

Chapter 4

The howling wind roared with tremendous vigor as a pair of heavily cloaked figures struggled against it toward a small copse of trees where a large bonfire blazed away, its flames flickering wildly and sparks shooting skyward every few moments. “Why we gotta haul the wood?” asked Humbort straining under a backload of thick sticks and heavy broken branches. “It’s her damn spell and the wind chills me to the bones.”

“Shut up or get cuffed,” said Shamki not bothering to turn around and address his companion. The packet of wood on the half-orc’s back was several times the size burdening his friend but he walked with apparent ease and sniffed at the air now and again.

“You smell something, Shamki?” asked Humbort looking around with wide eyes.

The big half-orc grunted and kept walking towards the bonfire.

“I don’t like being out here in the dark with all those dead things; you saw them down the coast, digging, what’re they after?”

The big half-orc grunted again and picked up the pace slightly.

“Slow down, Shamki,” complained Humbort and almost stumbled over a small rock in the road, which he bent down to examine. By the time he finished his friend was already out of sight in the darkness ahead. “Wait up, Shamki,” called Humbort loudly, his voice quickly carried away by the swift wind. The tall, gangly man looked around into the night seeing a thousand pinpoints of light in the sky, heard the sound of waves as they crashed over the shore, and then called out again, “Shamki, Shamki!” Getting no reply, he trotted in an awkward gait towards the bonfire. By the time he arrived everyone else was there and he came panting into the circle with his eyes wide and completely out of breath. He immediately inhaled a cloud of smoke from the fire and began to cough and hack until he fell to his knees, rolled onto his back, and continued to choke.

“Ariana, darling,” said Lousa, dressed in a dark blue cloak lined with luxuriant fox fur trim at the collar and around her wrists, to the young girl with a cleanly scrubbed face but the same bright smile that always seemed to adorn her face. “Could you make sure Humbort doesn’t choke to death?” The little girl hopped over to the downed man and began to pound on his back with a heavy club she liberated from the wood pile.

“It would be a terrible shame if he died and I called his spirit instead of someone useful,” said Hazlebug who wore a heavily stained, tattered yellow cloak that stank of sulfur.

“The witch makes a good point,” said Lousa. “How much longer before you can summon the creature from beyond?”

“These things are never quite ... predictable,” replied Hazlebug and spilled a vial of something onto the fire, which immediately flared up with reds and blues. “We shall see.”

“While we’re waiting, I understand that you have a report about finding something in the archives, Unerus?”

“She was called the Tremulus, out of Tarlton, another ship, the Light of Ras, drove her onto the rocks,” said Unerus quickly and with little fanfare.

“Tarltonites, you say?” asked Lousa and looked thoughtfully at the boy. “The Light of Ras, that rings a memory. The Priest of the Sun, Seymour of Tarlton, has private vessel of that name, does he not?”

Unerus read slowly from a piece of parchment written with clear, feminine handwriting, “The sunken ship was registered as a Tarlton trading vessel, she was called the Tremulus. She was new to the waters but identified by debris that washed ashore and the report from the captain of the Light of Ras who drove her onto the rocks. The captain, apparently a seafaring expert from Sea’cra, docked at Sea Fen the following day and claimed that there was a renegade political exile aboard the Tremulus wanted by the King of the Sand, Tarlton VI.

“That would have been the previous ruler of Tarlton,” mused Lousa quietly. “They’ve recently had a change of power in the south. Baron Avakubia was speaking about it when I last visited him. The authority of the realm is now in the hands of a darkling warlord named Ming.”

Hazlebob gave an exaggerated yawn at this and poured another liquid onto the fire that gave a startling blast of orange and red sparks.

“Pretty!” shouted Ariana and got up to dance around the sparkles as they flew quickly skyward.

“What do we know of this Seymour?” asked Lousa looking at Unerus who shuffled the papers around in his hands and looked to Ariana. The girl pointed to one and her brother smiled, nodded his head, and began to read, “Seymour the Bright,” he started and then looked up to the lovely woman.

