

Prologue: Put to Rest

Silence echoed off the walls of the small cavern like the tumultuous life beneath the surface of a calm ocean. Darkness surrounded several soldiers positioned as guards, and in the eerie quiet, they fidgeted in anticipation.

"I don't understand..." whispered a young soldier to the veteran walking with him, "What is the point of this?" His words became more intense and a little louder as he spoke; his fear was masked poorly by frustration.

"Quiet boy! Do yur job'n keep yur eyes'n ears keen," replied the veteran's gruff voice from just ahead in the darkness. The two patrolled slowly in a circuit through a short tunnel which had been built as an emergency escape route from the temple courtyard to the island's beach some thousand years before. Recently guards had been placed there to keep intruders out.

"It's just so... dark in here. Why am I here?" Fear was apparent in his quivering voice, "You can see just fine, wait... am I just bait?"

"Quiet!" the veteran's voice was a harsh whisper, "we should've passed t'other patrol bah now."

As the echo of a whispered exclamation faded, the faint sound like a boot sticking in mud or a dagger slipping in between ribs was heard. The young soldier's eyes went wide in the darkness as he sputtered silent screams then slumped to the ground.

"Hey boy, what'r ye about?" the veteran's stoic tone turned shaky. "Ah see ya thar," he lied, "Mine eyes aren't like yon human's, ah kin see'n this dark!" The quiver in his tone belied the gruffness. "Git'm now boys!" The dwarf veteran hefted his long halberd and began swinging in defensive arcs before him.

"Heh, are you shouting to the other two guards that were sent out to recon your tunnel?" The new voice was soft, almost musical in its tenor cadence and barely above a whisper.

The dwarf spun and his halberd arced wide in the attempt to cover the most area and ward off the voice that sounded just beside his ear.

"What'r ye about then assassin? Why canno' ah see you?"

"Because, I didn't want you to." A soft orange light appeared hovering beside a soft, sky-blue glow. In the penetrating darkness such radiance was a blinding beacon to the veteran's heat sensitive vision.

The veteran instantly turned and began wading towards the glowing daggers that bobbed and danced mockingly midair, always just out of reach of the veteran's halberd. The guard stepped sure-footedly forward and swung his halberd dangerously before him, then stopped the stroke to bring up the butt end. The orange dagger suddenly flared to life with a brilliant, angry blaze before it spiraled through the air and clanged against the dwarf's thick helm.

"Ha!" grunted the veteran as he stepped in again, the ax-head of the halberd came down where the blue dagger hovered and connected only with air. The blue dagger twisted to the side

as the orange dagger appeared once more beside the blue. The veteran pulled his halberd up defensively as he glanced down to see where the ricocheted weapon had fallen. Sharp agony spun through his thoughts as his thick beard parted to allow the returned dagger to swiftly slice the flesh beneath his chin. The veteran fell to his knees before he realized he had already dropped his halberd. As his vision blurred he snapped his hands to his throat where he felt the cold steel protruding and the warm blood escaping. The veteran felt the dagger vanish and his life pour even faster through his thick fingers. Slowly, the veteran slumped down against the young soldier's corpse and watched helplessly as the heated body of an elf appeared before him holding two fine daggers.

Eldorion stepped past the dying guard slowly until the last breath fell from the cadaver's lips. A simple cow-leather sheath rested on his right hip where he jammed the blue dagger, while a soft golden lion-hide leather sheath adorned with small gems hung from his left side. A thin satchel with the tools of his trade, padded for silence within, was buckled tightly to his waist. The orange dagger slid gently into the decorated sheath and Eldorion quickly ran his fingers across both bodies lying on the cavern floor. Supple black leather layered his body; fashioned from the same rhino he had slain to sheath Honor. Orange-glowing Spite's sleek handle was made with cold black marble and the blade from a rare metal named Bremlite, which made it weigh lighter than it appeared. The blade was straight and folded from a single piece of metal into the shape of a forearm-length arrowhead.

Eldorion sprinted through the remainder of the darkened tunnel. He realized he had taken too long playing with the guards and time was quickly running out. He slowed to a creep as he rounded the final bend. A heavy iron gate stood between him and the courtyard with six more guards on the other side. The assassin slowed his breathing and stepped silently again into his realm of calm, his place of silent refuge within the combined powers of his daggers. As Eldorion moved closer to the gate, the thrill of walking directly in front of the guards without detection washed through his body. It was a euphoria that he seemed to never get accustomed. Six alert soldiers were staring unswervingly in his direction, yet as he stalked up to the gate and slid the tools from his satchel, the wary guards still did not see him.

Bracing the lock with his padded jimmy, he slipped in a thin pick and hesitated. He realized that his target had locked the guards inside the tunnel. Someone knew he and his friends were there or at least that they were coming. Eldorion smiled as he picked the lock with practiced precision; this would prove to be an interesting encounter.

The chain fell and Eldorion became a blur of motion. In one swift movement he slipped through the gate, replaced his picks to their pouch, slid the orange-glowing Spite from her sheath and buried it in the throat of the closest guard.

Drawn out with a flash, the sky-blue-glowing Honor sliced through the air and scalp of its target with equal ease. Honor pulsed for a moment, but long enough for Eldorion to recognize the weapons claim over the victim. Honor curved slightly at the tip and was made from the same rare material as Spite. Two additional smaller curving rises along the back edge of the blade

came to fine points and gave it a slightly serrated appearance. The handle curved forward to cup the meaty portion of his palm and ended in a point of its own that looked similar to the beak of a bird of prey.

