

The Worth of a Stone

Chapter 1: Dinah

Dinah swore under her breath as the caravan slowed once more. Her horse snorted, sharing her frustration as the wagon creaked to a stop. Ahead of them the caravan stopped and men jumped out into a narrow, rocky valley carved by a powerful river. Great cliffs towered over her nearly a hundred feet tall. The Gullet. The High Plain of Urhsas lay beyond.

Despite everything, Dinah had been rather excited to see the Silver Run River and the Gullet, which marked journey's end. Their caravan of thirty wagons and two hundred men — Dinah was all too aware that she was the only woman in the caravan — had just entered the valley that morning. They were nearly there, and she still didn't know why they had come.

The Gullet let her down. It was a grey day; her eyes looked over stones that matched the sky. The cold spring day clung to the memory of winter. Here and there the cliffs were pitted and caves had been carved into the stone. There was no activity up there. Dinah didn't need to guess whose work that was.

At least the river lived up to her imagination, noisily crashing down from the heights and into the wide Lyliac Empire. Though loud, the sound was rather pleasing. A drunken music. On a brighter day the valley might be a beautiful place. She didn't have time to wait.

Letting go of the reins, Dinah hitched her skirts to avoid a snag and hopped down to the stony ground. The delay gave her time to search. If another wagon wheel had broken, it might just be long enough. She noted the wagons she hadn't been inside yet. Whatever the soldiers were doing here, the evidence she needed would be in one of the wagons.

She sighed as she trudged over stones. How had the Temple of Many Truths been caught flat footed? It was their duty to know all. To investigate the nobility and their schemes. Yet here she was. Alone. Unsupported. Surrounded by men who would kill her if they knew who she was.

As she walked, the men called out friendly words to her. They continued to play their farce as merchants. Some of them actually were, and Dinah could pick them out with a glance. Those were softer than the disguised soldiers, both in physique and in their eyes. At a guess, there were around seventy merchants.

As she passed men, she felt hungry eyes on her. Her fingers instinctively went to the pouch belt around her waist where a little knife waited. More of a needle, really. She couldn't use it on just anyone. For safety, she carried her butcher's knife, though instinct drew her fingers to the little one.

"Any venison today, good butcher Desmara?" a cheerful voice asked.

Dinah looked over and saw Tevran — a smaller man powerfully built — stepping out from behind a wagon. His face was squat, and he would have looked unremarkable in an imperial crowd. Olive skin, black hair, light brown eyes. He played the farce better than the others. Dinah wasn't sure if he was a knight or man at arms. Probably the latter. Tevran had walked or drove a wagon. The ones she marked out as knights rode horses. She had given her name as Desmara when she first joined the caravan. It was best not to use her real name.

Dinah fixed him with her best smile. He had been kind and protective of Dinah since she joined them, and easily manipulated. She noted with satisfaction the corners of his mouth moving to a smile, which he tried and failed to suppress. "I'm afraid not, good trader Tevran. At this point in our travels, I could only prepare it if you hunted it down. All my stores are low."

Tevran's face fell comically. Dinah fought back a laugh. *This poor fool*. "Then I am afraid that we won't have it the rest of our journey," he said.

"Why?"

He puffed himself up. "Because we will be reaching Last Hearth by sundown, so long as everything goes smoothly."

"Is there any reason to believe something will stop us?"

Tevran allowed himself a small chuckle. "I'm surprised at you, Desmara. For a southerner out here, you are surprisingly poorly traveled."

"I am not familiar with the wilds," Dinah said defensively. The Temple taught her to be demure to men. She hated it. "And still wouldn't be if my husband remained healthy."

Tevran's face fell another step. He always looked sour when she mentioned her fictitious husband. "But then we wouldn't be blessed with your company."

Dinah gave the small man a small smile. "Yes, well, I would prefer to be at home watching over the shop. All things being equal. What might delay us out here?"

Tevran walked up to her. Side by side, his short stature stood in stark contrast to her own slightly above average height. Tevran gestured and Dinah understood that he meant to escort her up the line. Men who contented themselves to being hangers on were a terrible inconvenience.

"I think we've arrived at a bridge," Tevran said meaningfully. Noticing the lack of comprehension from Dinah, he continued. "The river has carved out the valley, but it didn't do so evenly. Here and there it is close to the cliffs. Too close for a road. So the road zigzags from side to side where it is easiest to build. There are three bridges, and you know what that means."

Dinah nodded. "Ogres."

The largest of all the peoples of the world, excepting only dragons, ogres had a penchant for finding themselves a bridge and guarding it, taking a toll from whoever crossed. They were vital to the Lyliac Emperor's control of his nation, and thus nothing was done about them. Some exacted a heavy toll, others guarded small footbridges and asked only for a song. They were a

strange people. They seemed to feed on the traffic over their bridge, with the busiest boasting guardians nearly forty feet tall. Dinah wondered at the size of this one.

“Just so,” Tevran said. They passed men milling about as they walked up the column of wagons. “And I’m sure that you’ve seen the caves.”

“Goblins,” Dinah answered with a real note of apprehension. If she got back she was going to have it out with the priests who sent her on this.

Tevran laughed again. “Why, Desmara, you fooled me. Not the butcher’s wife at all, but a traveler.”

“My village had a number of goblins,” Dinah answered. “Civilized, of course.”

“Yes,” Tevran said, nodding. “The empire takes all peoples. These, however, live outside our laws. Savage as any people you are like to come across. From what I understand, the two tribes on either side of the Gullet are frequently at war. They shoot arrows at one another and the arrows fall on us. That’s the biggest worry. Don’t be afraid though, we merchants are strong enough to push them away.”

Dinah looked up. The space between the two cliffs was nearly two hundred feet apart. She tried imagining being caught out in the open during one of those battles. “I noticed. All of you look strong for merchants. I’ve known my fair share of them.” Dinah watched his eyes closely, and as expected, he looked away at the mention of deception. Not much of a liar, this one.

“Hardships on the road have made us strong. Ah, here we are.” They reached the head of the column. Tevran sidled closer to her. He gave Dinah a pat on the arm, as though he were leaving, but he stayed at her side. Tevran was going to be a problem.

The caravan had stopped at a bridge, just as Tevran had predicted. Ahead of Dinah were five men, all heavily muscled, dressed in warm trader’s clothes with wide, circular hats on their heads. Dinah suppressed a smile. Lions in hats might look funny, but were still lions.

Sir Uva Testaforte stood at the fore, seemingly conversing with his feet. The leader of this little military excursion was a perfect imperial, his hair dark and well-groomed. It rolled gently to the nape of his neck. He stood nearly a head taller than Dinah. Uva would be a handsome man if it weren’t for his nose, which was bulbous and squat, ruining the rest of the appearance. Something about his bearing kept her on edge, something in the way he held himself. He might pounce any moment.

Uva was a famous man, one Dinah had seen some years ago in a tournament. A renowned jousting, he had killed the leader of the Almeline Revolt. Loyal service to Lord Thevandris left him landed, renowned, and influential. He made a poor choice to lead this ruse. The man even wore the famous boar broach sigil while supposedly disguised, and he went by the name Uva, not a false one. Perhaps Lord Thevandris felt that no one could better complete his task, whatever it was, than his favorite pet.

Beside Uva was his own favorite. Dinah wasn't sure of his name, but she was certain it wasn't John as he introduced himself. For one thing, it had taken him nearly a full minute of stumbling to reach that name. A sharp-nosed man, but not sharp minded.

The third leader of this disguised military expedition was a thin man. Pale white skin and green eyes. A Northman from the outskirts of empire. An outsider like her, only she was from the south. Dinah hadn't talked to him in the week she had joined the caravan, and she was glad for it.

The other two men she knew the names of, but weren't worth much thought. They were soldiers, not the leaders of this merry band. Both kept swords at their sides.

As Dinah surveyed the scene, a great pale hand reached up from under the bridge. It was wet and warty. Slowly, the spindly form of an ogre pulled itself up. Dinah had seen ogres across the empire, and this one was young. It had little fat to it and was short, only around fourteen feet tall. Like all ogres, this one was naked. Warts, moles, and odd patches of hair covered his body. Loose skin hung in a pouch under his throat. Dinah thought she could count all the ogre's bones. His dull eyes swept over the caravan.

"I am Shok," the ogre said growled in a deep voice. Ogres were slow people. Dinah had yet to meet one that didn't struggle with language. Perhaps that's what happened when a people spent their lives living in rivers and not going to school. "Five Lylics to cross Lowbridge. Do not give me any with Martnius's face."

Smart ogre, then. Emperor Martnius had lowered the gold content of his coins. Shok wanted his money's worth.

"Five per person?" Uva asked, a tinge of outrage in his voice.

"No, five for group."

"All of us?" Uva's tone changed to disbelief. Five Lylics for two hundred men and wagons was practically free.

Shok shook his head back and forth. The pouch of skin under his neck inflated and he stomped his feet rhythmically. John and the Northman grabbed the hilts as Shok made strange sounds. "Uuuub. Uuuuub. Uuuub. Brrrrrrgrum. Yes. For all."

Uva reached into his money bag and pulled out five coins, inspecting their faces to be sure he didn't hand over any offending coins. Shok took all five, then picked out one and put it in his mouth. Great broken molars chewed over the gold. Everyone watched, curious for the verdict. Shok was satisfied. After a moment he swallowed and smiled, revealing a mouth of many broken teeth. This ogre might not live all that long.

"You may pass," Shok said, and then clambered down under his bridge without another word. Dinah heard a splash come from the river below.

"Ogres eat gold?" Dinah asked aloud.

Uva turned and saw her. He gave her what she supposed he thought was a flattering smile. “Ah, Desmara, didn’t see you there.” Uva’s voice was not a soothing one. He gave a signal with his hand and his men returned to the wagons. “Yes, I believe they do. I don’t quite understand it myself. I’ve heard tell that people pan for gold down stream of ogre bridges. It’s a grubby way to get gold, for sure. Some just don’t have the breeding for decent work.”

