



Height: 4'3"  
Weight: 202 lbs  
Age: 125  
Hair: Black  
Eyes: Brown

Lt Bruner Stonehammer, Iron Guard platoon commander and training instructor, is a firm dwarf. He is one that strives to ensure that he completes any and all assignments given to him in a timely manner. While patience is not one of his virtues, he does know when it is prudent to wait and have your query come to you.

He is tall by dwarven standards and his sturdy frame is covered with corded muscles that enable him to wreak havoc on the field of battle.

While most subordinates do not like a “ball buster” like Bruner, his troops do love him and would charge into the deepest bowls of hell if he asked them to. He knows all of them by name along with their family if they have one.

One of his men, a lad from the Mithril Hall named Berek Thunderfist, had been here for some time, had married a local girl and settled here. He had been distracted for a while and Bruner approached him about it and came to find out that Berek and his wife Diesa were expecting a child, he was anxious about being a good father. Shortly after the blessed event occurred, Bruner arranged for the whole unit to be relieved of duty for two days and held a massive feast for the new parents and their families. He also footed the bill for several roasted boar and 20 kegs of ale that were delivered to the feast. Seeing the new parents and grandparents together, he gave Berek a month off to get accustomed to parenthood.

He leads the troops from the front, trusting them to follow the plan laid out, but also trusts them to make any changes if necessary to carry the day. While on patrol, Bruner uses this time to ensure the newer troops are better acquainted with the others to function as a cohesive unit.

One particular event sealed their loyalty to Bruner was when on patrol, they stumbled upon an Orc Chieftain with a small contingent of orcs that had been conducting raids in the local area and being a thorn in the side of the guards for some time now.

They got as close as they could, had several of the units clerics bless them before battle as he said a brief prayer to Moradin, asking the All Father to watch over his charges and if anyone is to fall today let it be him. They charged against the orcs, catching them off guard as dwarves numbering 30 strong round the corner screaming their battle charge. Some froze while others bellowed and moved to meet the challenge. Bolts arced over their heads and peppered the orcs in a hail of pain and death. Grinning in his helm, Bruner understood the art of combined arms fighting and strives to make maximum use of his troops.

The first Orc he met with died as his head was severed from its body from a devastating swing of Bruner's waraxe, with barely having to break stride. Bolts continued to rain in, this time they had moved up along the hillside to get better shots into the mass of bodies.

The fighting continued for some time, with the orcs being slowly ground down. The clerics worked back and forth through the masses, alternating between melee combat, dispensing divine justice and aiding those who were in need.

The Chieftain was caught up between three dwarves, as fate would have it; it was also two of the new troops assigned to him. They needed help too, it was using its massive fists to beat them down and things were not looking good, he turned to Magnus Skullcrusher and told him the young ones were in need of him. Without a moment's hesitation, Magnus turned and sprinted to where he was needed. Letting out a savage war cry as he put all of his strength behind his swing, Bruner buried his axe into the orcs chest, splitting bone and carving up the vital organs inside the beast's chest.

As he pried his war axe from the vile creature's chest, it fell forward onto him, trapping him beneath its oppressing weight. Getting out took a few moments and as he pulled himself clear, his shield caught on the rocky ground and the orc's armor. Having no choice now, he drew a dagger and cut the shield's bindings from his arm.

A roar not far away caught his attention, the Orc Chieftain was holding a body over its head as he kicked and flailed to get free. Scooping up his waraxe, Bruner let out another blood-curdling war cry as he charged the Chieftain at a dead sprint. While not as fast or nimble as a rogue, once moving Bruner would not be stopped, he weighed about 270 lbs when fully armored. He bowled over a few orcs and past his own men as he lowered his

shoulder, extended his arms and plowed into the massive orc. That move caused it to drop the dwarves it had in its grips.

Bruner backed up as he gathered his feet under himself only to see a club the size of a massive tree fill his vision. The club's momentum coupled with the Chieftain's strength launched Bruner through the air and his flight was interrupted by a cliff face. He slammed into the rock face with his back and head bounced off it, knocking him out cold. His troops saw this and subsequent slide down into a heap. This drove them into an unparalleled frenzy as they moved against the Chieftain in one massive wave, cutting down all that stood between them and the chieftain to shreds and decimating the remaining orcs, leaving none alive.

The clerics sought to his wounds as best they could and yet he remained unconscious. They took the utmost care in transporting him and the other wounded back to the Citadel, with Bruner's second, Eberk, making the report for him to his superiors. Bruner remained this way for another three days and he woke with a skull-splitting headache.

This brooding dwarf is on a mission...not from Moradin, but one of vengeance. He seeks out one human, the one who killed his father. He was able to catch up to one of his henchmen and proceeded to "question" him through various means, mostly gauntleted fist to flesh. Towards the end, he had a list of names and where the man was heading to...High Hold.

He prayed that night for Moradin to grant him the strength to find the vile bastard and bring him to justice and to watch over his men while he was away.

The next day, he packed up his kit bag and joined a caravan making the journey from Citadel Adbar to the Mithril Hall via the tunnel network and to Rivermoot shortly there after. Now he begins his most difficult task of his life.

Over the past months of his travels, Bruner has met several different races, elves are new to him, gnomes are flourishing here and of course the annoying humans (which breed at the rate of rabbits). The highlight though has been the dwarves he has met and befriended.

Bruner is slowly gathering up some dwarves, assembling another group to lead against those that would harm them as a whole.

He has more or less taken on Berrar Torkara as a troop, keeping an eye on him; conducting combat training and ensuring that he has excellent gear to protect him with.

Steeg Horseback delivered some disturbing news to him. Steeg was unaware that Bruner was waiting on some of his troops to arrive from Citadel Adbar and when he asked Bruner to examine some armor, but one set of it was that of an Iron Guard. When asked Steeg said that he found it in the Moonwood Forest and took it from an orc. Running his hands over the armor, Bruner had slowly started to tune out the world and focus only on the armor and Steeg's words. Images of Mathias, Thorin and others flashed in his mind as he handled the armor. He asked Steeg to keep the armor for the time being, until he finds out if it was from his troops or not.

The two talked for some time discussing various topics including the orc forces that were near High Hold, how the bandits west of High Hold have recruited mages and clerics to their cause.

Bruner thanked Steeg for this information and felt the need to pray to the All Father for divine answers. With Rivermoot not having a Temple of Moradin, Bruner found a quiet clearing, knelt and prayed. He asked for the strength and wisdom to once again lead dwarves in His name, protect his family along with the troops he commands. His final request is that Moradin provide him a sign as to if the armor Steeg found does in fact belong to one of his missing troops.

With his prayers finished, Bruner turned to go for a walk to cool his temper. As he made his way down the hill and over the bridge, a group of skeletons appears and attacked him. Grinning as he drew his war axe and shield, he charged into them swinging his axe and shouting a challenge. Tearing through them in a matter of moments did little to sate his thirst for blood as he set out to find a challenge to his formidable skills.

Wandering and wandering for hours had left him beyond the southern part of the Frost Hills and he found himself at Settlestone. He relaxed as he passed through the gates and it felt good to be back amongst a dwarven settlement. The dwarves in the Mithril Hall not far from there built the shop wares and he was able to pick up a new war axe that caught his eye, *Kneecarver*.

After going to walk around the area, he ran into a multitude of creatures to include bears, a couple of packs of frost wolves, a couple of trolls and a frost giant. After all was said and done, Bruner stood over the fallen giant, his armor was dented, blood flowing from several wounds and a grin firmly seated on his bearded face. All of that to finally work out his frustration of not finding the man responsible for his father's death and the anguish of the prospect of the death of his troops.

He made his way back to Settlestone, deposited himself onto a stool, and had several steins of the bars finest dwarven ale. He savored the taste every time he brought the mug to his lips. He could only go for so long with out ale, and the manling's only watered down theirs until it looked like muddy water.

In High Hold, Bruner deposited himself onto a chair and waved over the nice dwarven lass named that had been making sure that everything was to his liking. The spicy foul was actually good and the ale was palatable with a nice quiet atmosphere for him to relax. He enjoyed these moments, no wars to fight, no orc siege to turn back, just piece and quiet with good food and ale.

He began to slowly work at thinking over the recent past and considering what the future will hold for him. Recently he reluctantly grouped up with several others, to include more elves than he cared for, to gather items for a manling. Mithril bars, blood from one of the mages and a few other items, which was not for a manling, but a lich. His anger started to creep up a bit as he got upset at being duped by the creature. *I should have known!*

Celdor was one of the elves that wanted to leave him behind as they made their journey to Settlestone. *Stupid filthy tree hugger!* They wanted to do things that would put his morals into question and possibly dishonor him and his clan. *What I would give to have my men with me, the elves would show proper respect instead of being all high and mighty as they tried to impress the manlings and females.* Bruner was thankful that his old mentor, Kebur, was not around when that happened. Kebur's intense hatred of the elves was common knowledge amongst the Iron Guard and those under his guidance. In the end, the lich was stopped, they all survived and he made a few gold coins out of it.

More dwarves has slowly begun to show up in the area and he was making more contacts with them and working to bring them into the fold once things unfolded to where they could be informed of what is happening in the region.

The one thing that still nagged at Bruner's heart was that he had yet to find any hint of his father's killer. He exchanged letters with his mother and sister to make sure that everything was going well back at the Citadel and to find out that his sister, Ana, was seeing a lad that was a successful blacksmith that lived in the Mithral Hall. While not happy about the prospect of her moving away from the clan, he was interested in meeting this lad, Hlaine Thunderfist and see if he was worth her time. *I will give this lad a chance.*

He opened his book and started to write out a report to send back to Citadel Adbar as to the goings on here in Rivermoot and his progress.

*Captain Druggath Shieldcleaver,*

*Things are progressing well here in Rivermoot and I believe that a suitable location has been found. It was recently discovered by several miners from the Mithral Hall, but there is an interesting problem. Clearing the cave system of goblins, a few giants, spiders will be time consuming. Also, this is slightly disturbing that driders have been spotted by Brottor Shieldbreaker.*

*I explored the tunnel system with him earlier and his account is accurate that it will take considerable time and manpower to make the area habitable. The manlings have yet to venture into the area and I believe that they will not lay claim to the mine with the Mithral Hall scouts posted nearby.*

*I will send another update when I have more information.*

*Lt Bruner Stonehammer.*

He continued to replay events in his mind as he slowly drank his ale.

The priest prayed over the gnawed bones of his kins-dwarves, his silver battle-axe pendant clutched in his bloody, gore covered, steel-gauntleted hand. The holy light of his God's symbol he clutched illuminated the scene of carnage and horror. Silently the massive armored bulk of another dwarf, Bruner, guarded the priest's prayers to Moradin...

Brottor and Bruner had traveled to the area just south of Settlestone to aid the dwarven miners whom the Clan had lost contact with. They found Scouts from Mithril Hall waiting for them on the snow swept side of the mountain. The wind howled and the air bit through the heavy gambesons the dwarves wore beneath their armor.

Quickly the scouts from the clan's stronghold told them of the horde of vicious goblins and worse, in the mine. With grim determination, the two dwarven champions settled their helms on head and drew forth their weapons. A moment's preparation and Brottor's axe blade glowed bright with the holy fire of Clangeddin Silverbeard, two long steps and into the dark cleft in the mountain's side they went...

Axes smashed, mystic fire burned, armor was rent asunder and blood flew from horrendous gaping wounds. The roar of dwarven war cries and the clash of dwarf forged weapon steel against goblin iron drowned the screams of the dead and dying.

All was swept aside before the avenging dwarves, their rage and determination were like the heat of the blazing sun that burns through the thickest morning fog. It was then, that the Giant made its fell presence known.

With a mighty roar, the giant rose from the depths of a deep shaft and waded into battle. Bruner and Brottor stood side by side, shied to shield and battled as only the Dwarven Clans of the Savage North can. Their axes flashed and the giant's club swung with the force of thunder. Together, the dwarves chopped and hewed until the giant fell lifeless at their feet, its life blood sprayed over every surface in the corner of the mine from which it had arisen...

As Brottor stood from the remains of his kins-dwarves, he looked about. The ore was

thick with Mithril Silver, a kingdoms ransom lay in the rock. Grimly, he turned his face to Bruner. "We canna let tha Langshanks take this place. Our kin lay dead in this mine, they died tae secure the mithril fer our Clans. Thars werk tae be done and we mun gae tae Settlestone fer tools tae do it wi."

Making their way to Settlestone, the two champions were sure to find the mining tools and help they needed to secure the mithril mine.

Bruner and Brottor had to go separate ways for the time being so they could each make their reports and gather the necessary equipment to venture back to the mines.

By now Bruner had finished his food and third stein of ale and decided it was time to go to the Temple of Moradin and attend a proper mass.

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*Captain Druggath Shieldcleaver,*

*The scouts followed the old one's instructions correctly and we believe the Deepward Keep has been located. We have encountered many obstacles in clearing out the way, gobos, a few giants and several driders. We have yet to enter the keep, the bridge covering a chasm needs to be rebuilt and then get past the iron gates and clear out the keep of any inhabitants.*

*We should send miners, guards and maybe even a few merchants to help ease the burden on the Mithril Hall. With this being a major thoroughway for to and from the Underdark we should try to take some advantage from all of this.*

*Thoradun has sent out runners to the major cities looking for aide in clearing out the Keep. He is only seeking out dwarven arms to help clear out the Keep. By the time this letter reaches you, I will be at the dig site.*

*I will send another update when I have more information.*

*Lt Bruner Stonehammer.*

Bruner handed off the message to one of the lads that transported them between the great holds of the dwarves. *Should be there in...four to six days.*

## **The Clearing of Deepward Keep**

Hard leather slapping across the marble floor followed Thoradun as he looked about the new excavations. Scanning about the various engineers working every aspect of such a job, he couldn't help but be amazed. It may take a bit longer than simply digging it out, but the original stonework must be saved if possible. In all his time, he never thought they would recover the legendary Keep of Deepward. Recovering himself, he realized his error. Looking across the chasm, past the heavily posted guards, he could see the awesome entrance. Of course, he could also see the thick webbing that hung from the statues of heroes from centuries past as well. His fixated attention on the heavy iron doors kept him from hearing Dranzul, his runemaster historian walk up to stand beside him.

"Dun't fret. We'll be opening those doors soon enough. Our brethren in there have waited centuries to travel to the ancestral home. They'll wait a few more days." Dranzul nods toward the keep. "Let us be finished with one job afore were starting the next. We will clear this rubble first. Our fallen brethren oot here deserve our respect and attention first. Once we have enough room to move about without fear of tripping, then we shall begin to plan to clear them cursed drow spider beasties." Dranzul spits into a pile of refuse at the very mention of the dark elves.

Thoradun turns from the doors and looks to him. "Really? A few days, you say?" Frustration begins to rise as he indicates the keep. "And just how do you propose we are to clear that hallowed ground?" Looking about the slowly enlarging room. "We have a handful of troops and scouts here. Perhaps as many outside again." Starting to stomp about in irritation, he kicks a small rock off the ledge into the inky darkness of the Underdark rift. "If I were to pull every man off of guard duty, I might be able to clear them damn spiders, but then who will watch the miners as they work?!"

Looking about again to watch the engineers as they continue to drill through the rubble, then quickly turns back to Dranzul. "I will not allow us to lose ground because I tried to snatch new ground without being able to protect what is in my hands." His voice dropping as he began to regain control of his emotion, he continues. "If only the armies were occupied with the Giants and Orcs to the North. Then Bruenor could send men to fill the hole. We cannot wait!" Thoradun's mailed hand smashes down on to the rough wood plank he is using as a table nearly spilling all of it's contents to the ground.

"Damn ye, Thoradun, control yourself! I unerstan' yur anger, but if'n yur tantrum cause me plans, und even worse, me cask of ale, to roll off'n that ledge to be drunk by some damned Drow, I swear I'll be throwing ya dun affer it!" Dranzul quickly snatches at the various items rolling and falling about the shaking table. "Send a runner into the towns. If'n the Mithral Hall cannae send troops, perhaps it's time for the towns to pay the High King back for giving them a bed that is safe to sleep in? Not ever dwarf lives in the Mithral Hall. Look for those brethren in the manling towns and remind them of their history and duties. Let them know that if they don't come forth, we have no choice but to either let them Driders walk our hallowed hall or, even worse, "Dranzul hesitates a moment at just the thought...", we may even have to look to them Manlings or Elves to be clearing our keep."



Thoradun spun and stared at Dranzul in astonishment at such a blasphemous thought. Instantly he cooled though. He too knew that this was more than simply Dwarven history here. This was the Deepward Keep. The crossroads of the Underdark Highway and religious center of most of the ancient holds, now long gone. Dethek runes long tell of the unusual number of temples within. That they were personally touched by the very lords themselves with their blessings. "Yes, a runner must be sent and bring others..." Looking up hard at Dranzul, "Other Dwarves, not the short lived manlings or the elves, elder race they are or not. There are things that must be untouched by those not of Moradins forge."

Thoradun turned to send runners to each of the manling cities....

Bruner sat in the Settlestone inn enjoying a nice slab of roth steak while working on his third stein of ale when the runner arrived. As he barged into the inn, he caught the attention of the few customers in the inn at this time of day, most was out conducting business or had already moved on.

The lad's eyes locked with Bruner's when he saw Bruner's tunic bore the mark of the Iron Guard. He approached him and asked for a moment of his time. Bruner motioned him to sit and explain, while his combat knife in his other hand under the table ready to strike in a moments notice. The lad quickly explained the situation at the excavation site and Thoradun's call for dwarven arms.

Once finished, Bruner told the young dwarf that he would go and head out as soon as he could get changed. As he stood, he motioned for the waitress and gave her some coin to cover his meal, buy some food and drink for the lad and provide a generous tip to her. He said goodbye to the lass with a wink and a wry grin as he went to his room to change and pack his belongings to head to the Keep of Deepward.

Packed and in armor, Bruner made his way to the Temple of Moradin, said several prayers, made a small donation to the church, loaded up on supplies and started his trek to the keep. He grinned as he pictured several others answering the call as he is doing...Steeg, Brottor, Berrar sprang to mind along with the prospect of standing shoulder to shoulder axes and hammers swinging away at whatever stood between them and victory.

Bruner slowly eased himself into the steaming hot water of the bathtub as he relaxed in Settlestone. He could feel the muscles unwinding in his axe arm, having pulled something in it when fighting either the drow or drider at the Deepward Keep. That day had been a glorious victory, snatching victory from the jaws of defeat. He was working with a group that shared a common goal, not one of gold, but of honor and purpose.

Bruner's head rests against the edge of the tub, he closed his eyes as he took a long drag off of his pipe. Brottor, Kilain, Steeg, Berrar and Telena accompanied him into the Keep to face unknown dangers of the rediscovered Keep. Before entering, the group worked out some tactics, marching order and who was to do what when in battle.

As they began their way across the reconstructed bridge and neared the massive stone doors, the group was attacked by a small lot of spiders. This was only a precursor as to what would plague them throughout this adventure. Upon opening the first door, the interior was covered in webbing, so they went to the second door and was able to gain access to the venerable dwarven fortress. Once inside the main hall, the group slowly fanned out only to encounter several drider and was plunged into darkness and several fought on blindly, while others trained to fight in such conditions sought out and killed the menace.

It was a slow going floor to floor, room to room grind as they moved to exterminate the beasts that had moved into their ancient home. Telena quickly adjusted her arcane powers to counter the drider tactics and speed up their progress. Her help with this proved invaluable as they now could cut through them easier. Bruner and Brottor's axes were alight with magical fire, leaving red streaks in the air and they were a flurry of motion in the darkness, slicing the drider to pieces, screaming battle cries. Bruner's battle lust had gotten the better part of him at times and almost became separated from the group as he went in search of more beasts to kill.

While in the upper floor, they encountered more drow and swarms of bugs that would chew away at your flesh, so they would have to get away as soon as they appeared. They also encountered more traps, with lacking a rogue for this, they inadvertently set them off, but it appeared that most of them were only designed to slow them down instead of damage them. This is most likely to not damage them so the drider could get more food. They were able to push on through these with only minor difficulty. They encountered more and more drider and flies.

Takes another long draw off his pipe as a lass comes into the room to add more hot water to the tub, overflowing it once again. Bruner was going to spoil himself today and he did not care how much the cost was. After this last adventure, he felt as though he deserved it.

The surprise came when they opened a door that bore the mark of the Reverend Mother. When Berrar opened the door, there stood an old dwarf who by some mystical way had survived the fall of the Keep up to the group opening the door. They assume that the long period of isolation drove the poor bastard insane. After the door opened for a few moments, he launched an attack at Berrar, hitting him with a spell then casting *Blade Barrier*, thankfully the lad had his senses about him and jumped away from the rotating blades before he could be cut to pieces. The dwarf stepped out of his safe haven and Bruner lunged forward cutting down the crazed dwarf in one brutal swing of his waraxe. Several protested his actions, but he justified them that they were attacked and he defended himself. *If I will face judgment by the All Father when the time comes.*

The snag came when it went black again and Kilain disappeared. The group tore through the upper level of the Keep, searching for the monk. Bruner, Brottor and Steeg hacked through anything that appeared before them.

After a brief search, the corridor went black once again and when it faded they found Kilain on the ground. Berrar saw to his healing and they regrouped there and Kilain informed them that a bargain had been struck between him and the drider. It turns out that the drow had pushed the drider from their previous home and they took residence in the Keep. Bruner was furious when he heard this, he wanted to clear out the fortress and be done with the foul monstrosities, but a bargain was struck and it must be honored no matter how revolting.

They moved back through the Keep and out to the bridge, where they traversed the scaffolding down to the floor below. They met a drider down there that put further conditions on the group's success that infuriated Bruner to no end. If they failed, the drider or if it saw any drow, the drider would stay in the Keep. Bruner lashed out at the beast that if they failed, more would come in their place to finish the job as they started down the cave to confront the drow. *Moradin forgive me, but I believe the ends will justify the means.*

They encountered a few drow foot soldiers here and there, but as they closed in on the area the drider told them about resistance became stout, several of their warriors moved out to face us, even under their combined might, they stood no chance. There were several priestesses and the occasional wizard that moved against them. Believing that their darkness spells were still an advantage, they launched a straight forward attack on them, with their warriors close behind. It was a clash of titans as the warriors met after the drow spell casters were quickly dispatched. Bruner was actually happy to finally have a challenge in the drow warrior he faced, but in the end it was Bruner who was standing over the warrior's corpse. In the lull of fighting, Berrar tended to all with healing and everyone cleaned off themselves as best they could while catching their breath. Telenia was a flurry of activity as she casts her spells for the untold time to prepare for the final push.

They approached the walled city and heard the alarm sound. Apparently the drow did not expect them to succeed because the massive gates were not barred and Bruner and Brottor were able to put their broad backs against it and force it open. As they made their way into the heart of the city, they noticed that it was almost empty and those that stayed were a delaying force to help the others escape. It was relayed that if it was not a dwarf, it died. Everyone fought to the peak of their abilities, working in sync of each others abilities and managed to catch a few drow before the last ship could set sail. The massacre came to an end with the group dragging their tired and beaten selves back to where the drider waited for them.

It said that the bargain was fulfilled and that it would take them a few days to get all of their kind out of the Keep and they were grateful for the party's assistance. Bruner

sneered at the beast that if they ever made the tiniest move against the Keep or anyone else, they would descend upon them like an avenging angel to exterminate them once and for all.

After returning to the Keep, they rested for a bit before turning over the dwarven treasures that they recovered to Thoradun and his men before they went their separate ways. Bruner went to Settlestone to get a good sleep then spend a few days there amongst the other Dwarves with good food and drink.

He figured he could let himself lay around for another day, before he would get too used to it and go soft. He took a couple more puffs off of his pipe then got out of the tub and wrapped a towel around himself, drained his ale and started to clean himself up.

Once back in his room, Bruner penned the following letter:

*Captain Druggath Shieldcleaver,*

*We have secured the Keep and the drider are no longer a problem in the area. A minor drow threat has been neutralized and operations can begin to be setup within the next 10 day. The Mithril Hall will need reinforcements and additional mining crew to speed up the excavation of the site.*

*I am going to continue with my search, I have received new information concerning his location and I feel as though I am closing in.*

*Lt Bruner Stonehammer*

## **Red Wizard**

Bruner sat down at a make shift table in the ruins of that stood before the awesome keep. He purchased and paid a local merchant to transport the three massive kegs of ale to the lads working to clear the rubble and carve the new structures. They were working at a break neck speed and he felt that they should be rewarded for their work thus far and could think of no better way than of the Hall's finest ale. Bruner sat there just off to the side watching them talk and sing a few songs, raise their steins in toasts to those that came before them and finally to the kings of the Mithral Hall and Citadel Adbar for supporting them in this grand occasion.

Bruner knocked back several steins of the strong ale as he recounted the recent past. He had spent a great deal of time in and around the Deepward Keep, talking with the troops, miners and a few merchants that had received news of securing the Keep and were looking to secure the best location for their wares.

He also scouted around the area, assessing the defensibility of the entrance, surrounding areas and scouted to see who and what posed a significant threat to the new dwarven enclave. A few things came to mind, wolves roamed the area quite freely and that would need to be addressed soon, so merchants and people would be safe to travel to the Keep. A few giants roamed the area and they would be dealt with, but the surprise came when he reached the bottom of the mountain, a group of orc scouts ambushed him.

What struck him so true were not the blows from the orcs, giants or even the skeletons that reared their unholy heads, but it was the words of the orc that struck him the most. They claimed to have been sent by someone they called "Red," and yelled out "Red wants him dead" and it was time to "collect their gold." It took him only about an hour or so to figure out who "Red" was and was willing to put a diamond on it that that vile Thayian bastard Vicho. I made it to Rivermoot later on and found the son of a bitch sitting at the fire pit outside the inn.

While I do not outright accuse the bastard, I make it well known that the orcs will not be reporting back. Of course, he plays the innocent victim of our scheming to be rid of him and further denies any involvement in this. I just want to break that stick over his high and mighty head and then crush him beneath my boot.

Bruner has enlisted the help of someone to keep an eye on Vicho. By not telling the others about this, and only he himself dealing with and making contact with him it reduces the risk of his contact being compromised. The lad, will be well compensated, especially if this plays out to what he thinks it might.

The one thing that really singed his beard is that he has heard rumors from others that Vicho had stumbled into Rivermoot bloody, beaten and broken, quite the sight and proceeded to spread lies that Bruner and the others tried to kill him. The bastard spun his web of lies to sow the seeds of mistrust and hatred. Bruner needed to find a way to counter the bastards poison and break his hold over their minds.

*Strip away the confusions of knowledge and you are left with only one thing: the truth.* That is what he was taught as a youngster by his clan elders and this is what he would show to the others what Vicho's treachery has done.

He will be stopped.

The next day, he ventured back to the Mithral Hall and found himself speaking with the smiths to forge him a waraxe that Moradin willing, would rival that of a crafter of artifacts. One that will strike the fear into the hearts with the mere sight of it as it cuts down all that stands in his path. The price will be incredible, but the weapon will become an extension of him and the two will act as one on the battlefield.

Bruner spent the remaining part of the day checking through the various shops, looking for anything that the lads or lasses would need. He had already spent the majority of his sizable fortune on some new boots, a couple of cloaks, a few weapons and some rings. He sold off his obscene collection of gems, some powerful scrolls that he has collected combined with his already sizable collection of coin. He was like a young dwarf running through the sweet shop, pointing at what he wanted and taking one, two or even three of an item. Twice he stopped in between shops for ale, as the constant haggling had parched his throat.

Chuckling as he remembered the jeweler's face as he carefully poured out the contents of two bags chocked full of the precious stones. It took him quite some time to sort, count and finally figure up the total and even he was shocked at the amount.

He now had set out back to Deepward Keep, which is now open for business to meet up with the others and pass out all the new equipment that he just bought and finally meet the master of the keep, Dorinthal "Ironwall" Kharazaad. Now Bruner has heard of him from several council members at Citadel Adbar and all of the information is positive about him.

Bruner trudged through the ice and snow from Settlestone to Deepward Keep, keeping an eye out for anything that was out of place. Once back to the Keep he found Steeg, Berrar, the young barbarian Dorvan, Torgga and Kilain and passed out a lot of the equipment.

They all met with Dorinthal Kharazaad, the master of the keep and talked for sometime about what is expected of them and they are welcome to stay as long as they like. Most of them spent the good portion of the day searching through the massive keep and the wonders that presented themselves. Several found the armory quickly and perused through the wares that were available and impressive they were. Kebur and Telenia both picked up new robes and others talked with the smith, trying to get him to budge on his prices, but it was to no avail, he would not budge his prices.

Several temples to the dwarven gods were found and Bruner spent some time in the temple of Moradin, contemplating recent events and what will the future hold for him.

After some wandering the great keep, Bruner and Berrar went through the Frost Hills around to Winteredge. They encountered several groups of frost giants, frost wolves and a few packs of bears. The two made their way through the twisting and turning paths of the mountains to the Ale House, just outside of Winteredge. Once there, they down several steins of ale to warm themselves as they sat near the fire.

Off in the Ale House of Deepward Keep, Bruner was enjoying another stein of Deepward Dark, as he waited for his roasted spicy foul to arrive. That was one of the things he brought with him from High Hold, a huge rack of spices for the both the Ale House and Keep's kitchen for things like this. He sat there at the table in the corner that he asked to

be reserved for the Keep's militia, they served to protect this stronghold, and this is one of the small privileges that service to one's king provides.

Captain of the Deepward Guards enters the Ale House; one of Bruner's known places when he has down time. Once the Captain located him sitting off in the corner, he makes his way to Bruner as he finished another stein of ale. "Sir, I have news. A human came to us (describes Vsevolod) He told us that the cursed Thayan Vicho was killed by him but before he could burn the body a drow came to the scene and took the body away. It seems the drow was Vicho's master. The cursed Thayan might come back to the book of living again. I gave the human five hundred gold coins as a reward. Also it seems that there are two camps of drow fighting each other as the Vicho's master seems to follow a drow god named Masked Lord and that the Lolth followers and them are on war path." The Captain and Bruner salute and then leaves to return to his duties.

Thinking for a few moments as he digs into his coin pouch to pay his bill then heads for the door at a fast pace, weaving through the other tables. He breaks into a dead run as he reaches the bridge, barrels past the guard and through the door leading into the Keep. He shoulders the chamber doors open, making eye contact with Kebur before he had make it to the door and makes his way to the anvil to address them.

Bruner then slams his own stein down upon the anvil with enough force to shatter it. Shards spraying all across the floor as he looks around at those seated here. "Lads...and Lasses," as he spies Telen and Torgga, "we 'ave a grave situation indeed that may 'ave gotten worse." Bruner recounts the message that was passed onto him from The Deepward Guard Captain to those in the room.

Sitting off to the side, Bruner sees Kebur grin a bit when his words of Vicho's death are mentioned, but they quickly fade at the mention of the drow that came to retrieve the corpse and finally turn to disgust as he realizes that Vicho is more than likely alive and now has a new master to follow.

Fed up with hearing this news, Kebur storms out of the chamber to his study to prepare some items for the upcoming expeditions into the Underdark and to find and kill Vicho.

**An Unwelcome Guest** (the following story is a compilation of posts from Brynjolf, axesrock, CKY, IllithidPie, JornB, Stonewyvern, OldRogue, Sharktnk, MasterofReality and Perkko)

From the east gate of Rivermoot a drow priestess launched her attack, hell-bent on finding her minion. She encountered a small, but strong group of defenders that were not about to have her tear the town apart as she was conducting her search. She left nothing in her path standing. Berent and Coroni were slain along with many other townsfolk.

The adventurers cornered and killed her, but were not able to get the body back into town

before it disappeared under a spell of darkness.

The second drow was a male, more than likely a militia member, not a spell caster was caught and his body was secured. He was searching for his "sister" and more than likely it was the one that disappeared. His body has been secured in the Deepward Keep to be raised and questioned by the dwarves.