The chain hit the ground and Eldorion felt an adrenal rush claim him. The cool beads of sweat pebbling his flesh felt as if they had each frozen individually, his heart felt as if it were going to explode out from his chest and his muscles clenched tightly as if he had been struck by lightning. Honor had siphoned out the life energy from its victim and Eldorion received the reward. Everything around him seemed to slow down. The remaining four guards came at him though they moved as if they were trapped in thick sticky webbing, slowly, they lifted their weapons to attack.

Eldorion wondered what he must look like to them as he spun out of the way of a slowly descending ax and shoved Spite into the swinger's armpit. Eldorion switched his grip and pulled on Spite's handle a little harder. The blade came out the attacker's chest in a clean slice so quickly that the blade left only an empty hole; the blood was slow to follow. A sword stroke from another guard passed harmlessly wide and impossibly slow, which allowed Honor to claim another victim. Eldorion retracted his arm and let fly Spite. Unlike most daggers that tumbled end-over-end when thrown, Spite spiraled as she flew and gained momentum with each spin shining ever brighter. She passed through the flimsy chain breastplate of the helpless guard as a worm burrows through dirt leaving an empty gaping wound in its wake. Eldorion felt the comforting weight on his hip when Spite reappeared in her sheath as he plunged Honor hilt-deep into the eye of the final guard.

Eldorion scanned the area and much to his disappointment the courtyard was disturbingly clear of any other guards. To his right further along a high stone wall, two enormous wooden doors were barricaded with a heavy log. The assassin blurred as he ran along the wall to the twin doors until disorientation burned through his senses. Eldorion lurched forward momentarily as nausea twisted his stomach and the world caught up to him. Regaining his composure, he looked back at the six corpses, their blood feeding the land behind him, then turned and strutted to the pair of doors. After a bit of struggle the huge gate swung open on one side with a loud creak that caused Eldorion to flinch despite himself.

"Good work," hissed a serpentine figure as he strolled through the open doors. Looking over at the fresh corpses near the iron gate Kinek'Aras asked, "Did you save any for us?" The Jungle Drake's smile allowed his sharp teeth and protruding top and bottom canines to show. His long serpentine neck did not make up for his lack of actual height, despite the two ram-like horns atop his head. He was short for his race, barely reaching Eldorion's collarbone. As he stepped through the doors he allowed his wings to unfurl. Dark green scales glistened in the noonday sun, and along the edges of his wings were thin razor-edged blades that were ablaze with tiny flames that swirled delicately all along their length. The blood red armor he wore contrasted the brilliant green of his natural scales. Kinek'Aras bore a giant two-headed ax; one head wavy, serrated, and painted to appear as a giant snake with its mouth open; the other a wide crescent

executioner's blade painted black except for its gleaming silver edge. The slender Jungle Drake hoisted it high, leaped into the air, buffeted his wings then hovered as he waited impatiently.

Following the drake was a tiny robust dwarf. Her armor and flesh both seemed made of blue ice, her eyes liquid white pupil-less orbs. White cloudy hair dotted her high cheekbones and cascaded in thick-knotted curls down to the center of her back. She said nothing as she passed Eldorion, holding both of her double-headed axes easily, one in each hand. She walked casually into the empty courtyard.

Kinek'Aras snaked his head around, "I see only a few corpses, did any escape to warn of our presence?"

Eldorion shook his head, "No, but I fear that our target suspected we would come," the assassin snickered, "did you have any troubles getting to the gate?"

Kinek'Aras hissed his answer to the insult, "I do not see the need for stealth, I could have flown over and easily..."

"Gotten us all caught before we were ready," finished Eldorion.

Next, Raek and Princess Fairtide entered, two creatures from opposite sides of the world with conflicting views on life and death, yet bound together as lovers. Raek, a fialt shaman was middle-aged for one of his feline race and wise beyond his years, patient and understanding. The shaman carried a staff of oddly mixed elements such as clouds, ocean currents, thin streams of lava and billowing dusty winds. A myriad of other, indefinable strangeness swirled within its depths. Raek wore a beaded headband which rattled as he moved, and a necklace of shark and bear teeth. The shaman wore ivy-laced hand wraps with slim vines that twined up his arms to his shoulders where thick thorns appeared to have grown from the strange grassy fabric. Raek was a member of the Val'Arias Fialt race, bipedal felines capable of hurling quills from within the folds of their bird-like wings. Raek however had long ago forsaken his heritage, and bound his wings as a rejection of his race's evolution.

Princess, Raek's opposite in nearly every way, stood a full head taller and bore no weapons or armor other than a brilliant yellow evening gown, as if she were attending a ball. Subtle black runes swirled all along the edges and low neckline of her attire that none in the party but Princess herself could identify. The Deep-ocean Merloch was from somewhere within the trenches of an exotic ocean floor. Her eyes were hidden behind a crown of exoskeletal bone and a natural protective carapace protruded from the gown in several places. Deep-ocean Merloch possessed dense bones that extended through their soft fleshy skin and provided them adequate protection from the wilds of the deepest oceans, and added macabre sense to the preposterous vision that she imposed.

"As far as I can tell, they are as of yet unaware of our presence Raek," said Eldorion as he watched the two enter and stop just inside the courtyard. "We should be able to just walk in now."

Raek's nose twitched and his whiskers quivered for a moment. His left ear pointed at Eldorion while the right pointed forward though it folded over slightly where it had been injured

in some previous battle. “Well done my friend,” said Raek with a hint of amusement, “Keeping Kinek’Aras on the ground has been a chore. Perhaps now we can let him do what he came for.” He motioned to the drake hovering over the ground near the center of the empty courtyard. Eldorion turned and began walking towards Kinek’Aras and the passage that led to the temple’s entrance on the opposite side of the courtyard as if Raek’s hand motion was a directive.