“How could that little gold sustain a creature so large?”

Uva shrugged. “I don’t know, but I imagine that they eat other things, or they are sustained by treasure like dragons. Either way, they’re not important. We pay them to use their bridges and they keep them standing.”

Dinah shook her head. “What a strange people.”

Uva laughed. “Not so near the bridge, please. It’s best to talk of these things out of earshot. You haven’t seen much of the world, have you Desmara?”

“If my husband stayed healthy, I still wouldn’t have.” Tevran, standing at her side, looked distinctly put-out.

“You,” Uva snapped at Tevran. “Go drive Desmara’s cart, she will walk alongside me to the next bridge.”

Dinah flushed. She could do so on command. “No, it’s alright. I can’t have someone driving my cart on the last day. A Wagoner has her pride.”

“As do I,” Uva said. “You have dutifully fulfilled the contract your husband was unable to. We have been fed by you since we left more settled lands. All of us are grateful. I insist you walk alongside me, at least for a short while.” There was a force in his words that sounded like a battlefield command. Uva was a man without any softness.

Dinah hid her disdain behind her flushed cheeks. After so many years in the Temple, she had perfect control of her features. When she spoke, she sounded suitably awed. “If you insist. Thank you Tevran, for minding my cart.”

She watched a crestfallen Tevran walk down the line. Dinah didn’t care for his feelings. In a day, he would probably be trying to kill her. All is fair in love and war, after all. Tomorrow, Tevran would realize that what he thought was the former was the latter.

Uva got the caravan moving, then mounted his horse. Dinah looked around for a horse to ride alongside, but none was forthcoming. Uva’s words played through her mind again. The bastard meant what he said, Dinah realized. She had to walk alongside him.

Gallantry was dead.

Doing his best to look dashing, Uva spurred his horse over the bridge. The ogre below didn’t make a peep. Dinah crossed just ahead of the first wagon. She then caught up to Uva, who was setting a slow pace as though this dismal valley were a parade ground. Even in the wilds, men found time for useless pomp.

Dinah was grateful at least for the pace he set. Any faster and she would struggle to keep up in her skirts and boots. The costume was burdensome, but no one questioned it. Looking the part was half the job. She had an apron tied to her, suitably stained with blood, her belt of pouches overflowing with various herbs. No one looked twice at her belt.

“A strange and savage land we are in now,” Uva said.

“Is Last Hearth savage?”

Uva chuckled and ran a hand across his mustache. “No, no. There at least we will find some comforts of home. Meat and grain. Songs such as weary traders can sing. A last bastion of civilization before the mountains.”

Dinah gave a girlish laugh which echoed emptily off the valley walls. It was not her own. “You seem to be in good spirits, good merchant. Have you been there before?”

Uva glanced at her sideways. “Never, but I have heard of the riches this route can provide. There is great wealth on the High Plain of Urhsas.”

“That I doubt. You must be clever,” Dinah said playfully. Uva seemed to enjoy sycophants, so she played the part.

“It may not look like much, but this is a wide land which produces many magical components. Poorly developed, but that will be changing.”

Changing? That was new. Dinah pried carefully. “Magic comes from this place?”

Uva puffed himself up impressively. “Oh aye. Plants and animals and magical stones, they all can be found here, though for centuries the wizards used other lands because of how difficult it is to get anything out of Urhsas.”

“Is it dangerous?” Dinah looked up at the imposing walls of the valley. She thought she saw something moving high up there, near the caves.

“Terribly. Especially for the empire. Great orc hordes roam these lands. The goblins are always fighting one another. All sorts of creatures. This land has been savage too long. That’s why Last Hearth was built, to give us some control.”

Dinah fell silent for a moment. There was something there. It sounded like these knights were the vanguard to some larger force aimed at conquest. But the High Plains were massive. That it had no single master only meant there was no person to defeat. Lord Thevandris was trying to gain land or favor, but there could be someone else involved. Dinah had a hard time imagining he would be so brazen as to launch the attack on his own. An unsanctioned military action was asking to get exiled by the emperor. Whatever was happening here was worse than the Temple had suspected.

She looked back to Uva and found him watching her closely. Something like suspicion danced across his eyes. Dinah gave him a queasy smile. “I don’t like the thought of heading into orc country.”

Uva looked up at the cliffs. “You have nothing to worry about. Last Hearth is right on the edge of the plain. We won’t be going into their country. At least, you won’t be. Once we reach Last Hearth your contract will be fulfilled and you can return to your...husband.”

His tone. A wave of panic raced through Dinah, only to be bottled up and stored in a corner of her mind. Panic got people killed. Dinah had no intention of being killed. Dinah had a mission, and she had never failed before. This oaf would not discover her.

“Do you mind if we change the subject from murderous hordes?” she asked in a faltering voice. She began wringing her hands, which went some way into defusing the panic.

Uva waved his hand graciously.

“What goods have you brought to the High Plain?” she asked.

“Weapons.”

Dinah stopped in her steps. Yes. This was an invasion, or the start to one. How had the Temple missed this? A somewhat inelegant excuse for their arms, but they were here. This thin vanguard would be strong on a wide plain. Dinah didn’t know how the people of the plain fought, but they would have a hard time against armored knights.

“What is it, good butcher?” Uva asked from up ahead. He didn’t turn his head to ask.

Dinah cast around for a reason. “You’re...delivering weapons to the dangerous orc hordes?” She smoothed her butcher’s apron and hurried to catch up. The road was not well maintained. Only the largest stones had been removed. She had to weave around stones as Uva’s horse took up the road. Dinah felt her annoyance spiking, but maintained her dismay.

“Yes,” he said with a casual air, not noticing Dinah struggling along beside him. “Do you have an objection?”

“You’re making them more dangerous. How do you plan to get your goods out of here when a powerful host of orcs has your weapons?” Plans. Violence and plans. That’s who this man was.

Uva laughed. “And who do you think they will use their weapons on? Themselves, of course. They couldn’t hurt the empire in the state they’re in, but each other, sure. They’ll weaken themselves, and won’t pay attention to us merchants.”

Dinah suppressed a shiver. He was a villain alright, though an honest sort. She lowered her head and followed him. Dinah was made to march beside him for some hours. The valley had not grown any more welcoming the further they went. On her left the cliff wall was twenty feet from her, and the river ten to the right. Grass and bushes grew strong in the valley, sometimes overgrowing the road. Somewhere high above the sun was trying to break through the clouds, but it didn’t have the strength to, not today. What a miserable place.

Her Temple had prepared her for such conversations. The key was to subtly redirect the talk away from her and onto the other person. Most people loved talking about themselves

because they were the only thing they really knew. Their interests, what they thought of the world, their feats of strength. That last one was particularly useful with soldiers.

Dinah managed to carry the conversation all the way to the next bridge. Time and again Uva all but revealed that he was a knight. His words betrayed him with every sentence.

Standing beside Uva, she got an excellent view of the second bridge, and with it, the second ogre. She couldn't suppress her smile when Uva called it out and it rose. A much larger hand reached up from under the bridge. At a guess it was nearly twice the size of the first. Then an arm, the other, a torso, and the head of the creature. The river was deep and swift, and had cut a gully out of the valley so that it was about ten feet to the water. The ogre stood nearly double the height of the first and was embarrassingly male. Where the other one had been long and thin, this ogre was nearly as wide as he was tall, his body built from equal parts muscle and fat. Water dripped from his skin as he watched them with eyes large as plates. His breath was so powerful that it made the air smell like rotten fish.

His lungs must be larger than a blacksmith's bellows, Dinah thought. As impressive as the ogre's size was, the stench of his breath was simply stunning. Dinah began timing her breaths opposite his so the air was a little clearer. Even so, her eyes watered.

"Mighty ogre. We are merchants traveling to the High Plain of Urhsas. We seek to cross your bridge. What is your toll?" Uva said this with a grand air, puffing up his chest. His horse was struggling before the great ogre, impatiently stamping its hooves and turning to get away. Uva struggled with the reins as he delivered his message.

The ogre didn't answer immediately, but began rocking back and forth on his feet. Dinah felt as his irregular steps shook the ground. The great sack of skin beneath his throat inflated like a frog. "Gggrrruub. Ouub. Uuuub. Shflugugugug."

Dinah hadn't noticed it on the smaller ogre, but the ears on this one were remarkable. They lay flat against the skull unless the ogre wanted otherwise. Then they came off and flapped like fans, being large and leaflike. When this ogre brought both his ears out, Dinah had to stop herself from laughing. He looked so surprised.

"I am Mon-Man. You can cross my bridge if you pay my toll. Ouuuugh."

Annoyance flashed across Uva's face. "Yes. How much is it?"

"Brrrrgum. One Lylic per wagon."

Dinah winced. That was a steep increase in price. Uva clearly thought so. His face flushed red and his hand went for a sword that wasn't there. "Good ogre, that is a high price."

That was the wrong thing to say. A change came over the ogre. His ears pinned back. It lifted itself out of the gully and sat down on the bridge. Dinah shrank, expecting the bridge to collapse beneath the weight of such a large creature, but not a stone moved as the rolls of fat blocked the bridge entire, his feet pointed out towards them. The ogre made more strange sounds, shaking his head back and forth.

“Kill me! Kill Mon-Man,” the ogre said, “and you will never reach the plain. Pay me or kill me, but dead you will not make a coin.”

Dinah could see Uva was considering it. His men were coming up, armed or not. His furrowed brow gave his face a darkness which couldn't be lifted. Dinah was certain he was going to order the attack. She doubted they would win, not on a bridge against an ogre. They weren't in their armor.

“Good ogre. Your price is your price.” Uva reached his hand into his pouch and drew out a handful of gold. He counted out thirty and held it up.

The ogre reached out one hand and took the gold from Uva. Mon-Man didn't move until he placed one in his mouth and swallowed it. Satisfied, Mon-Man stood and stepped into the gully, then Dinah heard a splash. Uva waved his hand and the caravan began moving over the bridge.

