

# Alex in the Quarry

Volume 1

## Chapter 1

The light came pouring in to the room from the mid day sun. Alex was just about to wake up by himself when he heard the alarm clock turn on. The ringing, loud and incessant, was both irritating and welcoming. He did not over sleep this morning, even if it wasn't a product of his own will power he will take this victory. Today he had to go out and do the work he'd been scheduled. It was a daunting task, but one that he could not escape. Manual labor wasn't the job he had always dreamed of having, but for now it was his lot. Sitting up from his bed made of woven sticks and cotton, he pulled on the top of his red shirt. Standing up, he felt woozy. Looking at the clock, he noticed that his alarm clock had to be recalibrated -- it was 30 minutes later than what he thought! Rushing, he grabbed a pair of pants from the closet, grabbed his work plough and log book and dashed for the kitchen.

"You're finally awake!" came a voice from the other side of the room. Alex looked over. It was his sister, Sharon.

"yeah yeah... the alarm clock wasn't set correctly. Thought it was earlier."

"You better get a move on, anyway. The pit boss is not going to be happy that you're late \_again\_!"

Alex grunted as he inhaled his breakfast biscuit and porridge. He stood up, did a quick sign of reverence at a picture of his parents hanging on the wall and dashed out the door. He could hear the sound of his sister beginning dishes as he ran down the front garden path. For a morning

in November, it was not that cold. Usually a biting and bitter season in the North, this morning was calm and warm. Any reason to take pleasure in the day he would relish. The birds this morning seemed to be singing in an extravagant matter - almost a complete mockery of the state of the world. But, still, it is important to be happy. What productive level of competence can a depressed sad sap hope to have? Alex finally crossed over to the other side of the neighborhood as the sun finally began to take its place in the mid-morning sky. Alex picked up his pace and crossed the bridge over the bordering river. Eventually, after traversing against a wide expanse of now-dead grass and hills, the sign of the work place came in to view. Holy Camp's Workforce. The words burned an unforgiving burn into Alex's eyes. The large facility guarded by this sign was an even larger eyesore, placed on what was once a beautiful forest and lake it completely dominated the once idyllic valley. A valley that was supposed to belong to him and his ilk. At least, in the eyes of Alex's God Hujik. But no one cared what Hujik had to say about things now. Lost in thought, Alex was surprised by a shadowy figure dropping out of a nearby tree.

"Drop your tool and turn out your pockets!" Came the voice. Because of his tranquil state, Alex was surprised at first. Uncharacteristically. Quickly though he came to his senses, and a smirk broke out on his bespeckled lower face.

"Gerald."

"Heh heh. How's it going Alex? Keeping your neck from the noose?" Gerald's morbid sense of humor - as always.

Gerald hopped down and took a squat next to me. He stared off towards the same desolation that I had just

before, gazing through the immense mirage of defeatism and hopelessness with me.

"You know," he broke the silence, "I think there's finally gonna be something big discovered today. I can feel it in my bones. We're going to dig up the big motherlode of gold, and the boss is gonna make us rich."

I rubbed my nose, "Maybe." Alex replied. It was good to have hope and Gerald had plenty of it. Sometimes, Alex wished he envied this good natured optimism of his.

"Look Alex, stop being so gloomy. I said I felt and so it must be true. You know how sensitive I am to the weave of things." Gerald re-iterated his positive thinking.

"Yeah, I believe you. Look, if we're trying to Dig something up -- then the deeper we dig the more chances we have of finding something, right?"

"Exactly!" Gerald's eyes lit up with an effervescent glow of divine insight. An omniscient know-all of absolute certainty. A complete acceptance, and a dogmatic evangelicalism of an existence of Providence.

"Well, I'll cheers to that at least."

## Chapter 2

Gerald and Alex went on to complete their commute. Eventually, the smoke stacks and the smog came rushing into their faces, greeting them to their destination. Stepping up to the edge of the pit they looked down between their toes at the unfathomable depth of the pit.

"See you down there!" a mirthful Gerald yelled out as he clicked his heels together and slid down a long rope towards a work platform below. Taking off his teal blue work shirt with one hand and grabbing his plough with the other, he began hammering away at a rock-infused dirt mound. The entire crew cheered him on and began chanting.

Alex sighed, and resigned himself back to his own isolatory depression. He kicked a rock or two down the pit and then jaunted over to the ropes and pulleys lift to bring himself down to the work office below. Today he was assigned to logging - a task that he equally detested and didn't mind. At least he'd be able to see her today. That was another thing that could be used to cheer up his gloomy disposition. He put his foot on the loop of the rope and his hand on the pulley mechanism, and thought of Asumi's face as he descended towards the office. The petite forlornness that always seemed to drift across her nose bridge, the inspiring crescent of light that habitually tends to rest upon her brow. Something transcendental about her physical appearance awoken a deep stirring of metaphysical joy within Alex. Even though, at this point of reflection as always, an obsession with the phenotypical characteristics of a person are both shallow, uncondusive to critical

thought, and a waste of frickin time! He did allow himself these brief, momentary bouts of romantic infatuation. Simple things such as noticing how you feel in reaction to a physical phenomenon don't force you to think. They just let you feel. Something pure in the thoughtless feeling of this situation brought about Alex a sort of comfort.

