

Chapter 9

The snow covered mountains to the north of Das'von reflected the blinding winter sunlight into the glacial bay for only a few hours during the deepest winter months but the city itself thrived year round. Now, with the army of Corancil gathered in a ramshackle tent encampment built outside of the city the place thrummed with the life of not only the huge influx of people but also from the massive ongoing construction projects that sprang up at virtually every corner. Dol, Milli, Brogus, and Petra spent their first two days after arriving at the city simply trying to get into the center of town but utterly failed in that endeavor. The ancient city was being transformed from wood to brick and stone at a frenetic pace and much of the central region that housed the bustling expanded government of Corancil was off limits to anyone except workers and diplomats.

It didn't take long for the three mountain dwellers to learn the value of the gold coins that they carried. Petra steadfastly refused to give them a return on their original and vast overpayment for services. "Consider it an expensive lesson," she said once and then refused to take up the subject again. Eventually they settled outside of the city in a ramshackle zone used by soldiers, hangers-on, and other never-do-wells that always seem to accumulate around conquerors. It was dirty, unpleasant, and overcrowded but there was no denying the buzz of energy all over the city. Despite the conditions people almost universally wore smiles on their faces and went about their business in a cheerful fashion.

On this bright and sunny day, Dol and Brogus climbed out of the ramshackle hut a quarter mile outside of town that had served as their domicile since they arrived at the city almost two weeks before. "It's impossible," said Brogus as he looked around with bleary, morning eyes despite the fact that it was already noon. To their north lay the city where a thousand workers scrambled over the old walls tearing them down stone by stone as they expanded the outer perimeter. "We've been here two weeks and we can't even get near the palace. There are ten thousand soldiers in tents and twice that many petitioners trying to get to see Corancil. This was a mistake from the beginning. We'll never get to see anyone in power."

"What do you propose," said Dol as he also rubbed his eyes and took in the hustle and bustle of the city. It wasn't as big as he originally expected although clearly the new ruler had plans for massive expansion. On their first day in the city they wandered around and found the proposed Grand Plaza at the center of the city. For now it was merely a dug up patch of earth and dirt that was once a great slum a mile in diameter. The old buildings and poor people now took up residence either outside the city walls or in some of the new housing districts still under construction. According to rumor, Corancil planned some sort of permanent art exhibition in the dug up territory and that, in addition to the expansion of the city walls, the building of grand new structures, and the influx of countless soldiers made the place hum with excitement. "We're here now. I will return to Craggen Steep with my head low."

A young boy, of perhaps seven or eight, wearing a ragged overcoat that dragged the ground around his ankles stopped and looked up at the two for the briefest of instants as he heard the name of the hidden citadel and then dashed off dodging a pair of tall warriors as they emerged from around a corner.

“No, no,” said Brogus shaking his head. “You’re right about that. We can’t go back to Craggen Steep like this, but there is no way we can get an audience with Corancil. The best we can hope for here is to be recruited as common soldiers. That’s the plan as far as I can tell. What do you want to do?”

Dol shook his head at that suggestion but did not reply.

“The girls will figure out something,” said Brogus as he turned and looked towards the hundreds of other little half-built wood shacks that lined the muddy thoroughfares that made up the city outside the city. “This place stinks, I haven’t bathed in weeks, I stink.”

Dol scratched his head through heavily matted hair and nodded, “We need to find our own way south.” He looked to the icy bay where hundreds of ships docked and unloaded goods from the southern lands to feed the throngs in the city. “We should find a ship heading south, join up with them.”

Brogus turned back from their little shack, kept moderately tidy but still a hovel at best, and looked towards the clear blue water of the bay. “I’ve never been aboard a ship. I’ve heard the motion will make you sick.”

“At least we’ll have clean water,” said Dol as he watched a neighbor dispose of a chamber pot by throwing it into the street. “My sense of smell is gone but my eyes water from the filth of this place. I will not stay a day more. I’m going down to the docks to find a ship.”

Brogus watched his friend gather up his equipment, including the great hammer which he wore around a loop on his belt so that the head swung free. They’d tried to cover it up early in their trip for fear dwarf pursuers might see the distinctive weapon, but a couple of incidents where Dol caught himself on fire eventually persuaded them to use the current arrangement. The hammer seemed to be growing more lively each day Dol handled the thing.