Driven by curiosity, Dinah walked to the bridge and looked over it. Ten feet below her she could see the river running swift, as well as the large blubbery body of Mon-Man mostly submerged. The river had broken its banks and ran through the gulley before returning to its course. Mon-Man regarded her disinterestedly.

“Incredible,” she whispered to herself.

Then she jumped back. The wagons approached without regard. This bridge was a much tighter fit than the previous. Dinah hurried to the other side, where Uva was watching.

“So who do you work for?” Uva asked without looking at her. “The alchemists seeking to swipe some crops? The wizards?”

Raw fear plunged through Dinah's heart, but not a ripple of it crossed her face. How could he have known? “I'm afraid I don't understand your question, sir.” *Sir*. That was a stupid mistake. She stopped herself from wincing.

Uva noticed, raising an eyebrow. “Sir?”

Dinah scrambled to cover herself. “You are a master merchant. Yes? And I am a wagoner.” She wasn't afraid of being caught as a liar, her face was too practiced for that. She was worried that her face was too sincere.

Uva watched her closely, then turned his attention to the wagons, his face set in a hard look. When his wagon passed, he looked it over and started his horse. He headed back to the front of the caravan. Uva's looked like a little home, and was painted as such. It was one of few she hadn't seen inside.

Uva's look told her something. Whatever was going on here had to be stopped. As the only Priest of Truth out here, it fell to her. For evidence there was only one place to go. Uva's wagon.

She'd had enough of him anyway. Dinah excused herself by saying she was going to prepare a meal, which Uva waved away. As she waited for her wagon to cross the bridge, Dinah thought on everything Uva had told her and came to the only conclusion. This was a vanguard. That much was certain. However, she needed proof.

If she returned to the Temple with her suspicions, she would be listened to. The trouble would then be convincing an imperial court, and she had no evidence. Suspicions didn't count. If she could get something, then she would be back down the valley tomorrow. Back in the empire, she would disappear. Uva would never find her. But she could only leave if she had proof. Dinah took a deep breath as her wagon came into view.

She muttered pleasantries to Tevran as her last place wagon crossed the bridge. He gave her a sullen smile when she asked him to drive the wagon while she made a stew. Inside, Dinah got to work. She was a passable cook, a side effect of spending sixteen years learning how to poison people. The Temple had taught her how to make a meal, in case she had to kill a noble. Soldiers didn't expect much from their meals, so her cooking was good enough for them.

Dinah only had one poison on her, and not enough to kill everyone. She didn't have the ingredients to cook some up. It was a rare poison, to be used on one person. As she made the stew, the poison rested inside the dagger hidden among the herbs on her belt.

Dinah was just about finished with the meal when the wagon stopped abruptly. Some stew sloshed out of the large pot. Dinah didn't bother cleaning it up. She bolted out the door. They can't have been at the last bridge already, could they? It didn't take that long to make a stew, though she had no idea how far the next bridge was from the last.

Dinah found the men running to the head of the column. Trouble seemed to be in the air. At a guess, Uva had insulted the third ogre. She started running, quickly catching up to Tevran.

"What's the trouble?" she asked. Dinah could run a mile, but not in skirts. She clomped after him. Dinah made sure that Tevran heard her labored breaths.

Tevran didn't respond, instead pointing upwards at the eastern cliffs. Goblins. They were peering out of their caves, sometimes preening for the others, walking along the edge and hurling insults at the caravan. There was nearly a hundred of them, and they were armed. The cliffs were lower, too, the threat of their bows more pronounced.

Dinah could see where the men were gathering, a hundred paces from her wagon. Her damned skirts were in the way and she was tired from walking with Uva all day. The men had bows and swords in hand. As they went to the front, a single wagon was moving back. It passed her by as it moved down. The driver was the Northman.

Uva's wagon.

Dinah muttered a quick prayer and stopped in her tracks. "I'm not about to fight goblins."

Tevran spun around as he ran. "Go back to your wagon. We will protect you."

Dinah made a show of going back and stalked Uva's wagon. It stopped halfway down the caravan. She cursed under her breath. She moved to the other side of the wagon line until she was level with her target.

The Northman was in the driver's seat. Dinah's hand went into her pouch and pulled out the short, needle-like dagger. The knife was as long as her pointer finger, the handle fit snugly in her palm. A small reservoir of poison, enough for one man, was in the handle.

Taking a deep breath, Dinah walked briskly to the back of the wagon. The Northman turned to watch the men up ahead. The caravan wagons were tall and wide, their walls wooden and the roofs canvas. Doors front and back allowed for the occupants to sleep safely. There was enough space in them for four men to sleep, but most were used for cargo. The Northman wouldn't see her.

She tried the door. Locked. Dinah smiled at the challenge. From her pouch she pulled out a lockpick. As she worked the lock, she crouched to avoid being seen from the road. The lock yielded without much work. Silently, Dinah opened the door. She had been expecting sleeping quarters. What she found was far worse.

Two narrow benches ran the length of the wagon, mattresses overflowed them. That wasn't the bad news. The bad news was between them. An illuminated sigil burned in the air at the front of the wagon, set against nothing. A sinister orange glow filled the room. Standing in the middle of the wagon, his feet secured to the floor that he would not be jostled, his arms raised up above his head and his back to her, stood a Priest of the Red. In his left hand was a bundle of jagaweed, the tips of the stalks just starting to smoke. In his right hand, between the thumb and forefinger a small ruby. His other three fingers held a letter before his eyes. The priest spoke in a confident, steady rhythm, which didn't carry outside the wagon. His words a magical language she didn't know.

Dinah rushed forward and stabbed the man in his side, placing a hand over his mouth. He groaned. The sigil fizzled and vanished in the air as she did, cutting the light from the room save for a small window at the back. He struggled in her arms, but Dinah gripped him like a vice.

"That is the Last Truth," she hissed. "No matter what you do, or where you go, it will kill you in twenty days. It is a painful death. The nearest Temple of Many Truths is twenty-five days from here. They have the antidote."

Deftly, she pulled the knife from his side and slid it back into her belt. The burning perfume of the jagaweed rolled through the air heavily. She blinked. Her mind stumbled. Dinah took breath sparingly. With her now free hand, Dinah took both the ruby and the letter from him and stashed them hastily in her belt. Evidence secured, she turned her attention back to him.

"You can make it, maybe, if you are quick. However, eighteen days walk from here there is a Priest of Many Truths waiting in a border town. I will tell you which tonight, only if you keep my identity secret. If I die, you die a most awful death. Stay in here. Say that the ritual was complete. Whatever you need to. I will give you the location and the password to the antidote tonight, in the town. Do you understand?"

The priest nodded. As soon as he did, Dinah let him go and walked out of the wagon, closing the door as silently as she could. She looked around and saw no one around. She could have killed the priest, but he was another piece of evidence. The Temple would imprison the priest after giving him the antidote. She locked the door behind her. Taking a deep breath, she walked briskly down the line of wagons. There, she looked back. The Northman was still in his seat, watching the cliffs.

Dinah looked up. The goblins were watching, but not saying anything. A fight seemed to have been avoided. Not a lot of time left, then. Dinah made a little show of worriedly watching the cliffs for the Northman, then retreated back to her wagon. The dagger, ruby, and letter all went into a false cupboard. Dinah hoped it would pass scrutiny, but felt anyone who looked long enough would see.

She calmed herself, taking deep breaths as she had been trained to do, and returned to her stew. After a little work, it was ready. All it needed was to be placed on a fire. She stifled a grin as she cleaned her hands on her apron. She had evidence, three pieces. Now all she needed was to escape.

She should have disguised her voice. But then, she was the only woman on this venture, and the priest saw her hands. Even in the dim wagon it would be hard for the man not to notice that she was a woman. Nervous, Dinah retrieved her dagger and placed it in her belt.

Deep breaths. Her heart still beat quickly. It felt good to have a dagger in her belt, but really, she was a poisoner and an assassin, not a fighter. Any one of the poorly disguised warriors would kill her in a fair fight. That was a simple fact. Her dagger was only a few inches long. They had swords.

Her wagon rocked. Someone was out front. Dinah smoothed her apron. It was nothing. It would be nothing. She opened the front door and stepped up to the driving bench. Tevran sat there, a sword across his lap, reins in his hands.

“What happened?” Dinah asked as she sat down beside him.

He looked nervous, his eyes darting to the cliffs and then to her. He was sweating. “Goblins rolled a boulder onto the road. From the cliff straight down here. Insane. Nearly killed Uva.”

“An ambush?”

“As far as we can tell, they just wanted someone to mock. Kept insulting us as we moved it out of the road.”

Dinah relaxed as the caravan started moving. That didn’t seem so bad. In the moment it must have been tense, but really, not so bad after all. She settled into the bench, looping her arm around his. Tevran tensed.

“Good merchant, I wanted to thank you for all the help you have given me. You have made me feel welcome and safe this last week. I will make sure my husband commends you to the guild. You deserve to be on more lucrative routes.”

Tevran placed his right hand on his heart, the military salute, before changing it quickly. Lord Thevandris had not cooked up a cunning plot, but a brazen one. It was simply their misfortune that the Temple suspected them. Dinah passed the time to the third bridge feigning worry of the goblins. It was fifty feet to the top of the cliffs, they were getting close.

Uva ordered them to ride hard. Dinah’s meal went uneaten. No loss for anyone there. Late in the afternoon the clouds began to break. The sunlight was not full, but the effect on the valley was remarkable. A grey, somber place was transformed into a valley full of color. The river shone white and its music became more beautiful. Songbirds darted from bush to bush. The stones turned from dull grey to a vibrant color that seemed almost white at the right angle. Over it all, the rushing river sang its joyful tune, and a voice in the distance hummed a low tune that harmonized with it. That voice grew louder and louder until Dinah saw the third bridge. The caravans were rolling over it. Uva had paid the toll for the third bridge. And Dinah saw why.

