

THE LAST  
MAJESTY

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# PART ONE

## THE BROKEN ONES



## ANCIENT LEGENDS

It was a still afternoon in the house of Laikmir, but even at that time of day, it was as dark as night. The cold season of Zum'viik was drawing in, but even the darkness that came with it was nowhere near what laid over these lands constantly. Everywhere one looked, there was little sign of light, just a dim, bleak atmosphere. This was not an uncommon sight for the D'uhmev who lived all over the Ahvred Plains. They were perfectly used to seeing the sun as if through a layer of black cloth, even in the middle of the day. It was there constantly, and it lingered. This was a strange darkness, it had little effect on the vegetation, for food grew as good as ever, it merely affected the people and their spirits. Animals were frolicking in the fields and birds were singing their usual cheerful songs, but all the D'uhmev could see was a bleak hint of light, and even that was fading.

Further up north the darkness grew thicker, and towards the northern coast of Ngooxmahnxv one could barely see one's own hand in front of them. This had been a reality for the D'uhmev for nearly six centuries. Legends spoke of the Treason of Juigyth, the terrible event which is said to have caused all of this. Although details were sparse, it was clear that it had been a key moment in the rich history of the Ahvred Plains. The lands carried some significance, but for reasons unknown to many. If it had not been for the spiritual importance of their residence, the D'uhmev would have moved further south, but as it stands now they have been in the midst of night for far too long. So that made it all the more special when light finally returned.

Without warning, a sharp light came over the house of Laikmir. This was no ordinary light, it could not be. The only thing strong enough to break through and put an end to this lingering blackness was the legendary light of Blekhmir. The story behind Blekhmir was long and complex, yet many knew it

well, and it seemed now that his light had come. M'hehrenness Laikmir was lying in bed, exhausted from tending her g'd'rahtf garden. As soon as the brightness struck her, she thought back to a recent conversation between her and Zgalok'nihh Stròm-Vrouzîs, an unusual, but wise and powerful man known to many as 'the Oracle'. Somewhere mixed up in him reminiscing about an old building with what seemed to be an important story behind it, he had mentioned his suspicions that light would return in early Zum'viik. This was quite a thing to hear, but M'hehrenness chose to keep it to herself, as she was not entirely sure whether the Oracle meant anything significant by this, and also so no unnecessary turmoil was brought into her family. But where she was now things looked perfectly clear. It seemed that the Oracle was right.

The light seeped through the panoramic ceiling of the Laikmir house. It was the light they had read about in countless places. A warm glow came at first, followed by the clear, piercing beams. Soon the house, which was large enough to be considered significant, was brighter than it had ever been. This brought out every single member of the Laikmir family, along with the other people who happened to be there at the time, to gather around the most important stone in the great hall. Before this tone stood Lord Dlrhnadh, the father and leader of the Laikmir family. He was a pompous man known to make long speeches which served little purpose other than to make him feel important, and this event, in his eyes, seemed to be the perfect time to rise up and speak. After grazing the stone, he stood up and looked out over his family.

"So this day has come at last," he said rather softly. "The light of Blekhir has come to us, and it chose to come to the house of Laikmir. At last we are free. Never again shall night rule over us, and never again shall darkness take command. We are the D'uhmev, and more importantly, we are the Laikmir. From this moment forth, we shall be the light. We are the light."

Lord Dlrhnadh continued speaking for some time. He repeated the significance the light carried, and he made sure to mention many times how the Laikmir family would emerge



from this stronger than any others. He had a remarkable way to make even the smallest thing cause to speak about the strength of his family, and how superior they were. The rest of the house were somewhat used to these speeches at this point, and they were sure that Lord Dliirhnadh had no malicious intent behind what he was saying, and that it was merely pride.

As her father rambled on, M'hehrenness had a peculiar feeling. The initial warmth and brightness seemed to have faded, and it had been replaced by a strange coldness. The light of Blekhmir was supposed to sweep away all evil and bring warmth and peace, but M'hehrenness still felt fear. Something was not quite right, but as she looked around she saw that she was the only one not smiling. There were clearly questions that needed answering. Why had the light affected her in this way, and why could she not celebrate it along with her family? As she thought to herself, she could come up with no reasonable explanation, and so she decided that this was a matter beyond her. There could be only one person who would know what was happening. What M'hehrenness needed at this point was to speak to Zgalok'nihh Stròm-Vroüzis. The immense wisdom of the Oracle was the only thing that could clear things up.

Once the speech was finished, M'hehrenness headed for her chambers and began composing a letter to the Oracle. She explained what had occurred, and the unsettling feelings she had about it. She also made sure to stress that he ought to come in some form of disguise, as the rest of her family was not too keen on the Oracle. Lord Dliirhnadh, especially, found him intensely frustrating, and he had many times said that M'hehrenness was not to listen to the Oracle. It would therefore be a bit risky to bring the Oracle to the Laikmir house, but M'hehrenness needed some answers. She finished the letter, sent it on its way via one of messengers at the Laikmir house, telling them to look for the Oracle in the southern Ahvred Plains, as it was there he had been last time they met. After this she only had to wait, while making sure not to talk too much to her family. Any suspicions that something might be wrong was not what they needed right then.

A week or so later, M'hehrenness sat in her chambers reading a book, when there came a knock on the door. Opening the door she found the messenger she had sent her letter with, and he was wearing the traditional green travelling-robos.

"A visitor has requested to see you," said the messenger.

M'hehrenness did not need to think for one second who it was. She told the kind messenger to show this visitor to her chambers, but to do it discreetly. This took little time, and soon the visitor was brought up to M'hehrenness's chambers. He was disguised as a monk, but even then there could be no mistaking who it was. Even under a large robe M'hehrenness recognised the Oracle's posture, and she could see his long braided beard hanging down. She thanked the messenger, and closed the door, whereafter the Oracle removed his hood and exposed his pale, aged face.

"Oracle," said M'hehrenness, eager to start talking.

"It has been way too long," the Oracle answered. "This is a very unsettling time."

"I feared it was. What exactly is going on here? Why did the light of Blekimir return now? Is it what you said, that the light would return in early Zum'viik?"

"Oh, my dear child, I say a lot of things. Now, before I tell you the ancient story of Fohlciha'ar, I must prepare my aromatic aura."

The Oracle did not explain what went into creating an aromatic aura, nor did he even say what it was, he simply stood up and started digging through his bag. At first he brought up drapes of dark purple and crimson, and hung them over all of the windows. He proceeded to light a single, foul-smelling candle at the small circular table in the middle of the room. Out of the same bag, he then picked up cups filled with wliuu, zsiilji, and iuutlah. What these were normally used for, M'hehrenness did not know, but she figured the Oracle was experienced enough to know what he was doing. He lit the contents of the cups close to the candle, all while muttering some strange verse. Each of the cups had a rather unique flame, and together with the candle it formed an interesting atmosphere. Along with the

visuals, came also a thick nauseating smoke, filling every corner of the room.

M'hehrenness started noticing how her clothes now seemed to have a thin layer of ash on them. If this was caused by the flames and smoke this quickly, she thought that surely the aura had to be finished. Barely had that thought entered her head when the Oracle pulled up eleven sticks of nvrpnuk, something which he explained one has to be especially careful with. He lit these using the candle, and placed them at precise spots on the table. M'hehrenness had trouble figuring out exactly what the smell coming from the sticks reminded her of, nonetheless it was not very pleasant. It was also slightly distressing for her that this took place in her personal chamber. She started worrying about what this aura might do to her possessions and the furniture, but at a time like this she thought it best to trust the Oracle, who by now seemed to be finished with his aura.

"There," he said as he sat down in the now ash-coated chair in the corner of the room. "Now, we can speak." He took a deep breath before he continued.

"This aura will make this a safer space for stories such as these. It will provide protection against the evils of which I am about to tell you."

The Oracle, out of the same bag where he kept the herbs, presented a large pale pipe, mostly covered in moss. From the bag he kept around his neck, he then drew four blue leaves that he folded one by one and put inside the pipe. As the last leaf was placed, the pipe lit up. Slowly, he then drew one long puff from the pipe, and looked deeply into M'hehrenness' confused eyes. Following this he exhaled a cloud of colourful smoke.

"Urgent matters such as these call for the ceremonial pipe of Hqrt'a'hn," he said in between puffs. "You see, Hqrt'a'hn was a master of the aromatic aura, it is said he could present an aura thick and spiritual enough to shut out even the lingering eyes of Arknzhahn. I have yet to accomplish such a thing, and since time is pressing on us at the moment, what I have prepared here will suffice." The bony fingers of the Oracle then reached into

yet another one of his pockets, and presented two small spheres.

“Would you like a m’Bhafrok? I find it helps stimulate the thoughts, as well as the bowel.” M’hehrenness politely shook her head, as there were enough smells already in this room. The Oracle proceeded to put both balls in his mouth, and as he bit down, two puffs of black mist exited his nostrils. He then chewed for quite a while, making noises which seemed to say this was an enjoyable treat, if not a bit chewy.

“It can be difficult to find a good m’Bhafrok, but these I got from a most pleasant gentleman at a stall which took me several hours to find, but that I have been unable to make my way back to,” said the Oracle, before returning to his pipe. He waited for a moment, looked up at the decorations on the ceiling, and then drew a few more puffs. Eventually he spoke again.

“Hqrt’a’hn found that the most potent combination of herbs was when iuutlah, an oil that you might use to clean your teeth, is combined with wliuu’ and zsiilji. This makes what we call wahktadaar, and is used as medicine for a variety of curses. Wahktadaar is however very strong, and can be quite lethal, for many careless Suu’wafijaàk have been killed by an accidental overdose. This is why a professional like myself should always be consulted when creating an aura. The Suu’wafijaàk can get a bit eager with their constant contact with herbs and flowers, but one must be patient before they attempt things of this magnitude. Sometimes one has to wait.”

The Oracle blew his nose in a blue and pink patterned handkerchief, which he then placed back into the sleeve of his robe.

“Now then, to the matter at hand, we can’t sit here squabbling all day. But first, if you’ll excuse me, it might have been a mistake eating two m’Bhafrok. I shall return shortly.”

It took a little over twenty minutes for the Oracle to return, and when he did he looked very much at ease. He entered the room with a cup filled with some sort of viscous, steamy liquid, and when he sat down, he took a long, slurping sip.

“Now, shall we begin?” He started stroking his beard and he

took on a face of deep contemplation. "As you know, the D'uhmev have long awaited the light of Blekhmir, for this season of darkness has rather overstayed its welcome. There are many things to say about the darkness, but we have few answers. The story of Juigyth is an intriguing one, and one which I am sure you know well. However, what powers were unleashed during this event is something which is shrouded in mysteries. All we have been able to do for some time is to look forward and wait for the light to return, which is where the light of Blekhmir comes in.

"I ought to tell you more about the light, as its origin is not usually taught. Blekhmir, or Tmoraht as he was then known, was an apprentice of Hloh, before being consumed by the darkness of Arknhahn. Little is known about what happened to him in the dark realm of Epohzra, and I suspect we will never truly know. All we know is that a blinding light arose from Epohzra one still morning, and forward came Tmoraht. From there he, together with the Light One, performed the attack which led to them retrieving the fabled staff of Arknhahn. Tmoraht was named Blekhmir, banisher of that which is evil, and his light is said to be a cleansing force, arising when, and wherever it is most needed. The staff of Arknhahn is, however, not currently being looked after by Hloh or myself. We placed it in the possession of the Order of Kuuluhhk, where it should be extremely safe.

