

Sample Chapter

“We have reached the time of decision,” said Master On as they stood on a road hewn through the solid rock of the Maw. It twisted and turned among the detritus of the volcano; one direction leading to their left and the other to their right.

“Ariana,” said Lousa looking at the girl while keeping her face calm and quiet.

“I know,” said Ariana with her hands on her hips and she looked back and forth in both directions.

“To the left is Hot Rock,” said Aydon.

“I said I know,” repeated Ariana with a glare.

“If we are to continue towards the Salt Fens we’ll need to go back into my father’s lands for a little while at least. We cannot crest the peak of the Maw. It is certain death to be exposed to the fumes at that altitude,” said Aydon.

“I know,” said Ariana again.

“You’ve had nearly a week to make up your mind,” prodded Lousa lifting a finger and pointing it at Ariana. “You have to decide one way or the other. To Hot Rock and Edorin so he can destroy that thing once and for all or to the Salt Fen where we will hide until this war is over.”

“What if Lord Thotmes wins?” asked Ariana. “We’ll have to come out eventually.”

“Then he will take the Black Sphere for his own,” said Aydon with a frown and a glance back from whence they came. The mountain was difficult terrain unless traveling on the road so painstakingly carved by the monks for the trading wagons that brought gold in exchange for the weapons Edorin forged.

“Do you think he will win?” asked Lousa. “Your father was taking the army to the north.”

“My father told you he was taking the army to the north,” said Aydon turning his head to look at her. He smiled. “A man might say anything.”

“He lied?” asked Ariana.

“It is not wise to divulge too much information on the movements of your armies to anyone, even if they are not the enemy,” said Aydon. “I am tempted to tell you that my father merely suspected that Lord Thotmes planned to attack. That he took some measures in preparations. But that would be a lie and even a short week with my old master,” this with a look at Master On, “has reminded me that I should be honest with my friends. Father knew that Lord Thotmes was going to attack immediately after the trade conference. He moved our troops to the north because we could not stand against the combined onslaught Thotmes has prepared.”

“But he can’t hide in the north for long,” said Lousa looking at the boy. “He will need food and supplies. He will need to strike back or Thotmes will simply claim the territory and the Queen might support him. He is young and vigorous, your father is neither.”

“My father’s yearly donations to the Queen’s coffers have some influence, Lousa,” said Aydon with a smile. “A nation without friends is a man alone. The man, no matter his strength, cannot stand alone against brothers with a united purpose. Likewise for a nation, or so my father tells me.”

“Your father has friends,” said Master On. “He has many friends and powerful ones at that. We have noticed significant troop movements among the hobgoblins to the south and west of the Maw. Our own men are formed into strike teams that harass Thotmes from every hidden grove of trees and unseen valley.”

“My father has friends,” said Aydon with a smile at Master On. “And he is grateful for them.”

“Why would you help Baron Avakubia?” said Lousa to the yellow-clad monk. “You are more than capable of defending the Maw yourselves. I saw you defeat those soldiers.”

“A minor skirmish,” said Master On. “Do not let a single, small victory convince you the war is won. Baron Avakubia removed the tariffs and rebuilt the roads so that the whole world could come to the Maw and purchase the goods made by Edorin. Before Avakubia we paid high fees and bandits ruled the paths from the interior of Doria to our lands. Perhaps we can defend the Maw from an army but can we defend the paths that lead to us? Can we convince merchants to come to our doors if the roads are unsafe?”

“I see your point,” said Lousa. “I never really considered those ... those sorts of things.”

“Economics,” said Aydon.

“What’s that?” asked Ariana.

“It is a complex subject,” said the boy with a grin and again found his gaze lingering a bit too long on her newly budding assets. She was a fierce girl and independent. He found he liked that.

“What are you looking at?” she said with narrowed eyes as she noted the direction of his gaze. The boy snapped out of his reverie with a jerk of his head.

“Nothing,” he said turning away and blushing.

“Don’t try and change the subject, young lady,” said Lousa putting her hand in front of her mouth to hide her own smile. “We have to decide one way or the other. Go into hiding or see what Edorin can do with that thing.”

“If we show it to Edorin do we have to destroy it?” asked the girl of everyone in general.

The adults looked at one another but it was Master On who spoke, “The decision is yours. It will be so until you no longer possess the Sphere.”

“Then let’s go and see what Edorin has to say,” said Ariana nodding her head. “Maybe he won’t even know how to destroy it.”

“I doubt that,” said Lousa. “He has the fire of the volcano in his hand. There is nothing he cannot destroy I would imagine.”

Ariana looked to Aydon who shrugged his shoulders and then to Master On.

“I cannot say what is within the power of Edos Edorin and what is not,” said the monk quietly his gaze impassive as always.

“Then let’s go already,” said Ariana. “I’m tired of standing around doing nothing. It’s boring. Maybe we’ll find something exciting.”

“I have no doubt there will be excitement,” said Master On. “I find that it is highly overrated. One prefers a hot cup of tea and a honey-cake.”

“Not me,” said Ariana and strode down the road towards Hot Rock. “Do you remember when we were here last time,” she said to Lousa. “We stayed at that funny inn with stilts and Tylan killed Khemer with his hammer.”

“I remember it well,” said Lousa with a faraway look in her eyes. “I wish Shamki was here.”

“Lousa loves Shamki,” chanted Ariana in a sing-song little voice.

“What if I do?” asked Lousa her green eyes light and shining.

“Eww,” said Ariana. “He’s ugly.”

“And I’m beautiful,” said Lousa looking down at her round breasts. “What does that mean to love?”

“Eww,” repeated Ariana as she skipped down the road.

“You have a boyfriend?” said Aydon looking up toward the now cloud enclosed peak of the volcano.

“I suppose you could say that,” said Lousa and her eyes went soft for a moment. “He is a good man and has been kind to me. That is more than most.”

Aydon nodded his head. “I would think men were nice to you all the time,” he said as they continued down the road. Heavy rubble lay both up the slope and down but the monks apparently spent a great deal of time keeping it clean despite what must be near constant disruption.

“Oh, they are nice enough when they want something.”

Aydon nodded his head again, “Yes, I see your point. Still, Lousa, there have to have been plenty of men who wanted to marry you over the years.”

Lousa turned to face Aydon her face was suddenly a mask of rage. She opened her mouth and shut it again and then stalked off in the direction of Ariana.

“Master On?” said Aydon turning to the monk.

“It is said we Thilnog Monks are among the wisest men in the world,” he said and then smiled. “But women, well, you’ll have to ask someone else.”

Aydon laughed aloud. “True words, Master On. I am glad to be with you again. My time on the mountain made me who I am today.”

“You made yourself,” said Master On. “There were many paths open to you, there are still many directions from which to choose, but you chose to be loyal to your adoptive father, to the nation and the territory to which you belong. These are honorable decisions and a dishonorable man could not do such a thing.”