“I’ll wait for the girls,” said Brogus with a half-hearted yell and waved at his friend. He felt low. They arrived in the city with such high hopes but their inability to make any headway in their efforts to see the new conqueror, the oppressive environment of the tent city, and the general sense of their impending failure seemed to sap all his strength. He slumped to a seat on a tree stump near the little shack and began to pick up little sticks from the ground, break them, and toss them away. That’s how Milli and Petra found him two hours later when they returned to the hut.

“Brogus, how long have you been sitting there and where is Dol?” asked Milli as she stood over the dwarf with a frown on her face. She had tied her hair back in a bun so tight that it stretched her face, she wore a thick coat covered with grime, and she appeared wan with little color in her face.

Brogus simply sat there without answering as he looked at the twig in his hand.

“Brogus,” she repeated and smacked the dwarf on the shoulder. “Where’s Dol?”

Brogus looked up with a glassy eyed gaze and shrugged his shoulders. “I’m not sure.”

Milli looked at Petra, "This place is killing us. The cold, the inactivity, the filth. We'll never get to see Corancil. We need to leave."

"That's what Dol said," said Brogus although his tongue felt like a thick layer of fur rested on it and the words seemed to ooze like tree sap.

Milli shook her head and turned to the old woman, "That's it. We're leaving tomorrow morning. We'll head south on our own. How far did you say the southern volcanoes are from here?"

"I've never been anywhere near that far south," said Petra with a shrug although her own complexion was pallid and her voice barely carried beyond her two friends. "I know there are some great lakes in the center of the continent and those are said to be ten thousand miles from here."

"If that's the center of the world then how much further is the southern tip?"

The old woman shrugged her shoulders and shook her head. "A lot further than that gold you gave me will take you."

"We gave you enough gold to last five years," said Milli with a fierce look at the old woman. "You can pretend it was an expensive lesson but you'll get nothing more from us. You can leave anytime you want."

Petra smiled and patted Milli on the back, although the Halfling girl turned and stepped away from the contact. "No, no. I'll stick with you for a while longer. This is proving to be a most interesting trip and I've seen those little pouches of gold coins and gemstones you carry. I could do far worse for travelling companions."

"Don't mention the gold," said Milli in a hushed voice. "If these cutthroats knew the value of our purses then our lives wouldn't be worth the price we paid for this shack. We need to go find your wagon up in the hills and get out of here."

"What about the mules? Do you want to bring them along as well," said Petra with a wicked grin as she asked the question in a toneless voice that belied her amusement.

Milli spun around and started to spit out something but managed to stifle her anger and just glared at Petra. After a moment Milli turned back to Brogus, "What did Dol say?"

"He said we need to get out of here. He was going to hire a ship," said Brogus with a nod of his head towards the crystal blue water in the bay.

Milli looked over to the water and the many ships that bobbed placidly on its surface. A few days after they arrived, a winter storm blew through the capital and half a dozen of the small ships crashed on the rocks killing many people. "I don't know about ships. I don't know how to swim and neither do any of you. That water is cold," she finished with a shiver and remembered her one attempt at a bath in a secluded little arm of the bay.

“A ship would be a faster way to get to the southern realms,” said Petra. “Although we’d have to leave the mules behind.”

Milli suddenly smiled and her yellow eyes shone so brightly that a pair of young soldiers stopped and looked at the pretty Halfling girl. Her smile turned into a snarl, “What are you looking at?” she snapped at them and put her hand to the dagger at her side.

The soldiers laughed, punched one another in the shoulder, and eventually wandered off. They wore sky blue jerkins with the silhouette of a small cat imprinted on the front and carried long swords in their belts. One of them called out over his shoulder, “See you later, cutie!”

“Argggh,” said Milli. “This place is filled with boys and all of them gross. I thought it was bad back at home but this is ridiculous. At least dwarves don’t just pinch you for no reason. Did you say Dol went to get passage on a ship?” she asked, turning to Brogus with narrowed eyes and lips tightened into a line.

Brogus nodded his head and continued to fiddle with a little stick in his hand.

Milli slapped the stick away, “Put that down. What is wrong with you?”

Brogus shrugged again and reached for the stick but Milli put her foot on it. He looked up at her lazily and smiled in a goofy way.

“That’s it,” said Milli. “There is something in the air or the water. We need to get out of here as quick as possible or we’ll be stuck forever.”