"Alex!" a voice hollered from an opened, squeaky door, "Stop fucking day dreaming get your stupid dumb ass bullshit face in here right this second, you mongrel bastard!"

And with that, the work day had officially began for him. A long arduous and zig-zagging journey of a rollercoaster of emotion came crashing to an end with a fat man calling him a mongrel bastard. Alex picked up his feet, which felt like they had been cast in mounds of lead, and slumped over into the work office.

Entering in to the small, wooden building he was assaulted with the smell of coffee. Probably on his third or forth cup already for the day, his boss Adam sat slurping up an obviously too hot cup at a small desk in the exact center of the room.

"Ah! Hot!" Alex yelped.

"Careful, it's hot..." Came a gentle voice wafting in from the service-window looking hole in the wall on the side of the room. Immediately - Alex knew who it was.

"Come. Sit. Now." A gruff and exhausted looking Adam said. "You have a lot of shit to get through, and I know you're a lazy piece of shit so it will take you twice as long as it should."

Alex ignored this constant barragment and sat down at his desk, squeezed into the corner. In front of him were a few sheets of paper. One red sheet and a stack of yellow sheets. His job was to read the yellow sheet which detailed a task by task break down of a person's workload, and identify any inefficiencies. Once these had been identified, he has to make note of these on the red sheet. Dull. Boring. Repetative. Perfectly suited to a sap such as himself. No creativity demanded! Just sit, grimly, and stroke the paper with the pen. Like a useless husk.





## Chapter 3

As the day rolled by, Alex rolled back in his seat as well. Rubbing his eyes, he took a quick glance over his pile of completed work.

"A modest amount," he mumbled to himself.

"No it isn't, you sad sack of shit." his sweaty boss Adam said over his fifteenth piping hot cup of coffee for the day, "You should be doing at least twice as much as you were today."

Alex again sighed as he let the insult roll over him, as the day had rolled on by. "Yes, you're right." he let these words escape from his defeated, impossibly pathetic trap.

"Why don't you just give him a break?" Asumi said, as she drifted into the room on a light breeze as a feather glides across the autumn sky.

"Yea... yeah... maybe I should. Or I would if he actually deserved a break! As I see it, every wakin moment he spends at this job is him taking an undeserved break."

"Come on, you can't be so harsh to your employees like that or-"

"Or what? They'll quit and die in a bed of their own filth when they can't afford the basic supplies needed to survive?" Adam husked a big husky husk. He chortled a low grumbling chort. A fat wet sigh of confidence and glee. "Fat chance!" He bellowed out, followed by an enormous belch.

Alex, having enough of this abuse, stood up, collected his papers, and headed for the door.

"Before you leave," Adam continued "There was something discovered out in the quarry today. Something big, I've heard. At least, from the sounds of the reports that Gerald's supervisor told me it sounds important. Why don't you take a few minutes and take a log of what's been discovered? It wouldn't hurt, and it don't count as overtime neither. As I see it you've only really worked a solid 15 minutes today."

"Yes, I get it. I'll go check it out. Sounds interesting anyway. You want to come, Asumi?"

"Sure, I'll come. let me go and clean up the kitchen and I'll head on down with you." Asumi left the room, and banging commenced from the kitchen. Loud banging. The kind of ruckous you'd expect a four year old to make, not the soft clanging of a delicate agent of hospitality putting away pieces of valuable silverware and China.

"You." Adam seized the opportunity to hurl more disgusting and combative insults at me. "I see you taking note of Asumi. Make no mistake, she sees it too. And don't ever let it slip your mind that romantic relationships among co-workers are expressly forbidden by company policy. I swear to Hujik I'll fire you in a heart beat if I ever get the opportunity too to see \_your\_ heart beat for Asumi's heart beat. You're just lucky that you're so much fun to push around."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Alex futilely tried to deflect the blame to something other than him. "It's perfectly normal and platonic to ask a coworker to come and check out something interesting happening, or whatever. Get over yourself." Alex was feeling brave this day, saying something as obstreperous as that.

"How are you this dumb?" Adam said with an incredulous look on his face. He took out both his hands from their pockets and put them in a claw formation in front of him, "I'll wring your neck, boy."

At this moment Asumi returned to the room, coat in hand, and hair tied back into a ponytail.

"Ready." she said. Alex and her left the room together and then the office building and headed down towards the main excavation site to check out what all the hub-bub was about. There was no conversation on the way there, just a sort of weary and comfortable silence. The day was still not done, but the sun was beginning to descend over the horizon causing the rays of light to become more acute.

Approaching the work site, the sound of Gerald hollering was unmistakable.

"I told you all! I knew today we'd find something big! We're all rich!"