“Go on,” said Lousa.

“Seymour the Bright,” began Unerus again, “is the oldest son of Tarlton VI and at one time seemed destined for the Glass Throne of City in the Sand but instead early in life became a devout worshipper of the Sun God Ras and forsook his royal heritage. He traveled the world for many years aboard his personal ship, the Light of Ras, attempting to do the will of his patron deity.”

“Ras god of sun,” said Shamki. “Fights god of death.”

“Yes, well, that is a bit more succinct than I might have put it but you have the gist of it, Shamki,” said Lousa nodding her head at the fearsome half-orc. “Seymour was clearly chasing someone aboard the Tremulus for something. Go on, Unerus.”

“There are no records about what happened to the Light of Ras after she left Sea Fen so we what is resting at the bottom of the bay is a mah ... me ...,” here he looked to his sister and she whispered, “Mystery.”

“Mystery.”

“Interesting,” said Lousa. “Whatever it is likely presents a threat to Doria. Queen Onolodia will be most pleased if we can garner the friendship of Seymour and Tarlton.”

“The spirit world is ready,” said Hazlehub, waving her hands above her head, sprinkling a strange golden dust through the air with a small grin on her face, and her eyes rolling upwards in some sort of trancelike state.

*Spirits Rise from grounded sleep
Break bounds born eons deep
Ghostly visage to us creep
Jump divide make the leap!*

The wind whipped through the little copse of trees at that moment and sent a medium sized branch to the ground at the feet of Lousa with a crash. She jumped back with a start while Shamki grabbed the arm of Humbort and prevented the little man from fleeing. Little Ariana moved next to her brother and put her arms around the boy as Hazlehub raised her arms high above her head and intoned the words of her witchery again.

*Spirits Rise from grounded sleep
Break bounds born eons deep
Ghostly visage to us creep
Jump divide make the leap!*

“I’m scared,” whispered Ariana into her brother’s ear and held him more tightly yet.

“It’s okay, Ariana; she knows what she’s doing.”

“Ahhhh,” shrieked the girl with hugely wide eyes pointing to a place just outside of the small circle. Unerus looked over and spotted a ghostly blue image floating towards them. It wore a loose fitting cloak that did not billow in the wind and its hair was wild around his head.

“I hear your call, woman, what would you have of me?”

Hazlehub took a step back and almost fell into the fire, her eyes wide for a moment before she managed to compose herself and began waving her arms over her head again. “Oh spirit of the world beyond, we seek your knowledge of the ship wrecked yonder,” this last as she pointed into the darkness in almost directly the opposite direction to where the shipwreck lay.

Unerus moved over, caught the eye of the woman, and pointed with his finger in the correct direction. Hazlehub righted herself easily enough. “In this direction,” she said continue the motion of her arm until it corresponded with that of the boy’s.

“I remember something,” said the glowing blue form for a moment and shook its head, “but it is all misty as if it were a dream or never happened at all.”

“What is your name, spirit?” asked Hazlehub

“I am ... I am ... Khemer ... Khemer dez Hadzall,” said the voice in a rather shaky fashion. “That seems familiar.”

“Tarltonite,” whispered Lousa to no one in particular.

“What is the name of that ship beyond the rocks,” asked Hazlehub and this time pointed in the correct direction the first time.

“It is the Tremulus,” said Khemer this time without pause. “Where am I? What is this place and who are you?”

“I am Hazlehub, mighty witch-woman of Doria. Yonder is the village of Iv’s Folly from where I hail. These others are my companions. There are foul undead creatures hunting for something on that ship, what can you tell us of it?”

“I was aboard that ship and we were pursued by ... by someone ... I cannot remember who or for what. We crashed, I was trying to swim but the waves were too, too strong, I went under, and now I am here. I see now, I am dead, called from beyond.”