Petra raised her eyebrows, “From what I can tell he’s been drinking mostly beer and wine since we arrived.”

Milli shook her head, “He’s a dwarf! He can handle his beer. Their mothers spoon it to them when they’re babies to keep them sedated.”

Petra shrugged, “All these soldiers, nothing to do, it’s a recipe for trouble. Dwarf he may be but he’s a male, and males are all susceptible to the same vices.”

“That’s a fact,” said Milli and put her arm around the older woman. “We gals have to stick together.”

At that moment, Dol limped into camp. His right sleeve was torn and blood from a scrape on his knee had dried to a crusty brown. “Hello.”

“What happened to you,” said Milli rushing over to the dwarf.

“Some soldiers thought I might be an easy mark,” said Dol with a smile and his eyes blazed red for the briefest of seconds.

“Are you ok?” asked Milli as she shoved Brogus off the stump, sat Dol down, and began to examine the scrape. “It doesn’t look too bad.”

“You should see the other guy,” said Dol with a smile and Milli took a step back and looked at the dwarf with her arms folded over her chest. “It’s got to be the water in the place. Dol, you haven’t been drinking, have you?”

Dol shook his head, “No. The beer is vile but the water,” this with a glance to the glacial stream that poured tens of thousands of gallons into the bay every second, “is exceptional. I cannot fathom why anyone would drink the slop they serve in the common houses.”

“It’s not that bad,” said Brogus with a little smile.

“Yes, it is,” said Milli with a shake of her head. “You’re not drinking any more beer as long as we’re in Das’von.”

“We’re not in Das’von,” said Petra, “technically.”

Milli rolled her eyes. “You know what I mean. Dol, did you find a ship to get us out of this place?”

Dol nodded his head, “I booked passage on the Fists of Dogs.”

“What kind of ship is she?” asked Milli.

“Trader,” said Dol, suddenly reverting to his usual taciturn manner and volunteering no more information.

Milli sighed, “And where is she headed?”

“Stav’rol,” said Dol.

Milli looked to Petra.

“That’s about half way down the side of the continent,” said the old woman. “Or so I’ve heard. It’s in the right direction if you want to get to the southern realms but it’s still a long way from the volcanic regions of the far south.”

“It’s in the right direction and it’s out of this place,” said Milli with a firm nod of her little head. “Did you book for three or four?”

Dol looked up without an expression, glanced at Petra, and then said, “Four. Petra’s been a true guide and she knows the ways of the world better than us.”

“She overcharges though,” said Brogus suddenly finding his humor again and smiling in a lazy way.

“As a dwarf I would think you might learn to appreciate that quality,” said Petra with a lopsided little grin on her face as she poked at Brogus with a finger, “at least if everything I’ve ever learned about dwarves is true.”

Brogus laughed and nodded his head. "All right, you can come along, but not as a guide, as an equal partner in whatever we find. We're not here on a sightseeing trip; we're here to make a name for ourselves, riches, fame."

"Then it's settled," said Milli with a curt little nod of her head. "When does the ship leave?"

"In two days," replied Dol. "The captain said we can board any time after tomorrow night. They're loading cargo for the return trip and don't want passengers in the way."

"Ugghh," said Milli as she looked around the foul encampment. "Another day in this pit. I suppose it could be worse, at least we'll be rid of that lice-ridden fleabag your so-called friends saddled me with," she went on with squinting eyes at Brogus.

Brogus shrugged his shoulders, "They were some merchants I knew and we didn't exactly have a great deal of time to plan the escape before we left. It was a last second decision. You can't still blame me, can you?"

"Oh can't I?" said Milli but with a playful giggle.

"You're not mad," said Brogus with a smile. "I can tell when you're really mad and just pretending to be mad."

"I am angry right now but that's because the thought of getting out of this place broke my foul mood. Don't let it go to your head. I'll never forgive you for that mule."

Brogus laughed and chucked Dol on the shoulder with a light punch, "She can't stay mad, she's a Halfling and everyone knows they are jolly bakers."

Milli raised one eyebrow and looked at him with her strange yellow eyes. After a few seconds of this the young dwarf raised his hands and lowered his head, "Enough, enough, you win."