“What other choice was there? To take the path of Jaylen?”

“That was a choice,” said Master On. “He spent time with me on the Maw as well, your father sent him to learn the ways of the Thilnog Monks but he made a different decision than you.”

“He was older, he knew mother better and father. He witnessed the events leading to ... to their deaths. I was just a child and they had less of an impact upon me. I do not blame him for his decision. His life is his own to lead.”

“It is likely he travels with Lord Thotmes. That the fates might bring the two of you together.”

“I have thought much upon that subject,” said Aydon and he looked to the ground where one foot led the next up the road to wherever it ended.

Master On asked no more questions.

They made excellent progress on the road as compared to their slow journey scrambling over rocks and debris, and within a few hours found themselves on the outskirts of Hot Rock. Thick metal sheets covered the roofs of all the buildings which stood on long stilts around which sat massive, coiled springs.

“I must report events,” said Master On taking his leave almost immediately, and the other monks followed him further into the city.

“What about us?” said Ariana watching them go with a frown.

“Come on,” said Aydon smiling widely. “I lived her for almost two years when I was your age. We’ll take a room at the inn and try to make an appointment with the trade-master.”

Ariana’s eyes opened wide, “I remember him. I don’t like him.”

“He’s not so bad. It’s his job to watch all the money so that’s hard,” said Aydon.

“He tried to kill us all,” said Lousa her green eyes dark and stormy.

“Oh,” said Aydon stopping suddenly and turning to her. “Well that certainly puts a different light on the matter. You’re sure he tried to kill you?”

“The last time we were here we had the Staff of Naught. Remember the story Ariana told you the other night?”

Aydon nodded his head, “Yes, I can see that. You’re with me now and it will be different, although it doesn’t hurt to be prepared.”

“Why wouldn’t he want to just take the Black Sphere from us and give it to Lord Thotmes?” asked Ariana. “That’s what he wanted to do with the Staff of Naught. He wanted to give it to that crazy darkling girl.”

“I doubt Thotmes could offer enough money to entice the trade-master,” said Aydon, “but it is a possibility. Lorim is a man with much information. I don’t think he would dare go against Edos Edorin or Master On. But as I said, it doesn’t hurt to consider all possibilities. For now let’s get a room at the Camel Sway and get some sleep. It’s been a long time since I roughed it on the mountain like that.”

“Agreed,” said Lousa nodding her head and smiling at the memory of the strange inn that stood in the center of the bizarre little town.

They made their way over to the biggest structure in the town which stood on dozens of stilt legs and boasted an enormous sign with a picture of two children atop a camel that leaned precariously to one side.

Lousa looked at Ariana whose eyes were suddenly damp, “Remembering Shalalee?” she asked and put her hand on Ariana’s shoulder.

Ariana nodded her head. “Are people going to die this time too?”

Lousa started to shrug her shoulder but then nodded her head instead. “It’s likely people we know are already dead if what Aydon says is true.”

“Do you think it is true? Do you think I caused this war?”

“No,” said Lousa nodding her head. “I mean yes. I mean that was two questions! I think what Aydon said is probably true to some degree. Lord Thotmes is young and ambitious and he probably knew about the Black Sphere. Maybe even the Warlord of Tarlton did pay him to invade our lands but I suspect Thotmes would have done it Sphere or no Sphere. Baron Avakubia is smarter than I realized, much smarter, and more powerful as well, but he is considered weak and that makes those around him ambitious. If not Thotmes then someone else. No, this war isn’t your fault anymore than having the Black Sphere is your fault.”

"I was the one who used the Staff of Naught against Seymour at that temple. If I hadn't done that none of this would have happened. If I had just let him destroy the Staff everyone would still be alive. It's all my fault," she spat out in one breath and suddenly began weeping loudly.

"Come along, Ariana," said Lousa hugging the girl more tightly. "I understand. Let's get to our room." She gave a little flicker with her head to Aydon who was standing wide-eyed nearby and he quickly walked over to a dark-haired man standing in front of a wall filled with keys. They spoke for a moment, Aydon passed over some silver coins, and then the boy returned with a pair of the keys, one of which he handed to Lousa as the girl continued to quietly snifle.

Ariana and Lousa made their way through the hallway, "Don't be so hard on yourself," said Lousa. "Master On is a hard man and he didn't have to say all those things."

"They were true!" sobbed Ariana. "I want to destroy it. I don't want anyone else hurt because I was selfish. I'm so sorry. I didn't mean it when I called you stupid. I don't know why I get so angry."

"It's all right," said Lousa patting her on the shoulder and fitting the key into the little lock on the room. "Let's get inside and get some clean clothes on. They have a hot springs, do you remember that? We'll get cleaned up and you'll feel better in the morning."

"I won't," said Ariana quietly staring into the room. "I won't feel better until it's gone. I don't want any part of this anymore."

"That's good," said Lousa. "When this war is over we'll go back to Iv's Folly and find you a husband."

"Eww," said Ariana but she laughed.

They took long baths in the hot springs and ate a sumptuous meal. Aydon was charming and seemed to know everyone in Hot Rock. He promised to take Ariana on a tour of the town the next day and told them of arrangements to meet with Lorim soon.

That night as she lay in bed she felt happy for a moment and then the voice came to her again, "Ariana," it said.

"I knew you would talk to me again," she said quietly looking over to where Lousa lay sleeping. The woman's long hair spread out onto her pillow and in the moonlight that streamed in one of the windows she looked even more beautiful than normal.

"I am sorry," said Shinamar.

"Why?" asked Ariana opening her eyes although she knew she would not see the man. He was only a voice, both distant and nearby at the same time.

"I used you to pursue my own agenda before," said Shinamar. "I had hoped I would not have to do so again."

"There are no gods," said Ariana her eyes fixed on the ceiling of the room.

"This is true," said the voice. "But perhaps I did not impress upon you the gravity of the danger you face, that the world faces. There might not be gods but there are beings nearly as powerful as people think the gods to be. The Mistress of the Abyss is now more powerful than you can imagine. She has acquired allies and through my own doings I'm afraid to say."

"I will kill her then," said Ariana clenching her teeth and remembering the blue-skinned woman and her Throne of Bones.

"Good," said the voice of the ancient denizen of Das'von.

"They say you betrayed Elucidor, that you destroyed your own city."

"Part of that is true," said the voice. "As often is with stories. I wish I could tell you everything, I wish I could explain the circumstances that led me to do such things, but I do not have time, Ariana. Now that I have made my presence known in this world I am pursued more briskly."

"Can I help," whispered the girl and Lousa stirred in her sleep.

"You have already helped more than you can know, Ariana. I am grateful to you and ashamed of my manipulations at the same time. However, on to the matter at hand, the Black Sphere."

"Yes," said Ariana reaching under her pillow where she carefully put the thing each night.

