its tail.

What was this thing? Another strange creature spawned of old world genetics?

Letting out an animal growl, Arden swung his blade at its leg, but again struck to no avail. Wrynric roared and brought his long sword two-handed down onto the creature's neck. It let out a deep throated mewling noise, and spun back to face him. Some of the fin was cut away, but no blood was spilled. Using its thick, muscular arms, the creature tried to grasp the old man, but he retreated.

With its back turned to him, Arden tried to hack off its tail, but again his weapon bounced off. He may as well have been trying to cut through the trunk of

one of those giant mushrooms they grew in Stelemia. Arden bared his teeth and went in to deliver another blow. If they didn't start inflicting damage soon, they were done for. Perhaps if he—

Erinie shoved a stopper in a vial. "Move away from it! Get back."

The creature spun to snap at Arden, who barely managed to avoid being bitten in half. He backed away, the beast coming after him, its dull grey eyes reflecting the flame of the torch burning on Arden's back. Hissing, it spread its arms and prepared to lunge at him. He continued retreating, mindful he was drawing closer to the edge of the cliff.

Lost Sun, help me!

Suddenly, the creature let out a loud hissing cry. It turned its head around to paw at its back, as a vial smelling noxious orange liquid ran down its sides. Smoke rose from the liquid, and with it, came a horrible sizzling sound.

Erinie had made an acidic substance, the liquid eating through the creature's tough hide. Aiming for a spot where the acid had exposed soft pink tissue, Arden raced forward and drove his sword into it. To his relief, he felt his weapon sink into the creature's side, tearing through melting flesh, soft organs and gouging out part of its spine.

It screamed, and began thrashing around, tearing at the sword with its teeth in a frenzy of pain. The sword was torn from Arden's hands as the creature swung around again, tail whipping toward Arden. He dove to the ground to avoid being hit, and the beast stumbled over him, one of its feet pinning him to the ground. Arden wheezed as the air rushed from his lungs and his bones creaked. Then the weight was lifted from him as the creature's frenzied movements took it over Arden and near the edge of the cliff.

Wrynric charged forward, and with a great kick, sent the creature over the edge, taking Arden's sword with it. Five seconds later came the thud of the beast crashing down onto the hard rock far below.

Chapter 5

Breathing heavily, the companions stared at where the creature had gone over the edge. It was a good few minutes before Arden got up from the ground. Rubbing his aching back from where he'd been stepped on, he asked, "Any injuries?"

They all shook their heads. He grimaced and told them what had happened to Kalisha.

"We heard," Wrynric said grimly. "But we didn't go down because—"

"I know." Arden wiped Kalisha's blood from his armor in a pool of water. They didn't come down because it would have put their lives at risk and they'd have to make the climb a second time. Kalisha would understand.

After they had rested and eaten, Wrynric handed Arden a short sword. "You'll need this."

Arden took it and nodded his thanks. The old man knew how much the sword Arden had just lost meant to him. It had been a good weapon, a weapon which

had seen more bloodshed than it ever should have. But once they returned with the artifact and learned what it did, hopefully those days would be over and his people could live in peace.

The next stage of their journey took them through another series of belly crawls. Arden always hated these sorts of passages, bumping your head, straining your arms as you pulled yourself forward, the claustrophobia of the rock closing in around you. Liana and Erinie would be suffering the most, as neither of them had done much of this before. Both women were bruised all over, and he was certain, suffering terrible muscle pain, but neither had complained. In their own way, the two were warriors like the rest of them. He'd never felt more proud of either of them.

They arrived at a small chamber and both Arden and Liana gazed upward. They knew this place from their visions. "We go up here," Liana said.

Erinie frowned. "How? I don't see—" She rolled her eyes. "How are we going to climb it?"

She had seen the small opening above them. Liana poked her tongue out at the librarian. "Like we always do, with our hands."

The two women stared at one another then burst out laughing. Their laughter was infectious, and soon Arden and Etrian were laughing too. Even Wrynic, normally so humorless and dour, wore a grin. It had been a hard journey; they were all weary, cold, wet and hungry. But their spirits held firm. They would never give up.

Their people needed them.

"We are drawing close to the city now," Arden said. "I am proud of all of you."

Etrian rested his head against the wall. "Well I hope whoever lives in this city has the tables set, the soup boiling and a nice warm bed for me to stretch out in. I'm about done with these caves."

"And warm water for a bath," Liana added.

"I hope they let me ask them all the questions I can think of." Erinie stroked her chin. "I want to know everything about them and their world."

Arden had never thought about it before. Did anyone or anything still live in the city he'd seen in his visiondreams? Nothing in the images and feelings he had felt, suggested anyone lived there anymore. The place was old, he knew that much. "Don't get your hopes up. I think the city is abandoned."

Liana nodded. "I think so too. The visions never showed me anything about people there. All I saw was a gray, empty ruin and darkness."

The light mood flowed out of the chamber, and once again their faces were haggard and drawn. "Don't fear." Arden got to his knees, and lifted his chin. "Once we return with the artifact and destroy the bone-scum, we will have all the rest we need. Your names will be inscribed into our history as the saviors of the Covenant, the heroes of Sunholm, blessed of the Lost Sun."

That seemed to improve their moods again. "Well, let's get to climbing," Etrian said. "We ain't making history squatting around in here."

Arden made the climb first, followed by Erinie. About twenty feet up the shaft, he came to an opening in the wall. A fleeting image appeared in his mind's eye. That was the way he needed to go. Maneuvering himself, he slipped inside it.

He had not gone far when he heard a feminine cry of pain behind him. Sliding back out, he perched at the entrance and looked down.

Erinie had descended and was kneeling beside... Arden's heart kicked. "Liana!"

Wrynric's face appeared at the entrance to the shaft. "She's alright, she fell and hurt her ankle is all."

Arden went down and took Liana's hand. He wanted to scoop her up and kiss it better, then hold her like he had when she'd hurt herself as a child. But his daughter was a woman now, and he had to treat her as such. *They grow up so fast.*

Liana groaned. "I think I've have sprained it. I'm sorry, Father."

"It's fine. Something like this was bound to happen at some point." He grinned at her. "At least you'll be able rest soon."

"I know, the city is close. I can see our path clearly. A river, and then a climb then we we'll be in the ruin."

He saw the same images burned into his mind. They were really close, so close he could almost feel the presence of the artifact like he had in his visiondreams. "How is her ankle?" Arden asked Erinie.

The librarian wound a bandage tightly around Liana's foot. "She'll be fine, but once we get out of these passages, she should rest for a few hours and have her foot elevated to keep the swelling down."

"Fine. All of us are tired and in need of some sleep. We should reach a river soon, then we can rest."



"I THOUGHT YOU SAID the river wasn't far," Erinie said from somewhere behind Arden.

"Well... I thought it was closer than this." Had his vision been wrong? Were they still going the right way? It felt like they were. It had been four hours since Liana had hurt herself, and most of their journey since had been long belly crawls with few places big enough to sit up and stretch. He was about to call a halt when he heard a distant sound coming from ahead of him.

Arden continued on, hope renewed. It was definitely a river.

Half an hour later, he emerged from the passage onto the gravel bank of the river and thanked the Lost Sun he could stand once more. Moving away from the entrance so the others could climb out, he stretched his aching muscles. If he hurt like this, how must Liana and Erinie be feeling?

When they were all out, they huddled together for warmth. Arden would give them five hours rest before he'd force them on. After eating a meal, Arden took first watch and let the others sleep. His thoughts were a turmoil of doubt, grief and unspoken fears.

Now that they neared their destination, it was as if everything came out to torment him one last time. Arden let the thoughts play themselves out. What did any of it matter anyway? Soon, he would wield the weapon that would change everything, and save them all.

His thoughts turned to Kalisha. He had known her his whole life. She had been a good woman, a brave warrior, a loyal friend. Kalisha had once taken down a full-grown aurtark with nothing but a spear, a knife and a few stones. Few warriors

had been as brave or as capable as she had been. *And now you have joined the growing list of others who have died while carrying out my orders. He held back a great sob. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I wish I could bring you back.*

Arden's father had led the Covenant for decades. Under his leadership, few scions or the people who lived with them had died violent deaths. Things had been much easier back then it seemed. In between fighting off the monsters that prowled the Nether and the occasional raid of exiles or bone-people, there had been long periods of peace. Babies had been born, food grown, territory expanded and trade with Stelemia had flourished.

These days, peace and prosperity were a distant memory. His people had suffered greatly over the last decade, fighting with bone-people, fending off increasing numbers of monsters and even a group of thieving husks who'd snuck into the granary and had gorged themselves on the Covenant's food supplies. Those light-starved people had fought like animals, seemingly having lost every shred of their humanity.

Never would the husks have dared such a thing in the time of Arden's father. In those days, the Covenant had been feared. Even the dark sisters of the Knives of Dwaycar had respected their might. Now all sorts of unsavory groups living out here in the Nether tested the Covenant's borders, and raided their mushroom patches and outer watch posts. None of the attacks had been coordinated until the bone-scum had come along, but each had taken its toll on the scions of the Covenant. Some had died, others had been wounded and precious supplies had been lost.