Alex and Asumi started to hasten their pace into a light jog and they approached the crowd. Pushing their way in, they took note of the faces of the spectators. Some mixed with confusion and awe, some clearly terrified. The hollering continued as more and more people were shoved aside. Finally they broke through the throng of slack-jawed ignoramuses and looked upon Gerald, standing on top of a mine cart and holding something in the air.

"Here it is, boys! Our ticket outta this mess! We'll never be going to sleep wondering about our future ever again!" he yelled, piercing the increasingly blue sky with his extremely

loud enthusiasm. Alex looked at Gerald's hand, and what he saw seemed like nothing more than a stick. Was this really what all the fuss was about? An insignificant piece of wood, that looks barely thick enough to serve as an axe handle? Alex, feeling confused and lost looked around to other people in the crowd. He noticed something off about them - in their eyes he saw a glint, a small speck, of a purple shine. Something was possessing these people. Something was controlling their perception, changing what they saw. Alarmed, he turned to Gerald whose big, beautiful eyes were full on purple, completely perplexed and under a spell.

## Chapter 4

Peering out over the people gathered, Alex wondered profusely about what it is he should do. First, he stole a quick glimpse of Asumi, trying to determine if she also was under some sort of spell.

"Asumi? Are you seeing what I'm seeing? All of these people are perplexed by a stick."

"I'm seeing it too," Asumi replied, a little bit delayed which worried Alex, "It's almost as if they are all being controlled by a powerful remote force or something."

Alex agreed and took a look around to see if there was anything else that he could get any clues from. None, it seemed - and Alex let out a sigh once more. All of the peoples' eyes were focused on Gerald whose exacerbated exhaltations only seemed to grow with sound and fury.

"Come now, everyone!" He bellowed, "Let's take what we have found over to Adam and demand our cut of the profit! He's a slippery one, you know!"

This seemed to rile the crowd up in an extreme manner. There were hoots, hollers and even some yips. The crowd of people turned and began to walk. Gerald hopped down from the turned over mine cart and approached Alex with a fucking ginormous grin.

"Alex, my good buddy. What did I tell you! I never lost my faith in my senses. I told you that I would - or we would, excuse me - find something great today and look-ee-here... something great was found after all!" Gerald stood, smiling

widely at Alex. The sound of the people marching through the mud began to fade away and soon became eclipsed by the distant sounds of larks chirping peacefully. Alex looked down at his shoes, then Gerald's shoes, and proceeded to try and talk some sense in to him.

"Gerald. What is it that you think you've found?"

"What? Isn't it obvious! This is the lost Scepter of Hujik! Our ancestral God! Praise be to Hujik!", Gerald blurted out in response, maniacally.

"No, it isn't." Alex meekly rebuked, "It is just a stick. There is nothing special about it at all. Are you playing some sort of game? It isn't funny." Gerald looked dead in to Alex's eyes. Alex knew at that moment that Gerald was in no gamer mindset. He was not playing a game. He was being very serious - so serious that it scared the jeepers out of Alex.

"Alex..." Gerald said calmly, but obviously hiding a scathing fury unbeknownst to mankind hitherto in history, "I don't know what you're getting at, but this is clearly a priceless artifact. Are you not interested in turning this in to try and improve our working conditions?"

"No. Well - I am, but... see: I mean I would be if I truly thought that it actually is what you say it really is. What real proof do you have that this isn't just some old stick? What mark on it have you found that denotes its divine origin?"

"Proof? I don't need to prove anything, you saw how everyone here was happily agreeing with me about how truly magnificent of a find this is."

"Yeah, I saw them, but I definitely also saw that they all had this weird off-putting purplish glint in their-" At that

moment, Gerald's eyes began to shine a bright light violet in response to the mentioning of the purple sheen. It almost was as if this color was aware, and making itself known to anyone who dared speak of its existence. Alex halted his speech, looked at Gerald up and down with fear and admiration, let his gaze fall longingly on his muscular calves and deltoids, and admitted to him, "You know what, you're right. I've been being stupid. You've really found something." Gerald's eyes began to fade right back to its normal shade. Asumi gave Alex an incredulous, questioning look and took a beat. Then she clearly understood, and would play along.

"Great! Great great great - I knew you would be understanding. Was this all a big joke? a-Hahaha! You really got me there." Gerald nearly illegally assaulted Alex with a loud cracking slap on his back as he jeered up towards the vacant, dimming sky. As Alex was enjoying, faintly, this distant comraderie a loud yelp (but not quite a yip) was heard from over towards where the office building was. It could be no one other than Adam. Asumi turned to Alex and said, "We must get back - I think something is happening to Adam. I saw the way those - people - were looking around. They don't seem like they're fully in control of what they're doing."

"What are you talking about, Sumi?" Gerald, a bit insulted, belched out, "Those guys were completely normal. Absolutely nothing wrong with them. But I agree, I did hear a yelp, but not really quite a yip, so let's head on over and see what sort of help is needed... if any. My guess: The guys are getting a little antsy with their demands of getting paid

a finder's fee for this artifact. Truth be told, it was all me, but you know the way that attribution can spread through out members of a collective team. It is frequently not a normalized distribution. As a matter of fact..." Gerald was beginning to bore everyone with this conversation, and he definitely knew it. He looked down and kicked a rock, and said, "Alright, yeah, let's go."