A clear baritone voice spoke up behind them softly from outside the heavy wooden doors. “Raek, I think that we should get inside that temple before it is too late. We can worry about Kinek’Aras’ revenge once we get inside.” Bargiss Vandelin stepped slowly into the courtyard with his head turned skyward as if he were watching a storm forming in the clear sky above. Bargiss had broad shoulders and thick arms though he wore only a thin purple scholar robe held closed by a twine of hemp around his waist. A heavy book-satchel hung on his left side, and a row of small vials on his right. Bargiss was bedecked with golden chains and jeweled rings; the human enjoyed his accessories. Embedded gems from his bracelets and anklets breathed cool lights and often pulsed with thought provoking radiance. A circlet wrapped his black hair; its eroded surface could not hide the tiny glinting blue diamond grasped by a silver hand. Despite Bargiss’ fetish for sparkles, Raek regarded the human with respect, for he knew the practicality of the items adorning his long-time friend.

“The Braid is funneling into the back of the temple as if it were being pulled in by a magnet.” Bargiss’ brown eyes were vacant as he looked up into the air above the square concrete walls of the temple before them, “Particularly the Yellow... odd. Why does he require so much of the Yellow Braid? It is the Violet that controls the Lesser Realms denizens.” Bargiss shuddered then turned his look on Raek, “I believe he has learned to Bend...”

All heads snapped forward suddenly to the sound of clattering boots on cobblestone. Thundering echoes rattled through the courtyard and a flood of red and black-clad foot soldiers rushed out of the pillared corridor that led from the temple. Dozens of heavily armed men swarmed out from the passage opposite the wooden doors. Raising their weapons, the soldiers let loose a unified battle cry and charged without hesitation.

Eldorion’s keen eyes were the first to notice as the enemy drew near that the soldiers were not ordinary humans, elves, and dwarves, but many were demons from other realms as well. “These are not the lackeys I fought in the tunnel!” warned the assassin.

Kinek’Aras held his long-handled ax high, “Nor did we face creatures as this outside!”

Eldorion faded from view and stepped off to the left towards the open metal gate he had come through. The round-shouldered Frost Dwarf, Felissa, braced herself beside Kinek’Aras and tensed beneath her icy blue armor in anticipation of the impending battle with both of her two-handed axes held at crisscrossed angles before her. The Jungle Drake however, did not wait. He sucked in a deep breath of air, lunged forward, and took flight low to the ground. Kinek’Aras crashed into the first line of soldiers with his two spiraled horns as they punched through one unfortunate victim. His flaming wings slashed two others and their oiled leather ignited. Kinek’Aras released the air in his lungs as he raised his head and lifted the impaled soldier off

the ground. A poisonous green vapor spread out around him, engulfing the nearest soldiers in a blanket of fog. Coughing, three nearby opponents folded over, vomiting as still other soldiers pressed in around him. Kinek'Aras raised his heavy, double-headed ax and knocked away a fat broadsword, but for each attack the drake blocked, two more slammed into his thick scales and armor. Kinek'Aras twisted his powerful serpentine neck from side to side to use the body stuck to his horns as a shield, though it was quickly hacked apart from the ensuing attacks.

Felissa trailed behind Kinek'Aras with her two heavy axes held high, she had no wish to breathe in the drake's nauseating spray. She stayed as close as she dare behind him as the throng swarmed around, keeping his back clear of attackers as she hacked down on skulls and limbs, uncaring of those who would strike her priceless armor. The crystalline shell of Blue Steel armor was nearly impenetrable.

Swords ricocheted off of her while the ax in her left hand began to hum with each deadly stroke. Whistle swam into bodies growing larger and larger, and louder and louder with each kill until the song it sung was that of a rumbling herd of wild animals. Perfectly balanced during its creation, Whistle was made from white metal known as Giantbone and strengthened with powerful runes. The pearly-white weapon reacted to Felissa when she entered into combat and with each killing blow, grew, if only slightly. The diamond shaped blades on both sides of the haft tore through armor, flesh and bone with indifference so that before long, the ax seemed too large for even her great arms to lift. Yet as Kinek'Aras pressed forward she too continued to wade into the mob, growling with each punishing stroke, she kept pace as Kinek'Aras blazed a trail.

In her right hand Felissa held another great ax, a two-handed weapon to any other warrior without her immense strength. Seemingly the antithesis of the weapon her left hand, Gorge was made from a strange marbled black metal. The thin handle ended with three crescent-moon razor edges, which encircled the head of the massive ax. Gorge's conical tip spiked up from the top of the haft like a wicked signpost complete with protruding slivers. With each powerful stroke demonic and humanoid soldiers alike fell dead, and those that were not immediately killed fell to the ground scrambling in attempt to keep their precious blood and entrails from spilling out in gory masses. Splinters of Gorge's dark metal continued to dig into their victims' flesh after each stroke. As Gorge killed, Felissa's arms swelled with reinforced strength, weariness would not settle in her body as Gorge fed her the strength of the fallen. Screams echoed through the courtyard and the once green grass was quickly stained red.

Near the double wooden doors Raek held his remaining allies back with one outstretched hand, and placed another gently on his lover's shoulder. Princess Fairtide was clenching and unclenching her fists, the jagged bones that protruded from them ground audibly. Raek held Princess and Bargiss back; perhaps it was good that the others could vent their frustrations. Kinek'Aras had been eager to fight this battle. Felissa was always eager to fight anything.

"Prepare yourself!" Bargiss shouted.

A deafening roar ruptured the air. A massive beast materialized from a green mist and roared again. Its head reminded Bargiss of a bulbous black bug, double the size of a human's. The creature stood on four carapace-plated legs, each with three joints that extended at different angles and made the creature lurch as if off balance. Two great clacking arms waved in the air and ended in long curving sword-like claws.