"There is much danger in your future."

"Edorin will destroy it; I have made up my mind."

"Do not pin your hopes on the Edos," said Shinamar. "If I am not mistaken he has greater concerns occupying his thoughts. I suspect he will not want to take on such an arduous task right now. There is an opportunity here to strike a blow against those who think they are gods."

"Tell me how," said Ariana and her hand found the Black Sphere and she felt its darkness swelling over her. "I want to help."

"Good," said the voice. "I have dallied too long, Ariana. Know that I am here and I will do what I can to help you. When things are at their darkest I will be there to protect you. I might not be able to save you from all harm but I will do my best. Will you remember at least that?"

"I will," said Ariana and she wasn't sure if Shinamar left or if she simply fell asleep, but she heard from him no more.

In the morning Aydon was waiting for them in the common hall and they feasted on a sumptuous breakfast of eggs, bread, and jam served on sturdy but finely made ceramic plates and they drank orange juice apparently shipped up all the way from the Delius coast of southern Doria.

"Breakfast for visitors in Hot Rock is more luxurious than in my house," said Aydon with a grin as he ate with the appetite only a teenage boy knows. "When I was taking my monkish vows the fare was not this

good but I suppose they like to keep the paying customers well fed.” This last he said with a wave of the hand not occupied in shoveling food toward the people who sat around them. There were fat merchants with heavy purses, hard-bitten warriors waiting for special order weapons, wizards, noblemen from all parts of Doria, and strange creatures as well, darklings, gnomes, an elf with blue hair past his waist, and others. All waiting for either for delivery of items crafted at the forge of Edorin or negotiating to place an order.

“I’ve heard the waiting list is up to three years now,” said Aydon his words spilling out with a great deal of the eggs he was eating.

“Chew with your mouth closed and don’t talk while you’re eating. Were you raised by wolves?” said Lousa in a stern voice while shaking her head.

Aydon smiled, chewed, swallowed, and then said, “Yes, mother.”

“She’s always on about manners,” said Ariana although she waited until after she downed her food before speaking.

“If you want to make a good impression it doesn’t help if you spit your breakfast all over your guests,” said Lousa. “Manners are important.”

“Yes, mother,” said Ariana and Aydon laughed and the two made faces at one another.

Lousa rolled her eyes, “Call me what you will but I will not allow you to go into this world with the manners of a billy-goat. I remember when you first came to me. That brother of yours had barely taught you how to use a fork, let alone a knife.”

“Back when I was your age ...,” said Aydon mimicking Lousa’s voice.

Ariana snorted spewing out a mix of eggs and juice which splattered across the table and Aydon began laughing so hard he risked falling out of his chair.

“That’s disgusting,” said Lousa shaking her head and reaching for some napkins.

“That’s disgusting,” repeated Ariana again coming fairly close to matching the older woman’s voice.

“People are looking at you and they don’t like what they’re seeing,” said Lousa frowning as she looked at the other guests enjoying their fine breakfast.

This only seemed to encourage the two children to laugh even harder.

“Fine, I’m going into town. There’s some shopping I’d like to do. We have the meeting with Edorin tomorrow but you can do whatever you want today, Ariana. Remember to wear a helmet when you go outside. The volcano can launch rocks at any time. Aydon, don’t let her talk you into not wearing it.”

“Yes, mother,” said both Aydon and Lousa at the same time and this sent them into another fit of giggles.

Lousa stood up, "I'm glad to at least see you're in a better humor this morning. We'll be done with this thing once and for all after tomorrow and I can't say that I'm bothered by that one little bit. And don't either of you say, 'yes, mother', or I'll start acting like a mother and punish you." With that she stood and strode out of the room.

"Is she always so bossy?" asked Aydon with a broad grin.

Ariana nodded her head, "She makes me wear shoes with heels when we visit the mayor."

"You should see what father makes we wear for trade meetings and diplomatic missions," said Aydon shaking his head. "It's awful and it's always hot and sweaty in the tents with all these old people talking about economics and taxes and tariffs. I have to study books!"

"Lousa makes me take music lessons! I have to sing and play the lute, it's terrible, it's not fair. I don't want to sing and dance. She even made me learn how to sew!"

Aydon laughed, "I don't know who has it worse," he said but did not let the conversation slow the steady shoveling of food into his mouth. "Gosh the food is good here."

"How do they have eggs? Orange juice?" asked Ariana looking at the many tables filled with patrons gorging themselves on the fine fare. "What are we going to see in town? When I was last here I didn't get to see much."

"The people here have lots of money," said Aydon nodding his head and smiling although he managed to swallow his food before he continued on. "Even the poorest person in Hot Rock is richer than most people in Doria. My father says that's what learning economics will do. He says if we increase trade we increase wealth and people are happier."

"Doesn't it just make the rich people happier?"

"Look around you," said Aydon with a wave of his hand.

Ariana looked and saw not only the customers but also the people who served them and there did seem to be an aura of happiness and efficiency about the place.

"If you live in Hot Rock it is because you want to live here. If you have a job it is because you are good at your job. People are paid highly so there is always someone wanting a job."

"Don't people come here looking for a job but can't get one? What happens to them?" asked Ariana.

"Not as many as you might imagine," Aydon. "The environment is harsh and people are killed by landslides and falling rocks. Even then there are those who unwilling to work hard enough and they must eventually leave. There is no room in Hot Rock for those who don't want to work."

"Oh," said Ariana.

“Enough of this talk of money and economics,” said Aydon leaning back in his chair and patting his stomach. “My belly is full. Do you wish to see the town? There is much to look at and many strange but wonderful people to meet. I’ll show you my dorm room when I was training under Master On. You will laugh at its size.”

“I was an orphan growing up until we met Lousa,” said Ariana meeting the boy’s gaze. “We lived in the streets and often had no home at all.”

Aydon nodded his head, “I see. C’mon! Let’s go see Hot Rock. It’s been almost two years since I was last here and I want to see how much the place has changed.”

Ariana smiled and the two wandered out of the Camelback Inn remembering to don the little steel helmets that everyone in town wore when not inside a shelter.

Aydon first took her to the monkish enclave where the Thilnog Monks made their home. Master On was not there and the place seemed to be almost empty although there were rooms for dozens of young acolytes.

“Where is everyone?” said Ariana as they wandered around the complex that was largely built into the side of the volcano.

“Probably fighting the war,” said Aydon while looking into his old room.

“How many monks are there?”

“Several hundred,” said Aydon. “They don’t all live here at the monastery. This is just where young acolytes get their training. Many live in little caves on the mountain or spend their lives traveling from one part of the volcano to the other. Some are like me who just come for a few years, train, and then leave to go about their real lives. Although I suppose part of us is always here.”

“What do you mean?” asked Ariana.

