

Five (Scott) Kiska & Company

Morning came with a rumbling of thunder and a cool breeze. The skies were gray and dismal, showing the threat of rain not far off. Arat's first business took him towards a tall tree away from the campsite. While tending to his business, he noticed some tracks in the dirt and found them to be that of a bear. Upon closer examination he learned they wound their way around the entire campsite as if the beast had circled them throughout the night. Arat found himself wishing Nyrin were with them, for then he would have learned of their visitor when he came calling and not after he spent the night stalking them. Even over a feast of *elan* and jerky he thought on it, wondering why the beast hadn't attacked them, and certainly their horses. And for that matter, why the horses hadn't cried out and gotten skittish when the tracks were found so close to where they were tethered. The one point he kept coming back to in his mind was why the beast was so out of his natural territory and why he had come so close to their camp. In the end he let it rest, Rathcar being no help to his quandaries. The two packed up their belongings and headed out, giving the matter of bears not another word.

With their cloaks pulled tightly around themselves, keeping the morning chill out as best they could, the elf lead the way on their continued westerly journey. Arat made several attempts that morn to pry more information from his elusive companion, but to no avail. Rathcar held fast in his tight lip and again said only "trust me." In an effort to change the conversation, Rathcar spoke of Kristel and the boy child, Tirem. He was pleased when his tactic worked well, for it wasn't long before Arat was speaking of his family and all talk of their journey ceased. Before he knew it, he had talked away the morning, telling Rathcar of Tirem whom the elf had yet to see. On many occasions the elf fell into a fit of laughter over how his companion would digress into an infant like language, imitating his son. He found it amazing how a child could turn a brave swordsman and warrior into a court jester without so much as a bat of an eye. He had no first hand experience with offspring, even the young of his clan seemed strange to him and he seemed to always keep a safe distance from them. But riding along and hearing his friend carry on made him understand now how even the great and feared bear could treat their young with such kindness and gentleness while in the same breath could disembowel a man without a thought. As mid revolution approached, so did the bad weather. All morning the skies grumbled with thunder and a couple of times drizzle fell, only to let up after a few ticks. But now the winds picked up and with it came the frequent cracks of lightning and the release of a full-fledged downpour. All talking ceased as the rain fell hard and heavy. The two sank into their cloaks as well as they could, trying to keep the rain off. Onward they rode at a slow yet steady pace. Their mounts trudged through the quickly soaking ground, heads hung low as they, too, tried to avoid the rain. They traveled about a league, the storm showing no sign of letting up. By now they were soaked to the bone, their spirits damp. Both looked in earnest for someplace to ride out the storm, but it seemed the land was nothing but a wide-open plain. The few trees that dotted the landscape were small and without much canopy, leaving them to look elsewhere. Finally Rathcar spotted something off to the north. Arat followed the direction he was pointing and saw too what they both sought. Standing out in the open, some half way was a lone building of some sort. Through the sheet of rain neither could see exactly what it was, but it was shelter and that was enough for both. Urging their horses on, they steered towards it, eager to be under a roof and out of the weather. When they rode up, they found it to be a vacant barn. It sat on a plot of land where other buildings had once stood, but all had long since fallen down and now only this single building remained. After a quick investigation to be sure it was unoccupied, they

led their horses inside, satisfied to remain until the storm passed.

Inside they found nothing fancy but enough to keep them dry. The roof had several holes in it and the center sagged from age and neglect. It was small and musty, in one corner a stack of hay bales sat, molding and rank. There were two windows, both broken and some of the boards that made up the walls had been either pulled free or had fallen out. Not feeling too choosy, and satisfied that this shelter would do to keep the rain off their heads, they unsaddled their horses. After a good brushing, they fed them a small bit of grain. The tack was laid out where the trickles of water from the roof wouldn't fall upon them. They made sure to tether them well clear of the moldy hay, not wanting them to founder. After seeing to those needs, the two set to preparing a small fire and hung out their own wet clothes to dry. Once into dryer clothes (even those in their packs were not untouched by the rain), Rathcar prepared some hot tea and a small lunch. While sitting by the fire and listening to the rainfall outside, Arat found himself recalling memories from the past. He sparked up a conversation of the days long ago when the two of them were younger and not as troubled by foul weather.

"It must have been some eleven season gone," Arat said as he sipped the hot tea. "We had met up with that group of adventures out of Roranou, you remember, they had that female warrior with them, I believe her name was Kiska. She was accompanied by a dwarven fellow, Maecx, who's eagerness to quench his thirst was matched only by our own Tars', and that odd wizard, Samar, and his mate the cleric-warrior, E'less. If I remember the facts correctly, this band was in search of a tome of ancient that was said to contain a powerful magic. According to Samar, the contents of the book held spells that no mortal had ever thought existed. You and I were in Roranou by nothing more than chance when we came across the four in that inn..."

The three strangers hurried through the door and slammed it quickly shut behind them. They stood in the foyer for a few moments, brushing the snow off of their furs and stomping their boots onto the floor, oblivious to the stare they were receiving. Arat was the first to throw his hood back when he saw the man leaning on the counter, gazing first at him, then at the clumps of fresh snow that had been tracked into his inn. By the look on his face, it was clear he was not pleased with these actions, and Arat could only smile at him as he nudged his companion.