Bargiss gaped. He was the one among them who could see the Green Braid pouring into the creature. What was normally thin and reed-like was now hard and heavy, a distortion of the magic that was the Rainbow Braid. Bargiss tried in vain to piece together what was happening but his many years of training with the source of magic could not allow him to see the truth. The Green Braid was particular for traveling, and explained how the beast had teleported into the courtyard, but could not explain the creature's presence in Reality. Bargiss should be witnessing the Violet Braid as it poured into the creature, the Violet that would be coming from the source, the creature's controller.

Dipping low, the sword-like claws swung once and were deflected by a bony exoskeleton as Princess leapt into the path. She took the brunt of the blow and fell to her back. A quick kick of her feet and she was standing once again, facing with the bug monster. A second sweeping stroke arced towards Princess as she realized the creature's reach was too great to dodge. She jumped into the strike with both arms up; the bones protruding from her forearms rattled as they absorbed the blow, but the weight behind the strike sent her through the air to crash into the high wall beside the double doors. Princess slid down to land on her feet and waited as the creature shambled slowly towards her, far out of danger of the others.

Raek growled in anger then began to change. The fialt shaman grunted and groaned with each shift as his body began contorting and changing shape. Bones popped and slipped out of and back into jointed sockets, skin stretched and fur began to grow coarser. As the creature neared Princess, it flung a careless backhand and caught Raek in the middle of his shamanistic state of transformation. Unable to dodge or even deflect the blow, Raek's body was blasted through the heavy wooden doors behind him. Splinters and large chunks of heavy wood showered down the slope of the hill on the other side. Raek lay struggling and bloody on the ground beneath one of the double doors that hung precariously from its weakened hinges.

Princess could hold back no longer. She clenched her fists tightly and exploded into the bug monster with unhindered fury. An iron-hard fist cracked the thick carapace covering the creature's chest and the second thunderous punch forced it to reel backwards. Princess spun under a four-sword swipe that gouged the stone wall behind and showered her in sparks then dodged the bug creature's follow-up jab. She kicked one of the three joints in the bug monster's leg, and spun again as she leaped into the air. The bug monster teetered for a moment; shocked that its leg had been injured, until Princess' foot smashed into the side of its head. The creature seemed to vomit splinters of chitin before it wailed; shrieking for help, or begging for mercy. With unforgiving resolve, the Deep-ocean Merloch focused her fury into calm powerful strikes. Princess was airborne more often than not as she smashed the creature with her normally deadly

strikes, and received ample blows in return. A backhand slapped her soundly in the chest, flinging her against the stone wall where she bound off of it and re-attacked. The creature was strong, and fast, but she was faster. Princess was certain she had the beast's attention, and that her lover was safe, but despite her ferocity the battered bug creature continued its assault.

From the deepening twilight shadows near the metal gate, Honor and Spite began to glow.

Bargiss thrust his hands into the torrential Yellow Braid that was funneling into the keep. The typically slow moving, soft stream of radiant Yellow Braid flooded through his hands as if it were a trapped maelstrom. Bargiss skillfully altered the flow a fraction for his task, as if snatching a droplet of water from a waterfall. Bargiss manipulated the Yellow like a master tailor would a needle and thread. He deftly shaped it and a minute fraction of the Orange Braid together into bands of magic that he used to secure the door back on its hinges. He then scrambled to search for his fallen friend, though Raek's feline form could not be found. Instead, a massive tabby-orange bear reared up with a jagged wooden shard protruding from its flank. Bargiss held up a reassuring hand to the behemoth bear, staying his advance.

"Hold Raek, Princess is fine! Let me work on you for a moment." The bear growled from deep within but did not press forward. Bargiss went to work. The area was saturated with the Braid and it took only a few short moments for him to gather what he needed from the flood of Yellow. With enough in his controlling grasp, Bargiss reached deep into Raek's wound where the wood was buried. Slowly kneading his fingers into the wound, Bargiss' hand caught the inside edge of the board and brought it out. Simultaneously, the Yellow stitched together the wounds and diffused the pain that would accompany such an act. The soft golden glow of the Yellow surrounded Bargiss. To those trained to see such things, the Yellow seeped into his pours and channeled out through his hands. In only a few short moments, the wood fell to the ground with a thump and the wound was sewn tight. "Go!" Bargiss stepped aside and the shaman roared with renewed energy and charged into the battle.

Two skeletal shadows slipped into the courtyard and a chilly cold descended over the combatants. Eldorion tore Honor from its latest victim's spine and became a blur of orange and blue light. Spite and Honor flashed at speeds the others could not fathom near the tunnel entrance, just to the side of where Felissa's heaving frame slashed heroically at the newest wave of demonic soldiers. Moving just as fast as Eldorion, the two shadowy wraiths quickly honed in on him and slipped in and out of his blurring blades. The living shadows danced in dangerously, drawing a bead of blood along his arm. The black supple rhino leather that he wore as protection separated as easily as his flesh. Eldorion knew Honor's enchantment would soon end, taking his quickness away, but the shadows would continue their onslaught. He knew he was the only one among his allies that had the advantage of Honor's gift of speed. The slippery specters were trying to surround him; one moved left, the other right. In a single instant, one of the shadows

dove high, both hands stabbing their long sharp nails at his face while the other lunged toward his midsection. Eldorion leaped high into the air and called upon the innate magic of his race to levitate; a claw ripped open his booted foot as the elf tumbled in the air over the shadow fiends and into the growing pile of dead, seemingly endless, soldiers. The shadows gave chase, their lithe forms floated effortlessly through the air. The stroke of an enormous screaming ax halted the path of one of the wraiths as it slowly split the skull of a hapless demonic soldier. Felissa's stray blow had delayed one of the apparitions. Her empty white eyes were grim and drawn down, her blue armor covered in the blood of her enemies; the accidental stroke was all the delay Eldorion needed.

