



The Path of Stone

By Jon Cook

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Introduction

The story of Icecrag Keep and its people is still being written. I consider myself fortunate to be in the right place at the right time, and able of mind and body to tell the tale thus far. The world is not as it should be. There are wrongs that must be put right. There are dark places in the world that need the light. Of course, the Dwarves would not say it thusly, but it is true nonetheless, however they might voice it themselves.

I am no scholar. Not a scribe. Not a historian. I am simply me. I am fascinated by the future, and I believe that in order to understand it, one must keep a tight hold of the past. Not to dwell there mind you, but to spend enough time there that the present is no mystery and the future no surprise. It is my hope and desire, that this chronicle will in some way enrich the lives of those who read it and that the reader may become that much more the wiser for the tale.

As I put quill to parchment, I sit at the edge of a deep forest, shadowed in the half-light of dusk. The forest is not shadowed by the mere falling of night. There is another shadow if one looks long enough. If one lets their senses quest over the growth of bramble and the dim vine choked foliage, there is more; an unquiet murmur of danger. The spirit of the forest is restless. It troubles me. Troubles us all .

I observe from a small window, the path that leads from the meadowlands. Beyond that, the steppe, the foothills, the mountains and there in the heart of the region known as Dilmhold, is Icecrag Keep. It is now more than two years abandoned by her rightful residents, the noble Dwarves. I never lived among them, but have been captivated by their mysterious

disappearance. That captivation led to an intense curiosity. I began to study them. I questioned those who knew them and I read of their culture. They left little behind, or at least they left little that we can reach. I assume that most of their possessions and records are safely locked behind a seemingly impenetrable gate. It is unbreakable, cannot be magically opened and, to my particular dismay, cannot be scryed. However, I digress. One might say that I have become a self-appointed keeper of the Dwarven culture while they are away. I have devoted myself to the preservation of their story, and also to helping to return them safely to their ancestral home, if need be.

The chain of events that brought me this far from Icecrag makes for a long telling; one that, as I have said, has no ending as yet. In this unsettling place I attempt to embrace the hope that I may survive it to completion.

And so we begin. Here on the final evening before a party of brave souls ventures into this terrifying wood in the attempt to locate the Dwarves. I am proud to say that I played no small part in bringing them here. If Uulru has guided us, then this will be the correct path. If there is anyone in the realms who can bring the Dwarves home, I can believe that it is these intrepid ten. I was there when they cleansed the tunnels beneath Icecrag. I was there when they returned from the deep darkness, having destroyed a beast so powerful that she was thought invincible. That is a part of our tale but only in passing. No, that is its own story. For another time perhaps...

Chapter 1

Stonerasp readjusted his heavy pack on his stout, muscled shoulders as he climbed the final few steps along the narrow mountain path. He was grateful to finally be climbing the last steps to the city. The season was late and a deep winter would be upon them. Travel from the city was difficult in good conditions. It was a part of Icecrag Keep's defense, but to hike the high reaches of Mount Sorrow in the heavy winter snow and ice? That would be a feat. From here the path wound another few hundred paces to the Great Span. Soon, he would be home. Soon his wife would be near him once more and he could return to his workshop. He'd been away for far too long, but when something such as this called, a Dwarf answered without hesitation. It was simply their way.

Stonerasp took only a moment to catch his breath before he started along the narrow way that clung to the high reaches of Mount Sorrow. His heavy trekking boots clumped on the icy stone, but held fast as the sharp iron studded tread bit into the snow pack. There was little that could make a Dwarf's feet go where they did not wish to go. He kept an eye on the path but dared to look ahead as he traversed the dangerous trail. His breath billowed visibly as he exhaled in the biting mountain air.

Stonerasp was a metalworker. That, in itself was not unusual for a Dwarf. But Stonerasp was not an ordinary worker of iron or steel. Stonerasp was also a worker in the rarest and most precious metal known to the Dwarves. Mithral. Light and strong, Mithral was an ideal material. It could be shaped and cast in any of the ways a normal metal could be, but any piece done in Mithral would be half the weight and twice the strength. That said nothing of the metal's incredible ability to retain enchantment. Iron and steel could be magically enhanced to a degree, but Mithral seemed to love magic. Those who studied such things used words like harmonics and synergy but Stonerasp wasn't concerned with the magic as much as creating a beautiful, functional piece of metalwork.

He rounded a bend in the path, pausing as the gates of Icecrag Keep came into view. They sprawled to either side of the far edge of the Great Span. Ancient murals, hewn from the living mountain by his ancestors when the last fractured tribes had united under one banner spread in either direction. The great iron gate was flanked on either side by 40 foot Dwarven Warriors, carved in relief. They stood in parade rest, their mighty double headed dire axes planted head-spike down before them, both hands resting atop the butts of their weapons. He never ceased to be inspired by the great helmed champions.

The tired Dwarf started across the span, the helmed stone warriors watching him as he came. He watched their hard gaze as he approached. Stonerasp has crossed the span many times in his life, and always, he felt an inexplicable nervousness upon facing these reliefs. His mother told him as a young dwarf that these two statues had the power to judge the heart of a Dwarf and determine his worth. If they found him to be unacceptable, he'd be thrown clear of the span and fall to his death. It had never happened, of course. All Dwarven parents told their children the same thing to make certain they stayed on the straight and narrow path, as it were. He never was able to shake the apprehension though. Even now, when both of his parents were long gone from life, the small child in him tried hard to be true and brave when he crossed the span, lest he be flung into the cold air and fall to his doom.

Mastering himself, Stonerasp continued across the Great Span. His thoughts turned to his wife as he crossed the last few steps. As his thick boot came in contact with the rock on other side of the chasm, a deep rumble thrummed from within the mountain. The two halves of Icecrag Keep's massive gate were so expertly cloven that they appeared as a solid slab of granite from any distance, but now, a gap appeared and widened gradually, the grind of stone upon stone thundering mightily. Slowly, the doors continued

to retreat until they slammed abruptly against an unseen stop.

Stonerasp moved forward, again adjusting his pack and feeling the weight of its contents as they shifted. He had traveled a long way for the prize that rested inside, but its worth far exceeded the trouble.

At long last, after months of searching and travel, Stonerasp's journey was at an end. He was scarcely inside the great gates, moving past four stoic sentries that held their quiet vigilant posts, when they began to slide closed behind him. The armored Dwarves nodded greeting as he passed, but said nothing. He stomped his boots to knock the icy slush from them, and bent to one knee to unfasten his ice treads. Stowing the spikes in a side pocket of his pack, he paused, letting his senses take in his beloved home.

As it was mid-day, Icecrag Keep was filled with activity. The air was hot and dry, and filled with the scents of the city. Mouth-watering cave bear meat pies were roasting somewhere. Their aroma mingled with the metallic scent of hot iron from the numerous forges throughout the city. Stonerasp could hear the vendors crying wares and the ring of anvils near and far. Sturdy carts filled with various goods and materials rumbled past, drawn by merchants and craftsmen. Icecrag Keep was filled with a palpable busyness. There was a determination and heartiness. It was a feeling that Stonerasp loved about his city and his people.

He didn't spend much time before he started moving again. He passed a few citizens that he knew. Hearty claps on the back, and rough embraces were exchanged, but in truth, little had changed and Stonerasp soon felt as though he'd been gone only a short time. Change was slow in Icecrag Keep. It didn't matter how long someone was away. It was always home.

Stonerasp made his way past the square and into the residential corridors beyond. Here, it was quieter. The ring of metal against metal was more distant. He wound his way through the narrowing streets until he came to a low, iron-clad wooden door at the end of a row of apartments. His door. Rather than walking in, he

smiled and knocked smartly on the wooden timbers.

After a few moments, he could hear the sound of sturdy footfalls, and then of a bolt being thrown. The door opened a little and someone peered out, then it swung wide to reveal a Dwarven woman, her eyes wide and her grin wider.

"Stonerasp!"

She burst from the doorway, enfolding him in a hug that made his bones crack.

"Frostbraid... you... are... crushing... me!", Stonerasp croaked through the powerful embrace.

Frostbraid released him from her hold and he nearly toppled as the blood rushed from his extremities.

"I travel far and wide, come against unimaginable danger and risk my life and limb, only to come home and be killed on my very threshold!"

Stonerasp made a stern face, but he was unable to hold it for long before he broke into a wide grin. He allowed the heavy pack to slip from his shoulders and caught the strap with one arm as he swept the other around Frostbraid. The pack dropped inside the door as it swung closed and was for the moment forgotten as Stonerasp and Frostbraid kissed one another.

"I have missed you!" He said pushing her to arm length back to look at her once more.

"Of course you have." Frostbraid held up her hands to illustrate how obvious the fact should be.

Remembering his pack, Stonerasp started, and then moved back to the doorway where he had left it leaning against the wall. Frostbraid followed.

"Did you find it?", she asked eagerly, peering around his broad shoulders as he knelt to unfasten the straps that held the main compartment closed.

"Among other things." Stonerasp thrust a hand into the pack up to the shoulder, and felt around in the bottom where the heavier gear was stowed. Smiling as he found what he was looking for, he pulled his arm free, quickly spinning to face Frostbraid as he hid what he was

holding behind him. Frostbraid made a suspicious face.

“What?”

Stonerasp only smiled as he brought his hand around and held out the object. It was resting in his palm. The object more than filled his hand. It was the size of a large apple or perhaps a small ice melon. The gemstone was nearly spherical and uncut. The clouded, rough surface did not hide the deep, mesmerizing green color though. It was easily the biggest emerald that Stonerasp had ever seen, and he was certain Frostbraid would be able to say the same. It was, in a word, gigantic.

“It’s the size of an ice melon!” Frostbraid said in an awed tone, echoing his thoughts.

“I know! I couldn’t believe it.” He reached the stone out toward her. “It’s yours, Frost.”

Frostbraid laid one of her rough hands gently on the stone, raised her gaze to meet his, and then wrapped her fingers around it. She turned it over in her hands, examining its surface. She said nothing, but repeatedly made little gasps as her trained jeweler’s eyes took in the stone.

“I could cut this and lose scarcely any at all. It is so well shaped!

Stonerasp only nodded, watching her enjoy the stone.

“Where did you... ”

“I looked a long time in a lot of places, and this was in one of them.”

Frostbraid shook her head. “Amazing.”

“Yes.”

The two stood in silence for a few moments, before Frostbraid finally shook her head, clearing away the trance that the improbably large emerald had created.

“You have to be hungry.”

Stonerasp laughed. “I barely managed to pull myself away from those cave bear vendors in the square. I’m starving! All I have left in my pack is old bread and half of a skin of bad wine.”

Frostbraid placed the emerald on a stone shelf in the front of the apartment and the two of them headed into the kitchen.

Stonerasp and Frostbraid busied themselves preparing an evening meal and catching up; Trading stories and laughing.

There on the shelf, the great emerald sat, beautiful despite the roughness. Even uncut it caught the eye. Some of the dim light of the apartment danced across its surfaces. Had anyone been watching at that moment they might have seen the faint blue and purple glow in the depths of the emerald, they might have seen it slowly wax from nothingness into a dim, but visible point, radiating out into the emerald’s mass and glittering briefly on the surface before waning once again into darkness. No one was watching, however, so no one saw.