How much of this is my fault? How much of it is the pure happenstance of fate?

Who could say? All Arden knew was that every waking moment he strived to be the best leader he could for his people. To give them hope in this dark time, wise council when they needed it and a solid wall at their backs. Someone they could trust with their lives. Only once had he failed to uphold their faith in him—when he had fathered a bastard half-blood—but they'd forgiven him.

Soon, the artifact would be his, and he would lead his people to victory. Once more would the Covenant stand proud, a bright bastion of light, in a world drowned in darkness.

Arden woke Etrian to take watch for a few hours so he could get some sleep.

After the scion woke them, they set out along the river, eager to make the final leg of the journey. Even with only a handful of hours of sleep, they all seemed refreshed. Liana walked with a bad limp, but she was cheerful and waded through the river, as fast as any of them. *I am proud of you, girl. You are the light of my life.*

Soon they passed a growth of dazzling crystals that covered the walls of the river passage. They marveled at the myriad of colors reflected off the water. "Truly wondrous," Erinie said, running her hand over them. She jumped. "Ow! It cut me."

Her cut wasn't bad so they moved on until they reached a giant shoal. Arden remembered it from his vision. "We climb here." His heart beat in exaltation. "Then we will be at the edge of the city."

They made the ascent without incident and gathered at the top, looking around in wonder. Around them were concrete walls, broken metal doors and a silence so deep, it was as if nothing had ever disturbed it.

After months of the same vision, he and Liana were finally here.

Chapter 6

They had searched this part of the city for four days now and had found nothing. Nothing!

No sign of anyone or anything, and more importantly, no sign of the artifact.

Arden pounded his fist against the wall, some of the ancient concrete breaking off and crumbling on the ground at his feet. "Curse it all. When we get too far away from here, I no longer feel like we're going the right way." He scanned the entrances to the empty rooms that stretched off into the distance. "It has to be here."

By now, he had said variations of the same thing more than a dozen times, and the others were probably getting sick of hearing it.

Liana struggled to hold back her tears. "I'm sorry, Father. I thought it might have been over here."

Trying to bury his anger, he hugged her. "It's not your fault. It's mine. Maybe I was foolish in bringing us out here, especially when the bone people—"

"We did the right thing," Liana said, peering up at him. "It is here somewhere."

It had to be. Visiondreams had been known to be wrong on occasion, but never ones that came as vividly or as regularly as those he and Liana had been having. "Wait here," he told her. "I'll go get the others, and we'll set up camp in one of these rooms and rest for half a day."

She nodded eagerly. "My foot could do with a little less weight on it, and some sleep will do me good."

Making camp in an empty room with a rusted metal door, they spoke among one another, sharing stories, making jokes, and generally doing their best to relax. Eventually sleep took them one by one, until only Arden and Etrian were still awake. "You get some rest," Arden said to his brother scion.

The man nodded and leaned against the wall and closed his eyes. A trained warrior, used to long marches and hard fighting, he was asleep in moments.

Arden stared out into the darkness, listening to his companion's breathing, and Erinie's light snore. He loved all of them and it broke his heart he hadn't found the artifact. *What if it isn't here? What if I was wrong? Will they still trust in my leadership? Will they think me a fraud?* He grimaced. Of course they would still trust in him. They loved him. Why did he always have to doubt himself?

They followed him because he was the best leader in the Covenant. They would forgive him, no matter what. After all, he had broken the Covenant's laws already and they still trusted him.

He shoved aside those dark thoughts and waited out his watch. Once it was time, Arden woke Wrynric, then sat in the corner and let himself drift off to sleep.

When he woke, Arden felt strangely calm and refreshed, almost like he had not been on a long and dangerous journey but had been lazing around back home. Meridia hated him when he was relaxed. She said if he sat around too much, he would end up an old drunkard like her father. She drove him on, like a teamster

driving an ox. If it was not for his power and the respect of the Covenant, he would have meant nothing to her and she'd have cast him aside without a second's thought. Or so it seemed.

Yet another reason he detested her.

Kristia didn't know or even care about his role in the Covenant. She had loved him for who he was. He gently made his hand into a fist, remembering the times he had run her soft hair between his fingers. *Oh, Kristia, I wish you were still here with me.*

But she was gone, her light forever dimmed.

When he had heard of Kristia's untimely passing, several months after he'd last seen her, he had wanted to murder Meridia. She had killed his beloved by making him go to Stelemia and break Kristia's dear heart.

But he was the leader of Sunholm. The people expected him to be the solid foundation of their community. He could not murder his wife. Already he'd broken their trust and to do so again would shake his people to the core. There was no one else to lead them, no one as trusted as he.

So Meridia still lived, her vile heart still beating, while beautiful, sweet Kristia, rotted away in the darkness beneath the capital and their daughter soiled her soul working the dingy tavern floor. *And there is nothing I can do to help her. She doesn't even know my name.*

As they ate breakfast, Arden said, "Today, we try a new direction. I have a good feeling we'll find it."

They all seemed a little happier and rekindled. Perhaps the extra rest had done them good. Even Liana's foot didn't seem as swollen.

When they set out, they moved to a section of the city they had yet to search. They stuck together, scouring every room, inside every door and down every corridor. Some of the doors would not open; other doors had rusted away and were easily breached and others still had been torn from the wall or had huge chunks blown out of them.

As they walked down a particularly damaged corridor, Erinie stopped. "Unless I'm mistaken, some of this damage was caused by explosives."

Arden glanced about, and noticed his hand had already moved to his sword. "Is it recent?"

Erinie kicked a broken piece of concrete into one of the craters. "No, I think this happened a long time ago. Maybe a war was fought here, and that is why whoever built this city left it."

A strange feeling came over Arden all of a sudden, and he saw Liana stiffen. She looked at him, her eyes wide. "Do you feel that?"

"I do." Arden closed his eyes, letting the feeling of having been here before wash over him. His subconscious mind might be remembering something from his visiondreams his conscious mind had forgotten.

Then he had it. Leading the rest of the group, he and Liana almost ran toward a door further up the corridor. It appeared to be like hundreds of others they'd seen, a twisted, rusted ruin—but it was different in another way. The artifact was behind it.

When they made it to the door, Arden burst into the room and found it full of rusted boxes and broken equipment. "It's in here somewhere, I can feel it."

He entered, Liana a step behind. They began moving the boxes around, some of them falling apart in their hands and leaving them covered in powdered rust. Wrynric came in to help them, but Arden motioned him back out the door. "Leave it to Liana and I. If we're all in here, we might accidentally step on the artifact and break it."

The other three stood in the doorway and watched them work.

Arden caught his breath. Near the corner of the room was what looked like human bones, the first they'd seen since arriving at the Dead City. He called Liana and they went over.

"They look they're made of metal," Liana said, kneeling next to them. "But they don't show any signs of rust."

He picked one up and was surprised by how heavy it felt. "It's definitely some form of metal, and it looks like it's molded after a human leg bone, if I'm not mistaken."

Liana ran her fingers along it. "Why would it be made of metal?" She glanced at the refuse scattered across the floor. "Who lived here?"

Erinie came into the room uninvited and almost snatched the bone from Arden so she could study it. "You're right; it's replica of a human bone. It is heavier than any metal I know of, even Stelemian steel."

Under a jagged chunk of broken concrete that had fallen from the wall, Arden caught sight of a skeletal hand, its fingers clasped around something. Carefully lifting the concrete away, he was relieved to find he could pry open the fingers with little effort. When the item was revealed, he felt like cheering.

The artifact. It was right in front of him. After all this time they had found it.

He picked it up carefully and held it to the torchlight. The artifact hung off a silver chain and almost looked like a playing card the Stelemians used in their tavern games. But this was no playing card. It was covered in strange writing and had a small red light bulb sticking out of one end.

"This is it," he said. "The artifact from our visiondreams."

The two men came into the room and gathered around Arden and the young women. All five of them stared at the artifact for a long time. Then Erinie said, "Is that it?"

Liana scowled. "What were you expecting? A giant sword?"

"I suppose I never really thought about what we were searching for. I just expected it would be something grander than a dusty card with a dead light bulb on it."

Arden couldn't help himself and chuckled. "Once we learn what it does, we'll know if our journey and the loss of Kalashi were worth it."

He hoped it was. Prayed to the Lost Sun it was. For if he had brought them out here for nothing... what would they think of him? Everything he had ever done would be brought into question. His position as leader—

No. They loved him. If he was wrong, they would accept it. The niggling doubt stayed at the back of his mind, and he made sure it remained there.

"Well, now what?" Liana asked.

Arden placed the artifact in the protective metal box he had brought for it. "We head home."

Chapter 7

As they were gathering to leave the Dead City, Etrian held up his hand. "Wait, I thought I heard someone speaking."

They silently drew their weapons, as Erinie reached into one of her bags to prepare one of her alchemical concoctions. The companions listened for several minutes. Arden was about to put his sword away when he heard a distant sound.

It had indeed sounded like a voice. But who could it be? Was there someone still living here?

