

THE ONCE AND FUTURE NERD  
Book II - MYTH MADE FLESH

Chapter 8  
"A Change of Scenery"

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1 TRAVEL MONTAGE

1

We hear the creaks and water sounds of an ocean voyage.

## NARRATOR

We now rejoin the Red Reaver, which, having deposited four of her passengers on the Sugarcane Archipelago, is presently nearing the end of her return journey to the mainland. Given all that had come before, the journey was mercifully uneventful, if understandably a bit melancholy for our party of heroes.

Regan - wounded arms and all - was grateful to be reunited with the vial of medicine that she herself had stolen barely a month ago. And though it did wonders for the pain of her injuries, she continued to consume vast quantities of rum. Several times, Nelson contemplated sharing with Billy and Jen what he'd discussed with Nia and her parents. But he could not fathom how to begin the conversation.

A huge chain unfurls from a winch.

Just under two days after she had dropped anchor on the southwest tip of the archipelago, the Red Reaver dropped anchor yet again. This time, half a mile offshore from the northern coast of Iorden.

A few oars beat the water in two tiny boats.

And an hour so later, two small rowboats came to dock in a busy harbor town, which was loyal to House Mooncrest. These boats of course bore seven admittedly unlikely rebel warriors (with whom you're already very familiar) one very small infant, and one very large Alf Firebeard.

We're in a bustling bazaar in the middle of a desert oasis.

Said Alf made the requisite seedy back-alley introductions, and then departed posthaste.

2 INT. SKETCHY TAVERN - EVENING

2

Buddy, if you don't know what a sketchy tavern sounds like by this point in our story, I don't know what to tell you.

VANDERBERG

So lemme get this straight. Your crew stole the White Lady. The real White Lady.

REGAN

The real fucking deal.

NARRATOR

Regan and Brennen were sat in a corner booth of a tavern, miles away from the tavern where they first met, but no safer or cleaner. Across from them was a wiry man with a sharp face, made to seem even sharper by his thin mustache. Dust and grit seemed to surround him, like flies surround a pig in summer. This man was called Vanderberg, and he--

--Sorry. Brief diversion if I may.

All ambience drops out.

When a Tree Sprite decides what they would like to be called, it is a deeply personal decision, which leads to an entirely unique name. I have one friend who is called The Feeling You Get From An Unexpected Boon After A String Of Poor Luck. And another who is called The Taste Of A Berry Which Is Precisely Ripe Enough But Not A Second More Ripe Than That.

(Sighs)

'Vanderberg,' on the other hand, comes from a sister tongue of the one which became Common throughout Eastern Iorden. And in that tongue, 'Vanderberg' means "from the town." Which tells me, let's see...PRECISELY NOTHING about someone. Why bother even having a name if you're just going to call yourself "from the town"?! Why not just save some breath and be called "man"?

Anyway. Where were we?

Ambience returns.

VANDERBERG

And you don't have it with you.

REGAN

Be a fool if I did.

VANDERBERG

But you'll tell me where it is, if my crew gets your crew over the mountains.

REGAN

That's the offer.

VANDERBERG

Okay, and why should I believe a word of that?

NARRATOR

Regan nodded to Brennen, who carefully held up two empty hands to Vanderberg, and then slowly reached one down below the table and produced a thick, finely-bound tome.

A heavy book hits the table.

VANDERBERG

What's that supposed to be?

BRENNEN

*On the Totemic Traditions of Primitive Iorden.*

NARRATOR

Vanderberg tilted his head, as if prompting Brennen to continue.

BRENNEN

It was in the private collection of Lord Professor Blu'u lo-Ba'al. That's his mark in the margins there.

REGAN

And if you took this meeting with us, then you already checked up on the White Lady getting stolen. If you did that, then you know that collection is where it was hiding all these years.

NARRATOR

Vanderberg paused, flattening his mustache with two fingers and stroking the stubble on his chin.

VANDERBERG

Just walk me through this. How'd you pull off the heist of the century, and why'd you send your spoils away?

REGAN

What's it matter how we did it?

VANDERBERG

It matters so I know you don't think I'm an idiot.

REGAN

Fine. Dumb luck, honestly. We weren't looking for the Lady. Someone wanted a book stolen from the collection, we had no idea it was there.

VANDERBERG

But presumably they did. So how'd you get in?

REGAN

We got a drop-out from the college in our crew, so she knew her way around. We sent in a mage, a heavy, and a lorist.

VANDERBERG

What kinda mage?

NARRATOR

Regan and Brennen briefly exchanged a glance.

REGAN

A storm mage.

NARRATOR

Vanderberg cocked an eyebrow, but did not interrupt.

REGAN

The mage and the heavy took care of the guards, and the lorist went for the collection. That's when they saw the damn thing. Soon as we realized what we had, we sent someone away while the rest stayed behind to finish the original job. But we hit a snag and had to split real quick. So now we're here.

VANDERBERG

So you got busted trying to fence a book after you'd already stolen something worth a thousand times more.  
(takes a deep breath)  
...Yeah, I reckon that's stupid enough to be true.  
Let's giddy-up.

3 EXT. TURNPIKE GARRISON - DAY

3

We're inside a covered wagon as it rolls along a dirt road.

NARRATOR

By steer-pulled wagon, it was a nearly week's bumpy ride to the foot of the Black Mountains. Our heroes' new chauffeurs knew how to maneuver around most of the highway garrisons along the way. But rough terrain in the foothills made the westernmost one unavoidable.

Connor starts to cry.

NELSON  
Dammit.

Vanderberg pokes his head in through the canopy.

VANDERBERG  
There's a turnpike coming up here that we can't get around. If you wanna get through, you better shut that thing up one way or another.

The music box starts playing.

It doesn't do much for Connor. And eventually, it winds down.

NELSON  
That...didn't help.

BRENNEN  
Jen. The...device you carry. Lady Arlene said she captured a lullaby with it.

JEN  
Oh. Okay!

She ruffles through her stuff.

JEN  
Yup, there it is.

*Through Jen's phone speaker, we hear a verse from the "Lullaby" Minisode.*

And Connor settles down.

Vanderberg pops back in.

VANDERBERG  
There's some Elves sniffing around too. Whichever one of you's the storm mage, be just swell if you wanted to send some wind away from us back towards where we came. We'll have to stop at the pike. Then once we start moving again, switch it around so it comes up behind us.

NARRATOR  
Jen did as Vanderberg suggested, and in this way were the Elves avoided.

4 INT. WHITE FOREST INFIRMARY - DAY

4

We hear the mystical woodland ambiance of the White Forest.

## NARRATOR

We return for a moment to a structure in the White Forest, where one might seek medical attention. We've been here before, but at that time we found ourselves in the main wing of the structure, where Elves and their most esteemed guests would go.

At this time though, I must take you to another, smaller wing. You might call it an annex. It was here that the other, less-frequently-spoken-of residents of the White Forest might seek help, should some urgent need arise. That is where we join a rather unpleasant conversation already underway.

## PHYSICIAN

...Some part of the body or another just...grows in a way it shouldn't. We don't know why it happens, unfortunately. But it does seem to afflict a certain number of your kind with some regularity.

## RUBY

*(can already guess the answer)*  
Is there any cure?

## PHYSICIAN

There are treatments that can meaningfully prolong life. But the cost is great, I'm afraid. Typically out of reach for one of your station. Unless your Patrons were to take a particular interest...

## RUBY

Master Ba'at - bless him - is already taking everything he's budgeted for the livery and sending it to my family. Those are the terms of my servitude.

## PHYSICIAN

I'm sure your family would understand if there were a momentary--

## RUBY

--With respect, Doctor, it's not a matter of them understanding. It's a matter of them eating.

## PHYSICIAN

I see. Well perhaps Ba'at lo-Yl might be willing to part with more, given the extenuating circumstances.

RUBY  
*(doubt it)*  
 Perhaps.

PHYSICIAN  
 No harm in asking.  
 A beat.

RUBY  
 There's always harm in asking.

5 EXT. OUTSIDE THE INFIRMARY - A FEW MINUTES LATER

5

*We hear Ruby walking down a wooded path.*

COUNCIL MEMBER  
 Girl? Girl!

*She stops.*

COUNCIL MEMBER  
 A moment of your time, if you please.

6 INT. HORSE'S HEAD INN - EARLY EVENING

6

*It's the cozy inn we've been in so many times before. The crowd is lively but not too raucous. A good vibe.*

NARRATOR  
 The sun had only just gone down over Maeve Bailey's inn, and already the establishment was nearly at capacity. This was good news for its proprietor - for her coffers, yes. But also because it diverted attention from the private conversation she was having with the hooded officer from Freehold who was sat at the bar.

*Through this scene, both of them keep their voices on the quiet side. Not quite a whisper, but markedly furtive.*

THE PROFESSOR  
 Any news from your sisters?

BAILEY  
 Quite a bit. Molly says Elf patrols have been looking around the orphanages, but she's not sure for what. And Minnie says she's been selling lots of knives and cheap half-swords of all a sudden. Most of them to young  
 (MORE)

BAILEY (cont'd)

women who can't seem to look her in the eyes. Many of them with babes-in-arms, and nearly all have to pay by barter.

THE PROFESSOR

I see.

BAILEY

But here's what gives me pause. Minnie made me promise I'd not say a word to Molly before she gave me any details. Molly's a bit too chummy with the City Guard if you ask her, and she was scared of trouble finding her customers. I think she was scared for herself as well.

THE PROFESSOR

And she feared trouble because she suspected her new customers were fugitives from the Elves somehow?

BAILEY

I think she suspected they were, you know...from the West? I'm reading between the words, but she says she got a good luck at one, and made a point of mentioning her striking eyes.

THE PROFESSOR

She thinks they're living in secret in Armstrungard? Wouldn't someone notice?

BAILEY

You'd know better than I. What did the Chieftain Traft look like?

THE PROFESSOR

...I suppose...not all that different.

A beat.

THE PROFESSOR

But why though? Why are they in Armstrungard?

BAILEY

People who follow battles often flee battles. We always assumed their kind would flee back the way they came. But, I imagine when your side loses you flee whichever way seems safer.

THE PROFESSOR

True enough.

BAILEY

Those two serving girls Bryce brought me. They found an orphaned babe, you know. Human I assumed, because why  
(MORE)

BAILEY (cont'd)

wouldn't it be? But Ry'y lo-Th'yyt seemed awfully curious about the little critter.

THE PROFESSOR

Hmm.

NARRATOR

The officer downed the contents of his mug, uncharacteristically swiftly for a man of his cool temperament.

THE PROFESSOR TAKES A **BIG GULP**.

THE PROFESSOR

Much obliged. You know.... Bryce was rarely in a hurry to make his heart known to you, as I'm sure you know too well.

BAILEY

Aye. He only told you the whole truth if he was singing it.

THE PROFESSOR

*(chuckles)*

Indeed. But I think he was...uneasy sometimes, with the charge of the Civic Guard. More so the older he got. You could see his shoulders slouch just a little, when he was asked to quell a mining rebellion or the like. When he was younger, he'd talk about justice a lot more. As got older he'd talk about oaths and duty, almost like he was...resigned to it. But he never complained out loud to me, probably because he was my superior. I wonder if he ever said anything to you.