“Part of me will always be here, with the monks, with Master On, with this place. I learned so much. I’m not an official Thilnog Monk but I guess I am in my heart forever. If I ever become ruler of my father’s lands I’ll do whatever I can to help them.”

Ariana nodded her head. “Do you think that’s why your father sent you here?”

“I don’t know,” said Aydon with a shrug. “Maybe he wanted that or maybe he wanted the Monks to know they had a friend in the valley. Maybe he just thought it would be good for me. My father isn’t always easy to understand, but when he does something it’s usually the right thing to do.”

“I hate that,” said Ariana thinking of all the times Lousa was right.

“Yeah,” said Aydon with a laugh. “Hey, let’s go see Amalg! I bet you’ve never met anyone like him before and I’d love to see what he’s been up to lately.”

“Who is Amalg?”

Aydon shook his head, “He’s not easy to describe. He’s an artist, a sculptor. He uses rocks from the mountain to make ... beautiful ... disturbing art.”

“Disturbing?”

“Come on, Ariana,” said Aydon. “I told you it’s hard to describe. You’ll have to see for yourself. It’s on the far side of town. Amalg likes his solitude and some people find him unpleasant to be around.”

Ariana started to ask more questions but realized that Aydon was not going to give any satisfactory answers and so busied herself taking in the sights as they wandered through the strange town. Almost all of the buildings were on the stilts with springs which apparently protected them from the periodic volcanic upheavals and thick steel plates provided cover for them.

“They’re not just one piece of steel,” said Aydon noting her gaze.

“The roofs you mean?”

Aydon nodded, “They’re actually five and six different layers of steel with gaps. Some are filled with water and others are empty. Steel is much stronger when gapped like that. If a rock comes flying down it might penetrate the first couple of layers but it rarely gets through to the building itself unless of tremendous size.”

“Really?” said Ariana. “I would have thought thicker was better.”

Aydon shook his head, “It sounds crazy, but it’s not. If there’s anything about the properties of metal that Edorin doesn’t know, then it’s not worth knowing.”

“Who is Edorin?” asked Ariana looking up at Aydon with wide eyes. The mountain air and perhaps the hot springs bath seemed to agree with her as her cheeks were rosy although the head of frizzed hair lay unseen beneath her helmet. “Last time we were here I didn’t get to meet him. He’s a dwarf, right? He came here a long time ago, that’s what Tanner told me.”

“That’s right,” said Aydon with a nod of his head. “But, honestly, I don’t know much more than that. He came here nearly thirty years ago according to what I’ve heard. He was a wandering dwarf, a master smith, Edos is what the dwarves call them, and he settled here on the mountain to build his own forge. Before that only the monks lived here.”

Ariana suddenly stopped, “Why do the Monks live here? I mean, it’s an awful place to live with the volcano and it smells terrible. Why would anyone want to live here?”

“You don’t know the story of Eberus Thilnog?” said Aydon walking forward for a few more steps before he realized the girl wasn’t at his side. He turned and looked back at her. “No one’s ever told you?”

She shook her head.

“He was a general in the armies of Queen Akiona IV over a century ago. He was from one of the noblest families in the entire Kingdom and was engaged to the Queen’s daughter, Onolodia.”

“The Queen?”

“No, not Onolodia V, that’s the current Queen. This was another girl with that name. Anyway, there was a war with the hobgoblins back then. This part of the kingdom wasn’t settled like it is now. The hobgoblins and we Dorians fought back and forth over this territory many times. General Eberus led the armies to a great victory but the Queen wasn’t satisfied. She sent him secret orders to gather the captured hobgoblins and their families for resettlement in the west but when they arrived they were to be slaughtered.”

“No!” said Ariana. “The Queen wouldn’t do that.”

Aydon shrugged, “I wasn’t around back then but that’s the story I’ve heard and it sounds possible to me. I’ve seen what a bad ruler can do.”

“So Thilnog refused and settled on the mountain instead?”

Aydon shook his head, “General Eberus was a soldier, and a soldier’s duty is to obey orders. He assembled the hobgoblins, just like the Queen wanted, and he had them slaughtered, man, woman, and child.”

“I don’t understand,” said Ariana staring up at Aydon. “I thought he was going to be the hero of the story.”

“He was a soldier, a man of honor.”

“No one with honor would kill people like that!”

“If he disobeyed the direct order of his queen he would be a traitor. Not only would his life as a soldier be over but he would have no honor left either. If you go back on your sworn word once, you can never be trusted again.”

“So if he obeyed the order he’s the bad guy of the story! Why are the monks of the volcano named after him?”

“After he carried out the order, he resigned. He told his soldiers that he would no longer take orders from any man or woman. That his life was his own to lead and if they wanted to follow him they could. There was a fight between those who joined him and those who stayed loyal to the Queen. He was driven back onto the mountain and there he made his last stand with the few remaining men left with him.”

“They won?”

“They were killed almost to the man but one of his soldiers survived the final onslaught and made a home here on the mountain. He lived for many years and others who found they did not like the orders

they were given joined him. Soldiers, yes, but sometimes criminals also, never-do-wells, and the ilk. They vowed to defend the volcano and they swear allegiance to no man ... or woman. Over the years their ranks grew but mainly because no one else really wanted to live on the mountain for the reasons you laid out earlier."

"That's an awful story," said Ariana staring at Aydon with fiercely glowing eyes. "Thilnog died, he killed the hobgoblins, only one man survived. What good was it all?"

"Not all stories have happy endings," said Aydon with a shrug. "Not the real ones at least."

"I don't like it," she said. "I'll pretend he didn't kill the women and children and he moved onto the mountain and lived happily ever after."

"That's the version of the story that you would tell a child," said Aydon. "You can choose whichever you want."

"I will," said Ariana and turned away from the young man.

Aydon began walking forward again and they moved side-by-side together for long minutes until they rounded a corner and a small yard filled with oddly-shaped statuary greeted them.

"We're here," said Aydon.

"I'd guessed as much," said Ariana in a catty tone of voice.

Aydon turned sharply to say something, then thought better of it, and turned back towards the yard, "Amalg! Are you here?"

"Maybe he's not here?" said Ariana looking back and forth to the small house, on stilts as usual, that stood near a rock wall that delineated the border of the sculpture garden. There were dozens of the things, no hundreds, some small, some twice the size of a man, scattered about the yard in apparent haphazard fashion. "I don't see anything so disturbing about them."

"Ay-don," came a monotone voice and stepping from around the back of the house came a strange creature with the head of a fish; the mouth of which held four writhing tentacles that waved aimlessly in the air.

"Eeek!" shrieked Ariana and dodged behind Aydon. "It's a brain eater!"

"Don't call him that," he whispered back to her. "He's fine."

"It has been a long time, Amalg. Your garden looks to be growing."

"Three years, two months, eight days, four hours, ten minutes, and some seconds," said Amalg in a strange stuttering sort of voice.