Using hand signals, he ushered the two warriors to flank him and Liana and Erinie to get behind them. He cautiously led them toward the voice, sword ready, nerves on edge.

Several minutes later, he called a stop, for they hadn't heard anything for some time. They waited for nearly ten minutes in silence, before hearing the voice again. "We go left," Wryrnic mouthed, leading them down another passage. Arden was certain they'd walked it a few days earlier, but they definitely hadn't heard a voice.

Some of the doors couldn't be opened so they'd passed them by and tried others. Could someone have been living behind one and not heard them outside hammering on their door? Why had they not spoken up or warned them to go away? Who was the voice speaking to now?

They arrived at where they thought the voice had spoken from and listened. They didn't have to wait long. The stranger began speaking in a deep monotone voice in a language Arden hadn't heard before. He glanced at the others, but they seemed as perplexed as he did. Even Erinie seemed without words.

The voice said something again.

"How about we try knocking?" The librarian whispered.

"I don't like that idea," Liana said. "Who knows what's in there."

They all looked to Arden to make the final decision. Taking a deep breath, he said, "I never saw or felt anything like this in my visiondream." He raised his eyebrows to Liana.

She shook her head. "Me either."

"But I see no reason not knock and see if they answer. If this is one of the inhabitants who calls this place home, perhaps they can tell us what the artifact is and how we can use it."

Etrian studied the door. "Or they could try to kill us."

Arden tightened his grip on his sword. "We are all seasoned warriors in our own way. If they try to attack us, we come at them from three sides and finish them quickly." He inclined his head toward Erinie. "Prepare something just in case."

She nodded and brought forth a vial of brown liquid. When they were ready, Wryrnic went over and knocked on the door with his mailed hand. "Hello, who are you?" The old warrior asked, leaning close to listen.

There came no reply.

He knocked again and repeated the same question but still no one answered. "What do we do now?" Liana asked.

Arden picked up a piece of broken concrete and bashed on the door with it. "Open up, we need to speak to you."

Nothing. Frowning, he put his ear to it. He thought he heard a faint tapping sound coming from within, but couldn't be certain.

Wrynric knocked again and they waited. Still no answer.

Arden sighed. "We wait here for a few hours and see if anything happens. If they start speaking again, we'll start knocking."

They sat against the wall and rested, their weapons never leaving their hands. After more than an hour of silence, the voice started up again. They rose from the floor and listened. The voice had a distinct cadence, like the person was listing off something or reciting numbers.

Arden knocked on the door, and called out in greeting. The voice fell silent and nothing more happened.

"Should we try to break in?" Wrynric asked.

Arden rubbed his chin. Should they? Or should they leave? His and Liana's visiondreams never showed anything about this door, nor a voice nor anything else. Perhaps they should return home. They had a community to save and an enemy to drive away.

"No, I think we return to Sunholm. We'll leave this place and never come back."

Everyone but Erinie seemed relieved. She glowered at the door, no doubt lamenting she'd never get to meet whoever was in there and ask them a million questions. But she would respect his decision and return home with no answers.

Perhaps this was for the best. The monotone voice had an eerie, off-putting sound to it, like it was something better left undisturbed.



IT TOOK THEM SIX DAYS to return to the edges of their scouting zone. They had gotten lost a few times and had to hide from a pack of jamalganas that were moving through the tunnels. But they had made it without having to engage in combat. Besides that one encounter with the jamalganas, the only other eventful thing had been their exploration of the highway. They had walked its full length and found it had ended at a vast chasm. Once there might have been a bridge spanning it, but if Erinie were correct, it had been destroyed with explosives. They would never find out where the road led, nor learn who had built it.

Arden's sword had been a loss, as by the time they'd returned to the carcass of the dead creature they'd fought, it had been picked clean by scavenges, and they could find no sign of his weapon. The others paid their respects to Kalisha, who had sadly also been fed on, leaving behind nothing but scattered bones and chunks of hair.

But they had expected that. For such was the way of things in the Nether.

One night out from Sunholm, someone shook Arden awake during the night. He sat up and reached for his weapon, expecting they were about to be attacked. The torch remained unlit and he could still hear the others' breathing. "Father," a small voice said.

It was Liana.

He put his sword away. "What's wrong? Who's on watch?"

"I am," Etrian whispered.

Arden felt a hand touch his mailed arm. Taking it, he encircled it in his. Liana's hand felt cold. "What happened? Did you have another vision?"

"Yes, but this one was new."

He leaned close to her. "Was it about the artifact?"

She didn't speak for a long moment. "No, not the artifact." She put her lips to his ear. "I think it was about Semira, but I can't be sure."

Arden frowned. "Semira. What did it show you?"

"I saw her dressed in white armor standing on a precipice with a lake of liquid fire behind her. On her shoulder was a metal bird, and before her were metal beasts with eight legs, and giant fangs tearing people apart." He felt her shudder. "It was horrible, Father. What do you think it means?"

He had no idea. Did it show the future? Or was this another one of the dreams where its meaning was impossible to discern? "Are you sure it was Semira?"

"It looked like her, but it also didn't. I'm not sure."

Liana was freighted and in need of comfort. Her dream might mean nothing, or it could mean everything. But right then, they both needed some sleep. "You can stay here beside me," he told her. "We both need rest, for we have a lot of work ahead of us."

"What if I have the vision again?"

"Then wake me, and we'll push on with little sleep until we get back home."

"You think..."

Arden sighed. "I don't know what I think. If the dream comes to you more than once in a night, it must be important. If it doesn't, then you need not worry about it."

She curled up next to him, and rested her face on his armored chest. "I love you, Father."

He kissed her head. "I love you too."

When they woke, Liana told him she'd not had another vision and that it must have been nothing. He hugged her. "Then put it aside, and let us focus on getting back to Sunholm and learning how to use the artifact."

As they made their way through a passages close to home, they saw recent signs of the passing of groups of bone people. The signs were hard to make out, but for Arden and the other two men who scouted through there regularly, they were blindingly obvious. He even thought he could smell them.

Tired though he was, Arden increased his pace. His people needed him. The others hurried after him, Liana limping still, but keeping pace, as she too was eager to get home.

Soon they saw torchlight ahead in the tunnel and a figure silhouetted against it. As he got closer he recognized the shape of the figure. Semira.

Walking toward his daughter, Arden handed Liana his torch then took the artifact out of its metal case and held it up for his first born to see. Semira gazed at it with a strange gleam in her eye. Thoughts of the dream he'd had where she killed him, came unbidden to his mind.

Arden discounted them immediately. Semira could be a strange one at times, and the older she got, the more detached she became. But she loved him, and he loved her. Later, he would find time to spend with her. Arden smiled to himself. When the war with the bone-people was over, he would take her with him on a trip

to Stelemia and let her see the wonders of Radashan Crevice and stand before the Iron Tower of Jharman. She'd love that.

"You've been gone a month... was it worth it?" She asked, as he stopped before her.

Arden put the item back in its case. "Our visiondreams never told us what it does, though I'm confident once we learn what it is, our journey will not have been for naught."

Semira wrapped her fingers around the stalagmite next to her and looked like she wanted to crush it with her bare hands. Her face twisted into a deeper frown than she normally wore. "What's with the frown?" He asked.

She let go of the stalagmite. "I'm glad you've returned, Father."

He studied her a long moment, the dream of her murdering him still playing out in his mind. What is she planning? He gritted his teeth. *She's my daughter. She loves me. She's not planning anything.*

"I know you're upset at me for not taking you. It's dangerous heading so deep into the Nether, and I didn't want to endanger both my girls." He pulled away and gave her a kiss on the forehead. "I must leave you now and meet with the librarians so they can study the artifact. We'll talk later."

With that, he took the torch back from Liana and strode into Sunholm, dark fears and uncertainty weighing him down. He expected his return to be triumphant. The artifact was found, his people were saved.

Instead, he felt more uncertainty, and a growing sense of approaching doom.

Chapter 8

The next day Arden and Liana stood beside Boran, the head librarian at the Repository, while Erinie watched on. "Do you see this?" The balding, elderly, man was saying, studying the strange writing over the artifact with a magnifying glass. "I have seen this word before in our ancient files. It belongs to one of the many languages spoken by our ancestors."

"Do you know what it says?" Arden asked.

The old man shook his head. "No, we've never been able to translate this language, but I know who might be able to." Boran leaned back on his stool and gently placed the magnifying glass on the table. "You're not going to like it though."

"Tell me."

"The Order of Ibilirith."

Arden blinked. "Why would they know?"

"I believe the words are written in what the Stelemians call the ancient language of Ibilirith. From what I know, the Order have managed to translate some of the language. They might not be able to tell you exactly what it says, but they should be able to at least give you an idea."

Arden ground his teeth. Why couldn't anything ever be easy? Why hadn't the visiondream shown him what to do? "Asking the Order for help is out of the

question." *They would purge every scion in Sunholm if they knew we were here.* "Is there no other way?"

Boran shook his head.

"Then it doesn't matter what it says. Let's work out what the artifact is and how to use it."

