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## THE BLOOD OF ALTLOCK REWRITE

by Robert A. Miller  
#

It was only an hour after sunset and already a light fog made its way in from the ocean and crept its way down the dirt streets. Terra was a small fishing town, with Main Street barely a hundred yards long. Not the smallest town in Altlock, but pretty close. An important destination for trade, Terra found itself bustling with visitors and merchants three times a month, yet managed to retain its small town sensibilities. It was a place where a man could make an honest living. It was a place where a kid could grow up with dreams of sailing the vast ocean, trying to make a name for themselves amongst the other fishermen of Terra.

Tellah Freemantle had dreams of joining his older brother Locke out on the water, sailing and delivering their catch to the other towns along the coast. It was a glamorous life to a seventeen year old boy. Spending his days as bus boy in his uncles bar, and his nights studying navigation. His dream was to be a ship's navigator, just like his brother Locke.

Tellah stood in the open doorway of his uncle Blaine's bar, sweeping dirt out onto Main Street. He watched the fog creep its way up from the docks, slinking and slithering its way under doors and along the cool ground on its way to the Freemantle. The boy felt a chill crawl down his back. He took one last look out towards the water, and closed the door as he went back inside.

"The fog is back, uncle," Tellah called across the room to his uncle Blaine, who was wiping down the top of the bar. The room itself was empty.

"That makes a week now," Blaine said, "Something dark is coming."

"Why do you say that?" Tellah asked.

"How long have you lived in Terra?"

Tellah looked at his uncle confused. He didn't know why the older man would ask that.

"All my life of course," Tellah said.

"And how often do we get fog at sunset, every night for a week?" Blaine asked.

"Never," Tellah confirmed.

"Your brother's due in tonight, right?" Blaine asked, changing the subject.

"Yeah, he's been gone for months," Tellah tossed his broom at the nearest table and turned back to the door. Before his uncle could call to him, the wooden door flew open, a cold blast of air and fog blowing inside. Tellah stepped back and watched a small hooded figure enter the Freemantle.

"Good evening, sir," Tellah said.

The small figure removed its hood, a battered old cloak that had seen better days, revealing the visage of an old dwarf, who had also seen better days. The dwarf's long beard is stark white, but his eyes were a translucent blue, like a summer sky, only brighter. Tellah thought the dwarf looked well over two hundred, but he moved like a young dwarf. The visitor removed a glove and stuck out his hand. Tellah shook the dwarf's hand, noting it was cold to the touch.

"Name's Albion Festus," the dwarf said.

"Tellah," the boy replied.

"Nice to meet you, Tellah. Got any ale for an old dwarf's aching bones?"

"Of course," Tellah said. He led the dwarf over to the bar where his uncle waited.

"Don't think I've seen you around before," Blaine said, "Where you from, friend?"

"Correct, sir. I've never been to your quaint little town. I'm passing through, really."

"Where you going?" Tellah asked.

"As far as I need to," Albion said. He smiled at the boy but quickly wiped it away when he looked up at Blaine. The older man clearly was not amused.

"What kind of business you got in town?" Blaine asked, "Fish market doesn't open for another two days."

"Not fish," Albion said, "People. I'm looking to put together a crew."

"A crew?" Tellah said.

"Yes," Albion said, "A crew brave enough to come with me up the coast."

"Where up the coast?" Blaine asked. The bartender kept his eyes locked on the dwarf, a sense of unease coming over him. Tellah took up the seat next to the dwarf, entranced like a child hearing a story.

"I'm headed for Elvintika, land of the elves, and last known resting place of the Dark Ice amulet."

"What's the Dark Ice amulet?" Tellah's eyes grew wide at the sound of the amulet. He almost fell out of his chair as he asked.

"Oh, it's quite special," Albion said, "I've been looking for it for many years."

"You're a treasure hunter," Blaine said, as if accusing the dwarf of something awful, "You wander the world looking for rare items, or is it just chasing stories?"

"Uncle!" Tellah looked at his uncle with even wider eyes. He couldn't believe he had just said that to a customer.

"It's alright, son," Albion said, "I get that a lot. But I assure you.." The dwarf stopped mid sentence and looked at Blaine, as if prompting him for an answer.

"Fremantle," Blaine said, "Mr. Freemantle."

"I assure you, Mr. Freemantle, that the Dark Ice amulet is very real. And now it is within my grasp. But I'm an old dwarf, and getting to Elvintika on my own is just out of the question. I need a crew, and a good one if I'm to make it in one piece."

"What makes you think you'll find your crew here?" Blaine asked.

"Call it a hunch," the dwarf said.

"You should speak with Locke," Tellah said, "His ship, The Fool's Bargain, has the best crew in all of Terra."

"Is that so?" Albion asked, "The best, huh?"

"There are plenty of other ships here that will take you up the coast, Mr. Festus." Blaine said.

"Is there something wrong with The Fool's Bargain?" Albion said.

"It's my brother's ship," Tellah said, "Uncle's just looking out for us."

"As he should," Albion said, "But if it's all the same to you, Mr. Freemantle, I'd like to talk to this Locke anyway."

Blaine studied the dwarf, but could not figure out what it was that unsettled him so. Tellah hopped up from his chair and waved Albion towards the door.

"The Fool's Bargain is set to come in to port any time now. We should probably get down there."

"Not so fast," Blaine said, stopping Tellah in his tracks, "Bartleby will tell us when the ship is in port, you still have chores to do."

"But uncle," Tellah pleaded, "Please? I can introduce them, and maybe it will help my cause."

"Your cause?" the dwarf said.

"I want to be on Locke's crew," Tellah said, "But he's always telling me I'm too young, and I have no experience."

"You are too young, Tellah," Blaine said, "Besides, I need

you here. What would I do without you?"

"You don't need me, uncle. You never did. Sweeping and mopping the bar was just a way to keep me busy and not asking about getting on Locke's ship. My father went out on the sea when he was fifteen."

"Yes, he did," Blaine conceded, "But look what happened to him. The sea killed him. I won't lose you to that same terrible fate."

"But you let Locke become a navigator. He's been out there for almost three years. Why's he so different?"

Blaine looked at Albion, then at Tellah. He saw that he wasn't going to win this argument at this moment. He certainly didn't want to have it in front of the stranger. Another patron entering the front door kept him from having to change the subject. It was Bartleby.

Dressed in rags and looking like a worn older man, Bartleby was younger than Blaine, but wore his job on his face. He had spent many years out at sea, before retiring to a life on land, coordinating fishing expeditions and assigning crew. He and Tellah had become friends, Tellah telling the older man stories of Locke and his adventures, and Bartleby telling stories of his own outings at sea. The return of Locke was always a joyous one, but this time the former fisherman didn't look too excited.

"Tellah," Bartleby said.

"It's Locke, right?" Tellah said, "Is he back?"

Blaine walked out from behind the bar and made his way towards the others. He saw the concern on Bartleby's face and tried to interject.

"Tellah," Blaine said, "Why don't you get our new friend here a drink while I talk to Bartleby."

"What's wrong?" Tellah asked. He looked between his uncle and Bartleby. Albion watched with a slight smile across his small face.

"There's a boat... a dingy, really," Bartleby said, "The Fool's Bargain didn't make it back."

"What do you mean, it didn't make it back?" Blaine asked.

"Is Locke OK?" Tellah asked.

"It's Locke, in the dingy. Just Locke."

"There's something you're not telling them," Albion chimed in, "What are you leaving out?"

"Spit it out, son," Blaine said.

"You must come and see, Mr. Freemantle. I... don't know how to explain it."

"Let's go," Tellah said. The boy moved for the door but was pulled back by his uncle. Albion's slight smile turned into a full grin.

"I do love a bit of mystery," the old dwarf said.

"I'm going with you, Tellah," Blaine said, "Let's go."

All four exited the Freemantle and Blaine locked up behind them. As they made their way down Main Street, Albion's attention kept darting around at the fog. The street was still covered in the cool fog, now much thicker than it had been when he arrived. The dwarf nodded, as if pleased with this new development.

#

A crowd had already begun to form at the docks, people trying to see what was in the boat. A couple of Bartleby's coworkers worked at keeping the people at bay. The dingy was quiet as it rocked back and forth on the waves. It was a stormy night and, along with the fog, the sea was upset, as if it were trying to warn them of something. Something bad.

Tellah and Blaine moved their way through the crowd and over to the main dock. They saw the dingy floating near the wooden dock, not yet tied off. Bartleby had said that they must see it for themselves, so uncle and nephew cautiously inched their way to the dingy. Albion stayed back and watched with eager anticipation. He was wringing his stubby hands together and smiling.