BAILEY

Well...he did say something once. Woke up after a nightmare. It was...odd, somehow, so it stuck with me.  
*(beat)*

Not his exact words, but...he said when you're young it's easy to imagine a better world. And then you get your heart broken pushing for it, again and again. At first you get angry, until it feels like you'll explode. So you abandon the better world, little by little piece by piece. Just so you can get through the day without your anger...

*(a grim chuckle)*

...Without your anger poisoning you to death. *Those* were his exact words. And eventually you convince yourself that the younger you was naive. But really, younger you was right, and you just lost the guts to stay angry. And then he looked at me like he was about to cry and said one day a chance really will come for a

(MORE)

BAILEY (cont'd)

better world. If I'm alive to see it, I just hope I'll have the guts to take it.

*(Reflects for a moment)*

I just stared at him, until he said he was overworked and half way to a hangover, and to ignore him. I'd never quite seen him like that.

That just hangs there for a good, long while.

THE PROFESSOR

Right. Think I need a refill.

7 INT. CAVES UNDER BLACK MOUNTAINS - DARK

7

Footsteps trudge through a seemingly endless cave. A few torches burn.

NARRATOR

Our tale now returns to General Traft. As you will recall, Traft found himself in the company of Arden the Annihilator and General Mag Uidhir, as well as a few former members of Traft's own army, lost in the East after the army was routed. The group now sought a route underneath the Black Mountains. We join them as they travel in comfortable, companionable silence.

They walk for a while. Someone chews very loudly.

ARDEN OCCASIONALLY **GRUNTS** AS HE EATS.

NARRATOR

Okay, fine. The silence was fairly awkward. I mean, you can't blame them though, how does one make small talk with a being who died centuries before one was born?

MAG UIDHIR

Er...so, tell me, young man. When you led the people over these mountains to repel the invade--

NARRATOR

--At the beginning of the word 'invaders,' Mag Uidhir glanced back at Arden, who looked up from the large haunch of...something...that he was gnawing at, the beginnings of rage glinting in his eye. Mag Uidhir quickly censored himself.

MAG UIDHIR

That is, the E-L-V-E-S. What was your plan?

TRAFT

Well, things have changed a bit since you were um... among the living I suppose. The elv--er, the folks who you mentioned weren't the initial target.

MAG UIDHIR

They weren't?

TRAFT

No. You see, these days, the people in the East outnumber the, ah, shall we say *hylyet*--

--Sound of meat splattering against the wall  
and the hefting of a war hammer

ARDEN

Invader speech! Must be invaders! To arms!!

MAG UIDHIR

Ack! Don't use *their* language around our friend here. Arden, calm down, our new friend made a mistake. They aren't here. Have some more meat.

ARDEN **GRUNTS** IN DISGUST.

MAG UIDHIR

I must say though Traft, I'm somewhat surprised to hear you use their tongue.

TRAFT

Feels hard to avoid sometimes. But anyway, the folks out east outnumber them ten, maybe fifteen to one. And yet they always fight for them and against us. Hundreds of 'em at a time even volunteer to hold forts where we might enter.

MAG UIDHIR

Mmm. Even in my time there were selfish and cowardly men who collaborated.

TRAFT

But now, it's the only thing they know. They think the only way they're safe is under the thumb of you know who. I thought if I showed them they weren't so safe after all, they'd realize what a raw deal they were getting.

MAG UIDHIR

I see.

Their footsteps come to rest.

NARRATOR

It was then this cohort reached a branching section of the cave. It was in fact the sixth one they had come to today, though admittedly they were struggling to keep track of the time in the utter absence of sunlight.

ARDEN

Uhhhhhhhh...this one.

After a beat, they set off again.

TRAFT

*(quietly, to Mag Uidhir)*

You know, I'm starting to have doubts about this little expedition.

MAG UIDHIR

Doubts? Young one, ye lack faith.

ARDEN

Hmph.

TRAFT

Arden, I know you probably thi--

ARDEN

--Shield here.

TRAFT

I understand the shield is in these caves but clearly it isn't *here*. Perhaps we can take a rest before aimlessly trudging forward, don't you agree friends?

NARRATOR

Their Western-born companions vigorously nodded.

MAG UIDHIR

*(sigh)*

Fine. I suppose your bodies need more rest. Arden, perhaps the young war chief is right. Is there a good place to rest for a bit?

NARRATOR

Their torch light was not bright enough to see Traft's eyes roll.

ARDEN

Hmph.

NARRATOR

Arden didn't add anything else to the conversation, but after another fifty feet of trudging, he held out an arm towards a narrow side passage. The weary Urrkyet rushed forward and collapsed towards the back of the cave.

TRAFT

*(relieved)*  
Thank you, kindly.

MAG UIDHIR

Don't be getting too comfortable here. We should continue the search before too long.

TRAFT

Yeah yeah, just a moment to rest our legs.

8 EXT. FOOT OF THE BLACK MOUNTAINS - DAWN

8

*There's a constant moderate wind around us,  
that occasionally whips up into a gale.*

NARRATOR

Though Traft and his companions had no way of knowing this, it was in fact just before dawn. And just a few miles to the east of Traft and the others, Vanderberg's caravan had reached terrain that was impassable by wagon.

*Vanderberg pulls back the canopy.*

VANDERBERG

All right. It's mules from here on out. I should warn you - the weather doesn't bode well.

NELSON

Meaning...?

VANDERBERG

Looking like the snows came early this year. Which means the way over the mountains may not be passable. There's a way *under* the mountains, but you don't wanna take it if you can avoid it.

NELSON

Great. Cool cool cool. Mines of Moria situation. Very great and cool.

VANDERBERG

Better get a move on.

9 INT. CAVES UNDER BLACK MOUNTAINS - DARK

9

Same ambience as before

NARRATOR

And back beneath the mountains, Mag Uidhir approached Arden, who stood at the entrance, surveying the larger cave network they just stepped out of.

MAG UIDHIR

So.....you have no idea where we - or the shield - are, do you?

ARDEN

Hmph.

MAG UIDHIR

Just how lost have you gotten us, exactly?

ARDEN

*Shield. Here.*

MAG UIDHIR

That bad, eh?

NARRATOR

The two ancient warriors stood in silence for a while, willing the darkness to present any valuable information.

A beat of ambient cave noises.

NARRATOR

But nothing presented itself.

MAG UIDHIR

Listen, Arden, maybe it's time we--

--**EXCITED SHOUTING** COMES FROM NEARBY.

NARRATOR

At the sound of yelling from the back of the cave, Arden and Traft drew their weapons to face the coming danger, but they were met only with their companions hooting and hollering while holding something in their hands.

TRAFT

What is it? What happened?!

NARRATOR

The Westerners came over and slowly opened their hands to reveal four small gold coins.

A couple of coins clink together.

ORC #1

Gul a. Gul a!

TRAF T

What? How--where did these come from?

NARRATOR

The Orcs joyfully pointed toward the back of the cave. As the party waved their torches into the darkness, the promise of more coins glimmered back to them. The orcs rushed forward to find them.

MAG UIDHIR

Lad, lemme see one of them.

NARRATOR

Having recently found another boon of coins, both orcs threw their first coins back towards their compatriots. Arden and Traft caught one each. Arden handed his to Mag Uidhir.

MAG UIDHIR

Lemme see...hold that torch closer...this looks to be...well now, there's a sight for sore eyes. Had figured all of these coin had been collected and melted down.

TRAF T

What are they?

MAG UIDHIR

These coins are older than Arden and I. Come from an old, old kingdom.

NARRATOR

Arden stiffened and strode towards the back of the cave with his torch held high.

TRAF T

Well, gold still spends in our time. No reason to leave it laying here where it isn't being used.

NARRATOR

The torchlight revealed another egress from their cave and the two Westerners rushed forward into the chamber with the promise of more gold.

ARDEN

WAIT!

NARRATOR

Arden grabbed one of them by the collar and stopped him dead in his tracks. But the other evaded his grasp.

TRAFT

Woah, what's the problem there, big fella?

NARRATOR

Arden stalked off after him, far more stealthily than Traft had ever seen him move before.

MAG UIDHIR

No....it couldn't possibly....

TRAFT

Possibly what? Do you know where we are?

MAG UIDHIR

Have an idea, and if Arden and I are thinking the same thing then we need to get our other friend back here now.

NARRATOR

Their second travel companion had by now climbed atop a veritable hill of gold coins in the chamber.

ORC #2

*[Jubliant laughter]*

TRAFT

Old timer, what made these?

NARRATOR

Traft held a torch high at the back of the small cave to reveal long, old, and deep scratch marks in the wall. Mag Uidhir's eyes bulged, his pallor growing even paler.

MAG UIDHIR

We need to leave this place. We need to leave this place now.

NARRATOR

Traft watched Arden finally catch up to their companion. He hefted them over his brauny shoulder and turned to face the darkness, hammer drawn. If Traft didn't know better, he'd say the ancient warrior looked a bit shaken. He peered into the dark chamber for what could possibly cause such a reaction in Arden.

We should start to perceive a pulsating, organic rumble, just *barely* high enough in pitch to be audible on most headphones. It should steadily grow louder through the end of this scene.

NARRATOR

And then Traft became aware of a deep rumble, periodically resonating throughout the cave. His first thought, in fact was "earthquake!" But when he stepped into the chamber where Arden stood he felt the rush of warm, damp air that accompanied each pulse. The hairs on his neck stood up.

And that's when he made out what lay beneath the pile of gold that Arden stood atop - an enormous, scaly claw, wider across than the warrior was tall. Arden stood deathly still, sucking in his breaths, and perspiring in the torchlight. And then one of the talons of the claw twitched.

A few coins skitter loose.

END OF PART ONE.

## PART TWO:

10 INT. CAVES UNDER THE BLACK MOUNTAINS - DARK

10

We're in the cave where we left Mag Uidhir et al. at the end of the last episode. There's at least one torch burning.

Very importantly, the breathing of a huge creature is still present.

As before, some coins skitter to the ground.

NARRATOR

Traft, Mag Uidhir, and Arden - you'll recall - were in a bit of tight spot. Deep below the Black Mountains, they had awakened...something. It was certainly extremely large.

MAG UIDHIR

Arden. You need to stay very, very calm.

NARRATOR

And given the scaled talon it had begun to reveal, and the enormous hoard of treasure amongst which it had until very recently slumbered, Mag Uidhir had a reasonable suspicion as to what it was.

MAG UIDHIR

I believe we are in the presence of a dragon.

NARRATOR

Arden the Annihilator nodded his approval, steeled his resolve, and drew his dagger.

A dagger is unsheathed.

MAG UIDHIR

No, Arden. Just walk away. Very carefully.

NARRATOR

But Arden was already stalking his way up the wrist that was revealing itself from beneath a pile of silver trinkets.

MAG UIDHIR

Arden...

There's a big, fast rush of air!

NARRATOR

In the blink of an eye, another talon slammed into the wrist - the way a man might swat a fly but scaled up to a monstrous size.

Arden skitters back along the cabin floor.

NARRATOR

A lesser warrior than Arden would have never dodged the strike, let alone retain his footing. Unfortunately...

A gigantic appendage whips past us.

NARRATOR

...He did not notice the backswipe of the tail.

It hits Arden. Hard.

