

FAR
FOREST
SCROLLS
Earth on Fire
Ocean of Blood







The League of Truth takes the direct path through the Abbre Fonce and quickly regrets the decision—barely surviving against the arboreal Fionadin. Scouting for food, Scelto and Gimelli come across a village of horrors. Will the League survive long enough to find the first set of Macht Crystals?

FAR FOREST SCROLLS

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BOOK FOUR

The external struggle is but a wisp of any war. Raging under muscle and metal, mental battles bristle, nourished by anxiously accelerated heartbeats and bated breath. On every battlefield those internal conflicts broiling beneath armor often rise above the physical, determining victory or defeat. Each warrior combats their own demons, wrestles their own special brand of fear, overcoming their dread, fighting nerves. On and off the battleground we must attempt to balance mind, body, and spirit. Despite their power, our minds, our will, are still but lowly shackled prisoners of our frangible mortal forms—fettered to gasp their emblematic last breath when the body falls.

The embryology of fate before the event is but an ethereal wish, gestating into existence only upon the conclusion. A construct about the past, fate only coagulates into physical form once the outcome has been determined. Only looking backwards from the cozy confines of the future can destiny materialize to be dispensed as an explanation—a fallacious attempt at justification—righteous rationalization for the victor and feeble crutch for the defeated.



Jumeaux fails his test, but Veneficus' disappointment ebbs after discovering Jumeaux converses with his sister and can monitor Bella's path to the crystals. In remittance, Veneficus tutors Jumeaux on advanced magical arts.

Fear.
Ghostly.
Ephemeral.

The greater the distance from the act or exploit,
the less fear seizes us...

Until the moment arrives, and thumps into
your core.

Only with terror resonating through the body
can courage be born. Bravery, the offspring of
fear, arises from panic and stress. The musician,
athlete, and poet should be commended and
honored for their sacrifices while
striving for success.

Yet the warrior
Stands alone

Overcoming true terror:

Merging will, body, spirit, and mind to
stand and fight

Within the fiery forge of life and death: battle.

Death, a concept usually relegated to the
unconscious—

A problem for another day.

Such unawareness is a luxury upon which the
warrior cannot be afflicted.



The Knights find themselves in a fight for their lives against a vastly superior force lead by the Proliate. Will Friar's intricate battle plan overcome the massive armies descending upon them?

For more information please visit:

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Scrolls from 1,000 C.E.
discovered during an archeological dig
in the Far Forest region of England,
the soul of this ancient fantasy tale
is reborn in your mind's eye.

Author: AAAA (Alpha Four) ❧❧❧❧ Illustrations: AAAA and Paganus
Scroll translation to English: Radek Novotny PhD ❧❧❧❧ Image Restoration: Altier Restoration

A sincere welcome back to the world
of the Far Forest Scrolls.
Return to its embrace, increasing
(we humbly hope) your Wisdom of How to Live.



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Library of Congress Control Number: 2020918811

ISBN (Hardcover, color edition) 978-1-7357528-0-8
ISBN (Paperback, black & white edition) 978-1-7357528-1-5
ISBN (e-book) 978-1-7357528-2-2



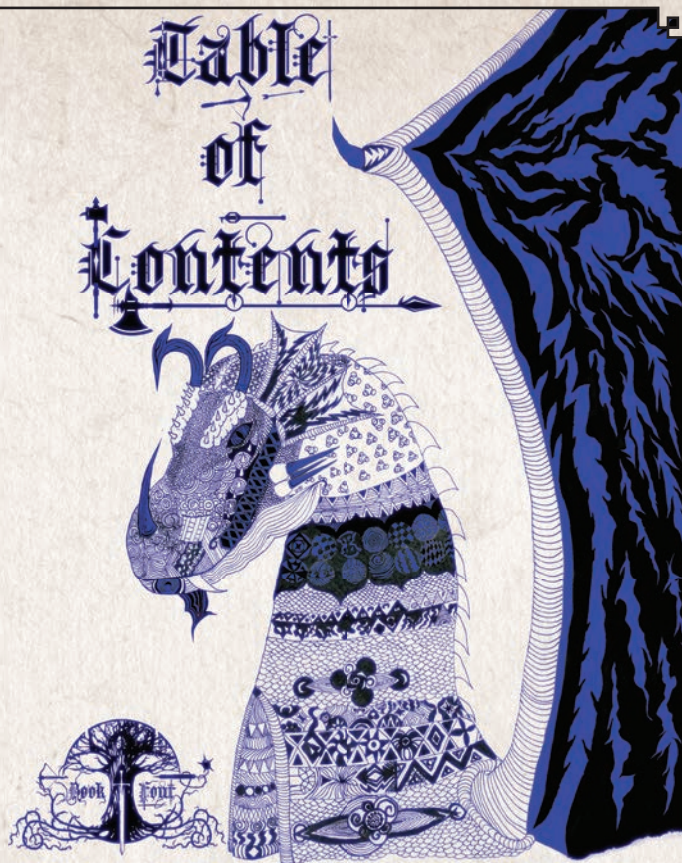
Named after the Norse god, Tyr, who volunteered to lose his hand in order to bind the savage wolf Fenrir. Teiwaz is the rune of sacrifice and courage. It represents the power of sacrifice given freely. It epitomizes the warrior spirit offered up by soldiers in a time of battle. War, with its insatiable appetite for the blood and spirit of the combatants, is always happy to oblige the leaders sending orders to march and die. It speaks perfectly to the upcoming battlefields about to be drenched in the lifeblood of its combatants. The required sacrifice will scour Verngaurd on an individual and societal level.



Reverse Teiwaz (from the underside of chest four in the Far Forest of England) speaks to the questionable causes of this war as deceit weaves its disruption through the leaders of Verngaurd.

(Aside on Norse mythology: wolf Fenrir was the third child of god Loki. The other gods, considering Fenrir dangerous, wanted to bind him. Fenrir, suspecting a trick, refused to be bound in the chain forged by the dwarves {out of the sound of a cat's footsteps, the beard of a woman, the breath of a fish, the roots of mountains, the sinews of a bear, and bird spittle}. Fenrir agreed to be bound only if a god would place their hand in his mouth. Tyr freely did so, and when the dwarf chain called Gleipnir bound the wolf, he chomped Tyr's hand off).

At the end of the day, even those of us who have never fought in a war have battle scars, visible and invisible, repressed and haunting, external and internal, public and confidential. Regrets can cling to our souls like invasive dew. A spirit dropped by adversity, if encouraged by hope and driven by resolve, can be reborn. For when we stand up after each failing, molded by the courage to endeavor again, a new version of ourselves does rise.



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Peractio

End of Book Three

Gathering the last of his wits, Scelto moved over to Ichor. With all his might he jumped up, and using his weight and power, thrust the sword down into Ichor's neck. With a sickening crunch and then a fleshy squish, Scelto's blade severed his spine and plunged deeply into his chest cavity. Ichor's eyes shot open in terror as blood gushed everywhere. With his neck cut apart and spine severed, he could not move, and his arms and hands went slack. Some of the countless appendages fell off Gimelli and began thrashing around violently, some whipping Scelto.

Yelling, Liha rushed towards Scelto. He quickly yanked his sword free and slashed horizontally with all his might across her neck. Her head flew up and to the side as her body continued forward for a few steps. Both disconnected pieces were pumping blood randomly about the room. Her hands grasped out desperately for Scelto and momentarily held on to his cloak before her body crumpled to the ground.

Turning back to Gimelli, Scelto's initial adrenaline rush was wearing down and the drugged incense was starting to take hold. With a massive stroke he severed Ichor's hand and wrenched the remaining tentacles off Gimelli's neck. It reminded him of pulling vines off Liberum's wall. Hundreds of wounds began to ooze blood as Ichor's hand fell lifelessly to the ground. The thin rope-like projections were still writhing angrily on the floor, fangs within his palm chomped angrily. Scelto kicked

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and stomped on the tentacles closest to him as they shot forward, still mindlessly rummaging for blood.

Moving quickly, Scelto sheathed his bloody sword and hoisted Gimelli onto his shoulders. He had to get out of the hut and away from the intoxicating smoke. As he left the doorway, the fresh air felt invigorating.

Just as his head began to clear, Gimelli moaned loudly, drawing the attention of one of the feasting undead. Scelto quickly ran between two huts into the forest. The heavy footsteps of the undead could be heard plodding after them. Carrying Gimelli slowed him down, and he could tell they were gaining.

“Unchain the Wasted Undead!” Ichor’s mother howled. “Let them loose!” she cackled. “Let the wasted loose!” she repeated before howling into a maniacal laugh.

How in the world am I going to get out of this? Scelto wondered.

Their bloodthirsty calls began echoing around the trees as more undead joined the chorus. Their cry was cut off by a blood-curdling scream fracturing out of the village.

Ichor’s mother had discovered her son’s body. Her shriek was quickly followed by a series of depraved howls, as all the undead of the village were now awake and enraged.



The feeble skirmishes of book three fade—mere kindling for the larger violence erupting. Sacrifice, freely given, is the fabric of the warrior. Stepping forward unwaveringly into battle despite the rattling armor and battle cries of the army assembled to kill, that is a warrior’s offering and courage melding into acceptance. Teiwaz symbolizes the warrior’s consent to the brutality of war despite its propensity to choke out compassion, embroiling the world in blood and fire.

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Take heed, all who would proceed.
The stripped-bare violence of war strains, breaking from its chains.
Those of flesh and sinew, with the courage to continue:
It is time to strap on your armor.



Figure 1: Carrying Gimelli is slowing Sceto, adding to his fatigue. The thought of the torture and death that awaits if caught spurs him to overcome exhaustion and keep moving.

Chapter One

Battle Begins



Scroll I: Oh, Shii...!

Scelto struggled to keep ahead of the undead in the thick Arbre Fonce. His breathing was loud, forced, his chest heaving over burning lungs as he struggled to carry Gimelli's limp and bleeding body. Scarlet colored him from head to toe, a mix of Liha's, Ichor's, and now Gimelli's weeping blood.

"We can smell you, boy!" one of the vampire's henchmen yelled. "There's no need trying to be quiet."

Great, Scelto thought. The only conclusion rattling around his mind was the desperate need to stay ahead of them.

"What?" Gimelli groaned.

Scelto stole a quick glance at her pale face bobbing on his chest as he ran. Blood oozed from countless puncture wounds the vampire had used to drain her blood. Scelto's arms and legs howled in desperate pain, shaking from the exertion. Grunting, he willed himself to continue.

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"You can't run from us forever, boy!"

They're right. I can't keep this up, and no way can I outrun them carrying Gimelli. His tired brain whirled for a solution. He remembered several large rocks they had glimpsed when heading to the village and shifted course to the left, making for the shelter the outcropping could provide.

"We're going to boil and eat you, boy!" an undead yelled.

"Get ready for pain!" another cried.

Scelto could hear their heavy footsteps, punctuated by occasional shrieks, closing in.

Surrender is not so much an option. Think what they'll do to Gimelli, his brain screamed in a vain attempt to motivate his protesting muscles.

The rocks.

Reaching the small clearing in front of three large boulders, he gently set Gimelli down, propping her up against the largest rock. He allowed his eyes to dwell on her for just a moment. The blood on her neck and upper back had turned dark, blending with the black stone. The most substantial boulder jutted out, tilting slightly forward, making it impossible for anyone to circle around and get at them from behind.

Scelto jumped back as her eyelids snapped open, revealing a terrifying pair of completely white eyes. "What the...?" He knelt down to get a closer look, but they had already closed. A small hissing sound leaked from her mouth as her body convulsed in a quick spasm. The sound, and her movement, gratefully stopped. Reaching out, he gently brushed his hand against her cheek. "Stay with me...please."

The rocks around its base, like everything else in the forest, were inky and rough. Many had jagged edges, but being oblong and thin, they were perfect aerodynamic projectiles. Tossing one in the air, he smiled. "Thanks for these, at least, you stupid petrified forest!"

Hearing the undead moving closer, he pocketed a few rocks then heaped a pile near Gimelli before sprinting to his right.

Let them come.

Crouching silently within the forest, he waited while desperately trying to slow his breathing as the pursuers crashed through the forest. Suddenly, the several undead who had been feasting around the

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cauldron burst through the edge of the small glade, stopping about ten feet from Gimelli, staring hungrily at her flaccid figure.

“Where’s boy dinner meat?” one said, his lips curling into a menacing snarl. All bared their yellow teeth, showing the black pincer-like fangs writhing out from their gums.

“Lovely smile,” Scelto whispered, heaving one of the stones over their heads. It sailed high in the air before landing on the opposite side of the forest, crashing through the trees, causing them to turn to the noise.

“Hiding won’t help. We’ll find and kill you!” one yelled to the empty side of the forest.

Stealthily, Scelto moved through the trees, coming out just behind them. When he was close enough, he hurtled forward, quickly cutting the head off the closest undead. Thick, dark blood spurted out in a putrid stream before degrading into a wild splay of frantic, disoriented droplets as the head fell. The next closest turned just as Scelto slammed his sword through his midface. A salvo of blood ejected around the sword, splattering upon the layers of dried blood already residing on Scelto’s clothes. Bringing his right foot up, Scelto kicked the undead in his chest with all his might. The still-twitching body fell, pulsing out blood in raining arcs as the sword slurped out.

The last undead spun towards the squire, howling angrily, baring his monstrous fangs. Scelto could see the chunks of flesh still dangling between his filed teeth and the deep black circles under his vacant, hateful eyes.

As the attacker lurched forward, Scelto stepped to his right and slashed the charging undead’s left arm off. Screeching savagely, he dove at Scelto with surprising speed. Scelto brought up his left knee and slammed it into the creature’s face, snapping it backwards. The undead was stunned long enough for Scelto to bring his sword over in a slicing arc that removed his head. As the body hit the floor, three more undead burst into the clearing.

“Hey, nice of you to show up,” Scelto said, his confidence blossoming. There was something strangely calming in the reality that there was nothing left to do but fight and win, or fight and die.

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The first one into the small clearing snarled, "Wipe that smile off your face, flesh bag, the Wasted Undead have been released. Soon they shall descend upon you and unleash true horror."

"Can't wait," Scelto replied.

Confused by the squire's untroubled attitude, the three undead stared at the body parts and seeping, fetid blood from their former comrades as Scelto took a few leisurely steps towards Gimelli. Stealthily, he took hold of one of the rocks from his pocket and without warning whipped his body around, throwing it with all his might at the closest undead. It hit right between his eyes, snapping his head backwards. Using the momentum from the throw, Scelto spun forward in a three-sixty revolution, cleanly decapitating the surprised undead. He quickly retreated to stand over his friend's unconscious body.

The two remaining undead howled with unbridled fury.

"I thought you might be the type to lose your heads," Scelto said, smiling.

The two creatures growled, rage boiling over.

"We're gonna pain you, boy!"

"Wait until the hordes of Wasted Undead come," the other said.

"Yeah, so you said," Scelto replied icily.

"We should just injure this fool then make him watch us have fun with the girl before we eat him," the first snarled as they moved toward the squires.

The mention of what they would do to Gimelli lit a fire, Scelto's rage blazing through widened eyes. Scelto stabbed his sword into the ground before reaching down to pick up a handful of rocks. The undead crouched low, raising their hands at the ready. He threw one hard at the undead furthest from him and then tossed the rest in the direction of the closer one. Reflexively, the undead raised his arms to block the cascade of rocks as Scelto smoothly grabbed his sword before bounding forward to pierce his neck.

With the sword still embedded, Scelto slashed hard to his right, cleaving the undead's neck half off, his head lopping forward, blood spurting out in a surreal strobe pattern. The other had recovered from the thrown rock and charged headlong at Scelto, who skillfully slashed

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up then quickly back down against the advancing undead while back-pedaling. Both strikes cut deeply, and it crumpled to the ground with blood spurting everywhere, splattering the ground in a torrent, some spraying the already-saturated-with-blood squire.

Gurgling, and fueled with adrenaline, the undead with his head dangling rushed forward. Scelto slashed furiously: right—left. Even with his chest and abdomen opened up, he continued moving forward. Slicing his blade horizontally with all his might, Scelto completely severed the undead's neck. With his head tumbling in a blood-sprinkling arc, the mutilated body finally fell.

A hand grabbed at his ankle. Despite his blood drenching into the earth, the one Scelto had slashed across his thorax crawled forward, his mouth open, teeth bared, two crazed black feelers hungrily thrashing at Scelto. Jumping, spinning, Scelto brought down his sword onto the back of the neck of the crawling savage. A loud *crack* was quickly followed by a shower of blood as the spinal cord shattered and both carotids exploded.

Breathing heavily, Scelto scanned the forest for others. Seeing none, he backed towards Gimelli. She suddenly seized his leg, hissing loudly—her eyes, completely covered in white sinewy strands, were wide and frenzied as her hiss turned to a deranged howl.

"Oh, shiite!" he screamed, quickly stepping away. Thankfully, she quickly passed out again. Bending down, he tenderly moved the hair out of her eyes. "You *have* to be okay."

Suddenly, a spasm quivered through her body as a bloody froth spewed from her mouth.

Is she turning? The idea she would become an undead was more frightening than battling them. After pausing to look for other attackers, he quickly wiped down then sheathed his sword. Gently picking Gimelli up, he took off running towards the meeting place.

A distant but roaring rumble of inhuman shrieks began to echo through the trees, sending flashes of the Wasted Undead chained by madness and fettered by shackles in their own excrement blazing through Scelto's mind.

They're right. I can't fight a mob of Wasted Undead, he thought, unsure

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of exactly how many there were. With a fresh dose of adrenaline he willed his tired legs to move forward.



Scroll 2: Now They Shall Know

“King Abernan, you honor us, leaving your besieged Kingdom to personally lead your army,” Friar said, beaming.

“My Dwarves will hold the Kingdom, especially now that we’ve unleashed the Saatana—payback for the Tournament loss of three of our beloved dragons. I almost pity the griffins and Magicians who try and step up. Almost,” the king said as he embraced Friar warmly. “Plus, all Dwarves know how important this battle is to Verngaurd.”

Friar sat astride his horse, watching the Northern Dwarves stream into the Allied camp. The red Saatana divisions, better known as dragon warriors, marched first. They drew their famous Draak swords with razor-sharp spikes up the entire length of the blade. Their equally fearsome helmets bore a pair of red dragon wings and black horns.

They were followed by the green Vioma infantry divisions carrying axes and S-curved swords. Friar knew that the Aer Ridire were patrolling the skies and setting up their own camp complete with dragons.

Even in the distant shadow of the walled Proliate fortress, Friar felt it was the enemy who should be afraid. The Northern Dwarves had arrived to join the small contingent of Knights of Liberum and a few Dwarves of the Rebelde Plains. The battle plan was materializing as Friar planned. All were being cloaked by prestidigitation. As the Dwarves continued to march into camp, he rode to check on Lovag.

“How are the siege engines coming?” Friar asked.

Lovag spun around, the strain boiling within the Knight instantly obvious. Sorea had so much to attend to west of the Tingij, she could

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not be in front of the whitewashed Proliate fortress. It was hard to tell who was more disappointed, Sorea for missing this phase, or Lovag for having to lead it.

“I wish Sorea was here.”

“I have faith in you. The time for wishing, for better or worse, is long past,” Friar answered. He spent the rest of the night moving around the camp, checking the war preparations. Even as fatigue pulled at his body, he kept moving, helping where possible.

During the uneasy time of the eve of battle, Friar returned to his tent, his outward quiet belying the agitation whisking below the surface. Warriors, faced with abrupt end to their time on earth, confront such a brusque potential shortage of time differently. Some become introspective, while a few boast, physically or verbally—a sort of piteous self-pep talk striving to mask the coagulating fear.

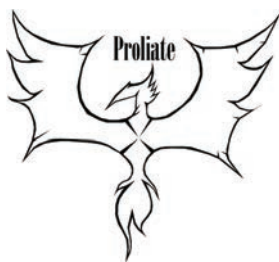
Friar unfurled his map. *Is this plan too complex? My Allied forces are scattered around Verngaurd like seeds in the wind.* Large forces, like his, were hidden while small contingents were made to look like massive armies to confuse the enemy. *Going against the old tenet of never dividing your forces in hostile territory? If the Proliate find us before my plan unfolds, all Allied forces will be obliterated.*

Hitting the table and maps hard, Friar stood up, fear recharging his exhaustion. *No more planning. From here on out, I react to the enemy's responses.* He ran his fingers over his chronically aching shins. The rubbing didn't help, but he continued the motion anyway.

Whose hands are these? he wondered, gazing on the withered and wilted look time compelled, wringing the youth from his hands.

Slowly, he retrieved a pair of greaves and carefully laced them over skin littered with scars and age spots. He would wear armor into battle for the first time. After covering the outward signs of his age, he smiled. With the bluster and athleticism of youth corroded by the ravages of age, his armor could cover some of his lost speed.

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"All the troops transferred from the eastern front against the Dwarves are tucked into their barracks here in the Citadel," an overexcited Proliate captain declared to Lidenskap. "They were unsuccessful in engaging the Knights' army, which is still at least a couple days march away from reaching the Citadel."

"What of the Northern Dwarves and the Rebelde Plains?"

"The Dwarves are on the move but heading towards us in relatively small numbers. We are seeing activity in the Rebelde Plains, but they have not moved out in force."

"What about dragons?" Lidenskap asked.

"The good news is we believe we have greatly reduced the Vioma ranks, as the Dwarves have started bringing out Saatana dragons to defend against griffin attacks. The bad news is the kill ratio has gone from twenty griffins dead to every dragon killed to thirty-five to one."

"Those losses are unacceptable!" Lidenskap howled. "Tallcon, curse all dragons!"

"High Commander Storlax is adjusting the strategy to improve the kill ratio in our favor. He wanted me to ask if you were going to summon the other nations in our Confederacy to the Citadel before the Knights arrive."

Lidenskap, feeling betrayed, stared at the young captain. *Did Storlax send him to spy on me? Am I in charge of the Citadel or not?* There was also a pang of regret after he had somehow, and unintentionally, ended up telling Veneficus he didn't need help from the Magicians. *While it's true I don't think too highly of the Knights, I want a quick and decisive battle to end this nuisance before it turns into a prolonged civil war.*

"I will not be summoning any other Confederate nations," Lidenskap answered.

"Perhaps it would be wise," the captain said.

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Lidenskap smiled smugly. “I won’t be summoning them because griffin riders were sent weeks ago.”

Obviously annoyed, the captain left. Lidenskap’s smile quickly faded as he unfurled the map. His trap was evolving perfectly. The Knights and their paltry Allies were walking right up to the impenetrable Citadel. He would let them bang their heads against its mighty walls until the nations making up the Confederation could fall down upon their rear, cutting off their thin supply lines, and demolish them.

Say no to Tallcon? Now you shall know our wrath. We shall slaughter them all.



Scroll 3: Stand Your Ground

Before dawn, Friar reviewed his plans one last time before leaving his tent.

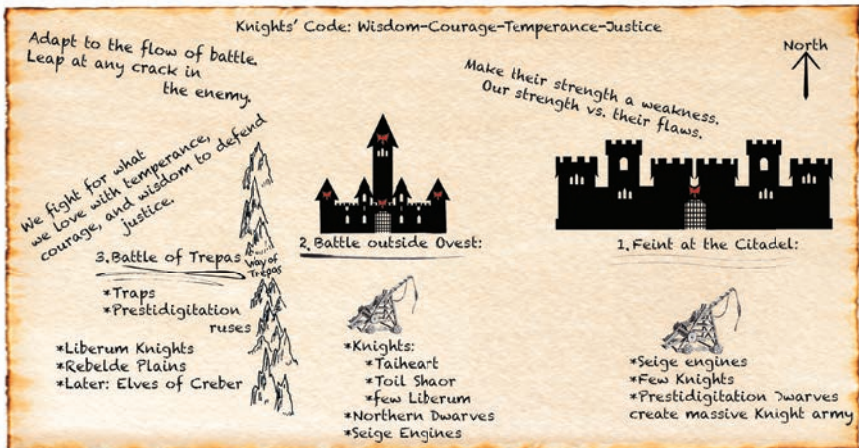


Figure 2: Friar’s complex series of maneuvers and the decision to divide his forces potentially leaves the Allies vulnerable.

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“The Proliate are falling for your deception,” Ritari greeted. “While they think the main Allied forces are heading to the Citadel, and days away, we sit hidden in front of Temple Ovest.”

“True, but we are putting a great strain on the Rebelde Plains Dwarves and their prestidigitation. They are conjuring a vast ‘army’ marching on the Citadel,” Friar said, worry wearing across his face.

Ritari nodded, handing Friar the enchanted Huuto. “The troops are ready.”

Taking the shell, Friar began, “It starts now. We did not ask for this war, but we are ready to fight. Overcome all fear. Transcend all doubts. To withhold your best is the same as letting life drain from your soul. With wisdom and temperance we fight with courage to defend justice. This day they may kill your body, but only you can harm your true self, your soul!

“Make no mistake, this fight is for our survival. Even though we are not in our mountains or castles, we fight for their defense. Even though our families are not here, we fight for their lives. Think of all the Proliate have taken: land, castles, Knights, dragons, Dwarves, squires. It ends here. It ends now. For the sister or brother who stands next to you, we fight. For our families and our very way of life, we fight! Hold nothing back. Unleash your soul!”

A roar of approval burst from the assembled Allies.

Friar nodded. “It begins!”

Ritari signaled the Northern Dwarves. Using their fastest Vioma Dragon, a single rider shot out of camp from Ovest to the small force outside the Citadel, followed by half a dozen slower moving transport dragons, each with a single driver and empty carrying platforms. For protection, four fully armored Vioma Dragons complete with five Aer Ridire Dwarves flew with them.

“Load the siege engines!” Friar shouted, part of his mind drifting to the feint at the Citadel that was about to be unleashed.

Lovag rode Behalen hard up and down the lines as the various machines of war being loaded groaned in feverish anticipation.

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General Lidenskap ran to the walls as the alarms rang. Shaking his head in disbelief, he stared at the large force of Knights and siege engines that seemingly appeared out of nowhere. Their intelligence had estimated they wouldn't be in position to attack the Citadel for several days. *Let them try to take down these walls*, he thought.

The Vioma Dragon sent from Ovest by Friar had arrived at what looked like the entire Knight army in front of the Citadel but, in actuality, was only a small group of Knights, a few siege engines, and several Dwarves skilled in prestidigitation.

"Unleash the mechanicians!" the Aer Ridire yelled. Thousands of imaginary troops and siege engines summoned by the Dwarves seemed to begin firing. The Citadel's whitewashed walls and flags shimmered in the Mardin sun as the repelling forces of the Proliate awaited fire from what they thought were hundreds of siege engines. In reality there were only two trebuchets aligned against the mass of the Citadel. As the two projectiles bounced harmlessly against the wall, the Proliate looked around in confusion. Repeatedly, the Knights manning the trebuchets launched large boulders at the walls of the Citadel, with little effect.

"Add some heaviness to the counterweight," Bly, the sergeant in charge of the small force of Knights, yelled. "It's time for the next phase."

"Hurry it up, guys," one of the Dwarves groaned. "Prestidigitation this large is harder than it looks!"

Bly, a seventh-generation Knight, sighed. "If the Proliate figure out how few of us are here, we all die!"

"The extra weight has been added," a Knight mechanician yelled.

"Good, that should carry our gifts over the wall. Iseal, put on your wools and load the boltinns," Bly ordered. "If you were better at dice, you wouldn't have gotten the lowly job of loading the trebuchet with our gifts!"

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“Who wouldn’t want to pack rancid meat, excrement, and entrails?” Iseal said, tying on a linen mask before putting on a woolen vest, chaps, and gloves. He had purposefully not eaten that morning but was still wracked with dry heaves as he opened the barrels of rancid material.

“Smells like the latrine after Bly used it!” Iseal said through his mask.

“Funny. Now get loading,” Bly replied dryly.