"What is it?" Rathcar asked as he pulled his hood off his shoulders and loosened the scarf that had been tied around his face. Just then he, too, saw the proprietor glaring at them and he looked from him to the mess on the floor. "Our apologies, good man. Allow us to clear this mess away from your front door."

"*Hmpf.*" Came a grunt from behind the counter. He flipped his head, directing the stranger's attention to the broom hanging on the wall behind the door.

"Very good." Replied Rathcar. He offered the man a pleasant smile and snatched up the broom. The Innkeeper watched these strangers carefully as they swept up the fresh snow and pushed it out the door. Spying them closely, he noticed that while one was human, the other appeared to be of Eve'lan decent. Though he was accustomed to seeing their kind before, the fair skin, sparkling eyes, and of course those strange ears. This one's skin was dark, his hair black as coal. Both men were dressed for the climate, heavy fur hides covering their bodies, muks on their feet and heavy gloves to keep their hands from freezing in the cold climate. When they opened their coats up he couldn't help but notice their fancy swords they carried, a good sign they were most likely bounty hunters come to Roranou in search of runaways. Yet of everything he found mysterious about them, none was as so as the third member of their party, the panther. This great cat lay on the floor near the human, cleaning the snow from out of his paws. The innkeeper

never actually saw the cat turn and look directly at him, however he could feel the things cold stare studying him, making sure he made no actions towards them.

"I believe that takes care of that." Rathcar said, breaking the silence that hung in the foyer. He returned the broom to the peg on the wall and turned to face the Innkeeper. He found the man to be a fairly large fellow, not fat but well stocked. His reddish hair thick and curly, covering his head as well as his face. His deep-set eyes were narrow and cautious, studying the strangers as they approached the counter. Now then, would you have rooms available for my friend and I?" They paid two days advance for their rooms, Arat handing the man enough coin to cover the rate. After learning their room was upstairs and that down the hall behind the front desk was where the dining room was, the three of them offered the man a polite smile and nod, heaved their packs over their shoulders and headed upstairs. "I do hope that fellow is not the example of the sort we will find in this place." Arat whispered to Rathcar as they climbed the stairs. "Certainly was an odd one."

"I tell you, Dayn, one was an Eve'lan, and they had a great black cat with them." The Innkeeper was sitting at table in the dining room located next to a plain wooden door with a round window cut in the center. With him sat a thin man with long hair pulled back behind his head. He wore a white apron around his front that was stained with grease and other culinary delights. Both men had tin cups in front of them, the innkeeper clutching his with his leathery hands while he talked. "I just think it too queer that they show up just after that group with the dwar."

"But, Lir," said the man in the apron as he rose the cup to his lips, blowing a trail of steam from off the top. "They arrived two yesters ago, and I thought you said they were on their way out by next full moon?"

"Aye, I said that. Just seems queer that all these strangers show up in dead of winter." He looked past Dayn to the door that led into the dining room. "Not just strangers neither, but Eve'lan, Dwars, and giant cats."

Dayn chuckled at that last part. "Lir, I'm tellin' you it ain't no giant cat. There's no such creature as that. It must have been something else, a..."

"...I'm tellin' you what I saw!" Lir snapped, slamming his empty cup hard on the table. "And it was a..." He broke off, staring over Dayn's shoulder, his eyes telling his friend to look. Dayn turned around and saw the door open. In came two men and trailing behind, a four-legged black beast. "By the hand of Cir, a giant cat."

Arat, Rathcar, and Nyrin sat at a table near a window that looked out into the snow-laden street. There were over two fists of tables spread out around the room, all were small and square with two, three, and even four chairs around them. Only one other table was occupied and the gentleman who had helped them earlier took that. He was sitting with a man who wore a dirty white apron, probably a cook. The two men sat bent over the table, whispering to one another and occasionally sneaking a look at the strangers as they sat down across the room. From where they stood, Arat and Rathcar thought the two men were arguing. When the man in the apron finally stood up with such a fit that his chair fell backwards and walked towards them, shoulders low, head down, they guessed what it was about it whom lost. The man approached slowly, one eye on them, the other on the black cat sitting beside Arat's chair. When he came to the table, his hands were working the towel looped on the ties of his apron and even then they could see he was shaking. "What'll it be sirs?" he croaked, trying hard to sound natural.

"Well my good sir," Arat said, looking around for some clue as to what was offered. "Since I no not what is on the menu, I suppose you could suggest something."

"Huh... oh, right... well I got some stew on the stove if yer liken something good and warm to eat and most say our ciders the best in Roranou."

"Very good then, stew and cider will be fine." Arat said with a smile, trying to put this man at ease before he fell over of a stopped heart. The man nodded, stepping backwards. He had just turned around and was ready to scurry away when the man with the accent spoke up. "Hold on there, our feline friend is need of some nourishment as well."

A lump formed in Dayn's throat. He turned around slowly, the towel now wrapped tightly around his hands. "Of... of course, anything you want." His eyes met the green eyes of Nyrin's and he shuddered. He was sure the creature was looking at him as if he were just the nourishment he sought.