There was no fighting this ogre. Her head was as large as a wagon. Dinah guessed this one stood at about thirty-five feet, nearly as wide. Heavy set and covered in warts and loose skin, she was the first ogre Dinah had seen to wear an accessory. Large bracelets made of dock rope and studded with the skulls of oxen, a necklace with a pendant made of a boulder which had been drilled through, and a dozen circlets of fresh, withering, and dead flowers on her head. Her skin was pale like the others but had a greenish tint in the light. She was humming a tune that matched the river, *was* the river, the sack beneath her throat inflating and rumbling as she did.

Dinah leapt from the wagon and ran to the river as Tevran shouted after her. She had to. This was the most extra-ordinary person Dinah had ever seen. The enormous ogre regarded her through smallish purple eyes. They were cloudy, but still had life in them.

“Excuse me,” Dinah called up to the ogre. “I must know your name.”

“Errrrrum. I am Madam Tauch, Mistress of Highbridge and soothsayer. Do you wish to know your fortune?”

“Err...” Dinah said, unsure of what to say. She had never thought such things were possible. A fortune? Like in a story? “Perhaps. I just wanted to say that you are beautiful. Never have I met such an intriguing person. I am delighted to meet you.” She bowed low.

When Dinah recovered, she found Madam Tauch looking at her eye to eye, having lowered herself. Tevran and the wagon were approaching the bridge. Dinah didn’t have much time. A burning curiosity stared back at her.

“Humans don’t show humility on the plains. You are rare. For your words I give your future freely.” Her pupils grew larger and she sniffed the air. Dinah stumbled as the ogre took in so much air. Madam Tauch grumbled, gurgled, then spoke in a voice barely above a whisper.

“Daughter of No One,

*Here you will become someone,
Here you will meet the one who can look at you as I do now,
Here, on my bridge you will face a choice,
You will choose wrong.”*

Dinah shuddered before the eye of Madam Tauch. The Temple was not a kind place to be raised. Beneath her calm façade, fear swirled. Madam Tauch gave a satisfied nod and turned away, watching the last wagon cross her bridge.

“Sixty axles, sixty gold,” she rumbled and began to return to the river. “Welcome, Daughter of No One, to the High Plain of Urhsas.” She submerged in the river.

Dinah looked down the valley just as the clouds parted. The road back to the empire was alive. She could see flower patches which she had missed in the grey day. Before her was a painting. With a heavy sigh, Dinah turned away and ran to catch up to her wagon.

Chapter 2: Dinah

From Highbridge the road took a steep path into the western rise. Not straight into the cliffs, which were falling lower, but along its base. There were no caves dug in the low cliffs. Dinah was grateful not to have any goblins above them as they rode.

Her wagon rolled last in the caravan, Tevran steering and Dinah beside him. Ahead of her the men were in good spirits. Those who rode their own horses and those on the wagons talked and joked, their laughter carried far into the sunlit pastures. The coldness in the air remained despite the late sun, but this did not affect the caravan. The journey was almost over; travelers were always eager at the end of the road.

The sun had long fallen behind the west cliff, leaving them in shadow. Then, suddenly, the road rose sharply, cutting back into the cliff which was only ten feet tall. The horses struggled to pull the heavy wagons up the grade, but then, as sudden as it had changed, the road was flat.

From her seat in the last wagon, Dinah saw a wide plain in front of her. The sun burned the heavens red and gold as the last clouds parted. When she looked north, Dinah saw a great lake from which a waterfall fell, becoming the Silver Run. She could make out Highbridge when she stood up. South of her stood a forest which ran right up to the edge of the cliff. It was some miles away, but Dinah could see clearly everything that was ahead. As she looked ahead, she saw tall grasses of the plains spring up, right up to the wall of a town. Smoke curled lazily into the sky. Last Hearth indeed.

Though she was turning back tomorrow, Dinah could not help feeling excited. She had traveled much of the empire and seen villages and towns and cities. After a while, they all blurred into the same places. Civilized life was always the same, only the faces changed.

But this was the wilds. Dinah's smile broke through her training. It was difficult to breathe. A thrill attached itself to her.

"How long will you stay?" Tevran asked.

His question shocked Dinah out of watching the strange new land and she had to pull her mind out of the scenery. Her smile dimmed as she looked at the man. Remembering where she was and who she was, Dinah sat down, smoothing her apron.

"Umm...not long, not long at all. You see, I am returning with the first light. It is a week's journey back to my home, and I am eager to see that my husband is well again. I left him

in care of my mother, so he should be alright.” She gave a smile, one that felt dead compared to the one she had just had.

Tevran looked distraught. He tried to put a brave face on it. “I shall miss your cooking. I’ve never had better.”

“Thank you, Tevran. You are too kind. There is a pot of stew that you may take. Eat and share as much as you want.”

“Thank you, good merchant,” he said with a strained voice.

Thereafter, their conversation was spare and filled with niceties. Dinah’s attention kept straying to the land around her. She would be sad to leave it so soon. Hopefully the goblins wouldn’t make much trouble. Dinah didn’t know how she was going to fight them off if they decided to. Maybe she could take a sword.

The sun was about an hour from setting when the caravan reached Last Hearth. After a brief pause, in which Uva shouted something Dinah couldn’t hear up at the wall, they entered. Slowly, the rest of a caravan followed after. Dinah took everything in as they approached.

A wooden palisade made of great tree trunks stood twenty feet tall. Around the base of the wall the ground was dug up and uneven. Only short grasses grew there. The gate swung inward. Haggard men watched from ramparts. The joy which Dinah had felt on the plains dimmed as she looked at them. Here, at least, was a place without joy.

Inside the gate the caravan spread out down the streets. Dinah saw that the walls were built into hills, and the men at the top were standing on planks set on top of the hills. They had dug out the hills and planted the palisade. Dinah could only imagine the manpower it took to dig all that. The village was not large, but it was built up. Dinah saw rows of orderly homes that would fit in any town in the empire. Nothing but the men looked run down. Opposite the gate she entered was another at the other side of town.

The men who lived in Last Hearth were gathering, interested in the caravan. There weren’t many of them. Two hundred men arriving swelled the population of the town. Dinah heard someone saying that the mayor welcomed them to Last Hearth, but she couldn’t see who was talking.

Tevran led her wagon off to the right, on a muddy street along the wall. Once Dinah’s wagon had been put out of the way on a side street, Tevran hopped down.

“Good butcher, I leave you.” He looked at her intensely, drinking her in greedily.

“Wait,” Dinah called after him. Tevran turned, too eagerly. “Take the stew with you. Please. I don’t need it.”

Tevran nodded in a defeated way. Dinah gave him the stew, said thank you, and waved him goodbye. There was nothing to feel sorry about. Tomorrow he would be chasing her down. When he was gone, Dinah fed her horse, ate something small for herself, and then locked the

doors to her wagon and opened the secret compartment. She lit two small candles and reviewed the evidence.

She ignored the ruby for the moment. It was a Ruling Stone, and Dinah couldn't think about what that meant at the moment. Instead, she turned her attention to the letter. The paper felt strange. Waxy, almost, though Dinah could not see anything on the paper other than ink. It was a long letter, written on five sheets of paper. The writing she could not understand, and she knew how to read and write every imperial language.

A code. She looked it over, tried to match the words to cyphers she knew. She tried it against every language that she knew. No such luck. Everything she threw at the papers yielded nothing.

Frustrated, she turned to the stone. The ruby was as long as her thumb, and carved into a multi-faceted leaf shape. Dinah peered at the stone closely, but the light in her wagon was poor, and she was not about to let in light from outside. She thought she saw the faintest outline of a scratch set inside the ruby, the first line of a triangle.

Dinah's blood ran cold. The caravan wasn't the vanguard to an invasion, it was the invasion. A secret attempt to take the High Plains in a fell swoop. It was so brazen Dinah could hardly believe it. She hurriedly packed the evidence back into the compartment and tidied up the wagon. Once it looked like she had just finished cooking, she undid a hidden latch in the floor and dropped through a trap door.

Dinah crouched as she hit the ground. She reset the trap door before shuffling into the narrow alley between two homes. Certain that she hadn't been seen, she straightened there and set off at a brisk clip through Last Hearth. She got looks as she walked. That was to be expected. These men hadn't seen a woman since they entered the Gullet. Dinah patted the hidden knife.

A quick question got her the location of the mayor's home. Dinah knew nothing about the people of Last Hearth, apart from their trade, but it was a good bet that they would not be thrilled by Lord Thevandris declaring him their liege lord. For one, there were taxes.

As she walked, she listened to conversations. No one had anything interesting to say, griping about the new arrivals and bed space. There was only one interesting piece she picked up as she walked. Two men talked in the street next to some barrels. One was asking for pitch to fix it.

His companion said "I gave the only barrel to the wizard. He paid two Lylics for it."

"Damn that useless fool."

A wizard up here? These were the fringes of the empire. The Emerald Eye commanded where the wizards went in service of the emperor. There were nearly five hundred in the capital, and every prosperous city or county had one, but here? Dinah made a mental note of it. Perhaps the Temple would be interested in them.

The mayor's house was not noticeably different from the rest. Two stories, wooden shutters. No house had much space between its neighbors, and each faced two streets. The mayor's house was one of those lucky few on the end of a row. There was a window box of flowers to liven things up. Dinah appreciated the effort.

Dinah approached the door and was about to knock when she heard raised voices coming from within. She turned, walking around the house and planting herself beneath a window facing the mayor's only neighbor. As she knelt, she heard an argument already in progress.

"...a finished act. It was over before we arrived here. All you have to do is accept it." Dinah recognized Uva's voice. It was raised, but it wasn't angry. He was gloating.

"This is outrageous. It won't even work. This is not the empire." Dinah guessed that voice was the mayor's.

"We have just made this the empire. You are a subject of Lord Thevandris, and I am his servant. You will obey my command or lose a daughter. Though, she is an ugly daughter. Not much of a loss."