"The staff was originally kept safe by the hand of the T'el, the highest order of the Suu'wafijáak. It is made up of four parts, myself, naturally, then Hloh, the one dedicated to keeping the light in the T'el, his great wisdom will undoubtedly prove helpful in the events about to unfold. And then we have Arknhahn, the dark one. He has been our great enemy since his arrival on Hzundus, and many wars have been fought against him over time. But for now he keeps to the dark lands of Epohzra, sitting on his throne while his servants kneel before him and call him Emperor. I fear to think of what evils he might be mustering in the darkness there, but we will get to that later.

“Finally, there is a strange wizard who can be unpredictable and sometimes rather frightening. It is because of this wizard, myself and Hloh deemed the palace Ul Golanaar of the Kuuluhhk to be a safer place for the staff. I shudder at the thought of the wizard getting the staff and deciding to use his immense power for evil. Hopefully this will never happen, for if it does, his powers combined with those of Arknzhahn could put the entire state of Hzundus at risk.

A long pause followed. The Oracle opened up his bag and pulled out some sort of root, which he then started slowly chewing the tip of. While doing this he muttered something to himself, and it was in a language M'hehrenness had no chance at all of understanding. She managed to pick up a word here and there, but as a whole it mostly sounded like nonsense. The muttering then stopped, and the Oracle took a sip from his cup. Just as he did so, he made a face of disgust.

"My grovha has gone slightly cold, and anyone who knows anything about grovha will tell you that there are few things more unpleasant than this. I shall return shortly." The Oracle picked up his cup and walked out slowly.

As much of the smoke had subsided by this point, M'hehrenness was at least not struggling to breathe anymore, but she had admittedly lost focus in the Oracle's stories. Much to her dismay, when the Oracle did return, he had brought with him a few more smoking cups of herbs, and four sticks of Nvrapnuk. In his calm way, these were lit and quickly the room was even more stuffy and aromatic than before. He sat down and once again opened his bag.

"I think it is time for something to eat, would you like a lkoftu?"

An assortment of fruits were presented to M'hehrenness, none of which looked particularly appetising. The Oracle picked up a large, dark brown lkoftu and started peeling it, very slowly. "I did not have much time to eat before I set off here, and since you specified discretion was key, I assumed that the hospitality would be limited, so I packed several foods which I find help me focus in tense, stressful situations like this, and a

few of them merely for my pleasure.” As he spoke, he cut up a small, almost pyramid shaped fruit which bore a very unappetising shade of green, in four pieces. When the Oracle now passed the plate over to M'hehrenness, she had no other choice than to try a piece.

M'hehrenness found the taste similar to what she imagined the Oracle's robe would taste like, and the texture was as if lumps of flour were held together with twine and fishing line. As it was very hard to hide her discomfort, the Oracle kindly gave her a cup with the thick, steamy liquid. Not only did the drink look like muddy tar, it tasted very much like it, but it did burn her mouth enough so that the flavour of the fruit was mostly washed away.

“As night turns to day, you shall once again be the light of Hzungus” The Oracle started speaking rather suddenly. “Those were the words heard from Juigyth as he cursed your people to live under eternal darkness, so I do not blame you for assuming the light of Blekimir had come to your aid. Alas, what has happened is grave, very grave, for if you were to look outside, you would see your realm once again cast under darkness.”

“But isn't it nighttime now?” said M'hehrenness carefully.

“Yes,” answered the Oracle. “And a dark night it shall be, for if you think you know darkness and suffering, if you think Juigyth was the worst that could befall your people.” The Oracle sighed deeply. “Forgive my blunt nature, but this is indeed urgent, we cannot waste any time.” Once again the Oracle loaded up his pipe, but this time with bright yellow leaves, six of them.

“The hour grows late, and the leaves of hyutfra are needed.” The smoke from these leaves was quite different, and quickly the room had been filled with a distinct smell which reminded M'hehrenness of a stew she used to fear her mother would cook her as a child. The Oracle did not seem too bothered by this.

“The ancient D'uhmev chose a rather peculiar place to build their civilization, not intentionally, of course. No, I do not think anyone would settle as much as a tent here if they knew what

evil resides within Z'Chundzaal." The Oracle paused, and looking most serious he reached, once again, into his bag, and drew out a small, bright red and pink berry with golden sparks. Still looking grim, he put the berry in his mouth, and swallowed it whole.

"I assume you have never heard the legend of Z'Chundzaal and ZhrHarkofn," the Oracle did not wait for M'hehrenness to answer before he continued. "Originally, ZhrHarkofn was one of the Pfredh, who I am sure you are very familiar with."

M'hehrenness was not.

"He wasn't bound to one house, as most of the Pfredh are, instead he traveled in between the beautiful Ul Golanaar palace, and the remarkable fort Oihhg-fa-blorgk. As he grew up, his travels brought him further from the peninsula where most of the Pfredh live out all of their days. From the forests of the Dhjêht, where a most peculiar folk live, to the creature-infested isles of the western coast of Ngooxmahnv. It became clear very quickly that ZhrHarkofn had no place either with the order of Kuuluhhk, or with the Watchers of the Esshul'kh."

Most of these names had gone straight past M'hehrenness, but since she started to feel a sense of urgency, she abstained from asking. After a few more puffs of the pipe, the Oracle continued.

"ZhrHarkofn was a seeker of knowledge, as we all are, but he had an obsession, he had an uncontrollable need to know all the hidden things in this world. And so he travelled, and he studied under all who would offer their knowledge to him. He did indeed come to me, and he requested to become my student, but I, and it seems I alone could see the sickness behind those eyes."

The Oracle took a deep sip of grovha while muttering slightly under his breath. He then slowly placed the cup at the windowsill which already had a few potted plants on it.

"I find too much clutter is cause for easy distraction," he said. "If one is to think clearly, they must have their possessions in order, otherwise you might find your thoughts wandering in circles." Then the familiar rustling of the Oracle's bag brought



M'hehrenness back from the edge of sleep. "I am in need of a stimulant, would you perhaps now take part in the traditional sharing of m'Bhafrok?"

Not wishing to seem rude, or rather not thinking of a way out, M'hehrenness smiled slightly and nodded. Reluctantly she grabbed the surprisingly slimy ball, and with shivering hands she placed it in her mouth.

The taste was surprisingly tolerable, or at least in comparison to the fruit she previously ate. That the m'Bhafrok would stimulate the mind wasn't something she was too sure about, if anything it would simply increase the frequency of dental treatments. This was by far the chewiest, sweetest thing M'hehrenness had ever eaten, but not in a pleasant way at all. Just when she thought she had been quiet and looked down for too long, she looked up to see the Oracle chewing with great intensity, while humming calmly to himself. When at last they had swallowed, the Oracle once again looked painfully serious. He continued his story, as if there had been no pause.

"ZhrHarkofn chose to gather all his forbidden knowledge in the ancient Gsrôöcfx tomb of Z'Chundzaal. An all but forgotten place, you see the Gsrôöcfx arose before even my time. This made Z'Chundzaal the perfect temple of knowledge, or at least it was in the mind of ZhrHarkofn. For he did not know what lurked within, or what the gathering of such dangerous knowledge could mean for the unprepared. Would you like a vko'flahh?" M'hehrenness had at this point become very interested, and the sudden offer of a pastry took her by great surprise, so much that she, very much unaware of herself, declined, even though the pastries were the first things that looked remotely edible.

"Suit yourself!" said the Oracle as reached over and grabbed his cup from the windowsill, he then proceeded to dip a vko'flahh in his grovha. "Now" he then said with his mouth full of crumbly cakes and thick tea. "The Lords of Eternity were a name given to unknown forces in the elder days of Gsrôöcfx. They were, of course, an uncivilized people, at least when it came to theology. Gsrôöcfxian architecture and engineering,

however, is some of the finest you'll see in Hzundus. I spent a great deal of my youth studying Gsrôöcfxian architecture, where I noticed some very interesting things in the pillarwork around the main chambers. They would curve and twist in an extraordinary fashion, supporting and surrounding the piping in a beautiful and effective way. I have written seventeen volumes on this and I shall remember to bring them on my next visit, hopefully then under more pleasant circumstances."

The Oracle stood up and brought down the fabric he had hung over the window as a drape, only to replace it with another drape, this one predominantly yellow and violet. At this point the room was so stuffy with smoke it would have made little difference to M'hehrenness what colour the drape was.

"In the Gsrôöcfxian ruin of Hchrdaâhha I remember finding a strange pink-and yellow-patterned book several hundred years ago. I did not understand a single word in this book, and I have yet to find someone to decipher it. It is my belief that it holds some of the secrets behind the remarkable mechanisms that control the inner parts of the library within Hchrdaâhha. There are several of these mechanisms within the ruin, but I have still only found one section of the elaborate mechanism. So until the book is translated and I've figured out the more detailed parts of these structures, I see little point in returning to Hchrdaâhha."

After this, the Oracle stayed quiet for a while. He pulled up a parchment which had many strange scribblings on it, and after staring at it for a while, he placed it carefully back in his bag.

"As in all things," the Oracle continued. "The Gsrôöcfx had a point. Z'Chundzaal is said to have been special even then, ages and ages ago. And it seems the Gsrôöcfx felt strange powers from the inner sanctum, so they named these as acts of the Lords of Eternity. The truth is more complicated than that, naturally, but it does seem like a particularly spiritual aura flows from Z'Chundzaal."

The Oracle removed the ornamental rams horn he had around his neck and placed it on a dresser beside him.

"I find this horn distracts me too easily, and we must hurry.

Of course I did not kill a ram for this horn. I was exploring the deserts of Hvrtdled when I found him just at the bottom of a large cliff, dead, and rather crushed it must be said. Many animals and adventurers meet an unfortunate fate near the cliffs of Hczurgj, and it seemed this ram was yet another victim of the perilous cliffs. Normally I would simply let the poor animal be at peace, but I felt particularly in contact with the T'el that day, so I harvested the one intact horn, and when I returned to my home I converted it into this rather stylish ornament. Most of the time I keep it above my herbal fireplace, but I do feel a strange comfort in wearing it around my neck. It reminds me of the fragility of life, the excitement of adventure, and the eternity of nothingness."

The Oracle turned to look at the horn, and he stared at it for quite some time, with some degree of sadness in his eyes.

"Night is drawing in, might I suggest we hurry this story along?" said M'hehrenness carefully.

"Patience, my dear. I am telling this story, and only this story in the way that it is to be told, now let us hurry." The Oracle then withdrew a crystal ball from his bag, which he then placed in front of him on the table. "The truth about the Lords of Eternity is that they only present themselves on Hzundus as one entity, one that we have given the name Fohlciha'ar. For that is what I fear lurks within Z'Chundzaal, and that is what I fear ZhrHarkofn disturbed in his blind quest. Now before I can continue, I must have a large mug of hot, spiced Lgforvéân wine." The Oracle then sat completely still for a while, until M'hehrenness eventually spoke.