"No need to be frightened." Arat said, now fully sensing that it was Nyrin this man was terrified of, not he and Rathcar. "Nyrin will not harm you, unless of course, you attempt to harm he... or us."

"No!" Dayn heard himself blurt out, his hands waving in front of him. "No, I would not make such a foolish attempt. Please, keep your creature at bay, I am only a cook. Now what will..." He shot a quick glance at the cat again, "...what will it be eating today?"

Arat burst out with such a fit of laughter that Dayn the cook stumbled backwards. He was sure the stranger was ordering the creature to take his choice on one of his own parts and all he wanted to do was scream. Instead he turned around quickly and made for the kitchen in such a rush that he nearly fell over the table next to theirs. Dayn's eyes were big as saucers but he caught a glimpse of Lir at the table ahead, his head buried in his hands in disgust. As he hurried for the kitchen, hoping to sneak past Lir's lashing, he heard the laughter loud as ever behind him and then the human called out, "Yes, I believe he *will* have the stew as well!"

It wasn't until they were almost finished with their second serving when another patron came into the dining room. The swing door pushed open and a tall, very well shaped woman stood, scanning the room. She wasn't a mere shapely woman, though her bosom was pressed tightly beneath her leather jerkin, she was as fit as most men. Dressed in tight leathers and steel plate, her arms bare and showing the muscles well. Not bulging or over worked, but shapely. In her hand was a long pole bearing a double edge shaft on its head. A dagger was tucked in a wide belt around her waist and a long bow and quiver slung over her shoulders. Her long, golden hair was wrapped in a tight braid that hung over her breast. Her eyes of sky blue surveyed the room and it's occupants. When she finally entered, she walked with her chin high, her posture full of pride, striding cross the room. The door never swung shut behind her when a second patron came behind her, and a third, and finally a last, a dwarf closing the ranks. The four took a larger table in the center of the room and the woman did not sit down until the other three did, even then giving both occupied tables another glance. The other two appeared to be human both dressed in robes. One was a male and just the sight of him reeked of magic. He was a dark fellow, his black hair cropped short, a well-groomed goatee growing from his chin. He wore no visible weaponry and whether any were hidden beneath his robes none could say. The other was a female, shorter and plumper than the first. Her cloak opened slightly as she sat and a glint of steel shown on the armor plate that covered her chest. What's more she bore a symbol round her neck and it was easy to see she was a priestess of some sect. The dwarf was a stout male, the length of his beard telling he was still young. He bore the typical gear of his kind, leather armor woven between tight rings of steel. At his side hung a finely crafted ax and on the table in front of him sat a steel helm.

"How 'bout some service here!" Shouted the taller female, voicing her request towards Lir who sat across the room.

"Kiska, please." Spoke the other female, much quieter, not wanting to cause attention. "You are causing a scene, make not a spectacle of yourself." The first female uttered something under her breath and folded her hands, offering her friend a practiced smile.

Arat and Rathcar kept a careful and watchful eye on the foursome. The same server who had tended to them came rushing out of the kitchen when the female shouted. He pushed through the door and froze, nearly catching the swinging door in the face as it came back. He stared at the new group of customers and then shot a quick look over at his friend. Seeing he was not about to offer any aid, the server shook his head and marched to the table. Being only two tables away, both Arat and Rathcar were able to hear their conversation and they listened intently, still being careful not to stare noticeably.

"Back again?" The server said, not afraid to hide his disgruntled tone. "I thought you were on your way?"

"We'll be gone soon enough." Spoke up the dwarf in a typical gruff utterance. "Right now we could use a meal."

"Of course. The usual?" Each one offered a silent nod and without another word, the server turned away.

"Your certain we will find it in the caves of Balamet?" The female warrior said in a softer voice, watching the server hurry back in to the kitchen.

"According to the old works I discovered in the library, it should be there. Though those words were written ages ago and it could have been moved by know."

"Or stolen." Barked the dwarf in response to the magi's words.

"Or it could be nothing more than a legend cooked up by old men or frightened children."

"There comes a time in ones life, Kiska, when a person must looked beyond the words of legends and into the heart of truths. What you may call a legend or a fable, others call truths, and were do legends grow but in the bud of truths."

"Samar is right," The priestess spoke up now. She placed a hand on the robed man and offered him a smile. "All we have learned so far seems to have rung true. The last ancient scroll we found told us of a city north of Balamet, a city were two spires rose together. Did we not find such spires to be the two towers adjoining the library? And did not this library contain hidden ledgers of the Moja where within them was the mentioning of the tomes in the belly of frozen mouths?"

"And is it not also true that the mountains of Balamet contain caves that were said to once be the homes of nomadic sorcerers, even *Mojas*?" The robed man added, tapping a stern finger on the table.

"I'm inclined to go along with Samar and E'less." Replied the dwarf with a nod. "I sure ain't one to go runnin' off on the fairy tales and the beards of dwarven women, but what they say makes sense to me. All these riddles and ancients writings have gotten us this far so we may as well see it through."