“I’m sorry, Khemer, but you are truly dead,” said Hazlehub her lips pursed and her eyes cast down. “I cannot help you with that. Your body is long eaten by the sea creatures and there is no hope of a return. But, perhaps you will help us discover what is aboard that ship and it will let you rest more easily upon your return to the Abyss where the Lady of the Night rules eternally?”

“I ... I ... cannot remember. Perhaps we should get close to the ship? That might jar my memory?”

Humbort shook his head vigorously at Shamki but the big half-orc remained silent.

“There’s all those skellies, Unerus?” said Ariana more as a question than as a statement.

“I know you’re scared Ariana but you have to trust me, if we do this for the mayor we’ll be in good, no more stealing food from the garbage pails,” he replied in a whisper. “Be brave, we protect each other, like always, right?”

“Right!” said the girl and got to her feet looping her arm under her brother’s. “Together.”

Shamki grabbed Humbort by his arm and dragged him along as the group headed away from the protection of the small wood and towards the exposed point where a thousand skeletal remains marched up and down busy with their strange tasks.

As her fox fur cloak whipped wildly about her ankles, Lousa first heard the strange clacks that came from ahead. “What is that?” she asked no one in particular but the wild wind stole the words right out of her mouth and it was up to Humbort to ask the question again as he shrieked in a voice pitched an octave too high, “What is that sound?”

“Bones,” said Hazlebug her voice piercing the wind as she pointed to a pair of skeletons walking next to each other. Their loose bones flapping in the breeze and smacking against one another.

“Like a ghost story,” said Ariana her eyes wide but a smile once again playing on her lips, “Right, Unerus?”

The boy shivered, his light cloak flapped in the breeze and revealed an even shabbier undershirt filled with almost as many holes as stains. “You’re a brave girl,” he said aloud with his teeth chattering and then, under his breath, “Braver than me.”

Ariana looked up at her brother her keen ears bright red from the cool night wind, smiled to herself, and began to sing a little song, her voice unable to clear the howling wind but pleasant enough in any case.

*“Candies fill my dreams all night
Red and green and gold all right
Candies fill my dreams all day
Candy, candy, more I say”*

One of the skeletons suddenly lurched towards them carrying a sharp rock and Shamki whipped out a long blade of steel from under his cloak so quickly that even Unerus didn’t yet have his dagger out, but the creature staggered past them, buffeted by the wind, and suddenly disappeared into the side of the point.

“It’s a cave,” shouted Humbort his eyes keener than his spirit and sure enough, there was an open gash in the side of the hill. Even as they watched another skeleton emerged from the small entrance, carrying two handfuls of rock and dirt and staggering off towards the ocean. Another creature followed this one, likewise burdened.

“They’re digging for the ship!” exclaimed Lousa. “It must have settled in the sand and it’s buried. Come on, we have to follow them. They’ll ignore us, right, Hazlebug?”

The witch woman’s eyes opened wide again as she stared at the shambling forms that seemed to come in an endless line both to and from the cave, those leaving with hands filled with rocks and dirt and those going empty. Occasionally one would come out, its boney wrist broken to reveal a stump. “I ... I have my guardian aura that will protect us,” she finally said although her body shuddered and her eyes darted around nervously.

“Look at this,” said the little voice of Ariana carried by the wind from a shallow depression just a few yards away.

“Ariana,” cried Unerus looking down and realizing she was no longer at his side. The big half-orc took two quick strides and shone his bright lantern into the small depression where hundreds of squirming skeletons lay in a pile of gruesome, living bones.

“Their hands and arms are all broke off,” said the girl and pointed to the arms of each of the skeletons lying in the pit. “They can’t dig no more!”

“Anymore,” said Lousa almost as a matter of habit rather than in a real attempt to correct the girl.

“She’s right,” cried Humbort. “They can’t dig no more!”

“Anymore,” said Lousa again her face an almost impassive mask as she struggled to keep her composure at this horrific scene.

Shamki patted the little girl on the head and smiled at her although his fiercely uneven teeth, accentuated by massive canines, often caused people think of it as a snarl. This did not seem to affect the girl as she smiled back, with her equally uneven rows of teeth half fallen out and half in place, and took his hand. “Let’s see what’s in the cave!”