NARRATOR

This blow sent him airborne, to crash into a marble column some thirty yards away.

Off to our left - a gnarly crunch.

NARRATOR

The blow would've killed a normal man. Arden was merely knocked out cold.

TRAFT

Oh, to Selbirin with this.

We hear a three people run away.

NARRATOR

At the sight of this, Traft and his soldiers beat a hasty retreat from the cavern. Mag Uidhir, however, stayed put.

Coins and treasure continues to shuffle all around until it starts to sound like an avalanche.

We're hearing the dragon rise from prone to up on its haunches. And we feel their size every step of the way. (They're about as big as a large commercial jet.)

When they speak, their voice is tremendous, booming and huge. And also androgynous. Furthermore, it's important that the breathing sound we've heard is consistent, whether the dragon is speaking or not.

DRAGON

Who dares disturb my slumber? I shall burn your flesh from your bones, and suckle upon your marrow!

MAG UIDHIR

Great and venerable Dragon. The disturbance was an accident, and I humbly beg your forgiveness. Also for the rude behavior of the others with me.

DRAGON

Be gone from here at once!

MAG UIDHIR

What will you accept in exchange for safe passage?

DRAGON

Accept?

MAG UIDHIR

Yes, what do you want?

DRAGON

*(taken aback by the question)*  
I...want to burn the flesh from your bones and suckle upon your marrow.

MAG UIDHIR

We seek something here. There must be something you would accept in return.

DRAGON

*(as menacing as possible)*  
Do not trifle with me, riverling!

NARRATOR

The Dragon opened their mouth and flared the plumage around their neck.

We hear an organic - almost insectoid but of course very large - clicking sound.

NARRATOR

And inside their gaping maw, literal sparks began to fly.

MAG UIDHIR

I've known Dragons in my time, oh venerable one. They have always been supremely rational creatures.

The clicking stops.

NARRATOR

The sparks died down, and the plumage receded.

MAG UIDHIR

I'm certain there's some bargain we can strike.

DRAGON

You've...known more of my kind?

MAG UIDHIR

Aye, I've known, one at least.

DRAGON

You will tell me about them. I must insist.

11 EXT. MOUNTAIN PASS - DEEP NIGHT

11

NARRATOR

Not so far away as the raven flies - but quite far away as the mole burrows...

We're in the middle of a white-out blizzard. The winds are so intense that everyone has to shout to be heard.

Connor is screaming the whole time.

VANDERBERG

Y'ALL, WE GOTTA GET OUT OF THIS WIND FOR A BIT. OR SOMEONE'S GONNA GET FROSTBITE.

NARRATOR

...Our heroes' quest to reach the western part of the continent had proven quite unpleasant. The inclement weather which, you'll recall, had made an overland route untenable, had only gotten worse. It was now making the path to the underground route treacherous as well.

REGAN

*(sarcastic)*

GOOD THING THERE'S A BUNCH OF INNS NEARBY, THEN.

VANDERBERG

THERE'S AN OLD HERMIT OVER THAT RIDGE, GOT A CABIN.  
HE'LL LET US WARM UP FOR A FEW.

12 INT. JETHRO'S CABIN - NEARLY CONTINUOUS

12

We're inside a cabin. Just outside the blizzard rages, and the walls creak from the wind. But inside is the quiet of the grave.

There's a VERY URGENT series of knocks on the door.

VANDERBERG

*(barely audible through door)*

Jethro! Jethro, you old coot, you in there?

NARRATOR

You may recall this particular cabin. But if you do, then your memories of it will not be especially warm.

Beat.

VANDERBERG

*(barely audible)*

We gotta come in!

Another beat.

VANDERBERG

*(barely audible)*

Sorry 'bout this!

Van Der Berg kicks the door in. The blizzard outside comes with it.

Eight sets of footsteps hurry inside, one of them carrying the crying Connor.

VANDERBERG **STRAINS** AGAINST THE DOOR.

VANDERBERG

Help me shut this thing!

BRENNEN

Right.

BRENNEN AND VANDERBERG BOTH **PUSH** TOGETHER.

The door closes - mostly. It still slams open and shut a little.

VANDERBERG

Now hold it down while I nail it shut.

Van Der Berg works quickly to drive four nails through the door.

FINALLY the storm is locked outside.

Things have calmed down, except for Connor.

VANDERBERG

Will someone *please* shut him up?

Arlene's lullaby plays through Jen's iPhone

Connor settles down.

VANDERBERG

Wonder where old Jethro is. I have a hard time believing he finally bought the farm after all these years. On the other hand, I guess I don't.

(Beat)

Well in any case, I got us here and did the door. Someone else can get the hearth going.

YLLLOWYYN

I will.

We hear Yllowyyyn walk to one side of the room, and strike steel against flint.

BRENNEN

Should we prepare to stay the night?

YLLLOWYYN **BLOWS LIGHTLY TO FUEL A FIRE.**

VANDERBERG

Not sure. Gonna have to shoot from the hip a little.

Under the next few lines, we'll hear Yllowyyyn futzing with some kindling.

REGAN

(*never heard the phrase*)

Shoot from the hip?

VANDERBERG

Wing it. Play it by ear. You never seen the way a bowslinger shoots, out west?

NARRATOR

Regan shook her head "no."

The fire begins to catch and crackle. It will steadily grow under the next several lines.

VANDERBERG

The best ones don't have to raise their crossbows to eye level to hit their marks. They just...

*(mimes it)*

*Thhhp!* ...Shoot from the hip.

REGAN

Are you one of the best ones?

VANDERBERG

I'm all right.

REGAN

Interesting.

NARRATOR

Regan did her best not to grimace as she flexed the muscles of her wounded arm. It hung in its sling, just above hip level.

We hear Yllowyyn make his way around the cabin, lighting wall lamps as he goes.

VANDERBERG

To answer your question, if the storm lets up at all tonight, I strongly suggest we hoof it then. It's less than a mile to the cave entrance we're using. Otherwise, we leave by first light, blizzard or no. Wait any longer, the cave's liable to snow over. Then we're well and truly screwed.

NARRATOR

By, now Yllowyyn had lit enough lamps to render the party's current lodgings visible.

BILLY

*(startled and genuinely disturbed)*

Yo what the *fuck* is up with that painting?

VANDERBERG

Yeah, he's had that for a while. Old codger has some strange tastes you ask me. But then what do I know about fine art?

BILLY

I'm gonna...turn it around or something. Those eyes are bugging me out.

Billy walks over and takes the painting off the wall.

BILLY

Hey yo there's like a...little cubby back here. Behind the painting. Just a...totally normal, not at all sketchy hole in the wall behind the creep-ass painting.

VANDERBERG

Anything in it?

BILLY

Uhh...looks like some kind of book.

NELSON

A book?

NIA

A book?

Nelson and Nia walk over.

VANDERBERG

No supplies, huh? All right, somebody gather up all the blankets lying around. And I know the old man had a larder in here somewhere, maybe hidden. So help me look for it.

REGAN

That gonna be a problem? If this guy turns out not to be dead?

VANDERBERG

I'll leave behind some money, don't worry.  
(*then, reading Regan's subtext...*)  
And if it came to it, no. Jethro might give you the willies but he was very old.

NIA

This looks hand-bound.

The book creaks open.

NIA

And hand-written. And this is a peculiar style of leather. Can't say I've ever seen its like before.

JEN

Looks like it's a diary or something. Do you know what these charts and symbols mean?

NARRATOR

Seeing at last what Jen was pointing to, Nia hastily closed the book.

The book slams shut.

NIA

We should not be here. This Jethro may have been old, but he was dangerous. Or at least he kept very dangerous company.

VANDERBERG

What do you mean, dangerous?

NIA

There is Templar magic in this book.

VANDERBERG

You mean those spooky geezers with the hoods?

NIA

The same.

VANDERBERG

Like I said. As soon as the snows let up we're gone.

NIA

*(quietly)*

Nelson, you should hang onto this book. But take care who finds out you have it.

NARRATOR

Having said her piece, Nia nodded politely to the Pennsylvanians, and then left them in their corner of the cabin.

Nia walks away.

NIA

*(drawing attention, as she walks across the cabin)*

Now let's see. If I were in a chaos cult, where would I hide my foodstuffs?

BILLY

*("that was weird.")*

Man, what did you and Nia talk about on the boat?

JEN

I mean...it's not really our business. Unless it is.

NELSON

Right. Um, okay. I guess we've got some time. Where to start?

*(Thinks for a sec)*

So you know those dreams everyone's been having?

Ambience fades out.

NARRATOR

Over the next several minutes, Nelson did his best to summarize his conversation with Nia and her mother to his compatriots. When he had finished, and looked up from his shoes to the faces of his interlocutors, he saw them both at a loss.

Ambience returns, much as it was before. But notably, the winds outside are a little calmer. They will gradually quiet even more throughout the rest of this scene.

JEN

...A god. Like, a God god? Like do they mean God the way we mean God?

NARRATOR

Nelson shrugged his shoulders sheepishly.

BILLY

Do you have any powers?

NELSON

I dunno, I guess I'm supposed to, but...Remember when we were on that dude's farm? Nia was teaching us magic. And I tried to do it, I really did. But I got nowhere. And Jen got it right away. So I just...figured I wasn't good at magic.

JEN

Might be worth trying again, you know, in light of the...maybe you're a god stuff.

NELSON

You know how they say everyone thinks they're the hero of their own story? And you hear that, and you think "Yeah, totally. Except not me because I actually am the hero?"

JEN AND BILLY **BOTH CHUCKLE.**

NELSON

I read so many books where it's like, the nobody is secretly the chosen one or whatever. I think that was the only thing that got me through ninth grade. Thinking like, one day I'm destined to be special. And now we're on some like, no shit for real for real fantasy shit, and...that day on the farm, I remember thinking: I'm not special. Nothing about me's special.

JEN

Okay but even if you can't do magic, you don't have to do magic to be special.

NELSON

Okay, then how am I special?

JEN

Everyone's special.

NELSON

If everyone's special, then no one's special.

BILLY

Gotcha there.

JEN

Nelson you had two experienced priests seriously considering that you might be a reincarnated god. That sounds pretty goddamn special to me.  
(*re: "goddamn," at least a little cheeky*)  
No offense.

NELSON

Like I feel like deep down this might be true. But it also sounds fucking bonkers, right? So...am I just lying to myself because I really want it to be true?

JEN

Do you...really want it to be true?

NELSON

Yeah!  
(*beat*)  
I mean...not really? I don't know.  
(*Thinks a little more*)  
I wanna be powerful. Who doesn't? I wanna protect people! And myself and stuff. But when someone tells you you might be a god, but also you're too out of touch with your godlike self to have any powers, it's like...what the hell am I supposed to do with that information?

BILLY

(*genuinely trying to be helpful*)  
Uh...get in touch? With your godlike self?

NELSON

I mean is there any version of the story where a kid finds out he's God that ends well for that kid?

A long pause.

NARRATOR

Jen looked over to Billy, who gave as surreptitious a shrug as he could managed. Then she looked back to Nelson.

JEN

Maybe this is a...new type of story?

NARRATOR

She held his gaze for a long moment, and then, seeing that he was not comforted, placed a consoling hand on top of his. Billy took the cue, and gave Nelson a few rough but amiable pats on the shoulder.