Tellah reached the edge of the dock first and peered out

into the dingy, Blaine followed right behind him. Inside the small boat, lay a lone figure clad in black. The black tunic was missing its gold buttons, and the figures face was gaunt and leathery, but Tellah could tell that it was his brother, Locke.

"Is he..." Tellah said, trailing off, not wanting it to be his dead brother.

"It's Locke," Blaine said, "He's dead."

The crowd gasped and stepped back. Everyone wanted to see the dead man in the boat, but they also respected the Freemantles and gave them some space. Albion made his way through the crowd and over to the dingy.

"I am so sorry," the dwarf said, "It's hard losing someone you love."

"We need to get him out of the boat," Tellah said, "He's not dead."

Blaine and Albion looked back at the boat and saw the figure's hand lift. Then its mouth moved, only a little. The man and dwarf looked at each other in disbelief. Three men, including Bartleby, ran over to help retrieve Locke from the small boat. Carefully, they pulled him from the boat and placed him on his back on the dock. Locke moved his hands from his chest and revealed a shiny gem around his neck. He spoke to his brother, who had to lean in to hear him.

"Tellah," Locke said, "You must... you must..."

"It's OK, big bro, take your time," Tellah said.

"You must... take this," Locke lifted the gem off of his chest for a moment, before it dropped out of his grip.

"Why?" Tellah asked.

"What happened to you?" Blaine chimed in.

"Uncle," Tellah said, "He's trying to tell us something."

"Elv... Elvin..."

"What's he saying?" Albion asked.

"What are you saying, Locke?" Tellah asked.

"Take this to... Elvintika... your destiny..."

"Something about an Elvintika and my destiny," Tellah said, "I don't understand."

Suddenly Locke sat straight up and grabbed his brother's collar. His eyes lit up and he locked gazes with Tellah. Blaine tried to pull them apart, but found he was not strong enough. Albion's eyes went wide with excitement.

"You must take the Hard Ice Amulet to Elvintika. It is your destiny. Only the chosen one can stop what's coming. The chosen one must have all three amulets, if he is to stop what's coming."

Tellah was afraid, but remained as strong as he could for as long as his brother was holding him.

"Who's the chosen one? What's coming?"

"You must stop what is coming, Tellah. Find the chosen one."

What's coming?" Blaine asked.

Locke let go of Tellah and fell back to the wooden planks beneath him. With his last breath, Locke uttered one last word; "Cold."

His hands fell to his sides and his head rolled left. Locke was dead.

"Locke!" Blaine yelled.

Albion leaned in for a closer look at the amulet. Tellah reached for the shiny blue gem, pulling it from his brother's neck. Blaine grabbed his nephew and picked him up, cradling him in his arms. His older nephew had returned after weeks at sea, without his ship or his crew, only to die in front of him. The bartender cried, tears falling onto the body of Locke and the wooden planks. He paid no attention to Tellah. But Albion did.

"He said it was my destiny to take this to Elvintika," Tellah said.

"Aye," Albion agreed, "He did. He also said that you had to find the chosen one to stop what was coming. What do you suppose he meant by that?"

"I don't know," Tellah said, "I've never left town before.

I don't have the slightest idea where to start."

"I might be able to help you there," Albion said.

"And what do you think he meant about cold being the thing that's coming?" Tellah asked.

"I suppose we'll find out when we get there," the dwarf said.

"No," Blaine said, having lay his nephew back onto the dock, "You are not getting on a boat, let alone going all the way to Elvintika."

"But it sounds important," Tellah said, "Locke said it was my destiny to go. He obviously died because of what is coming, shouldn't we honor his final wishes and take this gem to that place?"

"It sounds like that gem is what got him, and his entire crew, killed. No, you are not going anywhere."

Blaine grabbed the amulet from Tellah's hand. He held it up in the now even thicker fog and tried to examine it. He couldn't see anything. He tossed it to the dwarf at his left.

"Take it," Blaine said, "I don't want Tellah trying to go off on some fool quest. I've already lost his parents and now his older brother, I won't lose him too."

"But uncle," Tellah pleaded.

"We're not talking about it, Tellah. Now help me carry your

brother. We need to get him to the church. We have funeral arrangements to make."

Tellah looked longingly at the amulet before turning his attention to his brother. Albion called to him.

"Young Tellah," Albion said, "May I have a word?"

Blaine grabbed Bartleby and another man to help carry Locke, so Tellah moved aside to speak with the dwarf.

"Yes?" Tellah said.

"How bad do you want to fulfill your brother's final wish?"

"He said it was my destiny," Tellah said, "I have to. It might lead me to what killed him."

"Tomorrow morning," the dwarf said, "Meet me here. I will have a ship and a crew here ready to go by first light. If you want to take this amulet to the ancient elven city, be here first thing."

"You want me to sneak out?" Tellah asked.

"Yes. Unless you just want me to deliver the amulet for you," Albion said.

"No, no. I'll be here."

"You better not tell anyone that you're going," the dwarf said, "They'll only try and stop you."

Tellah nodded. His heartbreak over his brother's death easily outweighed his need to follow his uncle's rules. His

brother was dead and taking this amulet to Elvintika was the only way he was going to find out why. Tellah ran after his uncle and his brother's body. Albion watched them go, with the bystander now dispersing. He looked at the blue gem in his hand, the fog growing thicker with each passing second. He closed his small, stubby hand around the gem and stuffed it in a pocket.

"One down," the dwarf said, "Two more to go."

#

Borimar Fulldark paced the rendezvous point like a mountain lion stalking its prey. The impatient dwarf kicked a large stone at his feet as he let out a hard sigh. His thick beard was full of tangles and knots, the result of not sleeping well for the past two nights. He had been so preoccupied with this current hunt that he hadn't bothered to comb his beard, let alone wash it. He knew May would not approve. The sun was almost gone now, having fallen below the horizon. His empty hands clenched and unclenched, as if begging for his twin axes, the weapons he was rarely without.

The two thieves he had hired to retrieve the Dark Ice Amulet were late. He had been looking for this amulet for more than ten years. He had heard about it back when he was traveling through the frozen tundra in the North. The amulet was said to have magical properties, and it was supposed to be the key to

some vast treasure. It was treasure that Borimar was most interested in. It was the reason he had become a treasure hunter, after all.

This job was turning into L'vrel all over again. That job went south from the get go. He had lost the Staff of Livistria when the thief he paid to retrieve it, made off with it. He had finally caught up with the thief sometime later, but not before something else had torn him apart and made off with the staff. This job was not going to end that way, not if Borimar could help it.

A scream behind him caused the dwarf to spin around. He turned, the village in view, and saw Thomas, the younger of the two thieves, running at a sprint and screaming for his life. When the thief reached his dwarf employer he collapsed to his knees gasping for air. A look of pure terror occupied his usual smiling face. The thief grabbed at Borimar's clothing.

"Protect me, sir dwarf. Don't...let her...eat me!" Thomas continued to frantically look behind him, then back at Borimar.

"What in blazes are ye goin' on about?" the dwarf asked.

"Back there," the terrified thief pointed to the village, "In the church... James... is dead."

The dwarf considered this for a moment. He thought it might be a ruse to allow his brother escape with the amulet. But he

didn't suspect that the two thieves were that bright. Besides, the look on Thomas' face told him that he wasn't lying. At least he didn't believe he was. Borimar helped the trembling thief to his feet and looked up into his tear-rimmed eyes.

"Now slow down there, Thomas. What happened in the church?"

The terrified thief took a deep breath, swallowed hard, and then began to talk.

"We was breaking into the church... you know... the one you told us that gem was in... and we found the priest's office... when we heard a noise," Thomas took another deep breath and looked behind him again before he continued.

"A woman came into the room... a dark haired woman... dressed in black. She was asking about the amulet... but we told her we ain't got it. Then she grabbed James... and... and..."

The dwarf was curious. It sounded as if someone had beaten them to the gem. He pressed the thief for more.

"Right, then what did ye do?"

"She killed him," Thomas said, "She ripped him in half... There was blood... running down her chin and her hands. I ran..."

Thomas wrung his hands together, tears ran down his cheeks. The dwarf put his hand on the young man's wrist, he was too short to reach his shoulder, and nodded.

"Ye safe now boy. Go on."

"We never..." the thief trailed off, lost in thought. He shook off the distraction and continued, "We never found no amulet."

Suddenly the thief began to cry and fell back to his knees. Borimar considered Thomas' story, but did not believe him. He asked Thomas to repeat himself.

"Ye say she ripped a grown man in half, like he were a turkey leg?" the disbelief showing in his tone.

"Don't believe me," the young man blurted, "But I know what I saw. My brother is dead... and that crazy woman killed him! My brother is dead. And for what? Some damn necklace?"

"Whoa, there, Thomas, me boy," the dwarf tried to calm the young man down, "This woman, what did she look like again?"