The old man turned it over in his hand, then ran its silver chain through his wrinkled fingers. "Perhaps you should try wearing it."

Arden took the artifact from him and put it around his neck. He held his breath, waiting for something to happen. But nothing did. He neither felt different nor did the artifact change in any way.

Liana held out her hand. "Let me try."

He took it off and gave it to her. She put it around her neck, and again, nothing happened. Arden wanted to kick something. "Well, perhaps it doesn't work like this."

Erinie walked over and lifted it from Liana's neck. "Can I try?"

Arden was about to remind her she wasn't a scion, but she'd already slipped it around her neck. Just as he expected, nothing happened.

She took it off. "I think we should try to put it around the neck of every scion in our community, and if you allow it, every non scion too." She shrugged. "What else can we do?"

Arden had no answer for her. "Then let's do it. Bring them here in groups and give it a try."

Five hours later, every scion, including the children and babies had the artifact put around their necks. None of them reported feeling any different, and nothing on the artifact seemed to change.

Arden was growing increasingly agitated and the disquieting feeling he'd suffered since arriving back in Sunholm had grown. Had their journey been for nothing? Were people talking behind his back about his poor leadership? If they couldn't work out how to use the artifact, were they doomed? Three people had died in the fighting with the bone-scum while they were away, and one of the mushroom patches was defiled.

A group of scions were having a whispered conversation on the other side of the repository. The crotchety old woman, Ayra, was among them. She'd never been as fond of Arden as the rest of the community. He'd heard rumors that she'd been angry at her sons for having forgiven Arden for breaking the Covenant's oath and refused to speak to either of them for years afterward.

Was Ayra speaking ill of him? Several of the men in the group seemed to be doing most of the talking. Arden knew their names, for he had led them into battle. But if their faith in him was shaken? His heart thumped. *Maybe they're talking about supplanting me. What if...*

Arden growled and turned away to stare at one of the computers. They weren't talking about him. They trusted him. They all did.

"Are you alright?" Wrynric asked, placing a hand on Arden's shoulder.

Arden lowered his head. His old friend would stand by him, no matter what. "I worry we went out there for nothing. What if we can't—"

"We will learn how to use it. Give it time."

Sniffing, Arden turned to his old friend. "I have been growing uneasy. Ever since we returned home I haven't been able to shake this feeling of impending doom. Last night, I went to bed hoping to be taken into a visiondream, but nothing came to me. Well, at least not..." He realized what he was about to say and fell silent.

"Not what?" Wrynric looked concerned.

Glancing away, Arden said, "Nothing important." Arden recalled the nightmare he'd had the night before. In it, Semira had driven a sword through him. He had woken up with a start, and laid there in the darkness for a long time. Then he'd gotten up and listened at Semira's bedroom door and had heard nothing. Had she been in there sleeping? Or was she awake and aware he was outside her room?

I'm ashamed to admit, I was too afraid to go in and check on her. She's my daughter, and now I've come to be afraid of her because of a bad dream.

All of a sudden, Arden felt an overwhelming need to be alone. He'd had enough. The journey for the artifact had been a waste of time, and now his people were going to lose all faith in him. His first born daughter hated him, and his wife was a miserable husk who had nothing good to say about anyone. And then there was the bone-scum...

Could things be any worse?

After ordering the librarians to keep searching for a way to activate the artifact, he hurried toward the repository's front entrance. Wrynric called after him, but Arden ignored him.

When he returned home he sat at the dinner table staring into the fire. Meridia was out with Liana at the market and would not return home for at least an hour. That gave him time to meditate and be alone.

Little good it did him. He could not sit long, and began pacing back and forth. *I failed. My people hate me. What do I do?*

When his wife and daughter returned, he glanced over at them. Both their faces paled. "What's wrong?" Liana asked.

Meridia placed the box of food she'd bought at the market on the kitchen bench and walked over to him and began rubbing his aching shoulders. "Tell me, my love."

Arden almost shuddered at her touch, so repulsive was it to him. His wife had not shown affection to him like this for a long time. Even still, he could not tell her the truth. *What could I tell her anyway? That I'm afraid I'm a failure? That I fear my own daughter wants to kill me?*

He was about to open his mouth to tell them he was alright, when Semira came in from outside. They all looked at her and she froze in the doorway, as if caught in the act of doing something wrong. She narrowed her eyes. "What?"

Meridia rounded on her. "Where have you been? Skulking out in the dark again?"

Semira gave her a withering glare and started toward her room. "Don't you walk away from me, you vile husk." Meridia went after her. "Come here. Now!"

Arden got up and went after his wife. "Meridia, please. Just let her be."

His wife rounded on him now. "How dare you go against me like this in front of my daughters. If you don't show me respect, why should they?"

Now he had done it. This argument would go on for hours and the whole town would hear it. Liana made a swift retreat out the front door, probably going to the repository to be with Erinie. "Meridia, please..."

Semira quickly followed Liana out, with a withering gaze at both her parents. Sighing, Arden took Meridia's hand and led her to what had once been their bedroom, but now only belonged to her. The room was at the back of the house, so he hoped when she started her screeching, her voice would not carry outside. It was bad enough his people were probably already questioning his leadership. He'd promised them hope, a weapon to use against the bone-scum, but all they got was a few more deaths, another destroyed plantation and nothing else.

The last thing Arden needed right now was for them to hear Meridia raging at him.

When he closed the door, she spun on him. "You leave me here to fend for myself with our insane daughter as my only company!" With every word shot from her mouth, her face became more and more twisted with rage. "You always leave me here. Had I known you would force me to live such a loveless, wretched existence, I'd have never married you." She spat at his feet.

Sighing, he went over and tried to embrace her, doing his dutiful work as a husband trying to placate an angry wife. How he hated her, hated every part of her, never wanted to touch her again! The only way he could stomach being near her now was by imagining her to be Kristia.

Meridia held him back and he didn't fight it.

"Did you even think of me out there?" She wiped spit from her mouth on the back of her hand. "Or were you thinking of—"

"Don't go there. That part of my life is over. *"Kristia I am sorry."* "Of course I thought of you. Every time I sat down to rest, I prayed to the Lost Sun you were safe."

She picked up the cup beside her bed and drank from it with a grimace. It smelled like cold shroom tea. "Look, Meridia, I didn't want to go out there in search of the artifact—but I had to. You know that."

"And the stupid artifact you so lusted for, does nothing. Nothing!" She tossed the empty cup on the bedside bench with a loud clang. "Just like I told you it would."

He turned away. "Meridia... Please. Let's not do this. Not now."

Arden heard her walk up behind him, and he forced himself not to move away. She wrapped her arms around him and kissed him on the back of the neck. "Make love to me, like we used to. I want to feel your arms around me and listen to you tell me how much you need me."

"You want—?"

She dug her nails into his arm. "Shut up, and do as I tell you. I want you now."

Why must you make me feel so wretched before you ask me to do this? Perhaps, like him, she had found her own way to tolerate his touch. He thought of Kristia, while she thought of him as the dirt beneath her heel.

Swallowing, he turned and led his wife to their bed. She lay on her back waiting for him. He stared down at her. *I will do my duty. She is a scion. This is our way.*



AFTER THEY WERE DONE, she rested her head on Arden's chest and dozed. He closed his eyes, stroking her hair absently. Would they ever learn what the artifact was, or had it all been for nothing?

Over the next day, those thoughts never left Arden. He went about the task of overseeing Sunholm's defenses, of checking in on the supply hold, the newly forged weapons, checking on Perren—who was at home recovering from his shoulder wound—and generally making his presence known to everyone. Arden's people seemed to give him the same deference they always had, and he heard nor saw any sign they would cast him aside for another.

Still, the feeling of impending doom lingered at the back of his thoughts. When he could take it no longer, he went to the repository to check on the progress with the artifact.

The news was grim. The librarians had learned nothing. The artifact remained as dead as when Arden had found it.

"Don't worry," Wrynric said, knowing how Arden felt. He always seemed to know." We'll learn in time."

Arden strode out of the repository, the old man hurrying after him. People went about with their daily business, many watching him expectantly. What did they want from him now? He wanted to scream at them. *Stop looking at me like I have all the answers. I don't and never did.*

Then he took a deep breath and the rising panic eased. No one else could lead as well as he did. They could deal with the disappointment, as could he. The artifact might be a waste of time, but there was still a clan of bone-scum to fight.

Arden decided to go to the Chapel of the Lost Sun and meditate. Perhaps then he could center himself and work out what his next step should be. The bone-people were growing in numbers, and there had been sightings of the Knives of Dwaycar in one of the distant tunnels at the edge of Sunholm's borders. Their type were rarely seen out this way. Though the Covenant was on good terms with them, it made him uneasy they were skulking about. *Especially when I can't get a moment's peace from this feeling of impending doom.*

"I need to spend some time in reflection," Arden said to his old friend.