"Amalg has a good memory," said Aydon over his shoulder.

"It could be debated that humans have bad memories and that mine is average," said Amalg quietly and his little tentacles danced in a different pattern.

Aydon nodded his head, "True enough. This is my friend ...,"

"Ar-iana," said Amalg. "It has been two years, nine months, thirteen hours, forty-two minutes and some seconds since I gave your brother one of my creations. How is Tylan?"

"He's fine," said Ariana peering from around Aydon's back. "You remember him?"

"I told you, he's got an amazing memory," said Aydon.

"I remember him well. He selected an excellent piece. Do you know if he still has it? It would please me if he did. I enjoy it when my creations are appreciated."

"He has it," said Ariana suddenly remembering the odd little thing that Tylan kept in the trading wagon. It was made of strange volcanic materials and shimmered in different lights. It was disturbing she realized, remembering what Aydon told her. "He loves it."

"I am most pleased," said Amalg. "Please, would you come inside for a repast? Tea?"

"We just had breakfast," said Aydon.

"Cookies?" suggested Amalg.

"Well," said Aydon. "If you have cookies, what do you say, Ariana?"

"Cookies sound nice," she said almost fully emerging from behind Aydon.

Amalg led the way into his little house which proved to be a strange mix of cluttered and orderly. There were two dozen rocks of various sizes lined up across the entranceway which he stepped over without thought but when Ariana looked at them closely she noted that each was exactly the same distance from its neighbor. She looked at Aydon and raised her eyebrows.

Aydon smiled and showed his palms to the girl as if to say, "I told you so."

"Please come this way," said Amalg, his strange tentacles waving.

"He won't eat us?" whispered Ariana to Aydon and clutched his arm.

"Don't be ridiculous," said Aydon. "You won't eat us, will you Amalg?"

"Quite the contrary," said the creature. "I plan to feed you. I have been experimenting with different ratios of flour and sugar but as the creator of the food, as in artistic endeavors, it is often difficult to ascertain the success of one's efforts. Please be seated and I will bring the tea and cookies." With this he walked out of the room and soon soft little clinks and the rushing sound of water emanated from beyond.

“He’s very odd,” said Ariana still in a whisper.

“You’ll meet lots of odd people here in Hot Rock,” said Aydon. “It’s the nature of the mountain. What normal person would want to live up here?”

Ariana nodded her head. “It stinks!”

Soon enough Amalg returned and began to serve cookies on stylish little plates that were all different shapes and sizes with colorful patterns on them.

“Did you make these?” asked Ariana carefully sampling the cookie which proved to be different from any she had heretofore enjoyed, but delicious nevertheless.

“I have a kiln in the back,” said Amalg. “I find it soothing to shape soft clay at times rather than the igneous material that is my primary medium.”

“What?” said Ariana with her mouth slightly agape.

“I have a kiln in the back,” repeated Amalg. “I find it soothing to shape soft clay at times rather than the igneous material that is my primary medium.”

Ariana looked at Aydon who just smiled.

“How, why, how did you come to live here?” she asked, giving up on divining meaning of the previous statement.

Aydon looked up, his mouth full of cookie, with wide eyes, “Yes, Amalg, I’m curious also but I was never bold enough to ask.”

“Lousa says my mouth runs before my brain thinks,” said Ariana and Aydon laughed. She supposed Amalg did as well although the sound was as unlike a laugh as she could imagine.

“It has been many years,” said the strange creature. “The people to which I was born have a highly tuned intellect and my affliction was noted immediately upon being introduced to the spawning pool.”

“Affliction?” asked Ariana.

“Spawning pool?” asked Aydon.

“I have an affliction of the brain that prevents me from fully associating with the Collective. When this was noted it was assumed that I would be devoured in the spawning pools but this proved not to be the case.”

“Spawning pools?” repeated Aydon.

“It is where the children of my species are placed upon their birth. Only the strongest survive the horror of the pools.”

“Oh,” said Ariana. “You remember all the way back from when you were first born?”

“Before, even,” said Amalg a cookie hanging gingerly in one tentacle. “You do not?”

“No.”

“Perhaps a blessing,” said Amalg and fed himself the cookie. He waited until he completely finished eating before continuing. “As I was saying, my survival caused some consternation among my people and a meeting was convened in which it was decided I would be cast out from the Collective. Normally such a sentence means instant death to one of my race but my affliction perhaps allowed me to be better prepared for the loneliness of the world. It was quite painful even then. I managed to drag myself up from the deep realm. I found myself on the slopes of this great volcano. I had decided to throw myself into it, so horrible was my isolation, but then I ran across Master Petrus.”

“Who?” asked Aydon stopping with a cookie half-way into his mouth.

“Master Petrus was a predecessor of Master On,” said Amalg. “A prominent figure among the Thilnog Monks. He was not instantly repelled by me and we engaged in a lengthy conversation. He convinced me to live here on the mountain for a time and, if at the end of a one year term, I still wanted to throw myself in the volcano he would help me.”

“And you’ve been here ever since?” said Ariana.

“The evidence of that seems clear,” said Amalg.

Aydon laughed and popped the cookie in his mouth, “He does have a point there, Ariana.”

“I mean, yes, I guess so. I’m sorry for being stupid,” said Ariana looking down at the table.

“I see,” said Amalg and looked intently at the girl. “I have hurt your feelings. It is something I do inadvertently all too often. I am sorry, Ariana. Please have another cookie. I hear the water boiling so I will fetch some tea.”

“He didn’t mean you were stupid,” said Aydon. “He just sort of says what he thinks.”

“It was a stupid question,” said Ariana reaching for another cookie. “If I ask a stupid question maybe it’s better if someone tells me it’s stupid or I’ll just keep asking them.”

“It wasn’t really stupid,” said Aydon.

“Of course it was. Obviously he’s still here in Hot Rock so he didn’t throw himself into the volcano. Maybe I should think a little more before I talk. Maybe Lousa has a point. I hate it when she’s right.”

“It can’t hurt to think a little bit at least,” said Aydon and ducked away from the cookie that flew over his head. “You need to work on your aim.”

“I’d throw another one but I wouldn’t want to waste it, it would be rude is what Lousa would tell me.”

“They are strange but good,” said Aydon and soon after Amalg returned with a beautiful teapot although instead of pouring water from the spout there was a hidden opening on the other side and Ariana squealed with delight when he poured for her.

“That’s wonderful,” said Ariana. “Did you make it?”

Amalg nodded his head, “Do you like it?”

Ariana nodded again, “It’s wonderful. You have a way of seeing things differently.”

Amalg waved his tentacles rapidly and his eyes seemed to turn a little lighter, “Thank you so much, Ariana. Would you like it?”

Ariana looked over to Aydon who shrugged his shoulders and turned his head slightly to the side while grinning.