"She was human... tall for a girl. She had long black hair and wore thin black robes... kind of like a priest. And..." the young thief trailed off again.

"What is it lad?"

Thomas inhaled and looked the dwarf in the eyes. His bottom lip quivered as he spoke.

"She... there was something strange... about her mouth. When she smiled, the corners of her lips went up a bit higher than a usual smile and..."

"Get on with it lad," the dwarf said, trying to hurry Thomas to the point.

"Her teeth were... different. At the corners of her mouth, as plain as the beard on your face, I saw... fangs."

The dwarf straightened up and laughed. He knew what the thief was going to say next. It wouldn't be the first time someone wanted to cheat him out of money with the threat of vampyres, a creature known to have been extinct over a hundred years now.

Sure, it was a creature that the dwarf knew all too well to exist. Borimar had been on this world long enough to have met a few before they vanished. Though the common man only knew them from fairy tales. The thief was still crying, but the dwarf continued to laugh.

"Right, fangs. Ye had me goin' for a moment, lad. I should have guessed that ye and that brother of yours were trying to cheat me out of me prize."

The boy's cries turned to cries of terror, but the dwarf didn't falter.

"Aye, ye should be scared. I'm on to ye two now. Go on back and tell that brother of yours I'll be havin' me amulet now. Don't make me hunt him down for it."

Thomas stood rigid facing his employer. He was not looking

at the smaller dwarf, but rather, he was looking beyond him. The dwarf kicked him in the thigh, but still he did not move. Borimar jumped up and grabbed Thomas by the collar, bringing the thief face to face with his own bearded visage.

"What's the matter with ye? I said go get me what I paid ye for."

The dwarf let go of the thief and caught a whiff of something in the air. It was metallic, like iron. He recognized it as blood. Slowly he turned and was startled to see a tall, slender woman. It appeared to be the woman Thomas had described.

She indeed had long black hair and robes, with red eyes that matched the massive amount of blood on her hands and face. The mystery woman smiled at the dwarf. He noticed a point at the corner of her mouth on the right side, just in front of some small burns on her right cheek.

"Come now, Borimar. Can't you see that this poor... creature has been through enough today?"

"How do ye know me?" the dwarf asked. He didn't know what else to say.

"You would be surprised what I know, and how I know it," the woman smiled.

"I can defend meself better than this boy," Borimar nodded towards the terrified Thomas.

"Of that I have little doubt. But I'm not here to kill you, dwarf. In fact, I am here to offer you a deal."

"I don't deal with crazy people," the dwarf snarled.

"How cute. You're trying to be tough for that little snack behind you."

The woman continued to smile, showing off her fangs as she talked. Fangs that Borimar could clearly see. He didn't want to admit it, but the thief had been right. After a hundred years, there was a vampyre in front of him.

"By deal, sir dwarf," the woman corrected, "I mean that you have no choice. If you do not take my generous offer I will kill you before you can get those lovely axes from their holsters. Trust me, you'll want to hear me out."

Borimar considered her threat, knowing what the vampyre were capable of. He saw the look of terror still on Thomas' face, and relaxed.

"What exactly are ye wanting from me?"

"Its simple really. You have been tracking the Dark Ice Amulet, the treasure that you had thought to be hidden in this church. I too, have been tracking the same amulet, but for different reasons. Of all the treasure hunters I have come across in my search for this item, none have been as good as you. You were the first to track it this far. But alas, it is no

longer here."

"If the amulet isn't here, than what do ye want with me?"

"I want you to track it. You will continue to seek it out, and when it is finally found, you are free to go. If you can't locate it in two weeks time, however, I move on and you become my dinner."

Thomas frantically crawled backwards, away from the dwarf and the woman, still trembling and making whimpering noises. Borimar never had time to react; he only saw a blur, as the woman moved around him and picked up Thomas by the shoulders.

Borimar watched in awe as the woman lifted the thief off of the ground and sank her teeth into his neck, like the sound of biting into a fresh apple. The sound coming from the now dead thief reminded Borimar of ale being drank from a cup. Borimar knew she could smell the fear he was feeling, but knew better than to show it. Not if he wanted to live through this. Even after a hundred years, the dwarf never forgot what they were capable of.

The woman dropped Thomas' limp body, wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, and smiled at the dwarf. Her fangs were now a shining crimson.

"Tell your friends, dwarf. My name is Tatiana. I wield control over the dead..." she paused, making sure she had

Borimar's full attention, "And I am vampyre."

#

Markus Farrell tapped his wedding ring on the empty glass in front of him. It had been three years since his beloved wife, Katelynn, had died. He had tried to move on in the last year, but still found himself every afternoon sitting alone in the dining hall, thinking about the love of his life. He knew that it was unhealthy to keep that wound of her loss right there, on the surface for all to see. He should move on with his life, he knew that. But it was hard. Katelynn had been his whole world. Even more than ruling over Raven's Hold, his life was being her husband.

Every night Markus had the same meal prepared, and was served Katelynn's favorite drink, red wine, in her favorite golden glass. Markus stared across the table where his wife would have been. He allowed himself a smile and took a swig of his wine. He hadn't informed the staff yet, but he planned on this being the last night that he dined with the late Katelynn Farrell. Tomorrow, he would start his moving on. He owed it to his people, he owed it to Katelynn, but most importantly, he owed it to himself. Lost in thought, he never noticed the watchman enter.

"Your majesty," the young man announced, "You have a

visitor."

This startled Markus, but he made sure not to let it show, "You know the rules, Bill. I am not to be disturbed during dinner. Make them wait."

"I am sorry, sire, but the gentleman is insistent."

Markus finally looked up and, for the first time, noticed a palpable, almost child-like fear in the young watchman's eyes. The king promptly stood and gestured towards the door.

"Bill, look at me. You are within the walls of Raven's Hold. There is nothing to fear here. Unless you are making the dwarf wait, there is no need to be afraid. Tell this visitor that I will be with them soon. Understand?"

Bill nodded and retreated out of the dining hall. Moments later the door opened, and a man Markus had never seen before walked in. Bill followed close behind, a worried look dominated the young watchman's face.

"I thought I said I was not to be disturbed?" Markus said.

This man was a bit taller than the king, with dark hair and even darker eyes that glinted red in the light. The man wore a long sleeve shirt, adorned with gold trimming, and trousers equally majestic that seemed to shout royalty. This man had to have come from far away, since Markus did not recognize the man, nor his dress.

"I... I apologize sire. He pushed past me before I could detain him."

Three more guards entered the room and moved in on the stranger. Markus stood now and looked straight at Bill.

"Leave us. You two," he pointed to the guards flanking the newcomer, "Wait outside. You," he said to the final guard, "Stay. Close the doors behind you."

The clean-shaven young man bowed slightly as he entered and made his way around the table towards Markus. The guard closed the door and stood in front of it, blocking anyone else from getting in, or out.

Markus did his best to hide his anxiety. Something felt off about this man, but he couldn't say what it was. For now, he would entertain his presence. He had never seen this stranger before and he wanted to take no chances. He knew it better to be cautious.

"Your Highness," the stranger said with another polite bow, "My name is Bodon, and I am here on behalf of the one true queen, the lovely Dremora."

"I am sorry, good sir. I confess I am not aware of a Queen Dremora. I was still under the impression that King Spencer ruled over Foxcrest."

"You misunderstand me, sir. I am not from Foxcrest."

"Then where are you from, friend?" Markus asked, "There is no other recognized monarchy on this side of the Honore Sea."

"My Queen sends word from her castle in Elvintika. I bring a proposal from her majesty."

Markus remembered learning the history of Elvintika when he was a child, and how the dead and barren "Ghostlands" that separated it from Raven's Hold were the result of a massive magical overload. But it was information written in books. No one had been to Elvintika in almost a hundred years.

To make a claim such as this, Bodon must have serious nerve. Something was off and it made Markus wary. He gave the guard a look of trouble and the watchman turned to exit the room. Before he could, however, Bodon put up a hand and spoke more forcefully.

"There is no need for guards, Your Highness. It is a simple proposal. If you don't like what I have to say, then you are more than welcome to call in your dogs." Markus noted that Bodon seemed to spit that last word.

"Alright," Markus said, waving his guard back, "Lets hear it."

Bodon pulled out a chair, the queen's chair, and sat down. The choice grated on Markus.

"You are no doubt aware that the kingdom of Elvintika has

been quiet for a long time. It wasn't until recently, that we had cause to announce ourselves to humans."

"So, I take it to mean that you're claiming to be an elf?" Markus concluded.

"Gods forbid," Bodon seemed genuinely offended, "There are no more elves. No, we are something more than just an elf... or even human. We are an ancient race looking to get back onto the playing field, as it were."

"So what are you?" Markus was losing patience with his guest.