Someone in the room laughed, but it wasn't Uva or the mayor. The laughter was a perverse music, broken and cruel. John was there too, then, and Dinah didn't doubt that another soldier or two was with them.

"How dare you. I come from the Mountain of Thurgan. My forebearers built the imperial throne. I will have you roasted alive for this!" Brave though the mayor was, Dinah heard panic in his voice.

"What is a dwarf doing above ground in a house? It's unseemly. You belong underground." Uva's threat was obvious. "You'll live, but we're going to make your daughter beautiful. Cut her beard off."

Dinah wanted to leave, to not hear whatever the knights were going to do in there, but she felt she had a duty. The Temple of Many Truths served the empire and its people. She reached into her belt as inside the house screams erupted. The mayor protested, but he was unarmed. Dinah couldn't fight the men inside. Instead, she pulled out a piece of paper and a Morrow Flower from her belt and crushed it. The petals turned instantly into a sooty black ink. She wrote a message with her finger:

The Temple of Many Truths is watching. We will stop this.

She tucked the message into the window box and left. By that time, the young dwarf woman's screams had turned to sobs. Dinah needed to vanish. Now. Lord Thevandris would be castigated in court if she could get away.

A quick jaunt around town as Dinah bought food for the return journey. Last Hearth's population numbered nearly two hundred. The conquerors had fewer men, but they had arms and armor, which began coming out as Dinah bought supplies. Most were in leather and mail, but the knights had mail, a couple had plate.

In short order, the knights and men at arms were throwing traders out of their homes. The order came through, barked on every street, that half the homes would be given to Sir Uva Testaforte. The traders made little protest. What could they do?

Dinah was left alone. Some of the soldiers even gave her a friendly wave. Dinah returned that friendship, trying to seem unconcerned by the violence around her. It took all she had not to touch the pouch with her knife constantly. She made it back to her wagon unharmed.

Reentering the wagon, as there were now too many people on the street to be able to hide, Dinah stored everything away tightly and weighed her options. She could run then. Her fake contract had been completed the moment she entered Last Hearth. In her cupboard was the ruby and letter. Now, she was a witness. Not a strong one in the eyes of the imperial court, but better than nothing. On the other hand, leaving now might get her pursued, and killed. Were the gates even open?

As she struggled to choose, the wagon sagged and a knock came at her door.

“Who is it?” she asked lightly.

“Me,” a voice she didn’t recognize whispered.

“Who?” Dinah pressed herself against the door. The visitor sounded heavy.

“The priest. You promised me a name.”

“So I did. The village of Regona on the Pas River. House on the hill. Speak ‘anguish’ for the antidote.”

“Thank you,” the voice whispered quietly. Dinah heard him step off the wagon, though strangely the back step was sagged.

Just then the door to the left of her head burst as the thin edge of an axe crashed into the door. The gleaming blade was two inches from her. The bastard priest had told Uva.

Dinah didn’t panic. She was beyond that. Instinct kicked in and she reached for the secret drawer. She had only moments. With both the ruby and letter secured in her belt, she dropped through the trap door as a second and third strike smashed into the door. It would give soon.

Crouched beneath her wagon, precious evidence in her pockets and panicked sweat coursing down her back, Dinah looked around quickly. Five sets of feet stood at the back; one she recognized as Uva’s. On the side facing the street were three more pairs. They were just near enough the wagon that the men wouldn’t see her. At the front, another pair. No one was covering the alley.

Muttering a quick prayer, Dinah dashed that way. She reached the end of the alley before someone shouted. She could hear armor clinking after her. Dinah didn’t stop. Where exactly she was going was still unclear to her, but she knew if she stayed that she was dead, and Lord Thevandris would seize the High Plains before anyone could react.

Dinah ran as quickly as she could in skirts. Her pursuers were in armor. They would catch her. The streets were full of traders milling about, stewing over the loss of their homes. They watched with confusion as Dinah ran past them. She wasn't stopped, despite the shouting soldiers.

No place was safe, but there was one that was safer than others. The sun was falling quickly now, night seizing the edges of the sky. Night would protect her when nothing else did.

Dinah looked over her shoulder as she rounded a corner. Five men were running after her. They were only ten yards behind. Ahead she saw the gatehouse opposite where she had come in. It was closed and a small number of traders milled about as Uva's men stood at the gate. All of them turned to watch a lone woman pursued by men in armor.

"Help me," she shouted. Her voice a perfect plea.

The traders exchanged looks. There was no time to wonder what they were thinking, she could only hope they chose her. One of them stepped forward, turned back to look at his fellows, then sprinted toward her. Two of his fellows followed after.

"Get your hands off her you thugs!" the lead man shouted.

Dinah ran past the man and heard him collide with the knights. Adrenaline pushed her on, though she knew that she couldn't run much longer. Her skirt slowed her down too much. The Temple always dressed its people in the proper clothes for the role they were inhabiting. Perhaps they never thought their agent could screw up this badly.

The gate was barred. Dinah wasn't going to throw herself at soldiers. The walls were empty. Those traders who hadn't run at the knights turned to face the men at the gate. Dinah saw them sizing one another up. As she reached the foot of the hill, one of the traders picked up a rock and threw it at the soldiers. Dinah didn't see if it hit, her attention stayed on the wall.

A twenty-foot drop was survivable, but it wasn't going to feel good. With a last burst of effort, she reached the top of the hill and launched herself over the palisade. As she jumped, she looked back. She saw traders fighting Uva's men here and there, often without weapons. They were brave men, these merchants.

A heartbeat later, she hit the ground with a roll. The earth was softer than she had expected. She staggered up, winded but unharmed. Muddy ground surrounded the wall here and had some give. Small miracles. She picked herself up and took a deep breath.

Dinah started at a walk, not sure where she was going. Taking stock of her surroundings, she saw a road left Last Hearth and headed south, into the forest which stood only a couple hundred yards from her. West and north was a wide prairie heath stretching on into the dying sunset. Something skittered through the grass after her, but ran off when she turned. She looked back at the wall and saw a man watching her.

They would come after her that night. As soon as they got their horses. Forest it was. Dinah jogged into the woods. By the time she had reached it, night had fallen. Off came the apron. Then Dinah took her knife and cut her dress. She needed the freedom to run.

That was the only rest Dinah would give herself. The knights would be chasing her down soon. Hopefully they would follow her into the forest. While they searched it, Dinah would gain miles on the plain.

She didn't know where to go. All she knew was that she needed space and somewhere safe to rest. Tomorrow was the day for figuring out everything. Her face was known, but the Temple taught disguise. Maybe she could sneak past that way.

Dinah walked north as well as she could in a darkening forest. She heard owls and the occasional squawk of something else, but nothing she had to worry about. What felt like an hour later she was on the plain. In the distance she could see the light of the town. The plain was dark. The clouds had returned. Dinah was in the dark. With a prayer, she started running again.

Jog until she was tired, then walk till she caught her breath. Jog again. She ran in the darkness, cautiously in case of a hole. Falling in the darkness killed many. When she walked, she checked and rechecked the evidence. Always there, but every time she reached she felt a stab of worry that it might have fallen out.

Oddly, as she ran she passed patches where the vegetation was trampled down. She struggled against scratching flowers and bushes of burrs. Then they would be gone for a couple steps before she was back in the weeds. The pattern continued for what felt like hours. As she ran, Dinah couldn't help but feel like she was following after something enormous.

The running was terribly boring, though colored with fear. Her senses strained to discover danger as she ran, but the strain added to her exhaustion. Every rustle caused a stab of fear, every rush of wind which tugged at her felt like knights reaching for her.

To calm her mind, she fell back on Temple training. She tried to focus on coming up with a plan.

Lord Thevandris was trying to claim the High Plains as his own demesne. In fact, he was doing it so brazenly that he had sent a Ruling Stone to take it in one fell swoop. If the emperor had sanctioned this then there would be war here. But if he hadn't, there wasn't much he could do against a planted Ruling Stone. Lord Thevandris could be censored, fined and humiliated, but none of that would stop him from being the Lord of Urhsas. The emperor might even accept the fait accompli without punishment for anyone. If this was all sanctioned, then it was a long and bloody war for the plains.

Without taking the High Plain in one fell swoop, however...

Both the ruby and the letter made excellent evidence. The Priest of the Red would be nice too, so long as he left. He would give the password and be taken into custody. The Temple of Many Truths would imprison him, then deliver him to court for judgement. Taking the hundreds of miles wide plain would not be popular in the court, no matter what the emperor thought.

Dinah had once thought she would be sent to serve in court. She learned all about the imperial court in order to prepare her, but as she was getting sent out into mud for her missions, that didn't seem to be in the cards.

The Emerald Eye would likely be set against it. If magical components came out of Urhsas, then they would be upset with whatever tariffs Lord Thevandris charged. Dinah remembered the conversation she had overheard earlier that day.

There was a wizard up on the High Plain. If she could find him, then Dinah was sure that he would help her. Wizards were a distracted profession, consumed with making new spells. A wizard's place would be a good place to hide. No one would think to bother one.

Dinah felt secure in that plan when she was thrown violently from her feet. Something enormous had grabbed her and thrown her through the air. Dinah screamed. It was all she could do. She hit the ground hard and bounced, the heath grasses crunching beneath her. Her right ankle burned with pain and she struggled to catch her breath. The earth shook beneath her.

Whatever it was wasn't a knight.

Dinah lay where she had landed, confused. One moment she was running, the next she was on her side. She tried to stand but let out a gasp of pain and collapsed back down. Her right side was consumed by a ravenous pain. Dinah tried to rotate her ankle. It obeyed her. Not broken then.

Around her the grass shifted. Dinah froze. Whatever had tossed her was there, watching her. Slowly, she pulled her knife from her belt. Not much of a weapon, but it was better than being unarmed. The clouded sky hid her attacker from her.

"Mogriona, see me to the final truth," she whispered.