*Keepwarden Kharazaad,*

*A drow priestess attacked Rivermoot and was slain, but tha body was taken before we could get back inta town. Fortune was with us today and another drow attempted to locate 'er, but failed ta escape as I cut 'im down and 'e is now held in our Keep until we get every answer fram 'im.*

*///signed///*

*Bruner Stonehammer*

~~~~~

*Lord Kharazaad,*

*I 'ave taken over one o' tha rooms up quarters area ta 'ouse our "guest." 'e 'as been raised an tha room 'as been stripped o' all furniture. I will be questionin tha drow shortly an will report ta ye what I learn.*

*///signed///*

*Bruner Stonehammer*

Keepwarden Dorinthal enjoyed the feeling of warmth from the smith's fire as he finished giving respects to Moradin at his anvil. Bidding respect to the priest, he turned and begins to make his way to his room. The keep was starting to come together as he knew it would. The marketplace was generating income for some of the families in the area as well as making a reputation of stalwart and honest trade amongst the surface dwellers. Course, only having a backwoods place like Rivermoot to compete against, Dorinthal supposed that it was inevitable.

Stretching he feels his muscles begin to loosen with anticipation of his firm bed and the few hours of rest awaiting him. Turning toward the stairwell leading up to the barracks and senior quarters, he hears the heavy steps of guards coming about. Turning to wish well on whichever soldier was heading up, probably to throw dice for a few rounds, have some Rothe stew and head off for much earned sleep. Dorinthal turned and was taken aback as his deep-set eyes fell upon the obsidian skin of the prisoner as the guards escorted it toward the stairs.



Gaining himself he stood before the stairs as the captain of the keep stepped forward and began his report. "Keepwarden Dorinthal, we have been asked to take this prisoner up to one of the spare rooms until questioning can be done."

With a look of confusion, Dorinthal indicates the other stairwell leading down. "Is'n there a more appropriate bedding downstairs for our..." Looking at the Drow, Dorinthal's mind quickly flashes over the many he had seen, but each of them were across from him in battle. Finding the words, he turned back to the captain, "guest. I'll be thinking we shall not have this one upstairs. Who brought... this into our hold?"

The captain kept a strong grip on the unconscious prisoner as one of the other guards opened the secured doors leading downward. "Cap'n Bruner o' the civilian militia did."

"Aye, I'll receive my report from him then." Looking back toward the prisoner and then back to the captain, "I'll expect double guards on this one as well as the usual spellcrafters bag for his head and iron shackles for his hands. I'll nae ha' him polluting my keep. Da you understan me, Captain?"

The loud swallow and quick nod of his head was all Dorinthal needed to feel confident that no shortcuts would be taken with this prisoner. Without watching for the Captains actions, Dorinthal turned back toward his council room. Sleep, if not ale, would wait. Someone would be reporting why he had a Drow in his keep before this clock hour was changed...

Balneer awakened in a bare stone cell. He didn't remember how he got there and it wasn't of his peoples manufacture. It stunk of old ale and musty dwarf stench. It was then that he remembered. They had just reclaimed the body of the Priestess who led the raid against the Rivvil village of Rivermoot, where he was left as rear guard for the others escape. He remembered the dwarf and the others.

Balneer frowned and quickly ascertained his situation. He was stripped of everything but his common under tunic and breaches. Every last bit of equipment and every last possible weapon was taken from him. He silently snarled at his condition and looked around his cell for something to use as a weapon. Something to defend himself with when they came for him, but they removed anything and everything from the room only a straw mattress on the floor being the furniture left for him.

He resolved himself to his fate and silently prayed to the Spider Queen to smile upon him, he asked her to grant him the strength and ability to kill at least one of the Maggot-Kin, before they drug him to their foul alters and ripped out his heart as sacrifice to their false gods.

As he waited for his execution, Balneer sat quietly and focused his inner strength as he

had been taught when a student at the Academy of Melee Magarthe. The Maggot-Kin would find him no easy lamb for the slaughter.

Bruner tossed his gear bag dejectedly into the corner as he tried to work this out before Keepwarden Kharazaad loses his mind and had Bruner's head on a platter. He had done some pretty dumb things in his life, but this one pretty much tops the list, but his gut instinct is telling him that he's following the right course of action. The only thing left is to convince Kharazaad of this.

*The drow that they have captured worships Lolth and they fight against the ones that dragged Vicho off to Moradin knows where. The second group worships one they call the Masked One. The problem is that they know nothing of this new group nor the god they worship. He grinned knowing that he was above the standard way of thought of killing everything and sort it out later. He knows the value of information, it's ability to turn the tide in battle and this is one battle that they cannot afford to lose.*

He grabbed a rag out of his pack and wiped the grime off his armor and tried to make himself somewhat presentable as he walked towards the armory's door.

The kitchen was ablaze with both lights and activity. It always became the center of the keep, especially as the defender shifts switched. Walking the Underdark along the newly renovated deepway passage was hard work which resulted in tired, hungry and very thirsty dwarves. It didn't matter whether you returned as a warrior defending or a scout leading the way or even a miner removing rubble and shoring up new openings. Everyone here was as valuable in their way as each single pin in a machine.

Oddly there wasn't as much threat of Drow or Drider attacks of late, but there never seemed to be an end to other creatures. Today alone, both a Purple worm and a Xorn both were turned away as miners disturbed their lair amongst the deepway rubble. Luckily everyone returned uninjured, but not every day was so blessed. At least one stein of ale would be lifted to Moradin today.

Looking about the room he didn't see the militia member, Bruner anywhere about. When he left the guardsman a few moments ago, he had left word for Bruner to be found to provide a report regarding the drow captive. Unwilling to just sit and wait in the council hall, he thought perhaps he would find him here with the other members of Deepward Keep.

The cooking fires danced with the braziers along the wall to fill each corner with light pushing back the inevitable shadows. Giving up his search for the moment, he smelled the cooking Rothe meat on the spits in the kitchen. Gauging by the smell he guessed that they must be just about done. Making his way through the throng of dwarves and tables

to the kitchen area, he turned the corner to see the cook working on mushrooms to go into the stew. Smiling to himself as he realized that the cooling skewers of meat were within grasp and unwatched, he reached over and snatched one up before being seen.

Turning to scurry out, he noticed the grin on the face of his scout leader watching him. Quickly whispering under his breath and scowling at him, Dorinthal starts to make his way out of the kitchen area, "Say nary a word tae cook and you will find double shifts for the next month, you will."

Smiling broadly at the privilege of catching his commander in an act, Tholin quickly nods and turns back to his ale. "Aye Keepwarden. I'll let cook know that all I saw was a mangy dog coming out of the kitchen who may have pilfered some meat." Tholin watched out of the corner of his eye as the Keepwarden started to turn away and then stopped uncertain if Tholin was being sarcastic and playfully calling him a "Mangy dog" before finally deciding it wasn't worth the time to pursue and continued out of the dining room.

Moving quickly through the halls, he took his prize and headed toward the council chamber to await the arrival of Bruner and his report...

As he neared the door to the armory, Bruner caught his reflection in the mirror that hung there. *How much have I changed since leaving the Citadel? Have I strayed so far from what I was to what I have become, and I still have yet to find my father's killer.* Clenching his fists, as he remembers holding his father's head in his lap as the daggered still remained buried in his heart. *This must be sorted and quickly, so I can do what I came here to do.* His memory flashing back to patrolling, drinking and feasting with his men.

As he cleared the doorway, Bruner saw Keepwarden Kharazaad nearing the council chamber door. He called out to him as the door was just opening, "Keepwarden Kharazaad, I must speak with ye."

Deep in the bowels of the Deepward Keep, in a stone cell, Balneer focused his rage and his hate as he was taught. None hated as deeply or savagely as the drow, none had their capacity for pure evil when they put their minds to it.

It was to this end that he now meditated and keyed himself up. When the door to this cell opened, he would use his innate abilities to take the advantage. He would kill the jailer, seize his keys and make his way to the place where the maggots kept their children.

Once there, he would slaughter their children. He decided he would paint the caverns with the blood of dwarven young, so even when he fell to their axes, they would remember him and curse the one who brought him to this place.

Silently, Balneer nodded and smiled a savage grin. The great goddess Lolth would be pleased to receive his soul with the blood of dwarven young on his hands.

Today was a good day to die.

Once back in his room, Bruner hastily penned the following letter:

*Captain Druggath Shieldcleaver,*

*The Keep is an awe inspiring sight to be hold. About 75% of the stonework has remained intact as a testament to the builder's prowess in architecture and stonework. The Keep itself is a solid fortress to withstand a prolonged siege that is on par with our facilities, with the capacity to house many more dwarves if needed to. Overall this is a solid outpost that has the potential to be an excellent pathway to and from the Citadel, allow for increased trading. I am going to send a few items from the stores for your review.*

*Lt Bruner Stonehammer*

The dwarves had a drow prisoner... He mulled this fact over as he secretly made his way their stronghold, The one they called Deepward Keep. The way was clear to all who cared to look. The road was well traveled and there were frequent dwarven guards along the way, for the safety of the merchants and others who sought dwarven goods.

Golfildur smiled to himself. If the dwarves indeed held a drow prisoner, then he or she, was surely a Lolthite or a renegade such as himself, possibly a fellow drow who had not heard the holy words of Vhaeraun yet. It was Golfildur's responsibility to spread the words and teachings of his god. The Drow would convert or die, there was no other choice for the prisoner.

Using his natural abilities of stealth, his learned tactics of the rogue and Assassin and a combination of magical invisibility and sanctuary spells, he penetrated the Deepward Keep undetected. The dwarves had established a great and truly astounding fortification, but it was designed to defend against assault, not infiltration.

It took no time for Golfildur to locate the dungeon and cell that held the drow prisoner. The rows and rows of dwarven warriors provided a guiding path to the cell where they kept the most dangerous of prisoners. Golfildur bided his time and waited for the right opportunity to use his Lense of detection, an elven magical device that both detected traps and opened locks. When the chance came, he used the device and quickly stepped into the cell. A reversal of the device re-secured the lock in its original state.

Still cloaked in invisibility Galfildur stepped away from the door and ensured he could not be seen from the barred window in the door. The Prisoner was a male drow, a warrior trained to the highest level of proficiency by the looks of him. The Prisoner looked up with hate and a look that told Galfildur he was prepared to die.

Galfildur nodded to himself and dropped his cloak of invisibility so that the prisoner could see him. There was no doubt in the Priests mind, that he stood before a Lolthite warrior, trained in the war academy of Menzobarranzen. The prisoner said nothing as a lone drow suddenly appeared in his cell. His eyes held the questions he so wisely did not speak.

Quickly Galfildur's fingers flashed in the silent drow finger-language. "Are you so ready to die brother? Would you not prefer a chance to live? Lolth does not require martyrs this day." His smile was genuine, when the prisoner's eyes lost their resignation to death and hope appeared.

Quickly, in the flash of ebony fingers, Galfildur outlined his plan for their escape.

Bruner's voice carries through the hall as Dorinthal just enters the council chamber. Looking down the hall, he sees Bruner quickly walking toward him with determination. So close before being imposed on. So close... Looking back to the stein cabinet and then the ale keg with even more determination, he continues his way into the room.

<Come in lad, we need to talk.> Pulling fresh ale from the keg, Dorinthal watches the other dwarf walk in and take a seat. He also noticed that the dwarf was uncomfortable. Uncomfortable enough to have not even draw a stein of ale. <Lad, this is not an inquisition or dressing down. Get an ale and explain to me why you brung such a beastie in my keep.>

Dejectedly, Bruner gets a stein and fills it. Visibly starting to relax, he sits back down and begins the tale. He explains the whole situation and the potential threat to the Silver Marches and how such a prisoner could oust such a threat.

Dorinthal listens and lets the lad pour the whole story out. Bruner's intentions were good, if not his foresight. <Lad, up till just a few years ago, I would have looked upon that creature as nothing less than evil incarnate.> Pulling from his ale, he stops and thinks for a moment. <And believe me, I'm not altogether sure I don't still think as such, but as they say, 'the vein runs a different path of late'. With the recent friendship of a dark elf with King Bruennor, I can't say if they are truly evil or just forced as such in surviving.">

Dorinthal looks into the flames of the closest sconce and loses himself for a moment in the dancing flames. Far too many times he has stared into the flames, either in exhaustion when making difficult decisions or in war of seeing what the drow have destroyed in their

wars. There was an odd comfort in such a familiar act. It let him settle his thoughts and think clearly.

Turning suddenly back to Bruner, <I'll send word to King Bruennor and have him decide. With any luck his answer will be to deliver the prisoner to Mithral Hall and away from my keep.> Draining his mug, he sets it down. <I'm off to my room to draft a message and then some sleep. I expect you to double check on the prisoner and coordinate a messenger to come by to get the message to take to Mithril Hall and return immediately.> Dorinthal starts to walk toward the door. Without turning, he gives final words to Bruner.

<And if you ever bring such a beast in my keep again without discussing it lad...> The moments hesitation cannot be missed, <Well... Let us say that you won't have as easy access to Mithral Stout as you do now...>

Balneer watched as the mysterious, drow, male cast a cloak of invisibility and silently made his way out of the prison cell in which Balneer was being held. He winced as the door clicked back into the locked position with a barely audible "snick".

The "Elf Stone" the visitor had given him rested uncomfortably in the pit of his stomach. With all his weapons, armor and gear taken from him by the filthy dwarves, there was no place they would not find the magic stone, except inside of his body.

Balneer waited as was agreed upon by himself and the visitor, then he stood after a count of five hundred heartbeats and shouted for the dwarves. "YOU FILTHY MAGGOTS, WHO DWELL IN THIS DANK AND WORM FILLED HOLE! SUMMON THE COWARDLY, WALKING DUNG HEAP, WHO CALLS HIMSELF MASTER OF THIS PLACE! I WILL SPEAK WITH HIM, IF HE HAS COURAGE TO FACE AN UNARMED DROW!"

Grinning savagely, Balneer sat back down and waited. He understood now, that if he made no attempt to escape or to fight, the dwarves would not kill him. The visitor told him, they were too weak and self righteous to do what any drow would do to a prisoner. They did not torture or maim for enjoyment, nor did they commit sacrifices of blood and flesh to their gods. As long as Balneer was calm and showed no aggression, he would be well cared for.

Time passed and he waited. The visitor was not far or so he said he would be. The elf stone was a link, its twin held by the visitor. The Visitor would use it to track Balneer if the dwarves moved him. Escape would come in time, all he had to do was be patient.

Bruner sat down at the table in the Ale House with a stein in front of him, never in his years, even when he was young and still training in his clan, had he just been through what just happened in the council chambers. The master of the keep is "asking" someone

else what to do like a child asking a parent for permission to go do something. Once Bruner found this wizard he sought, he was almost certain to return to Citadel Adbar. Back to a much simpler life and less hassle, no more tip toeing around not to hurt someone's feelings.

He drained the stein and made his way to the door. Standing a guard rotation out at the front gate should help him clear his mind and focus on what to do in the immediate future. He snagged Dorvan, a new addition to the Keep's growing population and thought a rotation out there will show the lad there are times when you have to make sacrifices and this is going to be one of them.

He showed Dorvan ways to spot caravans and people approaching before they reached the top of the hill and ways to stay warm during the snows and most important to keep the paths clear so you can keep an eye out for trouble and not focus completely on where you are walking. Bruner pointed out a tree a little off the pathway up the hill and had Dorvan practice shooting his crossbow at it.

The guards alerted the two that someone was approaching, as the lone figure approached, it was the last person that Bruner ever thought would darken their door. Vicho Samada, the Red Wizard of Thay and lackey of the drow, approached the massive keep with his hands raised and open. Bruner ordered him to halt and remain there. He turned to Dorvan and instructed the lad to go and escort him to the bridge where he will meet them. If the wizard were to resist or make a wrong move in anyway, Dorvan is to cut him down.

Bruner stood at the bridge to Deepward Keep and calmly waited for the pair to return. He felt a slight twinge sending the lad out to escort someone to here that did not know the extent of what the filthy bastard's power was and he silently wished that Kebur was here to see this. After all this time and doubt by others that lived in the region, Kebur was right about the filthy bastard Vicho.

Bruner was taking not chances with him this time, whether he knew it or not, Vicho was not going to leave Deepward Keep alive. The last thing he would see would be Bruner's waraxe.

Vicho approached with Dorvan in tow, both hands on his sword ready to use if needed. Once they were near the bridge, Bruner told Vicho to say what he had to say. Here Vicho informs him of the civil war between the drow and how one drow is willing to win it at all costs. His name is Golfidur, and he is working at turning the elves of the Moonwood to his cause, and considers the other races nothing more than fodder in their war.

Bruner paused for a moment, that name, *I have heard it before*. "Jasmine, ye lyin bitch!" He now had someone else to track down and get the truth out of. Looking up, *Thank you lord Moradin. No rest for the wicked*.

Bruner ripped off his helm and tossed it aside, confronting Vicho with the last topic of their conversation, his failed assassination attempt on Bruner by the orcs. Vicho

hesitated for a moment before admitting that he did in fact order the orcs to do that and he would face justice for that and trying to kill Vsevolod with his own hands. Bruner assured him that he will face justice, dwarven justice. With that said Vicho knelt down to accept his fate and Bruner was more than happy to dispense it. With a swift stroke of his axe, Bruner used the flat side of his axe to smash Vicho into unconsciousness. He approached the unconscious wizard to make sure that he was not faking it and stomped his plated boot down onto Vicho's hand, he repeated it two more times to make sure that the bones in his hand were in fact broken.

Bruner instructed Dorvan to take their prisoner to the cells and to strip him of everything but his shorts, chain him to the wall, along with the whole magical restraints needed for people of his talent. Once completed, Dorvan informed Bruner that the only thing he was wearing was this robe and asked what should be done with it. Bruner's response was <Burn it.> So Dorvan drew his sword, tossed the garment onto it and watched as it was reduced to ashes.

Bruner now had to find Keepwarden Kharazaad and explain the new "guest" that they now had in the Keep. He figured that he would be paying for the ale now at the Ale House instead of enjoying the occasional stein in the council chambers, hell, he might even be looking for a new home here shortly considering what he's done...again.

Vicho woke to pain, not unbearable pain as he once had in the Drow encampment, but pain never the less. He quickly realized he was chained to the cold stone of some cell and that it was dark. He tried to moan but his voice was stopped, there was a wooden plug in his mouth. Realization set in upon him that he had been "Mage-Bound", it was cold and dark. Exhaling from his nose forcefully, he was able to determine a leather bag had been placed over his head his right hand had also been shattered, made useless.

Shaking his head sadly, he reflected on the fact that even when he tried to do the right thing by warning the dwarves of the drow threat, admitting his guilt in his plots against their Clan and not to mention the attempted assassination of the dwarf Bruner, he seemed doomed to be treated with the same savage disdain and abuse that others accused him of just because he was born Thayian.

With an inward sigh, he resigned himself to his fate, he had offered his neck to the dwarves axes in an attempt to end his existence in a modicum of honor. It was done out of unbearable shame and from fallen pride, it was his one last ditch gamble to regain what had been stolen from him. He had no doubt that Samas Kul was watching at this very moment, delirious with laughter as he scryed Vicho from the comforts of his opulent palace in Thay.

In coming to the Deepward Keep, He had fulfilled the commands of the Drow Golfildur. As the drow commanded, Vicho had begged for Vsevolod's forgiveness, he had gone to the dwarves, even though he knew it was his death. Chained to the cell wall, the fridged stone was slowly stealing the warmth and life from his naked body. It was going to be a



slow and agonizing death, not quick and clean. He had expected better of the dwarves. In the end however, Vicho took comfort in the fact that he would die a free man, free of the drow's manipulation.

The Thayian Zulkir, Samas Kul in a vicious and sadistic attempt to further Vicho's suffering, had broken the mental conditioning the drow had placed on his mind. Yes Vicho remembered all that had been done to him, yes he knew that he was degraded, beaten and forever would bear the marks of the drow's tender mercies upon his body and his soul, but he was free. His mind was his own once more...

Brottor returned to Deepward Keep from Settlestone and was amazed how well things had progressed since he had departed the mountain stronghold many tendays earlier. He had gone to study the faith of the dwarves and the religion and teachings of the Morndinsamen, to better be able to serve the folk of the clan.

Making his way up the mountain path to the Keep he smiled to himself and thought it good to be home. He wound his way deep into the mountain, past the mithril mine, into the market and was pleased to see not only dwarves but humans and elves as well buying and selling, conducting the business of trade.

He made his way to the inn and bought a thick, creamy, dwarven stout and set his heavy pack down. Leaning back on the bar, he listened to the conversations going on around him and froze in shock, his ale half way to his mouth, untouched.

The talk in the tavern and indeed the entire market, was of Bruner cutting down a helpless prisoner who had apparently come to the Deepward, to turn himself in. Brottor listened in disbelief, to the tales of the scene that transpired at the foot of the bridge in the market place. He couldn't believe this to be the same Bruner he knew.

Quickly paying for his ale, he finished it off and made his way to the keep Proper. Once there, he went directly to the cells of the keep and immediately took notice of the rows of warriors. With a grimace, he discovered the naked bound human chained against the cell wall and a drow chained in another cell.

He wondered at the drow, but quickly focused on the human. He couldn't see the man's face, because the man had a leather bag over his head, but the man's hand was clearly smashed, as the market place stories told. One of the guards laughed and cracked a joke about Bruner's rage and dwarven justice, that was too much for Brottor.

His beard quivered in rage as he looked at the unfortunate dwarf. "JUSTICE! DO YE MEEN TA TELL ME, THA CUTTIN DAEN A HELPLESS PRISONER IN COLD BLOOD AND CRIPPLIN HIM IS JUSTICE! DI YE MEEN TAE SAY THA IS WHA HONOR IS TAE! NAGH! BY THE BLOODY AXE O' CLANGEDDIN TIS NAY! YE GET THA BLOODY MITHRIL FIST IN THE COUNCIL ROOM NAEW! I'M NAY

SUMMIN EM AS JEST BROTTOR, TIS AS A PRIEST O' THE MORNDINSAMEN I WANT EM THERE, AN I WANT EM NAEW! GET EM!"

Brottor looked at the other guards standing by and growled, "hae any O' ye thought tae feed either O' tha prisoners? cause ifn ye aint I'll hae yer asses afore tha Gods this day. We aint Druagar tae be torturin, murderin er maimin those wha is in our care. Get em fed and soon. I'm on me way tae tha Council chambers, theres gonna be tha hells tae pay."

As Brottor stomped up into the main keep from the prison cells, he bellowed at the top of his lungs, "GET THA BLOODY KEEP WARDEN UP FRAM WHAR EVAR HE BE! BY THA GODS THIS NEEDS HIS ATTENTION!"

Making his way to the council chambers, he slammed the doors wide open and glowered at the guards. "Keep em open, this concerns the whole Clan and they needs tae hear it!"

Bruner slowly turns as he finishes up filling his stein of ale, "Ye dunna need ta yell an scream like a lass." He sits down in one of the massive chairs, "Dunna take it out on tha lads if yer upset with me." Takes a nice long swig of his ale, "If ye 'ave a problem with me, brin it up ta me." Bruner set himself for Brottor's tirade.

Mordual looks into the cell. He then finds out from the guards what the drow and human are in there for. After a few minutes of conversation with the guards he notices the human bleeding. He motions to the guard; "Open the gates and stand ready yer weapons I will check on the prisoners I need two of ye inside with me. If we need ta put this this two on trial they need ta be alive and well to receive their judgment". Taking some of his own rations and some healing supplies Mordual goes in with two guards stopping four paces from the prisoners he tells them to utter nothing and try nothing that will further discomfort themselves.

"I am not here to judge any of you two...there is another time for that...for now I just want to make sure you are well to get to a just trial. Let me do my work and I will leave you be"

Noli comes in, "What in the nine hells is this yelling for?"

Muttering repeatedly to himself as he writes his first report, oh hell it's really the first time he wrote anything! Becoming a priest was not as easy as he had thought it would be. The Clan elders made it look easy. Learning to write was even harder than becoming a

priest, and I had to deal with a dragon to become a priest!! Why do Priests need to read and write anyway?! It is evidently the will of Haela Brightaxe that I learn so I will not complain again.

The report reads as follows in very poor dwarven characters.

*Me be dorvan, dis my raport, buner grab me say we do guard, buner teaches me guard stuff, humen walk to guard place, buner yell to him to stoop and putt hans up, humen do dis, buner tell me go get humen and brin him to keep brij, i gets humen an brin him to brij an make him to keep hans in site, buner an humen talk, humen say him send udders to kill buner an stuff bout drow, buner throw helm an grip axe for swing so me grip sord for swing, humen neel an buner hit wit fat part ov ax, humen fall ovr an buner stomp han, buner say to cary to prison take stuf a way frum humen an chain an hood, me do dis, buner say burn robe, me burn on sord, buner say we dun, so dat me report*

*dorvan hammer fist*

When he is done writing the report he reads it over and nods in approval. He folds the paper and walks to the Keepwarden's office.

He hands it to the clerk, "This is for the Keep warden. It is my first report," he smiles at the clerk as he leaves. He makes his way to Haela's shrine to pray.

Behind him can be heard the sound of the clerks palm slapping into his forehead as he glances at the report, followed by some very foul dwarven curses. He decides not to change anything, but instead let the Warden deal with it.

Once the Mithral Fist is gathered Brottor looks around and grunts to himself. His eyes are hard and his beard is almost quivering in rage. Grimly he stumps down to the center of the Chamber and lays his axe on the Soul Forge.

"Most O ye ken me whall enuff, Ye ken I hae bleed and fought and werked hard tae bring this place tae its present state. Ye ken also I be a priest O' tha Morndinsamen, sworn tae Clangedden Silverbeard himself."

After a lengthy pause for his words to sink in he continues

"Naew, I come hame tae find tha people in the Deepward Market speakin O' a man wha comes tae surrender tae us, unarmed. An wha does I hear? Loe and behold, one O' our ain takes it upon thamselvs tae cut daen an unarmed prisoner, maim him an do awa wi tha wretch in a way wha will be sure tae kill im!"

With a sad look in his eyes, Brottor looks directly at Bruner

"Im askin ye Bruner, Im askin ye as nay yer friend, nay a fellow member O tha Fist... Im askin ye as a Priest O'tha Morndisamen, here an naew...

Wha was ye thinkin? Were ye thinkin? Yer actions cast doubt on tha whole Clan's honor. Folks seen wha ye done. Thay be talkin about it. We aint Druagar tae cut daen a prisoner! We dinna torture and maim our charges!

Could it be, ye aint me kins-dwarf Bruner? Maybe ye be same kinda doppelganger? Er is it, ye been lookin evil sae close in tha eye, tha ye canna tell right fram wrang anymore.

Tell me Bruner, do me words hurt ye? Cause if thay does, than theres hope fer ye. Ye aint beyond tha grace O tha Gods. If me words dinna phase ye, than ye aint me kins-dwarf and I call fer yer banishment from the Clan and tha Deepward Keep naew."

So saying Brottor picks up his axe from the soul forge and steps back up and to the edge of the council chambers, waiting for the next speaker

Bruner kept his temper in check as Brottor insulting remarks hit him like a slap to the face and remained in his seat to see if anyone else moved to the great anvil to be heard.

<I have something to say.> The voice came from near the doorway. The sound of leather boots and the tap of a staff on the stone floor as Kebur made his way down to the anvil. Apparently, one did not move far enough out of the way and he swatted his plated shin, with his staff to remind him to whom he was dealing with. <Move.>

Setting his staff across the anvil, he looked about the room his eyes moving from those he's known for some time to those he's just met. "I 'ave known Bruner since 'e was a youngin servin as a wet be'ind tha ears soldier in tha Iron Guard. Tha lad is unconventional ta say tha least, but," Holding one finger up to make his point, "tha lad 'as NEVER done anythin ta make me question 'is 'onor." Stares at Brottor, "I was nay 'appy ta learn that 'e brought a filthy drow into our 'ome, nor ta find tha Thayan bastard chained up in our cells, but I am sure that there be a goot reason they be 'ere. I taught 'im lon ago ta trust 'is instincts an ta act upon 'em. Nay everyone agrees wit 'im, but stop an think of what ye would da in 'is boots."

Kebur motioned over to Torgga who was sitting down near the bottom, close to the anvil and she passed over a full stein. He thanked her and took a quick pull off of it and went back to speaking.

Bruner recognized this. *Oh no, he's just getting warmed up.* Thankfully, he emptied his bladder before coming in here for this, because it's going to be a while before Kebur is finished speaking.

Kebur turned to those in the room as he started to pace around the anvil, leaving his staff lying across it, the slow shuffle allowed him time to take in all of the faces that filled the room. "Bruner 'as done nothin but devote 'imself ta this Keep, its residents an tha people of this region." Looking about seeing most nodding in agreement, "With 'is own coin 'e 'as made sure many o' ye 'ave tha best gear available an tha only thin 'e asks in return is that ye pass stuff onta others that may need it."

He took another draw off of his stein, "Bruner was the one that lead tha group that cleared out this very Keep ta include this very room from tha drider." He let his words sink in a bit, "'e 'as spent almost 'is entire LIFE in service ta protectin our entire way o' life. He commands 30 dwarves in tha Iron Guard who would 'appily lay down their lives with out question fer 'im an 'e tha same." Measuring the crowd carefully, "Ask yerselves lads...an lasses, 'ow many times 'as Bruner been tha first inta tha room that ye know is full o' vile creatures? 'ow many times 'as 'e been tha rear guard fendin off beasties as ye get ta safety?" He turns to Brottor again, "Ask yerself that."

He takes another draw from his stein, realizes that it's now empty and starts to pace yet again, gently playing with the stein as he makes his way around the anvil. "Fram what I 'ave 'eard in tha market place is that tha Thayan bastard came 'ere ta stand before us an confess everythin 'e's done." As he walked by Torgga, she quickly swapped steins with Kebur so his pace was not even interrupted. "Tha bastard admitted ta nay only tryin ta dishonor us in this room, but tha dwarves as a whole. Tha bastard also admitted to tryin ta assassinate Bruner by usin about 20 orcs just outside o' tha gates ta our 'ome. OUR 'OME!" Kebur smacked his open palm against the anvil to drive home the importance of this. "I am surprised that he did nay separate 'is 'ead fram 'is body right then an there. Someone admittin ta tryin ta kill ye an dishonor ye an yer kin..." Looking about the room, "What would ye 'ave done?"

Looking about the room for the last time, "Bruner kept tha filth alive ta stand trial as 'e should." Kebur then drain his stein, picked up his staff and make his way through the crowd up to where Bruner sat and rested a hand on his shoulder, "Ye did goot lad, ye did goot."

Noli looks all who are present "I think he 'aven't done nuthing wrong. We shouldn't be too friendly ta ones who tried ta kill one o us. If I be in Bruner's place me 'ammer would 'ave met 'is 'ead several times."

Brottor stands forward and bows to Kebur before he descends to the Soul Forge, he waits for a moment for the old wizard to take up his staff before laying his axe back atop the anvil. "First, let me speak in this, Kebur, ye be amongst our greatist treasures, yer mind is clear and sharp when our heads is filled wi battle and ale. I thank ye fer yer words and

yer counsel.” Brottor bows his head to Kebur in respect, then continues. “But it aint tha langshanks we is talkin about naew. I dinna give a gobo's filthy backside fer im an dinna care wha nussance he hae made O' himself. Tha langshanks wi get a fair trial and answer afore tha law fer any crimes he has done.”

“Tha issue here has tae deal wi tha way tha bugger was brought in. Naew, I ken verra whall who tha langshanks is an I hae heard tha filthy lies he hae been tellen about our kin and twa O' us in particular.” He looks from Kebur back to Bruner, “I ken tham blasphemus statements O' his as Nuthan but lies. But Tha othar langshanks is speakin Tham same tales accorss tha River valley in inns an taverns.” Points at Bruner, “His rage hae only fuelled those tales. By striken daen Thay filthy rat O' a langshanks as he di, he played right inta Tha hands O' Tha villian.”

“Whas goin tae be said naew I ask ye? Wi Tha folks stop commin hera tae trade cause it aint safe fram Tha axes O' Tha dwarves? Wi Tha wee uns O' othars fear us? Is Tha wha we want?” Brottor lowers his hand and touches the silver axe pendant he wears around his neck and looks each and every dwarf in the chamber in his or her eyes.

“I says Tha we be a people O' laws, laws made fer our protection and fer those under our care. Tis dishonorable tae strike a prisoner, nay matter how bloody angry ye be. Tha moment Tha bugger surrenders tae ye, he stops bein yer enemy and becomes yer charge. Tis Tha path O' honor, tae take care O'tha wretch then, nay matter hae much ye hate ‘em.” With a deep sigh he continues, “Tis nay fer Tha prisoners I be speakin, tis fer Bruner... I be verra afraid tha he hae been tae lang fram the ways O' our kin. Ye canna face evil, day in an day out, wi out it touchin yer soul. Tis as a Priest, I summoned ye hera. Tis me duty, tae remind all O' ye of our ways, lest we become just mountain rabble.”

He takes another deep breath, “We be tha children O'Holy Moradin, tis his breath tha brings life inta our bodies, tis his grace an luve tha fills our hearts. We canna gie inta savagry and hate... If we does, than we aint deservin the gift tha Stone Father bestowed upon us.” Looks directly into Bruner's eyes, “I wi be in tha temple O' Clangeddin, wha evar is decided hera, ye come an speak wi me. Yer me kins-dwarf, I ken me words was hard tae hear and hurtfull. But tis fer yer sake I called us hera, nay othars.” With that Brottor picks up his axe and resumes his place at the edge of the meeting chamber.

Steeg frowns as he listens to the other speakers. He begins to stand up a few times but as he hesitates others that are quicker get their words heard first. After Brottor has spoken and there is a break in the lines of speakers, some of those present discuss what has been said, Steeg finally musters enough courage to stand up. With his Hammer of the forge in hand he walks down to the anvil and hits it to silence his brethrens. The resulting clang resounds much louder than anticipated and wincing he blushes as the others turn to look at him.

He clears his throat before speaking, "Steeg of 'em Horsebacks..." Nods to those present, "...I've not been long amongst yer way of life and I was fairly young when..." He hesitates as he searches for the right words "...when I left the ways of my own clan behind me. I've never been in a council like tis'un afore and ye do me honour in invitin' me te make myself heard. I've been busy as of late wiv uther matters tha'll come te effect us all but tis fer another meetin' te discuss. Te tha matter at hand though...I'd say there are two things needin' te be cleared. I've fought wiv Bruner and would entrust me life in his care any day. I would never believe him te wilfully harm our clan."

He glances at Bruner and then looks over towards Brottor. "That said I can't swear his methods are always em best thought through. I reckon tis could be said about most of us though when it comes te decisions made in anger. Lookin' at tis specific case I reckon tha question raised is ifn exess force was used. I might not 'ave done it tha same way but how do ye disarm a mage? I've seen em cause fire te erupt from a small yellow stone of some sort..." He twirls his short braided beard, "...a bit te close up at tha'. We've all seen em wizard's robes and who knows wha' could be hidden in em. I would on tha uther hand 'ave given im some uther rags te wear and I assume tis been cared fer now, no? As te maimin'im....not sure how te make sure em can't cast spells. I would never 'ave thought about wha' Master Bruner apparently did but tha' might 'ave put as all in danger since we could've 'ad tha mad mage on tha loose in our very home." Shrugs, "Tis simply beyond me knowledge te judge his actions fully."

"In short it seemed a bit extreme te me but might've been called fer..." He clears his throat again, "...which brings me te tha' next issue; why did tha mad mage give himself up? I've seen tha madness in his eyes so he might indeed have had a sudden change of heart when it comes te his will te harm our kin. But I'd not trust 'im as far as I can throw 'im. As I've said afore he has claimed we've sent assassins after 'im and we weren't alone when he squealed about it oither. Tis might be we 'ave indeed walked into his trap about causin' our reputation te be tarnished. It might also be he expected te be thrown in one of em Keep's cells and had prepared te do us harm frum wivin'. So tis could be tha' Bruner's actions 'ave saved us frum a greater harm." Shrugs again before continuing, "I ain't sure ifn we'll be able te ever know fer sure."