"I think the name that you humans use in your stories is... vampyre. That is not the proper name, but if it makes this easier for you, we'll go with vampyre."

Markus sat staring at this man, taking in his claims to being a vampyre, and said nothing. He knew well enough that vampyre had existed. His dwarf friend had told him stories. Stories of creatures meaner and faster than anything you had ever seen. But they were also a creature that was supposed to be extinct. A creature that, along with the elves of Elvintika, were wiped out in a great war a hundred years ago. Yet, here this man was, claiming to be from a long dead race of beings from a long lost kingdom to the west.

Markus had noticed that while the man spoke, the guard had

slipped out of the room and was most likely on his way back with guards. This conversation would be over soon.

"I know your little watchman left a few moments ago."

Markus was surprised to hear it, but remained calm and continued to show nothing. He would not let this guy get to him. Nobody intimidated the king of Raven's Hold.

"You see," Bodon continued, "The proposal is simple. You step aside as Her Majesty takes over your kingdom and everyone lives... for now. Stand against us, and I can't stress this part enough... stand against us and everyone dies."

Markus stood, knocking his chair back against the wall and looked on this person with contempt. Bodon continued to sit with his hands placed palms down on the table, and smiled.

"How dare you come into my castle, my home, and threaten me. I don't know who you really are, or who put you up to this, but there is no such thing as vampyres anymore. And you are sorely mistaken if you think I will ever stand aside for anyone."

Bill charged into the room just then, with three of the largest guards Markus had. A look from his king told the watchman that he had done well. The three guards surrounded Bodon's chair and two of them grabbed him by his arms and hoisted him to his feet.

The stranger kept smiling and never resisted.

"If you need proof, Markus, than I shall give you proof."

It happened so fast that it was over before Markus knew what was happening. One second the guards were putting the stranger on his feet, the next second all three guards were lying dead on the floor with their throats ripped out. Blood covered the floor, the table, and the front of Markus' shirt. He had never seen anything move like that before.

Bodon was at the door holding Bill by the neck, several inches off the ground with one very bloody hand. Bodon turned his head towards the king and smiled big.

"Now you see. We are not a joke. I am but a messenger amongst an army. You will surrender this land to us, or your entire kingdom will look like this room."

Before Markus could react, he heard the sound of bones snapping and Bill's body being dropped to the floor. A second later Bodon was standing beside Markus, sniffing him, as if he were an animal. Markus' eyes darted back and forth from the bodies to Bodon. He was an animal.

"I can smell the fear in you. I'll take that as a yes. We will be crossing the river at sundown tomorrow."

"You said if I cooperate everyone lives," Markus reminded him.

"And they will, for now. We feed on blood. It's only a matter of time before we get hungry and need to... ah... feed. Its called survival, survival of the fittest."

The vampyre walked out of the dining hall, licking his fingers and laughing. Markus was terrified more than he had ever been in his life, and he didn't know how to handle it. All his life vampyres were nothing but stories. No one, not even old lady Katheryn at ninety years old, had ever seen a vampyre.

What he saw tonight, right in front of him, was proof enough. These creatures of legend were alive and very much the killers the stories said they were. His best men were no match for this thing, then his people were not safe. He had to defend them, no matter what the cost. He was the king, and it was his duty to keep his people safe.

He had to warn his people. He had to act now.

Markus pulled himself together and exited the dining hall in search of another watchman. He quickly found one at the end of the hallway. The young man was sitting against the wall, his hands holding his intestines in.

"Your Highness," the watchman exhaled, "We couldn't..."

Markus put a hand on the young man's shoulders and betrayed no fear or worry.

"It's alright, son. I will find help for you. Try not to

talk."

All along the hall bodies littered the floor, all dead. Guards and maids alike lay lifeless as he walked the hall. The heavy wooden doors at the end of the hall were open; two bloody handprints marked the place where the vampyre had touched them.

Outside, some men attended to a lone dead guard lying face down in the dirt. Markus pulled their attention away.

"My boy, call more guards, all of them. Have them meet in the courtyard. Then find yourself a horse. I need you to deliver a message to Foxcrest."

"What is it? What's happening, sire?"

"Go," Markus ordered, "Do it now and do it quickly. The kingdom depends on it."

Markus watched the young man disappear around a corner and took in a deep breath. He needed to form a plan and he needed to do it fast. He couldn't go into a meeting with his guard and have no idea what to do. But the truth was, he didn't. Nothing in his thirteen years as a king of Raven's Hold had prepared him for this. This was out of his league. This was out of control. This was madness.

A serving girl entered the hallway from the kitchens and headed for the dining hall. Markus stopped her and held her by the arm.

"Everyone needs to stay away from the dining hall. Go and tell the others. Go!"

The serving girl vanished around the corner. Markus wiped away the sweat that ran down his face, tension finding its way to the surface. What had just happened was unprecedented in his lifetime. An act of aggression from a species thought to be long gone from this world. He needed to find the dwarf. He would know what to do. He had experience with these creatures before. Markus hoped that the dwarf would have the answer. If not, then the people of Raven's Hold would be wiped from the world forever.

#

The vampyre Tatiana walked with confidence, a swagger to her step. She hadn't retrieved the Dark Ice Amulet, but she had managed to put the fear of the gods into a stupid dwarf. She had fed on three equally stupid humans, one protecting the amulet's resting place and two stupid humans trying to steal it. Except, the amulet wasn't there. The place had been turned over when she arrived, pointing to another party having already taken it.

The smell of dwarf was all over the amulet's resting place, yet the dwarf she had met outside town was not the same smell she had found in town. While most dwarves kept to the north, she knew it common for their filthy race to be all over lower

Altlock. Finding the right dwarf would be difficult, but not impossible.

As she thought about the dwarf, she could feel her burns healing, the sun now lower in the sky, allowing her healing to kick in and replace the burns from earlier with new skin. She remembered the look on the dwarf's face when she revealed herself, skin burning and her fangs out. The fear was amazing. He lived for it, bringing lesser beings to the brink of madness before she kills them. But she didn't kill this one. The more she thought about it, the more she wanted to.

Dremora had insisted that Tatiana turn the town of Hillside Glenn into zombies and send them against Raven's Hold. She decided now to give them a taste of dwarf first. She had changed her mind about the treasure hunting dwarf. He would be her pets' first meal. Amused with herself, her thoughts went back to who did have the amulet.

Who did take it then? She pondered this question as she passed under the wooden arch that acknowledged her entrance into the town of Hillside Glenn. The once bustling trade town was now quiet and still. Bodies of human men, women, and children lay strewn about the main road, piled all over the road and down the wooden sidewalks, as if a plague had worked its way through town. Every human she saw was dead.

She heard hissing coming from several of the buildings to her left and right. As she entered the center of town, figures began to emerge from the places where the hissing had just been. Six figures in all, the newcomers emerged from their sun free hiding places with dark hoods on their heads. One of them called out to Tatiana.

"Mistress," the young man called, "It is done."

"Have you done a final sweep to make sure no one was missed?" Tatiana asked.

"Yes, my Mistress," the young man said.

A familiar smell caught the nose of all six newcomers, as well as Tatiana. They all moved up the road, stopping at the hardware store. The door was locked, but Tatiana did not worry. She knew that she could get it open. She waved her right arm, sweeping it in front of her as if painting the door from left to right. The wooden door flew off its hinges and out into the street. Inside, was a trembling old man sitting on a crate.

"Who is this?" Tatiana asked.

"Don't know, Mistress," one of the vampyres said, "I must have missed him."

Tatiana muttered a spell under her breath, moments later, four corpses from the street began to stir. The four dead men stood and dragged themselves into the hardware store, all headed

for the old man. They grabbed him and dragged him to the ground. The trembling old man struggled to free himself, but was no match for the four living corpses on top of him. The corpses scratched at the old man and took bites out of his living flesh.

Tatiana smiled at the carnage. After a few moments the old man's screams were silenced, the living corpses now devouring the rest of his flesh. The tearing and squishing sounds seemed to please the vampyre. She loved showing off her knowledge of the elven necromancer. She knew that her Mistress, Dremora, would never approve of the grandstanding or waste of time. Good thing she wasn't here.

"When they're done," she said to her followers, "Bring our zombie friends to the inn. Take the remaining corpses and drag them to the inn and the hardware store. Make sure the doors are closed."

"Yes, Mistress," said the first vampyre.

Tatiana made her way to the inn, a large building on the corner of Main Street and the only side street, First Street. It was the largest building in town, wider and taller than even city hall. The inn was the only two-story building in all of Hillside Glenn. She liked the Broken Lace, probably for its name, but she liked it. She had stayed here once, a long time ago. She remembered it looking quite different then.