Chapter 2

I've been here for months. People come and go in this cavern. For some this life suits them as it suits me. Other people find the enclosure and constant dimness daunting. Typically they do not stay long. Some might think it strange for a human to take to Dwarven habitats, particularly one such as myself. Middle aged, accustomed to the outdoors and sunlight. Partial to finery. I'm not some spoiled diplomat, mind you, but to be honest I am... or was, prone to a life of comfort. When I arrived here the place fascinated me. I was drawn in by the mystery of it. What knowledge seeking person would not be attracted by such a conundrum?

Icecrag Keep. An entire, thriving Dwarven city, abandoned without warning by its denizens. Most of the vast network of caverns are sealed behind an impenetrable door. The strongest and most powerful people who could be found have tried to open it, but so far it stands. I have stood many times before the incredible gate. No apparent hinges. No gaps. I cannot make the smallest scratch in any part of the surface. It is just a blank door seemingly made of stone. Upon it is a central seal, flanked by two smaller ones. A scroll upon the door shows 8 numbers. "14226758". No one has been able to discern their purpose. The strangest part? I, a diviner by trade, cannot see beyond it, nor can I see anything about it. When I try, I see only a blank, black wall. Not even a wall in fact. I see nothing. The impossible gate is not the only notable thing here in Icecrag Keep, though.

There is the matter of the undead. The Void. The Dragon, Smoak. So much besets Icecrag Keep. It did until recent events came to pass, I should say. Much of the danger has now abated. But if I am to be of any use to anyone then I must start at the beginning. To sate my curiosity in these months, I have studied anything I could find concerning the Dwarves of Icecrag. In their absence, I suppose I am as much of an expert as anyone. Therefore...

In years long past, the Dwarves of the Dilmhold region were a dozen or more fractured and warring tribes. Two thousand years ago, Icecrag was called simply that, and was little more than a place for one of the Dwarven tribes to survive the coldest parts of the winter months in the mountains. Icecrag's first ruler, Frostbeard, was powerful but vain, and sought to expand his mountain shelter into a full city and eventually a capitol for his kingdom. Frostbeard's tribe spent decade upon decade in the depths of Mount Sorrow, digging and expanding the naturally occurring caverns there. The mountain-dwelling Dwarves of Icecrag became, in that time, masters of mining, of stonework and of metal. By the time the Dwarves began calling their home a keep, Frostbeard was well advanced in age and he began to realize that he would eventually die and decay. This is a fact of life, for all die and decay, but Frostbeard desired to break that rule and forever remain. It was Frostbeard's vanity that would start the Dwarves down a path that ended only weeks ago in a terrifying confrontation deep within the mountain.

In the course of their mining and building, the Dwarves discovered something. Beyond Icecrag, in a deeper part of the mountain, there was a place where the walls between the planes became thin. Legends speak of such places, but so rare are they that these weak points are scarcely more than sources of campfire tales. Frostbeard heard the report and immediately sought magical means to learn more.

It was determined that the weak point in the planar wall was pressing against, not another plane, but against the Void itself. The place between the planes where there was nothing. No time. No magic. Just blackness. The seers and wizards told Frostbeard all that could be seen with magic, and warned him against exploring the place any further. Frostbeard acquiesced for a time but he did not let their warnings dissuade him. The Void was timeless. One would never grow old there. Never rot away. Frostbeard allowed curiosity and arrogance to run wild in

his imagination and began working on ways to open and contain a small portal into The Void.

Frostbeard's team of miners and enchanters studied the rock and earth around the weakness tirelessly, heedless of the warnings they had received. Frostbeard himself, urged to caution by his advisors, scorned their advice as well. In a matter of weeks, a plan was devised to open a rift, which would then be contained by a gate using the best masonry, metalworking and enchantment that the Dwarven ruler had at his disposal.

The Dilmhold Gate, as it came to be known, was a massive structure. It was the height of four full grown Dwarves, the main arch was hewn from a single piece of granite and cut from the very room in which it stood. It was reinforced with bands of Mithral, at the time a very newly discovered metal, and then the entire structure was enchanted for strength. The sturdy elliptical ring was fitted with doors that were constructed the same way, and then the entire gate was etched with magical runes of power, strength and endurance. The legends say that it was, like the door that keeps us from the rest of Icecrag Keep, impregnable. It would become apparent, though, that the Dilmhold Gate was not the impenetrable barrier it was supposed to be.

Once the gate was complete and encompassing the planar weakness, Dwarven enchanters placed specially prepared explosives. A kind of magical dynamite made to tear a hole in the wall between the planes. It is said that the explosion did not affect stone and metal in any way, but that the resulting blast may have been heard across five planes.

The sound of the explosion rumbled the entire mountain, and those who were present say that before the Dilmhold Gate closed against the Void, there was an outpouring of such deep darkness that several of the guard who had accompanied the enchanters nearly lost their sanity. It is said that weeks passed before they could again hold their posts.

That is how the Dilmhold Gate came to be. It was then that the intended purpose behind the gate became known. Frostbeard proclaimed during a celebratory feast that the gate was to be the new method of burial for the Kings of

Icecrag Keep. He would be the first king to be interred within the Void, and there his body would never decay and never change. The still nothingness of the Void was better than any preservation or burial, he said. The lords of Icecrag deserved to be forever unchanged by time and decay.

Many would disagree, but Frostbeard's rule was law. The priests of Uulru were called upon to build a temple to her, there in the cavern near the gate that would shield pall bearers from the Void, and allow them to send their king's sarcophagus through the open gate. The priests completed their work, building passages and an intricate system of locks and traps to keep unwanted visitors away. In those intervening years, Frostbeard's health slowly deteriorated, and by the time all was completed, he was bedfast. Frostbeard's passing followed soon after, and he was indeed sent through the gate. It was the beginning of a long tradition of royal interment into the Void. All seemed as Frostbeard had planned it to be, but it most certainly was not.

The Dwarves lived for hundreds of years without incident. The Dilmhold Gate became not only a royal tomb, but a place to make pilgrimage. A place of honor and reverence. Frostbeard's greatest accomplishment, however, was also his folly. He and his engineers, smiths, masons and enchanters had created a gateway to the Void. A physical link to another dimension. It was an unprecedented feat. But in their haste, they did not realize that the gate was imperfect. The exact point of failure is unknown, but a flaw in the gate caused an undetectable fissure into the Void. As darkness from the Void seeped slowly into our world, its passage caused an imbalance which resulted in the creation of the enigmatic force called Darkrift Energy. If the fissure had been stable, there would have been no reason to worry, but neither the crack in the gate, nor the rift in the planar wall itself was stable. They both widened ever so slowly. Darkrift Energy is created when Void darkness flows across a crack between the planes. Like clotting blood closing a wound, it gathers around the tear and works to seal the rift on its own. It is harmless in very small quantities. The Dilmhold

Gate, though, would not allow the Darkrift Energy to close the gash. Instead it vented quietly and unnoticed into our world, methodically poisoning the deep caverns of the mountain.

Darkrift Energy has little effect on a living thing but it has a remarkable property on a dead one. That of preservation. Not restoration, but the sustenance of function. The energy cannot return the dead to life of course. It hasn't the power to restore the soul to the body, but as the Dwarves were to find out, it could cause the dead to walk once more.

Long was the gate in use before the Darkrift Energy existed in the kind of quantity that would manifest symptoms. Not until five years ago in fact. The last King of Icecrag Keep, Ironbrand, passed on. His body was prepared, as are all Dwarven Kings, in a stone sarcophagus bearing his likeness, and favored weapon. He was carried, then, by the Priests of Uulru, along the Pilgrim's Path and into the caverns, then placed on the altar before the Dilmhold Gate. It was then that the Priests, amid the Rite of Interment, heard the pounding.

From within the sarcophagus, something thumped against the lid again and again. The priests, thinking they were witnessing a miracle from Uulru, quickly slid aside the lid of the sarcophagus. Indeed they did find Ironbrand attempting to escape his stone enclosure, but this was no miracle. This was an abomination of Darkrift Energy. Ironbrand's body moved, but where his fierce eyes would have shone in life, there were now swirling pools of black and deep purple. Ironbrand's face was twisted in what seemed terror, confusion and anger. Many believe that the body, absent the soul, can do nothing but search vainly for life and warmth. Denied thought, conscience and self-awareness the undead being is single-minded in its pursuit of restoration. Ironbrand was no longer the noble king he had been, but a soulless ravaging monster.

He clawed and grabbed violently from his sarcophagus. The priests, still believing they beheld the returned king, did not attack him. Before any of them regained composure enough to fight, two of the ten of their number had fallen to the fiendish mockery of their fallen leader.

When at last they had damaged Ironbrand's body enough, it fell still once more. The priests had survived, but not without loss. Two dead, and more than half of the rest injured. As the priests enclosed Ironbrand's body once more, their two fallen brethren began to stir. This time, the priests were not so surprised and the two undead priests were destroyed before anyone else could be hurt.

We can only assume that things worsened for the Dwarves. Certainly when I arrived, the fallen dead came forth at all hours to assault living. If not for the volunteer militia, our casualties would have been multiplied many times over. This speaks nothing of the dragon, Smoak who herself had been touched by undeath, and hoped to use the failing gate to increase her power. I saw her once, before she had become what she was. Terrible in life as she was, I can only imagine how terrifying she should have been in the grip of living death.

That was the way of life in Icecrag Keep until a few weeks ago when a diverse band of ten showed up at our gates in search of Smoak. That story is one I would love to tell, but I can be safe in saying that these ten traveled selflessly into the darkness, confronted the dragon and ended her by collapsing the Dilmhold Gate, which also sealed the tear. It seems that the Darkrift Energy is dissipating. We are seeing less and less movement among the dead. Life is returning to the way it should be with the exception of one thing. Where are the Dwarves?

Chapter 3

Stonerasp awakened early the next morning. His reunion with Frostbraid had made for a wonderful night of stories and laughter, but he was also eager to get back to his shop, which had long been closed as he journeyed. Before the morning fires were lit, Stonerasp had already dressed and shouldered his now familiar pack and was already on his way back to the merchant square. It was relatively quiet at this early hour and Stonerasp had time to think about the possibilities of the prize for which he had looked so long.

Stonerasp rounded a corner and exchanged greetings with another Dwarf as he stepped up to a wooden door, banded in black iron, and split in half so that the top or bottom could open independently. He pulled a ring of keys from a pouch, found the correct one, and inserted it into the lock. The lock moved easily and the two doors, bolted together, swung inward. Stonerasp inhaled deeply as he usually did, habitually taking in the pleasant smells of the forge. Oils and iron and coal. This time it was a little musty having been shut for so long but that would fade with a little time. It still had the smell of a forge. The scent of home.

Stonerasp dropped his pack by a workbench, and went about the business of opening his shop. He started working on the fire, building a proper base. He wiped down his tools with an oiled cloth and ran the cloth over the wood surfaces for good measure, taking up the thin layer of dust and protecting the worn wood at the same time. He then pulled his heavy leather apron from a peg on the wall, noticing that the strings had to be tied around his waist more closely to the apron. He had lost some weight during his travels. Of course he had. One cannot keep weight when walking many miles per day and living on bread and jerky.

