

Sleeper's Ban

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The whitish shimmering wall completely filled his field of vision.

The rain, which had been accompanying him for the past few hours, bounced off it, and the droplets slid off with a sizzling sound. Even the wall itself seemed to emit a whistling noise, which deceived his exhausted and befuddled mind into hearing voices that seemed to mock and laugh at him.

The sight filled him with horror!

He had never thought that he would find himself standing on this cliff on a stormy morning, trembling and shivering, dressed only in the coarse cotton garment of a farmer and simple leather boots. Around him were the rough and garlic-smelling guards, among them the gaunt figure of the Archon, who sat on his horse, trembling and disgruntled, while reading the judgment. After all, he was the first son and heir of one of the largest trading houses in his hometown, accustomed to living in a grand villa, cared for by servants. He was not someone for whom a judgment was being read by the grating voice of a court official, mentioning "loss of citizenship" and "lifelong imprisonment."

As if through a wall of dread, he realized that his future was being described here. Theft was mentioned, and he remembered the sneering face of his stepbrother, the man who came into the family through his father's second marriage and had always envied him for the position of the heir.

His stepbrother's words came back to him. "...you stand in my way on the path to power!"

Back then, he had laughed and replied that it was just the way it was, and nothing could be done about it. At that moment, he was being proven wrong.

It had been just a week ago when he was awakened in the early morning hours by armed city guards who stormed into his chambers, followed by the sleepy figures of his terrified parents. To his surprise, he learned that he was suspected of stealing a valuable, magically enchanted, and almost priceless amulet from the treasury of one of the city's peace council members. His amazement turned to horror when that very amulet was found behind a tapestry.

The memories of the next few days were hazy: his pleas of innocence, the prosecution's evidence, testimonies from people he had never seen before, and finally, the trial and the judgment delivered by a princeps he had seen in the company of his stepbrother at balls. He could see the helpless anger on his father's face, filled with doubt, and then the mocking grin of his stepbrother, who whispered to him as they left the courtroom, "I told you, you were in my way."

And finally, this morning, footsteps clattered outside his cell door. He remembered the prison guards' cheap booze-scented breath as they searched him, the transport in a rattling, unsprung wooden wagon to this place. And lastly, the sight of this barrier, a gloomily shimmering hemisphere, with light rippling across its surface and worm-like movements that vaguely seemed to transform into structures.

He thought he saw his father's face in it, the malicious laughter of his stepbrother, the faces of his friends. The guards had told him it was impenetrable, only passable in one direction; those inside would never return. It was a perfect sphere with a 10-mile diameter, half-formed in the rock of this ancient ore mine by the most powerful Principals of the Mage's Guild. Inside it housed the scum, the dregs of society: assassins, bandits, murderers, rapists, insurgents; all those barred from society.

Oh yes, he had felt the astonishment of the guards that someone like him, a son of a respected merchant family, had been sentenced to such punishment for a crime like theft. Again, he saw the princeps and his stepbrother conspiring.

Oh yes, he understood...

Suddenly, he became aware of the silence around him. He heard the horses snorting, the creaking of leather, and the hissing of the magical barrier in front of him. He wanted to turn around and shout his innocence again.

The blow came hard and unexpected, causing him to sway, and with wildly flailing arms, he stumbled towards the white of the barrier. The movements within it seemed to quicken, and with horror, he saw small white light tendrils reaching out towards him, as if eager to engulf him.

The second blow made him lose his footing entirely, and with flailing arms, he staggered forward, through the barrier, which at the moment of impact seemed to take on the face of his stepbrother.

He felt... nothing, cold... perhaps, a pulling in his head... perhaps, and then he fell! With a loud scream in which the horror of the past days was discharged, he plummeted like a stone into the gray dim light that filled his field of vision. He saw lights in the distance, heard boisterous voices far off through the rush of the wind. Images raced through his mind at breakneck speed: his dying mother, the sorrow on his father's face, the laughter of his trusted friend and fencing instructor; followed by images of the ancient temple, animated by the shuffling steps of the guards who had been watching over the millennia-long sleep in this old temple deep underground for eons...

Temple?

Guards?

What...?

The impact on the water hit him like a club, pushing the air out of his lungs, and with the next breath, liquid entered his throat. Coughing, sputtering, and flailing, he sank deeper into the brackish, murky green water. The reflexes of a good swimmer, which he was, saved him. Suddenly, his head broke the surface, and he greedily drew in air, savoring its delicious taste.

With a pounding heart, on the brink of panic, he looked around while treading water. Some kind of mist seemed to hang over the lake into which he had fallen, and a milky, cloudy shimmer covered the scenery. The brackish water around him was surprisingly warm, as was the sultry air above.

To his left, in the distance, he saw several lights blinking above the water's surface and thought he heard a choir-like singing. Behind him, he saw the cliff from which he had fallen, smooth, almost vertical, rising directly from the water, pierced by several different-sized openings that stared at him like empty eyes. Opposite, at a few hundred meters, he could make out the dark line of a wooded shore.

Gradually, he calmed down, estimating the distance to the lights, confident that he could reach them shortly. "Stay calm," he told himself, "it's been going well so far; the guards said that ore deliveries from the convict camp regularly arrived at the end of the month, which sounds like order, organization, something to fit into."

After all, he had received excellent training in sword fighting and unarmed combat, and he had learned to deal with people of all kinds; qualities that would surely be useful here. His confidence grew.

Then he felt the touch. It was like a caress on his foot, gentle, light, a winding around his knee, as if from an aquatic plant. But it was too purposeful, wrapping around his leg, gripping tighter with each passing moment.

With a cry, he turned around, and the tightening grip, which had gradually wound tighter, was torn loose. He looked around frantically and saw a serpentine movement in the water behind him, a small wave heading straight for him and over the cliff, through a higher entrance...

The panic, which had been lurking on the edge of his consciousness like a wild animal, showed its claws, pounced on him, and with a horrified cry, he swam away from the cliff, away from that cave. Later, he couldn't remember how he had covered the distance to the shore. Several times, something had tried to pull him underwater, but with his fear-filled, frantic movements, he managed to break free. He saw nothing, heard nothing, only that cave entrance, that greenish mass that had taken on the perverse form of a female face several meters tall, dominated by green-glowing eyes and a wide, gaping mouth with several rows of pointed teeth. In between were dozens of arm-thick, green-scaled tentacles pouring into the water in his direction, causing the liquid at the edge of the cliff to boil.

He swam and swam, swallowing water, kicking, screaming, and only a merciful rock that suddenly appeared in his path ended his escape. Dazed by the impact, he sank beneath the surface, ready to let go of life. Then his knees touched the gravelly bottom, and in a reflex, he pulled his legs under his body and stood up. Staggering, dripping, and bleeding, waist-deep in the water at the edge of the shore he had seen from afar, he dragged himself to dry land with his last strength and collapsed.

Slowly, he calmed down, and his heartbeat and breathing returned to normal. He began to notice the sounds of his surroundings. Unchanged, from behind him on the left, he still heard the singing of the men's choir. From the forest in front of him, he heard the rustling of leaves, and beyond that, he thought he heard the pounding of a blacksmith's hammer. To the right, the crunching footsteps on the pebbly beach were getting closer.

After a brief moment of shock, he turned around and saw three figures approaching from the forest's edge. He scrambled to his feet and pressed his back against a prominent rock.

The largest, a rough-looking blond giant, seemed to be the leader. He was dressed in a patched, torn leather armor and leather pants, with the leather-wrapped handle of a wooden club protruding from his belt on the right.

As he drew nearer, a large, poorly healed scar became visible, dividing his face like a line, from the edge of his hair, past his nose to under the chin.

The second one, to the right of the leader, was a stocky, bald man, wearing only leather pants. His nose had twisted to the side after a punch, and as he approached, dozens of old scars became apparent on his upper body and face. Someone who didn't understand his trade had tattooed a snake winding over his face, skull, and neck. He tried to appear reassuring and even allowed a smile, which exposed several blackish tooth stumps. This impression was, however, undermined by the small, malicious-looking throwing axe he held loosely in his left hand.

The third member of the group, a slender figure in a gray cotton cloak and a tattered felt cap on his head, also tried to smile reassuringly and revealed a large gap between his front teeth.

Scarface spoke first: "Calm down, lad, the Mid'ssa doesn't come this close to the shore, you're safe here...." "Right," the lisping one interjected, his voice turning into a falsetto due to his gap, "you can relax, kid, half of the newcomers can't survive this trial; so you can feel good about that...." "Exactly," Scarface continued, with a malicious sidelong glance at the lisping one, "so calm down now!"

With a smile that was meant to appear friendly, the giant approached, saying, "We are, so to speak, the welcoming committee. We've heard that fresh convicts have arrived today, and you're the first one crawling ashore. That's why we've been sent by the Ore Barons to make it clear to the newcomers what's important here."

The addressed man looked from one to the other, not particularly reassured, and pressed further against the rock, saying, "Yes, I greet you. My name is..."

"YOUR NAME DOESN'T MATTER HERE. You should understand that the scum of our great kingdom lives here," roared Scarface. "The whole camp is full of murderers, thieves, rebels; everyone has a story. No one here cares about your name, where you're from, or what 'judicial error' brought you here. You must know that different rules apply here, and that's why we're here to make it clear to you."

After a meaningful pause, he continued, "Your name, your origin, your status - forget it! We'll give you a new name now, and everything that might have earned you money or respect elsewhere, you'll have to earn here first. Depending on what you achieve, a new name will be given to you. You look like a mama's boy, so let me tell you, no 'city watch' or any other fancy authority will protect your 'rights' as you're used to. It's every man for himself here. The stronger take what they can, and the weaker figure out how to cope with it. You, like every newcomer, will be given a period of exactly three days to get used to the circumstances here. After that, whatever you can defend will be yours, and by that, I mean ownership, personal freedom, down to body parts. Look around, recognize who your friends are, join a group if they'll have you. It's as simple as that!"

The man, who had just been educated, looked from one to the other as he saw the smirking grins on their faces, realizing that the three were enjoying this performance. Scarface moved closer and continued, "So remember, no one will help you unless you render some service to a group or guild. Everything works like this here, and it actually works quite well!"

"Well, kid, that's about it," he concluded.

"Wait, you forgot the name," grumbled the bald one, and the lispng one chimed in, "Right, you have to give him a name."

Scarface turned to him again and sized him up from head to toe. "Well, I'd say I'll name you..."

"But I have a name; my name is..."

"HAVEN'T YOU UNDERSTOOD YET?" Scarface yelled, grabbed the newcomer by the collar, and pulled him to his feet. The newcomer smelled his stale breath, which reeked of alcohol and garlic, and noticed an additional odor, sharp, strong, and unfamiliar.

"Your name doesn't matter to anyone here," the scarred man screamed in his face. "You're called Stomp, understood? Stomp!"

To emphasize his statement, he shook him vigorously, abruptly let go, and the subject of his poor treatment slumped back against the rock.

"Yeah, Stomp, a good name for the kid!" the lisping man chuckled. The tall one took a step back and looked down with disdain. "So, Stomp, then good luck! If you know what's good for you, report to the Ore Barons. They are the most important guild here, and maybe, if you handle things wisely, you can make something of yourself!" He turned to leave, followed by his two comrades.

"Hey, guys, didn't you forget something?"

All four of them jumped.

The voice was deep, sonorous, and accompanied by a strange growl. Stomp turned his head and looked in the direction from which the question had come. Directly above him, on the boulder in front of which he crouched, perched a figure. He had no idea how he had managed to approach so unnoticed, and with a startled cry, he jumped to his feet. From the corner of his eye, he noticed that the trio had also taken a step back.

From a safe distance, he observed the speaker. At first glance, he appeared old, slender, and hunched as he sat cross-legged on the rock. He had a thin, mischievous face that surveyed the group with a cheerful gaze. A flattened felt cap sat on his head, above a fringe of gray hair that protruded on all sides. A worn-out gray cotton shirt hung loosely on his emaciated frame, and a tattered, frayed cloak billowed over his shoulders. What stood out were his eyes, which assessed the group with a cheerful, relaxed twinkle. They were yellow, radiant, and accompanied by a playful, knowing glint.

The stranger began to address the scarred man with his sonorous voice: "Well, Scarface, you don't seem to be taking your task of welcoming newcomers very seriously!"

"Don't call me that!" Scarface gritted his teeth.

"Well, what are you going to do about it? Moreover, isn't it true that you omitted one of the essential points that the newcomer should know?" He looked at Stomp, who flinched under this scrutinizing gaze. "Or were you planning to tell him about Sruup when you got back to the camp?"

Stomp looked from one to the other and noticed that the atmosphere suddenly tensed. He realized that his welcoming committee was cautiously distancing themselves from each other to gain a better vantage point. He saw the bald man's right hand slowly descending to grip the handle of the throwing axe. With the situation appearing to be escalating, Stomp's mind was racing. Although he had grown up in a sheltered environment, he was familiar with these and similar situations from his youth, and he knew that the old man didn't stand much of a chance against three thugs like these. He desperately scanned for an object he could use as a weapon.

The three seemed to pay no attention to him, instead fixating on the old man, who remained entirely uninvolved and calm as he sat on the boulder. With his bright yellow eyes and a serene grin on his weathered, haggard face, he looked from one to the other. Stomp was surprised to see that the old man's cloak began to sway in undulating motions, even though he felt no wind. From the corner of his eye, he noticed a swift movement from the bald man, and he saw his hand gripping the throwing axe, ready to strike. He was about to shout a warning when a sound echoed. It seemed to emanate from deep within the earth, and the stones beneath his feet vibrated as it reverberated. It was a growl, accompanied by hissing noises, deep, resonant, and gradually rising. From the corner of his eye, he saw the old man rising to his feet. He stood tall on the boulder, and his cloak billowed behind him with a loud, almost horizontal flutter.

The sound grew louder and louder.

Stomp then found himself crouching on the ground; the pebbles pressed painfully through his thin pants. As he got up, still dazed, he saw the old man sitting with his legs dangling on the boulder, humming a tune, and holding a long-stemmed pipe from which thick smoke billowed.

When he looked around with a shake of his head, he saw Scarface and the lisping man on his right, struggling to sit up. On his left, the bald man was crouching, staring blankly at a large, deeply bleeding gash on his forearm.

"Yes, yes, such injuries are certainly painful," the old man said in a friendly, almost caring tone. "You should find someone to tend to your friend and not bother us any longer. Did no one tell you that handling sharp objects can sometimes end badly, even for those trying to use them?"

The bright yellow eyes turned to Scarface. "Take care of your friend, get him to a healer, and don't disturb us any longer!"

The words were spoken with clear authority. The old man's grin had vanished from his face, and the man addressed hurried to obey. He stomped over to the injured man and roughly pulled him to his feet. Then, followed by his companion supporting the bald man, he made his way to the edge of the forest. A loud clearing of the throat from the boulder made him stop and look back. Under the stern gaze of the old man, he flinched and, with a mumbled, "Yes, yes, okay," removed a flask from his belt and tossed it at Stomp's feet.

"Take that and have a sip from it every day. It will help you avoid falling into visions," he muttered, and with that statement, he turned and walked away with his companions into the forest. With trembling hands, Stomp picked up the flask and opened it. It contained a liquid, whose pungent odor reached his nose.

"You will need this elixir. Without it, you might experience delirium," the old man said, still seated on the boulder, softly humming and blowing thick clouds of smoke.

Stomp turned and cautiously approached the boulder. "I think I need to thank you. I don't know if those thugs weren't after my life."

The old man simply smiled, his yellow eyes twinkling in acknowledgment.

The old man scrutinized him for a long time, and he replied, "Get used to it, young man". Stomp again looked into his shining yellow eyes. "It will remain this way: you have no friends. And when the three-day grace period is over, this is a clear game of effort and reward, where the stronger take what the weaker cannot defend. That's human nature, and it becomes most evident here."

"What should I do now?" Stomp stuttered, clearly overwhelmed by the entire situation.

The old man sighed, "It's best if you go to the abandoned mine; there you may find some items you can use. Afterward, you should explore the camp and look into the various guilds and groups to join one as quickly as possible. Once you belong to one of them, they will offer you protection, but in return, you'll have to complete the tasks assigned to you. That's just how it is; accept it."

Stomp looked around and saw an opening in the woods as the old man pointed with his pipe. "Go along that path; it will lead you directly to the abandoned mine, and from there, you can find your way further."

Stomp memorized the location, and when he was sure he could find it again, he turned to the old man. "I must thank you; I don't know what..." but he fell silent when he saw that the rock was empty. Panicked, he searched the beach, but there was no trace of the old man. Only a cloud of the sweet-smelling smoke that had risen from the strange person's pipe still hovered above the stone.

With goosebumps, Stomp turned around and started running towards the forest's edge, recalling that Scarface and his companions had headed in that direction as well. The air was still filled with mist, and everything around him was shrouded in a milky twilight. After a few minutes, he reached the grove and found a well-trodden trail winding between the trees. With a nervous side glance, he stepped onto the path and began walking in the designated direction.

To his left, he could hear voices singing a coarse song from a distance, but other than that, he only heard forest sounds around him. After a few meters, the shore disappeared behind a turn, and he could only see the path stretching out in front of him.

He pondered the entire incident and realized that he didn't know how to assess the situation. What kind of old man had that been? And what was the deal with that elixir? What should he do now?

To his left, he heard a sharp cracking noise in the underbrush and flinched. Looking around anxiously and trying to discern something among the tightly packed trees, he noticed that the forest sounds around him had ceased. "Oh no, not again," he thought in a panic, looking around for something he could use as a weapon. That's when he heard the growling coming from between the trees.

He froze in his tracks and looked fearfully in the direction from which the sound was coming. He had been to the circus as a child, standing in awe before the cages of the Southern beasts, admiring their graceful movements, the emanation of concentrated power and grace. There, he had heard similar sounds, a restrained growl accompanied by a guttural rumble, much like what he now heard from the underbrush to his left. He thought he saw a shadow, almost human-sized, moving almost silently through the dense thicket.

That was too much!

He sprinted away. Driven by fear, he raced down the path, not looking back but just rushing forward. Amidst the pounding of his heart and the rush of blood in his ears, he continued to hear that rumbling sound from the left, which only intensified his panic, urging him to quicken his steps.

He dashed around a corner and saw something lying ahead on the forest floor but was too fast and too exhausted to slow down in time. He tripped on it, and with a horrified cry, rolled forward. He painfully bounced on the ground, feeling several sharp stones digging into his flesh. After several rough attempts to brake his momentum, he came to rest, breathing heavily.

Trembling and gasping, he straightened up and looked around. The forest on both sides remained quiet; he could hear only sporadic bird chirping, and there was no sign or sound of the creature that had been pursuing him. Then he remembered that he had tripped over something and spun around.

The bald man lay lifeless and still. It was clear that he would never again hurl his throwing axe at anyone. This impression was confirmed by the large pool of blood that had formed around the bald man's head. Stomp gazed at the gruesome scene in disbelief. Evidently, a swift and practiced cut to the man's throat had disrupted his plans for the day. Stomp realized that there was no saving this man, and, panting heavily, he got to his feet.

Quickly, he looked around, but there was no sign of the victim's companions. Slowly and timidly, he approached the lifeless man. It was apparent that the victim had been robbed. Stomp could see that the man's pockets had been slit open and emptied. There was no sign of the throwing axe anywhere nearby.

As he continued to stare at the unfortunate man, he heard the sound again: a rumble, a hiss, a deep guttural growl to his left. Horrified, he looked in that direction and noticed a large, almost human-sized shadow moving slowly and silently through the undergrowth. It appeared to be a dog or something similar but much larger than anything Stomp had ever seen in his life. It was a dark outline with no other details, except for a pair of shining yellow eyes, which locked onto him from the darkness of the thicket, only five meters away. Stomp froze, unable to take a step due to the horror. His horror intensified when he heard a deep voice, "Take the dagger and the belt! Take it, use it!"

He quickly glanced at the dead man and noticed a wide leather belt around his waist. Then he turned back to the thicket and saw that the shadow had disappeared. Only a few branches swayed gently. Paralyzed with horror, he stared at the scene and realized that the forest sounds around him were returning.

After a few minutes, he gathered his courage and approached the corpse. With disgust he unfastened the belt, and when he turned the dead man over, he found a heavy dagger securely strapped to his back. It was a simple weapon but well-balanced and in usable condition. Reluctantly, he took the items and put on the belt. Then he hurriedly set off on his way, trying to put as much distance as possible between himself and that gruesome scene.

The forest path wound a few meters further, and after two more turns, he came across a junction. He looked up, trying to spot the sun and its position, but couldn't discern a light source in the piercing, homogeneous twilight. To his left, he saw a wooden palisade rising in the distance, with several wooden houses behind it, and columns of smoke rising into the gray twilight. On the right side of the path, he noticed a square, with a steep rocky cliff behind it, similar to the one he had encountered only an hour ago.

The path directly across from him was visible for only a few meters before disappearing behind another bend between the trees. On the square to his right, he had seen several people, but after his recent experiences, he had no desire to encounter more of the inhabitants of this hell. Thus, he set off secretly and glanced around in all directions to locate the abandoned mine the old man had mentioned. Anxiously looking around, he continued down the path and after a few hundred meters reached a clearing, with a rocky formation rising from the forest floor at its center.

Near the ground, there was a large entrance carved in the rock, with two more above it. In a macabre fashion, the openings in this monolith resembled a human skull. Trembling, he surveyed the surroundings and quickly noticed a fast movement at the edge of the forest. He immediately dropped to the ground, retreated quickly into the dense undergrowth, and peered through the branches.

It was a single man who was running out of the forest edge opposite him towards the mine, as if pursued by Furies. Close behind him were three more people, and based on their appearances and the raucous voices with which they called after the fleeing man, they reminded Stomp of his own unpleasant welcoming committee. Shortly before reaching the entrance, the three caught up with the unfortunate man, and with disgust, Stomp watched them throw the man to the ground and begin to beat him with sticks and fists without paying any heed to his whimpering pleas.

He watched, transfixed, and an inner voice whispered to him that he must intervene to help. While he was still trying to make a decision, someone else made it for him.

He heard a crack behind him, and before he could whirl around, he felt a rough hand grab his collar and hoist him up. A shove sent him stumbling forward onto the clearing, and he heard a rough voice behind him say, "Parik, I've got another one here; seems to be one of those wretched Organizers."

Just as he tried to get back up, a kick to his back made him stumble further forward. Panic-stricken, he noticed that two members of the trio who had been attacking the man were now approaching him, while the third continued to assault the man on the ground.

He had never been a skilled fighter, but years of training with the fencing instructor his father had hired for him had left their mark. So he moved to the side to keep an eye on both the figure behind him and the two approaching attackers. The one who had unceremoniously thrown him onto the clearing was a Hueroth, as indicated by his red beard and blue eyes. The Hueroth were a barbaric northern tribe, which in previous generations had frequently raided the coast of his homeland, sinking many merchant ships to the bottom of the sea.

He stood there grinning, wearing only ragged cotton pants and a shirt, with his thumbs hooked into a wide belt. The handle of a large weapon loomed over his right shoulder. The other two approaching him weren't particularly trustworthy-looking either. One had dark skin and long, flowing green hair, which suggested he was a member of the Nurrba, an especially brutal tribe that had even been known to engage in cannibalism in some regions, despite repeated attempts to introduce them to the benefits of civilization.

The other man, grinning broadly as he moved closer, had a shaved head except for a single, long, black scalp lock that dangled at the back of his head, and multiple bone fragments dangled from his ears. Both were dressed in leather pants and shirts, and they held long iron bars in their hands, still marked with dark stains that were unsettlingly reminiscent of blood.

The Nurrba spoke first, "So, Orga, you want to steal ore again, the same ore our miner slaves have painstakingly extracted from the rock, to brighten your fine friends' day in the Free Camp? The Ore Barons don't like that, and, lad, believe me, when we turn in your ears and the pig's back there in the camp, we'll collect a fine reward for it."

The three moved closer to him, and as he stepped back, Stomp realized he was slowly being forced toward the mine entrance, right towards a fourth person who was still assaulting the man on the ground.

"I'm new here; I just arrived," Stomp stammered, trying to shout over their crude laughter.

"Yeah, right, a newbie? Are you trying to pull a fast one on us? Besides, I don't care; ears are ears, and a reward is a reward! And if it comforts you, if I treat myself to a big, thick beer with the reward, then I might think about whether you're a newcomer or not," the Hueroth boomed.

"But the grace period, they said I had three days before anyone does anything to me," Stomp argued as he continued to back away.

"Forget the grace period!" the Nurrba roared, and he charged at Stomp with a swinging iron club.

The attack was wild and unrelenting, but Stomp had learned enough during his training and from various bar brawls to have some experience. So he threw himself to the side, dodging with his left foot. His plan seemed to work as the Nurrba stumbled over his outstretched leg and struggled to stay upright. He quickly spun around and glared at Stomp, his eyes filled with anger. "So, you think this is a joke here, huh? Well, let's have some fun!" he yelled loudly and rushed forward. Stomp drew his knife, and from his right, he heard another figure charging toward him. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed that the third member of the gang was trying to get behind him, brandishing an iron club.

Stomp stood still, waiting, with his knife in hand. Just as the Nurrba was about to strike, he threw himself forward. With a quick turn, he was back on his feet just in time to see the Hueroth's legs appear to his right. When the Hueroth prepared to strike, Stomp swiftly threw his right elbow towards the Hueroth's groin. Immediately after, he spun backward and was rewarded with a labored gasp from the Hueroth. The Hueroth dropped his weapon, clutched his groin in pain, and fell to his knees.

But there was no time for Stomp to catch his breath. On the left he saw Nurrba holding his iron club, raising his foot to pin him to the ground. With a swift turn, Stomp used a technique he had learned from his teacher, flicking his left foot against the Green-haired man's supporting leg, causing him to fall.

Remembering the other two attackers, Stomp hurled himself to the side. Not a second too soon, as the head of the axe, wielded by the third member of the group, drove into the ground where he had just been. Stomp noticed the fist that had wielded the weapon and, without thinking, made a swift attack with his dagger, leaving a bloody streak on the attacker's fingers. The man cursed and retreated, letting go of the axe still deeply embedded in the forest floor. Slowly, Stomp regained his footing and found himself facing three of the four attackers.

He felt drained, exhausted, and with trembling knees, he raised his dagger threateningly. Behind the attackers, he could see his fellow sufferer trying to get back on his feet.

He turned his gaze back to the three grinning figures, and all his tension and fear boiled over. "Just disappear, I said I'm a newcomer, leave me alone!" he roared with a defiant voice, venting his frustration.

To his surprise, his words seemed to have an effect. The attackers' eyes widened, and the Hueroth and the Nurrba stepped back fearfully.

Then he noticed that they were not looking at him but over his right shoulder, and he heard the Nurrba stutter, "Shu..., Shu...!" Stomp felt his neck hairs stand on end. At the same moment, he heard that hissing growl behind him again, just like he had noticed in the forest before.

Forgetting his attackers, he glanced anxiously over his shoulder, and he almost dropped his dagger in horror. Sitting on a boulder next to the entrance of the mine, he saw the creature in its full size for the first time. It was large, bigger than any predators he had ever seen in the circus, larger than any panther that had ever crossed his path, even though it seemed to belong to a similar species considering its stature.

The creature crouched on the boulder, ready to jump, a black shadow with a menacing posture that exuded strength and aggression. His tense senses noticed that where the substantial finger-length claws touched the rock, the stone itself seemed to seethe, moving like water and rippling toward the plate-sized paws. What was most terrifying, however, were its eyes; they had no irises, no pupils, but the outlines of the eyes seemed to be filled with radiant, sun-bright, yellow light that fixed the group with a rigid stare. The creature opened its mouth, and Stomp saw finger-length, needle-sharp teeth. As the creature clamped its jaws shut with a loud click, he realized that the fangs extended almost a hand's span beyond the lower lip. In his fear, it seemed as if a yellow light was emanating from the creature's jaws.

He heard that growling and hissing again, emanating from the creature, but also seemingly echoing from the ground beneath him and the stone beside him. "Respect the grace period!" Like through a fog, he realized that the creature had spoken! And while he was still trying to come to terms with this realization, he heard loud cries and drumming steps from his attackers.

Looking back, he realized that his adversaries had disappeared, and he could just see the Nurrba's back between the trees. The only one left was the one who had been beaten up, now swaying and trying to get into a standing position with a bloodied face. On the verge of hysteria, Stomp turned around, knowing that he had no chance with his small dagger against a creature that exuded so much power and elegance even while sitting.

The boulder was empty.

Stomp stared in shock at the spot where the creature had been, noticing that the imprints of its paws on the stone were still visible, as if they had melted into the rock. Trembling, he lowered his dagger and looked around. No one was in sight anymore; only he and his fellow sufferer stood before the entrance of the mine.

His fellow sufferer!

Stomp turned around and saw his battered companion struggling to get on his feet. He cautiously approached him, and his companion raised his head, defensively raising both hands. "Leave me alone, please! I'm a newcomer, I've only been here for two days, there's supposed to be a grace period... in Kasakk's name, let me be in peace!"

"Calm down," Stomp replied, "I'm new here too, you have nothing to fear from me. But maybe you can explain what's going on here."

"Oh, no danger, huh?" the disoriented man retorted, giving a significant glance at the dagger that Stomp still held. Stomp guiltily sheathed the weapon.

"My name is Stomp," he said, approaching the unfortunate man with empty hands, who was now slumping with his bloodied face in his hands. Stomp crouched down beside him, unsure how to behave in this situation.

"Do you have Sruup?" came the plea suddenly from between the hands, and the beaten man lifted his face, looking at Stomp with hope. "Do you have Sruup?" he asked again. Stomp remembered what the term meant and, shrugging, he retrieved the flask and handed it to the injured man. With eager hands, he snatched the bottle from Stomp, uncorked it, and took a deep swig. Groaning, with his eyes closed, he leaned back. He reluctantly handed the bottle back to Stomp.

"You seem really new here because otherwise, you wouldn't have handed it over so willingly," the man said with a smirk.

Stomp furrowed his brow. "What's it all about?"

"I'm Kimbahl," his companion replied. "And you seem to know very little about this... world." He looked around with a condescending expression. "Without Sruup, you'll go insane. You'll experience visions of some temple, orcs, undead; they'll drive you crazy if you don't drink this stuff."

What he said puzzled Stomp, and something about it triggered a memory, although he couldn't quite place it.

Kimbahl continued, "Without Sruup, you'll go as crazy as if you get closer to the barrier. Have you figured out that this damned wall surrounding us allows passage in only one direction? Forget about going from inside to outside; anyone who gets closer than a step collapses, starts screaming, and drooling like a newborn. When you pull them away, they gradually calm down. Those who weren't taken away from the barrier in time went permanently insane. They just scream, soil themselves, and are incapable of any rational action until they eventually enter Kasakk's realm, simply because they forget to eat, breathe, drink, or do anything."

Heaving a sigh, Kimbahl got up and accepted Stomp's help. Stomp now had the opportunity to examine his companion. He saw a slender, fair-haired, and rather young man dressed similarly to himself in a simple cotton shirt and pants. Stomp couldn't spot any weapons or other items. Kimbahl looked at him with a cunning expression and began to wipe the blood from his face, which stemmed from an ugly gash over his right eye.

"If you share some of that Sruup with me, I'll tell you a few things you need to know to get by here," Kimbahl proposed. Stomp hesitated but handed over the flask. After another deep swig, followed by a contented sigh, Kimbahl limped over to the fissure in the rock and sat down on an old metal bucket, groaning.

"The damned light here remains constant. There's no day, no night; the light is always the same, the temperature is always the same; that's another curse of this barrier," he said. He gestured into the cave's interior and continued, "This used to be a large mine back in the day before the cursed king turned it into a prison and created this barrier. At some point, the prisoners killed the remaining guards who lived in here and took over the whole facility. The king doesn't care. As long as none of the convicts escape, and he gets his monthly ore delivery, he couldn't care less about what happens to us in here. And then there are the orc wars."

Stomp nodded, as he had heard of the great orc wars in the north and remembered what his father used to tell him, how the royal court was swamped dealing with the rebellious orcs, causing some important initiatives to be delayed due to a lack of funds and personnel.

While Kimbahl wiped the blood from his face with a dirty rag, he continued, "Yes, once a month, they haul the ore outside and, in return, they get things meant to make life here more comfortable, haha! No weapons, forget that, just other junk! We simple folks don't get any of that; it's all pocketed by the Ore Barons. You see, a sort of hierarchy has formed here, just as unfair as the one outside. We've got chiefs here too, who hold power and enjoy the benefits. And that's the Ore Barons here. They are the most powerful and ruthless guild, the one with the most influence."

Kimbahl started to take another swig from the bottle but halted, passing the bag back to Stomp with a guilty look. Nonchalantly, he continued, "The guys we just had a run-in with are part of the mercenaries hired by these Ore Barons. Hired thugs who enforce their lords' orders without regard for others, using their brutality and ruthlessness. And he who controls the ore has the power. Ore is the central commodity. You can get anything with ore, and it's also used to produce the Sruup," he gave a significant look at the flask, which Stomp had now reattached to his belt. "And, therefore, you can imagine how extensive the power of the Ore Barons is since they have a tight grip on mining and make the miners work for them."

Kimbahl paused. "Why are you looking around so wildly all the time? Is my story boring you?"

During the last words from Kimbahl, the thought of the creature that still must have been lurking around came back to Stomp, and he felt his neck hairs stand on end. "I just want to make sure that this creature doesn't catch us by surprise."

"What creature are you talking about?" Kimbahl stammered, now visibly paler under his blood and dirt.

"I haven't seen anything," Kimbahl replied, now clearly nervous, and got up.

"Then let's quickly see if we can find anything useful and get out of here," Stomp said, following Kimbahl with hesitation and one last scrutinizing glance around.

The inside of the cave was a gloomy place. They could barely make out the mine shafts in the darkness at the back, black holes from which a cold, musty wind brushed their faces, accompanied by a faint whistling and howling sound. To the right were the rotting remains of a rappelling device, its decayed wooden frame slanting and collapsed on the ground. It was evident that no ore had been mined here for years, and instead, this facility served as a dump for the entire camp. The floor was littered with all sorts of items that hadn't served their original purpose in a long time.

In the sparse light filtering through the entrance, the two began their search, casting anxious glances around frequently. Stomp felt watched; it seemed to him that yellow eyes were tracking every step he took. Nevertheless, Kimbahl and he continued their search for anything useful, and Stomp was rewarded with the discovery of an iron rod, a meter long, slightly bent but still sturdy and suitable as a weapon. Kimbahl also had success, pulling out a battered leather helmet from the pile at his feet with a triumphant cry and placing it proudly over his flaxen hair. He didn't seem bothered by the large cut on the left side, which exposed his temple and left ear entirely, any more than the dark, dried bloodstains that Stomp could still make out in this dim light.

A cracking noise from the depths of the tunnels in the back of the cave made the two jump nervously. Without another word of communication, they cautiously moved back to the cave's entrance.

"I'm sure that's enough," Kimbahl said, "let's get out of here." Stomp nodded, and after making sure the area in front of the mine was empty, they set off.

Kimbahl naturally took the lead and turned without hesitation toward the forest road where Stomp had arrived. Stomp had no objections and was too preoccupied with keeping an eye on their surroundings. Once again, he felt watched from all sides, a shiver ran down his spine, and he felt his neck hairs stand on end once more.

Nevertheless, they reached the path without any trouble and followed it at a brisk pace. Kimbahl visibly relaxed and started chatting again, proud to share his knowledge:

"Yes, there's no more ore to be found in that abandoned mine. The Barons have established a new one deeper down that still turns a good profit. But I don't really want to join one of their guilds, even though it would be the safest bet to align with the strongest."

"Are there any other options?" asked Stomp, surprised, as he had thought the Ore Barons were the only group.

"Well, there's the Free Miners and the New Camp," Kimbahl noted, glancing around conspiratorially. "The Free Miners are a group of people who rebelled against the Barons and didn't want to continue working under their yoke. They split off years ago and created their own guilds, which so far seem to resist the power of the Barons quite well. Then there are the farmers down below who've managed to maintain some independence."

At this, a memory struck Stomp, and he turned to Kimbahl. "What about these Organizers? The thugs from earlier said they were Organizers, and they wanted to take our ears!"

Kimbahl visibly flinched and looked nervously around. "Shh, not so loud, we don't talk about the Organizers here in the Old Camp area. The Organizers belong to the New Camp. They're thieves who repeatedly try to steal ore, you understand, to supply the Free Camp. This naturally undermines the Barons' power, and they're understandably upset about it. That's why they've put a reward on their heads. Anyone who catches an Organizer brings the person who's lucky enough to apprehend them some privileges. And believe me, as you've seen, some of the mercenaries don't care much if they actually have a genuine Organizer or find other ways to claim the reward."

With a mumble, Kimbahl added, "Although these thugs aren't even the worst."

"What do you mean?" Stomp asked, and after a brief hesitation, Kimbahl continued in a whisper, "There are the Shadows," he said. "You know, the mercenaries are kind of like the warriors of the Barons, but the Shadows are worse; they're assassins, scorpions that carry out murder orders, plot intrigues, and work in secrecy. From what I've heard, they gather deep beneath the Old Camp in the cellars and tunnels to launch their murder operations from there."

While Stomp was still trying to process what he'd heard, the two turned around the last bend of the road and reached the crossroads that Stomp had rushed through earlier. Completely engrossed in their conversation, they hadn't paid attention to their surroundings during the last few steps and were now surprised to find themselves facing a larger group of wild-looking fellows who, after a brief moment of shock, began to circle them with raucous shouting, blocking their escape route.

Stomp gripped his iron bar tightly and assessed the newcomers. He felt uneasy noticing that the two attackers from earlier were among them. Hueroth, in particular, glared at him menacingly and made an explicit gesture with his hands, directing Stomp's attention below the belt.

"They're the ones, they're the ones!" the Nurrba bellowed, looking around for approval.

"We'll take their little ears and have a drink to their souls so that they may howl for us in the seven demon hells," he proclaimed to a chorus of cheers, taking a menacing step closer.

Stomp glanced around for an escape route but found that the horde had surrounded him and Kimbahl. He realized that without a fight, he wouldn't be able to escape this situation. His hand crept toward the hilt of his dagger, determined not to give up so easily.

"Quiet now, you swine!" cut through the commotion, a cold, nasally voice that silenced the thugs. Stomp turned his attention to the speaker, a young man who stood apart from the group. His entire posture exuded calm and arrogance as he regarded the two culprits and his own gang with a haughty glance. His right hand toyed idly with the beautifully crafted handle of a rapier hanging at his right hip. He was dressed in a leather armor that, although worn and tattered, must have been a splendid piece in its prime. From his watery blue eyes, he sent a merciless look of icy coldness to the crowd, which didn't quite match his soft, pale, almost puffy childlike facial expression. Curly blond locks framed his face, peeking out from under a blue velvet cap. With an impatient sigh, he let out that nasal, affected voice again:

"So, what kind of fellows are you? What should I do with you? Are you Organizers, and do I have to take your ears, or are you just another example of the rubbish found on the streets?"

Stomp noticed that he must be their leader and was surprised to see that the roar of laughter from his men, which had resumed at his words, was silenced immediately by a quick glance from those blue eyes.

"No, sir," stammered Kimbahl, "we are newcomers. We've only been on this site for a day, and we truly have nothing to do with these Organizers. My name is Kimbahl, sir, and we were just on our way to the Old Camp, where we wanted to beg for the privilege of joining the followers of the Ore Barons."

Stomp looked puzzled at his newfound companion because what he had told earlier didn't sound like he was eager to join the Ore Barons. While still bewildered, he felt the gaze of those pale blue eyes turn prying and expectant towards him.

"I, uh, I'm called...uh, Stomp, my name is Stomp," and as the blonde raised an eyebrow questioningly, he rushed to continue louder, "and it's as my companion said."

The handsome man seemed to ponder, and his men looked at him expectantly, ready to pounce on the two hapless souls at his signal. Stomp noticed behind the crowd surrounding him and Kimbahl, more figures holding one person roughly by the arms. Stomp could see several bleeding wounds on the unfortunate individual's face, and he appeared severely injured, swaying unsteadily, held up by the brutal grips of his captors. His hands and feet were bound, and his eyes were covered with a blindfold.

When the blonde man spoke again, Stomp was startled.

"All right, you two, I believe you. Based on your appearance, you can't be Organizers. So here's my decision: you'll come with us, and we'll see if you can prove yourselves worthy to make a valuable contribution to one of our guilds."

Without another word, he turned around and walked toward the palisade gate, which Stomp had seen earlier. Almost disappointed and grumbling, the thugs abandoned Stomp and Kimbahl, joining their leader. Following them was the trio with the injured prisoner, and no one paid further attention to the two newcomers, who finally shrugged and fell into line with the group.

Stomp looked at his companion with a furrowed brow and couldn't help but ask, "So, you wanted to join the Ore Barons and their guilds? It sounded quite different just now."

"Keep your voice down," hissed Kimbahl with a sidelong glance. "We both know what was best in that situation. And who knows, maybe it's not so bad. They all seem pretty well-fed in there, and once you're inside, you belong to the most powerful guild here." Stomp nodded and couldn't dismiss his companion's arguments.

Maybe it's not such a bad idea, he thought. He had had contact with this kind of people through his father earlier, and he felt relatively confident that he could somehow adapt, thanks to his upbringing.

He turned to Kimbahl again. "So, who was that, the leader of the mercenaries?"

Kimbahl looked around, slowed his pace, and gestured for Stomp to gain some distance. When he felt secure enough, he whispered to his fellow sufferer, "As far as I know, he's the offspring of one of the guild leaders, the very son of an Ore Baron. No one knows his name; everyone just calls him the Warhound. They say he's one of the cruelest and most brutal sub-leaders in this camp. So, for the sake of the sunlight, be careful about what you say and do while he's watching you. Normally, he doesn't venture far from the camp. However, from what I've heard, information has reached the Ore Barons that the Organizers planned to intercept today's ore exchange with the outside world. That's why the Warhound himself led this exchange convoy, and it seems they managed to thwart the Organizers' plan and even capture one of them."

Kimbahl gestured emphatically towards the injured figure, who was stumbling between their guards towards the palisade gate.

Gradually, Stomp began to understand the spirit prevailing in this facility, and his previous confidence in fitting in with the Ore Barons began to diminish. "Maybe it's better," he thought to himself, "to take these three days to make the right decision."

The group left the forest, and Stomp looked around with interest. For the first time, he could observe the Old Camp up close. It wasn't large, perhaps a circle about five hundred meters in diameter, surrounded by a palisade fence that led to the gate the group was heading towards. Behind it, several multi-story wooden buildings could be seen, with columns of smoke rising into the dim twilight. Stomp could hear the metallic pounding of blacksmith's hammers, the barking of dogs, and the boisterous voices of men. His attention was drawn to a commotion at the gate, and he observed a group of people, looking as ragged and impoverished as he did, gawking at an individual dressed in a brightly orange, turban-like cloak. This person seemed to stand on a sort of podium and speak to their audience with a sonorous voice. As they approached, Stomp was astonished to see that the speaker was not standing but was seated in mid-air with crossed legs. There was nothing beneath them; their body floated, and the toga swayed beneath in flowing movements. Now he could hear the voice and understand what this striking figure was proclaiming:

"Listen, for the Enlightened One has a message for all the ignorant. I have been sent to speak to you, for the Sleeper awakens. Those who are willing to see and believe will be heard by him, and the unbelievers will be condemned to eternal torment and suffering. Make the right decision and join us. Eternal bliss and all the pleasures of the flesh and spirit will be yours if you choose the right path."

Contemptuous murmurs rose in the group of mercenaries ahead, and not a few spat on the ground in disgust. Some shook their fists, and Stomp caught snippets of muttered words like "Damned psionics" and "... these crazy seers will kill us all with their drug-induced gibberish and magical experiments."

Stomp was captivated by this figure, and the deep voice had something hypnotic about it. Kimbahl seemed equally unable to resist this impression, as his eyes were fixed on the speaker's mouth.

However, they then passed through the gate, and both were simultaneously distracted by the overcrowded chaos that engulfed them. Shouting and barking came from all directions, mangy stray dogs rushed at them from all sides, barking menacingly. Puddles covered the ground, and piles of garbage lined the corners of the buildings. A terrible stench pervaded the area, and Stomp felt jostled, shoved, and pushed aside. It was challenging to stay with the group in the midst of this chaos, and he instinctively gripped his iron rod more tightly. Looking around, he noticed that the two-story wooden houses were closely packed together, and the group around him attracted some attention from the locals.

From a building to the left, Stomp could hear female voices. Looking up, he saw several women who were heavily made up, displaying their low-cut necklines and shouting obscenities at the men. Blushing, he hurried onwards and noticed that the group was moving towards a square in the center of the village. Several large fires burned there, a stage was erected, and a crowd of figures awaited the mercenaries. It seemed the general attention of the mob around him was focused on them because dozens of ragged individuals, some in tattered peasant clothing and others in makeshift leather attire, pushed past him toward the square. He saw a group of men coming from a side alley onto the street, completely covered in blackish dust, which left only their mouths and eyes visible. They wore coarse leather aprons, from which several rugged, bulky tools protruded. They, too, joined the general movement towards the stage.

As the group of mercenaries around Stomp reached the square, it was already two-thirds full. Deafening cheers filled the air. It seemed that a special event was about to take place, and Stomp craned his neck to see what was happening in the middle of the square. There, he could see that a passage had formed through which the mercenary leader and his men were approaching the group in the center. Stomp examined the group more closely and noticed an intricately carved, sturdy wooden chair that stood on the stage. Sitting on it was a middle-aged man, adorned in heavy, opulent attire made of brocade and silk. He looked around with boredom, a ringed hand drumming his fingers on the carved backrest of his "throne." On both sides of the chair stood two towering, burly figures who maintained their positions without moving a muscle. Stomp observed them and realized with astonishment that he was looking at two representatives of the Shirtak race.

Although he had never seen a member of this race from the far north before, he immediately recognized them by their white mane of hair, pitch-black eyes, broad faces, and the famous bright blue tattoo on their foreheads, which depicted a Kumatekk, a polar badger. Just as legendary as the wildness and aggression of this animal species was the violence and unforgiving nature of the Shirtak people. He remembered the words his fencing instructor used to describe this ethnicity: they were said to be unkillable, accustomed to the harsh life of the polar regions, and never had they submitted to any other nation.

Throughout their long history, all members of this race—children, women, and men—had proven to be formidable fighters. The members of the Kumatekk clan, the only ones allowed to bear the tattoo, were considered the elite warriors of their race.

Stomp was abruptly pulled from his thoughts when the mercenaries in front of him came to a sudden stop, and the entire group uttered a sycophantic "Hail to you, Ore Baron Sangwah!" This confirmed what he had already suspected. A genuine Ore Baron! With keen interest, he observed as the Warhound stepped closer and lowered his head reverently.

The nasal voice once again echoed across the square, "Sangwah, I bring you a captured Organizer who will provide you with both entertainment and valuable information. Additionally, I have two newcomers here, who aim to undergo the entrance test for the Mercenary Guild or perhaps even the Ore Barons Guild."

Filled with unease, Stomp felt the gaze of the Ore Baron on him and couldn't suppress a sigh of relief when the cold, impassive look passed over him without further comment. The Ore Baron then rose from his seat and patted his Warhound on the shoulder before stepping to the edge of the stage. He looked down at the captive, assessing him at length. Then, without another word, he turned and signaled to a figure waiting on the right. The individual stood up from his stool and approached the Organizer, who was brutally hoisted onto the stage by his guards and slumped there, groaning. With a mix of curiosity and disgust, Stomp observed the proceedings.

The unfortunate figure crouched, hunched over, between the burly bodyguards. The one who had been summoned approached him. It was a very peculiar character. Dressed in a patchwork cloak that appeared to be sewn together from thousands of individual fabric scraps in various shades of gray, he limped closer. He wore a gray, tattered leather beret on his head, and his hands were covered by black gloves with the fingertips cut off. Under the cloak, Stomp could see a shimmering green vest and iridescent blue pants. What truly alarmed Stomp, however, was the man's face. It appeared soft at first glance, almost effeminate, but marred by a fiery tattoo on his right cheek. To add to the irony, there was an ugly scar on the left side, mirroring the flame design in shape and form. With scornful downturned corners of the mouth and a disdainful expression, he gazed at the moaning man with cold, calculating eyes.

Stomp couldn't hear what was being said, as the tattooed man only whispered. But seemingly out of nowhere, a small, brilliantly bright, beetle-like creature appeared in his right hand, radiating a fiery glow. It was about the size of a handspan and had eight visible legs. It sat in the palm of his hand, twitching to and fro, as if it couldn't decide in which direction to move. The creature locked eyes with the conjurer, as if listening to his soft, whispered words.

Only when the conjurer's soft, monotone incantation ended with a sharp, commanding sound, did the creature spring into action. Swift and agile, it crawled up the conjurer's arm, over his shoulder, and down his back to the ground. From there, it moved purposefully, leaving a thin trail of smoke, toward the bound and injured man. As if drawn by an invisible thread, it reached its target and disappeared into one of the numerous bloody holes torn in the man's pants.

Stomp could barely remember the following events, but they were etched in his memory with revulsion. The tortured man arched his back, and a hoarse scream pierced the air.

The man writhed in agony, although there were no external injuries or signs of violence. Stomp noticed that the Ore Baron visibly frowned due to the noise, which was apparently bothering him. He gave a nod to the tattooed man, who quickly made a gesture with his right hand. The screams were abruptly cut off as if with a knife, though Stomp could clearly see that the man's mouth and tongue were still moving. Nevertheless, not a sound was audible. However, it was evident that the man was suffering excruciating torment, judging from his writhing movements and anguished expression. After a few minutes, which felt endless even to Stomp as an uninvolved observer, the torturer uttered a brief word, and his victim slumped back, exhausted. With another hand signal from the tattooed man, the rapid and trembling breaths of the captive were once again audible.

With disgust, Stomp watched as the torturer leaned over the tortured man at his feet with an eager expression. A thin strand of saliva dripped from his lower lip as he hissed at the captive with gleaming eyes and a raspy whisper, "Organizer scum! Believe me, I can continue this for hours, and it brings me more pleasure than it brings you suffering. So speak and tell us where your cronies are, or what plans they are hatching against us! Speak and delight me, or talk and save my day!"

The speaker leaned forward intently, and even the normally bored expression of the Ore Baron showed a spark of interest. Stomp couldn't hear what the man on the ground mumbled, but his response seemed to infuriate the tattooed man. With a shout, he lunged forward and brutally kicked the hapless man on the ground. Frothing and roaring, he pounced on him, trying to scratch his face with his bare nails.

Upon the Ore Baron's signal, one of his bodyguards stepped forward, effortlessly lifted the frenzied figure, set him on his feet again, and roughly shook him. The man regained his composure, growling and drooling, and took a step back. The blond giant stooped, lifted the bloody body of the captive with one hand, and effortlessly tossed him over his shoulder.

The two Shirtakks then left the stage and vanished into the crowd. The Ore Baron himself rose and stepped to the edge of the stage, addressing the audience in a cold, commanding voice, "So, my dear friends, do you see what happens when one opposes the Guild of Ore Barons, when one opposes you? For you know that we are all one big family, bonded under this milky dome that will be our home until the end of our lives. So be wise and always remember what's best for you. Our good friend Lotho here..." He turned to the tattooed man, who was gradually regaining control, still muttering with a furious expression. "...will take care of the Organizer once more, and believe me, my friends, he will manage to squeeze every secret out of that wretched scoundrel. Then we shall go forth and deliver another devastating blow against this wretched rabble in the New Camp."

He looked around with a false, jovial grin and continued, "Now, my friends, continue working for the well-being of our great, functioning community, and always remember..." Now, the paternal tone had completely vanished from the speaker's voice, and with a steely gaze, he fixed his eyes on the crowd, "what awaits those who oppose the interests of our guild."

With this final sentence, he whirled around and left the stage through the rear. While Stomp, as well as Kimbahl, tried to comprehend what they had just witnessed, they suddenly found themselves once again at the center of attention. The Warhound, who had made himself comfortable on the stage steps, beckoned them over with a condescending gesture. Stomp felt himself pushed forward, and from the corner of his eye, he noticed that Kimbahl was no better off.

The blond dandy sat nonchalantly, toying with the pommel of his rapier, and turned his watery blue eyes to the two newcomers. "Well, my dears, now you've had a brief glimpse of the power our Guild holds and what happens to those who oppose it. You are new, and therefore, it's your privilege to freely choose which Guild you want to join. Now, be our guests and continue gathering your experiences. But..." and with these words, he stood up and looked down at the two. "when your three days are up, you should know to whom you belong and who your friends and your enemies are. Rigosh here will take care of you and answer your questions."

With these parting words, Stomp and Kimbahl turned around and faced a middle-aged woman who was observing the newcomers with amusement and frank appraisal. She had long black hair, with several gray strands, tightly tied back into a ponytail, revealing the shaved area on her left temple where the fading tattoo of a swordsman was visible. Her body, under a simple leather armor, appeared slim, muscular, and well-toned. Stomp noticed that she was one of the few people in front of him whose clothing was not haphazardly assembled from multiple pieces. Also, her simple sword at her hip, although old and unadorned, showed regular care and use. Dozens of small braids hung from the gray-tinged hair, each adorned with colorful wooden and metal pieces at the ends. Her weathered face had hundreds of smile lines, and her two bright green eyes sparkled with life.

A large earring dangled from her right ear, and several pieces of metal pierced her left nostril. The woman grinned at them merrily, revealing white, strong, and flawless teeth. As she raised her hand in greeting, Stomp noticed that her left hand was missing the fourth and fifth fingers, and the index and ring fingers were reinforced with a metal sleeve.

"Well, youngsters, seen enough?" came her amused question, and Stomp blushed, feeling himself go red. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to stare," he stammered, and Kimbahl nodded in agreement.

"It's all right, I'm Rigosh Twoknife, you can call me Twoknife. I have the truly honorable task of being your chaperone for the day, at your service," she continued in a sarcastic tone and turned to leave. Stomp and Kimbahl had no choice but to quickly follow her.

Cheerfully whistling, with the sparing and disciplined movements of an experienced swordswoman, Twoknife made her way between two of the larger buildings towards another building. Over its door, a carelessly painted sign hung, depicting a bull and a woman in an explicit pose.

While Stomp was still staring at the inn sign with his ears turning red as he realized what was depicted there, Twoknife, without glancing around, entered the tavern. Stomp and Kimbahl stumbled in after her, only to be hit by the stifling, muggy air inside, saturated with the smell of alcohol, pipe smoke, and the penetrating odor of unwashed bodies and urine. The room was well-filled, and Stomp, although raised in a port city, couldn't remember ever seeing such a congregation of scoundrels, cutthroats, and rogues as he found here.

Twoknife steered confidently toward a table, stood in front of it, hands on her hips, observing the people sitting at the table with a whistle. Stomp and Kimbahl, who had moved closer, watched as the people sitting at the table noticed who was in front of them and quickly left the table. Without further comment on the situation, Rigosh dragged a chair closer with her foot, sat down, and propped her feet up on the table. She then glanced around for the first time to look at her companions and yelled through the room, "Sit down, boys, my table is always free."