She remembered the outside being white with brown doors and windows sills. She remembered the white sheets in the room where she stayed. The sheets that became stained with her blood when a vampyre busted in and turned her. She never forgot that night, not after two hundred years of following Dremora across this world. She would never forget that night.

Now the Broken Lace was painted a dark brown, matching the buildings around it. The window sills were still brown, now matching the rest of the walls. She didn't know if the sheets were still white, and she had no intentions of going upstairs and checking. She watched her minions dragging the bodies into the inn. The vampyres piled corpses into each room and the lobby, as well as the small kitchen and behind the reception desk. A young girl was brought to Tatiana, another straggler hiding from her attackers.

"What is this?" Tatiana asked.

"Found her hiding in one of the rooms upstairs," the young vampyre said.

"How many more living are you going to find?" she asked, "This makes two you've missed. Explain."

"I don't know, Mistress," the vampyre offered. His voice trembling, afraid of what she might do to him.

"You're right to be afraid," she said. Tatiana grabbed the

girl from the vampyre's grasp and used her other hand to grab the young vampyre by the throat. She squeezed until her fingers punctured his throat, allowing her to rip through it and pull out the younger vampyre's esophagus. The vampyre dropped to the ground and fell face first to the dirt.

The young woman screamed.

Tatiana put her bloody hand over the woman's mouth, muffling her screams. When the woman wouldn't stop, Tatiana used her hands to break the woman's neck. She dropped the woman's body to the ground next to the dead vampyre.

"Take the girl back upstairs where she was found, then do another sweep for the living."

She bent down next to the dead woman and put her bloody hand back on the woman's head. She said the necromantic spell again, and the woman sat up. A hunger filled her now dead eyes, a hunger that she immediately tried to satiate with Tatiana. The necromancer kicked the zombie, knocking her back to the street. Two vampyres quickly ran over and grabbed the zombie woman, dragging her back to the inn.

The sun was setting and Tatiana wanted to be hidden before it was all the way down. They would have a visitor soon on their way northwest to Raven's Hold. She knew that the dwarf would have to pass through here on his way to the castle. There were

other routes to Raven's Hold, but she suspected that the dwarf wouldn't be able to pass up the best ale this side of Foxcrest. Dwarves were funny that way. She wanted to be sure that her new friend the dwarf made himself a new home here, a permanent home in Hillside Glenn.

#

"May!"

Borimar stood in the entrance to the inn of Cairn, the only small town between the site of his recent attack in Quillport to the south, and Hillside Glenn to the north. It had acted as a staging area for him and his companion, May LaCorte. A bread maker from the Borain Peninsula, she had been the dwarf's traveling companion for ten years, since he had saved her life from pirates. She had become his rock, his moral compass. Without her, he knew he would have been a very different dwarf.

He had fallen in love with her, an emotion that he was sure she shared, though neither of them ever talked about it. She followed him every fool treasure hunt or mission he went on, always by his side and backing him up when needed. This time she had stayed behind at the inn where it was safe, in case anything should go wrong. He always kept her out of harm's way when he could. This was one instance he was glad for that policy.

He called to his partner, eager to get on the road. May

stood at the bar, confusion set across her soft face, as she stared at her dwarf friend. Her dark almond colored skin and curly brown hair made her stand out in a room full of very white and very drunk men. She was tall and slim, quite the opposite of Borimar the dwarf. They made for quite a funny pair. Borimar made it across the tavern in seconds and grabbed May by the wrist.

"Let's go. We need to get out of town."

"Borimar, darling, slow down."

Her islander accent usually drove him crazy, but it was a welcome sound after the past few hours.

"No time. I need to get back to Raven's Hold."

The woman wrenched her arm free of his grasp and stood in defiance. He knew he was being difficult, but she didn't understand. How could she? She wasn't there; she didn't see. The dwarf stroked the tangles of his long beard a few times before speaking. The entire tavern stared at them. Now he understood. It wasn't that he was being vague and rude; it was more the fact that he was doing it in front of all these people. Borimar cleared his throat and started over.

"May, me dear, it's important that we leave this fine establishment and get home. There be urgent business that I must discuss with me old friend."

"You found it," her face lit up, bringing out a rather large smile.

"I found something," the dwarf mused.

"Alright. Give me a half hour and we can go."

"Twenty minutes," he offered.

"Fine. But you're in charge of the horses."

Borimar watched his companion dance up the stairs towards their room, her brown curls bouncing as she walked. He decided to let her be happy for now. He would have to tell her the truth once they were clear of the village, of course, but for now this made it easier to get her going.

As soon as May was out of sight, Borimar looked around the room and, satisfied that the patrons had all gone back to their cups and conversation, took a seat himself to order a drink.

"A pint of yer best ale, good sir," he smiled as the barkeep poured.

The barkeep scowled at him as the ale filled the glass, probably ready for the rude little man to leave. Borimar snorted under his breath and took a long swig from his cup. A second drink later and his cup was empty. Wiping his beard with the back of his hand, he ordered another.

Borimar looked around the bar and noticed that he was the only dwarf in the room. He had noticed that quite a bit lately.

Each town he stopped in, there were less and less dwarves around. Now there were none. What this meant escaped him, so he took another long swig of ale. Halfway through his third glass, May appeared next to him with hands on her hips and accusation in her eyes.

"I suppose the horses are ready?" she asked.

"I was getting ta that," he laughed, "Just needed some motivation."

He saw May roll her eyes before she turned to the door and walked away. Finishing his glass with one more long drink the dwarf slapped some coins on the bar and hopped down from his stool. The barkeep picked up the coins and tried to examine them with caution.

"That there be real gold," Borimar said, "Given to me by the king himself. I promise ye."

The barkeep shot him a doubtful look. Borimar thought it best to leave quickly before any more trouble started. He exited the tavern and turned left around the corner to the alley. May had the horses ready and was sitting atop hers, waiting to go.

"About time," she joked, "I was starting to think I was going alone."

"I had to pay the man for me drinks."

"Did you use the real gold this time or more of the fake

stuff?"

"Fake, of course. Ye know I don't like to part with me gold."

That's when he heard the doors to the tavern fly open violently, and a man shouting. The barkeep had figured out the truth of the gold and wanted his payment, even if that meant the dwarf's head mounted on the wall behind the bar. Borimar could hear several more people moving outside and the unmistakable sound of swords coming unsheathed.

"May," Borimar said, "I think its time we left."

"Yes darling, I agree."

Borimar quickly mounted his horse; they both snapped the reins and the horses took off. He could hear the men of the tavern yelling for his head as they rode off. Ordinarily, Borimar liked a good fight, but after what he had witnessed with Thomas, he just wanted to get home. Back to the confines of Raven's Hold and the protection of the city guards. Back where it was safe.

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Once the duo was a few miles outside of the village, May slowed her pace and Borimar pulled along side her.

"Why are we slowing down?" he asked.

"You need to explain yourself," she said, "Back at the tavern you said you found something. I take it that something doesn't mean the amulet."

The dwarf put his head down and sighed. He knew how stubborn she was and that there was no way she was going to drop the subject until he explained himself. He had surmised years ago that she was as stubborn as she was because she was an islander. Everyone he had ever met from the islands was hardheaded and bossy. She was a lot like her mother, a fact that wasn't lost on either of them.

Actually that was part of the reason he brought her on as a partner. Borimar sighed again. He looked over at May's sparkling green eyes and held back a frown.

"The amulet wasn't there," he began, "Something, no...Someone, was there waiting for us."

"Another treasure hunter?"

"Not exactly," he stalled.

"You're not making any sense. You say someone else but if not a treasure hunter than what were they?"

The dwarf considered for a moment, thought better of lying, and told her the truth.

"She was a vampyre."

May bit back a laugh but could not sustain it for long. She looked at the dwarf and the laugh tumbled out. Small giggles at first, but soon rising to full fledged belly laughs. May could not help herself. Borimar growled disapproval at her reaction and balled his fists. He hated being mocked, especially from someone who was supposed to be his partner, his friend.

"Ye think I'm lyin?" Borimar snorted.

"Vampyres...really...?" May breathed between laughs.

"Its not a joke, woman. This...thing..." he found it hard to call the vampyre a woman.

May saw the concern and fear on his face and her laughter grew less and less until she was barely laughing at all. Borimar turned away from her when he felt her warm almond skinned hand on his shoulder. She let her hand linger there until he finally turned back around.

She remained quiet, trying hard to wipe away the laughter and show her concern. The look on her face was a mix of amusement and support for her friend. He was finding it difficult to stay upset with her.

"I have spent the last forty-five years surrounded by killers, liars, and death. The eighty-five before that I was lucky enough to be in Mythryl." Borimar stroked his beard and looked his companion in the eyes, "I have seen vampyre before.