Despite the covering, Iseal felt the horrid refuse wicking its way into his skin. *I will never wash this slop off!* he thought, his head pounding at the wretched smell. The putrid meat and rotting entrails of long-dead animals were placed in the boltinn—spherical containers made of thin wood specifically designed to throw the foul and decaying matter over the enemy’s walls.

“Gently. Remember, they’re meant to shatter, spreading our fetid garbage gifts,” Bly said.

“Ready,” the queasy Iseal said after latching up the boltinn.

“No, no. We have special orders from Friar,” Bly yelled. “Open them up.”

Iseal opened up the boltinn, and the sergeant dumped in a bag of metal shards. “That should spice things up a bit,” he said, smiling.

The first noxious loads of the boltinn smashed behind the walls of the Citadel. Screams and cries ripped through the air as shards of shrapnel and excrement sliced into soldier and civilian alike—each wound a death sentence. Septicemia and high fevers would quickly set in, signaling death was dancing close by.

“Sir, the dragon rides are ready,” Iseal said, hopeful they could depart.

“We aren’t done yet,” Bly said. “We have more presents to deliver.”

Behind the walls, Lidenskap seethed. The idea of sticking to his plan was becoming harder to swallow. “Throwing entrails and feces over the walls? Spineless.”

“I’m not surprised,” a lieutenant replied.

“Why are we taking so few hits with that many siege engines laid out before us? It could mean factions of our enemy are convulsing in unorganized chaos and ripe for the picking,” Lidenskap said.

“The troops are assembled and await your order to attack,” the lieutenant said, his words coming out quickly, spurred by excitement.

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"The Knights have chosen good, high ground and are sure to have many gutless archers," Lidenskap said. *What if the other siege engines are aiming towards the gates, waiting for us to exit before hammering us?*

Another round of the rancid projectiles smashed around Lidenskap as he struggled with the decision blocking his way.

"General Lidenskap," a scout interrupted. "We have a visual on the contingent from Jaa heading for the Citadel. Your orders?"

"How many?" Lidenskap asked.

"All of them, sir."

This is my answer. Praise Tallcon! Lidenskap thought. "Quickly now, send a messenger. Tell the warriors of Jaa to attack the Knights' right side, flanking them. Assemble our troops at the gate. When the Jaa contingent is closing on the enemy's flank, we will break forth and attack from the front. We can roll up their lines and crush them all!"

"Yes, sir," the soldier said, sprinting off.



General Lidenskap impatiently paced upon the littered walls of the Citadel. Anticipating ending the Knights in one swift blow made time crawl. "Where are the rest of the civilian patrols? This rancid mess needs cleaning up!"

"More arrive each minute," the lieutenant said.

"Have you summoned Veneficus and his Magicians?"

The lieutenant hesitated. "Twice, but...no reply."

The warriors of Jaa looked like a giant white caterpillar inching along the plains towards the Citadel. Lidenskap smiled. They had sent their entire contingent of fierce women warriors. *This will be a quick victory.*

"Attack, sir?"

General Lidenskap gazed into the lieutenant's animated eyes, blazing with youthful excitement.

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“Dashing in at the wrong time is sure formula for defeat. A little more patience is required. The Jaa Warriors need to cover another half mile before—”

He didn’t finish, as the lieutenant tackled him to the wall-walk. A loud crack echoed in their ears as the wooden boltinn disintegrated into a shower of splintering shards. Their ears rung as the slivers jingled and tinked off of armor, their noses quickly filling with the putrid smell as refuse rained down on them.

Infuriated, Lidenskap stood up, throwing the lieutenant off his back. The startled lieutenant landed hard against the battlements. He stared up at Lidenskap, who was gazing at the warriors of Jaa, willing them to move faster.

“Lieutenant! Gut the Knights! Attack!” he screamed. “Get me a runner! Veneficus better get here right now! Their dragons will obliterate us without the Magicians and griffins to cover the air.”

Iseal looked up to the quivering siege engine wearily, sighing heavily through its stroke of death. *The forces of Jaa are getting close, too close.* Sweat poured outward, weaving its way through his heavy wool coverings, intertwining with the foul fluid wicking inward, soaking his skin in rancid liquid. *Give the bloody order to retreat! Do they expect a handful of Knights and a few Dwarves skilled in prestidigitation to stand against two armies?*

“Get back to loading the boltinns!” Bly yelled. “That slop won’t pack itself!”

Without speaking, Iseal pointed to the Citadel. A stream of Proliate Red Guard flowed out of the castle gates with blazing efficiency. Despite the bottleneck of the bridge and barbican, the Proliate were surging through at a full sprint thanks to their ordered, well-practiced discipline. All along the top of the gates and white towers the Red Guard could be seen raising their arms and chanting “Tallcon!”

“We have to take off now!” one of the Dwarves yelled. “Now!”

At that moment, the warriors of Jaa gave a fearsome shout—raising their menacing guanduo weapons and breaking into a sprint.

“To the dragons!” Bly yelled. “Retreat to Ovest!”

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The Dwarves stopped wielding their loitsia sticks. Instantly, the facade of a massive Allied army dropped away, leaving two trebuchets, a handful of Knights, a few exhausted Rebelde Plains Dwarves, and Vioma Dragons. Confused, the women warriors of Jaa slowed. Perplexed but undeterred, the Proliate continued to fly towards their position. Recovering from their shock, the women of Jaa were quickly moving again.

“Hurry up, you fools!” one of the Aer Ridire Dwarves howled, struggling to keep his Vioma Dragon calm at the approach of two armies.

Iseal struggled to get the wet, foul wool off as the others bolted for the Vioma Dragons with open platforms. They quickly began scurrying up the wobbling rope ladders as the nimble warriors of Jaa dashed closer.

“Iseal, here now!” Bly yelled frantically. The four armored Vioma serving as escorts took off and showered the warriors of Jaa with bursts of flames as the Aer Ridire added crossbow bolts. A large dent scorched through their front lines as the lucky ones fell by bolts and the unlucky by the slow, painful sear that is dragon’s breath. Other Jaa Warriors struggled to douse the flames, only stopping when the dragon naphtha ravaged the flesh of their comrades, eventually charring down to bone. Many had the burning naphtha transferred to their own bodies, beginning their own convulsions of pain.

“Bloody hell, Iseal! Move *right* now!” Bly screamed as the enemy closed in on the restless dragons, shuffling tensely.

“The rest of you, get moving,” an Aer Ridire on a transport dragon yelled. “I’ll stick around...at least for another minute.”

“Don’t wait too long. That number of Jaa Warriors will quickly flank, and overwhelm, your dragon,” another replied.

The rest of the dragon riders urged their Vioma Dragons into flight. Five of the transport dragons made it into the air while the last grounded dragon snorted enviously at those soaring to safety. His nervous stomps began to shudder with increasing apprehension as his driver struggled to provide reassurance. The single rope ladder quivered nervously under the dragon’s agitated movements.

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“There are too many warriors to slow them all down! We need to leave!” the Aer Ridire yelled as the four covering dragons continued spewing fire.

Iseal had his gloves and chaps off but was tangled in his rancidly soaked woolen vest.

“You, run to me right now!” Bly yelled. “That’s a direct order, Knight!”

Obediently Iseal began to run to the last grounded dragon as the army of Jaa closed in. With their heavier armor the Proliate were still minutes away.

“Speaking of right now, we need to take off, Bly!” the Aer Ridire driver pleaded.

“Hold.”

As the word came out, Iseal tumbled, slipping on a puddle of the refuse he had helped fire at the enemy. As he skidded to a stop, he looked up, knowing his fate had been sealed.

One of the escort dragons lit up the Knights’ two trebuchets, and the flames shot up behind Iseal, instantly turning him into a struggling silhouette. Bly stepped off the dragon platform onto the ladder just as the first guanduo sliced into Iseal’s leg.

Iseal screamed as the Aer Ridire driver jerked the reins up and the dragon frantically exploded into the air. Bly managed to strap in at the last second, watching in horror as the warriors of Jaa engulfed Iseal in a sea of vengeful blades. Long after his body was a lifeless pile of severed flesh floating in a lake of blood, the strikes continued to pierce and shred. Somberly, the dragons flew towards the real camp of the Knights and Dwarves, outside Temple Ovest.



“What devilry is this?” Princess Hamaza shouted.

“What did you expect from a bunch of criminal traitors? They sold out to the Dark Warriors to save their own skin. We should not be

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surprised they are resorting to deception,” Lidenskap said as the two met in his office after the battle.

“I lost over fifty warriors and they but *one*!” the princess howled. “My warriors still burn with unquenchable naphtha even as they enter their graves. Every fiber of my being, and that of my country, demands revenge! That a handful of Knights and a few dragons could play such a trick in front of the home of the Magicians is absurd, if not a signal of your own corruption!”

Lidenskap refused to blame Veneficus, even though he had summoned him repeatedly. “I take responsibility and assure you we want vengeance as well. They have fouled our sacred city and spilled your hallowed blood. Our scouts are scouring the countryside looking for—”

He was cut short by a knock. Without waiting to be told to enter, the door burst open.

“Storlax!” Lidenskap blurted, fearing repercussions of his failure. Then he noted the scorched appearance of the High Commander. “What...?”

“You first,” Storlax retorted.

Lidenskap related the Knights’ duplicity.

“Tired of hearing these ridiculous stories from scouts about the Knights and Dwarves appearing and disappearing, I rode out to see for myself. We found and killed a few Northern Dwarves and handful of Dwarves from the Rebelde Plains using the false black magic. After listening to your tale, I can see deception *is* their plan,” said Storlax.

“We were just about to rout them when a blasted Vioma Dragon dropped out of the skies. We were trounced, and I barely escaped with my life on a griffin. Our experiences are a wake-up call. In all ground battles we need to have air support to deal with dragons, or we burn. I—”

The High Commander was cut off by a frantic knock on the door.

“Come!” Lidenskap yelled.

A disheveled-looking scout stumbled in. “Sir...and High Commander,” he said, giving the Proliate salute. “I have urgent news. There’s a *massive* army attacking Temple Ovest.”

“Another trick...perhaps?” Lidenskap wondered, looking questioningly at Storlax. “What say you?”

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"I don't believe so, sir. The walls are taking a tremendous beating from a huge array of siege engines, and I personally saw the size of their army. I barely made it through, and only after my squad took massive losses."

"It looks like we know where you get your revenge, princess," Lidenskap said.



Scroll 4: West, Meet East

Time, and the distance he covered, seemed to grind forward while his breath and heart rate soared. *Keep moving*, Scelto repeated. His lungs' complaints reshaped from a burn to stinging fire as his throbbing muscles, not to be outdone, closed in on exhaustion. Scelto slowed as Gimelli abruptly groaned. Tenderly laying her down, he cradled her head.

Gimelli's eyes frenziedly opened wide, a white film covering them. The coating quickly disappeared, and her face softened. "What... where?" she mumbled, her yellow eyes looking hollow and vacant within her pale face. "Why do I feel so weak?"

"It's a long story."

"I love you, Scelto," she said, her eyes brightening briefly.

A storm of emotions surged through his body and mind, tumbling and climbing until rolling out of his mouth as an inept, "Hey."

Her eyelids fluttered as a white web rose to obscure her eyes before she passed out.

"Is all you can think of? Seriously, you're a moron," Scelto huffed to himself as unwelcome flashbacks of soiling himself with Princess Hamaza flashed in his mind. "Undead I can handle. Girls, not so much."

Just before he was about to pick her up, he froze. Closing his eyes, he cocked his head sideways, straining to listen. A series of demented howls scorched the air, quickly followed by a loud rustling sound as

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hundreds of the Wasted Undead crashed through the forest not far behind them.

"I'm going to eat you slowly while you're still alive!" Ichor's mother howled. "So you killed a few undead. Can you beat an army of Wasted Undead?"

A furious, inhuman series of growls and shrieks stung the air. After taking a deep breath, he opened his eyes, picked Gimelli up, adjusted her weight, then took off running. *No. No, I can't beat an army of those things.*

"I smell your blood and sweat!" one of them yelled.

Keep breathing, Scelto told himself, his chest heaving under the strain. Just like when in their gruesome village, his heart thumped in his chest. Despite his best efforts, he could feel his heart racing faster as his breath became labored.

"No cooking this one, boys!" Ichor's mother screeched. "We eat him alive!"

"First, we devour the girl!" an undead bawled. Ichor's mother howled with laughter, apparently thinking that was both a funny and great idea.

"I really hate these things," Scelto huffed.

Gimelli's body spasmed, throwing off his stride. He lurched to his left—luckily, a black oak tree was near. Tucking Gimelli in to protect her, his shoulder rammed into the hard bark. He shifted her over, using the tree to leverage her weight while taking several deep breaths.

A deep cackle from somewhere behind woke him up to the reality he had no time to rest if he wished to survive. Letting out his own primordial scream, he started off again.

"Good! Use your energy screaming. We're gaining!"

Without looking back, he called on all his strength to push his body forward. Despite the effort, his pace rapidly started to slow. His mind raced for solutions. If he stood to fight, he would quickly be overwhelmed. There was nowhere to hide Gimelli. With the monstrous black fangs sticking out of their gums he thought it likely they could smell him.

Eventually, exhaustion's momentum grew, teaming up with gravity to weigh down, then slow, his increasingly wobbly legs until he was no

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longer able to run. Soon even walking made every muscle shake under the strain, burning in protest. His right knee buckled briefly, and his body lurched to the right. He was barely able to compensate and keep upright.

Abruptly, someone grabbed his shoulder, Scelto spun around so quickly he nearly dropped Gimelli, struggling to make sense of what he was seeing. Finally, he recognized Arend. Scelto smiled broadly. With the last of his strength he shifted Gimelli over his head, thrusting her towards the Eaglian before promptly collapsing, his muscles aching, screaming as his breath rattled.

“Kainen!” Arend yelled, cradling Gimelli.

“Hey...” Kainen paused, taken aback by the sight of Gimelli looking pallid to the point of death, and Scelto, his muscles quivering in exhaustion, his entire body splattered with blood. “What the actual...?”

“No time,” Scelto huffed. “Arend needs to fly Bellae and Gimelli to safety, we are about to have a shit-ton of undead on us.”

“Gimelli!” Bellae cried out, dropping to her knees and sobbing at the sight of her sister. Her eyes scoured over the seemingly endless puncture wounds, some still oozing, others coagulated black, as Crann came over, tenderly rubbing his nose against Bellae’s back.

“Wait,” Kainen said. “Did you say un...dead?” *I knew the rumors about this forest were true*, he thought, more than a little angry with Sankari for forcing them into this heinous forest.

“Undead is what the vampire guy called them, but they’re partially alive.”

“Just rest a minute and then...” Kainen was interrupted by a series of savage cries.

“Do you want the girls to end up chained in a pool of their own shit?” Scelto asked.

“Wait, why is that even an option?” Lontas asked, helping Scelto take a drink.

“Listen, we need to move *right* now,” Scelto gasped after taking several large gulps, the cool liquid feeling amazing worming through his parched throat. “Vampires and undead—partial-dead, zombies, freaks,

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whatever you want to call them—are coming, and they are pissed. I may have killed their leader...and like a half a dozen or so.”

Sankari huffed, “He’s cray-cray-craaaazyyy.”

Thunderous crashing sounds echoed along with inhuman howls. They could now hear a large group rumbling through the forest directly for them.

“Maybe we should listen to Scelto,” Lontas said.

“If we stay and fight, we all die,” Scelto added.

“What about going north? South? Try and get away,” Lontas asserted.

“I’m pretty sure they can smell us and won’t stop until they kill me and Gimelli,” Scelto said, slowly rising.

“Let’s go towards the Fionain,” Kainen suggested. “Listen, listen!” he said over their protests. “They obviously hate...whatever those things are. The Fionain freaked out over those weird wooden masks hung up as a warning. The creatures Scelto ran into must have put them up as an impromptu border. If we lead them close enough to the Fionain, maybe those things will stop, just like the tree creatures did.”

“What are we supposed to do then?” Sankari asked, fluttering hotly. “What if the Fionain show up and attack? We’ll be stuck between two groups trying to kill us.”

“We’ll sort that out later,” Kainen answered, glaring angrily at the Fairy, but equally upset at himself for not trusting his gut to avoid this forest. “When I look around, the only semi-safe direction is east.”

“I trust his Elf eyes,” Arend said, nodding.

“Didn’t help us with the Fionain!” Sankari huffed.

“Actually, I did see them, just too late...”

“Enough!” Scelto yelled. “All I know is that we can’t stay here. No way am I ending up in one of those feces huts.”

“What’s with you and the—”

“They’re close. Move right now,” Arend interrupted Kainen, adjusting Gimelli and heading back to the east.

The others followed, Lontas helping Scelto, Sankari fluttering in the rear, keeping watch. As they popped between the pervasive forest

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shadow and scarce bursts of light, it seemed as if they, and time, were drudging forward.

"Pick it up, guys!" Sankari warned as the Wasted Undeads' wailing howls grew closer. "Who's that screaming lady?" she asked of the cackling voice.

"The mother of the head-guy, vampire thing. She's a little upset."

"You think?" Sankari hissed. "The mission was to find food, not make us someone else's."

"We were so hungry, and their food smelled delicious...until we found out it was people being cooked in green slop."

Lontas dry-heaved, his face shuddering in revulsion while they continued to move as fast as possible away from the wretched swarm pursuing them.

"Guys, I don't know if we can—" Kainen was cut off as they all came to an abrupt halt.

The grating screech of the Fionain directly in front of them crashed against the furious wailing of the undead closing in behind. Bellae stepped forward, her normally melodic talking-to-animals voice transforming to a guttural grating sound.

After listening to them for several moments, she pivoted to the others. "They hate the 'dead' who inhabit the west woods and say it's time to reclaim their forest."

"That's good," Lontas replied as Bellae swiveled to listen again.

She suddenly nodded vigorously. "We agree."

"What did we consent to?" Kainen asked.

"If we fight those they call the dead, and then leave their forest immediately, they will help us defeat them and not kill us. After seeing us battle two of their kind so fiercely, they decided to head west to help us rid the forest of the dead."

The Fionains' jarring words were mostly unrecognizable to everyone but Bellae. However, several creaked coherently, "Revenge" and "our forest."

Sagely laying Gimelli down behind them, the others drew their weapons and turned to face the coming horde. The Fionain stomped forward, making space for the League in their swarming line.

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"I'm glad they're fighting with us," Lontas said, staring up into the vacant black holes that served as eyes of the one closest to them. The Fionain opened its mouth, and hundreds of filamentous cirri shot forward in tune with a rolling screech that sent a shiver of fear through the young squire.

"Kill!" the creature moaned, using his vine-like arm to point towards the approaching undead.

"Yep, got it," Lontas replied, holding his sword a little tighter.

Looking back at Gimelli, still passed out behind them, Scelto let loose his own rumbling growl. Shaking out his muscles, he took a deep breath, trying to suppress the horrific visions from the village. Sensing Lontas' gaze, Scelto's head whirled, wide-eyed, towards his fellow squire and whispered, "Kill them all."

Lontas swallowed hard, nodding as Scelto's mind drifted to the black fangs, roasting humans, chains of the feces-filled hovel, and Liha attacking despite her wounds. "Brain shots or take off their heads. Cutting open or cutting off anything else is useless," he warned.

The racket from the legion of undead crashing through the forest grew, and they could now see flashes of them hurtling through the frames of branches, needles, and leaves. Abruptly, the forest around them exploded with activity as dozens of undead burst through the undergrowth to stand across from them—stunned to see Fionain.

Ichor's mother emerged, pushing through the agitated rows of the soulless. The front lines of undead were still in relatively good shape, the stragglers bringing up the rear, the wasted ones, were littered with lacerations, deep sores, and oozing wounds, brushed with a greenish hue. The smell of death and excrement wafted through the forest as the hundreds of Wasted Undead joined the others.

"They literally smell like rotting flesh and shit," Sankari retched.

"I warned you about the dung huts," Scelto said.

"Be gone, Fionain!" Zlota shouted. "You're in *our* side of the forest, and we will have that food." A heinous smile ripped across her face, revealing pointed teeth and wriggling black fangs as she pointed to the League.

Suddenly, one of the Fionain lurched forward, lifting Bellae up with the many tentacles of its arms. Before Scelto and Kainen could

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come to her defense, the Fionain gently set her down in front of them before speaking in his scraping language.

Bellae nodded, then translated, “They’re going to kill all of you, Zlota, all your sick underlings, and reclaim their forest. The peace accord is broken.”

Ichor’s mother laughed. “Your harpy friends killed my boy. I will not rest until you are all dead. We shall rip the flesh from your bones with our teeth. Your death shall be slow and painful. If I have to kill all the Fionain to do it, so be it—more room for us.”

Bellae smiled. *I’ve heard those ultimatums plenty of times from the Nishi.* “What an original threat.”

Zlota spoke in her own halting language, shouting orders. After finishing, a greasy smile spread across her face. “We shall drink the blood of those brats and bathe in the sap of you overgrown shrubs!”

The Wasted Undead moved forward, through the rows of healthier ones, howling and screaming. Some scurried on all fours, others lurched in jerking spasms, a few limped, but all had green eyes radiating hatred from within faces of sallow complexion. Massive sores littered their entire bodies while erosions circled their legs and arms where shackles had chained them in their huts of horror. As the wasted neared the Fionain, the healthier undead moved backwards before heading to their right, towards the left flank of the Fionain.

Kainen let loose a barrage of arrows. Two were direct headshots, instantly dropping the targets. As Scelto predicted, body shots did nothing to slow them down. As Kainen continued to fire and kill, the Fionain shuddered with pleasure as each undead target fell.

Despite his weakness, Scelto was the first to step forward as the undead rushed towards them, his sword impaling through an attacker’s eye socket. Scelto’s thrust combined with the undead’s momentum pushed the blade through the skull until it hit the sword’s cross guard. Blood gushed out, rushing onto the countless sores on the undead’s disfigured face. Some lesions percolated with active infection. A few were so deep you could see through sinewy windows into his festering mouth.

Before he could withdraw his sword, Scelto roared as one of the Wasted Undead running on all fours latched onto his leg. In a panic

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he ripped his sword violently upwards. The decomposing neck muscles snapped, and Scelto found himself with a detached head impaled on his sword, receiving another blood bath as spurts of gore shot out of the headless neck while the twitching corpse dropped. He stepped back as the one on all fours continued to lunge forward, violently clawing at Scelto. The undead's left eyelid had decayed, resulting in a wide-eyed look—giving his already maddening expression a beefy, psychotic appearance.

The undead thrust himself upwards. Now clutching Scelto's shirt, he shrieked a deranged cackle. His decayed mouth flung ajar, his filed teeth set to bite when Scelto began beating him with the head still affixed to his sword. Repeatedly, the blows rained down. Loud cracks filled the air as both skulls began to fracture. Finally, the undead fell to the ground. Scelto pointed his sword down and speared through the attacker's skull...repeatedly.

"Think he's dead there," Sankari said, fluttering anxiously. She moved to flitter around the head of an attacking undead, distracting him long enough to give Lontas time to react.

Lontas whipped his sword around, its blade chopping into the neck. It was enough of a blow to drop the undead assailant but not sufficient to completely decapitate him. Bellae moved forward with her small sword. Twisting with all her might she hacked at the tissue still clutching the head to the body.

The nearly headless attacker was still alive and with one hand grabbed Bellae's cloak, while the other landed several blows to her face. Grym and Borb angrily skittered across her arms and began chewing on the undead's eyes while scratching into his ragged and swampish skin. The two mice chewed mercilessly into his eyeballs, occasionally shaking their heads side to side in order to rip out larger sections as ocular fluid and blood flooded their fur. Their claws continued to dig and shred the scabrous skin of his face.

Blinded and enraged, his blows became much less effective. He let go of her arm to swat at the mice. With the distraction, Bellae managed to finish the decapitation, and his body descended into inactivity.

Grym began spitting out the repugnant flesh. *"This guy tasted dead and seriously needs a bath."*

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"For once I agree with Grym," Borb said. "Now we seriously need a wash. Dead-guy eye goo is, as you might expect, disgusting."

"Thanks for the assist, guys," Bellae said, holding the sore and reddening spot on her face.

Crann used his whip-like tail to upend an undead coming for Bellae. Spinning around, he began mercilessly stomping on its head until it was crunched into flattened gore, and all movement stopped.

"Thanks," Bellae said, gently patting the horse's neck.

"Move back, Scelto!" Kainen shouted, warning of an undead vaulting towards him.

As Scelto withdrew, Kainen slammed a side kick into the attacker's face before performing a three-sixty spin, his kama weapon cutting into the undead's heart. As the zombie fell, Kainen rained down blows, the sharp beak from Creber easily obliterating the zombie's neck, relieving it of the responsibility to hold the head in place.

The Fionain closest to the League threw down one of the undead, then rammed one of his spider-like legs through its skull. Another simultaneously shot his arm tendrils through the eye sockets, up the nose, and into the mouth of an undead before whirling and rotating the filamentous fingers until the zombie's brain liquefied and his body went flaccid.

To the left of the League sudden screeching howls of agony from the Fionain were followed by a cackling laugh from Zlota. Dozens of the sturdier undead had moved around to their left flank and were overwhelming the arboreal creatures. Using sheer numbers to overcome individual Fionain, they were rolling up the line.

Some of the undead threw clay pots, which shattered on impact, releasing noxious gas, which slowed the Fionain, as it had Gimelli. The arboreal creatures hit by the toxic vapor went flaccid, their viney arms falling slack at their sides. Although most had not brought weapons, a few undead had axes and quickly moved forward with blurring speed to rain down vicious blows. In reality they were not moving faster, but the dazing gas altered the victims' perceptions.

Sap exploded out as they mercilessly chopped and slashed at the Fionains' faces. After their trunk bodies hit the ground, the undead

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continued hacking until their tree-faces splintered. As other Fionain moved in to assist, they too were greeted with the smoke-filled grenades.

Even without the gas several of the tree creatures had fallen and were being gouged and torn apart by the crazed undead. Numerous zombies were teaming up, pulling, ripping, and detaching limbs and branches. Brutal screeching howls of pain and heinous shrieks oozed out of the maimed and dying Fionain.

Scelto made a move in that direction to help but was restrained by the tendrils of a Fionain. He soon discovered why as loud cracking sounds exploded all around the forest. Hundreds of new Fionain descended from all sides. They rolled onto the undead like a wave, many using the masks that had served as a restrictive barrier to bludgeon the overwhelmed zombies.

The last of their gas-filled containers were thrown, but other Fionain emerging from the forest simply moved past their stunned comrades. Using their innumerable tentacle arms, they quickly took possession of all axes. One undead was held up by his arms while an axe bisected his head. Harsh howls of revenge bellowed out of the arboreal creatures.

Four Fionain grabbed the cursing and thrashing Zlota. Their writhing tentacles became taut, lashed onto each of her extremities, and began viciously pulling. Their arachnid roots serving as legs surged backwards, wrenching her body taut. Her scream joined the dying shrieks of the other undead. With a ripping slurp they dismembered her, throwing her appendages and letting her body fall. Wriggling on the ground, she continued to scream as blood streamed out from where limbs were absent.

“My other sons shall rise and seek revenge! We shall repopulate the forest, and the world, with undead!” Zlota screamed, her eyes flashing pure hatred as her lips snarled. A heinous laugh echoed from her as she glared at the four Fionain standing over her.

After listening to her for a moment, they took turns stomping on her until only a beefy bloodbath remained. As the last of the undead were crushed, a resonant silence echoed off the gore-soaked forest floor, taking the place of the now-silenced screams and howls still chiming in their ears. The Fionain looked around fiercely, gazing for any

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more of the undead. Satisfied none remained, they joined their tendrils together. Lifting their heads back, they let out a piercing howl. The grating noise sounded like a thousand trees scraping and grinding off each other.

Arend hustled over to Gimelli, quickly lifting her up. "Let's get out of here."

The others nodded and began heading west.