While the two followed her invitation, the innkeeper quickly came over, a weasel-like man who hastily wiped his dirty hands on his even dirtier apron and bent towards the counter upon a signal from Twoknife. Shortly after, he returned to the table with three well-filled pitchers.

"Drink up, lads, this stuff is brewed here. The farmers around the castle are quite good at growing grain, and a few of them can brew some proper beer," Twoknife explained, taking a big gulp. Kimbahl and Stomp followed suit.

Wiping her mouth, Twoknife grinned slyly at the two and demanded, "Your names!" Stomp and Kimbahl complied, which elicited hearty laughter from their companion. Still chuckling, she continued, "So, so, you've got lovely names. They suit you in a way, and I think Little Stomp and Little Kimbahl must have some questions by now. Go ahead, don't be shy; that's what I'm here for. For now, you can say whatever you want. It's only after the deadline passes that you might find your tongue cut out for the first wrong word and some other body part gone for the second."

Encouraged, the two newcomers looked at each other, and Kimbahl blurted out, "So that was the Ore Baron just now, are there several of them? And what was the thing that threw that light on the Organizer? And the man who spoke at the gate, the one floating in the air, and talking about a sleeper, what's the story with him? And what's this about the New Camp? Where can we get some food and, most importantly, Sruup, and...and...eh..?" Kimbahl trailed off, as he and Stomp had noticed that the smirk had vanished from Twoknife's face.

The mood had suddenly shifted, and Twoknife responded in a low voice, "Firstly, Kimbahl..." she emphasized the name like an insult, "stop talking so much! I should probably point out that in this world, someone who blabbers on and asks a thousand questions can quickly get into serious trouble. We don't like that. But well..." She leaned back, and the grin returned to her face. "Let's not be like that today. So yes, that was Sangwah, one of the Ore Barons. There are more of them, and they are the ones who hold power here. In total, we have twelve guilds here, some of which you must know, while it's better if you don't know about the others. You'll figure that out in due time. As you know, we're in the Old Camp. The mine, which belongs to the Ore Barons, is further to the east. To the west is the marketplace, where once a month, they exchange the ore with the outside world. The Barons have their own Graves, who recover it and kindly deliver it to the Ore Barons, who then distribute it to the others. I belong to the Mercenaries' Guild, the group that puts the Barons' plans into action. And then there's the New Camp, the renegades..."

She paused, spat on the ground with a disdainful expression, cleared her throat, and continued after taking a long swig of beer, "Those are the airheads and aesthetes who want nothing to do with the Ore Barons. They've set up a camp to the north of here, and there you'll find the Alchemists of Water, a few of the farmers, and those who call themselves their fighters, the Reckoners. Nearby is also the old castle, where farmers have been successfully farming for a few years, and we all benefit from that, as you can see with this delicious beer. And then there's the Free Mine, the Miners Guild, which mines the ore on their own account. They're still doing it, but the Barons will soon put a stop to it. Don't worry. Lotho, whom you just saw in action, is an Alchemist of the Fire Circle, and as such, he performs various services for the Ore Barons, and in return, they let him play his, well, differently inclined games."

Twoknife continued, "And the guy in orange outside the gate who performed that airy-fairy stunt was one of the Psionics! Unfortunately, there are quite a few of them here. You know, the 'I see the light' weirdos who believe that their visions and nightmares have something to do with someone or something in the depths, a mysterious power that will save us all... blah blah blah. But overall, they spend their whole day singing songs, stuffing themselves with all sorts of drugs, from Sruup to finely boiled fingernails, like cotton candy. And when they're finally at a point where they don't know if they're male or female, they pounce on everything that can't climb a tree quickly enough and mate like rabbits. They call that finding the path to enlightenment. Pah!"

She spat again and took a hearty gulp. Kimbahl, who had been fidgeting in his seat for some time, couldn't contain himself any longer and blurted out, "Yes, but if you have mages here and people who can float in the air, why haven't you tried to break out?" He fell silent under Twoknife's stern gaze.

"Yep, you saw the barrier, you thick headed oaf. All attempts to break through it have been a bust so far. The Water Alchemists have been yapping for years about wanting to put an escape plan into action, but they want ore for that, which the Organizers steal from our Graves. That bunch sneaks into our camp and steals all the ore that isn't nailed down, only to bring it to their New Camp, to their pansy buddies. They brew their potions with it and ruin it, rendering it unusable. And even the concoction hasn't had any effect on the barrier – no sign of it! But that's all just kid's play. The Fire Alchemists and not even the Demon Summoner have managed to penetrate the barrier."

Stomp flinched, and in a hushed voice, he whispered, "Demon Summoner?"

Clearly uncomfortable, Twoknife grumbled in response, "Yeah, the Demon Summoner, a Fire Alchemist who's quite capable. Although a few of his experiments around here in the Old Camp transformed someone or another into, well, new forms of existence, and he had to leave the camp. He now lives on his own, leaves us in peace, and every now and then, we do each other simple favors. He's just someone you don't mess with; otherwise, the head and the rear end of whoever tries will be staring at each other from a mile away."

Twoknife got up. The conversation seemed to be over, and Stomp and Kimbahl hurried to do the same. Without another word, their guide stomped out of the room and turned east on the street. "So, guys," she thundered, "I'll show you the Place of Trust now. It's the only place here where different guilds can come together somewhat peacefully and exchange tasks. Because you should be clear on one thing: nothing is given to you for free. Everything you need, clothes, weapons, food, someone to screw – it all operates on the principle of trade and barter. You can trade anything, your skills, your abilities," and she shot a contemptuous glance at the two, "whatever you carry on or inside your body. The easiest thing for you would be to accept various tasks and services to earn a decent reputation and, secondly, to get what you need to live or survive – because that's important."

Twoknife abruptly stopped and glared at the two. "The names you have reveal something about your position and rank. So don't you dare come up with any titles for yourselves like 'The Grandiose Destroyer' or 'Godless Pleasurer.' The name you carry signifies how many tasks you've completed, how you've fared in this world so far, and what rank you hold in a guild. Clear?"

Stomp and Kimbahl nodded wordlessly, and Twoknife resumed her stride. They swiftly left the camp through the eastern gate, and their guide pointed to a wooden palisade building on the left. "Our arena," she explained proudly, "the Mercenaries' Guild holds regular competitions there. You know, death and games. It's a nice little side income through the betting... and people enjoy it."

She continued past the complex, and after a few steps through a small grove of trees, they found themselves in a secluded area surrounded by trees. It was empty except for a simple wooden hut. In front of the hut, several benches and tables could be seen, and a red pennant hung limply from a flagpole, clearly visible from afar.

Pointing to the flag, Twoknife explained, "That red flag there indicates that someone has a job to offer. It means someone from the guilds is here to recruit people and distribute tasks. You're lucky."

The two newcomers weren't entirely convinced because as they got closer, they could see Nurrba lounging on one of the benches, with whom they had already gathered painful experiences. He greeted the newcomers with a jeering, "Well, Rigosh, have you taught the fresh meat well?" which she only responded to with a grunt.

Curiously, Stomp looked around and surveyed the others present. There were two individuals who, as Stomp would later learn from their leather aprons and leather pants reinforced with steel caps on the knees, were members of the Miners Guild from the Free Mine. They appeared to be brothers, with the same rough but open expression and the same short-cropped blond hair.

Unfazed by the brawling fighters next to them but not without a disdainful sidelong glance at them, the first one began to speak, "Greetings. We, from the Miners Guild in the Free Mine, are looking for brave folks to accompany an ore transport. In return, we offer you some weapons and, if you do well, admission to our guild."

Stomp looked at the table the speaker had indicated and saw a small selection of one-handed weapons, all of which appeared simple and unadorned but were generally, to the best of his knowledge, in good condition. There was a throwing axe, a simple rapier, several daggers, and two iron-clad fighting staves.

Behind him, he heard the mocking laughter of the mercenaries. "Weapons, yeah, sure, a stick to play with and an axe that can barely cut off your own toe."

Although the two miners turned red with anger upon hearing these words, they made no further move to respond to this provocation, but instead, they looked at Stomp and Kimbahl, expecting an answer.

Before Stomp could respond, he heard Kimbahl babbling behind him, "Well, I've decided. I want to join the Mercenaries' Guild. I want to be a great fighter. So, if you'll have me, I'm more than willing to carry out assignments for you."

Judging by the laughter, Nurrba and Twoknife didn't seem particularly enthusiastic about this theory. Nevertheless, the mercenary woman slapped the newcomer on the shoulder, laughing, "All right, my little one. Then you come with me. I'll equip you and assign your first task. Let's see if you prove yourself. And then we'll try to find something for your salvation." With a suggestive grin, she turned to Stomp. "And what about you, boy? Do you want to be a man or dig in the dirt?"

Stomp had rarely felt more uncomfortable than under the scrutiny of these five onlookers, and following an inner intuition, he made a spontaneous decision. Without saying another word, he walked up to the table and looked inquiringly at the miners, who nodded encouragingly. He chose the throwing axe and the fighting staff, then practiced a few moves with them. They were simple weapons, but solidly made and serviceable. Wordlessly, he positioned himself next to the miners.

Twoknife grinned at him. "A silent lad, you've learned, even if you made the wrong choice. Well, maybe we'll meet again someday."

While Stomp was still considering whether this last sentence could also be taken as a threat, the two mercenaries and their apprentice turned and left the square with laughter. Nurrba turned around one more time, and with a long look at Stomp, he ran his right index finger across his throat in an all too clear gesture.

"You made the right decision," Stomp heard a voice behind him. Although he wasn't entirely sure, he knew he didn't want to be part of a group of people who tortured a bound and defenseless man and turned it into a public spectacle. So, he trudged behind the two miners, who left the square heading west.

In the course of their walk, one of the miners turned to him and introduced himself, "I'm Pioto Orefinder, and this is my brother, Laars. We'll take you to the Free Mine, the headquarters of the Miners Guild, and you'll see that not everyone here is as depraved as those back there."

After Stomp introduced himself, Pioto continued, "You must understand that we are in danger in the Free Mine. The Ore Barons envy our success and fear for their monopoly on ore mining. As you know, ore is used for everything. Sruup is made with it, and it's the only basis for trade with the outside world. But as long as the New Camp protects us and the Psionics still help us, the Barons haven't dared to openly attack us. It's a clear agreement; we provide ore to the New Camp, they offer us protection, and the Water Alchemists provide fairly decent healing magic. We're also in good contact with the farmers around the old castle, so we're well-supplied in that regard too. You'll see, you've made a good choice."

However, something about this description bothered Stomp, and he asked directly, "But if you're getting protection from the New Camp, isn't that enough? Why are you still recruiting new guards?"

The two brothers exchanged meaningful looks, and Laars spoke up, "Well, you see, due to ore mining, the ground below us is riddled with many tunnels. So in recent decades, we've come across caves where orcs live. The orcs are in the same situation as us; they can't get through the barrier either, and you know how simpleminded these creatures are."

Instead of seeking coexistence, they first attack anything that gets in their way. That's why the whole order broke down back then, because the uprisings, which ended with the deaths of the Wardens and the power shift to the Barons, were triggered by the increasing number of miners killed or maimed by orc attacks, and the Wardens and the outside world did nothing about it. Now we have the Greenfurred under control, but occasionally a band of them surfaces and stirs up trouble. And then there are the Minesprayers and Stonestranglers."

Seeing the frightened look on Stomp's face, Laars continued in a reassuring tone, "Well, it's not so bad; they're living creatures that dwell somewhere in the tunnels down there, predators that can sometimes cause problems. But, thanks to Kasakk, they aren't organized, just dumb creatures living in the lightless darkness and attacking the unfortunate ones who venture into their habitat carelessly."

While Stomp was still trying to process what he had been told, the three reached a fork in the road, and the brothers stopped. After a water bottle had made the rounds, Laars continued, "Back there, you see the old castle with the fields, and over there is the New Camp. Further along this path is the Free Mine."

Stomp looked around and identified the mentioned fields to the left, traversed by a winding river, behind which rose a sturdy wooden building. To the right, in a hollow, he could see a fortified camp, smaller than the one he had just left.

"If you follow the river upstream, you'll pass by the old mine, and where the river flows into the southern lake, you'll find the Temple of the Psionics and the Pole City," Laars explained further.

Stomp observed the New Camp from a distance. In principle, it was similarly structured; a wooden palisade offered protection, behind which stood multi-story wooden buildings. However, it appeared more peaceful than the place he had just left. He could hear voices and the sounds of people living closely together, but these aggressive and subtly violent undertones were absent. As if he had guessed the newcomer's thoughts, the larger of the two brothers said, "Don't be mistaken, they are also convicts. They are sentenced and serving a life sentence too. But it's not the absolute dregs, not this conglomerate of child molesters, rapists, and murderers that you find among the Ore Barons, along with a bunch of sycophants and backstabbers."

As the New Camp disappeared from view at the next bend in the road, Stomp walked thoughtfully behind the brothers. After a short time, the forest path led to a clearing that was bordered at the opposite end by a rocky cliff, which disappeared between the trees to the right and left. It stood about twenty man-lengths tall and was also covered with vegetation on its top. Attached to this cliff, there was a fenced compound that seemed to consist of only a few houses, dominated by a large rectangular entrance cut into the rock, about two man-lengths high. There was a lot of activity going on there.

From his vantage point, Stomp could see dozens of men, all dressed similarly to his two companions, bustling about. He observed wooden carts rumbling over the rocks and men straining as they harnessed themselves to move them. The entrance to the mine was lined with torches, and Stomp also noticed the armed guards stationed on the left and right in front of the palisade, their watchful eyes scanning the surroundings. They were the first to notice the arrival of the three newcomers and announced their presence with a loud horn signal.

Several of the figures paused in their work, casting curious gazes towards the trio. Stomp noticed square faces assessing him, which immediately brought back memories of the situation in the Old Camp.

However, there was a notable difference here, and he picked up on it immediately. While he overheard isolated comments expressing general disappointment that only one person had volunteered to support the guild, most of the people displayed a reserved friendliness towards him.

After a brief introduction, he was led to the battlement on the right edge of the palisade. One of the Orefinder brothers accompanied him there and instructed him to watch out for anything unusual from this elevated position. When he asked what that meant, he received a simple reply: "Well, orcs, human attackers, or anything that seems strange to you. If you see something, shout. Lurik down there will make some noise." Stomp glanced in the direction indicated and saw a robust man carrying a large, tin horn on his hip – the same horn he had heard earlier. With a shrug, he leaned against the palisade and peered outside over the parapet.

Now left alone, he had time to ponder his thoughts. He wondered which group he should join and whether he could truly survive in this hostile world. He sighed and looked around, observing the scene before him from his elevated position on the battlement. The chaos was no different here; it seemed there simply wasn't enough space for all the people working diligently to extract ore from the rock. However, despite the apparent disorder, it also felt organized and was notably less charged with latent aggression compared to the Old Camp. But it also seemed vulnerable in contrast to the thug-filled ranks that the Barons could muster. Moreover, there was the enigmatic Lotho and his mysterious powers, and the unanswered question about the demon summoner and his true abilities.

He gazed upwards, attempting to estimate the time. It must have been roughly in the afternoon, although in the dim light, determining the exact position of the sun was difficult. However, he thought he saw something in the murky light – a flowing, sinuous motion that appeared to snake its way across the entire sky. He was captivated by this sight and observed that the reptilian-like motion grew more intense. A colossal figure seemed to emerge from it, almost filling the entire horizon.

A face turned toward him, and he gazed into eyes of complete, abyssal blackness. The rest of the face, with its flat nose and closely fitting ears, appeared to be covered in small scales that shifted constantly in a ripple-like motion.

The creature opened its mouth, revealing gray, pointed teeth, between which three scarlet tongues slithered toward him. As he looked upon this scenario with disgust and confusion, at the enormous, alien visage slowly descending from above, he felt the ground beneath him begin to vibrate.

At first, he mistook it for weakness brought on by hunger or fatigue, but he quickly learned otherwise when an almost man-sized branch, from the height of the cliff, crashed down directly beside him on the ground. Horrified, he leaped aside and stared in shock at the broken end of the gnarled branch, which had almost struck him.

Looking up, he realized that the face had disappeared, and in hindsight, he wondered whether it had been reality or merely a vision.

By the frightened cries around him, he realized he wasn't the only one plagued by... something. Behind him, a man writhed in spasms, his eyes wide with fear, foam at his mouth, his bitten lips stained scarlet. He raised his hands in defense, his eyes staring into empty space, while a gurgled "No, no, don't!" escaped his lips.

Behind them, Stomp could make out two more individuals in blind fury, banging their heads against the rock wall until red marks revealed the spots where they had inflicted bloody wounds on themselves. The whole scene was accompanied by an earthquake beneath them, which had now reached such intensity that no one in his vicinity, including himself, could stay on their feet. Dazed, he fell to the ground and hit his head against the railing of the parapet.

Suddenly, everything stopped. Silence prevailed, only broken by the horrified groans and suppressed curses around him. He picked himself up, wiped the blood from his face, and looked around. Several huts had collapsed, standing crookedly and creaking, held up by only a few remaining beams. People around him were getting up, bleeding, moaning, and trembling. Wherever he looked, he saw bewildered faces.

"What in the name of the three-tailed Kasakk was that?... Did you see it too?" ...From all directions, questioning voices were heard, mingled with the groans and screams of the injured. "Did you see that giant bird hovering over us, trying to tear us apart?" "Nonsense!" yelled another, "It wasn't a bird; it was a bat!" "What kind of nonsense is that? It was a rider with a massive blood stained sword!" These and similar calls were heard, and Stomp realized that everyone had had a vision of a figure descending from above, but each vision was different. However, they all agreed that the earthquake had been real.

Gradually, calm returned. The injured were getting up, and the uninjured tended to their comrades. Stomp noticed his belongings next to him, and as his hand closed around the handle of the combat staff, he felt better already. Looking around, he saw some of the men around him greedily drinking something from their flasks and recalled the words of the old man by the lake. He took the flask from his belt and gazed at it for a while, frowning his brow. He had never been one to shy away from a good time and had emptied many a glass and smoked many a pipe, but taking more drugs somehow felt strange to him. Nevertheless, he relived that nameless terror, devoid of any existential feeling, which had turned him into a trembling wreck when that vision had come crashing down on him. With a sudden jerk, he lifted the flask to his mouth and took a deep swig.

The taste exploded in his throat, bringing tears to his eyes. It was a burning and tearing sensation, as if sharp claws were shredding his larynx.

Just as he thought he couldn't bear it any longer, the feeling vanished abruptly, and a pleasant tingling spread through his chest and abdomen. His senses seemed to sharpen, and he felt as though he could see every single speck of dust on the floor in front of him. He also heard the men breathing, even though they were too far away for him to naturally perceive it. The colors around him appeared vivid, clear, and he could feel the stone beneath his feet and the wood of the combat staff in his hand. He felt good, and the earlier hallucination seemed almost funny. Stomp felt a giggle rising in his throat and noticed that the groups around him had also burst into loud laughter.

However, this bout of hysterical silliness also subsided abruptly, leaving behind a pleasant, self-assured, and contented feeling.

Strengthened by this, he returned to his spot and observed his surroundings. A brief glance showed him that the others in the camp had also regained their composure and were nonchalantly addressing the damage caused by the earthquake.

Stomp leaned against the rock beside him, mostly satisfied with himself and his situation.

For this reason, he was not disturbed by the faint vibration emanating from the stone. "Probably another earthquake," he thought, "well, it won't bother me." He remained calm even as the tremor grew stronger, and he heard a slight crunching and crumbling behind him. However, he cautiously stepped away from the wall, turned around, and examined the spot from which these tremors were emanating. It seemed to be a piece of rock about a man's height above his head, which suddenly started rotating in a wave-like motion. "A vision," he thought, "another vision!"

Interested and swaying gently, he watched as the stone continued to swirl until it eventually turned into a circular, undulating mass. He didn't think much of it when the rock was suddenly pulled inward like a funnel, creating a tubular opening. Even when a pale gray, piston-like head, nearly a meter in diameter and surrounded by chitin rings, with no visible eye openings but crowned with dozens of twitching antennae, pushed through this opening, Stomp was mostly surprised by the detail of this hallucination.

It wasn't until one of these appendages pointed at him, and a fine stream of liquid rained down on him, causing a burning, intensely itchy pain as soon as it touched his skin, that he became suspicious. His amazement turned to horror as he heard voices, this time all in unison, screaming in alarm, and he heard the cries, "A Minesprayer, a Minesprayer! To arms! Hurry, hurry!"

With a cry, he threw himself back and looked wildly for cover. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed the creature continuing to emerge from the hole, using thin arms protruding from the sides of its head that dug into the rock. A worm-like body became visible, massive, nearly a meter in thickness, with a surface that gleamed with oil. The long, grotesque head continued to advance, protruding vertically from the rock wall. Behind the antennae, more appendages now emerged, whipping wildly and also releasing fine streams of acid onto the approaching ore miners. When these miners were hit, small puffs of smoke erupted, and the afflicted ones screamed in pain. Distracted by the oncoming defenders, the Sprayer released Stomp and turned its massive upper body towards its new opponents.

This gave Stomp the opportunity to see the chitin rings shifting as the creature's worm-like body moved. They seemed to overlap, forming an almost impenetrable armor against any type of weapon. The Sprayer still stood upright, held in this position by the powerful back muscles that fixed the upper body vertically at a height of about three man-lengths. From this height, it released its acid rain on the defenders, who quickly withdrew.

"Get arrows, get crossbows! Bows and arrows! Hurry, hurry, where there's one, there are others! If a whole pack appears here, we can forget about the mine!" shouted a booming, authoritative voice from the opposite side.

Fascinated, Stomp watched as more tiny droplets rained down from additional small glands on the underside of the creature, seemingly dissolving the rock like ice in the sun. Due to this transformation of the stone, the Sprayer descended and began crawling into the camp. It still faced the majority of the camp inhabitants, offering Stomp the back of its head. From the palisade, Stomp was now at the same level, just two steps away from it.

Without thinking, Stomp leaped forward and landed on the creature's neck with a great jump. Surprised by his own actions, he tightly closed his legs around the worm-like body and began wildly screaming, striking the monster's head with his axe. It wasn't a particularly precise or skillful attack, and it was more due to luck that he managed to sever several of those twitching stalks and tentacles that had just sprayed the deadly acid moments before. Triumph welled up within him when he noticed that the axe was quite capable of penetrating the chitin layer with a two-handed swing. However, this victory was short-lived because the creature managed to throw Stomp off with a vigorous defensive motion of its entire body. He lost his grip and, with a scream, tumbled two meters down onto the rocky ground.

The impact knocked the breath out of him, and lying on his back like a beetle, he stared upwards directly into the head opening of the Sprayer, which was now turning towards him with a soft hissing. Stomp believed his time had come when a large spear, thrown by a powerful hand, whizzed over him and impaled itself directly between the stalks of the attacking creature. It hit its mark. With a hiss, the Sprayer partially withdrew into its rocky orifice. From the head of the creature, the shaft of a spear protruded, only to be thrown to the ground when the creature made a second sweeping motion. It landed right in front of Stomp.

Without thinking, he scrambled to his feet, grabbed the weapon, and braced it against the rock wall, the spear's shaft wedged into the ground, its tip pointing upward. Just in time, because the Sprayer had by now recovered and was sliding angrily out of its hole, descending directly toward Stomp. He didn't move, whether out of fear or bravery, he couldn't say later. It was only when the creature had almost reached him that he took a step away from the rock wall, causing the spear, which had been leaning flat against the wall with its tip up until now, to stand upright.

Propelled by its own weight, the Sprayer couldn't slow its movement, and despite its attempt to veer away, the spear bore deep between the chitin layers of its body. The blow alone wouldn't have been enough to kill the resilient creature, but since it was in a downward motion, gravity did the rest. The beast drove the spear deeper and deeper into its body with its own weight. Then Stomp lost his nerve and, with a cry, he threw himself backward.

He landed hard on the ground, rolled away, and attempted to crawl on hands and knees to get further away from the creature. He felt a rain of acid on his buttocks and back and screamed in pain and fear. In his frantic escape, he didn't notice what was in front of him and collided with the corner of one of the wooden huts that seemed to block his path. Dazed, he slumped to the side, unable to move further, and looked around, breathing heavily.

It had become quiet around him. Two of the Graves beside him, who were also injured, looked down at him with an incredulous expression, and only after some hesitation did they step closer, taking him by the arms and pulling him to his feet. Leaning lightly against the wooden wall, he looked around.

The Sprayer lay there, motionless. Stomp marveled at the length of this creature; it seemed to measure almost twenty meters, had the shape of a worm, and even in its completely motionless state, it still appeared threatening and monstrous. The lower third of the spear protruded directly from the spherical head, with the rest seemingly disappearing into the creature's body.

Breathing a sigh of relief and trembling with joy, Stomp sank against the hut's wall. Slowly, his legs gave way, and he slid along it into a crouching position. In a daze, he noticed that excited murmurs were erupting around him, and several of the miners were cautiously approaching the dead attacker. He also realized that this was not the only creature that had met its end in that moment. To the left of the monster, he could see two figures lying motionless on the ground, and two legs in boots protruded from under the Sprayer's head.

Stomp seemed forgotten. The Graves, now gaining confidence, moved toward the Sprayer, eventually surrounding the corpse, and excited voices were heard: "Quick, get a bag; we need to collect the acid; it's priceless!" "Pull Shondar out from down there, damn it! He didn't deserve this, poor guy. He was a good buddy." "And a great miner!" "Did you see that with the spear, a great trick. I remember doing it that way back then; have I ever told you about the time when..."

Breathing heavily and with trembling legs, Stomp attempted to stand up again and pushed himself up along the slanting wooden wall. A strong hand gripped his upper arm, helped him to his feet, and a deep bass voice sounded to his right, "Well done, my lad! I could be wrong, of course, but you seem to be one of the very few in the history of the Miners Guild who has single-handedly taken down a Sprayer. Nice work!"

Stomp looked around and saw a figure about two heads shorter than him, which didn't seem to match the massive voice. Only on a second glance did he notice that a powerful chest and muscle-packed arms were evident under the coarse leather tunic. A kindly grin parted a dirty, rugged face, from which two bright scarlet eyes scrutinized him. The head was bald, the right ear was completely missing, while the left ear hung heavily downward from being pierced by steel and stone fragments. Startled, Stomp realized that his counterpart's legs, probably due to an accident, were mutilated. Slender limbs protruded from loose leather pants, and, too weak to support the body's weight, they were supported by a strange-looking metal and wooden lattice construction.

The one being assessed noticed Stomp's gaze and calmly replied, "Yeah, these little legs are no longer what they used to be, but trust me, I'm still faster in the tunnels than any of you surface-dwellers."

Apologetically, Stomp raised his hands, "I'm sorry, uh, I didn't mean to stare at you. I, uh, am one of the newcomers, and my name is Stomp." The halfling nodded and thumped his chest with a resounding thud. "You can call me Tunneltracker. You could say I run things around here. And..." with a sideways glance at the dead monster to his right, he continued, "I welcome you to the Miners Guild."

Stomp flinched as Tunneltracker let out his booming voice, addressing the group around the worm, "Hey there, Vluuk, Ishka, and Rigup, don't stand around like idiots. Help the others, get Shondar out of there, collect the acid, take care of the wounded, the rest of you back to the palisades, the rest, back to work, hurry up!" He then turned back to Stomp, who had taken his hands away from his ears. "Well," he said with a grin, "for someone not used to it, it can get pretty loud around here. Are you hurt?" Stomp shook his head. "Well then, come on, see what you've accomplished."

With a clattering stride and loud wooden framework noises, the halfling turned and stomped toward the dead creature, with Stomp following behind, noticing that despite this construction looking quite fragile and cumbersome, the halfling moved surprisingly nimbly with it.

Within a few steps, they reached the dead worm, which was just rolled to the side with a loud heave. Not much remained of the unfortunate person buried under the creature's mass. With disgust, Stomp watched several of the miners drain the milky yellowish fluid from the openings on the tentacles on the underside of the Sprayer and pour it into small bottles. Tunneltracker noticed his gaze, "This stuff is worth its weight in gold; it dissolves rock faster than you can say 'sprayer.' However, it breaks down quickly under sunlight, and its effect diminishes. But in the dark, it's a fantastic substance; you can use it as a weapon, you can use it to dig tunnels, and if you're an artist, you can even create some fantastic sculptures with it... ha!"

And he burst into laughter again, "Listen up, you ore-grubbing rabble! This is Stomp, one of the newcomers. You all saw what he did. He killed a Sprayer all by himself. That means he has earned the right, if he wants it, to join the Guild and claim a new name. And I'm assigning him a name now. I'm calling him... hm, 'Sprayerdeath.'"

And, almost to himself, he mumbled with a sidelong glance at the newcomer, "And 'Stomp' isn't exactly suitable for an epic poem!"

Staring into the crowd, he continued, "Does anyone object? If so, they must answer to me here and now!"

None of the onlookers seemed to have any desire to do so, and none showed even the slightest inclination to challenge the halfling's right to make these decisions.

Unperturbed, the halfling boomed on, "So, Zuhl, you get Shondar's dagger. After all, you're his brother. The rest of Shondar's belongings belong to Stomp, uh, Sprayerdeath, and he can choose what he wants from it. He really earned it in Kasakk's name. Also, give him two bottles of the Sprayer acid. You three back there, retrieve the meat, and you two, collect the upper chitinous halves for new shields."

Promptly, he looked at Stomp, or rather, Sprayerdeath. "So, what can you make use of from Shondar's belongings?"

"I, uh, I never thought..., well, I... don't know," mumbled the one questioned, glancing at the bloody remains while struggling to contain his nausea.

"I get it," the halfling grumbled, and once more, his command voice resounded. "Zuhl, you bury your brother. He won't need the pants anymore, so Sprayerdeath gets them. Also, his knife and his spear. So, come on, hurry up; the day is passing, and we still have to get to the New Camp."

Stomp was amazed that everyone around him obediently followed these orders without a second thought. At a signal from the crippled man, he followed him to the wooden palisade, where several heavily laden carts were already being prepared for transportation. There was a wooden trough nearby where he could wash, and he gratefully took advantage of it. Stomp noticed that many of the places where the acid had hit him were only marked with a red stripe; he couldn't find any serious skin injuries. After he had recovered, he heard the horn sound again. Looking up, he saw that a group of miners had formed around him, or rather around the carts.

Strong, calloused hands grabbed the handles, and at a command, the now five-wagon column set off. It was escorted by two dozen grim-looking figures, all armed with swords, staffs, or bows. As the wagons rumbled past him, Stomp saw a figure approaching him. It was Zuhl, Shondar's brother. He silently offered him the spear he had sunk into the Sprayer's head, a plain, unadorned sword in a black leather sheath, and one of the sturdy, thick leather pants reinforced with steel caps on the knees that Stomp had seen on the other miners.

Stammering, he accepted the items. Zuhl stared into his face for a long time, and in a hoarse voice, he whispered, "Thank you for avenging my brother's death so quickly." Without another word, he turned and marched after the column.

Undecided and somewhat overwhelmed by the whole situation, the recipient stared at him and then became aware of his new possessions. The spear measured a good two meters and proved to be a simple yet well-balanced weapon. In the middle, there was a piece about three hands wide wrapped with leather straps, allowing the handle to fit neatly into the palm. It was crowned with a carefully crafted iron tip, almost thirty centimeters long, without a single notch. The sword was a simple, solidly crafted piece of blacksmithing, devoid of embellishments, but in good condition.

Meanwhile, the wagons had left the gate, and Tunneltracker, who brought up the rear, shouted to the newly appointed hero, "Hurry up, put on your pants, and join us. Have you forgotten already? You're our escort!"

Stomp flinched and hurried to obey the command. The piece of clothing was a bit too large, but with the built-in belt, it eventually fit reasonably well. He fastened the sword, took the spear and staff, stored the throwing axe, and quickly followed the column.

As expected, the caravan was heading back to the New Camp, and the newcomer took the opportunity to gather more information about the world that would shape his future. He learned from the willing Tunneltracker that, after the uprisings twenty-five years ago, various groups had formed, which Stomp was now familiar with. The Ore Barons had made a deal with the kingdom, allowing the prison facility to be left to its own devices as long as the monthly ore deliveries continued. This relieved the king of the obligation to maintain order and provided a convenient way to get rid of all undesirable segments of society. Stomp continued to listen and learned that a delicate balance had been established between the Ore Barons and the groups that resisted their rule, such as the Miners Guild, the New Camp, and the farmers. But this balance was always on the verge of failing or tipping. Although a plan existed from the Water Alchemists to make the previously impenetrable barrier harmless, it required significant amounts of ore, which would be rendered unusable afterward. Therefore, all attempts in this direction had failed. Tunneltracker also reluctantly admitted that the "bastards of the Ore Barons" and the Fire Alchemists had no interest in giving up their comfortable slave-owner lives.

As the newcomer eagerly listened to the booming voice of the halfling, the column had almost reached the New Camp. Stomp gazed at the fortified compound and once again recognized that guards with spears were observing the newcomers from the palisades. As they approached, a double-winged gate creaked open to admit the miners. On either side, Stomp could now examine the guards more closely and noted that they all wore blue and gold sashes. These, like all other pieces of clothing he had seen, were stitched together from various parts and had primitive coloring.

Upon entering the camp, he noticed a significant difference from the facility he had left that afternoon. While there was still a dense crowd of various figures bustling between the tightly packed two- to three-story wooden buildings, and the sound of loud murmuring filled the air, it did not appear violent or aggressive in the same way. The column made its way toward a large, central building, and a gate to a courtyard was pushed aside on its left flank. In the background, Stomp could see the semi-open stalls of several smithing facilities, where hot fires burned, and the hammering and clanging of metal against metal were audible. From the door of the building emerged a tall figure who looked calmly at the newcomers.

Stomp felt a strong hand gripping him, and Tunneltracker led him towards the waiting man.

"Wishing you good health and successful coupling, great leader!" boomed the bass voice of the halfling, whose eyes now held a cheerful expression. The one addressed winced at the choice of words and gazed sternly at the speaker with gray eyes set in a lean face dominated by a hook-shaped nose.

"I'm pleased to see you too, oh Tito Tunneltracker. I see you're keeping to our agreement, and I'm doing the same. In the backyard, your people will find several carts with the items you need and have requested. Now, come inside and be my guest."

During this conversation, Stomp had time to observe the man. He saw a robust middle-aged individual who exuded the presence and authority of a natural leader. His weather-beaten face was framed by a shock of red hair that stood wild and untamed, barely held in check by a gray headband. He wore a patched-together leather jerkin and a tattered pale-blue cloak draped over his shoulders.

Other than a heavy dagger at his right side, there were no visible weapons. Despite the shabby appearance, he projected the dignity and strength of a commander, and Stomp knew that he was in the presence of the leader of the New Camp.

At the mention of food, Stomp's mouth watered, and he realized he hadn't eaten a morsel all day. With a rumbling stomach, he followed the two into the interior of the house. Upon entering, he found that the place served as both a residence and an office, or a sort of community center. In the large room he had just entered, several tables held groups of people. From the fragments of conversation he overheard, it was evident that one group was fervently debating which weapons and other items would be needed next. Another was discussing what agreements should be made between the farmers and the miners in the near future, and a third was loudly discussing the defense measures against the Ore Barons.

Through a curtain at the rear wall, the trio entered another room. Here, a large, roughly hewn table was surrounded by several chairs. A sturdy fire blazed in a built-in fireplace on the left, and through the opposite wall, they could again faintly hear the pounding of smithy hammers.

The redhead steered towards a big chair where a substantial leather sheath leaned against it. A two-handed sword protruded from its hilt. The host took his place and assigned seats to his two guests.

He then addressed Stomp, "Greetings to you, stranger, and my apologies for inviting you into my home without introducing myself. They call me Tark, Tark Eyewiper, and some think I'm the spokesperson for these fine folks here, though we all know there is no true leader."

The one addressed began to formulate a response, but his hesitant words were interrupted by the booming bass of his companion. "Now, let's not be so modest, my little friend. This is Stomp... uh... Sprayerdeath. I don't know if you've heard, but we had some unpleasant visitors today. I could be mistaken, but one of those slithering critters thought that a bit of miner's meat would enrich its diet and was in the process of beautifying our underground city if not for this brave lad who sent the worm into the realm of maggots with a well-thrust spear. Unfortunately, Kasakk laid three of our own to rest with copper on their eyes."

"I see," rumbled Eyewiper, casting a sidelong glance at the spear that Stomp had leaned against the wall, "then we have a reason to celebrate!"

After a few bellowed commands from beyond the door, the host turned back to Stomp. "You're a newcomer?" he inquired. Stomp nodded, and he continued, "Then you'll surely be interested to know..."

He was cut short by a sudden earthquake that shook the building. Amid the clattering of fallen objects and the cursing of men in the next room, all three heard a scraping and scratching noise coming from the rear wall of the building.

Turning abruptly, they looked at the wooden planks, witnessing a horrifying sight as a green-scaled head emerged with hissing and sizzling. The material itself seemed to bubble and contort, shaping a triple-horned skull two meters above a wide-toothed mouth that stared down at the trio.

With a loud buzzing sound, the two-handed sword was drawn from its scabbard, and from the corners of his eyes, Stomp also saw the halfling to his left conjure two crossbows seemingly out of thin air.

"Whatever it is, we'll deal with this hellish thing!" bellowed the halfling's voice through the room, and in response, the creature opened its mouth and shot a fireball that instantly set the table ablaze.

"I could be mistaken as well," added the halfling, his voice a bit quieter.

"You unholy creature, how dare you invade my house!" With these words, Tark courageously rushed toward the beast with his sword raised high. As the creature's shoulders, neck, and head slowly emerged into the room, Tark swung his sword, a two-handed swing that struck the beast around its neck.

The creature vanished.

The blade of the sword drove deep into the wood of the rear wall with a loud crash, and silence fell upon the room. Dazed, the three looked first at each other, then at the wooden wall, and finally at the table, which remained completely unscathed. No flames were in sight, no traces of smoke or signs of a fire. The wall itself only bore the large crack created by Eyewiper's sword. The earthquake subsided with a low rumble.

"What in the...," the halfling began, looking bewildered at the scene.

From outside, curses and agitated voices were now heard. "Did you see the serpents too?" and "It was huge, at least three feet long, entirely made of rocks, and it moved as swiftly as a scorpion, and I'm telling you, it would've crushed me if not..."

Slowly, Tark sheathed his sword and thoughtfully examined the crack he had made. Then he turned around and shrugged, "It's getting worse, don't you think?"

The halfling nodded, and both sat down at the table, glancing nervously around. Stomp stood there, clearly overwhelmed by the situation, feeling that his shaky knees could hardly carry him to the chair.

"What in the world is happening here?" he asked, noticing that he had practically yelled at the two in his agitation.

They exchanged a long look before Tunneltracker answered, "These visions are becoming more frequent and vivid. They began a few years ago, and at first, we thought they were just the ramblings of a few Sruup addicts. But lately, they've become more real, and almost everyone is falling victim to them. Even these earthquakes are increasing."

"Some say the Psionics are to blame," the red-haired man interrupted, "They speak of some power deep beneath us. They're trying to awaken and call on this power with dark ceremonies. Normally, we don't have much to do with the Psionics, but their warriors, the Templars, help us in the fight against the Ore Barons. So contact with these people is inevitable. That's how we know they occasionally hold black masses to penetrate this entity with magical rituals."

Looking around and shuddering, he continued, "But I don't know whether to be glad that this thing is beginning to take an interest in us."

The halfling continued, "Well, at some point, we'll have to do something about it, because if these Psionics really have something to do with it, it's a bad sign that the hallucinations and earthquakes are intensifying."

The commotion outside had subsided, and the conversation was interrupted by two young men who entered the room, placing steaming bowls and several plates on the table with still trembling hands. The aroma of the food made Stomp's mouth water, and for a brief moment, the visions were forgotten. Without paying attention to his behavior, he sat at the table and, after a nod from their host, eagerly began to eat.

After the hearty and simple meal, the three sat back, satisfied, with a smoldering pipe in their hands. Tunneltracker continued his story about the Miners Guild. To Stomp's surprise, he learned that the palisade village he had seen at the mine was not the only dwelling place for the guild. Most of them lived inside the rock, in a pueblo-like complex of caves and dwellings.

When he reached the part of his story about the Warhound and his troop, as well as the captured Organizer, Tark interrupted him, asking him to wait. With quick strides, he disappeared into the adjacent room, and the two left behind spent a few minutes in silence, engrossed in their pipes.

Tark returned, accompanied by another man. Stomp observed the newcomer and found himself facing a young man, tall and lean, dressed in dark blue cotton clothing that hung loosely on his lanky limbs. Apart from a blue-tinted hair comb that stood upright from his head, he was cleanly shaven, but the right side of his temple and face exhibited a wild interlocking pattern of more or less skillfully etched scars. He carried no visible weapons, but a creature sat on his right shoulder, initially resembling a rat at first glance. Notably, the creature had vivid blue fur, corresponding in color to its bright button-like eyes, with which it scrutinized its surroundings. The man entered the room behind Tark, stood waiting beside the door, and regarded the two with a cool gaze.

"This is Gaist," Tark introduced the blue-clad man before turning back to Stomp. "Now, tell us what happened to the Organizer."

He complied with the request and noticed that his three listeners were not unaffected by his account. Tension was building in the face of the lanky man, as a muscle twitched incessantly on his left cheek. The creature on his shoulder, clearly agitated by his nervousness, began to squeak excitedly and hop back and forth on his shoulder, using a long, blue-furred tail wrapped around the man's neck to maintain its balance.

After he had finished, there was a prolonged silence.

Finally, the red-haired man spoke up after clearing his throat, "We need to find the Forager. No one knows where he's gone." The halfling nodded, Gaist remained unmoved, and Stomp looked back and forth between them with a questioning gaze. Seeing this, the halfling explained, "Forager was the second Organizer on this raid. He's gone missing too, and we're concerned that he might be injured somewhere. The Ore Barons can't have him, or they would have displayed him like his comrade."

"I'll carry Sangwah's eyes in a jar with me!" came a hoarse whisper from the door. It was Gaist who had spoken, and his words were followed by a long silence.

The voice continued, "I'm going into the tunnels to find Forager. After that, I'll search for Sangwah. I'm leaving in an hour. Anyone who wants can accompany me. We'll meet at the gate."

Stomp fixed his gaze on Tark and the halfling, who both nodded in response. With a quick side glance to the door, he realized that Gaist had vanished.

Tark stood up and said, "I'll inform the others; you let your people know." With those words, he left the room. Tunneltracker also got up and approached the door, followed by Stomp, who hurriedly collected his belongings. In the front room, the chaos was still wild, and Stomp observed a group of men in simple cotton clothing loudly haggling over the exchange of grain and beer for weapons and clothing. When he stepped outside, he also noticed that, although the light had changed little, it appeared to be moving towards evening. Torches and oil lamps were being lit on houses all around, and he marveled at the kind of well-organized chaos that was happening here.

To the right, he saw the convoy, which was now moving towards the gate alongside other similarly heavily laden carts. The halfling rushed to his people, and once surrounded by them, he shared his news. Stomp could hear the piercing voice of the halfling as he reported on the events. An excited discussion ensued, and Stomp and the carts seemed to be forgotten.

Left to his own devices, he looked around and used the time to prepare his weapons and his thoughts. After a few minutes, he saw Tark coming toward him. When Tark reached him, Stomp asked, "Forgive me, sir, uh, where will Gaist be searching for the other Organizer? Is there any clue about where he might be found?"

Tark regarded him for a long moment and then replied, "Eyewiper will do just fine, my friend; we don't have titles here in our camp. As for your question, Gaist and his group will be searching in the tunnels of the Free Mine for the Organizer. It is said that this route can lead you almost to the abandoned mine and then on to the Old Camp. The two who went out yesterday to lighten the trading column wanted to explore this route."

He was about to walk away but hesitated mid-step, casting a sidelong glance at Stomp and asking, "Do you want to accompany him? If so, let me know in time, and you'll receive some additional equipment. After all, you're a newcomer and can still choose which guild you want to belong to. Why not the Organizers?"

With these words, Tark turned and entered the house. Stomp remained pensive. He had already experienced enough for the day, and he felt a certain weariness settling in.

When he noticed the halfling approaching, he pushed the thought aside and looked at him expectantly.

"There you are," he boomed. "Come on, we need to leave. We'll meet Gaist at the gate and take him and his people to the mine. From there, he plans to continue into the tunnels, and two of my men will accompany him. It's time for us to return... You can find yourself a farmer's daughter some other time, my dear."

Stomp, who had just been watching a group of girls giggling as they ran across the courtyard, felt guilty and jumped a little. He was about to turn away when his gaze fell upon another figure who had entered the square behind the girls. He froze, as if struck by lightning, and gawked at the person. She was the most beautiful woman he had ever encountered in his life. She was tall, towering over those around her. An explosion of deep black hair framed a classically beautiful and symmetrical face. Her youthful, lean body was clad in reddish-brown leather armor, moving with the grace and powerful elegance of a predator.

Most striking of all was the deep-red tattoo, sharply and precisely covering the left side of her face and neck, as if setting her graceful face on fire. Next, he noticed the weapon the warrior carried on her back, the hilt pointing downward. His father would have offered the earnings of an entire year for such a sword. It was undoubtedly a two-handed sword, in a scabbard of deep red, scarred leather, with a hilt resembling a column of small serrated ice crystals. Both the scabbard and the guard appeared to be made from violet-shimmering steel with such precision that Stomp thought he could hear the crackling of freezing water.

"Oh, don't overdo it, my friend," Tunneltracker's comment broke Stomp from his fascination. "You're definitely taking on too much for the first day with Iceskin. I could be wrong, but you're setting your sights high for the next few years. But don't worry; everyone has bitten off more than they can chew with her... I mean everyone!"

"Who... um, who is she, and how does she manage to keep that sword in this chaos?" Stomp stammered in admiration.

"Well, Mr. Sprayerdeath, that's Dailah Iceskin," Tunneltracker said. "Some say she's the only person in here who's not a criminal. No one knows exactly where she's from. Some say she's a researcher, driven here out of curiosity. She calls herself a 'Creesh a Suul,' whatever that may mean, and claims to come from the far north, where everything turns into ice instantly."

"As for the sword... believe me, I've seen her fight once; no one can match her, not even Zweifinger from the mercenaries, although she's supposedly a swordmaster from the king's ranks. She's quite a gem!"

He continued after a pause, "Someone managed to steal her sword once while she was asleep. And what can I say, it didn't even upset her. She just grinned and said her 'Qinna Suul' would find its way back to her."

And indeed, the next day, she carried that thing with her as if nothing had happened. As for the thief... well, since then, he's been known as 'Frosthands'!"

The halfling fell silent and looked at Stomp significantly. Stomp flinched, "You mean...?"

"Exactly," the halfling confirmed. "Totally frozen, blackened, withered, and dead... up to the elbow. He babbled that the weapon turned against him, that ice layers formed around his fingers... Well, no one dared to even touch it after that. But why am I telling you this... ask her yourself! Hey, Iceskin, hello, Iceskin...!"

Stomp was nearly knocked off his feet when the halfling's hoarse whisper suddenly turned into a roaring storm. His discomfort escalated further as the person they called Iceskin changed direction upon the halfling's vehement waving and walked towards them with a graceful stride. When the woman finally reached them, she gazed at both of them with a slight amused smile in her violet eyes. Stomp wished he could disappear into the floor.

Tunneltracker continued his banter, "Oh, my beauty, the object of everyone's wet dreams for the past hundred thousand years, the source of my never-ending passionate yearning. If only I were sixty centimeters taller, twenty times more handsome, a hundred times healthier, and ten years younger..."

"...your cheeky behavior and your big mouth would probably be too much for the strongest of human women," interrupted the lady who was showered with compliments.

"You're right," sighed the halfling. "Great, may I introduce Sprayerdeath, a newcomer who, within an hour of arriving here, managed to slay a Minesprayer and also..." Tunneltracker continued with a cough, "...one of your most ardent admirers, who has just been transformed into a quivering wreck by your grace."

The halfling was absolutely right; all attempts to silence him ended abruptly as those violet eyes turned toward Stomp with a playful smile. Despite his efforts, Stomp couldn't produce more than a dry croak.

A well-shaped eyebrow arched, and the beauty in front of him gently caressed Stomp's cheek. He noticed that the flame tattoo also covered her wrist and hand, and as if her face had ignited his, he felt the blood rush to his face. With a bright red head, he tried to string together a coherent sentence. His stuttering was interrupted by the peculiar greeting of the tall warrior.

"I greet you, Sprayerdeath, and may the ice bless your paths," the swordbearer said with a brief nod and then turned to continue her journey across the square.

Gradually, the chatter died down, and as Stomp, with wobbly knees, turned to the halfling, the latter scrutinized him with a long, thoughtful gaze. "Very impressive. I could be wrong, but you seem to be quite the heartbreaker. How you managed to enthrall this beauty with well-orchestrated flattery, one can still learn a thing or two!"

As the halfling clattered away with laughter, heading toward the waiting wagon convoy, Stomp felt tempted to thrust his spear into the broad back of the halfling but found himself incapable, his hands shaking and knees weak.

As if Tunneltracker had guessed his thoughts, he turned around halfway and said, "What about it, your grace, ladies' man, do you think you're capable of walking? The wagons won't wait; we have to move on, you know!"

Amid the small man's raucous laughter, Stomp, his face burning, made his way to the waiting wagons. There, an excited discussion was still ongoing, but at the brusque command of the halfling, the miners grabbed the wagon handles and set them in motion. In a few minutes, they reached the gate, and with a heart that still thumped loudly, Stomp saw that Gaist and two other figures were waiting there. The other two were clad in bright blue, simple shirts and pants. Both were blond, blue-eyed, and of similar build, seemingly related. Though they didn't have their companion's exquisite haircut, the left sides of their faces were adorned with the same intricate patterns of decorative scars.

While Gaist still didn't carry any visible weapons, each of them had a conically tapered wooden piece jutting over their shoulders, and when one of them turned around, Stomp realized it was Kodang wood, about eighty centimeters long. Stomp was only familiar with this weapon from his fencing instructor's descriptions. In the south, he'd been told, there were peoples who could hurl this wood in such a way that it described wide arcs in spinning motions and, unless obstructed by resistance, would return to the thrower. The more skilled ones could even throw this wood in a way that it continued its trajectory even after hitting a target.

While Stomp pondered how such a weapon could be used in a tunnel or the area they were traversing, the convoy had reached the group of three. With nods, they joined the procession, sharing short, lewd farewell words.

By now, the light had dimmed, and Stomp, like the others, moved closer to the wagons, peering into the darkness, prepared for an ambush. They were getting closer to the edge of the forest on the right, and in the distance, the lights of the Old Camp could be seen. As the convoy headed toward the abandoned mine, Stomp had that eerie feeling of being watched once again. While he trailed behind the wagons, he noticed that his companions were also looking around uncomfortably. Here and there, a sword was loosened in its scabbard, and the man in front of him slowly retrieved his bow from his shoulder. Conversations unintentionally grew quieter and eventually fell silent.

The air was filled with nothing but the thunderous noise of the wagon wheels on the rough terrain and the creaking of leather. Even the halfling lowered his voice, and his commands came out in a hushed, raspy whisper. Stomp felt his palms grow sweaty, and he instinctively gripped the spear in his right hand tighter, making sure the sword at his hip was securely fastened and within quick reach.

Once again, he thought he heard a rustling from the forest edge to the right, and he became fixated on the dark line of underbrush to his right. Was there some movement? He held his breath, stared at the spot, trying to discern details. And indeed, something large and black was moving through the thicket.

As his neck hairs stood on end, and a deep-seated fear overcame him, he heard that growling snarl once more, a sound he remembered all too well. To confirm his fears, he spotted those bright yellow eyes shimmering in the gloom of the underbrush, like lanterns piercing the darkness, glaring right at him.

As if through a fog, he realized that the sounds around him had ceased. A quick glance told him he wasn't the only one who'd perceived this creature. The wagons had come to a halt, and around him, there were muttered curses as swords were unsheathed and bowstrings were drawn taut.

Nothing moved. All were fixedly gazing at the forest edge, at the glaring bright eyes, observing them silently, silently and menacingly from the underbrush.

Then the creature stirred, and slowly, without a sound, its massive outline pushed through the trees. It was even larger than Stomp remembered, and in his panic, it seemed as though the trees themselves were parting, yielding to the creature in a fluid motion. Even the tall grass appeared to ripple in wave-like movements where the creature trod.

With an almost provocative calmness, the beast took three to four steps closer and stood still. When it opened its mouth and fixed the group with its panting tongue, Stomp saw those overly long fangs and sharp canines once again, between which a bright light gleamed from the creature's maw.

For seconds, everything seemed frozen. No one dared to make a single move. Each one seemed to understand that there was hardly a weapon capable of standing up to this monster, which stood as tall as a grown man at its shoulder.

However, someone from the procession suddenly lost their nerve. Stomp heard a loud cry, "The Shugul Sath!..." and the hum of a bowstring. In the dim light, he could make out the swift shadow of an arrow launched somewhere to his left, hurtling towards the creature.

"Oh no!" he exclaimed, well aware of the carnage this creature would unleash if, provoked by an arrow, it managed to cover the few steps to the column. He was proven wrong. With a graceful yet restrained display of strength, a hand, nearly the size of a human head, casually swept the arrow aside, sending it harmlessly whirring through the branches of the underbrush behind the beast. Almost mockingly, the creature then settled into a comfortable, crouching position and began to slowly and leisurely lick its paws, much like a domestic cat.

Stomp stared at the scene in disbelief, still too afraid to move. After a few seconds, which felt like an eternity, the creature raised its head and fixed its gaze on the group. Stomp nearly cried out when he heard the deep, rumbling voice that was clearly addressing him, "Search the orc caves. Use the Sprayer's gift, Spear-Bearer."

While Stomp was still dazed, trying to make sense of the words, the figure seemed to vanish. Amid the excited murmurs of the onlookers, it became transparent, and its boundaries appeared to blur. Eventually, Stomp found himself staring dazedly at a dark smoke cloud, which gradually spread out from where a fearsomely large feline had sat moments ago. Only the yellow, staring eyes remained in place, glowing through the smoky haze.

Then it seemed as though the earth absorbed the cloud. The murky swirl began to rotate faster, taking on the form of a whirlwind, which eventually sank into the ground. In the very last moment, a gray veil covered the downward-moving, radiant eyes, and a blink later, they too had disappeared into the earth. Then there was nothing to see. A faint, sweet, almost aromatic scent lingered in the air, which vaguely reminded Stomp of something.

The tension was released with loud sighs and curses from the men around him. Stunned, Stomp realized that the sounds of the forest had resumed. He also noticed that his hand and forearm ached from the tight grip on the spear, which he had unconsciously held tighter and tighter. He turned around, sighed, and looked at pale faces.

"You reckless idiot, you complete moron, you utter imbecile! Are you out of your mind to shoot an arrow at the Shugul Sath?" The thundering voice from the head of the column was accompanied by a clapping sound. One of the men, who had been closest to the creature, looked down at his trousers in embarrassment, mumbling as he withdrew his shirt from his belt.