This thing though, it looked like a woman and talked like a woman, but what it did was...horrifying. I'm no coward, but from this thing...I ran."

All traces of humor faded from May's face as she listened. She had never known him to get this emotional over anything, not even his ale. Whatever happened to him must have been truly terrifying. She nodded for him to continue.

"This thing moved faster than I could blink. I ain't ever seen anything move so fast. And the way it ripped that poor bastard apart, it was like a wild animal. Then there were the eyes. They were like looking into a deep dark hell."

"What did it say to you?" May asked.

"It was after the Dark Ice amulet. It wants me to find it. If I can't...it said it would kill me."

Both rode on in silence. Borimar could not stomach any more explanation. Finally, May put a hand on the dwarf's shoulder and looked into his hard gray eyes.

"I am sorry, my friend. I cannot possibly understand what you went through, but you have my help. What's our next step?"

"We get our asses to Raven's Hold," the dwarf commanded, "We need help and there is only one person I can think of with the power and resources to do so. We need to go see Markus."

The small town of Terra had slid out of sight several hours ago, but Tellah hadn't noticed. The young man sat with his back to the railing that was meant to keep him from falling overboard. He was all alone in the back of the ship, able to sulk, and grieve, on his own.

The idea of going on a quest, one that his older brother Locke had put him on, was thrilling. So much so, that he hadn't thought of what put him on this strange new ship. Locke had died in front of him over the very amulet that now adorned his neck.

After getting himself and his uncle Blaine settled on the ship, Tellah had made his way around the main deck, checking out the boat and getting some alone time. It wasn't long before the full weight of his brothers death hit him. The quest he had waited his whole life for was finally in his lap, but at the cost of the only friend that he had ever had. Tears silently rolled down Tellah's cheeks. He didn't bother to wipe at them, he knew more would be right behind them.

Blaine had seen to it that Locke's body was taken to the blacksmith's furnace to be cremated while they were gone. It had been a slow day for the blacksmith, so he did the job before they left the dock. As weird as it was, Tellah was almost glad that his brother's ashes would be coming along.

Uncle Blaine had insisted on leaving the urn in the bar,

but Tellah suggested they bring them along, just in case the bar was robbed before they returned. The old dwarf, Albion, had agreed. He said that it would help Tellah cope. Right now, Tellah just wanted to crawl into the urn with Locke.

He was only seventeen. He didn't know why he was sailing to Elvintika, a place that no man had seen in hundreds of years. He wasn't even sure that it still, or ever, existed. The dwarf seemed convinced, though. If it hadn't been for Albion's enthusiasm over their quest, Tellah might have had the ship turned around hours ago. The thought of his dead brother was becoming too much for him to deal with. All he wanted right now, was to have Locke back.

"Master Tellah," the deep voice of Albion's dark skinned companion startled Tellah.

When they arrived at the ship, a tall, broad shouldered man stood at the top of the ramp. His skin was as dark as onyx, and almost as shiny. He was bald, with a smile that more than a bit creepy. He had been nice to Tellah, almost like a servant. Albion had told the man, Timo, about the quest and Locke. Timo had been accommodating and helpful since. He had even kept the crew away from Tellah when he had come out to this part of the ship. Now the dark man was interrupting his grieving.

"Not now, Timo," Tellah said.

"Master Albion requests the presence of the young Master."

"Tell him I'm busy," Tellah said.

"Master Albion requests you, so Master Albion will see you," Timo grabbed Tellah by the arm and pulled him to his feet.

"What are you doing?" Tellah pulled away from the big man and looked as if he had just been attacked.

"Master Albion has spoken," Timo said, "We don't disrespect the Master."

Tellah wiped at the tears with the back of his hands. He tried to straighten up, make himself look taller. Even so, he dwarfed the dark man by at least two feet.

"Fine," Tellah relented, "Where is he? I'll tell him I'm busy."

Timo bowed and pointed an arm in the direction of the dwarf. Tellah walked away in the direction Timo had pointed, and found Albion and Blaine in the middle of the ship's main deck, discussing something with the ship's captain. Blaine gave Tellah a look of remorse and understanding. Albion looked pleased.

"Tellah," Blaine said, greeting his nephew from afar, "How are you?"

"Uncle," Tellah said, "Can we talk?"

"You two can have all the family time you want," Albion interrupted, "But after we talk. I see you still have the amulet

around your neck."

"You mean this amulet that my brother died bringing back to me?" Tellah grabbed the amulet and held it in his fist. Anger bubbled to the surface, his grief turning to hate.

"That's the one," the dwarf said, "Come here, boy."

Albion held up a map and looked genuinely excited about something. Tellah didn't know what the dwarf wanted, but maybe he had been too hard on the old dwarf. He moved to Albion's position, still clutching the amulet in his fist.

"What do you need?"

"Tellah," Blaine said, "Don't be rude."

"It's quite alright," Albion corrected, "I understand. I understand your anger over losing your brother, I truly do. But if we an fulfill this quest, this adventure that Locke has sent us on, then we would be honoring his memory."

"Have you lost a brother, Mr. Albion?" Tellah asked.

"No," the dwarf said, "But I have lost a son... to war."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Blaine said.

"So you see," the dwarf said, "I have lost someone dear to me as well. It cannot be easy for you, young Tellah, but trust me, trust your uncle, we won't let you down. Besides, Locke wouldn't want you to give up."

"How can you know what Locke wants me to do?" Tellah said,

"I should never have come. Why did he have to die?"

"I don't know, son," Blaine said, "I don't know. But we got to see him one more time before he died. He fought to make it home for you, Tellah. He made it back for you. Remember that."

Tellah worked up a smile for his uncle, who returned it with a short smile of his own. Tellah could see in Blaine's eyes that he had been crying too. It made him feel a little better to know that his uncle was as broken up as he was. Albion, on the other hand, seemed happy and excited. Not someone who had been grieving.

"Shall we show him?" Albion asked Blaine.

"Of course," Blaine said. He turned to Tellah and turned him towards his right, and the side of the ship. Tellah noticed, a ways off in the distance, a shoreline covered in large, pointed rocks. Tellah looked up at his uncle with a curious look.

"We can't be there already," Tellah said.

"No," Blaine said, "We are still a ways off from Elvintika. No, I wanted you to see where we were."

Tellah still didn't know. He felt as if his uncle expected him to know.

"It's the Sword Coast," Albion said, "The jagged coastline was forged by Archamond, the great emerald dragon. Do you know

the story?"

"No," Tellah said, "Can I go now?"

"Tellah," Blaine said, "I know you're hurting, so am I. If you don't want to hear the story now, it's OK. Mr. Festus just wanted to share some history with us. You can go, isn't that right, Mr. Festus?"

Albion looked at Blaine with the same look Tellah used to get from his uncle when he was in trouble. The dwarf turned to Tellah and gave him a look of compassion.

"Of course," Albion said, "Take your time. I can tell you the story later."

Tellah turned and headed back to his spot at the back of the ship.

"Shall I keep an eye on the boy, Master Albion?" Timo asked.

"No need, my man," Albion said, "Where's he going to go?" the dwarf let out a chuckle at his own words. Blaine didn't share his humor.

"Why would your man need to watch Tellah?" Blaine asked.

"Just a precaution," Albion said, "I wouldn't want him falling overboard or losing that amulet, now would we?"

"Why do you want that amulet so bad? I thought you were interested in Elvintika, not some piece of jewelry."

"I assure you, Mr. Freemantle, it's so much more than just some piece of jewelry. That amulet is the key to something far greater."

"What do you mean?"

"That amulet, the Hard Ice Amulet, is part of a trinity of jewels. A trinity that will reawaken Archamond and all the other dragons."

"You can't be serious," Blaine said, "Dragons are long gone. Assuming they're real, you'd have to be at least five hundred..."

Blaine realized in mid sentence that the old dwarf was in fact very old. Probably old enough to have seen a dragon. He quickly stopped talking.

"Five hundred and three, to be exact," Albion said.

"So you've seen them?" Blaine asked.

"Of course I have," Albion said, "And they're majestic, beautiful even. No other animal matches it in loyalty."

"You really think you can bring them back?" Blaine said.

"No, Mr. Freemantle, I want to control them."

#

From the giant picture window in the throne room, Markus could see all the way out to the castle gates, a good three hundred yards. On his side of the gates, people went about their

business as usual; sweeping, gossiping, and the palace guards patrolled their usual rounds. Outside, a mile from castle to city entrance, he could not see, but he prayed life went on as usual. All his life, Markus had never seen the castle gates closed to visitors. The city gates were always shut, but that was more for the people's safety from trolls and other creatures than it was other people. The open gates, and the welcoming atmosphere, had always been a staple of the Farrell rule in Raven's Hold.