Unerus settled in on the other side of the girl and the trio went into the cave hand in hand. Lousa, Hazlebub, and Humbort looked at each other for a moment before the young woman raised her left eyebrow and grabbed the witch by the hand and the two followed along. This left Humbort to stand alone in the howling wind with the untold number of skeletons that shambled around him. He paused for a moment and muttered to himself, “Stay with Shamki, stay with Shamki,” and his body gave a tremendous shudder all the way from this head to his toes but he managed to make that first step towards the cave and then rapidly followed the rest.

The width of the cave opening quickly narrowed into a newly dug tunnel heading both down and towards the ocean. In the narrow passage way there was only enough room for two bodies passing one another and skeletons filled most of the space. As they stumbled down the narrow corridor they inevitably bumped against the walking bones setting off a series of movement as one then stumbled against the other.

The lantern of Shamki shone like a beacon leaving shadows splattered across the rocky walls of the cave that moved in a strange, dancing motion. The whitened bones of the creatures reflected the light in blinding flashes while the deep black sockets of their eyes seemed like bottomless pits of darkness. Moving in a horrified single file, the group edged steadily forward trying not to look at the shambling skeletons inches from their faces.

“Lady of the Abyss protect me,” said Humbort over and over again his voice weak and shaking as the things shuffled past him in a never-ending line.

“At least it’s warmer,” said Unerus and moved sideways behind his sister who still clutched the hand of Shamki at the head of the little party.

After five minutes of nerve wracking shuffling forward, a natural cavern opened to the right and Shamki darted inside. The second group, led by Lousa almost walked past the opening as their eyes strained to pierce the darkness ahead, but the half-orc reached out with a hand and grabbed the tail of the fox fur cloak and pulled her in. Lousa gave out a yelp but noticed it was Shamki who had hold of her, gave a huge sigh, and hugged him tightly for a moment before letting go and straightening herself.

“Sorry about that, but this place has me a tad unnerved,” said Lousa to the half-orc whose dark features seemed a shade redder and eyes cast straight down.

“Holy mother of the Goddess,” said Hazlebug as she stumbled into the cave right behind Lousa. The old woman immediately dropped to her knees and tried to catch her breath. “I’m a village witch not the Queen’s Soothsayer!”

“Honesty doesn’t pay the bills though, does it?” asked Lousa going over to give the old woman a hug as well.

The old woman hugged back tightly just as the last member of the group staggered into the room and immediately collapsed to the ground his whole body trembling and shaking. He looked up to the big half-orc and tried to gasp out a few words but his breath was too rapid and he merely gave off the appearance of a fish on dry land. Little Ariana went over to him and started to gently pat him on the back, her smile bright and lopsided with missing teeth.

“Tunnel not stable,” said Shamki running his hand along the tunnel outside of the small cave. “No go further safe.”

“Send the spirit,” gasped Humbort from the ground.

“That’s actually a good idea,” said Lousa with a nod to the gasping man who immediately smiled brightly at the little girl who dusted off his shoulder. “Hazlebug, where is Khemer?”

The witch looked around and realized that the spirit was no longer at her side and then took a moment to straighten up and fish in her pockets for a small bag and a vial of liquid. “Oh great spirit of death,” she started but at that moment a bluish glow appeared in the wall of the cave and a moment later Khemer floated before them, his feet gently kicking just a few inches off the ground.

The ghostly apparition looked at them for a moment and then reached out a hand to touch the witch woman who flinched back and away but its fingers passed right through her shoulder in any case. “What is your command, master of death?”

“I ... I ... you shall go forward to the ship and try and learn what it is the skeletons are trying to obtain,” she said after a moment’s pause.

“And return to tell us the answer,” whispered Unerus. She responded with a sharp look, but then her face softened as she noticed he still shivered in his flimsy cloak.

“And return to tell us what you find,” she went on and smiling at Unerus and gave him a quick wink.