"I'll just conclude wiv a question; ifn tis would've been back in me home clan tis would never 'ave come te 'appen. He'd been put te tha' axe wivout any hesitation as soon as he had shown up admitting his crime. I understand tha' there are uther's laws then our own te consider 'ere so it might not've been so easy te do tha' 'ere. Who would in tha end 'ave been tha'un te pass judgement and execute tha' punishment? "He tucks the hammer inside the belt and nods to those present before retaking his seat."

While praying in the shrine of Haela Brightaxe, Dorvan hears shouting start up out in the hall. He grabs up his greatsword 'Flamebolt' and rushes out into the main hall expecting a battle. To his surprise a very angry dwarf is screaming for a council immediately. Dorvan puts the sword in its back sheath and follows some of the others into the council

chamber. Being from a mountain clan removed from all the pomp and ceremony of large clanholds, he watches from the back to gauge what is happening.

To his shock it is Bruner that the angry dwarf, whose name he learns is Brottor, is pointing fingers at. It is Bruner's actions that Brottor is putting to question. But why?! His rage is building as he listens to Brottor. He stands in amazement that Bruner does not jump up and thrash Brottor where he stands! Something goes on in this chamber that he is desperately trying to understand. He holds his tongue in check with a supreme effort of will, which is an accomplishment not possible just a tenday ago. He needs to understand what is happening so he can help Bruner!

Dorvan watches the next few speakers and manages to relax a bit. He thinks he knows what is expected of the speakers now. So without hesitation he makes his way to the anvil.

As Dorvan reaches the floor near the anvil he reaches over his shoulder and unclips the greatsword from its half sheath. As the sword comes free flame erupts along its blade. Dorvan hesitates with the sword over his head for just a few seconds before gently resting the blade tip on the anvil.

He looks up and nods to Bruner, "Few 'ere know mae. I bae new ta they hall. As ye ken sae by mae sord I bae a kaxanar of the Lady o' the Fray." He pauses to let that sink in to all present (including himself). "I was wit' Bruner when the longshank came a callin'. It bae mae 'oo stood by 'is side wen 'em say 'im sent murd'rs affer 'im 'an anudder! It bae mae 'oo 'eard 'im say hae tell lies to reck they dwarven 'onor!"

Rage is evident on his face and in his stance, but the tip of the sword never leaves the anvil as he circles it. "They longshank sed hae bae a liar, an' him werk agin us! By the Luckmaidens LAW, 'is life bae o'er! Hae deserves nay mercy! Bruner gaev 'im mercy by lettin' 'im live. That bae 'is way. Mae, I woulda cut 'is 'ead off, an kicked they body off'n the brij!"

He looks directly at Brottor as he spits out the next statement, "But mae an mae clan wat follows Haela Brightaxe are jus' a bunch o' 'MOUNTAIN RABBLE'!"

"Ifn Bruner goes I go! Mae clan ken bae puttin my sord an' mae faith ta Haela Brightaxe far better then ye, if'n ye thin' him not worthy of ye!"

As he finishes speaking he forcefully drags the tip of his sword across the anvil throwing sparks into the air. He walks to Bruner's side and places the tip of the sword between his feet as if standing guard.

Kilain had entered the market after a long walk, mapping the parts north of Settlestone. The news of a council was whispered in the market and Kilain hurried his steps in an



attempt not to miss it.

The speakers could be heard clearly as he entered the Keep and with light feet he entered the Hall, stopping just inside the door. He could see that this was something very important as the faces of all present were grim. He tried to get eye contact with some of the ones he knew, in an attempt to get an explanation, though most of them had their own thoughts to care about. Instead he started to listen.

As Dorvan leaves the center of the Council chamber many of the dwarves assembled start to talk amongst themselves and some voices are raised in anger or frustration. Everywhere one may look, the Clan seems to be deeply troubled and tempers can be seen rising. Some side with Brottor and others with Bruner, yet others shout for calm and deliberation.

Bruner sat in his chair, slowly stroking his beard as he listened to the speakers that came forward to speak their thoughts on the subject. He forced himself to remain calm through Brottor's turn at the anvil, a calm mind works much better than a rabid one. His time to speak at the anvil is coming.

Mordual goes down to the anvil and slowly places his axe on it. Pausing for a bit...weighing what was already said.

"I dun really care by what means that Thayan was brought in, Bruner brought him in, though banged up, he will live to see a fair trial. I 'ave seen ta his wounds." Pauses and looks to Bruner and looks around the gathered, "I was not there meself to witness what happened. So I say we put the Thayan on trial first, ta see the extent of his guilt and then see if Bruner was justified in his actions. Though the human says he's guilty it still concerns me that he would turn himself in the way he did." Looks back to Bruner again, "If he is found guilty and he had wronged Bruner I really 'ave no problem handing him back to Bruner. Although if the council wants to enforce its own punishment that would be acceptable too."

He then takes his axe from the forge, trying to listen to the murmurs that went on. Mordual walks off to make space for the next speaker.

Bruner felt the time was finally right to speak for himself against Brottor's accusations. With a deliberate slow gait, he stood up and made his way down the steps to the anvil in the center of the room. A path from his chair to the anvil formed as those in between

parted before him. Once at the anvil, he drew not his waraxe, but his combat knife, as he did so, memories spent with his father flashed through his mind. His father had given him this blade when he completed his training in the Iron Guard and was now a member of the prestigious unit. He knew in his heart that his father would not look upon him with shame and that he stayed true to himself. Bruner placed the sturdy blade upon the anvil to take his turn.

Bruner was an imposing figure even for a dwarf. He was tall for dwarven standards and his wide frame was covered with corded muscles. His beard was full, carefully maintained and had several braids through out with silver clasps at the ends. He was a powerhouse to content with on the field of battle even though he is known in only in a few dwarven circles. He did not care for fame or glory, but that when the day came to face the All Father, he could look him in the eyes with his head held high, bearing no shame.

He took a deep breath as he slowly circled the anvil once and took in those that were gathered here at this moment. Several were fresh faces to where he only knew their names and nothing of their kin. Others he knew as kin and have spent much time with their clan during the best of times and worst of times. It was good to see everyone together, they were flourishing in their own trade and as a Keep. He regretted that this was not the time for celebration, but one that no matter the outcome would tarnish not only his honor, but that of his clan. He accepted this and would face his clan with his head held high when he returned to the Citadel.

Looking about the room as he stood at the anvil, "I am grateful ta see ye all 'ere an ta know that our ranks are expandin as there be many naw faces 'ere tonight. We are attractin many new and even more experienced dwarves ta our cause 'ere at Deepward Keep." Shifting slightly, "But it saddens me that we are 'ere under less than joyous times."

He took a moment to compose himself before speaking. "We are 'ere, because Brottor of clan Shieldbreaker thinks my ways 'ave turned down tha dark path of evil." Looking about as he measured his words as he cut straight to the point, "Tha Thayan bastard openly admitted ta tryin ta kill me with usin tha orcs, tryin ta dishonor us 'ere in this room an our kin as a whole." He willed his fists to relax as he focused his anger into words, "Tha filth even screamed that we," indicating all those gathered, "tried ta kill 'im at one point." He took a swig of ale to keep his throat wet. "Tha bastard managed ta convince tha manlings in Rivermoot that 'e was tha victim of our foul schemes." He let the murmur die down before continuing.

He ran his hands over the cool metal of the anvil as he spoke, "I did brin a drow into this Keep. I did so ta find out what tis goin with those that are nay far fram our doorstep." He could tell that many were not happy about the drow situation, but he could deal with that problem later, assuming he's still around to handle it. "And yes. Yes, I did bring tha Thayan bastard into tha Keep after hittin him in tha 'ead with me axe. I thought it be best that tha filth did nay see tha inside of our 'ome. That be why I used tha flat side of me

axe.” Bruner patted the awesome weapon that is secured to his belt. “I broke ‘is ‘and so tha filth, that now ‘as nathin ta loose, fram turnin our ‘ome inta a ragin inferno. I dunna da thais ta slaughter at a time of me own choosin, but fer tha bastard ta stand trial fer attempted murder nay only on me, but another manling ‘e adventured with AND conspirin with tha drow.” Bruner stood there for a few moments to let that sink in a bit.

“Every day, I ask tha All Father to forgive me sins, ta purge me soul of any taint of evil.” Somethin was eating at him as he tried to put it to words, “a few thins me father taught me; ‘Be true ta Moradin,’ ‘Remain true ta tha clan,’ an ‘Be true in yer ‘onor.’ With that everythin else would take care of itself.” Looking about the room, he saw Kebur, Torgga, Kilain, Mordual and many others he has explored the region with and he stopped when his eyes locked with Brottor’s. Resting his palms on the massive anvil, “I ‘ave remained true ta all three.”

Kilain nods at Bruner’s words. *Wish ‘em all knew Bruner as I*, he thought to himself. He had met Bruner the first day he sat foot in the Marches and considered him to be a true kin in both word and action.

He takes out a bottle of Crankhammers and takes a swig, ponders for a while and then takes another swig. The cool ale gets him all warm inside and he feels confident enough to speak his mind. He puts the cork on the bottle, makes his way down to the small arena and puts the clan helmet on the anvil. He bows deeply to the Keepwarden and then nods to Bruner, Brottor and the rest of the assembly.

“Sum o’ ye knows me n’ sum donnay. I kinda fond o’ me hands n’ wish nay leave ‘em on the anvil.” He takes a deep breath. “Bruner has done nay wrong, he has followed the rules n’ laws written. In fact... he’s been more then that. An act o’ evil n’ selfishness would’a been ta turn the sharp side o’ the axe right below the Thayans ears.” He pauses and nods. “I’m nay sure o’ how I would’a reacted under the circumstances. How about ye all? So, what if the Thayan had a secon’ motive in turnin’ himself in? Is that what we be talkin’ about ‘ere? Nay, any secon’ motives by the Thayan should be discussed durin’ sum other time.” He looks around for something to drink when he realises that the Crankhammer is in his belt, he smiles as he takes the bottle out and takes a sip. “About the talluns, ‘em always speak before thinkin’... it be their way. Though now ‘em surely know nay to do any o’ our kin wrong in the way the Thayan did n’ with a proper endin’ ta this ‘em will know we be just n’ hard.” He ponders for a short while, mumbles a little then nods with a smile. “Aye, that be all. Thank ye fer yer time n’ fer listenin’.”

Kilain takes the helmet off the anvil and makes his way up to the place besides the doors.

Bad day. Started that way. Stayed that way... Dorinthal could feel his frustration in the day rise in his chest. Looking sideways at his drained mug, he again wished he hadn’t

drank it in one shot like some beardless, but, then again, what else is the only appropriate response to shattering an keg of Mithril Stout. Looking to the thick wetness on ground about the anvil, he again considered if he should regret that action.

Taking a long pause after hearing Master Bruner speak, he then turns to the Priest of Mordin. “Mordinsamen Brotter, your wisdom is known and respected by my men of the keep, your companions, and myself. I trust your concerns and hear them. You willingly carry the well being of each upon your back with the weight of a great anvil like a father for his children.”

Pulling at his beard in thought, he then turns to Bruner. “Captain Bruner, you are not of my keep by rank, but you are respected as though you were, by many here and that is nae an easy feat. Your passion for battle and honor and routing the enemies of your kin are without question.”

Looking about the room at each standing here in silent observance, he looks to see if the emotional young lad did leave as he seemed of mind to, or if he had chosen to stop at the doorway undecided. Not seeing him, he was unsure if he simply overlooked him in the throng of kinsmen here. Not taking time to search more in-depth, he did file it away to seek that one out later. One so emotional and troubled, as shown by his hand, was likely to lose the objectivity of any good dwarf. Without that, we are no better than waivable men or even flighty as elves.

“Master Mordual, I appreciate your taking consideration for our prisoners as it should be. Dwarven justice is as hard as Mithril when it is decided, but until that time, their basic needs will be cared for.” Looking to the captain of the guards on duty at the time, Dorinthal gives orders for the prisoners to be double watched, mage bound, but fed and watered appropriately. None were to speak with them without his leave first.

The thick mushroom smell of the delicious stout continued to pull at his senses and concentration as it made his drying throat increasingly distracting. *By all that's holy, where is that second cask?!*, he thought to himself as he looked down at the fouled liquid pooled about Bruner's wet leather boots.

Coming to a decision, he stands and addresses the council room. “The drow are becoming far too ambitious if they are pushing on the manling town of Rivermoot. This is not their usual area unless there is a reason. If this were the Moonwood, then perhaps a scout party, but not this far West. If they mean to take Rivermoot, they would effectively split the Silver Marches in half before we have the Underhighway completed. That cannot come to pass.” Thinking for a moment on the situation and what it may be, he continued. “Each of you within the militia forces will watch for drow activity and report it back here immediately. Be particularly cautious about the hidden edges of the manling towns.”

“I will send a scout today with news of this drow. King Bruennor and his companion will have knowledge of how to best find the answers from this black demon.” Running his thick calloused hand through his graying hair, he looks to the distant dark ceiling. For a

moment darkness seems to wave though as thought a darkness of blacker depth passes through, but then is gone. Just as his gut feeling is about to register that this is not just a trick of his eye's, the doors open and with them a fresh barrel of stout enters gathering his full attentions.

Walking over and taking the first mugful of the foamy heavy elixir, he drinks a large pull. "Now, what do we do with this manling amongst us?" Turning back to his chair and gathering both Brotter and Bruner in his gaze, he thinks about the situation. "First the situation of his treatment must be addressed. By his own words, he has admitted to grave crimes against our kin. While those of the manling race are not as known to be as honorable and stalwart as the dwarves, his actions are of a particular unfathomable oddity." Sitting back down with his full stein, he continues to consider the facts. "Why would he return to beg our forgiveness? His words of slander are not unknown to me, but I was not aware of his attempts on yours or any others life, Bruner and therefore I had not laid any direction to pursue him." Waving his hand dismissively he refers to the slanderous remarks. "As for his slanderous remarks, those are of no particular concern to me. As I said, manlings are not known for their honor in words and can be as flighty as elves in their handling of their grudges. His lies would do no more damage to our honor among the Marches than manling swords against Dwarven Mithril armor."

Taking another sip, he continues to think on the moment. "Being particularly surprised by the dishonorable actions of one such as him would be as foolish as not expecting darkness beneath the rocks. Just as one does not punish a child with the expectations of an adult, we shall not hold him to our unattainable standards." Nodding as it became clear, he looks directly to Bruner and Brotter.

"Mordinsamen Brotter, you will heal him of his wounds. Based on the severity of those wounds, you will determine appropriate recompense for them. I hold you charged to also see to his safety in his delivery back to his people for justice."

Nodding, Dorinthal looks to Steeg, "Master Steeg, you now give Dwarven wisdom to this new Council of theirs, do you not? We cannot trust this council's wisdom until we give it a chance and what better than the opportunity to rule on one of its own. You will ensure that manling justice by this council is appropriate for these actions. If they are unable to come to an appropriate punishment for his words against the Dwarven people, then he will be delivered to Mithril Hall for King Bruennor to decide his final fate. I trust you will ensure they do not fail in this simple task."

Finally, coming to a final decision, he addresses Bruner. "Master Bruner, you will pay this recompense to this manling. As per your own words, he was incapacitated by your masterful control of your blunt axe edge and anything beyond was not needed, but the result of your own emotions. We are not of the elder race and ruled by such dangerous paths as to be ruled by emotion over necessity. Of your honor within your intentions, I have no doubt. It's your wisdom that you have room to gain. You will also travel with Mordinsamen Brotter for delivering of this manling. You will also be charged in the safe delivery of this manling. As you both drain stein and travel together, I trust Mordinsamen

Brotter will impart some wisdom, and each of you will come to greater understanding of the other. With this, he will either discover a dark path within you or the well lit honorable path of a dwarven warrior.”

Standing to refill his stein, he completes his decision as he walks over to the barrel. “Make him ready for travel within two days.”

Brottor bowed low at the waist, before the Lord of Deepward Keep and touched the holy symbol of Clangeddin he wore about his neck as he did so.

"It will be as ye hae commanded me Laird. Wi yer permission, I'll be seein tae both me ain affairs an those of tha langshank prisoner's."

Brottor cast a sad eye towards Bruner before he departed, He greatly feared for his friend and prayed that the dwarven champion had not strayed too far down the wrong path into darkness. With powerful strides, the War-Priest made his way out of the Council chamber to do as he was commanded, leaving the others of the Clan to seek their own answers.

Golfildur stood in the far recesses of the dwarven council chamber, cloaked in invisibility and silent as only one of his race could be. He had heard it all. Silently he shook his head and frowned. The one named Bruner should have slain the human dog. Golfildur had counted on it. Again the stupid mercy and foolish ideals of the surfacers clouded their judgment.

No drow would have shown mercy to a self confessed enemy as they had done. It was madness. With a disgusted grimace, the old drow made his way to the stout doors the dwarves used to secure their keep. It was only a matter of time before one of them opened the doors and he could slip out into the Deepward Market. From there he would rejoin the others of House Jaelre and await the movement of the drow prisoner from Deepward Keep.

The Elf Stone would let him trace the captive and enact the rescue/escape. Golfildur's focus remained locked on the dictates of his god Vhaeraun. The captive must be given the chance to convert to the true faith or die.

Brottor finished packing his rucksack and stood in the center of the chamber he had been assigned as quarters, adjacent the temple of Clangeddin in Deepward Keep. He pulled thoughtfully at his braided red beard and considered what he may have forgotten. The trip to Rivermoot was less than a tenday in duration, but the mountains were never safe from wandering monsters and other less savory types.

Grimacing his heavy red eyebrows nearly touched as he turned about on his stubby legs. At four and half feet tall, he was average for one of the dwarves of the mountains. Common folk referred to his people as "Shield Dwarves", a name that reflected their propensity towards combat and all it entailed.

Snapping his fingers, Brottor realized he had not sent a squad of guards to fetch the human prisoner Vicho Smadda from the dungeon. The human was being sent to Rivermoot to be turned into his own peoples hands, so that he could face justice in a fair trial for his many evil deeds.

Going to the door of his chambers, Brottor caught the attention of one of Deepward Keep's may guardians. "OI! Tis bloody time fer tha langshanks tae be brought up an out fer tha trip daen tha mountain. Gae ye an fetch him lad, assemble tha othar guards goin wi me an Bruner. We meet in tha Deepward Market in fifteen minutes... And lad, tha prisoner better be dressed fer tha trip and nay mishandled. Remember he aint yer enemy any mora, hes yer charge... An, yer honor is countin on hae whall ye treat him. Naew gae and get crackin!"

As the guard hurried to do as he was instructed, Brottor thought of the humans fate, he was a liar, a villain to the core, there was no doubt that the Common Council would find him guilty and take the steps required for justice. Brottor stepped out of his chambers shouldered his rucksack and checked to make sure his axe was in his belt. It was time to find Bruner and get a move on.

Deep in the bowels of the Deepward Keep, Vicho Smadda was unchained from the cold stone wall, given warm clothing and stout boots for his feet. The wizard looked at the many grim faced dwarves and shuddered involuntarily. They had fed him, mended his wounds and treated him well after the initial harsh treatment. He had expected to be slain outright.

Death was better than the eternal shame he felt, with a resigned frame of mind, he squared his shoulders and moved out with his guards. He had no idea what they had in store for him, but he was determined to die well. They would not make him beg or cry for mercy. The Zulkir's of Thay would gain no pleasure from Vicho's execution. That was his revenge, he would deny them their final joy.

Brottor stumped his way down the stone corridors of Deepward Keep, his hard soled leather boots echoed from the good stone upon which he walked. His path led him to the chamber occupied by Bruner. With a grimace at what he anticipated to be a frosty reception from the champion, he raised his gauntleted fist and knocked hard, three times.

"Bruner, tha lads are assembled and ready tae take tha langshanks bastard daen tha mountain tae Rivermoot, Tis time we get awa!"

The War Priest waited for the response from within, chewing his lower lip as he did so. He was sure that Bruner would not understand his reasoning for calling the champion's actions into question before the entire Clan. Clangeddin knows it wasn't easy to do, but as a Priest of the Clan, Brottor would be damned to the fiery hells if he would let any of his folk take the first steps into darkness unchallenged. If shame and the risk of dishonor were the cost to save a dwarf's soul, then so be it.

Bruner was not in his room brooding about the blatant insult to his honor that he just received at the hands of Brottor. Instead, he was down in the temple of Moradin, praying for the All Father's protection for all involved in this, what was more than likely his final assignment at Deepward Keep.

Shortly after the Keepwarden's decision and Brottor's abrupt departure from the council chambers after that left Bruner fit to be tied by his frustration. What yanked his beard more than anything else is that not once did Brottor even approach him to discuss this in private and based this off of rumors. He sought out the wisdom of Sonnlino Sorgin Anvilbreaker, priest of Moradin, and they talked for many hours and over several steins of ale, but this did little to ease his mind and body. Now several of the training dummies will have to be replaced as he took out his frustration on them with a pair of training waraxes. Working to increase his skill of wielding two weapons later on he took up his shield and had several lads attack him in unison. It was valuable training for the lads to focus their efforts on a superior target. They were learning quick, had picked up on most of Bruner's tricks, and could counter a good portion of them. He was proud of the group that would soon be standing guard, protecting this great Keep.

Bruner took a moment's break and when Dorvan entered. The lad was eager to prove himself, grasped the opportunity at hand, picked up a training copy of a greatsword, looked over at Bruner, and saw that his clothes were sweat soaked, with a big grin on his face, "can ye still stand?"

Grinning, "Aye, I can." He picked up his axe and shield as they went to the center of the room. They squared off against each other probing each others defenses and then came the flurry of blows. Each taking turns as they seesawed back and forth about the room, weapons crashing against each other, they knocked over a couple of the benches nearby and Dorvan managed to wreck a training dummy that took the brunt of his attack as Bruner ducked under the blow, shifting off to his side and striking up into Dorvan's ribs with a light tap of his axe. Smiling, "Yer form an tactics 'ave improved greatly lad." Taking a serious tone, "Dorvan, ye 'ave an invitation ta join mae at tha Citadel's Iron Guards if ye are interested." Placing a hand on his shoulder, "Ye 'ave proved yerself time an again ta those 'ere an I 'old those who da so in 'igh regards. I will speak with mae commander if ye ever consider it."



With that said and done, Bruner told him to get cleaned up and make ready to escort the filthy bastard Vicho to town to face trial. Bruner knew this would not be easy and require everything of him to ensure that the filth made it there alive and in once piece. He would need all of the allies he could muster for this.

Once cleaned up and packed, Bruner made his way down to the temple to pray.

After approximately ten minutes of waiting for an answer at the door, Brottor grimaced and sighed in exasperation. Bruner was obviously not in his chambers. Pulling thoughtfully at his beard, Brottor took a moment to consider where the dwarven warrior might be.

There were many places Bruner could go, not the least of which that came to mind, was the ale-pit. Brottor suspected that Bruner was beyond angry with him, possibly to the point of irrational violence. And, if Brottor's suspicions concerning Bruner's spiritual state were correct... He feared for the safety of others as well.

Making his way back to the entrance of Deepward Keep, Brottor managed to send a guard to the awaiting escort detail in the Deepward Market, he sent the guard to let them know that they were to await both he and Bruner's arrival. As he stood there pondering just which ale-pit to check first, he noticed the Clans-dwarves nearest him suddenly tense and move slightly away from him. Turning, he saw Bruner move out of the training area and towards the direction of the temple to Moradin.

With a saddened expression, he glanced at the other dwarves trying to look nonchalant as they went about their business. This was going to be harder than he thought. But a rock once set down the side of a mountain will continue to roll regardless of the bumps in its path. With that in mind, he set his path to intercept that of Bruner.

Just as the champion was about to set his hand to the door of Moradin's temple, Brottor called out. "Thera ye are, I've been lookin fer ye. Tha langshanks is chained an waitin in the Market wi tha guards fer tha escort. Tis time we gae awa an be done wi this. I've sent em word tae wait fer us. An I means tae walk out O' tha keep by yer side, as tha Keepwarden hae ordered."

Brottor waited for Bruner's response, his green eyes focused hard on the other dwarf, seeking for any sign of the darkness that he suspected lay like rotten meat beneath the surface.

Vicho took great gulps of the fresh air in the market place. Everywhere there was the hustle and bustle of dwarves, elves and humans going about their lives and the business

of buying and selling. He was overjoyed to learn that the dwarves wouldn't kill him outright, but planned to take him to Rivermoot, where he would be turned over to the authorities. He was sure he would get a fair trial there and once everyone knew the circumstances of his crimes he was sure he would not be condemned to death.

Vicho thought of his deeds and weighted them in line with the warning he would give regarding the drow. He was sure the Council would use divination spells to learn the truth and verify his confession. He was sure they would be able to detect the physical signs of his torture at the drow's hands. With a light step he matched pace with his dwarven guards. He was safe, ringed by dwarven warriors and dwarven steel.

It wasn't until he saw a familiar shape amongst the crowded market, that he realized his true danger. She was cloaked and hooded, but he knew her, he would never forget her. She was dark and beautiful as a hot summer night, deadly and vicious as a starving, blood-crazed daemon. She had seen him and she made sure he saw her as well. Vicho started to shake and shudder uncontrollably as her crimson eyes bore into his, from under her purple hood.

His dwarven guards thinking he was trying to escape brought him down hard to the stone floor and a general panic ensued in the market as commoners screamed and fled from the sudden commotion. While his guards physically restrained him, Vicho struggled, screaming to be taken back into the Deepward Keep, he was begging now, shaking in terror... There were worse things than death and Amazagorza was waiting for him.

She giggled to herself as she twisted the ring of invisibility upon her finger and disappeared. She couldn't help herself, the miserable dog had appeared to be quite satisfied with himself. He had lived when he was supposed to be dead, slain by dwarven hands.

Amazagorza casually strolled past the pure chaos that erupted in the Deepward Market. Dwarves shouted, weapons flashed and women screamed. Booths were overturned and fights had broke out amongst the commoners as they became embroiled in the chaos that Vicho's outburst had started. With any luck, one of the dwarven warriors would knife the human-rat while they pinned him to the ground, trying to prevent his escape.

Little did they suspect, that Vicho would never try to be free of them and the supposed safety they provided to him. Vicho would never make it to Rivermoot. He was meant to die while in dwarven custody and by the nine-hells he would. Amazagorza would see to it her father's plans did not go awry. Vicho would go screaming to the abyss one way or another.

Bruner's hand rested on the door's latch into the temple as he heard the cleric's words. He spun to meet his eyes, the braids in his beard swayed in the momentum, as the words slowly sunk in and the ramifications hit him like a hammer. He closed the distance between them faster than what the others thought he could, hooked his hands into the collar of Brottor's armor and used his weight to force Brottor against the stone wall as he spoke through clenched teeth, "Are ye a beardlin?!" Bruner continued to pin Brottor against the stone wall, "Ye NEVER 'ave tha prisoner in tha open before formin up tha escort!" Bruner suddenly had a very bad feeling as he eased up Brottor from the wall, and then shoved him hard against it.

Looking about as he starts to the Keep's door, "Lads! With me, to the market place!" He spies Dorvan appearing from his small shrine, "Dorvan lad, follow me! Trouble is nearby." As Bruner hefted his own waraxe as a rallying call to the others, he was in full stride now as he barreled out the doors and began to cross the bridge's massive expanse.

Kilain hear the words from Bruner and rushes after him, with quick feet his is right by his side as they're halfway over the long bridge. He catches a glimpse of Bruners face as they're running towards the marketplace and sees the anger pouring like water from a waterfall. With some hesitation, though still with determination he says, "I'll stand by yer side... as always, Bruner."

Brottor smoothed the front of his beard and winced. He had seen something in Bruner's eyes, rage or an underlying evil, he couldn't tell which just yet.

He started to follow at a walk after the running dwarves, confident in the guard detail he had already sent out with the prisoner.... That was until the great doors to the Keep opened up and he heard the terrible commotion from out in the Deepward Market.

With a curse to all he held holy, the priest ran for all he was worth. Bruner had been right it seemed. The damned langshanks was trouble with a capitol "T".

The scene in the Deepward Market was one of pure pandemonium, the drunks from the ale-pits had entered the fray after there were calls of a ruckus amongst the guards and a prisoner. A basket of chickens that were for sale was overturned and busted open, the chickens tried to take flight, fluttering about in everyone's way, feathers dusted the entire market.

A child had become separated from her mother and was screaming in the middle of the marketplace as nearby a merchant slammed a stout basket of fruit into the face of a drunk who was trying to lift his purse. Additional dwarven warriors were rushing to the scene

from the guard posts leading from the underdark passages.

Suddenly amongst all the chaos, a female voice could be heard above the commotion.  
"LOOK! THE DWARVES ARE MURDERING A PRISONER!"

All eyes turned to the ring of dwarven guards at the foot of the great bridge leading into the keep. Many noticed a limp human form pinned down beneath a dwarven guard's heavy boot. One of the drunks nudged a nearby accomplice and said "That's the wizard Smadda they got, filthy bastards were huntin him and mean to do him harm. we should do sumthin."

Amazagorza silently made her way out of the market. Her yell had done its job, even if the dwarves had not already killed Vicho, they would be blamed. Now all she had to do was bide her time and wait until she could make sure her fathers plans didn't go awry.

Lucien sat in his customary space in the Deepward market and scrutinized the large stone statue before him. He had become enamored of dwarven stonework and sculpture some months ago when he had first visited. He had since moved into the Inn, hoping that soon Anastasia would put him into contact with a master dwarven stonemason. In the meantime he had done what he was doing today, analyzing the bas reliefs on columns, and sometimes sketching the work he saw. He would then retire at night to try and imitate what he had seen during by trying his own hand at sculpting, or to study their language. The dwarves themselves had been kind enough, although it was obvious he was still an outsider and as such none had agreed to take him on as an apprentice, or even share too much of their own culture with him. His study and sketching were interrupted by a sudden commotion on the other side of the market. Frowning slightly, he stood and smoothed out the folds of his red robe and walked around the statue to get a better view of what the trouble was. As he neared he could see several people crowding about. Somewhere someone shouted that the dwarves were killing a prisoner, and chaos began to erupt. Lucien's steps quickened as he moved to the epicenter of the trouble. Dwarves were often dour, and hard...but he had learned also that they were a fair people. Killing prisoners, much less in public, did not seem like something the people of Deepward would do. Something was wrong....

Dorvan sat quietly in Haela's shrine, his greatsword across his knee's. Thinking was not his strong suit, it never had been and it never would be. But all that had happened in the last ten day required some kind of reflection on his part. First his vision, then the dragon, the recovery of the greatsword he held reverently on his lap, becoming a kaxanar and the surrender of the manling and the council that it spawned. His head was reeling from it all so he had come to the shrine to hopefully sort things out.

It was calming to sit in front of the altar and lose himself in the flickering flames that ran

its length. But clarity, as it most often did, eluded him. He dutifully said his prayers, sheathed his sword and left the shrine to find spend some time with the practice dummies.

When he got there he heard a loud snapping and a muffled crash as something padded hit the floor. He stepped through the door in time to see Bruner kick the remnants of the practice dummy he had snapped in half, to the side wall. As Bruner leaned against the wall to catch his breath Dorvan asked him, "Can ye still stand?"

What ensued was a brutal training session between them. Dorvan always considered himself a good fighter but Bruner was definitely the better of the two! So he was surprised when it was over that Bruner had made him an offer to join the Iron Guard. Just when he had finally found a bit of equilibrium through training, Bruner had to go and throw his Dorvan's thoughts into disarray again! Gods, what else could happen?! He told Bruner he would need time to think about his offer and went back to the shrine.

After a bit more time in the shrine he decided to go soak in the bath house. As he was coming out of the shrine he heard Bruner shout his name and yell for him to follow. Dorvan did not hesitate, and as soon as he saw Bruner pull his axe from his belt, he reached over his shoulder for his holy symbol 'Flamebolt'.

When they exited the Keep the scene before them made Dorvan stumble to a temporary halt. The Market place was in utter chaos! People screaming and running, a multitude of small fights, tables and chairs flying as people crashed into them, and in the middle of it all, a group of the Keep guards. He quickly scanned for the enemy that had to be there...He could find none. He clipped the sword to his back again and headed into the scrum with the intention of helping Bruner and the guards as best he could.

The guards had the manling pinned to the ground. Had he started this? He pushed the guard off of the manling, and then lifted the manling onto his shoulder like a sack of grain. For a split second he looked at the chasm the bridge spanned and contemplated throwing the manling to his death. What little wisdom he had took over and he realized that would go against the wishes of the Keep council. Bruner needs to deliver the manling to be judged by his own race. Dorvan would do everything in his power to ensure Bruner succeeded!

He put his hand on Bruners back and said, "Mae gots da manling, make us a path so wae kin deliver 'im to da manling councl. Wen wae is clae, I bae chekin 'im fer woonds."

With that said he reached deep down inside himself and called on the strength of Haela, and followed Bruner out.

They poured into the crowd with Bruner leading those that were rallied inside the Keep. He did not want to shed blood, but would if need be. He trusted those around him and knew they would do what was right as they closed the distance to where the disturbance

is. Few looked to see where the commotion was coming from as Bruner's group came thundering over the bridge. Twenty dwarves crossed the massive stone bridge at full speed and the sight of them and sound of their plated forms thundering towards them was truly a sight to behold.

"Nay bloodshed if ye can 'elp it lads!" Bruner hollered out as he lowered his shoulder down and bowled over two dwarves that stood between him and his objective, Vicho. Once into the melee, they worked their way to where a small knot of guards stood, Bruner pushed his way past others and Dorvan shouted out that he had the manling and he was behind him. "Push through!" he yelled, motioning with his free hand toward the mine's entrance away from the Keep. He shouldered his way past several guards, drunks and others who were in the fray, clearing the path for Dorvan and the others following behind. They would rest and figure out what happened later, when they were in a safer place.

*I never thought I would be savin tha sorry bastard's life.* That thought raced through his mind as they continued through the mine and out into the fresh mountain air. He took a quick head count to see who made it through when he noticed that Brottor was absent. He said a quick prayer to Moradin that the cleric would attend to those in need and catch up in time, he felt as though everyone would be needed to make it though this alive.

Kilain followed Bruner through the crowd, when a drunkard with a bottled swung at him. Kilain rolled to the side and around the drunkard that stumbled as his main target was not to be found. Kilain struck with precision a nerve right below the drunkards shoulder, and Kilain saw how the poor bugger froze.

Bruner and the rest had already dashed for the entrance, so Kilain just tried to keep any pursuers away from them... rolling, dodging and slightly moving towards the exit. He just couldn't wait until the fresh mountain air blew through his beard once again.