It had been months since Stonerasp had worked metal, so to warm himself up, he began with a few pieces of iron. Some horseshoes and a set of hinges later, he felt ready to resume his real work.

Stonerasp wiped a sheen of sweat from his forehead, returned a hammer to its slot on the wall and then crossed the room to where he had propped his pack. He knelt to untie the top as he had the night before and then began to reach into the bag. He pulled out the first fragmented piece of metal. This was the entire reason for his long journey. Placing the first fragment on the table, he pulled out another. This one was bigger. The metal was a mottled silver and gray color. It was irregular, covered in pits and bumps and heavier than it looked.

The third piece was the largest that he had managed to collect. It was easily ten pounds. There were five pieces in all and maybe twenty pounds in total. With all five pieces on the table, he stood to look them over. It would make... something amazing, he knew. He didn't know exactly what, but that wasn't important just yet.

Stonerasp had recovered the largest part of a Starfall. Once in a great while, a piece of metal fell to the ground from the sky. No one knew from where and no one knew exactly how, but the metal was usually burned into nothingness as it fell. Sometimes though, it survived. When it did, the metal was worth a kingdom. The composition was never the same twice, so it was said. Stonerasp knew he was not looking at iron or steel, or even Mithral. The color was wrong. It was hard to explain, but this metal seemed more... vital than any of those three.

He'd examined it in the best ways he knew how in the field. He had attempted to scratch it with stone and other metals. They could not. He kept a small fragment wet to test rust. It did not. He tossed it in his camp fire on several occasions. That had been interesting. It didn't melt. It didn't even glow. But it did turn the flames around it a deep purple. It also did not retain heat for long. It was cool to the touch moments after having rested in a fire for over an hour. This metal exhibited properties unlike any he had ever seen. He hoped to be able to work it in the heat of his forge fire, but even the unworked Starfall would secure him a fortune.

Stonerasp dropped the fragments of metal into a crucible, lifted the container by a counter-weighted rod into his furnace and left it there while he attended to other matters in the shop. He periodically took the time to pump the bellows on the furnace, but gave the metal a long time to melt down. After nearly an hour, and two visitors, Stonerasp pulled the crucible from the heat and carefully looked inside. The metal glowed an intense white-purple, but as far as he could see, the pieces were still intact. The metal's glow faded quickly and before long the pieces looked exactly as if they had not been placed in flame. Stonerasp raised an eyebrow. He picked up a piece of straw from the floor of the shop and quickly held it against one of the fragments to find that there was no smoke, no fire, and in fact the warmth he felt came from the crucible walls, and not the fragment. He carefully placed a finger on the metal. Not even slightly warm. This would be difficult indeed. More heat would be required. There would be some thought that would have to go into the increase of heat. It would take special fuel, and a more efficient furnace than he had at his disposal. Stonerasp sat down at his bench to ponder the idea. That was when he heard the noise.

It was distant at first. Far off, there was screaming and the clash of arms. He stood, and walked to the window at the corner of his shop. The crowd grew louder, as if there was a battle progressing up the main street of the merchant quarter. Stonerasp picked up one of his larger hammers and walked to the door. He opened it only a crack, but the noise became much louder.

"Stand back! Clear the street!"

"You there! Notify the guard post at the other end!"

"Don't let them move down the side streets!"

Stonerasp could not see yet, but it sounded as though the city was being assaulted! Without hesitating any longer, Stonerasp hurried into the street, slamming and locking his shop door. He would help, but taking the time to secure his shop, he hoped, would prevent anyone from looting or damaging anything. He ran down the thoroughfare toward the commotion. When he

rounded the corner, what came into view nearly stopped his heart. There was a band of Icecrag's city guard, standing back to back in a circle, surrounded by a horror that he never could have imagined.

The soldiers worked to keep themselves together and to master the fear and dread that was apparent on all of their faces. There were at least a dozen of them and they were relentlessly moving inward, pressing the soldiers ever tighter. Their eyes, where there should have been eyes, were lit by a dim purple swirl of light. Each of the beings gaped with a terrifying lifeless purple gaze. Stonerasp looked about. It seemed there was no help to be had. He thought momentarily about his wife. Would she be safe? Would Frostbraid stay indoors out of harm's way? Was this even happening anywhere else? He couldn't be certain but hesitation could cost the lives of many. He had to act!

Stonerasp adjusted his grip on the heavy smith's hammer as he ran, the intensity of the situation causing his blood to rise and his heart to pound. His hands felt cold and he could feel time slowing down as the danger drew closer. A deep breath as he ran helped to steady him. He lowered the hammer head close to the ground as he grew close and in an arc, he swung it up and over his head. It came down against one of the foes, and when it contacted the head of the monster, there was a distinct pop of bone, a squish of flesh, and a splash of what once might have been blood. Now, it was a congealed, blackened red ooze spraying him and sticking to his face and clothes and hammer.

The creatures were not monsters. Or at least they had not been. They were clearly Dwarven. They *had* been Dwarven. The creatures were... decomposing. They smelled rotted and foul. The skin, where there was skin, sagged and tore loose from the limbs and body, and the flesh beneath was in various states of putrefication. He saw bone. Broken limbs, missing limbs, and terrifying gazes of undeath, but no emotion. He saw upon the clothing some of the creatures wore, insignias, which were the sigils of houses and families of Icecrag itself such as The Diamond Crest that denoted a king's guard. At once, Stonerasp came to a realization.

These were the dead of Icecrag Keep. She was expelling her dead from the catacombs below the mountains. How could this be happening? He imagined that some of these creatures could be his relatives and the idea turned his stomach more than anything he saw.

Pushing aside his sickness, he raised his hammer and lowered it once more on the head of another of the fiends... the Dwarves. They hadn't seen him coming, being singularly focused on the group of soldiers. These men were very close to their end, but hopefully he was in time to rescue them. The gap that Stonerasp had opened allowed one of the soldiers to gain purchase against the attacking mob.

The soldier raised his axe, managing enough room to plant the sharpened pommel into the chest of an oncoming attacker. The axe butt made an audible sucking sound as it was pulled free of the shambling Dwarf. The two that Stonerasp had struck in the head had fallen abruptly, but this one seemed to barely notice the axe blow. He simply staggered back momentarily. It was enough room however, that an adjacent soldier was free to heft his own axe, blade first into the same undead Dwarf. This time, the blow was solid, and deep in the chest. Stonerasp, and the two soldiers who had managed attacks were stunned utterly to realize that the groaning monster came on again, missing only a step. Stonerasp, thinking quickly, swung his hammer once more, connecting with the unfortunate Dwarf with a meaty thump, directly in the forehead. Like a marionette whose strings had been severed, it fell lifeless once more. The two soldier's eyes went wide, as did Stonerasp's.

"Aim for the head!" One of the soldiers cried above the clash. "The head brings them down!"

When the other soldiers began to obey the command, the fight quickly ended. The undead Dwarves fell and ceased to stir. One by one, they dropped to the cold stone of Icecrag Keep's merchant square. Stonerasp and the soldiers, after the last of the fiendish creatures had fallen, stood in silence. What could be said? One or two

of the soldiers nursed bites, from the terrifying mob.

"They were biting." Said one soldier, younger than most of the rest. He wrapped the exposed joint of his left elbow with a strip from his tunic, now ripped and worthless from the battle. "What were they? What kind of magic compels the dead to attack and bite the living?"

"I have heard stories of such things." A much older soldier spoke, his eyes blank and far away, "There are times when the body works independently of the soul. It can be magic...probably magic. Or it could be something more. Who is to say what caused it?"

"What are we supposed to do? Is this it? Will there be more?" The younger soldier, arm bandaged, clasped his hand over the strip to keep pressure on the fresh wound.

"How can we know?" The older said once more, assisting the young soldier in the re-sheathing of his weapon. "Maybe some fluke. This could be the end of it.

"Has it happened before?"

"Not that I know of. Not here. But the King should hear of it in any case. Some of us should report to the captains and make certain that this news reaches him "

A few of the soldiers volunteered and started toward the center of Icecrag Keep to give their report to King Fellhammer. The rest of the soldiers remained to oversee the aftermath of the battle. They were quick and efficient, and before too many of the rest of the citizens in the merchant square had come out in answer to the noise, they had covered the bodies that lay in the streets.

Stonerasp assisted in pulling the bodies aside, and provided a number of sheets to cover them. "Where did they come from?" He asked as he was helping one soldier with one of the fallen undead.

"We were patrolling." The stout soldier grunted as he lifted the body onto another and made certain that the limbs would not fall away to be revealed when covered. "I don't know exactly where they came from, but I know where we encountered them. We were in formation and passing the entrance to the Pilgrim's Path, when one of the other soldiers, I don't know which,

heard something unusual. We halted at the mouth of the cavern, and waited. The sound grew louder and before long we could hear what sounded like the groans of the injured.” The soldier stopped, and huffed a humorless laugh. “I suppose we weren’t far from the truth in our assumption. Our captain called out to them, asking if they were in need of assistance, and then the groans became more insistent. Frenzied you might say. Suddenly we faced them. The dozen and a half that you saw and helped to defeat.” The soldier fell silent again as they continued their work. Then he stopped and looked Stonerasp in the eyes.

“Thank you for your decisiveness. Your actions may have saved all of our lives.”

Stonerasp nodded solemnly. “We are all of us soldiers at all times.” He spoke, the familiar phrase leaving his mouth without thought. It was a long uttered maxim of the Dwarves of Icecrag. The soldier’s face softened at the reply.

“Indeed, we are.”

The grim work completed, Stonerasp bid the soldiers goodbye and quickly made his way back home. There was no need to stay and watch the rest of the proceedings, and he needed to be certain that Frostbraid was safe. His fears were allayed when he arrived and found that the incident had been singular, and did not reach to the residential quarter. Frostbraid was looking closely at her great emerald when he arrived, holding it close to her face in both hands. He entered and with a great sigh of relief, rushed across the room to embrace Frostbraid tightly from behind.

“Thanks be to Uulru you’re safe!” Stonerasp’s voice came hoarse and short of breath. He only then realized how quickly he had run.

“Of course I am.” Frostbraid said, one eyebrow quirked. “What did you think was wrong?”

He came up short, and oddly, he wondered for a moment if he’d dreamed the whole thing up. It was so surreal now, and he began to doubt himself. Looking down, he saw the bloody mess on his right sleeve and that brought him home.

“There was... an incident over in the merchant quarter. I think it was too quick to have caused any panic, but something happened that isn’t easy to explain.”

Stonerasp recounted the story to her. He told her about what the soldier had said. The horrifying reanimated corpses of the Dwarves’ ancient and recently dead. Her face slowly grew troubled as he talked, the realization that he was telling the truth was evident on her face.

“What... what is to be done then?” Frostbraid asked. “Will they be headed into the deep tunnels to find the reason behind it?”

“I can only assume.” Stonerasp replied, nodding. “What else can they do? It has to be looked into.”

The rest of the night passed in a kind of uncomfortable silence, only occasionally broken by sparse conversation. Despite the dreadful occurrence, the two of them eventually turned back to matters at hand. Stonerasp pondered how to increase the temperature in his furnace to attempt to melt down the Starfall while Frostbraid began sketches and measurements for her plan to the emerald he had brought home for her. Dinner was unusually quiet as well. Invasions had that effect even when the foes were beasts or enemy tribes, to say nothing of one’s own long buried kin.