The assassin stabbed in with Honor lifting a soldier off the ground as his blade dug deep under his target's chin and into his brain. Honor's quick spasm and blue flash gave the elf the boost he needed; ripping the enchanted blade free while scattering pieces of jawbone, Eldorion spun again to meet the wraiths anew. As he turned a raking shadowy claw tore clean through his soft leather helm above his left eye and all the flesh beneath. Spite stabbed out and passed through the living shadow, sending it back into the abyss from which it was summoned. Blinded with blood streaming down his face, Eldorion's left eye dangled grotesquely from its socket, when he felt the air turn cold to his right. The windy moan of the second wraith was all Eldorion's keen ears needed as he slashed out to his right with Honor. The assassin knew his reward as the air warmed once more.

Rising above the ruckus, Kinek'Aras leaped into the air. As he flew higher and higher, pumping his leathery wings, the drake shook a corpse in his mouth like a wild animal. A final thrash and Kinek'Aras released the victim; venom still oozed from his fangs. The Beaten Ax of Kelin'Eshra hung heavy, stuck in the spine of a limp soldier. Blood seeped from several of his own open wounds while Kinek'Aras kicked the corpse and yanked free his ax. The drake screamed angrily and leveled his flight path towards the keep. They could not fail here, not this close. Peotril must die.

The bug creature seemed to be both demonic and a master of the Green Braid, a rare combination; demons were not endowed with the ability to even see the Braid much less weave it into spells. The foreign nature of their existence ensured that demons could not access the Braid. Princess ducked and weaved, hammering the beast with her jagged bony knuckles, and dagger-like knee spurs to no avail. The shambling green monster took the beating stoically, nothing seemed to penetrate its thick bug-like skin and fast moving deflective defenses. It smashed down with heavy talons, and followed with a jab from its beak-like muzzle. Princess slipped out of the way of the sword-claws, but was caught on the top of her skull by its beak. If not for her jagged bony exoskeleton, she would have crumpled, dead to the ground. Instead she staggered in a daze as the world began to spin. Another raking talon slashed into her causing the world to tumble

around her. A subtle flash of green light and the creature was behind her, swatting her again. The next hit sent Princess Fairtide through the air limply to slam into the gate.

Raek roared. The sound reverberated through the courtyard as he barreled into the green beast in a massive tangle of claws and fangs. The two crashed to the ground raking and tearing at each other with ferocious abandon. Sword-like claws dug deep into the bears flank, but so great was he that Raek only growled and clamped down on the shoulder of the abomination. A mighty jerk of the bear's powerful neck and the sound of bone and meat rending could be heard as the green creature's shoulder was ripped from its body. Tendon, muscle sinew and bone hung loosely strung together as Raek tore upward with his jaw and pushed down with his front legs. The terrified shriek of the beast drowned out the battle raging around them. The green glow faded and the monster thrashed in futile attempts to get the bear off of him. Raek and Bargiss both watched in fascination as the creature fell limp, shrunk and changed shape into a dead human devoid of an entire right shoulder, a human who wore a giant bug's carapace as armor.

Kinek'Aras pushed his wings to their limit and fearlessly soared into the keep. He flew over the heads of a stream of soldiers, all swinging their halberds, swords and axes determinedly in an attempt to reach him, but he was too high. As he flew and released his toxic breath, the vapor settled in the passageway and once eager soldiers began coughing up green bile. The passage was long and full of combatants. Kinek'Aras could not understand where they were coming from, the keep could not be big enough to house so many. The passage ended in an archway at the threshold of an enormous temple. The volatile gaggle of soldiers began abruptly at the archway. One soldier seemed to be half-in, half-out of the archway. The threshold was a portal for the creatures from some other place, some other world.

Kinek'Aras swooped into the temple where a small being was kneeling in prayer on a dais opposite the archway. Hefting his battle-worn ax high, the Jungle Drake dipped down and dove towards the prone figure. Nearing the halfling, Kinek'Aras swung his ax with all the momentum of his flight behind him but the halfling quickly tucked and rolled to the side and narrowly avoided the ax stroke. His balance askew, Kinek'Aras' ax dug deep into a large stone statue at the back of the dais. The drake came to a sudden stop when he crashed into the far wall and landed by tumbling down to the floor. The small figure completed its roll coming to stand only a few short spans away from Kinek'Aras and turned to look at the drake that was slowly pulling himself onto his feet.

Outside in the courtyard the battle raged on. Raek reared up on his furry, orange hind legs. After unleashing a deafening roar, he rushed into the throng of seemingly endless soldiers and swiped massive paws at everything that moved.

Felissa was sodden with blood as it dripped from every side of her armor. Her snow-white hair was stained red, Whistle was two times as large as her own body and Gorge was pulsing with black energy, ready for more bloodletting. Watching Raek tear into the masses gave her a

moment to catch her breath. Her left arm was bulging, the muscle sore and weary from the weight of the great ax, but she knew she could not stop. She knew she was bleeding from a hundred small wounds, gashes, and cuts that had slipped under her armor, but she would not die here, not yet. Reaching deep inside herself, she found a storehouse of energy, a familiar feeling of hate. Anger welled up within her; centuries of hatred stored in her blood, from the betrayals of generations long lost to time, the anger of her father, and her father's father and beyond even that, began rushing through her veins, coursing through her heart, her blood, her fatigue. Felissa's liquid white eyes filled with that red absolute abhorrence and renewed her vigor tenfold. A low guttural rumble welled up inside her and Whistle and Gorge came up again. She charged into the fray beside Raek, rending bodies and hewing heads.