We hear Billy pat Nelson's leather armor.

NARRATOR

This moment of empathy, however, was promptly interrupted.

**REGAN SNAPS HER FINGERS INSISTENTLY.**

REGAN

The chest.

NARRATOR

Regan was gesturing towards - as you might have guessed - a formidable chest in the center of Jethro's cabin.

NIA

That's the first place I looked.

REGAN

Move the chest and pick up the rug. I'd bet a tit there's a trap door under there.

Two sets of footsteps approach the center of the room.

NARRATOR

Brennen and Yllowyyn immediately sought to comply with this order.

VANDERBERG

Wait, stop.

They do.

VANDERBERG

Listen. You hear that?

Everyone's quiet.

The audience may notice that the winds outside have died away to nothing.

BILLY

I don't hear anything.

VANDERBERG

Exactly. Blizzard let up. Gettin's good so we better get.

BRENNEN

What about the supplies?

VANDERBERG

We've got blankets, firewood, and dried oats. The rest we can scavenge. But if that pass snows over, we're here 'til spring.

NARRATOR

And so, quickly gathering their accouterments and steeling themselves anew for the cold outside, our party departed Jethro's cabin - leaving behind the oil painting in the corner. And the door to the cellar.

We might hear just the slightest hint of an eerie synth pad here.

13 EXT. ENTRANCE TO THE MOUNTAIN TUNNELS

13

We're outside. We hear some winds but they're pretty gentle.

Eight sets of footsteps trudge towards us through the snow.

Once they reach us...

VANDERBERG

There's the entrance, right where I left her. Everyone ready? Once we're go in, it's a three-day hike to the other side. Maybe two, if we really haul ass.

NARRATOR

Looking to his charges and seeing no objections...

VANDERBERG

Giddy up.

They all start walking again, receding into a tunnel of stone and wood.

Just before they exit our sound field though...

NELSON

Billy, listen to me very carefully, okay? Don't. Touch. Anything. No matter how cool it looks.

14 INT. CAVES UNDER THE BLACK MOUNTAINS - DARK

14

DRAGON

Where did you meet one of my kin? Tell me.

MAG UIDHIR

Oh, it was a long time ago. I was born around three thousand years ago, if my math serves.

DRAGON

River Folk do not live that long. Not even the Wood Folk live that long. Would you deceive me?

The dragon starts clicking again.

MAG UIDHIR

Never, venerable one. It sounds unlikely but I swear it on the Matron. My body was preserved long past when I should have been dead, and then reanimated by loathsome magics.

DRAGON

I see.

The clicking stops.

DRAGON

This one of my tribe that you knew - tell me about them. What did they call themselves? What business did you have with them?

MAG UIDHIR

I'm afraid I can't remember what he was called. Or... she? Forgive my stupidity, most ancient one, I don't think I knew.

DRAGON

This distinction is not meaningful to my kind. Continue your story.

That really grabs Mag Uidhir's attention.

MAG UIDHIR

It's not?

DRAGON

No.

He has much he wants to ask and no idea where to start.

MAG UIDHIR

I...If I may, oh venerable--

DRAGON

--Do not make yourself tiresome to me, riverling. Continue, I said.

MAG UIDHIR

I...of course. We approached...this Venerable Being because we sought...their help in our fight. The Elves are not scared of much, but you may know that your kind terrifies them.

DRAGON

A justified fear. The Tree Folk were considered a delicacy in many quarters.

MAG UIDHIR

We begged their aid, explained our plight, the justice of our position. I felt like they listened, really took what we said to heart. That was how I learned that your kind are so rational. But they said they would need time to think. And before they decided, we were captured.

DRAGON

Do you resent them this pause for contemplation?

MAG UIDHIR

I would not dare.

DRAGON

If you believe me rational, then you must believe lies anger me more than any truth.

MAG UIDHIR

Then yes. I did. But before long it was the least of my woes.

DRAGON

There is a parable my kind tell. There was once one of us who was very wise. The wisest, some say. They made no decision which did not have unassailable logic behind it. One day, they were sat atop a mountain. They

(MORE)

DRAGON (cont'd)

spied two goats, one each on opposite sides of the mountain's base. It was an equal distance to either goat. Neither goat looked more plump or more healthy than the other. There was no logical reason to choose one goat over the other. And that is how the wisest among us starved to death.

MAG UIDHIR

*(laughs)*

I'll admit - I knew your kind were wise, but not that they were funny.

DRAGON

That parable is not considered a joke, and I did not intend it to amuse you. I intended it as...an apology that is not fully mine to give. It is true my kind thinks carefully on our decisions, and that is nothing to apologize for. But the lives of your kind can seem so fleeting compared to ours, sometimes we forget how much they nevertheless contain. This...is an error.

MAG UIDHIR

You are most gracious, oh venerable one. Now, to your point, about the lives of my kind, I should like to begin negotiations, if it please you.

DRAGON

What do you seek in here.

MAG UIDHIR

Well, safe passage, to begin with.

DRAGON

I assumed you did not desire unsafe passage. What else?

MAG UIDHIR

We came to these caves seeking a weapon from my time - an enchanted shield. But now...it seems I have found a vastly more powerful weapon.

Beat.

DRAGON

If I understand your hope, then you should abandon it. I am oath-bound to never again take the life of a sentient creature.

MAG UIDHIR

Even to save the lives of other such creatures?

DRAGON

It is not my place to decide which lives are more worthy. And it is not your place to question my oaths.

MAG UIDHIR

Of course. Forgive my presumption. What would you accept for safe passage, and for your leave to search for the abandoned shield?

DRAGON

I shall grant you both things, if you can defeat me. In a game of riddles.

MAG UIDHIR

Riddles?

DRAGON

Long has it been since my wits were challenged. I relish the opportunity.

MAG UIDHIR

And if I lose - I suppose you'll find a way to square all the flesh burning and marrow suckling with your oath somehow?

DRAGON

*(forgot what they said)*  
Flesh burning and--ah yes. 'Twas an empty threat, I confess. But you shall not leave this chamber until you have bested me. And since there is little in here for you to eat or drink, I suggest you give it your all.

MAG UIDHIR

I understand. May I first rouse the one you swatted away before. It bodes ill to sleep like that after an injury.

DRAGON

Very well.

MAG UIDHIR

*(projecting across the chamber)*  
Arden? Arden, can you hear me? Best to wake up now.

ARDEN **GROANS** FROM ACROSS THE ROOM.

MAG UIDHIR

There's a good lad. Now I want you to listen to me, and stay very calm--

ARDEN

--VANQUISH THE DRAGON!

Footsteps sprint towards us.

NARRATOR

The Dragon took one look at the large, armed man dashing towards them.

We hear an almost cartoonish ping, and another CRASH!

NARRATOR

And flicked him away with a single digit of its talon, whereupon he crashed into a pile of treasure and fell still once again.

ARDEN **GROANS AGAIN**, THIS TIME IN OBVIOUS PAIN.

MAG UIDHIR

Arden. There's a parlay happening.

ARDEN

Parlay boring!

MAG UIDHIR

Yes, I know. So terribly boring. Why don't you go and find the general and his friends? Wait with them until I send for you.

ARDEN

I shall bide my time.

MAG UIDHIR

Please do that.

We hear Arden roll slowly out of the pile, and then trudge out of the chamber. Once he's gone...

MAG UIDHIR

Pray forgive the manners on that one. The Matron works through many instruments. Some are...not as sharp as others.

DRAGON

Mm. So then. Riddles.

MAG UIDHIR

Aye, as agreed. Who begins?

DRAGON

You are the guest.

NARRATOR

Mag Uidhir smirked.

MAG UIDHIR

What walks on four legs in the morning, two legs in the afternoon--

DRAGON

--A man.

MAG UIDHIR

I...didn't even finish the--

DRAGON

It walks on three legs in the evening. It's a metaphor for the life cycle of your kind.

MAG UIDHIR

How did you--

DRAGON

--EVERYONE KNOWS THAT RIDDLE! That's the one riddle that everyone knows!

MAG UIDHIR

Blast it. Feels like only yesterday I heard it for the first time. Nearly blew my skull open. I suppose it's been propagated widely in the thirty centuries since.

DRAGON

Then, riverling, it is my turn. You must grant me a... pause for contemplation.

**END OF PART TWO.**

## PART THREE:

15 INT. UNDER THE MOUNTAINS

15

Eight sets of footsteps - a few carrying torches - walk towards us, as our Party's voices fade in:

BILLY

What about *The Matrix*? You ever see that flick?

NELSON

(no duh)

Yeah, I've seen The frickin' *Matrix*, Billy. My Dad wrote a chapter in a textbook about it.

BILLY

Well Keanu's basically a god in that, and he turns out okay.

NELSON

He gets shot to death!

BILLY

Yeah but then he comes back all powerful and shit?

NELSON

He gets blinded by robots!

JEN

Hun, it's very sweet that you're trying to help but maybe we can just let Nelson sit with his feelings for a bit, yeah?

NARRATOR

But Nelson's feelings were interrupted once more by a fork in the subterranean path.

The footsteps gradually come to a halt.

VANDERBERG

Hey y'all. We're going left, on account of a dragon.

JEN

What?

VANDERBERG

Yeah, path to the right's a little shorter. But we've heard tell there's a dragon that way. Might be bullshit, but why chance it just to save an hour?

(Beat)

C'mon.

Footsteps resume, and recede off to our left.

16 INT. DRAGON'S HOARD

16

We're back in the Dragon's hoard. And for some reason...we're just sitting there for a while.

MAG UIDHIR

All right, that's it. I give up.

DRAGON

It is not permitted, this "giving up."

MAG UIDHIR

It must be almost a full day by now. I can't think of anything that has three wings, five legs, seven hearts, nine brains, no voice, and swims.

DRAGON

Well then keep trying.

MAG UIDHIR

I will not. You'll have to watch me die of thirst.

DRAGON

What if I gave you a hint?

MAG UIDHIR

I didn't know hints were an option. I would love a hint.

DRAGON

*(unsteady)*

Yes of course it's...ah...it has...eleven toes!

NARRATOR

Mag Uidhir looked deep into the Dragon's eyes, each one a globe of onyx, several yards around with a halo of fire for an iris.

He waits a beat.

MAG UIDHIR

This riddle has no answer, does it?

DRAGON

*(almost sheepish?)*

...No. I made up the clues on the spot and just hoped you'd think of something that fit.

MAG UIDHIR

*(sighs)*

You know, if I weren't speaking to so wise and venerable a being, I'd suspect you were stalling for time.

NARRATOR

Mag Uidhir's terrible and enormous interlocutor stared him down for a good...long...while.

DRAGON

...So I am.

MAG UIDHIR

Why?

DRAGON

Because I have enjoyed speaking with you. And I do not want you to leave.

MAG UIDHIR

You could overpower me as I could overpower an ant. Why the pretense of riddles?

DRAGON

Because riddles resemble conversation. And it would be immoral to overpower you.

MAG UIDHIR

You--we'll come back to that. Why not just venture out above. There are many who would relish--be honored by the chance to speak with you. Maybe even other living Dragons for all I know.

DRAGON

Because I do not want to.

MAG UIDHIR

You don't want to.

DRAGON

There's unlikely to be anyone interesting up there anyway.