Maybe something would make sense tomorrow.

Chapter 4

When I first arrived here, Smoak was just beginning to enact her plan. She felt the pull of The Void from the moment that she was attacked with the Evading Hilt. She could sense the creation of Darkrift Energy. A lich can always feel that sort of power. It strengthens them and reinforces their bodies, infusing them with unimaginable power. It was almost inevitable that she would seek to use it. I didn't have to be a diviner to guess that she might.

Nevertheless, I did see it coming. I'd have let someone else bother with Icecrag had it not been for the Enchantress, Emlin, rest her soul. She lost her husband in a town called Gilhaven, where I had been earning a living telling fortunes. In she came in a rage.

"Tell me where that dragon has gone!"

I was uncertain. I tell people what they want to know, but when they are angry or vengeful, I am hesitant to do so, at least not until they have taken the time to reason through their request.

"She will pay for what she has taken from me."

At first, I thought maybe she had lost some possession, and then I realized, it was love that had been stolen. Maybe I have a soft spot for that kind of loss because I gave her what she wanted that day. It was probably a mistake to relent so quickly. It cost her her own life.

"Emlin, you don't know what you're asking. You want to track a dragon? Worse, you want to track a Draco-Lich. What in the world do you intend to do if you catch up with her?" Even then, I did my best to dissuade her from rashness.

"I'll kill her. I'll come up with a way. I am not exactly weak amongst my sisters." Emlin, I came to find on our journey, was a high ranking member of the Sable Links, an order of enchantresses possessed of great power. I wish it had been enough.

"With respect, my lady, beware the lust for blood and revenge. If there is justice to be had, it will be had, but vengeance is rarely the way." Perhaps what I said was wise, but she would not

be soothed. So, I did what she asked. I read her future and divined the location that Smoak intended to find. What I saw was a terrifying future for her. It was hazy, but I saw her well enough. The vision haunts me still.

I saw Emlin, regal, as she was in life. Running toward Smoak, who faced her at her full rampant height atop the unmistakable peak of Mount Sorrow. But Emlin never reached the great beast. She ran into what I can only describe as a thick pane of hazy glass, which then enclosed her on all sides. It grew dark and purple and intense so that looking straight into it nearly burned the eyes. Just before it became unbearable to watch, I saw Emlin's body begin to wither. Her eyes shriveled and pulled into the recessed sockets of her skull, and they were replaced with a deep burning purple fire. Her lips, once full, shrank and pulled away from her teeth into a rictus grin. It was unbearable to watch, and when I came back from the sight, I was in tears over it. At first I refused to tell her, but she would not relent. She merely closed her eyes as tears rolled down each cheek.

I tried to persuade her to wait. To calm down and to think. It was no use. Her apprentice, Valenne, could do nothing to help. I fear she will always despise me for what I enabled to happen. The death of her mistress.

We all set out for Icecrag Keep. I had seen a glimpse of my own future there, and I knew that I needed to go. Emlin went for her reasons and Valenne, too loyal to stay behind, followed her teacher. We made an odd trio to be honest. The diviner, the enchantress and the apprentice. The road here to Icecrag wasn't all dread and despair though. We almost became what you'd call friends and were almost able to forget that Emlin was likely doomed. It was so much worse than simply dying, but she rests now at least. This I know.

As I said, when we reached Icecrag Keep, we took up residence, joining with a caravan of opportunistic human traders who claimed the Keep as their own kind of cavernous village. Emlin and I provided useful services to those

who would come in search of fame and fortune, to slay the Draco-Lich, or to put an end to the Dilmhold Gate's transformation of the dead. Emlin worked without ceasing on how to approach and defeat Smoak herself. The months went by and I began to think that perhaps Emlin's fate might be avoided. It happens sometimes. When someone hears their own future, it tends to lock that fate in place. One cannot change their destiny once they know it. But sometimes it can alter on its own if the person finds something powerful to distract them from their path. I hoped that she would grow so engrossed in her studies, that she'd lose sight of the purpose behind them. It wasn't to be, though. Emlin would maintain her focus, her drive and her passion to destroy that which had wronged her. Valenne tried her best to hang on to the tortured Emlin. But one morning, abruptly, she hired a few brave, or perhaps stupid men from a tavern and set out for the Temple of Uulru, where she hoped to face Smoak.

Valenne came to me, angry and tearful. I could think of nothing to say that hadn't been said, and I believe she mistook my silence for lack of concern. I never wanted it to happen the way it did. Intentions matter little to someone so attached.

Life went on when Emlin left. We all wondered. We all supposed, and we all hoped, Valenne most of all. She carried on her mistress' work, even enlisting others to help, and performed the job admirably. Under it all was that quiet sadness, and in my presence, the simmering anger. A month passed and Emlin had not returned. Then two. Then three. Smoak was still there, ever working to weaken the Dilmhold Gate. Ever growing larger and being fed by the Darkrift Energy. So many came to try and stop her. None would ever come back. For months, this was the way of things. A hero or heroes came to Icecrag Keep in search of Smoak. All who went looking, if they returned at all, came back as one of the undead. One of the shambling hordes of Darkrift driven foes, barely kept at bay

by a struggling band of volunteers. It was madness and chaos, but still life went on. I often wondered what drove me to stay.

All the while, the mystery that perplexed me was this: Why would the Dwarves abandon their ancestral home? What happened to them? I know the Dwarves as a whole to be a proud race, with a well-developed sense of family, history and bravery. There are none braver. So this question is interesting indeed. The Dwarves I know would not leave their home, but if they did, they would not stay away. They would find an answer to this trouble and return. They would fight any dragon to protect their heritage and livelihoods. What about the undead that emerge from their catacombs? I cannot imagine a Dwarf to allow this to happen without a fight. The strangest part? I cannot scry their whereabouts or the direction they may have gone. Nothing of the sort is visible to me. The uncharacteristic and apparently unknowable truth of their disappearance is the main reason I am still here, I believe. Either I will help to find them, or I will be there when they return so that I can hear the tale and write it down. Something makes me believe that it will be an unparalleled tale.

Now, where does that leave me? Someone finally came along who was powerful enough...fearless and skilled enough to put an end to Smoak as well as to collapse the gate into The Void. The walking corpses become less frequent by leaps and bounds each day. The Darkrift Energy is dissipating. I had begun to think it was impossible but the ten heroes of Icecrag Keep have proven me wrong. They are still here and have begun to turn their considerable power toward finding the Dwarves. We, the temporary dwellers of Icecrag Keep, begin to realize that this place grows quiet, and as it does, hope of profit dwindles away. There is no dragon to slay. There are no ghouls or zombie beings to destroy. The door to the rest of the city may draw some tourism, but we know our days of prosperity are numbered if we remain.

Chapter 5

By morning Icecrag was awash with the story of the patrol that had been assaulted by undead. Stonerasp spent most of the day sharpening axes for those who decided they would not be caught unaware. In addition, he had also performed three armor repairs and taken two orders for half plate. It was true that battle was good for business, but Stonerasp was impatient to work on finer metals. Steel made a living, though. He worked methodically on the orders as he thought about the mysterious metal in his crucible.

Clearly, Stonerasp's furnace was not able to achieve the temperature required to melt down the Starfall metal. He hammered a dent from an elbow cop as he pondered. Often, the more menial work that he did, like armor repair, helped him think. There were ways of acquiring a hotter fire, but after the attack the previous night, he was apprehensive about the method that kept occurring to him. If there were undead in the caverns, it would be a dangerous journey, but he could visit Uulru's Forge.

There was a volcanic fissure part of the way to the Dilmhold Gate. A crack in the earth that legend said boiled from the very depths of the underworld. If there was a fire that could melt the rare metal down, it was contained within Uulru's Forge. Stonerasp had never been, but he'd heard enough of the place to know that some long ago smith had built a furnace from the stone around the fissure and had even mounted an anvil. It was certainly worth the effort of making the trip, but yesterday. What was going on? Stonerasp had to keep reminding himself that it had really happened. Here in the relative quiet of his shop, he could imagine that it hadn't.

Stonerasp closed up his shop at mid-day and took a walk to the center of Icecrag Keep toward The barracks and the seat of power, where Icecrag's king lived and ruled. It would be difficult to make a trip to Uulru's Furnace now with the Militia on alert. He'd have to have an escort, and he did not want word to spread about the metal he had acquired. He wanted to be as discreet as possible just in case a covetous smith

decided to try something untoward. Crime was extremely rare in Icecrag Keep, but certainly not unheard of. He knew a couple of soldiers. Maybe they could assist him and keep things quiet.

"Halt, citizen. State your business." The guard was gruff, but not rude. He was clearly on edge, and quickly, Stonerasp recognized him as one of the patrol that he had helped the previous night. The guard recognized him as well after a moment, and his countenance softened slightly.

"Ah, you. Thank you for your assistance. That attack was nothing that we ever expected." He pounded a fist on his breastplate, lowering his helmed head a touch.

"I was glad to be of service. It was a duty that any good Dwarf would be willing to perform." Stonerasp returned the informal salute. It was not something a civilian was supposed to receive from a soldier, but under the circumstances, he could understand the breach of protocol. "I'm here to see if Rathmor is available."

The guard nodded tersely. "I know that I have seen him today. He is on duty, but I do not know where he is now. He could be on patrol or he could be inside."

"Am I permitted inside?" Stonerasp could normally enter, but the barracks was likely restricting access to civilians until the attack was sorted out.

The guard squinted in thought, and looked to the other soldier with him, flanking the gate. The soldier, too, thought a moment and then nodded.

"You may pass." The guard said, running his axe through a belt loop as he reached into a hide pouch on the opposite side. "Here you are. You need credentials while we are on alert."

The guard pulled a slim golden sheet, no larger than a playing card from the pouch and handed it to Stonerasp. It was a typical pass, stamped in relief with the Diamond Crest which was Icecrag Keep's official sigil. The golden card had a small clip on the back, which Stonerasp fastened to his wide belt so that the sigil would be visible as he walked.

“My thanks.” Stonerasp said as he stepped between the two stout guards.

“And mine.” The guard answered with a nod.

The search for Rathmor meant heading toward the main barracks to find out if he was on duty, and if so, where. Rathmor and he had grown up together. There was a time when Stonerasp had planned to join the Icecrag Militia, but when the time came to enlist, he had decided at last that his metal work was more important to him. Rathmor had been the better soldier and it had served him well. He had refused captaincy twice as he loved the patrolling and barracks life.

Stonerasp did not have to search long to find his friend. He was on the training field practicing forms with a few of the other soldiers. Rathmor was stripped of armor, in plain clothes. He held in each fist, a heavy bearded axe, grasped close to the heads. This was Rathmor’s favored technique. He called it bladed fists, and there was no one who could match his skill.