Lucien quickly took stock of the melee. He had no idea what was happening, but he could see that whatever the case the dwarves were not executing a prisoner. It looked more like they were trying to keep the mob at bay and protect the prisoner, although all the rioting and tumbling about obscured who they were trying the shield. From over the bridge he saw the doors to the keep fly open and a contingent of dwarves pour forth, charging across the bridge headed straight into the fray. Looking back he then noticed something else. Amidst all the fighting and chaos a lone child stood screaming. Quickly scanning the crowd he could see the mother, desperately attempting to force her own way through the dangerous mob to rescue her child. Without hesitation Lucien descended into the chaos. He ducked and weaved, pirouetted and parried in time to the crowds chaotic movements. He was a leaf, dancing amongst the waves of a storm tossed sea. He reached the child in time to shield it with his own body as a chair crashed down on the spot. It

broke across his back like the breakers against the rocks of the shore. Without missing a beat he snatched the child and spun out of the way just in time to avoid being trampled by the onrushing dwarven contingent from the keep. Keeping himself focused despite the heavy blow he had received he made his way back out through the crowd with the child in his arms, the grace of his movements lost amidst the contrasting violence.

Lucian had not gone far with the crying child, when her mother caught up to him. The woman was battered and blood dripped from her brow where someone had struck her. She took the child from his arms and crying thanked him over and over, her tears of joy mingling with the blood from her brow. Around them, the drunks were beginning to battle with gusto against the dwarven guards and each other. fists, furniture, ale bottles and chickens filled the air.

Brottor pulled up hard from his mad dash across the bridge. He had enough time to see Bruner and the dwarven contingent break out of the maelstrom in their dash for the exit of the market place. He watched as they headed into the mines and the exit to the surface.

A chicken fluttered in his face and nearly caused him to fall over the bridge into the endless chasm below, with a frustrated curse the Priest regained his balance and once again on solid footing, he drew forth his battle axe. As he raised his axe high above his head, the power of his god Clangeddin filled him and the blade burst into holy flame.

Roaring a mighty word of faith, Brottor called the presence of Clangeddin into the market place. Suddenly, there was a golden hued magical effect as Dethek Runes of power burst forth in the very air. Faithful dwarves of Clangeddin were unaffected by the holy presence, those not of the faith were laid flat on their backs too stunned to move or utter a cry. A half-Orc who was in the processes of strangling a Hin merchant to death, fell over dead, struck down by the God's manifestation.

As the chicken feathers floated to the stone floor of the market, sudden stillness was all that was heard.

Brottor looked about at the after effects of the chaos and grimaced. Using his axe to point to the wounded and unconscious, he growled deep and fierce. "We willna hae this sort O' goins on here. Tis a bloody place O' buisnees, nay a damnable brothel house brawl! Tend ye tae tha wounded and lock up the drunkards! Let tha Keepwarden deal wi it. Thars werk fer me tae be doin in tha meentimes. I anit got time tae be nurse maiden ye lot."

Lowering his axe, the flames died out. With a deep sigh, he carefully tread amongst the prostrate and unconscious forms of folk who had been laid low by the effects of Clangeddins gift.

Brottor regretted having to resort to such tactics, but it was the most direct means of restoring order. He could hear the armored column moving fast down the passageway leading to the surface. With a sigh he turned back to the standing dwarves.

"Tis hopin thay wi be waitin up topside. Send any wha can haelp tae Bruner. We may be needin all tha haelp we can get with tha bloody langshanks involved."

Finally getting to the other side of the market, with out treading on anyones head, he resumed his run to catch up to Bruner and the guards.

It was going to be a long day.

As the prisoner escort led by Bruner, burst out of the mouth of the mine into the cold mountain air, the sunshine upon their faces temporarily blinds them. The air is crisp, causing the tips of beards and moustaches to go stiff. The sky is a bright azure blue, with a few white fluffy clods over head. In the distance, the mountains shine like mithril silver as the sunlight strikes their snow clad slopes.

from above them, a Dwarven sentry challenges them "OI! WHAS AMISS IN THA MARKET?"

Captain of the guard, Thoridun picked himself up from being thrown back by the force of the spell. Shaking his head, he gripped his hammer tighter as quickly moved across the bridge toward the madness that had gripped the Marketplace. How by all the Stout in the Hall had this collapsed so fast and completely? Directing guards to separate the fools still trying to continue the brawl, and to care for those injured, he looked about the cavern. "Nae good will come about from this... Keepwarden will nae be pleased.. Nae pleased at all...."

Two full steins of Mithril Stout drained and a third looking to follow and yet the pain in his head stayed. He could feel the rhythmic drumming being pierced by a blast growing louder in the forefront of his skull behind his closed eyes as he sat in the quiet room. Pressing the cool stone to his warm forehead, he sat as he started to focus as he realized he was beginning to feel the rhythm through the very stone chair he sat upon. Just as began to realize that this new sensation wasn't from within, but from without, the large stone doors of the Council chamber flew open.

"Keepwarden, the marketplace is in chaos!" Dorinthal could see that the rhythmic feeling wasn't only his head throbbing, but the hard leather as guards stormed through the keep entryway and exiting into the Marketplace at a run. He see's his Captain of the Guards leading the group as they disappear into the darkness of the caverns.



Quickly rising to his feet, he pulls his waraxe from his belt. "Is it the Driders back again?!" Moving toward the doorway, the guard who passed the news moves to the side. "Nae, tis the prisoner moved out to Rivermoot. I be thinking he was trying to escape and the guard tackled him which set the whole market into a bloody brawl."

Dorinthal nearly stopped in midstride as he listened to the explanation. A common barroom brawl grew to a size needing his attention? Moving out the entrance to the Keep he looks across the chasm. It was as the guard said, though it seemed the greater chaos has subsided. His guards had the troublemakers round up and dealing with them. Chickens still ran about as they are want to do. Seeing that his axe was not needed, he slowly turned back to his keep and the desperately needed stout ale.

Bruner lead the way out into the sunlight he hears the guard, slowing his pace a few steps, <Bar brawl in the market place and we need to get clear quickly. Tell Brottor to catch up quickly when he passes by.> With that said he indicates to Dorvan to check Vicho for any wounds.

It was easy to follow the path that Bruner cleared before him. In no time they were through the tunnels and then out into the clear mountain air.

The gate guards hailed the group as they came into sight outside. While Bruner dealt with the guards, Dorvan dropped the manling to the ground and checked him for wounds. Dorvan called on the power of Haela Brightaxe and healed the minor cuts and bruises the manling had received in the market place. As an added precaution he had the manling drink a healing potion in case he had missed anything. When the potion was gone, Dorvan roughly pulled the manling to his feet by the chain on his wrists.

"Keep yer feet movin' manling or ye ride mae shoulder agin! An I bae knowin' 'at bae nun ta fun!"

Dorvan looks to Bruner as he finishes with the manling, "Hae will live, an' hae knows what 'appens ifn hae kenna keep up! Lead on!"

Gauging on the potion he was forced to drink, Vicho sits up, shakes his head to clear it. Looking around in a panic he quickly spots the twelve dwarven guards, Bruner and Dorvan.

"Drow! There was a drow in the market! Take me back! You don't know what they can do! Take me back to my cell! Ohhh... gods, she has found me... TAKE ME BACK!"

Vicho starts to shake violently in abject terror, all the while wringing his chained hands. His eyes are huge and dart back and forth as though he doesn't trust the clear light of day.

Kilain shrugs at first when the bright light hits his eyes, then he quickly turns around to check so that no one follows him. The cold breeze goes through his beard and a small cloud dissipates from his mouth as he speaks to Bruner and the rest of the escort. "Nay one's followin'." He takes a deep breath and feels the coldness down to his lungs. I be thinkin' that we be needin' ta quickin' our step though... one nevva' knows who might follow us." He looks at Vicho. "I saw nay drow... though they tend ta have tricks o' deceit ta get what they want." He ponders for a while and looks around as he starts to walk forward. The question be, *what 'em be wantin' n' why?*

Brottor huffed and puffed, his stubby legs pumping at a furious rate, his pack and armor weighed him down and made the entire process agonizing. It had been way too long since he last had to engage in the activities he now encountered. The close, dark, tunnels of the mine suddenly gave way to the clear crisp light of day. He blinked twice and bellowed for the others to wait. "OI! I DINNA MEENS TAE RUN AFTER YE ALL THA BLOODY WAYS TAE RIVERMOOT! HOLD UP YE SOTS!"

Gasping for breath, he resumed his run to catch up.

Vicho nearly squealed in his fear. "You thick headed stubborn knotheds! Didn't any of you listen! There's a civil war going on amongst the drow! We are in the middle of it! Take me back for the love of the Gods, please take me back! You cant stop them!"

Desperately the wizard tried to break away and flee back into the safety of the Deepward Keep.

Heavy, brown, leather boots stepped in front of Lucian's face and a stout, leather clad knee bent down as a dwarven under-priest laid a stoneware bottle to his lips. "Drink lad, twill make ye feel better." The dwarf gently helped Lucian take the healing potion. All around the Deepward Market, other dwarves were attending those who had been injured in the brawl, while the guards rounded up the drunks and villains. "Tha guards seen ye save tha wee lassie, twere a fine deed, ain ye should be proude O' "

Amazagorza turned and looked back up the hill, still under the cloak of invisibility, she

was confident none would see her. With a girlish skip to her step, she made her way down the rough path to the dirt road. She had time to set up her next move.

The Orcs of the Bone-Gnawer tribe would need a gift before they would listen to her. Giggling, she knew of just the right gift. Not far off in the forest, was a human's cottage. Orcs always appreciated a good meal.

North of Rivermoot, deep in a forest clearing, the drow of House Jaelre came and went on the assigned tasks given to them by their leader Golfildur. The old drow sat on a fallen log near the small fire, beneath the bright sunlight filtering through the tree tops.

He clutched the staff he had taken from the wizard Vicho. The child's skull atop the ebony wood, glared out into the distance with its dead empty eye sockets. He had much to think about. His meeting with the Darthiir Tieg was both enlightening and disturbing.

Neither of them had told the truth to the other. Lies could be told even when the words did not come forth. The Darthiir was tricky, devious and sly as any drow. Golfildur smiled to himself, this was going to be a perfect and rewarding partnership.

Regarding Vicho, well he was correct in sending Amazagorza to take care of the little rat. The human had outlived his usefulness to both the Blood Ravens and House Jaelre. The mercenary Captain Daric, was easy to manipulate into making the decision to kill the wizard. It was a favor that Golfildur was happy to oblige and would in debt the Captain to Golfildur's cause. Soon, he would know the location of the hidden Darthiir outpost in the Moonwood and his real work would begin. The plans for Elven supremacy in the north were progressing quite well.

Lucien drank the offered liquid and nodded gratefully. The dwarf was right, it did help. Taking a deep breath and centering himself he looked to his dwarven benefactor and smiled. "Thank you," he said smiling simply and got to his feet, wincing slightly at his bruised back. Looking around he could see the chaos of the past few minutes was drawing to a close, the dwarves moving methodically about restoring order.

"My names Lucien," he continued after a moment offering his hand. "And it was nothing, I was just happy I was quick enough. What exactly happened here anyways, and is there anything else I can do to help?"

The dwarf took the offered hand in a meaty fist and shook it with gusto, "Me names Trond." Trond looked about as a gaggle of chickens staggered by, weaving to and fro.

"Hmm... me guess is tha tha prisoner started a ruccus. Thay be takin him daen below tae Rivermoot fer trial." With a bright grin, Trond handed the remainder of the stoneware bottle to Lucian. "Keep tha lad, thars mora fram whar it come from. Ifn ye wanna haelp, mayhaps ye can catch tha escort up. Priest Brottor be runnin after em naew. If yer quick ye can catch em. I be guessin thay coul use all tha haelp thay can get thar hands on."

With a quick nod of his head, Trond indicates the passage out of Deepward Market towards the surface.

"Thank you, Trond" Lucien answered taking a half step back as a squealing pig darted between them. He gave a slight bow as the dwarf turned and walked away. Prisoner escort? Lucien did not think of himself as much of a prison guard, but he found himself moving out towards the exit in the direction Trond had indicated anyways. Maybe it was that he longed to be outside again to see the sun, the moon, and the stars. Maybe he wanted to once again do a little traveling after having been cooped up studying for so long. Or maybe whatever was in the stoneware jug Trond had given him was lowering his inhibitions. Whatever the case, he made his way out of the market and through the tunnels to the Keeps exit at a brisk pace.

Bruner's patience was already thinning, now he was being forced to move without the troops that were selected and next to no supplies for the journey. Thinking for a moment, he sent two of the guards back into the Keep to gather their gear bags, supplies and to find Brottor. They would remain here, in the relative safety in the shadow of the Keep.

He turned to Vicho and the look on his face was not a happy one, "We nay goin back." He wrapped the chain to his shackles around his wrist and gave them a hard tug, pulling him down to his knees and hissed, "Ye will make it ta Rivermoot." Looking over at Dorvan, then the others as he worked to keep the frustration from creeping into his voice, "Fer those that followed me ta this point, I thank ye an I will think nathin less of anyone that turns back naw." No one budged as he started to grin. "Goot. Tha path ta Rivermoot will be nathin but ambushes an traps as thay know we be comin' an tha path we be takin."

He turned to two of the guards that came from the Keep at his calling, "Orgrim and Ragnar, I need ye ta return ta that Keep an retrieve the rest of our gear. We be needin it an grab anthin else that tis nay nailed ta tha floor. We're gonna move on toward town, meet up with us as fast as ye can." He nodded to the lads who then turned and hustled back into the Keep for the supplies.

He took a moment to think, "We need to keep moving an aside fram Brottor or tha other twa, treat anyone else as a threat." He glanced about to make sure that his instructions

were clear and then turned to Dorvan, "Lad, would ye say a quick prayer fer protection in our travels?"

They all took a knee, but kept their eyes wary of the surroundings.

Dorvan hesitated when Bruner asked for a prayer to be said. He was just getting accustomed to saying his own prayers out loud in the shrine, let alone say prayers for others! He was not ready for this yet. He had only been a kaxanar for a couple of ten-days now. But with the others looking at him he felt the pressure to do as he had been asked.

He held his flaming greatsword in front of him and said a prayer to Haela Brightaxe. When he had finished he lowered his sword and told Bruner, "Its time ta git thae manling ta thae council. Les' bae off!"

The Deepward Keep guards, Orgrim and Ragnar thundered back up the slope to the Keep's entrance to do as they were ordered by Bruner. On reaching the summit, they saw a panting and out of breathe Brottor as he yelled out to the others. With a grin between the two guards they ran up to the Priest and Orgrim advised him that the others were not far off. "Oi! Priest Brottor! Dinna yell like a stuck pig will ye! Tha prisoners daen below an thay be waitin. We be goin in fer supplies. Tha miners keep a bundle O'goods near tha tabels and what not, in thar. Tis official Keep buisness, sae I dinna ken thay whall complain meuch."

So saying the two warriors reentered the mine and set about collecting the needed supplies.

Vicho, forced to his knees by Bruner's steely hand, winced in pain as the iron manacles bit into his flesh. Despite the pain, the fear he felt upon seeing the drowess was enough to give him courage to speak up.

"Bruner.... listen to me, I know that drowess I saw... She's part of the group loyal to Golfildur. It was she who tortured me... You must believe me. You can't do this! She isn't like the other drow you may have fought... They live in the forest like they were born to it and they don't suffer in the light of day! Bruner don't condemn us all... don't condemn me! Oh sacred and holy Gods! There are worse fates than death and that she devil knows what she's about, do you think she will give you an honorable, open, stand up fight! Bruner listen to me!"

Later that evening...

Jan was a forester by trade, he lived in the mountains and made his living from the forest at the edge of a mountain clearing. he had a small log cabin there. The cabin was modest and provided safety and comfort in the harsh winters that were the norm this high up in the mountains.

Jan had a productive day, he had shot a fine, twelve point stag, earlier in the afternoon while hunting. At six foot two inches tall, he was lean and strong as an ox. There was little this mountain man feared. As the sun was setting, he neared his home and saw the door open and light spilling out of the cabin. Someone had entered and was obviously making themselves at home in his house! Setting the stag down, he drew an arrow and knocked it to his longbow. He brushed back the shoulder length brown mop of hair out of his eyes with his left hand and cautiously made his way to the house to challenge the interloper.

As he neared the house, he could smell the delightful scent of something cooking on the fire inside. His belly rumbled and he suspected that who ever was inside, was eating his meager provisions. Most likely, it was a traveler who had gotten lost on their way to Deepward Keep. It had happened before. But the mountains breed caution in a man and he had lived here for a very long time. Stepping to the side of the door he peeked around the corner to see inside.

As his eyes took in the empty room, he felt a searing pain in his lower back, instantly his legs buckled and he fell face down, dropping his bow. He couldn't feel his legs nor move them. As he tried to roll over using his arms, he felt another quick, sharp, searing pain, this time between his shoulder blades, his arms went dead as well. In front of his face he saw purple leather boots, the sort a woman would wear.

Suddenly he was rolled over onto his back and could see who his attacker was. He stared in horror at the ebony face and the hard, merciless, crimson eyes. She was beautiful beyond belief her face framed in long, snow white hair.

Amazagorza smiled at the crippled man before her. He was lean and strong with corded muscles. With strength beyond any, which one would assume in one so diminutive, she picked him up. He was heavy but not beyond her magically enhanced ability. Silently she carried him into the night. They had far to go and despite his plaintive calls for help, no one answered. The mountains remained as they always had been.

Bruner was trying hard to work out a plan, but with Vicho's constant whining it was hard to concentrate. While in the shadow of the Keep's guard they had relative safety while Orgrim and Ragnar went for the gear and supplies. He turned to face the wizard, "Shut...yer...trap." He saw genuine fear when he looked into the Vicho's eyes, but

Bruner knew that this might be a one way trip and he accepted this, facing his fears of death. *I will face the All Father with my head held high.*

<Bruner lad, do not think you are going anywhere without me.> Kebur said as he moved through the massive doors that lead into the Keep. Apparently this was not whom or what Bruner expected to see coming through the doors.

Kebur was followed by Torgga who carried a solid pack, probably with both her's and Kebur's gear. The old one had a way to talking, no conning others to get his way. <We will not be left behind to play nursemaid to a bunch of drunks who fight in the market.> Adjusting her cloak enough to show that she was brandishing the heavy crossbow that she favored, <We will fight be your side. You have done more for those around you than anyone else, it is now time for us to return the favor.> She moved off to the side to keep an eye out for trouble.

Bruner's small group was now in fact turning into a small army, all for the delivery of one manling to face trial. He took a moment to factor in the new arrivals and what they brought to the fight and for once things started to look up. Now they only had to wait for Brottor to catch up along with the return of Orgrim and Ragnar and they would finally be on their way.

Bruner turned to Torgga grinning, <Lass, when the lads return, take my crossbow as it might be a bit more to your liking than the one you carry. Use it well.> Turning to Kebur, Bruner placed a hand on his mentor's shoulder, <My old friend, this is the time to when we fight together once more. Never surrender, never retreat.>

Kebur's face could have been chiseled out of stone as he grunted his response followed by a slight chuckle, <You realize that if Helena finds out about this, she will have both of our arses.> Stepping in close to Bruner, <This is my last hurrah lad, I want to return home not an old dwarf, but one that a song or two will be sung about years after my passing and this is it.>

Bruner rested his free hand on Kebur's shoulder. <Old one, I want you to come along, not for one last hurrah, but to unleash the magical arsenal you wield. We will need your help, I will need your help to make sure everyone gets through this.>

Kebur nodded his understanding and moved off to tend to several items to include the myriad of scroll tubes that he attached to the belt of his robe, and then pulled his cloak over once again, covering the tubes and the parchments they contained. He was as ready as he was going to be for this adventure.

Things looked even better as Orgrim and Ragnar finished leading the oxen cart across the bridge, gear bags tossed into the back that covered a few small kegs of ale that were smuggled out of the Keep's storehouse. They were technically following orders from

Bruner, but that was still pretty thin when it came to taking the kegs. The loading was easy with the help from the other guards and clerics inside the Keep as they understood what was happening.

Without asking, an escort formed up around the cart team as they made its way to the entrance. No other attacks would hinder the group from getting the vile bastard manling to his appointed time at the gallows. Sunlight hit their faces as they passed through the mine and into the fresh mountain air at the Keep's fortified mountain entrance.

Brottor caught up with the escort along with the oxcart. Looking about, he realized that they were losing daylight. "Bruner, if we hae evraone than tis time we shoul be movin out. We hae a lang ways tae gae."

With a slap of his axe upon his shield, the Priest of Clangeddin started to sing the battle chants of Clangeddin in a bold and loud voice. The ancient songs would help to put a spring into the warrior's steps and remind all enemies who saw them, that the dwarves of the mountains, like the mountains themselves, were to be respected and feared.

Brottor's song could be heard clear and sharp in the bright mountain sky.

"Axes smash, broad blades swing, shinin armor, mithril rings, awa we march tae win tha war, drive tha foe awa, till thay come nay mora...."

Bruner mumbles off to Kebur, <The inquisitor finally decides to joins us. I wonder what he will do when he does not find what he searches for in my soul.>

Kebur grunts his agreement, <Mind yourself lad, settle this after we finish this assignment.> He then moved on to secure his place on the bench seat of the ox cart.

Bruner moved to the cart, <Lads and Lass, gather up your gear and we will be on our way.> Securing his own bag, Bruner noticed one of the kegs that was not completely covered and looked at Ragnar.

<We were gathering supplies from the kitchen and passed by where a several were kept, following your orders we took what was not nailed down.> replied the young guard Ragnar.

Bruner didn't say anything and pulled the cover back over the keg. He then passed his crossbow over to Torgga to use.



Before everyone is set to go, Bruner crosses over to Brottor so to keep others involved to a minimum, <Let us get one thing clear. You are not in charge of this assignment...I am. Especially considering the colossal foul up that you created in the market place.> Stepping in close so that he is the only one to hear Bruner, <That and the lads do not trust you now. Several think you are an inquisitor not a cleric they can speak openly with anymore. They do not know if you will do to them what you did to me.>

With that said, Bruner turned and went to the front of the caravan and started his way down the hill.

Brottor continued singing the ancient chants of his people. He would not interrupt the sacred lyrical prayers just to satisfy Bruner's demand for authority. As the escort moved out, the Priest raised his voice even louder.

While he sang, his mind whirled. *Bruner may be correct, the lads may nay trust me anymore... Tis a hard price ta pay fer one's ain concern fer tha Clan.*

Switching to a chant regaling the ancient heros of the Clan, Brottor's mind focused on his duty to the Clan and the warrior named Bruner. *Trust er nay, me ain interests aint at stake hera, tis Bruner an his wha concerns me.*

Brottor was very conscious that Bruner had surrounded himself with all his closest allies. Those most likely to follow him into any fall to darkness. *Wont bloody happen! I aint loosin a single dwarven soul on this trip. Sooner we get tha damned langshanks tae River Moot, tha better.*

The bright sunlight reflected off dwarven armor and dwarven war-steel, high overhead the ravens soared to and fro.

Kilain was watching the sky, with an eerie feeling creeping up his spine... something was not right. Usually he always felt a strength and bond with the sunlight, this time he felt nothing... just that feeling of something that was not as it should be.

He heard Brottor singing and he turned toward the cleric, there was something about that song, something Kilain could not put his finger on. "Lads, there be sum'thin nay right... I can feel it." Kilain looked around at the others as to seek confirmation on what he felt. He then grabbed the symbol hanging around his neck and prayed a silent prayer in an attempt to get rid of the strange feeling.

Emerging from the keep into the bright light of day Lucien blinked. As he stood there to get his bearings he was jostled about by several dwarves apparently on urgent business. "Oh, excuse me," he said apologetically as he stepped aside. Looking down the slope he could see a rather large assembly of dwarves busy in what looked like preparations for travel. He wasn't sure if that was the escort, but even if it wasn't they might be able to tell him who and where this Brottor was. Taking a moment to smooth the wrinkles from his red robe in order to make a better impression, Lucien hurried down towards the group.

Ragnar was just finishing stowing away the last of the gear in the wagon and jumping down when he saw a man in red hurrying down the hill towards the escort. With a grimace, he didn't want to interrupt the Priest's holy chants, first it was rude and second he always liked this particular story anyway, he yelled at the top of his lungs "BRUNER WE GOT A RUNNER COMMUN UP FAST FRAM THA KEEP!"

Ragnar winced at the power of his own voice and nodded apologetically to the chanting priest, who stopped suddenly amidst the middle part of the story. Ragnar surely hoped Brottor would pick up the chant when this new situation resolved itself.

Bruner heard Ragnar's warning and in turn yell out, <Torgga! A runner from behind, take him down, but keep him alive.>

Turning to make sure she heard his order over Brottor's chants he saw that Torgga already had the heavy crossbow shouldered and was taking aim. He saw that Orgrim moved into the path of the bolt and yelled, <Orgrim...ground...now!>

Hearing Bruner's order and knowing that it was for a good reason for it, Orgrim dropped down to the ground face first and did not move. He heard the whistle of a pair of bolts sail past where he stood moments before and thanked the All Father repeatedly for the next few moments until it was safe for him to get up.

Torgga took careful aim and let sail not one, but two bolts from her crossbow. Both sailing true at each of the manling's thighs, stopping him dead in his tracks.

Three of the guards surrounded him as the others posted on the wagon with the prisoner as Bruner marched up to the manling and said, "Ye are nay taa bright laddie. What ye be doin 'ere?"

Ragnar got to his feet as fast as he could once others started moving and posted himself at the rear of the wagon, waiting for further orders.

The night was dark and under a moonless sky, amidst the House Jaelre camp, in the forest north of Rivermoot, Sorn dumped the load of blood-red cloaks onto the ground near the fallen log upon which sat Golfildur. "I have obtained what you sought Holy One. The fools are as infantile as a new born babes."

Golfildur looked up from his prayers. Sorn was correct of course, but it was never good to underestimate ones foes. "Do you think you were seen Sorn? They have Mages you know. If you have led them here... I will be most displeased with you."

Golfildur's crimson eyes bored into the younger drow's, until the younger male cast his eyes down and trembled in fear. "I was not followed Holy One. None saw me, nor suspect that it was we who took their clothing. I am sorry for causing you any concern".

Golfildur stood suddenly and closed the distance between them, much more quickly than one would expect from a drow of his advanced years. Sorn flinched as Golfildur's hand came up to rest on his face. With a fatherly gesture the old drow patted the side of Sorn's head, ruffling his white hair. "Do not ever underestimate your enemy Sorn. It is a mistake that many make and it has killed many who should have lived. That and stupid dialog, if you intend to kill someone, do not gloat or talk of it. Do it quickly and with no words. Gloat after your foe lays dead at your feet."

With a gesture, Golfildur indicated that Sorn should pick up the cloaks once more. "Amazagorza will need these for what we intend to do. Our cousins have agreed to open negotiations with us, if we ensure the prisoner is brought back to the Council alive to testify.

I do not trust either the Archer Jasren nor Tein'gathuin over much. But, it is up to us to provide a token of good faith. We can do that to a degree. But I still wish to put in motion the plan I have, to establish our cousins dominion over this region.

The dwarves of the mountains are too powerfull and thus pose a threat to our cousin's supremacy, as are the Blood Ravens. Let us see who amongst them is the strongest and perhaps the Council Of Commons will fall as well beneath the onslaught of bloody war.

Once the lesser races are at each others throats, then our cousins will be able to step in and establish peace under their terms... Of course with our proper guidance.

Cackling with laughter, Golfildur opened up the magical gate to his daughter's location. Sorn dumped the cloaks and a note containing further instructions through, as from beyond the gate, a man's screams of agony could be heard amongst the howls of Orcish laughter.

As he approached the dwarven contingent, he could hear them shouting to one another. His dwarf was too bad and he was too far to really catch all of what was being said. He managed to make out something about running and the ground. Before he could translate further however he saw one of the dwarves fall flat on his face abruptly, and perhaps more importantly saw another dwarf firing her crossbow at him. Lucien had only moments to be surprised at the speed with which she fired the weapon before surprise turned to action. Years of training had prepared him to act without thinking, relying on instinct. He quickly struck one of the bolts from the air with his hand while attempting to twist away from the other. The sudden heavy numbness spreading from his thigh was a sign he had been too slow to evade the second bolt however, and he staggered as his wounded leg refused his direction. Seeing the dwarven guards rapidly approaching him, and realizing they were obviously on a heightened state of alert he fell to one knee quickly answering Bruner in rather poor dwarvish <Peace! Am Friend!>

Brottor's chant was over for the moment. There was blood on the air and damned if he didn't know if that was a good thing or a bad thing.

Wheeling around, he drew forth his axe and waited. There were Clan warriors a work. If they needed aid, he'd call down Clangeddin's fire to burn the foe to cinders, if not he was prepared to heal wounds and mend broken bones.

Vicho screeched like a little frightened girl. "It's the drow! Bruner! Save me!" The wizard shook in abject terror confident he would be taken again.

Dwarves are fast when they have to be, at short distances they are incredibly fast. The warriors of the Clan stormed up the hill, armored and armed with fiersome axes, ready to deal death and worse if the need be.

Kilain reacted quickly on the words of a runner. "It be startin' now" he thought to himself as he turned to see Orgrim drop to the ground. He saw the bolts flying through the air and with a look of surprise he saw that the runner caught one of the bolts in mid air and how the man kneeled after the second bolt hit its mark.

"A monk n' human as well?" he thought as he dashed up the small slope towards the entry.

Kilain looked down at the man, trying to catch his eye and see if he had any visible symbols on him. "Who be yer deity, lad n' why ye be followin' us?"

Lucien maintained his position and did his best to exude an aura of non hostility as the dwarven guards flanked him, hoping to ease an already tense situation. Despite the pain in his thigh he smiled and tried to answer Kilain and Bruner in dwarvish <Am I looking for....I am for looking>

Sighing he switched to common. "I am sorry, I am afraid my dwarvish is still somewhat lacking. I am also sorry to have startled you unnecessarily.....I should have realized something was wrong by what happened in the marketplace and approached at an easier pace. It would seem my eagerness to be of help outspoke my common sense. My names Lucien, in service to the Order of the Sun Soul. Trond said I should come up here and see if I could be of help escorting a prisoner. He mentioned Brottor actually.....but I have no idea who he is."

Pausing to smile in good humor he added "I am guessing by the reception that I have at least found the right group."

Seeing that the threat had obviously been stopped, Brottor made his way back to the crest of the hill and saw the langshanks with a crossbow bolt through his leg. Kilain obviously was able to identify the fellow and surrounded as he was by Clans dwarves he wasn't a threat any longer.

Still, the red clothing the man wore made Brottor pause. He'd be damned if he was going to waste any of Clangeddin's holy gifts on a possible evil doer. "Me names Brottor an I suggest ye answer Kilain naew, er I'll let ye bleed ta death. If ye hae nuthin tae hide than rest assured ye'll be OK."

Brottor looked from the man to Kilain then to Bruner.

Grishnak counted himself lucky, he had made a wise choice in not eating the drow female who had boldly entered his tribe's camp. She had brought gifts and good food. His warriors feasted well on the human she brought to them. Grishnak smiled a toothy, tusked grin as he tried to remember the man's screams as they ripped the raw, fresh meat from his living bones. The humans skull was torn open and everyone shared in the warm fresh delicacies contained therein.

Yes, he was wise to listen to her. She brought them even better food and gifts. She promised him that she would lend her powerful magics and blades to their cause. Soon, the Bone Gnawer Tribe of Mountain Orcs, would feast on dwarf flesh and carry dwarf weapons as battle trophies.

*At'ar!* Kilain thought to himself. *Is this ta be a test me lord?* "He be a'right, Brottor, if what he be sayin' be true." Kilain turned back at Lucien. "Ye be a followa' o' Amaunator, ey?" He gave Lucien a suspicious look. "Soo, ye be o' tha Risen or Three-faced sun, lad?"

Brightening at Kilain and shifting just slightly to ease the pain in his leg somewhat, Lucien answered Kilain. "I am a member of the Sun Soul..yes, and while I revere and appreciate Lathander for all the good and beauty he brings to this world, the branch I serve follows the teachings of Sune. I am glad to meet you. I have not seen anyone from our order since I left the monastery a couple of years ago."

Kilain nods to Brottor as to say that Lucien is someone to trust and that he would be an asset to the assignment. "Kilain Thrili o' Mithril Fist..." He ponders a bit, "followa' o' tha Morninglord. What monastery are ye frum, lad? I'm frum Athkatla in Amn meself, tha Dome o' tha Rose."

He looks down at the leg and nods. "Ye be needin' sum aid with tha wound lad?" Kilain turns to Brottor with a raised eyebrow. "Can ye do sum'thin' fur him?"

Brottor nods and grunts. "Ifn Kilain speaks fer ye tis goot enuff fer me." Brottor kneels down by Lucian's side. this is gonna hurt lad. But, I got tae get tha bolt out first and I doubt tha lass wha shot ye, will appreciate me breakin her fine bolt. Tha meens, I wi hae tae push it through ta tha othar side ye ken me meenin?"

Before Lucian can respond the war-priest gives the bolt a sharp rap with the palm of his gauntleted hand. The bolt driven by his considerable strength, tears straight through and out the other side of Lucian's leg, clean as a hot knife through butter.

Quickly the priest grabs Lucian's leg in his meaty hand and invokes the divine gifts of his god Clangeddin. The wound closes as a warm blue light spreads from Brottor's hands over and into the damaged leg.

Once the blood has stopped flowing, Brottor picks up the bolt and stands back up wiping his hands off on his armored thighs. "Ye'll be needin tae speak to Bruner thar, he's tha ain scowlin at me as though I was a Tanari fram tha abyss."

So saying the priest goes back down the hill to the Ox-cart, twirling the bloody bolt in his hand as he does so.

Lucien listens to Brottor as he speaks, and before he can respond feels the intense pain of the bolt drive through his leg. His eyes shut tight and his jaw clenches for a moment, the only outward sign of his pain. As Brottor's healing energies quickly suffuse his leg and close the wound, the pain dissipates as quickly as it occurred. He let out a slow breath and reopened slightly watery eyes.

"I hope that is one valuable bolt..." he quips, his voice slightly hoarse. Getting to his feet he stretches his leg out and smiles. "Thank you, that's much more comfortable." He then turns to Kilain and answers him.

"Dome of the Rose, I have yet to go there but I have heard it is a beautiful place. My own monastery is not so well known. I received my training at a place called the Hall of the First Light...a small monastery just within the eaves of the High Forest. It also adhered to the teachings of Lathander. For the last two years, I have been more of a traveler, under the guidance of my mentor Brother Marcus. That story can wait however as I believe I should meet with Bruner. Care to introduce me?"

Kilain nods at Lucien's request. "Oi, Bruner! he shouts. Got a lad 'ere that wanta' meet ye, he be goin' by tha name o' Lucien o' Sune." <Think he is all right now after Torgga shot him> he says in dwarven with a slight grin on his face.

Bruner grunted as he approached the encircled monk, his cloak whipped about in the mountain breeze as he passed Brottor as he handled the bloody bolt, clearly not happy by this intrusion that is delaying their journey <So you say.> Looking over where the wound was, "If ye can fight," Looking over at Kilain "Then ye can come with us." Looking back at Lucien, "I will bae very clear lad, if canna follow mae orders leave naw."

After not hearing him protest this, Bruner turned to the others, <We move now lads, circle formation around the wagon.> Nods to Torgga <Back up front for you, keep a sharp eye out for anything.> Turning to Lucien, Bruner pointed over to Dorvan with a wry grin, "Ye follow Dorvan fer now."

Bruner said a quick prayer to Moradin that this be the only intrusion on the trip, but he knew that would not be the case and would be fought tooth and nail all the way to Rivermoot.

They moved on, the crunch of snow beneath their plated boots and wagon wheels as they began their journey that will more than likely bring to a close, a horrific chapter that is the life of Vicho Smadda.