MAG UIDHIR

You found me interesting. I assure you I am not *that* especially clever.

DRAGON

And look. Not even you wish to speak with me.

*(a pause...then, forlornly)*

You'll want to step to the side.

MAG UIDHIR  
What?

DRAGON  
Step a few yards away. Quickly!

Footsteps scuffle.

NARRATOR  
Mag Uidhir did so, and not a moment before something shiny and heavy came streaking down from the cavernous dark above, and crashed into where he'd been standing.

There's a quick whoosh of air and then a huge metallic clank.

MAG UIDHIR  
What the blazes?

NARRATOR  
Upon some inspection, Mag Uidhir saw that he had dodged a suit of gilded plate steel, now badly dented but complete - apart from one missing gauntlet. When it hit, it had spewed a small cloud of fine dust, the origins of which Mag Uidhir could guess, but was not willing to get close enough to know for certain.

DRAGON  
Such trinkets are always falling down here. Adventurous souls, who get lost or fall down a well or some such. In days gone by, I was grateful to be alerted of a meal. But now, you know...

MAG UIDHIR  
Aye, the oath. Now, to that point...I actually rather have enjoyed speaking with you. It's just...to your point, the ones I'm traveling with do not have the boon nor curse of magical long life. And I would very much like to keep my word to them by getting them what they seek.

DRAGON  
(big sigh)  
Alas you are right. I have again betrayed my morals, and disappointed my ancestors and myself.  
(beat)  
I shall grant you and your comrades safe passage. That is only fair.

MAG UIDHIR  
Thank you, oh venerable one.

DRAGON

The weapon you seek, this enchanted shield. Do you know what it looks like?

MAG UIDHIR

Thick oak, with a large ring of iron in its center. Leaves painted on it in woad and gold.

DRAGON

I have seen it. I will tell you where it is.

MAG UIDHIR

You... I thank you. I will tell stories of your graciousness to whoever will listen.

A beat...

NARRATOR

But Mag Uidhir, having been granted what he claimed to want by a terrible force of nature which owed him nothing, did not hasten to act on his unbelievable luck. Instead, he stood where he was, looking perhaps more nervous than he had since this entire ordeal began.

DRAGON

There is something else you seek.

MAG UIDHIR

...There is.

DRAGON

We agreed on terms and the terms have been met. One less patient than me might accuse you of having bargained in bad faith.

MAG UIDHIR

Never, oh Venerable One. Rather...I know that what I must ask next may indeed be too much. I would--I *must* dare for myself, but I would not take the risk on behalf of my companions.

DRAGON

You have my sacred word that I will not hold what you ask against your companions. But I must hear you ask it. Now.

MAG UIDHIR

*(takes a breath)*

A Dragon's plumage. Are the rumors true?

NARRATOR

At this, Mag Uidhir's gargantuan interlocutor flared their nostrils.

DRAGON

YOU INDEED ASK TOO MUCH! If I would not be your weapon in spirit then I would no more be your weapon in body. To ask it of me is insult against the sanctity of my spirit, my body, and my word!

MAG UIDHIR

You misunderstand me! I would not use it as a weapon. It is said that but one quill of your mane can unmake any injury. Is that true?

DRAGON

*(this is bringing up some shit for them)*  
Do you think I've not known your kind before? Of course you would use it as a weapon! It is all you know.

MAG UIDHIR

All I want is my body back.

DRAGON

Will you not use your body to fight in your war?

MAG UIDHIR

Of course I will. It's all I have to fight with. But I am no more or less able to fight in my body than in this...desecrated thing I now inhabit.

DRAGON

Then explain your desire to have it back.

MAG UIDHIR

*(much angrier than one should be when speaking to a Dragon)*  
BECAUSE IT IS MINE! I went through quite a lot to get it and I would go through quite a lot more to have it back.

A beat.

NARRATOR

Mag Uidhir's bargaining opponent narrowed their tremendous eyes.

DRAGON

You're not lying, but neither are you telling me the whole truth. I must insist that you do.

MAG UIDHIR

I will! In exchange for your plumage. One quill per question. I must answer each question as thoroughly as you like but they must indeed be *one question* each. Once I am satisfied that my body is returned to me, I shall leave. But I assure you, I have a great many injuries I wish to unmake.

NARRATOR

The slits of the Ancient One's irises opened, each to the size of a pitch black door through which a grown man could easily fit. They studied Mag Uidhir for a long, long time. Mag Uidhir, to his credit, trembled all the while but never once flinched from this awesome and horrible gaze.

DRAGON

I accept your proposal.

MAG UIDHIR

Very good.

*(shouts)*

Arden! General Traft! Get your arses in here! It's safe! For now!

*They start from pretty far away, but five sets of footsteps rapidly approach and then come to a halt.*

TRAFT

What's going on?

MAG UIDHIR

I've negotiated safe passage.

TRAFT

Well hot damn, you'll have to tell me how you managed that soon as we're out of here

MAG UIDHIR

That's not all. The mighty keeper of this cavern is going to show you where to find Mac Connor's Shield.

TRAFT

He what?

MAG UIDHIR

Take the shield, and bring it west as we planned. Find someone worthy to wield it.

TRAFT

What about you?

He pauses.

MAG UIDHIR

I've negotiated my own deal. I'll be staying here a while.

17 INT. FEDERATION HOUSE - DAY

17

NARRATOR

Now I must take you a good ways west, where another deal was being discussed.

We're inside a large wooden building. It's heated by a very big fire at its center.

CHIEF SPEAKER

First Snow of Three Bridges. The Speakers of the Federation have conferred about Three Bridges' plight, and your request for aid.

NARRATOR

The fire inside the Federation House had been built very large this day. There was a damp chill in the air; if you'd asked Steady River, she'd have said that First Snow's namesake was on its way. And between the fire, and her nerves from waiting to hear what the other Federation members had decided, First Snow's winter furs were damp with already damp with sweat.

CHIEF SPEAKER

By unanimous consent...  
(*knows they're delivering bad news*)  
...every village in the Federation will take your people in as their own, should they choose to flee.

NARRATOR

First Snow hung her head. For while this decision was generous in and of itself, the notable omission of her most urgent request told her all she needed to know. Steady River squeezed her hand in consolation.

CHIEF SPEAKER

Furthermore, Three Bridges is exempt from this year's request for additional corn.

FIRST SNOW

So, the call for warriors has been denied, then?

CHIEF SPEAKER

The villages will all be know of your troubles, and that you are asking for warriors. Some will be permitted to volunteer. However, we must insist that no

(MORE)

CHIEF SPEAKER (cont'd)  
village should deplete its workforce by any more than  
one quarter.

FIRST SNOW  
(*sad, not challenging*)  
You know that won't be enough to repel the rangers.

CHIEF SPEAKER  
(*genuine*)  
I'm sorry, First Snow. We expect a very hard winter.  
The able-bodied are needed.

FIRST SNOW  
But if more warriors are sent, we can defend the town  
with fewer losses. Everyone can return home to their  
work as soon as the fighting is done.

CHIEF SPEAKER  
Respectfully, First Snow, that is not our assessment.

FIRST SNOW  
So you think us incapable fighters, then?

CHIEF SPEAKER  
The village raised by Steady River and...her husband?  
No one could doubt your courage. But many of the  
Speakers here have run with war parties. Believe us  
when we say that courage is rarely enough. It's a  
matter of numbers, yes, but--

FIRST SNOW  
--Well then give us--

CHIEF SPEAKER  
--But! It is also a matter of experience. Of tactics.  
Of a great many skills, that you could never hope to  
acquire in a week's time.  
(*aside*)  
...And perhaps shouldn't want to.  
(*Continues*)  
Most in the Federation who had those skills joined  
Traft's campaign, and have returned maimed or not at  
all.

FIRST SNOW  
(*under her breath*)  
Not everyone.

NARRATOR  
At this, Steady River squeezed First Snow's hand a  
little more sharply. But if the Chief Speaker heard  
this reply, she made the diplomatic decision not to  
acknowledge it.

CHIEF SPEAKER

The Federation has nothing more to say on the matter, I'm afraid. But you are welcome to join us for our evening meal.

STEADY RIVER

Thank you, but no. I've found bad news is best delivered as soon as possible.

CHIEF SPEAKER

Will you take some bread and meat for the road?

STEADY RIVER

Yes, thank you.

CHIEF SPEAKER

Very well. If you're not staying, I believe some of the other Speakers had some things they wanted to say.

SPEAKER 1

Yes, that's right. Between Stones made more blankets than we think we'll need this year. We'll send them to Three Bridges. If you choose to leave, they'll warm you on your journey. If you choose to fight, perhaps you can trade them, and hire a ranger or two yourselves.

FIRST SNOW

*(has objections)*

I...

*(but thinks better of speaking them)*

...appreciate your generosity.

SPEAKER 2

North Bend has some lumber we can spare. We'll send a cart.

SPEAKER 3

South Hill has many bows that Traft's warriors left behind. Believe me when I tell you the cost of fighting the Easterners is terrible. But if you insist on it anyway, the bows are yours.

FIRST SNOW

Thank you, all of you.

STEADY RIVER

Yes, truly. We understand what you're doing for us.

CHIEF SPEAKER

And my village has extra salt, if you need to preserve any food. We hope it's clear what we advise your village to do. But may the many Matrons watch over you, whatever you decide.

18 EXT. OUT ON THE PLAINS - EVENING

18

A small cart, pulled by a mule, rattles along the prairie, as the creatures of the evening begin to emerge.

Daffodil brays.

STEADY RIVER

I know you're disappointed.

FIRST SNOW

*Disappointed?* I failed everyone.

STEADY RIVER

We didn't get what we wanted, that doesn't mean you failed.

FIRST SNOW

Why do you turn everything into some kind of riddle, where things don't mean what they mean? We came here for one thing! It was my responsibility to get it, and I didn't. Call that what you want, but I call it failure.

STEADY RIVER

...Are you finished?

FIRST SNOW

No, I'm not finished!

STEADY RIVER

Oh, well, by all means, carry on.

FIRST SNOW

Aggggggggghh!

First Snow stews for several beats, slowly but surely regaining her composure.

FIRST SNOW

*(a little embarrassed)*  
Okay, I'm finished.

STEADY RIVER

Your speech was better than any I could have given. Truly. You balanced passion with reason in a way few could have managed under such pressure. But we cannot make others act as we wish. We do not govern like those brutes from over the Mountains, where someone makes a decree, and the rest are made to follow it with steel at their throats. We have the Federation. We build consensus. That is part of what we're fighting

(MORE)

STEADY RIVER (cont'd)

to defend. But it means we don't always get what we want. Now - when you've heard me gripe about the Federation, what is it I've said?

FIRST SNOW

They're too cautious.

STEADY RIVER

Yes. I fear without a big change, they'll save a plant but lose the crop. But knowing that about them, it is to your great credit that we're not leaving empty-handed.

FIRST SNOW

I suppose.

STEADY RIVER

Let me guess. You're afraid of looking foolish when we return home. Because you convinced them of your plan and it didn't work go as you hoped.

FIRST SNOW

Well...yes, of course I am.

STEADY RIVER

Mm. Some advice then, if you want to be Speaker. You'll have to get used to that. Do you think your plan was wrong?