“I would like it but I don’t have much money or anything. I only really have one thing of value but I can’t give it to you.”

“I expect no payment,” said Amalg. “Although I would like to see this thing of value you possess.”

Ariana looked again to Aydon but this time the boy had a rather blank expression on his face.

“All right,” said Ariana and reached into her pocket. She pulled out the Black Sphere and it seemed to absorb the sunlight that filtered in through the heavy shutters. It was perfectly round and perhaps the size of a child’s fist. It didn’t glint or gleam but seemed to just be there. Each second she held it the darkness slowly spread from her hand and up her arm.

Amalg said nothing but held out his hand.

Ariana suddenly didn’t want to let go of it. It had hardly been out of her possession since those terrible days when she stood atop the White Marble ruin and struck Seymour the Bright with the Staff of Naught. She looked at Amalg and the creature began to withdraw his hand. “No, I’m sorry, you can hold it. It is dear to me and I wanted to keep it all to myself. But soon I must give it up forever so I might as well get used to it now.” She thought about telling him to be careful with it but looking around the room at the incredibly delicate pieces that sat on shelves she knew that was unnecessary.

He reached forward with a strange three-fingered hand, took the sphere, and brought it to the tentacles that curled away from his mouth.

Ariana suppressed the urge to shout out ‘no’ and grab it back as he gently caressed the thing in his tentacles and darkness slowly spread across his face. Ariana felt her legs jiggling up and down and her heart was racing but she somehow managed to stay seated and relatively still. Eventually Amalg took the thing from his tentacles and handed it back to Ariana.

“Thank you,” he said.

Ariana lurched forward, grabbed it a little too eagerly, and shoved it in her pocket. She felt relief and gave out a big sigh, "You're welcome."

"It is most interesting," he said and put his hand to his chin. "It is ancient beyond understanding and made with great care. There was not a single seam or flaw I could feel. It is quite beautiful and I understand why you cherish it so. I sometimes feel identically about my finest works. I do not wish to share them. Sometimes it hurts even to let other people see them. Would you care to come into my workshop and see some of things I have there?"

Ariana nodded her head and stood up.

Aydon started to stand but Amalg looked at him and shook his head, "Not you, Ay-don. I am sorry but it is not for everyone to see."

"I understand," said Aydon and watched the two disappear into a back room. He satisfied himself by eating more cookies and drinking more of the delicious tea. He leaned back in his chair and looked at the ceiling where more works of art were hanging that he had not noticed before. Then he stood and began to walk around the room examining the thousands of works lodged in every nook and cranny. Many were discernable shapes; people, animals, and things but others were just strange amalgamations of material and shapes that seemed to have no form or purpose. He wasn't sure how long he had been examining them when he heard Ariana give a little cough behind him.

"I'm ready to go," she said. "Thank you so much, Amalg for the teapot and letting me see your art."

"It was my pleasure, Ar-ianna."

They were no more than a few steps down the road when Aydon grabbed her by the arm, "What did he show you? What did you see? I never knew he had a back room."

Arianna stopped and looked at Aydon and then to the ground, "I don't know. He sees the world differently than me, maybe differently than anyone. You were right, it can be disturbing, but beautiful as well. Do people pay him for his work?"

"People pay a lot of gold. Not everyone who comes to Hot Rock wants something from Edorin. Amalg is very famous but he is strange. He will not sell to just anyone and I've heard he's turned down enormous sums for some of his works."

Arianna nodded her head and said nothing. "What else is there to see in Hot Rock?"

"Many things although I don't think we'll find anything as interesting as that," said Aydon grinning. "Come on, I'll show you the old lava tubes north of town. The lava is flowing below us right now but it shifts its tracks and leaves old tunnels all the time. You have to be careful. I've heard of people falling through soft spots in the ground."

"Sounds fun!" said Ariana and the two dashed off.

That night at dinner they spent the evening regaling Lousa with the tales of their adventures and retired to bed exhausted.

The next morning they enjoyed another wonderful breakfast and spent some time cleaning up at the hot springs but soon enough the time to meet with Edorin arrived. Ariana felt her heart beating in her chest at the thought of losing the Black Sphere forever although she could not help but remember the conversation with Shinamar, maybe it was a dream, and there was in her a hope that Edorin could not destroy the thing. Certainly Amalg suggested that it was well made, but what could stand up against the tools of the master Edos?

“Ariana, stop daydreaming and come along. We’re to meet him at the Trade Master’s home. No dawdling now. I want to be done with this once and for all. Then we can go back home.”

“No we can’t,” said Ariana. “There’s the war.”

“Oh,” said Lousa with a frown. “I managed to forget that little problem. We’ll deal with it when we have to. First things first, come along now.”

She went to the front door and started out before Ariana called her back, “Don’t forget your helmet!”

Lousa stopped, turned, and looked at the girl first with a frown and then a smile, “Thank you, dear. I’m not thinking clearly this morning. You, on the other hand, seem to be much calmer.”

“I feel better,” said Ariana with a grin towards Aydon. “We had a fun day yesterday and whatever happens today, I’ll be fine.”

“Good,” said Lousa carefully putting on the helmet to avoid doing damage to her cleaned and coiffed hair.

“You’ll be beautiful even with smushed hair,” said Ariana. “Right, Aydon?”

Aydon blushed.

“Come along and stop teasing the poor boy. I’ll be glad to have this business over with.”

They walked through the town to the Trade Master’s home where an attractive young woman let them in without question. She led them through luxuriously appointed halls with wood paneling and thick carpet to a heavy wooden door on which she rapped a single time.

“Come in,” said a voice that Lousa remembered and she felt a chill rush down her spine.

He was almost exactly the same as two years prior; a disgusting little goblin with pointed ears both huge and misshapen and a massive nose with warts and wisps of hair growing from them. He looked straight at her breasts and licked his lips with his long tongue, “Lousa, my dear, it is such a pleasure to see you again. I so enjoyed our previous bargaining session and I look forward to the results of our intercourse on this occasion.”

"It's wonderful to see you as well, Lorim" said Lousa with a broad smile and she walked up to him and gave him a gentle kiss on the cheek. "I also hope our discussions are fruitful. You remember Ariana?"

"I do," said the gnome with a nod to the girl. "I see she is growing into a lovely young woman as well." The direction of his gaze was unmistakable and Ariana folded her arms across her chest.

"It is a pleasure to see you again, Trade Master Gimplestrange," said Aydon stepping forward and offering his hand in greeting.

"I had heard you were with our little delegation," said Lorim and offered a tepid hand. "I would have thought you would be quite busy with events in the valley. Still, if you are here and not at your father's side that is none of my business."

"I am doing my father's bidding," said Aydon although his lips turned down as he noted the gaze of the Trade Master towards both Ariana and Lousa.

"I'm pleased to hear it. Have you heard the latest news of the hostilities?"