It was late that evening and Brogus was on watch - they kept turns staying awake after their first night in the camp when ruffians attempted to burgle their possession - when he heard approaching footsteps. He was inside the little hut but at the door, sitting on an old wood chair that was missing its back and acted more as a stool. It was sturdy enough and the one piece of furniture in the place when they originally took possession. Footsteps in the night weren't unusual in the encampment as soldiers, bored and mischievous, often drank too much and stumbled into the wrong hovel as they tried to find their way back home.

These footsteps were not the staggering strides of a drunken soldier but were steady, heavy, and purposeful. They approached the little shack and then stopped, next came the murmur of quiet voices, and finally the light tapping of a knock at the door.

Brogus looked over to the corner of the little shack where Milli and Petra slept on wood shavings they stole from behind a lumber mill north of the city and then to a wood board where Dol spent the

evenings and saw no one stirring. He took the short handle of a throwing axe in his right hand and went over to the door, "Who's there?"

"A messenger from the palace," said a quiet, calm voice. It spoke just loudly enough to easily penetrate the thin door but not so quietly as to lose any authority.

"What palace?" said Brogus, and he raised the axe higher while reaching forward with his left hand to the heavy bolt on the door. They put the bolt on themselves almost immediately upon purchasing the right to squat in the little hovel. The place was totally unsecured originally but a few modifications from Dol and Brogus changed that quickly enough. They weren't familiar with wood working but some of the same principals of stone masonry applied, at least enough for them to make the place safe from simple thieves.

"Corancil's palace, at the base of the Fountain of Graves," said the voice in the same quiet tone.

"I don't believe you," said Brogus and yanked the door open with a sudden movement. Brogus immediately took in the image of a tall, gangly man who wore a dark woolen overcoat. Even in the dim light of the moon the fine make of the cloak was obvious. The man stood quietly at the door and then bowed his head slightly, "May I come in? The camp is filled with ruffians and I fear for my safety."

Brogus shrugged his shoulders but took a step backwards to allow the man to pass through. He held the axe high but the man didn't seem to notice it as he ducked down to pass through the frame. Brogus realized he must be well over six feet in height and in the moonlight his skin seemed to shine a burnt orange color.

The visitor looked around the little shack for a moment and then walked over to the stove that dominated the center of the room where a kettle gently steamed. They kept hot water at the ready at all times during the long winter nights of the northern realms. "Can I pour myself a mug," he asked with a look to Brogus as his hand stopped, poised at the handle of the kettle.

Brogus again shrugged, "Go ahead. The mugs are over there," he said with a waving motion of his hand towards a little cupboard where half a dozen mugs rested on a plain wood panel that was partially warped to bend upwards at both the front and back.

"You might want to wake your friends," said the man as he poured steaming water into one of the mugs. "This concerns you all."

Brogus looked over to Milli and Petra but the two women were already awake and stared back at him with narrowed eyes in the dim light that came through the gratings on the stove. Dol was also awake and leaning on one elbow while he watched the newcomer closely. "We're up," said Milli with a little smile.

"Who are you?" said Brogus as the man finished stirring in some of the crushed coffee beans they kept in a little glass jar near the mugs.

“My name is unimportant,” said the man without expression on his face as he turned back to face Brogus. “I am here because First Citizen Corancil learned you are from Craggen Steep and hopes to make an alliance of sorts.”

“We’ve been trying to see him in the palace for weeks,” said Milli with a little frown as she sat further up on the wood shavings that served as a bed. “If he wanted an alliance why didn’t he just invite us?”

“I cannot say,” said the man with a shrug and a small smile. “Would you mind putting on a light so we don’t have to speak in the dark?”

“Turn around,” said Milli as she sat up and held a blanket up to her neck.

“Of course,” said the man and turned to face the wall of the one room shack and took a shallow sip from his mug.

“It won’t be easy to negotiate if we don’t know your name,” said Petra. Apparently the old woman had few qualms of modesty as she got up without ceremony exposing the flesh of her arms and legs in the thick woolen nightgown she wore. She threw a heavily patched cotton dress over her head and wiggled into it with a few shakes of her hip.

The man took another sip of his coffee, “I do not come to negotiate with you. I merely have a proposal from the First Citizen. You can accept it or reject it as you wish.”

“Why should we trust you?” said Milli now dressed in a wool jumper that buttoned up the front. It was a purchase made in town with some of their plentiful gold, both sturdy and comfortable although not particularly flattering to her slim frame.

The man said nothing for a few seconds as he sipped his coffee, “May I turn around now?”