"I don't think we have any of that wine"

The Oracle sighed at this. "Alas, it is my fault, for in my haste of leaving and packing refreshments I forgot to send a messenger requesting that you purchase this spicy treat."

"Couldn't you have brought some with you?" M'hehrenness asked.

"I fear not, for Lgforvéân wine does not travel well. It ages beautifully, but something about the change of homes is very unpleasant to the drink. I find the spicy undertones of oak and

grass are mostly affected by extensive traveling. When left alone these flavours create a beautiful symphony for your tastebuds, but when moved around they seem to distance themselves from one another, giving the wine a most unusual, and not very palatable taste. Not everyone will notice this, but since I've been an avid admirer of the subtle art form that is Lgforvéân wine for quite some time, I could not bring myself to settle for a bottle which had been subject to inadequate transportation. I can, of course, finish the story regardless, but I will be weary afterwards, and hungry for good food and drink.”

M'hehrenness gave a nervous twitch, for while she admired the Oracle she did rather feel her energy for the man was slipping away quickly. While slightly disappointed in the lack of refreshments, the Oracle quickly regained his composure and continued the story.

“Upon realising what he had done in awakening an ancient, evil force in the largest library on Hzundus, ZhrHarkofn fled to the remote isle of G'mhra. In doing this he left Z'Chundzaal, and indeed all of Ngooxmahnxv at the mercy of Fohlciha'ar. ZhrHarkofn thought himself to be quite clever, and planned to live out his days on the peaceful isle of G'mhra. But something he had failed to bear in to consideration was that Slu'Fhauckc, the greatest seer of the time, was rapidly approaching the end of his life on Hzundus. And in leaving his physical form he released a large storm in the middle of the Yfgazean sea, and that storm of Slu'Fhauckc swallowed up many landmasses, one of them being the isle of G'mhra. Thus ZhrHarkofn perished in a storm which is still there to this day, and will remain there until the T'el fades to darkness.”

The Oracle fell silent once again, increasing M'hehrenness' discomfort, and stress levels. She was unsure whether the Oracle was meaning to tell this story in a dramatic way, or if his mind really was in this constant state of confusion.

“Many ages ago” the Oracle exclaimed loudly. “Z'Chundzaal was sealed, for Fohlciha'ar and his threat to release his terrible curse was too big a thing to ignore. It was deemed by the leaders at the time that nothing could be done about Z'Chundzaal, and

the only thing they could think to do was to seal the gates shut, in the hopes that future generations might take care of it.” The Oracle looked worried, and now M'hehrenness could fully understand why, or at least she thought she could. The Oracle started speaking again.

“So you see now why that which fell upon you is most certainly not the light of Blekimir. I do remember telling you that the light of Blekimir might come and cast aside this terrible darkness, but I'm afraid this was misleading. You see the light of Blekimir does not come and go as the seasons in a year do, nor does it come and help everyone in need, or even the ones most desperate for help. Blekimir himself now resides in Zk'avvr, the Eternal Isles, where he has abandoned his mortal form in favour of an existence of pure energy amongst the T'el. So wherever the light of Blekimir travels next is not so much a judgement of Blekimir himself, but it is in the deep and eternal understanding of the T'el.”

The Oracle leaned forward and looked deep into his crystal ball. As he stared, he started muttering in a language M'hehrenness had never heard before. She wouldn't even have dared to guess where this language came from, but it did sound like a terrible strain on his voice.

“The Fhauckc has told me many things of interest, but I shall not waste any time trying to put into words the wisdom presented through this strange thing. Still, the light of Blekimir might come, for darkness has engulfed these lands for far too long, but we shall not waste more time talking about what might be. The unpleasant truth is that the terrible darkness of Z'Chundzaal has risen, and whatever we might find in there will be beyond anything even I have ever seen.”

“You said, what we might find in there?” said M'hehrenness carefully.

“Oh, yes. Naturally, we must travel to Z'Chundzaal and attempt to stop the terrible chain of events that have been set in motion. It was foolish of the generations of old to simply seal up Z'Chundzaal, hoping that would solve the problem. But it seems all they did was leave Fohlciha'ar to rest and release his

curse whenever he saw fit. Where we stand now we have no other option than to take on this threat, and it shall be a dangerous quest, for Z'Chundzaal is beyond that which we can understand.”

The Oracle took up a Rtuuz'zf which he then took a bite of, he then put on a necklace bearing a sign in the shape of a Jhhgaf'uumian tortoise. The necklace reflected the light from the candle on the table, creating a soft, gentle glow. The atmosphere was strange. With the dim light from the candle, the many strange smells, and the subtle sound of the Oracle's chewing, neither he nor M'hehrenness spoke. They simply sat in the thick herbal smoke, feeling that no words were needed at that very moment.

## THE BLEKHMIR FEAST

The Oracle reached into his bag and pulled up a mossy old fiddle.

"This fiddle," he said, "was handed to me by Gjaktruu the Beautiful. The story behind this is long, and would be better told at another occasion. What I can tell you is what a wonderful woman she was, and how it deeply affected me and my life. The fiddle is but one thing I carry with me from that story, but as I said, there is no time to speak of that right now. As you can see, it has been with me for quite a long time, but it still sounds as flawlessly, heartachingly beautiful as it did when it was first made." M'hehrenness could not see clearly through the thick smoke that laid in the air, but she was very apprehensive about hearing this old man play a nearly rotting violin at this moment of urgency.

"I would like to play you a short piece," the Oracle continued. "There are many things one could play at a time like this one, but I am not quite sure which one to pick. Do you have anything you wish to hear?"

M'hehrenness did not know much about music. The music she did hear was often nothing but background ambience played in the great hall, or sometimes during important dinners and such.

"I do not know," she said. "Music is not really a great passion of mine."

"Then I shall choose something for you," said the Oracle. "But there is so much to choose from. I know many pieces by a great songsmith by the name of Hjuu-G'. His music tends to be both dramatic, and rather sad as well. It seems that whenever I play one of his compositions I am left with this feeling of melancholy, and that is not something I wish for us at this time. No, we need something to capture the moment, the feeling of an upcoming adventure. Something to inspire us and drive us forth, and something to make us know that while the journey

will be harsh, we will return. I know just the piece, and it is the Sonata for the Suu'wafijaak. It was written by my people, and I find it extraordinarily inspiring. This is just what the moment calls for, and I hope you will enjoy it."

M'hehrenness was a bit sceptical, but the Oracle's great enthusiasm did intrigue her. He was clearly a passionate man, and perhaps that would translate into a lovely piece of music, played on a mossy fiddle.

The Oracle placed the bow on the strings with great care, and he took a deep breath. At once it became clear that the fiddle was not quite in tune, but not wishing to offend the Oracle, M'hehrenness remained silent. The music dragged on, and while it initially had not been too bad, a few minutes in it was starting to become dreary. The Oracle played, completely swept up in his own music, while M'hehrenness simply sat by. She tried her best to appreciate what was being played to her, but while she was not very experienced in the field of music, she knew that this was not quite something she liked. Perhaps it was the sort of piece that one would have to have been brought up with to appreciate.

Eventually, the Oracle drew out the last note, and he slowly opened his eyes and waited for M'hehrenness to respond. Wanting him to be happy, she smiled and told him it had been a great pleasure.

"How wonderful," said the Oracle. "I had a feeling you would enjoy this. Now then, we have important things to speak about." He put his fiddle aside, and returned to stroking his beard.

"As I have already told you, I find that the only thing that can be done at this moment is that we travel to Z'Chundzaal and attempt to understand what is happening. This alarming chain of events is not to be taken lightly, and it is our duty to examine it. But it will not be easy, I'm afraid, and we cannot do it alone."

"Do you need me to come?" said M'hehrenness.

"Oh yes, of course," said the Oracle. "I cannot do this without your assistance. I am old and weary, and you are still young and light on your feet." M'hehrenness felt a myriad of



emotions, ranging from fear to confusion. Then the Oracle continued, "You must not tell anyone in your family about this. I know you are already aware of this, but I am very serious. No one should know about this. Tell everyone that this indeed is the light of Blekhmir, and all shall be fine for now. Imagine the reactions of the powerful D'uhmev houses and their leaders should they find out that a curse is spreading throughout their lands." The smoke started to dissolve, and now M'hehrenness could look into the Oracle's eyes again.

"Little is known about the great temple," the Oracle continued, "but there are some who have very vital information that I would like for us to seek contact with." He reached into his bag again, but this time, he was not after fruit or pastries. Instead, he pulled up a small paperback book that looked like it had been swimming fifteen miles in a volcano, before being stomped on by a swarm of medium sized donkeys.

"Be very careful with this book," he said as he handed M'hehrenness the book. "This is a very old book - probably even older than me, and that is saying something." The Oracle put his hand back into his bag, and then picked up his handkerchief again, and started coughing from deep down in his throat. M'hehrenness was unsettled by the noises he made, but did not want to humiliate the old man, so she decided it was best to take a look in the book. On the front it said, "Khrugfvabpb," and she read that word aloud over and over again, changing pronunciations every time, all the while the Oracle was coughing up his lungs into his handkerchief.

"That book," he said when he was done, "was given to me by a traveller I met when I was only seventy years old. He didn't tell me much about the book's origin, so there is no need for you to ask me such questions, but I quickly discovered what a powerful tool this book could be, if it was used correctly. Sadly, however, I do not yet know exactly how to use it correctly, but I intend to learn it shortly. It is very important that we learn that before we can start our journey."

"What secrets does the book hold?" asked M'hehrenness.

"That is what we must find out," said the Oracle and once

again picked up his pipe, and started performing the same procedure as he had done earlier. “There is a group of people who could help us with this. I am talking about an unusual group who people do not normally interact with. They are the only scholars of the Sbraàkguff who still live,” he continued; “there are seven of them, and they are known as the Strangers. If you asked them, they would consider themselves the only scholars of Sbraàkguff altogether, but the story behind that is far too long to be told here. In their native language, the Strangers are called Ytl-Fruu’gh Tel-Mazu Grueitogglah. If I were you I would not even consider attempting to pronounce that correctly, for you are bound to fail. The language of the Strangers is without a doubt one of the most complex languages in all of Hzungus; not even I have learned to fully master it, and I speak twelve hundred languages somewhat fluently, while six of those languages I would say I am completely and flawlessly fluent in. But I digress.” By this point, M’hehrenness could feel how she grew more sleepy by the second; she was not sure how long she would be able to tolerate the Oracle’s drawn out stories.

“I met them when I was travelling through the deserts of Hvtled as a youngling. At first, they weren’t too pleased with my arrival, but after having cured their leader, who simply goes by the name the Prophet in these lands, from a deadly demonic curse, they told me in great kindness that I was welcome to return at any time, no matter my reasoning. Since then, I have only visited the deserts of Hvtled once, and sadly, I did not have the time for a reunion with the Prophet. I did however meet the Speaker and I have since begun to suspect that he does not like me very much. Which is very strange, because I told him several jokes and was quite generous with sharing the food I had brought along.” The Oracle took a pause, and it looked like he was staring through time. M’hehrenness was fascinated by the expression on the old man’s face. She had grown a tad bit warmer towards him.