Aydon shook his head.

"I'm afraid it is not good, well, not good for you. There are always two sides to every story."

"Go on," said Aydon folding his arms across his chest and staring at the gnome grimly.

"Lord Thotmes has conquered most of your father's territory with the exception of the northern lands. Your father's armies have put up rather pathetic resistance; I do not say this to denigrate him but simply to state facts. If not for our own monks interventions the rout might be more complete."

"A few battles do not make a war."

"Indeed, I'm sure there will eventually be a favorable outcome, for someone," said Lorim with a little grin and he waved his hands expressively.

"Enough," said Lousa. "We are here to see Edos Edorin, not discuss the difficulties in Doria. Where is he?"

"He promised me he would be here," said Lorim with a shrug of his shoulders walking back behind a desk that was at least ten feet long and stood so high Ariana could barely see over the top. He plumped himself down into the high-backed leather chair and put his hands behind his head. "We must wait. Sadly Edos Edorin has been most distracted of late. The Black Fire is running particularly hot and it makes his life most difficult. We have so many orders and the backlog is already quite immense. It forces those who want their specialty items to spend more to expedite the process."

"What is the Black Fire?" asked Ariana forgetting for a moment her distaste for the gnome.

Lorim smiled, "What a sweet question from a simple child. It is the lava that flows below this mountain which Edorin uses to forge the weapons that are in such great demand."

Ariana actually growled and Lousa and Aydon both put a hand on her shoulder.

Lorim continued on, feigning indifference to the girl's anger, "Of course I would not expect a child of your age to understand the niceties of economics. Supply and demand, I'm sure you are more interested in little dolls and toys. How old are you now, eleven?"

"You ... you ... you ...," stuttered Ariana her face red and her fists clenched.

"Enough of your games, Lorim. Where is Edorin? If you do not produce him we will find him ourselves," said Lousa.

"Such tempers. I'm tempted to call it hysteria. Those of the weak, or should I say fair sex, often lose their composure in such situation. This is why such dealings should be conducted between men. Right, Aydon?"

Aydon started to open his mouth but the fierce looks from Ariana and Lousa shut it quickly enough.

"Tiger's got your tongue?" said Lorim with a laugh and leaned further back in his chair. "As for you, Lousa, feel free to wander around the mine shafts looking for Edorin. I wish you luck. Now, do you care to bargain reasonably or is this session complete?"

"What do you want?" said Lousa in a cold tone.

"I think you know what I want," said Lorim and leered.

"No," said Ariana.

"No," said Aydon.

"I've done worse things," said Lousa her green eyes dark.

"No," repeated Ariana, this time shaking her head vigorously. "It's not worth it. We'll find another way."

Lorim shrugged, "It is all part of the negotiation. It is shame your friend Tanner is not here. He understood these things. Make me a counter offer, Lousa."

"I've saved up some silver," she said reaching for her coin pouch.

"Hardly enough," said Lorim with a firm shake of his head as he fingered the thick gold chain around his neck. "No."

Lousa looked at him with her green eyes going darker yet, "Where would you propose we carry out the terms of your proposal?"

"I have a room adjacent to my office that has served nicely in the past," he said with a grin.

"I'm not surprised," said Lousa arching her eyebrows.

"I would not expect you to be," said Lorim with a wide grin.

"Lousa, we can find another way," said Aydon and at that moment the door to the office burst open and a middle-aged dwarf wearing coveralls black with soot, carrying a small hammer in his right hand, and wearing a belt lined with smith tools entered.

"Gimplestrange," he said barely looking up to see the others. "We've just had a divergent in the stream and the Black Fire has calmed somewhat. I will be able to make this month's shipment after all."

"Edorin," said Lorim, jumping up from his seat. "These are the people I was talking about the other day with the item they wanted you to examine."

Edorin looked up and over to Aydon, Ariana, and Lousa and shook his head, "I do not recall such a conversation."

"You've been so distracted lately, what with the Black Fire running hot," said Lorim talking quickly and using a soothing voice. "I'm sure it just slipped your mind with all that you have to do. They have a relic, possibly of Old Imperial origin, they wanted you to examine it."

Lousa narrowed her eyes and looked sharply at Lorim.

The gnome smiled and shrugged, his ears wiggling in apparent delight at being caught out in his lie. "Come, now that you are here, could you take a few minutes from your busy day to perform the examination?"

"We actually hoped that you would dispose of the thing for us," said Lousa turning to Edorin and looking at the dwarf. He was short, as was typical of his species, but stoutly built with massive forearms. His soot-black skin was a testament to constant exposure to the fires of the forge and his eyes were also dark.

Ariana clenched her jaw but said nothing.

Edorin looked up, his dark eyes flat and serious, "Let me see this Imperial thing then. I have some experience dealing with the like although I suspect you will be disappointed. It will be a forgery of some sort."

"Ariana," said Lousa turning to look at the girl.

Ariana felt a sharp tug in her stomach but her hand went to her pocket and she produced the Black Sphere.

Edorin's eyes opened slightly at the sight of it. "Hmm," he said reaching forward to take it while almost unconsciously putting his hammer on his tool belt. He put the Sphere in the flat of his right palm and let it rest there for a moment and then brought it to his ear and gave it a little shake. "Hmm," he said, laid it flat in his palm, and moved his hand up and down. Then he brought it to his nose and smelled it.

"Hmm," he repeated.

Everyone around him held their breath as they watched him slowly examine the sphere, their eyes riveted on the Edos.

Next he put it to his lips and licked the thing. "Hmm," he said once again. Then he reached into his pocket with his free hand, rummaged around a bit, and pulled out a soft piece of cloth which he laid upon Lorim's considerable table. He put the Black Sphere on the cloth, reached around on his belt, and unhooked the smallest of claw hammers.

"No," squeaked Ariana quietly but no one seemed to notice.

Edorin gave the sphere a light rap with the hammer and then picked it up again and put it to his ear while he gently shook it. "Hmm," he predictably said. He put it back on the cloth and gave it a sharper rap eliciting a squeal from Ariana. "Hmm, indeed," said Edorin. He rolled the thing around in his hand a few more times and then handed it back to Ariana. "Interesting."

"Interesting?" said Lousa with her mouth hanging slightly open. "What does that mean? Can you destroy it or not?"

Edorin looked up and shook his head, "Not easily, no."

"We can pay you," said Lousa. "For the time it would take."

Edorin looked at her again and shook his head, "No. I could destroy it if I was back home but here, under these circumstances, no. You were right, of course, it was forged during the Imperial Era, of that there is no doubt. It has the hallmarks of being created upon the Anvil of Silk but I had not heard of such an item. It is still possible. Such things are not easily destroyed except upon which they were forged."

"Where is this Anvil of Silk?" said Aydon moving forward to stand tall in front of the dwarf. "We can go there and destroy it."