Several tendrils whipped out, wrapping around Bellae's neck, lashing her backwards. As the howling stopped, a Fionain that had not been fighting hobbled forward from the forest shadows. His movements were slow, disjointed, painful. Several of his arm tendrils were immobilized, dangling flaccidly. Two of his leg roots were disabled, dragging tediously behind.

Bellae was forcibly twirled around to face him as Lontas restrained Scelto. "Let's see what happens. They let us go once. There's no reason to think they won't keep their word."

"I don't see malice around them," Kainen added.

"But they have Bellae," Scelto seethed despite his exhaustion.

"I know, but look around," Lontas replied, nodding to the hundreds of Fionain closing in around them, many moist with blood and fleshy splatters from the undead still coloring their bark. "We're in no position to fight them."

Standing excessively close to Bellae, the ancient Fionain used some of his working tendrils to hold up her chin, turning her head side to side. Gently he rubbed the redness around her eye, which was quickly swelling. In a gravelly, scratching voice he spoke to her for a long time.

Eventually, Bellae nodded, hugged him, then slowly moved to the others. "Time to go."

The League headed west through the forest.

"The elder Fionain recognized Gimelli's wounds and gave me a suggestion," Bellae said.

"Right now, let's get some distance between us and them," Kainen said. "We'll get the details later."

"Let's give the dead village Scelto and Gimelli blundered into a wide berth," Sankari said, fluttering proudly, as if their stumbling into

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the village was worse than her insistence they enter the forest in the first place.

"Definitely. That lady who had her arms and legs amputated screamed there were more who could rebuild," Lontas added.

"Exactly. Those vampire creatures, like Ichor, didn't fight," Scelto said.

"What the?" Arend howled as Gimelli shrieked, her eyes exploding to reveal haunting white fibers. After her body spasmed several times, her eyes closed and her screaming stopped.

"Yeah, her eyes look like that now." Scelto sighed.

"Are all those spots bite marks?" Sankari asked.

"Yes," Scelto said, explaining the barbed tendrils of Ichor that leached from his fanged hands.

"I thought vampires bit people with their teeth," Lontas said.

"No. His teeth were blindingly bright white because he eats through the tendrils and fangs within his hands," Scelto said.

"Does this mean she's going to turn into one of...whatever they were?" Sankari asked.

"Absolutely not!" Scelto steamed.

"We should stop and rest," Lontas said.

"We're too close to that village of the damned," Kainen said. "We keep going."

After several hours of travel, Scelto paused before taking several deep breaths, his face shuddering in discomfort. Letting out a gasp, his body collapsed to the ground, his hands clasping his hamstrings as they seized in painful cramps.

"We have to rest," Kainen said. "We should be far enough from that village."

"Agreed," Arend replied. "It's time to take care of Gimelli."

"We should keep going. Scelto can suck it up," Sankari said.

"We rest!" Kainen said, his anger with Sankari boiling over.

"Gimelli's running a fever," Arend informed, gently setting her down.

"Is that good?" Lontas asked.

"No clue. What *would* have been good was to avoid this horror show of a forest," Kainen seethed, still glaring at Sankari. "What do we need, Bellae?"

Far Forest Scrolls

"The elder Fionain said we need arnebia plants," she said, wiping the sweat from Gimelli's forehead before starting on the monumental task of cleaning her wounds.

Kainen nodded to Arend. "Arnebia, that's a good thought."

As those two and Sankari headed out to look for medicines, Lontas and Bellae huddled near the now-moaning Gimelli. Scelto fell asleep, and Crann stood guard.

"She looks super pale," Lontas said.

Bellae nodded, tears welling in her eyes. "I don't think I could handle it if she dies."

Not knowing what to say, Lontas gently rubbed his friend's back. After several moments, he spoke, "What are the Fionain?"

Bellae looked up. "A long time ago, they were more animal than tree. At first, I thought they were humanoid, but they are kind of a mix, which is why I could talk to them. They adapted to draw nutrients from trees, never taking enough to kill them. They—"

"A symbiotic relationship!" Lontas interrupted excitedly. "You know, a lot of people mistakenly think *both* need to benefit from a symbiotic connection. Not true. It's simply a close relationship between two different beings or species where at least one gains an advantage. It could be protection, food, anything really. The other in the dyad could have a negative—parasitic, positive—mutualistic, or neutral—a commensalism outcome in the relationship. Some examples of each kind of symbiotic relationship include..."

Lontas stopped at the sight of tears and disinterest radiating from Bellae's eyes, one swollen and turning black from being hit. He murmured, "Oh, sorry."

"Many generations ago, the Fionain apparently began spending more and more time attached to trees, and now they spend most of their lives with just one."

"Did that old Fionain tell you that?"

"Yes. He also mentioned his ancestors referred to a group of human friends who could talk to them. He says they are the ones who taught them some words of the common tongue. Because of their connection

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to each other, they have kind of a collective knowledge. So what one knows, they all know once they connect.”

“So they were friends with the Ainmhi Caint?”

“Apparently. He remembered them as kind. I was a big reason they didn’t kill us. He actually thanked us for helping them rid the world of what he called ‘spirit assassins.’ It was his life’s goal to reclaim the entire forest for the Fionain before he died.”



When Scelto came to, Gimelli was lying next to him. She was sleeping, and her skin was heavily bandaged, each injury oozing an orangish-yellow hue underneath.

“We used the arnebia plant,” Kainen said, holding up bunches of small yellow flowers, each with five petals, giving them a star-like appearance. Every stalk had hundreds of small tendril-like leaves that gave Scelto a chill, reminding him of the vampire’s whip-like appendages.

“Arend flew to get them. Luckily, there are few griffins and no Watchers this far west. Obviously, the stories are true and the Fionain elder knew about these ancient plants as a cure. It seems vampires don’t like arnebia, so they must have had the undead pull it from the forest.”

“I think we caught the change in time,” Arend added.

“You *think*?” Scelto said, sitting up quickly. “Does that mean you believe there’s a chance she *might* turn?” He moved protectively closer to Gimelli, staring at her anemic face, longing to see her famous smile. “Are the bandages orange because the plant’s mixing with her blood?”

“No,” Arend answered. “We mixed in sap from the dragon trees of the Marskimaa Wetlands.”

Scelto looked up in surprise. “You flew all the way there?”

“Yes. Our warriors regularly go and cut open the bark to collect the healing red-orange sap.”

Scelto nodded. “I’m eternally grateful, my friend.”

Far Forest Scrolls

Gimelli's eyes suddenly burst open, the sinewy white film stretching across them, giving her a tortured appearance. Her mouth extended into a blood-curdling scream.

"It's okay," someone was saying, but Gimelli saw only darkness. *What's happening?* she wondered, desperately wanting to ask why she couldn't talk or see. *I feel like I'm stuck in a giant well of mud.*

"That's it. Calm down, calm down," Kainen said as Lontas wiped the sweat from her brow.

"She's burning up," Lontas said. "Her fever's higher."

Their voices barely registered with Gimelli as Ichor's eyes materialized out of the darkness encasing her mind. Slowly, the drugged incense of the hut materialized. She could hear his mother's cackles. Soon his face took shape, his mouth contorting into a devious smile before opening insantly wide. A hand whipped out of his mouth. Initially, a closed fist, it snapped open to reveal several sets of fangs and tentacles shooting out by the thousands. The black barbs began attaching to eat into her face. She began shrieking louder while hitting, striking out. Thinking she was fighting Ichor, she was actually pummeling the League trying to restrain her.

"She's going to hurt herself or someone else!" Sankari hissed. She was about to suggest dispatching Gimelli to protect the rest of the League when Scelto shot her a blistering look and she thought better of it.

Eventually, Gimelli's eyes closed and she passed out.

"We need to take turns watching her," Kainen announced.

"I'm first," Scelto said protectively.



"That last shriek woke me up," Bellae said, moving next to Scelto. "Thanks for taking first watch. How's it going?"

"Intermittently, she screams and spasms. She lashed out at me several times," Scelto replied, worry etched across his forehead as he nervously rubbed his face. "Her eyes..."

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“Still white?” Bellae asked.

He nodded. “She cannot turn, Bellae. She can’t.”

“I know,” Bellae said, moving to embrace Scelto, letting her cloak brush away his tears.

Gimelli’s hand clutched the back of Bellae’s leg as she let out a vicious bellow. Bellae moved to the other side as Scelto leaned over her, whispering calming words. Gimelli’s body began thrashing violently, her teeth bared, biting aimlessly as her eyes splintered open, revealing a pulpy white stare hauntingly gazing out in blind rage. Scelto moved to hold her down as her feverish body convulsed combatively. Her temperature soared as sweat erupted prodigiously while her vacant, ivory eyes flashed frenzied rage.

“Again, again, again?” Sankari whined. “She’s like a cracked bard who keeps singing the same line of a song.”

“Nice,” Kainen said, glaring at the Fairy as Lontas moved to assist.

“Her fever’s really up,” Arend added, joining them.

“Switch!” Scelto called out after trying to hold the pale, but surprisingly strong, Gimelli for half an hour.

Arend stepped forward and took his place. Scelto moved back, shaking out his tired muscles. He could feel the weight of Kainen’s stare. Angrily, he snapped his head towards the Elf, “She *will* be fine!”

“She’s absolutely not, by any sane definition, ‘fine,’” Sankari hissed. “We don’t know what’s going to happen, but we should prepare ourselves...”

“She...will...be...fine!” Scelto seethed deliberately.

“I-I know, but you...we, we all need to prepare ourselves for the worst-case scenario,” Kainen said gently.

Scelto shook his head, not allowing his mind to settle on the possibility she could turn.

“I think her fever’s breaking,” Lontas said after another half hour of fitful thrashing. “Finally, she’s settling into real sleep.”

“For her to recover we have to let her rest, so you might as well get some sleep,” Sankari said, fluttering anxiously around Scelto’s head. There was a streak of annoyance in her voice, but it was tempered with an unexpected amount of compassion. “I’m not sleeping anymore tonight, so I can help Bellae with the next watch.”

Far Forest Scrolls

As if on cue, Scelto felt a wave of fatigue. As Bellae anxiously watched, he curled up next to Gimelli, quickly fading into sleep.

“How in the world did they get away from those undead?” Kainen wondered.

“Lots and lots of blood. I found six decapitated bodies in a blood-stained clearing with a large rock formation. Looks like the Proliate gave him a really nice weapon during his time with them,” Arend said, nodding to Scelto’s sword that Lontas began sharpening.

“It’s good quality,” Lontas replied. “I wonder if there are any more of those undead creatures, and how many vampire things?”

“That’s why we avoided the village. After what that lady screamed, I bet there are more.”

“Are we safe here?” Bellae questioned, nervously petting Grym and Borb.

“Two of us should keep watch through the night, and we won’t risk a fire,” Arend said. “Come what may, we move out tomorrow, so you’d better get some rest.”

Bellae nodded, but the idea of falling asleep seemed ridiculous. Tenderly, she touched the swollen, throbbing skin around her eye. *Stupid undead*. Besides being worried about her sister every time she closed her eyes, she kept seeing the dead bodies of the zombies. She wasn’t sure what they were, and her imagination whipped fear into a frenzy.



Scroll 5: Proud Papa

“This one?” Jumeaux asked.

Irvikuva, the golden gargoyle, crossed his arms. “Yeah. Again, yeah,” the living statue said as one of the sealed doors opened. “No one will accuse you of being a scholar.”

“This is a cool room,” Jumeaux said, entering one of the side chambers off Veneficus’ office.

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“Actually, you aberration, this room is the exact same temperature as it was in the other chamber. Genius here thinks the temperature changed. This room is not ‘cool,’ you fool! Amazing that some people think this new generation is lazy, dull-witted, and talentless. You really buck the trend there with your astounding intellect,” a Valo stated, rolling his eyes.

“It’s my special training center,” Veneficus said, ignoring the floating light. “The walls are coated in mindre crystal dust designed to absorb spells.”

“That’s cool...er, awesome,” Jumeaux said glancing at the floating orb as the light rolled its eyes. “I wondered why the walls sparkled.” There were all manner of wooden contraptions, from hoops, to people, and monsters, around the room. Several stones ranging in size from small to enormous rose up as well.

Several Valo in the room carried on mumbling insults to Jumeaux as Veneficus continued, “I wouldn’t want you blowing up my office or killing yourself.”

“Oh, I don’t know, boss. I, personally, would love to see this guy blow himself up!” a Valo said, chuckling.

“Are you getting enough to eat? How’s the food?” Veneficus asked.

“Yes, and great, thanks. So much better than Liberum.”

“Classes going well? Keeping up?”

“Yes.”

“What an elegant response, youngling. ‘Yes.’ How profound,” a Valo asserted. “You really paint the picture of how classes are going with your delicate yet thorough descriptions. I feel like I’m living through the experience with you. In fact—”

“Excellent,” Veneficus said, interrupting the Valo. “I knew you could handle starting out as an Apprentice.”

Jumeaux beamed at the compliment.

“Alright, let’s get to it,” Veneficus said, handing Jumeaux a crosier.

“Oh, master, I could have done that for you!” a Valo stated, his expression suddenly turning to one of mock surprise. “Oh, that’s right! With no arms, I guess I can’t. Thanks again for that mildly irritating, and never inconvenient, oversight.”

“Let’s start with moving things around,” Veneficus said.

Far Forest Scrolls



“I think you have the *ex agito hic* spell down, Jumeaux,” Veneficus said after hours of moving increasingly heavy objects.

After starting with small boxes, by the end, Jumeaux was moving the largest boulder in the room. The former squire wiped the sweat from his forehead, taking several deep breaths.

“You know, big master guy, I think he should work on that spell a little more. I most definitely see room for improvement,” a Valo said, looking at Jumeaux with mock concern.

“That’s a lot harder than it looks, especially with the heavier boulders,” Jumeaux huffed.

“The greater weight requires extra concentration and effort. However, the more you practice, the easier it will become,” Veneficus said. “You’re learning the first lesson of Magic, stay hungry. You must—”

“You know, I could go for something to eat,” a Valo interrupted. “Oh wait, once again, thanks to your incredible kindness, I have no stomach or digestive system. That’s fine. You two go ahead and eat if you’re hungry. We’ll just float around aimlessly.”

“I could teach him the *ekrxi* spell and have him obliterate you into nothingness. Would you like that, my floating menace?” Veneficus asked.

Seeing the rage in his eyes, the Valo floated back silently but continued miming insults.

“Magic and life are successful when desire to achieve your goal encounters concentration. It all starts with having an objective. Once you commit to achieving it, you must ravenously attack it while maintaining clear focus. As your studies progress, you will start to see connections. Desire and focus are strength. Persistence is power. A hunger, a focus, and never giving up, this is the recipe for triumph.” Veneficus smiled, placing his hand on Jumeaux’s shoulder. “Enough for today. Are Kaveri and Chy treating you well?”

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“They’ve helped me a ton.”

“Excellent. You come to me if you have any problems.”

“Becoming a Magician and studying with you has been spectacular. It’s my dream to become a Master Magician.”

“Dreams, which can seem so hardy, even sturdy, within the fortified confines of our skull, acutely become fragile and vulnerable when exposed to the outside world. Each time we fight to achieve a dream, we uncover part of our heart. It takes courage to reveal a dream and diligent fortitude to achieve it. We will try to contact Bellae again soon, and you will continue your studies.”

Jumeaux nodded, trying to digest the words. Before he could turn to leave, Veneficus spoke again.

“Remember, don’t tell anyone, especially your friends, about this extra training,” Veneficus stated.

“I feel guilty about that.”

“Do not ever confuse being selfish with looking out for self.”

Smiling, Jumeaux nodded before exiting through the door, which magically sealed behind him.

“He’s making excellent progress. The Ainmhi Caint blood flowing within will make him an excellent Magician,” Veneficus said. When the Valo did not make a snide comment, he pivoted towards them with raised eyebrows.

“Oh, did you want one of us to say something?” a Valo said. “Sorry, I get a headache after pretending to care for so long.”

“I told you to let me know if my facial expression gave the impression I cared. I never want to portray the wrong appearance,” another Valo added. “Plus, sometimes silence is the only way I can stay out of trouble. Remaining quiet is better than spreading a thick load of bull excrement.”

“Although,” a third Valo said, “you know our motto: ‘Silence is for people too dim to discharge a thriving dose of sarcasm!’”

“You should stop persecuting him and help out that boy,” Veneficus said.

“Oh, sure, I would love to help him *out*, but he already *left*!”

“You really don’t like him?” Veneficus asked.

Far Forest Scrolls

“Let’s just say if gangly and awkward looks made money, he’d be super-duper rich,” one replied.

“In my opinion he looks best when I close my eyes,” another said to laughter.

“Enough,” Veneficus ordered. “Jumeaux’s parasitic self-victimization made it hard for him to feel attached to his sisters, although, now that he is gaining confidence, his fragmented sense of family seems to be healing. He’s starting to come into his own, realizing that maturing is a long and arduous path.”

“Aww, and people say you don’t care,” a Valo said while sneering.

“You sound like a proud papa!” Another Valo laughed, his face quickly turning serious as Veneficus’ eyes blazed with anger. “I meant that as a complement! Congratulations...er, Dad!”



Scroll 6: Unleash

Lovag rode Behalen to Friar. Even with the sweat pouring off of him he wore a thin smile. The attack had been going well, extremely well. The siege engines had been pounding the walls of Fortress Ovest for hours.

“The group attacking the Citadel has returned,” Friar informed. “Since the Veli and their Knights arrived earlier today, we are finally at full strength.”

“Any casualties at the Citadel?”

“Unfortunately, one,” Friar said somberly.

“No sign of movement from Temple Ovest, as of yet.”

“The Proliate forces at the Citadel were eventually drawn out by the decoys, but you never know what’s going to set these Red Guard off.”

“Friar, I’m seeing more troops patrolling the curtain walls and request permission to unleash the rakknivs,” Lovag asked.

Smiling, Friar nodded. “I think Finn would be proud to have you unleash his invention. Plus, it may be what we need to draw them out.”

Earth on Fire Ocean of Blood

"I'll give the order."

"Wait, I'll join you. I want to see this."

Riding to the siege engines, they passed the Dwarves of the Plains feverishly working their loitsia sticks.

"What are rakkniv?" a Dwarf taking a break asked.

"They consist of two extra-large ballistae whose behemoth bolts are connected by razor-sharp wire. Both bolts within the rakkniv are fired at the exact same time with a single trigger mechanism," Friar said.

"As the bolts fly through the air, the razor wire stretches between them, cutting the enemy in two," Lovag added.

"You Knights have waaay too much time on your hands," the exhausted Dwarf huffed.

What the walls of Temple Ovest lacked in style they made up for in thickness. It had two massive flanking towers that soared sixty feet. A tall circular tower with a red phoenix, representing Tallcon, was visible in the distance beyond the massive gate.

"We have been pounding the areas around the gate. It's relatively weak there, at least compared to their colossal walls. If we can't entice them out, we can pound that area into falling, but it could take weeks," Lovag stated.

"We don't have that kind of time, but they don't know that. Keep these siege engines running twenty-four seven!" Friar stated with an edge of excitement.

Friar, Lovag, and some Knights from Liberum were in the center, running the siege engines. A ditch ten feet deep sat in front of them, followed by an earthen rampart complete with wooden spikes. Using night and prestidigitation as cover, they had built the defenses without detection. The Northern Dwarf infantry was stationed behind the siege engines while the Vioma Dragons and their Aer Ridire were hidden up in the Tingij Mountains. The Veli, with the Knights from their castles, were in charge of the eastern flank, protecting it from attack by reinforcements from the Citadel. The intimidating walls of the Way of Trepas rose up on their left.

"Unleash," Lovag said in a quiet but menacing voice. The sharp, tangy snap of the ballistas firing contrasted the slow, aching groan of the trebuchets.

Far Forest Scrolls

The pairs of bolts fired from the ballistas surged forward, aimed just above the crenelated curtain wall of Ovest—the razor-sharp metal wire in between imperceptible. The right missile of one pair sank into one of the merlons at the top of the battlements while the left swung around, and the razor wire took out several of the defending Proliate. One was decapitated while two others were sliced in half as the wire whipped around and behind the wall. The other razor wire bolts from the rakkniv had similar results.

“Keep the rakkniv unpredictable. Target various parts of the wall, then give it a break before coming back to them,” Friar instructed, leaving to find Ritari.

“What are you thinking?” Friar asked upon finding his captain.

“Your plan had better work.”

Friar shrugged. “If it doesn’t, we won’t be around to worry about it.”

“Is that supposed to be humor?” Ritari asked with a dash of a smile.

“During battle, it qualifies. Either way, get ready—the night is just about to heat up.”

Just then, streaking flames and shrill screams bit through the air as hundreds of Knights unleashed a barrage of fiery, whistling arrows. Behind the pointed tip of each arrow was a rounded section with holes. As the arrows flew, air rushed through the holes, making a high-pitched screeching sound. To make it more terrifying they were presoaked in naphtha and lit on fire. Friar couldn’t help smiling at the musical symphony of terror and destruction. The harmonious sounds of devastation were occasionally highlighted by the screams of those on the receiving end.

“Beautiful music tonight,” Friar stated, wearing a smile of satisfaction rivaling that of any successful composer.

“It’s quite the sight,” Ritari said, following the arc of the flaming arrows. “We have reports that the Proliate in the Citadel have taken the bait and are mobilizing with other members of the Confederacy to move against us here at Ovest.”

“Excellent. Things are going nicely.”

“Why don’t you lie down and get some rest?”

Earth on Fire Ocean of Blood

“Not a chance. I’ve never felt more alive,” Friar beamed. “The wind has picked up and is blowing into the Temple. Let’s unleash the kites.”

“At night? In the dark?”

“Why not?” Friar replied. “Make it happen. With the light from the arrows and moons, the images should be fairly unnerving to the Proliate.”

After an hour, the melodic barrage abruptly stopped.

Friar smiled, the resonant silence signaling the giant kites were ready. The Knight Kiteer teams had silently moved around the earthen fortifications. The most difficult part was getting the massive kites and their loads off the ground, which was achieved using a modified ballista.

The kites were forged in the shapes of dragons and phoenixes and controlled with two strings. One thick cord flew the kite, the second went to a ring mechanism that, when pulled, would release a payload on the enemy.

“What are we delivering to our Proliate friends tonight?” Friar questioned as Ritari returned from overseeing the kite’s deployment.

“Ah, you know, standard welcome baskets: caltrops, excrement, pig heads, and animal entrails—all of which has been marinated to perfection in spoiled food.”

“I’m sure the Proliate will enjoy.”

“One of the Kiteers asked me what they should do if the wind suddenly changed and the payloads dropped outside the walls.”

“What did you say?” Friar asked.

“I told him not to eat any of it.”

Friar burst out laughing louder than he had in ages. It echoed around his troops and up to the Proliate on the wall, the cheerful cackle striking more fear than any battle cry. After a few moments, the adapted ballistas fired, sending the kites and their payloads into the air. Their extra-long tails flapped in the wind, helping with stability given the extra weight. Once caught by a current, it took four soldiers to control one kite. The wind stayed favorable, blowing them over the fortress walls. Terrified, the Proliate raised torches, trying to figure out what the strange shapes were.

“Restart the naphtha arrows!” Friar yelled.

Far Forest Scrolls

The flickering light from the flaming arrows and the Proliate torches gave haunting, strobe-like glances of dragons and phoenixes as the kites fluttered over the walls.

“Ritari! The Proliate are sending reserve troops to the walls, trying to figure out the kites. Run to Lovag! Order him to fire the rakkniv after we release the payloads and reel in the kites! Hurry, now!” Friar yelled.

After dropping their foul payloads, the Knights attached the ropes to a winch, slowly pulling the kites to the ground to be reloaded. The Proliate cries of fury and queasiness were still ringing out as the razor-sharp wires of the rakkniv ripped into the unfortunate Proliate on the walls. The ballista-razor wire combination was wrenching, slicing, and throwing them off the ramparts, leading to fresh screams. The barrage started again as Lovag ran up to Friar.

“Friar, your suggestions *are* adding terror but are killing *us*. None of my men have taken a break, much less slept. We all want victory but...”

“All right, son. Get the Knights some rest,” Friar said reluctantly, his voice dripping with disappointment. Despite his soulful knowledge of the horrors of war, he had to admit, there was pleasure in his plan coming together.



“There you are!” Lovag shouted.

Feeling as if he had never slept, Friar’s eyes snapped open, his body slouched between two creaking trebuchets. Rolling over to stand, his bones cracked and muscles ached.

“Sorry to wake you, but we have some action. We’ve been looking for you.”

“I’m ready to go,” Friar said, despite feeling exhausted, old, and stiff.

Lovag smiled but could see the age in his leader and was pessimistic about the ravages the coming war would unleash. Handing Friar a water skin, Lovag pointed to Ritari, who was gliding towards them.

Earth on Fire Ocean of Blood

“Don’t scare us like that,” Ritari said sincerely.

“I didn’t plan on sleeping...it just happened,” Friar said, shrugging.

“Our Eaglian friend Aquila has informed one of the Elf runners that the Proliate army from the Citadel *and* the warriors of Jaa will be upon us from the east very soon,” Ritari said.

“How did they get here so fast?” Friar answered his own question. “Magic. Any movement from within Ovest?” Friar questioned as he stiffly walked with his captain.

“No, I imagine they’ll wait for their reserves before attacking.”

“We have to encourage them to come out before they arrive,” Friar stated.

“Lovag, spare some of your onagers to the Veli on our flank. They will be the ones to take the first hits when they attack,” Friar ordered. As Lovag left, Friar walked up to King Abernan. “Looks like we’re going to see action soon.”

Abernan nodded excitedly and warmly clasped Friar’s arm. “We fight with you. To the end. Whatever happens, to the end.”

“Thank you,” Friar said, smiling at the intimidating Dwarves.



Scroll 7: Come Out, Come Out

“That’s a lot of reinforcements,” Ritari mumbled later that day. Friar and the others watched the seemingly endless line of Proliate and Jaa reinforcements march into Temple Ovest. Suddenly, the warriors of Jaa stopped. Those closest to the Knights performed a series of backflips towards them, landing on their knees and thrusting their guanduos menacingly at the Knights while yelling, “Death to you all!”

“I don’t think they like us anymore,” Ritari said.

“It’s hard to see former Allies lined up against you based on lies and deceit,” Friar said.

Far Forest Scrolls

The warriors of Jaa reformed and marched into the Temple but continued gesturing rudely. The Proliate marched in their typical silent, efficient way.

“General Lidenskap is there,” Friar said.

“Looks like they aren’t going to attack,” Ritari stated.

“Either they want to regroup inside Ovest, or they are waiting for even more reinforcements,” Friar replied.

The rest of the day went without more excitement as the Knights bombarded the Temple walls near the gates without any Proliate response.

“There’s some visible cracking along the gates and corners of the towers, but the blasted rounded towers deflect the force of projectiles,” Lovag said.

“Friar!” an urgent yell rang out. Ritari had already been on his way to give his leader some bad news when the messenger sprinted in front.

“What is it, son?” Friar asked. Breathless, the messenger handed Friar a note. The color drained from Friar’s face, and his knees trembled. Seeing Ritari approaching, he added, “We’ve got serious trouble. The army of Ager and the Southern Dwarves are nearly upon us. How did they sneak up on us? Aquila and the Eaglians should have seen them approaching.”

“The Eaglians are busy preparing for their upcoming role. Unfortunately, that’s not the half of it. We knew the Proliate sent a sizable force out for training exercises in Western Jaa. What we didn’t know is that they were given marching orders to move south *before* our attack,” the messenger said.

“When?” Friar asked.

“They’ve been marching for days.”

“How did they know to move south before we attacked?” Ritari wondered.

“It’s likely they were to be at the Citadel before our fake forces arrived. Either way, they are moving south, along the *western* edge of the Tingij Mountains!”

Earth on Fire Ocean of Blood

"They could then strike at our left flank after crossing through the Way of Trepas!" Friar stated.

"That will ruin your plan!" Ritari said.