Wrynric stopped and studied him. There was worry in his weary eyes. He knew how much faith Arden had put in the visiondreams of the artifact. *And now he knows my hopes have been crushed and that I'm second guessing myself. Sometimes, I wonder if he knows me better than my own family.*

"I'm alright." Arden turned toward the chapel. "Some time alone would do me good." It beat returning to Meridia or trying to find Semira. "Go see to the merchant caravan they are sending out tomorrow and ask them to trade for some more pelts. My wife and I need blankets, and I'm sure there are others who do too."

It was a pointless errand, as the merchants knew full well what to trade for, but Wrynric dutifully obeyed. Like he always did.

Arden watched him go. There was the best friend any man could hope for. A friend who would stick by your side, no matter how dark your journey, no matter the risk to their own life. *Will your loyalty to me lead you to your end?* Arden shuddered. For a fleeting moment, he had seen an image of Wrynric lying dead in a pool of blood. The image had come from the nightmare the night before.

Spinning around, Arden hurried to the chapel. He threw open the door and basked in the warm light of the torches reflecting the golden globe at the center of the domed room. Here he could contemplate under the Light of the Lost Sun and seek the answers he needed.

Kneeling under the globe, he lowered his head and closed his eyes. The chapel was so bright; he could see the light through his eyelids. *Tell me what I must do, my Lost Sun. I need your guidance. I need hope. I need peace...*

A great weariness overcame him, like the one that sometimes did before a visiondream. He let it take him, and slipped away.



TERRIBLE IMAGES CAME to Arden and with them the dread that had haunted him in waking. It permeated the visiondream, drowning him with one horrifying image after another. Arden saw cities crumble to ruin, bloody bodies pinned under rubble and beyond it all, hundreds of sinister red eyes shining from the darkness. Watching, analyzing, planning. Hungering for the destruction their weapons had wrought.

One by one, he saw Stelemia's sacred lights extinguished, saw their sacred places defiled, witnessed great fires burning on the black surface of Crystal Lake as the Stelemian Royal Navy was engulfed by flame.

What does it mean? What am I seeing?

Then he saw them. Huge metal creatures, standing in straight lines, holding weapons not seen for millennia. They were only images and no threat to him—but still he feared them. He had no idea what they were, but their purpose was clear.

They would annihilate humanity.

The metal beasts were destroying a Stelemian city with their weapons. They fired their projectiles, tearing apart its stone walls, slaughtering its defenders. After this, Arden saw images of bloody bodies strewn through the rubble, of fires burning, of filthy children weeping in the ruins of their homes. Then the metal beasts strode among them, burning everything, filling the air with ash.

Arden knew what they were. The Ancient Enemy who had exiled humanity from the Light of the Lost Sun.

The images faded and he saw a woman running ahead of him. The visiondream propelled him forward until he was running in her wake. He followed her through dark, dripping passages, and through sharp, twisting caves. Then he saw her face.

It was his half-blooded daughter, Kara. He had never spoken to her and only seen her from a distance, but her face was unmistakable. *You look like Semira.* A red light shone at her neck and the next image showed him what it was.

The artifact.

Somehow his half-blood daughter had activated it. Her image came to him again, as she journeyed deep into the Nether. Arden was propelled along with her, and soon realized he had trodden this path before. They were heading to the Dead City.

Feelings came to him and in them a message. Kara would save them. She had come out here to find a way to stop the ancient enemy and save humanity.

He followed her into the Dead City, along its silent concrete corridors and finally to a battered metal door. The very one where the voice had spoken from.

Arden watched her knock, and the door open. Standing before her was a man made of metal. A brief flash of memory of a book his mother had read to him as a child came to him. It was the Stelemian story of the Metal Man. Could this metal being be the Metal Man of the children's tale?

Kara spoke to the strange man, as he led her into a giant room. Within it stood a great host of metal men like the one beside his half-blood daughter.

The image changed and Arden saw Kara leading the army of metal man and thousands of humans against the ancient enemy. She wore glorious white armor, and stood overlooking the two armies in a place Arden recognized to be the Field of Spikes. Burning behind her, like a colossal torch, was the Capital Spire of Stelemia.

Arden could not believe what he was seeing. The capital city of the Caverns was in ruins. He had little love for the crazy, fanatical, light-dwelling Stelemians, but even he could not deny the terrible loss such a fate would bring. That city had stood for years beyond count, and countless thousands of people lived their entire lives within it.

The sprawling city around it had once been Kristia's home. To see it burn like this—

Kara pointed forward, the artifact burning bright at her neck. Her great host charged the enemy. Arden saw image after image of a terrible battle being waged, his daughter in the thick of it. At the height of the melee, he saw a distant figure, wreathed in phosphorescent light. He felt it to be Kara, but couldn't be sure. The next image showed the distant figure leading men, women and children toward a bright light. He left the battle and followed them, moving among the farm animals and goods laden wagons. With them, he passed into the light.

At first he was blinded, but then his eyes adjusted. The image pulsed with his shock. Hovering high above them, in a void of clear blue, was a golden disk.

The Lost Sun.

As the figure stopped the column of people, Arden became certain it was Kara. Red hair spilled down her back and she wore the same type of armor he had seen her in earlier, though now it was scorched black. She pointed up at the Lost Sun, and the people gathered around her like a loyal flock and bowed.

Then the image darkened until Arden could no longer see anything, and an immense feeling of terror engulfed him. He had to find his half-blood daughter and put the artifact around her neck before it was too late.

The vision showed him Wrynnic standing before the Golden Keg Tavern. Beloved Kristia's and Kara's home. The old man entered, and Arden saw him talk to Kara and place the artifact around her neck. It came to life, in a bright red flash.

This is where it would begin. Kara was the one. The one the artifact would come to life for.

So it wasn't a weapon, at least not one he could devise, and was something more than a tool he could use against the bone-people. *But where am I in all this?* Why had Wrynnic been the one who handed her the artifact?

At last Arden saw images of himself standing in the repository, saying goodbye to Wrynnic, Meridia and dozens of others. They disappeared out the secret exit as Arden's image turned to face a group of figures entering the lower floor of the

repository. Liana stood beside him, gazing down as the figures entered. *What are you doing here, girl!* He wanted to scream. *You should have gone with the others.*

Then realization dawned on him. The others would leave, but he and Liana would remain behind to confront the intruders.

With that last image, the vision was over and he woke with a start.

Arden sat there for a long time, playing out the visiondream in his head. Never had he felt such strong emotions during one. This was something more than his usual fare. The vision had clearly been the future, and there could be no deviation from it—otherwise they were all doomed. A time of darkness was rapidly approaching, and Kara would be the one to return them to the light.

Chilled by what he had seen, he rose and glanced up at the symbol globe of the Lost Sun. Reflected fire burned all across it, making the room appear as if it was alight.

Many would perish in the coming war, and the world would be changed forever.

Chapter 9

Arden rushed to find Wrynric to tell him what he saw. The old man listened dutifully, showing no signs of disbelief. "Now we must find Meridia, and Liana and Semira." Arden was breathing heavily, like he was running, sweat beading on his forehead. He felt such urgency, as if the roof was going to cave in at any moment. "I want to get the artifact. We need to take it to Stelemia and put it around my half-blooded daughter's neck."

The old man must have picked up on the urgency, for his hand went to his sword. "I'll get Meridia and meet you at the repository."

When he was gone, Arden went to find Liana. He found her at Erinie's house, listening to the librarian read from a book. "Come with me. We have work to do at the repository."

They must have seen something in his eyes, as they instantly dropped what they were doing and followed him. It was growing late, and there were scant few people about, so few saw them rushing to the repository. When they arrived, Arden headed upstairs to meet Master Librarian Boran. He burst in on the old man and found him studying a parchment of writing. The writing was familiar, as it was copied from the words on the artifact.

"Have you learned anything more?" Arden asked, coming up to the man.

He peered at Arden a moment, then glanced at Erinie, who shrugged. The old man was not used to being interrupted. "We think it is some form of dialect related to the ancient language of Ibilirith. It shares some words, but not others. As I told you earlier, the Order of—"

"What words can you translate?" Arden's impatience grew.

The old man frowned. "A word here and there, but without being able to understand the rest of the sentence for context, we still have no idea what it says." He pointed at the parchment. "This means 'place,' and this is 'your' and lastly, we

are certain this word is 'open.'" He shook his head. "You see? Meaningless, without context."

Arden drummed his fingers on his sword hilt. So they'd learned nothing. He supposed it didn't matter, now that he knew Kara would be the one to activate the artifact.

"Why did you bring us here, Father?" Liana asked.

"I had a vision, and it showed me you must all remain here until I tell you to leave." They all needed to stay at the repository, until the right moment had been reached. When that moment was, or what it would mean, had yet to be revealed. The two young women stared at him, Erinie fidgeting with one of her bags.

"I've had another visiondream, but this was different to the others," Arden explained. "It was more powerful—more detailed."

Liana reached for him. "Father, you're scaring me."

Arden forced himself to calm down a little. "I'm not trying to. Now listen, it is imperative you all do what I tell you. For now, remain here with me." He glanced toward the front entrance. "Once Wrynric and Meridia are here, I will tell you what I saw."