Stonerasp watched at a distance, not wishing to interrupt what looked to be a lesson to some younger soldiers. He liked to watch this demonstration and had seen it many times. Rathmor stepped through a series of short thrusts with the axe heads, wielding them like bare fists. He lunged forward and spun on one leg, allowing the axe hafts to slide through his hands, extending them to their full fighting length. They struck a training dummy, bundled wood and straw, butts first, which sounded a smart ‘thwack’. As quickly as the axes had extended, Rathmor pulled back, allowing his hands to slide beneath the heads once more. Lunging forward, he then pushed the spiked ends of the axes into the bundled dummy at the mid-section, quickly withdrew them, and in a smooth motion pulled back again, the handles of his axes finding their belt loops and slamming home.

Rathmor paused there for a moment, his hands still on his axes, clearing his mind and re-focusing before addressing his observers.

“How many weapons did I use in that demonstration?” Rathmor asked, assuming a teaching tone.

There was some hesitation before one soldier, then a few more answered. “Two.”

Rathmor was silent as there were nods of agreement.

“Wrong.” He said. “Think about that question. Tomorrow I’ll show you again. Watch more closely. Dismissed.”

With that, Rathmor turned away from his pupils to face Stonerasp, who had been certain he was far enough away to avoid notice while he had been in the midst of the demonstration. The young Dwarves began splitting into pairs and practicing various techniques and drills on their own and Rathmor closed the short distance between Stonerasp and himself.

“What brings you to the barracks, Stone?”

It took Stonerasp a moment to answer. He was always taken aback by Rathmor’s easy skill and abrupt manner. “I came to see you, actually.”

Rathmor nodded. “And you have managed the feat.” Rathmor said with a short laugh that came from the belly.

Stonerasp shook his head, smiling. “True. I came to see you because I need help. I want to make a trip to Uulru’s Forge.”

Rathmor sucked air through his teeth and cocked his head to one side. “Bad timing for something like that.”

“I know, Rath.”

“I heard you helped a patrol last night. Those hammer skills do come in handy, don’t they?”

“They do.” It was an ongoing, friendly jest amongst them. He had become a smith instead of a soldier. In a way, they depended on one another for safety and livelihood. They knew it, but it didn’t stop friendly banter and rivalry.

“Not biting today?” Rathmor said, with a clap to Stonerasp’s shoulder. “I don’t blame you. That was right unsettling to hear about. Our own dead coming out of the catacombs? No good Dwarf should have to fight to rebury his own fallen fathers.”

Stonerasp nodded wordlessly and the two stood in silence for a moment, pondering the thought. He hoped that it wouldn’t happen again, but something told him that it wasn’t some strange magical isolated event. Those kinds of things were known to happen, of course, but not in a stable place like Icecrag Keep.

“Welcome back, by the way.” Rathmor had a way of changing the course of conversation that never let you get your feet under you. “How long were you gone?”

“A few weeks.”

“And you found it?”

Stonerasp nodded. “I did. That’s why I need to go to The Forge. My fire isn’t hot enough to melt it down.”

Rathmor nodded understanding. “Right. If it can survive the journey from the sky, it can handle your little oven.”

“My little oven made your little hatchets.”

Rathmor laughed heartily again. “That’s the spirit!”

“So, will you help me? I just need someone from the militia along. Probably nothing will happen.”

Rathmor’s face grew serious. “If you want to go, I will go with you. But I don’t like the feel of what happened. I can tell you don’t either. I’d advise against it, but I’ll go.”

Stonerasp nodded, mimicking Rathmor’s mood. “I could wait. Maybe this will blow over. It probably will. It probably already has.” He said it, but he wasn’t certain he actually believed it. “But it could also get worse. Maybe going now is the one way to avoid trouble.”

“You don’t really think that.” Rathmor replied dubiously.

It was uncanny how well his old friend could read him. “No, I don’t, but I do want to get these pieces melted down so I can work them, and quickly. This is something I have chased for a hundred years, and finally, I have made it home with a Starfall. I can work the metal in my shop, so it’s just a quick run to the forge, a short time to melt and pour the metal, and we’ll be back.”

“Are you going to make me a new pair of axes from it as payment for my help?”

“No, I’m not.”

“That seems fair.”

“I think so.”

“... Alright. I’ll go.”

Rathmor and Stonerasp talked for a while longer, about nothing so serious. It would be two days before he was able to arrange their travel to Uulru’s Forge, but that would work well. Two days to make certain he had everything sorted and ready to go. As much as he wanted the previous day’s attack to be a single incident; As much as he believed it to be, he could not shake the nervous feeling that something darker was behind it.

Chapter 6

I am one of the few who remain here in the Keep's halls. Valenne stays, untethered as she is. Emlin is gone. Her admission to the Sable Links being reliant on the testimony of her mistress, she must now find another path. She is a gifted young woman and in recent weeks has begun to soften in her attitude toward me. I expect the closure that our heroes have provided her play a great part in that development.

The abjurer and his wife have departed. They left with the larger part of the old caravan and a few of the other residents. We have food to last awhile before we must seek to restock but the settlement is drying up, make no mistake. The adventurous souls that destroyed Smoak have been here and gone over and over again. They comb the area looking for news or rumors of the missing Dwarves. Thus far, the search has yielded nothing. I have attempted to divine something, anything, but for some reason my attempts meet with blackness or swirling haze like endless clouds.

The Dwarves left so little behind. Everything that I sense may be important is behind that gate in the rest of the Keep. Then, there is the enigmatic numbered parchment. None of us can make heads or tails of the numbers. It is not a code, certainly. I can divine the solution to a code or riddle. These numbers resist any kind of delving. I keep the scroll in my possession now and nightly I stare at it, hoping that in some way it will finally make sense.

What is clear to me is that we must find them. Their home is now purged of the tainted energy and the dragon. They should once again be allowed to claim Icecrag Keep. There are many who would disagree with me, but they became bored when the traffic ceased and when no quick way past the heavy gate could be determined.

Tonight it is quiet. These days it is usually so, but tonight the quiet is deeper than usual. Outside the Keep, there is a lush, heavy snowfall which always seems to dampen noise. The flakes

fall lazily in an uncharacteristically slow breeze. I am standing on the top of Mount Sorrow looking across the wood and metal span that grants access to the keep from the adjacent peak. Two mighty stone Dwarves flank me, their axes resting before them.

I like to stand here in all kinds of weather and at all times of day, but at night, during a snow, it somehow feels the most important. Since I have begun to learn of the Icecrag Dwarves, I have found that standing at their gate gives me a sense of knowing them. Maybe it's the diviner's nature, but this ceremony I have created... this vigil that I often keep for them, is a way that I can try to send them word. Word that someone is looking and that they will be found someday. I simply hope that wherever they are, they desire to be found.

As I stand on the peak watching the snowfall and listening to the faint, distant cry of an owl far below in the Ironwood, I see a silhouette against the grey and white of the mountain. A slender figure, even bundled as it seems to be against the biting cold, is walking toward me. The moon is not full, and it takes me a few moments to realize who approaches. The bard. I can recognize his wide hat, worn to keep the wet and snow away. He travels with the other nine heroes and he has been away in a neighboring town, searching for stories or clues to the Dwarves' whereabouts. My spirits rise hopefully as he approaches, but when he is close enough I can see that his face is drawn down. He wears his emotions so visibly and it is plain now that his journey has been for naught. He catches my eye as he comes nearer and shakes his head in confirmation of my assumption.

"Nothing." He says, a touch out of breath from the climb. "They are as the last fingers of fog before the sun. They have melted away without a trace."

He always speaks this way, The bard. Always the world reveals itself to him in poem and metaphor. The bard's arrival breaks my vigil and we both return to the warmth of Icecrag Keep. That night is a feast, such as we have, to

celebrate the bard's return. The news is bad, but the return of a comrade is always cause for celebration. This is the way of the heroes. They are filled with life and hope, enough for even this occasion.

Feast is the word we use, but it is no different than any other meal. It is good food. Hot and nourishing, but basic and sustaining and not extravagant like a true celebration. No one is disappointed in this.

The bard recounts his story. He tells us of the fear of those he visited. They had heard of the demise of Smoak but news is not news when it is second hand. The bard, with a first-hand account of the slaying of Smoak, laid to rest the rumors and doubts. A hearty laugh is shared when the bard reveals that the town celebrated his arrival and report with a feast of their own. Being a messenger with good news is not without its rewards.

Despite his report to the outlying town, they could be of no assistance to us. They had heard nothing of the Dwarves. No news of their passage, their location, or any detail at all concerning their fate. It was as if they had carefully packed their belongings, sealed Icecrag Keep from outsiders, and calmly vanished into the very sky.

We all sat together well into the night in what had been one of the settlement's makeshift inns and talked of things that had come to pass. A few remaining folk passed by now and then, leaning in to see if there was any new information. Most of them were very near to moving on I assume. You could see it in their countenance. They were becoming tired of being the few dwindling residents of a waning boom town.

Valenne passed by on her way from the storeroom and uncharacteristically came inside to sit with us. It is not that she would have passed by the heroes, but when I was near, she was seldom interested in remaining over long.

The twelve of us pondered the question that we all thought, but did not ask aloud. What if the Dwarves were simply untraceable? Suppose we could not find them. Were they even

there to be found? The fear that I harbored was that perhaps they had all been pulled into The Void. It was a little irrational, I thought, but I was beginning to feel irrational.

After the heroes began to one by one retire to their own beds, and not wanting to be the last to leave, I excused myself and made my way toward my small accommodations. I had made them my home since my arrival in Icecrag Keep. Captain Stanic, the settlement's assumed leader, had allowed me to take up the corner storefront in the low row of buildings. There was a small apartment behind it where I slept. I entered and locked the door behind me, bypassing my chair and desk and heading straight to my cot. I did snatch the heavy parchment from the desk as I passed. Maybe staring at it again would cause the Dwarves to show up after all of this time. My thoughts were sullen, I admit. It is hard to blame us all for being downtrodden. No leads, and no hope of finding Icecrag's rightful owners.

I struck flint and steel, lighting an oil lamp, and from it, a pair of fat tallow candles, which I placed on the other side of the meager bedroom. Then, I unceremoniously fell back onto the cot, one arm over my eyes, and the other hand resting the parchment on my stomach. A few deep breaths to relax and then I held the parchment up in the light of the oil lamp over my shoulder. There it was. The same series of numbers as before. They taunted me. 14226758. I had no idea what they could mean. No idea if they even should mean something.

Idly, I held the parchment above my head, hoping that inspiration would suddenly strike as to the meaning of this strange cryptic message. If it wasn't a message, then why was it fastened to the gate? Didn't one tend to leave notes when going away? That's what it felt like. It felt like the parchment should read 'will return soon', but all that the writer had seen fit to use were the numbers. My arms grew tired as I held the note above my head and so I let them fall back toward the oil lamp to rest on the cot's headboard. As I was doing so, the parchment came to rest between me and the flame of the oil lamp, light showing through the skin. What I saw did not register at first. I was so accustomed to seeing nothing on that sheet except the plainly written

numbers. But I blinked. Then, to be certain of what I was seeing, I sat upright and turned my body around on the bed, placing the parchment sheet between myself and the lamp.

My eyes widened. It was unmistakable! There were faint lines. The natural watermark from the processing of the parchment. But there was more. There was more to the watermark that I had never seen. I rubbed my eyes and looked again and then I smiled.