FIRST SNOW

*(pensive)*

No. I still think it's the only smart thing to do.

STEADY RIVER

Good. It's right that you care what your neighbors think of you. But you also need to trust yourself enough that you're willing to earn their scorn sometimes.

FIRST SNOW

Yes, Auntie.

STEADY RIVER

There's more that troubles you, though.

FIRST SNOW

I can't help but think that if Wolf-Spear were here to fight--

STEADY RIVER

--He's not.

FIRST SNOW

The other towns would send more warriors if he were fighting, you know they would!

STEADY RIVER

*(a flare of bitterness)*

Listen to me, girl. That man is no more. I don't even know where Tree That Bends is half of the time. And he's supposedly still alive. And supposedly still my husband. I'm not saying this to take your hero away from you. I'm saying it so you can spend your energy on matters you might actually influence. Now I'll hear no more about Wolf-Spear. Is that understood?

FIRST SNOW

*(a little hurt)*

I understand, Auntie.

A beat.

FIRST SNOW

It's just that...

STEADY RIVER

*(tired, wants to move on)*

First Snow, please.

FIRST SNOW

I only wish I understood. I've asked Uncle to explain but he never does.

STEADY RIVER

It's a terrible thing your Uncle had to do. He'll talk about it in his own time.

FIRST SNOW

I think he's embarrassed.

STEADY RIVER

*(getting testy again)*

First Snow.

FIRST SNOW

I think he still questions his decision.

STEADY RIVER

ENOUGH!

*This reverberates - literally and emotionally - for a moment.*

STEADY RIVER

Forgive me. You don't deserve to be shouted down for speaking your mind. It seems that particular scar is even more raw than I realized. The truth is, of course he questions his decision. Just like me, just like

(MORE)

STEADY RIVER (cont'd)

everyone else. But he certainly didn't make it lightly. To harp on it would only serve to cause him shame. And believe me, girl. Shame will be the death of that man before anything else.

FIRST SNOW

I'm sorry, Auntie. I didn't mean to be rude.

*Note: Steady River pronounces 'coyote' with three syllables, and closer to the Spanish pronunciation. That matters later, I promise.*

STEADY RIVER

It's all right, dear. I'm sorry to have shouted. At least I'll have scared off the coyotes.

*(beat)*

Do you want me to give tell everyone the news when we get back?

FIRST SNOW

*(unhappy, but courageous)*

...No. I should do it. It was my plan. And I do want to be Speaker.

STEADY RIVER

I really am proud of you, girl. You'll have my vote for sure.

FIRST SNOW

Daffodil? Do you want a carrot?

*We fade out on the mule braying excitedly.*

19 INT. WHITE FOREST - GREAT COUNCIL CHAMBER - AFTERNOON

19

*The space is wide, rich, and echo-ey, with a crackling fire in its center.*

NARRATOR

Now, there is one more political arrangement that you must understand in order to make sense of what follows.

We travel now to the White Forest, where the sun was low, and the Great Council was nearing the end of its session. And being that today was the last of the season before the autumnal holy days, there was a certain urgency felt towards concluding the day's business.

WYYN

So then...final statements on the proposed motion?

BA'AT

I think there's general agreement.

COUNCIL MEMBER

Let the record show there is not general agreement.

BA'AT

I think there's a sizable majority agreement. As much as we are sympathetic to the aims of the farming colonies out west, the proprietors knew the risks when they requested their charter. We simply cannot spare the resources at present to quell Urrkyet unrest, especially with these troubling new reports of Memyet unrest closer to home.

ANOTHER ELF

The Honorable Ba'at lo-Yl is not wrong. But perhaps we might offer to send a few troops, provided Lord Tyymos and the rest would be willing to pay for them in additional duties and customs.

BA'AT

Mm. They'll never accept but I suppose it would be decent to offer.

WYYN

We'll take the proposals individually. All in favor of the motion to send a company of Knights over the mountain to aid the farming colonies?

There's a little bit of shuffling.

WYYN

All opposed?

There's a lot more shuffling.

WYYN

By a vote of twenty five to six, the motion fails. All in favor of sending the additional correspondence as recommended by the Honorable Ba'al lo-Vyr?

Lots of fast shuffling.

WYYN

That motion passes unanimously. Thus closes docket item one hundred thirty six of one hundred thirty seven for the season. Now, as docket item one hundred thirty requires the testimony of Lord Commander Ry'y lo-Th'yyt, who cannot be here at present, we will need a secondary motion to vote anyway in her absence. Would anyone care to--

--Huge and outrageously noisy doors are thrown open!

NARRATOR

The entire council gawked and gaped at the sudden arrival of Ry'y lo-Th'yyt - burned and bloodied and barely keeping upright.

THE ENTIRE COUNCIL

*(ad lib.)*

My word! Dear me! Is that the Lord Commander? What happened to her? *[etc.]*

BA'AT

*(genuinely taken aback)*  
...Lord Commander?

RY'Y

*(full of venom and barely holding it together)*  
I believe I was summoned.

WYYN

I...we were...your outriders informed us you were gravely wounded in the fracas on the coast.

RY'Y

They spoke true.

WYYN

Perhaps you should take some time to...rest and recover before you attend to highly consequential matters of state, no?

RY'Y

Whatever was urgent enough to summon me for is urgent enough to discuss here and now. To my face.

BA'AT

Lord Commander, please. Take some time to collect and comport yourself. If for no other reason than at least to preserve genteelness of this ancient and sacred room. You are literally bleeding on the floor.

RY'Y

*(like a viper coiling and then striking)*  
Oh, you soft lilted flower. It is NOT MY DIGNITY THAT IS IN PERIL! Yes I am bleeding on the floor. Look upon it! It is the blood of my kind which waters this sacred tree. While the politicians and bureaucrats sit in their plush and gilded chairs and dare to judge. So go ahead, tell me what you have brought me here to tell me. Only mind your dignity as you do it, Sir.

There is a deeply uncomfortable silence

Someone half-stifles a cough.

WYYN

*(can't help but tread lightly)*

...Lord Commander. There is no one in this room, or indeed, in all the White Forest, who would question your bravery or the honor of your deeds. But one fears that you are, perhaps...too devoted to your duty.

RY'Y

Of course, now I see my error. I should have known you bureaucrats would not suffer devotion to duty.

BA'AT

*(finds some nerve)*

We mean to say that we have reason to question your use of martial power. And whether it is always used as best serves Elfkind.

WYYN

Indeed. We spoke not a fortnight ago regarding the culling that escaped your control. And now this business with the Memyet sporting affair - we've heard reports of a dozen Memyet dead, and two score wounded.

BA'AT

Not to mention nearly a dozen of your knights!

WYYN

It is simply beyond the pale.

BA'AT

We wished to offer you one final chance to explain yourself. Before this council is forced to relieve you of your command.

NARRATOR

Ry'y lo-Th'yyt dabbed the sweat of agony from off her brow, and slowly scanned the council with bloodshot, narrow eyes.

RY'Y

*(quiet rage building)*

One day a councilor found a termite, all the way up in her bedchambers, atop a great and venerable whitewood tree. So she trapped it under a jar, and called to the horticulturist, and said "kill this termite." And he did. But it happened again the next night. THE THIRD NIGHT THERE WERE TWO TERMITES, AND THEN--

WYYN

--Lord Commander, we were all taught this parable as children. The vermin kept returning until they were killed at the root. But since we trod familiar ground anyway, why don't you remind us how the horticulturist eradicates the vermin?

The parry lands.

BA'AT

Surely 'tis not by taking hatchet or torch to the root of the tree! Indeed is not the great skill of horticulture knowing which poisons to apply and when, so that the vermin are killed but the tree survives?  
(beat)

Our great civilization rests upon a delicate balance, which must always be maintained if that civilization is to endure. Excessive warmaking, even with the aim of preserving order, is like to spawn chaos as much as anything else.

RY'Y

You do our ancestors a great dishonor to so disparage what they built! The order they envisaged is not as precarious as you would have it. The Urrkyet grow bold. The Memyet forget themselves. And not a few of our own sons and daughters contribute to this decay.

WYYN

Lord Commander, you will explain your insinuation at once!

(Gets legitimately choked up)

For well you know that our own dear son has been missing nearly--

RY'Y

--Your son is a traitor!

THIS USUALLY PRIM AND PROPER CROWD IS **SHOCKED INTO GASPS!**

BA'AT

(quiet to conceal his fury)

How dare you, sir? How dare you.

RY'Y

Not only did he aid and abet enemies of the Concordant in evading justice, he has shot at and killed Knights of the Wood to do so.

WYYN

Have you any proof of this outrageous accusation? Or will you speak any infamy or blasphemy you think you must to retain your title?

RY'Y

I have seen it with my own eyes! So have my troops!

BA'AT

You're a liar!

RY'Y

Is it really that hard to believe? We have all heard the disdain their daughter has for her elders, when she's deep in her cups. Why shouldn't her younger brother take her indecent rhetoric to its logical conclusion?

BA'AT

Her claims are nothing short of treasonous. I move we vote right now to strip her of her titles.

WYYN

That barely fits her misdeeds. She should be exiled!

There are some mumblings and murmurs at this escalation.

COUNCIL MEMBER

Come now, let us calm ourselves.

BA'AT

I will not calm myself as my family is besmirched. I've a right mind to demand satisfaction for that.

**RY'Y LAUGHS, LOUDLY AND DERISIVELY.**

RY'Y

Oh, how I wish you would! It would be the honor of my life to shoot you in the front, before you can stab anyone else in the back.

COUNCIL MEMBER

Now wait just a minute! No one is going to shoot anyone. There are devastating implications to the claims made here today. And yet both parties involved have been dependable servants of the realm for as long as I can remember. Would it not behoove us to investigate the matter, calmly and soberly?

WYYN

You mean for us to *calmly and soberly* consider our children being accused of treason?

COUNCIL MEMBER

Of course not, Wynn lo-Dyyk. None could be asked to do so. That is why you are far from the only votes on this council. I'd like to propose that Ba'at lo-Yl and Wynn

(MORE)

COUNCIL MEMBER (cont'd)

lo-Dyk abstain from any votes on this matter, as is only right and proper. However! I'd also like to propose that until the matter is resolved, Ry'y lo-Th'yyt should be sent away from the White Forest, and an acting commander should assume control of the Th'ar lo-Hyyl.

RY'Y

WHAT?

COUNCIL MEMBER

Hear me out, Commander. This is not a punishment, merely a precaution to maintain decorum during our investigation. There's no doubt in my mind you've brought forth your allegations out of concern for the realm. So I pray you permit us the time to conduct an investigation that meets the gravity of the charges.

RY'Y

Hah! "Gravity of the charges." Spare me. This den of cowardice is a shame to your ancestors *and* your descendants.

*She storms out.*

*The ostentatiously creaky doors open and shut behind her.*

20 INT. WHITE FOREST - STABLE - A LITTLE WHILE LATER

20

*We're in a stable. We hear a bunch of straps being hastily fastened and saddle bags being loaded up.*

NARRATOR

And so Ry'y lo-Th'yyt made preparations to depart the White Forest in a hurry. But she was met in the stables by an unexpected visitor.

COUNCIL MEMBER

Lord Commander.