It took the old man twenty minutes to return. Only Meridia followed him, her face twisted in an angry scowl. By the look on Wrynric's face, he had been forced to drag her here. Arden had hoped Semira would be with them. Where was she? The last he had seen her was when she had headed out the gate earlier in the day. It was unsafe outside the wall, but there would be no way in stopping her leaving. She had a will of her own.

Meridia came up to him, stood at his side, and dug her nails into his hand. "What is this about, dear?"

Pulling his hand away from her, he led them into the council room and made them sit at the table. It was cluttered with tablets, quills and computer disks. Boran had some of the librarians clean the clutter, then had them bring food and drink. When all the librarians had left, Arden spoke about what he had seen. He tried to avoid his wife's gaze as he talked of Kara. He could feel Meridia's anger building every time he mentioned Kara's name. But there was nothing he could do. This was what he saw, and it needed to be shared.

When Arden was done, they stared at him for a long time. Thankfully, up until this point, Meridia had said nothing. But now she did. "So, you think your half-blood spawn is important? How could she be? She's no scion."

"I don't know. I'm telling you what I saw."

His wife bared her teeth. "You should never have fathered a half-blood. Had you remained—"

Arden slammed his fist on the table. "Meridia, shut your mouth."

Her teeth clicked as she snapped her mouth closed. He'd never spoken to her this way before, but he had far more important things to do than listen to her nonsense. Erinie and Wrynric both looked like they wanted to be anywhere than here, while Liana had her hand over her mouth, her eyes wide.

"Soon we must part ways." Arden studied each of them. "All of you must leave this place and go to Safehold." *Even Liana. I will not let her stay with me. If I am to die, so be it, but she must live.*

"What? No." The all burst out at once.

"Listen," he roared, and all four of them instantly fell silent. He pointed at Wrynric. "After you are sure our people are safe, I want you to go to Stelemia and find Kara. Take the artifact with you, and put it around her neck. Only she can activate it."

The old warrior clasped his sword hilt and nodded once. Out of anyone in the room, Arden trusted only Wrynric to carry out his orders. The rest would likely put their emotions before their duty. If he had to throw them into the secret passage leading out of Sunholm, he would. It would break his heart, but he'd do it. Too much was at stake to risk changing what he'd seen in his vision.

Loud voices came from outside the room. Arden glanced over at the door, his heart beating fast. *It has begun.*

Wrynric went to see what was happening, but Arden beat him to it. Arden threw open the door and saw people running into the repository, some carrying children in their arms, others valuables. A guard ran up to Arden, shaking with panic. "We're under attack. They're already inside the walls."

Arden spun around. "All of you, head to the secret exit. I will meet you there."

They hesitated, until he screamed at them to go. Thankfully they did as he commanded, including Meridia. She tried to touch him as she went by, but he motioned her to go.

When they had gathered before the bookcase that hid the secret door, Arden ran to get the artifact. He snatched it from the holder where the librarians had been studying it and raced back into the main room.

On the lower level, the guards had forced the door shut. Many of the people who had fled in from outside made their way to the top level. "Go over to Wrynric," he ordered them. "He'll lead you to safety."

They didn't argue. Arden went to the guardrail and shouted down to the guards on the lower level. "Where are the rest of you? Who's attacking us?"

A scion called Thrim shouted up to him. "Most of us are already dead or cut off from the repository. We lack the numbers to go out there and—"

"Who is attacking us?" Arden had never seen who they were in his vision. "Is it the bone-scum?"

"We're not sure who's attacking us, but they must have had help. They came through the front gates and the guards stationed there did nothing." Thrim shuffled his feet. "Someone told me they saw a young red-headed woman enter the guardhouse a few minutes before the attack."

Arden gripped the railing tight, his vision of Semira destroying Sunholm in his mind. *Could it be? Could his daughter be behind this? How many young women in Sunholm had red hair?* He wanted to rush out into the town and save as many of his people as he could, but his visions—

His thoughts scattered as he noticed Wrynric beside him. The old man glared down at Thrim. Had he heard? Did he think Semira was behind this?

The others had gathered at the railing too. Had they all heard?

Rage filled Arden and he shoved Wrynric back. "You need to go. Take everyone you can, but if the librarians won't follow you, then leave them behind and get to Safehold." He doubted the librarians would leave their precious books and computers; many would rather stay here and die defending them.

Arden shoved the artifact into the old man's hands. "When everyone is safe, take this to Kara."

Wrynic hesitated, his eyes flicking between Arden and the front door. Arden shoved him again. "If you are still my loyal friend, you'll go."

Sighing, the old warrior gripped Arden's arm for a moment, "May the Lost Sun watch over you." Then he hurried away, yelling at the others to follow him. He opened the secret entrance and they filed in.

Meridia, Liana and Erinie hovered in the doorway. Arden went over to them. "Please go."

"Come with us, Father."

"No, I cannot. My vision was clear. It showed me staying here to confront our attackers. We can't deviate from it, or we'll put everything at risk."

Meridia's lower lip trembled. He went over and hugged her. "Take care. I will return to you when this is over."

She kissed his neck then with one final gentle touch, she backed away and waited for the other two. Erinie came to him next and gave him a quick hug. "I wish you were coming. Are you sure—"

"Yes, now go."

She pulled away. "You were like a father to me." Tears glistened on her cheek. "Please return to us."

Arden forced a grin. "I will."

A thump came from downstairs. It sounded like the front doors being pounded on by an angry mob. They were running out of time.

He gave Liana a quick kiss on the cheek. "You need to go. Take care of your mother for me. I love you." He forced her in the door.

Spinning around, he hit the switch to close it then saw a group of librarians trying to drag computers and boxes of books into the vault. He glanced over the railing, saw the front door on the lower level was still closed, then raced over to help the librarians. Perhaps if they got as much of their histories into the vault, and locked it, the enemy would not be able to destroy it.

Arden grabbed a metal box filled with parchments and placed it in a haphazard pile to the side of the thick iron vault door. It was then he heard the doors on the lower level burst open. Then the screams started.

He hurried toward the railing and froze. *No...* "Liana," he screamed. "What are you doing?" She was still here, standing at the railing, looking down at the lower level.

His heart raced. *No, she was meant to go. I don't care what I saw.*

A strange sense of peace settled over him. *She will be alright.* A voice within him said. *It must happen this way.*

Who are you? He asked.

When you come to bask in the radiant light of the Sun, you will know me for who I am. I've been with you for many years, my love, and soon we will be as one. Now go stand beside your daughter, the time has come.

With those words lingering in his mind, Arden walked up beside Liana and peered down.

No... Semira stared up at him, her hands dripping blood. "Semira. My dear, sweet daughter. I prayed to the Lost Sun that this day would never come." *My vision was true. She has come to kill me and destroy Sunholm.*

She pointed her sword at him. "I'm here for the artifact. Give it to me."

He shook his head. "It's not yours to take. Please don't do this." *I loved you, Semira. Why? Why are you doing this?*

"I need to. I've had visions of my own... of a sort. The artifact is dangerous and it must be destroyed, for the good of us all."

Tears ran down Arden's face as he watched the last guards and librarians on the lower level be slaughtered. He started sobbing. "I'm sorry that I've failed you and that you came to hate us so."

A black-clad man stepped beside her. "We have come to stop the Prophecy of Ibilirith from coming to pass. That item you hold will destroy us all. Hand it over or die."

Arden recognized him. He was the leader of the Knives of Dwaycar, a sect of Stelemians who had long ago been exiled into the Nether. He and Arden had spoken once, a few years back, when the knives had come to Sunholm to trade. But why did he think the artifact had anything to do with some Stelemian prophecy? How did they even know the artifact was here?

Liana buried her face in his side and burst into tears. He pulled her close. "Why didn't you flee?" She didn't answer or didn't hear. Arden addressed the man downstairs. "We don't even know what it is, Dark Brother. My people and yours have been at peace for many years. You could have approached us and stated your concerns, yet you've come here and murdered us in our sleep."

Semira kicked a chair and sent it flying. "Enough talk, Father. Give us the artifact."

Liana pushed away from him. "You're too late, Sister. Some have managed to escape through the secret tunnels. They have it, not us."

"You lie," the knife of Dwaycar snarled.

Arden laughed bitterly. "No lie, spawn of Dwaycar. The item is gone and you'll never find it."

Suddenly, Semira sprinted toward the stairs. A guard threw a dagger at her, but she ducked under it. Another wave of peace came over Arden as he watched his first born daughter speed toward him. Her face was twisted with hate, her eyes burning with madness.

Liana fought against him, but he held her back.

Then intense pain hammered through him, as he felt Semira's sword tear through his guts. A deep serenity descended upon him. He could still feel the pain, feel the sword inside him, but the sensations were distant, a part of his world, but in the background and easily forgotten.

He noticed he had gripped Semira's shoulder. She looked just as she had in his vision. "I knew this day would come. I saw it in a dream years ago. If I'd known it was today... Your sister—please don't hurt her—"

Blood gurgled up Arden's throat. "I hoped my vision was wrong and that you didn't hate us so. You're my daughter... How could—" His knees gave out and he fell, taking Semira with him. Somehow he still managed to hold Liana back. "Do not walk long in the dark, daughter. Return to the Light of the Lost Sun, or you'll

become a slave to darkness forever.” He opened his mouth to forgive her, but his time was done. Such was the way of things.