“We must travel to the deserts of Hvtled instantly,” he exclaimed suddenly. “Tomorrow morning, we travel. Tell your

mother and father that you have been called on to join a quest of such importance that saying anything more would be endangering things to the point where many lives would be at stake.”

“You know my father, Oracle. He wouldn’t believe me.”

“Then make sure he does. Now, I am growing hungry and sleepy, so I should probably head for the dining room to see what they have to offer a man such as myself.”

“But Oracle,” said M’hehrenness, “you are not welcome here. My family does not wish to see you here. I can take you to one of the locked chambers, but you are not to show your face to anyone in this house but me. Understood?”

“I do see your point. I suppose I could dine here, it should be fairly comfortable. Do you wish to join me?”

“I think I’d better join my family.”

“That is very wise of you. We must not raise any suspicions at all.”

“I thought so. Now, I must join my family.”

M’hehrenness left the Oracle alone in her chamber, feeling a great many things. She had been given plenty of information in a rather short space of time, and learning that she had to go out on a large adventure was not something to be taken lightly. But these thoughts and concerns would have to wait, for it was now time for the great Blekhmir feast. Tales had been told of the return of the light, and now, when it had happened, it was cause for enormous celebration. It was such a special occasion, that even the house of Riik’la had been invited for the feast, because despite what a Laikmir might tell you, the Riik’la are D’uhmev too, and therefore, the return of the light very much concerned them as well.

Lord Dlihrnadh had prepared a speech that would last an hour or so. It was very important that the patriarch of the house in which the feast was held gave a speech, and especially if the Riik’la family were to join them. He made sure to include them in his speech, in the most loving manner possible, with phrases such as, “It is an honour to have duke Hihchztouyd of house Riik’la present, along with his wife, the indomitable

duchess Klijsarnya of Muylkaszaar." This, Dliirhnadh imagined, would actually result in duke Hihchztouyd shedding a tear or two. This would by far not be enough to settle the conflict and the feud between the two D'uhmev houses, but it could make Duchess Klijsarnya of Muylkaszaar warm up to the idea.

A special bottle of wine was opened for the feast; the wine that was made on the day of the Treason. Lady Luuhnziir Eëboleth of house Laikmir herself received the honour to open the bottle from her husband the lord, but she decided it was best to let one of the Riik'la house members open it. This, as expected, led to many a discussion during the remainder of the feast, and was quite controversial, especially among the Laikmir children, not including M'hehrenness, of course. She kept rather quiet during the long feast, and only spoke when she was asked a question.

Udriickh, the eldest son of house Riik'la, had been told by his father duke Hihchztouyd that lord Dliirhnadh and lady Luuhnziir wished that he married M'hehrenness before the end of the year. This was, of course, a lie, meant to stir up conflict and confusion in the Laikmir house. So at dinner, Udriickh made sure he was seated next to M'hehrenness, and did his best to spark up conversation after conversation, none of which seemed to grab M'hehrenness' interest. But Udriickh was not one to give up so easily, so he quickly turned away from chit chat, and started firing up conversation of a flirtatious nature instead. This was somewhat of an improvement, thought M'hehrenness, but she still had no interest in engaging in any sort of relationship with the young man, whether it be a romantic one or one of friendship. Udriickh, however, was desperate to grab her attention, so he did not stop talking until it was time for lord Dliirhnadh's speech.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he began as he stood up with the glass of the special red wine, "we have gathered to celebrate the return of the daylight. For six hundred years, we have been shrouded in darkness. But now, those days are over, and a new era has begun. In this new era, let us call it the fourteenth era,

the house of Laikmir would like to settle the feud that has infected the relationship between the Laikmir house and the Riik'la house." The duke looked up in astonishment as lord Dlrhnhadh uttered these words. Could he really suggest a truce between the two ruling D'uhmev houses?

"It is an honour to have duke Hihchztouyd of house Riik'la present, along with his wife, the indomitable duchess Klijsarnya of Muylkaszaar," the lord continued. "I want to tell you now, so that you remember until the end of your days, that you are always welcome in this house, regardless of what day of the week it is. You are always welcome." The entire dining room rose to their feet and gave the lord a ten minute long standing ovation, which caused even the stiff lord Dlrhnhadh to shed a tear. Those who knew the lord well, however, could sense the lack of any genuine emotion in his words.

"Thank you," he said, as the guests sat down again. "Thank you to duke Hihchztouyd, and thank you to Duchess Klijsarnya of Muylkaszaar. Now, at last, we dine." Another standing ovation was given, this time lasting closer to twenty minutes, and then the eating commenced.

At first, only bread was served. This was, of course, due to the role that bread has played in the history of the Ahvrehd Plains and its people, the D'uhmev. The bread was white and dry, but no one dared complain. Even the Riik'la children ate without once telling their mother or father that they did not appreciate the taste and texture of the bread, for they understood its purpose.

The wine which had been opened for the first time in six hundred years was sadly not enough for every guest present, but lord Dlrhnhadh made sure all of his children - even the youngest, Yyszca at five years of age - had a taste. Yyszca did not have much of the beverage, for her father did not allow her more than one glass, but she felt as if she could practically taste the age of the wine.

M'hehrenness enjoyed the wine very much, not only for its taste, but for its ability to numb the pain of speaking to Udriickh. She found a way to enjoy herself a bit more through

the excessive drinking, and it was her who drank the last drop.

“Oh heavens!” said her father. “M'hehrenness, how much have you drunk of this precious wine?”

“Not nearly enough,” she answered with a hiccup. Her father was furious.

“Do you not realise what you have done!” he screamed, but to M'hehrenness' surprise, Udriickh came to her defence.

“Excuse me, my lord, but don't you think you're overreacting?”

“Overreacting? Son, for centuries we have waited, and for centuries this family of which I am the patriarch have lusted for the taste of the great grape of Tjryo'hatg. Do you not see that this is more than just a mere bottle of wine? This is an artefact - nay, a relic - of our forefathers. M'hehrenness, you are my child, my favourite daughter by far, but this is beneath you. I thought you would grasp the importance of this wine. But now, I think not. My child, the duke and duchess proposed an idea to me just minutes ago, which at the time seemed ludicrous, but now I am slightly tempted.”

“And what was that idea?” said M'hehrenness in great fear.

“I shall announce it to the guests.” Lord Ddirhnadh sprung up on his feet and said loudly, “Attention!” The room silenced. M'hehrenness was sweating, and Udriickh could not have been happier.

“I have an announcement that very much concerns everyone in this hall. My eldest daughter, at the modest age of fifteen...” M'hehrenness was on tenterhooks. “... is going to marry Udriickh of house Riik'la before the feast has seen its end!” The room gasped, and M'hehrenness was on the verge of tears. Young Udriickh grabbed her hand in excitement and euphoria, for this was something he had dreamed about since he and M'hehrenness had been children.

Lord Ddirhnadh sat down in his chair and turned his devilish face towards his daughter.

“I shall make sure you behave,” he said sharply. “You shall do whatever this young lad asks of you, if it means peace between our two houses. Is that understood?” M'hehrenness was of

course sad, but she quickly realised that she did not need to defy her father, for she was about to embark on a quest of epic proportions.

“Yes, father,” she simply said, and the lord was shocked, but simultaneously, there was a hint of happiness there. M'hehrenness wanted her father to suffer, and was rather certain that what he would have wanted from her was nothing but rage. But she gave him consent, and he was not pleased.

“Very well,” he spoke sternly, “I shall speak with your mother about the ceremony, which you are to stay out of completely. It shall be one for the ages, my child. Udriickh, if you do not treat my daughter well, I shall make sure that the many cold and dark dungeons of the Laikmir house are put to good use.”

“Yes, my lord,” said Udriickh while a large amount of sweat left his body and stained his clothes. “Now, if you would excuse me, please.” Udriickh stood up and left the dining room, doing his best to hide the many stains all over him.

Udriickh had not visited the Laikmir house since he and M'hehrenness were nine years old, so he had some trouble finding his way to the washroom. He would ask guards for directions, but they were not very helpful, he found, since he forgot what they had told him within seconds.

All of a sudden, he found himself in a dark corridor with no windows. A few torches lit up the long hallway, but it was not enough for Udriickh to see what was on the other end. He thought he could probably go up the stairs on the other end, for he was certain there was a set of stairs on the other end of the corridor. The walk was long and terrifyingly silent. His footsteps echoed like a horse's shoe to the mountain top. On both sides, there were doors, all of which were shut, except for one that was located maybe ten or eleven feet ahead of him. He was very curious to see what this could mean. Were there any dark Laikmir secrets he did not yet know of, but would be trusted with after he married M'hehrenness? What would he see in that room? A corpse? A relic? Something of great value, he hoped.

As he reached the open door, he slowly peeked inside, and saw that in the corner of the hollow room, an old, robed man

was sitting, almost hugging his knees, and eating some sort of pastry. He hadn't noticed Udriickh's arrival, for he had a hood over his head that most likely covered his eyesight.

"Excuse me?" said Udriickh. The old man jumped up slightly.

"Who are you?" he said in a slightly worried tone. "Please, I assure you that I have an invitation, but I must have lost it. Perhaps I dropped it in the pie I was eating, or it could have been grabbed by a pigeon as I went outside to smoke."

"I'm not going to check your invitation," said Udriickh. "I just want to ask you who you are."

"Right, who I am," answered the old man, who started to calm down a bit. "I..." He thought of the right thing to say. "Around these parts I am known as the Wanderer, if you must know."

"Wanderer? Where are you wandering?"

"I have no specific location in mind towards which I am travelling, I just wander about, and make sure the land is kept in peace."

"And is it?"

"Well, of course, haven't you seen? The light of Blekhmir has come back!"

"Oh, yes, of course I've seen it."

"Would you like a pastry?"

"No, thank you, I'm full."

"Full? The feast has barely even begun!"

"Speaking of the feast, why aren't you present? Were you not invited by lord Dlihrnadh? I'm sure there's enough room for you too."

"Oh no, I do not dare disturb such an occasion. I think it is best if I stay here."

"Well, I am heading off to the washroom. I hope I'll be seeing you again soon."

"Likewise." Udriickh went past the doorway and continued on his path. Just as he had hoped and expected, the other end of a corridor presented him with a set of stairs, on the top of which, there was a sign that read, "Washroom". He was very



pleased by this, and opened the large wooden door to go inside.

In the dining hall, M'hehrenness and her father had not spoken since the announcement. Her mother, too, was silent, but the other Laikmir children were telling stories and jokes back and forth with one another, and seemed to be enjoying the feast more than anyone at that table.

Duke Hihchztouyd went up to lord Dlrhnadh and asked to speak to him and his wife in private.

"Excuse me, children," said the lord, as he stood up and followed the duke to outside the dining hall, where the duchess was waiting.

"I must say, I am very pleased with this decision," said the duke quietly, "but I am concerned, simultaneously."

"There is no need for concern," said lady Luuhnziir.

"Oh, but there is," said the duchess. "You wish to have them wed before the end of the feast! That is a ridiculous idea; an unrealistic plan that will steer the focus from the feast, to them - and they are merely children! Fifteen is no age, and you know it as well as I do."