Edorin looked up at the boy and gave him a bemused smile, "Such is not possible for you. No. I could throw it into the Black Fire or you could drop it in the ocean, but I surmise the reason you want to destroy it is that others wish to possess it?"

"Yes," said Lousa nodding her head.

"Both of those methods would fail in the end. The desire for power of this nature is too strong. Whoever wanted it would summon an elemental of water or of fire and retrieve it easily enough. No, those would not be effective methods although would at least remove you from whatever danger you currently face in possessing the Black Sphere."

"I don't want to just throw it away!" said Ariana shaking her head vigorously. "It's mine and I should be the one to find a way to destroy it."

"Agreed," said Lousa nodding her own head. "Throwing it away just makes it someone else's problem. We have to accept responsibility for it. Edos Edorin, there is no other way?"

Edorin brought his fire-blackened fingers to his short beard and scratched it for a moment. "I suppose," he said and then stopped.

"Yes," said Lousa.

"I suppose," repeated the dwarf but then fell silent again.

Everyone waited.

"You would have to find a powerful device of the old Empire. You might be able to destroy the Sphere with something of that nature. If the second item were to be used to strike the first with enough vigor it might break the Sphere. It might destroy the other device, it might not. The Sphere does not feel solid, although perhaps I am wrong about that. I suspect there is something inside."

"What sort of relic would we need?" asked Lousa.

"I could not say," said Edorin with a shrug. "There are a few relics of the old Empire still about. Find one of them and smash the thing, of course you might break them both or neither, these matters are not easily predicted."

"You have no suggestions as to where to find such a thing?" asked Lousa. "You have crafted the finest weapons in the world."

"Jon Gray had one," said Ariana looking up. "It looked like it could break anything."

"The Stone Sword?" asked Lousa looking up with a gleam of hope in her eyes. "He did have that. I agree, it looked powerful enough to break just about anything."

"The Staff of Sakatha as well," said Ariana nodding her head. "He showed it to us that night, remember? And he said his father has the Black Sword. I bet it could break anything."

"That's all true, of course, yes. But Jon Gray headed north nearly a year ago and Tanelorn is at the far end of the world, or at least he said so. It would take us years to get there and longer yet to even find Jon Gray if he is still alive. I do not like to think about years on the road looking for someone who might already be dead."

"What else can we do?" said Ariana looking up at the woman.

Edorin slipped out of the room while the discussion was ongoing but Lorim watched and listened closely.

Lousa glanced at Lorim and suddenly shook her head, "This is not a conversation for public ears," she said. "Let us return to the inn where we can discuss it privately."

Ariana looked at Lorim and stuck out her tongue.

The goblin responded in like fashion.

Soon enough they found themselves back in the comfortable room that Lousa and Ariana shared. The two women sat on the bed while Aydon took up position in a sturdy, metal framed chair.

“My father told me to stay with you but I’m not sure he envisioned a journey of such scale,” said Aydon interlocking the fingers on his hands together and looking at them. “My loyalty is to my father and to Doria. I do not think that I can go with you should you attempt to head north. It will take years to get to this place Tanelorn and even then you are not assured success.”

Lousa nodded her head and Ariana bit her lip, “I do not want to undertake such a journey either. It seems to me that we would be extremely vulnerable going north like that. The journey is immense, the wild lands between here and Tanelorn are unfathomably dangerous.”

“Maybe I should just keep the Black Sphere and use it to help Aydon’s father win the war!” suggested Ariana nodding her head and bouncing on the bed a little. “Shinamar thinks I should use it. I want to use it. Powerful things are in this world to be used, not stored away like Jon’s father does.”

“We could try to find another relic of the Imperial Age here in Doria,” suggested Aydon. “The Queen certainly has a few items that meet that description. Her scepter perhaps? Her crown is said to date from the time of Akiona the First.”

“That’s possible,” said Lousa nodding her head and tapping her fingers on the bedspread. “We would have to wait for the war to end but, if your father wins, we would then be in a good position to bargain with the Queen.”

“Lorim said...,” started Ariana.

“We can’t trust what Lorim said, any of it,” said Lousa shaking her head and frowning at the thought of having almost been fooled into going through with his original bargain. “He is at heart a little boy. He has big toys and a lot of money to be sure, but he is just a boy and will lie and steal to get what he wants.”

“Men lie too,” said Ariana.

“Not about important things,” said Aydon firmly shaking his head.

“Especially about important things,” said Lousa just as firmly.

“No,” said Aydon. “Children lie about everything. Men do not.”

“He has a point,” came a deep voice from the shadows of the room.

“Ahh!” shrieked Lousa and Ariana clutched at the Black Sphere now safely ensconced in her pocket. Aydon whirled around towards the sound and drew his sword.

“Who said that?” he said waving his sword toward the corner of the room.

“Be careful with that thing,” said Lousa, grabbing Ariana and pulling her away from the blade and toward the door.

A vaguely shadowy form slowly emerged from the corner, “It is I, Tenebrous.”

Aydon stepped forward and raised his sword.

“No!” shouted Lousa and then in a quieter voice, “No, Aydon. He is, or was, a friend. He helped us before.”

“That thing?” said Aydon still holding his sword high and pointing it towards the shadow. “It is unlife of a kind I’ve never seen before. It cannot be good by its very nature.”

“I do not say I am good, but I am here to help,” said the deep and sonorous voice of the shadow.

“How?” asked Lousa still holding Ariana and poised by the door.

“You are seeking a way to destroy the Black Sphere?” said the dark shadow.

“Yes,” said Lousa with a slight nod of her head.

“I offer a solution,” said Tenebrous and his shadowy form seemed to coalesce into the vague shape of a man.

“Go on,” said Lousa.

“Don’t listen to it,” said Aydon still holding his sword at the ready. “It’s a trap!”

“He was nice before,” said Ariana detaching herself from Lousa’s grasp and walking over Aydon. “We can trust him.”

Tenebrous said, “I would not go so far as to say you can trust me but our goals are, at this time, on parallel paths.”

“How can we destroy the Sphere?” asked Lousa coming over to stand with Aydon and Ariana.

“I know of a relic that could be used to destroy the Black Sphere. It was broken into two parts. One was hidden in the Great Salt Fen while the other resides with the Mistress of the Abyss whom I serve.”

“How do you know this?” asked Lousa looking at him with narrowed eyes and a furrowed brow. “Why do you wish to help us? What are these parallel goals?”

“The item in question is well known to the denizens of the Abyss and, as a member of this group, I have some knowledge of it. I wish to help you because my Mistress commands me to help you destroy the Black Sphere to annoy her rival who had a hand in creating it.”

Lousa looked to Ariana, “It’s your decision, Ariana.”

“What is this thing called?”

“The Rod of Orcus,” said Tenebrous and his shadow grew dark and formed into the discernable shape of an obese, bat-winged man.