My hope was that some of the heroes were still awake. I ran back across the common area to the inn, where I failed to find the heroes, but Valenne had not yet retired. I was too excited about my discovery to be nervous about speaking with her. I had to tell someone.

“Valenne! I have something.”

She started at my abrupt, loud cry. “What, some cryptic divination?”

I shook my head. “No, no nothing like that. This is something on the parchment that I’ve not seen before. I rushed across the room to a still burning lamp and thrust the scroll up into the light. “Come over here and tell me what you see!”

Valenne sighed, rubbing one of her eyes as she walked across to join me, and upon reaching my side she looked up at the lamp-lit skin. I felt my hopes rise as her eyes, like mine had only minutes before, went wide. She turned her head to face me.

“What... what is it that I’m seeing here?”

“That... ” I said, pausing for the sheer drama of the moment. “... is how we’re going to find out what happened to the Dwarves.”

Chapter 7

The next afternoon, Stonerasp stayed home from the shop. Frostbraid had completed her sketches and measurements of the emerald, which she had taken to calling Uulru's Eye. It had a nice ring. He stayed to assist Frostbraid in her workshop, which was in one of the back rooms of the apartment. She didn't have a shop in the merchant quarter, choosing instead to do her work from home and occasionally sell smaller pieces, or to use them as gifts, or for barter. Though she was a hobbyist, she was exceptionally skilled with small tools and gem cutting.

Stonerasp looked at the sketches that Frostbraid intended to use for the cutting. It would be a twenty sided cut. Frostbraid had a name for it, but Stonerasp could never remember it. Ico... ico something. He watched as she aligned the stone in and tightened it down in a rod that extended over a grinding wheel. She carefully adjusted the enormous emerald according to a series of marks she had made with a piece of chalk. This kind of cut was always difficult, he knew. Even, straight surfaces over the entire face of the round stone would take exact alignments, and flawless technique. Frostbraid was more than capable of both. He had seen her work stones of all sizes and all shapes, and always, the results were stunning to behold. They had even worked together on a number of pieces that combined Mithral and precious stones.

Frostbraid had everything mounted and adjusted, but she checked it all once more, making certain that absolutely nothing was incorrect. The stone would be magnificent, and she was exceptionally careful not to make a mistake.

The preparation and extra checks complete, Frostbraid nodded to herself and then turned to Stonerasp. "It is all in order. Everything is finished but the actually cutting."

Stonerasp looked around her at the stone, mounted and ready. "Can I do anything to help?"

She shook her head. "No, this one will require attention and care, but it is something

that I can manage. Why don't you head over to the shop and get ready for your trip to the Forge?"

Stonerasp shrugged at the question. "Honestly, I'm about as ready as I can be. The things I need are either already there, or they'll pack into the hand cart tomorrow morning when we leave. All I need is to pack provisions and Rathmor will be bringing his own gear."

"Well, if you want to stand around here, just make sure you stay out of my way you big oaf!" Frostbraid chided with a smile.

"I'm like an ogre amongst the earthenware." He returned, faking a stumble. "I'll stay out of your way, but I can't wait to see what you do with this emerald. I mean, Uulru's Eye."

"It's a lot more dramatic than that big emerald, don't you think?"

"I cannot argue with that. Dramatic names are worth more."

Frostbraid feigned offense. "I would never sell a gift like this! I'm wearing it as a necklace!"

Stonerasp laughed heartily at the thought of Frostbraid wearing the gigantic stone about her neck, and she too chuckled merrily, even as she was seating herself in her stool to begin her work.

"Alright, go make us dinner or something. Let me see what I can do with this old rock."

Frostbraid put a foot on the floor pedal below the workbench where the grindstone was mounted, and began pumping her leg slowly and steadily. The wheel spun to life and checking the alignment of the stone once more, she took it in hand and tilted the swing arm down until the emerald came into contact with the grinder. Stonerasp liked the sound of grinding gemstone. He mused that it must be inborn into a Dwarf to love the sounds of good crafting. Of making something out of a raw piece of rock or metal. It was a good wholesome sound.

Stonerasp stood well back from Frostbraid as she worked, but close enough that he could watch the stone begin to take shape. It was a tedious, labor intensive process, just like

smithing, but the results were worth the effort, she made an adjustment and turned the stone to work on the next edge, and he was able to catch a glimpse of the beginnings of a facet. The green was even deeper than he'd imagined it would be. Almost as if the stone was emitting its own light. He watched a moment longer and then took Frostbraid's advice, walking to the larder to find something for their afternoon meal. Grains and vegetables would suffice, but tonight, he would have to see about something heartier. They would be celebrating a job well done, he imagined. He and Frostbraid always celebrated good crafting.

"Stone!"

Frostbraid's abrupt cry ripped Stonerasp from his revelry and he dropped the sack of dried cave root he had been holding. He did not return her call, but instead ran back through the apartment to the workshop, where Frostbraid was backed against the wall away from her grinder. It was still spinning down, with the emerald laying against it. The grinding noise still filled the small room. Stonerasp gaped as he watched the stone vibrate against the grinding wheel.

The emerald was definitely giving off light. It was a pulsing black and purple glow. It quavered with the vibration of the grinder, and as the wheel grew slower, the pulsing became steadier. Stonerasp and Frostbraid watched it until it was still, and the glowing ceased. The stone sat upon the motionless wheel. Its original deep green color had returned. Neither of the pair

spoke for a moment, but eventually Frostbraid recovered herself.

"I was working the fourth facet and it began to glow. Slightly, but it grew brighter quickly. I felt it get a little warm, but I don't know. That could just have been the grinding. There's always some warmth, depending on the stone. What... What did you make of that? That light?"

Stonerasp kept his eyes on the grinding wheel and the great emerald. He only shook his head.

"I've never seen anything like before, and I've seen an enchantment or two in my day." Frostbraid said, still stunned. She seemed to be speaking simply so there would be sound. The silence was a little unnerving considering the circumstance. Stonerasp was about to agree with her. He was about to say that he hadn't ever seen anything like that light. But then he realized that he indeed had.

"Frost, I have to report this. To the king. To the militia." Stonerasp, in his distraction, realized he wasn't being clear and had skipped over the important information. "That light. Those undead. That light was in their eyes when they attacked the patrol. It's the emerald, Frost. The emerald is returning our ancestors from the grave!"

Chapter 8

It took us a short while to rouse the heroes. They are a dangerous lot, but they all came around when we told them that we had discovered something of great importance to locating the Dwarves. Before long I had them all back in the common room of the inn, bleary eyed, but attentive as I stood there before them, the parchment in one hand and a bright lamp in the other.

“I want to thank you all for coming back out. This is a discovery so big that I would imagine you would all have been more upset had I let it rest until morning. Does anyone need anything to drink before I show you...”

“Get on with it!” Several of the heroes chimed in near unison.

“Of course, of course.” I suppose I do have a way of becoming long winded. “I was laying in my cot staring at this parchment for what must be the thousandth time just hoping for something to finally fall into place and I expected to once again fall asleep without a clue but then my arms got tired...”

One of them stood, the wooden chair scraping the stone floor as he turned to move toward the door.

“Wait!” I called. “Wait, I’ll get to it right now if you’ll stay a few moments longer.” I really am dramatic to a fault sometimes.

“Alright, the short of it. Look at this!”

I moved the parchment in front of the lamp, eclipsing the flame with the yellowed skin. I moved the lamp and parchment back and forth so that everyone could get a good look at what was there, as plain as if it were written. A stamp in the watermark. A symbol that looked like a wide, stepped pyramid with a stylized flame at its base. It surrounded the numbers on the sheet. No one spoke, but everyone was transfixed on the watermark. I waited for someone to voice a thought or opinion. The gods know I talk too much. Finally someone did, but not the heroes. It was Valenne.

“We see the symbol. But are you going to tell us what it means?” There was a hint of impatience in her voice and I then realized that I

hadn’t yet explained it to her either. I had assumed that she would know the symbol’s meaning as well, but then, while she was as talented an enchantress as Emlin had been, she was still inexperienced. Not as widely read.

“My apologies, Valenne. To you all. I tend to grow scattered in the brain when something of this magnitude surfaces. This symbol represents a forge.”

They all nodded, looking to each other. It made sense. It looked like a forge. I went on.

“It isn’t just a forge however. This symbol represents a specific forge. Uulru’s Forge.”

One of the heroes, a gruff warrior, spoke up. “The forge of a god? How does that help us?”

“It isn’t actually Uulru’s Forge. Well, at least it isn’t anymore. It may have been at one time. But the forge is here, somewhere.”

“And so, what are we supposed to do about that? Do you have any idea where it might be?” I could sense that he was not as convinced as I that this was the piece of the puzzle we had been looking for.

“I think...” I spoke carefully, trying not to become too overly wordy again. “... that if we find it. If we go there, with this parchment, then we’ll be able to proceed forward with our search.”

He took a long breath before speaking again. “Very well, then. Where is this forge?”

“Well.” I paused again. This time, not as much for dramatic effect. “I don’t know.”

Valenne spoke up again, then. “How do you know that this symbol refers to Uulru’s Forge? What do you know about it?”

I brightened at that. Valenne was asking the questions I could answer. I was thankful, at least for the moment, that the fighter’s direct, probing manner was stalled.

“I don’t know a great deal, but I’ll tell you what I have learned having studied the Dwarves of Icecrag Keep.”

“The Icecrag Dwarves were, and I hope still are, one of the larger clans from antiquity. They have a belief that Uulru created them here

in the Dilmhold Mountains and that she was the one who first instructed them in the ways of metal, stone and gem crafts. She is the one who taught them to be Dwarves. The legend says that after she made the first Dwarves she taught them first to clothe and arm themselves. To do that, she fashioned a furnace using the deep volcanic veins of the mountain and showed them how to extract metal from stone. She showed them how to refine and shape the metal into armor and weapons. When the first Dwarves were prepared, she taught them to hunt and to defend themselves. To cultivate vegetation and to write their language.

That was a time of vast learning for the Dwarves, but always they returned to the forge. The fire and metal called to them. The legend says that it was because they were born here in the deep volcanic depths of the mountains. It is and will always be their home. But as is my tendency, I make a simple story into a long one. The important part is that Uulru's Forge remained. The Dwarves revered it. Used it. It was central to their religion, livelihood, and society.

Outsiders, though, were never allowed to know its location. It is hard to blame them. The Forge is a Dwarven treasure. Legend says that its fires are the hottest of any furnace, natural or made, in any of the realms.

I can't imagine what will happen if and when we find the Forge, but we have to try. Doesn't this have to be some kind of clue?"

Everyone looked at me, some faces were stern. Some nodded in agreement. Some were casually unreadable even for a diviner like myself. Not without my equipment anyway. The silence implied much. We knew another piece of information but apart from finding this legendary Forge, we were still in a very difficult place.

"If I may..." A new voice began. The wizard's voice. He spoke rarely, but when he did, it was usually something useful. I nodded, insisting that he continue.

"I am only casually informed on your discipline. Your divining. But, if I understand correctly, you have already examined this parchment with your abilities?" It wasn't a question, but his tone rose at the end as though it had been. I answered it as such.

"I have. I could perceive very little about the parchment's intent." Then the slender mage continued.