"Ruin it? That will get us all killed. If they come through Trepas, our escape will be cut off, and we'll be surrounded and crushed in a pincer movement by the armies of Ager and the Southern Dwarves," Friar replied, pacing nervously.

"What are your orders?" Ritari asked, grateful he was not Friar.

"Tell Aquila I need details on the size of the Proliate army coming down from Jaa and accurate information on when they will reach Trepas. We have no choice—we move now!" Friar yelled. "Bring me Pumilus."

"Don't you think it's odd we haven't seen Watchers or Dark Warriors?" Ritari asked.

"No, actually," Friar responded. "I think they've withdrawn, happy to let us kill each other before swooping in to mop us up. The Vioma Dragon scouts have told us they are no longer casting their nets around the mountains."

As Pumilus walked up to Friar, his eyelids fluttered with exhaustion. Gone was the edgy temperament that usually served as an abrasive decoration on his ill-tempered personality.

"We have an emergency," Friar said. The Dwarf just shook his head and let his tired eyes close fully.

"Pumilus, unless you want your rest to come through death, I need you, and I need you now," Friar declared.

Pumilus raised his eyes and nodded.

After they had a chance to talk, Friar stood next to Ritari as they waited for Pumilus and his prestidigitator Dwarves to start. It was only a few minutes, but it seemed like an eternity.

"Should we have Aquila risk direct landings for messages in order to get rid of the delay using the Elf runners?" Ritari questioned.

"Oh, no! Eaglian involvement *must* stay a surprise. Remember your shock at seeing one. Imagine the enemies' fright at a thousand swarming the skies. We will have to go on our wits from here on out."

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Ritari was happy to see the mischievous gleam back in Friar's eyes.

"Finally, Pumilus is ready. He looks thinner than usual, and his sparse red beard looks even rattier than normal," Friar said as Ritari nodded.

Suddenly, a large object appeared just to the side of the siege engines. It was covered in a flowing black drape.

The enchanted huuto made Friar's words bellow out. "Behold a stolen sanctus kivi!"

At that Pumilus banged his loitsia sticks, and the fictitious black drape he had created fluttered away, revealing a massive, glowing orange stone.

"We will defile your sacred rock unless you immediately come out from behind your cowardly walls and fight!" Friar continued.

"I saw the sacred stone during the ceremony at the Citadel, and this is an excellent recreation," Friar said to just Ritari. "The Proliate believe the divine volcanic rocks are residue from Tallcon's rebirth."

With no response, Friar nodded to the Dwarves in charge of the prestidigitation. They conjured imaginary Knights defiling the rock. All sorts of nasty substances, including animal blood and waste, were splattered on their holy rock. Several fictitious Knights were also pounding at the rock with war hammers and axes. After twenty minutes without a response, a Knight runner approached at a dead sprint.

"They're coming," he said breathlessly. After a few slow deep breaths he continued, "The army of Piscium is here, and Ager is not far behind!"

"We need to get the Proliate out of that bloody Temple now!" Ritari yelled.

"Friar, I have an idea," Lovag said. "Have Pumilus use the prestidigitation to imitate someone from Piscium being tortured."

"No!" Friar yelled. "That will feed into the lies about us and play right into the Dark Warriors' hands!"

"I also hate the idea, but we don't have a choice. If we're going to follow your plan, especially the phase with the Eaglians, the Proliate *have* to come out of Ovest. Defiling the sanctus kivi was a great idea,

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but it didn't work. You said we should take advantage of their piety, so..." Ritari added, letting his voice slowly recede.

"If I were them, I'd sit in that Fortress until the Proliate troops coming from Jaa made their way south, moved through the Way of Trepas, and fell upon our left flank," Lovag said. "With Piscium and Ager on our right flank, they have us in a death pincer," Lovag uttered. "I say we fake the torture or retreat."

"If we retreat without drawing them out of Ovest, all the planning, all the surprises we spent years preparing, will go to waste," Friar announced. "However, if we go through with this, there's no turning back. All of the lies told about us torturing and destroying villages will be confirmed in their minds. The point of this war was to force them *back* into an alliance, not destroy any hope of a relationship with the Proliate and all the countries of their Confederacy."

"Was there really any chance of an alliance with the Proliate after all the lies? After these battles dripping with deception and death?" Ritari asked.

"Then why are we here?" Friar thundered.

"When there are no choices left, you fight."

Friar nodded. "I guess deep down, even when I was planning this battle, I knew I was deluding myself all along that peace and unity would ever be an option."

"I can't tell you what to do, but those are the two choices," Ritari stated.

"When you're fighting the wrong war, there can be no victory, no matter the outcome." Friar paused, letting his chin fall heavily on his chest. His brain felt hazy, his mind spinning over anemic knees. Feeling completely off balance, it seemed he was having an out-of-body experience yet, perhaps for the first time, truly seeing the predicament he was in.

Have I led my Knights to their doom? Scanning the faces of those staring expectantly, Friar's breath quickened. His heart bounded as panic showered its pollution across his brain. Everything seemed wrong as his mind played out the coming battle complete with brutal combat and cruel traps. *There are no answers to impossible questions.*

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Ritari steadied him.

Although destiny is a myth, sometimes you find yourself with your back against the wall and no choice but to fight. “After all our preparations, there’s no way we’re walking away. If the stories about the power of the diezmar siege engines are correct, our walls won’t hold out. We came here to provoke Lidenskap’s self-righteousness until he’s ruled by anger. Fake the torture,” Friar said with more conviction than he felt.

Pumilus and the others began the difficult prestidigitation. Soon large wooden stakes were conjured, complete with images of Piscinians with various illusory wounds tied to them. Cries of outrage could be heard from behind the walls of the Temple complex.

“Now you will see a truth of war manifested. There can be infinite power in restraint and unadulterated weakness and defeat in attacking,” Friar said. “We shall see which path the Proliate choose.”

Ritari nodded as Ovest exploded with activity. “Since they swore to protect all those in their Confederacy, the Proliate should have no choice but to advance and rescue the victims being fabricated by the Dwarves.”

“Their unwavering conviction is easily sculpted, manipulated,” Friar murmured as a loud gong rang from the Temple.

With impressive precision the Red Guard infantry were lined up just inside the gates of Ovest. General Lidenskap strode in front, his eyes wide with rage.

“Each and every one of you, as well as your weapons and pieces of armor, were forged from the sacred fire given by Tallcon. We, the chosen, were spewed forth from the rocky volcanoes making up our home. We are born of righteousness and cannot be intimidated!

“All of us marching into battle have cause to give thanks. No matter our fate, we are victorious. The luckiest amongst us are blessed to die in sacrificial service of Tallcon. Those who live have the honor to carry on his fight another day. So together, in complete faith, let us march against those who defile our land, our friends, and our god. To victory!”

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The Proliate roared back their support in voice and rattle of spears against shields. The gates opened, and they flooded out, forming lines to the east to avoid the earthen wall and trench in front of the Temple. Their lines slanted towards the southeast to match the Knights led by the two Veli. The various Red Guard regiments took up the middle and right flank.

“Piscinians,” Ritari seethed.

The Piscinian warriors gyrated forward, forming the left flank of the Proliate line. The warriors of Jaa followed the Proliate out of Ovest, taking up a position in reserve.

Directly opposite the Confederate troops were the two Veli from Taiheart and Toil Shaor. Veli Falciss took up position on the right, and Veli Pingius took up the left. Behind the earthen works were the siege engines, and behind them were the Northern Dwarves. A cavalry made up of a combined force of Knights from all three castles had been off to the west, but Friar ordered them back as the situation began taking shape.

“Should we move the Northern Dwarves?” Ritari questioned.

Before Friar could answer, the massive battle horns, the same ones used to pass messages deep in the mines of the Southern Dwarves, blasted into the awkward pre-battle silence. Any remaining birds flew far from the field of battle as their arrival blared across the field.

“Blasted magic, speeding their arrival!” Friar howled.

Directly east, across from the Veli, a long line of Southern Dwarves appeared in their pretentiously gaudy armor. They aligned in six regiments representing the major mines of the Southern Dwarf Kingdom.

“The Veli are going to get flanked and enveloped!” Friar screamed. “Pull them back to re-form here with the Dwarves!”

Immediately, the communication flags and drums of the Knights went to work. However, fierce and cavernous drums of Ager overwhelmed the Knights’ message. To the south of the Southern Dwarves the hulking infantry of Ager appeared.

“You’ve got to be kidding!” Pumilus bellowed, his voice burdened with exhaustion.



Figure 3: Battle of Ovest Battle Key

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Figure 4: Battle of Temple Ovest Icon I: The Knights and Northern Dwarves stand against the armies of five nations.

TABLE ONE Battle of Ovest

Allies		Confederacy	
Knights of Liberum:	2,000	Proliate Red Guard:	20,000
Knight Cavalry:	1,500	Piscinians:	
(lightly armored from all three castles)		Retiarian Division:	3,500
Knights of Taiheart:	7,500	Suoli Division:	3,500
(led by Veli Falciss)		Warriors of Jaa:	5,000
Knights of Toil Shaor:	5,000	Southern Dwarves:	10,000
(led by Veli Pingius)		Ager:	8,000
Northern Dwarves:		Auxiliary Cavalry:	2,000
Vioma Division:	7,500	(Heavily armored-inside Temple Ovest)	
(Green)			
Saatana Division:	5,000		
(Red)			
Rebelde Plains Dwarves:	250		
(skilled in prestidigitation)			
Total	28,750		52,000

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“Fire onagers!” Friar yelled. “Lovag, get any siege engine that can turn trained on their lines. If they can’t turn, keep pounding the Temple!”

“If the Veli don’t fall back, they’re going to be slaughtered!” Ritari yelled.

“Resend the bloody order to fall back!” Friar shouted.

The onagers Lovag had moved to support the Veli creaked into ferocious action. Their throwing arms slammed into the wooden cross beams propelling large rock projectiles towards the Confederate lines. The large boulders exploded into the Piscinian and Southern Dwarf lines. One rock slammed into an unsuspecting Southern Dwarf’s head, thrashing his neck backwards with such force the spine cracked and the muscles tore. His gooey, unrecognizable face hung down by the thinnest of strands of skin down past his shoulder blades, what was left of his eyes staring lifelessly backwards, before his entire body crumpled.

“Abernan, get your Northern Dwarves formed up perpendicular to the end siege engines. As the Veli retreat, they can re-form to the right of your lines. The siege engines and earthen works should protect our flank to the north. Ritari, move the cavalry on the far-right flank!” Friar shouted.

While Ritari informed the signalers, Abernan immediately took off to organize his fierce Northern Dwarves. The meager force of Knights and Northern Dwarves were hopelessly outnumbered against the armies of Ager, Piscium, Jaa, the Proliate Islands, and the Southern Dwarves.

“I need Iontaofa!” Friar yelled. The fastest runner in all of Liberum glided his thin athletic frame to Friar.

“He learned to run before walking and never saw reason to try the latter,” Friar said to Ritari before whispering to Iontaofa. “It’s time. Alert Aquila and the Eaglians.”

Iontaofa smiled and nodded before sprinting off, his feet seeming to barely touch the ground. On his back he carried the tightly rolled signaling flags they needed.

“Hurry!” Friar yelled, but Iontaofa was already far away.

Another messenger arrived. “Veli Falciss is refusing to retreat!”

“Repositioning, *not* retreating,” Friar said, pivoting to see Veli Falciss of Castle Taiheart thinning his lines to match the massive army spread out before him. His men moved efficiently and unquestioningly.

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Veli Pingius of Castle Toil Shaor, however, was quickly retreating with his forces towards the Northern Dwarf lines—his sizeable body fighting gravity and lack of conditioning as sweat poured off. Friar felt a tinge of embarrassment at the panic in the undisciplined movements.

“You taunt us to come out and then run like cowards!” Lidenskap yelled.

“Send the order to retreat *again!*” Friar shouted. “We must choose our ground wisely.”

From across the battlefield Falciss glared back at Friar, blatantly ignoring the signals.

“Runner, now!” Friar shouted. When one sprinted up, he continued, “Tell Falciss I can’t help his Knights without endangering my own troops. He is to retreat right...bloody...now!”

Time oozed forward as the two armies closed in on each other.

Sweating profusely, the runner bolted back to Friar. “His reply is, ‘I shall never retreat in front of these lowlife red birds!’” Friar seethed, but the runner continued, “Standing alone I keep alive the Knights’ fighting spirit.”

“We need to help Falciss right now!” Ritari cried longingly.

“He needed to follow orders. His arrogance is going to cost his Knights their lives. If we send troops to his position? Lambs to slaughter. The ground down there is horrible, and the numbers are ridiculous in our enemies’ favor. We would be quickly enveloped and destroyed.”

“We can’t lose one third of our Knight force!” Ritari cried out.

“At this point, we’re trying to *only* lose one third. Horrible ground, massively outnumbered, and positioned to be enveloped...they are beaten before it begins,” Friar said.

“We must help!”

Friar sighed. “That’s your warrior’s heart speaking, not your captain’s brain. Brave is what is forced upon us when there are no other choices, or when we must stand against evil. Stupidity is choosing to throw yourself, and your troops, into the jaws of defeat under the falsity of valor and frailty of bravado disguised as courage. Falciss will find what he has so longed for—a heroic death, created in his tangled web of a self-fulfilling prophecy.”

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Ritari looked down, his eyes a mix of rage and aggravation.

“I know what you’re thinking, but there’s no honor in suicide, and that’s exactly what an attack would be. Only a fool throws good troops after bad into a doomed plan. If we attack now, the enemy will kill us all and spit on our graves. Falciss’ obstinance, however misguided, is giving us time to form up proper battle lines. Now get over there and organize the mess that is Pingius’ troops!”

Ritari left, understanding Friar’s reasoning but loath to accept the consequences.

The Confederate troops consisting of the Proliate, Piscinians, and warriors of Jaa were lined up slanting towards the southeast. The armies of the Southern Dwarves and Ager lined up straight south. Veli Falciss spread out his Knights in a thin line across from the Proliate, Piscinians, and Southern Dwarves.



Figure 5: Battle of Temple Ovest Icon II: Veli Falciss disregards several desperate orders to retreat, instead throwing himself, and his Knights, into the jaws of impossible odds.

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The Confederate armies paused, confused by the thin line of Knights in front of them.

“Are the Knights really going to sacrifice an entire castle to be butchered?” Emperor Fanga of Piscium wondered aloud.

“Hold the onagers!” Lovag yelled across the battlefield. “We’ll risk hitting our Knights. If we aren’t going to help, what do we do now?” Lovag asked Friar.

“We watch them die,” Friar said, sadness at the reality coiling with anger at Falciss for disobeying orders. “I swear I can see a giant smile on his face even from this distance. Warriors enraptured with a ‘glorious’ death in battle often find it.”

Falciss raised his sword and let out a loud yell. The Proliate Red Guard formed a shield wall anticipating his charge. Falciss turned towards his Knights. “From the time of your birth there was nothing for you to do but die. Now do it with glory. We shall flame out like shooting stars, streaking across the sky until there is nothing left for us to give. To victory! To death!”

“To death!” his Knights shouted.

He led his Knights from the front in a desperate charge. Instead of heading straight ahead, towards the Proliate, they swung to their right and made for the gap between the Piscinians and Southern Dwarves. The Knights crashed into the enemy lines. The Confederate soldiers were caught off guard, surprised to find themselves taking the brunt of the assault.

The Knights initially made headway, hacking through the startled lines. However, they were quickly enveloped as the Piscinians and Southern Dwarves closed in around the vastly outnumbered Knights. The well-organized Falciss had his disciplined troops form up in a square despite the chaos.

General Falciss moved to the center of his encircled Knights. “Do you think you are the only ones who are crazy?” he yelled to those surrounding them.

His troops screamed as one, “Death!”

“Do you think you are the only ones who are fanatical?” Falciss wailed.

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“To die!” his Knights shouted back.

The armies of Jaa and Ager misinterpreted Veli Falciss’ motives and moved to block any possible escape route for the Knights. He was not trying to break through the lines to escape, but, at least in his mind, sacrificing himself and his Knights to save the Knights’ honor while giving the rest of the army time to reform.

Once Falciss and his Knights were surrounded, Lidenskap saw the Northern Dwarves across the field. With a satisfied smile he yelled for the Proliate to advance. Before joining them, he signaled the tower guards. Like one giant shield, the Proliate infantry moved—swinging clear of the Piscinians battling Veli Falciss and his hard-fighting Knights. The Knights who had been manning the siege engines moved to form up lines to avoid having the Proliate move through and around the trebuchets, potentially rolling up the Northern Dwarves’ flank. Even after the creaking and groaning complaints of the trebuchets fell silent, the sound still replayed in the ears of the Knights who had been manning their unceasing assault.

When the Proliate were just over a hundred yards from the Knights and Northern Dwarves, their red shield wall suddenly stopped before parting to reveal a hard-charging cavalry leaving the gates of the Temple.

“Heavy cavalry!” Ritari yelled.

Friar called out several commands. As his orders were being carried out, he revealed, “A novice using cavalry, Lidenskap made a crucial error revealing his plan so early! He should have waited to have the infantry part so we didn’t have so much warning.”

The Knights’ lightly armed cavalry was out, heading towards the gap in the Proliate line that had occurred when they separated. Secondly, the Knights quickly passed forward their enormous rectangular stoova shields designed to hold up to a heavy cavalry charge.

The shield’s lower edge had four spikes facing straight down, giving it the appearance of “fangs.” Two conical spikes in the middle and two larger spikes with barbs on the outside were all driven into the ground. Halfway up the shield two bracing poles angled backwards and were also pounded into the ground.

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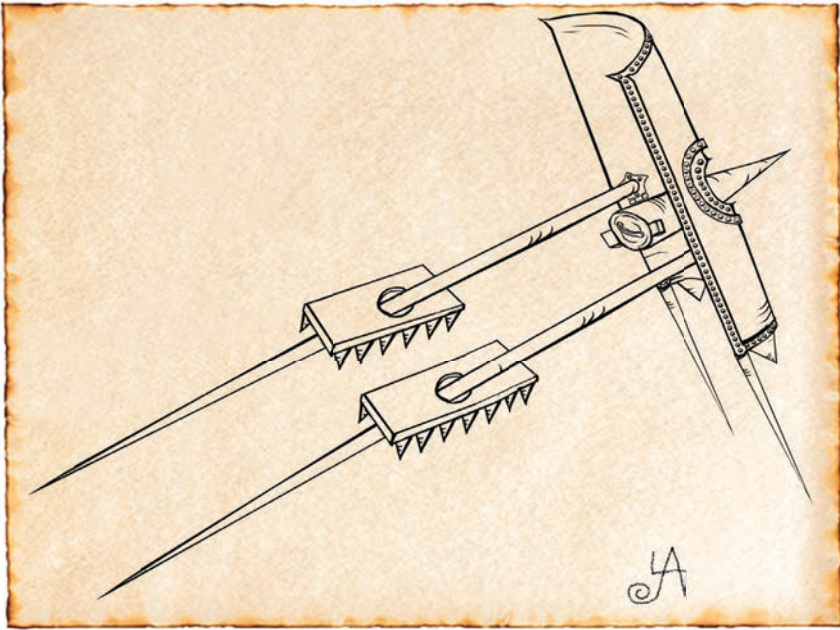


Figure 6: Although unwieldy and time consuming to place, the stoova shields provide a fearsome wall of steel against a heavy cavalry charge. What appears to be a small central prong transforms into a three-foot-long spike when pushed forward and locked into place.

All Proliate heavy cavalry finally exited the temple, forming up in two lines before toiling towards the Knights.

“We need more time to set up the stoova shields,” Friar cried.

He and Ritari ran to the front line to assist the squires and Knights pounding in the spikes, anchoring both the front of the shield and bracing it from behind. The center fallaciously appeared to have a small, pointed, brass boss.

“Remember your training on the stoova!” Ritari called out from the front line. “Do NOT push the central spike forward until I give the order. Doing it too soon will alert the enemy and potentially give them time to divert their attack.”

“Just before the charging cavalry hits our shields, slam the large cone-shaped spike forward,” Friar added.

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“Do not forget to lock it in place by twisting. You don’t want it flying back and knocking you out,” Ritari stated. “Remember to quickly insert your arms through the double argive grip of the shield and put your weight into it. With no time to stop, their horses will impale themselves on a three-foot spike.”

As the much lighter cavalry of the Knights closed in on the gap of Proliate infantry, they began riding in a circle. They fired their composite bows repeatedly at the infantry around the gap. This served to block the Proliate cavalry’s view of the installation of the stoova shields while thinning the Proliate ranks.

As the Proliate cavalry burst into the opening made by their infantry lines, the composite bows began firing at them, aiming at the sides and backs of the horses where they had no armor. Arrow after arrow found its mark, instantly creating havoc for the inexperienced cavalry’s discipline. The horses were strong but too new to be true destriers. Many horses bucked and kicked into the Proliate infantry. Some bolted back towards the Temple.

“Falciss and his Knights are putting up a monster fight,” Friar commented to Lovag after the stoova shields were secured. “They’re keeping their square and giving us the precious gift of time.”

“It’s not worth losing an entire castle of Knights,” Lovag replied.

“There’s a hefty price for lusty hubris,” Friar said, looking toward the Tingij Mountains for their relief. The timing had to be perfect. Lingered in the back of his mind were the nagging doubts about the force of Proliate moving down the western side of the Tingij. If they arrived through the Way of Trepas before them—the entire plan would crumble and every Allied soldier east of the Way of Trepas would be slaughtered.

“We may not need Sorea’s stoova shields if our arrows keep landing,” Lovag commented.

Friar shook his head. “Enough cavalry will make it through. They always do.”

“Friar, as Captain I am again formally requesting permission to relieve Veli Falciss!”

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“Sacrificing good troops to failure is like adding naphtha to a fire you want to put out—it makes the situation worse.”

General Falciss began shouting passionately from inside his Knights’ squared-up formation.

“We trade our lives for...” Falciss started.

“...everlasting honor!” his Knights finished.

Ritari huffed away in frustration as the number of Knights from Taiheart surrounding Veli Falciss continued to shrink. A wave of Proliate infantry moved forward and, using their infamous merja spears, forced the Knights’ light cavalry to abandon their wheeling maneuver that had allowed almost constant fire on the approaching heavy cavalry.

Friar signaled his cavalry to feign retreat. A large cheer rose up from the Proliate, believing they had forced them back. Once the arrows stopped, Lidenskap berated the heavy cavalry. The only thing he hated more than cavalry was archers, viewing both as spineless.

The Proliate cavalry began moving east, as if they would circumvent the stoova shields. Friar quickly signaled for the light cavalry to move back and fire, forcing the Proliate cavalry towards the waiting stoova shields. Once the herded Proliate cavalry was funneled towards the waiting Knights, the archers shifted their fire to the rear of the heavy cavalry, compelling those in back to push forward. Once the Knights’ cavalry saw the Proliate in a full charge towards the fortified shields, they retreated once again.

Out of nowhere, Ritari was among the front-line Knights, encouraging and reassuring those in front bracing the massive, anchored shields. The Proliate heavy cavalry shook the ground, their massive hooves roaring forward as they thundered towards the Knights.

“You will fight like Knights!” Ritari yelled as they braced for impact.

“Knights!” they replied back.

“We *will* *HOLD!*” Ritari called out.

“Hold!” the Knights howled.

“Steady your hearts!” Ritari shouted.

“Steady!” the Knights roared as the stoova shields rattled at the behest of the reverberation of the cavalry.

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Figure 7: Battle of Temple Ovest Icon III: Unfamiliar with cavalry, General Lidenskap shows his intention too early—allowing the Knights to set their stoova shields. Veli Falciss and his Knights fight in forlorn desperation.

“Advance spikes!” Ritari bellowed.

“Advance!”

“Lock spikes!” Ritari ordered.

“Lock!” the Knights hollered in reply.

Each front-line Knight pushed the three-foot spike in the center of their shield forward, twisting to lock it behind a metal ridge. The cavalry was too heavy and traveling too fast to stop. The first line of horses slammed into the spiked shields. Whinnies of fear and pain stung the air as the violent crashing of metal, wood, and flesh rang across the battlefield. Most of the shields held, but some shattered, sending splintered shards of metal and wood slashing through Knights’ flesh. Others had the metal ridge holding the cylindrical spike break, the force of the horse sending the metal whipping back, obliterating the Knights’ forearms and smashing their ribs. They crumpled to the ground, in a blur of pain, gasping for air, lungs filling with blood.

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The spikes of the shields that did hold easily penetrated the peytral armor protecting the horses' chests. Many of the heavily armored riders were tossed from their saddles, some thrown over the massive shields. Once down, their heavy armor prevented them from easily rising, and the Knights made quick work of them. Those with swords probed the Proliate armor for weaknesses, while those with maces and war hammers did not bother, denting the downed riders' helmets repeatedly until blood pooled beneath and their spastic movements stopped.

As line after line of the cavalry piled into one another, the force transferred into the groaning shields. Friar moved next to his signalers. His first order was to have the light cavalry move forward. They did, firing into the rear of the heavy cavalry, forcing them to scrunch ahead into the claustrophobically tight mass of armor, horses, and men. This effectively negated their maneuverability and momentum. The second order was an infantry flanking maneuver. The Knights to the rear of the stoova shields swung around the western edge of the shields to attack the cavalry's right flank.

Using halberds, the Knight infantry pulled off the Proliate riders. Once dismounted, they were easy fodder for war hammers and maces. A few loud snaps rang out as sections of the stoova shields began to fragment and sliver behind the enormous pressure pushing forward.

"Knights, fall back!" Friar yelled. "Mechanicians ready!"

With a tumultuous crack, the shields began to shatter and fracture as the Knights manning the shields and directly behind quickly moved back and to the sides.

"Wait until your fellow Knights are clear!" Friar ordered.

The Proliate cavalry closest to the shields were thrown forward and hurled off their horses. As the shields continued to completely break apart, many of the riders were trampled as the horses stomped over them. Several Knights did not move fast enough and were crushed.

"Fire!" Friar screamed.

The Knight mechanicians from the west opened up fire with ballista and onagers. The large bolts and stones crushed and fractured anything

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they hit. One particularly fast Proliate horse made it close to one of the ballistas just as it fired.

The massive bolt demolished the horse's armor and sent it slamming into the horse's chest. Its legs and head continued moving forward, wrapping around the bolt before its lifeless body crumpled to the ground in a heap of blood. The Knight cavalry concentrated their fire on those horses breaking through the ranks. One of the ballista shots slammed into a Proliate rider just as he was thrown forward off his dying horse. The huge bolt impaled him sideways, pinning him to a passing horse, killing both. Shot after shot from the Knight mechanics crashed into the panicking Proliate cavalry. Soon, most were dead or dying.

"Hold, my excellent mechanics! Knights, finish this!"

Chaos ensued with an overall rout of the cavalry as Veli Pingius and his Knights moved forward to help clean up any survivors. The Knights mopping up the field walked among the injured littering the ground, drawn to the howls of agony and groans of pain. Inverse gardening, they plucked the life from the dying enemy as mace blows dented armor and skulls while war hammers pulverized flesh with little regard for metal or bone.

Friar Pallium turned to see the blue flag of the Knights under Veli Falciss wavering. The large white dove of peace flying over two crossed swords and a single castle tower fluttered briefly before it was violently ripped down. Suddenly, Falciss emerged above the fray, violently swinging his sword, sending the front line of attackers rippling backwards. One of the Southern Dwarves picked up the Knights' banner, brandishing it scornfully.

Falciss leapt up with his sword held high, his raging wide-eyed stare glaring with resolve to take as many of the enemy with him as possible yet tempered with a practical conviction that he would soon be swaddled within death's embrace. His helmet off, blood and dents obscured his once pristine armor. With a primal scream he drove his sword into the Dwarf holding the Knights' banner. It pierced just above the chest plate and quickly plunged into the chest cavity, exploding the heart. Falciss grabbed the banner.

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Figure 8: Falciss Falls. Despite his valor and determination, the wide-eyed Falciss dooms himself, and his Knights, to die.