"How old were you," said lord Dlrhnadh and turned to duke Hihchztouyd, "when you married the duchess? Were you not fourteen years of age?"

"I was," said the duke, "but she was not. My parents steered me into this marriage against my will, and I would not have survived if it weren't for Duchess Klijsarnya's maturity and wisdom, at the age of twenty two. Our children, though destined for one another, are too young and naïve to engage in a lifelong bond such as this."

"I, too, would be scared," said the lord calmly, "if I did not know my daughter, for she is a remarkable young woman, and I promise to you that all the qualities you saw in lady Klijsarnya all those years ago, I see in M'hehrenness. She is ready, duke Hihchztouyd, you must believe me when I tell you she is ready."

"I will choose to believe you, my lord," said the duchess, before the duke got a chance to respond to the lord. "Now, can we return to the feast? It has barely even begun." With a fiery attitude she turned away from her husband and the Laikmir

couple, and went back into the dining hall. The remaining three stayed put.

“All will turn out for the best,” said lord Dliirhnadh, as he took his wife’s hand and headed back to enjoy the feast.

In Udriickh’s absence, the eldest son of the Laikmir house, Dejrehlghi, and second oldest of the five children, sat next to M’hehrenness.

“What say you, M’hehrenness?” he asked her. “Are you ready for the wedding? It will be held in just a few days.”

“I know, brother,” she answered stoically. “I do not yet know what to say about this whole affair.”

“Do you love him, sister?”

“I will most likely grow to love him.” She knew, however, that this would not be the case.

“I think this is a very good thing. I am very happy for you.”

“Thank you, dear brother. I assume you will be next. Maybe one of the Gryphfguuah girls?” She giggled, and Dejrehlghi’s face turned red.

“Oh, I don’t know if I’m good enough for them, sister,” he said as he shook in embarrassment.

“Not even Tleejva? I think you two would get along very well.” M’hehrenness turned her head around to try and locate Tleejva.

“I have barely spoken to her at all,” said Dejrehlghi.

“There!” M’hehrenness exclaimed when she saw where Tleejva was sitting. “In the corner, there, by the round table.” Dejrehlghi started sweating.

“Go speak to her, brother. Go!” Against his own will, Dejrehlghi got up on his feet and started walking towards Tleejva’s table. M’hehrenness was watching him closely and carefully, and laughing like a clown.

He asked her for a dance, and to M’hehrenness’ surprise, the young girl accepted. Holding her hand, Dejrehlghi led Tleejva to the dancefloor, and as the band started playing the Waltz of Hjiirgalsuf, they began their dance. It was quite a dance indeed, one for the ages. Dejrehlghi danced like one of the Fliirlian princes, and he was glowing like a Zk’avvr jewel. Tleejva, who

had seemed sceptical toward the young lad at first, was also impressed by his skills on the dancefloor. His sense of rhythm was flawless, and the softness with which he moved and swayed made for a very pleasant experience. And his hands were so soft, and not a drop of sweat could be seen on his face nor his hands.

M'hehrenness sat by and watched for a while, feeling for the first time that she was actually enjoying the feast. The night went on for a bit longer, until the guests started disappearing into their guest rooms, and M'hehrenness thought this was the right time for her to go to sleep as well. After all, she had quite a day ahead of her.

## THE DEPARTURE

M'hehrenness awoke to the sound of a loud knocking on her chamber door. She did need to think for one moment who it was. In an instant, she was out of bed, but after the large amount of wine she had consumed during the feast, she started seeing black spots as she made her way to the door. And there was the Oracle, robed, and with his bags fully packed.

"I snuck into the kitchen," he said quietly, "and took what was left from the feast. Did you enjoy it, M'hehrenness? I sure wish I could have participated." His face showed great disappointment.

"My head is aching, Oracle," she said, rubbing her temples, "could the departure wait?" She then looked out the windows of her chamber and saw that it was pitch black. "What time is it?"

"I am afraid we cannot wait," said the Oracle. "Now, get dressed, you don't need to pack anything. Trust me, I have prepared everything."

"Would you mind stepping outside while I get dressed?" said M'hehrenness, slightly irritated.

"Of course, of course, I shall give you privacy. I will be waiting outside this very door, ready to leave whenever you are." The Oracle closed the chamber door and sat down on the stone floor. The entire house was completely silent, and the Oracle could not have been more pleased. He had a feeling that the journey they had ahead of them was going to turn out splendidly, especially if M'hehrenness would remain this enthusiastic.

"I am done," she said, as she opened her door.

"Great," said the Oracle and jumped up on his two feet. "Now, let us go." And go, they did. Through the corridors, in complete silence, through the great halls, until they were outside in the cold.

"Here," said the Oracle, "I have stolen two horses."

M'hehrenness was disgusted.

“You stole from my family?” she said angrily.

“What other way was there to retrieve horses?”

“I could have asked my father or mother or house counselor! There was no need for theft!”

“Well, since we will be travelling alongside one another, this is practically the same thing as you asking permission from your father, mother or house.... composer, or whatever his epithet was.”

“House counselor, and his name is Löyjrekktaf Pelhgrofnik,” she said. “He is a great man. And now, they will notice the absence of two horses, which is bad.”

“Well, there’s little to do about it now. Let us go! I know the way, with the help of a map; which reminds me, could I borrow a map from the house?”

“So, you don’t know the way?”

“I will if you were to give me a map.”

“Morning is approaching, and I think it is best if we don’t show our faces inside the house out of risk that we are seen wearing travellers’ clothes.”

“You are right, but I do need that map. Could we perhaps ask one of the locals to perform the task for us?”

“That’s not a bad idea,” said M'hehrenness, as she started to look around for someone - just anyone that was present and could be of help. But there was no one there.

“Actually, I do not wish to postpone this departure any longer. Forgive me, M'hehrenness, for I feel I have been somewhat inconveniencing you and your family.”

“We could find a map along the way, maybe ask for directions.”

“I do believe we will figure this out.” They both mounted their respective steeds, and then swiftly set off.

The early morning air was brisk and dry, and the winds coming from the west were strong. Due to the northern climate of this part of the Ahvred Plains the grass was short and trees were few, and traces of frost could be seen on the ground. As

the sun started to rise it became clear that the darkness of Juigyth was still very much a reality, and the light they had seen and celebrated was merely a sign of the terrible things to come.

The narrow gravel path led straight on from the Laikmir house for some time, during which the Oracle told many long stories, all of which eventually seemed to blend together. The stories were of the old days and the quests he and his companions took on, and he also spoke about the architecture he studied in excruciating detail, but then the topic could quickly switch to the flora surrounding the great volcano on the Isle of Suu'Wafijaák.

This continued for quite some time, until they eventually reached a crossing where there was a small village, and where also one of the most popular taverns of the area could be found. The Oracle deemed this to be the perfect place to get hold of a map, so he and M'hehrenness dismounted their steeds, and entered the surprisingly small tavern. On the steps leading up to the front door they found a four meter long Alcxcêë'gh sleeping. Though it did wake up from the sound of footsteps, it did not seem to mind, and quickly went back to sleep.

Once inside, they were immediately met by the smell of freshly boiled S'mhru crab. There were very few guests in the main hall, and most of the tables stood empty and dusty. That this was considered the most popular tavern of the area seemed somewhat sad, as by any other standard the tavern would likely have closed long ago.

Though empty, it was a warm and nice place to be, with a distinct friendly, welcoming feel to it. The innkeeper sat behind his desk with a magnifying glass in his hand, reading a dreadfully thick book. This gentleman had clearly passed his prime age several times over, and hadn't seemed to trim his beard once in that time. As the Oracle and M'hehrenness approached the counter he did not react. So the Oracle cleared his throat loudly, not to gain the innkeeper's attention, but because he had been enjoying several treats along the way to the tavern, having also packed an insufficient amount of drinks.

The innkeeper turned his head most slowly, and when he saw the Oracle and M'hehrenness he lit up, seeing new guests was perhaps one of the few joys he had left, along with reading books several times older than himself. After a couple of failed attempts, he managed to get up from his rickety chair, and he then walked excruciatingly slowly towards the counter. When he arrived he grasped on to the very old wood as if his life depended on it, which it likely did.

“A most very pleasant good morning to you, good sir, madam, both of you, a couple maybe? Oh, of course not. No, do not think me rude, I merely thought of something I read a few days ago when I was cleaning the fine garden outside, or was it last week? When was the last storm in these areas? Oh it was a while ago, maybe it said so in the book on woodcarving which I left somewhere. I do miss that bookshelf greatly, it was given to me by my grandfather on his deathbed, but after he died strangely. In the attic of course, that’s where I keep the onions, but not the parsnips, no, I keep them safely in the safe. Safe in the safe, that’s what I always say, but you have to know me to know that. But I do believe that most people who know me have passed on. You wouldn’t happen to know any? Oh well, water under the well, a hole in the porch, so to speak. Will that be all?”

Even the Oracle couldn’t decipher very much of what the little old man had said, and he thought it best not to inquire further into it. There was quite a long pause, during which the old man maintained a wide smile, showing he had very few teeth left. Eventually the Oracle decided to take a chance and ask;

“Yes, hello good sir. We stopped by your lovely tavern looking for a map of routes in northern Ngooxmahnxv and the Deserts of Hvtled, and also to ask where one might find some fresh, fruity pastries in this lovely village.”

The little fellow looked at the Oracle with wide eyes for some time, he then spoke.

“Yes, yes, yes yes yes. I know what you want, nay, what you need. I always keep some here in case curious folk come by, in

my grandma-ma's old strongbox of course."

As he bent down there was an audible crack followed by a faint grunt from the poor man. He then got up and placed a large, slightly moldy potato on the counter.

"Told you I had it somewhere, room for six is it, or do you need a basket of pine needles?"

"Well, yes, thank you very much, your kindness shall echo through these rooms as long as the walls of this tavern stand up." The Oracle and M'hehrenness then quickly turned around and left the tavern as fast as they could.

Somewhat unsettled by what had just happened, M'hehrenness asked a man digging a hole by the side of the road if he had met the innkeeper. The man laughed and said that the innkeeper had been bitten by a *w̄pzithoĝld* a few decades ago, and that he is very friendly and helpful once you learn how to interpret his mixed up words. M'hehrenness thanked the man, and when she turned around she saw the Oracle entering a small wooden building which said "Fresh Cakes and Pastries" above the front door, she sighed to herself, and then followed him in.

It was a small and humble bakery, run by an elderly woman bearing a floral dress and an apron decorated with pink and azure lace. There were plenty of pictures of adorable animals hung all over the walls of the rather overly-decorated bakery. All of the tables had delicate patterned fabric on top of them, and on the one windowsill there were vases with immaculately composed flower bouquets. The main counter had an astonishing assortment of cakes, pastries, biscuits, pies, and any other sort of baked good one could think of. It seemed like a wonder that this small building could fit this much in it.

M'hehrenness saw the Oracle by the display looking over the array of treats with hunger in his eyes. He asked the kind woman who ran the bakery about every one of the baked goods available for sale, each one with great intrigue. M'hehrenness thought about reminding him of the purpose of their stop, but thought it best not to disturb what was clearly very important to the Oracle. She often had to remind herself of the Oracle's



great importance, his vast wisdom, and his allegedly stunning powers.