Torgga was back up in front on the wagon with Kebur, crossbow ready to be shouldered at a moments notice, the bolts that were passed on in the quiver were warm to the touch. In a hushed whisper, <Lord Moradin, please watch over us on this journey.> Checking the quiver to make sure that it was secured to her belt and was readily available. Her eyes scanned back and forth, alert for possible danger, knowing that she did not hold anything back and everything from now on was to be treated as an aggressor, shoot to kill was the standing order.

Kebur sat on the wagon as it swayed back and forth as it moved down the mountain side. He kept his cloak pulled tight over his heavy coat, the snow and wind whipped at caravan as they trekked down the mountain. He knew that several would not return to the place they called home, but would meet their end in battle and have glorious songs sung in their honor. While they were not the Iron Guard that Bruner commands, however they will follow him where ever he goes. Kebur looked back at Vicho as he was shackled to the wagon, <I know you understand me Thayan bastard. The next time something happens do not cry like a babe.> Pausing for a moment, “We will see you to Rivermoot and not having to yell over your begging will be a good start.>

It had been two days on the march from Deepward Keep. The weather had been fine and the trip uneventful as the dwarves made their way down out of the mountains. On the third morning as they were just passing out of a canyon they caught sight of trouble.

Ahead of the prisoner's escort, deep in a rugged, narrow defile, that sufficed as a pass down off the mountain plateau to the lower valleys, stood an Orc horde. It was not easy to count the surging, pulsing mass, but at first count, there were at least one hundred of the filthy beasts.

They stood forming a rough shield wall, blocking the pass to the lower road. Screaming, hooting and calling curses on the dwarves in broken common, they flew a filthy piece of cloth from a rusty lance. The cloth banner bore a crude emblem of an Orc's head with a bone in its mouth. To the discerning and sharp eye, bright red cloaks could be seen amongst the horde. It appeared that Blood Raven guards stood against the dwarves of the Clan with their Orc kin.

Grishnak the Orc Chief, clutched the amulet The drowess had given him. Its black, adamantine metal, cool in his taloned hand. The bass relief of the spider told all who saw it, that he was a Friend of the City of Menzobarranzen. Around his powerful shoulders, he wore a bright red woolen cloak. The cloak was also a gift from the drow, all his best warriors wore one. She had told them the cloaks were sent by the Blood Ravens, a powerful force of mercenaries who liked and respected Orcs. She said the cloaks were enchanted to strike fear in all who saw them.



The amulet was heavy in his taloned fist. Its magic would help the Orcs trap the dwarves. She had promised him this. Still clutching the amulet, he pointed at the dwarves and howled the drow word she taught him. Instantly, an impenetrable darkness enveloped the dwarves. With a bloody scream he and his warriors launched their attack.

Grishnak had not counted on one thing however. The magical darkness was intended to disorientate the dwarves, to prevent them from forming a viable defense against the Orcish charge. He had forgotten that dwarves are also blessed with a keen sight in the dark.

As the darkness lifted, Grishnak had only enough time to realize his horde would not be smashing into disorganized, panicked pack of dwarves, but a well armed and prepared dwarven shield wall. The tidal wave of the Orc attack smashed into the dwarves and shattered like rain drops on solid stone. Axes hewed, hammers smashed, magic flew and Orcs died by the score.

The tide of battle was not one sided though, the guard Ragnar was pierced by a rusty, iron, Orc's lance and pinned to the side of the ox-cart, he hung there dead, amidst the free for all that the battle had become. Another dwarf lost his right arm below the elbow, as he over extended his attack and an Orc hacked his arm away. The oxen both were slain outright by Orcish axes.

Grishnak surrounded by his best warriors moved through the battle like a daemon, their "Blood Raven" cloaks clearly marked them as leaders. As the dwarves magic burst upon them, fireballs, lightning bolts and the cursed, dreadful, holy words of power took their toll. As the dwarven leader brought his terrible axe down onto Grishnak's head, the Orc realized the drow had lied to him. She never showed her black face, she never meant to help him. He realized as he died, that he had been used.

Amazagorza watched it all from the ridge above and behind the dwarves. The stupid Orcs were doing just what she told them to do. They were like children, give them a good meal and some trinkets along with a promise for more and they would gladly die for you.

Reaching down she took up the crossbow she had stolen from the Master Weapon Smith, Furin. A "Mini-Ballista" he called it. With a chuckle, she slotted the quarrel into the weapon. The quarrel had been coated with the most lethal poison known to her people and fortified by her father. It held dire and vile necromantic spells of death. No one could survive a hit by these quarrels and the necromantic magic enchanted into them ensured death was permanent, there was no coming back.

Giggling like a little girl, she sighted down the weapon, taking careful aim. She only had one shot. A professional never fired twice from the same sniper blind. Doing so would give away your position and bring the enemy down upon you. When the mountain air was still, she took a slight breath and held it.

A squeeze of the trigger and the quarrel was off. She watched it arc through the clear blue

sky, a black streak of hell. Speeding down, it gained more momentum, the bolt struck the dwarf as he was trying to defend the little human rat from an onslaught of Orcs. Amazagorza hissed in pleasure at the excellent shot.

The dwarf was hit squarely between his shoulders, the quarrel pierced his heavy mail and sunk up to the fletching in his armored back. As clean a kill as ever she had made. She watched just for a second as he sank to his knees, struggling to remain upright by leaning on his axe.

With a savage snarl, she twisted her ring of invisibility and moved out of her concealed position. Her job was done for now.

Brottor struggled to breath, the pain was unbearable, he groaned as he fell to his knees, only his axe kept him from falling onto his face. Looking down he could see the war-head of the crossbow bolt sticking through his chest. The war-head glowed a sickly reddish, bespeaking of vile enchantments. he groaned as he realized it was of dwarven manufacture. Agony erupted in his body then, pain unlike any he had ever imagined, he cried out once his scream fading quickly as he fell backward. "CLAN...Geddin....."

Laying on his back the crossbow quarrel shaft disintegrated into pure hellish filth, the wound instantly became septic and an unnatural blackness of pure corruption spread consuming all it touched.

Brottor coughed up black viscous blood, fighting to remain conscious, he gasped... "Bruner..."

Vicho seeing the necromantic enchantments taking hold of the dwarven priest, screamed out loud like the coward he really was. With a mad burst of strength he smashed aside the dwarf nearest him with his chains and made a mad dash back the way they had come, to safety.

He hadn't gone ten steps when a crude iron axe thrown by a savage Orc, struck him in the head, cleanly knocking him out. Vicho fell face down into the mud and blood. The last of House Smadda, far from Thay, he lay down as if dead, unaware of the battle that raged around him.

Above, the ravens gathered for the feast. The flash of sunlight on weapons and the reek of fresh spilt blood calling them from far upon the wind. Tonight, they would dine on the eyes of the dead.

Bruner saw the orcs and set the others into a line and shouted words of encouragement over that of Brottor's singing to bolster their spirits. <This is where we fight! This is where they die!> He kept Dorvan in check and off to the side until the line broke down into melee combat, then he would unleash the barbarian onto the orcs.

As the horde smashed into the dwarves, Bruner and Brottor fought side by side, recent history pushed aside, as they fought to keep the orcs at bay. Yelling out, <Now Dorvan!> He watched as the barbarian plowed into the orc flank attempting to sing a battle hymn that was horribly off key, but it was having a profound effect. He began to blaze a path through the orcs with his flaming greatsword swinging away.

Bruner and Brottor had split up, Bruner had waded into the orc line, slowly grinding his way through their numbers. He knew that not everything would go their way, but they must carry the day, no matter what.

The battle raged back and forth as each side worked to get the upper hand. All that changed when Bruner and the orc chieftain squared off. It was nothing short of a deadly dance as the two attacked and countered each other's moves. The orc landed a couple of unyielding blows from his club that would momentarily stall Bruner's assault and irritated the dwarf considerably. The dwarf let out a war cry as he slammed his waraxe against his shield several times and began to close once again and put on a display as to why he is the best at what he does. He pushed the orc chieftain back under the flurry of his assault and moved in close with his shield to give him a good shove. What the chieftain didn't see is the dead body of one of his men was in his path and he fell over backwards, laying flat on his back. Bruner launch himself into the air and brought his axe down hard, caving in the orc's head. Gore and ichor sprayed up into the air, covering his axe in the beast's blood as he landed on its chest.

Bruner worked his waraxe free from the orc chief's skull and let out another war cry over the din of battle as he thrusts his gore covered axe into the air. He knew there were casualties and began to fight back through the thick of orcs that remained. He watched the flame of Dorvan's greatsword swinging in precise strokes that ranged from sideways to the brutal overhead chop. The smell of burnt orc flesh grew stronger as he closed in on the lad. Bruner passed well out of Dorvan's reach as he saw that the barbarian was in a full berserker rage and cutting a wide swath through the orc line, still singing the hymn of battle he knew.

Torgga perched herself on top of the wagon as she pumped fiery bolt after bolt into the orc horde, mostly those that started to close in on her and Kebur, but poured the others into those near Dorvan. Her aim was unerring, scoring with each shot that caused more than a few orcs to turn their attention away from Dorvan to see her grinning as she took aim again or Dorvan closed to deliver the deathblow from "Flamebolt."

When the horde has gotten too close for her to use the crossbow, she drew two wands that she had "acquired" from Kebur's pack while still inside the Keep. With one in each hand, Torgga unleashed missile storm after missile storm into the orcs. The amount of power that poured from the wands in her hands almost over took her, but she maintained her

balance and kept her focus while raining down death and destruction upon the orcs. She watched them flinch as each arcane bolt landed, not that they did a great deal of damage, but it was the amount of bolts that were sailing through the air that was horrifying.

Kebur knew his time was now, the point in life when things are at their clearest, as he saw that the orcs only brought fighters to break them down and slaughter them quickly. He rose from his seat in the wagon and arcane powers crackled from his fingertips as he unleashed spells from his vast arsenal. He let loose casting firebrand several times, following up with greater missile storm, before realizing that a great deal more arcane power was being used. He looked over and saw Torgga using two wands, alternating between them as they were launching missile storms out into the orcs. He made a mental note to check his pack after this was over to make sure that everything is accounted for. <Nice wands lass!> He yelled out over the noise of battle. <They do come in handy do they not?> Her response was a sheepish grin that told him everything he needed to know...she took them.

An arrow sailed in and struck Kebur in his thigh, he screamed out in pain as he fell back onto the wagon's bench seat. He cursed in four different languages as he was upset at himself more than anything for not anticipating this, pushing the pain from his mind, Kebur rose back up and launch three consecutive fireballs that left craters where the explosive spells and charred the bodies of where the orc archers once stood.

As the Orc horde came into view, Dorvan felt that familiar rush of adrenalin surge through him. He knew enough not to charge headlong into the horde but waited off to the right side of the wagon and the inevitable shield wall that the dwarves would form, as he knew his great sword had no place in such a formation. The darkness spell made the world go dark, and in that moment he could hear the dwarves forming up and the charge of the orcs begin. As the darkness gave way and the orcs hit the point of the shield wall wedge, Dorvan started singing war hymns to Haela Brightaxe at the top of his lungs, his voice off key but strong and sure!

He used his rage to fuel his combat skills. To the untrained eye he would seem to be completely out of control, but he had learned to unleash and harness that rage into a weapon as deadly as the six foot flaming greatsword he wielded. The orc bodies were falling before him and the power of his faith like wheat at harvest time. Fueled by the power of his unwavering faith in his goddess the sword became more than just a weapon in the hands of a fighter, it became an extension of his body and soul!

As the battle continues to rage around him, his voice never waivers, and his sword never stops swinging. The smell of burnt orc flesh hangs heavily in the air around him. From the sheer numbers of the orcs, blows do reach his body, but he uses that pain to fuel his rage to a white-hot heat that no mere orc will ever withstand.

When the battle ends, his faith fueled rage slowly subsides, and the aches and pains of his wounds flood in. But the smile never leaves his face as he kneels as says a prayer to The Lady of the Fray for guiding his hands in battle. He quickly stands and surveys the dwarven contingent to see if any aid is required. His eye's come to rest on Ragnar's body pinned to the side of the wagon. Grabbing the nearest mobile dwarf, he moves to the wagon, " 'ole up 'is body lad". He grabs the lance as his kinsman braced the limp body of Ragnar. He ripped the lance from the wagon and body in one fluid motion, and the body was lowered gently to the ground. He then makes a circuit around the wagon to see if Brottor needs help in tending the wounded.

He quickly kneels at Brottor's side as he notices him twisting in agony on the ground. The wound is like nothing he has ever seen! HE yells out, "BRUNER, HERE, NOW!!" HE says a prayer as he waits for Bruner.

Gasping for breath, the black bile erupting from his mouth as he weakly tries to speak, Brottor clutches his silver amulet of the twin battle axes of Clangeddin in his left hand spasmodically. With a last burst of strength, he tears the amulet from his neck and presses it into Dorvan's gauntleted fist. His eyes already have the glaze of death upon them.

With a raw, raspy voice filled with the premonition of his own death, he whispers to the dwarf he once called friend. "I was wrang about ye Bruner... Thars nay taint O' evil in ye... Fergive me Bruner... I dinna wanna pass fram hera till ye fergive me... Take me amulet... May tha Axe father watch ye an guide ye... Ye aint jest Bruner tha dwarf anymora... Tha beardslings watch ye... Thay copy ye.... Yer a hero naew... Ye lead em goot Bruner... Teach em right..."

With a sudden harsh gasp, Brottor's eyes fill with agony and he clutches a his breast, his booted feet drumming on the blood soaked ground in a tattoo of pain and death. In an instant, his body gives up the last fight and begins to molder and collapses in on itself, like a one hundred year old corpse's. The armor he wore begins to rust and molder as well as the taint of the spells fully exerts itself. In ten breaths the body of the war-priest looks as though he were one of the long dead from ancient days.

Lying on the ground next to the corpse, dropped and forgotten, the holy fire that once covered the blade of Brottor's axe suddenly goes out.

During the first days of travel Kilain spoke with Lucien about all that once had been apart of him, the Dome of the Rose, his brothers and friends, the teachings of the monastery. He also mentioned about the situation that started the mission they were on at the moment.

It was invigorating to walk alongside the cart with all the others, instead of traveling all alone in desolated areas and drawing in a book. Kilain was confident that this was what was right for him, serving his kin at best of his abilities.

Kilain's jaw dropped, he shook his head in disbelief but it did not make what he saw disappear. "How?" he thought as he quickly turned to Lucien. "Stay behind tha shield wall, lad! This be Bruner's n' tha guards fight ye just take care o' any stray dogs n' aid any o' tha lads that needs it."

When the Orcs smashed into the dwarven shield wall it sounded like thunder. Kilain still waited by the cart, confident in the ability of his kin and also near the human in case he would try to escape. Not many Orcs made it through the dwarven shield wall, though there was some that somehow came running towards the cart. Kilain was quick to meet the opposition fist versus axe. Suddenly under the commotion of battle Kilain heard Brottor, he turned and saw how he fell backwards screaming "CLAN!"

"BROTTOR!!" Kilain screamed and with grinding teeth and narrow eyes he struck the Orc in front of him, right on the tip of the nose, with the carpal bones of his right hand. Kilain was by Brottor's side before the Orc fell to the ground.

Standing alongside Dorvan Kilain saw what happened, and he took a few steps back... "May tha All-father greet ye, Brottor." He looked down on what was left of Brottor. "This be black magic... but frum where?" He looked around, "nay Orc be aroond here." Then he saw the cart without the human. "THA PRISONA' BE RUNNIN'!" He screamed from the top of his lungs.

Dorvan watches in horror at what the wound is doing to Brottor. As Brottor presses his holy symbol in to his hand, Dorvan takes a firm grip on both the amulet and the hand of Brottor. "Ta Mordisamman gain a great warrior 'is day, Brottor Go wit honor and ta soun's of dwarven song in ye ears." As Bruner kneels at Brottor's side to hear his last words, Dorvan raises his flaming greatsword over his head with one hand and starts to sing in a very controlled voice, of the loss of Brottor to the living, and of the great rewards that await him as he passes over to the Dwarfhome All the while he continues to hold the hand and amulet of Brottor.

Brottor's bodies turns to dust leaving naught but his holy symbol in Dorvan's hand. He stands and hands Bruner the amulet, "Hea bae wantin' ye ta 'ave 'is. In thee en' hae bae dooin' us all prout Grant 'im 'is fergivniss and keep 'is amulet fer strenth an' 'onor " He indicates Brottor's axe on the ground, "If'n ye nae bae wantin tha, I will bae takin' it ta 'is temple in tha Keep."

Dorvan heard Kilain yell out about the prisoner and looked up in time to see the axe fell the manling. He quickly shifted his sword to his left hand and grabbed a throwing axe

from his belt. He quickly traced what had been the flight path of the axe and let loose with his own. Rage and holy wrath fueled that throw. The axe hit the orc full in the chest, he wobbled for a second and then fell forward, burying the axe even deeper. The orc would never again rise.

Dorvan ran to the manling to see if he still lived. If he could help it the manling would still stand trial. He had pledged to Bruner to help get him there and he would do whatever it took to see that task completed.

After attending to those still alive, he returned to the body of Ragnar. He dug through his pack pulling out a scroll tube. He removes a scroll and call's on the power of Haela Brightaxe to perform a powerful spell to return him to the land of the living.

Lucien's fist struck the orc squarely in the throat breaking its windpipe and it collapsed gargling to the ground. Looking around he could see they were hard pressed, the orcs outnumbered them badly and they were in danger of being overwhelmed by sheer numbers. How had things come to this?

The first few days had passed pleasantly enough, the air had been clear and crisp, and the cold felt good. He had spent most of his time with Kilain, listening to his tales of the Dome and his training, sharing his own in return. He had been dismayed to learn that the prisoner was Vicho, not surprised, but still dismayed. Despite this somewhat sad fact the journey had been pleasant, and it had been wonderful to speak with Kilain as well as practice his dwarven. They were good people these dwarves, proud, yet fair.

And now he was here, fighting against a raiding party of orcs. How had things come to this? It was a lot like the market. One moment all was calm and the next it seemed all the hells were loose. Lucien sidestepped an orcs clumsy swing and planted his fist firmly along the bridge of its nose, breaking it and sending sprawling to the ground. These orcs were clumsy, taking him for an unarmed traveler they sought only an easy kill and in turn gave that to Lucien. He had been told to stay by Dorvan, but as the dwarf had entered the fray he had quickly realized Dorvan was better suited having a little space. He had stayed near Kilain, heeding his words until the orcs scrambled over their position. Now he fought to keep the orcs back from the cart giving Torgga and Kebur room to do what they needed to do. The orcs had learned however, that although Lucien was unarmed he was far from helpless. Three now advanced cautiously on him, attempting to flank him. Focusing, Lucien began to hum a tune quietly and moved to engage. He timed his movements perfectly to the orcs attacks, molding his steps to their movements, making it look as if it were a dance. The orc in front caught a sharp blow to the face sending it reeling. Lucien then stepped back, turning slightly as he did so. The orc on his left swung his heavy falchion cleaving only air, while the spear from the one behind him passed harmlessly between the space of his chest and his arm. Lucien's elbow came down squarely on top of the orc's head and it grunted and slumped to the ground. As the falchion wielding orc recovered from his over extended strike, Lucien stepped foreword

this time and caught the orc at his knee with a well-placed kick. There was a loud snap and the orc screamed and fell. Lucien carried foreword and put the orc out of its misery. Turning he could see the orcs were beginning to fall fast, their numbers no match for the training and courage of the dwarves. Above the din of the dying battle he heard Kilain shout Brottor's name. Turning he rounded the wagon to see what was happening.

For Bruner, the world stood still. He was as motionless as a statue for what seemed like an eternity as the wind howled through the canyon, scattering Brottor's ashes to the four winds. He gripped the amulet's chain tightly in his plated fist, bowed his head and muttered to himself, <You followed your path that was laid before you and I follow mine. Our goal was the same, service to the clan and dwarven way of life. You are forgiven old friend.> *I am no hero.*

Bruner was visibly upset, not at losing a solid fighter, but at losing a friend, one that he had ventured with for some time here. He looked at the ground to where Brottor fell and something in his mind whispered that something is not right. He motioned to Torgga and did a few quick hand gestures that he taught her, and she quickly scanned the cliff edges for any sign of movement. Nothing.

In a hushed tone, <It is a sad day today that brother Brottor fell, but his spirit is now returning to the All Father.> Thinking for a moment, <This is not the result of an orc weapon. Something or someone else does not want us to make it to town.> Looking about to make sure that his message was reaching those gathered. <See to the wounded and prepare to make way. We are inviting another attack or an ambush from the cliffs.> He put the amulet around his neck and then reached down, picking up Brottor's waraxe and tucked it into his belt.

Torgga pulled her cloak closer to her as she crept around the canyon, hiding in its shadows. Bruner wanted her to look ahead to see what else lay in wait for them. She blocked out as best she could of Brottor's death. She focused on what she did best, scout ahead and find problems before the others arrived. There will be time later on for grieving.

Kebur watched Bruner with careful eyes, as he dealt with the death of a good friend and comrade. He sat on the bench tending to his own wounds when Bruner turned and looked up at him, <There are four bags in my pack, do not hesitate to use whatever you need.> Bruner set his pack in the back of the wagon so that it was easily within reach of Kebur and returned to the others to make sure they could be moving soon.



Bruner felt as though the world was weighing down on him as he had just lost a couple of good lads, Brottor amongst them, and an unknown force was moving against them. He walked through the corpses that littered the battlefield. Looking for anything out of the ordinary as to who led them to here. He returned to where the orc chieftain's corpse lay and gave it a closer examination. The normal armament for an orc, but an amulet that lay near by caught his attention, <What is this?> He picked up the amulet and then noticed that for the most part the orcs near the chieftain wore red cloaks. Bruner snatched two off of the bodies and returned to the wagon.

He handed them over to Kebur, <When we get a chance to rest, figure out what these are and if you can recognize anything odd about the cloaks. They were worn only by those near the chieftain, probably a note of position in the horde's army.>

Bruner went back out onto the field and collected up the rest of the cloaks, several of which were in tatters from the fighting. *I will have answers.*

Kebur took the items and set them into the bag he carried until he could look at them later on. He was now rummaging through Bruner's pack and pulled out the four bags he spoke of, and to his amazement, stacks of scrolls filled each one. Apparently Bruner was hording any scroll he found and was purchasing selected scrolls for such an occasion. There was enough to easily make two if not three tomes out of the stack contained in the bags. Kebur felt as though he was a bearding in the sweet store back home. Grinning as he talked to no one, <Bruner lad, you have unlocked the floodgates of Moradin's fury with this.>

Bruner went over to Dorvan, <How is Ragnar lad?>

Kilain stood stunned like a statue in the middle of Waukeen's Promenade, looking around trying to get a bearing on the events that had happened. Even though the Orcs had been slaughtered as predicted, the cost was severe... Brottor had fallen; by some sort of strange magic, others of the kin had also fallen and the human they were suppose to take to Rivermoot was gone. "I donay know what ta do me lord," he whispered as he breathed heavily... not from the battle itself but from the chock of loosing a dear friend and be so unsuccessful in something so important for him and the kin.

He tried to correct his footing, widening his stance... but his legs failed him. He fell to his knees in the mud, fist clinched he started to pound the ground. "WHY'D... YE.... FAIL... ME?" He screamed out loud. "WHY?"

He lowered his head and then he slowly moved his muddy right hand to the small symbol of a sunrise. With a quick snap he pulled the thin chain off his neck and with a tiny notion of hesitation... he threw the symbol away into the ground that was mixed with snow, mud and blood.

That fact that Brottor fell was a terrible loss to the keep. Even though he had called into question the actions of Bruner, and in a way Dorvan's as well, in a much too public fashion. No dwarf should die like that! And in the end he had done the honorable thing in regards to Bruner. He did the Keep proud defending the wretched manling, and the honor of the Keep and all dwarves! Dorvan will always remember Brottor as a proud and honorable dwarf! Though the sight of Brottor's passing will haunt Dorvan till his dying day.

Thank the gods the manling Vicho would survive to stand trial. All this was at least not done in vain. But it cost Dorvan what little healing magic he possessed to get rid of that bump on the back of his head and get his eyes to flutter open. He got the aid of one of the other dwarves to help get Vicho and Ragnar in the wagon. He asked the dwarf, whose name escaped him at the moment, to guard Vicho and keep an eye on Ragnar. He looked around at the other dwarves gathering the gear and possessions of the fallen, and nodded knowing that once they were back at the keep the fallen would get a proper burial ceremony.

As he walks past Kebur he says, "I'll bae needin' one o' yer strenth spells afore wae go, if'n I'm to pull 'is danged cart thay rest o' thay way. I dun bae wantin' ta leave thay fallin lads stuff behin'. An it bae easier den carryin' it. An' Ragnar needs ta rest anyway."

Dorvan approached the only other manling (Lucien) with the group. "Ye did a goot thin' taday lad! An' mae, 'ill r'member it. I bae knowin' ye was ta stick by mae, but ye did thay right thin by stayin' wit Kilain and 'elpin perfect thay prisner. If'n ye need anythin' jus' ask." With that said he taps Lucien on the shoulder and turns to walk away.

As he turns away from Lucien he hears Kilain yell out, and spins in that direction, throwing axes seem to leap into his hands as he does so. But all he sees is Kilain kneeling in the snow, and appears to throw something away. Fearing he failed to attend to an injury he didn't know about, he rushes to Kilain's side, clipping the axes back on his belt as he moves.

Dorvan kneels beside Kilain, lays a hand on his back and speaks to him in dwarven, <Are ye ok lad? Are ye injured? If ye are let me help ye.> Very quietly, so only Kilain can hear, he adds, <Who was ye yelling at?> Dorvan waits patiently for an answer from Kilain. This day was hard on all present, Dorvan included, and he knew not to push too hard.

The sun slowly moved down behind the mountain peaks and trees in the west and it started to get colder.

The anger was slowly leaving Kilain's face as he watched Dorvan. "Nay wounds except me soul lad, he watched the sun go down." Narrowing his eyes, "Brottor has fallen n' tha priona' be gone...", he looked at Dorvan, "or did ye find 'im?"

Fear, its strikes us all for different reasons, and at times we least expect it. In a battle it can be suppressed by the instinct to survive and the routines of your combat training. The fear that suddenly flooded Dorvan could not be handled in that fashion. He is a kaxanar, and a kinsman is in pain in a way he is unsure how to heal. He knows it is another test of his faith in the Luckmaiden. His faith had always given him strength and courage in battle, and by the gods it would do so now! He grabbed hold of his fear firmly. He would find the strength now to help his kinsman!

Dorvan helps Kilain to his feet and places a hand on his shoulder.

<Aye, the prisoner still lives. The coward is in the wagon under guard. We shall finish his transfer, and honor Brottor's memory!> Dorvan takes a deep breath to steady himself, <Brottor died to protect his honor and the honor of the Keep and his kinsman. I held his hand as he passed from this world,> Dorvan shudders slightly at the memory of Brottor turning to dust in his hands, <and in the end he showed courage and honor in asking for Bruner's forgiveness.>

Dorvan looked over to his friend Bruner and caught a new reflection on his armor in the fading light. He smiled as he realized Bruner was wearing Brottor's amulet around his neck. Faith and forgiveness, Brottor's soul can rest easy now!

He turned back to Kilain, <Aye, Brottor will be missed, but he will never be forgotten. He has passed over to Dwarfhome. The Father of Battle has called him to stand and defend the Morndinsamman! When our time comes we shall do the same. The gods call, and we answer, it is the way of things!>

"Come on lad, wae need ta move fram 'is place, an rest fer da night. Wen da sun rises tamarra wae bae finishin' 'is task fer Brottor and thay others what fell!" With that he claps Kilain on the shoulder and heads back to the wagon and the work that awaits him.

The path out of the mountains was long steep and very treacherous. Dorvan, aided by many spells of strength was able to move the cart along as a back breaking pace. Once down in the valley below. The dwarves were able to purchase a new set of oxen for the cart, from a farmer and thereby increase their pace.

Within days, they passed the refugee camp of the people of Nesme and crossed the river into Rivermoot. The Rangers greeted the worn, dusty dwarves and their prisoner and took custody of Vicho. Bruner and his fellows were left to their own devices then, to follow their own paths as fate and their conscious led them.

**The Heroes End...**(the following story takes place immediate following “an unwelcome guest” and is a compilation of posts from Brynjolf, axesrock, CKY and JornB)

Bruner and the others was quite the site to behold, armor was dented, smeared with blood and gore from the battle with the orcs, their boots were covered in layers of mud. Bruner was truly a wreck; his beard was in dire need of care and let us just says a good bath was in need for him. He trudged the last few steps into Rivermoot and found the Ranger named Dave. The other dwarves and the oxen pulling the cart followed him and stopped nearby, as vigilant as ever for any possible threat.

Bruner's mood was one that made him dangerous, he was tired, sore and angry. He led Dave over to the cart, hauled Vicho over the side, and let him hit the ground hard, "Tha bastard tis yer problem now." Turning, <Torgga lass, put the oxen and cart in the stables and then secure several rooms in the inn. We will be there for a short time.>

Running his hand through his beard he turned to Kebur, <Old one, secure us a private area in the Inn, I believe there is a place to where we can be by ourselves.> Nodding off to Lucien, <He is welcome too.> Bruner reaches into his pack and tosses Kebur a bag of coins, <Use this to see to it that everyone has their fill in food and drink. Pay for the rooms too...tonight we will remember them.>

As the lads slowly made their way through the Inn's door, Bruner thanked each and every one of them for what they had done. He told them to clean up a bit and put on a change of clothes and to relax and enjoy the food and ale.

Bruner pulled one of the red cloaks out of his pack. *I need some answers.* As the last of the lads filed in through the door, Bruner walked over to the tree near the General Store and drove a knife through one of the red cloaks with a note on it that reads:

*Daric,*

*I think ye lost this.*

*Bruner*

With that done, Bruner made his way into the inn to get cleaned up and enjoy a good meal.

Before venturing down to join in the feast that is being prepared, Bruner penned a message to Keepwarden Kharazaad, sealed it in a scroll tube and dropped it into a sack that contained one of the cloaks that was found on the orc's and dispatched a courier to Deepward Keep.

Kilain was in anguish, not sure to follow the kin and its traditions with the whole of his being or the human god, Lathander. The way of the Morninglord had been his truth and his life, now feeling betrayed and backstabbed, he doubted his whole being.

Sitting in the "dwarven area" of the Inn, deep in thought it suddenly struck him "This may be as I've been readin' about the rites of passing". He felt weird in a way he never felt before, he saw flashes of Brottor's face as he dissolved into the air. "Aye, this may way to go, for my kin". He looked up as one of the regulars went to take some ale and he saw Dorvan sitting around another table. Kilain nodded.

Bruner appeared from the second floor of the inn and made his way to the area they had haggled with the tavern owner over and surveyed the room. The kegs they brought from Deepward Keep sat off to the side along with the two large ones they purchased from the tavern were moved into the room. The food was coming in at a steady pace to fill the table. Several of the lads were pulling a few pieces of meat to snack on until everyone arrived. Torgga was the last to arrive and several of the lads suddenly became mindful of their manners and were trying to impress the young lass.

Once all were there, Bruner cleared his throat to get everyone's attention, <Tonight we will honor those that have fallen on our journey.> Looking about as he worked to keep his emotions in check, pointing at the empty setting at the end of the table, <A place is set for those that cannot be here, a plate for the food they cannot eat and a stein for ale that they cannot drink. Let us not mourn their loss, but celebrate their lives and the marks they have left!> With that said, Bruner thrust his stein into the air and said, <Remember those that have gone to fight the war eternal! There is no greater way to die than in battle!> Then he took a healthy draw from his stein.

The rest of the trip to Rivermoot was a solemn one. Dorvan did not sleep well with visions of Brottor turning to dust whenever he closed his eyes. His only release was pulling the cart and losing himself in the physical exertion! They took that away from him when they bought more oxen, damn them! He did not say anything as that would reveal his weakness.

He was relieved and saddened by their arrival in Rivermoot. With the task complete his mind had even more time to dwell on the horror of Brottor's death. Axes to the head, a sword in the guts, his head crushed by a mace, all were acceptable deaths in Dorvan's eyes. At least he would have gone down fighting! But no one deserved to die the way Brottor did; a foul magic delivered by a bolt in the back by a coward!

Dorvan sat quietly at a table in the inn, his greatsword on the table in front of him along with a stein of dwarven stout. His eye's kept drifting to his left hand, and the image of dust flowing through his fingers kept coming unbidden to his mind. He could still feel the sensation of it as he sat there. He looked up and surveyed the room, catching the eye of Kilain, he acknowledged his kinsman's nod. He gathered up his sword and stein and went to sit with Kilain.

As he sat down Bruner made his short speech, and Dorvan raised his stein in honor of the fallen. When the toast is finished he looks back to Kilain seated across the table from him, "Mae 'and cin still feel thay dust run through it. I close mae eye's an' all I sae is people turnin' ta dust." He pauses and looks at his hand again, and then back up at Kilain. "I sae in yur eye's thay same I sae in mine wen I look at mae reflection." He pauses again as he thinks before he speaks.

"I 'ave ne'er asked fer 'elp afore, but I'm thinkin' wae both nead 'elp now. Ifn' I'm wron' tell mae ta bugger off an I'll nay bother ye nay more, but ifn' ye want mae 'elp then I bae doin' wha' I cin ta 'elp ye, an' maybae ye cin 'elp mae twoa."

Dorvan slowly sits back, absently scratching his left palm with his right hand, as he waits to see how Kilain will respond.

Kilain nods at Dorvan's words. "I'm in need o' aid aye." He ponders for a while in search of words to describe his feelings, "I've... nay idea o'... how ta tell ye'..." he says with hesitation. He looks into the ale stein in front of him, the dark sweet drink, with its full body and fruity, butter-like taste had started to get to his liking. Then the bitter, herbal flavored beverage gradually changes into Brottor's face slowly turning into dust. Kilain looks up and pale in the face he says while shaking his head. "I be needin'... sum'thin' much stronga' than this."

He gets up and walks over to the table weighed down with food and drink. He finds a bottle of whiskey and a grilled chicken that he takes back to the table where Dorvan is sitting. "Thought this ta be good fer us as well."

Kilain sits with a full glass of whiskey in front of him and a piece of the chicken in his right hand. After some sips of the whiskey and a bite of the chicken leg, Kilain's tongue loosens up. "I felt sum'thin' was nay right when we left ta Keep, like sum'thin' was missin'. Now I know what be wrong that day... tha Morninglord were nay on me side. Donay know why that be, but as he be decidin' ta abandon one o' his servants in a time o' need..." Kilain looks down into the glass and clears his throat, "... I've decided ta abandon him." He ponders for a short while, "Nay only fer this..." he looks into the glass one more time as he speaks, "but me mentor n' traina' has passed as well, feels like tha gods be ta busy ta care fer us in Faerûn."

He takes a proper swig from the glass and makes a face as the strong, distilled fermented grain beverage slowly rolls down his throat filling both his stomach and head.

Bruner took another swig of ale to wash down the spicy foul and letting out a hearty belch. He took a quick look around the room to see how everyone was doing. As to be expected, several were slightly withdrawn, but enjoying the meal. He filled his stein again and started to make a round of the table to make sure that they knew he truly cared for their well-being.

Bruner himself was not as ease, his heart screamed for blood...Blood Raven blood, but as a commander, you have to put on a face and show that you are hurt a bit, but not let on how much. Inside he was a wreck and he knew it. He just lost the one person who had the guts to stand up to him and keep him on the straight and narrow.

He knew that Kilain and Brottor were hit the hardest with Brottor's passing. Kilain is having a crisis of faith and is lost with way to look for help. Dorvan was there, holding Brottor's hand when he died and turned to ash. That alone might be enough to push the lad a bit too far.