Now one Altlock's greatest menaces had raised its ugly head, right at his doorstep. From stories told by his grandfather to real, living vampyres. The truth would surely panic the masses. The dead guards were being kept down below in the crypt, well out of sight of prying eyes. The longer he could keep the people calm, the easier it would be later when it was time to act.

What he needed was his old friend, Borimar. The dwarf always had a plan, no matter the situation. As Markus' most trusted advisor, and his father's before, the dwarf had made himself a reputation for making the tough calls. But Markus wondered where he was now. His friend had been off hunting treasure for over a year now, without even so much as a letter.

When their king ordered the city gates locked and to deny

any and all entrants, no one batted an eye. But Markus saw them whispering to each other, asking themselves why they were denying admittance to not just the castle, but the city as well. They didn't question his orders, but they were visibly concerned. He worried that he may not be able to contain the problem for very long.

"Katelynn, what do I do?" Markus said, thinking of his wife again.

It had only been a few years since her passing, and Markus still grieved for her. It had been hard for him to move on, and seeking her advice now was helping him stay calm. He closed his eyes and prayed for a sign. Something to let him know that he would be able to handle the storm of violence that was surely on its way.

When he opened his eyes, a great commotion at the castle gates caught his attention. He motioned for one of the his nearby guards.

"Find out what's going on down there."

"Yes, sire."

The guardsman hurried from the throne room and ran as fast as he could to the castle gates. Markus watched several guards converging on the gates as well, with weapons drawn. The gates opened, and almost immediately the guards dispersed and made way

for the party of two that seeked refuge within Markus' walls.

A darker skinned woman and an old looking dwarf made their way past the guards and out of sight below. Markus noted that both looked haggard and tired, as if they had been some great battle. A young soldier hurried into the room, moving with haste to his king.

"What is it, son?" Markus asked.

"You have visitors, sire."

"Who seeks my audience?" A smile crept onto the king's face.

The soldier straightened and his own smile grew as he spoke.

"We are saved, sire. The dwarf and his companion have returned."

Markus met his visitors downstairs in the foyer. May hugged Markus upon arrival and Borimar nodded at the king. A twinge of jealousy splashed across his face. Markus stepped to the dwarf and hugged his old friend, even with embarrassment showing in the dwarf's face. He ushered his friends upstairs, and commanded his guards and soldiers that they not be disturbed.

"I am so glad to see you both," Markus said. The relief in his voice unmistakeable.

"Aye, and we to see ye," Borimar added, "But I have ill

news to bring ye, though I am at a loss as to how to explain it."

"I pray it is not as grave as what I have to tell you," Markus said.

"Alright, somebody spill," May interrupted. She was as eager to tell Markus about what she had encountered as he was to tell them about Bodon.

"Never one to mince words, right my friend?" Markus said.

Borimar nodded and let out a chuckle. He stroked his scraggly beard, glad to let out some anxiety. But Markus saw fear in his old friend's eyes, and found that same fear echoed in May's eyes as well. Something had them spooked.

"I was visited today by a... dangerous man," Markus said, "This man claimed to be from Elvintika, and that his queen was going to take over all of Raven's Hold."

Borimar and May listened but were not at all shocked by what Markus said. The King studied the dwarf's face but saw no disbelief or humor. He turned his attention to May and found the same. Markus continued.

"This man... no, monster... killed three of my guards right in front of me, then threatened to do the same to me. He moved so fast I couldn't defend myself. The way he killed, with no compassion for human life, made my skin crawl. I don't know how

to handle an attack like this. It was like nothing I have ever witnessed in all my years on this world."

"This man," Borimar asked, "Wouldn't happen to have referred to himself as a vampyre, would he?"

"How could you know?" Markus asked.

"I too, had a run in with one of them vampyres," Borimar said, "She was every bit as terrifying as yours, but she also gave me an ultimatum. Me life in exchange for an amulet that she was looking for. The same treasure that I was hunting."

"An amulet?" Markus said, "This attack was about a jewel?"

"The Dark Ice Amulet. Crafted by the elves several hundred years ago. Supposed to be the key to a vast fortune."

"I thought that thing was just treasure hunter talk. You said yourself there was no merit in it. Just more rumor started by a long dead race of elves. Since when do you listen to dead elves?"

"Aye," Borimar said, "I thought so meself, until I got reliable intel that it was real, and in a church in Fayth." Borimar chewed on his bottom lip and continued stroking his beard, "Now I wish I had never went looking for the damn thing."

"What did this creature want with the amulet?" Markus asked.

"I dunno," Borimar said, "But she wanted it real bad, and

she's killing for it. Now it's me life if I don't bring it to her. That's why we're here, me friend. We were hoping you could help us."

"It sounds like you have your own problems to deal with," May said.

"I have lived my entire life with stories that vampyres were a fairy tale, nothing more. A horror story that the elves concocted to put their young to sleep. When the elves were wiped out, the stories died with them. They were scary stories to tell around the fire in winter. Even the stories you've told of your battles with them all those years ago, they were still stories to me.

Then out of the blue this man... this thing, comes into my castle and claims to be one. If I hadn't seen the slaughter with my own eyes I wouldn't be believing it right now."

May took hold of Markus' hand. He looked up at her and she gave him a reassuring smile. Markus nodded. She always had that ability to calm him down.

So did Katelynn.

"It can't be coincidence that two separate beings claiming to be vampyres show up on the same day and in very much the same way, nearly two day's travel from each other," May said.

"She's right," Markus said, "We have to assume that

whatever this threat is, it's real."

"So what's our move?" Borimar asked.

"I am king of Raven's Hold," Markus said, "I don't go on assumptions and threats, no matter how convincing he was. We need to establish whether there are more of them, or if these were isolated incidents. We need to know how many and where they are."

"And then what?" the dwarf asked.

"We take the fight to them and finish it," Markus said.

"Ye don't just attack a group of vampyres," Borimar said, "I've seen these things first hand. Granted, it was many years back, but they're vicious beasts. If we ambush them they'll only fight harder, and with less mercy than they have shown thus far."

Markus refused to call it a vampyre. Man didn't seem right either. Monster was better. Whatever his visitor was, he wasn't human. No matter what was going on, Markus felt it was only the beginning.

"So where do we start?" May asked.

"I think that's where I come in."

The voice came from the doorway behind Borimar. He and May turned around to see a familiar woman standing there. Upon seeing the woman standing in the threshold, Borimar hopped out

of his seat. May smiled and rolled her eyes at her small companion.

"Quinn," the dwarf said, "It's been awhile."

Quintessa Rivermark leaned against the doorframe; her slender arms crossed just below her ample breasts. This pushed them up a little out of the top of her green silk blouse; a fact that did not go unnoticed by the dwarf. She wore her blond hair up in a ponytail and was barefoot. She looked as if she had been sleeping.

Quinn came from The Hunters: a group of monster and big game hunters who live their lives in the wild, tracking and killing monsters for money. Sometimes they even took contracts for the kings of Raven's Hold or Foxcrest, whichever paid more. Markus had given her use of the north tower while she stayed in Raven's Hold. She was all too happy to accept.

"I know," Quinn said, "You have more wrinkles and I think I see some gray mixed in that brown tangle you call a beard."

Borimar gave the Hunter a hug, May stood and did likewise.

"What brought you here?" May asked.

"Funny story," Quinn said.

"Not really that funny," Markus added.

"Funny," Quinn continued, "Meaning The Hunters don't know that I'm here."

"Deserter?" May said.

"No, more like a detour."

"Ye mean ye deserted," Borimar said.

"I got a mission from the king of Foxcrest, so when I finished with that I decided to come here."

"Instead of checking in with The Hunters." Borimar said.

"Markus and I haven't seen each other in almost ten years. I haven't been this close to Raven's Hold in a long time. Once I arrived, I sought him out. We talked and caught up, and he agreed to let me stay in the north tower for a while. I've been hunting down trolls in the Briar Forest for the past week."

"Do you ever plan to go back?" May said.

"Not anytime soon," Quinn said, "At least not until we figure out this vampyre mess."

She stole a glance over at Markus, who was playing with the wedding ring he still wore. She brushed a strand of hair from her face and turned her attention back to Borimar.

"Enough about me, lets talk about your problems."

Markus ran through everything that Quinn missed. When he was done, Markus looked across the table at his friend Borimar and took a deep breath.

"We need to find one of these two beings and have them followed. We need to know whether or not there are more of them

and where they are hiding," Markus said.

"That's what you need me for," Quinn said.

"Ye were a master thief before joining up with The Hunters," Borimar said.

"Thanks."

"You're a master of stealth and tracking," Markus corrected, "Plus, neither of our visitors have seen you."

"I know," Quinn said, "Doesn't mean I can't give the little dwarf a hard time."