Her attacker rushed through the grass, it sounded like a gust of wind. A moment later, something large and slimy wrapped itself around her right leg. It bit her calf. Dinah let out a scream and plunged her knife into it. The creature, which had wrapped itself around her leg twice, let out a low wet growl and squirmed against her. Dinah hardly noticed, she just kept stabbing.

The creature relaxed its grip on her, and Dinah felt her leg slick with blood. As Dinah moved to stab again, the creature twisted violently. She was knocked to the ground, a thud echoing out over the plain.

Dinah lay stunned as the creature wrapped itself around her leg once more. She felt distantly aware that the creature was gashing her leg. Her knife had fallen out of her hands. In the darkness, she wouldn't be able to recover it. The creature lapped at her blood, then it put its tongue in her wound. She screamed. Dinah tried to fight back, but the blow to her head dazed her, and her arms would not respond.

Cold began to steal its way over her and Dinah knew that she was close to death. She had lost to whatever this creature was. Hopefully, the beast would eat the evidence she carried, and foil the plot. Small comfort.

The creature lay something warm against her leg, then another and another. The night was filled with a putrid smell. The creature retched and a warm waxy substance coated her leg. A moment later, the creature was gone.

Slowly, the dazed feeling left Dinah. She could still hear her attacker nearby, rustling in the grass, but Dinah felt that she was safe, at least for the time being. Her leg burned. Cautiously, she reached a hand down her leg. What felt like scar tissue or hardened wax covered her outer thigh. Dinah felt three distinct bumps beneath it, each the size of a quail egg. She wasn't bleeding any more, though.

Dinah took some time just resting, surprised to be alive. Then, gingerly, she raised herself up into a sitting position. Pain wracked her right side, but she had to keep moving. As she shifted her hands to stand up, she felt her little knife. Fat lot of good it did her. Dinah began shivering uncontrollably, both from the cold night on the heath and her loss of blood. Dinah started walking, but had no direction. She stumbled aimless through the grass.

A cold wind blew over the heath. As Dinah shivered, she paused. She couldn't go much further, not with her leg. Something was out there. A voice in the air, singing. A low rumbling voice was hidden just under the wind. Dinah couldn't make out the words, but it felt warm.

She didn't hesitate for a second but followed the sound of the voice on the wind as a moth after the moon. On the wide open plain, she could even see where it was coming from. A lantern glow hovered above the plain. Dinah guessed a mile or so away from her. The glow swayed back and forth in the darkness, the only light she could see.

Hope seized her and energy welled up inside of her. She set off at a shuffle, going as quickly as she could with her injured side and leg. Behind her, the creature scuffled through the grass, keeping close. Her panic spiked. She could make, she could. Hope burned in her chest, making every step lighter.

It hurt, everything hurt, but Dinah didn't stop. She couldn't. Dinah was not going to be eaten by some slimy muck creature on the High Plain. She was going to live.

As she got closer, she heard the words of the song. They were accompanied by a rhythmless stomping.

"Barrrrrgum. Darrrrrgum Brrrrrrgm. Grrruuuuumg." An ogre.

Dinah relaxed. Her interactions with the ogres of the High Plain had been good. She had no coin on her; what she had was lost with the wagon. They were an honorable people, hopefully.

Her limbs were cold, sweat froze against her skin, mud and blood made her lose her footing. Stumbling, falling because of her weak leg, Dinah would pick herself back up and run. No matter how long it took her to reach this ogre's bridge, she would run.

It may have been an hour, it may have been ten minutes, but suddenly when she looked up, she wasn't far from the ogre. It loomed up in the darkness, enormous. Something large and circular was on its back, like a turtle's shell. Dinah could also see that the legs of the ogre were black while the rest of it was pale like the others.

As she got closer, she saw that the lights illuminating the great ogre — which stood a towering twenty-five feet and nearly as wide, though hunched over so that it resembled a thick question mark — were set on a wooden structure.

A house.

Dinah marveled as she ran closer. It covered the ogre's back from shoulder to shoulder. It was circular but except for the back, which where a small covered porch protruded from a flat wall. A dim glow came out the windows. The roof was orange tiles, like a merchant's home in a fashionable part of the empire. There were even flowerboxes on the windows. Dinah saw a rope ladder dangling down and trailing on the prairie.

She didn't think, she didn't consider, Dinah simply grabbed the ladder and started climbing. The ogre would likely be upset with her tomorrow climbing on their back in the night, but Dinah would be alive tomorrow. It was difficult going, but Dinah slowly managed to climb up the ladder.

She saw now that the ogre was wearing pants of woven reeds. Bizarre. Those pants had a belt at the top, made of what looked like several cows' worth of leather. Wooden supports rested on the belt, holding up the half of the house that didn't rest on the ogre's back.

Half-way up the ladder she paused. There were footsteps above her. A set of them. People in the house. It seemed obvious to her then. Dinah couldn't meet them, not in her state. Exhausted and wounded, Dinah would not put herself at the mercy of others. There was a conversation going on inside the house as the ogre mumbled to themselves.

"What? Who's there?" the ogre said to the night. The voice was deep, but soothing.

Summoning her last reserve of strength, Dinah scrambled up the ladder, then swung to the other side and crawled onto the support beams underneath. There was a little space, two feet between the floor of the house and a beam that connected the supports to the house. Dinah crawled in there and held on tight. Twenty feet above the ground, she was safe for the time being.

The ogre turned around sharply. Dinah held her breath. "Ah. Moss Salamander." The ogre stood perfectly still for a long moment, and then reached out a long hand faster than Dinah thought possible for the large ogre. She clung tightly to not fall off.

The ogre grabbed something in the grass which let out a wet screech. Dinah couldn't see anything her position other than the ogre's reed-covered butt.

"Haha, small teeth. Too small to bite me." The ogre took a deep breath and Dinah heard a large mouth open. The screeching stopped.

Above her, feet hurried and a door opened. A high-pitched voice called out into the night "What's going on?" The speaker was just above Dinah. They had a light bearing about them.

"Moss Salamander," the ogre answered as it turned back to its original course and started stomping off.

"Did you eat it?"

"Yes."

"Good." The speaker took two steps above Dinah before stopping. "Oh no, I left the ladder down." The voice was motherly and small. A woman? The ladder was brought up. "I'm sorry you can't sleep tonight. You will take care of yourself, won't you, Brayman?"

"Yes," the ogre rumbled into the darkness.

"Good. Goodnight."

"Goodnight, Idafir."

Dinah listened as the ogre sang little songs to themselves, walking with a rhythm she couldn't deduce. Still, it was comforting to be there, uncomfortable as the beam was. Safe at last. For the time being at least.

When she awoke, she was on the ground, looking into a small, smiling face. Dinah groaned.

Chapter 3-Desmond

Wizard Desmond Mingle, Guardian of the High Plains of Urhsas and member of the Emerald Eye, was having the perfect morning. He often woke early then fell back asleep snug in his bed. This repeated several times until the late morning. Somedays he woke up and couldn't fall back asleep. Somedays going back to sleep left him feeling groggy with a funny taste in his mouth. But there were those days when the cycle was just perfect. Not for the last time Desmond found himself grateful that he wasn't a peasant. Getting out of bed before sunrise was dreadful. He wanted no part of it.

A wizard got out of bed when they decided.

Today something was missing from his perfect morning. Breakfast. When he woke up for good, the noticeable lack of cooking smells was off-putting. Desmond raised himself from his bed and looked at the oven. A small fire burned, just holding on to the embers. Breakfast was noticeably lacking.

Desmond looked about his home. Ida was nowhere to be seen. What could a molgrin be up to this late in the morning other than breakfast? Desmond rose out of bed and put on his morning robe. He straightened the books in the bookcase, which had fallen over during the night march. Avoiding his two work desks, Desmond rounded his bed and opened the curtains. Sunlight rushed in which Desmond spent the next minute blinking away.

Another cloudless day. What a waste.

Brayman's pate shone like the moon. They would need to deploy the canvas for today's walk to prevent the ogre from sunburn. Oddly, they weren't moving. Brayman should have been marching toward the Gladewhite River, a five-day journey from what passed for civilization around here. He could hear the ogre 'brrrgumming' to himself. Sometimes Desmond got the impression Brayman was talking to someone, but he couldn't figure out who. Neither he nor Ida knew what the ogre was saying, so he probably wasn't saying anything at all.

He turned and bumped his head into a glass jar that hung from the rafters. A great many things hung from the rafters. Magical ingredients and their containers, as well as food. A particularly delicious link of sausage dangled just to his left, gloriously catching the sunlight. That would make an excellent breakfast. He tossed a couple small logs into the oven to keep the fire going.

Desmond opened the door to the small storeroom. This room was even more full of food and magical components. Ida wasn't in there. Desmond picked up a bowl of Cadoria flowers and smelled them. He gagged. They had gone bad and smelled of week-old fish. Perhaps he could clean out the storeroom, loath as he was to lose his stores. Nearly everything he needed to be a wizard could be found on the High Plains. The rest he could go without.

Closing the door to the storeroom, Desmond knocked at the lavatory. No answer. Where was she? Outside was the obvious answer. Annoyed, Desmond opened the lavatory and emptied the flowers into the hole in the bench. The room was not large. He watched the flowers fall to the ground below, off the side of Brayman. He then used the lavatory.

Finished with that business, Desmond rounded his bed again and went to his desk. He cast a quick spell with a hand touching the copper circle he had installed in the floor. It enclosed the entire room, except for some corners. With a word the home was scourged clean, everything inside the circle, including himself. Bright-eyed and ready to start his day, Desmond leaned into the speaking tube to his left.

"Ida, where are you?" He leaned back in his seat and waited.

A couple moments later her voice piped through. "I'm out here Desmond. There's a woman."

Desmond leaned in, confused. "A woman?"

"A woman," Ida answered matter-of-factly. "A woman sure as I am a molgrin."

"What is she doing?" he asked.

"Umm...laying on the ground as though she fell from the sky. She's having a difficult morning, it would seem."