Kiska eyed the dwarf for a long moment, no one saying a word. Finally she said, "Are you drunk Maex?"

"No I ain't drunk!" snapped the dwarf, bringing a closed fist down hard on the table.

"Then I'll go along with the rest of you. Besides, I haven't got any pressing matters waiting for me elsewhere."

"What's a *Moja*?"

Rathcar seemed to be deep in thought. He had brought his cup up to his lips but did not drink, only sat frozen. His eyes went from one stranger to another, and always they seemed to go back to the dark-haired human, the one called Samar. He searched his memory for some recollection of that name but found none. The man did not resemble any faces of the past either, still, there had to be something about him that made the elf so curious, something.

"...listening to me?"

"Hmm?" Rathcar turned to his companion, his eyes a twinkle, a smile growing on his lips.

"I was asking if you knew what *Moja* meant?"

"Aye, I do. It is a name given to a sorcerer who's power has grown beyond mortal reach. In my world a *Moja's* immortality and inner power is greater than even our own kind. It is also said in our world that a mortal man who reaches such a level is beyond his own control and is dangerous... very dangerous." Rathcar took a drink of his cider and set the cup down, his eyes again falling on the robed human at the other table.

The four ate their meal in mostly silence, speaking only of lighter subjects and not of their current task. When Dayn had removed their plates and filled their mugs with cider or ale (E'less monitoring the dwarfs consumption closely), they huddled in closer together and again began to speak, this time on guarded whispers.

"Do you get the feeling those two over there are watching us?" Kiska said, using her eyes to direct the others attention to the table nearby.

"The thought had crossed my mind," Answered E'less. "But I did not want to seem paranoid."

"Do you think they were sent by Koraith?" Samar offered, studying the three carefully.

"They certainly don't appear to be locals. By the looks of their weaponry, I'd say they were skilled warriors, perhaps assassins."

Maex nodded at Kiska, "You could be right, Kiska. One thing fer sure, if they came fer a fight, I'm in the mood." The dwarf slipped a hand down at his side and loosened the strap on his ax, being careful not to draw the stranger's attention to him.

"You're always ready for a fight, Maex." E'less shook her head, giving the dwarf a stern gaze.

"Hold your eagerness for blood, I believe we're about to learn their intentions."

"What are you doing?" Arat asked as his friend slid his chair back and prepared to rise. "We no nothing of these folk, we could be stepping into a fight."

"And when have you ever stepped away from a possible skirmish?" Rathcar shot Arat a wink and stood up. "Besides, the odds seem fair where I stand." The last comment came as a whisper, spoken in elven.

"Point taken." Arat nodded and added in the same elven tongue, "Nyrin and I are at your back if the need arises."

"Greetings friends." Rathcar announced as he approached the table. He met the eyes of each one, giving each an honest smile.

"What makes you think we're friends?" Maex came back, no smile on his bearded face.

"I believe we are all friends in the beginning. It is the actions we take later that determine how long lived that friendship goes."

"You speak wisely, elf. I believe if all beings carried such noble thought in their hearts, there would be less death in Arth. Will you sit and have cider with us?" E'less scooted her chair over, making room for the elf. When he turned to fetch a chair from the next table, the priestess looked at her companions. Kiska and Maex shook their heads, letting their feelings known while Samar merely shrugged. Having no reason to be suspicious of this man, he saw no harm in

seeing where the conversation led.

"Are you from Roranou?" Rathcar asked as he slipped between the two females. He could feel the cold gaze from the taller one and also noticed the dwarf's hand resting on his ax.

"Look, let's not insult one another with a bunch of woman chatter... no offense gals," the dwarf responded. "If there's somethin' on yer mind then get on with it, we've got places to go and were not gonna get there dancin' round the table with you."

Rathcar was stunned but was careful not to let his pleasant expression falter. He had a feeling this group was more than a band of common travelers, their talk earlier told him that. But he was quite impressed with their boldness and straight-forward manner. He'd forgotten just how rude and unsociable dwarves could be.

"Very good then, I am not in favor of all this sweet coated cantor myself. To the point I will be and when I have spoken I will ask nothing less than a true and honest response from you, agreed?"

"Just say what you came to say and we will see what response is warranted." Kiska answered, still showing her distrust towards the elf. She took a quick look at the man and the panther at the other table. Seeing they still sat and looked on, she returned her attention to the elf.

"Fair enough. My name is Rathcar and I come from Timberwood. My companions, Arat and Nyrin, and I are laying over in Roranou before setting off to cross the Balamet Mountain range. I overheard you earlier speaking some quest you have been on and of a *Moja*." He paused, meeting the eyes of the dark-haired man. He saw no reaction in the human's eyes nor any change in mannerism so he continued. "It has been over five score of thirteen moons since I have heard that name spoken and I am not inclined to deny my curiosity. It is my guess that you are either searching for the Tome of *Krya* so that this mage may awaken his powers, or for profit." He studied each one of them, seeing that even the dwarf's narrow stare had grown wide-eyed. "So, which be it?"