“You can,” said Milli with a smile.

Petra went over to a lantern and quickly set the thing ablaze which brought the room into full focus.

The man turned around and then spoke, “It is the opinion of the First Citizen that nations must be built by men ... and women ... who are both talented and who have a strong sense in achieving things that are in their best self-interest.”

“What if it’s in my best interest to betray you? Or it is in your best interest to betray me?” said Dol, still sitting on the wooden plank but now fingering the handle of his hammer which was looped to the bed in such a way that the head did not touch anything combustible.

“That is the First Citizen’s point,” said the man with a wide smile that revealed a mouthful of perfectly straight, brilliant white, teeth. In the light it was clear he was rather gangly in appearance and perhaps in his mid-thirties. His long arms and delicate fingers did not fidget but seemed to rest in a natural position against his side. “Men ..and women,” this addition with a look to Milli and Petra, “who do not act in a manner that is towards their own benefit cannot be trusted to make good decisions. In fact, it is most

likely that when presented with any decision, those who are concerned with something besides their own concerns will chose poorly, so ingrained are the roots of their self-destructive behavior. The only people to be enlisted to aid in important matters are those accustomed to making decisions that improve their own life.”

“But ...,” said Milli and then stopped.

“What if our interests conflict?” finished the man for her with a gentle nod of his head.

“Yes,” said Milli nodding her head in agreement.

“Then he is fool to ask you for help. The First Citizen makes decision in his best interest and among those decisions was sending me here to make my offer.”

“But ...,” said Milli again, but proved unable to complete the sentence.

“People are not self-destructive; they make all their decisions hoping for the best outcome?” said the man again with an indulgent smile.

“Yes,” said Milli and frowned at his apparent mindreading abilities. She looked around for some sort of magical talisman that might aid in knowing the thoughts of others but saw nothing particularly suspicious on the man. He wore a slim gold ring on his left middle finger and no other sign of jewelry. His cloak was of the finest wool and its buttons sewed with expert precision, like a line of soldiers marching off to battle. His hair was brown and a bit ruffled from the windy evening breeze and his eyes were plain brown. There was nothing in the man to suggest a powerful mage but that might not mean anything.

He looked at her with those plain brown eyes and seemed to take in every part of her, “It is a fair question. The answer is that people are, by and large, quite self-destructive. Think back to all the people you’ve known over your lifetime and their penchant for making decisions that are detrimental to their life.”

“That doesn’t make sense. We do everything to better ourselves,” said Milli taking a step forward and clenching her fists somehow angry although she didn’t know exactly why.

“The rational thinker does, yes,” replied the man. “That is true and that is why I am here today to ask for your help. The First Citizens suspects that you are, like he, rational thinkers. Sadly, most people are unreasoning thinker and they make decisions based largely on what they want to be true. That is if they give it any thought at all. For the most part people are happy to repeat the musings of someone else and save themselves the effort of thinking. This naturally means that they are simply doing what is in the best interest of whoever told them how to think in the first place. Anyone who does things in someone else’s interest is, by definition, self-destructive.”

“There is some truth to that,” said Petra, as she walked over to the man and looked at him closely. “You have the bearing of a noble, not a messenger.”

“Can I not be a noble messenger?” he said with a laugh. “You have the bearing of an intelligent woman who preys upon the weaknesses in others while pretending to be a witchy woman.”

“Pretending?” said Petra although she smiled broadly despite herself as she realized the compliment.

The man shrugged, “Well, perhaps you can do a bit of magic. Many witches can brew tonics and the like, but it is the love potions and curse dolls that provide the vast majority of their income. Thus, proving my original point, I might add.”

Petra nodded her head and put her hand on her chin, “People do make poor decisions all too frequently. I see it all the time in my line of work. It never occurred to me that it was because they wanted to sabotage their own lives or that they were doing the bidding of someone else without regard to its effect on their lives. I’m not sure I completely agree with you on the matter, but I do see the truth of the argument. I would much like to meet the First Citizen and discuss these matters.”

“He is an extraordinarily busy man and cannot personally attend to every occasion, no matter the importance,” said the messenger. “But I will make certain he knows your desires. Perhaps, if our arrangement proves fruitful you will have that chance someday.”

“I don’t get it,” said Brogus lagging a bit in the conversation, his eyebrows close together and his nose wrinkled up. “Why would you trust us if you think we’ll only do what’s good for us?”