"Okay. You've stumped me." Desmond peered through the window above his desk, but he couldn't see the ground close to him. He leaned into the voice tube on the right. "Brayman, we are taking a slow day today, apparently. Set the house down."

"Okay Desmo," Brayman said. Desmond didn't need the voice pipe to hear Brayman's responses. When the ogre spoke, the windows rattled.

Brayman carefully unslung Desmond's home from his back, unclipping the supports at his waist before setting it down on the ground gently. Fifteen feet away from the front of his home, lay a dark-skinned woman. The grasses around her had all been trampled down by Brayman, and Ida was fussing over her. The woman looked terrible. Brayman watched over her, worried.

Desmond sat down in his chair and watched them care for her. She was alive at least. While he waited, he looked around, trying to see where she might have come from. How does a woman end up on the High Plain of Urhas? Since arriving to take his station two years ago, Desmond hadn't seen a woman.

Oh, there were female ogres and goblins and molgrin, like Ida, but no human women. Every human who came up here was a merchant down on their luck. The mayor had a daughter, but they were dwarves. The High Plains was sat in between the empire and the distant mountains. There was no civilization here. Just grass. A woman would be too popular up here.

Ida would bring the woman into his house eventually, once she was sure Brayman could move her safely. Instead of watching Ida work and Brayman look on, Desmond took his flute off the wall, leaving his fife and tabor pipe hanging. His feet up on his ottoman, he played through a few tunes, improvising and wasting away the morning. The sunlight through the window made him sleepy. The glass had been difficult to make up here, but he managed.

He was so engrossed in his playing that he hadn't notice them moving her until there was a thump at the door. There was a graceless scuffling in the mudroom, which shared a wall with the back of his bed. Desmond didn't get up, but he did put his flute to the side.

"It's okay, it's okay. I have you," Ida said through the door. "One step at a time. Desmond?"

"Yes?"

"Could you please give me a hand?" Ida was annoyed. Desmond didn't worry about it much. Her anger was always short lived.

"Is the door closed?"

There was a pause, and Desmond heard the door outside close. "Yes."

He smiled. "On my way."

Walking around the bed and avoiding the low hanging ingredients, Desmond reached the door. Apart from the storeroom and lavatory, the house had a main room with his oven, dinner table, bed, work desk, and his comfortable chair. Everything he needed was in one place. It was perfect. Ida slept in a little hammock hung from the rafters near the stove and storeroom door. Desmond had installed that and built a small ladder into the wall when he hired her so she could sleep comfortably.

The mud room shared a wall with his bed's headboard. It was the only entrance, opening opposite the bathroom door on the right side of the house. Gingerly, Desmond opened the door. Ida was flustered, doing her best to support the woman. The woman looked at him warily, her eyes sharp. Exhausted though she was, she was ready for a fight.

"What do you need help with?" he asked.

"Desmond, I'm three and a half feet tall. Help her."

Desmond gave the molgrin a look and got double in return. Ida was small, as all molgrin were. Her face was pinched and narrow, her eyes small but warm. Her cheeks were rosy and her clothes colorful. Desmond found that all molgrin had a look of cleverness about them, even when they weren't clever at all. Despite their size, they were strong.

He walked into the mud room and took the woman's hand. She had an ugly wound on her leg, one which was coated in a dark waxy substance. Her skirt had been cut off at the knees. A familiar pain blossomed in his stomach. He did not like uninvited guests.

"What happened?"

"A moss salamander," Ida answered, her voice full of venom. "Brayman ate it last night but didn't see her."

"Ah, mating season already," Desmond said as he led the woman into his home.

He took her to his favorite chair. There were five chairs in the house. Two at the dinner table, one at his desk, Ida kept a stool by the oven, and the comfortable chair stuffed with feathers that sat right under the front windows.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Desmara."

Desmond looked her in the eyes. They were brown and warm, but as he looked, he found that they held a most remarkable quality. Her eyes were mirrors, holding whatever it was that the beholder was looking for. Her eyes were so well practiced that Desmond could see exactly what he felt in them. The woman should have been terrified. Instead, she matched his confusion. The one thing he couldn't see was the truth.

She was lying, and good at it. Already he had lost control of the conversation. Anxiety grew in his stomach but he wrestled it down. Here he was powerful. The mystery of her was more interesting than his usual pain. There was something about her, beyond the fact that she had popped on the High Plain out of thin air. As a wizard, Desmond knew people didn't fall from the sky. Not without a good reason. She had a purpose, and had been walking around the plains unguarded. Desmond thought he knew who this person was.

Leaning back, Desmond looked her over. Apart from the large waxy glob on her right thigh, she was muddy. Her hair pulled back in a tight bun. Scrapes and bruises covered her. The moss salamander attack had done a number on her. She was lucky. The usual prey, molgrin and goblins, were easier for it to subdue and plant its eggs. Desmond had no doubt the fight had been terrible.

Her skirt, however, had been cut with a blade. Devious though they were, moss salamanders didn't use knives. No thumbs. Or brains. She wore a useful belt, one with many pouches. She had kept it on through her rough night.

Desmond got off his knees and sat on the ottoman. He turned to Ida, who was worriedly hovering over his shoulder. “She is tired and will need breakfast. So will I, for that matter. Then we need to make a poultice. Could you bring me a brush thick with the pitch, please?”

At the request for breakfast Ida bristled, but she accepted it once he gave a diagnosis. The sunlight in the room dimmed. Desmond looked to his right and saw Brayman’s enormous face nearly pressed against the glass. Desmond chuckled softly. The woman seemed unnerved.

“I need the light,” he said, tapping on the glass. “Could you back up a little ways?”

Brayman blinked. “Brrrrrgm. Okay, Desmo.” As gingerly as someone of his size could, the ogre backed away from the windows.

Still smiling to himself, Desmond sat back down on the ottoman. “I know who you are, Priestess of Many Truths. I won’t hurt you. But you are in my home and I would like to know your real name.”

Her demeanor changed subtly. Her facial muscles relaxed and she shoulders drooped just a touch. Desmond got the feeling that he was treading on dangerous ground. Desmond wasn’t too concerned for his safety. After all, he was a wizard — and Ida was there. She wouldn’t let anything bad happen to him.

“How did you know?”

“I’ll tell you when you say your real name. I don’t like being lied to in my own home.”

She met his eyes and Desmond could see mistrust there. Her eyes were no longer mirrors. Desmond was under no illusions that he had somehow pushed past her armor. He was seeing the person because the person was letting him.

“Dinah,” she said softly.

“Dinah, I knew you belonged to the Temple because of your eyes. You have eyes that show me what I want to see.”

She grimaced, then relaxed into her seat. “I always hated being demure. Just once I want to be loud. I’m so tired.” She sank into the seat.

Ida came to Desmond’s side, holding a paint brush coated in pitch. She was looking at the pair of them quizzically. The molgrin was an excellent head of household, but she was nosey. It was usually a good thing, giving Desmond access to information across the plains. But at that moment, he felt a twinge of annoyance to have her beside him.

“Thank you,” he said, taking the brush. There was an edge to his tone. He didn’t mean to put it in there but it slipped out all the same. He was just tense. Annoyance fluttered across Ida’s face, but she didn’t say anything. She just turned and began cooking breakfast.

Desmond looked to Dinah. Her face was impassive, but he knew she saw the tension. A spy from that temple never missed a beat. Anxiety boiled inside him and his hands became sweaty. Retreat. His hands clasped. He glanced at his bed. For a moment, he thought he might

crawl back under the covers and sleep until all of this was gone. A familiar flowery scent hit him. The moment passed. Dinah watched him closely.

“Sorry,” he said softly. He began to cover the wax with pitch. “This will suffocate the eggs. I’ll need to make a poultice to poison them, harmless to you. It may make you feel queasy for a few days.”

“Are you sure?” She sounded almost afraid.

Desmond sat up straight. “Of course, I am.” He’d nearly covered the wax. “I’m not some bog hag or fen witch. I am a wizard. I graduated the college. There is no guesswork in my services.”

Dinah didn’t challenge him as he finished coating her leg in pitch. He made sure to cover all the wax he could see. The air inside the cabin began to smell of breakfast. The kettle was whistling pleasantly. Desmond’s stomach gave a pleased gurgle and his anxiety waned.

Patients were rare for Desmond. No one seemed to need his services, not since he first arrived from the empire. Those that did were in a desperate state, sometimes beyond help. Desmond checked the pitch once more. He didn’t see any wax. He had done a good job so far, at least.

Ida handed him a cup of Uxomian tea and took the brush. “Would you like a cup of tea?” she asked Dinah.

Dinah looked uncertain. A priestess of Many Truths probably won’t trust anything they didn’t prepare themselves. Desmond took a big sip and instantly regretted it. The tea had just come out of the kettle. Wincing, Desmond swallowed it. His tongue was burned. Eyes watering, he set his cup on the table. Both Ida and Dinah looked at him bemused.

“It’s good tea,” Desmond said hoarsely.

Ida turned to Dinah. “We have little variety, but Uxomian tea is excellent. Desmond swears by it.”

“That would be lovely, thank you.” Dinah leaned back into the chair.

Desmond started eating his eggs as Dinah received a cup. The eggs had no taste in his burned mouth, but they settled his stomach. The interrupted morning was righting itself. Desmond finished breakfast before Dinah had her tea.

He left Ida and Dinah alone to talk as he went into the store room. Time to make the poultice. Desmond remembered his lessons well. A quick perusal through the storeroom gave him all the ingredients he would need. He walked back out into the main room.

Dinah ate her breakfast, wincing when she moved her right side. Desmond watched a moment before going to the stove on top of the oven. He pulled out a little pot and poured water in. Then came crushed Thrallwood, a sliver of copper, rose petals, orange peel, and a number of smaller ingredients. He waited until it simmered. Desmond then opened the glass jar he had

taken. The faint whiff of cow manure hit the room and spoiled the lingering smell of breakfast. Gingerly, Desmond picked out one of the partially digested hairweed bulbs. It looked like a tangle of muddy hair. He gagged as he tossed it into the concoction and began stirring.