By the time they left the dining room, the lunch crowd had come and gone. After several mugs of cider and a few ales, it was agreed that they would join forces. The four had been searching for three seasons for the Tome of Koraith, saying their goal was to keep it out of his hands. What they did not know of the legend, Rathcar filled them in. They learned that *Krya* (known to man as Koraith) had been searching for this book of ancient spells of power since any of those around the table were born (save Rathcar) and that with it he would plunge the upper world into darkness. They learned that the book did not actually belong to him but over the ages had his name attached to it through the tales told by men and elf alike. When the elf pressed the group as to what brought them together to take up such a task, none would say. Part of him was still not convinced that the wizard, Samar, was not looking for the book for his personal gain but did not voice this aloud. Instead, they all set aside their distrust (even Maex offered a toast to the newly formed band) and made plans to get under way. It was no surprise to any of them that they were all staying upstairs; Rathcar called it *pa*. They would collect their belongings, square up with the innkeeper and meet out front immediately. As they left the dining room, Kiska added one last note that made her companions cringe.

"So, why is it again that you are willing to risk your life for someone you just met?"

Rathcar gave her that grin and wink of his, answering, "As I said, if *Krya* gets his hands on that tome, we are all in great peril my dear woman. Though it is true I do not know any of you any more than I know the proprietor of this fine establishment, I would not see him suffer the fate of *Krya's* wraith any more than any of you. So, since your present goal seems parallel to my own

wishes, it seems wise to offer my aid to you in hopes of your success."

On the fourth revolution out of Roranou, the party reached the foot of the Balemets Mountain range. It was nearing nightfall and the cold winter winds were fierce and strong. At least the snowfall had let up and for that, they were grateful. The second morning on their trek across the frozen tundra the snow had started. At first it came with light, powdery flakes, but by the time they had stopped for their first rest, it had reached an all-out whiteout. They pressed on as best they could for the rest of the rev but by sunset, they were forced to stop, having traveled barely two leagues. When morning came, the wind had let up some but the snow continued to fall at a disheartening rate of accumulation. Each stride they took, heads bent low, hoods tied tightly to keep the icy wind out. Maex was forced to don snowshoes since his height made trudging through the deep snow nearly impossible. These made his rate slower and they found their pace was cut nearly in half by then. Each night they dug a hole in the snow and huddled inside, using the walls around them to at least keep out of the wind and blowing snow. With the help of both Samar's and Rathcar's magic, they were able to keep fires going, and that bit of warmth to look forward to at night kept them going throughout the daylight march. Along the way they were glad to remain unmolested by wolves, nomads, and other creatures that favored the cold climate. Even bands of Ogres that were known to frequent the area kept clear. They guessed that the foul weather made up for most of their luck, but E'less said that the panther was partly responsible for their good fortune. At night they sometimes heard the howling of packs. The wolves never seemed too close to their camp, fearing the fire. It was mid of morn on the fourth day when they caught their first glimpse of the mountains. Still the snow came and the visibility had been reduced to merely a throwing distance. It was Maex who spied them first, much to Rathcar's surprise. Even with his keen sight he was unable to detect the dark shadows in the distance. Maex responded by telling him he did not see them, he *smelled* them. With a new energy and a kindled spirit, the frozen and weary group hurried forward, each of them peering through tightly drawn hoods and wrapped faces for a glimpse of the mountains. They did not stop to rest and take nourishment as they had done at each previous midday, instead they agreed to press on, hoping Maex was right. None was able to see the large mountains yet, and though it was due to the still blowing snow, they wondered if their dwarven friend's nose was hindered by the fact that it was red and numb. The light of day grew grayer and the sky dimmer as night came. With the light went their spirits. The storm had finally weakened for the most part and even that did not make their hearts any lighter. Their pace had become nothing more than dragging feet by now. Just when they were about to give up and make camp for the night, Kiska shouted, "Look!" Everyone's head rose. Their eyes followed the direction of her outstretched arm. Less than a mile ahead towered a vast landscape of Black Mountain. Stretching from horizon to horizon, the Balemets range nearly blocked out the sky, reaching almost a thousand lengths in height in some points. They had made it, all the long days and freezing cold they had endured had brought them to their destination. For a few moments they all stood and admired the mountains. Samar and E'less were the only ones who had never actually been in mountains of any form, though the others gazed with just as much wonder at these. For they had labored hard to reach them and the journey behind them would not be forgotten. No one was thinking about what step would be next. None wondered where exactly this cave was and how much of the range they would need to search. No one even noticed it had stopped snowing.

"Koraith knows we are here." Kiska was sitting in front of a warm fire, E'less tending to her frost bitten extremities. They had spent the last span discussing their plan of action, probing

Samar's knowledge of the scrolls he had read in the library of Roranou. While they talked, the priestess mended their wounds caused by the cold, occasionally offering her own input. But it was Kiska's words that made them all stop and stare at the fire.

"Koraith?" Arat spoke up, looking at each of his four new companions, studying the worry written on their faces. "Are you saying you believe a man... one who none of you even knows actually exists... brought this storm down on us to prevent us from reaching the mountains?" He shook his head and took a sip of his hot tea. "Absurd."

"Yeah, that's what I used to think a couple revs ago." It was Maex who answered Arat's lack of faith. "In fact I think I may have said those very words... though without as much flare. But after seeing the things I've seen and not being able to explain them away so easily, I have had a change of heart."