*She continues her work, ignoring him completely.*

COUNCIL MEMBER

Your wounds do seem quite serious. I've brought you some medicine.

RY'Y

*(flat)*  
Thank you.

She snatches a few vials out of his hand, but continues the work.

COUNCIL MEMBER

I was hoping we might have a word before you left.

RY'Y

I'm afraid I've already wasted enough precious breath on politicians for one lifetime.

COUNCIL MEMBER

Have I misjudged you then? Do you not imagine yourself Chancellor one day?

She pauses her work for a pregnant second...But then sets back to it.

COUNCIL MEMBER

I tend to recognize in others those traits of character which have been the most motivating to myself.

RY'Y

Perhaps I did, once. When I was more naive.

COUNCIL MEMBER

I think you are principled, not naive. You were right, of course, that we have gone too soft. But a righteous cause is unfortunately not enough to win in politics. We must play by the established rules, until we are powerful enough to rewrite them.

*(Okay, fine. Cards on the table.)*

That is why I intend to unseat that pompous blowhard Ba'at lo-Yl, and take his place. And then I shall return us to the resolve which has earned us all we have.

Ry'y finally ceases her work and starts paying attention.

RY'Y

And how did you intend to do that?

COUNCIL MEMBER

For now, let us say that I have several irons in that fire. But you may have brought me an opportunity to drastically accelerate my plans. I take it you were not bluffing about young Yllowynn.

RY'Y

I was not.

COUNCIL MEMBER

Then instruct the subordinates who can support your claim to remain behind during your period of exile. The council will summon them to testify. I will continue to play the part of impartial but principled observer, and all the while we shall build the case against young Yllowyyn.

RY'Y

You could compel their testimony without my help. Why involve me?

COUNCIL MEMBER

Because you are uniquely able to help me with another matter. You see there's been some trouble out west, with some of the charter farms. Some Urrkyet trouble. I wanted to send Knights, but I was outvoted. Now as it happens, I have some fairly substantial investments in those farms - but more importantly - it's obvious to me we'll need to civilize that region sooner or later. No sense tiptoeing around it now. And so long as you're temporarily relieved of your duties...

RY'Y

...Perhaps I might take a trip out west.

COUNCIL MEMBER

Precisely my thinking. I know you're capable of the decisive action that the situation requires. Do that for me...and you shall be my Vice Chancellor. Do we have an understanding?

NARRATOR

And for the first time since the day of the horse race, a glint shone in Ry'y lo-Th'yyt's eye.

RY'Y

On my honor.

**END OF PART THREE.**

## PART FOUR:

21 OUTSIDE TIME AND SPACE

21

There's perfect quiet except for the Narrator.

NARRATOR

Now, for the remainder of this Book of our tale, the experiences of the Party of Seven - plus young Connor - are bound to be quite "action packed," as they say. So before I set us upon that ramp of causal gravity, I must tie up a few other loose threads.

These events, all profoundly important to what will follow, will nevertheless interrupt my...how do you say, "flow," if left for later. Impeccable pacing, you see, is a skill one acquires when free to exist outside time and space.

FADE IN:

22 EXT. SUGARCANE ISLE PORT - DAY

22

We're in a tropical clime, and at a busy seaport.

NARRATOR

First we journey to the southwestern-most tip of the so-called Sugarcane Archipelago, where a small rowboat has just made port.

BEN

After you, darling.

Four steps of feet walk onto a dock.

MILDRED

Well. I suppose...this is where we live now.

GWEN

Suppose it is.

MILDRED

*(exhales)*

Quite hot for late autumn, wouldn't you say?

ARLENE

My, what unusual trees. Beautiful though.

BEN

Listen, don't take this the wrong way. I can't imagine you have supper plans. And since you're the only familiar faces on this entire landmass...what say we four find a public house and get better acquainted?

ARLENE

I think that would be love--

*--She's interrupted by just the kindest-sounding middle-aged church lady you can possibly imagine--*

ETHEL

--Excuse me, I'm so sorry to intrude. Are you four new here, by any chance?

A brief, uncertain beat...

MILDRED

We are.

GWEN

Why do you ask?

ETHEL

Well I work for the Church, and--oh, how rude of me! My name's Ethel. How do you do?

BEN

Well met, Ethel. I'm Ben.

ETHEL

Ben.

MILDRED

Mildred.

ARLENE

Anna.

GWEN

Gayle.

ETHEL

Well color me charmed. And might I ask - I don't know the customs where you all are from, but around here you two are dressed as preachers. Are you of Galadon's Cloth by any chance?

MILDRED

Me and Ben were preachers on the mainland.

ETHEL

Oh, wonderful! That will give us something to talk about for sure. Not that we wouldn't have found other topics on our own. Anyway, as I was saying, I work for the Church too. We make it a point to try and welcome all the newcomers here. So consider yourselves bade welcome!

ARLENE

*(pleasant surprise)*  
Oh. How very kind of you.

ETHEL

And if you're interested, we serve a meal everyday at our rectory. It's later than breakfast and earlier than lunch, so we call it lunchfast - just a cute little thing we all do around here. It's pay what you can, wouldn't wanna presume anything either way about your circumstances. And there's lots of friendly, decent folk to meet. If you need help finding somewhere to stay, just talk to Gregory and he'll get you set right up.

NARRATOR

A cascade of grateful smiles passed between the four weary travelers.

MILDRED

*(mostly to herself)*  
Galadon does provide.

ETHEL

Indeed he does! So you'll stop by, then?

ARLENE

I believe we shall.

ETHEL

Oh, I'm so glad! Now, I have to stay here a while longer in case anyone else arrives. But if you stay on this road a-ways, it'll take you straight to our rectory. It's just a few paces past the auction house. You can't miss it.

23 EXT. SEAHOLD DOCKS - NIGHT

23

It's night, but there's still some commercial activity around us. And definitely some waves and sea birds.

NARRATOR

Now, indeed the very night before these four travelers were bid this warm welcome, there was another journey to the Sugarcane Isles being planned. And this one was...well, I'll let you see for yourself.

We set our scene now in Seahold, where two men - both very recently down on their luck - were meeting. Little did they know, they were each soon to be the next in the other's latest streak of misfortunes.

ARDEL

I'm told you can offer discreet and safe passage to the Sugarcane Isles.

NARRATOR

The one - Ardel Redmoor - had recently been exposed and deposed by a much craftier opponent. And, you'll recall, he was rapidly running low on the means by which the highborn typically evaded justice.

OLAFSSON

Ayup. For a reasonable fee, of course.

NARRATOR

The other - Captain Otto Olafsson - had been robbed of everything but the shirt off his back, and set adrift at sea, by Red Ren the Ruthless and her crew.

ARDEL

Would you accept that ass?

OLAFSSON

Excuse me?

ARDEL

That donkey, right over there. Hearty farm stock to be sure.

The donkey brays.

OLAFSSON

For the journey you're after? That's an insultingly low price.

ARDEL

And yet here you are, still on the docks after dark, after all the more reputable captains have already found employment.

A beat...

24 EXT. MERCHANT VESSEL DECK - DAWN

24

We're out at sea on a large, wooden vessel.

OLAFSSON

*(mutters under his breath)*

So this is what you've come to, Otto. Reputation in the shitter, plying your father's trade for flea-bitten livestock. What would he say if he saw you?

Two feet - and four hooves - approach.

OLAFSSON

Will you get that ass back below deck?

The donkey brays.

OLAFSSON

You're not paying enough to be up here. You're barely paying enough for steerage!

ARDEL

*(anger and disdain)*

My briny fellow, do you see those watch lights on the shore?

OLAFSSON

Ayup.

ARDEL

Might I ask what part of my desire for *discretion* was unclear?

OLAFSSON

Whoever they are, they can't reach us out here. You do understand that, don't you?

ARDEL

We need to be farther out. Now.

OLAFSSON

Any farther out, we're bound to be boarded by pirates. I'm certainly not doing that again.

NARRATOR

And then, with self-certainty that could only be mustered by a man accustomed to having all his worst impulses enabled by those around him, Ardel grabbed the helm.

He yanks the helm to one side.

OLAFSSON

Let go of that you goofy bastard!

Olafsson yanks it back.

ARDEL

Farther I said!

He yanks again.

NARRATOR

A few minutes later...

WHOOSH TO...

25 SAME - A FEW MINUTES LATER

25

SAILOR IN CROW'S NEST  
Pirates!

There's panic down below.

NARRATOR

Another few minutes later...

WHOOSH TO...

26 SAME - ANOTHER FEW MINUTES LATER

26

A ship-to-ship swordfight is in full swing all around us.

NARRATOR

And a few minutes later still...

WHOOSH TO...

27 SAME - GET THE IDEA YET?

27

REN

This fucker again? You don't learn too quick, do you?

OLAFSSON TRIES TO STAND UP FOR HIMSELF, THROUGH A GAG.

ALF

Searched the ship, Mum. He's poorer than a dirt farmer's stable boy, doncha know.

OLAFSSON MANAGES TO SPIT OUT HIS GAG.

OLAFSSON

'Cause you robbed me blind, not two weeks ago!

REN

*(we can hear her impish grin)*  
You though. You're a rich bastard.

ARDEL

What? No! I've nothing to my name. Just that ass.

*The donkey brays.*

ARDEL

And it's his now anyway.

REN

Ha! Never before have I seen someone on a boat like this, who looks less comfortable to be here. If you can't fetch a pretty little ransom, I'll eat my scabbard. Alf - grab him.

ARDEL **PROTESTS**, BUT HE'S GAGGED MID-THOUGHT.

ALL THE **PIRATES CHEER**.

GATHERED PIRATES

*(celebratory)*  
*We're the salty sons of no one.\*  
*Sailing the red, red reaver.\*  
*Though the seas get tough we're sticking tough.\*  
*Gotta see her to believe her.\*

*We fade out midway through their song...*

28 INT. JETHRO'S CABIN - NIGHT

28

*We're inside the cabin, but the door is ajar and rattling. Outside, the winds are fierce and frigid.*

NARRATOR

And as we continue our tying of loose threads, I must return you once more to a remote cabin on the eastern  
(MORE)

NARRATOR (cont'd)

slope of the Black Mountains. And to two of the most loathsome creatures we have met to date.

A literal pile of bones drags itself inside the cabin.

The door shuts.

*As always, the barely-corporeal Renault speaks by means of magic, not mechanics.*

RENAULT

Hello? Is anyone home?

*(beat)*

Anyone? Going once...

*(barely half a beat)*

Well finders keepers I suppose. Now let's see here, must be a pantry or a larder or--

*Jethro also speaks by means of magic.*

JETHRO

--You're looking pretty rough, there, fella.

RENAULT

Who said that?

JETHRO

Just the owner of the homestead you've availed yourself of.

RENAULT

Well show yourself, then! But be warned! I have terrible and powerful magicks at my disposal.

JETHRO

Yeahhh, the fact you still walking and talking inclines me to believe you. But I'm not unskilled in the arcane arts myself.

A fireplace and couple of torches suddenly blaze alight.

RENAULT

So it's that way, is it? Very well!

We hear a sickly magical pad...

...and before too long, all kinds of bugs and worms and shit are skittering up from the floor and through the walls

JETHRO

Easy there, fella, easy. I see no need for us to quarrel. Least not yet. I was just giving us some light.