“It is not an easy thing to understand,” said the man with an easy smile as he looked towards Brugus. “It took me many years and many discussions with the First Citizen to fully understand the value of his philosophy. He only asks people to act in ways that will benefit their own lives. By working to benefit my life I end up helping those around me. Those people in turn act in their own best interest which serves the entire nation.”

“Now see here,” said Petra suddenly jumping back into the conversation. “There were rulers in Das’von before Corancil conquered it. Many men died in the wars that led to his rule. The previous kings faced death or exile. How is it in their interest to have died in this fight?”

“They did not surround themselves with people who could be trusted to act in their own self-interest and thus they suffered. There will be conflict. There will be winners and losers in life. The First Citizen makes decisions that will be to his benefit and picks allies who will do the same. What more can anyone do?”

“I still don’t think that it applies completely,” said Petra shaking her head as her voice trailed off into silence.

“Postulate your objections then,” said the man with the same calm expression of absolute certitude.

“There can be disagreement as long as both sides listen. Just because you try to make the best decision doesn’t mean that you always will do so. Knowledge is as important as action. Academics enjoy verbal jousting while men ... and women ... of action prefer activity to thought. The true ruler, the builder, the doer of deeds can be either a thug or a man of rational self-interest. The thug will build, will create, will

attract followers but their foundation is built on mud. A man who drinks wine at all times because it tastes good destroys himself. The rational man drinks enough to sustain himself and surrounds himself with those of a similar ilk," this last came as the man stood up straight, revealing a greater height than he first projected, and his plain brown eyes seemed to shine with passion. His jaw was firm and his hands were now clasped strongly together behind his back.

"I ... I ... let me think about it," finally lapsed Petra and none of the others said anything either as the room fell into silence. Brogus found himself standing up straight and felt the urge to salute, Dol slipped off the bed and also stood up straight, while Milli felt a sudden dizziness in her stomach.

"Tell us your proposition then," said Dol, finally breaking the stillness that engulfed the small chamber.

"The First Citizen has need of information about the ruler of a nomadic force in a great sandy desert to the south. This Black Rider poses a threat to the First Citizen's plans of conquest in the southern continent. He proposes to aid you in your journey south, in return you will learn as much as you can about this person and, should you survive, pass this along to agents of the First Citizen."

"Why us?" said Milli, folding her arms across her chest and staring at the man with narrowed eyes. "The First Citizen must have plenty of spies?"

"The First Citizens would very much like the alliance of people familiar with the location of Craggen Steep. Conquest is costly and the need for gold a never ending burden. And, of course, the south is your chosen destination in any case which sweetens the offer."

"I've never heard of Craggen Steep," said Dol in a steady tone.

"Yes, I'm aware that is the answer everyone from Craggen Steep gives when questioned about the place. I appreciate the drollness of it. Consider me impressed with your cleverness," said the man in a flat sort of tone. "Now, I've made my proposition. You may discuss it tonight. If you agree then you will not board your transport tomorrow and will await further instructions. In that happy event, I will arrange your trip to the south which, I assure you, will be far quicker and more comfortable than the vessel."

"Thank you for stopping by," said Milli as she shook off her stupor for a moment although she could not take her eyes off the charismatic messenger. "Are you sure we can't get your name?"

The man bowed and put down his coffee cup, "I'm sorry, but no. I hope that this alliance proves fruitful and we can meet again. You intrigue me," he said with a look to Milli and then a pointed glance to Dol who stood with the Hammer of Fire in his hand. "Farewell and best of luck whatever decision you make." With that, he turned, strode to the door which he opened with a quick motion, and left the room while shutting the door gently behind him.

Brogus followed him to the door, slid the bolt, and then turned to face his companions. "I didn't really follow all of that but I did hear something about an easier journey. I don't think I'd like sailing much."

Milli sat back down on the sawdust that served as a mattress and blinked her eyes a few times, "I don't agree with everything he said but I like the idea of it. We get a free ride to the southern continent faster than any other way and we're not really obligated to learn more about this Black Rider fellow. We can always just find the five volcanoes, kill Gazadum, and then be on our way. If anyone asks we can just say we didn't learn anything."

"Kill who?" said Petra.

"Oh," said Milli and covered her mouth.