The light faded and he was gone.

Epilogue

Arden flew through the darkness at what felt like immutable speed.

Was he dead? Was this the end?

Something in the black grabbed his leg, and with a gut-wrenching jolt, he came to a stop. Fingers moved up his legs and he tried to scream, tried to move to knock them away, but he found he had no body, or at least not one he could control. Then the fingers slipped away and he was hurtling forward again. Another hand tried to grab him, but the force propelling him forward tore him from the hand’s grip.

This process seemed to go on for days, years, decades. Arden couldn’t tell.

Then a spot of light shone in the darkness and he felt his course slowly curving around until the white was in front of him. It drew closer and he watched the tiny speck of light grow until it had driven the blackness away.

As he drew closer he made out a figure standing within the light. No, not a figure... a tree, like the ones in the capital in Stelemia. He flew right at the tree and its branches moved to catch him.

With a sickening impact he struck a branch and came to a sudden stop. Pain radiated throughout his body, and it felt like every bone had been broken.

But then the pain was gone, and he felt himself be gently lowered to the ground. A small branch reached down to brush his face. *My love, you are with me at last. I have saved you from the clutches of the wild ones and now you must remain here with me.*

It was some time before Arden could speak. “Who are you?”

I am the heart of this place.

Arden peered down at himself. He looked normal. There were no wounds, no blood, no sword sticking out of his stomach. “Where am I?” He glanced around, and found himself in a garden in a large, concrete room. “Where are Liana and Semira?”

They are gone. You are with me now.

A door opened and a small child skipped in. He saw Arden and froze. They stared at one another, the boy seemingly as bewildered as Arden.

Then the boy ran screaming from the room. “Mother, Mother, come quickly.”

Fear not. They will watch over you.

Arden turned back to the tree. “Why am I here? Where am I?”

You are part of me now, as are the child and his mother. Here is where you were always meant to be. The branches pulled him against the tree, hugging him in a wooden embrace.

Glossary of Terms

STELERIA: Is an underground kingdom and the last known bastion of humanity. It is made up of two main caverns, and a few smaller ones. Stelemia is a place where sword and shield meet ancient high technology, some of whose purpose is as mysterious as the murky human past. It is ruled by a Priest King, the head religious figure in the worship of the Four Divines.

Stelemia is a place steeped in history, medieval values and ideas, and yet some of the technologies of the ancient world, like electricity and computers, still exist within it. To the Stelemian people, the surface world is completely forgotten. All they know is the darkness of the underground world, and a medieval system of governance. Stelemia is said to have been founded by a man known as Radashan the Founder.

In recent times, educated Stelemians might be overheard speaking about how stagnant Stelemian society has become and that few things of great worth are created anymore. People seem content to live on the glories of the past, and not think of creating a brighter future. The population level has stopped growing, as has the economy. Most of the noble families focus solely on their own interests, often at the expense of the rest of society.

THE FOUR DIVINES: These are the gods of Stelemia who replaced the ancient One God, who disappeared before the War in Heaven. The Four Divines: Lydan, Roryur, Ibilirith and Dwaycar were once mortals who climbed the waterfall in the River of the Gods and ascended to heaven to fight the Ancient Enemy who had invaded the blessed realm and had driven out the One God.

Once there, the four became gods themselves, and Lydan, Roryur and Ibilirith now watch over Stelemia and protect its people. Dwaycar is worshiped in secret, as he rebelled against Ibilirith's technologies long ago and was cast out by the other Divines.

The Order of Inquisitors, a group who ensures strict obedience to the tenants of the Divines, exiles or executes many Stelemians for daring to speak ill of one of any the Divines except Dwaycar.

IBILIRITH: The divine of sacred lights and the creator of the other ancient machines in Stelemia. She and Dwaycar are twins, and with Roryur and Lydan, climbed the waterfall at the River of the Gods and entered heaven to drive out the Ancient Enemy and bring back the One God. When she went to heaven, she was a mere mortal, but once there, she became a divine, and is often portrayed as a beautiful, golden-haired woman, with a metallic bird perched on her shoulder. The bird is said to be her beloved pet, that never left her side.

In later years, it is said that mortal Ibilirith died, though Divine Ibilirith still watches down on humanity from heaven. Her remains can be found under the Temple of Sacred Lights, the heart of her faith.

DWAYCAR: Sometimes known as Dwaycar the Betrayer, or simply the Betrayer, he is the twin brother of Ibilirith and entered heaven with her and Roryur and Lydan, and became one of the divines. His godly domain is said to be that of treachery and deceit, so he is often blamed for the negative things in people's lives.

At some point in the distant past, long after the War in Heaven, he rejected the technologies of Ibilirith, and his followers tried to destroy the Serdtse Power Station. This event was called the Blackout War, or the Zetemneniye Voyna, as spoken in the Ancient Language of Ibilirith.

Many Knives of Dwaycar (the warriors of his order) were killed, though some were driven out into the Great Dark. No one from Stelemia has heard from them for many

years, though as Kara and Aemon in *Heir to a Lost Sun* find out, the Knives of Dwaycar are far from extinct.

Dwaycar is shown dressed head-to-toe in black leather armor, with only the top half of his face, and his implacable eyes visible. The Knives of Dwaycar dress this way in honor of him.

THE ANCIENT ENEMY: It is unknown what exactly the Ancient Enemy is, but it is known that they were the ones who seized heaven from the One God, and were later driven out by the Four Divines during the War in Heaven. Their dead were numberless, and to dispose of them, the Four Divines dumped them into the bottomless Rift, at the northern end of Radashan Crevice. Even today, the Rift is a haunted place, and there are reports of voices drifting up from the darkness.

The Ancient Enemy plays a big part in the legends of the Covenant of the Lost Sun, which say the Ancient Enemy will return, and that after the Final Battle is fought against them and they are driven back, humanity will be able to return to the Light of the Lost Sun.

THE ORDER OF IBILIRITH: Often shortened simply to the Order, this is the primary religious institution in Stelemia, and is the group responsible for maintaining the advanced technologies of Ibilirith (computers, the power grid, the sacred lights). It also has access to many of the old files on its computers, written in the ancient languages of the old world, much of which can no longer be translated.

The Order, like Stelemia, was founded by a man known as Radashan the Founder, who was its first Patriarch. The Order is centered in two main areas. The Temple of Sacred Lights and the Obelisk of Light, where many of their records are kept.

In recent years, the Order has grown stagnate, and is showing signs of decline. Another symptom of the wider stagnation of the caverns. At current, the group is led by Patriarch Lucien, a man said to be a direct descendent of Radashan the Founder. Though, of course, all patriarchs have claimed this.

Another sacred task of the Order, is the protection of mortal Ibilirith's remains that are interred under their temple. They keep them well-preserved, so that when Divine Ibilirith returns to the mortal realm to bless her loyal followers and grant them immortality, she will see how well her servants have treated her holy remains.

As to their own remains, the Order deals with its dead with little fanfare. If a monk dies, their body is taken down into the catacombs and left to rot. It is their belief that the human body is nothing but an engine for Ibilirith and when it dies, it is of no use to her anymore, and can be discarded like a broken hammer. When she returns, she will raise the Order's dead, and they will once again serve her as immortals.

The Machine Chapel is the main place of worship to Divine Ibilirith at the temple, but once a day, a group of monks, led by the reigning Patriarch, stands outside her tomb and sings,

Oh, Mother Ibilirith, power us, fuel us, set us upon our sacred tasks. Let us be spinning cogs in your great machines. Bless us for our faithfulness, our diligence to our humble duties and our eternal war against the darkness, for we live out our lives under the pure radiance of your sacred lights.

Forgmon set out on his grand adventure at the behest of members of this group. This story is related in the Lost Sun side adventure book, *Ruins of a Lost Sun*.

THE KNIVES OF DWAYCAR: A group of people who follow Divine Dwaycar. Once they lived within Stelemia, but after the Blackout War, the few who survived were driven out into the Great Dark and were never seen again by the Stelemians, until the events of *Heir to a Lost Sun*. However, their presence was well known to those living out in the Great

Dark. The Covenant of the Lost Sun had regular dealings with them—until the Knives turned on them and destroyed the covenant.

The group is led by an old woman named Gwendolyn, the Shadow Trainer of Dwaycar and she can be found worshipping at his polished tourmaline statue at the center of their hometown. The Knives are dressed head to toe in black, except for the top half of their faces. All are women, except the man who leads them. The man is always a son of the current Shadow Trainer, and is deemed the strongest and most fit to lead. His role is to act as a surrogate Dwaycar, as the divine himself watches from heaven. All the other sons of the Shadow Trainer are left to the monsters of the Great Dark.

Once a female Knife has proved herself in battle, she is allowed to bear children. As there is only ever one man in their order, the female knives seek out Stelemian exiles to breed with. Any son who is born is either handed back to the exiles, or more rarely, left to die.