The crew started a hustle and were soon within about ten or twenty yards of the office building. Or small office trailer, really. They saw a riled up crowd of purple eyed hooligans and ruffians shouting and pound pounding on the outside of the wall. "Come on out, Adam!" one of them shouted, "We got something to show ya!"



## Chapter 5

The situation seemed to be getting more and more dire. Thinking quickly, Alex picked up a rock and chucked it at the nearest person, hoping to knock some sense in to them. The rock went wizzing across the field and pegged someone right in the back, near the shoulders. A loud thud could be heard and the person fell over face down in the mud. All of the sudden, Gerald cried out in pain.

"What the hell! I felt that!"

Alex, now intrigued tossed another rock at another person - same result. "This is really fascinating." Alex said, incredulously.

"Yeah, and painful, man." Gerald said to Alex, through a scowl that could scald a water fowl. Continuing with a train of thought, Gerald stepped up and gently put his hand on a person close to him from the crowd. The person seemed to instantly calm down. A bright idea came to Gerald.

"I'm not sure what's exactly causing all of this to happen, but I think I've found a way to get these people to settle down."

Alex limped meekly towards Gerald, eager to hear what sort of solution he had worked out. He sighed, again depressed and also annoyed at his persistent irritating habit of becoming depressed at the most inopportune of times. He thought of back when he was a little boy, and started to have a flash back but then shook his head to focus. He would not let that sort of thing take his mind... not this time, at least!

"It looks like that whenever I put my hand out and touch one of these people..." at this point Gerald reached out and laid his hands on a nearby person he hadn't calmed yet, "...they are instantly put in to a calm state." The person that Gerald patted had reverted to a pre-insane state. "Again, I don't know what the hell is going on," Gerald continued, "but this at least seems like a solution." Alex violently nodded his head in agreement and began to try and pat a few people to calm them down. It didn't work. It has to be Gerald. Alex informed Gerald of the predicament and stepped back to allow him to get to work. The sun was now almost completely gone, twilight starting to transform the light blue sky to a dark black one. Asumi stood by, feeling helpless but constantly thinking. She let her thoughts drift back to the stick that Gerald had found - was it really a magical artifact after all? She had never heard of a magical stick capable of a possession charm before.

An idea hit her and she informed Alex, "We should do some research on relics. I think that all of this crazy magic stuff has something to do with an object they found down in the pits today." Alex heeded this counsel with an admonished ear.

"Yes, I agree." He replied, "and probably out of ear shot of..." Alex nudged his shoulder and cocked his head to stealthily point over towards Gerald. Asumi agreed, as if it was already a pretty obvious condition that Gerald not be permitted to attend their research endeavor. Meanwhile, Gerald was still making progress with the collective calming of the riotous crowd. He had a path cleared that led up to the front door of the work office. Alex and Asumi took the

opportunity to rush in and check in on Adam. Sure Adam was a constant grouch and definitely emotionally abusive towards him but Alex still felt a duty to make sure that no harm had come to him. Alex busted in to the work office and a sight of struggle came in to view.

Adam was standing in the middle of the office near where his desk was. Behind him was another pit digger, possessed, holding Adam's wrists in a painful lock behind his back. He was pushing his wrists up towards his shoulder blades, causing extreme pain. A second pit digger was in front of Adam yelling at him.

"I told you! We have found the Staff of Hujik! Hand over the finder's fee!" yelled the one pit digger that was standing in front of him

Adam, sweat pooling in a dimple around his neck formed by an obtrusive clavical, said through gritted teeth, "and I told you - we can't just hand out money like that willy nilly! We need to call in the Holy Camp Inspector to verify any magic item finds. Only then do you get the -" Adam screamed out in pain as the pit digger behind him twisted his wrists in an impossible way. A sickening crack was heard by Alex, with Asumi right behind him.

"You sick bastard! You broke my arm!" cried Adam.

The pit digger in front of him again demanded that he be given the finder's fee. Adam was less responsive this time, "You're not listening to me, so screw you!" The pit digger in front looked at the one holding Alex and nodded curtly. Adam was let go, and fell to the floor.



## Chapter 6

With Adam laying on the floor, things looked as if they were about to get much, much worse. Adam's fat globular body flipped over and gazed over towards where Alex was standing. He looked at Alex, first with a wild face of questioning, and then with a determined face of pure anger. Adam was convinced that Alex had something, if not a principal thing, to do with this whole disastrous conundrum.

"You..." Adam said as he stood up. One of the pit diggers pushed the enormous man back down to the floor. He pulled out a long bladed weapon before anyone had a chance to notice, and stuck the tip of the sharp part to Adam's neck.

"The next time you move, it will be the last time you move." Said the digger.

"What are you doing!?" Alex cried out, hoping to defuse the situation with his insane hysterics. A bad plan, he had decided upon immediate reflection. The digger did not break eye contact with Adam but told his partner to come over and address Alex. The devious looking mongrel approached him, and began to reach for something by his left hip. Slowly his hand lifted up what looked to be a short dagger.