When he came around to Kilain working on a bottle of whiskey, he placed a hand on his shoulder, "Might I 'ave a werd with ye?"

As Kilain has worked his way through the first glass things starts to look and sound weird. Yet the sturdy hand of Bruner makes him more or less wide awake. "Aye, lad... sire..." He coughed and clears his throat "Aye, Bruner." Kilain gets up, clears his throat once again, rips a wing of the half eaten grilled chicken and shakes his head. Then he follows Bruner.

Dorvan sits quietly listening to Kilain, not interrupting, as he knows he would not want to be interrupted. He does not realize he is absently tracing the flaming sword shaped scars on his forearms. The dwarven stout just doesn't taste right this night, he doubts anything will either.

When Kilain rises to get some food and drink, Dorvan looks down at his arms and realizes from the redness that he has been tracing his scars for some time now. He stops momentarily until he comes to the realization that at some level it's a comfort to trace those scars. It's a connection to The Lady of the Fray, and then a truth hits him, it's not the tracing of the scars that's a comfort, but rather it's his connection to Haela Brightaxe that is the comfort! This new found knowledge is like the lighting of a candle in a dark room.

When Kilain sits back down, he patiently continues to listen knowing now he has the strength to help his kinsman. When Kilain tells him he has lost his faith, Dorvan finally understands what the duty of a kaxanar or any priest is. As he gets ready to try and speak with Kilain, Bruner walks up and asks to speak with Kilain. With his new found knowledge Dorvan can see the pain and loss in Bruner's eyes as well. Maybe he will have to talk to both of them.

Dorvan looks to Kilain, "I bae waitin' 'ere fer ye, whin Bruner bae dun talkin' ta ye." When he finished speaking he locked eyes with Bruner for a second or two, willing him to help Kilain as well.

As they walked away, Dorvan pulled the other wing off the chicken and gnawed on the meaty end. He was right nothing tasted right. As he looked into his hand to put the chicken aside, it turned to dust in his hand! He jumped up from his chair in shock as he tilted his hand to dump the dust out. The chair crashed to the floor behind him and he looked to the table in horror as the wing hit the table unchanged! He knew his faith was strong, but he now knew his mind was much weaker. This would haunt him forever unless he found a way to purge the memory of Brottor's death from his mind.

He was gonna need the strength of his friends to see him through this. He righted his chair and sat back down, ignoring the stares of those in the room. As he waited for Kilain to return, he once again started tracing the scars on his arms. What he failed to notice was that he was now pushing much harder and his finger nails were starting to draw blood. The pain and the warm trickle's of blood did nothing to rouse him from his almost trance like state.

The double, battle axe pendant was heavy. It was made by dwarves, for dwarves, fashioned of the purest silver. Dorvan had given it to Bruner when the war-priest Brottor had died. It was bequeathed by the dead to the living.

Unbeknownst to most and hither too unnoticed by all in attendance to the feast, it glowed a fierce blue-white. The light was pure and clean, giving a sense of reverence and



holiness. Suddenly, mighty dwarven voices could be heard singing the ancient songs of valor and bravery that lasts beyond death.

The song came from everywhere and nowhere. For a fleeting moment it rang clear and loud, for all to hear, then it was gone, except for the echo of the last verse, which hung in the air.

"Weep not for us our kin... We stand strong and proud in the mighty host... Axes raised high, we sing and fight by Clangeddin's side..."

With everything that had happened since they left the Keep to this moment was a great deal for all of them to deal with, Bruner had to push his own grief to the side for the moment to make sure that everyone else not going to do something rash and get all of them home to Deepward Keep as soon as possible. With the possible implication of the Blood Ravens, town was not a good place to be, one of them might be spotted and several of the lads might want a measure of vengeance, this must not happen.

Bruner pulled Kilain off to the side to speak with him, "Kilain, I know ye 'ave nay been yerself...none of us 'ave since this whole journey started." Bruner took a swig of ale before continuing, "We should nay mourn their deaths, but celebrate their lives an tha deeds thay accomplished."

He took the heavy amulet from his belt and passed it over to him, "I want ye ta 'ave this, remember tha strength an determination Brottor 'ad..." Bruner was about to continue when the amulet in Kilain's hands started to glow.

The room came to a stop when the music began, Bruner even took a few tentative steps back not sure what was going to happen, then Brottor's voice is heard as he tells them not to mourn their loss, that they now stand by Clangeddin's side. He smiles hearing the news and smacks Kilain on the arm, "That stand once again fightin tha war eternal."

Kilain did his best to concentrate on what Bruner said and he nodded in agreement as Bruner mentioned "... nay mourn... celebrate their lives..."

With a bowed head, widen eyes and deep respect he received the amulet, he knew how much the amulet meant to Bruner. Kilain did not have the time to think as the amulet started to glow and chants from old times could be heard, his jaw dropped. The chants struck a cord in Kilain, there was something familiar about it, even though he was sure he had not heard it before.

With somewhat dazed eyes he held the amulet in front of himself. The chants died off but the glow remained and Kilain had to squint to be able to look at it, suddenly everything

went from bright blue-white to black. Kilain fell to the floor head first still grasping the amulet. The half eaten chicken wing slowly tried to make its escape though the weight of Kilain and his knee stopped it right on its way to freedom.

Bruner was not fast enough to catch Kilain before he fell over, but worked to get him upright. Propping him up against the back of one of the heavy chairs, he gave his friend a gentle shake to try to get him to snap out of it.

Kebur rushes over to try and help out Kilain, when he sees that he is somewhat dazed, he grabs a goblet of water from the table and sloshes Kilain in the face. <Oi! Kilain, are you alright? Wake up lad.>

An intense light fills his vision. He is wondering if he is going to pass out, but reconsiders, knowing he did not have enough ale for that to happen. Dorvan looks up and his mind returns from its wanderings in time to hear the ancient dwarven song. It seems to him one voice is familiar to him, but he can't quite place it as it's mixed in with the other voices. The light seems to be coming from something in Kilain's hand. As the song ends Kilain crumples to the floor. Is he dead! Will he turn to ash! It was Brottor's voice! Wait! It can't be real! This is just another vision like the chicken wing! Just close your eyes and concentrate on the Luckmaiden and when your eye's open it will be gone!

When he opens his eye's the light and the song are gone. Thank the Gods, the false vision is gone! Then why is Kilain being lifted off the floor? Why are Bruner and Kebur yelling at him? Is Kilain indeed dead? Wait, you don't throw water in the face of a dead man. You do that when someone passes out! But what made him pass out? Did he really drink that much? He didn't think he had!

Dorvan stands to go to Kilain's aid as well. He feels the warm trickle down each arm for the first time. He looks down at the blood coming from his arms, to the blood on his hands and finally to the small pools of blood on the table where his arms had rested. He considers a quick prayer which would stop the bleeding, but then realizes that what he had done was done out of his faith. The bleeding would stop on its own and the ritual scaring on his arms would be that much more noticeable.

Dorvan calmly went to aid those helping Kilain. He was right in his earlier thoughts, his faith was strong, and his mind was weak and prone to flights of horror. He needs to find a way to control his mind, and banish this weakness...

The fresh water hits Kilain and he wakes up from his unconsciousness with a shake of his head. He smiles widely and looks up at Kebur. A small cut can be seen on his left eyebrow, as some blood is making its gentle way down his cheek. <Aye, no worries about me... I never felt better in all of my life.>

A small glow can be seen beaming from his eyes, not extremely apparent but standing close to him one could sense it. He gets up from the floor with the aid of the others and with a stern look on his face, he puts the amulet around his neck. With the amulet around his neck he relaxes, looks around at the gathering and smiles.

Bruner is glad to see that his friend is fine and helps him to his feet. Slapping him on the back, <Lad, get back to your table, I think Dorvan wants to have a word with you.> He gently nudged him that way and proceeded to finish his way around the table sharing some laughs and a few moments with all those here. He stopped again to fill his stein with more ale before returning to his seat and share some stories with others at that table.

Ragnar was off to the side and chatting with Torgga. Bruner was impressed that someone was able to get through the walls enough to get the lass to enjoy a quite moment away from everyone else was quite the achievement. He watched the two for another moment then went back to listening to Kebur retell one of his stories of when he was younger and out adventuring. Bruner smiled at hearing his old mentor enjoying the moment and he could tell that he truly enjoyed being useful in combat again and not a teacher.

Bruner sat there and was pleased that the mood of the gathering, while somber, had gradually begun to be a bit more uplifting. He sits back and watches those gathered here. He stood up once more and said, <Lads and lass...> indicating Torgga, <Tonight eat and drink your fill, because tomorrow we return to Deepward Keep.>

**Silver Marches vs Vicho Smadda** (the following story is a compilation of posts from Surlian, Brynjolf, CKY, axesrock, The Secret, Mighty Khan, Aeterna, darthweasel, Memengwa and MasterofReality)

Sati looks at Vicho for a long while, green eyes mild, some vague sort of pleasure hiding in the tilt of her brows.

"Court is now in session. Vicho Smadda, you stand accused by the Council of the Western Marches of the following crimes: treason, being a plot to overthrow the Confederacy of the Silver Marches; murder in two counts and attempted murder in two more, one of those being on the person of a Councilor; the use of assassins; banditry; and the practice of necromantic magic. You have confessed to all of these crimes, and witnesses can be called. If you have a statement to make, or if someone else wishes to make a statement on your behalf, now is the time."

Vicho standing in chains, looks about pathetically, its obvious to all that care to look, that he has been shown "many tender mercies" at the Inquisitor's hand.

With a shudder he catches a glimpse of a familiar purple cloak moving away from the crowd, towards the back of the Court room and the exit.

His eyes rolling in fear, he looks back at the woman who will pronounce his death sentence. "I... I am... I am guilty of all charges. Please let us not drag this out any longer... I am ready... Kill me now and be done with it!"

Off in one of the corners about a dozen dwarves stood, wearing the armor of Deepward Keep. A rough lot that looks ready to go to war at a moment's notice, with Bruner Stonehammer standing in the front of the group and the old wizard beside him. They are a well-disciplined lot that was not caught up in the emotions of the moment and cry out for Vicho's blood here and now, but the look in their eyes shown that they would not hesitate if an executioner were sought out.

There was a low murmur from them as they saw the condition that Vicho was in, apparently from the hands of the inquisitor and then when he confessed to all of the charges against him.

Bruner made a few deft hand gestures to them, ensuring that they would not do something rash. His own rage was being contained at the moment, his hands tightly gripped the railing that separates Vicho and himself. He wanted nothing more to bring his axe screaming down upon Vicho's neck.

She nods once, the expression infuriatingly small.

"Vicho Smadda, I hereby proclaim you guilty of all charges. You are condemned to death by beheading, to be carried out in the courtyard of the Keep at sunrise tomorrow. I will be present to see this through.

"Court is adjourned."

**CRIME(S):** Treason, Murder (2), Attempted Murder (2), Hiring Assassins, Banditry, and Practicing Necromancy.

**RULING:** Guilty

**SENTENCE:** Death

From outside the court room, the tinkling laughter of a young maiden can be heard fading off in the distance as Vicho is led away to his execution. With a swish of her cloak, Amazagorza headed out of town to rejoin Sorn. It was a long way to the underdark and the safe houses her father had promised Tien'gathuin.

Bruner nods his head in agreement with the sentencing of the Thayan bastard, then says, "I 'ave someone who wishes ta be tha one ta end it." He turns and pulls Dorvan up to stand beside him, "Dorvan Hammerfist 'as spoken ta mae about this and wishes tha 'onor."

Sati bows her head, shaking it slowly.

"The offer is greatly appreciated, sirs, but I will be the one to end it. I feel it is my duty to take the life whose end was decided by my words. You are welcome, however, to attend."

Upon hearing that he was denied the Right to dispense dwarven justice to Vicho, Dorvan spits on the floor in the direction of Sati, turns and storms out!

Bruner is disgusted when he hears that Sati is going to take the honor of killing the bastard. Several of them are mumbling in dwarven as he follows Dorvan and leads the others out of the courtroom.

Vsevolod leans against the wall, watching the court proceedings with very tightly held in anger....barely restrained. His eye turns over the dwarves as one begins spitting and storming out.

"You aren't zhe only people who have a claim to Vicho's head. I suggest you stop acting like children, throwing tantrums because you did not get your vay. I would expect better from dwarves."

Dorvan didn't think it was possible to get any angrier...He was wrong!

At the manling's words he stopped dead in his tracks. He slowly turned, his face flushed with undisguised rage! He pushed past the dwarves following him and purposefully strode up to Vsevolod. Hands clenching and unclenching as he tries hard not to let his temper take him over the edge into bloodlust.

He speaks to the manling with a voice as chill as the grave itself, "Ye bae talkin' ta mae manling!? Let mae ask ye sumthin'. Did ye take him into cus'ady? NAY! Twas mae an' Bruner! Did ye lose Kinsman in 'is trasport to dis place?! OI, tha's right, Ye didnt e'en help git 'im 'ere! Mae an' mae Kinsman los' fife goot lads gettin' 'im 'ere! Lads wit families what gots ta bae told! Are ye gonna console 'em families?! NAY!! It bae mae an' mae kin what 'ave ta do 'at! So dun't bae sayin' thin's ye know nothin abou'!!!"

He stands in front of the manling hoping he is stupid enough to take a swing at him. Anything he does after that would be self defense and if he happened to die, well, it would be one less short lived manling to deal with!

A figure in black, hood covering most of her face watches with a slight smile visible under the hood. She waits to see what will happen, hoping that her perceptions on a "bad man" being in charge will be proven wrong, but based on what little she has seen of him doubts it. She has so far liked what she has seen of dwarves, and understands them after Dorvan's words and the frustrations they feel.

She did however agree with the sentence given to Vicho when she heard his statements in the matter, and would watch the execution in the shadows.

Vsevolod stands his ground to the dwarf, speech and then lowers himself to meet the dwarf eye to eye, the blue eye shining out opposite to the wall of hair over the left side of his face burning brightly with an intense hatred and rage, the sneer on his face is one that demands blood, and his voice is stone grating on stone as he speaks quietly to the dwarf.

"Yes I'm talking to you dwarf, you know why he was caught at all? You know why you were even able to bring him in...because zhe drow tortured him beyond belief, and he deserved it. I know zhis because I killed him, and I was zhere when he returned...zhe only reason he is here at all, guilty of being vith drow is because I found out, because I followed him and because I killed him and made zhe drow show himself. You have no idea what I've lost to Thayans like zhat, and I don't have zhe time or zhe patience to explain it to you, you ignorant little bastard. You want to go console familys, you want to see justice done, fine, but you and I both have claims to zhis mans life, so let zhe law deal vith it and it be satisfied, it's zhe only way to ensure everyvon and zheir mother isn't claiming zheir right to kill him....did you think of zhe parents of zhe unnamed little girl?"

Did you think about anyone else?

And as for your men, if they died, it is because you and the survivors failed them. Why are you even here dwarf, have some honor and cut your beard in shame for failing your people, and don't try to make up for it with vengeance alone. Don't speak to me like you know me dwarf, you know nothing."

Vsevolod stops talking, eye still blazing in rage at the dwarf, lip twitching up into almost a snarl, everything about the short, badger built man screams murder, with only a slight bit of control.

Tieg, having dropped by only to see what the whole ruckus about a trial was, listens to the charges as they're listed, then the admission of the spindly, broken-down mage.

His expression doesn't change with the rendering of the obvious verdict, though when the dwarf and Vsevolod get in each others' face, he is quick to flip his hood up.

"...Yep." He mutters, and after rendering his only comment on the whole affair, he turns to leave.

Antikas did not bother attending the trial. *Let the folks in power have their show. Let them all make a public spectacle of what should have been done and over with by now.*

It was not this man he was really concerned about, But another in the cells.

A very pale elf with violet eyes was sitting quietly in the corner during the trial. She is still sitting there during the commotion, watching the happenings.

What is going through her head (if anything at all) is unknown.

Bruner realized that this was about to get out of hand very quickly and end very badly, most likely for Vsesolod, he grabbed Dorvan by the collar of his armor and pulled him out of arms reach so he couldn't grab a hold of the manling. He then told him in a not so quiet voice, "Dorvan lad, the manling is just upset that we accomplished somethin 'e couldn't, 'is pride is 'urt an wishes 'e could 'ave done what we did." Bruner slapped his comrade's back a few times, "We overcame 'orrific odds in the battle, loses will 'appen whether ye want it or nay." He kept a hand on Dorvan's armor as he gently, but

forcibly moved him toward the door. Several other dwarves put themselves in between the two to keep the manling from doing something that he would regret.

Once away from the room he turned to them and spoke in dwarven, <There is more to this than what is shown and we need answers.> Looking at all of them to make sure they were paying attention, <Do not do anything stupid, we are heading back to the Keep shortly and I do not want to have to explain as to why I returned one more short because your arse is in a jail cell.>

<Once we get back to the inn, rest up and prepare to make way back home.>

Vsevolod continues to stare down Dorvan as he leaves, lips twitching into almost snarls, he averts his gaze only once, when Bruner takes him and gives him a quiet nod, a sign of respect, an unspoken notice that he's not going to jump on the dwarf as he's being taken off, he stands straight, back to his own meager height, waiting until the dwarf leaves, to make sure he himself doesn't attempt an attack.

Then he turned to Sati and looked at her for a long moment...she'd have the pleasure of killing Vicho. He wasn't sure yet how he felt about not being able to kill him himself...Sati had treated the dwarves with politeness and respect, and they'd approached with the same and then when rejected turned rude, they might as well have demanded it in the first place...he didn't have patience for folks with two faces, polite one minute, turning on you when they weren't pleased... He nodded once without a word and walked away towards his rooms.

A figure observes the trial on a corner without anyone noticing. After the trial the shady figure leaves without trace.

**Sunrise in the Courtyard** (the following story is a compilation of posts from Surlian, Brynjolf, Arathoss Black, The Secret and MasterofReality)

In the slight damp of early dawn Sati waited by the block for the guards to bring Vicho. She was not dressed up nor made up -- her hair tied back simply, her clothing the mismatched mixture of armor padding and walking clothes that she often wore. One gloveless hand rested on her sword-hilt. Other than breathing, she was perfectly still.

The guards brought the prisoner through the crowd, and inside she smiled, though she was very careful not to let it touch her face. *Death, you sniveling schemer, and death by my hand. Your time is ended in this body, and I rejoice to send your soul to the God for reforging.*



Quite suddenly she had to hide a grin, ducking her head down to check something on her sword-belt. *And let us be honest with ourselves -- I have looked forward to taking your life for a good long while now, and I will relish the feel of your blood on my hands. Come, Vicho, you broken spirit. Politics be damned, I will do this myself.*

When she raised her head again, scarcely two second had gone by. The grin was gone entirely, if it had ever indeed existed. The sky had begun to lighten, blue-purple fading into dove gray, and she turned to face the block as Vicho knelt, was forced to kneel. After a half-second of consideration, she dropped to a knee before him and moved a thumb across his forehead, her back to the crowd. Her whisper was so soft her lips barely moved. Then she was up again, looking down on him, drawing her sword, and the smell of corrosion drifted through the air, burned the nostrils of all those nearby.

"May whatever gods choose to take you judge you fairly, Vicho Smadda." And she swung. It was a clean death.

Darkness... Then pain unending, took the soul once known as Vicho Smadda. A scream was ripped from it and the scream howled across the ether, it was the scream of the eternally damned. The tortured soul descended further into pain and torment, beyond any it had known in life. The soul screamed again and again, there was no respite for the eternal torment, not in the Abyss.

So ends the tale of Vicho Smadda.

Vsevolod stood watching the execution...it should have been his hand, but that would have any started a war...the dwarves would have demanded it was their right, citizens would have demanded it was their right...a lot of useless bickering and a delay that couldn't be tolerated. He wanted the man dead, and he'd killed him once...all in all, it didn't matter how he died...he supposed...He'd had most of his revenge against the Thayans in the lands, he'd killed Vicho once, knew the satisfaction of seeing him die twice now...and he'd burnt their home behind them as they fled Nesme...

He watched the blade stroke fall, and as Vicho Smadda died he closed his eye...without the rage of battle, the rage of his own kill...he felt next to nothing...a hallow victory...but sometimes hallow victories had to be accepted. He bowed his head to Sati after catching her eye, and then walked off through the crowd, back to his office, back to paperwork and the piano.

A cold laughter can be heard when the sword strikes down. The source of the laughter remains unseen.

### **A Message to Dorinthal Kharazaad**

The currier runs across the bridge and into Deepward Keep. He arrives at the entry to the Keep and hands off a small package to the guard. The human is clearly out of breath as he tries to say, "From...Bruner...Stonehammer...for...Lord...Kharazaad." After he passed on the package, the human turned and left, his delivery has been made.

Everything was checked for traps, both magical and mundane, prior to being handed over to the Keepwarden, the dwarves have many enemies.

The note reads in dwarven:

*Keepwarden Kharazaad,*

*We have arrived in Rivermoot with the manling alive. However I regret to inform you that we lost six that set out with us, Brottor was amongst those that fell.*

*My gut tells me that there is something else is a foot nearby. Brottor did not fall in combat, but was murdered with a shot in the back with a poison that not only killed him, but turned his body to ash. Several of the lads are distraught and I suggest that those that went on the trip be taken off duty for some time and speak with Sonnlínor Anvilbreaker before resuming any sort of duty. Kilain and Dorvan have me the most concerned right now, I think Kilain feels helpless that he could do nothing but watch Brottor die and Dorvan was the one holding Brottor's hand when it turned to ash. Both are having difficulties dealing with this and I do not blame them.*

*I would like to have a remembrance of those that fell once we return. There were several injuries that we sustained and a few days rest will benefit before returning.*

*The cloak that I sent is from one of the orcs we fought. There was a horde waiting for us along the path, about 100 or so and the cloak seemed to be a badge of honor for several, maybe to show authority or favored by the orc chieftain, but they are the same cloaks worn by the Blood Raven mercenaries. Perhaps you can use some connections to validate this and find out some truth to the matter.*

*I will send word when we will be ready to travel home.*

*///signed///*  
*Bruner Stonehammer*

**A Messenger Visits Deepward Keep** (the following story is a compilation of posts from Death-Walker, CKY)

As he approached the door to Deepward Keep Jonus frowned, as he started to wonder at the Wisdom of him being the one to bring the message to the head of the Mithral Fist.

Why would they listen to him now, when they had ignored his letter about the Council position. Shrugging of his doubts, he nodded up to the guards as they stood on the battlements, quenched the fire from his hammer in the snow, slung his shield on his back, opened the door, and entered.

As he trudged down the entrance tunnel, he looked at the stonework, nodding at the skilled workings he saw, at least it appeared his kin here could work stone as well as those of his birthplace Citadel Adbar.

Crossing the large open market place, he paused to glance at the Alepit, but frowned at himself, no ale could wait, he had a message to deliver and deliver it he would, after all he'd promised Jasren.

Moving out onto the bridge spans that lead to the Citadel, he glances down then frowns. Stopping a moment, he kicks the toes of his boot on the ground, shedding the snow and fast melting slush.

Straightening himself, he reaches under his armor, and pulls out a necklace, settling the chain in plain view, the silver medallion of a heavy mace in front of fur-trimmed boots, glistening in the torch light.

Setting his shoulders square, he walks the last few yards to the gate guard.

"Can youse be telling ye boss, dat Jonus T'ank be 'ere wit', a message from de 'ead a de Marches Militia, Counciler Jasren, it be about recent developments with de orcses"

Shuffling slightly from one foot to the other Jonus, waited for the guard to respond.

Being a Deepward Scout, paranoia was second nature to Torgga Dankil, always on the lookout for anything or anyone that looked out of place and ranks them accordingly if they are a threat. She saw a new face in the crowd today, one that tripped an alarm in her head that classified him as a possible threat. Taking on last swig of cider, she stood and left, the ale pit owner knows that she is good for it and will just put it on her tab. Quietly

she slides into following the new comer, she did draw a few curious looks as she loaded her crossbow and continued to follow the dwarf about 30 paces behind. She pushed her cloak off one shoulder so it would not restrict her movement as she continued onto the bridge.

As he stopped to talk to the guard at the massive doors, she shouldered the ballista crossbow, but kept it pointed in a downward angle as not to alarm the guards. She carefully watched the exchange and when the doors opened up and a small group passed through, she grinned as she realized that the dwarf was dead if he had any ill intentions planned with Bruner and the others coming outside. *Trapped like a rat.*

Now she had to wait and watch the scene unfold.

Bruner passed through the massive doors to the Keep, leading five young lads that were obviously training for the militia. <Today you will learn to deal with the bitter cold and how it will affect you and the importance of being prepared.> With that said, he turned, watched and patiently waited as the lads check each other to make sure that their cold weather clothing was on correctly. He could see it in their eyes as he gave them a final check before they went outside, each of them was nervous and excited about venturing outside of the Keep on their training. Most of all, they were excited about being taught by Bruner, they viewed him as a champion of the Keep for others to rally around, but he did not view it the same way. He viewed himself simply as a leader and he was doing what was needed of him.

With the final check completed, they started towards the bridge, but that is all the further they make it when Bruner catches the trailing edge of the conversation between a dwarf that he does not know and one of the guards. Movement down the bridge a bit caught his attention and his hand immediately went to his waraxe as he saw Torgga with her crossbow shouldered.

The lads spied Bruner's actions after a few moments and spread out a bit, as they had been taught in training. Rurik quickly turned and secured the massive doors that kept unwanted visitors out of their home.

Bruner let a predatory grin slide across his face as he heard the lads behind him spring into motion a few moments after they saw him shift. *Slow, but they are still learning.* He was taking no chances when someone came to their doorstep. <Greetings, what is your name and business here?>

Noticing the door open Jonus turned, and watched as a group of Dwarves approached, the one in front seemed in charge, he raised his eyebrow as he noticed the leader's hand hovering by the handle of his waraxe.

He blinked his eye at the question, then cleared his throat before replying.

"Like I be Tellin de Lad 'ere" Nodding to the Guard "I Be Jonus, I be comin 'ere with a message from Councilor Jasren from de marches militia... I guess 'e would a told Steeg, but as 'e bin resignin' from de Council I guess Jasren aint seen 'im."

"So ye gonna take ye 'and off ye axe an take me te ye bosses, or ye want de orcses te catch ye with ye pants down cos ye scared a one old Dwarf"

Pausing to see the affect of his words Jonus swallowed gently, carefully not moving his hand towards his hammer at his side.

Bruner's armor was repaired, cleaned and polished since returning from Rivermoot. His left pauldron was now colored black, to show the recent loss of members on the mission of transporting Vicho Smadda.

<You will mind your tongue.> He was not pleased with this development, especially when he hears that Jonus was sent by the Council, while his hatred of Vsevolod did not rival that of Dorvan's, it was a burning one. Bruner saw Torgga down a vile of something then she vanished. *Invisibility potion, nice trick lass.* Standing his ground Bruner's voice was almost a growl, contempt for the council's messenger was very apparent. <Anything you want to say to the Keepwarden, you will tell me and I will ensure that the words of the council's lackey reaches his ears.> He stood there waiting for Jonus to respond.

A pained expression flickers across Jonus's face as Bruner spoke, then he shrugged his shoulders. "Tryin te wotch me toungue, an not 'avin a mirra aint workin, an If ye aint even avin de courtesy a tellin me ye name, wen i be tellin ye mine, I aint thinkin ye worth talkin te." He starts to turn away, sighs and then turns back, "But me messege be urgent, so I guess I bettta put up wit' ye bad manna's."

Moving slowly, and using two fingers, he gently unhooks his hammer and places it on the floor. "Now can we be goin inside? Cos i aint sayin anythin stood out 'ere w'ere anyones could be evesdroppin... wot be stoppin dem as be invisible walkin in de door, or a ye wantin de symbol a me God an all." He gestures towards the necklace he is wearing, the pendant plainly the symbol of Marthammor Duin, and smiles slightly, the scars on his face pulling at the corners of his mouth.

For Torgga, patience was a virtue that she had a great deal of and it often rewarded her many times over as it did now. She patiently waited for an opening and it had just arrived with Jonus setting his hammer on the ground. She slung her crossbow and sprinted forward towards him. As she neared Jonus she said, <Smart move lad.> She had timed the tumble perfectly, scooped up the hammer and righted herself beside the guard.

Now visible, she casually hands the weapon over to the guard while addressing Jonus with a wry grin. <I am sure it will be here when you leave.>

She watched Bruner turn and nod to two of the trainees as they moved to the great doors and opened them. Turning her attention back to Jonus, <Follow me.> As she started into the keep, following Bruner as the lads form up behind Jonus. She leaned over to him and whispered, <Be careful on how you conduct yourself inside, members of the council and people who represent them are not well received, mainly due to Vsevolod's insult at the Thayan bastard's trial.> She turned and halted the group for a moment. <Speak plain, deliver your message and leave. That is my last bit of advice.>

She resumed her walk inside, the smell of incense was strong as it was always burning at the tomb of King Durin Thunderaxe, the keep's last ruler. It reminded her to enjoy the moment and to live life to its fullest.

Looking off to the side she saw Bruner standing there waiting for them. She looked back over her shoulder, <This way.> was all that was said. She came to a halt about five paces from Bruner and gestured for Jonus to continue on and conduct his business.

It was hard for Bruner to keep the smirk off of his face to suddenly see the Jonus' hammer get snatched up from the ground and have it appear in Torgga's hands as she passes it off to the guard, but he did his best.

He nodded to two of the lads as he turned around, they quickly moved to comply with his instructions, opening the doors and would escort the visitor inside. <Watch him carefully.> Was his only instruction that was whispered to them as he passed into the doorway.

As he entered the Keep, he walked over to an open space and stood with his thumbs hooked into the front of his belt, waiting for Jonus to give him the message, so it can be passed onto the Keepwarden.

Jonus blinked his eye, then chuckled at the dwarf taking his hammer, nodding to the Guard as he passed "Take care of it lad, I be likin it back wen I be leavin."

Following he watched the smooth way the dwarf walked, then slowed fighting the itch, but it was to much, he carefully slipped his index finger up under his eye patch, scratching at the socket, trying to be as quick as possible, he pulled his finger out again as he moved through the door.

Trying to look composed he nodded as he saw inside the door. "It be good stone work youse be avin 'ere."

Wiping his finger on the edge of his cloak, he moved towards the waiting dwarf, nodding slightly at the words of advice.

"I aint from de council, I be from de militia. Jasren wos wantin ye te know dat we be seein Signs a Frost Giants joinin up wit' Orcses, an some sort a ice Goblins bein wit' dem. Twice in de last tenday dere be people runnin inta groups, Nort' a 'igh 'old de first time, an in de Moonwood de second. De frost giants be bloodie big buggas, an at least on a dem be 'urlin spells."

He looks around and takes a deep breath, lowering his voice so only his guide and the Stern dwarf he was addressing could hear. "An de worse news be dat we also be seein Dark elvses, we aint sure if dey be workin wit' de orcse, giants or bein on dere own, but dere be at least two sightins a dem, dey be travellin in strength an usin magic te not be seen."

He straightens an pauses, "A ye wantin me te be waitin fe a reply, or a ye wantin me te leave?"

Bruner listened to what the lad had to say as he caught a glance of Torgga slipping away into the shaddows and let out a low chuckle and grinned a bit. <That is the question you have for the Keepwarden?> He slowly stroked his chin with his hand, <Jonus lad, that is no secret amongst these walls that there has been more activity with frost giants, orcs and gobos. In several cases they have been spotted working together in limited numbers.> Thinking for a moment, <My hunch is that Obould is on the warpath again and managed to get the others to help him. A war is coming that is certain.>

A wry grin creeps across his face as he speaks in a normal volume so those around can hear, <As for the other thing, yes we have seen a couple of drow near Rivermoot. I managed to capture one of them and he is our prisoner at the moment. The Blood Ravens have a female prisoner too, the one that our prisoner was searching for. As far as I can tell, the filth is not working with anyone else, but its own kind.> *This will give them something to think about.* <Just so you know, the drow are in the middle of a civil war. There are those loyal to Lolth> He spits on the floor at the mention of the drow goddess. <And one they call The Masked One. Once I am done questioning him, we figure out what is to be done with him we will let the council know and they might have you come

to collect him, but again, I cannot speak for the Keepwarden. I will pass on your concerns and send a messenger if things change.>

Jonus Nods as Bruner speaks, noting the lack of reaction with slight puzzlement. “OK den I just be 'avin one other question, an dont be shoutin at me I just be askin.” He swallows slightly, “wot be Deepwards position on de Council... I wos 'earin dat Steeg dat wos representin Deepward be resignin.”

Shrugs “So de question be a ye still part a de council, an if so a ye gonna be sendin someone te be representin ye interests?” Eases his weight backwards. “An wos ye knowin dat de counciler fe law be resignin an bein gettin replaced?”

Hiding his surprise of this news well he carefully measured his response. <The question to remain part of the council I cannot answer. The Keepwarden will have to be consulted and it will be put out to the citizens that there are council positions that are vacant. Eying him carefully, <I can assure you that he is most displeased after speaking with Master Steeg concerning his reasons for leaving. A message will be sent when a decision has been made.>

Jonus blinks his eye at the lack of response, then shrugs, “Ok den, I be tellin Jasren dat... 'e can be tellin de rest a de council. I Guess dere aint anythin else te be sayin, so i be leavin.” He turns to leave then turns back and smiles, the scars on his face pulling the corners of his mouth askew, “De Blessins a Marthammor Duin be wit' ye an ye kin.” He nods and turns, heading back for the door he came in through.

Watching Jonus leave, Bruner waved over Magnus and said, <Find Master Steeg and inform him that I would like to speak with him when we complete today's training.> Thinking for a moment, <Tell him it is cold weather training, so do not expect us back for some time. Once you deliver the message, catch up with the rest of us outside.>

Magnus nodded his understanding of the instructions and set off to find Master Steeg.

**The Alliance of Deepward Keep and Holy Order of the Just** (the following story is a compilation of in game RPing and posts from CKY, GES02)



Bruner was on the hunt for a certain manling, one that he did not want to stomp into a mud hole, but wanted to determine his worth and if the Holy Order of Just is worth the dwarf's attention. He had read the message board in town that they were a small group of knights and paladins that were using their faith to combat the evils of the region.

He eventually made his way to Rauvinwatch Keep and passed by a human that was dressed and carried himself in a way that he thought could be a knight or paladin, so he stopped him and asked if he was Angelo Sovereign. Apparently luck was on his side and he found the right person. He introduced himself and asked a few questions about his order, what they plan to do about the constant threat of evil. They were interrupted when Sati Blackson and Vsevolod can by and Bruner made eye contact with Vsevolod and spit on the boat docks and the two exchanged barbs until Angelo suggested that they retire to a less congested area, the Imateri Mission was located nearby.

Once inside the Mission, the two discuss various topics ranging from religion, the Arcane group and possible taint of evil it carries, Dragotha and the horrors it brings, the Council of Commons and the slight of their honor at the hands of Vsevolod and finally talk of forming an alliance.

Bruner asks them about their equipment and Angelo is slightly embarrassed to admit that it is mostly piecemeal outfits that they find and pass onto each other. Realizing a potential way for both groups to prosper, he offers the following to the knight.

Five suits of armor

Five shields

Five weapons of their choice