A spear lanced into the side of the Veli's head, shaving off his left ear and shearing his scalp to the bone. An amalgamated scream of pain and rage bellowed from Falciss as he used the flagpole like a lance and shoved it through the face of the attacker. Before he could withdraw his makeshift weapon, a mace blow shattered his jaw, showering his already bloody and soiled chest plate with bone, fragmented teeth, and a deluge of blood. Swords and axes hacked into the Veli from all sides as he fell.

Shouts of joy and loud cheers erupted from the Piscinians and Southern Dwarves as those closest to Veli Falciss continued to rain down gratuitous blows on his long-dead body. A Southern Dwarf

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greedily held up the severed head of the former leader of Castle Taiheart, prompting more cheers.

“One entire castle contingent destroyed!” Lidenskap yelled heartily.

Across the field Lovag murmured, “Did we just lose *all* the Knights from Taiheart?”

Friar nodded numbly.

A fresh round of cheers from the Piscinians and Southern Dwarves made Friar realize they were now free to turn and attack his Knights and Allies.

“Fall back and reform lines!” Friar yelled. “Square up perpendicular to the siege engines and ramparts! Knights from Liberum, to the left flank! I want the Northern Dwarves to hold our center! Veli Pingius, you and your Knights to the right flank! We may need to thin out our ranks to match our enemies’ lines!”

Pingius waddled nervously amongst his soldiers, his hands fumbling anxiously as he directed them to spread out, his usual mirthful expression masked in rigid fear.

Our traps! Friar suddenly remembered.

“Pingius! Do *not* move any further south!” Friar yelled.

“I thought you said to spread our lines?”

“I have a few tricks to the south reserved for the Proliate and their Confederacy. You will have our cavalry just behind you, but do *not* move further south!”

Forming up in lines directly across from them were the fresh Proliate and Ager troops. Behind them were the Southern Dwarves, Jaa, and Piscinians who had finished mopping up every Knight under Veli Falciss.

General Lidenskap suddenly stopped. “What are they doing?”

“It appears they’re falling back to reorganize,” a lieutenant stated.

“They’ve lost over a third of their Knights, and I don’t see any Elves of Creber or warriors from the Rebelde Plains. They should be afraid!” Lidenskap offered. “We need to stop them from retreating so when our forces from the north come through the Way of Trepas, we will have them in a pincer and kill all the traitors!”

The two armies stood facing each other, anticipation shivering through the very air. It was tempered by fear sweating up and acting

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like an unreachable itch under hot armor. For just a moment, an eerie silence settled on the battlefield. Even the flags representing each country seemed to open and close like quiet butterfly wings, giving brief glimpses of their emblems.

TABLE TWO Battle of Ovest

		Dead	Reduced number
Allies			Confederacy
Knights of Liberum:	1,850		Proliate Red Guard: 19,735
Knight Cavalry: (lightly armored from all three castles)	1,350		Piscinians:
Knights of Taiheart: (led by Veli Falciss)	7,500		Retiarian Division: 3,200
Knights of Toil Shaor: (led by Veli Pingius)	5,000		Suoli Division: 3,150
Northern Dwarves:			Warriors of Jaa: 4,300
Vioma Division: (Green)	7,500		Southern Dwarves: 8,700
Saatana Division: (Red)	5,000		Ager: 8,000
Rebelde Plains Dwarves: (skilled in prestidigitation)	250		Auxiliary Cavalry: 2,000 (Heavily armored)
Total:	20,950 (7,800 casualties)		47,350 (4,650 casualties)

“We can wipe out the Knights and most of their Allies in one day!” the lieutenant said, his voice full of excitement.

“Praise Tallcon!” Lidenskap stated just as the Knights and Northern Dwarves began to rapidly retreat.

“Should we order the attack?” the lieutenant asked longingly.

“Not yet, son,” Lidenskap answered. “We’ll chase them down once they move past their siege engines—their left flank won’t be protected. Then our superior numbers can sweep around both of ends with plenty of time before they get to the Way of Trepas.”

“They do have cavalry in reserve, while ours was destroyed.”

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“Even more of a reason for us to spread out our lines once we get away from their siege engines and have some breathing space,” Lidenskap pronounced. “Have the warriors of Jaa, the Southern Dwarves, and Piscinians take up our left flank. We don’t want their cavalry trying to move around us.”

Before the Knights made it past the siege engines, they began to contract their lines. “Move north,” Friar extolled frantically, removing small markers delineating his traps as he went. Few knew his reasoning. The Knights under Veli Pingius of Toil Shaor and the Vioma Northern Dwarves moved backwards to take a reserve position.

“Why are they making it easier for us to surround them?” Lidenskap asked.

“Maybe they’re getting ready to make a move through the Way of Trepas?”

“Seems early,” Lidenskap replied. “They’re still quite a ways from its entrance.”

Once they passed the siege engines, the Knights continued to retreat while deepening their ranks. The Confederacy, on the other hand, was spreading out from right to left: Proliate, Ager, Jaa, Southern Dwarves, and Piscinians. Their huge force outnumbered the Allies more than two to one. Even with their cavalry intact, the Allies were in serious jeopardy of being outflanked.

“The fools continue to bunch their lines. They must assume we’re content to let them escape,” the lieutenant repeated. “If we let them get to the other side of the Tingij Mountains, they’ll be able to spread out and, if our forces from the north are delayed, they could bottleneck us at the opening of the pass and negate our superior numbers.”

Lidenskap paused. *Do they know about our troops from the north? Where are the dragons? Where is Veneficus and his griffins?* Lingering doubts rattled in his mind, raising an internal alarm. He shook the uncertainty away, yelling, “Sound the attack! Charge!”

Once the order went through, the Piscinians let out a howl of rage, spurred by their taste of Knight blood when killing Veli Falciss and his Knights. They charged forward recklessly.

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“Stay together!” Lidenskap yelled. “A hole in our front lines will split our forces! Signal the order for Jaa and the Southern Dwarves to move forward. Keep the line unbroken!”

“The Southern Dwarves and warriors of Jaa can’t keep up. The line’s breaking!” the lieutenant yelled as the heavily armored Southern Dwarves struggled to keep up with the passionate Piscinians.

“Send another order for the Piscinians to slow their advance! Those delinquent neophytes could ruin everything. We can’t afford a breakdown in discipline when we’re this close to victory.”

Despite the lieutenant’s frantic signals, their line was becoming more unbalanced with their left flank swinging forward, away from the Proliate troops, who were advancing with shields locked in an orderly march.

“Sir, it appears the Piscinians are about to outflank them. Should we order a faster charge?”

“We’ll lose our shield wall and we know the Knights and Northern Dwarves have plenty of bolts and arrows. Plus, the Knight cavalry is just sitting there,” Lidenskap said. “In the future there will be a Proliate commander with each Confederate army to control those hot heads. The impetuous Piscinians are the worst of the lot and are going to get us killed by exposing our lines.”

Before the words slipped away from his lips, a loud creaking sound was followed by an immense crack as the ground crumbled under the feet of the front line Piscinians and Southern Dwarves. Screams of terror and agony filled the air.

“What’s happening?” King Abernan demanded.

“My Knights, under prestidigitation, dug a large trench and then constructed flimsy wooden and rope supports before replacing the soil and grass on top. As the Piscinians and Southern Dwarves marched forward, their weight became too much, and it snapped,” Friar said as momentum pushed several more rows of shrieking infantry into the pit.

“How deep is it? They scream horrifically!” Abernan said.

“It’s not the depth,” Friar answered.

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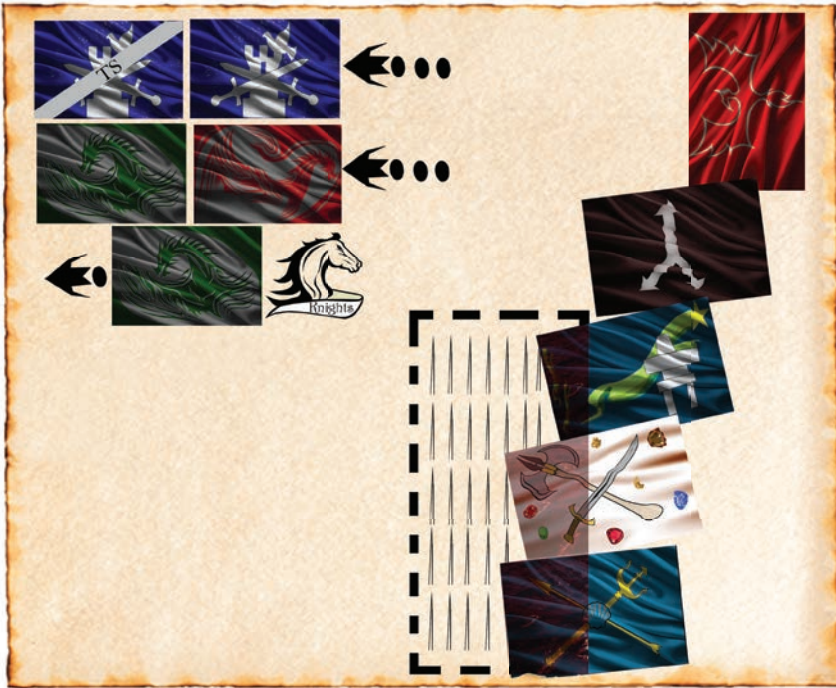


Figure 9: Battle of Temple Ovest Icon IV: Friar's elaborate plan is coming to actualization, resulting in an abundance of pain and death.

"There are punji sticks in the pit," Friar said, his ears assaulted by more intense screams of pain erupting as the soldiers fell onto the sharpened stakes.

"You're dedicated to victory, I'll give you that," Abernan said.

Friar shook his head. "Whatever the reasons for us ending up here today, we still have to fight and win."

"Of course—" Abernan started, interrupted by Friar's yell.

"Cavalry, forward, and fire!" *No choice but to fight and win. Regret will have to wait.*

Arrows from the Knight cavalry began to pour into the Piscinians and Southern Dwarves.

"Vioma warriors! Move forward and loose your crossbows!" Abernan commanded.

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The green-clad Dwarf warriors quickly moved ahead, sending bolts gushing into the Proliate lines. The front row would kneel and fire before shuffling to the rear to reload as another line of warriors moved up to fire. They continually repeated this rotation of death.

“Remind me never to get on your bad side, Friar,” King Abernan said, cringing at the howls of pain and stench of death.

Chaos erupted up and down the Confederate lines, except for the well-disciplined Proliate.

“The Proliate are something,” Abernan commented to Friar. “They have amazing restraint. I don’t think they ever break ranks.”

Friar couldn’t help smiling. “Oh, there’s a way to break their discipline. There’s a key to turn everyone’s heart from calm to rage, from control to fear. Some take more planning, but I shall make their strength a fatal weakness.”

King Abernan turned to him questioningly.

“Our goal is to unnerve, transforming the backbone of their toughness into frailty. I shall unfocus their minds, deform their spirituality, and command victory,” Friar remarked ominously.

Across the battlefield the Proliate lieutenant turned to Lidenskap. “What do we do?”

“Obviously, they narrowed their lines to avoid their iniquitous pit. Once again, they prove they have no honor.”

“Praise Tallcon!” one of the Proliate soldiers yelled—his words followed by howls of unadulterated joy as the Proliate turned their eyes towards the skies.

“Tallcon! Tallcon!”

Floating high in the sky behind the Knights, there appeared a gigantic flaming sword. Several Proliate dropped their shields and weapons in disbelief. The sword was so vast it was the size of a large temple. Orange-red flames bristled and flared off as it slowly moved through the blue sky, closer to where the enemies were facing off.



Scroll 8: Tallcon has Come!

“The sword of Tallcon, straight out of the Sanctus Kirja Flamma. The fire of retribution shall be laid down upon you!” Lidenskap yelled, his voice trembling as pride and exhilaration wove together into a knot of self-vindication.

“These dealers in deception will get what they deserve! Chapter twenty-one, Rune fourteen,” Lidenskap quoted from memory. “He shall divide His infinite body and send down from the sky a terrible fire of retribution, a blazing sword, against your enemies. Behind the sword shall emerge innumerable images of the one true Tallcon, and your enemy will burn!”

Across the battlefield Friar smirked, reciting the same passage underlined in the book, given to him by Veneficus, that Bellae had read so long ago in his office.

“Word of Tallcon, speak to these non-believers in the language they understand, death!” the lieutenant howled.

Friar signaled the stunned Knights and Northern Dwarves to restart their retreat while the cavalry formed a thin line in front to help mask their withdrawal. The devout cries of the Proliate scattered, mingling with the sickening howls of pain from those dying in the punji pits. The uninjured warriors desperately tried to help their fallen comrades get out without falling in themselves. It was a bloody, painful mess as they tried to hoist out the impaled. Many of the injured had their armor skewered onto the impaling sticks, making it difficult to lift them out. The pit quickly became slippery with splinters, blood, screams, and death.

Suddenly, explosions of fire and lightning ripped the sky around the flaming sword soaring overhead as storm clouds rippled out, scampering across, spreading a curtain of darkness. Angry-looking flares arched towards the raging clouds as the sword tilted downwards, directly towards the Knight cavalry, causing the horses to neigh loudly in protest.

Earth on Fire Ocean of Blood

The sword suddenly fractured into hundreds of glowing sparks bathed in fire. As the flames died down, the outlines of hundreds of flaming phoenix shapes crisped into view.

Overcome with emotion, Lidenskap whispered, "It's happening! Behind the sword shall emerge innumerable images of the one true Tallcon."

Shouts of joy exploded from the Proliate lines as they gazed upon the intimidating scene. Hundreds of fiery phoenix-shaped figures flew through the sky, inching ever closer to the battle lines. As they flew nearer, they began to change color, from red to orange to yellow and finally white with a soft flame surrounding them. The flying phoenixes passed over the Knight cavalry, continuing towards the Proliate lines.

"It's magnificent!" Lidenskap murmured. "Tallcon has come!"

The hundreds of white phoenixes stopped and hovered. Outlined vividly against the stormy sky they seemed to glisten. The awe-inspiring sight sent tingling sensations through the spines of combatants on both sides of the battle. Some Proliate dropped to their knees in prostration as others stared in wonderment. Almost all of them had thrown down or lowered their shields. Many chanted songs of worship. A unique atmosphere undulated across the battlefield: extreme excitement balanced by calm reverence. The glinting phoenixes gently floating through the sky gave a dreamlike feel to the whole scene.

Without warning the sky was fractured with piercing shrieks that skewered the air from high above the phoenixes as the storm clouds began to break up. Abruptly, the flames surrounding the white phoenixes were quenched as the prestidigitation stopped, and rapidly the shapes flipped over. Strapped to the back of the hundreds of metal phoenixes were the Northern Dwarf Vasama warriors, each one wielding several loaded crossbows.

Friar couldn't help smiling as he continued to retreat, the dark clouds disappearing to reveal blue skies.

"What just happened?" King Abernan gasped.

"Those are the metal kauhistaa gliders I developed. They are carried by Eaglians via a series of ropes. One set of cables supports the weight of the glider and Northern Dwarf during the flight while another set of ropes are used to flip it over!"

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“When you asked for my Special Forces, I had no idea this is what you had in store for them.”

Friar smiled. “Your Dwarf warriors were initially lying on the side facing up, carrying three loaded crossbows, while the Rebelde Plains Dwarves used prestidigitation to concoct the sword breaking into flaming phoenixes—that’s right out of their holy book. The goal was to catch the Proliate in stunned, pious bewilderment by deception. They had been so sure Tallcon came to kill us ‘deceivers’ that they are unable to comprehend what’s happening.” *They can’t help but believe.*

The side of the gliders now facing down was blue, blending in with the azure sky, further adding to the confusion of the Proliate. With a sharp war cry the Dwarves let loose bolts of terror on the stunned Proliate. The projectiles rained down, slamming into the dazed warriors before they could recoup their wits. Their lines had fallen into righteous disorder when the flaming sword had appeared. Many had their helmets off and shields down, making easy targets.

With gravity aiding the powerful weapons, the bolts easily pierced through any armor they happened to meet. The Proliate fell by the hundreds. Those who did not die instantly had the metal of their armor peeled into and around the wounds—adding to the pain.

Friar gave an order. Taking advantage of the Proliate looking towards the sky, the cavalry galloped forward, swiftly firing several volleys into the dumbfounded Proliate before sprinting back towards Friar and the retreating infantry, which had long ago picked up their pace.

The Vasama Dwarves strapped into the gliders reloaded their crossbows, which were connected to the phoenixes, and repeatedly fired death volleys. The normally rigid discipline of the Proliate wavered under the shock of the duplicity. The other commanders of the Confederacy were still trying to heave and tear their soldiers from the punji pit. Without knowing the extent of the pit and its direction, they were not anxious about rushing after the Knights. Abruptly, dozens of new Eaglians dropped out of the sky, their fearsome appearance adding to the mayhem.

“What in Tallcon’s name are they?” a lieutenant howled.

Lidenskap shook his head, still having trouble coming to grips with what happened.

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“Eagliers!” King Tarha of Ager yelled.

“I thought they were a myth,” Lidenskap whispered.

“Wake up, Lidenskap, and get your men organized!” Tarha screamed.

Pairs of the newly arrived Eagliers carried large barrels. They began dumping a sticky, black liquid on the border between the Proliate troops and those of Ager, making a thick stripe of the viscous fluid. A single Eaglier swooped down from the opposite direction and dropped a torch, lighting the liquid concoction that included dragon naphtha. A huge surge of heat and flame burst forth and quickly traveled down the line of the dark liquid, completely separating the Proliate from the armies of the other countries.

The Eagliers flew off with the Vasama warriors riding the kauhistaa gliders just as fresh screams joined the fray from those unfortunate enough to be anywhere near the naphtha. Men were struggling to get their burning armor and clothes off as they were slowly cooked alive. Those caught directly in the fire had their screams quickly melt to gurgling sobs. Thick black smoke, followed by the sick smell of burning flesh, exploded. As the warriors of Ager tried to move away from the fire, they pushed into other Confederate warriors, unleashing a chain reaction in which scores were pushed into the lethal punji pits. Fights broke out along the lines separating the countries—struggles to get away from the pit on one side and fire on the other.

The Vasama Dwarves flying on gliders returned, but this time from the back. The gliders had been flipped again, and the now unstrapped Dwarves were air surfing on top. The Eagliers carrying them let go of the gliders directly behind the Proliate line. The metal gliders smashed into the backs of the Proliate soldiers, causing a horrific boom followed by a series of nauseating *cracks* as their bodies snapped under the force of the gliders. Most of the rear lines of the Proliate were knocked over, and those that weren’t had the surfing Dwarves jumping on them, quickly hacking at the Proliate with two curved, medium-length swords. The Proliate turned to meet them, struggling to form lines in the pandemonium. The disarray was too great for the Proliate to form their shield wall, and the skill of the Vasama Dwarves rapidly began to cut a wedge of death through the Red Guard.

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"They have turned our reverent dream into a nightmare, one from which we cannot wake," Lidenskap whispered to King Tarha. The two stared helplessly through the wall of fire at the massacre of the Proliate warriors. Before the naphtha was lit, several warriors from Ager had pulled the dazed General to the Ager side. The young lieutenants left to lead the Red Guard were inexperienced and overwhelmed.

"Turn and form up in your lines!" a Proliate lieutenant finally yelled, flames and death surrounding them. As those at the front of the lines were cut down, the discipline and training of the Proliate kicked in and many remaining Proliate formed up into tight enough lines to create a shield wall.

"For Tallcon!" the lieutenant yelled as they surged forward, slamming into the advancing Vasama Dwarves. Slowly, the lightly armed and colossally outnumbered Dwarves were pushed back.

Just as the Proliate were getting the upper hand, hundreds of startling squawks filled the air as the Eaglians who had been carrying the kauhistaa gliders descended with a vengeance upon what was now the rear of the Proliate lines.

This unanticipated attack flustered the struggling Proliate, especially when their remaining lieutenants were quickly reduced to shreds by the powerful talons of the Eaglians. Parts of them went flying in different directions as the Eaglians tore them into shredded bits. The Eaglians began to claw and rip their way through the back of the Proliate lines. The shield wall quickly disintegrated, and the Eaglians and Northern Dwarves soon met in the middle of the blood-drenched battlefield. Once every Proliate north of the fire had been killed, the Eaglians swooped around and picked up the Dwarves, flying off towards the Tingij Mountains.

As the Eaglians were leaving the carnage, the retreating infantry of the Knights and Northern Dwarves reached the Way of Trepas.

"A little warning about your traps would have been nice!" King Abernan said. "When those gliders flipped over, I almost shite my saddle!"

"Surprise was crucial," Friar replied. "If our plans leaked, we would have lost the shock. Deep, pious betrayal, after stirring up devout feelings, created the magnitude of trauma needed."

"Plus Eaglians? After all this time?"

"They're intimidating, no doubt," Friar answered.

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A wave of excitement ran through the Allies. The complete devastation of the Proliate Divisions emboldened their spirits, tempered only by the sacrifice of the Knights under Falciss.

While the Eaglians carrying the Dwarf Special Forces crested the peaks of the Tingij Mountains, the stunned troops of the Confederacy were still struggling with fire and punji pits. After the Proliate, the Piscinians had taken the second worst beating, sustaining fierce casualties from the punji pits and the arrows from the Knights. The armies of Jaa and the Southern Dwarves were not much better off. Ager's army was in the best shape, having taken only mild losses.

"You!" Lidenskap thundered. "Get to the Temple and have them send an urgent message to Veneficus. Tell him to fill the skies with his blasted Magicians and griffins!"

TABLE THREE Battle of Ovest

		Dead <i>Reduced number</i>	
Allies		Confederacy	
Knights of Liberum:	<i>1,850</i>	Proliate Red Guard:	<i>1,150</i>
Knight Cavalry: (lightly armored from all three castles)	<i>1,350</i>	Piscinians:	
Knights of Taiheart: (led by Veli Falciss)	7,500	Retiarian Division:	<i>875</i>
Knights of Toil Shaor: (led by Veli Pingius)	5,000	Suoli Division:	<i>2,000</i>
Northern Dwarves:		Warriors of Jaa:	<i>3,500</i>
Vioma Division: (Green)	7,500	Southern Dwarves:	<i>5,000</i>
Saatana Division: (Red)	5,000	Ager:	<i>7,500</i>
Rebelde Plains Dwarves: (skilled in prestidigitation)	250	Auxiliary Cavalry: (Heavily armored)	2,000
Total:	20,950 (7,800 casualties)		20,025 (31,975 casualties)

There were fifty casualties for the Northern Dwarves Special Forces (Vasama Division) and five Eaglians killed {7,855 total casualties}.

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Scroll 9: Death Sickness

"Come on, Kari. Eat something," Arend encouraged.

Shaking her head, Sankari's wings drooped in despondency.

"Hey, Gimelli's eating!" Bellae announced. "Take the ropes off her legs."

"She needs to be bound to protect us, and we don't want her running off. Besides, look at her eyes," Kainen said.

Bellae walked around the slightly damp ground inside the Dark Forest. "Still white," she said, tears forming at the corners of her own eyes. Everyone but Sankari watched Gimelli eat in an unconscious stupor. Her innumerable wounds were covered with arnebia and dragon sap, but her yellow eyes and smile were missing. Her muscles seemed to be moving in automated fashion as Lontas put pieces of peccary into her hand.

Finally, Sankari fluttered over, her eyes puffy from fitful crying. "We, Fairies, were aware of this illness, but we didn't know it was from creatures in the Dark Forest. I genuinely didn't know they existed. We thought those with this illness were poisoned or possessed. There was an unwritten rule to never cross the Satu River, but most thought it was nonsense. In Cappadocia we call this the death sickness. I'm sorry Gimelli isn't getting better."

Everyone froze from a mixture of surprise at her emotional apology and hesitation to respond that it was "okay" in deference to Bellae when it seemed Gimelli might not recover. Lontas looked to Bellae, hoping she would answer, but only awkward silence roared in his ears.

"Thank you, Sankari," Bellae finally said. "I know you wouldn't lead us to this on purpose."

Sankari was cut off before she could reply as Gimelli spoke, "Bellae."

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Even though her eyes had the white film over them, she stared towards her sister.

"I'm here," Bellae said, kneeling. "You're going to be okay. I want to—uhhg."

Bellae's words turned to a gasping gurgle as Gimelli began choking her. Her breathing turned to short, ragged gasps as Gimelli's hands tightened around her throat. Bellae's head exploded in pain, still sore from the beating she took from the undead.

Scelto quickly removed her hands, but Gimelli began scratching and clawing at Bellae and him, violently drawing blood. Lontas pulled Bellae away as Arend moved in to help. Eventually, the two managed to tie her hands behind her back.

A sickening gurgle erupted from Gimelli's throat as she lunged at them, teeth bared. Kainen moved in, tying cloth around her chomping mouth as Gimelli unleashed a loathsome, muffled scream. After several minutes, she stopped fighting, drifting into restless sleep.

"Kari, have any infected Fairies ever recovered?" Kainen asked.

The Fairy looked uncomfortable. "No...but," Sankari cried as Bellae began to sob, "we never tried arnebia or dragon sap."

Kainen looked at Arend, who vigorously shook his head. The Elf mouthed, "We might have to."

"What?" Scelto seethed. "Might have to do what?"

"All I'm saying is we need to be realistic. If she gets worse, we have no choice but to deal with it."

"By 'deal with it' do you mean kill her? Because you'll have to finish off me first," Scelto raged.

Kainen sighed. "Our mission comes first, over any of us. If it were me, I would want to be killed if I turned into one of those monsters."

"Well, it's not you, and you don't get to touch her."

The young Elf put his hands on his head, sighing. The whole trip had not followed the script written in his imagination. *My father trained me to take control. I rarely have it. I should have respect, but don't.* He was beginning to question the whole idea of a youthful, small group that the League elders had espoused given Bellae's age. They had almost died

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multiple times and didn't even know their first quest. *My dad, or Aquila, Arend's dad, should be here.*

"It's going to be okay. You are doing good," Arend encouraged, reading the doubt on his friend's face.

Kainen fought back tears. The pockmarks on his face from fighting the Fionain were starting to heal but still painful. "After all the training, all the sacrifices, to have it...this quest...I don't know, turn out so badly, this early?"

"It's because of our training we will succeed."

"Do you ever wonder if we should have had an army of Eaglians and Elves instead of us?" Kainen asked.

"No!" Arend answered emphatically. "If such a group made it through the enemy-filled skies, it would not have survived the Dark Forest. If they saw an army of Elves or Eaglians, or both, the Fionain would have seen them as a threat and instantly killed them."

Kainen's head remained tethered by doubt.

"Do you remember when strange things started happening around Verngaurd, including Nishi? Our fathers sat us down and told us the timetable for the plan had to be moved up a decade because Na Cearcaill was here. There wasn't time to let her, or us, grow older. They asked if we were ready, and we both answered a resounding yes. I left to watch over Bellae while you continued training."

"I remember."

"Good. Keep in mind our size was chosen on purpose. We are lethal enough when we need to be but can slip by undetected and are not seen as a threat to large armies. The elders knew what they were doing. We're young, mobile, and going to triumph. Sacrifice for success."

"Love you, crazy bird," Kainen said, unable to stop a few tears from leaking.

"Don't make this weird, Elf." Arend laughed.

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Scroll 10: Blodskogur

The entire garrison of the Ragorsaf outpost had been ordered to move out and meet up with the Proliate troops coming down from Jaa in the north. Together they would march through the Way of Trepas and attack the Knights from the flank or rear as the Proliate and their Confederate allies assailed them from the front and side.

“The Red Guard coming from the north had been stationed on the upper frontier of Jaa,” Velox, Scelto’s former mentor, stated as they continued their forced march.

“I cannot believe the Knights think they can take the Citadel,” Fenik said. “With the Piscinians, Jaainians, Agerians, and Southern Dwarves coming from the East, we will absolutely crush them all.”