"The first Fire Elemental," said Dol. "I will slay him with the Hammer of Fire and gain eternal glory."

"Ohhh," said Petra, "that Gazadum. I thought you meant a friend of my father's. Short fellow, round belly."

At this the entire group broke into gales of laughter, even Dol.

A day later the four waited in the little ramshackle hut and everyone except Dol nervously looked back and forth at one another. The tall dwarf with the little greenish apples in his hair and beard stood quietly by the door with the Hammer of Fire hanging from his belt. They had rigged a little flange that pushed the hammer away from his leg when he walked so as to avoid scorching his clothes. During their trip north to Das'von and after a great deal of experimentation with the great weapon they determined that even Dol was incapable of wielding the thing for more than a minute before the intensity of the heat built up to a point that he was unable to hold it any longer. Thus he tended to keep it on the loop at his belt until it was immediately needed.

"What if he doesn't come?" said Brogus with an anxious look at Milli. His eyes darted back and forth between the two women and the furrows on his brow were deep. "We still have time to catch the ship."

"He'll come," said Milli. "Did he strike you as the sort to renege on an agreement?"

"What on an agreement?" said Brogus.

"Renegade, not follow through," said Milli with a shake of her long hair. She apparently found fresh water in the shanty town, or possibly bathed in the freezing cold glacial runoff, because her gold hair shone brightly and curled in long, luxurious waves. She had a pair of green ribbons in it and wore a lighter-weight dress that showed off her trim but firm figure and even wore a pair of pinch-toed shoes with long heels that increased her height by several inches.

"You look pretty," said Brogus as he came over to look at her. "And you smell nice too," this last as he reached towards the ribbons in her hair.

"Don't touch!" said Milli and took a step backwards while raising her hands toward the stout dwarf. "You'll wreck it. And, it's not a big thing. I just needed to clean up a bit if we're going on a journey. It might be my last chance for a while."

“Rap,” came a firm knock at the door.

Everyone in the shack stopped and looked at each other, “Here we go,” said Brogus with a broad smile as he went to the door and opened it.

A tall man, perhaps in his fifties, with a heavy black cloak, dark eyes, and a pock marked face stepped into the room and looked around. “I’m to facilitate your transportation to the southlands. Are you ready?”

“Who are you?” asked Milli with a long frown on her face.

“I am Robel,” said the man. “But it doesn’t make any difference really. I am to facilitate your transport. Are you ready?”

“Where’s the messenger?” asked Milli as she tried to peer around the tall man to the doorway behind.

“I’m not sure who you mean,” said Robel with a shrug of his shoulders and in a neutral tone. “Are you ready to go, or not?”

“The man we first spoke with,” said Milli with a little stamp of her foot. “We liked him.”

The man in black cocked his head at the Halfling girl, “It’s not my concern if you like me or not. I’ve been asked to transport you to the southern realm. Are you ready to leave or do you need more time to prepare? Our window of opportunity is short.”

“Fine,” said Milli and pursed her lips as she took one last, hopeful look around the man to the area outside the door. “We’re ready to go.”

“Follow me then,” said Robel turning to exit the little building.

“Do we have everything?” said Brogus taking one last frantic look around the little hut. The rotted wood, boarded up and broken windows, the sputtering stove, and all the other amenities of the last few weeks stared back at him in silence.

“Is there anything here we want to keep?” said Milli with a little curl of her upper lip. “The sooner the memory of this place is gone from my mind the better. Leave it all except your gear.”

“Fine by me,” said Brogus and he turned to follow the man outside. The wind howled through the little shanty village and the poorly built structures shuddered with the force of it. On more than one occasion a brick or heavy stone tumbled off a roof of one of the better built structure and injured passersbys. Over the last couple of weeks they learned to listen carefully for the sound of sliding masonry and duck under low eaves to avoid a braining.

The man strode off in the opposite direction of the great city and they followed him on foot for half an hour with no sign of their destination. They soon left the shanty-town village where the soldiers lived and passed onto the open plains where the ground was somewhat spongy with a soft grassy material.

“Where are we going?” Brogus finally asked as he moved up to stand next to Robel.

“Transportation circle,” replied the tall man with the dark robes.

“What’s that?” asked Brogus as he looked keenly ahead trying to spot anything that might be a transportation circle, whatever that might be.

“It’s a circle for transportation,” said Robel.