~~~~~

A hastily penned note reads:

*Keepwarden Kharazaad,*

*I recently had a very long discussion with one Angelo Sovereign, a knight of his order. Of the many topics discussed were the Arcane group and the mess they have caused, the council and the suspicions that something is not right in that group and that Vsevolod is a coward, the lich Dragotha were the main ones.*

*They are very small in number and are using any and all scraps of armor that they can find and from what I saw, they are in need and I believe we can help them. I suggest that we contribute five suits of armor, shields and one weapon each to their holy order.*

*I feel it would benefit both of us in a way that both gain an ally and a potential increase of business when word spreads of our wares as they move about the region wearing the items that our shopkeepers make. They did offer us shelter if we were in the Rauvinwatch Keep area and needed a place to rest. Their shelter is located in the Inner Courtyard*

*beside the main building on the right side. I offered them the same courtesy, but in the market place ale house, for no fee.*

*I did provide them with the following items out of my stores of equipment:*

*+2 Ring of Protection*

*+2 Ring of Resistance X 2*

*Purple Dragon Ring*

*+2 Periapt of Wisdom*

*+3 Cloak of Protection X 2*

*+5 Boots of Reflexes*

*+4 Boots of Reflexes*

*///signed///*

*Bruner Stonehammer*

Bruner had managed to catch the Keepwarden and they conferred for many hours over several steins of ale on exactly how they will aide them. Dorinthal was not all for sending them supplies of arms and armor, instead suggested that we offer to send them one of our smiths and enough supplies to help them craft their own wares. Bruner agreed with the wisdom of such an idea. As they spoke and walked about the keep, a guard approached and handed Bruner a folded note. He quickly scans it for anything alarming, but instead grunts as he finishes reading it:

*Bruner Stonehammer of Deepward Keep,*

*I wish to inform you and your brethren of the Order's plan to go ahead with the construction of our bastion within the Keep of Rauvin Watch. It will be an addition to Ilmater's Mission as well as a partial demolition/construction of the building itself. We are skilled workers, but not to the point of dwarven skill. We humbly request your assistance in the building process if at all possible.*

*Your Ally,*

*Angelo Sovereign*

*Holy Order of the Just*

He passes it off to Dorinthal to read and awaits his response.

**Decisions and Consequences** (the following story takes place right after “A Messenger visits Deepward Keep” is a compilation of posts from CKY, Perkko)

Bruner and the trainees trudged their way up the hillside, Bruner motioned them to hurry up, the Keep’s entrance was in sight, as the trainees were dead on their feet from today’s excursion into the area near the Frost Hills.

Standing at the top of the hill, <You are almost there lads.> Pointing towards the Keep’s massive gates.

Not recognizing the group, one of the guards standing along the battlements that overlook the path leading up to the Keep challenges them. <OI! You there! State your name and business.> His voice loud as the others took aim with their crossbows.

Bruner motioned one of the lads up to him, <Rurik, come here lad.>

From the middle of the group one of the older trainees comes jogging up beside Bruner with the perpetual snow crunching beneath his boots, <Aye?>

Bruner turned slightly as he approached and gently slapped him on the shoulder, <Tell the guard who we are and what we are doing.>

Rurik stepped forward a few paces and realized that this was no drill that Bruner setup for them, the guards were ready to strike if things turned hostile. Clearing his throat before he spoke, <I am Rurik of the Holderhek clan and I am returning from militia training with the others present.>

The guards relaxed slightly, <Who is your trainer Rurik of the Holderhek clan?> A valid question as a group of trainees would not venture out with a trainer present.

He was not exactly sure on how to answer and looked to Bruner who stood there who pointed back up to the guard that asked the question. <Bruner Stonehammer is our trainer.> He turned a bit and pointed to Bruner.

Bruner stood there and waved to the guard. <Aye, it’s me Bruner.>

The guard relaxed and signaled the others to stand down. Once they returned to their posts along the cliff face the head guard waved them forward, <Welcome home!>

Bruner motioned the others to forward as they made their way through the Keep’s entrance, then the mine and finally the marketplace, before reaching the Keep itself. Once inside, Bruner turned to them and said, <Good work today, you learned the importance of staying warm and the effects it can have on you in prolonged exposure. Any questions?>

One of the younger lads on the end raised his hand, <Aye sir, would it not be easier to have a magical item that would keep us warm instead of the layers of clothing?>

Nodding in agreement <Aye Barendd, it would be,> holding up one finger to make a point, <but the whole point of training is so that you know what to do when you have to do it. Now you know how to dress to survive out in the cold without a magical item.> He looked back and forth again, <Any more questions?> Seeing that there were none. <Good. Stow your gear and get something warm to eat, you're done for the day. Be ready for weapons drills again tomorrow. Dismissed.> He watched the lads head back to get cleaned up and get some warm food. *Now to find Steeg.*

Steeg was sitting in the Keep's dining room, chewing on some rothe jerky. The recent months had been filled with turmoil and it had left the young dwarf in shambles. Turning his back on the council had been the easy way out, he was fully aware of this. Sweeping a problem under the rug didn't really make them go away, but Steeg had seen no other way out of the situation he was in. With no councilor of trade and more importantly no representative from Deepward Keep, they were all worse off than before the turmoil had begun. Brooding over his passed decisions Steeg was too deep in thought to take any notice of his surroundings.

Bruner had quickly changed from his cold weather clothing into a pair of simple shirt and pants and started looking around the keep for Steeg, looking in the armory, council chambers, but finally came to the dining room. He saw several dwarves in the massive room, Torgga was sharing her table with Ragnar and the two were chatting quietly over a couple steins of ale. He saw her look up at him and he shook his head "no" and she turned back to the conversation. After a few more seconds of scanning the room, he saw Steeg sitting off to the side, chewing on some food. He heads over to where massive kegs line a portion of the wall, buys two steins of Deepward Dark and head over to the table where Steeg is seated. He walked up behind Steeg and gently kicked the chair, <Thinking too much usually gets people into trouble.> Setting the stein down in front of his friend, Bruner parked himself in a seat across from him, <What is troubling you old friend?> Looking into his eyes, Bruner saw that Steeg did indeed have a great deal on his mind.

Jumping startled at the abrupt greeting Steeg looked up from the spot on the table he had studied for the last hour long enough to give Bruner a grunt in recognition. Taking a mouthful from the new stein, he returned to staring at the table.

<Well Bruner, I am just worrying about this whole council issue. It seemed so promising

and I cannot get my head around why things went down the drain. I am sure I could have done more in some way. But, I have thought enough of this for today. What brings you to the warmth of the Hold? I heard you were out training the recruits. You haven't managed to get them all killed, have you?>

He managed to give Bruner a weak smile while making the joke.

As Bruner sat down on the wooden bench, he narrowed his eyes when he heard Steeg's words. He took a healthy draw from his stein before he spoke, <Steeg, we have been through harsh times together, we have fought giants,> spreading his arms wide to take in the expanse of the room, <we cleared this keep for Moradin's sake!> Bruner was getting upset that Steeg viewed his leaving the council as a personal failure and slapped his hand against the table to get Steeg's attention, <Damn it Steeg! How can you think like that?! Did you conduct yourself in an honorable manner? Did you see to it that your duties were executed in a prompt and orderly fashion? If the council fails, it is not due to your actions! Sati Blackson recently resigned from her position, I do not know what her reason is nor do I care. All that I know is that some of the manlings probably have personal agendas that they place above the good of the realm, while you did the honorable thing and place the realm's needs over yours. So quit beating yourself up over this! I am sure that Dorinthal could use your help in working with the merchants in the market place, settling a dispute or anything that comes up.>

He took another draw from the stein of ale before continuing, <As for the training, the lads did well outside today, we found some bears that we avoided and showed them the foothills of the Frost Hills. Tomorrow, we continue weapons training, I am hoping to get Dorvan involved with them. He took Brottor's death pretty hard, then dealing with Vsevolod only made it worse.> He let out a sigh that showed the weight of responsibility he bears, <I want him to become involved with training to get him to help improve the training, exposing the young ones to a variety of fighting methods. The future of the Keep is in good hands with the lads that are being trained. You are welcome to join to if you wish.> He looked at Steeg, hoping that he would accept his invitation at either helping Dorinthal or joining him in the training of the lads. Anything to help him get out of this foul mood he is in.

Steeg nodded as he listened to Bruner's reasoning but remained silent and busy with slowly emptying the stein. As Bruner changed the subject to training of the troops, he put his now empty stein down.

<Well, I ain't probably of much use when it comes to troop movements and general tactics since most of what I know is the little I've picked up when fighting along side you and the other brothers in the Keep. But, I guess I could make myself useful for the weapons training. With the risk of sounding pretentious I might be one of the best trained

axemen in the keep, only second to you that is.”

He grinned at the last statement, but as he grabbed for the empty stein he frowned, displeased with the fact that he was again out of ale.

Bruner grunted at the last comment and tried to goad Steeg about it to fire him up as he waved down the lass for another round of ales, <Spending time amongst the manlings probably dulled your skills to the point of being a match to theirs, so lads might give you a bit of a challenge.> He chuckled a bit as he watched Steeg for his reaction. He was glad to see him back in the Keep after his time spent away working on the council.

With Steeg back in Deepward Keep, the market place would prosper more under his watchful eye. His grasp of the commerce was exceptional and his ability to settle disputes amongst the vendors was admirable and was respected by all in the marketplace.

Steeg scoffed at the obviously feigned insult.

"Bah! I don't reckon em have dulled anything other than my taste buds with their sorry excuse for ale. Might I'll have to show you and the recruits that my axe is still as sharp as the next kin's. Or are ye too old to dare take up a challenge? I don't doubt you'd best me...that is if you could catch me with your heavy blows."

His face started to brighten up a bit more and when the serving wench came with the next rounds he couldn't help but feeling quite at ease with life again.

Bruner noticed the change in Steeg's demeanor and was pleased that his friend's mood what lightening up. They started to relax and enjoy their next stein of ale when he saw one of the new guards run into the chow hall breathing hard.

The guard quickly scanned the room and ran over to where Bruner and Steeg sat, <Capt Stonehammer sir,> he managed between breaths.

Bruner sensed that something was very wrong with the way the lad arrived. <What is the matter lad?>

The young guard composed himself, <Sir, a scout just reported in that Settlestone is under siege by orcs and giants.>

Bruner looked over at Steeg, <Get everyone together and out in the main hall as quickly as you can. Full armor and armaments for all and prepare for siege operations.> He

turned to the guard, <Good work lad, back to the ramparts with you.> He watched the guard turn and instead of running out of the doorway, he ran over to where Torgga and Ragnar sat. He told her something and she quickly said goodbye to Ragnar and ran out the doorway with the guard in tow.

## Defending the Keep

The Deepward Scout ran as fast as his stubby legs would carry him, the snow crushing beneath every step as he made his way back to the venerable Keep. <I must warn them.> He said to himself as he crested another hill drawing closer to the hilltop. His breathing labored as he ran as fast as he can from Settlestone, only stopping when he could walk no more. Being as close as he was, he ran for all of his worth, one hand holding firm to his waraxe and the other on his chest, holding the amulet of Moradin against his skin. *All Father, your servant humbly beseeches you, aide me so that those will hear the message I carry.* Grulgar's muscles felt as though they were on fire due to the exertion of traveling so far so fast, through grim determination he pressed on.

As he made his way up the mountainside, Grulgar started to feel lightheaded, the physical exertion had taxed his body to the point of collapsing as he gasped for breath with Deepward Keep less than an hour's journey away. The wind had picked up gradually as he made his way up the mountain. He fell to his hands and knees, breath came to him raggedly as he started crawling to his destination. Grulgar had stopped momentarily, his muscles ached, he could hardly breath and his vision was swimming back and forth unable to focus.

<Grulgar my son.>

The voice boomed into his head, looking about to see who said that, he replied weakly, "Who...who...said...that?" His crawling continued, as he slowly made progress to his destination. "SS...show...yourself," as his hand tightened around his waraxe. If he was going to die in a fight, it would be on his feet, not crawling on his hands and knees. Through sheer determination, he willed himself to his feet and stood there on wobbly legs against the whipping wind that now threatened to knock him over.

<Grulgar, it is I, Moradin.> Came the voice inside his head again.

Grulgar fell to his knees, bowing his head low, not even knowing where his lord stood, tears streaming down his face and onto the snowy ground beneath him.

<I have heard your plea my son along with those that have asked me to watch over you on your journey here, as I have watched you traverse the great distance between the two strongholds.>

Grulgar felt a presence near him, but could not tell exactly where.

<Rise my child, I will lend you my strength. Your journey is one of grave importance.>

As he heard Moradin's words, Grulgar slowly stood up and as he did, a warm feeling fell upon him. All of his fatigue was gone, his muscles felt refreshed and he has a single minded purpose to fulfill, deliver the message. He took off at a run up the mountain path, his legs chewed up the worn path as he drew closer and closer to Deepward Keep.

*Less than an hour later...*

Finally as he drew closer to the massive doors, he saw the guards and yelled out, <Brothers!> This alerted the Keep's guards that there was something amiss.

The sergeant in charge of the post replied, <Grulgar lad? Is that you?>

He smiled as someone recognized him, but vanished quickly as he delivered his warning, <Aye, it is me. Sound the alarm, Settlestone is under siege by giants and orcs!>

The sergeant nearly dropped his axe before he recovered from the shock, <Hurry inside lad, you must speak with Sonnilar Anvilbreaker!> He turned to one of the new dwarves that had recently finished their training and in a firm commanding tone told him, <Sound the alarm lad. Find Capt Stonehammer and tell him that Settlestone is under siege, get all of the guards together and help get the barricades in place. Send for Torgga Dankil, I could use a crack shot up here on the ramparts.> Turning to the other guards along the wall, <Challenge everyone coming in and have a squad of five assemble down at the doors to search any wagon or cart that comes into the Keep.> He watched the lad disappear into the depths of the stronghold.

He thought for a moment before turning back to the others, <Be ready lads. This is going to be a rough one.>

In the Deepward Keep Mess Hall...

Bruner noticed the change in Steeg's demeanor and was pleased that his friend's mood what lightening up. They started to relax and enjoy their next stein of ale when he saw one of the new guards run into the chow hall breathing hard.

The guard quickly scanned the room and ran over to where Bruner and Steeg sat, <Capt Stonehammer sir,> he managed between breaths.

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*In the Armory sometime later...*

Torgga walked in carrying a new weapon, some variation of the heavy crossbow and it was one that Bruner had not seen before. She nodded to him, <A new crossbow from Egil...field testing.> She let a wicked grin slide across her face.

Bruner narrowed his eyes and grunted as he knew better than to ask for any more information.

She had commandeered one of the militia trainees, Barendd, that had reported in, without waiting for Bruner's acknowledgement and made her way to the ramparts. As the guards were forming up, she spied Ragnar and blew him a kiss. The wry grin was on her face as she continued on to the front.

He smiled as he saw her and felt the nudge of a couple of his comrades as they witnessed the exchange. *Damn it all! That smile always gets me.* He felt his face flush a bit as he continued to watch her walk. *That arse too.* He let out a low grunt as she walked around the corner.

<Ragnar!> Bruner barked out. <Get over here and pay attention lad.>

Bruner's slight rebuke shook Ragnar from his daydreaming and back to the task at hand.

Down the way a bit, almost out of earshot, there was a slight giggle of a lass that could only be heard if you were listening for it.

He gathered Steeg, Dorvan, Kilain and Sorgin and they debated whether or not the many of the recruits were ready for this. After a short, but heated discussion, it was decided that they would select those that they felt were ready to stand at the gate with Sorgin Anvilbreaker and Ragnar. While many of the militia members would venture into the Underdark highway to see if they could make it to the Mithral Hall.

Several hours later...

The last of the barricades were now in place, Bruner and the others standing guard at the edge of the hill watching and waiting for the orcs to arrive en mass.

Ragnar approached and stood beside Bruner, <Sir, the barricades are in place and the scouts are reporting orc troops moving this way from Settlestone.>

Nodding he turned to Ragnar, <Good, with the traps in place along with the barricades they will be ground down.> Pointing back at the ramparts, <With rotating troops along the wall we can grind them down for the infantry at the gates.>

Ragnar nodded his head in agreement, Bruner was trusting him and several others to keep many of the regulars and recruits that were selected to defend the gates to hold the line. Bruner and the others were on a more dangerous mission that would lead them into the Underdark.

Not long after the fortifications were in place, scouts reported in that a horde of orcs and giants were heading toward the keep, but were almost a day's journey from arriving.

*At the entrance to Deepward Mountain...*

A human page approached the venerable keep, seeing a great deal of barricades erected and many more guards along the crenellations above the entrance to the mines. Once he reached the massive gates one dwarf approaches him and searches him with two others standing nearby and the crossbowmen taking aim at him. The page was nervous as he could tell that the dwarfs were prepared for war as he was searched and his messaged check for any traps both magical and mundane.