After a few minutes during which everyone attempted to regain their composure, they hurriedly left that spot. Confused, Stomp trudged along behind the group and asked the person nearest to him, "Excuse me, what was that? What is a Shugul Sath?"

The person, whom Stomp now recognized as one of the blue-clad individuals, turned to him. "Nobody knows, buddy. Some say it's just one of those cave creatures causing trouble here. Others think it's an ancient being that has roamed the cosmos for millennia and just happened to be trapped within this barrier on its journey through the world."

"Is it..." Stomp hesitated. He had wanted to ask if the creature was dangerous, but considering those teeth and paws, it seemed ridiculous, so he rephrased, "Has it ever attacked anyone?" The man shook his head. "Well, no one has ever talked about it. On the other hand, I can imagine that if such a thing were to attack someone, there wouldn't be much left to tell the tale."

With that, the conversation seemed to end, and Stomp understood why. He also felt the unease that crept over him when he thought about this creature.

The rest of the journey was made in silence, and Stomp was relieved to see the palisade and the torches affixed to it as they approached the mine. The caravan entered the camp, and the gates were swiftly closed behind them.

Now, Stomp realized that the halfling's description had been accurate. Above him and on both sides, he could see several holes and openings in the towering rock wall, from which torchlight and candlelight flickered. It seemed that most of the Miners Guild had settled within the caves themselves, rather than the wooden houses.

The loud, commanding voice of the halfling filled the air once more, leaving Stomp feeling entirely superfluous. In front of the mine entrance, several tables and benches were set up, and several miners were already tucking into a simple yet hearty communal meal. Stomp found a less crowded bench and sat down. He listened to the conversations around him and realized that the vanished Organizer and the encounter with the Shugul Sath – whatever that might be – were the main topics of discussion.

A plate was handed to him, and he started eating the somewhat tough but tasty meat. Shortly afterward, Tunneltracker and Gaist joined him, and they too dug into the meal.

"Do you like the worm meat?" the halfling asked with an amused twinkle in his eye. Stomp had his mouth full at the moment and nearly choked. He stared at the meat on his plate, torn between appetite and repulsion, wondering whether to swallow or spit it out. With a knowing smirk, the short one took a swig from a beer mug and, after wiping his mouth, continued, "Gaist here," nodding in the man's direction, "wonders if you'd like to accompany him. He says someone who took down a Minesprayer with a spear blow might be quite useful in the caves."

Stomp looked at the lanky man, who fixed him with blue eyes. With some discomfort, he noticed that the creature on the man's shoulder was also staring at him, and he felt as though he heard a whispering voice in his head. He felt observed and uncomfortable, so his response came out more abruptly than intended: "And what's in it for me? Why should I do that?"

"Well, you'll get equipment, can choose another weapon if you like, and if you do well, you could even join the Organizers Guild," the halfling grumbled in response.

Stomp contemplated the offer, as it wasn't a bad one. However, he felt exhausted, and the idea of wandering around in dark tunnels with this silent figure he'd only known for two hours, in an unfamiliar place, didn't seem very appealing.

"Actually, I'm pretty much at the end of my tether. After all, the day hasn't been easy," he admitted, looking a bit embarrassed and staring at his plate. When he looked up again, he found himself sitting across from the halfling. Gaist had vanished.

"Yeah, that's him!" the halfling commented with a glance to where the man in blue had been a moment ago. "It can be quite unnerving, but you get used to it sooner or later."

Seemingly, that topic was closed for him, and he returned his attention to his meal. Stomp felt uneasy, as if he had just made a mistake. He had allied himself with these people, and it didn't feel right to just stop halfway.

As if to confirm his thoughts, he noticed movement to his left. Something blue darted through his field of vision. When he looked in that direction, he saw Gaist's creature sitting right on the table. From this close, he could finally examine it in detail. It was about twice the size of a rat but had a similar body shape and posture. However, it was covered in thick, almost fluffy, blue fur, and its long tail, which whipped back and forth, had the same texture. With a twitching nose and wildly whisking barbs, it looked up at him. The bright blue button-like eyes fixed on him, and he once again felt as though he heard whispering. The eyes appeared intelligent and seemed to hold a question, and he felt uncomfortably exposed to his very core. Just as he was contemplating whether it would be wise to push this creature off the table, it spun around in an exceedingly rapid motion, briefly presented its rear end, and then darted into the darkness with its tail flickering.

"Chekk likes you," came a hoarse whisper from his right, and Stomp jumped up in surprise. He spun around and saw Gaist standing next to him. For the first time, there was a hint of a smile flickering across his face. Next to him was another figure who looked down at Stomp with an amused grin.

"Do you have to scare me like that?" Stomp exclaimed, completely thrown off balance. "The day has been bad enough. I'm a newbie, for heaven's sake. I've only been here for a day, and you're bombarding me with worms, blue rats, people suddenly appearing out of nowhere, and then that panther thing..."

It had become quiet around him, and some of the people sitting nearby watched the scene with a mixture of amusement and understanding. Gaist's companion now spoke for the first time: "Calm down, my friend. Believe me, we all know this feeling."

Stomp took a deep breath and sat back down. He then allowed himself to look at the speaker. He was slim, although not as gaunt and skinny as Gaist. He wore a dark gray, iridescent shirt and trousers, with several vial flasks hanging from his belt. As he spoke, he made sparing gestures with his ringed hands. His open and friendly face, with black eyes fixed on Stomp, looked youthful, fresh, and well-rested. His closely cropped black hair stood in stubbles in all directions, and a blue wave tattoo adorned his forehead. To Stomp's relief, he realized that he was in the presence of a Water Circle alchemist. He knew that this group of magicians specialized in healing and that most of the major advancements in arcane medicine came from their ranks. The alchemist continued speaking, and Stomp realized that he was already using the power of his words to achieve a calming effect. The voice took on a shimmering, sonorous undertone, and Stomp felt his heart rate slow, his breathing become slower, and a pleasant warmth spread inside him.

"Gaist here asks me to offer you that, in case you accompany him, I use my powers to enhance your physical performance or replenish the losses your reserves have suffered. I would be pleased to provide you with this service if you allow me."

Stomp knew that this was a ritual question with which Water Circle alchemists began every treatment of injuries or illnesses. He raised his hand.

He looked long into Gaist's face and replayed the events of today in his mind. Finally, he made a decision and turned to the healer. "I am grateful to receive the art of your gift," he spoke the formal words and gazed into Gaist's face as he said it. For the first time, Gaist smiled, nodded at him, and quickly disappeared into the darkness behind him.

Stomp turned back to the healer and saw that he was offering him a vial flask. "Take this with you. One sip, and you'll feel better. Two sips, and your physical performance will be enhanced. Now, close your eyes."

As Stomp obeyed, he heard the halfling's bass voice behind him saying, "I always enjoy seeing this..." The halfling continued speaking, but Stomp no longer heard him. His entire consciousness was now filled with the murmuring that the healer in front of him emitted. The murmuring grew deeper, and Stomp felt his excitement fade away, his breathing become regular, and, behind his closed eyelids, blue, lightning-like structures began to appear. In a few seconds, these structures formed and took on a wavy shape. Finally, all he perceived behind his closed eyes was a blue, undulating movement, and deep peace overcame him.

Gradually, the phenomenon faded, and Stomp opened his eyes. He felt fresh and rested, as if after a long sleep and a hearty breakfast. Looking around, he realized that not a second had passed; "... not something I could afford too often, after all, I'm just a regular ore digger."

Stomp looked at the smiling magician and uttered the ritual words: "Your gift saved me." With a nod, the magician turned away. As Stomp returned his attention to his meal and listened to the cheerful chatter of the halfling, he saw the Organizers approaching his table.

The two brothers carried a backpack on their shoulders, just like Gaist, who held a fourth one in his hand. Gaist placed one of the bundles on the table and nodded at Stomp, who got up hesitantly. He opened the container, which was entirely woven from a brightly blue cloth, and uncovered its contents. Inside, there was a braided leather rope that, as the halfling assured, could easily hold his weight with full equipment. Attached to it was a three-pronged climbing claw. He also found several torches, tinderboxes, candles, a belt with multiple pockets and loops, as well as a blue-dyed leather gambeson that, while no longer new and already patched in several places, roughly matched his size. He noticed that it was dyed blue on the outside, but he could reverse it and wear the dark brown surface outward.

"Practical," he thought to himself as he took out the acid vials and put them in one of the belt pouches. He placed the vial that the alchemist had given him in another pocket, along with the tinderbox. The dagger went into his boot, and the sword, with its sheath, was fastened to a designated loop. The rest went into the backpack, which was equipped with a long strap that could be worn across his shoulder.

Having equipped himself in this way, he looked from one to the other, and as the Organizers turned and headed towards the mine, Stomp approached the halfling and extended his hand.

"Thank you. You have shown yourself to be a fair man, and I hope to prove myself worthy of your friendship."

"Ah, never mind that!" boomed the halfling, shaking Stomp's hand. "Even though I'm not so sure anymore if you're cut out for the Miners Guild," he added, giving a significant glance to the blue gambeson.

With a grin, Stomp turned around, picked up the spear, and handed the halfling his fighting staff, saying, "Maybe someone could use this." Tunneltracker accepted the weapon and watched the departing newcomer.

When Stomp reached the group ahead of him, he realized that it had now been reinforced by two more members, as the halfling had mentioned that two miners would accompany them. These two, both stout men in their middle years, were dressed in the typical miner's attire, and they introduced themselves as Jan Ore-Nose and Yoyo.

The latter earned his name because the only words he spoke were a grunting "Yo!" However, Ore-Nose assured Stomp that Yoyo had always managed to make his intentions and opinions understood. As Stomp looked at Yoyo's strong, callused hands, broad, honest face, and stocky, muscular body, he could already imagine what Ore-Nose meant.

Amid encouraging comments from the onlookers, the five entered the entrance of the open mine, and Stomp marveled at its interior. It was a large alcove, roughly forty meters in diameter, gradually tapering into several tunnel entrances that seemed to swallow everything like black holes. On both sides of the chamber, several houses and huts were built into the walls, some made of stone, others of wood, interconnected by ladders and wooden walkways. Firelight and torchlight shone from many windows and openings, and the whole pueblo hummed with life. Many eyes followed them, and the air was filled with both encouraging and bawdy shouts.

As the group approached the middle of the gaping tunnel entrances and then plunged into the darkness, the comments behind them gradually fell silent. Stomp, too, felt less comfortable now and noticed a growing unease, especially when steep steps appeared before him in the light of the torches they had taken from wall brackets. Without hesitation, they began descending into the depths. On the staircase, Stomp noticed that at irregular intervals, side tunnels and passages were dug, and he imagined the whole mine as a giant, bustling anthill, perforated by thousands of diligent hands in search of the coveted mineral. As they descended deeper, the side passages became less frequent, and the walls closed in, heightening the newcomer's unease.

This unease intensified as the path took a sharp left turn and entered a steep, roughly hewn tunnel that was shored up every fifteen steps with wooden supports that looked too makeshift for Stomp's taste. Ore-Nose noticed his nervous stare and reassured him with a pat on the shoulder, claiming that there was no danger, which his companion confirmed with a dry "Yo, yo, yo." Ignoring the sweat glistening on Stomp's forehead, the miner continued to talk.

"Well, it does happen occasionally that a tunnel collapses, but that's rare. The last time was two years ago when further down, an entire cavern collapsed because those blasted Stonestranglers thought they needed fresh meat. They caused two tunnels to cave in, those darn critters. Fifteen people were trapped. Here, our Tunneltracker was the only one who found the way to those unfortunate souls and brought them all out, every single one. Unfortunately, it crushed his legs in the process. Can't have been pretty when several tons of rock fell on his feet." "Yo, bang, bang, Yo," his companion chimed in.

Stomp was now light-years away from feeling safe, and every creak in the timber, every puff of dust that rose in front of him, sent shivers down his spine.

Unperturbed, the miner continued, "Down there, we have the Orc caves. It must have been quite strange for the miners: you dig and dig, thinking you're about to return home for food and beer, bringing back the loot, and suddenly you're facing fifteen marauding orcs. Well, thank the Kasakks, it happens rarely, but when it does, you probably won't live to tell the tale." "Yo!"

Stomp was almost thankful to the Organizers when they silenced the talkative miner with a hiss and a resounding "Yo!" from Yoyo. With the last word echoing several times through the cavern, Yoyo received several angry glares from the blue-clad figures.

"Yo yo, yo yo yo!" he whispered sheepishly and shrugged his shoulders. The group turned away from the tunnel entrance to the right, and Stomp noticed an irregular, winding ridge that slanted along the side of the cavern into the depths. To the left, toward the abyss, a makeshift wooden gate had been installed, and as Stomp approached it, he saw a gaping, pitch-black chasm in front of his feet, the bottom of which was invisible. In the darkness of this area, there was nothing to see—no light, no reflections, no movement. He quickly directed his steps toward the right side of the ridge, where the rock wall appeared much safer.

However, his feeling of safety was short-lived. Ore-Nose, the ever-talkative miner, couldn't keep his mouth shut and whispered to Stomp, "The wall seems pretty sturdy, right? But you don't know the Stonestranglers yet. They're five meters long, look like giant cockroaches. And the worst part is, they burrow attack tunnels through the stone and camouflage the ends to look like solid rock. So when you, a harmless miner, come by, whistling and thinking about wine, beer, and food, whoosh, a large, hook-armed limb grabs you from behind, digs into your back, and pulls you into one of those tunnels faster than you can say 'Stonestrangler.' The only thing your buddies notice is your wriggling legs and your faint screams of pain, disappearing into the distance."

Stomp looked at the naive face of the burly, stocky man next to him and was tempted to drive his spearhead deep into that person's rear end for this unwelcome information. "Fascinating," he mumbled through clenched teeth, "but I'd appreciate it if you could keep your comments to yourself for now."

"Yo yo," the other miner agreed.

They descended deeper and deeper. To Stomp, it felt like hours as the group navigated through winding passages and caverns before, judging by a noticeable breeze, they reached a larger cavern.

Stomp almost collided with the Organizers in front when they came to a sudden stop. With a swift motion, Gaist spun around and knocked the surprised newcomer's torch from his hand. "What...?" he exclaimed when he realized he was now standing in total darkness. But not quite.

Further ahead in the depths, points of light appeared, one after the other, and from a distance, faint murmurs of voices could be heard. Behind them, Stomp heard a surprised "Yo" followed by a muffled thud. Otherwise, it was quiet.

Out of the darkness, they watched as a chain of twelve, no, thirteen torches moved in the depths of the abyss. Guttural, restrained sounds could be heard, interspersed with grunting and chattering noises. "Orcs," Ore-Nose whispered to the newcomer, causing Stomp to nearly drop his spear in shock. When, in response, he heard another muffled thud and an emphatic "Yo" from behind him, he couldn't help but grin.

"Where are we?" Stomp whispered into the darkness, and a hoarse voice responded, "We are directly under the abandoned mine. Forager and his companion were looking for a way there."

In the silence that followed, Stomp could hear the other group passing below the ridge they crouched on. Nothing could be seen except for the points of light moving about fifty meters below them. After a few minutes, the torches disappeared one by one around a bend, and the deep darkness returned.

"Where are we exactly?" Stomp repeated his whispering question, and Gaist's voice replied, "We should have reached the Orc caves. I don't know if that was just a group of orcs or if the gang from the Old Camp is up to something nasty. I can only hope our guards aren't asleep. We've always assumed there's a connecting passage from the Free Mine to the Abandoned one, but we hoped those swine from the Old Camp didn't know about it. I hope what we just saw doesn't mean the opposite."

In the darkness, Stomp nodded and wondered how anyone could keep their bearings in this darkness amid this maze of tunnels.

After silence had settled, they continued on, moving cautiously. The descent that followed was quiet. The Organizers led the group with an almost sleepwalking confidence through the darkness. After another half an hour, when Stomp thought he couldn't bear the darkness any longer, their guides stopped, and one of the three knelt behind a rocky outcrop to light a torch. Stomp squinted against the blinding light, and his eyes slowly adjusted. He looked around and saw a large, naturally formed cavern filled with stalactites and stalagmites, their shadows cast threateningly on the walls by the torchlight. Several tunnel-like passages led in different directions, and above them, a cave mouth yawned open like a maw, from which a cold, musty draft quietly blew out.

"That's the way up," Gaist whispered, pointing to a rope dangling down from the right edge of the opening above them. Stomp was about to ask what they meant by "up" when he halted.

They all felt it. The trembling began beneath them, and in response, a cracking and creaking of shattering stone echoed around them.

Everyone instinctively lowered their heads and looked in horror at the rocky walls and the hanging stalactites, which started to sway in the torchlight. Not far from them, one of these giants crashed to the ground with a resounding noise, and they crouched to avoid the flying rock splinters. The tremors grew stronger, and they struggled to stay on their feet. After seemingly endless seconds, the vibrations subsided, and they hastily picked up the items that had fallen from their hands during the shaking. Stomp stopped when he heard a loud "Yo, yo, yo yo yo" behind him and looked questioningly at the miner who was bouncing up and down wildly, making frantic gestures toward one of the tunnel openings.

"What is he saying?" he asked the companion, who furrowed his brow and looked at his friend. "I'm not sure. I usually understand what he says, but..." "Maybe it's another vision; they always come with the shaking," Gaist's whispered voice remarked.

All doubt vanished when a loud, guttural howl, which eerily echoed off the walls, could be heard coming from the direction the miner had pointed. As if to confirm, in the torchlight, hairy figures of several man-sized beings appeared in the tunnel opening, waving grotesquely long arms and charging toward the group with wild grunts.

"Cave orcs, by Kasakk's reeking pile!" Ore-Nose bellowed, and without hesitation, he rushed toward the attackers, followed by the loudly chattering Yoyo. While Stomp was still trying to regain his composure, frantically looking around and picking up his spear, he heard a double hissing on his left and saw the Kodang woods whirling through the air toward the attackers. He watched with fascination as the unusual weapons, seemingly expertly thrown, buried themselves deep into the skulls of the two leading the charge. One of the sticks got stuck, but the other returned smoothly, following a clean, arched path back into the hand of the blue-clad figure on Stomp's left, leaving a deep furrow in the bewildered orc's face before it collapsed beside his already fallen comrade.

Then Stomp had no more time to pay attention to the events around him, as two of the hairy creatures, loudly snorting and wielding primitive clubs, were approaching his position. He saw their broad faces in front of him, their wide-open, drooling mouths with dirty yellow teeth. Their lower fangs reached far up into their faces, and their big, wide-open eyes glittered maliciously in the torchlight. With more caution, they approached, making threatening gestures and challenging roars at the lone man.

Stomp could see the matted, greenish-brown fur covering their entire bodies, the primitive loincloths they wore, and the numerous pieces of iron worked into the clubs, which were made from dozens of rootwood sticks. What became evident now was that they were more than just primitive creatures. Following a brief, rapid exchange in a rough, guttural language that Stomp couldn't comprehend, the two attackers moved apart and tried to encircle him.

The one on the right, the larger of the two, roared at him defiantly and struck the ground several times with his club while making obscene gestures with his free hand. Despite the crude display, Stomp, young as he was, was experienced enough not to be distracted by it. He slowly backed away, desperately trying to keep an eye on the other attacker who was attempting to get behind him. Eventually, the larger orc grew impatient and, with a loud grunt, charged at Stomp.

Stomp had anticipated the attack and ran toward the creature in front of him to evade the one behind him. Just as the creature in front had raised its arm for a strike, Stomp dropped to the ground. He silently thanked the metal reinforcements in his knee area when he landed on the uneven rock surface, right at the feet of the creature.

The creature tried to stop its charge but couldn't prevent Stomp's spear, held horizontally, from smashing into its kneecaps with a loud crash from the front. The impact brought tears to Stomp's eyes, but he was rewarded with a surprised cry from the creature above him and a dull thud behind him.

Without taking a triumphant pause, Stomp rolled forward and heard the second attacker's club strike the rock surface right where his back had been a moment earlier. With a quick spin, he got back on his feet just in time to block the incoming club attack from above with a two-handed parry.

A nearly overpowering cloud of foul odor, a mixture of urine, unwashed bodies, and wet fur, engulfed him, bringing tears to his eyes. Right in front of him was the ugly face of his opponent, who spewed guttural cries and sprayed droplets of saliva into his face. Despite his best efforts, he couldn't withstand the pressure from above, and he felt his arms beginning to tremble. He knew he wouldn't hold up in a direct strength comparison, so he resorted to a last-ditch effort, silently praying that the anatomy of these creatures wasn't too different from humans.

He raised his right knee high and thrust it deep into the creature's abdomen. It worked! The pressure lessened, and the orc stumbled backward with an almost endearing whimper. Stomp, who was ready to follow up with the spear to end the fight, hesitated when he saw the creature drop its club. He wouldn't kill a helpless opponent. That moment of compassion nearly cost him dearly.

As soon as he lowered his spear, the orc, its long arms outstretched sideways, jumped over the tip of the weapon and pounced on Stomp. He tried to raise the spear, but it was too late. The orc fell on him with a loud cry, and the impact knocked Stomp off his feet. He landed heavily on his back and felt sharp rocks digging into his flesh. Over him crouched the attacker, raising a hand that held a curved dagger whose blade glinted in the torchlight. The jagged edge moved downward, and Stomp thought his last second had arrived as the cold steel pressed against the exposed skin of his throat.

He almost screamed when the creature began to speak. "I eat your liver; my little ones will play with your eyes, and your corpse will be left for the scavengers," it growled in its guttural language. Foul breath wafted over Stomp's face, accompanied by a rain of drool. He could see this wide, brutal face up close, with black eyes set deep beneath bushy brows, gleaming with malicious triumph.

The orc straightened up and raised the dagger for the final thrust. It tilted its head back and let out a triumphant roar into the darkness of the cave. Stomp used this opportunity to quickly draw the dagger from his boot. As the orc turned back to complete its work, he pulled his arm free with a sudden motion. The orc, taken off guard by this sudden attack, flinched and stared at the hilt of the weapon that Stomp had thrust deep into its lower abdomen. Full of horror and unable to take further action, the creature watched as the dagger slipped from its fingers and, with a bone-chilling scream, it fell to the side. In a panic and gripped by terror, Stomp scrambled away from the scene to be immediately confronted by another of the cave dwellers. This one limped toward him, its face twisted in pain, gnashing its teeth in anger. It held a club in its left hand and a fist-sized rock in its right, which it hurled with a swift motion. Stomp just managed to drop to the ground, narrowly avoiding the projectile that shattered against the cave wall behind him. Frantically searching for his spear, Stomp spotted it just two paces in front of him. In a swift move, he positioned himself beside it. He raised the weapon and turned to face the creature limping even slower towards him, holding a mangled club in its left hand. It had a slow reaction time due to its injuries, and Stomp took advantage of this by stepping forward, extending the longer reach of his weapon.

Stomp swung the spear in a wide arc, taking advantage of the creature's slowness. The end of the spear crashed into the already injured knee of the attacker. This momentarily slowed the orc, but with a crunching noise from its massive teeth, it hobbled closer, its angry eyes focused intently on its opponent.

The club was raised, and a sweeping blow nearly knocked Stomp off his feet. He staggered backward, holding the spear horizontally to fend off another similar attack. His injured shoulder was throbbing, making it difficult to hold the weapon upright. Using the orc's sluggishness to his advantage and the greater range of his weapon, Stomp stepped forward, swinging the spear in another wide arc. The orc, too slow to react in time, took the hit on its already injured knee. This slowed it briefly, but with a crunching noise from its massive teeth, it inched closer, its eyes filled with anger, its dripping saliva making its intentions clear.

The club was raised, and a sweeping blow would have nearly knocked Stomp off his feet. He staggered backward and held the spear horizontally to fend off another attack of a similar kind. His wounded shoulder was throbbing, and it was increasingly difficult to hold the weapon upright. With triumphant roars and recognizing his weakening opponent, the green-haired monster continued to charge at him. Stomp, struggling to keep his spear up, could feel his strength waning. The relentless blows from the orc's club wore him down, and around him, he heard cries—some triumphant, some filled with pain. But he was unable to focus on his surroundings. He saw the malicious glint in his opponent's eyes, the drool on its dirty, yellow teeth, and he knew that his strength was gradually diminishing.

Recalling an old lesson from his fencing instructor, Stomp resorted to a last-ditch effort and shouted at his opponent, "I will eat your liver, you monster, and I will give your eyes to my children to play with!" His adversary stood as if struck by lightning, only to rush at him a second later with a loud grunt.

This was precisely what Stomp had hoped for, and as intended, his opponent threw caution to the wind. Gasping for breath, Stomp dropped to one knee, causing the heavy club to swoosh harmlessly over him. He raised the end of his spear between the orc's unprotected legs. Without waiting for a reaction, he propelled himself upwards, driving his shoulder into the creature's abdomen and throwing himself forward with a desperate cry.

The two of them fell heavily on top of each other, and a noxious cloud of stench engulfed Stomp. Using his momentum, he rolled over his opponent. With his last ounce of strength, he turned around and struck the one on the ground with the tip of his spear. He unloaded all his frustration and anger in these blows, and he realized that the one letting out that loud, animalistic scream was himself. He struck and thrust again and again. It was only when he couldn't lift his weapon anymore and took a trembling step back that he noticed his adversary no longer moved. Instead, there lay a bloody, lifeless bundle of green, foul-smelling fur before him.

A buzzing sound filled the air. At first, Stomp thought it was a product of his overwrought senses, but looking around, he noticed the sound was everywhere. It seemed to be emanating from the ground and the rocks surrounding him. He gazed around in puzzlement.

Around him, several dead orcs were scattered. There was no sign of the recent battle. On closer examination, he saw one of the miners, Ore-Nose, and one of the Organizers lying lifeless on the ground. As he reached them, he realized that Ore-Nose would never fill the air with his chatter again, and the other companion was also gone. In silent respect, Stomp uttered a prayer for the souls of the deceased.

After a deep sigh, he stood up and continued his search. Further ahead, one of the blue-clad figures was sitting on the ground, burying their face in their hands.

Gaist or Yoyo was nowhere to be seen. Stomp, swaying as he got to his feet, set off toward the blue-clad figure. Disgusted, he walked around the orc corpses, realizing that the group of five had fought bravely against a force more than double their size. While collecting his belongings that he had carelessly dropped earlier, he approached the person who sat hunched on the ground. Coming closer, he observed the person swaying their upper body in what seemed like agony and thought he could hear a muffled muttering between their fingers.

He approached gently, and when he was one step away, he spoke to the person in a soft voice, saying, "I'm sorry, my friend, that your companion perished."

The crouching figure remained in its movement but made no further indication or showed any sign of understanding that Stomp was there. Stomp hesitated and looked at the figure in front of him. There was something strange about him; he trembled as if holding back restrained energy or an unspeakable anger.

With caution, almost hesitantly, Stomp reached out his hand and touched the figure on the shoulder... and jumped back in alarm because his counterpart had spun around with an almost animalistic growl and fixed a wild gaze on his surroundings. He looked mostly the same as before, actually, but something was different. It wasn't the animalistic growl that emanated from his throat, it wasn't the bloody foam from a bitten lower lip, nor the frantic look as he scanned the cave for who knows what. It wasn't even the fingers that were clawed and wildly gesticulating in the air. The most terrifying aspect was his eyes. The pupils still looked the same as before, but the whites of his eyes had turned into a flaming red, which brought a frightening change to his facial expression. The Organizer growled at Stomp, his face twisted into a wild grimace of hatred or fear. With his hands raised, Stomp stepped back.

"Calm down, it's me, your companion. The danger is over! Come to your senses! What happened to you?"

Instead of a response, the crouching figure lunged at him with a loud growl. He almost stabbed with his spear, which he still held defensively in his hand. In the nick of time, he realized he was facing a friend and quickly swung the weapon aside; otherwise, the rushing figure might have impaled himself without realizing it. The two collided with each other, and Stomp was knocked off his feet by the furious force of the attack. Sharp rock fragments painfully dug into his back as he fell heavily to the ground. The Organizer loomed over him, attempting to put his hands around Stomp's throat, slobbering and frothing at the mouth. His clawed fingers wildly waved in front of Stomp's face, and his fingernails tore into Stomp's cheek several times. Desperately, Stomp tried to shield his face. When he finally managed to grasp the wrists of his aggressor, he was horrified by the relentless strength he felt in them. His horror intensified as the attacker bared his teeth with a wolfish growl and quickly lowered his head to bite into Stomp's neck.

That was too much, friend or not! With his last bit of strength, he managed to keep the madman at bay, throwing himself around desperately and causing the man crouching on top of him to fall. Kicking and cursing, he pushed him away and tried to get to his feet. Not fast enough! Swift as a weasel, the other man had already jumped up and threw himself at the fleeing one. Just in time, Stomp managed to pull up one leg and place his knee between the two bodies.

Unmoved, the crazy Organizer continued his attack. He did not seem to notice at all the knee-jerk that must have hit him in a sensitive spot. Again, the fingernails drove through Stomp's face, leaving bloody welts. Desperately, Stomp fumbled for his dagger, until he remembered that he had left it stuck in the orc's corpse.

His frantic searching hands found a stone, and as a last resort, he clutched it and struck it against the temple of his attacker once, twice, thrice... Only at the fifth blow did it show any effect: the hands' movements became more erratic, the gaze became vacant, and the tension left the body of the madman, allowing Stomp to push him away with his last strength.

Breathing heavily, he stood up and hastily looked for his spear. Only when he felt the familiar grip and raised the weapon did he turn to the Organizer. The Organizer appeared dazed, touching the blood on his face and looking around in astonishment. Stomp was bewildered, and the humming noise that had been subtly present all along caught his attention. He noticed that, in synchrony with this sound, a transformation was taking place in the figure before him: it froze, all muscles seemed tense, fingers curled, and as it spun around and growled at Stomp, he was not surprised to see the eyes swimming in red once more.

Now, he was wiser, he raised the tip of his spear and pointed it at the intimidating figure. The figure stared at him indifferently, seemingly ignoring the weapon. In a sudden movement, it spun around and raced into the darkness of the left tunnel opening, emitting a mad laughter.

Stomp stared after it in disbelief and was relieved to see the noise fading further into the darkness until it finally echoed away. The enervating hum, which seemed to emanate from his head and body, from the ground and the rocks, slowly faded. Trembling, Stomp lowered his now heavy weapon and looked around, breathing heavily. The place was dimly lit. The darkness was only illuminated by a few torches scattered between the rocks, giving off a gloomy shimmer. With rising horror, he realized that he was alone, the sole survivor of this orc attack, and he had no idea where he was. He would never find his way back through this intricate, labyrinthine tunnel system. He didn't even know in which direction he had moved or how deep underground he was. He struggled to control the panic that threatened to steal his breath.

"Think, think, what had the Organizer said: the group was located beneath the abandoned mine when the attack occurred."

He remembered the hole above them, the rope that temptingly dangled from it.

He quickly looked around. He found the creature he had killed and hobbled over to the corpse. His dagger was still where he had left it, and he shuddered as he pulled it out. He cleaned it thoroughly and then sheathed it in his boot.

Now, for the first time, he had the opportunity to take a closer look at his opponent. He had never seen an orc before, heard of them, yes, but seen one up close, no. Despite the oppressive situation, he examined the figure on the ground more closely. He noticed the green, matted fur that covered its entire body. The creature was roughly his size, although its hunched posture made it seem smaller. Its overlong arms ended in five-fingered hands armed with razor-sharp, dirty claws. The eyes, staring upwards, were black-green, and they looked out of a broad, rugged face with thick eyebrows, which, except for the lips and nose, was also covered with the same green, matted fur. The creature was clad in a primitive loincloth and emitted a foul, musky odor reminiscent of wet wool. With disgust, Stomp noticed that the creature's fur was infested with vermin. Nevertheless, it appeared well-nourished, and he shuddered with revulsion as he thought of the rumors and stories about man-eating orcs.

Once again, the rock around him vibrated, almost as if it wanted to remind him that it was unwise to linger in this place. He quickly looked around for his backpack and, after a short search, collected his belongings. He set off on the path he thought was the right one. After a short while, he spotted the abyss that he hoped would lead him to the escape route into the abandoned mine, and to his dismay, he found that the rope had disappeared. Additionally, several boulders falling from above had wedged the abyss shut. With a sigh, he accepted that he had no way of reaching the upper end of the abyss in this four-meter-high cave and abandoned all hope of being able to dig his way through this jumble of stones. Panic welled up again as he attempted to find the way back.

His fear intensified when he discovered the tunnel entrance from which he and the group had entered the cave just ten minutes earlier. Here, too, a chaotic mass of boulders, almost the size of men, seemed to mockingly block the way. Panic seemed to become overwhelming, and as he sat down, drenched in sweat and trembling, against a boulder, he heard that eerie humming again. At that moment, he remembered the flask that still hung soothingly full at his belt. An inner voice told him, advised him, no, ordered him, that now was the right time to fortify himself with a little spiritual strength. Without hesitation, he uncorked the bottle and took a hearty sip. Again, he felt that strange euphoria and managed to suppress the chuckle that was rising in his throat. Then that, too, was over, and with newfound confidence, he looked around. He remembered the three cave exits and, shrugging his shoulders, knowing that no other path was destined for him, headed toward them. While doing so, he recalled that there was no sign left of the other companions, and a faint hope sprouted that he might find one of those men who knew their way around the caves well.

When he reached the tunnels and was still pondering which way to go, he noticed for the first time the dripping sound coming from the left entrance. Almost simultaneously, he realized that he was stepping through puddles as he walked, and a pungent, earthy smell wafted out of the opening and brushed against him.

If he remembered correctly, the orcs had stormed out of the middle cave, so his only option was the right path. He looked around and collected all the torches he could find.

There were four that were still somewhat usable. He quickly extinguished three of them, placed them in his bundle, and took the fourth, which was the longest. Shuddering, filled with discomfort and only relying on the chemical confidence inside him, which he had consumed earlier with a big gulp, he set off.

Upon entering the tunnels, he quickly realized that he was descending again, which did nothing to improve his mood. Unconsciously, he tightened his grip on the spear and tried to pierce the darkness ahead. The humming had stopped, and there was no longer any sign of the earthquake.

"Perhaps a good sign," he thought to himself and began counting his steps, hoping to gain at least a rough sense of orientation. After twenty steps, he reached a sharp bend and, after making sure he was alone, he turned into the new passage. Thanks to Kasakk, he held the torch high enough, for otherwise, he would have almost fallen into the abyss gaping in front of him after a few meters. He realized that this black, gaping chasm in front of him must have had a natural origin, and judging from all the rubble, he concluded that it had been opened by the earthquake. The passage behind it grew narrower in the torchlight, and in the darkness beyond, he thought he could see the end. He knelt down and listened. His overstimulated senses seemed to perceive murmured voices below.

After a brief consideration, he took out a torch he had collected earlier and lit it. Gathering his courage, he dropped the shorter of the two torches into the hole and watched its fall. To his great relief, he found that it struck the ground after only four or five meters, and his mood improved when nothing and no one reacted to this event. Moreover, he could see that on the opposite side, easily reachable by a short climb, several boulders provided a good descent. After waiting for several minutes without incident, he dared to start his descent. It was not easy to find a firm footing on this slippery and loose rubble, but he made it to the bottom without major injuries.

Extinguishing the torch lying there with his foot and stowing it in his backpack, he looked around. It was another passage extending into the darkness at a right angle to the direction he had previously taken. He saw a dead end after a few steps in the opposite direction, and since the path was clear, he cautiously moved towards the noise. He oriented himself along the left side of the tunnel and continued, clutching the torch with his left hand and the spear with his right.

It became evident that this was not an artificially created cavern and it must have been quite old. The passage in front of him narrowed in the darkness and eventually ended in a round, almost dome-like chamber, from which two more paths branched out almost at right angles. The murmuring voices he had heard earlier now grew louder and appeared to be coming from the right opening.

He also believed he could see the faint glimmer of fire there. He extinguished his torch and crept on, following the voices. He hoped to encounter more members of the New Camp and find a way out of this eerie labyrinth. Nevertheless, he remained cautious, remembering the experiences he had had in this facility so far.

As he approached, he realized his caution was justified, for the voices ahead turned out to be the guttural, throaty grunts he had previously heard from the Greenfurred. His hair stood on end, and with all senses on high alert, he continued with extreme caution.

The light grew brighter, and in front of him, a bend in the path appeared. Upon reaching it, he dared to take a look around the curve and found that the corridor ahead of him led to what seemed like a balcony. Crawling on his belly, paying no attention to the dirt and filth he was moving through, he approached the edge and peered over it.

Before him, he saw a relatively large, natural cave, roughly thirty meters in diameter. It extended almost five men's lengths to the highest point, and the floor was about three men's lengths below his position. Amid hundreds of stalactites and stalagmites, he observed several figures in the light of several torches and two individual large fires, clearly hearing their throaty sounds used for communication.

They did not seem to be concerned in any way and made no effort to be particularly quiet. To the right, he could see a large passage where the large fires blazed on either side. Several notably large specimens of this species, armed with pikes and axes, held their positions by these fires. Between them, their kind came and went, chatting and grunting. Some of them carried loads on their backs, while others seemed to be loitering without much purpose.

In the middle of the cave, sitting around another large fire, he found a dozen or so of these creatures. Over the fire, a piece of meat was rotating, which ominously reminded him of the Minesprayer he had encountered only a few hours ago.

Directly across from him, about one man's length above the ground, he could see two more holes, which appeared to be additional tunnel entrances. He withdrew, leaned against the wall, and contemplated his situation. He saw no way to bridge the three men's length difference to the ground, and he didn't know how he could pass these creatures unseen. Moreover, he thought that the fact they had settled so unreservedly in this cave meant he must be much deeper than he thought, and this was likely an area where hardly anyone from the camps above would venture.

Following his thoughts, he slowly and cautiously retreated into the tunnel. Only after he had left the bend behind did he dare to pick up the pace. He listened carefully, ready to sprint at the first sign of discovery, as if Furies were chasing him. However, he reached the junction unharmed. Carefully, with all senses alert, he entered the other tunnel and navigated through the darkness. He finally allowed himself to light a torch after the voices behind him had almost faded away.

He continued to sneak forward, and after about fifty meters, he noticed that the floor was gently sloping upward. A little later, he entered another cave, about ten meters in diameter, which, as a quick check showed, was unoccupied and empty. Relieved, he found a suitable spot and took a short break. The air smelled musty, and he heard the dripping of water from the corners of the room. He could see several glistening, moist roots extending from the ceiling, about four meters high. After a brief pause, he set off again and left the cave through the opposite opening.

But he didn't get far. After just ten meters behind a bend, he was faced with a massive rock wall, and with increasing anxiety, he realized that this passage led to a dead end. His panic grew when he realized that he had no way left, and he hurried back to the cavern where he had taken a break just minutes ago. There, he stopped, breathing heavily, struggling to suppress his fear.

As he stood there, in the middle of the cave, shoulders slumped, jaws grinding, trembling and desperate, he heard the sounds he had hoped never to hear again. Directly above him, that rumbling growl echoed, and slowly, very slowly, he turned his face upwards. At first, he couldn't perceive anything. The shadows cast by his torch danced wildly among the roots hanging from the cave ceiling. Then, he saw between two roots, a dark cloud forming. Initially, he mistook it for smoke from his torch. However, as he continued to observe, this cloud condensed and took the shape of a large cat. He could hardly believe his eyes; the cat sat upside down on the ceiling, high above him. The familiar eye sockets began to glow, and he saw the yellow glint from the creature's abyss of a mouth between long, gleaming fangs. It sat there, upside down, on the ceiling, high above him, just as calmly and serenely as if it were sitting on the ground before him. The massive head twisted, and the yellow lights fixed upon his astonished face. He dared not move. He did not want to imagine what would happen to him if he had to face this creature alone in this cave, a creature that seemed not to be concerned with the laws of gravity.

Slowly, he backed away until he felt the hard edge of the rock wall against his shoulders, unable to tear his gaze away from the unbelievable sight above him. There was a strange aroma in the air, smoky and sweet. He had smelled this odor before, but he couldn't determine when or where. He watched in amazement as the dark figure began to blur and formed small, silent tendrils, as if the whole creature were evaporating. The outlines became increasingly unclear, leaving only a dark smoky cloud between the roots. Only the eyes still radiated from it.

With growing unease, he noticed a thin thread descending from the mist down towards the ground, right in front of him. The entire cloud gradually shifted down to collect at his feet. Last of all, the yellow eyes glided along the thin column of gray mist and paused directly at eye level.

A few heartbeats later, the sooty cloud solidified back into the form of a large panther-like cat that sat calmly before him, its bright yellow eyes fixating on him. With a smooth, powerful movement, it turned around and trotted with a spring in its step towards the opposite rock wall. Right before the wall, it stopped and looked at him almost invitingly over its shoulder.

He jerked back in surprise and almost dropped his spear when he heard that deep, rumbling voice say, "Search in the orc caves. Use the Minesprayer's gift, Spearbearer."

The creature turned its head and stared at the wall. A yellowish glow appeared on the stone, and as if it were the most natural thing in the world, the creature moved towards that radiance, disappearing into the rock with a faint hiss. Silence fell. The only light in the room was now from his own torch and the faintly pulsating glow from the spot opposite him, which gradually faded. It took him several minutes to recover from the shock, and he eventually gathered his courage.

Hesitantly, spear at the ready, he crept towards the spot where the panther-like creature had vanished. He stopped at a respectful distance and carefully prodded the stone with the tip of his spear. It appeared massive, several meters thick, impenetrable. He nearly laughed. He had almost believed that a creature that had instilled such fear in him, like nothing else in the world, could point him towards an exit. Half giggling, half sobbing, he sank to his knees. The floor seemed to vibrate beneath him, and he almost thought he heard that eerie, high-pitched hum again. "I'm going mad, I'm going mad just like the Organizer," he thought.

Without thinking, he pulled out the flask from his belt, uncorked it, and took a sip. It was like always, and after the initial effects of the drug had faded, he felt refreshed and revitalized. He settled into a more comfortable position, sitting cross-legged and staring at the spot in the rock. He pondered. In reality, this creature hadn't even attacked him. Quite the opposite, for some reason, it seemed to want to help him. Once more, her words came back to him. "Gift of the Minesprayer," he murmured to himself, and he contemplated desperately until, with a triumphant shout, followed by a furtive, fearful glance around, he fished out one of the vials of Sprayer acid, which, thanks to Kasakk, had remained intact.

It wasn't large, containing perhaps three ounces of the corrosive liquid. Hesitatingly, he opened the wax seal. A pungent, acrid aroma emanated from the bottle. With trembling fingers, he approached the wall and began to spray the foul-smelling substance against the stone. Where the acid met the surface, small plumes of smoke rose, and there was a distinct cracking and grinding noise from the wall. Then, silence returned.

Disappointed, he stepped back, hoping to see the swirling movements in the rock that had heralded the approach of the Sprayer. Growing increasingly frustrated, he first looked at the seemingly untouched stone, then at the empty bottle in his hands.

In anger, he flung the bottle away from him and stared at the wall, which seemed to mock him with silent grins. Angrily, he turned to leave, but not before striking the rock with the shaft of his spear.

A splintering sound followed, and refreshing air brushed against his face. With a cry, all caution forgotten, he rushed closer and discovered that the spear had created a hole in the wall about the size of a human head. He struck it again and again and a third and fourth time until he had created an opening nearly a meter wide in the brittle stone. Casting a fearful look around, concerned that a horde of orcs might arrive at the last moment to thwart his escape, he crawled through the opening on all fours.

Inside, he noticed that a strong gust of wind almost extinguished his torch. There was a howling sound, as if the air had to travel a great distance through a narrow pipe. After climbing for several meters, his outstretched hand brushed against a rising wall. The wind blew down on him from above, and as he leaned back, he spotted a single point of light far above him. It seemed to be in a chimney, and his searching hands found smooth, naturally carved rock walls all around.

Just as he was about to give up his search in frustration, something brushed against his head, and with a cry, he dropped. It was only then, in the light of his torch, that he saw the end of a dangling rope. Trembling, he stood up, grasped the roughly four-centimeter-thick rope, and pulled on it to test its strength. A creaking sound echoed above him, but otherwise, the rope seemed to hold. He quickly extinguished the torch and stowed it in his backpack.

Uncertain, he held the spear in his hand, unsure of how to ascend with it. Leaving it behind was not an option, so he nervously used the rope from his bundle to create a loop that allowed him to strap the weapon to his back.

By now, his eyes had adjusted to the twilight, and in the reflection above, he could see a long, ascending shaft dotted with irregularly placed openings at different heights. He grabbed the rope and, with his feet braced against the rock wall, started the arduous ascent. After just a few meters, when his strength began to wane, he reached the first traverse and found himself in a cavern that was clearly not of natural origin. In the dim light, he could see several supporting beams and several tunnel entrances in different directions. Everything was empty and abandoned.

He left the rope, his arms trembling and aching, and slowly moved further into the room. He could tell from the debris at his feet and the surroundings that, although this area seemed to belong to one of the mines, it hadn't been in use for a long time.

He lit a torch, and in its light, he examined the room more closely. At the back of the chamber, he saw a rectangular structure, and upon closer inspection, he realized it was an old, rotting mine cage. It was a primitive wooden frame with a semi-decayed wooden basket that could accommodate three men. Several ropes led upwards from it. Above, he spotted another tunnel entrance and, without knowing why, he ventured further into it.

Something felt vaguely familiar to him, and after a few steps, he reached the end of the passage. He peered into a cave, scattered with stalagmites and stalactites, illuminated by two torches that were about to give their last flicker of light. To his astonishment, he recognized the cave; he saw the dead orcs in front of him and, further down, the three tunnel openings. He was high above the ground, and it was now clear to him why he had missed the tunnel entrance from which he had just looked down during his escape. Down below, nothing had changed; the dead bodies were still there, and there was no sign of his missing companions. To his left, he saw the blocked entrance from which he believed he had come.

Stomp sighed and turned around, eager to get to the surface and leave this labyrinth behind. Spitting into his hands, he grabbed the rope and continued to climb. He passed two more tunnel entrances, equally as abandoned as the first, and although his arms ached, he didn't have the courage or strength for further explorations. After another five meters, his strength began to wane, and just as he was looking for a suitable resting place, the rope jerked. Another jerk followed, and in terror, he screamed as the rope tightened and was rapidly pulled upwards. Desperately, he held on, clinging to the old, brittle rope and looked fearfully upward. A large, black shadow descended upon him, threatening to crush him. Paralyzed with fear, he watched as a massive boulder shot past him faster than he could react. Breathing a sigh of relief, he looked up, holding on to the rope with his last strength. The ascent continued faster and faster, and the light point above grew in seconds. He could already see a rock ceiling above him, illuminated by daylight. Just as he wondered if he would be shattered against it, a muffled thud came from below, and the rapid upward movement abruptly stopped. Trembling, he hung freely on the creaking, rotten rope in a large cave, with the misty, dim light of the day entering through the three man-high, circular entrances. Below him, he saw the circular chimney opening from which he had been shot like a crossbow bolt. With his last strength, he carefully descended along the rope, and after some clumsy attempts, he swung himself to the rock floor, where he hunched down, exhausted and on the verge of hysteria, at the edge of his physical and emotional limits.

He looked at his bloody fingers and then, with a pounding heart, surveyed the cavern. It felt familiar to him, especially the floor littered with debris and filth, which reminded him of the place where he had found an iron rod and Kimbahl an old leather helmet. He was back in the abandoned mine!

"So Gaist was right after all; there is a connection from the Free Mine to the abandoned one," he thought to himself. "Although it leads through the orc caves. And you need a black giant panther to find it!"

He felt a hysterical laughter welling up inside him, mixed with the relief of escaping from this labyrinth. Just as he was beginning to feel better, he leaped to his feet with a horrified cry as a cheerful voice sounded behind him.

"Well, you got out of there pretty well, my lad. I thought I'd do you a favor and lower the counterweight. When the rope started creaking, I already suspected that someone was climbing up, and it would have been quite a long ascent, wouldn't it?"

At first, Stomp looked at the speaker with fear, then with increasing bewilderment. He recognized him, sitting there cross-legged, his shabby coat gently swaying over his shoulder, a long-stemmed pipe in his hand, emitting large, sweetly aromatic clouds. The elderly man's brilliantly yellow eyes fixed on the astonished young man.

"What are you staring at? Never seen a man in his prime sitting in an abandoned mine, surrounded by rubbish and filth, enjoying his pipe?" The man remarked playfully.

This was too much. Stomp burst into laughter, feeling the pressure release through hysterical giggles. Silently and with a smirk, the old man watched his outburst, puffing on his pipe without making further comments.

Gradually, the young man calmed down and turned to his savior with an embarrassed, apologetic smile. "Forgive me, but I've only been here for the first or rather the second day, and I must tell you, it's unbelievable what I've been through. You must imagine, I got lost in caves, fought against orcs, and in the end, I was even attacked by a giant panther."

The old man raised his eyebrows without uttering a word, sucking on his pipe. "Well, not exactly attacked. I just met it, and, well, you could almost say it helped me. I mean, um... you know," Stomp stammered.

The old man nodded, giving an approving "Hm, hm," as he rose to his feet while puffing on his pipe. "Sounds quite exciting. It seems you're an extraordinary young man if you've experienced such peculiar things within forty-eight hours," he said, grumbling.

Both of them jumped as voices and footfalls from the cave entrance became loud. Whirling around, Stomp noticed several figures rushing past the mine entrance, moving quickly and loudly shouting. They seemed to be in great excitement, much like the dozen others who were sprinting in the same direction, passing by the mine.

"What's going on? Have they caught another Organizer?" Stomp asked.

"No. I think it's more likely that the old mine, the source of wealth and prosperity for the Ore Barons, got flooded during the last big quake. Some of the Graves have drowned. I suspect the quake opened up some passage to the lake, and the floods are finding themselves a new home," the old man explained with a shrug.

Stomp looked at him thoughtfully and said, "The entire mine is flooded, I mean, really filled up, totally unusable, completely filled with water, right?"

The old man grumbled in agreement, "In general, that's what the word 'flooded' means, yes."

"But they must inform the people in the New Camp, right? That would mean... I mean, the people in the New Camp and the Free Mine are in greater danger if I understood this correctly," Stomp blurted out as he realized the implications of this new twist of events for all parties involved.

The old man only looked at him with raised eyebrows.

Stomp continued, "Well, understand, if the mine is no longer producing, the Ore Barons won't want to give up their wealth. They will try to seize the ore in the Free Mine. We have to warn the miners there, or at least inform them that there's a connecting passage here."

"What have we here?" a voice echoed loudly off the cave walls.

Whirling around, Stomp saw four figures approaching the entrance with raised weapons. "Oh no, not this as well," he thought to himself, unconsciously taking a defensive posture. He quickly surveyed his surroundings, searching for a better vantage point and noticed the old man behind him, calmly drawing on his pipe as he observed the approaching group.

"The old Yellow-eye," one of them said loudly. "You've tormented us long enough, old man. You might have heard that the old mine is full of water and collapsed. The Ore Barons are furious, and everything is falling apart. Dozens of desperate people are trying to grab whatever they can get their hands on. And we'll take advantage of this chaos to repay you for all the trouble you've caused us in the last few months."

Stomp observed the approaching figures and saw in the spokesperson a burly, stocky man dressed in a wild mishmash of patched and cobbled-together leather and cotton scraps. Nevertheless, he appeared strong and well-fed, just like his companions, who were now spreading out with a malicious chuckle to cut off their escape route.

Stomp noticed that each of the four carried a weapon. He saw two swords, a two-handed battle-axe, and a long leather whip. In contrast, the old man, armed only with his long-stemmed pipe, appeared laughably defenseless.

The pale-green eyes of the leader turned towards Stomp and fixed on him for a long time. "As for you, kid, you can go away. We have nothing to do with you. It's up to you whether you stay and brighten our day, or you disappear and don't bother us."

Stomp gripped his spear tighter and without thinking, he blurted out, "You want to attack an unarmed old man with four of you, are you out of your minds? You..." He fell silent as he looked into the eyes of his adversary, where there was no white left, only pupils swimming in fiery red. He was reminded of the transformation the Organizer had undergone deep in the caves. It was only now that he noticed that strange buzzing in the air he had heard before.

"Your choice! Then I can welcome you to my collection right now," the man in front of him replied with a wicked grin, raising a chain around his neck. With disgust, Stomp realized they were human ears, dozens of them, meticulously strung together like pearls on a string.

The distraction almost worked, and Stomp's time might have been up. With a cry, the ear-bearer took advantage of his distraction, lunging over the trash-strewn cave floor toward him, launching a malevolent two-handed attack from above with his sword raised.

Stomp managed to drop to one knee and raised his spear just in time to intercept the sword strike. The impact went through his arms, and he recognized that madness had given extra strength to his opponent. With a swift movement, he thrust the shaft of the spear toward the waist of his adversary while still parrying the sword. The man staggered back a step but immediately launched another attack with a frenzied grin.

Stomp, again, managed to deflect the sword blows coming from the side with his spear. From the corner of his eye, he noticed that one of the group was trying to get to his left flank, while the other two remained fixed on the old man with a blank stare.

"Run, old man, run and get to safety!" he shouted, but he had no time to worry about the old man anymore. In the next few seconds, Stomp's world seemed to consist only of the gleaming sword blade that rushed towards his body in wild, jerky movements, which he managed to parry at the last moment repeatedly. Gradually, he grew tired, his recent ascent still weighing on his limbs. Desperately, he tried to both parry the sword strikes and keep an eye on his adversary's companions, all while avoiding slipping on the rubbish piling up at his feet.

To his right, he heard a loud scream, which quickly grew faint, and he fervently hoped that the strange old man had managed to get to safety. The forceful attacks also seemed to take a toll on his opponent, and when the latter paused for a brief moment, Stomp saw his chance. With his last bit of strength, he swung his spear around, and the long steel blade struck against his opponent's sword hand. Stomp had put all his strength into this blow, and with great satisfaction, he saw his opponent's sword lifted high with a spinning motion. Without thinking, he took a step forward, swinging the spear in a wide arc toward his opponent's face. As his opponent raised his arm to parry the blow, Stomp swiftly drew his dagger from his boot and stabbed into his opponent's unprotected abdomen. A shrill scream rewarded his efforts, and something warm splattered onto his face. The attacker staggered back, and out of the corner of his eye, he saw his opponent's accomplices rushing toward him. Without thinking, he swung his spear in their direction, and one of them barely managed to dodge the clumsily aimed thrust.

Stomp had had enough.

In a furious motion, putting every last bit of his energy into it, he hurled the spear in the direction of the newly appeared enemy. Right after that, with a loud roar, he drew his sword. He charged forward, and his adversary, who had only narrowly dodged the thrown spear with a quick leap to the side, looked at him in astonishment. Stomp delivered a clumsy series of attacks, which his opponent managed to parry initially. On the fourth strike, however, Stomp felt the blade of his weapon dig deep into the body of his opponent. The man let out a shrill scream and turned to flee. After a few steps he collapsed, his hands pressed against his body. Stomp wheeled around, the bloodied sword still in his hand, looking wildly for more opponents.