RENAULT

If you're not my foe then show yourself!

JETHRO

Look over in the corner there. You see that painting?

RENAULT

...Yes?

JETHRO

Well there I am.

RENAULT

Is that meant to be a joke?

JETHRO

Oh, no joke fella. You see I ran into some trouble with some folks, and they, ah...well suffice it to say the vessel my mother gave me wasn't much good no more. From the looks of it, you know what that's like. So I found the next best vessel at hand.

RENAULT

A vessel? Are we speaking, then, of transcending the natural limitations of mortal flesh?

JETHRO

Indeed we are.

RENAULT

And am I to understand that you have extended your life into something which was never living to begin with?

JETHRO

Well...not never. It's a matter of degrees, ain't it? This canvas was plants once. But fair enough, its lifetime is much more distant than the bodies you and I was born with.

RENAULT

A fascinating and useful talent.

(MORE)

RENAULT (cont'd)

*(pause)*

Suppose you were to teach it to me. Perhaps I have something you would consider fair in return.

JETHRO

Well I seen what you did with all them creepy crawlies in the wall. Were you merely calling them to your aid, or was they following your will in a more specific way?

RENAULT

*(very proud of himself)*

Each creature that emerged was at my beck and call.

JETHRO

You're sure now? Can be hard to tell with those little whosits. And we wouldn't wanna get any future... collaborations started with an empty boast.

RENAULT

Nothing at all empty about this.

NARRATOR

Renault uncurled what was left of an arm out towards the painting with which he conversed. And as he did, a particularly plump and furry spider ran up his shoulder and into his outstretched palm. At which point, it reared up on its four hind legs...and begin to wiggle its front four back and forth.

RENAULT

*(singing...poorly)*

*Ya ta ta, hot cha cha, this is how the girls at the college dance, Ya ta ta ta ta taaa, ta ta hot cha cha.*

JETHRO

Well...never quite got the hang of that one, myself. All right then. I'll teach you mine if you teach me yours. Deal?

RENAULT

Deal.

NARRATOR

And now, if you'll indulge me, there's one more thread to tie, so long as we are speaking of loathsome things.

We hear dinner being eaten on the left and right of us, but conspicuously not center.

NARRATOR

We return to the house of Yllowyyn's parents. Where I'm afraid a loathsome event is about to transpire.

*Mixer: Wynn is to our right, and Ba'at is to our left.*

BA'AT

My darling, I do not blame you for disliking this news, but would you please eat something?

WYYN

Ruby worked all last night and all today to make your favorite stew.

YLLODYK

So I'm to be a prisoner in my own house, then.

WYYN

If you only knew the absurdity, child, of calling this place a prison.

YLLODYK

Would you consent to such a condition?

BA'AT

I would if it were for my own safety, dear.

YLLODYK

*Safety.* Must you always be so dramatic, father?

BA'AT

One day you will know what it is to love a child.  
*(getting wound up)*  
 To know with certainty that you would not only give your life for another, but that you rend the very foundations of Selbirin and Iorden just to make them comfortable, only to have them SPIT IN THE FACE of *everything* gave them--

YLLODYK

--I never wanted any of this, and if you'd only listen to me long enough to--

WYYN

--ENOUGH!!

That shuts them both up for a bit.

WYYN

Husband, when she speaks deliberately to rile you, I think you are clever enough to not let yourself be riled. Look, your face is already growing red. And child, I assure you your father is not being dramatic when he speaks of your safety. Now will you please eat?

YLLODYK

What danger could I possibly be in?

NARRATOR

A wordless exchange passed, then, between Ba'at lo-Yl and Wynn lo-Dyk. It was an exchange of parents, deciding what sorts of knowledge it was worth burdening their offspring with.

A beat.

BA'AT

That's...just it, my love. We're not sure.

YLLODYK

Pah! Well there you have it.

WYYN

What your father means to say is that... we now have an enemy in Ry'y lo-Th'yyt. Not to mention that dreadful Ba'al Synddyk. And both of them are the kind whose ambitions far outpace their consciences. We must be exceedingly careful.

A tense silence.

BA'AT

Will you please eat something, darling?

YLLODYK

For the last time, I am not hungry.

*(then...an idea.)*

In fact! I don't think I shall be hungry for quite some time.

WYYN

What ever are you talking about?

YLLODYK

Ba'alophyyl told me about the workers under the mountains. When their conditions became truly intolerable, they would simply refuse to eat, until conditions improved...or they DIED! That's what I shall do.

WYYN

Yllodyk, I have known you longer than you have known you. If it's one thing you won't do it's starve yourself to death in protest.

BA'AT

Now *your* face is growing red, dear.

HE **COUGHS**.

YLLODYK

*(smug)*

Well I don't need to die. I only need to outlast this tyrannical dictate of yours. And look how out of sorts I've gotten you just by skipping one meal.

WYYN

Child, for the love of Galadon, will you--

*(coughs)*

--please. Stop. Being. So--

--HER **COUGHING FIT** STOPS HER FROM FINISHING HER SENTENCE.

BA'AT'S **COUGHING** HAS GOTTEN INTENSE AS WELL.

YLLODYK

*(just generally being a little shit)*

Well don't get all choked up about it.

NARRATOR

But even as this jape left her tongue, Yllodyk saw both her parents' expressions cross from annoyance to discomfort to genuine distress.

THE COUGHS GIVE WAY TO **PANICKED GASPS FOR AIR**.

YLLODYK

*(panicking herself)*

Mother? Father

A beat with no improvement.

YLLODYK

Ruby!

Yllodyk leaps up from her seat, knocking it to the floor in the process.

She sprints to the kitchen door and throws it open.

YLLODYK

Ruby! Quick, call the phys--

NARRATOR

--But when Yllodyk opened the kitchen door, the sight therein stopped the words in her throat.

YLLODYK

*(breathless)*  
Ruby.

NARRATOR

The serving girl Ruby lay pallid and still on the floor, blood pooling around her open wrists, and a paring knife in one limp hand.

YLLODYK

Galadon have mercy.

NARRATOR

Yllodyk clutched at a counter-top and clenched her eyes to stop from fainting herself. When she opened her eyes, the world was spinning and a grey haze was tickling at the corners of her vision. And it was in this state - somehow both detached and deeply focused at the same time - that she noticed the piece of parchment on the counter.

*We hear her pick up a piece of paper.*

YLLODYK

*(reading - hastily!)*  
Woe is me, terrible woe is me. I have foolishly mistaken deadly Widow's Cup for shameless Peasant's Saucer in my mistresses favorite mushroom stew.  
*(starting to make sense of it)*  
Widow's Cup!

*She runs back into the dining room.*

YLLODYK

Mother, Father, we need to get you--

NARRATOR

--But when she returned to the dining room, both of her parents were already face down on the table, unmoving, with the skin around their necks an angry shade of purple.

YLLODYK

FATHER! MMMM--

--BUT 'MOTHER' DISSOLVES INTO INCOHERENT **SOBBING**.

NARRATOR

Had nothing else happened, it is entirely possible that Yllodyk might have stayed in that spot, crying until she had run out of tears. And perhaps even she would die of deprivation after all, so great was the shock she'd just suffered. But, for better or for worse, she was not yet free from danger - not at all. And the next danger headed her way made itself known to her by...  
*(extremely resentful sigh)*  
 ...it must be admitted - the loud and ostentatious door into the main hall.

We hear a loud an ostentatious door creak and groan open, at the other end of a VERY long hall.

IT TAKES GREAT EFFORT, BUT YLLODYK **STIFLES HER OWN CRIES.**

AN ELF TOUGH

*(at - again - the other end of a VERY long hall)*  
 He said make sure it was done right.

Footsteps head towards us from down that VERY long hall.

NARRATOR

Her desire to live now pushing back against her desire to grieve, Yllodyk did something so well-practiced that it was possible even in an utter state of panic. Without making a sound, she slipped off her shoes and took them in hand. She dashed deftly up the servants' stairs, knowing exactly where to land on each step so that it would not creak. Upon reaching the second floor, she darted into her bedroom, opened a window, and slipped out onto a nearby branch...quiet as a summer breeze.

FADE SLOWLY TO QUIET.

30 INT. UNDER THE MOUNTAINS

30

NARRATOR

So. The remainder of Van Der Berg's journey with his eight charges under the mountains passed uneventfully.  
*(beat)*  
 Well...largely uneventfully.

WHOOSH IN mountain tunnel ambience. The party walks towards us.

BILLY

*(a sudden insight)*

Bro. I don't know how I didn't think of this before.  
But...Jesus.

NELSON

What about him?

BILLY

He finds out he's god.

NELSON

He gets tortured to death!

BILLY

Oh, word, I forgot about that.

NELSON

You for--that's a hugely important part of that story!

JEN

Billy, remember we talked about this?

BILLY

Oh snap, what's over there?

He runs off to the side.

VANDERBERG

Hey, easy now.

NARRATOR

The glint that caught Billy's eyes revealed itself, under torchlight, to be a full suit of gilded plate steel, sat on the lip of what looked like a well.

BILLY

Ah sick, bro, free armor! I got dibs.

VANDERBERG

Now just hang on.

NELSON

*(panicked)*

Billy, wait wait wait wait wait wait.

NARRATOR

But on holding the torch closer, Billy saw through the helmet, to the desiccated skull of the armor's prior owner.

BILLY

Ugh, what the fuck?!

NARRATOR

And as he recoiled in horror, he managed to dislodge a single gauntlet, and send the rest of the suit careening down the well.

We hear the armor clatter loudly all the way down and extremely deep hole. It stays clattering until it falls completely out of earshot; the hole is so deep we don't even hear it hit the bottom.

NELSON

*(a furious stage whisper)*  
BILLY!? WHAT. DID. I. SAY.

There is a very long and tense silence.

When nothing else happens...

BILLY

*(whispers)*  
Sorry.

VANDERBERG

Sounds like we're clear. Let's keep moving. And don't do that shit again.

31 EXT. WESTERN MOUNTAIN TUNNEL - LATER

31

NARRATOR

So yes, that aside it was uneventful.

WHOOSH BACK.

The party walks towards us.

NARRATOR

And it was a little before noon on the third day of their travels when Van Der Berg - well-trained in what to look for - began to perceive a faint bluish glow up ahead. And soon thereafter, he felt the slightest stirrings of a breeze.

VANDERBERG

Hey y'all. You feel that? Look up ahead. We made it.

**THE WHOLE PARTY CHEERS.**

The pace of their steps picks up drastically.

Then, the space opens up. The echoes and cave sounds recede, and we're met with a cool mountain breeze. Maybe even the cry of a hawk if it's not too trite a clip.

NARRATOR

And as they walked, blinking, out of the tunnel and onto a plateau, the sensory experience was overwhelming. It might have been just the contrast with the damp and dark under the mountains. But the air smelled...crisp. Like a handful of untrod snow. The sun burned brighter amidst the deepest blue expanse. And the landscape was a vivid tableau of land and life. Oceans of green grass, specked with towers of vibrant red clay stretching to the skies.

VANDERBERG

Ladies. Gentlemen. Welcome to the West.

*(Under the end credits of this episode, a new, decidedly more "Western" arrangement of the theme music plays.)*

**END OF CHAPTER.**