Bargiss knelt down beside the prone form of Princess Fairtide. She was breathing heavily, but breathing. A quick prayer to his goddess sent a jolt of vigor through him and into the Deep-ocean Merloch. Knowing she would come-to, he stood and ran to where Eldorion had fallen. Raek and Felissa were making progress against the never-ending waves of soldiers. They downed five soldiers for every one that managed to get an awkward stroke inside their defenses. A hole had been cleared where Eldorion lay motionless on a mound of carnage. From the ruined pile of mush that was his face, the elf let out a weak cough. Bargiss slipped a thick book out of his satchel and placed it, opened, on Eldorion's chest. He began channeling again, this time combining his yellow spellweaving magic with a prayer to his goddess. A smile cracked his lips, his eyes dilated as he read and his hand disappeared into the very skull of his friend. Without breaking the skin, Bargiss' delicate touch filled Eldorion's body with strength, encouraging the natural healing process to hasten. His hand moved down, still inside the flesh, through the elf's throat and began to massage the clots of blood that hindered his breathing. Slowly, he pulled up the blood, through the passageway, and with his free hand, rolled the elf onto his side, to allow for vomiting. Bargiss then laid his free hand on Eldorion's mangled forehead while he raised his voice in prayer. Divine energy coursed through him and into the torn flesh, knitting and healing. Scar tissue welded together flawlessly; muscle and sinus cavities grew together seamlessly. He brought his left hand up again, and out of the surface of Eldorion's flesh to his burst left eye, dangling precariously by a thin thread of meat.

Princess ran past him at a full sprint and leaped into the crowd feet first but Bargiss paid no heed. He did not have the time.

Tenderly at first, Bargiss stitched and sewed, piecing the eye together slowly like a fragile puzzle. His fingers worked quickly, channeling the radiant Yellow Braid while his lips gently sung the prayer needed from the Archon that he had opened and placed on his friend's chest. The eye in his hand was whole again, bound together by his magic and healed by his goddess. He gingerly placed it back in the socket of Eldorion's repaired face as he completed the prayer. The raw Yellow radiated into Bargiss' body and acted as a conduit to filter, temper and channel the power. He slipped his finger behind his friend's eye and repaired the remaining miniscule muscles that held the eye in place and the nerves that allowed vision.

Bargiss leaned back, his hands bloody and his body sore. He quickly inspected the damaged foot, which had also been healed by the prayer to his goddess. There would be more of that he was certain. Slowly rising to his feet, Bargiss snatched up Spite and Honor then kicked Eldorion gently in the shoulder. "Get up friend, your task here is not yet ended."

Eldorion coughed and then rolled onto his back. He blinked a few times and looked up, squinting at Bargiss. "I hate it when I wake up to your face Bargiss," he began, "I always seem to have the taste of bile in my mouth." He chuckled softly; his throat was dry and tender from the surgery, but he accepted his ally's hand helping him to his feet.

Bargiss hefted a leather skin of water, proffering it to Eldorion who took small sips from it at first, then tilted it back. "Thank you twice then, friend." Eldorion winked with his newly repaired eye, retrieved his blades from Bargiss and walked casually towards the passageway into the keep. Raek, Felissa and Princess had all disappeared inside; they were pushing back the tides without him!

"You will never succeed in your quest, Kinek'Aras," The small hooded figure stood watching as the drake regained his composure. "You were not prepared for me the first time we met, and you are not now."

Kinek'Aras snaked his neck around, looked to the entranceway where he had come in and saw a shimmering, translucent purple portal. The direct view allowed him to see the backs of several of the denizen soldiers as they pushed their way towards the courtyard. He was pleased that he could see their backs; the prayer or spell Peotril maintained must have let those creatures out of whatever realm they lived in, though they were not allowing entry into the temple.

When he spoke, Kinek'Aras' voice was grave, his tone sharp, "I have grown since then, Peotril. My life is mine now, and you will not live past this day; you will never enslave another being. You will never get the chance to destroy a family or a village for your own greed." As he spoke, Kinek'Aras looked around the temple, taking note of the several statues that stood vigil in crevices all around the room.

Peotril's eyes began to glow violet under his white hood as he brought his hands together, tucking them inside the voluminous sleeves of the other arm. "You give yourself too much credit, pet. You are not the center of this world. I too have found a new benefactor. Your little team outside is already weary; they are tired, and bested. The minions they battle are endless, and as soon as you are dispatched, I will tap a different realm, a stronger one with more denizens. Your friends will never traverse the passage they are in!" Peotril spread his hands wide and his hood fell back as he cackled with glee. His skin was dotted with tiny scales that resembled thorns than overlapping drake scales. He had blunt, human-like teeth with the exception of two pointed canines that gleamed when he smiled. His demon-touched lineage was even more realized when Peotril allowed his black, forked tongue to lick his lips.

Kinek'Aras leapt into the air, unfurled his wings and worked them to get some height, knowing what was to come. Peotril was a Violet spellweaver. Sucking in a deep breath of air,

Kinek'Aras scanned the room for movement. Noise in the passageway told him that his friends were coming; he just hoped they would get there soon enough. He let loose the green billowing cloud of toxic breath and watched. His poison falling over Peotril gave him hope, but the Seviak showed no sign of being affected.

The room shook around him as Kinek'Aras hovered midair and beat his wings in the center of the temple. Great statues lining the walls of the room stepped forth, their eyes glowed the same color of violet as Peotril's. They dropped to the ground from their high pedestals and smashed several pews into splinters causing craters in the floors marble tiles.

Kinek'Aras hefted his great ax. His heart was beating faster than his wings as he spoke the name of his eternal mate. "Kelin'Eshra," he said, "Help me now. I need your strength!" The Beaten Ax of Kelin'Eshra began vibrating softly in his hands in answer to his call. Kinek'Aras felt a growing surge of strength fill his muscles and his body began to swell as the raw force poured into him, enhanced him, empowered him.