The Oracle finally settled on what he wanted to purchase. Three sugared Cxaulrd with Uu'jhq-filling, eight Xxcaååfs with a honey glaze, a syrup covered Jkhlurrian cake, four cream filled Bhukk buns, five sugar coated gthrfee fingers, a candy Pöjhl filled with Ftmbuuberry jam, and lastly, four pounds of Jhgfadzoftian toffee.

"Would you recommend any sort of drink to go with these treats?" asked the Oracle while licking his lips.

"That is a very interesting question," said the kind woman, "but I fear I am not the right person to answer it. Perhaps you could go to the winery a couple of houses down the street, and ask the gentleman with the pointy hat and round glasses."

"Yes, M'hehrenness, we shall venture to the winery swiftly, for we have little time!"

"So glad I could be of help," said the kind woman. She then charged the very reasonable amount for such wonderful, lovingly baked treats.

"If these treats taste half as good as they look, it will be well worth it" said the Oracle with a wide smile as he rustled through all of the pockets, pouches, and small bags he had on him. Eventually he got up the right number of coins, and deposited them on the counter. The small woman looked at the Oracle with a gentle smile and warm eyes.

"You are most kind, I certainly hope you'll come here again. We don't get many visitors as exciting as you here"

"The quest ahead of us is long and dangerous, but it shall not stand in the way of my returning here, that I can assure you of," said the Oracle, who in M'hehrenness' eyes seemed rather smitten by the old woman.

"Well then," said the woman, "I shall long for the day when this door is once again opened by you. Until then, please have this from me." The woman handed the Oracle a piece of parchment with a drawing of a flower on it, and some text below it written in an indistinguishable cursive.

"Oh, thank you. I shall carry this close to my heart."

As they exited the bakery most slowly, the Oracle and the woman waved at each other until he and M'hehrenness were outside and the door had closed. They then went to their horses as the Oracle needed to add the excessive amount of pastries he had purchased to the packing. He packed everything as carefully as possible, in order for any of it not to be harmed during travel.

"Well then, there is still much to do. Let us visit the winery, and make it as swift as possible, for I rather fancy a slice of fruitcake." M'hehrenness had at this point stopped being annoyed, and had learned how to calmly follow the Oracle's detours, so she simply smiled and followed him towards the winery.

A round, bald man ran the winery. His name was Hztridjan, and he was kind and welcoming, as most people were in the village. So when M'hehrenness and the Oracle entered, he greeted them with tremendous warmth.

"Visitors, how lovely. Please, come sit down and have a sample of my latest wine, I'm really quite pleased with how it turned out."

The man tended to them very nicely and gave them several samples of different wines, and the Oracle even got the slice of fruitcake he was craving.

"I'm most impressed by your craft," said the Oracle while eating his second slice of cake. "I wish to purchase some of your wine, what can you recommend?"

"Ah, well my personal favourite both to drink and to make is Lgforvéân wine, and I must say I've come up with quite a nice recipe."

"Oh, that does sound lovely, but I'm afraid we have a long journey ahead of us."

"Of course, I see. In that case you'll want the Jzatyynh wine, with light and fragrant tones reminiscent of those one might find on the meadows of Klm'fe-z. I have a few barrels aged for 3 years that I think will do nicely, shall I tap a few bottles for you?"

"It is as if you can read my mind," said the Oracle. "You see

I just purchased several Xxcaââfs with honey glaze, and surely there could be nothing better to accompany that wine than these”

“Exactly sir, you clearly have a well-developed taste for good food and drink”

“You flatter me, I’ll take six bottles”

So they left the winery and added the bottles to the already heavily packed bags. And as the Oracle began to mount his horse, he remembered something.

“Of course, how could I not see this earlier”

“What do you mean?” said a confused M’hehrenness.

“The innkeeper, he showed clear signs of w̃pzithoĝldish insanity, a subject I researched while I was teaching at the college of Uhhohlugh. I shall go to the inn once again and ask him for a map, for we are now truly in a hurry. Wait here, this shall only take a moment.”

The Oracle left M’hehrenness by the horses, and he then entered the inn. So M’hehrenness waited, and she waited for a long time. She brushed the horses a little bit, mostly because they seemed to enjoy it greatly. She then pulled out a few carrots from the packing and fed them to the horses, which they appreciated as well. After this she walked around the small village for a while, looking at the people, the animals, and the cozy little houses. Once she had seen everything at least three times she went back to the horses and returned to brushing them. She was not very surprised that the Oracle took a long time to return, for at his age he didn’t seem to have a firm grasp of time anymore.

After nearly an hour and a half, the door to the inn opened and the Oracle came out with a large piece of parchment in his hands. He walked up to M’hehrenness looking very pleased with himself.

“That went quicker than I could have ever expected. W̃pzithoĝldish insanity can be most unpredictable, but the innkeeper turned out to be rather well spoken once interpreted, and he was able to get me this large and detailed map of almost all of northern Ngooxmahnxv.”

“Wonderful,” said M'hehrenness with a hint of sarcasm in her voice. “What path do you suggest we take?”

“Hmm, now that is a good question.” The Oracle then studied the map thoroughly for some time while mumbling to himself.

“The logical way would be to go around lake G'zfuym and bypass the House of Riik'la, but that would mean having to deal with the mountains of Jhurzfyon, and that is something I would like to avoid. Our other option is to cross G'zfuym at its most narrow point, as there seems to be a bridge there, and from there continue east towards Ou-dchzajn, which, of course, is where the Strangers reside in the Deserts of Hvrtled. I am unsure of the condition of this bridge, as I have only ever taken the path around the lake, but since discretion is highly important in our mission it is probably best to stay clear of House Riik'la, as suspicions may arise.”

The Oracle looked at M'hehrenness as if he wanted approval of his plan, but as she knew little of the roads in these parts she remained silent.

“Very well,” said the Oracle. “We shall go south, cross the bridge, then head southeast as we enter the deserts. A marvelous plan if I may say so, but it is too late to continue our journey now, so let us spend the night at the delightful inn, eat and drink good, and set off early in the morning.”

It was when the Oracle said this that M'hehrenness realised they had spent several hours in the small village, and nighttime was indeed approaching. So they led their horses to the stable by the inn and were assured that they and their packing would be well taken care off. M'hehrenness gave her horse a friendly pat on the head, for she had grown very fond of him during their ride to the village, and she was already looking forward to reuniting with him in the morning. She then followed the Oracle towards the inn, for they were both tired and hungry.

There were seven tables in the main hall of the inn, and in the center of the room was a fireplace which warmed and lit up the room nicely. The innkeeper sat behind his desk reading the same large book as before while rocking slowly back and forth

in his chair, and upon closer inspection it seemed as if he had his eyes closed. Only two guests were present in the main hall, and they each sat at their own tables. One guest was a large muscular man who wore patches over both his eyes and had a pitchfork for his right arm. The other guest had blue, scaly skin, many small horns on top of his head, and he ate by flicking out his long tongue and grabbing the food with it.

“The blue one is from Dhjjêht” The Oracle whispered to M'hehrenness. “Most of them are very nice, but one should do well to stay clear of the ones who aren't.”

The Oracle went up to the old innkeeper and gave him a friendly nudge on the shoulder to wake him up. This woke him up so suddenly he sprung up on his feet, and in doing so he flung his leaking pen across the room, leaving a trail of ink on the floor.

“Oh, the beehive is ripe for harvest!” said the innkeeper while looking both ecstatic and dreadfully tired at the same time. The Oracle then whispered to M'hehrenness;

“I'll handle this, go and find us a table, not too close to the fire as I tend to get hot, but also not too far away, as I tend to get cold.”

M'hehrenness chose the table she thought looked the cleanest, which happened to be not too far from the fire, nor too near it. Just as she sat down a tall, well dressed man appeared.

“Anything to drink?” he asked with a tone in his voice which seemed to imply he did not enjoy working at this particular tavern.

“Eh..” M'hehrenness hesitated, but then she remembered something.

“Yes!” she exclaimed. “Two mugs of hot, spiced Lgforvéân wine, please.”

The tall, handsome man nodded slightly, and then returned swiftly to what M'hehrenness assumed was the kitchen. While she was less than impressed by his sense of service, it was very hard for her not to appreciate his fine form. She even found herself fantasizing about him in such a way that her face started

blushing. This was, naturally, when the Oracle returned.

“Yes, I too find this table to be a bit close to the fire, no wonder you’re getting warm. But I’m in no mood to switch tables, the other ones seem to be made of Zjerskzuulian lumber, quite foolish if you ask me, so this will have to do.”

“Oh... yes, of course,” M’hehrenness said as she snapped back to reality. “I ordered us some of that wine you like”

“Splendid, I think you’ll find it most enjoyable, especially after a hard day like this one.” The Oracle then removed the cloak he was wearing, only to reveal an almost identical cloak underneath.

“I arranged our accommodation for tonight with the help of the kind innkeeper, we’ll each have one of the attic rooms. And he also recommended the S’mhru crab pie with fresh Xvuyrss’z secretion and a g’d’rahtf drizzle, so I went ahead and order that for both of us.”

M’hehrenness didn’t have much time to respond as the handsome man returned with their wine.

“Thank you,” said M’hehrenness softly as the man put down the drinks on the table. He did not say anything in response, but gave her a hint of what could be interpreted as a smile. But before her mind could venture off into more fantasies the Oracle started speaking.

“So then, we’ll get up at sunrise and eat a proper, hearty breakfast, and then set off south as quickly as we can. There is little time to waste, if we stop at every picturesque tavern, winery, or stone masonry along the way then we’ll never get anywhere.”

“Agreed,” sighed M’hehrenness. The Oracle then started telling a terribly long story about doorknobs. He was interrupted when the food came but continued as they ate.

After the revolting dinner they both went up the old and narrow stairs to the attic. The ceiling was especially low, and several nails and splinters stuck out from the aging wood. There were only two doors, both of them lacking locks and doorknobs. This made M’hehrenness and the Oracle slightly

confused as to why they had each been given a key. But as both of them were exhausted and blissfully aware that their stay was only for one night, they each entered their rooms and went to sleep.

The winds were harsh and the night was long. The creaking of the old wood in the unforgiving weather meant M'hehrenness did not get more than an hour or two of uninterrupted sleep. She would fall asleep and veer off into strange dreams, but then quickly wake up, either from the sound and feel of the wind on the aging building, or from the loud sounds coming from the Oracle's room. His snoring was something she could live with, as it was something to expect from a man who had been smoking almost every herb imaginable ever since the beginning of this time age. What was difficult to cope with was his tendency to talk rather aggressively in one, or several of the many languages he knew while sleeping.

M'hehrenness tried many things to dampen the many sounds intruding on her well needed rest. This included building a wall of pillows around her head, hoping this would absorb some of the noise, but all it did was induce a slight sense of claustrophobia. At one point she even considered crawling underneath the bed, but the generations of dust and shells from insects she found there somewhat deterred her from that. So for much of the night she simply laid there, trying to think amidst the shaking from the weather and the Oracle's loud muttering and snoring. The times when she did manage to fall asleep briefly, she dreamt that she was applying tiles to the walls of a light beige washroom. It was without a doubt the longest night she had ever experienced, but morning did eventually come.