The bank has unknown owners, though the rumors are that a select few noble families own it. But is this just rumor? Or is there a hidden power in Stelmeia that hides in the shadows and secretly controls the caverns through control of the bank? Read *Dawn of a Lost Sun* to find out!

SACRED LIGHTS: Basically, electrical lights as we know them. They are sacred to the Stelemians, as they are said to have been invented by the Divine Ibilirith before she ascended to heaven. They are the primary light source in Stelemia, besides mushroom stem torches and the phosphorescent bacterial colonies that grow within some of the caverns.

THE SCIENCES OF THE OLD WORLD: The ancients, who lived in the time when the Divines still walked the caverns as mortals, possessed many great wonders of technology and science, long forgotten in Stelemia. Of note is the science of genetics. From animals, to the mushrooms the Stelemians eat, to the ones they harvest for wood, the ancients genetically modified everything. If some of the old files are to be believed, the sciences of the old world even genetically altered humans, though what was changed, has long since been lost to history.

It is said the ancients tried to shape life into their own image, but the accidental result was the monsters that now prowl the endless darkness of the Great Dark.

THE GREAT DARK: The vast world beyond the Kingdom of Stelemia. The very name instills fear into the Stelemian people, as it is place of monsters, heretics and mystery. Exiles (people who have spoken ill of the Divines) are sent down the Path of Exile and banished into the Great Dark. Few are ever seen again.

To the non-Stelemians who live in this region, such as the Covenant of the Lost Sun, the Great Dark is called the Nether.

THE STELEMIAN CAVERN: The primary, most populous cavern in all Stelemia. It contains five of the larger cities of the kingdom. Stelemia the capital, Eryport, Crystal Cove, Gravelbank Bridge and Dere-zor, along with dozens of minor settlements. Much of the food production takes place within the cavern: livestock, mushroom farms and fishing.

The southern edge of the cavern is sparsely populated and dominated by the Field of Spikes, a large, open area with thousands of stalagmites jutting up from the cavern floor.

THE CAPITAL SPIRE: The heart of the governance of the caverns, and the home of the Priest King, who lives at its very pinnacle in the Halls of the Priest King. It is a towering dormant stalagmite situated near the center of the city of Stelemia. Over forty-five thousand people, many of them nobles, make this their home.

THE CITY OF STELEMIA: The capital of the Caverns, and the city that gives the human kingdom its name. It is a large city of many tens of thousands of people. Kara comes from a suburb of this city, called Westhollow. The urban sprawl of this city takes up much of the western edge of Crystal Lake. It is also the home port of the Royal

Stelemian Navy, home to its venerable banking institution (the Royal Stelemian Bank) and is the heart of commerce in the caverns.

The Priest King watches over the city from his towering Capital Spire.

CRYSTAL LAKE: The huge lake that dominates the primary cavern in Stelemia and the home of the Royal Stelemian Navy. Its depths are unknown, and monsters are known to lurk within its waters. The lake sees much shipping and trade, as the major cities built along its edge trade with one another.

THE PATH OF EXILE: Located in northern Stelemia, beyond the town of Sapphire Sinkhole, exiles (people who have spoken ill of the Divines) are sent down the Path of Exile and banished into the Great Dark. Few are ever seen again. A frightening place for the peasantry of Stelemia, as they are the ones who are cast out into the darkness. Rarely are the nobles or wealthy merchants exiled.

Dissident forces within Stelemia claim that the Path of Exile is nothing more than a useful tool for the Priest King and Inquisitors to remove unwanted elements in Stelemian society.

THE OLD WORLD: The time period of the ancients that existed before the founding of Stelemia. Little is known about it, but some of the ideas and personalities remain important in the myths and legends of Stelemia. Many of the monsters that plague the darkness beyond the lights of humanity are said to have been made from the sciences of the old world. It is known the ancients used something called genetics to alter life in an attempt to shape it into their own image.

THE DEAD CITY: This is the city where Arden (Kara and Semira's father) discovered the artifact that comes to be known as the passkey. This adventure is related in the book, *Fall of a Lost Sun*.

The Dead City was a vast ruin made by the ancients. It is unknown what happened to its inhabitants, though it is clear a battle was fought there. As Kara discovers, the city is named Annbar, and is the place where the ghost woman in her visiondreams told her a great library can be found.

A mysterious voice can be heard beyond one of the doors of this city, and below it, lives a metal man, though it is unknown if this metal man is the famous one from the children's tale.

SINJAR: A mysterious ancient fortress city, deep in the Great Dark. It is unknown what happened to the inhabitants of the city, as they seem to have disappeared without a trace. A strange unexplainable glow illuminated the very air of Sinjar. Deep underneath the streets is a vast manufactory and supply room. Within these rooms, the metal child, Pilly, makes his home.

To find out more about this city and the character Pilly (along with his mysterious parents), read the book *Ruins of a Lost Sun*. References to this city can also be found in *Dawn of a Lost Sun*.

THE ANCIENT HIGHWAY: A road running from Annbar (Dead City) to Ebon Shelf in Stelemia. It is assumed the ancients made this road with technologies long lost to Stelemia.

THE METAL MAN: The name of the protagonist of the children's tale about a lover of Ibilirith's who stayed behind when she ascended to heaven. He waited many long years for her return, but she never came back to him. In great despair, he turned himself into metal so he would live forever and be alive when she returned, if she ever did. Then he locked himself beyond a metal door to wait. It is said his voice can still be heard calling out for her if you chance upon his door.

The story is told so children understand that love can change the nature of a man.

Kara is told by a man named Wrynric, that Arden, her father, foresaw that she would journey to the Dead City to speak to this Metal Man and that he would help her in the

Final Battle to end humanity's exile. When Kara defeats the Ancient Enemy in this battle, humanity will be able to return to the Light of the Lost Sun.

THE COVENANT OF THE LOST SUN: Possibly founded by Radashan, the same man who founded Stelemia (according to Radashan himself in a conversation in *Dawn of a Lost Sun*), this Covenant is located in an unknown location in the Great Dark, or as the people who were born in the Great Dark call it, the Nether. The Covenant is home to Arden, Semira, Liana, Meridia, Wrynric and Erinie.

The covenant believes humans came from somewhere high above their cave home and once lived under the Light of the Lost Sun.

Up until its almost complete destruction at the hands of the traitorous Semira, along with the Knives of Dwaycar, this covenant had survived the many years since the evacuation of Annbar, to the present time. It is a covenant of humans called scions, special people with the ability to enter visiondreams, and as Kara and Aemon discover, people created from the sciences of the old world.

The covenant's sacred oath is as follows...

We who are chosen to carry the lineage of the scions, through the ages of the future untold, must keep the bloodline pure, protect those who are of the blood and preserve the knowledge handed down to us from our ancestors.

For one day, all three will be needed for the time of darkness, when the Final Battle to end humanity's exile will be fought. When humankind is victorious, we will emerge from the darkness and into the blessed light of the Lost Sun.

They preserved much knowledge of the old world on their computers and in their vault. Some of the ancient languages they were able to decipher, while others remained unreadable to them. One such unreadable language was that of the Ancient Language of Ibilirith, which only the Order of Ibilirith can understand.

SUNHOLM: The home of the scions. It is located in the Nether (Great Dark), and is completely unknown to the Stelemians. It is the home of the scions, along with some of the normal humans who live with them. It is also a trade hub for the disparate communities of the Nether. The town was largely destroyed after Semira and the Knives of Dwaycar attacked it.

THE LIBRARIANS: This is a sub order in the covenant of the Lost Sun and they reside in the Repository. Erinie is a member of this order. It is a librarian's task to preserve the knowledge of the old world and to study new and mysterious items found out in the Nether. They also study and categorize new species of monsters that the scion patrols encounter. After the slaughter at Sunholm, Erinie is the last surviving librarian.

SAFEHOLD: The secret location of the Covenant of the Lost Sun that the survivors of the slaughter fled to after Sunholm was destroyed. It is now the home of Erinie and Meridia. The location is nothing more than a hidden series of small passages, with a few chambers to store supplies and to live in.

THE WATCHER: The Watcher is a giant skull of an unknown creature. It sits at the edge of Stelemia and the Great Dark, in an exit leading from the cavern containing the city of Celestial Rest. Many explorers and members of the Covenant of the Lost Sun leave offerings around the skull, and it has become somewhat of a sacred place.

It is believed that if you leave an offering to the Watcher, it will bless your journey into the dangers of the Great Dark and you will return home safe.

THE WORLD OF THE VISIONDREAM: This is the world scions enter during a visiondream. Up until Kara, it was believed that scions could only experience visiondreams where they merely saw images and felt feelings. Yet Kara, a half-blood scion,

had visiondreams of a far different nature. She was transported to the visiondream world and could interact with it. Within this world, she met the ghost woman, and was hunted by a hideous flying monster named the Great Shadow.

Within the world of the visiondream, Kara learns what the artifact she carries around her neck is, as well as what she must do to save her people.

The ghost woman speaks of the code making up the visiondream, so it is possible all is not what it seems in that world. Perhaps the whole thing is nothing more than a construct made by the sciences of the old world...