Borimar smiled, then laughed a hearty laugh that shook his small frame.

"So now where do we begin?" Markus asked.

"Fast or not," Quinn said, "He still would have left tracks. If there's tracks, I'll find him."

"And if there ain't?" Borimar asked.

"We could always go to church."

"Church?" May asked.

"I don't think the Gods will be helping ye track," Borimar said.

"No," Quinn said, "I mean The Temple of Alec. It's far north in the frozen wastes. It would be a last resort, I suppose."

"How can they help?" Markus asked.

"They can't," Quinn said, "Only a priest and a handful of workers live there now. But their library contains every word ever written by Alec, himself a known vampyre hunter."

"Why I have I never heard of this until now," Markus asked, "That was never in any of the stories."

"It wouldn't be," Borimar said.

"Why's that?" May asked.

"Because it's not supposed to exist," the dwarf said.

"It was built soon after the vampyres were wiped out, but kept a secret from most of the world. The Hunters know of it because we have a divisions that watches over the temple."

"Ah," Borimar said, "I have heard of him. He is legendary for hunting and killing hundreds of them. I've never been there meself, but I know where it be."

"Right," Quinn said, "There may be something there that will help."

"Let's hope it doesn't come to that," Markus said.

"I need to get started," Quinn said, "I'll get dressed and start tracking."

"Be careful," Markus said, "He's dangerous."

"Why Markus," Quinn said, "Is that concern I hear?"

"You're our friend, Quinn, we all worry for you."

"Oh."

Defeat crossed Quinn's face as she left the dining hall.

"She's in love with you," May's words caught the king off guard.

"What?" Markus said.

"Quinn," May said, "She loves you. It's obvious. Don't you see it?"

"She's one of my best friends. She has been for years. I don't think she's trying to come between me and..."

Markus caught himself playing with his wedding ring again. His cheeks flushed and he looked away from May.

"When she gets back," May said, "You should talk to her. Maybe it's time to think about moving on."

"Maybe you're right," Markus said, "But now is not the time. We have to prepare to defend this city. Real threat or not, I won't be caught unprepared."

"What do you need us to do?" May asked.

"You've fought these creatures before," Markus said to Borimar, "You think you could teach my men how to fight them?"

"I could show you a thing or two," the dwarf said, "But it be no guarantee. When I last faced them, I nearly died. There's a real threat here, Markus."

"I know. I get that, old friend. But even the smallest bit of advice could be the difference. I need you on the front line

here."

Borimar went back to chewing on his lower lip. He was worried, the king could see that. But if they stood any chance, it was with Borimar at his side.

"Gather your men, my friend," Borimar said, "Let's prepare for a fight."

#

She could feel the magic creeping all around her; even without opening her eyes she could see it. She welcomed it, like an old friend come back from a long trip. She absorbed its warmth, a welcome change from the cold earth that served as her prison. The thin tendrils of dark magic attached themselves to her like vines on stone and crept up her enormous body until they covered her from head to claw. She fluttered the ends of her massive wings and the magic gripped tighter, unwilling to let go, and she didn't want it to.

This was when she realized that the magic, though familiar, was also somehow different.

Tainted.

Tighter and tighter the tendrils grew until she felt almost suffocated. Then she heard the words. The words that would force her awake from her century long slumber.

Words that were close, but not quite right.

Now the magic was penetrating her scales and burying deep into her flesh. The pain, now unbearable, caused her to struggle against the tendrils that were growing larger the deeper they bored into her.

This was all that she could take. She knew she must awaken and find out who was summoning her, then eat them for all the pain they were causing.

No Gaelach would be this careless, she thought.

She had spent a millennium serving the Gaelach, the elves, as their God and protector. Before she was forced into this hole, that is. This had that same feel. It was the Gaelach magic, but it was something else using them.

She opened her eyes and immediately tendrils grabbed at them and bore into her pupils. She lifted her mighty back and pushed the dirt above her. She pushed harder and harder until sunlight, something she hadn't seen in over a hundred years, began to warm her cold scales.

Finally she had burst through, sunlight in her eyes. She took a moment to take in the warm sun before looking at her surroundings. In her long absence, it seemed a small village had sprouted in the place of her prison. Women and children, human from the smell, ran in all directions. Men came at her with pitchforks and swords. She was amused at their effort.

The one who had woken her was not here. She snatched up a few of the men to nourish her. More ran around her and she snatched them in her large jaws and swallowed them whole.

The magic released its hold on her and began to fade away. Without its restriction, she could stretch her wings. She let out a roar to sound her return. And to signal her brethren that Brostaigid had returned.

#

Tatiana raised her head up from between the legs of particularly leggy blond woman. The rumbling began again and, though far away, felt as if it were getting stronger. If the timetable had been moved up, and Dremora left her out, she would have just one more reason for her and Bodon to take over the vampyre horde. Their queen was getting greedy and impatient.

Dremora thought she was the most accomplished of all the vampyre with the elven magic. But Tatiana knew the truth. She was the one who translated the book, she was the one who perfected necromancy, and she was the one who figured out how to summon the red dragon.

Another rumble.

She could smell the magic at work this time. Someone was summoning the dragon without her.

Tatiana wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and

stood. The pair of thighs that had just been wrapped around her neck remained open. The vampyre's gaze held on them for only a moment.

She grabbed her dark robes and dressed. She knew she must hurry if she were going to get to the dragon before Dremora did. The almighty queen may know the ritual, but only Tatiana knew the dragon's resting place.

She threw a few coins on the bed and opened the door.

"Don't go anywhere," she said to the naked woman on the bed, "I'll be back for the rest of my meal."

The woman lying on the bed snatched up the coins and rolled over to her side, giving the exiting vampyre a full view of her breasts. Tatiana smiled at the human before walking out the door. Not everything about humans was bad.

The vampyre walked down the empty street towards the river. Since she knew where the dragon would be, she didn't feel the need to run. She would find the red beast well before her queen did. An unfortunate blacksmith interrupted her train of thought as he walked out of his shop and right into the vampyre.

"Excuse me ma'am," the man said. He looked her up and down, dirty thoughts showing in his expression, "Anything I can do for you?"

"Yes," she said, "You can feed me."

Tatiana grabbed the man and pulled him into the alley nearby. She held him against the wall with one hand and tilted his head with the other. She bit into his neck with a satisfying crunch and drank his blood hungrily. The blood was warm and calming to her as it flowed down her throat. She drank the man until there was nothing left, and then let the dry carcass fall to the ground. It didn't matter now if someone found him. All of Altlock was about to find out about her kind.

It took her less than an hour to reach the spot where the dragon had risen. There was an enormous hole in the ground, but the dragon was gone. The bones and sand that covered the ground made it difficult to see any tracks. The remnants of a small village lay in shambles around the hole. The dragon had eaten when it woke.

She walked towards the river, looking for any sign of the beast. It looked as if it had fed, so now it would need to drink. The river was a ready source of water and it would lead the beast to more food. Just before the river, she spotted large tracks left by the dragon. They terminated at the water.

"Damn. She's out...and roaming without a master. I must find her."

Tatiana knew she had to follow the tracks and retrieve the dragon before anyone else found it. She was going to use the

dragon to destroy the humans. Then she would turn it on her queen. Soon all of Altlock would bend to her and her dragon.

Soon.

The vampyre found the crimson dragon minutes later, further up river, sitting near the bank and drinking. The blood staining its lower jaw told her that it had indeed eaten. Now was her chance to approach the beast and bend it to her will.

The dragon paid her no attention as she approached. She was sure she could outrun it should the beast decide to turn and attack, but she would rather not take that chance. Once she was in position behind the dragon, about twenty feet away, the vampyre stretched out her arms and began the spell.

"Brostaigid, thusas sa speir. Brostaigid, thusas sa speir.  
Abaidi, Brostaigid, abaidi. Brostaigid abaidi!"

As she spoke the last word, Tatiana dropped to her knees. She struggled to stay upright, her strength waning from the spell. Her head pounded and her vision blurred. Unlike summoning the dead, this spell required most of her life force. But if it was successful, she knew it would be worth it.

The dragon stood and turned to face her. Fiery eyes stared at Tatiana, a rage visibly building behind them. Tatiana remained in defiance to this and waited. She saw the light in

the dragon's eyes begin to fade and change to a glowing orange.

She made herself stand, still weak from the spell. She approached the dragon, hand extended, and the dragon bowed its head to allow the vampyre to touch its snout. With help from her new pet, Tatiana climbed onto the dragon's head and took up a spot on the dragon's neck. The great crimson dragon, Brostaigid, God and protector of the elves, was now in her control.

"Now, my pet," she said, "Let us show the king of Raven's Hold what you can do."

Brostaigid jumped into the air, and with a beat of it's mighty leathery wings, took off.

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