There was never really a proper sunrise due to the darkness of Juigyth, but one could see a slight change in light outside, and there was also the unmistakable sound of the hbestnoskf roar. As the hbestnoskf owned by this village was either very old or exceptionally tired, M'hehrenness was caught somewhat by surprise when the Oracle stormed into her room.

"What a morning!" he exclaimed. "I don't think I've had a

better night of sleep in centuries, do you find the fresh country air as invigorating as I do?

“Ehrm, yea...” M'hehrenness sat up on the side of her bed, rubbing her eyes and yawning excessively.

“You'll feel better after a strong breakfast. I've already been down and made sure they put on a large pot of grovha, and the cook even offered to open up a tin of lkoftu-pickled sardines. That should go excellently with Jhjudsÿ biscuits, something the cook told me they have plenty of.”

“Ehrm, yea...” M'hehrenness stood up and became so light-headed she had to sit down again. “I'll be down in a minute”

“Don't be too long, remember the urgency of our quest.” The Oracle then went down with a certain enthusiasm in his steps.

While she was easily irritated by the Oracle's enthusiasm for strange food, M'hehrenness found a certain joy in seeing him get so excited about the smallest things, he was after all much older than she could ever imagine. And to still have such an appetite for life and pastries was quite inspiring to her.

As she had been dressed for hours, M'hehrenness quickly followed the Oracle down. There she could see the same two guests from last night but now sitting in different places, and the Oracle sitting at the same table where they ate dinner. He had clearly already helped himself to the surprisingly generous breakfast buffet. He had four plates in front of him, all of them stacked high with what looked like a little bit of everything. As soon as M'hehrenness sat down the handsome server appeared and placed a cup of warm grovha in front of her. He went away as fast as he arrived, but M'hehrenness could swear she saw a little glimt of something in his eyes. It suddenly seemed a shame to her that they had to leave today.

“Go, go, I highly recommend the buffet! Make sure to eat a strong breakfast, we have a long journey ahead of us,” said the Oracle while eating with the appetite of a fully grown iiju'hlagtar after a two week trek through the Dhjÿht forests.

M'hehrenness got up and grabbed whatever she could recognise from the buffet, which turned out to be only two dry



crackers, a green fhhsry egg, and a single plum, the only one left. The Oracle made no effort to hide his disappointment in M'hehrenness' breakfast. He made it clear that when presented with such an assortment of breakfast foods one should see it as an opportunity to not only eat, but to expand their knowledge of the culinary wonders of the world.

"I'm still a bit full from dinner," lied M'hehrenness, who had managed to sneak most of the S'mhru crab pie into her napkin last night.

"Nonsense, you must eat! Try a bit of bread with the southern-style lard and kidney scramble. It's the best I've had in years," said the Oracle while finishing his third plate.

M'hehrenness then took a sip of grovha, which was a lot better than when she had last tried it. It was so good, in fact, that she made a face which suggested great surprise.

"I know," said the Oracle. "The grovha here was greatly disappointing, but don't worry, there's plenty of my delicious brew in the packing."

"Oh, yea, great," said M'hehrenness quietly.

"Shall we go over our plan?" said the Oracle with great excitement.

"You've already..."

"We will travel towards the bridge over G'zfuym" Continued the Oracle, interrupting M'hehrenness. "It is pretty much straight south from here, at least according to the map I was given. From there I think it is wise to head straight east, and cover most of our longitudinal travelling outside of the desert. Then we can travel south and we should reach Ou-dchzajn in as little as four days from now."

The Oracle then stood up and went to pay the innkeeper for their stay. M'hehrenness was in no mood to wait inside the inn, so she went outside to the stables and found, to her great relief, that the horses were well and happy, and the packing was also completely intact. She gave her horse a pat on the neck, and then fed him the plum she had grabbed from the breakfast buffet. The majestic horse chewed for a few seconds, and then spat out the stone onto the hay-covered stable floor. The Oracle

then returned.

"I apologize for the time it took, the innkeeper wasn't nearly as cooperative today, hope you didn't mind waiting."

"Well no, not at all," said M'hehrenness who was a bit confused about the Oracle's perception of time.

"Very well, let us ride, there is no time to lose," said the Oracle as he added a brown bag to the packing, which M'hehrenness suspected had food from the inn in it.

Then they rode away from the village, taking a path leading slightly southwest. This may have seemed somewhat counter-intuitive, but as there was a fairly significant mountain straight south from the village, they needed to pass around it to reach the G'zfuym. And they could not ride east, for there the river opened up into a vast lake, and going around that lake was an option they had dismissed, as it would mean passing suspiciously close to the house of Riik'la.

So they rode for several hours, with not much to see along the way. As the name of the region might suggest, the Ahvred Plains consisted mostly of flat lands with either short grass, or even snow and tundra further up north. They passed several villages along the way, but to M'hehrenness' great surprise they did not stop at any one of them. It would seem that the Oracle had finally found his well needed focus on the matter at hand. Although it might have been foolish of M'hehrenness to think that, for not long after she noticed the Oracle's increased focus, he insisted that they should stop at the stones of Jerhzuŋh.

"These stones are some of the most marvelous relics of the ancient world, it would be foolish not to stop and admire them," said the Oracle as he led them off the road and across a muddy field.

"Are you sure we have time for this?" said M'hehrenness.

"Ah, one can never know what the wisdom held in places like this can be used for further along a quest. They might just prove to be essential to our understanding of the world."

M'hehrenness was most hesitant, for when they finally reached the stones they looked like little more than a few gray rocks in a muddy field. But the Oracle was full of excitement,

he dismounted and quickly skipped over to the largest stone.

“Come here, M’hehrenness. This is an excellent opportunity to learn!”

Very reluctantly, she stepped down and walked through the mud up to the stones. Much to her relief, the ground just around the stones was covered in gravel, so at least she didn’t have to stand in mud while listening to the Oracle’s inevitable lecture. It was extremely difficult for her to imagine what significance these stones could possibly bear. They were not any better looking than any other large stones, and the scenery around them was less than impressive. There really wasn’t anything noteworthy about the landscape at all. It was flat as far as the eye could see, and the ground consisted of either mud, brown-ish grass, or small puddles of water.

The Oracle then started talking about the stones, and as it turned out there was plenty to say about the seemingly insignificant rocks.

“There are many theories behind the stones and how they were formed. No one is quite sure as they are exceptionally old and have been here for as long as anyone can remember. Some theories suggest that they were created to replicate the fangs of the Great Snake-Lords of the ancient world countless years ago.”

M’hehrenness didn’t have a single clue what the ancient Snake-Lords were, but when the Oracle turned to her she nodded and tried to look as interested as possible.

“Yes, a fascinating theory isn’t it?” the Oracle continued. “Some suggest that the stones were a part of barricades used as protection against those very Snake-Lords, but most of that is based on pure speculation. But the most ludicrous of all theories I’ve heard is that the stones could make up the tips of an ancient underground ruin. Although we might only consider this theory ridiculous because very few seem to be bothered to conduct proper research around the stones. I for one would love the opportunity to study the amazing stones in detail, but I never seem to find the time for it.”

He took a long pause to look over the most deplorable

looking stone, before continuing.

“The one thing we can be sure about is their immense beauty. How could one look upon these stones and not be filled with inspiration and excitement?”

M'hehrenness didn't have a lot to say on the subject, but she was quite hungry so she suggested that they eat a bit of lunch, and the Oracle naturally said yes to this, as he was also becoming quite peckish.

The Oracle then went over to his horse and removed several bags and bottles from the packing. He then placed down a large piece of cloth on the gravel-covered ground, and then on top of that cloth he arranged many of the dishes he had packed. Including pastries, stews, sandwiches, and also a variety of wines, ales, and other brews unfamiliar to M'hehrenness. But she wasn't really inclined to ask about the lunch presented to her, as most of it actually looked rather tasty.

The Oracle then summoned a fire next to one of the stones, he did this by simply waving about a bit with an old stick. He then told M'hehrenness not to worry about the stones being damaged from the fire, as they were probably amongst the most resilient things in this world. This hadn't really been a worry for M'hehrenness, but she acted out some form of mild relief, if only to please the Oracle.

They sat down and started eating, just as the sun moved so that the largest stone cast a shadow over their chosen eating spot. M'hehrenness ate quickly, and soon found that she was ready to pack up and leave, but the Oracle continued for quite some time, going through many of the dishes and even some of the wine he had bought from the nice winery in the village.

“This wine paired marvelously with the bread, you simply must try it.”

“I'm a bit full, but thank you," said M'hehrenness nicely.

At last, lunch was finished and the Oracle packed everything up. He then took one last look at the stones, and made a few scribbles in one of his many notebooks, and he then suggested that their journey should continue. And so they did, they rode on for many more hours through the flat scenery, where

everything was either brown, gray, or a sort of brown, grayish green.

Eventually they found G'zfuym in sight, and by simply following the road soon they were at the bridge. The wooden bridge was wide enough for about two horses, and it looked remarkably stable. However the Oracle insisted on examining the bridge closely, to make sure it would hold the weight of them, their horses, and the heavy packing. M'hehrenness didn't think this was necessary, as she could have sworn she saw a large elephant-sized creature crossing the bridge before them, but once again she restrained herself and let the Oracle do what he wanted to.

He pulled out a long staff with several branches hanging from it, and with it firm in his hand he walked onto the bridge. Halfway across he stopped and bent down. He then turned his head and pressed his right ear against the wood, all this while humming atonally. Following this, the Oracle then stood up and waved about with his staff, his eyes completely closed. His examination went on for a long time, which was perhaps to be expected, but at last he deemed the bridge safe to cross.

After crossing G'zfuym their journey had to be put on hold, as it was now getting dark. It was when evening started drawing in that M'hehrenness noticed the increase in light, and how the darkness of Juigyth seemed to be fading as they went further south. Not far from the bridge was a suitable spot for spending the night, it was flat and dry, and a few trees nearby provided some protection against the winds. So they raised their tents and the Oracle lit a fire, and soon they had themselves a cozy little campsite.

For supper they had a surprisingly tasty stew the Oracle had prepared from vegetables in his own garden, and to drink they enjoyed a delicate cider made from T'wye'ajcs and Bhyr-rôplq. They followed up the meal with hot grovha, an exceptionally bitter Uzgo'uraht liqueur, and a cream filled Bhukk bun each. After this they went in to their respective tents, and the Oracle quickly fell asleep and started snoring loudly. M'hehrenness however stayed awake for a while, she had many things on her

mind, about their journey, their quest, and how things might turn out. This was after all only the start of their journey.

## CRIMSON TWILIGHTS

As night slowly faded into day, the unmistakable sounds of many male hbestnoskfs waking up rang throughout the lands. M'hehrenness quickly got up after only getting a few hours of sleep, probably the best she could have hoped for with the horrible sleeping mats the Oracle had brought. Upon leaving her tent and greeting the new day and the fresh, brisk morning air, she was surprised to find the Oracle was in his tent, still sleeping, or still snoring at least. His enthusiasm from previous mornings and the very nature of his demeanour had given M'hehrenness the idea that the Oracle had a clear appetite for mornings, but this morning definitely proved otherwise. This surprised her a lot more than it bothered her; if anything she was happy the old man was getting some rest.