“Thanks,” said Brogus with a snort and looked back to his companions and spread his arms out with hands up while rolling his eyes.

The man laughed, “All right, all right. I suppose there isn’t a big need for all the mystery. Prepare yourself for you are about to witness first-hand in just a few minutes anyway. Corancil is in the process of building portals all over the northern realms that can send a person from one to the other almost instantaneously.”

“I don’t believe it,” said Brogus narrowing his eyes as he stopped walking and falling a few paces behind Robel.

“It doesn’t matter what you believe,” said the dark-cloaked man with a shrug of his shoulders. His pace did not diminish. “You will see soon enough, and, as I said, our window of opportunity is not wide. The link to the realms outside their immediate influence is somewhat ... shaky.”

Soon enough they reached the low outskirts of even the small forts that marked the very edge of the military encampments and now tall pine trees and spongy ground cover made up most of the terrain. To their right the glistening blue of the bay was just visible between hills now and again while behind them the smoke of the city hung in a low haze. “It’s just a few more minutes to the site,” said Robel.

“I’m not sure I like the idea of being ported from one side of the continent to the other with magic,” said Petra to Milli, and the Halfling girl nodded her head. “I’m still trying to figure out how we are going to be sent to the south if these portals only work between one and the other and Corancil hasn’t built any down there yet.”

“That’s a good question!” chimed in Brogus who picked up the conversation.

“Here we are,” said Robel as they rounded a slight bend and suddenly the portal appeared.

Thirty or forty rectangular stones stood on a cleared patch of ground in a rough circle around a central rock. The stones shone unblemished white in the sunshine and almost blinded their vision even in the faded light of a winter morning in the northern realm. Each stone, except the central monolith, looked exactly like the other so much so that there was a strange illusion of looking in some sort of mirror in a mirror.

“By Davim,” said Brogus and pulled up short as he stared at the circle.

“What sort of stone is that?” said Dol and immediately moved forward toward the nearest of the monoliths.

“White marble,” said Robel as he moved forward with the tall dwarf. “Is that an apple in your hair?”

“No,” said Dol and brushed away the hand that moved towards his head. Within a stride he stood at the first of the stones and ran his hand up and down its surface with gentle motions.

“It is an apple,” said the black cloaked man and started to reach towards Dol again but the tall dwarf turned and gazed at him with, not hatred or anger, but simply with such a look of unadulterated menace that Robel put his hand back down. “Not that it matters, just a curiosity.”

“What sort of masonry could produce this,” said Brogus coming up to Dol and likewise running his palm over the smooth surface of the white stone.

“Magic,” said Dol in a low voice. “Very, very powerful magic.”

“But how?” said Brogus. “We dwarves are the finest workers of stone and I’ve never see the like of this in ... our home.”

Dol shook his head and leaned close to smell the stone, “I don’t know. But it’s this Corancil that’s doing it.” Milli joined the two dwarves at the stone while Petra slowly followed Robel towards the center of the circle. Dol continued, “If he’s got the power to make these then maybe he has the power to unite the northern realm. Power to conquer the world.”

“Power beyond anything I’ve ever seen,” said Brogus his hand still gently touching the white marble.

“Maybe we should find out as much about this Black Rider as possible,” said Milli as her eyes took a faraway look for a moment. “Just to play it safe in case we ever do get back to Corancil. Or his messenger.”

Brogus nodded his head and Dol did as well although both dwarves seemed loathe to remove their hands from the surface of the stone. They touched it as a mother might caress her newborn infant.

“It hasn’t even been fully ensorcelled,” said Robel with a tight smile as he watched them from his position at the center of the circle. “You have no idea the trouble it took to manufacturer those stones.”

“Yes, yes I do,” said Dol and finally turned away from the monolith and walked over to the center of the circle. The orange-gray rock in the middle of the white stones stood in stark contrast to those around it, for it was raw, unshaped, unpolished, with hematite veins thick across its surface. Energy seemed to crackle on its surface as they approached and everyone felt the hairs on their hands and necks stand on end.

“Put your hand on the rock,” said Robel, “time is short.”

The four looked at each other but then did as instructed. The mage raised his arms and smiled broadly:

Dark stone, white light
Bring forth the calls of night
Fly east, fly west, fly left, fly right
My mind's eye your final flight
Go now, with speed, do not ...

Suddenly the voice of the wizard stopped and a wall of heat and light engulfed them.