"You're a wise guy, huh? You a friend of this fat greedy slob? Well, I always pegged you as not one of us, what with your fancy ability to read and write. You think all of us are Luddites and Philistines, don't you!" The digger approached

Alex closer and closer and began to remove any doubt in his mind that he was now being directly threatened. The digger now had his short bladed weapon removed from whatever sheathe it was being held by and began to thrust it towards Alex's chest. Instinctively Alex backed away with a jerk and tried to avoid getting stuck. He was not quick enough. He would have had 4 frightening inches of cold steel sticking into his heart if the digger hadn't stopped in his tracks. Surprised, Alex looked at the digger's face, now as cold as the dagger and stuck, himself, in a shocked expression. Then he fell to the ground, face first, with a loud thud. Blood began to pool around his body and soak in to the carpet. Alex looked around the room for the cause, almost unconsciously skipping over it when he saw it. Asumi stood there, sword in hand. Covered in blood, Alex knew that Asumi had just stabbed the digger with the dagger in the back and probably saved his life. At this same exact moment, the other digger also noticed what was going on. As quick as opening a letter, he flicked his blade to the side and spilled Adam's guts all over the ground. Standing up he presented his blade and pointed it towards Asumi, ready to attack. Asumi was not professionally trained swordsperson and so had no desire of starting a fight with this beast. She quickly called to Alex, "Run!" and gathered him up as fast as possible, Alex being crumpled on the ground like a pathetic heap of embodied self-loathing. The two dashed from the room, out the door with the fiendish digger running after both of them. Running down the short flight of four or five steps to the dirt outside, the couple saw Gerald who was just about done with his task of calming the group. Gerald spied them as well, just as quickly.

"What happened?" Gerald said, spying the splatter of blood on Asumi's shirt with visible disgust. Before an answer could be provided to him, he saw another digger leaving the office behind his two friends. This one had a sword, and Gerald then realized the gist of what had, in fact, happened. He ducked and dodged, absolutely for no reason, and ran on over to the armed digger. Placing a hand on the digger's rippling and muscular pecs, he calmed the fury's boiling temper down to a mild simmer and then a placid lake. Gerald, now out of breath from the constant fondling of diggers turned to face Alex.

"Alex. We need to get out of here. I've noticed that some of these guys I calmed getting roused up again. We don't have that much time, and I absolutely do not want you to be around when that murderous and villainous fellow comes around again." Gerald said, pointing out the digger with the sword that was just about to assault Asumi.

"I don't think I could ever agree more, Gerald." Alex spouted out in a breathless reply.

Asumi jolted up and said, "We need to go look for some help immediately. Something is happening, and we don't understand what it is."

Alex, a bright idea weighing down his mind, said, "Let's go to my place. My sister Sharon knows where the local bookseller lives. I think that's where we can get some answers. We also have to stop by and inform the town High priest of what happened. I don't want this to be discovered without our intervention."

Alex looked to Gerald, and then Asumi. Both of his friends were now directly and indirectly responsible for murder. Gerald, influencing the murderer of Adam, and Asumi, directly putting a sword through the back of a innocent, as anyone would guess, digger. Answers were needed, and they were in very short supply. The group rushed off to Alex's house.



## Chapter 7

On the way back to his house, the young Alex and his friends ran in to a bit of serious trouble. They had crossed over the cursed wheat fields, lacking in diligent workers but dripping with untapped potential labor, and had weaved their ways through the dead as winter forests, also vacant of any sort of woodcutters. They were just about to reach the rushing river that marks the border of Alex's neighborhood village.

"There it is," Alex said, out of breath, exasperating, and on the verge of passing out. The long run from the Quarry to his residence was more grueling a task than anything that he had done in many a fortnight. The despicable shape his body was in was now more evident than ever. But, he had to really focus and get his ass in gear and back to his house.

"Not long now," Gerald said, "But wait... what's that? " Gerald questioned as he extended a long finger out towards a shadowy figure slumping out of the aforementioned forest and towards a bridge that spanned the wide expanse of the river. Looking closely, this figure looked to be up to no good, at least on first glance. You never can tell if you judge a book by its cover anyway, Alex thought.

"That is not something I've seen before, and look -- at the figure's hooded area -- is that a glowing glint of purple I see in its eyes?" the athletic, in shape and not-out-of-breath Asumi added in.

"I think its a safe assumption that he is up to no good. Or she. Or whatever it is..." Asumi added.

"Don't assume, Asumi. Assuming only makes an ass out of Asumi and me. That's how the saying goes." Gerald clumsily tried to make a joke. No one laughed.

The figure turned to look up at the trio, huddled together at the top of a small foothill about to make their descent. The stare shocked them all cold to their bones. The movement of this shadowy visage had changed course. It now decided that it would rather pursue these kids instead of going to do whatever it was going to do in the village.