The cave was empty. There was no sign of the other two attackers, nor of the old man. Stomp recalled the loud scream again and fervently hoped that it was one of the assailants who had seemingly fallen into the pit, and that the old man had managed to escape. Gasping, with trembling fingers and aching arms, he began to gather his spear and retrieve his dagger, which was still lodged in the now completely motionless leader. He cleaned his weapons, sheathed the sword, and placed the dagger back in his boot.

Deep in thought and with a queasy feeling, he looked at the two lifeless men in front of him. He had once killed a man in self-defense and remembered with horror the nights that followed, filled with nightmares where his opponent's bloody face stared accusingly at him, and the days consumed by the recurring question of whether his action had been truly necessary and right. It took him weeks to feel like a normal person again, and he had been wondering all that time how others could handle such situations so easily. Back then, his fencing instructor had set him straight: "It's never easy!"

He was right; Stomp sighed and said a short prayer before getting ready to leave.

As he raised his spear, he paused for a moment and looked thoughtfully at the weapon. It had saved his life several times. Following a sudden inspiration, he mumbled, "I'll call you Sprayer Sting."

He turned to leave, adjusted his carry bag, and approached the shaft opening. With a heavy heart, he wondered if the old man had survived the skirmish and looked for signs of a struggle. There was no sign of the old man anywhere, but he found a large pool of blood near the pit, slowly drying at the edges. Just as he wondered whose blood it was, he stepped on something soft, and with a disgusted cry, he jumped back.

There lay a human hand. With revulsion, he crouched down and examined his find. It didn't seem to belong to the old man because the skin appeared too smooth. It had been cleanly severed, and the crooked, claw-like fingers seemed to be accusingly pointing at him. While he stared at this scene, he saw something flash beneath the severed limb.

With the tip of his dagger, he carefully pushed his macabre discovery aside and was surprised by the object that appeared underneath. It was a tooth, a long tooth measuring about a span. It was slightly curved and eerily reminded him of the fangs of the creature he had last encountered deep in the caves. He gently pushed this strange object out of the pool, took one of the surrounding rags, picked up the tooth, and cleaned it. He was amazed to find that it wasn't broken but had been neatly cut and had a fine gold inlay around the cut edge. It felt cool, smooth, and to his overstimulated senses, it seemed to emit a faint vibration.

Inexplicably, this object now seemed priceless to him. He had the impression that nothing and no one in the world should take this treasure away from him. He hastily placed the find in his bag. After some thought, he took it out again, put it in one of the pouches on his belt, and carefully sealed it. After ensuring that his treasure wouldn't fall out due to any inadvertent movement, he set off with a final look around.

Above the dark abyss of the shaft, he briefly paused and muttered another prayer, hoping that the old man had survived the encounter unharmed. Then he approached the cave entrance.

As he approached it, he became more cautious, sneaking along the right wall until he reached the entrance. The milky twilight that had prevailed since his arrival was again visible, and the air was filled with the clamor of voices. The entire area seemed to be in turmoil. Stomp could hear the sounds of battles from various directions. He looked around hesitantly, and for the moment, he couldn't see anything or anyone on the forecourt. He leaned against the rock wall and, without thinking, took another sip of Sruup.

As the pleasant sensation spread through his guts, he contemplated his situation, unsure of where to direct his steps now. It seemed that news of the collapse and destruction of the old mine had already spread everywhere. He could assume that the Miners Guild was already aware of it. On the other hand, this discovery of the orc caves appeared to be important, as these hordes were a constant threat. For this reason, he decided to head for the New Camp and report to Tark Eyewiper.

He peered out of the cave and surveyed the forest edge to his right. He knew the New Camp had to be somewhere beyond it. Between the trees, he could make out several figures rushing wildly through the undergrowth. He could also hear loud noises of a skirmish from that direction, punctuated by occasional shouts. So, taking the direct path to the New Camp did not seem to be the best idea.

Following a sudden inspiration, he removed the leather vest that still bore the telltale blue color of the Organizers and stuffed it into his bag. Then he set off. He crossed the square in the direction he had left it with Kimbahl just a day earlier. He hurried along the path and as he approached the intersection, he cautiously made his way into the bushes on the right. Maneuvering through the underbrush, he advanced carefully until he could observe the Old Camp from the forest edge.

There was a commotion there. From his vantage point, he could see a wild melee. A long line of thugs, whom he took for members of the Mercenaries' Guild, rushed out of the gate. Among them, he could also identify Rigosh Twoknife, who was barking orders loudly and driving her subordinates to run faster with curses and kicks. They were all armed to the teeth, and it was clear that they were heading to defend the old mine. Stomp hoped at least that this wasn't the prelude to an attack by the Ore Barons on the New Camp or the Free Mine. Shuddering, he noticed that at the palisade, left and right of the gates, the bodies of several unfortunate individuals hung naked, bloody, and battered. A few of them were still moving, while others had been crucified, and still, others dangled lifeless. "This seemed to be the punishment of the Ore Barons for people who didn't pay enough attention to their mine," Stomp thought to himself.

Another group of mercenaries left the camp, and he realized with shock that they were moving directly towards him. Trembling, he retreated further into the undergrowth and stood still as some two dozen of these brutal-looking men passed his hiding spot on their way to the abandoned mine and the trading post.

They stopped right at his level, and, in response to some shouted commands, they formed a long chain along the edge of the path. Stomp realized they were preparing for an attack and had taken their positions, waiting for further orders. Cursing under his breath, he had to accept that the direct path to the New Camp was now cut off by these well-armed mercenaries. He would never be able to slip past them unseen. Reluctantly and grinding his teeth, he retreated carefully, avoiding making any noise, further into the underbrush away from the mercenaries.

On this path, he would eventually reach the shore, where he had first entered this complex, he knew that. However, he had no other choice because he didn't want to encounter those thugs. At a safe distance, Stomp quickened his pace, and after a few hundred meters, he saw the brackish water of the lake emerging between the trees. He cautiously approached the forest's edge, using every bit of cover, and peered out between the trees.

As he scanned the beach, he gasped in astonishment and relief. The Old Man sat there, just about two hundred meters east of him, unmistakable in his typical posture, with his flowing cloak around his shoulders. The line in his right hand swung gently out into the lake, and on the other side of the shore, opposite him, Stomp could see a wooden structure built on stilts. Recalling the information he had received so far, he realized that this must be the Psionics' stilt city.

Stomp returned his gaze to the Old Man, relieved to see him unharmed by the shore. Stomp noticed how the object of his attention suddenly lifted his head and turned around slowly. The Old Man seemed to be staring directly at him, and even though Stomp was crouched in the underbrush, well-hidden from any potential observers, it was as if he knew exactly where he was.

Just as he was about to stand up and reveal himself, a faint hissing noise sounded right in front of him, coming from the ground. Dumbfounded, he saw a gray mist rising from the ground directly below and around him. Just as he wondered where he had seen this phenomenon before, the fog seemed to envelop him.

Uncomfortably, he detected the smell of a blacksmith's forge: smoke, hot metal, and damp stone. It was eerie, and he urgently wanted to get away from this place when suddenly, a voice whispered directly to his left, "On the beach, one, unarmed, otherwise empty," and another voice from his right replied in the same hushed tone, "I am here." As Stomp's terror grew, a third voice came from above him in the trees, "Above you."

Unable to move, he trembled and sank even lower to the ground. He was about to scream when two black leather boots appeared right next to his face. Turning his head, he peered up and saw the hunched figure of a slender young man, who, dressed in all black - shirt, trousers, and cloak - was observing the beach through the thickets. He wore black gloves, and his face was also darkened with ore or coal dust. Like all the camp's inhabitants, his clothes were patched together and made up of various components but were uniform in their matte black color. Stomp could see a hefty boarding knife hanging from the man's belt, whose blade and handle also had the same coloration. Several thread-like items dangled just behind it. Stomp recognized a bolas and several wire snares, but he didn't know what they were for.

Although Stomp's face was just a hand's breadth away from the newcomer's right foot, it seemed that the newcomer hadn't noticed him yet. Stomp's terror grew to unprecedented levels, and in silence, he began to make his peace with his life when he heard stealthy footsteps approaching from behind. A whisper came, "It's the Old Man, do you see him? Why does he always have to show up where he's most annoying?"

The man in front of Stomp turned his head, and as he looked down to check the position of his boarding knife, he glanced directly into Stomp's face. Stomp held his breath, fully aware that lying flat on his stomach between two of these figures left him with no chance whatsoever. He expected a cry and tensed his muscles, ready to fight for his life.

But nothing happened.

The man in black continued his actions, passing right through Stomp, as if he didn't exist. Instead, he replied to his comrade, "I would love to wring that old turkey's scrawny, wrinkled neck."

The third voice from the trees added, "Shut up, you down there. You know the Old Man isn't easy to take down. Remember what happened to Childkiller when he tried to go after the Old Man. No one saw the fight, but the next morning, our man was dead, throat cut, hands and feet severed. So be quiet!"

The trio fell silent. Stomp lay there, trembling, unable to move a muscle. He didn't understand what was happening around him. The man in black should have seen him; he had looked right at him and had not reacted in any way. What was going on here? Fearfully, he looked around, waiting.

"How do we proceed?" the first one whispered.

"It's obvious. In disguise, strike, and retreat," came the response.

"We'll do it as usual. You, First, take care of the guards. You, Second, provide distraction, and I'll try to penetrate the Enlightened One and stuff his damned prayers and holy babble back down his throat."

All three mumbled a restrained but affirming "Aye."

The first one resumed in a whisper, "With his reckless demon summoning, he triggered the earthquakes, destroyed the old mine, and earned the wrath of our Lords. We are the Scorpions of the Ore Barons, and tonight the Enlightened One will feel our sting! Let's put copper coins on his eyes!"

Again, this muted "Aye" followed by a brief rustling. Within the blink of an eye, the boot disappeared from Stomp's field of view.

Around him, it grew silent, and when he dared to lift his head a few minutes later, he was alone. There was no sign of the men in black, and nothing revealed that they had truly been here. Dazed and stunned, Stomp sat up.

"What's happening here?" he murmured. He didn't understand it; he should be dead. In his depleted state, he wouldn't have had a chance against three, as he believed, assassins who were apparently on their way to kill the leader of the Psionics. Why hadn't they seen him? One of them had stood just ten centimeters from his nose for several minutes, and he had looked right at him!

Gradually, his trembling subsided. As he looked around, Stomp noticed that the sounds around him had faded to occasional, timid bird chirping. However, the sounds of battle farther back continued unabated. On the beach in front of him, he still saw the Old Man, standing on the riverbank, casting his line into the water in a wide arc. Incredulously, he noted that amid all this fighting, this old scatterbrain had nothing better to do than go fishing. His astonishment turned into sudden horror when he again saw a serpentine movement under the water's surface exactly where the line entered the water.

Instantly, he recalled his first encounter with the being - what had his welcoming committee called it? Mid'ssa? - when he was thrown into prison. That greenish, meter-high face protruding from the cave in an absurd parody of a girl's head, thick, snake-like arms on its head, writhing out of its throat as it tried to grab him.

In horror, he watched as a green-scaled arm emerged from the water and attempted to free the fishing hook with loud flapping. The line, now taut, led directly to the Old Man. Stomp wondered how long the Old Man could resist this thigh-thick tentacle when the line suddenly snapped with a loud crack heard far across the water, and the tentacles splashed back into the water. Stomp heard soft laughter, and when he looked again at the spot where the Old Man had just stood, it was empty. He instinctively moved forward and scanned the beach. There was nothing to be seen. He couldn't even spot a trace of the Old Man in the water itself.

As he tried to recover from these impressions and continued to scan the shore, the men across from him began to sing their malevolent song that he had already heard upon entering this complex. With tones that surged up and down, dozens of throats seemed to sing an eerie chant that kept growing louder. There was something unnatural about it, something inhuman, and Stomp felt a chill running down his spine. His fear intensified when, after a few seconds, almost in response, the ground beneath him began to shake. Again, this eerie, high-pitched humming came from all directions, and the trees around him trembled in synchronization with the earthquakes.

While Stomp still clung to the ground, with loose branches and twigs falling around him, the singing continued to swell, only to abruptly silence with a piercing scream shortly thereafter. The earthquake came to an abrupt halt, but the buzzing persisted for a few more heartbeats. Stomp felt that something was happening. The air around him seemed to vibrate, and he felt a tingling on his skin. It seemed like the earth beneath him was undulating. When he looked between his hands, he saw that even the smallest blades of grass and roots were moving wildly. It was a swirling and surging motion playing out on the forest floor. Before his overstimulated senses, faces seemed to form in these swirling masses, terrifying grotesque images, disfigured monstrosities, and perversions of both human and non-human visages.

Stomp dared not move and felt as though none of his muscles would obey him at that moment. Helpless and trembling, he remained motionless, and it wasn't until a few minutes had passed after the apparitions had faded that he let out a prolonged sigh, releasing the breath he had held the entire time. He felt weak and drained, as if he had just completed a long run. With shaking fingers, he grabbed the now half-empty bottle of Sruup and took a greedy sip. However, this time, the expected, comforting effect didn't materialize. It was only after three more swigs that he noticed the tension receding, the trembling subsiding, and his surroundings becoming clearer once again.

A few minutes later, Stomp had calmed down to some extent. When he heard the sounds of approaching men from behind, he hurried onward. He reached the beach and, crouching and using the scattered rocks for cover, he rushed along it towards the east, heading towards the end of the lake.

He knew he had to circumvent the Old Camp to safely reach the New Camp or the Free Mine to share his information. As he gradually approached the spot where the lake narrowed into a stream, he took shelter behind two closely spaced rock formations and allowed himself a brief breather. From this vantage point, he could clearly observe the elevated lakeside city, situated approximately twenty meters above the lake's surface, directly across from him.

Between the buildings, he could see several large fires and dozens of figures draped in brightly orange, flowing garments, engaged in a kind of dance. They moved in wild, twitching motions. There was singing again, but it wasn't the same unnatural, eerie singing from before. Instead, it was a loud, lusty bellow that echoed far across the lake. In disbelief, Stomp watched as the dance grew wilder and more frantic, with the first of the celebrants shedding their clothes. Men and women, partially or completely nude, tumbled over each other.

This wasn't a fight playing out; on the contrary, to the sound of a booming drum and exuberant singing, Stomp observed as the "celebrants" divided into several groups and sank to the ground in close embrace wherever they stood.

They leaned on each other like rutting animals. He saw twitching buttocks and sweat-glistening bodies as dozens of the psionics, men and women, men and men in groups of two, three and four, indulged in all variations of carnal lust all over the square. Stomp had never been a prude, after all, he came from a port city. But what he saw now made him stare in amazement at the scenario.

Then the ground began to shake again, and that high-pitched humming sound returned. Seeking support, he leaned against the surrounding rocks, and a shrill scream from the other side of the lake refocused his attention on the scene. The scenario had changed. While dozens of Psionics still lay, stood, and squatted in quivering tangles of human limbs and bodies, there were now occasional cries and roars that had nothing to do with ecstatic sounds. A woman, naked and with a bleeding face, ran to the edge of the site, scratching her face with wild, inhuman cries, and then threw herself into the waters with a bloody body. She sank like a stone. Behind her, Stomp noticed a man who, with animalistic roars, held his hands in front of his groin while a woman with a blood-smearred mouth rose from her knees and pounced on him like a fury. Painful cries of distress and horror rang out everywhere, and at several spots, Stomp observed how what had been an orgy had now taken the form of a bloody massacre.

Mesmerized by horror, he stared at the scene and paid no further attention to his surroundings.

A strong push to his back sent him stumbling forward, out from behind the protection of the boulders. When he attempted to turn and confront his attacker, he lost his footing on the slippery gravel ground and fell heavily onto his back. A figure loomed over him, a knife gleamed, and before Stomp could defend himself, two knees pressed into his chest, pinning him firmly to the ground.

He felt the cold steel of a blade against his throat, and as his vision cleared, he saw a gaunt face above him, crowned with a blue, vertically standing crest of hair. In his head, he felt that same familiar whispering. Blue button-like eyes scrutinized him, and without saying another word, the assailant rose from his chest, stood up, and extended a hand towards him. Bewildered and relieved, Stomp got up and, in turn, stared silently into the eyes of his savior. He found it reassuring that Gaist's eyes looked normal, with no trace of red.

Then it all poured out of him, and he began talking wildly: "I thought you were dead. How did you escape from the caves, and what's happening over there? Do you understand anything about what's going on here?"

Without changing his expression, Gaist looked at him and put a finger to his lips. Glancing around, he pulled the stammering man back to the rock and pushed him into a crouching position. He crouched down across from him after making sure that they were alone on the beach.

"After the orc attack, everyone had disappeared. My comrades were dead. The main route to the Free Mine was blocked. I couldn't find any of you, so I started back. There's another way back to the Free Mine. There, I heard that the old mine had collapsed and was flooded. Everyone is getting ready for the inevitable attack by the Ore Barons.

Then I heard that the Shadows of the Ore Barons had received orders to kill the leader of the Psionics as punishment for what he had caused with his summonings. I'm here to thwart that. And I'm surprised to see you here!"

The hoarse whisper faded, and Gaist, thinking he had said enough, looked at Stomp expectantly.

"Well, I, um, I, well, the orcs, I could handle them, but one of your comrades attacked me, he was out of his mind, but I managed to drive him away. Then I wandered through the caves and found an entrance guarded by the Greenfurred ones. Then that panther thing was back and showed me a way through the rocks. That's how I got out into the abandoned mine, and I heard about what's happening there. Honestly, I have no idea what to do now."

Stomp fell silent when that whispering in his head became audible again. With an uncertain sidelong glance at the blue creature, he paused, looking anxiously at Gaist. Gaist tilted his head and looked at him closely.

Stomp noticed that the long, brightly blue, bushy tail of the creature, which Gaist had called "Chekk," was wrapped around the Organizer's right ear. It did not move. After a few seconds, the tail loosened, and Gaist nodded silently to himself. "A confusing story... but the truth," his hoarse whisper resounded.

Half-rising, he looked around and turned back to Stomp. "Everyone's going crazy, friends are attacking each other, allies are at each other's throats. That always happens when these earthquakes and this humming appear. So far, I haven't felt anything, and I think it's because of Chekk here. I don't know what's protecting you from these fits of madness, but it doesn't matter. I have to go there!" He nodded towards the structure from which the sounds were gradually fading. "I'll try to prevent the Shadows' assassination. If their leader called something, he can also make it disappear."

Without waiting for a response, he stood up and crept toward the riverbank after glancing briefly around. Bewildered, Stomp stared after him, and after a brief moment of shock, he hurried to follow. "Wait, I'm coming with you."

If Gaist heard him, he showed no emotion as he slipped into the water. He swam smoothly in the direction of the palisade. Stomp stood hesitantly. Painful memories of green, scale-armored tentacles slowly came back to him, and he reluctantly placed a foot in the warm, brackish water. When nothing happened, and Gaist had already covered half the distance, Stomp strapped the spear to his back and, with an uncomfortable look around, followed the figure in blue.

Unimpeded, they reached the first posts of the structure. Stomp caught up with the waiting Organizer, who was holding onto a rung with one hand. As soon as he reached him, Gaist started to climb up, and Stomp hurried to follow. It had become quieter above them, and from his position under the plateau, Stomp could hear the panting and whimpering of injured people.

Cautiously, they peered over the planks onto the square where the large fire was still burning. Scattered around were only partially clothed figures. Some of them didn't move anymore, and there were several large pools of blood on the ground. Others, injured or exhausted, were dragging themselves toward the huts with bent heads, without even acknowledging the dead and wounded with a single glance. Still, others stared motionlessly with vacant eyes at their bloody hands or the injuries they had sustained in the massacre. The whole scene reeked of madness and agony.

Unperturbed by this scene of horror, Gaist swiftly moved up to the planks in a fluid motion, and with a few quick steps, he reached the shadow of a hut. Less gracefully but nonetheless unnoticed, Stomp followed him. Guided by the blue-clad figure, they silently made their way, always staying in the shadow of the huts, to a large central building, a palisade house that dominated the square with nearly three stories. Without another word, Gaist headed for the entrance, and Stomp followed him. The door, accessible via two steps, stood wide open. On the right doorpost, Stomp could see the booted legs of a prone figure, and as the pair entered the house, Stomp noticed a fully armed man, dead, surrounded by a pool of blood. All his weapons were still in their sheaths, and the end must have come suddenly, triggered by a clean cut from ear to ear. Looking around, Stomp recognized two more dead guards inside the room.

Nothing stirred, and Stomp hurried to follow the Organizer, who was already stealthily moving upstairs on a winding staircase at the rear of the room. Halfway up, the two heard a creak and a grumbling voice uttering incomprehensible syllables in slow succession from above. At the sound of this noise, Stomp shuddered to the core; he had never heard anything like it before. He knew that nothing human was up there, and involuntarily, he froze. To his amazement, he noticed that his newfound companion seemed entirely unfazed by the situation and continued to climb the steps, fully attentive, like a taut spring.

It took him some effort to follow Gaist, and what ultimately tipped the scales was the fact that Stomp absolutely did not want to stay alone on this staircase, surrounded by the insane scene unfolding around him. Trembling and looking around fearfully, he stumbled along behind the figure in blue clothing. Upon reaching the top, both found themselves in front of a locked, double-winged door, from which a sweet, putrid smell wafted. Gaist dropped to one knee and pressed an ear to the wood. Both recoiled as the deep, sonorous sound emanated from inside once more. Taking advantage of the noise, Gaist carefully pushed the door open a crack.

The sweet smell of decay that emerged from inside was overpowering, and Stomp recoiled in horror. Full of dread, he watched as a shudder coursed through his companion's body, and he stiffly straightened up, almost like a marionette. Without a word, Gaist pushed the door open and stepped into the room, wooden and almost as if pulled by strings.

"What are you doing?" Stomp whispered, trying to grab him. He managed to seize Gaist, but despite all his efforts, he couldn't hold him back. Instead, he tore Gaist's shirt, and he found himself standing at the entrance with a blue scrap of fabric in his hand. Then his gaze fell upon the interior, and he froze.

Gaist stood motionless in the middle of the room like a wooden puppet. The room was spacious, about ten paces in size, and through a large window, Stomp could see the fire on the square. The room was sparsely furnished, with a single chair on a platform dominating the scene. Sitting on this chair was a figure that must have been intimidating in the past. It was large, heavy, and ponderous, draped in several meters of orange cloth that scarcely concealed the bulging fat rolls. However, it had now slumped, and there was also a wide cut across its throat, with a large pool of blood splattering over its belly, clothes, and the chair it sat on. Directly opposite it, three black-clad figures hung lifeless, two steps high on the wall. They appeared to stick to the wall, upside down with arms outstretched. Their faces stared straight ahead, utterly motionless. At first, it seemed to Stomp as though they had been crucified upside down, but then he saw that there was nothing holding them in that position, and there were no visible injuries. Only upon closer inspection did Stomp notice that their eyes had entirely turned black, making them hardly visible in their blackened faces. Apart from that, there was nothing happening in the room, just the sickeningly sweet smell of decay hung over everything.

Seconds passed, and nothing occurred. Panic welled up within Stomp. Finally, he mustered up the courage to lean forward and whisper into the room, "Gaist, Gaist, for Kasakk's sake, let's get out of here. What's wrong with you? Chekk, can't you do something?" Still, nothing happened. Gaist didn't move a muscle.

Stomp was at a loss. Leaving his companion behind was repugnant to him, but every fiber of his being screamed to get away from this horrifying scene as quickly as possible. After a moment of hesitation, he took another step into the room, clutching the spear tightly. Nothing happened. He ventured another step, and with horror, he heard the door creaking behind him as it slowly closed.

He threw himself backward, attempting to keep the door open, but it continued to shut relentlessly, as if driven by titanic forces. At the last moment, Stomp managed to pull his fingers back; otherwise, the slamming door would have severed them. He stared in horror at the wood and tried to shake it, but it refused to yield even a fraction of an inch. He looked around wildly and brought the spear into position, ready to confront whatever would come at him.

Still, nothing happened.

With his heart pounding wildly, he ventured further into the room. As he approached Gaist and circled him, he was horrified to see that Gaist's eyes had also completely turned dark. There were no pupils and no iris left to see, only unfathomable blackness gaping between the lids.

As he attempted to shake Gaist's shoulder, it felt as though he was touching a wooden puppet. Chekk and the clothing of the unfortunate man also seemed as if they were carved from stone. "Tell me, oh Charotekk, why that one can still move!"

Gasping, Stomp spun around, trying to locate the source of the voice, which seemed to be coming from everywhere, speaking in a soft, effeminate tone. His panic erupted in a wild shout, "Who's there? Come out, show yourself, for Kasakk's sake!" A light giggle followed, and the voice continued, "Kasakk, Kasakk? Yes, there was that little god. I remember. But Charotekk, now answer my question. Why is this human child still moving?"

Stomp frantically looked around; the voice seemed to come from all directions! Nothing was in sight, and no one moved. His composure unraveled when a rumbling, booming voice responded from out of nowhere, barely a step away from him, "The Tooth of the Smokehunter protects him, my Lord."

Silence fell. All Stomp was aware of was the pounding of his heart and his labored breaths.

"Interesting, interesting!" the first voice returned. "I must take a closer look."

From the corner of his eye, Stomp noticed a swirling motion and turned abruptly. Behind the podium where the dead high priest sat, the air seemed to warp, and the outlines behind it blurred, distorted by something crystallizing from the air itself. A circular funnel of shimmering air appeared, and from it emerged a slim figure dressed in red, who slowly, almost lazily, approached Stomp.

Trembling, Stomp raised his spear with quivering hands and shouted at the figure, "Stay away from me, whoever you...are!"

An amused giggle echoed, and the figure approached, unfazed. With a desperate roar, Stomp hurled his weapon at the figure, which was now only about three meters away. The projectile found its path with a hiss, but not entirely.

Appallingly, Stomp watched as it came to an abrupt halt mid-air. It floated there, firmly pinned in place, trembling slightly, with its tip just a hand's breadth away from the figure's chest. Unperturbed, the figure continued its approach, and with a turned face, it examined the projectile more closely.

Finally, he turned back to Stomp and muttered, "Interesting, interesting."

He continued to glide toward the hapless man, who trembled and stammered, hands raised, moving backward. What Stomp saw deeply horrified him! His counterpart appeared smaller than he, graceful even. Dressed in blood-red garments that billowed around his shoulders, a blue-black tuft of hair crowned a soft, youthful, almost childlike face. The eyes, however, were terribly unsettling; they were completely white, a radiant white glow staring out from between the lids. The approaching figure wore an amused and sphinx-like smile.

When the voice sounded again, Stomp noticed that the lips remained closed while he distinctly heard the words in his head: "So, we have a human child here carrying a gift from a Smokehunter. Interesting, very interesting. Would you kindly tell me what you're looking for here? And now, STAY STILL!" The last word sounded like a command, a whip-like sound that struck deep within Stomp.

Continuing to step backward, Stomp realized that something had changed. After a quick glance around, he knew what it was: nothing moved anymore! The curtains in front of the windows, which had been swaying in the warm evening breeze, hung still. Even the flames from the torches and candles that illuminated the room froze in the midst of their flickering. Nevertheless, he was able to keep retreating until he felt the rough wooden wall against his shoulder blades.

His counterpart also noticed that Stomp wasn't reacting as intended. A steep crease of irritation appeared between the man's flawless black eyebrows. With a quick, twitching movement, he glided closer until he came to a standstill within arm's reach of the unfortunate man. The sickly sweet stench of decay became overpowering, and the voice resurfaced, although the face of the figure in red remained motionless, and the closed lips maintained that puppet-like smile.

"I must tell you, my uncouth friend, I do not like that. Tell me, oh Charotekk, is there anything I can do to discipline this lad?"

Once again, Stomp flinched at the sound of the rumbling voice emanating from an inch beside his head out of nowhere. "Nothing, my Lord, unless he willingly hands you the gift of Shugul Sath."

"Mmh, mmh," the effeminate voice chimed in. With a questioning expression, the man in front of Stomp tilted his head slightly to the side and asked, "I suppose you won't give that to me, will you?"

Wildly shaking his head, Stomp was unable to utter a sound, especially since he had no idea what was being discussed here, in the name of Kasakk. The figure sighed, and with a fleeting motion, turned around and returned to the center of the room. Once there, he spun back toward Stomp, and the voice sounded again, this time sharp, accompanied by a malicious hiss.

"Do you know who I am, little human?" And when Stomp didn't answer, she continued, "They call me the Demon Summoner. I have the privilege of making some of the fascinating creatures of the lower hells my servants. Believe me, it can be a mistake to have me as your enemy. What's your name?"

Startled by the sudden question, Stomp stammered, "I, my Lord, am Stomp, my Lord. I, uh, don't want to make you my enemy. I'm here purely by chance..."

"Yes, yes, of course you are. Look at this!" the mage continued with a sweeping motion of her right hand. "These half-wit assassins arrive and have nothing better to do than to kill the Enlightened. Well, he deserved it. After all, that lunatic was incapable of assessing what he was causing here. But we could have used his arcane powers to control what is now stirring. This place wasn't so bad until now. What's approaching is absolutely unpredictable! What we're going to face now, no human mind can even fathom."

"True," came a resounding agreement from the void.

The one in red robes cast a stern frown into the air. "I didn't ask you, wait until you're spoken to," their voice cut through the room with a sharp tone.

"Yes, my Lord," the bass voice responded, and Stomp, who was listening intently, sensed an element of amusement.

The Demon Summoner turned back to Stomp. "Yesssssss, what should I do with you, my unsuspecting yet untouchable visitor? I can't kill you, and I can't incorporate you into my, well, minions. And letting you simply walk away... that, I'm afraid, will not be allowed! Perhaps..." and they glided closer, "you'd like to undertake a little task for me, as you just said you don't want me as an enemy? And perha..."

Stomp seized this opportunity like a drowning man grasping at a straw and hurried to affirm, "A task, yes, of course, my Lord, of course!"

"Kindly do not interrupt me, little human!" The Demon Summoner said with a cutting tone. "What I need is quite easy to acquire. In the lower realms, you'll find the orc caves. The orc shaman is, besides me and a few alchemists of the Fire and Water circles who are bumbling around here, the only one left with arcane powers. We need these gifts now, since the Enlightened is dead, to control what is gradually awakening. You don't need to bring me the shaman. Bring me his liver; that should suffice."

Stomp recoiled in horror. "But how should I... how should I... his liver?"

"His liver," the Demon Summoner emphasized, sighing impatiently. "Hurry, we don't have much time left."

With that, the mage turned away. The conversation seemed to be over for her. After a moment of shock, Stomp mumbled, "Yes, my Lord," and glanced at Gaist before setting off on his errand.

Just before the door, the cutting voice of the Demon Summoner made him pause.

"And by the way..." Stomp whirled around, "if you think I can't find you or believe this is a joke..."

To emphasize his words, the one in red performed some quick movements in the air and with an ornamental dagger that had appeared out of nowhere, he cut his thumb on his left hand, spewing tiny droplets of blood. He then made some rapid gestures, and a white cloud appeared beside him. It billowed, condensed, and seemed to pulsate in a soft pink light. Before Stomp's horrified eyes, it took shape and formed a countenance floating freely in the air without a corresponding body.

It was a broad, plump, baby-like face, the face of an infant, with its eyes closed and its mouth curved in a happy smile. It measured about a step in diameter and reminded Stomp of the expression of a contented, happy infant sleeping in its cradle.

This impression shattered when the eyelids lifted, revealing slit pupils in blood-red eyes that stared at Stomp. The mouth opened, exposing a long row of pointed, blackened teeth. Again, that grumbling voice sounded, "Here I am, Master! Charotekk serves you."

"You see, where there is one demon, there are others," the summoner stated. "And now, go!"

Stomp needed no further encouragement. As if pursued by Furies, he flung the door open, which now offered no resistance, and ran out of the room. He had wanted to ask what would become of Gaist, had considered whether to plead with the Demon Summoner to release his companion, but all thoughts of that were gone. He just wanted to get away, away from that figure, away from that face, whose eyes still seemed to follow him, and whose grumbling voice continued to echo in his ears.

He rushed out of the house, onto the square, past the injured and the psionics who were still scattered on the podium.

He ran and ran, pushing anyone who got in his way aside with a grunt. Ahead of him, he saw the path that led along the river to the old mine, and without thinking, he sprinted across it.

He ran and ran, with his lungs aching and his feet burning, until he saw the bridge in front of him, leading from the old camp to the mine. From the right, on the path, he heard the sound of many running footsteps. To the left, across the river, from the direction of the old mine, whose entrance he saw emerging about two hundred meters away, he heard screams, noise, and the clashing of weapons, amid the rush of blood in his ears and his panting breath. The noise of approaching people from the direction of the old camp grew louder. He looked around frantically; if the newcomers turned the corner, they would find him. He desperately wanted to avoid this encounter. He hurried to the bridge, and as soon as he reached it, he slid into the water next to the first support pillar of the wooden structure and clung to it with trembling arms. Not a moment too soon. Above him, he heard shouted commands and the pounding of footsteps on the planks.

Under the bridge, he found a recess, a narrow strip of riverbank that provided enough space for one person and was hidden from external view. With his last ounce of strength, he pulled himself ashore and crawled into the darkness. Once he reached a prone position, he gasped for breath, still shaking from the encounter.

Later, he didn't know how much time had passed when he jerked upright from the restless sleep plagued by nightmares. As he rubbed his aching head, he glanced around. In front of him, the brackish water of the small river gurgled by in a slow current. While he stared at the surface, he observed the bodies of a naked man and woman floating past him with empty faces turned upward. The noise from the direction of the old mine had largely subsided, but he could still hear faint murmuring voices and muffled shouts coming from the Old Camp behind him.

He wished he could have just stayed there, rested his head between his arms, and let things unfold as they would. He felt exhausted and drained. His stomach rumbled, and his overstimulated senses cried out for rest. But he knew he wouldn't find reprieve anytime soon. He had, in a way, accepted a mission from a demon summoner! And he would have to find a way to fulfill it.

There was no doubt that this creature would find him. Even if he was protected by the "gift of the Smokehunter" during their initial encounter, he knew that when they met again, this powerful alchemist would have plenty of means to exact revenge for his disobedience. Moreover, he contemplated the idea that the demon summoner might be right, and that all means must be employed to control this uncanny entity that was on the verge of awakening. In his current state, he didn't feel like a world savior, but the memories of the Psionic City, where people with red eyes tore each other apart, sent shivers down his spine, and he recognized that no one would have a chance of survival if this entity fully awoke.

He remembered the alchemist of the Water Circle and hastily began searching for the vial. After a few seconds, he found it with a triumphant sigh, uncorked it, and sniffed the contents. The liquid inside emitted a slightly flowery aroma, and with full confidence, Stomp took a sip.

At first, nothing happened. As his anticipation was turning into disappointment, he felt his hands, fingers, and toes starting to experience a gentle tingling sensation. The feeling intensified until it became almost uncomfortable, and then it escalated into vigorous shivers. Stomp's teeth chattered, and he curled up in the fetal position as if experiencing a severe bout of chills. Panic filled him as he feared someone must have swapped the vials in an attempt to poison him. Helpless and resigned, Stomp allowed the experience to wash over him. Only after what felt like an eternity did the trembling subside, and new strength began to awaken within him.

Feeling fresh and rejuvenated, Stomp suddenly sat up with a surge of energy. The hardships of the past few hours seemed like a distant memory, leaving him with a more detached, observant recollection. The resignation and fear he had felt earlier evaporated, and he was convinced that he could easily handle the task at hand. With a grin, he gazed at the vial, gently shook it to hear a satisfying sloshing sound, carefully sealed it, and stowed it away. After a brief equipment check, he slowly waded into the river's waters. Utilizing the current, he swam downstream, staying close to the cover of the bank.

After a few hundred meters, he climbed ashore on the opposite side of the river and peered at the entrance to the old mine from a slightly elevated spot, concealed by tall reeds. It was an ugly place. Several hastily assembled wooden shacks surrounded an opening carved into the mountainside, with several large fires burning around its edges. The signs of battle were evident, with dozens of the Ore Baron's mercenaries now lingering in the area, gathered around the fires or patrolling the surrounding area. Two of the wooden shacks were in ruins, reduced to smoldering, charred remains. Behind them, a gruesome pile, disturbingly reminiscent of stacked bodies, loomed with some of the thugs currently setting it ablaze. Others sat before the pyre, rummaging through personal items—likely the clothing and possessions of the slain—while a few were engaged in a boisterous dice game, attempting to outdo each other.

The entrance to the mine itself also showed signs of destruction; the left part of the cladding had been shattered, and a large portion of the entrance was now blocked by a loose pile of rubble and debris.

Slowly, Stomp retreated through the tall grass, only allowing himself to stand upright once he had reached the low hillside and was out of sight of the mine guards. Then, with a hunched walk, he continued along the riverbank. After several river bends, he noticed the imposing wooden structure to his left, previously described to him as the old fortress. For some time now, he had moved away from the tall grass and into an area cultivated for farming. Extensive fields stretched out around him, filling the space between the river and the barrier that was now clearly visible in the distance.

He had reached the farmers' territory, where the grain needed for the compound's sustenance was cultivated. He didn't dare approach the fortress, whose gates were secured and whose walkways atop the three-man-high palisade were manned. Crouching low and using the nearly chest-high grain as cover, he stealthily moved closer to a bridge that spanned the river about fifty meters ahead of him. Beyond it, he could already see the New Camp in the distance, his destination.

Carefully, he approached the wooden bridge, and as he searched for a hiding place and found none, he simply lowered himself amidst the stalks of grain and peered through them, intently observing the ongoing events. It was then that he first noticed a group of individuals dressed in orange attire, roughly a dozen tall figures running at a fast pace from across the river toward the bridge.

Frantically, he searched for a hiding place, but not finding one, he settled amidst the wheat, peering between the stalks, watching the events unfold. There were about a dozen tall figures, identifiable by their orange clothing as Psionics.

In contrast to the only partially veiled worshipers he had seen earlier, who were dressed in flowing robes, these men were prepared for battle. Stomp observed leather jerkins, dyed orange, and some even had pieces of metal armor. They were all armed with swords, bows, and fighting staves. They presented themselves as a well-organized and disciplined group. These must be the fighters of the Psionics, Stomp recalled that Tito Tunneltracker referred to them as "Templars."

To his left, he heard a discreet whistle, and when he looked in that direction, he saw several shadows gliding through the grain field. Taking cover, he crouched lower. As the Templars, cautiously looking around, reached and entered the bridge, Stomp heard the buzzing of bowstrings to his left. Several of the orange-clad men cried out in pain and fell to the ground, while the others, after a brief moment of shock, charged across the wooden planks with loud shouts. Several figures rose from the field ahead and rushed to meet them. A wild commotion erupted just twenty meters away as the two groups collided, disregarding all caution. Painful screams and battle cries filled the air.

Stomp had no desire to get involved in this fight. Crawling backward, he tried to create some distance.

"Where do you think you're sneaking off to, little one?" a voice boomed behind him. Whirling around, he found himself facing two familiar figures he knew all too well. Hueroth glared at him with malice and let out a suggestive bellow: "My two balls still have a score to settle with you!" as he let the club in his right hand thud heavily onto the ground.

However, Stomp paid him little attention, his focus drawn to the second figure. Kimbahl, now dressed in a patched leather jerkin and leather pants, still had the damaged leather helmet that he and Stomp had found in the abandoned mine on his head. He held a shortsword in his hands, with a bow slung over his shoulder, observing his former comrade with an uncertain grin, apparently wavering in his assessment of the situation.

Stomp looked at him and said, "Kimbahl, it's me, Stomp! Don't you recognize me?"

"Uh, hello... What are you doing here?" Kimbahl stammered, nervously glancing at the burly giant beside him.

Stomp asked, "And what about you? Have you really become one of these mercenaries?"

The barbarian let out a boisterous laugh and said, "Well, the little one is at least trying to join them. That's why he'll survive this whole mess, unlike you. You'll be the lubricant for my club!" With these words, he charged forward.

Stomp had no other choice now, and defensively raised the spear's tip toward the approaching Hueroth. The burly man seemed to have expected this move, quickly knocking the spear aside, and then, capitalizing on the momentum of the motion, brought his club back over his head, looming with the weapon raised high in front of his opponent. With a pounding heart and aching arms still vibrating from the previous attack, Stomp waited, and just as the club began its downward arc, he threw himself to the side, releasing the spear.

With a dull thud, the wood struck the black earth, and Stomp rolled sideways, quickly getting back on his feet.

"Now, Kimbahl, take your bow and prepare it!" the barbarian roared, and Stomp fervently prayed that, due to their shared experiences, Kimbahl would hesitate.

A brief glance over his shoulder confirmed Stomp's hope: Kimbahl stood there with the bow in his hands and an arrow nocked, but he didn't aim it at the combatants. A confused expression appeared on his face. However, Stomp had no more time to concern himself with Kimbahl because Hueroth charged at him once more.

"I'll gut you like a halibut, my boy, and I'll use your bones to make a nice frame!" he bellowed. Gritting his teeth, Stomp drew his sword and held it threateningly in front of him. He yelled back defiantly, "Come too close with your stick, and you'll see that a sword always beats a club!"

Unfazed, Hueroth bent down just a few steps away from his adversary while running and with a sweeping motion, hurled a handful of dirt and stones into Stomp's face. Completely surprised, Stomp jerked his head to the side, and a brutal blow from the club struck his shoulder, knocking him off his feet with a thud. With his last ounce of strength, he managed to hold onto the sword before painfully landing several steps away from his starting point.

Dazed and with a throbbing pain in his left arm, he struggled to his feet. The barbarian watched him contemptuously and swirled his club invitingly.

Frowning, he looked over at the archer and roared, "Kimbahl, what are you waiting for, you worm-faced descendant of a mud-crawler!"

This brief distraction gave Stomp an opening. He took two quick steps and, dropping to one knee, launched a swift left-right attack with his sword, slashing sideways at the big man's unprotected legs. It seemed like Hueroth had noticed the attack, albeit only from the corner of his eye, as he made an instinctive defensive move. While this move provided some distance, it couldn't prevent two bloody welts from appearing on the giant's thighs. Howling in pain, he staggered back, gazing at his bleeding legs.

Apparently, the attack had inflicted more psychological than actual damage because the barbarian now launched a counterattack with a ferocity and recklessness that made it difficult for Stomp to parry the two-handed, power-packed blows raining down on him with his sword. Exhaustion set in as the blows seemed to drain the last of his energy, and he desperately tried to keep the barbarian positioned between himself and the still indecisive Kimbahl. Moreover, he could hear the sounds of battle behind him; danger could come from there as well.

The most significant threat, however, remained this furious, bearded giant in front of him who kept ruthlessly pounding away. More out of desperation than calculated strategy, Stomp charged forward as the club was raised for another strike to the head, ducking under the blow and dropping to one knee.

The barbarian, who had been about to crush Stomp's skull with a triumphant cry, couldn't brake the swing of his club in time. The sword attack from his wheezing opponent, powered by both arms and Stomp's last reserves of strength, swept in a wide arc from bottom to top, struck the unprotected upper arms of the bearded man. Stomp felt the blade sink deep into the flesh, momentarily stopping, and then continuing its path. Something warm sprayed down on him, and an agonized scream above him, piercing and deafening, made his eardrums shudder. With a quick leap backward, he got out of harm's way and fell heavily to the ground.

Scrambling to his feet once more, he saw the barbarian in front of him, his bloody arm stumps raised, from which red fluid spurted. Incredulously, he gazed at the club lying before him, still gripped by the barbarian's hands. With a grimace of pain, the big man sank to his knees, bellowing one last loud, "Kimbahl, finally finish him...!" before he fell forward and lay twitching.

Stomp turned around to the archer and looked him in the face. The archer stood there indecisively, bow raised and ready to shoot. Stomp waited. Seconds dragged on, and suddenly, Kimbahl roared, "There's another one here! Come on, people, I've caught another one!" With these last words, he let the arrow fly.

Anticipating this, Stomp dropped to the ground like a stone just in time, and he heard the projectile whiz over him with satisfaction. With an angry shout, he threw himself forward and charged toward the retreating archer. The archer raised his hands in horror and desperately tried to extract an arrow from his well-stocked quiver on his back. But he wasn't quick enough. Stomp reached him and, in a wild attack with a forcefully executed punch, knocked the bow out of his adversary's hand. Kimbahl staggered back and stammered, "But I didn't want to, I just, please, I, I, I mean, aren't we friends..."

Stomp paused and looked at the wretched figure before him with contempt. A quick glance over his shoulder showed him that the archer's comrades were still engaged with the Templars and had moved further away from the bridge. Then, his gaze fell on the bow in front of him, and he reached out his hand insistently, saying, "Give me the quiver, you two-faced traitor!" Trembling and mumbling, the archer obeyed. Stomp took the quiver, picked up the bow, and turned to leave. Half-turned, he suddenly whirled around again and sent the bewildered Kimbahl sprawling to the ground with a well-aimed punch. Bloodied and battered, Kimbahl was flung backward and disappeared among the rows of grain.

Stomp hurried to collect his spear and belongings. With a sidelong glance at the ongoing battle between the mercenaries and Templars to his left, he made his way, crouched down, to the bridge. It seemed as if Kasakk were smiling at him because he reached the bridge without drawing attention. However, when he was right in the middle of it, a loud shout from behind indicated that his lucky streak had come to an end. A glance over his shoulder showed several mercenaries and a Templar, weapons drawn, chasing after him. Stomp knew when it was time to make a hasty retreat, and he took off running. Thanks to the elixir he had consumed an hour ago, maintaining his swift pace was easy, and he sprinted, crouched down, as if the Furies were chasing him, along the forest path towards the New Camp, with the shouts and footsteps of his pursuers behind him.

As the camp came into view, Stomp cursed when he noticed figures on the paths in front of him. They seemed to be part of the mercenary group but, fortunately, had their backs to him. He quickly moved to the right and took cover in the bushes, his heart pounding. To his right, some of the mercenaries turned as the footsteps and shouts of his pursuers grew louder, and two from that group hurried to intercept the approaching pursuers.

They met almost at his position, and between his own wheezing breaths, Stomp caught parts of their conversation:

"What are you doing up here? You should be..."

"Didn't you see the son of a gun? One of those cursed Organizers came this way. I think he's headed to the New Camp!"

The first one responded with a malicious laugh, "He'll be out of luck. We've got it surrounded, the attack is imminent. Nothing goes in or out. And when we're done with the New Camp, we'll deal with the damn Miners Guild!"

The leader of the pursuing group, only partially satisfied, asked, "But just letting the lad escape so easily?"

"Nonsense!" interrupted the first man again. "You have a clear mission; you can have your fun later when we deal with the women from the New Camp. Go and take care of the peasants now!"

Grumbling, the reprimanded man shrugged and reluctantly rejoined his comrades who were waiting a few steps behind him. After a brief conversation, the group left the path, and the man in front of Stomp's hiding place returned to the circle that, as Stomp now observed, had closed tightly around the New Camp, with its gates locked and palisades manned.

The battle appeared to be imminent. Stomp saw his hopes of sneaking into the New Camp fading. He also realized that the news of the abandoned mine and its collapse was no longer current, and a warning about a takeover by the Ore Barons seemed too late. Therefore, he decided to make his way to the Free Mine to potentially deliver a timely warning there.

True to his decision, after a short breather, he fought his way backward through the underbrush and then moved among the trees of the small forest toward the mine. He shivered, remembering that just a day ago, the Shugul Sath had encountered the convoy at this very spot. With his neck hairs standing on end, he constantly cast anxious glances over his shoulder. He reached the edge of the woods unharmed and saw the rock face rising in front of him, with the palisade of the Free Mine just in front of it. Here, too, he realized that preparations for an attack had already been made. The gates were closed, and just before them, he could see several groups of armed individuals, including the orange-clad Psionic warriors. There was no sign of any mercenary thugs. So, he finally plucked up the courage and left the cover of the forest edge, running quickly across the open area toward the palisade. Those standing there, whose attention he had now attracted, drew their weapons and positioned themselves menacingly in his way.

A few meters away from the guards, he slowed down and raised his bare hands, saying, "It's me, Stomp. Can't you recognize me? I'm a friend, not one of the Ore Barons! I bring important information!"

The armed men in front of him didn't reply but regarded him with narrowed eyes, full of suspicion. A gruff voice from above the gate called out, "Who do you know here, who can vouch for you? Speak, or our arrows will send you to hell!"

Stomp hastened to reply, "Uh, Tito, Tito, uh, Tunneltracker knows me. He offered me a chance to join the guild. I'm Stomp, uh, I mean Sprayerdeath."

"Wait!" commanded the voice from beyond the palisade.

Stomp felt uncomfortable obeying this order. He was acutely aware of how vulnerable he was, alone in the open field, possibly with the first wave of mercenaries behind him and guards and templars in front, focusing their sharp weapons at him.

His relief was immense when he heard the booming voice of Tunneltracker, "Well, if it isn't the Wormslayer! Come on in, my lad; we thought you were dead! Come on, you lightheaded rock-eaters, open the gate! Can't you see him? It's Sprayerdeath! Don't you see the spear? By Kasakk's round behinds, you completely brain-dead, pale-skulled nincompoops, open the gate, quickly!"

A few seconds later, the entrance through the palisade creaked open, and the newcomer hurriedly entered the camp with a sigh of relief. He felt scrutinized and accompanied by suspicious glares. Nonetheless, he sighed in relief as the opening creaked shut behind him, and heavy bars slid into place. He recognized the familiar clattering of wooden frames behind him and turned to see his friend descending from the battlements. With a wide grin, the small figure, clattering with his metal shins, rushed over to Stomp and, upon reaching him, picked him up and hugged him warmly.

"What a joy, none of the people who went into the mine have returned, and we thought a Stonestrangler had made a meal of you, laying its eggs in your flesh. But tell us, have a beer, and recount how you escaped and what else there is."

Stomp raised his hand reassuringly and replied, "Later, later! Do you know that a mercenary attack is imminent? The abandoned mine is flooded, and deep inside, I found the entrance to the Orc caves, and... we need the Orc Shaman..." He prattled on excitedly.

"Slow down," replied the halfling, drawing the wildly gesticulating Stomp to one of the tables at the back of the camp. "Now, sit down and calm yourself; you're safe here. The Ore Barons and their thugs have tried their luck a few times already. Tell us instead what happened to our guild members."

Stomp began recounting his experiences, stuttering from excitement, and as he told of the death of the Organizers and the Orc attack, he noticed how the faces of those around him grew hard and resolute.

"What about Gaist?" the halfling's booming voice interrupted him. Stomp quickly responded, pleased to share something less unfortunate, "Calm down, Gaist survived! He made it to the surface just like I did, and Kasakk knows how he managed it. I found him at the Psionic Camp. He wanted to prevent the assassination of the Enlightened, but unfortunately, we arrived too late."

Excited exclamations erupted around him: "The Enlightened is dead!" and "Is that a good thing or a bad thing?" and a tumult of voices filled the air.

The halfling didn't engage in the general commotion but continued to stare at Stomp for a long time before asking, "What happened?"

Stomp flinched, gathered his courage, and stammered on, "Yes, Gaist, uh, he's been... well, I believe... yes, I believe he's been captured." When the halfling continued to fix him with a wordless gaze, Stomp continued, "The Enlightened was likely killed by agents of the Ore Barons. I think it was on their orders. And the Demon Summoner..."

Stomp halted in mid-sentence as he sensed an icy silence spreading around him. Tunneltracker's face turned to stone, and he inquired in a dangerously low tone, "What's your connection with the Demon Caller?"

A paralyzing hush fell over the group. With his heart pounding wildly, fully aware that a false answer could pose a serious threat to him, Stomp found himself unable to lie to these men. "He was there; he captured Gaist. He seemed to want to prevent the assassination..." he stammered.

"And how did you escape? Did you trick him somehow?" someone from the rear called out, and murmurs of approval echoed this question. Stomp paid little attention, keeping his gaze locked onto Tunneltracker's.

"You have to believe me; I don't know how, but for some reason, the Demon Master couldn't harm me," Stomp asserted. After a short pause, he continued, "He attempted it, and he had a demon with him, but neither of them could or would lay a finger on me. You have to believe that I don't understand it myself."

Now voices rose again around him: "But wasn't Gaist protected by Chekk? How could the Demon Caller reach him?" "And this kid walks away unharmed?" "Well, if that's the whole truth..."

Stomp could feel the atmosphere shifting, turning against him. Desperately, he raised his arms and exclaimed, "Please, believe me! He rambled on about something called a 'Smokehunter's gift' that was supposed to protect me, and I swear, by my mother's grave, I don't know what he meant!"

He was almost ignored, and the ominous murmuring and hostile glares intensified. Slowly, the bystanders closed in on him, forming a tight ring around him and the halfling. The halfling hadn't said a word but had been observing Stomp's face. Stomp tried to speak again, but when he saw the stony faces and mistrustful expressions, his voice failed him.

"Silence, Gravedigger!" Tunneltracker's voice thundered, stifling any further words. Silence descended, and all eyes turned expectantly toward the halfling. He got up, his wooden gear clattering, and climbed onto the table. With a condemning look cast upon the crowd, Stomp was amazed to see that those closest to him now took a step back. With a disdainful expression, Tunneltracker spat in the general direction of the onlookers and turned away with a scoff. He nimbly jumped off the table, dragging the bewildered Stomp behind him, as he raged aloud, "We have more important things to do, you see. We mustn't waste time fighting amongst ourselves or falling for some conspiracy spun by a bunch of candle pushers and incense snuffers."

People willingly cleared a path for him, and Stomp could observe growing uncertainty on their faces. He was grateful that the hostile atmosphere that seemed to be turning against him had seemingly dissipated. He gazed appreciatively at the muscular back of the halfling, who was still mumbling angrily to himself and pacing through the complex with his gear clattering loudly. Just before the entrance, he stopped abruptly, and Stomp nearly bumped into him from behind. He curiously looked over the halfling's shoulder and saw the Water Alchemist sitting on a wooden stool, leaning against the rock wall, his peacefully sleeping face bearing a relaxed smile. This man appeared entirely unaffected by the chaos unfolding around him. His hands rested gently on his thighs, and his entire posture exuded deep and complete relaxation. Right next to him, deep in thought and contemplation, sat Dailah Ironhide.

Once again, the man who had single-handedly defeated a Minesprayer felt his knees go weak and his throat dry. Violet eyes turned toward the approaching crowd and fixed on Stomp, who, forgetting his tense situation, was being pushed closer by Tito's large hands, like a mesmerized rabbit.

"Come on, kid, save your admiring glances for later; the situation isn't as harmless as it appears. The guys are a bit on edge because of the impending battles, and your thoughtless comment about the Sulphurniffer isn't helping to calm them down!" the halfling whispered to him with surprising restraint.

With a graceful movement, Ironhide rose and assessed the crowd, most of whom were dwarfed by his entire head. His cool composure and a faint smile on his perfect lips conveyed deep relaxation, which brought a tense stillness.

This tranquility was significantly disrupted when Tito cleared his throat with a sound more reminiscent of a stampeding herd of cattle than a human noise.