The griffin and Magician who had given them their orders did not know the attack on the Citadel was a diversion, nor had they been updated of the massive defeat at Ovest.

“They will get what’s coming soon enough,” Velox said confidently. However, he silently prayed to Tallcon that Scelto, the squire he had grown to admire at Ragorsaf, was not amongst them.

Even the disciplined and well-trained Proliate garrison was feeling the effects of the blistering pace. They had been traveling nonstop save for prayer breaks. Despite the cooler weather, all of them were drenched

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with sweat and covered in dust and grime as they traveled between two enemy territories.

“Luckily, no sightings of the ragtag warriors of the Rebelde Plains to the north or the Elves of Creber from the south,” Gozador said.

“I would love to face the shambles that is the army of the Rebelde Plains,” Velox replied. “The Elves, however, are brutal.” Velox had been trying to forgive Gozador, still blaming him for driving Scelto away during the late-night clarification process.

“We should be coming up on the Blodskogur Woods,” Gozador said.

“Time to read from the raamattu!” Fenik bellowed before Velox could answer. The Proliate garrison came to a grateful stop, anxious not just for the spiritual restoration it would bestow but the needed physical break. The Proliate formed an oval with the large Proliate champion, Fenik, in the center. They had a few soldiers on watch in every direction and scouts ahead and behind. Just as Fenik cleared his throat to start reading, large arrows began raining down. The Proliate watch had been the first to fall, the sizable arrows piercing their throats and denying them a chance to call out. Wave after wave of arrows rolled down on the Proliate from the southwest, wreaking havoc as many had taken off their helmets for prayer.

“Shield wall!” Fenik yelled as they scrambled to escape the torrent of arrows.

“How’d they get past our scouts, and where did they come from?” Temere, the Proliate who had helped Scelto with the diezmar, questioned.

“We may have outrun our scouts to the south,” Fenik answered as they efficiently formed a shield wall.

“There’s one of the forward scouts,” someone yelled over the clink of arrows on armor and shield. Standing on a small hill to the east was one of the Proliate forward scouts. His winged helmet was bobbing with urgency as he motioned for them to come.

Velox stared at Fenik, wordlessly asking if they should move towards the scout.

“I don’t see much choice,” Fenik answered. “If we stay here, we’ll be pulverized.”

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“Cowardly arrows!” Gozador screamed. “You have no honor!”

They moved as one towards the ridge, fighting to keep their shield wall. Their training and discipline kicked in to keep the arrows out. Dozens of Proliate lay dead or dying from the initial arrow barrage. The scout’s gesticulations for them to hurry became more exaggerated as they inched closer to the hill. Suddenly, the scout disappeared behind the slope.

“The regiments coming from the north must be in trouble!” Velox said.

“Do you think the scouts can see them?” Fenik questioned. “Aren’t we too far away?”

“Not sure. Let’s step it up anyway,” Velox replied.

“Agreed.” Fenik yelled, “Stay together but double time it to that hill.”

Once on top of the hill, the arrows thankfully stopped, but there was no one there. “Where’s that bloody scout?” Velox asked.

“Not sure. Let’s square up until we find out what’s going on,” Fenik ordered.

“Should we go back and get our supply train?” Velox questioned.

“After we figure out what’s happening.”

“There. In the trees...I saw, I think, our scout,” Temere stated.

“Are you sure?” Fenik questioned.

“No.”

“That’s Blodskogur Woods,” Gozador said.

“It’ll provide cover from the archers,” Fenik stated.

“Is it safe?” Velox questioned.

“Should be. It’s not part of Creber.”

The garrison moved towards the large grove of trees. As they moved closer, arrows from the tops of the trees began to pour down on the Proliate. Because they were in a square, the arrows targeted the backs of the Proliate facing away from the forest. Within minutes, the entire far wall of Proliate was killed. The remainder formed up a shield wall facing the forest just as the hill behind them filled with hundreds of Elven archers letting loose arrows into the back of the shield wall, quickly decimating the rear lines.

Far Forest Scrolls

“Run for the forest!” Velox yelled.

The Proliate garrison sprinted towards the thicket, still under fire from above and behind. As they made it to the forest, they saw the trail of dead stretched back to the hilltop. Some were still writhing in pain while others gurgled out blood, fighting for absconded air.

“Stay together!” Fenik ordered the remaining three thousand troops—down from five thousand.

“What now?” Velox whispered.

“Keep your eyes open. Look to the tops of the trees for archers,” Fenik ordered. Turning to Velox, he whispered, “I think we should move through the grove and see where we’re at on the other side. Perhaps our scout did the same?”

The Proliate moved through the thick woods. Their labored breathing, along with the crunch of sticks and leaves below their feet, broke the silence. Their clumsy merja spears were constantly getting caught on branches in the dense woods.

“Oafish Proliate are noisier than a thousand siege engines!” a heavy voice called out.

“Who said that?” Velox questioned.

The Proliate strained their senses, searching for the source of the speech. Darkness, tree trunks, and golden, fluttering fall leaves silently greeted them. Slowly, they began to move again, quickly becoming disoriented in the thick trees.

“What’s that noise?” Fenik asked.

“Sounds like scratching.”

Several trees and larger branches began nodding, bending, and straightening as the gratingly abrasive scratching sound continued.

“Someone’s rubbing tree bark. I think—” a Proliate soldier was abruptly cut off. He fell flaccidly to the ground. As his body crumpled to the earth, several other loud thumps followed as a handful of other Proliate hit the ground with crashing thuds.

“Talk to me! What’s happening?” Velox shouted.

No one answered.

“What’s happening?” he screamed.

Earth on Fire Ocean of Blood

"I saw a wooden staff come out of nowhere and hit them," a soldier answered.

"They're not dead!"

"He's right," Velox said gratefully. "They're only knocked out. Pick them up, and let's keep moving."

"That noise is back," Fenik whispered.

"Stop that bloody scratching!" Velox bellowed, panic blending with the darkness and confusion they bathed within. As he spoke, the scraping sound intensified, quickly followed by the bending of branches and smaller trees, loud cracks as wooden staffs met Proliate helmets, and finally, thumps as bodies hit the dirt.

"Same as before—they aren't killing, just knocking them out!"

"Get them up and move!" Velox yelled.

This cycle repeated until all of the Proliate were either carrying or being carried.

"We're no longer a viable fighting force. We have to get out of here, now!" Velox seethed, supporting two injured Proliate.

"We aren't getting out of here," Fenik said darkly.

"The trees are alive!" Temere yelled. Suddenly, the Elves of Creber, who had been hiding amongst the trees, opened their eyes and stepped in front of the Proliate. They calmly removed their kama weapons. Several Proliate on the edges had the bird-beak weapons rip into their necks, blood spurting everywhere.

Screams of panic burst through the Proliate like a shock wave as they realized the trap they were in. With their bodies already shaking with exhaustion and alarm, the Proliate set down their injured brothers, took out their swords, and hacked wildly at anything and everything around them. They watched in horror as Elves appeared and disappeared at will, sometimes scampering up the trees, sometimes seeming to magically emerge from the bark itself, striking quickly before retreating. The clumsy swords and spears of the Proliate were constantly hitting branches or vines in the thick forest.

After a few hours, the few hundred Proliate that were left put their backs together in a crude circle of desperate exhaustion. Dying soldiers

Far Forest Scrolls

clawed to get in the fraudulent safety of the middle of the circle but were ignored. Some began to sob, any veneer of pride or invincibility long evaporated. As the wounded scratched and swatted at their legs, the abrasive scuffing of Elfin skin against bark surrounded them.

“Finish this!” Velox yelled.

Abruptly the chafing sound of scratching stopped, plunging the forest into a deafening silence. Those Proliate able to stand froze, staring into the darkness of the forest, scanning and searching for any sign of movement from the Elves in the unnatural silence.

After hours of listening to the cutting sounds of the Elves moving amongst the forest, the corpulent quiet seemed as terrifying as the previous racket. The Proliate frantically tried to quiet their rapid breathing, straining their ears for any sign of the Elves. Many were bruised and cut, and all splattered with the blood of their dead and dying comrades. A burning rage simmered within, but with no outlet it simply churned their stomachs, brewing into dense anxiety.

“What can we do?” Velox asked.

“The forest is their world, not ours. We die,” Fenik answered.

The helplessness they swam in soaked into them so thoroughly, their spirits wrinkled in frustration and their battered morale evaporated. With eerie silence ringing in their ears, they startled when someone shouted, “Our scout!”

Slowly, the gleaming red armor of a Proliate scout moved through the thick underbrush. There was something odd about his movements—awkward, unnatural.

“Hi, it’s me! Your friendly scout here to rescue you,” a strange voice called out.

“What the...” Fenik mumbled.

About ten feet from the last of the battered Proliate, the scout began to dance bizarrely, like that of a puppet—movements irregular and jerky. Suddenly, he stopped, and a sickening chorus of laughter echoed through the forest from all sides. The body of the scout slumped to the floor to reveal several Elves of Creber who had been supporting his dead body like a marionette.

Earth on Fire Ocean of Blood

Throwing their arms up into a self-congratulatory “V,” they shouted, “Ta-da! It was us all along, silly Proliate!” Shrill cackling rang through the forest, vibrating from everywhere and nowhere. A chill ran through the spines of the meager remaining Proliate.

“Oh, crap,” Gozador mumbled.

Suddenly, the darkness around the bleeding warriors scattered, replaced with the stern faces of the Elves of Creber who had been mercilessly torturing them. Their features seemingly materialized out of thin air to surround the Proliate.

One Elf stepped forward. The Proliate in front of him held out his sword, but it shook with fear and exhaustion. The Elf stared at the Proliate for a while before speaking.

“You threaten our forest. You endanger our families. You make up lies accusing us of betraying Verngaard! You condemn us as traitors who side with the bloody Dark Warriors. Did you think such blasphemy would go unanswered? There is a sharp price for such indiscretions.”

The Elf paused and paced back and forth several times before stopping to examine the two closest trees. “Your pride, your pompous over-confidence...they will be your undoing. Amongst the trees, that is our world. The forest is *our* home! It’s time to finish your welcome.”

Suddenly, the abrasive scratching sound shocked the air above the Proliate once again as the Elves’ rough hands and feet scampered down the bark. The scant light piercing the forest canopy was completely blacked out as the sky exploded with Elves.

They gracefully bobbed down just long enough to strike a blow before shooting back up. Hundreds of them alternated moving up and down to completely disorient the Proliate. Howls of pain and fear rung out, only to be methodically silenced by the Elves.

As the Proliate slashed and thrust their weapons blindly skyward, the ring of Elves on the ground tightened the noose, hacking their way forward. It was only a matter of moments before the blood-curdling screams gave way to gore-soaked silence. The Elves of Creber were covered in the splattered blood and fleshy debris of their enemy.

Only one Proliate remained alive. Fenik stood, a shaky red figure,

Far Forest Scrolls

exhaustion, pain, and injuries yoking his normally formidable body. His feet drenched in the bloody lake of dead friends, he stared at the thousands of Elves surrounding him on all sides and above. His helmet gone, he briefly glanced at his lifelong friend, Velox, grimacing at his dead companion's wide-eyed stare of pain. Gozador had his face smashed in, almost unrecognizable.

Fenik's chest plate was riddled with dents and fissures. Looking down again, to see what happened to his shield, he stole a glance at his left arm, quickly learning why it would not move as it dangled lower than normal. His left vambrace was gone, his mutilated lower arm barely dangling by a few strained tendons as blood gushed out of the hacked remains. With a resigned attitude and realistic awareness of his impending death, his weary eyelids fluttered back up to the Elves. A shredded arm was of little consequence.

Soon, it would all be over.

Tallcon, I shall see you quickly, he thought wearily.

Kempe strode up to him, and the two warriors stared at each other. Kempe could see by Fenik's pale complexion that he had lost an enormous amount of blood.

"We just wanted to live in peace within our forest," the large muscular Elf said. "But you had to accuse me of killing children? Accuse all Elves of dishonor? Your arrogance shall be your undoing."

Wishing it to be over, Fenik used his right arm to slash with his sword. The strike had none of its usual speed or power. Kempe easily slashed it away with his kama before driving his weapon's sharp beak right into the mid-face of the giant warrior. There was a sickening crunch, a spray of blood, and a heavy thud as the last of the Proliate of Ragorsaf fell into the basin of blood and lifeless bodies on the forest floor.

"I see no evidence of Tallcon here!" an Elf said in a forbidding tone. He emerged from the background and pulled back his hood. It was Ailante. His green eyes stood out even in the darkness of the forest, their grey streaks shining with determination.

"Tallcon must not like forests," Kempe said to laughter.

"They should rename this Blood Forest," the first Elf said, stomping in the bloodied ground.

Earth on Fire Ocean of Blood

“Friar’s right—pride blinds them. To march straight into our trap is testimony to this fact. This bodes well for today’s battle. Now, to the rest of Friar’s plan,” Kempe encouraged.



Scroll II: Protracted

“I can’t wait to get out of this forest!” Scelto seethed.

“We’re seriously moving soooo slow. This trip through the forest was supposed to be the ‘fast’ way,” Sankari lamented.

Kainen held his tongue but mentally berated her for convincing them to take the forest. Her surprisingly authentic statements of regret had shriveled long ago.

“We’re losing daylight. Plus, there’ll be plenty of food on the Cappadocia Plains. Three rivers, a lake, plenty of game, and wild berries,” Sankari tempted.

Arend was going to say something, but Gimelli’s screaming interrupted. Scelto quickly wiped away some frothy spittle foaming out of her mouth once she quieted.

“She’s alerting anyone and everyone to our position.” Kainen sighed. “We still don’t know if those vampire things are coming after us.” He paused, looking up to the dark canopy above. “This forest is so thick there are few windows for light. It’s not just the bark that’s black, but a general absence of light.”

Arend motioned for Kainen, and the two walked a short distance away.

“What are we doing about Gimelli?”

Kainen looked away, as if the answer might be somewhere in the forest. “Absolutely no idea. Losing her sister is going to seriously put Bellae off balance, and then there’s Scelto...”

“Welcome to the gray that is life and leadership. Answers do not come easy, and there is rarely a clear path.”

Far Forest Scrolls

"Is that supposed to be helpful?" Kainen complained.

Arend chuckled and shrugged his shoulders. "The truth doesn't have to be."



"I'm totally fine! Untie me!" Gimelli pleaded, her voice cracking from her previous shrieking. "It's hard to walk tied up."

The League had made ploddingly slow progress due to Gimelli alternating states of vegetative sleep and raging attacks.

Sankari had lost her cursory patience and misplaced her ephemeral humility. "Gimelli's definitely turning into one of things and needs to die."

"Sankari!" Arend berated. "Patience and rest are what she needs. Plus, she's herself much more now—her eyes are even normal."

The Fairy huffed. "We should have ended it back when you attacked Bellae."

"I would never attack her!" Gimelli rustled, stumbling on a rock.

Arend held the rope leading her bound hands. "You seem to be getting better, but you still have times where your eyes glaze white and you become infuriated."

"It's great to see your...yellow eyes again," Scelto said, evading the insertion of "beautiful," wavering under embarrassment.

"Your color looks better. You've been eating a ton, and peccary are high in vital fluids to replace what that vampire guy sucked out of you," Lontas added.

"I'm starting to see Ichor's face less during my blackout times. I'm truly sleeping now, and only partly in a weird trance state," Gimelli said, shuddering. "Those half-conscious times feel more claustrophobic than being tied up."

"You still screamed most of last night," Kainen said skeptically.

"But her wounds are looking better. The arnebia and dragon sap have really been helping," Lontas added. "Thanks, Arend."

Earth on Fire Ocean of Blood

“Speaking of food, night’s about to fall, and I’m hungry,” Sankari voiced.

“Why do we say night falls?” Lontas wondered. “It’s the suns that ‘fall’ as they rotate out of our vision while darkness hungrily fills the void. It is interesting to think of the suns and the evidence showing that we are actually spinning and traveling around them. I remember...”

Lontas trailed off as Sankari fluttered close, her face red and peccary sword drawn. “Do not test me! I will cut you! I’m seriously not in the mood for another science lesson.”



Scroll 12: Cracked

Friar paced nervously outside the western entrance to the Way of Trepas. Through the dark and misty gorge the path took on a ghostly, undulating appearance as if it were a vision in a dream, threatening the Knights with revenge.

“It’s okay. We’re ready,” Sorea reassured with a smile.

“I need them to come through before their northern reinforcements arrive,” he said anxiously. “Plus, we’ve had no sightings of the Western Elves.”

Even being back with the full force of his Knights of Liberum was not easing his pain at the loss of Veli Falciss and his entire castle of well-trained Knights. Shaking his head, he brought his mind to the present. *Focus*. “How’s Gleoi Dea?”

“Feeling guilty for being here helping me and not with the Knights from her castle when they died,” Sorea answered. “That said, she’ll fight well when battle comes.”

“I have every faith in her,” Friar stated as Ritari strode up.

Far Forest Scrolls

“Large numbers of reserve Proliate infantry from the Citadel are on their way. I don’t think they can get here in time to impact this battle. However, the blasted Magicians and their griffins will be arriving on the other end of the Way of Trepas shortly.”

“We must make sure the Eaglians stay away from the griffins at all costs! They are more evenly matched than they will admit, and we can’t have them getting distracted from their future assignments. Let the Vioma Dragons and their Aer Ridire take care of griffins,” Friar said.

“I’ll personally talk with Abhac,” Ritari answered.

“What news of the Proliate coming from the north?”

“Depending on how fast they march, they may get here before the troops on the other side of the pass come through. It could be trouble if we are engaged with them when Lidenskap decides to march through.”

“Can we divert the Plains troops up north to harass them?”

“No. Their forces are already in camp,” Ritari answered. “Plus, I’m not sure they’re the best choice to face four seasoned regiments of Proliate. I don’t doubt their courage, but their training and discipline are different matters.”

“The Elves better make it. We need them after they deal with Ragorsaf,” Friar stated. “Let’s head to the war council.”

Standing next to several massive siege engines, the various leaders of the Alliance awaited Friar’s arrival.

A loud squawk from Eaglian General Orel broke the tense silence. His neck swiveled around beneath the uncomfortable gaze of the others, still in shock at the sight of Eaglians. After centuries hiding, their emergence was a thunderous surprise. He spread out his wings, revealing his desire to get back in the air.

“Congratulations to General Orel, his Eaglians, and the Vasama Dwarves on their wonderful victory at the Battle of Ovest. Their skill is stunning and potent,” Friar said as he arrived. He forced a smile, trying to remain calm in the face of the apprehensive looks of the other leaders.

The rulers from the Rebelde Plains stood nervously next to Friar. The Elf Kelig anxiously thumbed his bow as the human, Teyol, fretfully rubbed his stubbly chin. The Dwarf Vakava’s eyes darted furtively.

Earth on Fire Ocean of Blood

King Abernan of the Northern Dwarves growled, “We’re hungry for battle! We want some payback for all the attacks they’ve dished out to us.”

“We shall all have our fill of battle,” Friar said ominously. “We stick to the plan, while being flexible.”

“Where are the Elves?” King Abernan demanded. “Or is it just Knights and my Dwarves who spill their blood today?”

“They’ll be here. Remember, everyone has different assignments.”

“After this battle, what will we have gained?” Teyol of the Rebelde Plains asked. “What are we supposed to do?”

“We fight until they all die!” Abernan growled angrily.

“Please. That’s vague and insulting, even for the King of Dwarves,” Kelig stated.

“We have enough enemies to fight. We don’t need to start on each other,” Friar admonished as King Abernan snarled angrily. “It’s a valid question, but our priority is to survive today. Once this is over, we’ll reexamine our situation. We could negotiate...”

“Negotiate?” King Abernan yelled. “They just wiped out Veli Falciss, and they are constantly pummeling my home, and you want to discuss terms?”

“Verngaard still has to deal with the Dark Warriors,” Friar said as a din of separate conversations erupted around him. “Enough!” Friar yelled. “We didn’t ask for this. They declared war *on us* based on false information! Today we focus on killing as many of them as we can while losing as few of our troops as possible. After the battle, we regroup. We have Eaglians and dragons to rule the skies. We must keep this advantage. Air superiority is key to our communication and strategy. Let’s review the battle plan and seize victory.”



“We need to get the Confederate force into the Way of Trepas before we unleash our plan. What news?” Friar asked, addressing Ritari and Eaglian Orel.

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"The griffins are closing quickly," the Eaglian said. "The Proliate regiments that had been stationed in Jaa have stopped, for some unknown reason, north of here. Maybe they are waiting for the Proliate from Ragorsaf. If so, they'll be waiting a *very* long time!"

"You have news of the Elves?"

"My scouts state the Proliate regiment from Ragorsaf fell into the Blodskogur Woods trap. They were decimated with *zero* casualties from the Elves!"

"Wonderful!" Friar said. "Fighting Elves in a forest? Suicide."

"Ragorsaf is in ashes. The Elves sent a small force to burn it," Orel finished.

"If the Proliate from the north have stopped, we still may have time to send a carrot into the Way of Trepas to lure the main Confederate troops to come through," Friar stated.

"Who did you have in mind?" Ritari questioned.

"Me," Friar answered, quickly holding up his hand to silence any protests from his captain.

On the other side of the Way of Trepas, the Confederate rulers were meeting. In his flowing yellow cape, Emperor Fanga of Piscium paced back and forth, using his large scepter as a hammer, as if punishing the ground beneath him. King Tarha of Ager stood in his simple leather clothes and cape. His enormous girth rested on his large, gold scepter. Campesino was next to his king.

The massive man of Ager had his armored pole flail out, absently swinging it around—impatient to head through the Way of Trepas to harvest revenge on the Knights and Dwarves. Princess Hamaza stood with quiet elegance while whispering to several of her trusted advisors. In their ornate armor, the representatives for the Southern Dwarves, Dverg and Dvergur, stood in quiet but heated discussion. The rulers of the four countries had been discussing strategy when General Lidenskap rashly took off to scout the Way of Trepas.

"Lidenskap is acting cracked," Dverg said. "After the deception with Tallcon, and loss of his soldiers, we should just leave."

"None have lost more than Lidenskap and his Proliate," King Tarha of Ager said.

Earth on Fire Ocean of Blood

“Do you really think there are Proliate regiments coming down from Jaa and the west? Even if there are, Friar surely knows,” Emperor Fanga said.

“The Proliate were doing military exercises with our forces to the north,” Princess Hamaza stated. “However, I highly doubt Friar is unaware of their movements. He has obviously been planning this for an extremely long time.”

“If we move through the Way of Trepas, do you think we could catch Friar and the Knights in a pincer trap with our troops and then the Proliate marching from the north and west?” Tarha wondered.

“Even with the griffins and Magicians finally deciding to show up, this smells of another Friar setup,” Dvergur huffed. “We should leave!”

“Agreed,” the others said, nodding.

“Just in case, I sent a couple Piscinian squads to check out Trepas. I don’t trust Lidenskap or—” Emperor Fanga of Piscium started, interrupted by Lidenskap running towards them, eyes wide with elation.

“There’s nothing there! Prepare your troops and follow me!” he screamed, with the last part morphing into an animal-like cry. After several large strides back towards the gorge, he turned to see them standing firm, staring in contempt.

“What’s wrong with you? I just returned from going up and down the blasted gorge. Look at the carnage behind you! We avenge this treachery!”

“Everyone wants revenge,” Princess Hamaza said. “However, we can’t afford to walk into another trap.”

“I already told you there’s *nothing* there.”

“Friar has been ten steps ahead all day,” the princess replied. “There’s no reason to think otherwise now. We should regroup, not rashly rush in.”

“Agreed. Just because you don’t see anything doesn’t mean it’s not there,” King Tarha of Ager said, pointing to the punji pits. “We learned that painful lesson today.”

Without a word, Lidenskap marched up to the king. Even though Lidenskap was a good-sized man, the massive King from Ager dwarfed him. Unexpectedly, Lidenskap backed away, cheering zealously. Pointing upwards, he said, “Here they come.”

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The others turned to see the sky filled with a lone white figure and thousands of brown streaks. In a few moments, the white Pegasus touched down with such grace and beauty as to take your breath away, quickly followed by legions of griffins screeching and squawking.

“Good job, Runor,” Veneficus told the large white stallion with two powerful wings.

“We surveyed the skies,” Veneficus started, forcefully cutting off Lidenskap. “There are no Vioma Dragons or Eaglians. Our griffins will allow quick communication. I have already sent a platoon of griffins and riders to the Proliate regiments on the other side of the Tingij to alert them of our presence.

“I’m sorry to see the carnage behind us. However, we can still win the day. There have been sightings of large forces of Dark Warriors to the far east, so we can’t afford a drawn-out battle.”

Turning to the rulers of the Confederate nations he stated, “For your safety, I insist you ride next to me on a griffin. At least until we get your troops through the Way of Trepas.” His voice thundered with such conviction the rulers could only look helplessly at each other. Many had experienced his power when he slammed them to the floor and allowed them to lie in suffocating agony.

Even the fiery spirit of Princess Hamaza was quiet as Lidenskap said, “Now, here’s our strategy.”



Scroll 13: I Hate Vegetables

“You okay, Friar?” Lovag asked Friar outside the Way of Trepas.

“It feels as if we are drowning in a sea of lies, the tentacles of deception pulling us down into a nightmare. The more we gasp, the more watery deceit we swallow.”

Earth on Fire Ocean of Blood

Lovag nodded.

Friar forced his face to soften, easing the worry adhered to it. "Battle has the unique power to rip death from its dubious, foggy, often ignored position hidden obscurely in the future and bring our demise bitterly into focus, a razor's edge away." Friar paused, looking at the Knights and their allies. "War brings together a million discrete stories hidden within each individual combatant. We all carry victories, defeats, goals won, dreams lost. Each of us bears tales of parents, family, friends, enemies, being bullied, bullying ourselves. All those narratives broiling, simmering, coalescing under our individual armor entwines with those standing next to, and across from, us. Those innumerable accounts braid together for one moment in time. An unbelievably complex set of backstories coalesce to create one storyline, one outcome. Victory or defeat, life or death."

Lovag sighed. "That's pretty deep. I thought I was the studious one."

Friar continued, "Once the entropy of war is tipped forward, it is impossible to control the devastation. Think how many stories are about to come to an end on both sides."

Before Lovag could speak, Luchar came rushing up. "Let's go kill them all!"

Lovag began laughing. "Friar and I were just talking about something fairly profound."

"This is *not* library hour. No time for profundity, time to pound!"

Lovag laughed. "I didn't know you knew 'profundity.'"

"Looks like we're ready," Friar announced. "Let's go."

Friar, Luchar, Lovag, and the Ulven squad led by Varg, representing the Knights, were joined by a platoon of ten Vioma Northern Dwarves. The group cautiously made their way into the claustrophobically high walls of the gorge.

"Friar, you know I hate vegetables," Luchar growled after they had been walking for some time.

"What?" Lovag asked, chuckling at the odd statement.

"We're being used as human carrots," Luchar said without cracking a smile.

"Who knew you were so funny?" Lovag replied.

Far Forest Scrolls

"Tighten up," Friar said, his eyes darting unceasingly. "We're about three-fourths of the way through the Way of Trepas."

"We should hold," Varg said. "I feel someone watching us."

A pang of regret rocked Friar. He couldn't help looking for Finn, missing his special vision, which could sometimes warn of danger.

"I should have brought Gleoi Dea," Friar whispered.

"I can feel them," Luchar said in an ominous tone. The weight of the hidden eyes suddenly feeling overwhelming, he unconsciously bounced side to side, his axe twirling as his eyes swiveled.

"Watch your head today, buddy," Lovag said, jokingly tapping his friend's helmet. "I don't want to have to pry another of these off."

Luchar ignored the comment, suddenly looking above the soaring canyon walls. Something was streaking across the opening. "Are they Eaglians or griffins?"

Before Friar could answer, inhuman screams echoed off the canyon walls—coming from everywhere and nowhere.

"Circle!" Friar called—but too late.