"Shit! It's coming right for us!" Alex screamed out, way too loud considering his face was right next to Gerald's ear. Gerald's ear began ringing. Thinking quickly, Asumi took out her blade and took a stance that she saw one of the townsguards do one day as he was mock pretending to fight a rat off from the city gate at the border.

"I got this." Asumi flatly said.

"No you definitely don't." Gerald said, stepping up about to try and display some show of faux-macho man quality. He quickly he got shook out of this mirage as the shadow disrobed. It was none other than the high priest Zeckariah Weedst. A faithful servant of Hijuk and, most importantly, the personal tutor of the group. Zeek, as he's called, kneeled down and raised a hand.

"Please, children. Don't bring harm to me. I meant only to scare away any of the mindless drones if there were any."

"The drones?" Alex asked, questioningly, "What are you talking about? You've seen them too?"

Zeek did not nod or shake his head no. His stare a poker face. He gave no clear answer to what was a very straight

forward question that Alex had presented him. "It would be in your best interests to come with me and talk things over. I know you've been through quite a lot this evening." The trio followed Zeek and took a quick walk over to Alex's house. Asumi took the lead, and busted open the door in anticipation of a hidden foe and aggressively stabbed her sword into the darkened kitchen. The move was futile, pointless, as no threats lay within.

The group stepped into the kitchen and sat down. A sleepy Sharon wandered in from the side room and looked at her new company with wide eyes.

"What's going on here?" She asked the group. "It's too late for a dinner, and I was starting to get worried about you not returning, Alex."

Alex let out a stupid "ah" and rubbed the back of his head like he was an 11 year old. He finally mustered up the courage to say something, "Sorry" he said.

The group got around the table and pulled out chairs, after explaining what had happened to Sharon. Now, not able to fall asleep, she took a seat at the dining room table. Zeek was at the head.

"Now, I need you three first to tell me everything that happened, exactly as it had happened." Zeek instructed the group.

They did so, telling the story of the stick, the mindless drones, the murder of Adam, and the attempted murder of Asumi.

"These are dark tales indeed. But they are not unfamiliar. And I see you have been touched as well," Zeek said pointing out Gerald who immediately blushed - his face as deep red as a ripe apple ready for a good apple sauce. "I am saddened to hear of this, in any case. Luckily, I have some useful knowledge in matters such as this." Zeek took out a large ancient looking Tome from the kitchen cabinet. Sharon looked utterly confused on how or why that book was in her house already. Zeek waved away any question she asked, ignoring it as he ignored her initial question on why they were all here in the first place. He opened the book flat on the kitchen table, and pointed his olde Crone's finger towards a specific passage titled "The Shibboleth of Zebolith". It was accompanied by a disgusting looking staff, encrusted with wandering eye balls, pools of puss and dripping strings of orange slime.

"This is an ancient, and evil artifact. And it's what you have in your hand right now, Gerald." Zeek expounded upon the young, athletically-bodied man.

"But this looks nothing like that." Gerald said, ready to dispute the wise old man.

Zeek quickly interrogated him. Slamming the book shut, he shouted out the question, "Tell me right now, what does that staff you hold look like?"

Gerald took some time to describe it. He was careful to not leave out any details.

"It's a golden staff, topped with a pyramid. Around the center point of the staff is a leather grip, encrusted with jewels an-" Zeek interrupted at this point.

"You think it's the Staff of Hujik?"

Gerald nodded aggressively like a dog that had just learned that if he nodded he'd get a handful of dog treats and a second course of raw meat.

"I'm sorry to do this to you..." Zeek said as he waved his hand in the sky and uttered an incomprehensible tongue. Immediately, Gerald clutched at his neck and his eyes began to bulge out of his head. Asumi yelled at Zeek to stop. Sharon just yelled in general at nothing at all. Asumi began to approach Zeek and hammered his back with a fury of blows that would definitely knock out at least an average sized man. Alex sat, belly sticking out, in his chair knowing he should be doing something to again help this situation. But the truth was he was burned out. Nothing had been going according to plan today. He didn't even care anymore really. Asumi slapped him across his face with the might of a baseball player slugging a baseball out of the park with an iron fireplace poker.

"Hey! Uh!" Alex stumbled to his feet, "Zeek let him go."

Zeek eyed him with a curling smirk on his cheek and lowered his hand. Gerald fell backwards into his chair, which tipped over backwards and was about to throw him out tumbling before it was caught mid air and levitated itself back to an upstanding position. Zeek, having saved Gerald, informed him that the procedure was complete and to look at the stick that was in his hand. Gerald let out a "Yuck!" and let his grasp loosen the stick. It clambered to the ground. Alex was still confused, as the stick looked like a normal stick, until Zeek bellowed out, "Behold!" and picked up the table cloth and waved it through the air as clearing it

of crumbs. The table cloth grew to a size immeasurable and completely covered everyone's vision for a complete second. Once it had gone, they could all clearly see as plain as day the disgusting looking stick. It was indeed the Shibboleth of Zebolith. It had hid itself from everyone with a kind of illusion magic.

"Now you see," Zeek said.