The mage startled, and his violent movement nearly toppled him from his stool. He opened his eyes and stared blankly at those around him. It took a few seconds for his gaze to normalize, and he let out an audible sigh as he regained his composure.

Then a youthful smile, encompassing everyone in its warmth, graced his face. Slowly, he stood up and greeted those present, "Greetings, friends. I hope none of you are injured or in need of my assistance; otherwise, it may exceed my abilities." With a questioning look, he turned to Tito Tunneltracker, "What's going on, my little friend?"

"Kaskoh, do me a favor. This lad here encountered the Demon Summoner, and these Spray-Heads," he shot a bitter look around, "are spinning tales about him being a spy. Can you use your talents to provide us with certainty or, better yet, dispel the suspicions that these dust-brains have, which are diverting their attention from vital tasks?"

The Water Alchemist glanced up, appraisingly eyeing Stomp. "I'm sorry, but at the moment, considering the conflict at hand, I do not see the wisdom in using my abilities for such purposes. I suggest you find a secure place for the young man, even though it doesn't seem very Kasakk-like, until the situation..."

"I'll help," interrupted the tall warrior woman beside him, who had been intently watching Stomp, causing him to turn beet red.

"I believe that my vouching for him should suffice to dispel your distrust," she continued, her gloved hand resting on the finely crafted hilt of her sword. Her cold gaze swept over the crowd, who had gloves for hands and were voicing their agreement. "Let Icehide examine him... Yes, that's how we'll do it... I wouldn't want to be the one to challenge her judgment, remember what she did to Alfie One-Hand..."

"Very well!" the Alchemist replied, taking a step back and clearing a space by the rock wall. Iceskin turned to Tunneltracker, "You are the leader of these people; do you agree?"

Clearly relieved, he replied in his booming voice, "Oh, you center of my barely functioning masculinity, if you inspect someone and vouch for them, I'll personally send anyone who questions your judgment to the sewers of Kasakk!" To emphasize his words, he playfully patted the hip of the warrior woman, who towered over him by almost twice.

Stomp, who was as if in a daze, witnessed how a few of those around him held their breath, knowing that apart from the halfling, no one else would dare take such liberties with the Amazon.

With a furrowed brow and a slight, almost resigned shake of her head, the warrior woman turned her attention to the subject of their discussion, "Are you in agreement?" Stomp's parched throat produced only a croak, but he managed a nod.

"Stand here!" Iceskin commanded. She leaned down to him, and their violet eyes met. Stomp felt like he heard a sound, the splashing of water; he wanted to say something, to shout out the truth of his accounts... and he felt deep tranquility wash over him.

A cold wind whipped across his face as he gazed at the endless expanse of water before him, interrupted by brilliantly white shapes that rose hundreds of meters high, forming jagged, icy outlines. "Icebergs," he thought, but just as he was starting to wonder about this, he felt a sway beneath his feet. He looked down and found himself standing on a tiny ice floe, measuring just about the length of a man.

A movement at the edge of his peripheral vision captured his attention. It was a triangular fin, towering over two meters high as it glided through the water, followed by a second... and a third!

Growing up in a port city, he was familiar with sailors' tales of sharks and their attacks, but he had never heard of a fish whose skin shone with such brilliant blue that it even outshone the color of the sea in this radiant sunlight. Then he realized how vulnerable he was, standing on a tiny ice floe, surrounded by predators with fins that hinted at a truly formidable size.

Anxiously scanning his surroundings, he knelt down, waiting for what he thought would be the inevitable sight of gaping jaws.

Then he heard a splash behind him. He spun around, bracing himself for a snarling maw. But to his surprise, there were no sharks in sight. Yet, he was no longer alone on the ice floe.

Three figures stood there, two women and one man, all clad in simple, vibrant blue leather garments. Drenched from head to toe, they stood in the chilly breeze, their eyes fixed on him. Stomp met their blue eyes beneath a tangle of blonde hair, and he noticed a similar radiant blue wave-like pattern adorning the left side of each of their faces and necks.

After a brief pause, one of the women began to speak. Though Stomp couldn't understand a word of the melodic tones she uttered, it seemed like she was asking him questions. She paused, tilting her head slightly and offering a gentle smile, awaiting a response.

Stomp could only manage an apologetic grin and shake of the head.

Yet, it seemed the three of them had received an answer. After a quick exchange of glances among themselves, they turned back to Stomp and raised their right arms, gesturing behind him.

Perplexed, he turned to see... and was left dumbfounded.

Where there had been an endless expanse of water and ice just moments ago, a colossal iceberg now loomed not far away, rising hundreds of meters into the air. On its flank was a city, or rather, a pueblo-like complex, all born from the ice of the mountain. Hundreds of buildings, with protrusions, stairs, and bridges connecting them, covered nearly the entire face of this colossus. Stomp saw a myriad of graceful spires and minarets, rising against all laws of gravity, forming the most impossible angles and constructions. Everything appeared to be made of glittering green ice, reflecting the radiant light of the low-hanging sun in a rainbow of colors that shimmered across the city's hundreds of intricate surfaces. The sight was so stunning in its beauty and grandeur that Stomp felt a lump in his throat.

Perplexed, Stomp turned to the three individuals behind him after a period of awestruck wonder, who were watching him with indulgent smiles.

Inquisitively, he raised his arms with a shy smile. In response, all three gestured to a point at the base of the mountain. Stomp looked more closely and spotted a freestanding portal formed by two irregular ice pillars, behind which an open staircase led upward into the city. After about forty meters, the stairs disappeared into the maze of houses, spires, and stairs.

Once again, he heard a faint splash behind him, and as he turned back, he found himself alone, only seeing three vivid blue fins quickly moving away towards the open sea, disappearing into the blue water.

Stomp watched them disappear into the distance for a while and, after some hesitation, he set out to reach the indicated point. He couldn't help but wonder why... all of this seemed entirely normal to him. After all, he had just been...? He couldn't remember a thing.

Finally, he reached the portal and, somewhat intimidated, he approached. Something ominous emanated from these massive, ten-meter-high stalagmites made of greenish-white shimmering ice. Even though they stood completely isolated, they seemed to convey that nothing and no one could pass through them. In fact, it appeared to Stomp as if these two pillars were leaning toward him menacingly.

Beyond them, he could see a wide, gently curving staircase. After some hesitation, Stomp mustered his courage, stepped between the portal's pillars... and froze. To his right, he heard a deep growl that seemed to come from the depths of the ice itself.

As he tentatively looked that way, he saw swirling movements within the ice. Something seemed to be emerging, something large and powerful! Trembling, he took a step back and stared at the creature forming out of the ice on the left. The same phenomenon was happening on the other side.

In just a few seconds, the beings had stepped out of the ice and loomed four meters high, glaring at the trembling human before them. Stomp saw bright white fur, a wall of fur, pawprints as large as his head with finger-length claws, and he looked into gaping maws with elongated fangs, reflecting the sunlight.

Then, as if paralyzed with fear, he noticed the radiant red patterns covering the left side of the creatures' faces, necks, and upper bodies.

The fear that had churned through his gut just moments ago dissipated instantly. He knew these marks, he had seen them before, even if he couldn't remember where. The growling and panting ceased. The threat of the situation vanished in an instant. The human and the towering polar bears locked eyes for a long moment. Then, with a blink, the scene blurred...

...and he found himself in the residence of the High Priest of the Psionics, who was once again dead, slumped in his throne-like chair.

In front of him stood Gaist, as stiff as a marionette, with wide-open eyes displaying nothing but profound blackness between the lids. He heard the booming voice again, saw the infantile face of the demon, and the same terror that had driven him from the Psionics camp now surged through his limbs. With a wild cry, he dashed forward, pushing away the hands and arms that tried to restrain him, paying no heed to the bruises he inflicted. Only after a few strides did he come to his senses, trembling and bewildered. He was back in the open mine, standing in the middle of the square, gazing blankly at the onlookers.

Gradually, the remnants of his dream faded, but not entirely. The vision of the ice fortress remained, etched into his mind, as did the red marking on the left side of a polar bear. His eyes searched and found those of the warrior, who tilted her head in what seemed like a friendly greeting, devoid of any mockery.

Stomp looked around. It seemed like only a few seconds had passed, but he was surprised to notice that the grim and hostile expressions on most faces had dissipated. Some even approached him, muttering words of apology. He received pats on the back, and someone handed him a vessel containing a potent-smelling distilled liquor. Behind him, Tunneltracker's deep voice thundered, "There you unbelieving rabble, now you should be convinced, and let this be a lesson to you not to jump to suspicions too quickly. Enough gawking! Return to your places, and perhaps some of you might bother to keep watch for the real threats among us!"

Stomp turned around and looked at the withered figure before him with affection and gratitude, and then to the tall warrior woman.

He approached her and said, "I don't know what you did, but I'll always be thankful to you. You seem to have dispelled the suspicion of these people."

Tunneltracker burst into laughter and roared, "Me! Do you think I'm a...?" He gave an amused sidelong glance at the alchemist. "Formula reciter and spellcaster?"

While Tunneltracker seemed on the brink of hysteria from his own laughter, the alchemist tried to explain the situation to the bewildered Stomp above the cacophonous mirth. "This being here," he gestured to the woman beside him, "comes from far in the North and possesses powers that I, despite my knowledge, do not fully understand. However, her sincerity is beyond question."

Tito, now having regained his composure, interrupted, "Don't be so vague, Waterbearer." He gave the alchemist a reproachful look. The alchemist was unfazed and continued to explain. "In any case, she compelled the young man to recite the conversation word for word." He grinned slyly at Stomp. "It was quite amusing to see you suddenly wear a different face, speaking with that dark, rumbling voice, and then immediately with that squeak. We all recognized those voices, and we all know that it was not within your capability to present anything other than the truth. After all, we are aware of this heroine's talents."

With these words, the halfling raised his hand, seemingly about to, once again unconsciously, stroke the woman's hip next to him. Just in time, he noticed the raised eyebrows of the warrior, and with a clearing of his throat, he withdrew his hand, looking at the top of his fingernail with apparent interest.

"Ahem, and what do we do now?" The little one thoughtfully folded his powerful, muscle-packed arms across his chest, took a step back, and inspected Stomp, who was utterly bewildered, from head to toe. He then turned to the alchemist and asked, "Can you imagine what kind of gift this could be, the one the Floating Visage mentioned?" When the alchemist merely shrugged, Tunneltracker turned back to Stomp. "What do you have with you? Do you have any idea what might have prevented the Sulphurniffer from turning you into a wooden puppet too?"

Stomp pondered but was distracted by a hoarse murmur emanating from the Water Alchemist. Observing him, he noticed that the alchemist's entire body was covered by a faintly bluish shimmering layer, undulating like waves. Fascinated, he watched as a thin stream of water, defying gravity, hovered horizontally through the air, snaking its way towards him. Anxiously, he stepped back, but Tunneltracker reassured him, saying, "Stay calm, Kaskoh is searching, nothing will happen to you."

Both fearful and fascinated, Stomp watched the tentacle of water slowly slithering towards him. He barely felt a touch when this "organ" reached him and, after some slight waving, zeroed in on one of his belt pouches. The tip disappeared inside the bag, and, after a soft sigh from the alchemist, the water probe disintegrated, falling as fine droplets onto the rock at their feet.

The magician remained silent, then nodded towards the bag. Completely confused, Stomp hurriedly opened the fastening with trembling hands. He reached inside, and with a sudden recollection, he felt the object within. With a bashful grin, he retrieved the large gold-framed tooth that he had found in the abandoned mine. As he held it out to the alchemist, he noticed the alchemist recoiling in terror.

The halfling beside him let out a low whistle, "Now I understand. Well, roast me a Stonestrangler, this boy keeps surprising me! How, by Kasakk's hairy eggs, did you get hold of a tooth from a Shugul Sath? I mean, you surprised us by flattening a Minesprayer with one blow, but carrying a Shugul Sath tooth around like it's nothing, my dear, that's a feat no one else can match! Did you defeat it, or did you bet with it, or how did you manage to get that?"

Stomp looked from one to another, completely baffled, holding the object of their interest in his right hand. Slowly, he lost his composure, and he could feel the frustration and fear inside him boiling into a turbulent mixture.

"If the next person asks me how I did something, or why I am what I am, or why I have what I have, by Kasakk's behind, I swear I'll ram this tooth into their...!" he gritted his teeth between clenched jaws. To his amazement, the Water Alchemist took another step back, appearing almost fearful, and gazed searchingly at Stomp's face.

Stomp held the object out to him and said, "I, anyway, think it's better if you take this thing! I have no idea what it can do, what it does, or what it's for - it's a tooth, damn it!"

The man he was addressing raised his hands defensively and almost shouted at the now utterly bewildered Stomp, "Keep it, I don't want to touch it, I'll steer clear of it!"

Stomp looked at the two of them for a long moment, still holding the mysterious object in his hand. He had the impression that there was an odd tingle emanating from it. When none of the bystanders made a move, he casually tucked the tooth back into his belongings. "So, what should I do with it?"

The people he asked shook their heads and shrugged. "No idea," said the Water Alchemist. "What I can sense is that it's an artifact of great power, and only Kasakk knows what it might be good for."

"So, what's next?" the halfling interjected. "What else have you experienced?"

Stomp sighed and gave a detailed account of what had happened to him since he left the miner's camp. The three listened in silence, only occasionally interrupting Stomp's account to ask a follow-up question.

When Stomp finished, silence fell.

"So, you just have to go into the depths, find the orc camp, and somehow convince the shaman to part with his liver. Afterward, you bring it to the demon summoner, who then summons some creature from the depths that wakes up and wants to have us all for breakfast. Then, you have a good meal, take a hot bath, and enjoy your life."

Stomp nodded hesitantly. "Yes, what else can I do?" he asked, almost pleadingly. "I don't even want to imagine what happens if the demon summoner really sends such hellish creatures after me. And with what's going on here, and that something is happening, as you've said yourselves."

His listeners nodded thoughtfully.

Gradually, it all became too much for Stomp. He turned around, fetched an old tin bucket, and sat down on it. Absent-mindedly, he took a sip from his flask and noted that the drug seemed to be losing its effect. While he felt somewhat better, the emotional storms he had sensed earlier were almost entirely absent.

Desperate and resigned, he raised his head and noticed that both the halfling and the alchemist were surrounded by groups of miners, engaged in loud discussions. He was reassured to see that the guards remained undistracted by the commotion within the camp. Just now, a sentry seemed to have noticed something, and a runner swiftly left the palisade to approach the group with the halfling. The agitated voices grew louder, punctuated by the deep voice of the halfling. Iceskin seemed to have left, and to his dismay, he couldn't spot the warrior woman anywhere.

After a few minutes of frantic discussion, the crowd dispersed, and the halfling hurried over to Stomp, accompanied by the Water Alchemist.

"Why are you still sitting around? Get yourself ready. After all, you have a task to complete. You'll receive equipment, weapons, and whatever else you need from us, to the extent we can provide," the halfling said as he forcibly lifted Stomp from his seat.

Stomp raised his head inquiringly, and the halfling continued energetically, "You should know that the Ore Barons are starting to cause trouble. They've surrounded the New Camp and threaten to attack. Some of our runners have reported that their mercenaries are also moving in our direction. That's why we can only send one man with you."

There was a significant pause, and when Stomp looked at him questioningly, the halfling added with a self-satisfied expression, "But the best man in the tunnels." It took a few heartbeats for Stomp to understand what the halfling had just said.

"You, you want to come with me?"

The alchemist also didn't seem pleased about it. "That's not possible. You're the leader of these people here, you can't just hide in some tunnels or burrow through the earth right when a battle is about to happen."

Tunneltracker looked sternly at both of them. "Nonsense! What Sprayerdeath just told us proves that his mission is important, not for the demon summoner, not for Sprayerdeath, but for all of us here. Klitho Kampfhand can lead the people just as well as I can."

With an almost embarrassed grin, he looked at his legs and continued, "Up here, I can't help you much, and I appear quite weak in a fight. But in the tunnels, I'm fast and know exactly what's important. This means that if I can do something to prevent the chaos that's coming our way, it's down there."

As he spoke, his bass voice became progressively louder, startling both Stomp and the alchemist. Convinced by the volume and the arguments of the halfling, they eventually relented. Stomp found that the idea of having this capable man by his side was rather appealing, and he stuttered out his thanks. Tunneltracker waved it off, and even as Stomp stumbled over his words of gratitude, the halfling was already pulling him along.

"Enough jabbering, stop babbling. We have work to do! You, Alchemist, get your task done, and both of us will prepare. Follow me."

Stomp, stumbling behind the halfling's iron grip, had no other choice. They eventually reached the mine entrance and made their way toward one of the larger stone huts. Inside, which seemed to be Tunneltracker's dwelling, Stomp marveled at the large workbench with hundreds of tools, where several peculiar-looking devices stood. Some were partially finished, and others were so intricately constructed that their purpose was not immediately apparent.

The grip released, and Tunneltracker hurried to the back section of the room, where he knelt in front of a crate, muttering to himself as he gathered various utensils that soon formed a neat pile beside him.

"I've instructed that the provisions and a few other essential items are yet to be brought. You can take a break. You'll find a flask of Sruup on the shelf, and there are some arrows for your bow in the back," Tunneltracker said.

Continuing to mumble to himself, with comments like "do I need... - do I need... - what's this, did I put this here...?" he continued to pull items from various boxes, either discarding them or adding them to the growing pile beside him.

Stomp did as he was told, shrugging as instructed, and stowed a large flask of Sruup he found on the shelves into his bag. He replenished his quiver with the mentioned arrows. In the meantime, two younger miners appeared, holding out a leather provision sack with embarrassed grins. He gratefully accepted it and found inside another rope, several torches, and, to his delight, two flasks of the Spray Acid that had already served him well.

At a booming "I'm ready, how about you?" he turned around and watched as the halfling heaved a hefty backpack onto his shoulder.

Stomp was surprised that the little guy appeared to be unarmed. Apart from a staff-like object with a beautifully crafted silver fox head for a handle, he seemed to carry no weapons. When Stomp asked, the halfling beamed and said, "Well, lad, I'm actually something of an inventor. I've constructed these wooden contraptions for my feet, too. And this here is my favorite piece, I call it 'Albert.' It's quite handy for walking, and you can even use it to support a plant if needed. As you can see," and with those words, he folded down a round disk in the upper third, "it can also be used as a seat, which is quite sensible with my little legs, believe me."

Stomp shook his head and raised his eyebrows inquiringly.

"Moreover," and his voice lost its cheerful tone at this point, and something steely crept in, "it has this little button." He pressed the handle, and from the front part of the device shot out a wickedly wavy blade, about forty centimeters long, with barbs along the front edge.

"And then this little lever," and as he said these words, two viciously serrated sickles emerged from the upper part of the weapon, which Stomp now unmistakably recognized as a weapon. They were connected to the staff itself by a chain and with each other, and when the halfling whirled the weapon around, they described a circle of about half a meter with a hissing sound.

"Any more questions?" the halfling commented after his demonstration. When Stomp shook his head in amazement, the halfling continued, "Those were just two of the tricks Albert has up his sleeve! Alright, we've played enough. Are you ready?" Stomp could only nod, and without another word, Tunneltracker strode outside.

Stomp had no choice but to follow, and he noticed that several dozen miners had gathered outside the hut to wish them a safe journey and success. After the shoulder pats and handshakes were done, the two of them left the group, which was now growing quieter, and headed toward the mines. They descended once more.

Initially, Stomp could remember the way. They went down the ramp, past dozens of side tunnels from which work noises and torchlight emanated. Then they continued down the stairs through a chaotic labyrinth of passages and shafts. As they traveled, Tunneltracker reviewed the route that Stomp had taken initially, as far as Stomp could remember. Eventually, they reached the large cavern where Stomp had encountered the torchlight procession not too long ago.

They proceeded quietly. The halfling, who seemed to see just as well in the dark as in the light, moved forward without incident, but the hapless newcomer bumped into protruding rock spikes and uneven ground several times. Finally, the little guy took pity and retrieved something from his bag.

He shook it several times, blew into it, and a greenish, cold light appeared from a small vessel in his hand. It wasn't bright, but it provided enough illumination to see the ground two to three meters around them. "Mold spores!" the halfling whispered mysteriously, and Stomp refrained from further questions.

After nearly two hours of exhausting climbing, which didn't seem to affect the tireless Tunneltracker at all, Stomp felt his legs growing heavier. Also, this constant twilight seemed to weigh on his spirits, and he wondered if the entire enterprise could have even the slightest chance of success. Lost in thought, he was inattentive, and when the short man in front of him suddenly stopped, he bumped into him unceremoniously.

"What the..." Stomp whispered, but Tunneltracker raised a warning hand and looked at the spot on the right-hand wall. He motioned for Stomp to stay back and cautiously approached the section in question. For the life of him, Stomp couldn't see what was so special about this particular piece of stone.

Tunneltracker crouched down and tapped the wall several times with his staff. Nothing happened. With an apologetic grin, the halfling turned around and said, "I could be mistaken, but I thought that..." he didn't get to finish his sentence.

Behind him, Stomp saw the rock wall burst apart, several small stone fragments scattered in all directions, and an opening about two meters in diameter appeared seemingly out of nowhere. From it, two shiny, black, horned arms swept into the cave at an alarming speed, followed by several darkly shimmering, wildly twitching appendages. Tunneltracker, who had his back turned to it, must have noticed Stomp's expression and made a quick jump forward. He rolled agilely to his feet, almost next to Stomp.

"Holla, I knew it!" he shouted loudly, his voice almost completely drowned out by the hissing, crackling clicks emanating from the opening.

Following the noise came a head, roughly a meter wide, triangular, flattened, encased in horn-like chitinous plates above and below. Two long, six-segmented arms emerged from the opening and latched onto the rock in front of them. The rest of the body followed, and the astounded newcomer saw a roughly five-meter-long, insect-like creature before him. It resembled a massively enlarged cockroach and moved quite agilely on eight legs, while the grotesque, flat head jerked wildly from side to side. Stomp could see the large, mandible-like grasping tools on its underside, three times as long as a man's arm, dripping with an oily liquid. The large, hemispherical compound eyes and the darting antennae on the top of the head seemed to take in everything.

With almost imperceptibly fast movements, the creature whirled around toward them.

Stomp recalled Ore-Nose's stories, and for a second, he admired the halfling's reflexes that had brought him out of the grip of those grasping arms so quickly.

However, he had no more time to spare for awe because the beast, accompanied by that bright, iridescent chirping, was closing in on his location.

To make matters worse, he noticed, out of the corner of his eye, another insect-like creature, almost larger than the first, springing out of the attack tube. He couldn't suppress a desperate groan, clueless as to how they should conquer these ghostly fast-moving monsters.

For a fraction of a second, he saw himself, alive, encased in a cocoon in the lightless darkness of a breeding chamber, knowing that this creature had laid hundreds of larvae inside his flesh, and he was doomed to serve as a food source for the hatching brood, fully aware of their emergence.

Then the Stonestrangler, for that was the only thing it could be based on Ore-Nose's descriptions, was upon him.

Stomp automatically pointed the tip of the spear toward the creature closing in on him and saw, out of the corner of his eye, the halfling moving to the side to flank the monster. The creature was still about three meters away, and Stomp had no idea how he could pierce the formidable-looking chitinous plates with his weapon. For that reason, he resorted to a very simple maneuver and began to swing the spear in a circular motion in front of him.

While doing this, he noticed, with a sidelong glance, that the second Stonestrangler had turned its back on them and was busy with something in the dark beyond. Stomp prayed that it would remain preoccupied for a while, whatever it was doing.

Having managed to fend off the rapidly advancing grasping arms of the Stonestrangler with his frantic circular spear strikes several times, it seemed that the creature was contemplating a new strategy. It took a few hesitant steps backward and, with reluctant clicking and its head swaying while its feelers twitched, it observed its stubborn prey.

Then it leaped.

Launching vertically into the air, in an arc that would take it directly over Stomp, the creature was out of reach of the halfling's light source and panic set in. In response, Stomp instinctively did the only thing he could think of: he moved forward.

Tunneltracker, who had stealthily crept into the creature's rear and was about to strike, was left baffled by the monster's sudden disappearance. He cursed and hurriedly followed it. The two companions met a few steps later and frantically looked around. Just as Stomp heard a loud snapping and chirping sound behind him, the monstrous creature reappeared in the light and spun around with a disappointed hiss.

"Now or never, while it exposes its flank to us!" roared the halfling, clattering on his stilts toward the monster. Admiring the courage of the halfling and feeling less resolute, Stomp followed.

Stomp witnessed the blades of "Albert" spring forth with a mighty snap, and as the creature was still in the process of turning, the halfling had reached its flank. With a roll beneath the creature's legs, taking advantage of his diminutive size, he knelt back up. Tunneltracker's weapon flickered multiple times as it pierced the soft belly of the Stonestrangler.

Then, from the corner of his eye, Stomp saw the mandibles snap towards him from the right. Without thinking, he thrust his spear in that direction. After two or three futile thrusts that left him feeling the tip slipping off the hard chitinous plates, he was rewarded with the sensation of something soft. Full of despair, he stabbed repeatedly. The clicking changed, growing more frantic, and it seemed like the creature was attempting to create some distance. It whirled around, and Stomp made the most of the opportunity to repeatedly employ his spear. Eventually, the Stonestrangler retreated, scuttling away into the darkness, but not without dragging the kneeling halfling over the ground with its sagging belly.

When the halfling finally stood up, covered in a sticky, foul-smelling substance, cursing and grumbling, and Stomp was just about to breathe a sigh of relief, he noticed several clumps of slimy, malodorous liquid dripping from above onto the ground in front of him, onto his shoes, and then onto his head.

The second Stonestrangler had seized the opportunity during the chaos to sneak up from behind its prey unnoticed.

As Stomp slowly turned his face, almost in a trance-like state, he saw the massive body looming directly in front of him. Trembling, he looked up, taking in the upraised front body encased in chitinous rings and then the ugly, meter-wide triangular skull floating nearly vertical over him. The creature's large, dome-like compound eyes reflected the light from Tunneltracker. They glinted with cold malevolence.

The realization that he could not make a sound struck Stomp. He tried to scream a warning or a cry for help, but his throat was paralyzed, and no sound came out. He stood there like a rabbit in front of a snake, staring at the Stonestrangler's mandibles that were nearly two meters long, equipped with razor-sharp tips and cutting edges, making slow, hypnotic movements all around him and in front of his face, almost as if in anticipation. In between, he could see the gaping maw, dripping black saliva onto the ground.

Slowly, the spear slipped from Stomp's clammy fingers, and it was as if the creature had recognized his surrender. Its skull slowly descended onto the face of its helpless prey. The sound sliced through the air, and it was a triumphal human shout, underlined by the sound of ice cracking in the freezing cold.

A bright, white streak shot through Stomp's field of vision, and searing cold seemed to scorch his face. He let out a tormented scream and collapsed to the ground, his watery eyes squeezed shut. A cacophony of various sounds overwhelmed him: Tunneltracker's surprised cry, the frantic and, he imagined, pained chirping and clicking of the Stonestrangler, interrupted by a hissing and roaring, as well as the scraping of chitin claws on stone just in front of him.

In wild panic, he opened his eyes and began to crawl backward away from the creature. Through the veil of his tears, he saw that the creature had turned its attention to a new adversary. Iceskin seemed to be performing a dance, surrounded by the striking mandibles.

She whirled in rapid spins and turns of her body directly in front of the creature's mouth, and during her "dance," the violet-shimmering steel of her sword, expertly wielded, struck the Stonestrangler time and again, leaving behind steaming wounds with each hit. Despite the monster's extremely fast and close-range attacks, its pointed and cutting edges appeared to never touch her. The sword emitted those roaring jubilant cries, Stomp recognized, and he was mesmerized by the bluish-violet eldritch fire running up and down the blade, forming streaky tongues of light in the wake of its twitching strikes. And the woman wielding the weapon...

She was magnificent, her face marked by serene concentration, bathed in violet radiance, and a slight smile gracing her lips...

Stomp flinched with a horrified cry when he was suddenly lifted into the air by strong hands, but he relaxed as he heard Tunneltracker's roaring excitement through his ears: "Look at her, isn't she amazing? By Kasakk's weeping eyes... I've never seen anything like it! Go, girl, give it to that horned face, finish it off, turn its shell into a table lamp...!"

The battle came to a swift end. Somewhat disappointed, the two men watched as the Stonestrangler slowly dragged itself away, making a tortured and seemingly frustrated clicking sound. Clearly, it was heavily wounded, with thick, glacial-crusting fluid oozing from multiple injuries, and one of its eight legs twitched detached in front of it on the rock. The warrior lowered her shimmering sword, and the jubilant cheers faded. Silence fell upon the scene, with Stomp and Tito observing in open-mouthed astonishment. They were merely three or four meters apart, and the only light came from the faint glow of Tunneltracker's lamp on the ground in front of them.

A soft, almost questioning chirp came from the massive creature, and its faceted eyes on the tilted head stared at the woman. She stood calmly, her sword lowered. Then, with slow, limping movements, the Stonestrangler turned away from the warrior and hobbled hesitantly toward the rock wall. It disappeared with cumbersome, clunky motions, presenting its hindquarters, into the attack tube from which it had been propelled just minutes ago.

The ensuing silence was filled with the men's heavy panting, the echoes of the battle sounds, and Tito's outbursts, who had watched the events with his mouth agape and now expressed his frustrations: "What in the blazes, why did you let that hellish creature go? With a snap of your fingers, you could've turned its own eating utensils against it!"

Stomp no longer listened to Tito's rant. Instead, he kept his gaze fixed on the warrior, who, in a caressing gesture, cleaned her weapon. Then she briefly pressed the hilt to her lips—Stomp believed he heard that triumphant call again amidst the noise beside him—and gracefully sheathed her sword.

Seemingly having vented his anger, Tito quieted down, and Stomp, still watching the warrior, finally spoke up, his eyes never leaving her: "Tunneltracker... and once more, this time louder, almost shouting: 'Tunneltracker...!'"

The scolding came to an abrupt halt, and the inquisitive halfling stared at the man who turned toward him, placing a finger to his lips. "Shh!"

Grumbling, the little fellow acquiesced and turned his attention to the towering woman. Tito, now warmer, addressed her with a lopsided grin: "Even though I didn't understand the last part, for the first part, I owe you my life, Tall One."

After a pause and with an unusual seriousness, he added, "I am Tito Theosorus Elain, Master Smith and former Hetman of the Guild of Metallurgists of the western provinces; my friends call me Tunneltracker, and I vouch for my courage, strength, and intellect, to the best of my ability, for the safety and well-being of your person and those with you!"

Stomp gazed in astonishment at the little man beside him. He recognized these formal words and knew that each one was meant with deep sincerity and commitment.

Iceskin appeared to be aware of this, as after gazing at the halfling for a long moment, she leaned forward and kissed him slowly and almost tenderly on both cheeks. Stomp observed in silence as the two held each other's gaze for a long time, hands tightly clasped. Just as he began to feel somewhat superfluous, the halfling gently loosened his grip, breaking the solemnity of the situation less gently: "One might also say you owe me...", he added in a hoarse voice.

"Really?" the warrior answered with a faint smile, seizing her chance. "Then I'd appreciate it if you could refrain from making those innuendos about me."

Tunneltracker grinned up at her, "Done, you hourglass-shaped dream of any being that... well..." The last words were mumbled softer and softer, and with a loud clearing of his throat, the halfling turned away, muttering something about "finding Albert," leaving the two of them standing there.

Stomp looked into violet eyes and couldn't resist asking, "You could have easily taken down that Stonestrangler...?"

Iceskin smiled faintly and with her gaze averted, following Tunneltracker's broad back, she replied, "I am a Creesh a Suul, a Bear Daughter, a First Warrior of my people."

Stomp remembered a pueblo on the flank of a massive iceberg, the shaggy and intimidating figure of a four-meter-tall polar bear, red flame runes over the left side of the face and neck of this imposing creature, and he nodded.

Iceskin continued, "As such, I was taught that the highest art of a Sword Singer is to spare lives, and that the easier it would be to take a life, the more important it is to preserve it."

Stomp was genuinely impressed by the woman's words and the memory of the halfling's introduction returned to his mind; he knew that Guild Leaders were highly esteemed individuals, whose social standing far surpassed that of, for instance, his father.

Lost in his thoughts, he started violently when loud cries echoed from the cave walls. A heartbeat later, the warrior's sword sprang from its sheath with a jubilant hum. Both of them ran towards the source of the commotion and found Tunneltracker busily cleaning his "Albert" while loudly lamenting what that "oily crap" might have done to the mechanism of his masterpiece.

Finally, he paused, looking apologetically back at Iceskin, who stood over him with her sword at the ready and a raised eyebrow, silently reprimanding him. The halfling grinned sheepishly and added a belated and unnecessary "Shh!"

Once the little man had calmed down and Stomp had found his Sprayer Sting, they made their way to leave the scene of this encounter.

After a few minutes, they reached a tunnel entrance blocked by some wedged rocks. "This is the way to the cave you talked about. We need to find another way, and I think it's over there," Tunneltracker said after taking a sip from his water bottle. Stomp realized that the halfling was true to his name. After a brief search in a dark tunnel, the little man triumphantly pointed out a crack in the rocks that Stomp would have easily missed. Once there, the three of them managed to squeeze through with some effort.

Finally, the greenish light from Tunneltracker's moldy orb revealed the cave, a place Stomp knew all too well. They silently bid farewell to Jan Ore-Nose and the blue-clad man, whose bodies were undisturbed. The silence was only broken by Tunneltracker's grinding teeth. After a brief glance at the rocky walls, he proceeded to carry the fallen friends into a cascade of stones with some precise blows. Once the rumbling of the collapsing rocks had subsided, only the halfling's snuffles filled the silence.

Then, reluctantly wiping his eyes, the little man looked at the Orc corpses that were still untouched, and followed Stomp, who had taken the lead, into the tunnel where they found the landslide through which he had previously descended. After making sure they were alone, they climbed down and reached the tunnel junction without any interference. Even now, they could hear voices in the distance and see torchlight. Tunneltracker hurried to extinguish his moldy light. They moved quickly and stealthily, and when they reached the balcony, they crawled on their bellies up to the edge.

The men and the woman were surprised to find not Orcs in the room below them but human figures whose behavior and clothing clearly marked them as mercenaries of the Baronets. Tunneltracker muttered softly between his teeth, "So those bastards have managed to dig their way down here. I just hope they haven't found an entrance to the main mine." In silence, they observed the group exiting through one of the rear tunnel openings.

Subsequently, the room was empty, lit only by the two fires at the large entrance, which illuminated a massive structure in the center of the room. After a moment's thought, Stomp recognized this contraption as a ballista, a device for shooting large arrows. He still wondered how the mercenaries had managed to bring this device to such depths when Tunneltracker started to make his way along a ledge and leave the balcony, preparing for the descent. When he noticed Stomp's questioning look, the halfling shrugged and whispered, "Now or never, my friend. The Greenfurred are probably hiding in their caves, and the mercenaries are wandering somewhere above. Let's go!"

They did as he said.

When they reached the cave floor, the three of them crept along, making use of every bit of cover as they moved toward the entrance. They cautiously peeked around the corner and saw a roughly hewn tunnel illuminated by several torches, which appeared to have been added later, winding its way deeper into the earth. A cool, musty stench wafted toward them, with a sweetish undertone of decay. After silently signaling each other, they carefully moved down the passage.

Initially, things went smoothly, but after about forty meters, during which the passage continued uninterrupted into the depths, they encountered a group of Orcs coming from a side tunnel. These Orcs were as surprised to see the intruders as they were to see the Orcs. After a brief moment of shock, they charged at each other. Stomp found himself facing one of these green- and gray-haired monsters, brandishing a club-like weapon and approaching him menacingly. Having already experienced the fighting style of these creatures, he knew what to do. He dodged the first blow, which would have surely shattered all his bones in its force, and swiftly moved to the side of the beast, delivering a quick double-attack to the creature's belly and back with a rapid motion of his horizontally held spear. As the Orc tried to regain its balance with wild, flailing arms, Stomp plunged the tip of his spear deep into the creature's broad back.

Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed the halfling running toward the second of the cave dwellers. When the Orc grunted and stooped down to pick up what it thought was an easy target from the ground, Tunneltracker dropped to his knees and slid toward the creature. Sparks flew from the metal supports of his leg braces as he slid between the Orc's legs. With a quick spin right behind the surprised Orc, the halfling emerged. The Orc turned around, and with a quick motion, Tunneltracker's "Albert" embedded its point in the creature's kneecap. The Orc stumbled forward, roaring, and as Tunneltracker let "Albert" snap against the creature's calf in a quick movement, the Orc went down with a loud crash. Agile as a monkey, the halfling ran over the creature's hairy back and, once he reached its neck, swiftly drove the handle of his walking stick between the beast's vertebrae. The creature twitched one last time and then lay still.

"Never underestimate the little ones," the halfling said as if teaching a lesson to the unconscious Greenfurred.

While Stomp still marveled at the fighting style of the little guy, he heard stomping footsteps to his right and saw the receding back of the third Orc, who, in keeping with his kind, was making a run for it. Without hesitation, Stomp took action. He pulled his bow from his shoulder, drew an arrow from the quiver, nocked it, raised the weapon, aimed – and then heard a whirling sound above him. A Kodang wood dart soared through the air, hit the fleeing Orc on the head, felling him like lightning, and returned with a soft hum to the hand of the warrior woman.

The commotion appeared to have gone largely unnoticed, and after they safely bundled up the three Greenfurred creatures and dragged them into a side passage to avoid premature discovery, they continued to creep along. The tunnel seemed to stretch endlessly before them, with branching paths leading off in irregular intervals in all directions. Yet, no one crossed their path.

Having reached another tunnel junction, Stomp halted in his tracks. He thought he had heard a human voice coming from a side passage to his left, and he wildly gestured to his companions to stop. In response to their questioning looks, he pointed to the opening on their left, and the halfling followed him, muttering, "Who's the real tunnel explorer here?"

Iceskin, securing all directions, followed behind.

The side passage they entered was unlit, but the reflection of several torches could be seen further ahead. Unmolested, they reached the end of the tunnel, which opened into a large, roughly hewn cave, measuring approximately ten by ten meters. The cavern itself was empty, but there were several openings and recesses in the back, roughly sealed with wooden bars. From one of these cells, a human voice could be heard reciting in a calm tone. The rest of the space contained several beds, a fireplace, and a roughly constructed table. They proceeded cautiously, following the sound, and passed three cells. The first two were empty, but the third contained an inhabitant who would never utter a human sound again. They stared at the grim sight of the broken-eyed figure with a slit throat, staring at the cave's ceiling. When they peered into the fourth cell, they encountered an unusual scene.

A man was squatting there, dressed in simple brown leather garments with his long graying hair tied into a ponytail. He sat calmly with his legs crossed on a makeshift bed covered with straw and chaff. Three of the Greenfurred creatures crouched at his feet, gazing at him with an almost reverential look.

The companions stared in amazement at this scene. When the halfling accidentally made a loud clattering noise with his equipment during a movement, the four inmates in the cells turned to the door with startled expressions. The orcs jumped to their feet, chattering and gesturing anxiously, as they retreated to the cave wall. The man, however, regarded the newcomers with a calm gaze.

Gray eyes in a haggard, wrinkled, pale face met their gaze serenely. A finely trimmed mustache curled into a knowing smile. The man slowly rose and approached the wooden bars with unhurried steps. When he spoke, his resonant voice, the same voice that had led the companions to this cave, filled the chamber.

"If it isn't Tito Tunneltracker, the halfling who leads the Miners Guild. What an esteemed visitor."

The addressed halfling furrowed his brow and asked, "How do you know me? I've never seen you before. You're not one of the miners. Do you belong to the Ore Barons, the mercenaries, or the demon summoner? Speak up!" he demanded in a gruff tone.

The inmate didn't answer but shifted his gaze towards Iceskin. "They speak of your bravery and grace everywhere, only surpassed by your mastery of the sword. However, words are too feeble; my eyes rejoice in the attempt to describe your grace to my heart. My lady, you must be the reason the sun shamefully withdraws behind the horizon in the evening, knowing that its radiance fades before your beauty. Forgive me if this environment doesn't allow me to pay you the homage befitting your stature."

And then he turned to Stomp and asked, "And who do we have here; I believe we haven't had the pleasure...?"

"I'm Stomp, uh, Sprayerdeath," he replied.

Then, silence fell. The quartet sized each other up, while the three orcs in the background chattered and pressed themselves against the rock wall.

With a glance at them, the halfling finally said, "You seem to be in good company here, and I think we'll be on our way."

"Not so fast, my impatient little friend," the gray-haired man replied. "In fact, it would be a great service if you'd be so kind as to free me from this predicament. My cellmates, although not as boorish as most of their kind, are becoming rather tedious company over time. Their conversations usually revolve around food consumption or the act of procreation, and, I must admit, my feeble attempts to impart some education and refinement have failed to make much of an impact. Although I have witnessed that the epic love poems of Gavriel Guy or Rohan de Scod's 'Ode to Segaloth's Grove' induce a near-reverential trance in my fellow inmates. Furthermore, their, well, manners leave much to be desired."

Stomp was amazed. This man, who had been in a cell with three orcs for who knows how long, still possessed the courage to speak about his fate in such a composed manner. He spent his time reciting elaborate poetry to them. Stomp involuntarily examined the cell door and noted that it was secured with a simple bolt system, unreachable from the inside but easily operated from the outside.

His musings were interrupted by the halfling's hissed demand, "Then state your name!"

The gray-haired man sighed, "They call me Benedikt."

"Ah!" exclaimed the halfling, looking around guiltily and then continuing softly, "Benedikt, 'the Hand,' I've heard of you. You're a master."

As Benedikt merely nodded with a serene smile, Stomp couldn't contain himself any longer and blurted out, "A master, what's a master?"

The halfling looked at him in astonishment and explained, "You don't know what a master is? By Kasakk's name, you must know the guilds. There are the Shadows, the assassins of the Ore Barons, and there are the mercenaries, the thugs. Then there's another group, no one knows whose side they're on. They're all thieves, unscrupulous rogues with nothing to do except wander around and steal various items from respectable people. However..." he continued with a pensive side glance at Benedikt, "it can't be said that they side with the Ore Barons. They'll steal from anyone."

"Oh, no no no no no!" retorted the prisoner. "Stealing is not the right word. We alter ownership. It's an art that must be learned painstakingly and executed with love. Stealing and robbing, that's for amateurs and ruffians who pickpocket at fairs or break windows and frighten innocent merchants."

Again, a long pause ensued as the three of them stared at the cell. Finally, Stomp gathered his courage and said, "Thief or not, no one deserves to be down here in a cell, especially with three orcs. Who knows what they have in mind for them?"

"That's simple," sighed the gray-haired man. "We're a food supply for the Greenfurred!"

Stomp recoiled in horror. "A food supply? You mean they eat their own kind?"

With a sidelong glance at the cave-dwellers, who were slowly calming down, the gray-haired man explained, "Well, that's how these creatures are. Besides, the three behind me seem somewhat out of the ordinary. They are more peaceful. The largest one among them was even intelligent enough that I could teach him the basics of our language. There seems to be a group of them who are less violent. Also, please don't forget that the Greenfurred lived here in peace before we came and started drilling holes in the rock. When that abhorrent barrier appeared, preventing any escape, they simply panicked, as simple minds tend to do, so we can't really blame them. And, if I may kindly request that you consider this," he continued with a sardonic glance at his conversational partners, "it is the human beings within this mysterious sphere who are here due to their past as murderers, cutthroats, and rapists!"

Stomp looked at him for a long time and then turned his gaze to the three orcs, who were now mostly calm but with fearful expressions as they observed the events.

He made a decision and, after a quick glance at the halfling, who nodded in agreement, he stepped up to the bolt lever that opened the cells and pushed it down after a brief hesitation.

A brief scraping sound followed, and a portion of the wooden grating slid open on all the chambers. With a triumphant grunt, the three orcs threw themselves against the cell wall. The two in front grabbed the bars and effortlessly pulled them aside. Grunting and chattering, they rushed out into the darkness of the cave.

The third followed more slowly, stopped in front of the gray-haired man, and Stomp was amazed to hear the guttural voice utter human sounds: "You frriend, welcome to the Firre of Orrkas. No morre fight against you." He took the gray-haired man's hand, bowed his head, and touched the back of the man's hand to his low forehead. Then, he turned and, standing at the cell's entrance, looked at Stomp, Iceskin, and Tunneltracker.

"Frriends, you too," he grunted and slowly, almost deliberately, left the room.

The three watched him go, still wondering if this had been a mistake, when the gray-haired man emerged among them.

"I would consider it a special favor if one of you gentlemen, or even better, though I dare not hope, perhaps the lady, could escort me back to the surface. The guild I belong to is undoubtedly interested in the information I can provide. Moreover, I think the recent chaos down here is indicative of something terrible happening on the surface. Consider this: first, this was an area inhabited by orcs. Suddenly, these uncouth mercenaries showed up, fighting their way into the orc caves with a ballista. There was a terrible massacre; many humans were killed, and dozens of orcs fell. Eventually, the fighting retreated deeper into the caves. Believe me, this is not a scenario in which a master wants to be involved."

He looked at each of them invitingly, a sardonic smile on his lips.

After some consideration, Tunneltracker grumbled, "If I have to listen to this high-flown nonsense any longer, I'll become melancholic. Besides, he's just a hindrance to what we have in mind. So, take him up quickly. I'll hold the fort here, and we'll meet again."

Stomp nodded in agreement, and after a brief exchange of glances, the gray-haired man, Iceskin, and Stomp made their way back.

They reached the balcony, the tunnel junction, and, after further cautious creeping, the cave where Stomp had the encounter with Shugul Sath. To his relief, he saw the opening his spear had left in the twilight from the halfling. He climbed through it and found the counterweight that had propelled him rapidly upward not long ago.

"If you climb up this rope, you'll reach the abandoned mine," he explained.

The master turned to them with a fatherly grin and removed a ring from his hand. "I am indebted to you. My life was in your hands, and you returned it to me. So know that from here on, I will find my way alone. Take this ring, and whenever you encounter a member of the Masters' Guild, show it, and they will know that Benedikt 'the Hand' supports your membership in the Masters' Guild."

Stomp, looking bewildered and glancing at the warrior woman who nodded nonchalantly, accepted the gift. While he was still searching for words of thanks, the gray-haired man, not without saying his goodbyes to Iceskin with a hand kiss in perfect grandeur, which she let happen with a bemused smile, had already climbed up the counterweight, starting his ascent with powerful strokes along the rope.

As nothing further happened and no attack sounds were heard, Stomp turned around. "If he only knew who he just blew a kiss to," he grinned up at the woman, who then gave him a stern look.

"You spent too much time with the gnome," she replied, and turned away. Nevertheless, Stomp was sure he heard a nearly girlish giggle right after.

The return journey proceeded initially without any disturbance, and they cautiously crept through the greenish twilight. However, they soon ducked into the shadows of the tunnels when they heard frantic voices coming from the breakthrough that led to the upper cave where Stomp had been attacked by the insane Organizer. They relaxed a bit upon realizing that the voices were not the guttural sounds of the Greenfurred but rather excited murmurs clearly from human throats. From a safe vantage point, crouched in the shadow of a rock, they watched several men, holding torches, descending the landslide with rumbling and hushed whispers.

From their conversation, Stomp gathered that they were members of the Miners Guild. Without further hesitation, he revealed himself with a loud "Hey there!" The ore miners fell silent abruptly, and he could hear the hissing of swords being drawn hastily.

"Calm down! Don't you recognize me? It's me, Sprayerdeath, and Iceskin!" He was surprised to note that he was already referring to himself by the name bestowed upon him by the halfling. The men in front of him visibly relaxed and lowered their weapons upon recognizing him and, more importantly, the warrior in the torchlight.

Shortly thereafter, they were surrounded by several agitated miners.

"It's good to see you; I hope you're safe. Terrible things have happened. Shortly after you left, the Baronets attacked us. We had no chance, the Free Mine has been captured. Our comrades are scattered in all directions. We fled into the tunnels. We're looking for the halfling; he must lead us. You said there's a way out to the abandoned mine here."

Stomp glanced uncomfortably at the opening above, from which the men had come, and asked, "Are the mercenaries after you?"

The men gave a bitter laugh. "Don't worry, we've collapsed the tunnels behind us. Those bastards will need days to dig their way through," one of the refugees said grimly.

Stomp nodded, "Alright, I can show you the way up; it's not far from here. The halfling is farther down and waiting. I don't think it's a good idea for all of us to march through the orc cave. I'll send the halfling to you. Let's pick a meeting point where he can find you."

There was an agreement among them, "So, we'll wait on the lakeshore for Tunneltracker. There's a good spot where you can hide underwater. We'll take shelter there. It's a particularly good, inaccessible location in the caves. The halfling knows where."

There was nothing more to add, and Stomp led the group back to the shaft that the Master had climbed recently. Iceskin had taken over guard duty at the tunnel junction. One by one, they disappeared into the hole, and finally, Stomp was alone. Once again, he set off, met the waiting warrior woman, and took the path into the orc caves. In silent agreement, they quickened their pace, hoping that nothing had befallen the halfling in the meantime.

Arriving back at the bend, they crawled on their bellies to the balcony. The room was empty, so they started descending. Both of them crept between the stalagmites to the entrance of the orc caves without encountering any problems. Stomp, leading the way, was thunderstruck and Iceskin nearly bumped into him.

The four Orcs that lay lifeless on the ground would pose no threat to them anymore. There had obviously been a fight; almost all the furniture was overturned or shattered on the floor, and there were several large pools of blood spread across the ground. After a brief scan of the room, Stomp realized that, except for his companion, he was still alone, which put him at ease.

He looked at the corpses with disgust, noticing that three of the Orcs had deep puncture wounds that automatically reminded him of 'Albert' and his malevolent spikes. The fourth unfortunate Greenfurred seemed unharmed, but his head was at a grotesque angle, reminding Stomp of the halfling's muscle-packed arms. It wasn't hard to guess what had happened here. The Orcs had apparently caught Tunneltracker off guard, and it had cost them their lives. But where was the halfling? And Iceskin voiced Stomp's next thoughts: "If he killed them, it must have been serious; otherwise, he would have tried to keep them alive."

Stomp nodded, agreeing with the warrior. Despite the raucous shouting, the halfling didn't seem to enjoy unnecessary killing. However, in this case, it meant...

They exchanged a brief glance and silently began searching the room for clues. Stomp looked around frantically, rummaged through the chamber, and didn't forget to check the cells. Nowhere was the halfling to be seen. He heard a faint whistle behind him. Iceskin pointed to the ground. There were clearly bloody footprints leading out of the room, apparently not from the large, bare feet of the Orcs but from someone wearing boots.

After one last look around, he gripped his weapon more firmly and followed the tracks, with the reassuring presence of the warrior behind him.

They continued deeper into the orc realm, with the duo darting along the tunnel while making sure to secure their surroundings in all directions. They passed several long, dark side passages from which musty air blew, and continued to follow the bloody footprints. After about a hundred meters through the twisting tunnel, Stomp became aware that the halfling must be injured, as the tracks on the ground in front of him were still clearly visible. The two exchanged concerned glances and quickened their steps.

The path led through wild turns into the dark, interrupted by numerous branches. Otherwise, it seemed deserted.

Unhindered, Stomp and Iceskin reached another side passage and followed the bloodstains inside. Stomp felt a draft in his face, causing the torch flame to flicker and realized they were approaching a larger chamber. He could see the tunnel end in a semicircle just ahead, and he noticed the reflection of several torches from the area beyond. He quickly extinguished his own light.

Once again, the two exchanged a wordless look. It appeared that they had found the "village" of the Orcs.

The cave in front of them was at least a hundred meters wide and over thirty meters high. It seemed to be a natural cavern, filled with various rock formations, irregularities, and hundreds of stalactites and stalagmites. Scattered throughout the cave were dozens of makeshift, rudimentary huts constructed from tilted wood and mud. In the center, a clear space had been left, with a small pool of water springing from a single rock, gathering in a small natural basin, and then flowing out of the cave through a small stream.

Directly beside the pool was a massive boulder that eerily resembled an altar. Seeing the dark stains scattered across it, Stomp shuddered at the thought of the rituals that might have taken place here. The space was illuminated by several large fires burning across the area. However, what alarmed Stomp were the dozens of motionless figures lying sprawled across the area and between the huts.

A terrible massacre must have occurred here. Stomp saw large, bloody wounds inflicted on figures covered in green fur. Here and there, an unfortunate victim was no longer recognizable as a humanoid being, lying in a jumbled mess of individual limbs. Not ten steps ahead, he saw the severed head of an orc, with broken eyes accusingly staring at its own body, which lay like a discarded puppet two meters away. Large pools of blood were everywhere, and some of the blood splatters reached almost two to three meters high on the stalactites and cave walls. The whole place was permeated with the smell of death and decay, and the silence that hung over it was only broken by the crackling of the torches in the room.

After recovering from the initial shock, Stomp urgently searched the cave but couldn't find any trace of Tunneltracker other than the bloody footprints stretching out in front of him across the rubble into the cave.

Nothing moved.

Hastily, Stomp retreated into the tunnel, leaning against the wall, trying to steady his trembling hands with another sip of Sruup. What had happened? He glanced at the woman who was at the cave entrance, one hand holding a piece of Kodangwood, the other resting on her sword hilt, slightly crouched and scanning the surroundings like a coiled predator.

Stomp was certain that something powerful, fast, and fierce had attacked this village. The mercenaries, as cruel as they might be, were not responsible for this devastation. Stomp's previous encounters with the Greenfurred had revealed that they should not be underestimated as fighters. However, something had raged among them, killing dozens of Orcs in a truly barbaric manner. It couldn't have been something large, Stomp mused, because the huts and closely spaced stalagmites were untouched. Whatever it was, he wondered where it was now, and more importantly, where Tunneltracker was.

Anxiety gnawed at him as he scanned the cave and the dark tunnels, fearing he might be attacked at any moment by some nameless creature, just like the unfortunate Orcs outside the cave. Despite his fear, he decided to follow the halfling's trail, as it was the only lead to find a way out of the caves. With growing dread, he realized he wasn't certain about finding the way back to the surface, and the thought of retracing his steps through the dark tunnels with some unknown entity on his heels sent shivers down his spine.

After securing his gear, he crawled back to the entrance. The warrior awaited him, and her silent, long gaze seemed to contain a question. With a feigned grin of confidence he didn't feel, he nodded in the direction of the cave, and her brief smile conveyed her response.

After a brief prayer, he set off, moving stealthily through the cavern. His steps echoed loudly in the empty space, and he kept a constant watch, always expecting that something might leap out from behind a hut or a rocky outcrop. His hairs stood on end, and the metallic taste in his mouth grew more pronounced. With trembling hands, he picked up one of the torches and hurriedly moved on, utilizing any available cover.