"You see, Arat, Koraith knows what we seek and the reason behind our search," Maex continued. "He knows that if we succeed, he will fail. Each time our trail leads us closer to the answers, he steps in and attempts to destroy us. But perhaps someone even more powerful than he is watching over us for nothing he has done as of yet has succeeded. Not assassins, trolls, wraiths, or giants... Not fires, floods, twisters, or earthquakes..."

"Or blizzards." Kiska added.

"Or blizzards." E'less echoed.

"Surely you do not each believe that this... this *Moja* is responsible for all the dangers you have faced?" Arat questioned. "Why I have seen many of these things you speak of and though I could easily explain them away as a dark force at work against me, I know better."

Samar threw the remains of his tea into the fire. A hiss of steam and a cloud of smoke erupted from the pit, giving everyone a sudden start. He threw his hood back and looked at Arat, his dark, mysterious eyes fixed on the unbeliever. "So do we."

There was a long silence, too long for Rathcar. He had listened to the conversation closely, heeded every word. He did not argue what these folk believed in, nor did he offer his own thoughts. He had seen much in his time, even more than these four spoke of. He knew that Arat could proclaim the same if he wished but guessed he chose not to bring his own matters into the light. No matter the beliefs any of them had, one thing was for certain, the Tome of *Krya* was out there and he was as close as he ever deemed possible to discovering it. And if it was to be discovered now, then they had to work together.

"It is said among my people that while each heart carries its own message, all souls read from the same text. It is pointless to sit here and discuss what we choose to believe in or not to believe in. Each of us here has insight into the nature of things. Each of us knows of powers around us that work both for us and against us. I tell you, Arat, my friend, that *Krya* is real and though he is now beyond age, he is upon this world, perhaps here on Arth as we speak. Think back into your own past, into the darkness, and remember the things that you never thought possible and of how they turned out to be harsh, cruel truths. And as for the rest of you, Kiska, Samar, E'less, and Maex, do not let your fear of this *Moja* effect your courage. If you have gone as far as you say without crumbling to his strength and will, than you should be proud. Do not think of your courage less because you choose to put your fate and good fortune in the hands of someone mightier than you. Instead, place it back into your hearts and use it to carry you forward, forward to the very end." With that Rathcar fell silent, letting them absorb his words. He had drawn forth a pipe from his pouch as he spoke and upon his last word, a small flame sprang up from the bowl, igniting the aromatic leaf inside. That was the last he heard of them argue about their personal beliefs.

The search began at morning's first light. They each awoke at the same time, feeling well rested and refreshed. Though it was still quite cold, the mountains had blocked the harsh winds and the snows had not returned. They sat in a circle, eating a morning meal of dry rations, continuing last night's discussion of what move to make next. Again each of the four told what they knew of the book, of what they had learned along the road. Samar, who had the most knowledge, having done all of the diligent studying and translating of the ancient scrolls and texts, had the most input. Rathcar questioned him slowly and carefully, getting each piece of information like a puzzle that he was putting together inside his head. He watched the man's eyes and read his body language in hopes to see if he was telling all or holding anything back. Along the way he added what information he knew. At each gap, he filled in a lot of unanswered questions Samar had always had. With his knowledge and remembrances, the wizard was able to put several more pieces into the puzzle and when it was over, he offered his deduction.

"From what I learned in Roranou, it seems logical that we seek a cave somewhere in these mountains. What we do not know is where. From what Rathcar has said, Koraith fears the elves and though his power is greater than theirs singly in number, they were always able to defeat him. We have also learned that in the beginning, it was the elven sorcerers of the winds, stars, and earth who created the tome of magic. It was their intent to use it as a way for their people to broaden their minds and care for the world they lived in. But when man heard of this, it was yearned for with much determination and lust. One who sought it was Koraith and the elves knew that if this wizard of the dark forces found it, it would mean the destruction of the world itself. So they hid it in a place where no human could ever find it. A place where it would remain until the time came when man was wise enough to use it in the manner it was intended. All this said, and now knowing of the elven kingdoms that lay on either side of these mountains, it seems more likely that we are in the right place. The elves did not want to guard it directly and since Koraith feared their kind in numbers, the old ones thought it would be safe if hidden between two of the seven mighty kingdoms." Samar studied the map they had laid out in front of them and marked the spots that Rathcar had pointed out as the two kingdoms. He laid his fingers at the point he figured them to be now (at the foot of the range in the north) and traced his finger south. When he came to the point where the two kingdoms lay directly between, he stopped, tapping that spot. "Here is where the tome is."

Kiska leaned in and saw where Samar had pointed. "Hey, that's the narrowest point of the range... according to the map anyway."

"Sure is." Maex added as he studied it even more carefully. "If this map gives us a true reading of the mountains, that must be a gorge, a roadway between the lands on either side. But why would this book be hidden in the most open area of the mountains? Surely there are far better places to hide it."

"But it is usually the obvious that is the best kept secret." Arat spoke up for the first time. He was stroking Nyryn's coat, listening carefully to all he heard. "It has been my experience that when someone wants to find something, they usually think it will be buried so deep that no one can find it. So while they dig, what they seek is in the first shovel full, simply to be tossed aside."