The ghost turned with a spin and floated through the opposite wall to which it entered and, after a moment, the last of the blue glow it left behind seemed to evaporate into the wall.

From the floor Humbort stared, “Like we need more creepy than we already got,” and then smiled at Lousa who nodded her head. Little Ariana laughed out loud, “I think it’s fun!”

"I always knew there was something wrong with you, Ariana," said Unerus and gave his little sister a punch in the arm.

"You come with me anytime," said Shamki patting her on the head and wrinkling his nose.

"How long do we have to wait?" asked Lousa and looked at Hazlebug who shrugged her shoulders.

"The dead have their own sense of time, it could be a minute, or it could be hours."

"Hours?" asked Humbort his face drooped and his hands twitched at his side.

"Even longer," continued Hazlebug, waving her right hand in some sort of mystical gesture, and her voice took on the airy, vague quality she used while conducting the ceremony on the surface. "The dead do not exist within our realm and are not subject to its laws."

"How long before these damn skeletons realize we're here and turn on us?" asked Humbort with a glance to the small opening where shadowy forms continued to shuttle past at irregular intervals. "Then we're doomed, even Shamki can't take that many of them."

Shamki walked over to Humbort and slapped the back of his head quickly, the thwack resounding through the cave, "Be brave."

"Be brave? Be brave my ass!" said Humbort and put his hand to the back of his head.

Ariana giggled.

"Watch your language in front of the girl," said Lousa although she couldn't help but giggle for a moment herself.

"I've heard worse," said the girl with a look up at her brother. "We steal stuff from the" And then shut her mouth as she saw Unerus give a quick shake of his head. "I mean we walk around at the merchant's fair all the time and people say lots of stuff."

"That's no reason we should use such language in front of impressionable ears," continued Lousa sternly.

"People do say lots of stuff," said Unerus with a smile. "I've heard Mayor Shumba talking about not getting his fair cut for giving people good booth positions."

"All right then," said Lousa. "You've made your point, Unerus. Ariana hears things no proper young lady should hear but hopefully we can change all of that and get her raised as a lady from here on out."

"I don't want to be raised properly, I want my brother to do it!" said the girl and grabbed hold of her brother once again.

"I'm not sure that was a compliment," said Unerus smiling broadly.

"I'm sure it wasn't," said Hazlebub with a laugh that quickly spread to everyone else in the cave until they were all on hands and knees or sat on the ground and guffawed until they could hardly breathe.

Shamki, doubled over and gasping, wiped a tear from his eye a few moments later and pointed to a spot on the wall that glowed with a faint shade of blue, "Ghost."

All five pairs of eyes turned to the wall and watched as Khemer slowly emerged from the limestone walls and appeared before them again, this time his face agitated and his body shimmered strangely from a light to darker shade of blue, "It's the Staff of Naught!" he gasped in his ghostly voice, "I remember now, the Staff of Naught!"

Four people looked to Hazlebub who looked right back at them, "How am I supposed to know what the Staff of Naught is?"

"We can't expect anyone here to know such a thing." replied Lousa with a shake of her head. "What is it?" she said turning to the ghostly presence.

"Only I can ...," started Hazlebub but the agitated spirit interrupted her.

"A staff with the power over life and death!" said the spirit directly to Lousa. "It is a relic of the Old Empire and of great power. The skeletons are within a few yards of retrieving it."

"What do the skeletons want with it?" shouted Humbort.

"Maybe somebody is controlling them," suggested Unerus.

"If so we have to find them!" said Lousa.

"Could it bring them back to life?" asked Ariana.

"Can you tell me if there are other deathly presences nearby?" asked Hazlebub looking around the cave.

"Good question!" said Humbort.

And then a booming voice drowned them all out, "No talk, now do!" said Shamki standing to his full height and pulling out his long blade.

"My god," said Lousa. "He's right. We'll have plenty of time to debate later. The skeletons will have to bring out the Staff, right past this cave!"