"What the hell is that thing!?" Sharon yelled, demanding someone at least recognize that she had asked yet another question. Zeek ignored her.

"The staff had worked its magic on Gerald. It had convinced him that it was a holy sceptor capable of good. Gerald acted in as its agent, though convinced that he was only doing good." Zeek let out a big sigh, licked his forefinger before opening up his book again to read a line from it, "And it says here that, 'Once spoken to from an agent under the spell of the Shibboleth, anyone will become a thrall to their whim.' This part is telling, as you two were never under the spell. This means something important, but I fear it is not the time to tell you just yet. But take solace in the fact that you are now free, Gerald."

Gerald bowed his head, did the ziggurat shaped sign of the faith of Hujik and proclaimed Zeek a holy man. Zeek told Gerald to please come up and stop prostrating himself in front of him. He is no God, only a follower of a good one. Zeek told Sharon to please return to bed, as he would protect them and alarm her if things were going south. Sharon said she wasn't tired, but submitted after Zeek just stared at her for a long enough time to make her uncomfortable and leave on her own accord.

To the remaining group, Zeek said, "Now I must tell you the stories of these two twin artifacts. You have found the Shibboleth of Zebolith and unleashed its madness. Make no mistake, even though Gerald is cured of its grasp for now it is still working its way through the minds of the crowd that were infected at the pit." The thought of a still continuing threat made Alex's stomach feel like \_it\_ was dropped into a pit. Zeek continued, "Their story is woven into the origin story of creation, and the damnation that the Holy Camp has wrought upon the Fields of Hujik - our home." Zeek lit the bonfire and began to tell the group a story.



## Chapter 8

Zeek began orating heroically. "This is the story of the origin of our camp, Highheart. The camp Highheart is now situated on an ancient battlefield, the participants of this battle having long passed on it is easy to forgive most of the population for not being aware of the details of this major event. 1,000 years ago, after the dawn of the Sun and just following the formation of the clay of Land, the God Jinniku sent down his two faithful servants to patrol the earthscape to find capable plots of land for hosting the cradles of situation. The two faithful servants were named Hujik and Zebolith. They followed the command of their god to a tee, and quickly scoured the lands for a fruitful area capable of such a demand. Hujik turned to Zebolith and said, 'Zebolith, my dear brother, let us make a quick work of this assignment. I'm sure you too yearn to return to the Heavens from which we have descended. This land is far from perfect, and our delicate tastes so refined from an eternity in heaven have left us unable to stomach this unpallatable existence.' Zebolith took this in to consideration and responded, 'Yes, let us make haste and be done with this task at once.'

Hujik devised a plan and procured a cartographic representation of the lands through the use of his arcane eye. He layed out the lands and divided them into three distinct quadrans. In the east, Zebolith would search for suitable areas. In the north west, Hujik would search for equally suitable lands for settlment. As for the south west, Hujik proclaimed, 'I have augured an auspicious Omen of



this land. We shall not search it, as it has no fruits to bare other than those of deception.' Zebolith bowed, and shook Hujik's hand as an equal. The plan as he had layed it out sounds full of wisdom and promise, Zebolith relayed to Hujik. That night, the two made camp at the exact center of the world, an area surrounded by rivers known as Yellowleaf. You three may recognize this name as reminiscent of our town of Yelea. This is no accident, as you would not be surprised to learn if you had payed attention during my history lessons."

Gerald did a loud gulp, and a click sound from his throat. Alex started rubbing the back of his head like a kid, again. Asumi on the other hand, looked confidently at Zeek as he had not told her anything she did not already know. She, unlike the other two, paid attention during her years of tutelage.

Zeek took a big sip of dandelion tea and continued the story, "Now in the middle of the night, as Hujik was resting, Zebolith awoke early. He took note of the lands in the South West and had decided that he would make an independent excursion now under the cover of night. He did not, for one, completely trust Hujik's proposed ability to augur omens and, in any case, was now very curious about what could possibly reside there. Before leaving, Zebolith crushed up some yellow leaves that lay at the foot of a nearby tree, and sprinkled them over the face of Hujik, casting him into a magical slumber that he would not awake from until Zebolith was to return and awake him himself. Zebolith departed and walked towards the dark territory of the South west. He traveled several days before coming to a

large mountain with natural stairs carved into its north eastern side. At the top of these natural stairs the mountain split in two, creating what looked like a massive gate leading up back towards heaven. The thought of returning home overwhelmed his decision making and he at once ascended the stairs, hoping to find something to finally satisfy his curiosity. The stares were haunted by hungry beasts, and Zebolith took great pains to fight them off. During one of these encounters, Zebolith lost a hand to the foul bite of a four-legged rabid horse. The horse, being a sign of the high god Jinniku, struck an existential fear in Zebolith. He thought he should turn back, but found himself compelled to keep going until he reached the top of the mountain. He continued his trek."

Zeek smacked the table to wake Alex back up. Asumi rolled her eyes at him and Gerald covertly slid a small cup of coffee over. Zeek looked at the three, not quite sure they were mature enough to hear the conclusion of his story.