"This makes sense." Replied Samar. "I remember reading somewhere while searching for the whereabouts of the tome that in the end, the answer will be found on the 'lips of the truth.' Now I think I understand it."

"What do you mean, love? What does it mean?" Asked E'less, letting her relationship with the wizard slip from her lips for the first time. Rathcar found this fact to be quite coincidental indeed.

“There is an old saying that says ‘it's right at the tip of my tongue,’” the mage responded. “It means that you know the answer, it's right within your grasp, but you just can't seem to snatch it.”

"Of course!" Kiska shouted, slapping her mittens together. "The gorge is a wide-open place, the most obvious point in the range. If the book is there, it would lay right under our noses. A place seemingly too obvious to be true... by Olanah, we have done it!"

"Don't celebrate just yet, my dear." Rathcar held up a hand, halting the elation. "If you look at the map you will see that this gorge lays some twenty miles to the south. We have a long road yet ahead of us."

Over a half moon passed as the party journeyed south. They kept close to the mountain base most of the time, favoring the windbreak to the easier road. On several occasions they were greeted by snowfall, sometimes light and not much to contend with. However, there were three occasions when they found themselves in the middle of a storm and each time were forced to seek shelter from the cold winds and blowing snow. Each time they huddled up against the rocks, sitting close together and covered in fur cloaks. Each time they sat for spans. Cold and miserable, the snow covering them up, like a white blanket thrown down by the gods. The last time they sat for two entire days as a fierce blizzard swept through. During that stand they ate nothing, none of them wanted to unbundle long enough to retrieve food from their packs. Even their water was frozen and they took turns pressing skins close to their bodies in order to thaw enough water to share. When it was over, two of them suffered severe frostbite. Maex fared the worst. Being smaller in stature than the others, he was completely buried in snow and his comrades had to practically chisel him free. It took two days just to get his strength back enough to continue on and the ordeal cost him two toes. The weather turned out to not even be the worst of their troubles, however. For less than two days from the spot they figured the gorge to be they encountered a much larger problem.

Kiska looked upwards, searching the skies. Though it was the usual gray and without any sight of the sun, the sound did not seem to make sense.

"There is again, can't you hear it?" Kiska said, stopping again and gazing at the skies. "It sounds like thunder."

"Thunder?" Arat looked at the woman warrior with a puzzled expression. "It is unlikely under such conditions that a thunderstorm is forming. I am no weather expert, but I am almost certain that is impossible."

"Look, I know it sounds foolish, but I know the sound of thunder and this sounds like thunder!" Kiska insisted.

Rumble.

That time they all heard it. A low, rumbling sound echoed from somewhere overhead. Faint at first, but then seeming to grow louder and louder. The group stared towards the sky, wondering what the sound was.

All at once Rathcar shouted. "Look out! Get against the rock!" With two great strides, he threw himself against the rock face.

The others stood dazed for merely a moment, wondering what the commotion was about. All at once they looked to the sky and saw a huge boulder descending upon them. With not time to think, each dove in different directions in an effort to avoid the falling rock. The next sound they heard was something of an explosion as the rock crashed to the ground. Pieces flew in all directions and the air was immediately filled with a mixture of snow and dirt. The impact came with such force that parts of the mountain fell. For a few moments, it was as though Balemets was

falling down around them. When it was over there came the sounds of coughing and then voices called out through the haze.

"Is everyone alright?" It was Rathcar. He got a response from everyone and was about to say something else when another shout rang-out from their group.

"Look out! Here comes another one!" Kiska shouted.

Again a great chunk of mountain came rolling down at them, this one bringing smaller pieces with it. Again, everyone scattered for cover as the boulder crashed to the ground. Again someone called out, but this time the response was cut off by another sound. This one, not a rumbling, but something like a bellow. As if some great man had reached deep-down inside himself and drew forth a cry from the very depth of his being. The sound rang out through the land. The group found themselves throwing their hands to their ears. With their heads pulled down, none of them saw the next missile descend on them. This one found a target. With a crash and a bellow of snow and dirt, a third boulder hit the ground, landing directly atop the dwarf. Kiska was nearest Maex. She saw the rock crush him beneath a mass over four times his size; she raised her arms into the air and let out an ear-piercing cry. As her eyes rose upwards, she saw something that cut her off in mid wail.

"Up there!" She cried, pointing to the first ridge overhead. "What is that?"

Something large was on the ridge. What looked to be a man-like figure, it stood nearly five lengths high and what part of it that wasn't covered in hides was covered with thick hair. As they looked up, they saw it raising another boulder over its head, preparing to hurl it down upon its victims below. Without thinking, Kiska sprang forward and began scurrying up the rock face, heading right towards the giant. The others went into action as well. Samar went into a meditation state, preparing a spell while E'less guarded over him. Arat saw no other alternative than the action taken by the female. He too began climbing up the mountain. His path was not as direct, however, for he moved more stealthily than Kiska, hoping to come up on the giant's flank. As for Rathcar, the elf threw off his fur cloak and wraps and set to the air. His beautiful white wings unfolding as he shot into the sky. The giant saw this happening as he was about to toss his boulder, and found himself stumped for a brief moment. Not sure which target to choose, he looked from one tiny figure to another. He was about to choose the two who remained below when something else caught his attention. One of the man-things had taken to the sky like a bird, great white wings flapping behind him. This diversion was just enough to give Kiska a chance to strike; she took it without hesitation. With all her might she launched her spear at the giant. She was at least twenty lengths away. The beast was even higher. Her footing was loose and unsure but none of that mattered as she hurled her spear at her target.