He noticed that the huts he passed were empty or filled with dead Orcs. The injuries, seen up close, were horrifying. They couldn't have been caused by a sword, but rather by something larger, heavier, and sharper, wielded with immense force. Slowly, he crept towards the back of the cave and realized that something had torn up the ground there. Large rocks and shale slabs had been pushed aside and hurled as if something massive had broken through the cave floor from below. The breach was around ten meters in diameter, and within a twenty-meter radius, large boulders were strewn about.

From the abyss that yawned before him, he felt a cold wind that swept upwards with a low, mournful sound. It tugged at his clothes, his hair, and the light of his torch.

Here, there were several piles of stones inside the hole, and after mustering his courage, he took a second torch, lit it from the first, and let it fall into the hole. Sparking and hissing, it tumbled over the rocks in front of him, descending about twenty meters, appearing as a small, lost point of light.

Nothing else happened.

Only the faint howling of the wind could be heard, and his overwrought senses seemed to hear in it the sobbing of people and the cries of tortured creatures. The light below him flickered two or three more times before extinguishing. He had seen enough. He knew that about two meters away, the pile of rubble below him could be easily climbed, and from there, they would find a way into the depths. Looking around, he searched for his companion and held his breath when he couldn't spot her anywhere, only to let out an audible sigh of relief as she, seemingly out of nowhere, glided from behind one of the huts. He waved her over, and swiftly, she approached, crouching and scanning the area. Looking over his shoulder, she surveyed the crater before them, seeming to take everything in with one glance. Once again, Stomp felt relief in having this experienced sword singer with him.

As if she had guessed his thoughts, she turned to him with a puzzled expression and pointed at the hole before them. Caught red-handed, Stomp nodded and began his descent. He didn't want to linger any longer in this place of horror, even though he knew they might encounter greater terrors down below. Then, he thought again of the demon summoner's milky eyes, realizing that he had no other choice. Furthermore, Tunneltracker might still be down there, injured and possibly in need of help. To confirm this, he noticed more blood drops in the torchlight, and a bloody footprint was imprinted on the topmost rock in the hole.

He secured the spear on his back, checked that his backpack was tightly secured, and ensured his sword could be quickly drawn. He glanced back at Iceskin, who was once again keeping an eye on the cave, and began his descent. The sword singer followed at a short distance. Climbing down the slippery rubble was challenging, and the clattering of loosened stones echoed loudly in the silence several times. Stopping often to peer into the darkness, his senses on edge, he heard nothing but his own labored breathing and the pounding of his heart. Slowly, he continued his climb, reaching the base of the rubble heap, panting heavily and trembling in all limbs. His torch lay before him, still gently glowing. He picked it up, ignited it from the one he held, which had burned down to about a hand's breadth, and cast its light to illuminate the chamber. Before him stretched a circular tunnel, nearly six men's lengths in diameter, winding downward into the abyss.

The cave walls were remarkably even, and every two steps, they were marked with a clamp-like indentation that extended uniformly into the darkness. Looking around, Stomp realized that this tunnel continued behind the pile of rocks and was only interrupted by the hole above them and the rubble pile in front of him. Otherwise, everything appeared perfectly regular, and Stomp, feeling the walls with his hands, was amazed to find that the rock felt entirely smooth, as if polished. Suddenly, he realized where he was.

This had to be the trace of a Minesprayer. Involuntarily, he pulled his head back and with a restrained cry, Stomp realized he was in the path of a twelve-meter diameter Minesprayer!

Just in time to intensify his horror, he heard a muted wheezing and snorting behind the boulders. Panic nearly caused him to drop his torch, and in frantic haste, he fumbled for his sword, which clanged loudly as he unsheathed it.

Standing on the rubble heap behind him, securing the area, Iceskin already held her weapon, and this time, the calling of the sword was only a muted whisper, as if the steel could recognize the eerie nature of the situation.

The wheezing was heard again, and some smaller stones trickled and clattered down the rock slope he had descended. With trembling limbs and his sword drawn, Stomp approached the source of the sound. His relief was boundless as he recognized the source of the noise after a few steps.

The halfling was there, upside down, his shins trapped by a large boulder, hanging in the rubble slope. A broad trail of blood flowed beneath his body onto the ground. He moved weakly, his eyes closed, and with fluttering eyelids, he breathed rapidly, interrupted by slight wheezing.

Stomp quickly placed the torch between two loose rocks and climbed the few steps to the unfortunate Tito. Anxiously, he waved the warrior to him, who rushed to them with a startled cry. Stomp gently shook the injured man's broad shoulder. "Tito, Tito, can you hear me? How are you feeling? Say something!"

Tito didn't respond, and in panic, Stomp began to check the injured man. When he reached his legs, he discovered that they were trapped between the boulders. However, the halfling had multiple superficial wounds, and the back of his leather jerkin was soaked with blood. He didn't look well; his face appeared pale with a greenish tint, and thick beads of sweat dripped from his forehead onto the rock below. His breathing was shallow and labored. He didn't react to Stomp's words, and in his fear, Stomp made his first clumsy attempts to pull the boulders off the halfling's feet. Apart from a faint groan, they showed no response to his efforts, and Stomp felt his anger growing.

Frantically looking around for an object to use as leverage, his gaze fell on his spear, and he quickly picked it up.

He wedged the end under the boulder, muttering, "Help me, Sprayer Sting!" He pushed with all his strength, the tip resting on his shoulder, straining every muscle and sinew, feeling like they were about to tear as he pressed against the spear. Iceskin appeared beside him and wordlessly joined in, the wood bending and making a loud cracking noise. Just as he feared it might break, he noticed the boulder above the halfling's leg beginning to move.

With a crunch followed by the clatter of loose rocks, the stone lifted several centimeters, freeing the halfling's legs. Following gravity, Tito's body began to slide, accompanied by a shower of loose stones, passing Stomp and making its way to the tunnel floor. Before he could react, the woman released the spear to catch Tito's fall, lifted him gently, and moved him further into the tunnel to safety.

Meanwhile, Stomp, left on his own, had his hands full to avoid being hit by the shifting rubble. Carefully, he let the boulder slide back into its original position and looked apprehensively at the unstable stone cascade in the tunnel. He quickly pulled the spear out of the crevice and, with a final glance at the rockslide, he bridged the short distance to the halfling in quick strides.

A crunching sound behind him was heard, and he hurried away from the landslide. Not a moment too soon, as a few seconds later, there was a loud, deafening roar and crash, followed by a cloud of dust that enveloped him. Several loose stones struck his running legs before it went quiet and dark.

Coming to a halt with the groaning and bleeding Tunneltracker in front of him, he looked around into absolute darkness. He had forgotten the torch between the rocks, and it was now buried under several meters of debris behind him. Dust enveloped him, and there was nothing else to be seen. Behind him, some loose stones continued to tumble and slide down. After his eyes had adjusted to the darkness, he realized that the only faint light filling the tunnel was the reflection from the Orc camp's torches above, which fell through the inaccessible hole about twelve meters overhead. The debris pile below had further collapsed, and even from the highest point of it, there was still a good seven meters to the jagged edge of the opening above.

Slowly, Stomp knelt beside his injured companion, watching Iceskin as she expertly examined him. After a few moments, she straightened up, her back turned to Stomp, and whispered into the darkness, "There's nothing I can do for him; he's too severely injured."

Stomp stared in disbelief at the woman. He could sense her pain in her hoarse voice and her tense posture, and a chilling dread overcame him. "You mean..." he began. Silently, the sword singer nodded and slowly lowered her head, gently pushing the injured halfling's sweaty hair from his face.

Desperation overwhelmed Stomp. The way back was clearly cut off; he was inside the path of a gigantic Minesprayer, and the halfling's gasping between irregular wheezing breaths seemed to confirm the warrior's words. His hands were clammy, and without looking, he knew the liquid was the halfling's blood. Throwing caution to the wind, he let out a loud cry born of despair and anger, echoing loudly from the walls.

The only response was the howling of the wind, sweeping through the tunnel and breaking against the jagged edge of the hole above him, as if mocking him.

After a few minutes, during which he could barely suppress a sob, he regained his composure. He fumbled in the dark with blood-soaked hands, retrieving another torch from his backpack. His trembling fingers took several attempts to produce an acceptable flame from the tinderbox, and eventually, the wood was burning brightly.

When his gaze fell upon the injured halfling before him, a new shock coursed through his body. The halfling's face was waxen white, his eyelids no longer fluttering, and Stomp believed he couldn't see any signs of breathing anymore.

His relief was boundless when the mighty chest of the halfling rose and fell again in an irregular breath. Iceskin had turned him onto his side, and Stomp noticed a large, jagged wound on his back, from which dark red blood flowed steadily in a weak pulsing stream. With flying fingers and all his knowledge of wounds and injuries summoned from memory, he desperately searched for the vial of the alchemist's water, finding it after a brief search in one of his pockets. He uncorked it, and in his exhaustion, the temptation to take a sip for himself was overwhelming. Nevertheless, he composed himself and hesitantly regarded the tiny container. Would it be enough?

He turned the halfling onto his back, lifted his head, and let a sip of the concoction flow between limp lips. Then, he turned him back onto his stomach and used the rest of the liquid to apply it to the wound. With blood stained fingers, he waited anxiously. The halfling's body trembled violently, as if seized by cramps. His teeth chattered, and Stomp observed the situation with worry.

Something appeared to be happening; the color of the halfling's face improved, and his breathing grew steadier, but the continuous flow of blood didn't stop. In fact, the pulsing seemed to grow stronger. Hastily, Stomp retrieved the blue-dyed leather jerkin from his backpack and packed it onto the wound.

Helplessly, he glanced at the swordswoman, who shook her head hopelessly with tears in her eyes. With horror, he realized that the fabric was quickly soaked, and the blood-stopping effect was not as effective as he had hoped.

In his efforts to help the halfling, he had unknowingly started to pray, and this continuous stabbing sensation in his hip eluded him. It was only after some time that he noticed this pain and looked in surprise at his belt. One of the pouches was bulging, as if something were pushing against it from the inside. It was a worm-like movement that deformed the leather bag. With a cry, he jumped to his feet, and with frantic, fumbling fingers, he removed the belt from his body and tossed it to the ground.

When nothing happened, he cautiously approached and prodded the bag in question with the tip of his dagger. Nothing stirred, the leather appeared as it always did, and the movements were no longer visible. Carefully, with his dagger drawn, he opened the pouch clasp and took a step back. The garment lay there completely unaffected, the lid was open, and in the torchlight, he could see something white inside. He looked at Iceskin, who, kneeling with the halfling, paid no attention to her surroundings.

After several breaths, he approached the belt again. As he lifted it, the tooth he had found in the abandoned mine fell to the ground with a faint, oddly sighing sound. It gleamed in the torchlight, and as Stomp leaned closer, he held his breath. The initially gentle, soft rustling sound did not subside; rather, it swelled, growing louder and deeper. Overtones joined in; the sound rose from the rock and the ground around them, changing further and causing the stone and air to vibrate. Eventually, the sounds merged into a resounding call that seemed distantly familiar. It was a rumble, a hissing breath, a predatory growl and panting. The ground around the tooth began to deform, moving in small waves toward it, just like the surface of a still lake when someone tossed a stone into it. Under his feet, Stomp felt himself sinking into the soft, liquefied rock, without any pain. On the contrary, the sensation was pleasant, almost caressing. He slid a short distance deeper and then found firm footing again. The rock of the floor and the walls around him undulated, the flowing eddies seemed to take on structures, but just before Stomp could make out anything, new movements occurred in the formations. He looked at the tooth in amazement and noticed that thousands of small tendrils had formed from the stone below it, resembling tiny arms, slowly but purposefully rotating and moving toward the halfling. Iceskin had jumped up; with a furrowed brow, she watched the events with uncertainty, her hand gripping the hilt of her sword.

The lifeless body of the halfling appeared to be in motion, gliding on the waves of the underground towards the tooth.

In a sudden inspiration, Stomp seized the artifact and closed the gap between him and his comrade with two swift strides. He knelt down and turned the injured halfling onto his stomach. The wound had started bleeding again, and Stomp quickly pulled out the blood-soaked leather jerkin. He briefly looked at the woman for approval, and after a short pause, she nodded. Without thinking, he instinctively placed the tooth on the wound.

A milky white light seemed to emanate from the object, growing rapidly stronger, to the point where both companions had to close their eyes due to the blinding radiance. The rumbling grew louder, resonating in his head, in the rock, in the air, reverberating everywhere – he thought he heard words, growling syllables of a language he had never heard before, foreign, inhuman, slowly reciting something - and then fell silent abruptly. Darkness returned. The silence reverberated once again from the aftermath of the phenomenon.

The only thing Stomp saw were red spirals and circles behind his closed eyelids. It was only when he heard mumbled swearing in front of him that he abruptly opened his burning and teary eyes. In the torchlight's glow, he saw the halfling sitting, looking around with a bewildered face while continuously muttering a series of suppressed curses.

With a loud cry, he jumped up, rushed towards the surprised halfling, patted him on the shoulder, and hugged him. "Nanana, my friend, we're not there yet," he grumbled in surprise.

"You're alive, unharmed. What joy! Are you well? Can you feel your legs? How are you?" With a puzzled expression, the recipient of this treatment pushed aside Stomp's waving arms and his stuttered questions and looked over to Iceskin, who silently approached, with traces of tears on her cheeks, and extended her hand. Accepting her help, the halfling rose with a labored groan.

He cautiously attempted to stand on the wooden splints, which eventually held his weight with a loud creaking. He took a few steps and then shook his head while looking at the still babbling Stomp. "Did you hit your head somewhere, or what happened to you?" he asked, his bass voice resonating almost as usual throughout the tunnel.

As Stomp beamed happily at him, he turned to Iceskin. "So, lovely, can you please... Heeee..." He couldn't finish his sentence as he was lifted off his feet and found himself pressed against the ample bosom of the warrior woman in a passionate embrace. His bewildered face was too much, and Stomp couldn't contain the laughter welling up inside him. The tunnel reverberated again with his hysterical laughter and the muffled sounds of the halfling squirming in Iceskin's arms.

The sword singer eventually put down the halfling, who quickly took a step back to safety. Suspiciously squinting his eyes, he looked back and forth between the two of them. "I might be wrong, but it seems like you both had a taste of the wrong Sruup," he said.

Stomp calmed himself and began explaining, but he was once again interrupted by the halfling's astonished, "Where are we?" He rushed to tell him about the recent events but was interrupted again when the halfling, with an incredulous expression, asked, "Inside the path of a Minesprayer? Are you out of your mind? Nonsense! Your imagination is running wild! There are no Minesprayers that big!"

With those words, he walked up to the wall, feeling it and even tasting it. He then stepped back with a pensive expression and muttered, "Of course, I could also be wrong."

He looked around warily in both directions, as if expecting one of those creatures to appear at any moment in the torchlight. His gaze landed on the pile of rubble in the middle of the tunnel and the jagged hole above it, causing him to furrow his brow.

"I think I remember something," he said. "Yes, I remember now. I was in prison when suddenly four of the Greenfurred ones showed up. They were in a complete panic, babbling about creatures attacking them and kidnapping their mind healer. They also mistook me for an attacker, and I had no choice but to correct the situation with 'Albert' here. Then, about a dozen of those fluffy creatures appeared, and we had to make a run for it."

"Finally, always on the run from our pursuers, I stumbled into this main cave. It was eerie, everything dead, and behind it, a huge hole. The orcs were chasing me, so I had to dash through the cave, and what can I say, then, as sorry as I am," he hunched his shoulders, "I fell into that accursed hole. And just as I was getting back on my feet, there was a two-meter tall thing in front of me. I, without hesitation, gave 'Albert' a swift move right between its legs, but it didn't react at all. It didn't need to, because I, you see, had missed the second one behind me. All I remember from that one was a strange chant and a blow from something incredibly sharp and heavy right into my back. I remember flying through the darkness, couldn't even hold on to 'Albert!'"

"The next thing I remember was you, my friend, sitting in front of me and doing a crazy dance as if a Minesprayer had crawled up your rear end."

Stomp inquired, "Apart from that, you don't remember anything else, have no idea what caused all this or what killed the orcs?"

The halfling shook his head.

Stomp looked back at the opening and realized that the three of them didn't stand a chance of reaching the opening without further equipment. His thoughts were interrupted by a loud exclamation, "My backpack, my backpack! Help me look!" He hurried to follow the halfling, who was marching toward the rubble heap with a determined look.

Iceskin, who had been keeping an eye on their surroundings during their conversation, followed with a resigned sigh, barely audible. Doubting their chances of finding anything amidst the rubble and debris, Stomp joined in the search. Nevertheless, their efforts were soon rewarded with a triumphant shout from the halfling as he pulled the dusty, battered backpack from under several rocks.

With nimble fingers, he opened the clasp, rummaging through its contents. "Almost everything is intact, almost everything is intact!" boomed the halfling in satisfaction as he shouldered the bag. After a brief, regretful look back and a sigh, "I guess I'll have to write off 'Albert'..." Tunneltracker turned to his companions and shouted, "What are you waiting for? Do you think we can stand around here until this tunnel's mother eventually shows up? We have to move forward or not. Don't you have a mission?"

With these words echoing in Stomp's ears, Tunneltracker clanked ahead. "Back to his old self, isn't he?" the warrior woman remarked, then continued, "Someday, you'll have to explain how you managed that healing!"

Stomp shrugged. "If I only knew..."

They had to hurry to catch up to the halfling. The rest of the journey was spent in silence. The initial euphoria over saving Tunneltracker had faded, and Stomp pondered what had truly happened. It struck him that he had left the "gift" lying on the rubble heap, and his discomfort grew when he found it back in his pocket as though it had never been removed. The tooth lay innocently in the torchlight, flashing white and seemingly harmless.

"What's...?" whispered the Amazon behind him, who had naturally taken up the rear guard. Stomp just shook his head wordlessly.

He forced himself not to dwell on this phenomenon any longer. They had more important things to focus on. Whether it was what they had witnessed before or the thought of the creature that might have left this tunnel in the rock, they often glanced back in haste, always prepared to see something unspeakable emerge from the darkness.

They followed the smoothly polished tunnel for about a hundred meters, passing through two gently winding bends, when the halfling suddenly stopped in his tracks. "Do you hear that?" While Stomp was still wondering about the low, restrained whispers that this small being could produce, he heard it too. Grunting, stomping, and snorting coming from ahead in the darkness of the tunnel. A sound as if many feet were shuffling, bare feet patting on stone.

They looked around in unease, and in a reflexive movement, Stomp extinguished the torch. In the darkness that followed, they could make out the faint glow of lights approaching, still hidden by the curve of the tunnel in front of them. They hurried to get to the right side and pressed themselves tightly against the wall. Stomp felt, more than saw, that the halfling was rummaging hastily in his backpack and eventually held two silver objects in his hands with a whispered triumphant "Aha." Beside him, the sound of whispering returned as Iceskin drew her weapon.

Then the noises grew louder, and it became evident that a group of several figures was approaching from beyond the bend in the tunnel. Stomp had learned to recognize the guttural growling and grunting. He pressed himself closer to the wall.

Two heartbeats later, a group of orcs came charging around the bend at a breakneck pace. Stomp squinted his eyes as the light from several torches fell on their faces. The orcs rushed past them, shouting guttural commands, and Stomp could barely see that they didn't even acknowledge their presence. The orcs appeared to be in a panicked flight. Not a few of them looked around in fear, and in their hasty escape, they paid no attention to the figures pressed against the tunnel edge.

A few seconds later, it was all over. In the distance, they could hear the sounds receding and see the diminishing light of the torches. Only then did the companions allow themselves to breathe again and looked at each other in puzzlement. Beyond the bend, another noise could be heard, this time the shuffling of something large and heavy, followed by an agonized death scream. The faint light of torches was still visible, and the slow, shuffling steps echoed into the distance after a brief pause.

Only after some time did Stomp dare to take a quick look around the corner. He could see several lifeless figures lying on the ground in the straight section of the tunnel ahead, faintly illuminated by the light of three torches lying on the ground, slowly flickering out. He recoiled in horror and heard the urgent question from behind, "What's going on? What do you see?"

Without waiting for an answer, the halfling squeezed past Stomp and also looked around the corner. When he turned back to Stomp, he furrowed his brow thoughtfully. "I wonder..." "What do you mean? Do you know what killed the orcs?" Stomp whispered excitedly. "Well, I'm not sure," the halfling replied hesitantly.

"There are strange stories; rumors from the miners that they've heard shuffling footsteps in the tunnels, and from time to time, one of the ore diggers has disappeared. I remember we found one once, I still know that; he was terribly mutilated. Nobody knows what it was, not a stone grinder, not an orc... mmh," he paused suggestively.

The silence that followed was only interrupted by the crackling and hissing of the slowly fading torches on the ground in front of them as they pondered how to proceed. Finally, the little one said confidently, "Nonsense! We can't go back. Behind us is rubble and orcs, and in front of us, well..." Reluctantly, Stomp agreed, and Iceskin seemed to have no doubt about the course of action. The companions cautiously moved around the edge and crept along the wall, staying in the shadows, on the daunting path. They were eager not to get too close to the dead or the torches, and they moved forward, Iceskin silently, and Stomp and Tunneltracker as quietly as possible. After just a few dozen meters, another bend appeared in front of them, illuminated again by the light from beyond. They crept closer, and when they reached it and dared to look beyond, their hearts almost stopped in horror.

After a few meters of the passage, a cavern opened up before them. As far as they could see, it seemed to be large, at least fifty meters in diameter. From their limited field of view, they could see that the floor was smooth and level, and the semi-spherical walls appeared to be made of marbled and polished stone. But what terrified them was the nearly fourteen-meter-high head of a Minesprayer lying on the floor opposite the wall of this hemisphere, staring at them. Hundreds of Sprayer tentacles and other frightening gripping and biting tools protruded menacingly in all directions.

The circular feeding orifice of the monster, about four meters high, was wide open, and Stomp could see the interlocking, shifting chewing plates of the creature, which were pulled far back. To his right, the massive, twelve-meter-wide body of the monster snaked back in a gentle curve along the cave walls and occupied almost half of the cave's circumference. Directly to the right of the entrance where they stood, he could see the rear end of this gigantic creature in the cave. The beast did not move. On closer inspection, Stomp noticed with a furrowed brow that this monster would never move again. It seemed petrified, with the head of the colossus lying in the center of the cave, the first part of the body leading to the edge of the cave opposite them and then turning to fill the curve of the cave up to the entrance of the tunnel where they were standing.

Over the head and neck of the creature, a kind of building was erected. It was old, ancient. Stomp noticed in astonishment that meter-high rock blocks were combined with graceful arches that rested on and around the head of this gigantic Sprayer. This created a large structure that filled the rear part of this dome, intricately intertwined with arches, bays, and balconies, without a single window reaching up to the apex of the dome. The building looked dark and menacing, and the architecture had a foreign, eerie impression. The head, or rather the feeding orifice of the Sprayer, seemed to be the entrance to this building. On the front facade and at irregular intervals across the dome of the cave, large, lump-like bundles clung, emitting a sickly greenish light, casting the entire cave in a pale twilight.

Then he heard the shuffling again to his left, and as if on cue, combat sounds erupted from the left side outside of their field of vision, accompanied by the guttural growling from orc throats and the screaming and moaning of wounded or injured creatures. The three of them looked at each other in puzzlement, and finally, they gathered their courage and cautiously pushed themselves to the edge of the tunnel and peered around the corner. And they recoiled in shock once more!

After a brief hesitation with their weapons at the ready, they looked back at the scene and observed the procession. It consisted of eight creatures unlike anything Stomp had ever seen before. He watched them with disgust and realized that they must have been humans at some point. They were still dressed in tatters and remnants of various clothing. They moved sluggishly, slowly, purposefully in a double file, four on each side, heading toward the portal. However, their dimensions had shifted. Something seemed to have possessed them and seemingly enlarged their bodies. They stood nearly three meters tall, but their arms and legs appeared to have extended faster than their bodies and heads. They were a pale brown color, hairless, and moved forward like wooden puppets. No weapons or other utensils were visible.

They were carrying a body between them. As the observers ventured further forward, they could also see where the source of the fighting noises was coming from. A mob of orcs followed the procession, growling and heavily armed with clubs and primitive axes. They were trying desperately to keep pace but were held back by more of these creatures.

Effectively held back!

Stomp saw a large, green-furred orc with wild grunts leap at one of these creatures, swinging a heavy, primitive axe. The creature barely reacted. With its raised right arm, it effortlessly blocked the ferocious blow, and in a second, swift movement, its left hand swept in a swinging arc across the face of its attacker. Stomp was horrified to see that it must have some form of weapon because the upper part of the unfortunate assailant's head flew to the side with a loud splash. Subsequently, the torso collapsed, covered in blood, and the creature in front of him paid him no further attention but turned to a new attacker.

Despite the furious attacks of the orcs, they couldn't catch up with the procession, which apparently carried one of their own among them, and they were continually pushed further back. Stomp wondered what was so important about this individual that these generally known as cowardly creatures were so determined to rescue him.

Following a sudden insight, he whispered to the halfling, "Could that be the shaman?" The halfling raised his bushy eyebrows and began to nod slowly as he gazed into the cave. "That's the only explanation for why they're still trying to get him out," he replied in a whisper.

A dull scream interrupted their thoughts. There was nothing human in it, and the hollow moaning that now rose seemed completely emotionless. When both looked quickly into the cave, they saw one of the individual giants stumble to the ground. The orcs seemed to have formed up and were now attacking in groups of four each one of the guards, as Stomp privately called them.

One of the guards had success with this tactic because, even though the creature on the ground continued to flail wildly and inflict some damage with its terrible moaning, a large orc finally managed to get up and, with a triumphant shout, brought his axe down on the creature's head. The hollow moaning abruptly ceased, and the silence was filled with the wild triumphant cries of the attackers. Another guard was similarly dispatched, and while some of the orcs were still struggling with the remaining rearguard, the rest pressed on to catch up with the procession.

The procession had been walking slowly and indifferently toward the portal and was about twenty meters away from it when the first pursuers caught up with them, wildly screeching and attacking. The rear four dropped the body they had been carrying and turned to face the attackers. Stomp could now see that the left hand of this creature did not carry a weapon. Instead, the five fingers of the left hand were armed with razor-sharp claws that had grown together into a solid comb above the fingers. With this, the guards now struck at the oncoming orcs, and one unfortunate orc who couldn't dodge quickly enough staggered back, his belly slashed open, and stared in horror at his protruding entrails. He collapsed with a shrill scream. A terrible tumult ensued, interrupted by the roars of the orcs, but also by the hollow moans with which five of the guards finally fell to the ground. The companions watched this incredible slaughter in front of them, stiff and full of disgust. The ground was littered with dead and wounded, and still, two of the guards, carrying the limp and lifeless form of the shaman between them, were slowly shuffling toward the portal. Behind them, the remaining three guards and the remaining dozen orcs, all bleeding from multiple wounds, engaged in a fierce battle.

Stomp felt a nudge, and as he looked down, the halfling whispered, "Now or never...! What about you, Beauty, are you in?" The warrior didn't respond, but as she drew her sword, she glided into the cavern on the opposite side of the tunnel.

"Thought so..." grumbled the halfling and set off himself. While Stomp was still trying to digest what he had just witnessed and hesitated, the halfling was already darting away with clattering footsteps. He raced along the right curve of the dome, following the petrified Minesprayer's body toward the portal, aiming to cut off the two guards. Full of doubt about whether he was doing the right thing and more to avoid leaving his companions behind, Stomp set off on the same path.

From the corner of his eye, he saw that their progress had not yet been noticed. The combatants were too preoccupied with each other to register their presence, while the remaining two guards continued to march with fixed gazes toward the opening. They were about five meters from the portal when the halfling arrived in front of them. Stomp watched as the halfling's right arm made a swirling motion, and then something glittering shot at the right of the monsters.

As he ran, he saw something coiling around the monster's neck, spinning in ever-tightening circles around it, and finally, it slapped against its face. The creature let go of the shaman and, with its hands raised, took a step toward the halfling. Stomp was fascinated to see a small cloud of smoke detach from its head, and the next step of the creature was unsteady. The familiar hollow moaning resumed, and just a step away from the halfling, the colossal being knelt down, its hands raised in wild, flailing motions.

Stomp saw how the halfling roared and set off, but he was distracted as the last of the remaining guards also let go of the shaman and turned with swirling hands toward him. Surprised by this attack, he abruptly slowed his run, which had almost brought him to the gate, and raised his spear. Two hasty steps to the side took him out of the reach of his fighting comrade, and he looked tremblingly at the approaching figure, which stood nearly three meters high above him. For the first time, he saw the creature's face, and it filled him with terror. He knew he had seen this "thing" before, in a vision, as he fell like a stone from a cliff. Those eyes, with irises and pupils covered by a milky layer, that stiff, expressionless visage resembling dirty brown wax. With horror, he recognized that he was at the temple of this eerie creature, whose visions haunted all the inmates, and whose awakening had triggered this general catastrophe.

This knowledge hit him like a lightning bolt, and for a few seconds, he was distracted. His spear was swept aside with a powerful blow, and only a quick reflex that made him recoil saved him from the razor-sharp claw comb that cut through the air in front of him. The guard was just one meter away from him, so he had no choice but to bring his weapon back into position. With a quick leap to the side, still holding the spear, he got to safety. But only for a second because to his right, he saw the second guard, who was still kneeling, trying to reach the halfling with punches, and behind him, he heard the chanting of Iceskin's sword, and from the left, he saw the creature, stiff as a marionette, continuing to approach him.

Desperately, he tried to raise the spear and get the tip between himself and the monster. But the space was too tight, and while he was still occupied with the long-handled weapon, the right paw of the monster descended onto his shoulder. An icy coldness emanated from the hand, and before his horrified eyes, the events seemed to dramatically slow down. The throbbing coldness that enveloped his shoulder spread throughout his entire body. His left arm became numb and stiff, making it difficult for him to move his head. He also felt his knees give way, and he collapsed, trembling. A shimmer appeared before his eyes, and a strange chant surged in his mind. Completely powerless and trembling, he dropped his weapon. His movements seemed to slow down dramatically, almost as if he were swimming in a pot of jelly or freezing water. It took him almost superhuman effort to lift his head.

In amazement, he watched as the left hand of the creature in front of him, equipped with that razor-sharp horn comb growing from its fingers, was raised. Phlegmatically, almost entirely uninvolved, he registered that this weapon would be lowered in a downward motion to separate his head from his shoulders.

As he was still wondering about his own apathy, a second sound surged in his skull, a growling rumble, like that of an angry panther, and a pleasant warmth spread from his hip.

He noticed that he could move again, the icy cold and the paralyzing feeling it had brought with it disappeared within a few split seconds. And even as the horn comb menacingly hovered above him, he felt new strength returning. The roaring still echoed in his head, and with a guttural growl, he lunged forward. He collided heavily with the guard's legs, briefly feeling the inhuman cold emanating from this body, and was rewarded with the creature stumbling back. It took two steps backward, paused briefly, and then began to advance on Stomp again, completely impassive. However, Stomp now had the time to pick up his spear, and this time the space was wide enough to position the tip in front of him. It pierced deep into the creature's body, and the impact's force pushed Stomp back across the smooth floor. The familiar moaning resumed, and Stomp, releasing the weapon, lunged to the left. With a clumsy roll, he got back on his feet and hurried to draw his sword. The guard turned toward him, grotesquely pushing the spear shaft in front of it. It had noticeably slowed down, but overall, the wound didn't seem to impress it further. Stomp began to dance wildly around the creature and, out of the corner of his eye, saw that the halfling on the other side was in a similar situation.

The halfling was again busy releasing a second sling at the monster in front of him in a swirling motion, which hit in the same way and caused a slight puff of smoke to rise from the creature's shoulders. Then Stomp's field of vision was filled by the attacker in front of him, who lumbered toward him with wooden steps. With a cry of anger, he lunged forward and swung his sword in a wild attack.

In his head, that hissing, panther-like sound still resonated, and with newfound strength, he ducked beneath the swinging arms of the guard and executed a wild left-right attack on its abdomen. This hit, and as he stepped back, he saw with amazement that blood-red sand was trickling from the wounds. Encouraged that his sword strikes were effective, he leaped around the cumbersome rotating giant and managed to land four more blows.

The hollow moaning emanating from the creature deepened, and Stomp noticed with relief that it was moving much more clumsily than before. The spear was still stuck in its abdomen, and it moved it like a pointer in front of itself. Finally, he gathered his courage and, rolling once more under the swinging arms of the monster, emerged sideways behind it. In a sweeping motion, he put all his strength into his blade and circled it against the creature's thighs.

This strike hit home as well, and the creature's knees gave way with a hollow noise. Stomp leaped from behind and drove the blade of his sword deep between its shoulder blades. The moaning abruptly ceased, and the figure collapsed forward. In its fall, it tore the sword hilt from Stomp's hand and drove the spear even deeper into its body, the spear emerging on the other side with an ugly noise. Breathing heavily and half dazed, Stomp gazed at the motionless monster.

The hissing in his head gradually faded. After a brief moment of shock, he whirled around, and to his relief, he saw Tunneltracker dismounting from the defeated opponent's back. In the background, nearly at the entrance to the temple, he spotted Iceskin, who was standing on the motionless body of a guardian, defending herself by delivering powerful, flickering strikes to another one who was trying to approach her.

While the carrier of the spear still wondered whether these two additional monsters might have come from the temple and, most importantly, how many might still be waiting for them inside, the halfling approached and bellowed, "See, my friend, it wasn't that hard after all. It's good to see you've finished off yours too. I guess they might be large, but something large can be easily broken in two, so..."

His speech was abruptly cut short as he noticed something behind Stomp. Stomp spun around and saw three of the guards approaching him. None of the orcs were alive anymore, and these ones appeared to be the victors of the skirmish with the green-furred creatures. With outstretched arms and rotating horn combs, they approached the companions silently.

"I might be mistaken," Tunneltracker interjected hastily, resuming his frantic spinning of the sling.

Stomp, not one to remain idle, ran to the slain monstrosity with his weapon still "stuck" in its body. He struggled to free the spear when the creatures reached him and advanced wordlessly on the halfling. Tunneltracker hurled his Bola, but luck wasn't on his side this time; the cords entangled in the flailing arms of the guardian in front of him and wrapped around its wrist. The halfling exclaimed, "Ahyayayay," as he desperately tried to avoid the approaching horn combs that were speeding towards his head.

Stomp put aside his attempts to free the lodged spear from the dead monstrosity and made a mighty leap backward to evade the swinging arms of the second monster. As he squeezed through its legs, he noticed that Iceskin was also grappling with the third creature, which, despite sand trickling from multiple wounds, continued to press on.

Retreating further from the guardian in front of him, Stomp observed that the halfling wasn't faring any better. He had been pushed against the rock wall by the creature and, at that moment, the right paw of the monstrosity descended upon the halfling's head.

Tunneltracker froze, his facial expression taking on a waxen hue. Stomp knew exactly what was happening, still feeling the coldness in his left shoulder. He watched in horror as Tunneltracker dropped the silver-gleaming items he had held in his hands with a loud clatter. Disregarding his own safety, Stomp leaped aside once more, frantically trying to outmaneuver the colossus before him and reach the creature that threatened his comrade and was about to deliver a decisive blow with its left hand.

He hurriedly ran towards the creature, hearing the stomping steps of the second guardian behind him. He heard a roar in the air and astonishingly realized it came from his own throat. The guardian in front of him didn't react to the attack approaching from behind, allowing Stomp to land two well-aimed strikes on the monster's legs as he passed by. The creature let go of the halfling, who then dropped to the ground like a limp puppet with a dry sigh.

Stomp now found himself facing two of these monstrosities. Looking around, he slowly backed away with his sword raised. Iceskin was also being attacked by two of these creatures. The two in front of him continued to stomp in his direction, slowly pushing him back toward the bloody battlefield with the torn Orc corpses behind him. With his hope fading, he hesitantly gestured with his sword, pointing at one of the creatures and then at the other, all while moving backward to avoid their flailing arms.

Then, the hissing in his head returned, and with a wild battle cry into which he poured all his resignation, despair, and anger, he lunged forward. He ducked under the swinging arms of one of the guardians and slammed into the legs of the other.

He felt the back of his backpack being swiftly slashed by a blow from the horn comb before he collided hard with the guardian's thighs. He once again felt the icy coldness, though much weaker this time, as if it were bouncing off him, and quickly leaped to the side, evading the swinging hands.

In a rapid turn, he delivered two swift attacks to the right leg of the first creature, then leaped back directly behind the second guardian, who was slowly turning around. He ducked once more and struck two more blows against the exposed thighs of his opponent.

The two guardians had turned back around and now loomed menacingly in front of him. Once again, Stomp retreated, this time heading toward the temple entrance, and tried to maneuver his steps sideways to divert the guardians' attention from his unconscious comrade. He realized once more that the wounds he had inflicted produced not liquid but a flow of blood-red dust. While these monsters were somewhat hindered by his sword strikes, it seemed they weren't significantly injured.

Gradually, exhaustion overcame him, his hand trembled, and his knees weakened. He couldn't fathom how he could stand against these two creatures, even with Kasakk's help. As he began to come to terms with the idea of ending his life, he heard a sound from the temple portal, a sound he never thought he would hear again.

"Yo yo yo yooooo" resounded from there, and from the corner of his eye, he saw an all too familiar, brown-clad figure charging towards the guardians. Yoyo rushed out of the portal with the force of a ballistic missile, throwing himself with all his vigor and brute strength at the legs of the right guardian. The guardian stumbled and, with wildly flailing arms, toppled forward, over the crouched form of the Scraper at his feet.

The Scraper sprang up with a wild "Yo yo yo" and, wielding a primitive club that had clearly belonged to an Orc warrior, rushed over the fallen giant's back toward its unprotected neck. Once again, Stomp couldn't keep up with the events, for the whipping arms of the guardian before him were drawing dangerously close.

However, the unexpected arrival of another comrade, whom he had thought was dead for hours, had given him a new sense of hope. He heard that predatory growl rise in his throat once more as he, in turn, attacked the creature before him with wild swings of his sword. This time, he didn't bother with any evasive maneuvers but executed a brutal, arched attack on the incessantly flailing arms of the monster, severing its right hand with a blow. Spewing red sand, the guardian continued to march towards him, and the horn comb whizzed dangerously close to his face. A swift leap to the side placed him beside the creature, and he delivered a strike against the right thigh of the guardian with all his might.

This time, his aim was better, and with a dry, whistling sound, the steel cut through the leg of the monster. Once more, that loud, hollow, tomb-like noise resounded, and with a sluggish sigh, the creature toppled to the side. Stomp managed to leap back in the nick of time, and as he now saw the unprotected neck of this creature before him, he couldn't hold back any longer.

With a loud cry, he raised the sword and swung it down on the guardian's head with a powerfully executed overhead strike. He could feel, rather than see, that the head was separated from the shoulders of the creature. Stumbling back, with trembling arms barely able to hold his weapon, he realized that the skull, which had come to rest a few meters from the guardian, still emitted that gruesome moaning sound, and the torso, still spraying red sand in wild movements, attempted to find an opponent and stand up. However, its strength and coordination were no longer sufficient to pose a serious threat. After staring at this incredible scene for several seconds, he turned to see what had become of his returned comrade.

A cheerful "Yo yo" made him breathe a sigh of relief, and he looked in amazement at the Scraper who was still stubbornly pounding the club on the head of the monster before him. There was no contour left; only a sand pile marked the spot where the monster's skull had previously been. The body twitched still. Stomp quickly scanned the surroundings and found that he and his comrade were the only ones still moving in the large cave.

"Iceskin, hey!" His call was answered as a mane of black hair emerged from the portal. "I'm uninjured, and as far as I can see, there are no more of those creatures here in the antechamber; where's the halfling?"

"Tunneltracker!" Stomp cried with a frightened shout, recalling his comrade, and he rushed to the motionless body of his friend. Upon reaching him, he was relieved to find that the mighty chest still rose and fell in regular breaths. The small one's face appeared waxen, covered in sweat, and his eyes stared blankly at the ceiling. Stomp knelt down and shook the halfling. With growing horror, he noticed that his comrade's body felt cold, like an ice block. Puzzled, Stomp looked at the halfling and eventually realized, to his relief, that a hint of color was gradually returning to his face. After a few seconds, Tunneltracker opened his eyes, accompanied by an excited "Yo yo," and he struggled to sit up.

"By Kasakk's hairy eggs, unbelievable!" he muttered, shaking his head.

"How are you?" Stomp interrupted him excitedly. "Can you walk?"

Accepting Stomp's assistance gratefully, the halfling got to his feet, where, after a brief wobble, he regained his balance.

"That was a very... interesting experience," he mumbled to himself. "I almost had visions when that..." he spat in disgust towards the dead guardian, "thing touched me. These visions were about this place. It seems that the path to that sleeping...thing begins here. This 'temple' is thousands of years old, filled with treasures and artifacts, and deep down below lives, sleeps, or dwells that...thing."

With clattering wooden joints, he marched towards the entrance, accompanied by an excited "Yo yo" from the Scraper, who jumped around him wildly, gesticulating. Tunneltracker paused, gazing at the broadly grinning Excavator and then exclaimed, "And where in Kasakk's swinging eggs have you, you cursed little scoundrel, been gallivanting around...where did you come from? You're up to some shenanigans in the caves, and we all thought you were dead...!!!"

The two locked eyes for a moment, fell silent, and then, with a resounding roar, they embraced each other. Tunneltracker's loud cheers were overshadowed by his counterpart's even louder "Yo yo," and Stomp noticed tears glistening in both their eyes.

Behind the two men who were bouncing up and down, he noticed that Iceskin emerged from the portal, watching the scene with curiosity. He was relieved to see the talkative Scraper again, especially considering that his well-timed attack had likely saved his life. This brought him back to reality, and he looked around fearfully.

The courtyard was littered with bodies, and there was no sign of life anywhere.

Then, his gaze fell upon the body that the procession had initially carried, and cautiously, forgetting the chattering men behind him, he ventured closer. The Orc he found was a frail figure, well over a head shorter than him; dozens of chains hung around the thin neck, overflowing with semiprecious stones, brightly painted bones, and metal plates. A filthy loincloth was adorned at the hip with several pouches from which colorful and foul-smelling powder trickled. Leather straps with feathers, bones, and metal bells were fastened around the wrists and ankles.

The eyes stared broken and lifeless, and there was a grotesque wound, apparently from one of the guardian's horn combs, running across its chest. Several hairless spots on its right cheek revealed what appeared to be dyed ritual scars beneath. Stomp gazed at the figure for a while, uncertain about what to do next.

"Well, get on with it!" the halfling's bass voice resounded, making Stomp startle.

"Get on with what, uh...?" Stomp hesitated.

"Take the liver," the halfling urged, "that's why we're here."

"Yoyo?" came from the Scaper, who looked puzzled as he shifted his gaze from one to the other.

"We need the liver to put that thing down there back to sleep," the halfling explained. With a face that suggested this explanation should be more than enough, the Scaper accepted it with a contented "Yo!"

This did not help Stomp's unease, as his hands were trembling significantly now when he bent down to draw his dagger with a disgusted look on his face. It was not pleasant work, and from the corner of his eye, he noticed that his companions were observing the scene from a safe distance. After a while, he held the steaming organ in his hands and looked around for help. Yoyo understood him and, muttering to himself, rushed over to one of the Orc corpses, returning a short while later with a tattered leather vest in which the three wrapped the purpose of their visit. Once the organ was secured, Stomp used some of his water supply to clean his hands. Then, a reverent "Yooooo" sounded next to him. Stomp looked at the caller and followed his gaze, spotting Iceskin leaving her post at the entrance and walking swiftly toward the group.

Ignoring the Scaper, the warrior approached and asked, "Is everyone uninjured? Or do we need to...?"

She stopped and turned her gaze to Yoyo, who was staring at her with an expression of profound admiration on his simple face.

"Right," the halfling chimed in, "you spent the past few months in the tunnels and haven't met this lovely lady yet. So, Yoyo...Iceskin, Iceskin...Yoyo! And for now, we don't have any more time!" The one who had just been introduced seemed not to have heard, adding a soft "Yo." It was only a hearty poke in the ribs by Tito that brought the lovesick Scaper back to reality, and with a crimson face, he turned toward the portal. "Yo yo yo yo," he said, pointing at the building. His recovered comrades understood him and gazed with uneasy reverence at the imposing structure before them.

Stomp asked, "So what now?"

"Well, we explore this thing here, and then we'll find a way out quietly. I don't think there are more of those things like the ones that troubled the Orcs around here."

Almost tauntingly, shuffling footsteps echoed from the inner depths of the temple portal. The little one added with a furrowed brow, "I could be wrong, of course."

The noises grew louder, and it became apparent that there was more than one approaching the entrance.

"Where to, where to?" Stomp urged, looking around wildly. "We can't go back!" In response, the Scraper started running, his loud "Yo yo" echoing off the walls, and he gestured wildly as he rushed toward the temple entrance.

"Yoyo, are you crazy? You're running toward them!" Tunneltracker yelled, but this had no effect on the Scraper. He stopped directly in front of the temple portal and waved invitingly. His frantic "Yo yo yo yo yo" rang out to them.

The three looked at each other, and Tunneltracker said with a shrug, "Well, if he's good at something, it's navigating caves."

In silent agreement, albeit with a certain amount of distrust, they followed the agitated Scraper, who disappeared into the darkness as soon as he saw them following. With weapons drawn and staring fearfully into the darkness where they could still hear the shuffling steps, they followed their companion.

After crossing the threshold, profound darkness enveloped them, and it took a few moments for their eyes to adjust to the dim light inside. Here, too, the scattered clusters of glowing rocks provided a greenish, pallid light, and Stomp was amazed by the sight despite the perilous situation.

After a short passage, which, to Stomp's horror, he thought might have been the throat of the Minesprayer, they entered a colossal chamber. In the greenish glow, he could see several large, wide stairs leading upward, with balcony-like galleries spread over three stories around the massive hall. A jumble of musty and strange scents wafted in from various tunnel openings, and from several of these exits, they could hear the sound of large feet moving.

The floor gleamed like polished marble, and in the center of the room was a ten by ten-meter pool filled with water that looked black in the twilight, its surface gently rippling. The galleries' balconies were supported by arched columns, between which stone figures were visible. Nightmarish figures resembling a grotesque mix of bats, humans, and cats. Directly opposite them, a broad staircase spiraled upward to meet another large portal, about two lengths of a man high, with its winged doors closed. A whispering pervaded the air, and the entire room exuded cold and malevolence, which left Stomp paralyzed with fear. Only a firm hand that pulled him aside rudely under muttered curses jolted him out of his stupor. He followed the halfling, who was urgently heading for the Scraper, half-hidden behind one of these water-spouting figures, making frantic gestures. Iceskin followed them, as always, forming the unwavering rearguard.

As Stomp approached the Scraper and saw him pointing to a triangular gap between two boulders, behind which a black void yawned, he heard a soft crunch to his right. He turned his head and found himself eye to eye with the stone figure across from him, which was slowly turning its head in jerky movements. A malevolent, narrowed eye rolled around and fixed him with a cold, merciless gaze. Stunned, Stomp froze in his tracks and stammered, "Uh, look, ehehah."

Then, he was pulled further by the strong hand of the halfling, who hadn't noticed the entire scenario that had unfolded above his head.

Yoyo disappeared into the hole, followed by Tunneltracker, who pulled the confused man along with relentless force. Stomp was still staring in horror at the statue's head, which continued to turn and fixate on him. "Uh, can't you see, uhuhuhuh," he stammered, then he went through the entrance, and absolute darkness enveloped him. "Didn't you... by Kasakk, you must've... you did," he turned to the warrior woman behind him. "Iceskin, there was..." "I saw it," she calmly replied.

"Quiet now," grumbled the deep voice of the halfling in front of him, and, more pulled than led, Stomp took his stumbling steps in the direction that the pulling hand indicated. He bumped his head several times as the two of them moved ahead of him, guided by an invisible thread, through the irregularly jagged and apparently natural passage in complete darkness.

When the four stopped for a brief moment to orient themselves and catch their breath, they noticed that the shuffling sounds had ceased. In the ensuing silence, there were snuffling and snorting noises, and then, after a brief pause, the hollow moaning sound emanated again, this time from multiple throats.

While the companions listened breathlessly, waiting, a muffled blow shook the rock around them, then another, and another. Stomp could hear small rocks trickling from the rock above him, and a dust cloud began to make breathing difficult. "They're trying to break through; they want to follow us. We need to keep going," Tunneltracker whispered, and Stomp sensed more than saw that he was rummaging in his backpack.

"They can smell us; they will be able to follow us anyway," Iceskin whispered. "I'll distract them; I'll meet you..."

Tunneltracker paused. "Quickly, put that shovel away; you're not going to use it. We stick together!"

The halfling nearly choked on his attempt to say these words in a hushed tone.

Stomp couldn't see the face of the warrior in the darkness but felt more how she shook her head. "Your mission is too important. May Jassa, the Singer of the Sea, send you her song in hundreds of years!" She spoke calmly through the stammered and frantic objections of the halfling. After this strange farewell, she was gone.

"Wait, damn it...!" In their effort to reach the woman, Stomp and Tunneltracker got tangled up, and as they tried to pick themselves up, with a puzzled "Yo" from Yoyo, they were again on their feet. Just then, the chorus of howling and the earth-shaking blows ended. Silence returned, with only the sounds of retreating footsteps and moans still audible, along with the muttered curses of Tunneltracker.

A timid "Yo" posed a question, and the torrent of curses stopped abruptly. After a pause, during which the halfling trembled as he regained his composure, he said in a strained voice:

"Yes, I know, we must go on, and yes, I know, if anything happens to her, I'll kick that sleeping thing until it wishes it had never woken up!" Stomp placed his hand on his companion's shoulder, feeling the strong muscles trembling with tension. "We'll meet her safely at the lake, I'm sure," he whispered with confidence that he didn't really feel.

With a loud sigh, the tension in the halfling discharged, and in the darkness, Stomp felt him nod in agreement. "So, let's go!" After a shaking motion from the halfling, a greenish light flickered to life in his hand, revealing they were in a small two by two-meter chamber with a low ceiling, forcing Stomp to instinctively crouch. Ahead of them, the path continued at a slight incline. Yoyo, still muttering and sniffing, led the way.

As suddenly as before, the earth-shattering blows began behind them, with seemingly double the force and speed. "By Kasakk's steaming pile!" Tunneltracker shouted, "They haven't fallen for it." Although another possibility crossed Stomp's mind, he didn't want to dwell on it now. The rock around them creaked, and dozens of dust plumes and pebbles trickled through the light of Tunneltracker's lamp.

From the concerned looks on his companions' faces, Stomp could tell they weren't out of danger yet. The passage meandered through the rock for several meters, eventually leading to a club-shaped cave. They found themselves in a dead-end. Massive rock surrounded them on three sides, and behind them, the corridor stretched into darkness, with the muffled sounds of pounding and the echoing groans of the guardian creatures behind them still audible. With growing panic, Stomp looked around and then helplessly at his two companions.

The miner, with a resigned "Yo yo yo," stared at the rock walls and sank heavily to his knees. Tunneltracker muttered a series of curses and stormed over to the opposite side, then abruptly stopped and, almost as if he had caught a scent, whirled around. Sniffing, he got down on all fours, dragging his rattling wooden frames behind him, and began to search the ground in expanding circles. Stomp watched him in awe, and the miner became aware of him. A new sense of hope spread across his simple face, and with an eager "Yo," he gestured toward the halfling.

"What is he doing?" Stomp whispered to the miner, who grinned and explained: "Yo yo."

"Here!" the bass voice resonated, startling Stomp.

Kneeling in front of a rock wall, Tunneltracker felt the stone and bellowed over his shoulder, "This is the way out!"

Stomp looked at the massive rock with a skeptical expression and then back at the halfling. "Are you sure? I can't see any passage."

The halfling rose to his feet and with a dignified tone and puffed-up chest, he assured, "What's my name? Where do you think I got that name? I know this rock like the back of my hand!" He took a step back and examined the stone wall, his forehead furrowing. Muttering, he took his backpack off and retrieved a medium-sized vial, spraying its contents onto the wall in front of him. Thin plumes of smoke rose, accompanied by a hissing sound, followed by cracking and grinding from the rock in front of the halfling. Amidst these noises, Stomp also heard pushing, bursting, and scraping coming from the tunnel behind them, accompanied by panting and snuffling sounds. He knew their pursuers were on their way, pushing through the narrow tunnel. Frantically, he broke the tense silence, "Hurry up! The guardians are coming!"

"Easy there, my little friend. The acid spray is doing its job," Tunneltracker assured. He turned his attention to the miner and said, "I think you can break through now, my good man."

The miner nodded briefly, got up, trotted to the other end of the cave, lowered his head, and with a resounding roar, sprinted forward. He threw himself at full force, shouting "Yooooo," against the still-smoking stone barrier in front of him.

And he bounced back.

His cry stopped abruptly, and he sat down, holding his aching shoulder and shaking his throbbing head. He whispered "Yo yo yo" and then glared at Tunneltracker accusingly. "Yo yo!" he stated, pointing to his shoulder. The halfling paid him no attention and walked past him with a furrowed brow. Stomp could hear him mutter, "Not enough acid, by Kasakk's eggs, not enough acid!" Unperturbed and untouched by the scraping noises from the tunnel behind them, which were making Stomp increasingly nervous, he fetched a second bottle and poured its contents onto the still-smoking area.

Then, stepping back, he told the miner, "You can do it now..." but he looked at the sitting man, who still wore an annoyed expression and continued, "Well, I'll just do it myself."

He sprinted toward the wall. With a heavy impact, he slammed into the rock, and Stomp thought he might also be thrown back. However, after a brief cracking sound, the rock gave way, bending backward. The cave shook, and there was a thunderous cracking noise all around them. Stones, dust, and rubble rained down on them, and a warm draft brushed Stomp's face. Astonishingly, he peered over the halfling's shoulder and realized that behind the solid-looking rock, a nearly man-high crack had formed.

Quickly, Tunneltracker, aided by the miner, began to clear the loose and brittle rocks with their bare hands. A hole, filled with profound darkness, appeared behind. Stomp heard the digging in front and the digging behind and urged them, "Hurry, hurry!"

"Hear me out, if you want to teach us diggers how to dig, Little One... Help us instead!" the halfling gasped, and Stomp quickly complied with the request. In just a few breaths, they had widened the hole enough for Tunneltracker to squeeze through, and as they did so, the mournful groans of the guardian creatures filled the space.

It sounded very close, and as Stomp spun around, he could see movement in the dark tunnel behind him, followed by a dull thud that made the ground tremble beneath his feet and sent small stones tumbling down. This sight doubled their efforts, and the three of them widened the entrance like berserkers. Eventually, the hole was sufficiently large, and Yoyo slipped in first. Stomp looked back at the opening and saw the broad shoulders and expressionless face of the first guardian emerging into the light. He struggled to force his body through the narrow rock, but advanced with inhuman composure. Stomp watched in astonishment as those shoulders, where they were obstructed by the rock, gradually pushed through centimeter by centimeter, leaving behind pulverized stone. Too petrified to take a step, he stared at the scene, feeling seized by a powerful hand and shoved through the hole like a sack of rags. On the other side, an excitedly babbling Yoyo received him. Immediately after, Tunneltracker followed, sniffing the air. Stomp also looked upward and spotted a small point of light above.