Dinah did as well. “What is that stench?”

“Hairweed has a number of magical properties. Unfortunately, it wants to keep it for itself. The best way to get it out is to run it through a cow first.”

“Why not use the cow then?”

Desmond put a lid on the brew. It would take some cooking to achieve potency. “Magic is found in the earth. Some stones contain it and are useful, but for the most part plants draw the magic from the soil. There are no magical animals. If you ate fresh hairweed, it would do nothing for you. Eating it doesn’t make you magical, so why would it make an animal? I can’t even begin to describe the cruelties inflicted on animals by idiots slaughtering or torturing them to gain magical abilities. You’d as much luck snorting your fingernails for magic. No, those of us who study the art know to leave animals alone. The plants which pass through them, on the other hand...”

“But you have snakeskin in the rafters,” Dinah countered.

“And sheep guts.” Desmond took the lid off and gave the potion a stir. “The snake skin is only shed skin. Hollowing out a snake would be too much work. I use them to hold potions and poultices. Nothing more.”

Their conversation waned as Desmond checked the pot. A brownish slurry waited for him. It wasn’t an appealing cure, but then there were few that were. He gave it a couple of stirs, chanted some magic, and then sat down at the table.

“It has to reduce for a little while,” he said. “So what brings you to the High Plain?”

“Work for the Temple.” Dinah winced and put a hand on her right side.

Right, she had more wounds than just the egg sack. “May I check your other injuries?”

Dinah gave him a weary wave and sank into his favorite chair. He would have to clean it with the spell after she was righted. Desmond put his hand on her shoulder and muttered a few spells. He could feel his senses expanding as his magic coursed through her and returned with information. Ignoring the wound on her leg, she had a broken rib and a list of bruises.

Desmond sat back down. “I figured that. We don’t get tourists up here. Why does the Temple need a priest up here? It’s not me, is it?” He asked suddenly alarmed. His hands were clenched.

Injured though she was, Dinah managed a wry look. Desmond grinned. He ran a hand through his hair. His hair was tangled, knotted, and oily. It had been some time since last it rained.

“Sorry,” he said. “It’s just that when I was in the college, we had a joke. Well, part joke and part wild fantasy.” He stopped, embarrassed.

“Which was?” Dinah asked with a knowing look.

Desmond ran his hand through his hair again. “That one day we would become powerful wizards and hold important court positions so that the Temple of Many Truths would send a beautiful spy to seduce us and keep an eye on our experiments.” At some point in the explanation he’d started blushing.

Dinah held his gaze throughout, without a hint of embarrassment. “I imagine that is a common dream.”

“What is this temple?” Ida piped up. Desmond had forgotten about her. She was standing to his left, just off his elbow and against the bed.

Caught off guard, it took a moment for Desmond to gather his thoughts. Dinah didn’t look like she was going to offer up any information. It fell to Desmond. “Right...well...umm. The Temple of Many Truths is one of many temples within the empire. Each worships its own god. The name of the god worshiped there is unknown to outsiders, though doubtless our guest knows it.” He inclined his head to Dinah. She gave a small, encouraging nod.

“The empire doesn’t have a single will, it has dozens. Factions vie for the emperor’s ear. Even he doesn’t make choices on everything. I don’t know, he may not make choices on anything. Ministers and guilds and lords of varying statues, all of them coming together and breaking apart to gain power. It’s a deadly game.

“My people, the wizards that is, formed the Emerald Eye to safeguard their interests. Naturally, being composed of the legal magic wielders in the empire, we have quite a lot of influence. The Temple of Many Truths is also influential. They like to think of themselves as the guardians of the empire, taking down corruption and those who would weaken the empire for their own gain.” Desmond finished and looked to Dinah. She was watching him impartially.

“And do they?” Ida asked curiously.

Desmond and Dinah shared a look. What was she thinking? He could tell that she wasn’t going to answer. “The Emerald Eye also has lofty claims to their importance. I know for a fact that they fail their aims regularly. You are the first member of that temple which I have met, or at least know that I’ve met. I don’t mean to cast doubt on your aims or your views, but in my experience every organization is plagued by the same issue. They are made of people, and people always seek their own ease.”

Dinah watched him, but didn’t say anything. It would be best to change the subject. Desmond stood and checked his pot. The concoction was ready. He squashed it down as much as he could with a spoon, then ladled it out onto his still dirty plate. The brownish slurry looked unappealing and smelled worse. He put it in front of her.

“I apologize for the taste and smell. This will kill the eggs quickly. You’ll feel ill for a day or two. The wax will form a good scab, and your skin will heal well beneath it. Maybe a month before you’re all good. I can’t help with the ribs much. I am hardly a healer. Maybe I can bind up your sides?”

Dinah placed the plate on her lap and stared down the poultice. She cocked an eyebrow. “Why do I need this when you already painted the pitch on me?”

Desmond sat back down. “Because moss salamanders eggs are hardy, and it is best to come at them from a couple angles.”

Dinah didn’t look away as he told her. Her gaze was intense. When he finished, she gave a nod and a shrug and downed it all in once gulp. Desmond shivered. He took the plate and all the tableware from breakfast and put it on the table. One modified cleaning spell later (one which didn’t affect the pitch) and they were clean. He handed them to Ida to put away.

He turned his attention back to Dinah. “So, what are you doing out here?”

With a sentence, her defenses were back up. She regarded him behind those mirrorlike eyes. “It isn’t your business.”

“I am the wizard of the High Plains of Urhsas. Appointed by the Emerald Eye and approved by the emperor himself. It is my duty to protect Urhsas. Tell me why you are here. Unless you are here to kill me, and I’m not sure why you would be.”

Dinah stared daggers at him and didn’t speak.

“We can start with how you got here. I know you crossed the plains. Why were you walking the moors at night?”

She silent a moment. “When I was running on the moors, I saw the ogre. Since the three ogres I met that day had been civil, I thought I would be safe with you. That salamander was still chasing me.”

It wasn’t what he’d asked, but Desmond knew it to be a peace offering. “What did you do when you reached us?”

Dinah looked puzzled. The corner of her mouth dipped down. “You don’t know?” She looked to Ida.

“No. I was asleep by then. I go to bed in the Hour of the Frog and rise in the Hour of the Hawk. I first learned about you then.”

“I have no idea when I reached you,” Dinah said. “The ladder was down and I crawled under the house to rest.”

Desmond turned to Ida who flushed. “Well, I heard a commotion in my hammock and went to check,” she said. “It must have been the Hour of the Wolf, and you rolled down Brayman’s backside just an hour ago.”

Desmond chuckled. "Not a dignified entrance."

Dinah shot him a look. "Nor a safe one."

"So, who is chasing you?" he asked.

"Desmond," Ida said in a warning tone. "Don't pester her."

He gave her a look. Ida was useful. No, she was beyond useful, she was indispensable. Still, her job was to oversee the household, not to censor social etiquette. Maybe he could find a time to talk to her about it.

"Dangerous men from the empire," Dinah answered. She said it lightly, as though it was of little consequence.

Strangely, Desmond felt his anxiety lessen just a notch. "Good."

"Desmond!" Ida exclaimed aghast. A talk really was necessary.

Dinah didn't seem upset. Her expression changed from focused to curious. "Why is that?"

"Because I am responsible for the High Plains. I am here to help its people and keep peace between them. If you were chased by an orc tribe or molgrin family then I would have to sort it out. Since it's not, I can continue on my course."

Desmond stood and went to his work desk, then called out into Brayman's tube. "Alright. I want to get moving again. If you would please, Brayman."

Brayman, who had been watching them while laying down on the marsh, nodded eagerly. "Yes, Desmo. Hello little lady. Feeling strong?"

Desmond smiled. Brayman was always cheerful. He didn't know how he would manage without the large ogre. "Her name is Dinah," he said into the tube. He turned to look at her. "Should he not know that?"

Dinah waved him off. "No one knows that name. I came to the High Plains as Desmara, a name I am happy to leave behind."

Gingerly, Brayman picked up the house and set it over his back. He could do up all the straps himself, securing the house. With that done, he unfurled the large blue canvas which was spooled above the windows in the front of the house. Two large tent poles pulled the cloth out and Brayman covered his stooped neck and head with the canvas. The pole dangled in front of the ogre's head, weighing down the canvas against the wind. It protected Brayman from the sun.

"Why don't you just open a window?" Desmond turned from his desk to see Dinah at the windows.

"No!" he shouted. She froze. Gaining control of himself, Desmond took a deep breath. "Don't open the windows and do not leave the doors outside open."

“Why?” Dinah was looking at him with a cutting curiosity. For the first time since meeting her, Desmond felt uncomfortable. Having a spy in the house suddenly felt as though his privacy had evaporated.

“You are in a wizard’s home. You will abide his rules,” Desmond said forcefully. Dinah had no reaction, her eyes impassive. Desmond flushed. “We are aiming for the Gladewhite River. You are welcome to stay with us and coalesce. Though, I would feel better if I had you on as a member of the staff.”

“Why?” she asked again. Desmond felt a wall had returned between them.

He shifted uncomfortably. He felt he couldn’t lie to her. She would know if he did. “Because I don’t like strangers in my home. I especially don’t like them staying. This is not a hospital. I don’t like people invading my privacy. If you were on my staff, I would find that...acceptable.”

She quirked an exhausted eyebrow, but said nothing.

Beneath them, Brayman began ‘brumbruming’ as his feet beat out one of his strange rhythms. A feeling of ease swept over Desmond. Everything was moving the way it should again.

“I don’t know what job I would have you do,” Desmond continued, “but I could pay you one Lylic a week.”

Dinah held her gaze a moment, then nodded. She looked relaxed in the comfortable chair.

“Oh, and one more thing. In order for you to travel with us, you must play an instrument.”