Arat saw the flash of steel as it cut through the air with great speed and accuracy. He was just about to climb upon the very ridge the giant was on when the spear sank deep in the beast's body. Buried nearly half way up the shaft, Kiska's spear found it's mark in the rib cage. The giant reeled in pain. He dropped the boulder immediately, grabbing the spear as blood poured from the wound. The rock fell behind him without incident. The giant stumbled backward a step as he tugged at he shaft. Not seeing the swordsman coming up on his right flank, Arat was able to move in and make a strike of his own. With Orthinel in hand, he rushed in fast and swift. One clean strike to the giant's lower leg was all he would need, enough to bring it to its knees for the finishing blow. The giant heard a *whoosh* and turned just as the sword cut through the air, slicing him at the Achilles tendon cleanly. He reached out for the human but before he could reach him, an incredible pain shot up his leg and he found himself unable to stand. As the giant fell to his knees, Arat raised his blade to make the final strike. Before he could swing, however,

he saw Rathcar out of the corner of his eye, swooping in fast. Knowing the elf enough to step back, he did just that as the twinkle of steel and a blur of white feathers came and went. With a blink of an eye, Arat saw the giant's throat cut cleanly from ear to ear. The beast clutched its throat, a gurgling sound coming from its mouth as it fell dead in a heap.

Down below, E'less saw the beast drop to its knees after Arat's blow and knew the trio had the matter well in hand. She turned her attention to the last boulder that had fallen and after trying with no success to move it, turned to Samar for help. The wizard held up a hand and uttered some foreign words: *Itqua uta ruto mo*. Suddenly the boulder moved and with the raising of his hand, Samar lifted the boulder into the air. When it came off the ground, both of them saw their friend crushed beneath. The sight caused a rage to build up inside the wizard that he clenched his fist so tightly the knuckles grew pale. Staring hard at the boulder, he threw his arm to the side and sent the rock crashing into the mountainside with such force that exploded into nothing but a pile of sand. Without even giving the action a second thought, he knelt beside E'less who had her head bowed.

"There is nothing that can be done." She said as she clutched the symbol of her god hanging around her neck. "He has gone to his mountain kingdom."

When the others had come back down and announced the giant had been slain, they set to burying their comrade. Digging a grave at the foot of the mountains, they laid him to rest where any dwarf would desire. Using the remains of the boulder that had crushed him as a sort of anointing touch to the burial mound. E'less spoke a few words and the group left Maex behind, carrying with them only his memory.

Four days after they buried Maex, they reached the gorge. The weather had held out until that point at which time a storm came out of nowhere. The winds were as cold as they had been since the journey began and the snow fell at such a rate that they were in it up to their knees. This slowed them none however, and half way through the narrow pathway between the mountains, they found a small cave up on a ledge. Samar, E'less, and Rathcar entered the cave while Arat and Kiska remained outside to guard the entrance. Arat stood with his arms wrapped tightly around himself, trying in vain to keep the wind from blowing down his neck. Harder it blew and harder the snow fell, hitting him with the force of a man pushing him. All the while the swordsman could not help but wonder if Koraiith was aware of them and what sort of evil he would throw at them at any moment. Every sound made him turn, ready to face the minions of the wizard, but each time there was nothing. After several hours, the three came out, and in Samar's hands was a large book that looked to be as old as Arth itself.

"Now those were some mighty cold days." Arat reminded Rathcar as he shuttered at the memory. His hands were held out over the fire to warm them but suddenly they didn't feel so cold.

"Aye, my friend. Those were cold days indeed. There were times I thought the storms would gain the better of us."

"As did I. But we were younger then, our bones not as thin. Still, just thinking of it, makes the rain a more tolerable welcome sight."

Rathcar nodded as he stared at the fire. Arat saw his friend deep in thought and said, "What are you thinking?"

The elf did not answer directly, his mind far away. Finally he turned and met the green eyes of his human friend and said simply, "We did a good thing then, Arat, a good thing."

"Aye, but a heavy price was paid for our deed. Though I knew the dwarf little, he seemed a good

fellow, and reminded me in many ways of our own comrade, Tars." Arat got up and looked outside to learn that the rain had stopped. "I only hope he is happy where he is now." He tossed the remainder of his drink in the fire and added, "Come, the rain has stopped and our clothes are surely dry. We best be back on our way."

"Agreed." Rathcar said as he threw dirt onto the fire, glad of the change of topic. "We've yet a good distance to go still this rev."

"How nice." Arat sighed as he threw his saddle over the horse's back.

Rathcar merely smiled.