The green glow shifted as Tunneltracker raised the lamp, and Stomp saw several loops of rope dangling in the air.

"I knew it, I knew it!" the halfling triumphed, rocking up and down with rattling wooden supports, "We found a chimney, we found a chimney, we can go up! Quick, Yoyo, grab the loop!"

Yoyo complied, and Stomp asked, "How are the three of us going to climb up together? The rope won't hold!"

"We'll slow each other down!" Stomp continued, "Hurry up, do something!"

The halfling grinned at him with a wolfish expression and simply said, "Climbing? Climb? Ha! Yoyo, hold on tight!" With these words, he swiftly cut through one of the ropes.

While Stomp watched in disbelief, the miner was pulled upwards right next to him. Accompanied by a diminishing "Yooooo," he disappeared into the darkness above the two of them.

"Any more questions, Little One? Take the loop and don't let go now!" Tunneltracker boomed. Stomp obediently grabbed the loop, puzzled, and stammered, "What about you? The things are right at the door!"

As if to confirm it, there was a muffled thud right against the rock wall beside them, and both of them jumped aside in horror. The entrance they had broken through darkened, and a dirty brown hand shot into the space, groping wildly just inches from the faces of the two companions.

The creature's moans filled the chamber, punctuated by the halfling's booming cry, "Do it now!"

Stomp had no choice but to grab one of the loops above him, trying not to get within reach of the guardian's flailing limb. As soon as he firmly grasped the rope, he heard a snapping sound beside him, and an immense force propelled him upward. He thought his arm would be dislocated as he shot up like a crossbow bolt. The ascent was incredibly rapid, and he could still hear the halfling's thundering voice shouting something below. He wondered how anything could manage this upward flight, and most importantly, how he would slow down. Then, suddenly, it became brilliantly bright.

He shot out of the chute and, unable to perform any conscious action, he realized he was hanging headfirst in the air. His vision spun wildly, and he slammed into sandy ground with a jolt that left him breathless. Blinking his eyes closed, he tried to make sense of where up and down was while wondering if his arm was still in its socket. Through the roaring in his head, he heard a resounding, "Yaaay!" followed by a muffled thud and a pained, "Ouch, by Kasakk's hairy teeth, that did hurt a bit!"

As a response, a panting "Yo yo!" came from his left.

A few minutes later, the world around him swayed a little slower, and as the dizzying nausea began to subside, he cautiously opened his eyes. The dim, pale light in front of him looked familiar. He was back on the surface!

Slowly, carefully protecting his aching arm, he sat up. Something pressed hard against his back, and to his immense relief, he found the spear and the backpack were still there. They were damaged, but mostly intact. Once his vision cleared to the point where it no longer caused nausea when he turned his head, he looked around.

The ground he was sitting on felt sandy, and he saw an A-shaped wooden structure a couple of man-lengths high. Several ropes led from it down to the ground and disappeared into it. Other ropes led downward into a circular, throat-like hole, which he assumed he had just been shot out of like a cork from a bottle.

The rope still tangled around his wrist led to the top of the wooden structure and passed over a kind of pulley. Panic-stricken, as if fending off a poisonous snake, he removed the loop from his arm.

Yoyo crouched to the left, hunched down and muttering in the sand, while Tunneltracker stood up right in front of Stomp, incessantly cursing. Stomp tried to speak, but it took several swallows and clearing his throat before more than a dry croak emerged from his mouth: "Can the guardians follow us?"

The halfling looked up and interrupted his series of curses with which he had been inspecting his leg supports. He glanced at the hole and then said dismissively, "I don't think the clayheads know which ropes to cut to get up here. Plus, I've tried to cut all the guide ropes. I think we're safe."

Looking around, Stomp asked, "Where are we?" The halfling was now busy with his wooden contraptions again and replied without looking up, "We're at one of the Scavenger's escape points."

He raised his head, surveyed the surroundings, and then added, "To the south of the trading post. The lake should be behind us, and beyond that, the Psionics camp." With a bitter laugh, he continued, "If the Scavengers had known that one of their escape tunnels extended almost directly to this Temple-thing of that beast, they'd probably still be sitting somewhere, scared out of their wits."

"Lucky for us," replied Stomp, rising with a groan.

After the dizziness had passed, he checked his belongings and then trudged over to the halfling, who looked desperate as Stomp approached. "They're ruined, damn it, they're completely ruined. I thought they could withstand anything!"

Stomp looked at the seated figure and understood what he meant. The wooden structures were shattered, and the metal parts were terribly bent. Stomp wondered why the legs themselves had taken so little damage, but as he bent down, he realized that the left calf was grotesquely askew and obviously not unscathed. This sight filled him with horror.

He placed a hand on the halfling's muscular shoulder and said sympathetically, "What can we do? You know that not far from here, some of the Scavengers have taken refuge. I've completely forgotten to tell you that I've met them in the caves. The Ore Barons have taken over the Free Mine, and I don't know why I haven't told you until now. There's supposed to be a secret escape point around here, and you would probably know."

The halfling nodded and replied, "Yes, I know it. It's not far from here, and I think I can make it. Yoyo can help me, and..." he looked with a wry grin at Stomp, despite the pain he must have been in, "...that you didn't tell me this from the beginning, well, there were quite a few distractions." He added dryly, "There's supposed to be a secret escape point, and you would probably know."

In haste, the three of them fashioned a makeshift splint from the wreckage to set and temporarily support the halfling's leg. With the halfling grinding his teeth in pain, they set the leg into place. Then the halfling, supported by the other two, cautiously rose on his healthy leg. He turned to Stomp and said, "You've saved my life at least once, so I'm giving you a new name. When I was injured in the tunnel, I had a vision. I saw you kneeling in front of me, inserting the tooth into my wound, and beside you crouched, barely visible in the dark, its yellow eyes gleaming, the Shugul Sath..."

"He seemed to be watching you, and he seemed satisfied with your actions... somehow! Well, he turned back into that gray cloud and merged with the darkness. I don't get it! Anyway, I'm calling you 'Toothbearer.'"

Tito extended his hand, and Stomp awkwardly, with a face burning with embarrassment, took hold of his forearm. After a long, friendly look, the halfling interrupted Stomp's embarrassed stammering. "Yoyo and I will manage to find our people. You should go to the Sulphursniffer now and hand him the liver, and for Kasakk's sake, I hope we're doing the right thing." Stomp flinched because he had completely forgotten what was ahead of him, and with sudden, icy dread, he fumbled in his backpack for the blood-soaked bundle, which he finally found with a sigh of relief.

Then he looked down at the halfling, puzzled. Something had changed: no more cursing, no more obscene jokes... Through the smile on Tunneltracker's face, Stomp sensed deep pain, and impulsively, he embraced the halfling. "She'll make it!" he whispered. When they released their embrace, the halfling nodded at him with teary eyes. "Take care, and finish this!"

All three shook hands. With murmured words like "Kasakk be with you" and "Yo yo," the two Scavengers turned and headed towards the forest behind the sand. Stomp couldn't help but grin when he heard the initial dialogue as the departing figures receded, "Toothbearer will show the Sulphursniffer!" "Yo yo yo yo." "I could be wrong, of course." "Yo."

He watched them disappear into the trees and then sighed as he began to make his way in the direction indicated by the halfling. After a few steps, he disappeared into the underbrush, and, with everything around him remaining quiet, he continued to move stealthily. Finally, he saw the surface of the lake shining through the trees ahead of him. After a short orientation, he knew where he was. Immediately before him, he gazed from about ten meters high upon the Psionics' palisade city. To his left, across the narrowing lake, he could see the Old Camp, and there he noticed still busy activity. Further left, behind the woods, he knew the old mine of the Ore Barons must be situated.

Then, he knelt down in confusion, and while taking a sip of Sruup, his last, he wondered how he would find the demon summoner now. He dropped the pouch bottle when, out of nowhere, to his left, the familiar rumbling voice sounded, "Well, he'll find you!"

He whirled around and saw the infantile face of the demon appearing in a swirl in front of him.

Crawling on all fours in fear away from this apparition, he painfully struck his shoulder and head against one of the trees behind him and lay trembling, staring at the face. The infant opened its eyes, and from blood-red eyes, bisected by vertically slit pupils, the demon observed him, seemingly amused. Three split tongues hissed out between its blackened teeth and darted in the direction of the terrified man.

"Follow me, toy. My master ordered me to bring you to him!"

With these words, the face drew closer. Stomp raised his hands defensively, wanting to get up and run away. But before he could make another move, the thing reached him, and a foul-smelling cloud enveloped him.

He sensed a penetrating smell of sulfur, decay, and death, mixed with other odors he couldn't define. Dizziness overcame him, and before his wide-open eyes, blood-red circles started spinning. All his hair stood on end, and when he looked at his hands, he saw bluish sparks wafting back and forth over the hairs. There was nothing around him, just a green, pale light, and he noticed that the high-pitched noise he heard was a scream from his own throat.

Then, the apparition ended abruptly, and in a state of confusion, Stomp blinked and found himself lying on a wooden floor. Shivering all over, he sat up. He felt weak, drained, as if he had gone through twice the torment he had already endured. He gazed in astonishment at the peaceful scene around him. He lay on a kind of wooden veranda, with a simple wooden cabin behind him. In front of him stretched a forest clearing, filled with sunlight and the sounds of birdsong. He looked up, and saw a bright blue sky, only fringed with a few large, billowy summer clouds. Tears welled up in his eyes as he realized how much he had longed to see a normal sky again. He gazed in wonder at the forest meadow in front of him, seeing hummingbirds flitting about and bees buzzing. The entire clearing buzzed with life.

But something was wrong. As he continued to look, the sky darkened, changing from a lighter blue to a rapidly deepening blue, eventually turning violet, like twilight, but at a fast pace. Even the large, billowy clouds that had sailed peacefully across the sky began to change. He could make out faces now. Grimaces, glaring with teeth and malevolent eyes, gazing down at him. He heard a repulsive hissing at his feet, and as he looked down, he saw the grass winding in his direction, with each blade exhibiting whipping movements, as if tiny tentacles or grasping arms were present.

With a scream, he jumped to his feet and felt rock against his back. He spun around, and where the hut had been before, he now saw a stone wall rising steeply before him into the now dark gray sky. Looking upward, he could also see the barrier in the dim light, standing out against the dark background, where a four- or five-story tower rose. He took a step back and searched for an entrance or a window somewhere. He realized that this had to be the abode of the demon summoner.

As if to confirm, he felt the tugging movements on his boots again, and as he looked more closely, he could see long grass blades winding around his ankles and gradually, like hunting creatures, reaching up his shins. With a disgusted face, he ripped his legs free and approached the wall again.

Beneath the threatening hissing of the grasses around him, he began to tentatively explore the curve of the tower. It didn't seem to be large because, after about forty steps, he had circled the building. Nowhere could he see an entrance, a window, a bay, or a protrusion.

"Impressive, isn't it?" the effeminate, gentle voice suddenly echoed again out of nowhere, and he spun around. Before him stood the demon summoner, still dressed in that dark red robe that seemed to move on its own, swirling and undulating independently of the magician's gestures.

He saw those deep pools of pristine white between his counterpart's eyelids, the rigid face, despite the noticeable words, the smirking smile, and involuntarily shivered.

"Did you bring what I asked you for?" Stomp, unable to speak, merely nodded.

"Then come!" Without another word, the figure floated towards the wall and disappeared into it. Stomp approached this section hesitantly and cautiously placed his hand on it. His hand disappeared inside. After a brief moment of shock, he took a step forward. He felt a brief tingling sensation, similar to when he had passed through the barrier, and found himself in a room illuminated by dim oil lamps and a fireplace to his left. Apart from a high-backed chair in front of a cluttered desk, the chamber, roughly eight meters in diameter, was empty.

"Follow me, my friend, follow me!" With these words, the red-clad figure vanished into an entrance opposite to Stomp's current position. He hastened to obey and noted with disgust that small, scurrying movements darted away from his feet. Several palm-sized creatures scurried away, crawling with many legs while emitting a soft chirping sound, eagerly avoiding the light of the torches and the fireplace. Stomp hurried to exit the room. He felt a slight wavering, a vibration in the air, sensing he was being watched and excitedly felt his neck hairs stand on end. Hateful eyes seemed to lurk on him from all directions, and when he held his breath, he thought he heard whispering voices in the air around him. There was a presence in this room, something non-human, invisible, malevolent, staring at him from the darkness of the room.

He quickly followed his "mentor" and left the chamber. Before him stretched a winding staircase, lit by the flickering light of several torches. He hurried upwards, trying to catch up with the demon summoner, whom he always saw vanish around the corner at the last moment. Up and up they went, and after covering a distance of about twenty meters, Stomp found himself in another large room.

This room was filled with the dim light of the prison dome, and he gazed in wonder at a kind of observation platform, its ceiling supported by several columns. Instead of walls, crystalline panes were set, providing a circular, unobstructed view of the surrounding area.

In the center of the room was another spiral staircase leading up through the ceiling. A freestanding fireplace provided light and warmth, and the floor was covered with thick carpets. In one corner of the room, a kind of divan made of several cushions, rugs, and bolster rolls was assembled, and the demon summoner had just settled on it.

"Now, get on with it," urged the bodiless voice of the magician, and he reached out a commanding hand with a beckoning gesture. Stomp hastily removed his backpack and retrieved the blood-soaked bundle with trembling fingers. Following a brief movement from the magician, the bundle, floating as if pulled by invisible threads, left his hand and moved in a straight line through the air towards the outstretched hands of the magician. Ignoring the stains, the magician opened the leather scraps and extracted the bloody organ.

A smile distorted his features, and when he let out a satisfying "Ah!" it didn't seem to come from just one throat. Stomp could discern several voices in the air around him, all joining in this chorus of satisfaction, lust, and greed.

He looked around, and to his left and right, he saw the air shimmer as if figures were hiding there, just at the edge of perception. At least two spots around him appeared distorted, and the view of objects behind them became warped. Figures emerged from the shimmer. These shapes had nothing human about them. Stomp saw several snake-like protrusions whipping through the air, darting out of one of the beings towards the organ. The second creature seemed to be twice as tall as he was, stooping in this space much too low for it. A strange chirping filled the air, a trilling accompanied by inhuman hissing sounds. While Stomp was still watching, these swirling air movements condensed, and the monstrosities further took form from nothingness.

To the right, he spotted a grotesque assembly of limbs, some scaly, some resembling perverted human extremities, protruding from a barrel-shaped torso. They writhed and moved wildly to and fro. There was no head to be seen, and the lumpy body stood on two claw-like legs, whose talons sank deep into the soft carpet. Oily fluid dripped from the green-scaled surface onto the fine fibers below.

Stomp saw human hands, bird-like claws, and several forearm-thick tentacles, all moving in wild, frenzied hunger. Several of these limbs ended in infant-like heads, which now opened their toothless mouths and emitted a loud, whining cry. Drawn by invisible threads, the limbs waved wildly towards the liver of the shaman and the demon summoner who held it, stopping about half a meter away, as if against an invisible barrier.

While Stomp was still gaping in astonishment at this manifestation, he heard a hissing sound behind him and looked over his shoulder.

The creature there was over four meters tall, its body bent at the hips in the low space. At first glance, it appeared almost human and remotely resembled an oversized, extremely obese man. A grimy loincloth stretched over its warty, coarse-pored skin. Several fat rolls bulged over the string holding the loincloth in place, and thick, fleshy arms were directed towards the demon summoner.

The hairless, oily-glistening skull swayed on a much too long neck, and as the monstrosity turned its head, Stomp found himself looking into small, yellow eyes that surveyed the surroundings and him with malevolent intelligence. From a lipless mouth that nearly split the face in half, equipped with flat, pointed teeth, emitted that hollow, hissing chirping sound that had been ringing in Stomp's ears all along. Unable to hold the creature's gaze, he lowered his eyes and, to his horror, realized that several small openings formed between its ribs, from which he thought he could see human faces peering out at him, eyes wide open, mouths gaping in silent agony. Then, the flaps of skin shifted again, only to reveal the gaze of other beings at a different location, ones that the creature had assimilated.

Stomp turned away, refusing to acknowledge the horrors to his left and right, and while sweat poured down his forehead in large drops, he looked at the demon summoner. The summoner stood there calmly, still holding the shaman's liver in his bloodstained hand, and appeared to take satisfaction in the two creatures he had gathered.

"The Bloody Seeker and the Messenger of Torments! How lovely that you could make it. I greet you and ask for your understanding that I do not call your true names in the presence of this mortal here."

The hissing grew louder, and Stomp had the impression of being examined and assessed by non-human eyes on both sides, so he continued to stare straight ahead.

"Come closer, my friend, do not be afraid. These two guests know very well who the stronger one in the room is and will behave accordingly." With the summoner's gracious wave, Stomp obeyed hesitantly, accompanied by the indignant hissing of the infernal messengers to his left and right. As he approached, he noticed they had followed him, and he sensed their emanations, sickly sweet, with the odor of decay and corruption, repulsive and nauseating.

In front of him, the tentacles of the one on his left whirled through the air in wild whipping motions. One of these appendages descended to the level of the demon summoner, taking on a form that perversely resembled a human hand. In it, the summoner placed the liver, and amid excited hissing and chirping, the two beings began to rise and disappeared through the ceiling of the room. As Stomp watched them, it seemed as if the rock beneath him trembled and shifted aside, as if it were trying to avoid contact with these abominations. After a few seconds, they were gone. Only several thick blobs of oily fluid, along with the lingering, pungent stench, served as reminders of their presence. Nevertheless, the air still vibrated with the malevolent presence of other entities.

"Aren't they enchanting, my two darlings?" the red-clad figure asked before Stomp. He looked down again.

"You did well!" the demon summoner continued, a pensive expression settling on the childlike, puppet-like features. "I wonder if I should entrust you with another mission, for our task is not yet complete." Stomp made no sound and waited.

With a commanding gesture from the red-clad figure, a goblet filled with steaming liquid materialized in the air. "Drink, my friend," the voice echoed in Stomp's head. Hesitatingly, he shook his head and croaked, "No thanks, I'm not thirsty."

A deep furrow appeared on the smooth forehead of the figure. In Stomp's overwrought senses, it felt like the air was crackling in anticipation of an outburst of anger, as if the invisible things in the room were eagerly waiting. Then, the displeased expression vanished from the mage's face, and a high-pitched, giggling laughter filled the room. With an indifferent shrug, the mage reached for the vessel and drained it in one gulp. Afterward, he simply placed it back in the air, where it disappeared with a soft, sighing sound.

As quickly as a snake, a clawed hand shot towards Stomp and grabbed his arm before he could evade it, pulling him along with the mage, who continued talking in a cheerful tone. "Well, it was worth a try; you're not as naive as you seem!"

With a bright chuckle, he continued, dragging the uncomfortable Stomp along with an iron grip. "You see, the Sleeper, that's what I call this being among us, is awakening. These earthquakes and these, well, quite enjoyable fits of rage spreading through the simple bumpkins' heads around us, seem to be harbingers of its awakening. It's a truly interesting event unfolding here, and I'm delighted to be part of it; I just want to ensure I survive it, if you understand."

Stomp, stumbling behind the magus, could only nod. They reached the room above via the spiral staircase, a dark attic, circular, limited by the dome-like roof of the tower. There were no windows to be seen, and only two dozen oil lamps arranged in a circle illuminated the scene. The room was littered with tables and benches, on which the most peculiar objects were crammed. Even here, his strained senses made it seem like they were not alone: there was a muttering and whispering, and several times he noticed darting or slithering movements from the corner of his eye. But each time he jerked his head anxiously in that direction, there was nothing to be seen.

Stomp shuddered as he looked at glass containers, where grotesque entities swam in yellowish liquid. He realized with horror that some of these unfortunate creatures were apparently still alive; several eyes opened when he approached, staring at him desperately or indifferently.

As Stomp was guided further through the room, his hair stood on end as one of these chimeras, swimming in an almost meter-sized tub and vaguely resembling an absurd mix of fish and ape, opened its eyes. Accompanied by bubbling noises, it whispered in a barely audible human voice, "Help me, help me!"

Unperturbed, the magician continued on, while Stomp was still in disbelief, unable to take his eyes off the pitiable creature. He nearly collided with the demon summoner when he abruptly stopped and spun around to the bewildered man. "...and that's why it's important that you return to the temple."

"Uh, what, uh... uh," stammered Stomp, who had missed the magician's last sentences due to his horror.

"I said you must go back to the caves. We need to figure out which portals lead there!" he explained slowly, as if speaking to a child, with a slightly irritated tone. "The demons among us are getting restless. This is a sign that there are still astral pathways to the temple that partially pass through the demon realm. I can't for the life of me tell you if that's good or bad for our cause, and therefore..." at these words, a claw-like hand descended on Stomp's shoulder, causing him to shiver from the icy cold radiating from the claw. "...it's important that you go back there. This is an assignment, we understand each other, right?"

Stomp had no choice but to nod in agreement, his knees trembling.

After giving Stomp an extended, stern look from the white abyss of his face, making Stomp feel vulnerable and exposed, the magician spun around and darted to a shelf on the opposite wall.

While Stomp still looked around uneasily, the red-clad figure returned, holding a simple brown leather bag. He handed it to the bewildered Stomp with the words, "Rigosh Firebreath will help you get in. Greet him!"

After a bewildered look at the summoner, who accompanied his words with encouraging gestures, Stomp accepted the surprisingly heavy container. It seemed to contain a round object, and when Stomp opened it, he recoiled in horror.

Inside was the head of a man, a man with fiery red hair and a full beard that seemed to fill the bag. His face appeared calm and peaceful, marked by several scars and a large, ugly wound that disfigured the back of his head. It wasn't difficult to guess how this man had met his demise.

What sent a chilling shock through Stomp, however, was that the head suddenly opened its glowing red eyes and, with grinding jaws, let out a grumbling voice, "You short-tailed, piss-smelling magician, have you finally decided to wake me up? What is this with this sack? Have I not served you well? We had an agreement, and now you're still not ready to keep your word, you oath-breaking scoundrel!"

The fiery red eyes in the sockets rolled around and fixed on Stomp. "And who are you, a spineless wimp? Believe me, if you get involved in any dealings with this redtail here, you're done for. If you're smart, you'll run for your life as fast as you can."

"Quiet now!" the magician's voice had taken on a threatening tone, and the head that Stomp was still gazing at in disbelief fell silent with a grumbling mutter. It took Stomp a few seconds to regain his composure, but he then held out the leather bag to the demon summoner with trembling fingers. "I don't think... um... that I need this help, especially when I'm not sure if this thing, whatever it is..."

"It's... well, you'd probably call it a spirit," the magician interrupted. "You know, dead, passed away, and then caught in time." Seeing Stomp's puzzled look, he continued, "Well, this world is a bit different, as you may have noticed. The magical barrier, the proximity to the demon world, and maybe the existence of this being among us can cause a dying person's soul not to immediately depart to Kasakk's realm. Instead, they may wander in this barrier, perhaps not finding an exit, and possibly, if they're lucky, being reborn as a human, naked, in an ancient stone circle not far from here. However, it's possible that a... well, let's say, a skilled magician is capable of capturing such a wandering, lost soul and assigning it to a more meaningful task."

"Yeah, yeah," grumbled the disgruntled voice from the bag in Stomp's hands. "He captured me, that short-tailed scoundrel. Imagine this – you're just a harmless, lovable spirit wandering around, and then a demon-sucker comes along and condemns you to sit in a leather sack for days."

"Innocent!" snorted the demon summoner. "You were the greatest burglar and contract thief in the southern provinces. Don't tell me anything! At least a hundred and fifty of those thefts were your doing!"

"A hundred and fifty-two!" the voice interjected.

"Yeah, innocent! And what about the people you beat up?"

"Witnesses, nothing but witnesses! Intimidation is better than slitting throats."

"Nonsense! I don't want to hear any more about it; you're here to serve me, and that's the end of it."

"We had an agreement!" "Hah!"

With a sigh, the magician looked back at Stomp. "You see the problem with these spirits. You can't scare them anymore, what else can you take from them? The only way to get them to behave is to promise to give them a body again. That's the only way to make them serve you."

With these words, the demon summoner took the sack, with the head still mumbling, from Stomp's hands and tied it shut.

"Nevertheless, this being can be very useful to you; make friends with it, as it possesses powers that could aid you. I've also added something that will help you survive down there. Now, hurry, my dear; we don't have time to linger for a cozy chat. Enter the temple, explore the portals, come back, and give me a word. Meanwhile, my two favorites and I will work on harnessing the arcane powers of the unfortunate shaman, so at least his useless existence can be put to some use."

With these words, the demon summoner handed the leather bag to his protege, who took it cautiously with pointed fingers and secured it to his belt.

"And make it fast," the demon summoner urged. "You see, things are happening, the Sleeper keeps awakening, and only if we interrupt his slumber and conquer him before he fully awakens and reaches his full strength do we stand a chance. Then, I can harness the power of this being as well."

With these words, he dragged his newly acquired protégé to one of the crystal windows and pointed outside. Stomp followed the outstretched finger, and it felt as if he was being pulled from the room at breakneck speed, eventually hovering in nothingness over the old campsite. As he gasped for air and looked down between his dangling feet, he clearly witnessed the events unfolding below.

The camp was barricaded, and the walkways were manned. To his surprise, he observed a group of Greenfurred beings, Orcs, charging the palisades with wild grunts and snorts in desperate panic. When he shifted his gaze, he witnessed violent confrontations taking place everywhere. It was a war, everyone against everyone! He saw an Orc attack against a group of farmers, and further to the west, he observed a skirmish between mercenaries from the Old Camp and independent miners, each fighting each other with bloody determination. The entire nightmarish scene was bathed in a dim, eerie light, and looking up, he noticed that the milky barrier had lost its shine. It was now imbued with a pale, blood-red shimmer that cast the entire world below in a dusky hue. Everywhere he looked, the milky hemisphere had taken on this dark, murky red tone.

"Seen enough?" After a brief moment and a swift motion, he found himself back in the room of the demon summoner, swaying slightly. "You see, we don't have any more time. You must hurry, my friend!" With these words, a pallid, clawed hand again rested on Stomp's shoulder, and he was pulled forward by the demon summoner and led down the stairs to the room below. Waiting there was the familiar infant-faced demon, glancing at them with flickering tongues between sharp teeth.

"Charotekk will take you to the temple portal," the magician concluded.

"Uh... is that really necessary? I... uh... think I can manage on my own," Stomp stammered.

"Listen, listen!" rumbled a voice dully from the leather bag at his hip.

"We don't have time for that!" the robed figure cut him off, and with an impatient movement, Stomp felt more than saw himself enveloped again by a greenish mist. He was astonished to gradually notice how he was surrounded by the sweet putrid odor of the unholy creature, sinking slowly into the ground.

The magician, who gazed at them thoughtfully, disappeared from his field of view. Perplexed, Stomp observed the layers of earth as he descended. It was cold but not uncomfortable, and he felt that slight chill again, watching blue wisps of light travel along the raised hairs on his forearms.

After just a few heartbeats, it was all over, and Stomp floated, shrouded in dim light, in a large, seemingly naturally formed cave. It was gigantic, and the gloomy twilight emanating from the greenish glowing slime clusters on the walls illuminated hundreds of irregular rock formations, stalactites, stone arches, and rock pillars, which protruded chaotically into the interior of the cavern. Stomp slowly descended towards a rocky ledge, and between his feet, he noticed a type of bridge leading from it into the darkness below.

Charotekk gently placed him on the ground, and as soon as he felt solid ground beneath his feet, the hazy waver disappeared, and the demon morphed back into the infant-like face.

"Walk your path, little human, and know this: do not dare to deviate from this path, for it will lead you through the demon world to the temple portals. Believe me, on the left and right in the darkness, entities lurk that would play with your soul for millennia. Follow the path, and the influence of our master will protect you. If you stray from the path, you are lost!"

And with a rumbling chuckle, the green sphere condensed until it was only the size of a hand span, and it disappeared in an abrupt hissing motion, leaving a green trail of smoke in the darkness above the nervous looking Stomp.

A strange twilight pervaded the surroundings, and the lone figure could observe the immediate area only within a stone's throw. Behind him, there was an uninterrupted, naturally formed rock wall extending in all directions, offering the deceptive illusion of safety. Extending into the cave was a maze of barely visible, crisscrossing pillars, bridges, galleries, and arches, defying the laws of physics, meandering through the obscurity of this cavern. He stood absurdly exposed on a balcony-like rock ledge, barely a body's length in edge length.

He couldn't spot any entrances or exits, only the wall surrounding him, extending in all directions into the gloomy abyss of the cavern. Ahead of him, there was a fragile-looking bridge without railings. Apart from this, he couldn't make out the boundaries of the giant cave in the pervasive twilight, only the labyrinthine tangle of bridges, transitions, graceful galleries, and outcroppings around him, filling the interior space and disappearing into the darkness of the cavern after just a few meters.

And he wasn't alone; there was something else, many other beings that seemed to focus malevolent, non-human eyes from all corners of this three-dimensional labyrinth on the unfortunate trespasser at this very moment. Stomp felt, no, he knew he was being watched, assessed like a sacrificial victim. An image shot through his mind: hundreds of entities, whose appearance and nature were so repulsive that no human brain could bear it. These entities had lain dormant, waiting for prey for thousands of years and now suddenly awakened. They were hungrily emerging from all sides, creeping toward their prey. He could practically feel the air around him vibrating from the growing presence of these soul hunters.

He flinched as the muffled voice from the leather bag at his hip emitted a loud, disgruntled "Great, just great. Would it be too much to ask if you could free me from this bag? I sense that something is strange about you, and it hurts. It causes pain, great pain, REALLY GREAT PAIN!" The last words were roared loudly, and Stomp, hurrying to comply with this request, noticed a whitish shimmer at his hip, emanating from the bag where he kept the Panther's tooth.

With nimble fingers, he untied the bag containing the head of Rigosh Firebreath and eventually opened it. The face looked at him plaintively. "This won't do, my friend. I am a spirit, I'm not used to and can't stand being hauled around with any other magical artifacts. So far, the influence of the demon summoner seems to have dampened his emanations, but now it HURTS! Just throw the other thing away, and we'll be the best of friends."

There was something lurking, a cunning undertone in these words, and Stomp examined his "companion" carefully. After a brief pause, he shook his head. "Forget it, 'my friend.' I'm pretty sure this tooth offers me more protection and benefit than any harm you can inflict. Besides, you're not in a position to make any demands; you have a mission just like me, so stick to it!"

As if to confirm this, he shook the bag roughly, and it responded with a grumbling "Alright, alright."

Surprisingly, Stomp found himself standing in a cave, having a casual conversation with the severed head of a dead master thief. Without paying any further attention to the head's continued tirades, he hurriedly closed the bag and resumed his inspection.

He looked perplexed at the tangle of bridges, galleries, and bizarre rock formations that crisscrossed the darkness before him in an inhuman arrangement. Only now did he realize that the cavern was filled with sounds. From a distance, there were cries, moans, like those of hundreds of tormented souls, accompanied by deep voices that seemed to make mocking comments further away.

Furthermore, there was a hissing and chirping all around in the air, which reminded him uncomfortably of the two creatures he had encountered with the demon summoner above.

Anxiously, he looked around, gripping the spear in one hand and holding the bag with the still grumbling head in the other. He cautiously began his descent. As he approached the bridge, the surface of the rock seemed to shift, forming a stone face right at the entrance to the balcony. The face looked down at him from below with a mocking, twisted grin. As it began to speak, a creaking and grinding voice filled the space, making Stomp stop abruptly. "Know, human, mortal being, that when you step onto this bridge, you enter the realm of soul devourers. Be prepared to serve the mighty beings that have been here for millennia as their plaything for all eternity. The only way to cross this place unharmed is to use my body as a path. But this comes at a price." The stone face on the bridge pursed its lips and appeared to assess him disdainfully. "It will be enough if you offer me a part of your body as payment. Perhaps a finger or an eye?"

Stomp looked puzzled at the grimace in the rock before him, lifted the leather bag in his left hand, and whispered, "What should I do now? I can't just give it a finger of mine. Come on, help me, that's your job!" He shook his "companion" insistently.

"Stop shaking me; you won't do me a small favor, but you need my help after just three steps!" After a brief grumble, he added, "Let me see!" Stomp obeyed, opening the bundle, lifting the head, and turning it in the direction of the stone face in front of him.

"Don't worry about the rock face," he grumbled. "A low-ranking demon, condemned to play the role of guardian here."

With a loud and imperious voice, he continued, "Hey, Stoneface! Don't even think about it, for we know that we are sent by a man who knows your secret name. And if you obstruct us in any way, you will serve as a plaything for others. So move aside, you bungler, and let us pass!"

As a confirmation of his words, two blood-red spears of light shot out from the head's eyes. Stomp could feel the heat emanating from them and heard the tortured grinding ahead as the beams struck the stone. The stone face turned into a pool of boiling rock, followed by a loud, painful scream that faded with a hollow echo. As the glow subsided, a cloud of smoke rose, and Stomp watched as the rock solidified rapidly with cracking and creaking noises. There was nothing left of the face, and in response to an encouraging "Come on, lad, get moving!" he hesitantly began to move.

When he reached the pool of glassy, molten rock, he gingerly placed his foot on it. Nothing happened. Growing bolder, he stepped onto the bridge and started his descent.

It was a dreadful path.

Stomp felt, no, he knew he was being observed. From the corners of his eyes, he thought he perceived swift movements in the darkness, and each time he looked in that direction, all he saw was blackness. With trembling knees, he continued onward. The hissing and growling around him grew louder, and the air was filled with entities. He felt as though malevolent eyes were watching him. In his fear, he believed he saw glistening fangs shimmering in the darkness, from which oily liquid dripped, and he thought he heard whispering voices calling out to him. The path led deeper and, although the bridge became somewhat steeper, making him believe he might slip at any moment, he was able to descend the sloping rocks without any difficulty. After a few more minutes of anxious progress, he suddenly noticed that the sounds around him had fallen silent. A foreboding silence spread, and he stood in tense anticipation.

The grumbling "Oh oh" from the leather bag in his left hand did not contribute to improving his mood, and while he still furrowed his brow, staring at the artifact in his left hand, he noticed a swinging movement out of the corner of his eye. He spun around. Something large was approaching slowly from the darkness diagonally ahead of him. As he squinted his eyes to see better, he noticed the path in front of him darkening, as if it was being enveloped by a sinister mist. A large, smoky black cloud gathered on the bridge just five steps away. The stone beneath him jerked and crunched as though under a tremendous weight and began to pulse and vibrate. In the mist, he believed he saw waving movements and glimpses of blackish scales glinting in the greenish twilight. At times, he thought he saw brief images of open jaws with hundreds of dark, forearm-length fangs, but each time he focused on them, they blurred and disappeared into the smoky darkness in front of him. Slowly, this cloud drew closer, and Stomp watched with trembling as myriads of misty tendrils spread in a wild dance around him, already seeming to encircle him in a possessive manner.

The bridge beneath him trembled and quaked, and involuntarily, Stomp crouched to maintain his balance. He quickly raised the bag to his head and whispered through the fabric, "What is that, what is that?" The response, surprisingly calm and restrained, came through the leather, "One of the Demon Lords, my boy. Whatever you do, don't make a mistake now. I'm not sure if the protection granted to us by the demon summoner is sufficient to appease this entity."

As if in confirmation, the blackness before him parted, and the stunned Stomp looked into a room, it seemed to be some kind of cave, filled with the blood-red light of several briefly flaring fires. Stomp beheld scenes of unimagined cruelty, he saw people stretched out on horrific devices, tortured, their mouths contorted into nameless screams and agony. He observed scenes of murder, rape, and violation a hundredfold, playing out rapidly before his eyes. The torturers were faceless beings who did their work with dispassionate thoroughness. Stomp saw humans carrying out these activities, then orcs and other creatures he had never seen before. He wanted to turn away, to throw up, run away, but the horrifying images kept him almost nailed to his spot.

He saw a scene in which a running man, identifiable as a wizard by his robes, was being pursued in a dark street by something that hovered in the air above him. It was made of winged darkness, descending calmly upon the fleeing man. Stomp shuddered as he watched this creature reach out with extended claws and snatch its victim, whose mouth was open in a silent scream, pulling him from his feet. In a matter of seconds, the man's expression changed as he turned pale, and the wrinkled white skin of the victim contrasted starkly with the steaming, bright-red stream of blood that disappeared into the profound darkness behind him. It was all over in a few seconds, and the winged figure rose nonchalantly upward, dropping the bright shimmering heap, which had been a human just moments ago, callously to the ground. Then the scene shifted, and Stomp observed a not-so-young woman, dressed in fine garments, performing sensual movements around a censer. The smoke rising from it condensed into a vaguely human-like shape, which silently flung itself onto her body. After a brief frenzy of twitching limbs, the smoke dissipated, leaving behind the emaciated body of an old woman who stared in horror at her wrinkled hands, then collapsed with a silent scream.

The darkness swirled, and the images faded. Stomp sat there, unable to make another move. A soft, whispering voice emerged, accompanied by a grunting undertone: "And you, little human, will you also belong to my world? As you can see, I have many entertainments to pass the time through the eons. Answer me, what is your desire! And perhaps you may decide how you will contribute to my amusements during my wanderings at the edge of the universe."

Stomp opened his mouth but could only produce a dry croak from his throat. Slowly, the cloud drew closer, its smoky tendrils whipping around him in frantic, eager movements, closing in on him.

"Go on, say something. You must show it that you're not afraid! That is the basis of its power!" urged the grumbling voice of his disembodied companion.

"I... I must pass through here," Stomp stammered in a hoarse whisper.

"Truly impressive, very clever!" commented the head.

Wordlessly, the black cloud closed in on the unfortunate man. Instinctively, Stomp placed his hand on the pouch where he knew the tooth was and gathered all his desperate courage, standing in a defiant manner. He knew this was his only chance, and he roared at his gloomy, bodiless counterpart with a quivering voice, "I demand to be allowed through! My master has been guaranteed passage! And, following a sudden idea, he added, 'This path does not belong to the demon world! I only seek a passage!'"

Silence followed his words. The entire cave seemed to hold its breath, waiting. Stomp flinched when, from the bag in his left hand, an urgent, murmuring voice said, "Now go, go, go!"

Obediently, he began to move, his knees trembling. Uncertain if he was doing the right thing, he marched straight toward the ominous cloud of smoke in front of him. At the last moment, just as he could perceive the oily emanations of this entity, the mist appeared to part, and he walked through it. Out of the corner of his eye, he once again glimpsed horrifying scenes, only an arm's length away. He saw these scenes of combat and torture again, and as sweat poured down his forehead in rivulets, he marched, keeping his gaze fixed firmly on the stony ground at his feet.

A grumbling sigh emanated from the smoke around him, angry and grinding, filled with impotent rage. He felt this profound hatred for all living things, and following the encouraging murmured words of the head in his left hand, he forced himself, with all his might, not to run but to trudge onward, keeping his gaze stubbornly directed at the stony ground beneath his feet.

Then he had passed through, and he realized, with a sigh of relief, that the cloud was not pursuing him, and the threatening muttering and hissing sounds behind him slowly faded. Instead, the other noises of the cave returned. When he dared to turn his gaze and survey his surroundings, he could see more demonic entities in the dark corners. He saw two other cloud-like entities similar to the one he had just passed through. In another alcove, just a stone's throw away through the endless blackness from his path, sat a woman dressed in dirty red robes, combing her long gray hair with an implement that eerily resembled a clawed hand. When she cast him a glance, he gazed into her striking green eyes with vertically slit pupils and noted that the body beneath the flowing skirt of her robe terminated in a scorpion-like tail that swung pendulously into the bottomless abyss below her, with a forearm-length point at its end twitching back and forth. Hastily avoiding eye contact with the bright green eyes, he continued his march.

A short while later, his path was accompanied by fluttering sounds above him, and when he looked up, he recognized a creature similar to the ones he had seen in the body of the demon lord. It floated above him with the fleshy, black appendages swaying in the air, right over him. He spotted tentacles dripping toward him, and unable to make out any further details, he saw whitish fingers in the front part of the creature that held a human head, from which fine blood droplets sprayed him. With another flap of its wings, the being disappeared, and wiping his face, Stomp hurried onward.

Unharméd, he reached the end of the bridge, which also opened into a sort of balcony at the other end, where he could see a dark passage. Above, several dozen meters high, a visage resembling a human face was carved into the rock. Stomp hoped at least that this was the work of a "stonemason."

In a macabre way, the exit formed the wide-open mouth of this face. Reddish firelight glowed at him from the inside. Stomp quickened his pace, grateful to see something that appeared of natural origin, even if it was just the light of a torch. As he left the bridge and passed through the gaping maw, he heard a chorus of moaning and sighing behind him, full of suppressed anger and frustration. Then he was through, and he heard the stone maw close with a crash and a grating sound. Breathing a sigh of relief, he stopped and wiped the bloody sweat from his forehead before casting a somewhat calm glance around the cave. He knew nothing that could come at him now would be worse than what he had just left behind.

He was mistaken; he would come to know that later!

The space he was in was empty. It also appeared to be a natural cave, approximately ten meters in diameter, illuminated by two torches in wall sconces. He hurried to get to the entrance at the opposite side, eager to put as much distance as possible between himself and the demon world. He rushed through the tunnel, paying little attention to the events to his left and right, and only came to an abrupt halt in his run when that familiar, tomb-like moaning emanated from the tunnel ahead of him. Battle sounds could be heard as well, the cries of the wounded, the moans of the dying, and the shuffling steps of the guards that had become so familiar to Stomp's ears. He paused and quickly looked around. He stood in a cave passage, barely three feet high, leading into darkness.

He cried out as the grumbling voice from the leather bag made itself heard again, which he still clutched in his left hand: "You should think of something, my dear! We won't get any further like this. Since we left the influence of the demon summoner, the vibration from that other thing hanging at your belt is driving me crazy. I can't stand that hissing and growling anymore, no matter how hard I try!"

Stomp's already frayed nerves erupted into a loud scream as he flung the bundle away from him. It bounced and rolled a few steps further, accompanied by a dry voice saying, "Very charming, feel free to thank me for my help that saved your hide from the soul collectors!" and lay a few steps away from him.

Stomp had had enough and, disregarding all caution, he yelled, "Can you stop constantly accusing me of something? It's not normal to run around with the severed head of a thief and rapist! It's not normal to encounter a demon lord while walking through some caves! It's not normal to face off with some 'something' without knowing how to deal with it! And it's absolutely not normal that I'm now concerned about whether you have a headache or not!" His voice broke, echoing from the walls.

With clenched fists and trembling all over, he approached, ready to make the leather bag disappear into some dark crevice forever. Furious, he tore the clasp open and pulled the head out by its hair. He held it up and stared eye to eye into the face of his "companion," twisted into a sardonic grin. Almost casually, he noticed that the cut surface separating the head from the body was covered with a greenish, glass-like sheen. He shook his "interlocutor" and shouted into its face, "What the hell am I supposed to do with you now?"

The head roared back, "Take that back about the rapist; I never did anything like that, an absolute outrage! Typical for a prude to lump an honorable profession like mine with such criminals." He fell silent, and the two opponents glared at each other with anger.

Unperturbed by it all, the battle raged on further ahead, and Stomp flinched as another sharp death cry echoed through the tunnel.

"Your sword, your sword!" the head in his hand growled, and Stomp dropped the spear, drew his sword, and looked around wildly, preparing for an attack from behind. But nothing happened; he was alone. He glared at Firebreath and ground his teeth between words, "I don't have time for these jokes now! You should be helping me, damn it! And by Kasakk..."

"Yes, that's what I mean; I could flow into your sword! I think I can handle those weird emanations from that...thing of yours," with a disdainful sidelong glance at Stomp's belt, "...better. Besides, I can serve as a better weapon."

Stomp looked incredulously from the blade in his hand back to the face, from which Firebreath stared at him innocently with blood-red eyes. "And what should I do?"

"Place the blade on the ground and stand me on it!" ordered the redhead. Stomp did as he was told, and when a pleasant "Ahh" sounded, he stepped back. A reddish mist spread over the two "objects" at his feet, and after the swirling movements in the red haze, which obscured the outlines of the two objects, subsided and dissipated, there lay a sword!

It was longer than the one Stomp had initially possessed, with a long, straight, flawless blade shimmering with a reddish glow. As he approached in amazement, he could see cloud-like formations shifting beneath the smooth metal, moving and swaying. The crossguard was forged in the shape of two flickering flames, curving gently upward from the hilt and ending on both sides in about a dozen menacing-looking points, about a hand's breadth from the shaft of the weapon.

The intricately carved grip was covered in a leather-like layer that shimmered in a bright, blood-red glow. The pommel was formed in the likeness of a head that eerily resembled his companion.

To intensify this impression, the eyes of the metallic visage opened and gazed at him with pinpoint, blood-red pupils. The metallic face contorted into a pleasurable grin, and Stomp heard the familiar voice saying, "This is much better, much better! Now hurry, I've turned the bag into a scabbard. Pick me up, and let's see what we can do!"

Stomp looked around and saw a simple, reddish scabbard lying on the ground. Without thinking, he seized the sword, and with a certain revulsion, he felt the hilt of the grip molding into his hand, as though he were holding something alive. He lifted the weapon and looked at the head-shaped pommel, from which Firebreath's face stared at him. It seemed to shift on the metal so that the eyes were once again level with him, and with a joyful grin, it revealed metallic teeth. "Impressed, aren't you? What a simple spirit can achieve with a little help and some gadgets from an old demon sucker. Believe me, it's not typical; usually, we spirits are quite helpless and clumsy, but I like this. It's also enough if you take me with you; you can leave your pig sticker here."

While Stomp sheathed the weapon and pulled the leather loop attached to it over his head, so the grip extended over his right shoulder, he shook his head and muttered, "You can forget about that; I won't leave Sprayer Sting here!"

"Alright, alright," grumbled Firebreath, then urged, "And now get a move on; we have things to do!"

Without another word, Stomp picked up his spear and hurried towards the sounds of battle. During the last few steps, he noticed that it had grown quieter ahead of him. As he turned the corner, he saw the familiar cavern with the gigantic head of the petrified Minesprayer in front of him and the temple-like structure above it.

He appeared to be standing at a different entrance than the one he had used to enter the cave previously. He was positioned to the left of it, roughly in the area where the procession had entered the cave during their first visit.

He was looking at a battlefield. Dozens of mutilated figures lay scattered on the ground, surrounded by large pools of blood. He could make out several different people, mercenaries, miners, including some motionless figures of dead guards. They seemed to have torn each other apart in a wild and senseless carnage.

He could see a miner still clutching the throat of a mercenary, having met death through a blade thrust deep into his entrails by a blue-clad Organizer, who himself lay lifeless and contorted. Elsewhere, he saw a dead guard, with several mercenaries and miners biting into him like wild animals in a joint effort. Torn and mutilated body parts lay scattered everywhere.

Nothing stirred.

Carefully, Stomp, with sword and spear in hand, securing in all directions, made his way to the temple portal. He reached the entrance without any disturbance and slipped inside, his senses on high alert. He entered the antechamber again, which he had already come to know, and saw the arched supports of the galleries in front of him, the figures of the not entirely petrified water spouts scattered between them. The pool of blackish water before him seemed perfectly calm, with only the surface slightly rippling. Swiftly, his sword at the ready, he crossed the room, and again, he heard the crunching noises around him.

He noticed that the spout figures were following him with their gazes, their heads turning to watch his progress. Other than that, they allowed him to pass without interference, and he reached the opposite staircase. With swift steps, he rushed upstairs, prepared at any moment to be attacked by an unnamed and unnamable creature. But nothing happened. He reached the heavy stone gates above him, towering about four meters high. Two knobs were visible, almost at eye level, large enough for him to grasp with both hands. After a quick survey, he set the spear aside, gripped the sword more firmly, and turned the knob with his left hand.

After a short time, he heard a grinding and rumbling from within the door, and with a sigh-like noise, it swung toward him. Hastily, he took a step back and smelled the cold, stale, musty air. Then the door was swung open with an eerie force from the inside, and only a quick leap backward could save him from the upswinging stone. A familiar sound followed, and he found himself facing three of the guardian creatures, with their blank stares and waving arms, marching toward him.

Without thinking, he dropped to one knee and swung his sword at the legs of the first monster charging at him. Accompanied by a loud, roaring "Yeehaw" from Firebreath, the blade hissed through the creature's legs, and with a quick jerk, Stomp observed as the weapon came out on the other side. Two fountains of blood-red sand sprayed from the wounds, and with a loud crunch, the colossus fell in front of Stomp, who barely managed to jump aside to avoid the crashing masses.

While he still stared in disbelief at the twitching creature before him, the sword in his right hand jerked around, almost on its own, and executed another well-aimed attack on the second guardian who had come dangerously close to Stomp. It was more the sword than Stomp himself that performed a well-targeted double strike to the monster's lower abdomen. As a result, the second creature also crashed to the ground, accompanied by an explosion of sand. Encouraged by his success, Stomp sprang to his feet, holding the weapon high above his head with both hands and dashed toward the third guardian. This one attempted to parry the attack with its left arm, which was easily sliced through by the blade, which then sank deeply into the creature's chest. It was thrown two steps back. The third monster also collapsed, sliding down the rear wall as a lifeless lump.

Breathing heavily, Stomp looked around. "Well, that was easy!" commented the weapon in his hand dryly. He raised the hilt and looked into Firebreath's amused grin. "Nevertheless, I'd appreciate it if you let me handle my fights myself," Stomp gritted his teeth.

"Don't get sensitive now; after all, we're in this together! Still in this together," the sword commented calmly.

Stomp looked into the chamber that the three guards had unlocked and, to his disappointment, saw a closed, rocky space. "There's no way forward from here," he said. "How are we supposed to get into that blasted temple now?"

He carefully made his way through the three dead guardians into the alcove and found his suspicion confirmed. The room was a square, four by four meters, surrounded by natural rock, with no exits or branches anywhere. Perplexed, he raised the sword and looked at the blood-red button eyes questioningly. "Well, I think this is an illusion, this portal and this staircase. I believe the entrance is somewhere else. Maybe you'll have to swim!" the sword commented suggestively.

Stomp looked around the entrance hall, and his gaze fell on the black pool beneath him. "You mean...?" he asked.

"Give it a try! Come on, that's what the Red gave me to give to you; He imparted some of his knowledge about this facility to me. Trust me!" the dry comment came.

Snorting, Stomp hurried to descend the stairs and finally, accompanied by the creaking sounds of the spout figures on the left and right, stood in front of the water basin. Again, the surface rippled slightly, and Stomp felt a slight tremor beneath his feet.

"How are you supposed to get into any temple through this?" he pondered to himself, but as he saw no other alternative to an endless inspection of dozens of other doors, passages, and corridors in this room, he followed the insistent growl of his sword. He sat down on the floor, accompanied by an uncomfortable shiver, and extended his legs into the water. And when nothing happened, he let himself fully into the pool.

Holding on with one arm, he felt his way down and couldn't feel the bottom. "I'm going to drown, and that will be the end of the heroic battle of Stomp Sprayerdeath and Toothbearer!" he lamented loudly.

"Nonsense, you're talking like an old woman! Besides, you still have my help, and that weird tooth is still there. You'll just have to learn how to use these portals!" scolded his weapon.

Stomp sighed and slowly sank into the dark fluid. He glided deeper, and after a few moments, his feet touched solid ground. He opened his eyes and looked around in the gloomy gray twilight of the water. He was in a shaft, three meters in diameter, surrounded on all sides by brick walls.

"Now think, you want to enter the Sleeper's portal, visualize everything you know about the Sleeper!" commanded Firebreath.

Stomp closed his eyes and tried to focus on this being. He recalled the view of the temple, tried to remember the visions he had during his fall from the cliff. He remembered the moaning of the guardian creatures, the humming that accompanied the waves of madness. He felt how the weapon in his hand came to life, how the metal nestled against his palm. At the same time, he felt a pulsation at his right hip and continued to focus on these sensations with clenched teeth. A dull booming noise resonated in his head, a thumping, pulsating rhythm that sounded in his mind. The images before his eyes blurred and were replaced by a black silhouette pulsating in a cave with a cold, booming noise, and Stomp instinctively took a step toward it. Concentrating on this sight, he took another step, and another, and another. When he finally realized that he must have reached the other end of the shaft a long time ago, he opened his eyes in surprise.

He found himself in a water-filled tunnel, and turning around, he saw the chimney through which he had just descended. The passage continued to wind in front of him, filled with a bluish light. It hadn't been there before, he knew that, and it seemed to be one of those portals Firebreath had mentioned. He trudged on and noticed with surprise that he felt no shortage of air. Slowly, hindered by the water, he continued along the corridor and found that the floor beneath him began to rise. A long, arrow-like shadow shot toward him, and as he made a defensive movement with the sword, it swiftly and curvedly moved to the left, disappearing with a glint of silver scales in the twilight. Stomp could now see that the water around him was not lifeless. Dozens of different-sized fish and fish-like creatures swam around him, most of them indifferent, some eager to get out of his reach.

Carefully, he continued, and after a few steps, his head broke through the water's surface. He took a deep breath and climbed up the ramp until he stood in another masonry recess, dripping wet. It seemed to be some sort of altar room. Directly in front of him, he could see a podium on which several now-cooled braziers stood. Around him, he recognized several stone-carved rows of seats, all of them vacant and covered in inches of dust. Three exits led from this cave: one behind him, over the ramp, forming a bridge over the channel, and two on each side. Gurgling and splashing behind him made him jump, and he saw a meandering movement under the bridge, which prompted him to jump onto dry ground with a quick leap. The serpentine motion moved towards the spot he had just occupied, and a gray-scaled creature lifted itself out of the water. Stomp saw a thigh-thick serpent-like body winding upward, crowned by a human head that looked at him with green eyes. With an almost disappointed hiss, the creature withdrew into the channel after a long gaze and disappeared into it.

Stomp looked around. "So, where to now?" he whispered. The answer came in a didactic tone to his ears, "Always follow the noise!" and he could now hear the clanging of weapons and shouting from the corridor to his left. Crouching, he continued, holding both his weapons firmly in his hands.

After sneaking through several passages that provided glimpses into the altar and prayer rooms on both sides, he entered another large crypt where the source of the fighting noise seemed to be. Carefully, he peered around the corner and spotted two dozen human figures engaged in a wild melee against each other. This, too, appeared to be a kind of prayer room, but it had now become the scene of a barbaric brawl. From his vantage point, Stomp could see members of different guilds: at one spot, an orange-robed Templar swung a massive two-handed weapon at two mercenaries, who grinned manically, attempting to break through their opponent's defenses. Elsewhere, two individuals who appeared to belong to the Miners Guild wrestled violently on the ground, trying to maul each other with nails and teeth. Right in front of him, Stomp witnessed a blue-clad Organizer leaping from behind to attack a mercenary. With a swift and flowing motion, the Organizer drew his dagger across the mercenary's throat, causing him to collapse in a pool of blood. The attacker landed on his feet and looked around with a mad grin. Stomp recognized the redness in his eyes and knew that everyone in this room had succumbed to the emanations of madness spread by the Sleeper.