He informed the guard named Ragnar that his message is for Capt Bruner Stonehammer and that is from Rya Mishima of the Holy Order of the Just. The dwarf grunted as he passed the note off to a subordinate that quickly ventured into the Keep to deliver the message.

Looking over the page again Ragnar and said, "Laddie, get inside an rest fer a bit. I canna say if tha orcs are nearby er nat." Thumbing toward the Keep's gates, "I'll 'ave one of tha lads take ye ta tha Ale Pit ta rest. If the path tis clear tamarrow then ye can return." Looking the page over with a careful eye and saw that he wore the colors of the order he said he was from, "Capt Stonehammer may want ta speak with ye." Ragnar motioned a new recruit forward and told him to take the page to the Ale Pit for food and shelter.

The recruit lead the page into the depths of the mountain.

*Inside the Keep's Main Room...*

Grulgar once again approached Bruner and the group as they worked on the plan to venture into the Underdark. Dorvan casually slapped Bruner's pauldron and pointed to Grulgar.

Bruner turned to him, <Aye lad?>

Grulgar nodded to Bruner, <Sir, a messenger just arrived from the Holy Order of the Just.> He handed over the papers to Bruner, <If there is nothing else sir, I will return to the gate.>

Thinking for a moment, <Aye lad, there is.> He was not pleased with issuing this next order, but it was necessary, <Have Ragnar find a volunteer to locate the other scouts that are out patrolling and recall them back here if possible. If they cannot return here, they are to go to Rauvinwatch Keep and seek out Brother Angelo, they will have food and shelter there until they can return to us here. It is too dangerous to patrol the area at squad strength let alone in pairs or alone.>

Grulgar was a bit taken by the instructions as normally Bruner would find that volunteer for the mission. *Are things that bad to where our champion remains in the safety of the fortress or has Ragnar gained much favor in the eyes of the Keepwarden?* <Aye sir. It will be done.> He turned and jogged away from the group, carrying out Bruner's instructions.

Bruner turned his attention from Grulgar's departure to the letters that he passed to him. He opened them and began to read the letters written in elegant common...

*The Holy Order of the Just make note of disturbances at Settlestone, although we are late to arrive, we reallocate sources and help as you need it. One is Rya Mishima and will be your contact should friend wish to use the offer.*

*Also attached is another letter one has sent but had received no reply to the friend dwarf Keg.*

*Gods Bless You,  
Rya Mishima*

*To the Dwarves of Deep Keep (sent to Keg)*

*One was the student of the now passed Angelo Sovereign of whom one deducts you had meetings with? One wishes to give thanks for lending aid in the construction of the home for the Holy Order of the Just.*

*Also one wishes to discuss important matters concerning the upcoming elections for the seats on the Council of Commons. One has been told of our Dwarven allies wishes to obtain a seat, this is a goal the Order wishes to accomplish as well. One wishes to discuss this topic further at your convenience, but one wishes this be acted upon with haste. One plans to hold the seat of Councilor of Law. Given the current state of affairs in regards to the defense of the Marches, one hopes that a dwarf occupy the seat of Councilor of Defense; one has many misgivings concerning others who have applied for that seat. One also directs attention to the fact that those are but two out of seven seats, not at all a voting power within the council. The Order is few in number, but perhaps there are Dwarves fit to occupy some of the other seats? One sees the first steps for a new confederacy to be the most important, one hopes to make the best possible outcome for the benefit of the Marches and its peoples.*

*Respectfully awaiting your reply,  
Lady Rya Mishima  
Child of Torm, Daughter of The Way  
Holy Order of the Just  
\*shou characters of Kozakura included\**

Bruner let out a profanity laced tirade barely above a whisper as he finished the letters. He looked about the room and pointed to one of the young recruits that stood nearby, they were to be runners that sped information and orders between the group here and the ones at the gate. <You...come here now.>

The lad warily approached, seeing that Bruner was in a foul mood, <Aye sir?>

<Quickly get to gate and find Ragnar, tell him a change in plans and to have those that cannot make it back to us in time to meet up with a Lady Rya,> He looked at the letter again to get her last name correct, <Mishima. She is of the Order of the Just and is leading help this way.>

The recruit repeated the information and Bruner nodded that it is correct and took off at a run to the gate.

Bruner addressed the small gathering, <The All Father smiles upon us brothers, the Holy Order of the Just is enroute to lend us aide. They are few in number, but they are a welcome addition to our forces here.>

He saw the others nod in agreement as the group of knights moved to fulfill the agreement that he and Angelo had made. *I will see to it that they are outfitted in proper wares before they go into battle alongside us.*

*Back on the ramparts...*

Torgga pumped bolt after bolt into the oncoming orcs that arrived sooner than when they were expected, driving home each round with precision that would unnerve any sane person on the receiving end of her fire. Today she wielded a prototype crossbow that Egil Skallagrimsson had constructed. Instead of loading a bolt after each shot, she simply pulled the handrest back and the bow string came back to the seated position. A series of gears made the reloading process very quick and easy as she made the best use of this new weapon. The third magazine was now empty, she hit the release mechanism, gave it a gentle shake and it fell away to the ground, she then slammed home a fresh one into the housing. <Keep them coming> she said to the young dwarf that carried the fresh magazines as she shouldered the crossbow and continued to rain down fire bolts onto the mass of orcs below.

The dwarfs at the Keep's ramparts were turning the orcs into pincushions, several well placed headshots to those leading orc groups had helped to demoralize the orcs. The dwarfs suffered several casualties and they were moved into the enclosure inside the mountain. They were rotating the guards at regular intervals, to keep them fresh and well armed against the horde below them. Torgga was one of the few that would spend two rotations out there to inflict as much damage as she could. Inside Deepward Keep, her skills were second to none with the heavy crossbow when under fire.

The barricades that were placed along the narrow path, slowed the horde advance enough to give the crossbowmen good shots as the orcs had to maneuver past them and over their dead comrades. This also prevented the horde from bringing their siege weapons to bear.

"AAAAHHHHHHHH!" Barendd let out a howl and grasped his arm.

Torgga turned to see that Barendd fell victim to an orc arrow that was went through his arm and was now mid shaft in his arm. Knowing that she could not treat his wounds and continue the rate of fire, she yelled over her shoulder, <Go back inside lad and send a replacement, you've done well.> as she continued firing more bolts.

Barendd handed her one last magazine before he carefully made his way back to the mountainside door, taking care to stay below the not to bump into anything that would worsen the agony in his arm. He made it to the doors as they sprung open with the next wave of guards coming out. He moved to the side as the new rotation came out and back inside to have his wound treated.

The last magazine he handed her was loaded with what were dubbed as “lightning” bolts, she let out a chuckle as the first one struck an orc in the shin and he jumped from the hit. She risked a quick look over the edge and saw Ragnar in the middle of the shield wall yelling out words of encouragement to those that were standing with him for the first time. She smiled inwardly that she had found someone strong to lean on at times.

Looking back up, she saw an orc berserker break from his line and charge the wall of armored dwarfs. Most of the crossbowmen continued to fire into the orc line, so Torgga quickly pumped two bolts into the axe arm of the orc. Electric arcs danced over the beast's arm and it was too late when it realized it was in trouble as the arm became limp. Grulgar and Ragnar's waraxes flashed up and down, carving deep wounds into its chest, splitting bone and carving organs into pieces. The berserker now lay dead at their feet.

A moment of inspiration struck Ragnar, he cleaved the orc's head from its body with a mighty swing of his axe. Hefting the skull up by its stringy hair, he swung it around, gaining momentum with each rotation and let it fly back to the orc line. Showing them what will happen to the next one that attacks the gate. Ragnar picked his waraxe back up and slammed the flat part against his shield and let out a battle cry to show the orcs that no matter how many they throw at them, they will crash against the defenders like rain on rocks.

#### *In the Keep's Main Room...*

With several maps layed out over a makeshift table, Bruner traced out a route, <Once down in the Underdark, we will see how strong if any resistance is present there. The way might be clear all the way to the Mithral Hall.> He stood there for a moment thinking. *You know that it's not, any twit with half a brain knows that to properly lay siege to a dwarf stronghold one must do it both above and below ground.* He looked about the table at the others present. <Speak your mind lads. I value your input on planning this out.>

#### *Within the Keep of Rauvin Watch...*

With the construction halted, there was a strange quiet that filled the area. By no means though, did that mean nothing was being done.

Both quickly and silently, a few knights of the Holy Order of the Just made their way through the armory, preparing themselves to aid their allies of Deep Keep. With armor and weaponry donned, Rya lead a short prayer to ask for the blessings of their gods. Without a word spoken, the uniform group of knights clad in navy blue hooded capes

walked calmly in single file towards the ferry. The skies were a dark foreboding grey, clouds above whipping by as a slow misty drizzle fell around the few in blue.

After a verbal altercation with the stubborn ferry master, the group managed to pay for passage to bring them closer to their destination. They would of course, have to make the rest of the way by foot. The air was cold and wet. The only sounds were the birds above, the clang of the ferry bell, and the quiet scuffle of folk on the boat's deck. Rya stood at the back of the boat directly beneath the ship's wheel. With the cloak and hood, she too was barely distinguishable from the others...

...save for item that hung from her back, a large zanbato blade that once belonged to her teacher Angelo Sovereign. "Are you ready teacher?" She quietly whispered to the blade as it hummed a reply.

### *In the Keep's Main Room...*

Kilain watched the maps on the table, somewhat hesitant when it came to the choice of using Underdark as a way to Mithral Hall. Underdark had always been a myth in Kilain's eyes, told to little children to scare them when done wrong, but after the venture with the drow and driders clearing out the Keep he knew how real it was.

<Are there no other way for us to take?> he pondered for a while after asking the question, already knowing the answer. He grasped the symbol around his neck and felt the presence of Brottor and continued, <I'll be following any orders taken and I'll be sure to see that Twin Axes will guard our path, both outside our gates and in Underdark> he nodded to the others as he slowly whispered a prayer.

### *Between Rauvinwatch Keep and Rivermoot...*

*Blasted bandits!* A second volley of bolts struck the side of the slow moving ferry. "Of all the times to be doing this... if there weren't defenders in this region, then the bandits would taste their own medicine at the hands of the orcs." The captain was cursing up a storm... if he were an archaist, he would make quite the spellslinger.

A fireball singed the bow as it flew by... well at least the bandits were a bad shot.

### *The bend in the river...*

If only they could reach it in time. If the ferry caught aflame, the knights would be the ones in need of rescue.

Brother Taman healed who he could as a helmite provided him cover with a large tower shield.

The few clerics join in a triangle and began casting a prayer spell in unison.

The next fireball struck starboard side below the waterline.

We're takin' on water!

Ground her! Ground the ship!

Finishing the collective prayer, the clouds parted above the bandit ambush point... a single ray of light shown through, then expanded as it lit up the ground as it spread. The bandits had been temporarily dealt with it would seem.

CRRAACK-KSHH!

Some of those on deck were flung off their feet as the barely afloat ferry hit shallow water. It stopped and reached the shallows, but not before tearing a gash in the side.

*In the Keep's Main Room...*

Bruner's gauntleted fist rubbed his chin as he considered Kilain's words and any other options for their travel to the Mithral Hall. He leaned onto the table, carefully weighing his words as he looked about those gathered here. <I will not order anyone to follow me on this journey.> He met each person's gaze, <I will only be taking volunteers with me. Those that remain may be the only ones to train the next generation of defenders of this stronghold.> Bruner never took on anything like this before. While having fought countless battles against overwhelming odds only to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat, Bruner and his group would be traveling by maps as none here had journeyed between Deepward Keep and Mithral Hall via the Underdark.

<I volunteer my lord.> A soft voice came from the shadows as a lithe figure detached itself from one of the room's many dark recesses and approached. Once at about five paces from them, she stopped and dropped to one knee. <My mistress asked me to aide you in your journey to Mithral Hall.> Her head was still bowed low as she awaited his response.

Those at the table were so engrossed in their conversation that they didn't notice the new comer nearing them. The minimal guards and the recruits that stood by waiting to deliver orders to the front line never saw her or heard a whisper of her movement as she blended in with the shadows. As she spoke her words, those at the table, including Bruner, jumped in surprise that one could get as close as she did without raising any alarms.



Once they regained their composure and held their weapons before their reflexes kicked in and attacking the unknown threat.

Bruner spoke up first, <Damn it all! This is not the place to playing hide and seek lass! You scared a few years off of me.> He gave her a good look over, from what he could see of her, which was mostly a cloak, but her outline was one that was of slender build for a dwarf and a bit on the short side. He noticed that the others had spread out a bit, to use their numbers against her if things turned bad. He approached her to only two paces separated them, <Stand.>

She stood up and threw back her cloak's hood. Bruner's assumption about her height was correct, she stood only four feet tall, if that. Her black hair was tied back into a pony tail that just lay past her shoulders. Her dark eyes darted about for a moment before fixing on Bruner. Her figure was slender, but not skinny as some of the humans prefer to look like. Her clothing was simple, but they were of quality material and every piece served a purpose in her trade. A rapier hung at her hip, along with an assortment of daggers strapped to various locations on her body. What did catch him off guard was her age...she was too young to have the skills she does

Bruner looked her over, <What is your name lass?>

<Arwen Thunderfist> was her response.

#### *Between Rauvinwatch Keep and Rivermoot...*

The trees were growing sparse here... if one looked far back enough, one could see burning remains of the scuttled ferry by the riverside.

A line of knights clad in blue were formed in groups of three breast-across and so on... one never knew when something 'of interest' would pop its head out of the undergrowth... or the canopy for that matter.

The air was still save for the occasional howl of a wild creature. The winds had died, but the sky was still overcast... perhaps a calm before a storm?

#### *In Deepward Keep...*

Bruner was shocked at hearing her name, the only tell about that is when he stopped stroking his beard for a moment before continuing. *Orgrim and his brother Therin Thunderfist are highly respected warriors in the Mithral Hall. Why would Orgrim's*

*daughter be here before me like this?* <Who is your mistress?> He had a hunch as to whom it was, but needed confirmation on it.

Arwen hesitated, <I cannot say.>

Bruner narrowed his eyes at her response and a bit frustrated by her answer, <How many more of you are there?>

Again she hesitated, <I cannot say.>

He grunted at her answer, *A secret group inside the Keep, I wonder what else she's up too.* <If your mistress sent you, then you are welcome, but know this...> Bruner took a step closer, <Where we're going there are no second chances.>

Arwen nodded in understanding.

Bruner turned back to the group and saw that Dorvan was restless. *Ragnar can keep him in check until it breaks down into melee combat, then Dorvan will at his best.* A wry grin crept upon his face as he turned to his young friend, <Dorvan lad, I need you to go to the front gates and help Ragnar lead the lads there.> He saw the glint in his eyes and the grin on his face as Dorvan turned and headed out to the front.

Once again, Bruner traced out the path on the map that they would be exploring toward the Mithral Hall, before turning to those gathered, <This is the path. Gather anything you need from the armory and meet me near the entrance by the Ale Pit in one hour.>

At Deepward Keep's front gate...

A hooded figure snuck out in the mix of guards coming outside. Kebur once again stood at the entrance to the venerable Keep and realized that he was needed once again. He moved off to where Ragnar stood, his cloak billowing in the breeze that has picked up, blowing snow from the mountainside. He smoothed his beard as he approached the young leader, <Greetings young Ragnar.>

Ragnar turned slightly and nodded in respect to the old wizard, <Greetings master Kebur, what word does Bruner send?>

He shrugged a bit, <I do not know, he is planning his expedition to the Mithral Hall as we speak, anything more I am not privy to.>

Ragnar nodded again, <The runner came with his last order and Grulgar volunteered to make the journey to find the others.> He kept an eye out for any danger along the orc battle line. The last wave was driven back before they could reach the infantry wall amassed here. Reports of hooded figures appearing and disappearing along the edges of

battle and from large rocks have been coming in, but as to their identity can not be confirmed. He was about to say something to Kebur...

<ARROWS INCOMING!> came from down the line.

Looking skyward, Ragnar reached back and pulled Kebur in under the protection of his shield. The orc arrows landed all about them, few impacting on Ragnar's shield. Once the barrage stopped, they stood back up and assessed the damage. Only minor injuries were reported in, a few that were immediately treated by the clerics that were nearby.

Kebur knew that another orc attack was coming soon and pulled out a wand and reached out to Ragnar and hit him with it before he could protest. The wand activated and turned his skin into stone. The old dwarf worked his way down the line tapping those on the shoulder with the wand until it was extinguished. *Let the stupid beasties come.* He turned back to Ragnar and drew back his cloak, revealing many scroll tubes and wands attached to his belt.

He set himself behind a small knot of recruits that made up part of the dwarf wall. <Moradin watches over us this hour lads. We will be blessed with victory, fight hard and be worthy of his blessing.> He saw that they were nervous and would remain here as a sergeant not far away nodded his thanks.

Kebur reached down and felt the ground, the gentle shake of the earth revealed the orc charge, <It begins again...> He looked up, <Set yourselves lads, they're coming.> He drew a wand as crossbow bolts began to rain down upon the attacking orcs. Just as he saw them reach the rise, many were peppered with bolts, he raised his arm and a fireball shot from the wand. Before the first fireball could reach the horde, a second one shot forth towards the middle of the attacking orc's line. The arcane spells hit the ground, sending fire and gouts of snow, rock and dirt flying into the air.

The orcs caught in the blast suffered a horrible death as the explosion of fire rained down upon them, only to be followed by the rocks and other debris. Those that were lucky died instantly, others laid there wallowing in pain until a dwarf crossbowman finished them off.

One of the lads looked back as Kebur had pulled a scroll from one of the many tubes he carried and the old dwarf gave him a menacing smile at him.

<Watch this laddie.> The air around the old dwarf crackled with the powers of the arcane as he recited the incantation on the scroll and extended his free hand towards the orcs. Fiery arrows leapt from his hand and showered the orcs, inflicting horrendous casualties upon the invaders. Many fell instantly, only the momentum of their charge urged them a few steps closer to the dwarfs.

The orc charge continued.

Kebur realized that this group would reach them, he pulled another wand out and began to tap as many on the shoulder as he could. Seeing each he touched turn into a small dwarven stone statue. *This will protect them some.* He saw the sergeant nod his head again in thanks as he and Kebur briefly made eye contact.

<Dig in lads!> The sergeant yelled down both sides of the line where he stood and drove the tip of his massive shield into the ground where he stood. Others repeated his move as it rippled down the dwarven shield wall.

Down at the middle of the formation at the gates, Ragnar stood shoulder to shoulder with recruits that were in need of solid leadership...his leadership. Bruner trusts me with this, I must not fail him. <We hold them here!> He yelled out. Crossbow fire continued from the ramparts above as the horde neared point blank range, their fire was unerring and made the orcs pay for every step with blood. He risked a glance at the blue silk cord that was wrapped around his gauntlet. Torgga gave that to him as a reminder that he fights for more than just himself.

A handful of cloaked figures drifted in and out of the shadows along the path leading to the Keep's entrance. Tossing alchemists fire onto the orcs and springing traps that were placed along the path. Each of them was armed with wands and knew how to use them. Spheres of electricity shot down from the cliffs upon the orcs, causing chaos and mayhem in their rear lines. Their mistress has taught them well in the art of stealth and patience, as they waiting in the shadows for the better part of a day to achieve these results. All were in sight of each other and communicated through hand signals to coordinate attacks and retreats. Each drifted back into the shadows and relocated back towards the Keep as their mistress planned.

The orc horde was growing closer and closer and Ragnar yelled out more words of encouragement, not necessarily for the veteran sergeants, but for the recruits and mostly for himself to calm his nerves. So much rests on his shoulders and he will not fail them all.

The gate opened a bit and a dwarf carrying a greatsword stepped forth, <I hope you were not going to start without me.> Dorvan stood there as his sword 'Flamebolt' lit up, bathing the dwarf an eerie glow.

*In Deepward Keep...*

Kilain gave Arwen a look of disbelief not sure what to think of her. A dwarven lass that acts in the shadows, something never heard of before... not at least by Kilain and the way she acted made Kilain feel that he could not trust her.

He pondered on it when he made his way to the market to buy whatever items he would need for the trip. Bruner had showed the way on the map and as far as Kilian could interpret, that way was the only logical one... if the maps were correct. He whispered another prayer when he heard the rally and noise of the market. *Aye, the battle is on. I be needin' ta hurry*, he thought to himself as he increased the length of his steps and slowly the walk turned into a dash.

<How is it going out there? Are we holding?> he shouted to one of the guards. The guard looked up as he was trying to organize for the caring of any wounded from the wall outside.

<We're holding!> he shouted. He then turned around and pointed towards some tables that was scattered around, <Move those over here and hurry> as the old dwarf prepared bandages for those that would surely arrive here for treatment. <I saw that Dorvan went to the wall as well> he gave Kilain a wide grin <So, I would guess the bastards will feel a lot of pain now>.

Kilain nodded, he had never really felt any join in hurting and killing... although at this point almost anything was alright that would protect the one thing important in his life.

He quickly gathered things needed for the trip and headed for the Ale Pit.

### *On the bridge between Deepward Keep and the Marketplace...*

Bruner made the long walk from the Keep's armory to the entrance to the doors that lead to the Underdark Highway, he was happy to be alone at the moment, the only sound was that of his armor shifting as he walked. The weight of leadership was bearing down on his shoulders once more and it was the heaviest yet. He was planning the defense of not to hold a pass or attack an orc horde, but to defend an entire dwarf stronghold on two fronts. One that he would not even be at the forefront to lead them, instead he would be leading a group of the Keep's veteran warriors through the Underdark in an effort to gauge if it was possible to move troops and supplies back and forth to the Mithral Hall.

He trusted Ragnar to lead the gate's defenders, now with Dorvan there, that should bolster his efforts a bit. Torgga was coordinating efforts along the ramparts and Kebur was rumored to be amongst the infantry inspiring the new recruits. Shaking his head, *he still has it in him...he will use everything he has in his arsenal to help carry the day*. Bruner's old mentor was one that time will not forget.

Caught in a moment of reflection, Bruner failed to notice that he now had a shadow following him across the bridge. As he neared the middle of the great expanse, she coughed loud enough so that he would hear her. Bruner turned to see Arwen a mere 10 paces behind him as they stood on the bridge. <Aye?>

<May I have a moment of your time my lord?> She stood before him again, her cloak's hood resting on her shoulders and her head was bowed slightly in respect to the warrior before her.

It rankled Bruner to be addressed with a title besides 'sir' or his rank but it did now show outwardly to those around him, <Aye, speak your mind lass.> He was in the middle of his mental preparation for the upcoming journey into the Underdark. His mind was calm after paying a short visit to the temple of Moradin and asked the All Father to protect those around him and those fighting at the Keep's front gate.

Arwen looked up as he addressed her, <I meant no offense earlier when I did not answer your questions, but wish you to know that those of us that serve our mistress have taken oaths never to reveal who or how many of us there are.> Spreading her arms apart with her palms up showing that there is nothing she can do. <I am bound by my honor to secrecy.>

Bruner let this information sink in a moment or two before he replied, <Let me make one thing clear lass...> He paused as he chose his words carefully, <Secrets are one thing that I do not like, especially when there is one where I live.> He looked over the edge of the bridge into the blackness of the oblivion below then back to Arwen, <Where do you sit in the grand schemes of your mistress?> His question was a change in tactics as he worked to gain more information on the secret society within the Keep.

Bruner's question caught Arwen off guard as she blinked a few times as the change in approach did an end run against the defense she had prepared to the possible questions he could ask. <My lord?>

Bruner kept the grin off his face, <You heard me lass. Where do you sit in the grand scheme of your mistress' has put together?>

Arwen was unsure on how to answer it as she slowly shifted her weight slightly from one foot to another, <I...I...>

Bruner cut her off, <Let me make this easier for you, what is it you do for Torgga?>

Arwen went quiet at the mention of her mistress and realized that she did not heed the warning that Torgga gave her about Bruner and his way of picking things apart.

Before she could answer, <The secret is safe with me lass. I knew that she was up to something, but did not know what it was until now.>

Trying to control some of the damage that has been done, <My lord, we work to protect the Keep.> Arwen spread her arms to take in the massive cavern that housed the Keep and the market place. <We...> She started to explain what they do, but realized that the more she talked the more she exposed of her mistress' network of spies.

Bruner saw that she recognized what she was doing as she stopped talking, <Knowing her, I am sure that your services are used for the purposes of good.> He looked her over one more time, <Go meet the others near the gate, I have one more thing to take care of before we leave.>

She bowed her head again, <Aye my lord, as you wish.> She ran on ahead of him making no more than a slight noise of her padded boots lightly tapping the stone expanse of the bridge.

Bruner turned and headed into the market place, stopping at the Deepward Arms store to make a purchase. He walked out with several quivers of bolts and made his way into the chamber that leads out onto the ramparts where the battle raged on.

As he made his way into the room, several of the others that were there resting moved to allow him to pass unhindered. He set the numerous quivers of bolts down on the central table and announced to no one in particular, <Put these to good use.> A cruel smile came to his face and it was returned in kind by those that nodded their understanding.

He found one of the sergeants helping pass out healing supplies and treat wounds that were easy to manage. Bruner picked up a couple of bandages as he turned to help with the wounded, <Report.> His voice was barely that of a normal conversation.

The sergeant did not stop tending to the wounded as he gave his report, <We have been blessed that only three have died so far,> the tone of loss was heavy in his voice at the loss of three good dwarfs, <mostly moderate wounds here. The idea of rotating the men is a solid tactic that keeps them fresh and lets them relax for a few moments before going back into combat. Our bolts sail true and the orcs are paying for their insolence in attacking us.>

Bruner nodded at the report and placed his hand on the sergeant's shoulder, <You have done as well as any commander could hope. I only ask that you continue,> his voice taking on a dark menace, <to kill as many of the bloody bastards that you can. Teach them the error of their ways.> Pointing over to the table, <Those are a mix of many different bolts to help crush them beneath our boots.>

The sergeant grinned again, <Aye sir, we will.>

Bruner nodded again, <Carry on lad. Carry on.>

Bruner made his way about the room thanking those that were here at the moment. He paused when he saw the three bodies covered with blankets off to the side. *Lord Moradin, your humble servant asks that you guide them back to you to fight the war eternal. When this is all said and done, I will pen the clans of the noble sacrifice that they made here today.*

He continued about the room until he found Torgga and two recruits reloading spent magazines for her crossbow. Both of the lads showed wounds and Barendd had both arms bandaged from apparent arrow wounds. The two recruits stood up as Bruner stopped where they worked, coming to attention as he stopped in front of them. He motioned them to relax and said, <Continue lads, you have done well and I only ask that you continue to do so in service to the Keep.> Once both of them returned to their duties, he motioned for Torgga to join him away from the lads.

She rose and followed Bruner a few paces away from earshot of those around, <Aye Bruner?> There were few that addressed him as such and Torgga was one did so.

<How is the new crossbow working out?> His interest was piqued when she arrived with it earlier in the armory.

The wry grin came easy, <Quite well. Once I figured out the rhythm of shoot, reload and change magazines I was able to fire twice as fast as normal and not sacrifice any aiming in the process.> She quickly figured out that was not the only reason for his journey here. Through a couple of hand gestures she asked ‘What is wrong?’

He leaned in close so that no others would hear, <You send Orgrim Thunderfist’s daughter to help lead us through the Underhighway?>

Torgga’s facial expression nor body language gave away any indication that she knew what he was talking about, but she admitted it freely, <I cannot be there myself as I coordinate the people here, so I sent the best that I have available to me.>

Bruner was shocked that she outright admitted to being the defacto leader of the unknown group. <How many are there?> His tone was curious, not demanding.

<Counting her, there are six.> She paused for a moment, <the other five are outside the gates working to delay the orcs as long as possible and inflict as much damage as possible.>

He rubbed his chin in thought, <How good are they?>

That same wicked grin flashed across her face, <Damn good. They had me as a teacher and are armed with several of Kebur’s and Talena’s wands.> Holding up a hand to



forestall Bruner's next question, <No they do not know about them, just which I pay well for their services.>

Bruner took a moment to process this new bit of information, <Keep them under tight wraps, a few others know that a 'mistress' leads them, so expect some questions and we will talk more about this later.>

She smiled, <Of course.>

He shook his head a bit, <Carry on and kill one for me, we are leaving for the Mithral Hall when I get to the door.>

Torgga eyed him carefully, <Be careful and come back in one piece.> She hit his arm on the way out as he turned to leave. She saw the burden he shouldered in his eyes. She watched his heavily armored form stand out from the lesser armored crossbowmen that were scurrying about the room as he passes by.

He nodded as he made his way to the chamber's door and ultimately to where the others were waiting for him at the entrance to the Underhighway.

### *The Pass leading to Deepward Keep...*

Hlin and the others struck at the orcs from the shadows of the pass, heavy crossbows quickly reloaded and struck one more before they changed positions. *Fear is sometimes more useful killing them. It can spread through an army like a disease, destroying their morale and at times it may drive them away.* Those words were only part of the lessons that her mistress had passed onto them in their training.

They would shoot twice then fall back to move up past the last one in the line and lay in wait again for the orcs to reach them. They were striking the orcs legs, mostly at their barbarians and archers, who wore little armor, leaving the warriors to the traps and the wands they carried.

Hlin and the others kept communicating back and forth using hand gestures to coordinate the attacks and movements. She learned that Gunnloda, the group's pyromaniac, had spent the past two days preparing and placing alchemists fire along their route so they would not have to carry it all with them. The bottles were being hurled over the edge randomly down onto the orcs, while not inflicting a great deal of damage, it was a great distraction that enabled them to strike from the shadows a little longer before moving on again.

Not far away they heard stones roll down the mountainside. Hlin and Diesa froze and slowly worked their way to the nearest shadows to hide and wait to see to was approaching. Hlin signaled Artin on the other side that someone was approaching and to

keep attacking. Artin flashed two fingers across her mouth, indicating a smile, then tossed another bottle over the edge and shouldered the heavy crossbow taking aim on an orc archer.

Grulgar tried to make his way down the mountainside as fast as he could and not draw the attention of the horde that was going up the mountain. He had to find the others that were trapped out here and gather them at Rivermoot to wait for a human from their allies. *I am not suited for this...* He struggled with his footing and had to secure his waraxe as he climbed over and around the obstacles in his path. He stripped down most of his armor when he relayed Bruner's message to Ragnar and volunteered immediately to find the others. Ragnar considered it for a moment and had Grulgar get a lighter set from the Deepward Arms store. *I feel naked wearing so little armor.*

Diesa pointed to where the noise came from and quietly drifted from one shadow to another in preparation to ambush the interloper. Hlin moved into what was hopefully the path of the intruder. Both were surprised to see a dwarf wearing the colors of the Keep climbing down the path and around the boulder in it. Once he cleared it, Hlin whistled to get his attention, especially since his hands were empty, they clearly held the advantage.

Grulgar dusted off his hands as he moved past the boulder he just navigated and heard someone whistle. Looking up he saw a figure with a heavy crossbow shouldered and aimed at him. There was no way for him to draw his weapon in time and his shield was left back at the Keep to reduce the weight he carried on his journey. The only thing he could see is that the person before him was of considerable skill as the crossbow never moved and he did not see them before when he looked over the boulder to see if it was clear or not. He could not make out whom it was that stood there, the cloak covered their frame completely.

<Who are you?> Hlin demanded.

*A female dwarf is out here alone?* <I am Grulgar Torunn of Deepward. Who are you?> His tone was much more friendly, due to being unarmed and on the business end of the crossbow.

Hlin thought for a moment, *I must not reveal myself*, <I am a 'Ghost' and you may refer to me as such.> Her tone was all business.

Diesa decided to make her presence known, <As am I.> As she steps out from the shadows of a boulder nearby with her own crossbow pointed at Grulgar.

Having a newcomer appear so suddenly scared Grulgar enough to have him jump a good two feet away from where Diesa appeared. He clutched his chest as he caught his breath, <Dear god, how many of you are there?!>

Diesa quickly closed the distance to Grulgar and slapped him across the face hard with an open hand, <Silence you fool. You will give away our location.> She chastised him in a harsh whisper.

Grulgar reeled from such a strike, especially one from a woman. He was about to reach out to grab at her, when he heard a whistle and looked up at the crossbow still aimed at him.