"But am I correct to say that understanding the object of study as fully as possible is part of the key to scrying an inanimate object?" I nodded.

"You are correct. The more you know about the object in question prior to you..." I stopped, and squeezed my eyes shut, bringing my hand to my face with a smack. I could not believe it hadn't occurred to me. "This piece of information could drastically improve the results of a scrying. That is inspired!" I pointed to the wizard and he smiled wanly.

Truthfully, I must have been slipping to not have thought of that very thing. It was the way Diviners were taught to train their minds. Every small piece of information you could know about an object. The best example was a common fortune teller. They always ask for an object that belonged to the lost in order to do any kind of search for them. This was simply because the party interested in searching knew more about the object. This was a little different than scrying for a person, but not entirely. When the search was impersonal, you had to rely on the object itself. It was far less to go on. There was no real history or connection to anyone, but it worked the same way. Knowing this parchment's hidden emblem could make all the difference!

"We have a plan." I said, confidently. "I will attempt to re-scry the parchment. Perhaps then we will be able to take another step forward. Perhaps we may even find our missing Dwarves!

Chapter 9

Stonerasp stood with Frostbraid in the antechamber of the throne room. In his hands, he held a leaden chest, bound in a grid of iron bands and padlocked. He had placed the Emerald inside immediately following their conversation. They came straight to the barracks, asking to see King Icebrand, stating that there was an emergency that had to be dealt with before it could grow any worse. They had not offered any details, and that had caused delays, but Stonerasp was adamant that his news be for the king's ears only. Now they waited.

He and Frostbraid didn't talk as they stood there, but they did share meaningful glances. The lead box felt heavy in his hands, but not because of the metal. He turned the whole situation over in his head, sick over the fact that he had apparently returned home with a naturally occurring gem that brought the dead to life. How would the king react to this kind of news? Would he be sent away with it to dispose of it? Have it confiscated? He could not say what the outcome might be, but the worst of it was that he had placed everyone and everything in Icecrag Keep in danger. Whatever King Icebrand had to say, he held himself responsible.

There was movement behind them, which turned out to be Rathmor. He entered through the doors that led to the commons. Upon entry, he came up short and looked at he and Frostbraid in turn, his face drawn and serious.

"Someone mentioned that you were here with some kind of news that you would not talk about, until the king arrived. I had to come to be certain it was you, Stone. Good evening, Frostbraid." He placed a fist to his chest in salute, bending slightly at the waist.

"Rathmor, it is good to see you again. I wish it were under less difficult circumstances." Frostbraid nodded her head as she spoke.

"Rath, you can hear this too, but I'd rather wait until the king has arrived. It concerns the attack on the patrol." Stonerasp watched Rathmor's eyes drop to the heavy box in his hands and then return again to meet his gaze.

Rathmor gestured to the box with one hand, the other rested on his wide belt. "What would you have in a lead box?"

"Trouble. Trouble of my own making."

Rathmor didn't say anything right away. Stonerasp saw his jaw clench as he thought, but all he did was nod, accepting that they would deal with whatever needed dealt with. Stonerasp knew his friend well enough to know that Rathmor would help in any way he could to protect Icecrag Keep, and anything to protect his friends and family.

The three Dwarves only had to wait a few more minutes before King Icebrand arrived. He was tall, for a Dwarf, and even dressed down as he was, he still put for an air of power and command. The idea that always crossed Stonerasp's mind when he met King Icebrand, named for a legendary Dire Axe as he was, was named correctly. The king always looked sharp and deadly, even in the late hours of evening and without his armor or weapons.

Icebrand entered the room from the rear by way of a heavy pair of curtains that covered his rooms of council. He came forward to meet them, Stonerasp, Frostbraid and Rathmor all dropping to a knee as he did so.

"Rise, Dwarves. We are all of us warriors." King Icebrand spoke and stopped before them. They came back to their feet in response to the customary words of greeting. Icebrand met each of their eyes, nodding in turn before continuing. "Now, which of you has called this meeting?"

Stonerasp took a step forward, placing a fist over his chest. "I have, King Icebrand. Stonerasp the Mithralsmith."

Icebrand nodded. "They tell me that you would only speak to me. Can it be that important, that only I could receive your news?"

"I believe so, Sire." Stonerasp replied, nodding. "Shall I brief you?"

"Yes, please. If it is news of that magnitude, let us waste no time, but let us discuss what you have to say in a more private location." Icebrand turned after he spoke, gesturing with one hand for them to follow. They

were led by the king to a side room, where inside a small table and several chairs had been placed. Icebrand spoke something quietly to a guard who had been at the door to the room. He saluted and walked off at a quick pace. Icebrand took a seat at one end and the other three arranged themselves in the remaining places. When all were seated, Icebrand raised a hand toward Stonerasp, indicating that he continue.

Stonerasp cleared his throat as he placed the box on the table and slid it to the center. "A few months ago, there was a Starfall. A large one. Do you recall, Sire?"

Icebrand nodded.

"It was at that time, that I left on a journey in the direction that the Starfall had been falling. Far away to the east. Frostbraid and I watched its path and we judged it large enough, and low enough, that it would have likely survived the fall. So, being a worker of finer metals, I decided that I would try to find where it had fallen, and recover the Starfall metal for myself.

I was successful eventually in that quest, but it took me months to find the crater. I was able to bring home a Starfall, from which I hope to create a piece that will make Icecrag Keep proud, but that is not the only rare and precious item that I acquired during my journeys..."

Icebrand still refrained from speaking, as he was famously capable of doing. He listened until he had the entire truth of the matter. It could be unnerving. Stonerasp pressed on, coming to the point.

"While surveying a forested area for signs of the place where the Starfall came down, I happened across a natural cut into a low rock face. It was well disguised by the trees and surrounding mountains, and looked entirely untouched. My natural curiosity took over, and I spent nearly two days delving into the crater, hoping perhaps to find something of value or interest. Mithral perhaps.

While I found no metals to speak of, the cavern was home to many gemstones. Mostly emerald. It was a pristine and untapped source. I marked it on my map, hoping that I might return with the tools to mine at a later time. But I was ill equipped to spend much time there as I was. Also, I needed to find the Starfall before

someone else did. But I did bring one example of the emerald home.

Stonerasp placed his hand over Frostbraid's. "My wife is an excellent gemcutter and jeweler. So I brought her home a magnificent emerald. The largest I have seen in my lifetime. Flawless and almost perfectly shaped, even raw. It is in the box, here. I am hesitant to open it, but believe me when I tell you it is unmatched."

"The reason I have come to you tonight, is for fear that this emerald may be possessed of certain properties." Stonerasp stopped and swallowed. Here was the crux of the matter. "I believe that this emerald is responsible for the attack on the patrol two nights ago. While Frostbraid was applying the emerald to a grinder this evening, it began to glow. A black and purple light emanated from within the stone as she cut. I recognized it, because the attack happened near my shop. It was the same swirling black and purple that I saw in the eyes of our risen ancestors when I assisted the patrol in their fight. I think that the emerald is somehow infusing our fallen fathers with undeath."

All were silent. Rathmor's eyes were uncharacteristically wide. Icebrand brought his elbows to the table, intertwining his fingers and resting his mouth against them. His eyes went to Rathmor, and then to Frostbraid and Stonerasp in turn. There was a call from the hallway that interrupted the intense brooding quiet. The guard had returned and when Icebrand bade him, he entered bearing flagons and a bottle of mead.

"Thank you. That will be all. You can leave us to it." Icebrand dismissed the guard, who saluted and turned to go, closing the door behind him.

"Icebrand continued his silent ponderment as he served them mead. Stonerasp took a moment, even in the heaviness of the moment to respect Icebrand for his ability to remain a Dwarf and not just a king. One who would serve his guests mead. When all had their flagons full and before them, he sat again, and at last he spoke.

"It is not the emerald. It is worse than that."

Rathmor started slightly at the king's admission, but a look from Icebrand stopped him.

"They need to know, Captain Rathmor. Everyone needs to know, but we'll begin with these two. They have stumbled into it, but I will not allow them to remain in that stumble." At a nod from Rathmor, Icebrand looked back to Stonerasp and Frostbraid.

"You are familiar, I would imagine, with the story of Frostbeard?"

Both nodded. It was a tale that every Icecrag Dwarf was told a thousand times before they were even old enough to apprentice. Frostbeard had advanced metallurgy and mining like no other Dwarf in history in order to create the Dilmhold Gate, where the kings and honored dead would be preserved forever without decay.

"The story that is told to all young Dwarves is true, but it is not the entire story. Not for several generations now." Icebrand paused, seeming to consider how to go on with his story. "I'll be plain. The Dilmhold Gate is flawed and it seems that it has been that way since its creation. Frostbeard, in his haste to complete the construction, failed to completely seal the rift into the Void."

Stonerasp heard Frostbraid gasp. He wasn't sure, but he may have done so as well.

"How... what does that mean? How long has this been known? Is this the cause of the attack?"

Stonerasp's questions poured from him. There were many more in his mind fighting for dominance. Why was the emerald glowing then? Why would the attack happen now? Why didn't they tell someone?

"Hold on, Stone." Rathmor interrupted. "One thought at a time."

Stonerasp stopped, putting a hand to his face and pulling it down his long beard. Realizing that this would not be simple or easy discussion, he tried to calm himself. He took a drink of his fine dark mead, which brought him around.

"What is the entire story, Sire?"

Mirroring Stonerasp, King Icebrand too took a swallow of his rich honey wine. "This is

not a short tale, but it must be told. I fear after two days ago, we are facing dire peril."

Icebrand recounted what they all knew, telling of Frostbeard's accomplishment. Typically, it was told as a triumph of the ancient king of Icecrag. Harnessing the power of another plane using Dwarven ingenuity and enchantment, he had led a team to create the gate by which the Dwarves of Icecrag Keep could forever preserve their cherished ancestors. For centuries upon centuries, kings, honored warriors and other notable Dwarves had been sent into The Void. Icebrand went on though, speaking of matters well after Frostbeard had passed into The Void.

"Frostbeard was vain. Honest. Loyal. A true Dwarf, but a vain one. His fear of decay is what led to his folly. It is his vanity that places us in the danger we are in today. The seal of the Dilmhold Gate is faulty, and for all of these years it has slowly allowed the Darkrift Energy from the Void to escape into our world. This energy, so I am told, attempts to seal the rift between planes, like blood seals a wound as it dries. But another effect is that when it comes into contact with the flesh of the dead, it tries to heal that too. It does not... can not succeed, for the soul is long departed from the body. Instead of returning the being to life, to real life, Darkrift Energy creates a false life. It replaces the soul. Fills the gap left by the spirit. That is why the eyes of the undead glow with a black and purple light. It is the false soul created by the Darkrift Energy, showing through from within the corpse. The first incident was almost five-hundred years ago, when the Priests of Uulru attempted to send King Ironbrand through the gate. Instead, Ironbrand reanimated and turned on the Priests. This is why we seal the Sarcophagus. If we did not, the fallen kings would rise.

Only now... two nights ago, those Dwarves. They were from the Catacombs far closer to the city. If they have begun to animate, then that means the rift is widening. That means the Darkrift Energy is becoming more concentrated, and that means that we are running out of time. We must do something, and it must be soon."