The blood-red eyes scanned wildly, spotted Stomp, and with a loud hiss and a screech, the blue-clad man charged at him. "Let's go, young man!" With these words, the sword in Stomp's hands twitched, and he quickly assumed a combat stance.

Not a second too soon, because the Organizer was still hurling his dagger across the room in a frenzied run, and while Stomp was still fending off the flying projectile in a rapid movement, his counterpart had pulled a rapier, with which he now confronted him. Retreating, Stomp parried three of the insidiously aimed blows of the opponent's weapon before striking his opponent's hand with a powerful blow, which, still gripping the rapier, sailed across the room in a wide arc, spraying drops of blood.

Unimpressed by his injury, the maniac continued to charge Stomp and jump at him. The latter just managed to get his right hand between him with the spear before he was knocked off his feet by the impact. He was lying on his back, the drooling and screeching face of the insane Organizer above him.

He felt the bloody stump being punched in his face several times, while the remaining claw-like hand of his counterpart tried to find his throat. In a wild hurry, driven by disgust and revulsion, he dropped the sword, followed by a disappointed "Yes, but what's the point now?" and groped for the dagger at his belt. When the left hand was already beginning to squeeze his neck, he had finally reached the handle, pulled out the weapon and thrust it several times into the unprotected flank of his opponent.

It wasn't until the tenth or eleventh thrust that the Organizer's strength finally gave way. Stomp, with the first colored spots appearing before his eyes, pushed the now lifeless body aside. As he struggled to his feet, his face smeared with blood, he spotted two more figures charging towards him, their swords drawn. Still crouched, he hurled the spear at one and the dagger at the other, then grabbed his sword.

The left one of the two was able to dodge the spear effortlessly, but the right one had seen the dagger coming too late, and it now dug into his chest with an ugly smacking sound. Unimpressed, the two continued to attack Stomp. The latter, however, had his sword in his hands again and stormed towards them with a loud roar.

He felt more than he heard that his own cry was accompanied by a deep roar from Firebreath. Just before the collision, Stomp dropped to his knees in full stride and slid toward the two opponents on his knees. Just before he reached them, he swung the sword in a wide, two-handed arc towards their running legs. He was rewarded with a brief jerk as his weapon buried itself deeply into the calf of his left opponent and, after a brief resistance, continued its path. He collapsed, blood-soaked, next to Stomp, but the right one saw his chance to strike the unprotected flank of his kneeling opponent. He had miscalculated the distance, though, and only hit Stomp's shoulder painfully with the crossguard. With a swift return motion, he knocked the one who was still running off his feet, causing him to crash to the ground with a loud thud.

Stomp heard a hissing sound to his left and spun around. The left of the two opponents, whose legs were severed at the calf, now tried to reach him, his face contorted with hatred, crawling on his hands with a dagger in each hand. The blades produced ugly, scraping sounds on the rocky floor as he continued to crawl. He paid no attention to the fountains of blood spraying from his leg stumps and crawled on, grinding his teeth. Before the man could reach him, Stomp swung his sword in a sweeping motion, and with a mixture of disgust, fear, and pity, he buried the blade deep in his opponent's throat. Spraying a fountain of blood, his opponent collapsed.

Stomp whirled around, not a second too soon, for his second opponent had recovered from the fall and was now charging at him, sword raised high above his head with both hands, roaring. Stomp wrenched his weapon free, swung it around, and drilled the tip into the attacker's unprotected belly. The latter, propelled by his own momentum, plunged the blade deeper into the body and, regardless of the steel in his guts, tried to get at him even further. His blow, bringing his own sword down on Stomp's head, was already powerlessly wielded and easily parried by the latter's left hand. Still in death, his opponent continued to work his way until he was stopped by the flame shape of the guard. His unarmed hands sought Stomp's face, and with nails and teeth he tried to injure the latter's neck. Disgusted, Stomp pushed the dying man away from him. He took a few steps back and turned back to the fray.

This entity had moved away from him somewhat, leaving him alone and facing a second person he had hoped never to see again.

"I told you we'd meet again," announced Rigosh Twoknife with a sardonic grin. She stood there calmly, leaning on Stomp's Sprayer Sting. "It seems you've made quite a career for yourself. You have a fine little sword there, and this toothpick here isn't too shabby either. Nevertheless, I'm going to take that away from you now and carry your balls in a sack on my belt!"

"Listen, listen," dryly commented on the weapon in Stomp's hands. Stomp had had enough. He knew he couldn't allow this woman to stop him now, and when he looked into Twoknife's eyes, he could see the bloody redness, indicating that she, too, had succumbed to madness. Through gritted teeth, he raised the tip of his sword and pointed it at his opponent.

"I've had enough of you, mercenary scum! Come here and fight me if you dare. I'm no longer a novice, and I have no intention of letting you hold me back!"

As if in response, Twoknife lifted Stomp's spear high and regarded him with a disdainful look as she replied, "I'm going to take your weapons away from you, I'm going to slay you with your own sword, and the last thing you'll ever perceive in this world is my foul breath in your face!"

With these words, she charged at Stomp. He, with his sword raised, also made his move.

When the two combatants clashed, Twoknife tried some feints with the blunt end of the spear, then swung the blade towards Stomp's face in a rapid arc. He parried the spear as best he could, managed to deflect the treacherous strikes, and counterattacked. With a powerful, two-handed blow, shoving the spear aside, he continued the attack on her unprotected right leg, accompanied by the gruesome sound of the weapon cutting through flesh. Twoknife hobbled back with a pained expression and regarded her opponent with newfound respect. "You did that quite nicely," she commented. "I think so too," grumbled the sword in Stomp's hands. He looked annoyed at the weapon and ground his teeth, saying, "Please, that's disgusting enough without any comments from you."

Then he looked up again, just in time! Twoknife had recognized the distraction for what it was, dropped the spear in a catlike swift motion, and drew her sword. She now charged towards him with her weapon raised, forcing Stomp back against the opposite wall with several treacherously executed attacks. Her strikes came hard and fast, like the biting head of a viper. Stomp struggled to parry the blows, often feeling that the sword in his hand had led the defensive motion itself, much faster than he could have managed. This allowed him to deflect each of these thrusts, and when Twoknife finally ceased her attack, she stepped back and regarded Stomp suspiciously.

"How are you doing this? This can't be on the up-and-up!" she exclaimed.

"Exactly," Stomp roared in response and launched his own attack. Again, it felt to him as if the battle cry rising from his throat was accompanied by a loud rumbling emanating from Firebreath in his hand.

With several powerful attacks, he continued to drive the mercenary woman further back, pounding her parrying sword with both hands. To his amazement, he found that these mighty attacks hardly tired him. It was different for Twoknife. Her exhaustion was becoming evident, and when Stomp eventually launched a two-pronged attack, one above and one below, Twoknife failed to parry the second strike. Stomp's blade sank into her right calf, briefly paused, and then came free. With a disbelieving expression, Twoknife crumpled beside her severed leg in front of Stomp. Filled with the battle's rush, he didn't hesitate and plunged the blade deep into his opponent's heart. She went limp and dropped her sword with a loud clatter. Breathing heavily, Stomp withdrew his weapon, took a few steps back from the lifeless mercenary, and looked around.

The massacre was nearly over; only three men remained standing. On the opposite wall, he saw a lone figure pressed against the wall, almost concealed by the towering bodies of two orange-clad guardsmen who wordlessly and with determined anger swung their swords at him. A growl rose from Stomp's throat, and without hesitation, he approached the two figures, raising his bloodied sword.

Just a few steps away from them, he bellowed out a defiant "Heda," and as they turned, he dispatched them without much ado. Eventually, he stood as the last one remaining in the cave. After he had caught his breath and glanced around, he stared at the only other living figure in the room. This figure was hunched over at the back of the cave. Stomp recognized him; he recognized the long gray mane of hair and the gray garb of the Master he had led to the surface just a day before. When the injured man looked up at him, Stomp was relieved to see no redness in his eyes. Clear gray pupils met him in rapid recognition, and a weak smile appeared on his wrinkled face.

"Ah, the young man who opened the prison cells. I greet you, my friend, and regret that we must meet again under such dreadful circumstances."

As Stomp began to speak, the injured man interrupted, saying, "Please, let me finish, young warrior. It won't be long before the dark life-thief places silver coins on my eyes. You may be right; once you reached the surface, it would have been wiser to stay there rather than descend back into these inhospitable caves.

But know this, up there, there's no place left where a man can lead his life with dignity and honor. Everyone is mad, everyone is consumed by this strange frenzy; they tear each other apart, friends slaughter friends, and relatives murder relatives. No place where one would want to linger with joy. Moreover, my thoughts irresistibly drew me down into these lands, which I knew held a legendary treasure somewhere, filled with the most precious objects and astounding magical artifacts. Well, as it seems, it was a wrong decision.

But it fills my fluttering heart with joy that the great planners have guided my final paths to you..." He paused and pulled out a leather pouch from beneath his vest, opened it, and handed it to Stomp with trembling, bloody hands. Stomp knelt beside him, helplessly looking at the dying man.

"Take this!" the Master continued. "Take this from Benedict 'the Hand.' It will help you navigate this facility and teach you how to use the portals. I've been carrying it with me for a while, hoping that it would one day clear the path to the treasures of this facility. But it seems I no longer need it."

Stomp gently took the container from the Master's limp fingers, and the gray-haired man lowered his hand wearily. "Now go, my friend. Leave me alone, for I must plan the last great heist that Kasakk has bestowed upon me." With a soft sigh, the gray-haired man closed his eyes.

Stomp rose, unsure of what to do next, and looked at the small leather pouch in his hand, about the size of a mandarin.

"I want that," he heard a hoarse whisper.

Startled by the whisper, Stomp whirled around. Before him stood Rigosh Twoknife, covered in blood, her severed leg lying next to her. Something seemed to hold her in an upright position, and as Stomp looked more closely at the inexplicable scene before him, he could make out a dark silhouette behind the mercenary's figure, dark and smoky, enveloping Twoknife's body like a cloak. This wavering figure raised its right arm, and as if pulled by unseen strings, Twoknife's arm followed the motion. The hand reached out demanding, and the voice repeated:

"Give it to me and live!" Stomp took a step back, feeling the rock wall behind him, and shook his head. "You'll have to come and get it yourself, mercenary," he hissed.

Hollow laughter filled the cave, and the hissing voice continued, "You do not speak with Rigosh Twoknife."

As if to confirm, the head of the lifeless mercenary began to deform with a loud and unpleasant cracking and grinding noise. Several horn-like spikes sprouted from her forehead, her features coarsened, and her teeth grew longer and longer. In the broken eyes of the deceased, a reddish fire began to smolder, which Stomp met with a cold stare.

Finally, the grotesque face, which remotely resembled one of the water-spitting figures in the antechamber, hovered over the mercenary's neck, and the whole creature took two thundering, stomping steps toward Stomp. "You will not leave this room without handing me this artifact. Whether I take it from you as a living or dead man, I care not, mortal!"

"A demon, once again!" Stomp's weapon dryly commented, "Be cautious! This doesn't seem to be one of the lesser ones, and since it has somehow slipped into the body of this mercenary, I don't know if the demon summoner's ban will hold it back."

The figure continued to approach Stomp, and he looked at it helplessly. He knew he was lost, and as he searched for an escape route, an idea struck him.

Slowly retreating, Stomp didn't take his eyes off the creature following him. He reached down with his free left hand, undoing the belt pouch, and retrieved the tooth.

"Watch yourself, unholy creature! I'm not the prey you can snatch so easily."

In response, his adversary suddenly lunged at him, with movements too fast for the eye to follow. A claw-like hand swept toward him. Without thinking, he parried with his sword, and the impact made his arms tremble to the shoulders. Nonetheless, he remained unharmed, and the creature slowly recoiled. Drawing new courage, Stomp launched a fierce attack, charging at the figure before him with a wild cry. His sword struck in several desperate blows, inflicting large, bloody wounds on the lifeless mercenary's form. Slowly, he drove the figure back and thought of himself as the victor, but suddenly the figure collapsed, and Stomp found himself facing a shadowy, vaguely human-shaped outline, which now drifted toward him with a hissing sound.

His sword strikes passed ineffectually through this structure, and suddenly he felt surrounded by darkness. Something soft and sticky seemed to encase his hands, and his vision darkened under a somber, gray veil that fell over his face. Something strange entered his nostrils and mouth as he gasped for air. His arms were pinned to his body with incredible force, and his ears felt clogged as he faintly heard Firebreath's voice from a distant fog, "Do something, do something, it's getting tight."

Desperately wriggling and shaking, he felt himself fall and roll, enveloped in a cocoon of sinister gray malevolence. The air grew thin, and the first red circles began to swirl before his eyes. Full of despair, he clutched the tooth more tightly with his left hand and thrust it into the substance enveloping him. Something tore, and suddenly he was able to move his left arm more freely. In utter desperation and panic, he stabbed his own body, attempting to hit the gray shroud encasing him. He felt nothing, he felt emptiness, his legs went numb, he lost all sense of his body, didn't notice the wounds he was inflicting on himself with the tooth, and in wild agony, he kept hacking at that something. Suddenly, he saw the demon's visage before him and felt the shroud receding.

Gasping for air and eagerly inhaling, he yanked the tooth up with a shout and buried its tip deep into the creature's face before him. A loud chirping sound echoed, and with the jolt as the demon recoiled, the tooth was nearly torn from his hand. Breathing heavily, he got up and charged, holding the tooth high, limping toward the creature. It seemed to shrink, and when he reached it and struck it two or three more times, it dissolved entirely. Only a small cloud of vapor shot around Stomp, making a loud hissing, iridescent noise in wild flight. It finally broke through the rock wall to his left with a loud crash.

Stomp observed the scenario and was astonished to notice a hole in the rock wall, about the size of a human head, from which oily liquid was dripping.

Exhausted and on the verge of hysteria, he slumped backward. He felt utterly drained, and when he looked down at himself, he saw several superficial puncture wounds he had inflicted on himself with the tooth. With his last ounce of strength, he raised his sword and whispered, "I guess this is it," before sinking into a crouched position. He looked around listlessly, taking in the dead Master whose face now bore a peacefully smiling expression and the dozens of other corpses scattered about. He felt as though he could hear, or more accurately feel, that pounding, pulsating rhythm in the ground beneath him and involuntarily tightened his grip on the tooth in his left hand and Firebreath in his right.

Gradually, his vision cleared, and, without understanding why, he felt renewed strength coursing through his body. He heard a faint growling, a rumbling breath, and when he looked down at himself, he realized that the wounds he had inflicted on himself with the tooth had either healed or disappeared. He didn't feel bad, just somewhat tired and fatigued, like after a long fight, but he didn't sense any serious injuries.

He cautiously knelt and then, with a surge of new energy, got back on his feet. Puzzled, he looked around and finally turned his gaze to the face of Firebreath on the pommel of his sword.

"Well," the sword commented significantly, only to press on, "Come on, we're in a hurry, haven't you forgotten?"

Stomp looked around, unsure of which way to go now. Two openings led out of this room, both through a portal vaguely shaped like a skull. As he moved towards the two exits, he noticed his spear lying broken into several pieces on the ground.

He paused for a moment, then sighed and continued on his way. Upon reaching the gates, he gazed questioningly from one to the other, recalling the Master's words. He retrieved the small leather pouch, and from it, he pulled out a smooth, mandarin-sized stone. Beneath the glassy surface, several blood-red threads and veins were visible. On the front, there was a spindle-shaped black recess that faintly resembled a slit pupil. The object was completely smooth, cold, and tranquil in his hand. Puzzled, Stomp looked at the artifact, whispering, "What now?"

"No idea," replied Firebreath. "I'm a spirit and a sword, not a source of information."

Stomp just snorted.

While he still stared at the stone, it seemed to twitch, and he felt a slight pulsation in his palm. Following a sudden intuition, whether from his own mind or triggered by the stone, he raised the sphere to eye level and looked inside. He could see through it as if it were a glass lens, and in the left opening, he observed nested, abysmal darkness crisscrossed by hundreds of branching tunnels, stairs, and corridors. In the right entrance, he saw a large cavern filled with a massive, black entity that seemed to expand slowly in sync with the pulsating beats he felt at his feet.

He lowered the stone, quickly stowed the seemingly innocent sphere in the leather pouch, and made sure it was safely placed in one of his pockets before entering the tunnel with a command of "Go right."

Benedict's gift guided them safely through a labyrinth of passages and tunnels. Stomp encountered dozens of chambers along his descent, which had once been bustling. He found altars, arenas, and lounges, all carved from the same dark gray basalt, covered in dust and abandoned. Several times, he was attacked by guardian creatures or people who had succumbed to madness, but with the tooth in his left hand and Firebreath in his right, he managed to fend off all these assaults. Finally, he reached a large chamber with tunnel entrances evenly spaced from twelve different directions, similar to the one he had exited.

The chamber was empty, and in the center, there was another circular shaft filled with black water. The pulsing was louder here, causing the walls and the floor to vibrate heavily, as well as the surface of the pool, which exhibited circular ripples with each throb. Using the artifact once again, Stomp realized that this was another portal.

Bolder or more desperate than before, he rushed toward the center. After a quick look into the dark water, he leaped in without hesitation. He descended slowly until something stopped his movement after a few meters. He hovered in the dark, brackish, warm liquid and couldn't move another inch. It seemed as though there was an invisible barrier preventing him from going any further. As he descended further and looked down, he felt nothing but water. He noticed he could breathe underwater and now, visibly calmer, he repeated the procedure he had learned. He closed his eyes and allowed himself to be enveloped by the pulsating drone, which he could both feel and hear all around him. In synchrony, he recalled the visions of the black, pulsating mass, focusing on it, allowing images of guardians, of millennia-old slumber to flow into his mind.

He sensed that he was sinking further, and when he opened his eyes, he fought a wave of nausea. He felt like he was spinning, as if he were standing upside down in the water and moving further upside down. Holding his sword more firmly and clutching the tooth and the eye-shaped sphere, as he had come to call it, he descended deeper. Finally, his head pierced the surface, and like someone treading water, he remained suspended in that position. His head protruded upside down from a pool, similar to the one he had jumped into just minutes ago.

This pool, however, was situated at the apex of a large, domed cavern. When he turned his head, he could see the ground far below him. The cave appeared uninhabited and empty, but it was filled with the resounding, pounding rhythm that he had been aware of in his surroundings and in his consciousness for hours. In awe, he remained in his position, fully aware that he had now reached the Sleeper's place.

The moldy lumps placed everywhere spread their pale greenish twilight, and as Stomp turned his head, he could oversee the place in its entirety.

In the left, rear region, in a kind of niche, he noticed something that seemed to entirely absorb the light from the moldy lumps. An area of profound darkness had spread there, and after a few seconds of anxious staring, he realized that a massive object, approximately ten by twenty meters in size, lay there, undergoing pulsating movements. It was from there that the noise emanated, filling the room with a pounding, pulsating thud.

He had found the Sleeper!

Hastily, he withdrew his head beneath the water's surface and contemplated his next move. "So, what do you want to do now, my incarnate companion?" his sword's muffled rumbling bubbled beside him. Stomp shrugged. "It's best to go back and get the demon summoner. He's definitely the one to face this 'thing.' I don't know," replied Firebreath. "I'm not even sure if the demon summoner would want that."

"But he said he just needed to come down here..."

"Yes, he said that," his sword replied cryptically, "but he conveniently omitted that..."

The discussion was interrupted when Stomp noticed that he was sinking further. He quickly looked around; he was surrounded by smooth, vertically ascending shaft walls. Nowhere was there an object to hold onto. He tried to swim, but the oily liquid around him seemed to thwart his efforts, pushing him downward with undulating movements. In a panic, he realized that his legs were no longer in the water but kicking in the air. He sank deeper, his hips broke free, his upper body followed, and eventually, he broke free with a squelching sound from the liquid and plummeted with a piercing scream toward the cavern's floor.

The impact was horrific. The jolt knocked the air out of his lungs, and he lay in astonishment on the cavern's floor, looking up at the black point of the shaft, some fifty meters above him, from which he had fallen. He wondered how he was still alive. He remembered that just before the impact, he had seen a reddish cloud spreading beneath him from his sword.

As he looked around now, he noticed that the rock surrounding him was blackened, covered with a centimeter-thick layer of soot within a radius of about five meters, which also encircled him completely. He raised his sword and looked questioningly at Firebreath.

"Well, somehow I had to make sure you didn't break your legs," he grumbled and added a "clumsy" for good measure. Tentatively, Stomp got to his feet and was relieved to find that he hadn't suffered any serious injuries, apart from a few bruises. Then he remembered where he was and quickly scanned his surroundings.

The cave was empty. There was nothing on the floor, and both the walls and the ground itself seemed to be roughly hewn from rock and appeared completely clean. There was no trace of rubble or dust anywhere. Thirty meters away, the dark flank of the entity that he now recognized as the Sleeper loomed.

As he observed it, it seemed to expand with each of the resounding, pulsating beats that made the air and rock beneath his feet tremble. Slowly, with trembling hands clutching his weapon, he crept closer.

He almost had to shout to overpower the noise, "Do you think it's still sleeping?" He received only a meaningful "Hmm" as a response.

Baffled, Stomp raised the eye to his face and looked through it. What he saw made him gasp in horror. In the midst of this cloud, he could discern a figure; it appeared to shift, alternating between vaguely human and animal-like forms, with no clear outline. It lay in the midst of the darkness. As far as could be determined through the rapidly changing shapes, it seemed to be several meters tall. It moved, writhing restlessly as if someone was about to wake up from a long slumber.

Desperately, he lowered the eye and looked around, puzzled. "What do we do now?"

"Well, of course, we attack it!" his weapon replied in its typical manner. "It's still asleep; we won't be able to do much once it's awake. You have no other choice; you can't go back! Besides," the spirit continued, "when the blabbermouth granted me additional abilities to protect you, he slipped up. I know that the barrier became so impenetrable only because this creature is here. To break down the wall, this thing must be destroyed! One will lead to the other. Don't ask me why; that's what the Soul-Eater's darling knows. And the candle-pusher doesn't intend that at all! He wants to control this being, use it and its powers as a weapon and leverage. So, we shouldn't rely on his help, or...?"

Stomp looked doubtfully at his sword, wondering if it would be enough to fight a creature that was still capable of driving hundreds of people insane while asleep and making creatures like the Guardians build a temple like this. Coming to terms with his fate, he slowly and hesitantly set off. A few steps in front of the black, pulsating, mist-like wall, he felt the freezing cold emanating from this structure, and his steps slowed.

As if to confirm his hesitation, movement stirred in the dark mass in front of him, and after a swirling vortex, it formed a face measuring three to four meters in diameter, alien and inhuman. Eyes of profound blackness fixed on the newcomers inquisitively. A man-sized maw opened, and a hollow, resonant voice filled the room, "WHO?"

In the darkness of the gaping maw, movements were visible as the moldy light refracted off chitin-like protrusions. Emerging from the darkness, several creatures, each three meters in size, took shape and caused Stomp to step back in horror. He saw scaly bodies, horn- and chitin-armored limbs as these insect-like nightmare formations began to take form from the shadows.

Malicious hissing sounds grew louder as three of these creatures took a step forward. Large, three-toed feet, covered in chitinous plates and bristling with dozens of glistening spines, extended from the darkness and slammed onto the rocky ground with a dull, resonating thud. Each of these creatures appeared to have six limbs supporting a long, spindle-like torso. Their heads, high above Stomp, were armed with grasping appendages and mandibles that rubbed against each other in hissing, grinding movements. Cold, unfeeling faceted eyes fixed on the intruder as the monsters continued to form from the darkness.

Stomp jerked in fright and was abruptly interrupted in his panicked daze when Firebreath's voice suddenly thundered, "Now or never, while they're still not fully formed!"

The weapon jerked in his hands and sent him stumbling forward, straight towards the adversaries. With a wild cry that seemed to emanate half from his own throat and half from Firebreath's entity, he charged forward. Just a few steps from the creatures, he noticed them turning towards him and began swinging his sword in wild, sweeping arcs. Fang-like appendages whizzed in his direction but were deflected thanks to the agility of his weapon.

Then he reached the mass and, wildly waving his sword, plunged into it. He felt more than saw his blade cutting through bodies. Around him, menacing hissing noises filled the air, and he felt himself struck heavily several times by sharp and blunt objects. He kept running, partly pulled by the weapon, partly driven by his own panic. Thrashing wildly, he pushed forward.

Cold fluid splashed him from head to toe, and in the darkness around him, he could see waving movements of writhing bodies and limbs. Whenever something came near him, or more accurately, his metallic companion, he was quick enough to execute a parry or attack, rewarded by the sensation of cutting through a body more and more often. Without realizing it, he swung with Firebreath in his right hand and with the Tooth in his left, slashing wildly and pressing forward.

Finally, it became bright around him, and he stumbled into the open. Trembling, bleeding from several wounds, and with the metallic taste of adrenaline in his mouth, he spun around. He found himself in a cavern, surrounded in a domed fashion by the same dark mass he had just fought through. The passage he had just navigated through closed behind him with a squelching noise. A horned, claw-like arm reaching out for him was severed by the closing movement of the darkness, falling to the ground with a loud clatter and lying motionless after a brief shuffling.

Wildly, almost frantically, with the echoes of the carnage still in his mind, he looked around in haste and found himself alone in the room with an altar-like stone structure. Trembling and drenched from head to toe in a foul, icy-cold liquid, he trudged closer. His amazement was overwhelming when he saw a man's figure lying on the rocky slab.

The figure was there, naked, curled up in the fetal position as if asleep. The flanks of his chest gently rose and fell with each deep breath. The innocent, youthful face wore a serene, peaceful smile, while white-blond hair framed a beautiful and symmetrical visage. The body appeared flawless. A pronounced furrow appeared between the eyebrows, and, as if caught in a restless slumber, the figure tossed and turned, shifting its back to Stomp.

He stood there, struck dumb, trembling, bloodied, and smeared with a foul, cold liquid, feeling entirely out of place. Baffled, he glanced at his sword and then back at the creature before him. "I can't kill an unarmed person. This can't be the Sleeper! How can this innocent being have anything to do with the horror above us?"

"Well, I don't know," grumbled Firebreath. "What else would a youngling be doing down here?"

Stomp approached cautiously. Circling the altar, he observed the being from all angles. There was nothing to suggest any threat from this young man. His sleeping features radiated pure innocence. "Come on! He's still asleep. Can you imagine what it could unleash once it's awake?" urged his sword, and with trembling steps, Stomp moved closer.

Stopping at the edge of the altar, he hesitantly extended a hand but dared not touch the sleeper. He noticed that the fingertips nearing the body's skin perceived an icy cold that seemed to emanate from the figure, as well as a tingling sensation. Stomp saw Elmsfire swirl over the tiny hairs on his forearm. That was enough. With a fluid motion, he raised the sword high above his head, poised to strike it down at any moment. After murmuring, "Kasakk, assist me!" he tensed his muscles, ready to bring the sword down.

The creature opened its eyelids. Stomp looked into innocent, childlike, deep blue eyes staring at him inquisitively. He froze in his motion, unable to inflict harm on this expression of childlike innocence. While Stomp hesitated, he felt the weapon in his hand urging him to lower it. Just as he was about to lower his sword, a shocking transformation occurred in the face of the young man before him. In a split second, the features contorted into a visage of profound malevolence, and from the gaping mouth, three finger-thick tentacles shot toward his face with a disgusting, smacking sound.

As a defensive reflex rather than an attack, the blade swung down forcefully and with a smacking, gruesome noise, severed the man's head from his body. Sparks flew as Firebreath's edge bit deeply into the rock below, accompanied by an inhuman, hissing, abyssal scream that echoed from the creature's body.

Stomp was hurled backward, still clutching his weapon desperately, and landed unceremoniously several meters away on his back. The darkness surrounding him frenziedly swirled and seemed to give rise to entities from all directions, which swiftly took form, striving to get closer to their master. The headless torso lifted up, and a dark liquid gushed vertically from the neck opening in a stark jet. Arms stretched to the sides, and from the forearms, tentacles of profound blackness shot out, connecting like a fan with the dark envelope of the room. Pulled up by these puppet strings, the body was hoisted upwards until it hung five meters above the dome of the dark mass.

The weapon in Stomp's hand jerked forward, snapping him out of the incredulous stupor into which he had fallen. "Hurry! The head! We can still get to it!" With numb fingers and trembling limbs, Stomp hurried to heed this instruction and picked himself up. He ran toward the head, its mouth wide open, from which a high-pitched, whimpering hiss emanated between its pristine white teeth. From the mouth, several tentacles stretched out, extending several meters to the dome's walls. The eyes rolled and locked onto the approaching Stomp. Some of the grasping arms altered their course, moving closer with lashing movements. Stomp had his hands full fending off the limbs raining blows from all directions, their prickly ends spewing oily, malodorous liquid at him. He struggled to make steady progress, inching closer to the head, and with mounting dread, he noticed that many of the grasping arms had reached the darkness and started pulling his opponent away from him, toward the gloomy boundary. He redoubled his efforts, fighting off the limbs assaulting him from all sides, gaining ground with each step. Finally, he was just two steps away from the head, which seemed to take notice.

Behind him, he heard a loud, cracking sound, and as he was about to reach the head, despite the relentless attacks from the front, he observed that the dome behind him had developed a crack. It seemed to retract and create space, as if the darkness was parting and moving toward him, as if trying to prevent him from reaching the head. In the ever-widening gap, he could see the rest of the cave and thought he spotted some movement there. Then he was distracted again by the striking, whipping tentacles in front of his face, and he barely managed to fend them off, particularly since several of the insect-like creatures materialized from above, hanging upside down from the mass, and lashed out at him.

The situation seemed hopeless. Dark arms whipped through the air all around him, hitting him hard, and bleeding from numerous wounds, he felt himself growing weaker. Overhead, he heard a hissing sound and saw several of the beetle-like monsters, still partially woven into the substance of the dome, beginning to descend upon him. Desperately, he slashed in all directions, no longer focused on reaching the head, which was slowly moving away from him as if being dragged, but simply trying to fend off the multitude of attacks coming from all sides.

He recoiled in shock as a resounding "FIREBREATH" echoed through the room, and a meter-long tongue of flames erupted from his sword, colliding with the creatures dangling above him. He felt the searing heat and watched in disbelief as several of the monsters were vaporized by the fiery torrent that emanated from his right hand.

The attacks grew weaker, and it almost seemed as if his adversary was hesitating in the face of these new developments. He stared at the smoking, scorching hot blade in his hand that still adhered to his palm. "Well," remarked the head on the sword's pommel, "it's good to have a few tricks up your sleeve... Watch out!" The warning came just in time, as Stomp had barely begun to wonder about his sword's newfound abilities when the grasping arms launched another ferocious assault. With renewed determination, he clenched the tooth between his teeth, gripped the sword with both hands, and used powerful, sweeping strokes to clear a path through the swirling tangle of tentacles.

Nonetheless, his progress seemed sufficiently hindered, as the head had once again distanced itself by about four meters. Looking up, he now realized that the torso of the man had completely transformed into a dark, shapeless mass that was steadily losing form.

At last, he had come within striking distance of the skull, and his waning strength forced him to swing the sword in more uncoordinated movements. As he triumphantly raised the weapon to bring it down on the head, whose face had twisted into a grotesque mask, he froze as if struck by lightning.

The sensation was foreign; it didn't come from him, he knew that, it had nothing to do with him. Yet, it was...beautiful. It was as if all the pleasant feelings of a human life raced through his mind in a matter of seconds, leaving a desire for more in their wake. He felt his own memories fading away; the thoughts of Tunneltracker, of Iceskin, of his family—they became hazy and disappeared. It meant nothing; it was all the same! Almost indifferently, he noticed that his sword had fallen to the ground. He felt a twitch and pull, something that seemed vaguely familiar, at the edge of his consciousness, but at this moment, it was just a nuisance. He raised his hand as if to brush it away, only to realize that there was nothing left to lift. He no longer felt his body, and he regarded it as a relief.

The roaring, hissing voice cut through his emotions like a knife. In the grayness before his eyes, two lens-like, luminous eyes gleamed, and a saber-toothed maw opened, from which a warm yellow light dispelled the surrounding darkness.

The paralysis dissolved once again! "... INSANE, GO ON, DAMN IT, BY ALL THE HARLOTS FROM BARTELLDAS' WHOREHOUSE. KINDLY LIFT YOUR IRON AND DISPATCH HIM, YOU SHORT-TAILED..." Firebreath's shouting had an almost hysterical quality, and it reverberated even louder because it was the only sound in the cave.

The throbbing had ceased, and before him, Stomp could see the head, connected by dozens of grasping arms to the surrounding darkness. From the corner of his eye, he noticed that the black dome had contracted around him. Various growths reached out in his direction, and dozens of creatures were in the process of forming, ready to descend upon him from above and all sides. Nothing moved. Except for a slight, anticipatory trembling, the beings around him remained motionless, some still partially connected to the parent mass. Everything seemed to wait, lurking with cold, malevolent eyes for the outcome of this "battle."

Stomp remembered! He gazed at the visage of the Sleeper; the once youthful face had lost its innocence, and eyes from the depths of madness peered out from a twisted, grotesque expression.

Yes, Stomp, Sprayerdeath, and Toothbearer, remembered. He thought of Tunneltracker, Gaist, the Creesh a Suul, and Eyewiper, and the possibility that, driven by madness, they might be tearing each other apart right at that moment.

Yes, he remembered... and he raised his sword high, accompanied by a thunderous "Yessss" from Firebreath. The grotesquely twisted head was lifted from the ground, shooting rapidly along the black tentacles, past Stomp's bewildered face, into the air. Movement stirred in the swarm of creatures around him. Stomp ducked in anticipation of further attacks, but nothing happened. The appendages were rapidly drawn back into the substance of the dome, as if being sucked inside. The dome itself ascended from the floor. After a few bewildering blinks, the cave floor was empty. The formerly hemispherical black mass had completely retreated behind the body suspended in the air. Behind him, Stomp could see the open cave. Above, at a height of approximately ten meters, the form of the Sleeper, crowned at its front by a four-meter-tall, vaguely human-like figure, was suspended as a mass of abyssal darkness, taking in the head that shot upward with a disgusting, smacking noise. Upon impact, it triggered undulating movements within the dark substance.

As Stomp slowly withdrew with his raised sword, the mass descended lower, further condensing into a human-like shape until it landed on the rock floor with a muffled boom. Stomp casually noticed that the dull, pulsating throbbing had stopped. Before him stood an almost human-like silhouette, continuously wavering and entirely formed from the somber material. It loomed over the trembling man, standing five meters tall, with its arms hanging loosely and its head lowered.

Stomp flinched as the creature before him emitted a deep, rumbling hiss, and it spoke, "FINALLY!"

Stomp tightened his grip on the tooth, clutching it in his left hand like a dagger, held the hilt of his sword with sweaty palms, and prepared himself for his final stand. The weapon in his hand surged forward, impatiently seeking to confront the adversary, accompanied by the familiar, unwavering cry of "Now or never!" He was pulled forward by the sword, which seemed eager to engage the foe. The figure in front of him, which had kept its head lowered until now, lifted it, and he gazed upon a face formed from pure, abyssal blackness, its flawless, childlike features contorted in disbelief. "YOU...?"

The creature raised its head and arms upward, emitting a resounding roar. This noise was accompanied by hundreds of grasping arms, tentacles, and clawed appendages exploding from the creature's body, directed toward the unfortunate attacker - all around him, closing in on him!

He had no choice but to defend himself as fiercely as he could, slashing and thrashing left and right. It seemed hopeless. Stomp could feel his strength waning, and even as Firebreath lived up to its name, sending scorching fire spears to vaporize dozens of these appendages, the number of his adversaries didn't diminish. Beyond the hundreds of wildly swirling grasping arms, he could see the composed face of his opponent, who silently watched him while these dreadful things struck and whipped at him.

Suddenly, a tremor seemed to run through the creature. The cacophony in the room changed, and a new sound emerged - a hissing and chirping that seemed all too familiar to Stomp. As if to confirm, he saw two swift movements next to him easily cutting through the forest of tentacles and approaching the figure, whose features now twisted with gruesome anticipation. Stomp witnessed the "Messenger of Torment" and the "Bloody Seeker" rolling toward his opponent on either side of him. Their arms whirled wildly, seizing the grasping arms and tearing them apart where they could reach them. The battle raged wildly, and Stomp, preoccupied with defending against the striking appendages, observed how hundreds of these limbs coiled around the two demonic figures and, despite their resistance, continued to move toward the mass of the Sleeper. Somehow, the Sleeper appeared weakened. Stomp noticed that the attacks against his person were getting weaker. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a movement and, as he turned his head, he saw the red-clad figure of the demon summoner appearing beside him.

"Shouldn't you be waiting?" he heard the effeminate voice of the demon summoner in an imperious tone.

"Why should I, demon-sucker?" commented the sword in his hand. Stomp, unable to speak, merely nodded. While he continued to fight against the striking arms heading toward the Sleeper, he heard murmurs from his left and, out of the corner of his eye, saw more nightmare creatures materializing out of thin air, summoned into action by the magician's imperious gestures against the Sleeper.

Gradually, the tables turned. The Sleeper retreated, with six or seven demonic figures hanging from its grasping arms, struggling fiercely despite their confinement. They seemed to be draining the Sleeper's strength. Eventually, the creature in front of him seemed to recognize its true adversary, and its expressionless face turned toward the demon summoner. From its eyes shot two beams of inky black light, enshrouding the summoner like a cloak.

The murmured incantations abruptly ceased, interrupted by a piercing scream as the attacked figure, splattered with blood, was torn off his feet and pulled toward the Sleeper. While in mid-air, he shouted an incantation, and Stomp saw his body transform into a blaze of blue, unnatural fire. Upon impact with the Sleeper, the flames enveloped it completely, causing Stomp to stagger back from the wave of heat. The tentacles in his vicinity ceased their attacks, and gasping for breath, he stumbled backward.

Breathless and astounded, he watched the further events unfold. The wildly swirling grasping arms and appendages in the room seemed to shrink and freeze, leaving only the hissing and crackling of the unnaturally blue flames before him. This was followed by the sizzling and thudding sounds of hundreds of grasping arms, which swept wildly through the cave, suddenly becoming motionless and limp as they fell to the ground. Before him lay a double-sized lump of a blackish, foul-smelling substance, from which gray clouds rose and gathered in the cave's dome. Breathing heavily and with trembling fingers, he cautiously approached this something, fervently hoping it would never move again.

A few steps away, he stopped, the sword still raised. "Do you think it's dead?" he asked his companion. "I don't know," replied the sword. "The demon-sucker has quite a lot to offer. Or rather, had quite a lot to offer," Firebreath corrected himself.

As if to confirm, the surface of the mound burst open and sprayed Stomp with thick chunks of foul-smelling, blackish slime. Something smooth, black, and circular rose from the resulting crater. Exhausted, Stomp staggered back, helplessly watching as the hairless, man-sized skull, with the same composed, expressionless face he had come to know, formed from the gray steaming mass in front of him. The eyes opened, and from them, two beams of black light shot toward him.

Stomp felt enveloped by the abyssal darkness. His arms, which had been raised to strike with the sword, became heavy, and icy coldness ran through him. His heartbeat seemed to slow, his breathing faltered, and before his eyes, he saw only a dark, grayish swirling.

As if through a wall of cotton, he heard Firebreath's voice: "Fight against it, fight against it!" Another sound reached his fading senses. He heard a hissing and rumbling, and unconsciously, he thought of Shugul Sath, that being whose tooth he still clutched in his left hand.

He flinched when he heard a delighted voice to his left, as if from a distant place: "Have I come too late?" With great effort, he turned his head and saw the old man standing beside him, his brightly yellow eyes gleaming with a dangerous glint, fixed on the head of the Sleeper. While Stomp still gaped, the old man's form began to blur, fine threads of smoke rising from it, and his outlines became fuzzy. The yellow of his eyes remained in place, but changed its shape, taking on a lens-like contour. They wound downward, just like the smoke cloud comprising the creature's body, moving deeper and shifting. Before Stomp's astonished eyes, the gray mist took the form of the panther creature he already knew.

Stomp noticed that the grip that had enveloped him was loosening, and he raised his sword. To his left, he saw Shugul Sath up close. There was nothing elderly about him anymore; powerful muscles moved gracefully under his gray-glistening fur, and his posture exuded the elegance of coiled strength. Stomp now knew who the "Smokehunter" referred to. The creature's body had solidified, its brightly yellow eyes fixing on the menacing figure in front of them. Its jaws opened, sharp teeth gleamed in the light pouring from the creature's gaping maw, and it hurled a challenging, defiant roar at the Sleeper.

The noise was accompanied by a thundering "Firebreath" from the sword in his right hand, and while he let out a piercing scream, Stomp saw himself rush blindly at the immaculate face, formed from perfect darkness, of the Sleeper in front of him. He collided simultaneously with the airborne panther figure to his left against his opponent, and what followed, he could only remember as a series of chaotic impressions. He swung and struck in all directions, hacking through inhuman substance with his sword. In the meantime, a pale-white spear of fire from his right hand illuminated the scene, in its light and heat, the foreign darkness melted and morphed. To his left, he heard the thunderous roar of Shugul Sath and saw his swirling paws and teeth puncturing holes in the blackness.

He felt himself being hit and injured dozens of times, but regardless of that, he kept hacking and slashing at the flawless face before him. After a while, he sensed that his enemy's attacks gradually turned into defensive movements and finally, into retreat maneuvers, but he kept hacking and hacking, while hysterical screams emanated from his throat.

Suddenly, it was over.

Silence descended.

Stomp took some time to realize that his sword was now swinging through empty space, creating sparks and chipping away at the rock in front of him. His high-pitched battle cry came to an abrupt end, turning into a sob-like sound, and he collapsed onto his knees, exhausted. After a few heavy breaths, he looked around.

He saw, he felt, the cave was empty; something had disappeared, and that malevolent presence was no longer perceptible. Only after a prolonged period of breathless panting and exhausted, bewildered staring did he become aware of his surroundings once more.

He was alone in the grotto, and even Firebreath in his hand had fallen silent.

Around him and below him, he noticed a fine layer of a black, glass-like hard surface covering the rock. It seemed to extend over a radius of about ten meters. Apart from this, there was nothing to see and nothing to hear, except for his own wheezing breaths. He was bleeding from numerous wounds, feeling battered and bruised, unable to lift the sword for a single further action.

As he looked down at his hands, he heard a faint crunching and crackling beneath him. Starting from his knees, he saw this black, basalt-like layer begin to crack. First one, then many. These fine fractures spread across the entire surface, accompanied by an increasing grinding and snapping. Looking around, he recognized that within a few heartbeats, the blackness had been crisscrossed with a delicate spiderweb pattern of cracks. Here and there, some of the fragments began to slide across the floor and eventually defied the laws of gravity, rising into the air. First one, then many, then hundreds. Astonished, Stomp realized that he stood amidst a shower of shards that moved past him from below to above, defying gravity.

While still staring and jumping to his feet with a groan, he became aware that he was no longer standing on the rock but rising slowly from the cave's floor. Clutching the sword, he floated upward in increasingly rapid motions. While he glanced around, searching for his companion, who was nowhere to be seen, he heard the clinking and clattering sound of stones and glass fragments colliding around him. Eventually, he slammed against the cave's ceiling, which gave way with a loud, cracking noise. Stomp was pulled upward in a whirlwind of air currents and swirling rock and glass fragments, thrown around wildly until everything blurred before his eyes. Holding onto the sword, the only object that still felt familiar, he was pulled upward, screaming loudly. After a few minutes, behind his tightly closed eyelids, he noticed a reddish glow and opened his eyes.

Before him, he once again saw the blood-red twilight of the barrier, which, as he remembered, had taken on this color before his descent into the Sleeper's cave.

He knew he was back on the surface, and while he was still pondering how to halt this rapid fall or float, he spun around and realized, amidst the swirling impressions before him, that he was being hurled through the air in a high arc. For a brief moment, he saw his old camp in his field of vision, the smoke clouds above it, only to be replaced by the green of the lake into which he crashed with a loud splash. Lacking strength and unable to make another move, he allowed himself to sink deeper, ready to resign both himself and his life.

He had noticed the barrier, the blood-red glow of the wall, and he knew that it was still intact. It seemed his fight had been in vain; the Sleeper was not defeated.

Stomp felt a resigned sob rising within him, choking his throat. He heard a splash above him, and with the last of his strength, he turned his head, catching a glimpse of a large barrel-shaped silhouette, dark against the light of the surface.

"The Sleeper... he's pursuing me," raced through his mind, and he felt too drained to be frightened any longer. His lungs burned, and as red circles appeared before his eyes, he simply let himself fall. The barrier still stood; he had failed, and everything was over.

A mighty, white-furred arm shot through his field of view, something grabbed him with animalistic strength and pulled. With diminishing consciousness, Stomp noticed a wall of white fur beside him, swimming powerfully upwards.

Finally, his head broke the surface, and he greedily gasped for air. Pulled with an unwavering grip, he felt himself being dragged toward the nearby shore, unable to make out who or what was holding him, with water in his eyes, coughing and sputtering.

Ultimately, he was deposited on the beach like a wet sack, still clutching his sword.

"Well, there you are," a familiar voice boomed, and dazed, he raised his head. Indeed, in front of him stood Tunneltracker, a broad grin on his misshapen face.

"You... you... you... are you alright? You're... you..." Stomp stammered, coughing and sputtering.

"Take it easy, my little friend, take it easy. The water alchemists are not as bad as their reputation, as you know. My legs are fine, and the rails are back in action, even though I'm not the best swimmer. But I thought right away that you must be the one flying through the air, screaming like a cork out of a bottle. And the good Iceskin here pulled you out; can you tell me what happened?"

Stomp, still trying to gather his senses, could only stutter and heaved himself up. He looked up at the woman who stood before him, soaking wet, a slight smile on her beautiful face.

"Thank you, Creesh a Suul," he choked out in a sudden understanding.

An admiring whistle made him pause. Tunneltracker had taken Stomp's blade in his hand, his eyes gleaming, and said, "What a beautiful weapon. Where did you get this... and what happened? Please, tell us."

Stomp raised his hand defensively and asked, "What happened up here?"

The halfling looked around and responded with a shrug, "Well, the good news is, you were right. This warrior was already waiting for me at our meeting point. How she managed to do that..."

Stomp looked questioningly at the warrior, who shrugged and commented, "I fought, lured them away, evaded them, fought again, found the vent, and looked for you."

Tunneltracker grinned at Stomp with raised eyebrows and continued, "Yes, that's our Iceskin, always ready for lengthy explanations! Well, up here was less pleasant. You could say that the barrier turned this blood-red color that you see here. It all went crazy, people attacked each other, they lost their minds, orcs showed up, and I even saw a few damned demons dragging some unfortunate souls into the abyss. Then, suddenly, that loud buzzing was back, and everyone more or less collapsed. I got a blow to the head. When I woke up again, it was quiet all around me. Before I could even say 'Tunneltracker,' I heard a loud scream and saw you flying through the air and landing in the water right in front of me. I was about to jump in after you when I heard a thud behind me, and I nearly soiled my leg braces as a huge white bear suddenly plunged into the water and swam towards you. I was just about to unleash my crossbows, although I had no idea if that would do anything, when I noticed that familiar red mark on its face, which I recognized very well. Then... in an instant, the creature was gone, and instead of it, there was Iceskin, and..."

The little man hesitated, deep red coloring his face. He whirled around to the woman, saying, "Could you explain that to me now? A bear, or rather a she-bear? Have I been infatuated with a bear the whole time?"

The warrior shrugged, grinning. "Take it easy. I have to live with your first name, too... Theosorus."

"Ha! If you ever tell anyone about this, furball, by Kasakk's hairy balls, I will..."

Stomp didn't hear the rest of what Tunneltracker was saying. He was trying to sit up. Every bone ached. With a groan, he finally managed to sit up, and he waited while the halfling, realizing the warrior's nonchalance, threw his hands in the air and surrendered. "Women!!!" he exclaimed. He then glanced at her with a sly grin. "Uh... Creesh a... Thing? Whatever!"

Shaking his head, the halfling turned away.

Silence returned. They looked around, everything was calm. Stomp recognized their location – it was the spot where the lake tapered and flowed into the river, past the farmers' fields. To the left, he could see the bridge where he had battled the Hueroth. Groaning, he got to his feet. There was no movement anywhere. As he glanced around, he noticed... he couldn't quite pinpoint it, but something was off. Something had changed!

"Hey..." Stomp began. "Yes?" replied the halfling. "Something... something seems different," Stomp continued, frowning and gazing at the red light above him.

Then he knew, he saw it clearly. He looked at the streaks of clouds in the evening red above him, and as he turned his eyes toward the east, he could still discern the faint fading blue of the evening sky. A sudden realization struck him, and tears welled up in his eyes as he stared in utter astonishment.

He spun around to face Tunneltracker, who took a step back, watching him warily. He grabbed the halfling's muscular shoulders and whirled him around. In a joyful dance, he circled the completely bewildered halfling, whose right hand slowly crept toward the crossbow at his belt.

"Can you tell me what..." Stomp embraced Creesh a Suuhl, who sent a meaningful glance toward the little man. "The sky, the sky, it's evening red, the barrier is gone, the Sleeper is dead, we did it!"

"What the..." Tunneltracker exclaimed, then quickly spun around and stared upward, fixating on the sky above. A smile gradually spread across his gnarled features, and he boomed, "You're right, you're right!"

A few minutes passed as the three of them leaped and danced around one another, throwing each other to the ground, until, eventually, breathless and elated, they sprawled in the warm earth.

After a while, Stomp felt able to lift his head and look around. The silence was broken only by a bird's chirping, a sound he never thought he would hear again. The river's murmur and the rustling of the crops behind him seemed to have taken on a different character, more peaceful.

Iceskin rose slowly and walked away from the men who silently watched her. After a few steps, she drew her sword, and the sword's cry reverberated through the air. She neared the riverbank, and in a slow, infinitely graceful movement, she swung the weapon around and lowered its tip onto the water's surface. A crackling sound rang out, and as the woman raised both hands toward the red of the evening sky, the sword remained fixed in that position.

Iceskin began to sing; her voice created a perfect harmony with the rejoicing of her mesmerizing weapon. Then, accompanied by this enchanting and otherworldly duet, graceful icicles emerged from the lake's water, snaking upward in elegant movements. They wove a complex pattern around the steel, intertwining and creating a structure of foreign beauty that refracted the glow of the red evening sky, casting multicolored reflections onto the beach.

The men stared in astonishment at this spectacle, and when the music - far too soon - faded, Stomp recognized an image of Icehold within the sculpture, a place he had admired during Iceskin's trial.

Smiling, the sword singer lowered her arms and whispered, her gaze fixed in the distance, "I can return to my homeland."

Stomp heard the halfling beside him sniffing, and he, too, was captivated by the enchantment of this sight. The ice structure slowly descended into the water, and the swordswoman happily sighed. She then turned to her companions. Stomp hadn't noticed when she had retrieved her sword, but the warrior already wore her blade on her hip, as she usually did.

Silently, the three embraced, and for a long time, no words were spoken. They only separated from each other much later, murmuring softly.

Stomp raised his voice, cleared his throat, and tried again: "What about the others?"

Tunneltracker's expression turned somber. "I don't know who survived. We hid in the caves, and then the demons and orcs attacked. Everyone who fought was killed. I got a blow to the head and only woke up later. I don't know if Kasakk watched over me, but I escaped with nothing more than a few bruises."

In silent agreement, they all bowed their heads, each offering a brief prayer in their respective ways for their fallen friends. Afterwards, they wordlessly picked up their weapons and left the beach.

Many hadn't survived.

They spent a short time in the completely devastated Miners Guild camp to gather supplies. They encountered the survivors, with roughly half of the miners having fallen victim to the chaos. Amid the horror and grief, an unbelievable sense of astonishment gradually filled the minds of the survivors as they realized they had been given a second chance, an opportunity to leave this dreadful place.

Tunneltracker roamed like many others, downtrodden among their fallen comrades, to bid their farewells. He eventually, with tears in his eyes, abruptly turned away from the nightmarish scene. Gradually, more and more survivors gathered with them.

They walked through the cornfields heading towards a notch in the cliffs to the east, which, as the halfling noted, was a good way to leave this basin. As they passed the fortress of the farmers, they could also see traces of devastation. A thick cloud of smoke hung over the wooden fort, and through the shattered gates, they saw dozens of lifeless bodies. They continued to find the dead scattered through the fields in front of the castle, belonging to various guilds without discrimination.

As they walked, more and more survivors joined their group. All newcomers were greeted in silent agreement without discrimination, as the memories of the frenzy under the influence of the Sleeper's magic were too horrible. An hour later, the steadily growing column had left the passage through the rocks behind them and gazed upon the wide plain beyond the barrier. There was not a single guard in sight. They knew they were already beyond the former prison, and in unspoken agreement, they paused and looked back through the evening twilight. The Old Camp of the Ore Barons now burned brightly, its flames enveloping the barracks that had housed generations of prisoners.

Stomp, Iceskin, and Tito exchanged long looks before they roused themselves and turned their backs to the scene.

"What are your plans now?" the halfling broke the silence with his deep voice.

"I will return to my people," Iceskin replied.

That seemed to remind the halfling of something; he tugged at Stomp's sleeve and signaled for him to hold back. "She transforms into a bear?" he asked in a hushed tone. Stomp nodded, "Four meters tall," and had trouble suppressing a grin.

"That's... big... very big... I guess I was really lucky with all my remarks," Tunneltracker responded.

He cleared his throat and sped up his steps, catching up with Iceskin, who seemed to have been oblivious to the entire conversation.

"And you, do you want to go home too?" the little one asked a little later. Stomp nodded, "I have some things to sort out there and introduce my half-brother to my sword here."

"Exactly, young fighter," a voice echoed in his mind, and he involuntarily glanced at the hilt of the weapon at his side. The metallic face of Firebreath grinned at him, and with a quick side glance, Stomp realized that Tito had not overheard this conversation.

The halfling continued to chatter merrily as they gradually left the scene of horror behind them. "If you don't mind, I'll accompany you. My family is no longer alive, and I've lost my place in the guild. Besides, I still want to know what really happened down in those caves."

Stomp was actually relieved by this offer. Besides Iceskin, parting with Tunneltracker would have been difficult. He looked down at the halfling with affection as he clanked along with his battered backpack on his back, chatting away, "Who knows, maybe the lovely... I mean, the be... well, Iceskin will still be with us until she has to turn north. And who knows what exciting things we might encounter. I'm just glad we're done with this business. I'm afraid we might be the only survivors here, but well, we'll make the best of it. I don't think anyone else is left here except for us, although natu..." His speech came to an abrupt halt.

Stomp looked down at the halfling who was gazing thoughtfully at a point and followed his gaze. There, the three of them saw a deep gray smoke cloud, hovering about two meters above the ground, about thirty meters away from them, being swirled back and forth by faint gusts of wind. While the companions were still staring at it, the cloud seemed to shape itself into the form of a panther's head with a wide-open maw and two large fangs before being dispersed by another gentle evening breeze.

"Well," the halfling rumbled, "I could be mistaken, of course..."