Felissa led the way swatting aside soldier after soldier. Her rage intensified with every kill so that even the enormous Whistle seemed light in her hand. The double head was as large as a horse, the haft as thick as her own arm. She watched as the blood flowed out and the thralls so freely gave away their lives for their master. What motivated their loyalty she could not say. In fact, when Felissa even attempted to speak it just came out as a feral growl that made her enemies' eyes wild with fear. Among the humans, elves, dwarves, drakes and fiats, would be a rare gnome or merloch that would fall to one of her axes, but the language they spoke was one she had never heard before. While they all wore a uniform representing some hidden master within the Temple of Orinis'Thas, their eyes were untamed, uncontrolled, and their skills with the weapons they wielded were rudimentary at best. Finally Felissa stopped, realizing that Whistle had reached full capacity. The emotions of her weapon broke through the blood rage haze that she had been in and set upon her like a yoke. She bellowed fiercely as she dropped Gorge to the ground and hefted Whistle with both hands. A mad soldier leapt to recover her fearful weapon but was too slow. A crackling bolt of electricity suddenly ripped through the air from the apex of Whistle's heads with such force that the five closest soldiers to Felissa were completely obliterated from existence, not even ash remained of them. Behind those five, others instantly fell dead in smoldering piles of melted flesh. The lightening continued to jump through bodies, leaping from corpse to corpse, bouncing down the hallway like a jester before a king. Felissa stood her ground against the sheer force of her weapon's release of energy; both powerful arms corded against the recoil.

As the smell of burnt flesh, fur, and scale filled the room, Felissa fell to a knee and leaned heavily on her now normal-sized ax. Fatigue caught up to her and threatened to overcome her. Raek's gentle furry hand came to rest on the frost dwarf's shoulder. "You have done well, Felissa Gemgate. Let Bargiss help you, and we will finish this together."

Felissa looked up angrily at her friend. Two boulders rubbing together would sound as rough, “No. No so bad. I go on.” Her mastery of the language they chose to use was poor, but her angry white eyes could not be misinterpreted. She would kill Bargiss if he laid a hand on her. She stood up, using Whistle as a crutch and looked over her shoulder at the spellweaver coming into the hallway behind them. Crusted with the blood of her fallen enemies, Felissa’s blue face twisted into a wry half-grin at the sight of Bargiss, the frail human spellweaver. She lifted Gorge and swung both of her mighty weapons up to rest on her shoulders. Felissa Gemgate walked down the empty hallway, ignoring the pain she felt, ignoring the eyes of her friends on her back and ignoring the horrible smell filling her nose.

Kinek’Aras swung down and his ax connected with the statue’s head at the same moment that a stone fist connected with the thin scale armor covering his thigh. The ax shattered the stone statue, turning a once beautiful sculpture of some long lost god into small chunks of raining rock. The hit to his thigh sent him careening out of control, his flight path disrupted. Kinek’Aras tucked his wings as he neared the back wall of the temple and pulled his legs in tight. Spinning, he aimed his legs at the wall to break his fall. Kinek’Aras pushed off, extended his wings and flew up into the rafters, narrowly avoiding a boulder that had been thrown in his direction. *Two down, only four to go*, he thought. Suddenly, a great flash of lightening tore through the room and struck one of the living statues then grounded out harmlessly. The statue hoisted a pew and threw it up into the air at Kinek’Aras.

“Was it you then, who set the shadows upon us Peotril?” Kinek’Aras dove to avoid a pew as he tried to break the Seviak’s concentration, but could not get close enough to him to actually strike him. He let loose another wave of poisonous vapor to descend over the tiny spellweaver in white, and again, it had no effect. “I’m whittling away at your guardians. Soon you’ll be out of toys to play with. Then what? Will you face my ax, coward?” He hissed out his words, taunting Peotril into making a mistake.

Peotril stood nearly motionless on the dais. His fingers were working furtively, controlling the creatures wandering around the room tossing chunks of stone and pews around carelessly. Kinek’Aras did not think that the Seviak was focused exclusively on him; he had seen Peotril’s power before, and these six stone statues did not require much concentration for the small spellweaver. *What is he about?* Kinek’Aras had seen the results of Peotril’s spellweaving after he had raised an army of graveyard statues and stony gargoyles into shambling unlife months before. The stone puppets had torn through a small human settlement with abandon; Peotril had slaughtered masses with his dark magic that day.

Bargiss stepped up to the portal with a fist full of the Indigo Braid. The spellweaver twisted it several times within his grasp and stretched it into three long thin lines that he placed against the portal’s opening. The Indigo quickly dissipated the portal and Bargiss stepped aside to allow the others to enter the temple proper.

Raek and Princess were the first into the temple foyer followed by Felissa, Eldorion and then Bargiss. Raek was leaning on his mysterious totem; the energies within it swirled unnervingly throughout the confines of the staff. Princess took off running, leapt into the air and drove both of her knee spurs into one of the living statues that had just thrown a heavy chunk of marble at Kinek'Aras. Stone split under her power and she stuck to the creature's midsection. Princess pounded at the cracks with her fists, causing the fissures to spread wider and deeper along the creature's entire front side. Reacting slowly, the creature punched her, which resulted in several small cracks to form on its fist. Princess did not budge; her perch was firm, her protection complete. The first line of defense was her exoskeleton; the second was her rune-covered gown, which she rarely needed.

Felissa moved to the center of the temple, expecting her mere presence to draw the attention of the remaining creatures. However, they ignored her entirely. She shrugged and went bounding after one, axes raised high.