Stonerasp hadn't realized, but his mouth was open. He promptly closed it, then put the mead to his lips once more, taking a long pull and emptying half the flagon. He could not begin to think of the correct questions to ask. He managed one, though.

"Why then... why is the emerald glowing?"

Icebrand thought a moment, and answered. "As to that, I can only make a guess. Gemstones, in particular the harder ones, diamond especially, are very sensitive to Darkrift Energy. They absorb it. They glow in its presence. If what you saw was the emerald glowing in the presence of low levels of Darkrift Energy, then we are in more trouble than we thought. If it is present in the residential quarter, then it is present in the rest of Icecrag Keep."

Chapter 10

I was alone again. The heroes, despite the good news and the possibility of some kind of advancement in the search for the missing Dwarves, were still intent on returning to bed. I assured them that given the time in my chambers I could now delve further into the parchment's history. The knowledge of the watermark was not simply a visible clue. The wizard had been correct. The symbol in the watermark could give me the insight into this message that I needed to truly find useful information.

Valenne and I conversed for a few minutes after everyone else retired. The discovery had given us all some hope and that granted me a reprieve from the grudge that the enchantress held for me.

"So, do you really think you will be able to discern more of the parchment's story by knowing about that mark?" Valenne sipped a glass of dark red mulled wine she had prepared for herself. I was still holding the same mug of ale that I poured an hour before. I wanted to be clear headed, so I had refrained from drinking it too fast.

"There is every possibility. It should provide me something more. I'll find out tonight. I won't be able to rest until I know."

Valenne stared into her glass. I knew where her mind had drifted. I could see it in her expression. She was thinking of Emlin again. Not angrily this time, as was usual when I was around. No, it was more of a sadness. Grief. She needed that, and it seemed with the population thinning in Icecrag, and business on the wane, she finally had the time.

With a heavy sigh and a visible sag in her shoulders, she spoke. "Are you sure that they took care of Emlin? Are you sure they saw to it that she was... at peace?"

Talk always turned to Emlin between us. I was grateful this time that it was not the fiery accusation that I had killed her and just wanted her money. So I answered as gently as I could, not wanting to spoil the progress Valenne seemed to be making.

"I am. The cleric was very specific as to the outcome of their encounter. Emlin is at rest now and her soul is in no way sullied by the experience. She will be well, wherever she now resides."

Valenne closed her eyes and a tear ran down each cheek. She wept silently for her fallen teacher and I admit that I too felt myself well up. It is not something that anyone should have to suffer, the loss of a loved one. It was even worse that Emlin had met her end and became one of those horrible undead fiends.

"I'm... sorry for being so terrible." Valenne uttered, sniffing through her tears. "I know she would have found a way, even if you had refused to help. She'd have found Smoak and it would have been her undoing regardless. But I... I needed someone to blame."

Her quiet tears became sobbing and I moved to take her wine from her and set it on the nearby table. Without saying anything, I simply put a hand on her shoulder and let her weep for Emlin.

In a few minutes she recovered enough to wipe her eyes dry and regain her composure. Her eyes were red and puffy but in her face I could see a measure of improvement. She would be able to move on and heal. I didn't need to be a diviner to see it.

"Thank you." She said simply, wiping her face on her sleeve. "I didn't intend to do that."

"No thanks needed. It was something you needed to do. All I did was pat you on the shoulder and keep you from spilling your wine." A small laugh escaped her, which was the first one I recalled hearing since before Emlin had failed to return so many months ago.

"You know what I mean. Thank you for being patient while I figured everything out. I was terrible."

"You weren't that bad. Believe me, you could have been much worse. You never tried to kill me, and I can say for certain that some have." She laughed again and I handed her wine glass back to her.

She took a long drink of the ruby red wine, followed by a deep, cleansing breath. "Even so, you were the kinder of the two of us and I appreciate that. I will do my very best to catch up to you."

"Let's just call everything even and you help me find the Dwarves."

"You have a deal." She smiled a refreshed smile as she ran her fingers back through her hair.

“Right now, though, I need sleep. This night has been a trial.”

I nodded. “I won’t argue with you there but the rest of the night is still full for me. I won’t be able to rest until I’ve scryed this parchment. I have to know.”

“I wish you the best luck. It will work. It has to.” Valenne stood, finishing her glass of wine, and abruptly enfolding me in a fierce two armed hug. To be such a slight girl, she was strong enough to crack my spine.

“There... there... have mercy on me girl!” I gasped. She released her embrace and chuckled.

“Something tells me that you’re going to have to be tougher than that before this is all over.”

I just shook my head, drawing my brows down skeptically. Valenne placed her glass behind the small makeshift bar before making her exit. I remained a few minutes more in the quiet, thinking over the scrying I was about to perform. About what I could possibly learn. Then I too deposited my glass and made my way home.

And so, as I said, here I am. The parchment now before me on the table is surrounded by the tools of my trade, amidst the patterns and symbols etched into the tabletop. Each corner of the scroll is held down by a large wooden four sided rod, also each etched with symbols. Candles are placed all around the room; at certain points on the tabletop and on the various chests and pedestals in the corners. All is in place and prepared as I begin my meditations. I close my eyes, bringing to mind all that is known about the parchment scroll. It’s size. The animal from which it was made. The color of the ink. The numbers themselves inscribed upon it. The emblem of Uulru’s Furnace. Anything I can know about it.

With my eyes closed as they are, I cannot exactly see, but more accurately I feel the energy that begins to fill the room. The table upon which the parchment itself is placed will now be giving off a faint blue glow. The table is designed to function as a kind of window into the object upon it. I continue to hold the object, the scroll, in my mind as I call upon the magical energies and forces so intricately represented on the tabletop and the rods. I call them each in turn, like a subtle and complicated dance of the mind. Many do not realize

the complexities of Divination. It is this complexity that renders the art so fickle. Outcomes can be based solely on the quality of one small part of a process of thousands of tiny steps. Most believe that I should be staring into a ball of crystal and wearing ridiculous gaudy attire, readily and easily informing them of romance and money. It is the charlatan circus performers that perpetuate this myth. They have never seen a real diviner work and wouldn’t know the first thing about it.

My preparations take me a large portion of the remaining night. After two hours of connecting energies, channeling magic and infusing the parchment with powerful scrying spells, I open my eyes. Now that all is prepared, I can begin my search for knowledge. The scroll itself has little to do with the process now. It is the table, which is connected to the essence of the scroll that will show me what I seek. As I said, it is the window through which I will see the scroll’s history.

When in the midst of a scrying session, time can seem less... concrete. In reality, I will remain seated for most of the rest of the night, observing the table intently. Sometimes there are definite images to be seen. The visions can be quite clear. Often, though, there is little to see and less to learn. I watch as quick flashes of the parchment’s story pass in front of me. The colors and impressions scatter across the table’s surface rapidly, like a dream. It becomes clear to me that the additional information I have learned is providing more insight. The watermark is important.

I see the manufacture of the parchment. It still amazes me, some of the inconsequential things that a diviner can know. I see the mountain goat that the skin was made from. He lived on this very mountain and had an injury that made him favor a leg. I see the hands of the Dwarf who fashioned the skin into parchment. I see him apply the impression of Uulru’s Forge into the parchment as it was being created. I learned as I watched that this parchment was so stamped, because it was used in the Forge to create records of the work done there.

This excited me as I observed. If the parchment was used in the Forge, perhaps I would see its transmission to or from the actual location! As I continued watching, it became apparent that life in Icecrag Keep had become difficult before the

Dwarves disappeared. I couldn't see, but I heard the sounds of battle and the screams of the terrified, or the angry. I heard the all too familiar growls and snarls of the undead.

There were distinct feelings too. Impressions, really, like disdain and shame. There was sorrow, confusion and then acceptance and determination. I felt urgency, and lastly wistful detachment. If these were the feelings surrounding Icecrag Keep when the Dwarves disappeared, then perhaps we could at least assume that the departure was voluntary. The feelings were of those who had decided to go, not of those who had been taken. This has been my belief all along, despite the renowned pride and stubbornness of Dwarves. It all seemed too neat to have been unexpected or violent. This seemed to confirm my hunch.

There was more to learn. I did receive images. I received faint, sketchy pictures surrounding the parchment...places where it had rested for any period of time...the hands of the Dwarf who had written the message upon it. I saw a brief flash of a seemingly enormous anvil, flowing fire and magma and this symbol... Uulru's Forge. It was there on a banner! This must be the Forge! I focused hard, trying to take in every detail.

One wall was bright red and blurred. I wasn't certain why. I saw the quickest flash of another wall, filled floor to ceiling with what looked like small vaults covered in a lot of squarish... somethings. It was gone too quickly. Another wall was bare stone, rounded. I could not see whether it was shaped by hand, or perhaps some natural bubble in the stone. There were streaks of a shining crystal running throughout the stony chamber. I caught only a quick flash, but the red magma flickering within the crystalline veins gave the appearance of bright flowing red blood like a pulse of life within the dead stone walls.

Sound was rare in this kind of vision, but this time I heard a sound like grinding stone. Then, very quickly, it was dark. There was only the faintest flickering orange light. It brought to mind running at a quick pace with a torch in hand.

The vision began to fade, and with it, the scrying spells I had placed over the parchment. I hung on to the flickering light and sounds as long as I was able. The last thing I heard was a sound like thunder, but not exactly. It was more regular than thunder, with a kind of humming beneath it. Low,

almost musical pitch was buried within the rumble. The sound grew closer, but then began to fade as my scrying came to an end. The very last impression I was able to pull from the experience, was a feeling of completion and relief but not pure. There was a hint of dread for something to come. The closest way I can think to describe it was narrowly surviving a battle. Relief. You're alive to fight another day, but then, you know that another day is coming sooner than you would like. Real relief is never truly an option.

As the scrying ended, I became aware again of my surroundings. There was motion and noise outside, so clearly I had been up all night. My clothes were damp from sweat. Hanging on so long to the vision was strenuous but it had paid off. I had something new. I hadn't seen anything about the Forge before, but now it seemed that it truly might be right here in or around Icecrag Keep. It had felt close. That had to have been the forge. The anvil and the magma. The banner! Yes it must have been.

I stood and spent a few minutes allowing blood to flow to my limbs. The stillness during a scrying often ends with stiff arms and legs and I'm not as young as I once was. I walked to the adjacent room, which could be called a kitchen, though I did not keep much in the way of kitchen utensils there. I stored some food and my supply of water, mainly. I took a long drink from a half filled water skin and then wet my hands and splashed some on my face.

It would be best to get some sleep, but not much. I needed to speak with everyone. Perhaps if we could find the Forge, then we could at long last learn where the Dwarves had gone. I was certain of two things though. They had planned to leave in haste and though it seemed apparent that they left voluntarily, someone had seen fit to leave a message. The part of it all that had me concerned was that the message had not been plain. It was not a casually written note. No, "We'll be back soon". No indication of where they were going, or when they'd return. It didn't exactly add up.

"What happened?" I found myself uttering in the dim light of my candles, now mostly burned to nubs. The more I thought about it all, the more I began to think that the Dwarves may not simply need to be found. I suspected, but hoped against the idea that they might need to be rescued. The thought chilled me.