Light blue and yellow streaks of the Piscinians were streaming out of hidden crevices from behind. With their large fin-like crests and manicas (shoulder and arm guards) the Retiarrians crashed down on them from the left. Their deadly anclas weapons were out. The very sight of the curved trident and bladed weapon could not help but produce fear. The Suoli washed on them from the right with their shields and iaculum, or disemboweling spears, out.

The Dwarves and their crossbows did not turn quickly enough. The Dwarf furthest back was just rotating when the curved end of an anclas slammed into his face and chest. His green helmet split from the ferocity of the attack. As the Piscinian warrior repeatedly slashed with his weapon, ripping flesh and armor completely off, the Dwarf slumped into a bloody heap, his tissue stripped to the bone.

The right side was also suffering the ambush. The longer reach of the iaculum spear made that side of the Dwarf line fall almost instantly. The backwards-facing barbs of the iaculum lived true to their name, and the entire canyon floor was quickly crowded with blood and freed intestine.

"Fall back!" Friar yelled. The Knights and four surviving Vioma

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Dwarves quickly formed a defensive line a few yards back. “Fire at the Retiarrians with no shields!”

The four surviving Dwarves unloaded their bolts with three direct hits and one that bounced off a manica and back into the gorge. They then went behind the Knights to reload their crossbows. The small band of Allies saw they were facing about thirty vengeful Piscinian warriors. Seeing Friar’s strategy to target the shieldless Retiarrians, the Piscinians alternated them with the shield-carrying Suoli fighters as they formed up in three lines.

The Knights lined up with the five Ulven squad members led by Varg on their right and Friar, Luchar, and Lovag on the left. The four Dwarves would step up when they reloaded.

“Revenge-revenge...” the Piscinians chanted as they moved forward. The melodic tone and resulting echo off the canyon walls combined to make it disorienting and terrifying.

“Fire on their left flank,” Friar whispered to Lovag and the Dwarves. He stole a quick glance behind. They were caught between the Piscinians on one side and a large Confederate army beyond the gorge. Lovag was letting his arrows fly every few seconds, his fire making the lines bunch to their right. With only four crossbows and taking twenty seconds to reload and fire, it was taking too long to have the impact he wanted.



Scroll 14: You Don't See That Everyday

Bellae couldn't help smiling at the sight of Lontas sleeping soundly when all she could manage were stumbling fits of restless dozing. A few weeks ago, he would have been terrified to walk, much less sleep, in the Dark Forest's clutches. The blue dragon Stralande's words echoed in her head as the first whispers of morning peeked through the dark branches of the forest, transfiguring complete darkness into dirty gray.

Kainen had been rustling around for some time, and Bellae could tell they would move out soon. As a cruel joke, her eyelids started

Far Forest Scrolls

feeling heavy just as Borb and Grym started squeaking for breakfast. She might have been able to ignore them but for Crann's nuzzling.

All eyes turned to Gimelli. When she began to stir, Scelto was over her in a flash. Her eyes fluttered open as she began licking her lips.

"Hey!" he said.

Gimelli smiled weakly before mumbling something. Her eyes were their normal yellow. "I kept dreaming I couldn't see—at least not anything real. Ichor attacking me and his awful, incense-loving mother kept replaying in my head."

"We're just glad to see and talk to you," Kainen said. "Let me look at these wounds." He carefully applied more of the mixture of salve from the arnebia plant's yellow flowers and the orange-red sap, or blood, of the dragon tree over the seemingly endless puncture wounds.

"They look way better. Does it sting when I apply this?"

"Not now. At first it burned like crazy," Gimelli commented in a hoarse voice, still strained from screaming.

"That's good," Kainen added. "It likely means the poison from the bites is gone.

"Can we risk a fire?" Scelto asked as Arend prepared a large hare he had killed.

"No choice," Kainen answered. "Gimelli must keep eating meat to replenish the lost blood. Thank goodness you ate, even if reflexively."

"I regret to tell you," Arend stated, "this catch is just for Gimelli."

Gimelli surprised everyone, including herself, devouring the entire hare with blistering speed. After swallowing the last bite, she burped. "Sorry," she mumbled before instantly falling asleep.

"Let her nap while we get ready," Kainen stated.



The cold morning had given way to a comfortable day, and the League had not stopped. Everyone was relieved to finally be out of the forest. After days of fitful walking, Gimelli was finally getting some

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color back, thanks to Arend's hunting. The Satu River was just ahead, and even Sankari was in good spirits.

"I'm so itchy," Scelto said.

"You'll feel better after washing up," Kainen advised. "Dried blood and mud are not good when left on your skin. As an Elf I feel weird saying this, but I'm grateful to be out of that forest and have a chance to clean up."

"How about today?" Gimelli asked, nodding to the ropes binding her.

"She didn't scream at all last night, and her eyes have been normal for a while," Scelto added.

"Okay," Kainen said as Arend nodded, "untie her."

They sought different areas of the crystal clear Satu River to clean up. There were a few scattered trees but mostly wild prairie grass around them. The distant outline of Mount Boken was visible to the northwest.

"That was so refreshing," Bellae said, glad to have the grime washed away.

"We have two more chances," Sankari said. "Plenty of bath time, and plenty of fish!"



"It's just a little bit farther," Sankari said the next day, her voice rising with enthusiasm. She had been perpetually talking, her excited chatter increasing exponentially with each step closer to home.

"Cappadocia is *the* wonder of the world. The area used to be full of volcanoes, in a time too long ago to imagine. That's where our homes, the Fairy Chimneys, came from. We Fairies mostly stay up in the middle and upper sections where everything's brown.

"The real action is below, around the Sprite Streams. They run in between our rock spire homes. It's so beautiful. You really can't imagine how ravishing it looks, even if you've been to the Storten Flower Fields. Now you won't be able to see the Rite of Desumo since that happens in the spring..."

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“What’s that again?” Lontas asked with a huge smile. Bellae squeezed his hand and flashed a razor-sharp look of disgust.

“What are thinking? You *want* to hear about this again?” she whispered.

Lontas patted her hand. “What? It’s interesting,” he claimed while suppressing a laugh. “Actually, it’s just really nice to see Sankari truly happy. I guess she was homesick.”

“I’m most happy to go over it again!” Sankari announced, her wings fluttering incredibly fast. She darted back and forth between the members of the League as she chattered, making sure they were paying close attention.

“So, as I said, Sprites live along the colorful rivers and streams that weave their way through our Fairy Chimneys. The Sprites live in the larger mushrooms that grow along the banks of the stream. Oh, they are just indescribably gorgeous—bursting with color and surrounded by flowers and vines.

“The Rite of Desumo happens in the spring when spriggans are born. They are funny little creatures that can fly and swim with equal skill. Spriggans are born with completely clear skin—you can actually see their blood vessels, organs...everything. The newborn spriggans meet with three-year-old Sprites—who have to pick a spriggan to be their kindred spirit for the rest of their lives. After the choice is made, the spriggan takes on the color of the Sprite that chose them, and they will be together as friends until death. The spriggans can only communicate with their Sprite. If the matched Sprite dies, the spriggan passes away quickly from the loss of their one confidant.”

The skies were clear of griffins and Watchers, so Arend circled above, elated to fly freely. Gimelli was riding Crann, Sankari fluttered, and all the others—Bellae, Kainen, Lontas, and Scelto—walked. Later that day, well after crossing the Hada River, they came to a steep hill.

“We’re here!” Sankari shouted, pirouetting in the air euphorically.

After walking up the knoll, they found themselves staring into a valley. The dale’s incline was broad but gentle as it slopped down and back up again. On the other side of the valley, they started to see the famed

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Fairy Chimneys hiding behind the second hill. Conical dark brown to black rooftops of stone sat on the cylindrical light brown homes.

"We carve our homes right into the Fairy Chimney rocks!" Sankari stated with more than a little pride. "Come, let's go! Oh, I forgot to tell you, Crann can't come. Larger animals aren't allowed in Cappadocia. He could kill someone or destroy the Sprites' homes."

Bellae nodded and informed Crann.

"*See you soon,*" Bellae said, squeezing his neck. "*Love you, Crann. I wish Finn could see this.*"

"*Love you too, and I miss him as well,*" Crann said.

Bellae choked back tears over Finn and the emotions of the quest that had been thrust upon her.

"*We'll get through this,*" Crann added, seeing the depth of her sadness.

"*Take one step,*" Bellae said. "*Just one step at a time. That's what Stralande told me,*" she added, noticing his confusion.

"Let's go before Sankari explodes," Kainen said with a small chuckle.

"*Do you guys want to come or stay with Crann?*" Bellae asked the mice.

"*We'll take our chances with the Sprites and Fairies,*" Grym stated. "*Better prospects for food,*" he added quickly.

The League of Truth, minus Crann, made their way up the steep and slippery rock face. The craggy surface was hard, but there was a dry, almost spongy softness to it that made you think it might not be too bad to carve into. Reaching the top of the hill, it became apparent that part of the defensive spiked top was missing, enough to let them squeeze through.

"No sentries? No guards?" Kainen asked.

Sankari shrugged. "Few come this far north."

Upon cresting the top, their breath dropped away. The brown Fairy Chimneys stretched out far into the distance like castle spires. They came in an astonishing array of shapes. Instead of streets, the Fairy Chimneys had magnificent streams weaving their way between them. Each stream was accessorized on both sides with ridiculous colors that wavered as if alive. The dazzling hues took the form of flowers and something else—alive and extremely active.

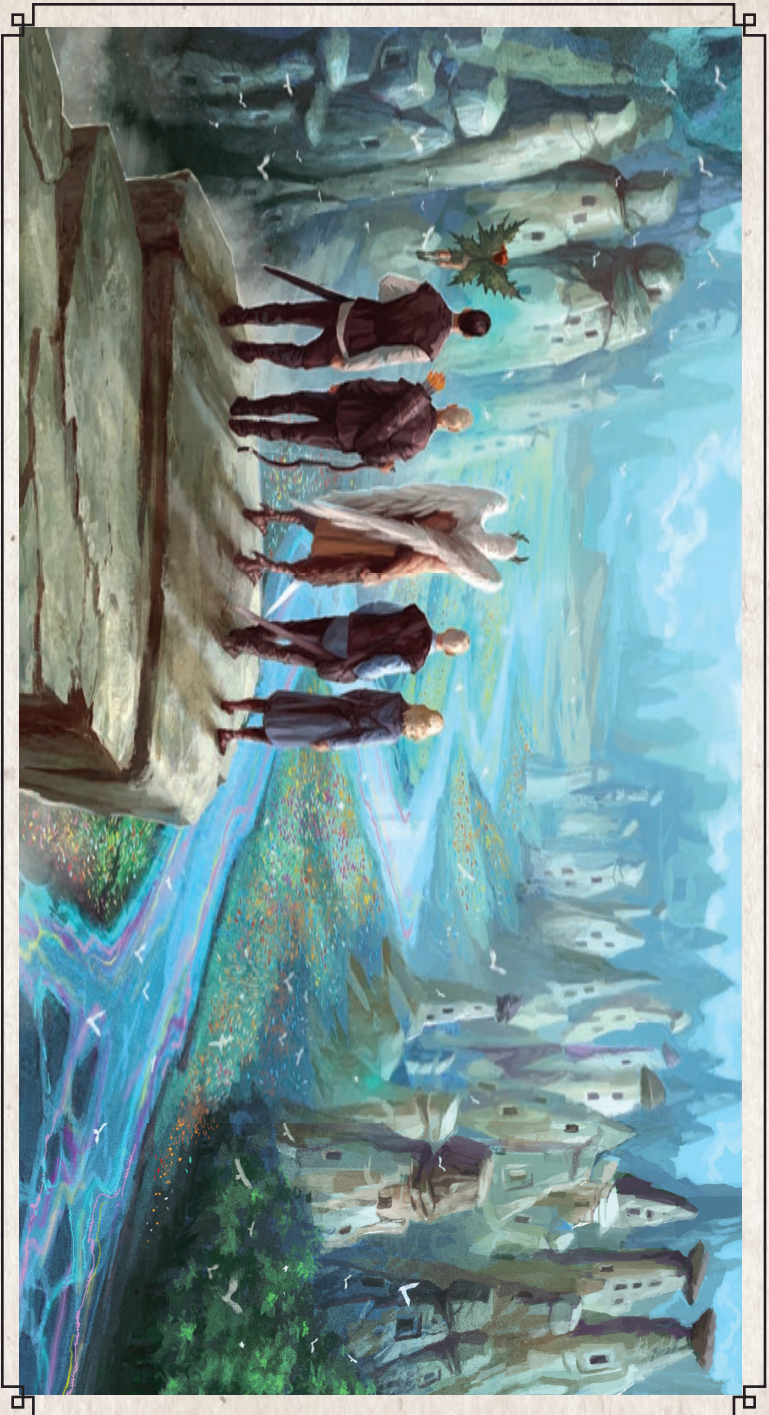


Figure 10: The League of Truth arrives at the fabled Cappadocia: land of Sprites and Fairies. The impressive, but relatively monochromatic, brown towers of the Fairies stand in stark contrast to the flowing streams of color that harbor Sprites and spriggans.

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What looked like large butterflies and small birds were careening around with abundant energy. The streams were awash in reflected color from the magnificent hues lining their banks and zooming overhead.

"You don't see that every day," Scelto murmured, amazed by the beauty and wonder of Cappadocia.

"Now you understand! Once seen, this place never leaves you," Sankari said, quickly performing aerial summersaults before fluttering down the hill to the closest stream. Suddenly, the color collecting around the stream swarmed up like a flock towards the fairy.

"Bellae, what's this?" Lontas questioned, pointing to what looked like a wisp of white cotton floating near his face. "I thought it was tree pollen except it's hovering." He reached out his hand, but Bellae quickly grabbed it.

"*Hello!*" Bellae tried, instantly sensing it was alive.

"Where'd Sankari go?" Kainen interrupted, overwhelmed at the sight of Cappadocia.

Looking down, the League saw only a swarm of color swirling frenetically.

Seeing their hesitation, Sankari zoomed back up. The haze of color followed her a short distance before dropping back towards the stream in a cloud of iridescence. "Come on!" she coaxed, waving her hand energetically, an enormous smile cutting across her normally critical face. "Oh, that's a cotton bird. They're nice but rather dull."

Lontas and Bellae looked at each other, knowing it was one of the coolest things they had seen. Its large, soft-looking white threads protruded all around, and two small black eyes in the front sat over four small legs. Instead of wings, the wisps of cotton-like strips vibrated and contracted to keep it afloat. As it flew away, they were magnetically pulled towards the burst of color around the stream by Sankari's sheer will.

"The smell's intense. It's like you're tasting a bouquet of beautiful flowers," Bellae said as an elegant medley of aromas thrust into their nostrils.

"Oh wow!" Gimelli said, feeling a tinge of lightheadedness as a blistering array of colors engulfed their eyes in flashing waves. Soon

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they were completely surrounded by vivid shades pouncing around in feverish swirls.

"It's breezy," Bellae laughed as the gusts of thousands of fluttering wings vibrated all around them. "It tickles when their wings sweep against you!"

"Enough. Enough!" a rough voice bellowed some distance away, the source of the vocalization blocked by the rainbow of commotion. However, the words held power as the barrage of colors immediately began to blur, scrambling this way and that before fading.

Relieved at the breathing space, the League began to take stock of their surroundings. The stream flowing confidently in front of them glowed a radiant bluish green—coated in a viscous color palate of pollen. On either side of the stream sprouted innumerable flowers of every shape, height, and color. Rows of magnificent, but comparatively drab, Fairy Chimneys rose up in the distance. The colorful figures previously besieging them once again moved in mass to hover closer. Wingless creatures were riding odd animals with furiously beating wings and long snouts.

"Those are Sprites riding their spriggan," Sankari informed.

The Sprites were about six inches tall, and no two held the same color. Some were solid while others were streaked or splattered by a tremendous number of tints. Their whole bodies gave off a sparkling appearance. Their elongated faces were almost insect like. Despite this, they wore cheerful, mischievous smiles. Two antennae sprouted next to flattened ear structures on their foreheads. Several sharp fangs spilled out over their lower lips.

Sankari pointed. "They use their antennae to greet one another and their spriggans."

"Are they drinking the water?" Bellae asked.

"Yes, a tube-like proboscis feasts on the water, which is ripe with nutrition from the constant supply of thick pollen from the surrounding plants—see the steady flow falling to the stream?"

The League gazed at the perpetual snowfall of pollen fluttering and flitting downward. Once mooring upon the stream, colors coalesced into a flowing, but constantly morphing, rainbow.

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“They also eat small fish and insects,” Sankari added as the polychromatic throng of hovering creatures occasionally bumped the flowers, cajoling an extra cascade of brightly colored pollen to escape.

“Like I said, each Sprite rides a spriggan of matching color,” Sankari said, fluttering feverishly while pointing out examples.

The spriggan had long snouts and tongues, useful for getting at nectar. A small pair of wings protruded from their heads and two large sets from their sides. Spikes crowned the tops of their heads and ran down most of their backs save one section where their Sprite sits. The most distinctive feature of the spriggan was the fact they had no arms or legs.

“See their long, spiked tails? They use them hold onto vines or plants either above or below the water,” Sankari informed.



Figure 11: Companions for life, spriggan take on the color scheme of their counterpart Sprite.

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“Oh!” Bellae howled when, as if on cue, a spriggan dove into the river.

“They are at home on either side of the border: under or over the stream, as their wings are functional in and out of the water,” Sankari informed. “They’re excellent swimmers, and the smaller wings on their heads are useful for maneuvering.”

Trumpets blared, startling the League. Their mesmerized stares broke loose from the enchanting Sprites and spriggan to see a group of Fairies approaching.

“It’s King Kuningas, the one who told everyone to leave you alone,” Sankari said. “We Fairies were here first. The Knights transported the Sprites and spriggan here when the Proliate tried to wipe them out from the flower fields.”

The squires nodded, remembering the story from when they visited the Storten Flower Fields so long ago. The king, relaxing on a large litter, contrasted sharply with the four Fairies struggling to carry him while flying. The open sedan chair had ornately carved wood and was escorted by twelve Fairies blowing trumpets circling the perimeter. Eventually, they landed and, at a mere eighteen inches, short even by Fairy standards, the king stood up, his girth more than compensating for his lack of height. His stretched golden-brown garment sweat from the pressure of his jostling belly. The typical bland brown wings fluttered above his intense face.

“Welcome, honored guests!” he bellowed, his voice resonating below his large and meaty nose. Hanging lazily from the middle of his face it lingered, seemingly waiting for someone to prop it up. “We’re honored to have the great and mighty League of Truth join us in Cappadocia. Our tradition is to welcome you with a feast. Come, it’s time celebrate!”

Scelto smiled at the idea that the League was great and mighty. *I guess we are compared to six-inch Sprites and two-foot-tall Fairies.*

The League walked through Cappadocia as if in a dream. The colors of the streams and Sprites balanced the relatively unadorned Fairies and their unique tan rock spires.

“Ow!” Bellae cried, doubling over, holding her stomach.

“What is it?” Lontas asked.

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Bellae didn't answer, too busy scanning for the source of pain she felt. She searched the bursts of color crowding and zig-zagging, but she couldn't localize the injured creature. She began walking away from the others, who continued following King Kuningas and his entourage.

"Bellae!" Lontas pleaded. "We need to follow him. All this is for you."

She stopped, hurt radiating from her eyes. *All for me?* She did not know everything, but she understood enough to realize this was no holiday. *No one would choose what lies ahead*, she thought. The sting of what Stralande told her in confidence bit into her anger, emboldening it. A sharp pang of pain brought her back to the suffering animal.

The king can wait. Turning, she walked into the shadowy base of a Fairy Chimney. Her eyes adjusted, the darkness giving way to amazing details previously obscured by shade. There were countless brawny mushroom homes hugging the base of the Fairy Chimneys. Sprouting at odd angles, some appeared frozen in the middle of a raucous dance. Each enormous mushroom was surrounded by a series of vines crawling up the sides of their houses and onto the rock they backed up to. Delicate bursts of color flowered their way up each vine. Moving closer, she saw smaller rows of crop mushrooms growing out from a terraced section above each house. Some were fat and juicy, while others were tall and thin. A few had wet-looking patterns zig-zagging over their tops.

Shuffling forward, she began to make out carved doors in each of the large mushrooms. Occasionally, a Sprite would poke its head out and stare wide-eyed at her for a second before quickly retreating to the presumed safety of their mushroom homes.

"Those are TaiMadarch mushroom houses," Sankari said, fluttering over. "They are tough, like trees, and the Sprites carve them out to make their homes. It takes over a hundred years for them to grow that tall. Anyway, we can look at them later."

Bellae ignored Sankari. Something was moving in the flower-lined vines. It took her a moment to realize it was spriggans hanging upside down. Closing her eyes, she focused on the feeling of pain, blocking out Sankari's continued protests. Opening her eyes, she moved to the

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source and knelt. A red spriggan with yellow splotches was swaying on a vine with its wings tucked back and both eyes closed.

Nausea, pain, frustration, fear, loneliness—Bellae could feel each and every emotion as they gashed into her.

“Are you okay?”

The spriggan’s eyes shot open in horror, having never communicated with anyone but its matched Sprite.

A small hand vibrated on Bellae’s shoulder. “This spriggan’s Sprite was killed several days ago, and it has not eaten since,” a Fairy stated sadly, nodding at Sankari.

“Will you come and eat with me?” Bellae pleaded.

The spriggan’s long tongue flicked in and out, slowly dragging along its dry and gaunt skin. It was well past the point of hunger—that sensation disappeared long ago as its stomach shriveled under neglect. Its wings began to sputter—buzzing briefly as its tail let go of the vine. Its undernourished body quivered briefly before plummeting towards the ground. Bellae let out a scream while desperately reaching forward to catch it.

“Thanks,” the spriggan buzzed before dying in her hands.

Closing her eyes, Bellae began to sob softly. Overwhelming emotions squeezed her mind: hunger, fatigue, pressure, grief, expectations, death. She closed her eyes. Lontas knelt down, supporting her as she leaned into him. The tears came, harder, faster.

“I’m already tired, Lontas,” she said. “We haven’t even really started, and I’m exhausted. Fatigue sidled behind her sobs, and she drifted off to sleep, still gently cradling the spriggan.



A loud clanging noise woke Bellae. She sat up, disoriented, head spinning. Looking up, the ceiling was only a few inches above her.

Gimelli quickly slid over on all fours to give her a hug. “You’re in a Fairy’s house right next to King Kuningas’ royal hall.” The room was

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sculpted out of stone with intricately carved wooden furniture, miniaturized for Fairies.

"Scelto carried you here," Gimelli said, pointing to the low ceiling. "He left with more than a few bumps to his head!"

"Oh no," Bellae said.

"You missed the party, and the king was sad but understood how tired you were," Gimelli said as a loud sound rang out. "That gong means King Kuningas has left the banquet. The nice Fairy who lives here said you could lie down in the lower level of their house. Lontas and I took turns watching you."

"Thanks," Bellae said, her stomach gurgling.

"I understand that sound. Let's head to the royal hall and get you some food."

The two sisters hunched their way out of the quaintly decorated front room of the Fairy's house. Carefully avoiding the TaiMadarch houses, Sprites, and spriggan, they headed into the banquet hall.

"Sorry I missed everything," Bellae said, licking her dry lips. She reached out to steady herself against her sister. "I'm feeling a little lightheaded."

"It's okay. Let's just rest here," Gimelli said. The two sat against the corner wall, leaning heavily against one another. The great hall was empty save for Fairies cleaning up the enormous mess and sticky residue of what had obviously been quite a feast.

Suddenly, Gimelli began mumbling, an agitated look sprouting across her face.

"Jumeaux...telepathically?" Bellae mouthed.

"Yes, he keeps bugging me. He always wants to know what we are doing and where we are. At Liberum he could care less about us. He claims he's an 'influential' Magician and has learned to appreciate us," Gimelli scoffed, but instantly blushed. "Sorry, he's still our brother." Pausing, she stared at Bellae, concern etched on her face. "He relentlessly wants to know about you." Gimelli bit her lower lip, desperately wanting to believe Jumeaux cared for them but unable to deny the feeling he had ulterior motives.

"Did you tell him where we are?"

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"Didn't have to. He sees us now, using magic, when we talk telepathically," Gimelli said.

"Can't change it, I guess. How are you feeling? Your color's better, and the wounds look a ton better."

"I feel healthier, and while you slept, a Fairy healer checked me. She said I'm cured," Gimelli answered, flashing her celebrated smile. "Look—no white eyes, and no black fang thingies! I'm more worried about you. I feel terrible I choked you."

"That wasn't really you."

"Thanks for that. I also feel bad about eating so much food through the forest. You have to be starving."

"Not really. I guess I'm just tired...and nervous," Bellae said.

"I know. Me too. What exactly we are supposed to do? How do we get to the crystals?"

Bellae nodded, tears bristling in the corners of her eyes.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to make things worse."

"You didn't," Bellae reassured, laying her head on Gimelli's shoulder. Gazing around the king's hall, she could see it was carved into the same tan stone that made up most of Cappadocia. The most impressive feature was its size, especially considering the diminutive Fairies and Sprites. A series of ornamental arches and columns, all carved from solid rock, bounced around the large room.

"What did I miss?" Bellae asked.

"Lots and lots of mushrooms, tasty, sweet water, and did I mention mushrooms? No sign of Patuljak," Gimelli said before getting up to fetch a pitcher and cup, offering Bellae water.

"Oh, my!" Bellae gasped. "This is amazing."

"I know! It's honeyed from all the nectar. It's like a banquet itself. Apparently, there are underground volcanic springs so flowers bloom year round."

Gimelli paused, staring at her sister. *We're supposed to save the world? We barely made it here.* "I'm nervous about meeting the Grand Master Elf, Patuljak, and this quest," she said out loud. "However, we'll do it together."

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“Just...no more trying to make ‘friends’ with vampires and zombies!” Bellae said.

Gimelli laughed. “I promise. Did I mention there were a lot of mushrooms?” Gimelli said, reaching up for a platter on a nearby table. “Those brown ones with the white powdery mold are cogumelos. It sounds disgusting, but it’s not bad. The tan ones with the milky, jagged streaks are faixa-cogumelo. You dip crisp bread into the milky part and eat it.” Gimelli made a disgusted face and began laughing again.

“I don’t remember the names of the others. Actually, the one with the slimy stripes is pretty good. There’s also peccary meat and some weird-looking fruits and vegetables. I’ll find some.”

Bellae nodded, drinking more of the wonderful water.

“Sorry to interrupt here!” Grym squeaked, raising his paws to his mouth outside her pocket. *“You picked the absolute perfect, really ideal time to nap—while everyone else feasted! Now I’m so weak, I can barely move...food!”* Grym said, feigning dizziness.

Bellae chuckled, grabbing a mushroom and crisp bread. Setting it down, her mice ravenously ate. Finding a cup that still had some of the stream water in it, she helped them drink. After gorging themselves, the two crawled contentedly back into her pocket.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” Bellae said, snuggling in next to her sister, who had returned with another salver of food.

“Peccary and fruit as promised,” Gimelli said.

“May I sit with you?” a new voice pierced their serenity.



Scroll 15: An Answers Reward

Standing over the sisters was an elderly Elf. His rough skin drooped, sagging beneath the burden of age, especially around his eyes—giving him a tired expression. Despite his years, there was an unmistakable

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twinkle of vitality in his deep brown eyes. With a loud grunt, he sat down on the floor next to them. Even while seated, the hunch in his spine was apparent. His knobby legs stretched out before them, but they could tell he had been tall and strong in his youth.

He flashed a warm smile, and Gimelli saw something familiar in his face. "I'm Patuljak, and glad to see you again."

Bellae jumped up with surprise. "The Grand Master Elf?"

He smiled, adjusting his simple white cloak. "The title's nothing, especially these days. Please, sit. I walked with you long ago, when Bellae was just a baby, to deliver you to Liberum," the Elf said, looking down despairingly. "My son, Kempe, was with me. I know you met him again. My grandson, Kainen, has been traveling with you. I hope he isn't giving you too much grief."