Eldorion, Raek and Bargiss stood in the archway where the otherworldly soldiers' portal to the world had been erected. Felissa smashed into a statue with reckless abandon and traded her ax strikes with the living statue's punches blow-for-blow.

"Good that you could make it!" hissed Kinek'Aras. He dodged a broken statue piece that had been hurled into the air at him, "I believe Peotril does not directly control these creatures. Something else is happening here!"

Bargiss nodded in agreement, "Yes, his lines are feeding through him into the ground beneath his feet." The spellweaver pointed to the dais on which Peotril stood. As if they had heard Bargiss' words, the two as-of-yet untargeted animated statues turned their full attentions on him. They trampled towards him in unison, raising their enormous stone feet as if to crush him. Raek reached into a medicine bag on his hip and began to forage for something within while watching the impending approach. Kinek'Aras seized the opportunity to dive towards his nemesis on the dais with his ax ready to feed.

Bargiss reached out with his right hand, feeling the Yellow energies flowing, he clenched his fist and moved as if to pull a blanket over himself and Raek. While Raek pulled something out of his pouch awkwardly, one of the statues stomped down, its foot stopping short where Bargiss' hand had passed, as if the statue had stepped on an invisible stair.

Raek held two fragile lizard skins in his hand, "Here," he said as he handed one to Bargiss, "Eat this!"

Bargiss looked at the skin, then at Raek, then at the flaky lizard skin again. The other Statue slammed its fist down at the two of them only to be stopped by the same barrier. The first statue's foot was still pressing on the invisible wall. It lifted its leg then stomped again to no avail. Bargiss flipped the skin into his mouth and gagged for a moment before chewing it quickly and swallowing.

“Now run!” Raek turned and ran in the opposite direction that Eldorion had fled. Bargiss ran as well, just behind the shaman, both of their legs moving them faster than ever they had run before. The animated statues began pursuit.

Felissa’s axes sparked against the stone shell of a statue and caused cracks to appear in several places. The statue pulled its leg back and kicked Felissa in the chest in response, catapulting the dwarf backwards across the room and through a wall where she disappeared into whatever room was beyond.

Kinek’Aras arrived at Peotril ax first. Kelin’Eshra’s Beaten Ax sliced into the small spellweaver’s chest and out his back with such force that the top half of his hewn body toppled backwards several spans before the lower half of his body hit the ground. Kinek’Aras landed with a thump breathing heavily he stared at his handiwork and smiled. Finally, his vengeance was fulfilled.

At that moment a shriek of terror rose up through the bowels of the temple from far beneath where they stood. The remaining statues stopped where they were, motionless once again without the magical Violet Braid that allowed them simulated life. A second, separate piercing scream echoed after the first. The second scream sounded like a thousand voices coming from the same mouth, the volume and intensity far more resonant than the first.

Raek and Bargiss rounded on the dais and stopped running as they came upon Kinek’Aras. Eldorion and Felissa were nowhere to be seen, and Princess was pulling her knees free of the collapsed statue when the whole room began to shake. A tremendous roar filled the temple as if it were coming through what was left of the very walls around them.

A crushing blow to the floor knocked everyone to the ground. Eldorion appeared near the passageway that led to the courtyard, sitting on his rear. He quickly recovered and leapt into the air, once again, to hover in the air. Likewise, Kinek’Aras flew up just as another jarring blow slammed into the floor beneath them. Raek and Bargiss zipped towards the passageway and quickly overcame Eldorion in his attempt to escape the confines of the temple. Princess stepped back and looked down just as the next hammering strike knocked the center floor upwards in an explosion of stone and marble.

Princess made a fast gesture of power in the air causing a flash of yellow runic markings outlined in black to appear before her. A tumultuous vacuum of sound was deafening an instant before stone rained down in a heavy hailstorm that began to destroy what was left of the temple floor. The passage remained untouched, though several enormous boulders bounced off shimmering runic flashes. The Symbol Princess left in the air protected the archway where she stood from cascading rubble.

A giant horned head appeared from the gaping hole in the temple floor. One horn was a broken jagged nub over the right crimson-flaming eye slit. The other horn was long and twisted, and curved around the left side of the demon’s head. Its powerful arms pushed at the fissure as they ripped upwards. Rock, dust and foundation stones topple down upon the demon, rending his already bloody flesh in its gravitational path. A swollen dust cloud heaved into the air as the

entire structure fell in upon itself. Torn demonic muscle tissue and dark blood sprayed all around, but the creature paid no heed to the damage he received from the debris. Freedom belonged to Velthanjantle.

Finally pulling free of the ruined keep the demon stood, spread wide its leathery wings and roared again. Thick scar tissue covered his red and black flesh where the demon appeared to have been recently healed and sewn together. A broad rib bone the size of a man's leg protruded from its side, and one knee appeared disjointed as he stood screaming at the wind like a newborn infant. The creature flew off the ground, beating huge, gristly wings and looked down to where he had been imprisoned for so long. A single passage of stone remained of whatever had been built over him. Velthanjantle knew that he had much recovering to do before he was prepared to rule this world in the name of his master, but time was something he had plenty of.

Below, a battered human hid beneath a mountain of rubble. He twisted the Green Braid into intricate knots as he spoke harshly to the unconscious Frost Dwarf at his feet. "You and yours have forfeited your lives! The healing was incomplete! The world was not prepared for Velthanjantle! The bones of a dead god now roam unhindered in our world, who will stop it, dwarf, you?" The ensuing fearful scream did not echo in the tiny bubble that kept the two alive, and Felissa was unaffected by the several kicks she received to her jaw. A moment later, a fading flash of Green was all that remained under the Yellow blanket, just before the Temple of Orinis'Thas was put to rest.