"They're thousands of them," warned Humbort. "They'll tear us to shreds if we take it from them."

"We could collapse the tunnel behind us," said Unerus, "then the ones inside would be trapped, the ones outside wouldn't know for a few minutes, and we could get away."

"Of course they would know, they can sense the Staff, we're doomed!" said Humbort. "We're doomed!"

“Unerus’s plan is sound,” said Lousa. “You and Ariana try and grab the staff. Hazlebug, can you create some sort of force field to block them off from us?”

The old witch shook her head, “No, that’s not my specialty magic.”

“Khemer, you go ahead and tell us when it’s almost here; Humbort, head to the mouth of the cave and get a light set up so we can get out of here quickly; Shamki, find a weak spot in the wall and get ready to collapse the tunnel; kids, on my word, Unerus, trip the skeleton, Ariana you grab the Staff and run, don’t stop until you get all the way back to town. Don’t wait for any of us.”

“Not even Unerus?”

“Not even me, Ariana. Do as Lousa says, we’ll catch up later!” said the boy.

Khemer reappeared at that moment, “It’s coming!”

“Get ready,” shrieked Lousa as Humbort immediately slid back down the corridor and Shamki moved in the opposite direction while Ariana and Unerus waited poised at the entrance to the side cavern.

“There,” shouted Khemer and pointed to a skeleton. It took Unerus a moment to realize the thing had three arms, its two regular skeletal appendages, and a third lower arm bone ending in a clawed fist that seemed to glow with a black energy. The boy leapt forward and down at the last moment appearing suddenly at the feet of the creature whose hard leg smashed into his side.

“Urggh,” said the boy but the skeleton flipped over him and tumbled to the ground the strange third arm skittered along the stone floor of the recently dug tunnel.

Little Ariana dashed forward like a crab, grabbed the fallen arm, and with her eyes opened wide exclaimed, “It’s wood!”

“Run,” shouted both Lousa and Unerus at the same moment and then the woman turned to face down the corridor, “Now, Shamki, now!” She then looked at Unerus and pointed away, “follow your sister, I’ll hold them for a moment,” she said raising her arms above her head and recited a few quick words,

Darts of light

Flames so bright

Forward to my foes you smite!

With that a half dozen small fire darts appeared at her finger tips and crashed into some of the skeletons that moved down the corridor sending their bones flying in all directions and leaving scorch marks on everything they touched.

Unerus sprinted down the hall as the woman repeated her enchantment and scattered more of the creatures but one of them survived the hail of fiery darts and reached for her with sharpened fingers only to have its head suddenly fly off as Shamki’s blade flashed through the air. The big half-orc grabbed the woman by the waist, hoisted her on his shoulder in a flash, and sprinted off down the corridor.

Within a few strides he caught up to the boy and, without breaking stride, grabbed him with his off hand, tucked him under his arm, and still managed to decapitate another skeleton with his sword. A moment later they emerged into the brightness of the starry night.

“That way,” shouted Unerus from under the warrior’s arm as he pointed to a bobbing lantern light to their right.

“Put me down,” gasped Lousa from the shoulder of the half-orc but if he heard her plea he did not act upon it as he sprinted towards the light. Around them dozens of skeletons milled about in confusion, their actions no longer with purpose. It took Shamki only a few seconds to catch up to the girl and Humbort who held her hand as they stumbled over the broken terrain.

“They’re not chasing us,” said the voice of Lousa from the back of Shamki, “You can put me down now.”

“Me too,” said a squirming Unerus who tried to pry himself from the iron grip of the half-orc.

“Unerus!” called the girl rushing over to embrace her brother even as Shamki let him go. “We did it!”

“Indeed we did,” said Lousa and looked around. “Where is Hazlehub?”

“Oh no!” said Ariana and looked around as well.

“There,” said Humbort with a glance to the hazy blue glow that approached. “It’s Khemer and Hazlehub,” and sure enough the aged woman limped up with the ghostly form of Khemer at her side.