This was the brightest morning M'hehrenness had seen since her visit to the house of Rük'la a few years ago. Although it was quite cool, the sensation of a bright morning made M'hehrenness feel wonderfully warm inside, so much so that she started preparing breakfast. With the Oracle asleep she had to prepare a fire the hard way, by using the fire starting device she had received as a gift on her 9th birthday from her father. This was an old and heavy device, and relied on a thumb-operated handle creating enough friction to generate a spark, and if you were lucky enough this could lead to a fire.

Upon receiving this gift, lord Dlrhnadh had told her that the device was likely to break one's thumb. He told her that he, in his youth, had broken his thumb on a similar device, and his father before him, and that she should have seen it as a great honour that she, a girl, had received such a traditional device originally only intended for men. M'hehrenness still wasn't sure how she felt about the gift - was it her father's way of saying he loved and respected her enough to break the gifting traditions? Or did he mean to say he was disappointed that his first-born was a girl? Whatever his intentions were, M'hehrenness thought

it might be a useful thing to bring along.

So she gathered up some sticks and twigs, a few handfuls of dry moss, and a couple of hefty logs, and arranged these on the coal from last night's fire. She then took the fire-starter in her hand, placed it close to the dry moss, took a deep breath, and then firmly flicked her thumb down on the handle. This started the fire quite effectively, but it also sent out a shot of pain that M'hehrenness could almost feel in her teeth. Her thumb didn't appear to be broken, but the pain was still intense enough for her to drop the device and shake her hand around while swearing profoundly.

Amazingly, the Oracle didn't wake up from the woosh of a large fire, nor from the many profanities coming from M'hehrenness. She eventually settled down and shifted her focus to what she might prepare for breakfast. While the Oracle was responsible for most of the food in the packing, M'hehrenness had brought with her a few bags of oats, seeds, and nuts. This was in case she wanted to prepare her mother's porridge, something she had practiced making since the age of 7. And on this peaceful morning she thought it might be fitting to make one of the few things she knew how to cook.

The process of preparing the porridge involved plenty of stirring in different pots and adding every ingredient at a crucial time, all while controlling the temperature of the mixture. Making the recipe in an improvised environment was a bit trickier than she had expected, but after plenty of struggling and swearing she had two steaming hot bowls of delicious porridge prepared. She then intentionally dropped the largest pot onto a large stone, and the following loud noise woke the Oracle up very effectively. It wasn't long until he was out of his tent looking as cheerful as ever.

"Oh my, you've prepared breakfast, what is it?" said the Oracle.

"Just a simple porridge."

"There's nothing simple about a porridge. I once had to rebuild my entire kitchen after trying to cook porridge for my mule. You see he only ate cold porridge in his older days, and he



rarely drank anything other than freshly squeezed onion juice. A peculiar animal, but I really do miss him. What happened was that I reached up for the tin of cloves above my stove, and in doing so a bit of my robe grazed the surface of the stove and caught fire. As soon as I noticed this I threw my robe to the ground and poured a glass of pickle-brine I was saving for later on the robe. But when that fire was out, I noticed how the porridge started to burn, so I took a fast step towards the stove but slipped on the pickle-brine.

“The thump of me hitting the ground was loud enough for my Alzfaprogguh parrot to come flying into the kitchen in panic. His rapid flying around the kitchen tore down tins, bowls, and even shelves, and this scared my mutated bees so much that they started eating away at the stone floor. Many more things happened after that but I think you get the general idea. So do not underestimate the damage a porridge can cause.”

M'hehrenness tried desperately to hold back laughter, as it was clear the Oracle didn't find his story funny in the slightest.

“Sorry to hear that,” she managed to get out.

“Thank you, M'hehrenness. I still think about that mule every time I sleep in my bed at home, for he liked to sleep next to me when he was feeling ill, or when he was afraid of the dark.” The Oracle then started eating the porridge, and while eating he made many sounds indicating that he found it quite tasty. Apart from the Oracle's humming noises they ate mostly in silence, and when they were finished, it didn't take long at all to pack everything up. The Oracle then consulted the map for some time.

“Now, it would probably be best if we went over our travel plan,” he then said.

“But haven't we already -”

The Oracle interrupted M'hehrenness; “One can never go through one's plan too many times. It is of vital importance that we have a clear route to follow, so we can avoid diversions as best as possible. And speaking of that, we simply must stop and visit my dear friend Khjehqzhrun whã'i-Ghzaoddzjiv. He has a small house just a couple of hours away from the main road,

and you never know what wisdom he might enrich us with.”

“Is that really necessary?”

“It might be, or it might not be. I have had spurts of fantastic inspiration while talking to Khjehqzhrun whã'i-Ghzaoddzjiv, and I've also had conversations with him that seemed to drain all the energy from my body. But with the number of uncertainties in our quest, I think it would be foolish for us not to visit him.”

“Well, I suppose so,” said M'hehrenness with some hesitation in her voice.

“Then it's decided, let us be off.”

The Oracle then folded up the map and placed it in one of his many pockets, they then made their final preparations before riding off into the distance.

And so began the third day of their journey, now with few obstacles in their way and a clear, mostly straight path to follow. It was one of the main roads over the Ahvred Plains, it went around the lake, past the house of Riik'la, and all the way up to the Laikmir house. M'hehrenness and the Oracle could only stay on this road for a while, for they did not intend to ride around the lake and return to the place where they started. Their intention was to follow the main path for as long as possible, but then head southeast when the other path would start to turn north.

It was a well-used but not very well-maintained road. The many people travelling by carriage meant there were tracks on either side of the path, with a distinct mound of the rougher gravel in the middle. It was also uneven from animals of different sizes and species going at different speeds and places on the road. But despite the condition of the track, it was still the best way to travel over this part of the Ahvred Plains.

The terrain was fairly uneven, with the road frequently slanting to one side or the other. And as the name of the Ahvred Plains might suggest, there were mostly meadows by the side of the road, with forests very sparse. Apart from fields of short grass, one could also see plenty of farmlands. The soil

in these regions is as good as it gets north of the deserts, so most of the D'uhmev farmers chose to set up their family farms as far south as they could, without getting too close to the desert, for vegetation didn't at all thrive in the harsh sands of Hvrtled. These were humble and hard-working farmers that made the best of their lands, and in fact supplied most of the northern part of Ngooxmahnxv with fresh produce.

M'hehrenness and the Oracle saw many of these farms as they rode along, they also went past several villages, all of them similar to the one where they spent the night before last. Here and there stood a few solitary houses, all of which probably had long and interesting stories hidden within their walls. With most of the ground covered in short grass, one could see far ahead over the rolling hills, with houses and trees standing tall and exposed like the pillars of Fxuim'hh. And with the vibrant colours of the cattle that frequently moved slowly across the fields, it truly made it a pleasant sight for sore eyes.

Their horses took calm steps along the path, the sounds of their hooves against the gravel was something M'hehrenness found most calming. The horses continued trudging along steadily, with the picturesque scenery and the occasional herd of Hjjuxtuuovian geese to behold. There were plenty of other birds, but few of them flew in groupings as large as the geese did, and even fewer could match them in sheer beauty. They had a larger wingspan than most geese, and eyes that shimmered with the essence of nature in harmony. They were elegant to admire, especially in the pleasant silence that the Oracle soon broke;

"I once attended a dinner party of sorts where the main course was a thigh of Hjjuxtuuovian goose with a vanilla raspberry flambé and a reduction of green Pluiyrgah. It was actually rather tasty, these geese contain quite a bit of fat, but when prepared properly it had a flavour fitting for such a gorgeous bird. The fat itself is most useful, I use it to grease up the trunks of the trees in my garden, and it also makes a good lubricant for an older seed-mill."

"Do you know how long it will take to reach the desert?"

asked M'hehrenness, not really interested in hearing about further uses for Hjjjuxtuoovian goose fat.

"It will be a while still. We should arrive at Khjehqzhrun whâ'i-Ghzaoddzjiv by midday tomorrow, and I shall be most surprised if he doesn't let us spend the night there. From there it should only be three or four days of steady riding, provided of course that we don't get distracted along the way. And I also suspect it will be a solid day of riding through the desert until we arrive at Ou-dchzajn. A long trip, I know, but this is a vital step in our quest to solve the mystery of what truly resides within Z'Chundzaal."

"But that long story you told me about the curse, isn't that what lives there?"

"Maybe I should have been more clear. While we know the story of Fohlciha'ar awakening in Z'Chundzaal, what his curse really is and what it will do to us is something there is plenty of uncertainty around. But I'm sure the Strangers can tell us more, they have a fascinating connection with the T'el, and that may prove essential."

"You still seem calm about this," said M'hehrenness after a short moment of silence.

"If I were to worry about this, if I were to run around screaming in panic, this trip would still take several days. The distance to the Strangers will not shorten as a result of stress and panic, regardless of one's mindset it will remain a long journey. I will worry when there is need to, but right now things are unfolding the way they will unfold no matter what. This is a day, and if we choose to make it a good or bad one will not change the fact that it is a day, so all one can do is to enjoy the trip and the pretty scenery."

"Thank you," said M'hehrenness, who was starting to feel bad about how she had been so greatly annoyed by the Oracle earlier. From what he had just said it was clear that he was indeed a very wise man. His words made plenty of sense to M'hehrenness, and she was now able to relax a lot more than before. She turned towards the Oracle who had his look firmly set on the horizon, and an expression which suggested a

peaceful, yet focused mindset. He also had four large wasps in his beard, something of which he seemed to be unaware.

And so they continued on, the road now going over a slight hill. At the bottom of this hill was a small, decrepit shed, its walls overgrown with moss, and much of the roof had fallen to the ground. The Oracle slowed down to look at the shed, but to M'hehrenness' relief he didn't stop. The door was long gone, so one could see straight into the forfallen remains of the shed. Inside there was nothing but a few rotting wooden planks, plenty of weeds, and an open, empty chest. Once the Oracle had gotten a good look at the old building they sped up again and kept going.

The lonesome shed turned out to be the only point of interest over the next four hours, they simply went along the rough gravel path on their cheerful horses while sharing stories and memories. The Oracle had what he called a "snack-bag" just by his side on the horse, so he wouldn't have to stop every time he felt peckish. It only took a few hours for M'hehrenness to feel amazed over how much food and drink the small bag could fit. It seemed as if the Oracle was chewing on something or sipping from a small mug every time M'hehrenness looked to her side. He frequently offered her treats she had never heard of, but in order not to disappoint him she accepted a few now and then, some of which were actually rather tasty.

Their steady pace was halted after a few hours when they met a D'uhmev farmer, a small old man with a majestic beard and a hat made from straw in many different colours. He appeared to be herding his entire stock of izchizchuiohz ducks from one field to another. This meant crossing the road, and with the sheer size of the herd, and the infamous slow pace of the izchizchuiohz ducks, it was not a fast process. The farmer was standing facing the ducks so he didn't see M'hehrenness and the Oracle approaching, neither did he hear them over the chaotic quacking of the confused birds. The Oracle dismounted and went up to the farmer.

"Ah, travellers! I do beg your pardon, but I chose to herd me ducks at this hour when traffic was lo'" Said the small farmer.