"I remember you," Gimelli said before reassuring him how great the two Elves were.

Bellae felt a bit disappointed, expecting to meet the Grand Master Elf in an ornate hall full of warriors and great pageantry. This Elf, these circumstances, seemed anticlimactic. *That's vain*, she thought, blushing. Patuljak smiled brightly as if he could read her mind.

"I'm supposed to say hello from Stralande. He said you were friends," Bellae said.

A despondent, almost pained look spread across his creased face. "I was sorry to hear he died. I'm pleased he saw you before he did. These are dangerous times, and much depends on you." As he spoke, his eyes bore deeply into Bellae. They moved side to side as if judging every square inch of her.

Bellae couldn't help focusing on the haunting secrets Stralande whispered. *Someday I'll tell someone what he said...but not today.*

"I was in the town of Torpe, meeting with Western Elves, when the first attempt on my life occurred. After that, everything spiraled out of control. Piscium, Ager, Jaa, and the Rebelde Plains were temporary stops before travelling here. An evil has gripped Verngaard, and I fear my presence is putting the Fairies and Sprites in danger." The Elf looked around the great hall as if reminiscing.

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“As you know, Magician’s mindre crystals ultimately depend on Macht Crystals—the true source of magic in the world. If the lesser mindre crystals lose contact with the Macht for too long, they lose all power. Your ancestors, the Airmhi Caint, made the supreme sacrifice to steal and hide these Macht Crystals to avoid a great evil, the cycle of destruction—Na Cearcaill. They were relentlessly hunted. As their numbers dwindled, they enlisted others who could not speak with animals to help keep the secret of the crystals safe. Hence, the League of Truth was born.

“When no pure-blood Airmhi Caint remained, your direct forebearers, distant relatives of the animal talkers, were hidden in the Giant Redwoods for safety. There we waited for the gift of the Airmhi Caint to reemerge. The Eaglians agreed to withdraw from Verngaard, pretending to turn into isolationists, in order to protect and nurture the heirs of the Airmhi Caint, for only an animal talker can complete the prophecy and discover the Macht Crystals.”

“How did I get the ability? Why not Gimelli or Jumeaux?” Bellae asked.

An intensely tortured look flashed across his face, only to be quickly replaced by a forced smile. “Some are born to be tall, others to run fast, another to jump high. We all inherit different gifts, and sometimes talents coalesce into something special.”

“Thank you for the background,” Gimelli commented. “Our time with Stralande was much more abbreviated than we expected. To be honest, we came away with more questions than answers. A big one is why the Airmhi Caint stole the crystals from Veneficus in the first place? Isn’t he on our side?”

Patuljak sighed, as if it was a question he had hoped to avoid. “The Airmhi Caint somehow discovered a great evil was about to descend upon the world, causing global destruction. The cycle, it alarmingly turns out, has repeated a large number of times, Na Cearcaill. Those ancient writings are long gone, but I have heard they spoke of the slaughter and extermination of almost the entire world. This ‘evil force’ could only carry out their plan if they could acquire the Macht Crystals. Therefore, they stole and hid them.”

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“Couldn’t Veneficus have stopped the ‘evil’ if they had left the crystals with him?” Bellae asked, remembering his awesome power.

“Apparently not. Or at least the Airmhi Caint were convinced he couldn’t,” Patuljak replied. “Remember, this all took place eons and eons ago.”

“The evil you speak of, the White Wizard?” Gimelli questioned.

Patuljak rubbed his forehead as if he was wiping away the early appearance of sweat. “He’s undoubtedly part of the evil. However, it’s much more complicated. Many of the writings with those details were lost generations ago. More will be revealed to you as the journey progresses. I’m but a lowly servant of the League of Truth.”

“I don’t understand!” Bellae exclaimed, becoming irritated by the mystery surrounding their quest. “Is he or isn’t he the evil you speak of?”

Patuljak laughed. “You’ll need that spunk, believe me. But you have to understand, I simply don’t know. There will be clues along the path you are about to embark upon.” He smiled apologetically. “The Airmhi Caint left much out and divided our responsibilities, purposefully keeping us, and our knowledge, segregated. The overall picture was known only to them and will become clear only once you complete the task.”

Bellae rolled her eyes. “You know...this whole Chosen One, secrecy thing is getting annoying. We need to find Macht Crystals to defeat some sort of evil you can’t even tell us about? Something ‘wicked’ is going to destroy the world? I still don’t understand Na Cearcaill thingy.”

Patuljak’s smile disappeared. “I’m afraid, my dear, annoyance will be the least of the trials you are about to face. Your ancestors purposefully kept this knowledge secret to protect us for as long as possible. Anyone knowing the ultimate truth is long since dust in their grave.

“Na Cearcaill means ‘never-ending cycle.’ A pattern of destruction that occurred on such a monumental time scale that an average being could not possibly notice these repeated devastations as a pattern. Somehow, the Airmhi Caint discovered this cycle and made it their life’s mission to end it, to free Verngaard from its evil grasp.”

Gimelli squeezed her sister tight. “From the beginning of this... whatever it is, every step leads to more questions than answers.”

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Patuljak laughed. “Welcome to life. Welcome to the reality of every scholar, scientist, and seeker of knowledge. Every cave we illuminate reveals ten more offshoot chambers to explore. Each bit of knowledge we garner reveals dozens of questions we hadn’t even thought of. That is the glorious, and frustrating, thing about scholarship—there is no end point. There is always more to know.” He paused, looking down for several moments before looking up. “That is the underappreciated audacity of the scholar. We march forward into the dark caverns of ignorance, desperately searching for the ultimate answers, knowing we will never live to see the end.

“Perhaps, the intellectual and warrior have more in common than either wishes to admit. The warrior heads to battle, facing darkness and death, while the scholar, already swimming in the murkiness, and seeing the reality of death, fights for answers. Maybe if we could see more of ourselves in each other, we wouldn’t need to kill each other so often in war.

“Growing older has its own cycle. Find an answer and have ten more problems tied to your consciousness. You have to trust your predecessors. Have faith that they knew more than I. The emergence of the Chosen One signals a return of hope, optimism that the evil cycle, Na Cearcaill, can finally end. Know that innumerable ancestors died setting up this elaborate prophecy just for this moment. You must find a way to finish the job and end the threat once and for all.”

Bellae paused, remembering Stralande’s secret words. Perhaps she knew more than even the Grand Master Elf. *That’s discouraging*, she thought, looking into his kind eyes.

“I just *LOVE* it when you guys put that much pressure on my little sister. It’s sooo reasonable, so compassionate,” Gimelli said, clenching her jaw.

“Pressure is an interesting concept,” Patuljak mused. “If a house falls on you, that is external pressure. Anxiety, however, is an internal construct of our creation, and one, fortunately, we control.”

Gimelli tilted her head. “Fancy words, but it’s still more than she should have to bear.”

“That I agree with. Words are easy, while activating them within your mind is a different matter. Still, choosing to see, and attack, the

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hardships in front of you, freeing yourself from excuses and justifications, is true strength. I know it will be hard, but your success will depend on you, not fate or circumstance.”

“What exactly is ‘success?’” Bellae asked. “What happens when we find these Macht Crystals?”

Patuljak paused, his eyes locked on Bellae’s with such ferocity she had to blink and turn away. *Does he expect me to know what to do with them?*

Finally, after an uncomfortable silence, he spoke. “That knowledge is revealed *only* when all Macht Crystals have been gathered.”

“How about a hint? Do we give them to Veneficus to fight the White Wizard? Do we ‘use’ them? Is that even possible?” Gimelli questioned.

“Sure,” Patuljak answered with infuriating, and ambiguous, simplicity.

“What does that even mean?” Gimelli questioned, irritation leaking from her words.

“It means you need to survive and solve the riddles to find all five quests, for five separate pairs of Macht Crystals,” the Elf answered.

“Wait, what?” Gimelli roared. “Five separate quests?”

Patuljak nodded.

Bellae fought tears. *Five quests? Not one?*

Gimelli rubbed her eyes, suddenly feeling dizzy.

Bellae remembered some of what Stralande had said to her. *“You will not want to see or learn most of what is coming. Some of it will be downright painful, mentally, and physically. It does no good to try and gloss over the truth. It will, sooner or later, always break through.”*

“Pressure and stress can be excitement and enthusiasm,” Bellae said out loud.

“What?” Gimelli asked.

“That’s one of the things Stralande wrote to me in the note before we left. He also told me, ‘Move forward with your family and friends, taking one step at a time for them. Let the outcome work itself out.’”

Patuljak nodded as if he was impressed and proud of her. “He clearly gave you better advice than I.”

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"She's supposed to magically know what to do with the *five* sets of Crystals when we're done?" Gimelli inquired.

"I'm sure you're sick of hearing this, but with each step you learn more. Listen to Stralande, have faith, keep moving forward. Here." Reaching into his knapsack, he carefully removed a leather pouch. Tenderly, he pulled out a scroll and handed it to her. Standing to leave, he said, "Good luck with your first mission scroll."

"Wait!" Bellae cried out. "Aren't you going to help?"

He smiled. "I'll be back to check on you, but this is your burden."

"That's incredibly unfair," Gimelli stated, anger rising in her voice.

"Perhaps, but my job is to give you that. Your role is to solve it."

"Speaking of such things," Gimelli said. "You know we almost died, like several times, just getting here?" She whooshed her hair over, showing her neck before rolling up her sleeves to reveal the healing wounds from the vampire. She had several flashbacks to Ichor and the thousands of little barbs shooting out on tendrils to suck her blood. Shuddering, she continued, "Shouldn't we have an army? Or at least more help."

Patuljak nodded, seemingly genuinely concerned. "I...have often wondered that myself. However, the architects of this prophecy, your ancestors, have passed down the proclamation that a small group not only has the best chance to triumph but the *only* chance for victory."

He moved to leave before stopping. *Only the young would keep going with this quest, moving forward despite the absurd odds, and not become discouraged.* Partially looking back, he added, "That is where the faith part comes in. Remember, I send with you my grandson. I can tell you I wish for, with all my heart, your triumph and safe return."

The further away he walked, the more despondent the two sisters felt, despite his enigmatic message. They both realized cryptic was the currency of this quest. Bellae looked up to see Kainen, Arend, Lontas, and Scelto walking in. They were staring at the girls with a protective glare she recognized so often in Finn's face. Lontas, his pants suspended high above his ankles, looked like he had grown another inch in size and a mile in maturity since they had left. She wondered what would happen if Lontas ran into the bullies that used to torment him back to

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Liberum. She battled tears knocking to come out. *I know I will never see Liberum again.*

The invisible target of self-doubt that all who are bullied carry, that trawled his expressions into caution, and yanked his movements into nervous twitches were gone. His growing coordination teamed up with his cultivating self-assurance to form proof that invisible forces can affect your physical being.

Bellae inspected the scroll. *This is it? So much fuss over a rolled up, blah-looking, yellow sheet of paper.* She gently touched the curved lines and felt its brittleness crackling under her fingers. The girls cautiously unrolled the scroll, bits of its edges flaking off.

“Ah-ahh! Careful!” Gimelli said as pieces fragmented off.



Scroll 16: Have Fun...

Once the flaking ancient scroll had crunched into an unrolled position, Gimelli read:

“Cleared the dragon’s test.
Now you are ready for your quest.
Carefully follow each clue.
Courage and persistence will see you through.

Let there be no doubt,
Nothing shall be freely given out.
Each step will be a fight,
Bringing secrets to light.

Five sets of Power Crystals to seek.
Succeed, and the strong shall fear the weak.

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Recover them and deny Evil.
Undo millennia of savage crimes and upheaval.

First, crystals of **Sight**.
Sometimes you need more than light.
Seek the crystals of **Perception**.
Beware it's joined opposite, **Deception**.

Go where there is no time for seasons in the land.
Half each day ruled cool—half it's banned.
Within the ocean of brown,
Sits a gem fit for any crown.
Beware apparitions or in the dry drown.

After wading into this desolate sea,
Few areas of life can be.
Find the area that is lower down.
Follow birds, and it can be found—the rock crown.

Go between the sprigs,
Of dates, olives, apricot, and figs.
There, discover a mystery you must solve,
Before the door will revolve.

Once you enter and stand,
Try and hold it in your hand.
Open your fingers, and there it's not.
Squeeze it tight, and you lose a lot."

The girls groaned in exasperated unison.
"Can't they just tell us where to go?" Bellae questioned.
"I guess not," Gimelli replied, feeling tired and desperately wanting to lie down. The run-in with Ichor and the undead had taken more out of her than she wanted to admit. Instinctively, she rubbed her neck, still

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struggling with feeling lightheaded and sluggish. Although the small puncture wounds were healing externally, internally, she felt a chill at the dark memories of the slimy tentacles and their piercing needles.

“Not good?” Lontas asked tentatively.

Without thinking about it, Bellae stood up quickly and gave Lontas a warm hug.

“Need help then?”

Bellae nodded emphatically. Kainen, Arend, Scelto, and Lontas all joined the two sisters around the ancient scroll and read it themselves.

“Clear as mire sludge,” Kainen said.

“Why does it always have to be a rhyme?” Bellae wondered.

“It’s easier to remember that way,” Patuljak stated calmly, his sudden appearance startling them.

“Grandpelf!” Kainen said, spryly jumping up to give his grandfather a long hug. “I was so sad you weren’t at the feast.”

“Every second I get to see you is a blessing, dear child,” Patuljak said, then, as if it was a ritual required of all elderly relatives, he held his grandson at arm’s length and studied him. He nodded proudly before embracing him again.

When they finished, the aged Elf looked to Gimelli. “I thought about what you said, and I wanted to give you something. Before I do that, let me answer about the rhyming. There’s only one copy of each scroll, and only one person at any time that knows what it says. We have to memorize it in case we need to destroy and rewrite the scroll.”

“I couldn’t memorize that,” Bellae stated, staring at the long-dusty scroll.

Patuljak laughed before settling into a reflective smile. “It took me a while, but as with anything, if you put your mind to it and practice long enough, there’s nothing you can’t do. Plus, like all the guardians of the scrolls, I just had to memorize this one. I know it forwards and backwards.

“Want to hear it backwards?” he asked. Without waiting for an answer, he began, “Lot a lose you, and tight it squeeze. Not it’s there, and fingers your open. Hand your in it hold and try, stand and enter you once. Revolve will door the before, solve must you mystery—”

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“Grandpelf, really?” Kainen interrupted, embarrassment infusing amusement.

“That’s nice, sir, but I’m not sure it adds much,” Arend stated directly.

Patuljak laughed, nodding his head in agreement. “The one keeper or guardian-one scroll rule has been the norm for thousands of years. I have no idea what any of the other scrolls will say as you journey to find all five sets of Macht Crystals.”

“You can’t tell us what’s coming?” Bellae clarified.

A look of sadness flashed across his face, quickly replaced, with exertion, with one of optimism. “Unfortunately, you’re on your own, but I have every faith in you.”

“It’s good your ancestors are dead, girls, or I might kill them myself,” Scelto scoffed.

“You mean, you don’t know if the other scrolls even still exist?” Lontas asked incredulously, the reality of the keepers or guardians only knowing their part finally sinking in. “If one of them didn’t pass on their knowledge, our quest comes to a crashing halt.” He quickly glanced at Bellae. There was a steely look in her eyes articulating determination. No storm was going to shake her resolve, no matter what Patuljak answered. He sighed. *I’m with you, my friend, all the way.*

“That’s correct,” the Elf stated. “In the beginning, when these rules were forged, the Ainmhi Caint were being relentlessly hunted. Once they were wiped out, things slowed down. It has only been in recent generations that those of us in the League of Truth have been pursued again.”

“We have to take one quest at a time and not worry about what comes after. The prophecy was quite specific about protecting these clues,” Kainen stated.

“Can you tell us anything about this riddle?” Gimelli asked. “You know it so well.”

Patuljak looked concerned. “Unfortunately, I’m forbidden from offering verbal assistance. The Chosen One, and her companions, must figure it out. I know it seems unfair, but there’s a reason. You have a long road full of many trials ahead. You must overcome them on your own. Trust *no one* but those walking this path with you.”

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"Hello, hello!" the booming voice of King Kuningas rang out as he was carried on his litter. On either side of him Fairies carried various platters and bowls of food.

"Hello—" Patuljak began, only to have Kuningas interject hungrily.

"That scroll's the reason it was so important for us to protect our Grand Elf brother. We Fairies and Sprites were happy to do so..." His voice trailed off as he took an obscenely large ladle of mushroom pudding.

A female Fairy quickly fluttered over to wipe a dribbling splash from his chin.

"How long will this quest take?" Bellae asked.

"No one knows. You have to discover the rest," Patuljak replied.

"Do we know who specifically wrote this prophecy anyway?" Gimelli pressed.

Nodding approvingly, Kuningas paused as a Fairy again approached to wipe away drizzle. "Good question, but to be honest, we just don't know. Most believe it was the last Airmhi Caint together with the earliest members of the League of Truth."

Patuljak added, "Keep in mind these prophecies go back to the earliest recorded history of our turn on this world. Countless generations have been born and died since this was handed to us. The leaders of Elves, Eaglians, Fairies, and dragons have protected the prophecy through innumerable generations after the last of the pure Airmhi Caint died."

"Well, I hope you enjoyed the feast, my friends. I must be off for official duties..." Kuningas said as his eyes cravingly massaged the various foods around him.

"Official duties," Patuljak said once the king was out of sight while quickly shoveling imaginary food into his mouth. The squires suppressed a laugh.

"What will you do now?" Bellae asked Patuljak.

He sighed deeply. As the breath escaped from his lips, you could almost see the burden of carrying the scroll wafting away. "I'm relieved to have done my part. I will still try to reconcile the differences between the Elven countries. Those with whom we have the most in common are often the ones it is easiest to find fault. It is mentally simpler to see

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our own imperfections in those who share them. When we find shortcomings in others, it is often our subconscious throwing us a warning, one that we all too often ignore. Would you mind if I sit in as you try to figure out the location?"

"Of course not," Gimelli said, smiling. *None of this prophecy is his fault.* Any anger she felt towards him vanished. It was hard to imagine some mysterious evil and almost impossible to fathom Na Cearcaill.

Squeezing her sister tight, Gimelli whispered, "Let's take the next step, and all yet to come...together." Smiles were shared as the League turned to the scroll. Everyone silently reread the contents.

"Look here, 'desolate sea,' and then, 'drown.' It must mean we need to find a lake, or something," Scelto stated.

"I don't think so," Kainen said. Scelto shot him a defensive glance. "Look, it talks about being 'desolate of life' and mentions 'dry drown'. Lakes are obviously not dry, and they are teeming with life."

"Kainen's correct. It says 'ocean of brown.' That doesn't sound like water," Arend stated.

"Maybe a dried-up lake?" Lontas remarked.

"That's a good thought. If the water dried up, 'ocean of brown' could be mud," Gimelli said.

"Exactly!" Lontas replied excitedly. "And you could 'drown' in the mud. You could get stuck and sink." He paused and frowned. "Wait a second. If it's so 'desolate,' why does it talk about birds and trees?" Momentarily baffled, the League paused to review the scroll.

"Wait, wait," Kainen said. "Think about the trees mentioned, 'dates, olives, apricot, and figs.' They all thrive in areas that are hot and dry."

"I see where you're going," Lontas announced eagerly, grabbing Bellae's arm to steady himself. "A desert!"

"Exactly. A desert is a desolate 'sea' of sand that's tannish brown. Some creatures survive there, including birds," Kainen stated.

"Look," Gimelli said, pointing to a section. "It talks about trying to hold 'it' and you can't if your hand is open or if you squeeze it. That has to be sand."

"Yes," Scelto agreed. "Sand would slip through your fingers if you opened them or closed them in a fist."

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"Also, the desert doesn't have a change of seasons, and it's hot in the day but gets cold at night," Bellae added, pointing to a section and reading, "...there is no time for seasons in the land. Half of each day ruled cool—half it's banned."

"There's only one desert in Verngaard, Calor," Arend stated.

"That was quick!" Patuljak exclaimed. "You're a sharp group. I expect you will have no trouble figuring out the details of where you are going within the desert."

The Elf suddenly looked down briefly before continuing. "Although I couldn't tell you where, I have been there and would like to give you something I made." Patuljak went back and grabbed a large brown sack off a table. Returning, he pulled out a beautiful shield, handing it to Kainen.

"It may come in handy in the desert," he said, winking at his grandson.

"I can remember seeing you work on this for...a long time," Kainen said. It was highly polished, like a mirror on the inner, concave side. Even in the soft light of the hall it reflected vivid shafts of brightness, which danced into their eyes and across the ceiling.

"That's totally impractical as a shield," Sankari said. "It would blind the bearer and all standing behind!"

"Sankari!" Arend said as the Fairy shrugged her shoulders.

"You will probably want to carry it in the bag," Patuljak stated, waving his hands to block the reflected light. He motioned to Bellae. "Come with me for a moment, please."

Bellae obliged.

"I have something to whisper to you alone," he said.

Bellae sighed. *Here we go again.* "You know Stralande already told me lots of secrets."

"Did he?"

"Yes, and they were mostly painful. He told me a prophecy is nothing but a wish, a hope for the future, and that the Chosen One thing is for *others* to believe in me. I'm just a girl who happened to be born with the gift of the Ainmhi Caint. My ancestors wanted to make sure only an animal talker solved the riddles. There's nothing 'Chosen' about me—just blind luck. Sometimes I wish it wasn't me."

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“But, why *not* you? It’s easy to be a reductionist, but that path quickly leads to depression. Why me for this? Why am I even here? What does it all mean? Trimming life down with questions that, for the most part, can’t be answered reduces existence to something that owes us answers and promises of hope, of prosperity. Life only offers a solitary *opportunity*, a chance to succeed, or not, but never promises anything except a hard-stop end. Also, don’t so easily underestimate the power of hope and belief.

“Even if you don’t agree, the mere prospect of using your gift to save untold lives and end Na Cearcaill is amazing. Before you can see that life itself, as well as this opportunity, is a gift, you have to start with acceptance. Accept you cannot control the situation, but you can determine your response. Don’t be an observer of life. Be a participant. Take responsibility for the problems in the world. Try to fix them. See life’s challenges as opportunities to be tackled with gratitude.”

“It doesn’t feel like a ‘choice.’ Pretend to be some ‘Chosen’ and follow a quest to save everyone, *or* let them all die,” Bellae sneered.

“Oh, but it *is* a choice, one of many you will have to make, and there will be innumerable opportunities to stop and take the easy way out,” Patuljak said. “You’d be surprised how many in your situation would come up with excuses and not even attempt this quest. Fear and anxiety are powerful deterrents while pain and sorrow can seize good intentions and freeze our hearts.”

Bellae shivered in dread, longingly looking towards the exit. *Run!* her mind screamed in fight-or-flight overload. Standing before this immense task, her choice seemed clear—battle for months, maybe years, in an extreme quest, or spring out in an instant.

Bellae looked back to Patuljak. “How would I live with letting Na Cearcaill kill so many? Running away might give temporary relief, but ultimately, it would haunt me for the rest of my life. When I ask about Na Cearcaill, I get told, ‘You have to figure it out,’” Bellae said, trying to mimic Stralande’s voice. “Or, ‘The answers will be revealed as you move forward on the quest,’” she uttered in the Elf’s voice. “It gets super old.”

Patuljak chuckled. “I know it’s frustrating, but realize how ancient Na Cearcaill is, and how countless generations have fought to end it.

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Even if you stopped searching for the crystals and spent the rest of your life studying all the texts and rumors about this cycle, you would only get through a fraction of the narrative.

“Your ancestors, the Ainmhi Caint, failed to stop the cycle and suffered greatly for the attempt. We planned to let you get older before beginning, but time did not allow this. The White Wizard and Veneficus have been increasingly desperate to find the crystals, sending increasing numbers of minions to find you.”

Patuljak paused, seemingly lost in thought. “I had a dream last night that you failed and never made it here.”

Bellae tilted her head, eyes widening. “Thaaanks?”

“You made it, obviously. In plenty of dreams you succeed. Dreams are an invitation given at night, but to be fulfilled into true substance, must be conjured through hard work in the waking hours. I know this seems overwhelming, but the true danger is in being ordinary. That is the great lie within the whisper of fear and murmur of anxiety—the greatest deceivers in the world. Fear never tells you the repercussions of *not* acting, not moving towards your dream. Dread and anxiety are begging you to be satisfied with the common, the safe, the known. I sincerely wish I was young enough to go with you, but I am grateful my grandson gets to travel with you.”

“Stralande said something similar,” Bellae said.

“From the precipice of old age, the wonderment of a true adventure shines perfectly clear.” The Grand Master Elf looked down. “Unfortunately, there will be more surprises ahead, each carrying their own brand of pain.”

“Not really heartening. I still want to know more.”

“Unfortunately, especially when great distances and many have touched it, no matter the original truth, there will inevitably be lies folded within its core. Perhaps the greatest dangers are half-truths and lies of omission.”

Bellae raised her eyebrows in displeasure.

Patuljak laughed. “Simplified, I don’t know. However...”

“Let me guess, this prophecy is really old so you can’t know everything?” Bellae said, her expression softening.

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Patuljak nodded before leaning in. “There’s a price for everything. A life of adventure demands we give up security and normalcy. A life filled with the ordinary provides stability, but it lacks thrilling exploits. Both will dispense their own forms of regret, manifesting as the shapes of the choices we made and the phantom notions of the ones we didn’t. The blade is always sharper in the other armory, as they say. Don’t let regret leech joy from your chosen journey.”

Bellae scrunched her nose, feeling overwhelmed and sick of philosophical lectures.

Patuljak laughed. “I can see I’m not the first to try and offer wisdom, but remember, many of us have waited our whole lives to meet you. Can you blame us for sermonizing?”

“Even though you did not choose this path, it is still an adventure, and for some reason, it is in our nature to think, ‘If only we had taken the other road, things would be better.’ Each track has its own problems we simply can’t see, unless we walk it.”

Stepping back, Patuljak smiled. “This part’s just for you.

If hope is to breathe a chance.
Ever onward advance.
If you fail,
We continue beneath the evil veil.
The cycle of death, Na Cearcaill, will repeat,
Until the One ends in defeat.
Be careful of untrue friend and perilous stranger,
You will never be far from danger.”

Bellae’s breathing quickened. Her heart rate bustled forward as the room started to spin. Smiling, Patuljak gently steadied her by the shoulders.

“What if I fail?” Bellae huffed.

Complete with crackling joints, Patuljak bent down to make eye contact. “In life, and on this quest, do not lose sight of the importance of the journey itself. Concentrate on your heart and dedicated effort. Those are the things you can control. Isn’t your best all that you, and the world, can ask?”

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Bellae chuckled. "Now you really sound like Stralande and Friar."

"Ah, how flattering! Shall we?" Patuljak said, turning to rejoin the others, Bellae trailing behind. They were met with expectant stares and strained silence, the others unsure of what was to come. Finally, Patuljak said, "Hey, at least I stopped reciting it backwards." Everyone laughed as some tension floated away.

"Thanks, Grandpelf," Kainen stated, holding up the bag with the shield before embracing Patuljak.

"I'm proud of you, and confident you'll figure out when to use it," Patuljak stated, smiling tenderly to camouflage the depth of his concern at the dangers the youth would soon face.

Shaking the forearm of each and every one of them, he stated, "Well, I'm off. For the first time in many years I'll sleep well, confident in your ability. You are the League of Truth, and don't forget it. May the spirits of the forest and good luck ride with you."

"Thank you," Bellae stated. She threw her hands around the Elf, squeezing him tightly. Smiling, he turned and left, hoping he had spun around fast enough to hide his tears.

"Have fun in the desert," he stated with a parting wave. Nearing the door, he stopped and turned. "Remember, your perception does not change the reality."

As he exited through the doors, a crafty grin stared out from his face.