“I fell, twisted my ankle but I guess those skellies didn’t care about me,” said Hazlehub. “I thought I was done for when I saw Shamki sprint off but once the Staff was gone they didn’t pay any thought to me at all.”

“Hazlehub!” shouted Ariana and relinquished the stranglehold she had on her brother and rushed to grab the leg of the elderly woman. “You’re alive!”

“Yes, dear, I’m fine but it warms an old witch’s heart to see you so happy at the news. I can’t remember the last time anyone was glad to know that I was still among the living.”

“Should we stay so close to all those skeletons,” asked Humbort looking back towards the shipwreck his breath ragged and his hand shaking as he pointed in their direction.

“Hazlehub’s right, they don’t seem to be following us,” said Lousa. “What do you think Khemer?”

The ghostly creature looked at her for a moment and paused.

“Why is it still here?” asked Unerus to Hazlehub.

The witch looked at the creature and with a gentle touch detached herself from the young girl and fished in her pocket for another of the vile potions that she seemed to carry in endless supply. She dipped a finger in the liquid and then gave it two shakes in the direction of Khemer.

*Deathly friend, your job be done
Obligations filled the light you shun
I give you freedom, return to none!*

The ghostly image seemed to shimmer for a moment but then maintained itself unchanged.

Hazlebug repeated her words and sprinkled the liquid more vigorously towards Khemer with exactly the same results. She tried it a third time with no better outcome for her efforts.

"It has unfinished business in the realm of the living," she said as her eyes once again rolled back in her head.

"Yes," said Khemer and suddenly interrupted. "We must destroy the Staff of Naught. My memory is returning. There is a ceremony. I was aboard the Tremulus attempting to steal and destroy the staff."

"It is as I foretold," said Hazlebug raising her hands above her head.

Ariana looked at her brother her eyes narrowed and upper lip pursed over the lower, "She did?" The boy shook his head and put an impassive expression on his face.

"How do we destroy the staff?" squeaked Humbort with a look at the thing grasped in Ariana's hand for the first time. It looked like the boney remains of a man's forearm but with tendons and muscle holding the structure together. At one end the elbow ball made a smooth handle while a skeletal hand emerged from the other, half open as if it grasped toward or held some rounded object.

"I cannot remember the ceremony," said Khemer, his ghostly hand moving towards his forehead where it rested for a moment. "But we cannot let word of the Staff's retrieval be allowed to circulate. There will be others, more powerful creatures, who want to use it for their own nefarious ends."

Lousa stared at the ghostly figure for a moment, her eyes narrowed, and her hand went to her chin. "Perhaps we should take it to Iv's Leap in the interim. I'll report to the mayor and Shamki, Humbort, and Hazlebug can stay with it while the children come with me."

"I don't want to stay with it," said Humbort and looked again at the Staff, which the little girl now cupped over her own head while she giggled heartily.

"Shamki," said Lousa and stood tall while her cloak whipped around her as another gust of wind shot through the little copse of wood on the hill. "Take the staff to Iv's Leap; there are old smuggler caves half way up the hill. Wait there for me. If Khemer remembers the ceremony you can send Humbort to report. Children, come with me." With that the woman whirled and began to stride back down toward the blinking lights of the Iv's Folly. Unerus looked at his sister who offered up the Staff to the half-orc. He took it with a graceful bow that belied his rough appearance. The girl gave an awkward little courtesy, her legs moving in an ill-timed manner; she almost stumbled, but managed to right herself at the last second before Unerus could move to catch her. "Until we meet again," she said with a calm, dignified voice and tilted her head to the side in a manner quite reminiscent of Lousa's way of speaking.

"I don't want to go," complained Humbort, his eyes still focused on the staff.

"Come, or get clout," said Shamki and then gave him a sharp rap to the back of the head anyway.

"I was coming, you didn't have to hit me!" said Humbort, his own hand rubbing the oft abused spot.

The girl and her brother took each other's hand and started after Lousa while Shamki led his friend, the witch woman, and the strange blue ghostly apparition to the west.