## Chapter 9

Zeek cleared his throat and continued his story, "Now Zebolith, having lost his hand, was nearing the top of the long staircase. He looked up to the end of his journey and saw a bright shining light beckoning him forth. With the omen of the rabid horse buried in his short term memory, he continued to ascend and reached the summit. Infront of him lay an altar, and on top of it a luxurious looking staff. Unable to contain himself, he picked it up. Immediately he was imbued with power and with the ability to command creatures. The ripple of power expanded throughout the young land, and awoke Hujik. Hujik immediately sat up, and saw a dark cloud coming from the south west. He called for Zebolith and, not seeing him, quickly realized that Zebolith had been the source of this dark magic and bad fortune. Hujik stood up, took his leave and approached the mountain that Zebolith was on top of, just in time to catch him descending. 'Brother,' Zebolith announced, 'Look here. You had warned me to not venture into this quadrant of the world, but deep within its confines I have found a glorious and powerful artifact.' Hujik, shaking with rage, chastised him. 'You fool,' yelled out Hujik, 'You went and touched an artifact of Jinniku. You were not destined to handle this staff of power. You have defied fate and made a mockery of the predestination imbued in the creation of Jinniku. You will pay dearly for this.' Zebolith was enraged at his brother, and the staff he was holding had only enflamed this anger. The staff, itself sentient, had gained a foothold in the young god's mind, and seeked to forward its power through him as

an agent. Zebolith raised his staff up above his head and let forth its awesome power. Immediately, a large throng of rabid beasts roamed up the side of the mountain. The same beasts that had attacked Zebolith on his ascent, though not one horse was among them. Hujik reacted with his divine sense, and pulled off a branch of a nearby pine tree. He said a short, powerful prayer and morphed the branch into a staff as luxurious as the one that Zebolith had found. He called out to the Jinniku to assist him in the correction of fate's plan, and his wish was granted. The staff of Hujik glowed with a celestial glow, and he lowered it down and stuck it in the earth. There was a great crack and rumbling of the earth. The gathered beasts became cowardly and scattered the from them, but not fast enough. As the power of Jinniku descended from the heavens, the mountain they stood on cracked in two and fell deep into the earth, burying both the staff of Zebolith, and the staff of Hujik, along with all the beasts that roamed around mountain. Over time, the tainted staff that Zebolith found came to be know as the Shibboleth of Zebolith, and that is exactly what lays at your feet, Gerald. The staff of Hujik still lays deep, buried under ground. The pit in which you dig is the site of that mountain's collapse. Once the Holy Camp was able to pinpoint this fact, they made no delay in trying to excavate these powerful artifacts. It seems that today, one of them has been found."

Zeek sat back in his chair, satisfied that his story had been completed. The other three looked down, blankly, at the table realizing the sheer gravity of the situation that they were in.

"So," Alex said, "What you're telling us is that Gerald has found this one thousand year old artifact, and that it was corrupting him the same way it was corrupting Zebolith?" Zeek nodded, solemnly.

"Yes. I'm afraid so. And I'm also afraid to report that it seems the staff's power has learned to transmit itself to other beings, like a virus. No doubt one of the crowd of diggers you converted back when you found this staff is off creating his own cohort of followers. The Shibboleth won't stop until it has its one trued fated owner. Who that is, only Jinniku knows." Gerald let out a sigh of relief, knowing that he was at least free from its corruption. For now. Gerald inquired.

"Master Zeek..."

Zeek immediately interrupted, "Don't use honorifics with me boy. Zeek alone will do."

Gerald nodded, and took a sip of coffee and yelped "Ah!" at it being too hot. He then continued his question, "Zeek, am I free of being corrupted now that you force choked me, or whatever it was you did." Zeek took one look at Gerald as if he was a stupid lump of bread sludge.

"Yes. For now. Until you lose focus, you will be protected. But, you will lose focus. Mark my words." Zeek said.

"What should we do next? We can't just let this mind virus spread across the land." Alex said, "Maybe we should inform the town militia? We could muster forces around Yelea."

Zeek shook his head, "No. That will not work. We would be better advised not to bring an armed, trained force to the

influence of the staff." Zeek coughed up a ball of phlegm, and continued, "We must descend into the pit ourselves, into the restricted caverns, and find the staff of Hujik."

## Chapter 10

Zeek set the book he had opened up on the table back into his backpack. He looked over his company at his table and waved his hand away, dispelling any sort of anticipation that the group may have had.

"We can't leave tonight," Zeek said, "The danger of being caught on the road in the middle of the night is too great. We don't have any reason to believe that the horde of diggers will make it back to your house, Alex. Gerald, you live on the other side of the county, don't you?" Zeek looked over at Gerald, and expected a reply.

Gerald, getting out of his day dreaming mindset, look at Zeek and responded, "Yes. That's right. It's a good 40 minutes from here, but if the group were to actually \_search\_ for me there, then they'd be occupied all night easily."

Zeek nodded, "Good, I'm glad to have the reassurance. Let's go to bed, wake up bright and early in the morning and then set off." The first to stand up and leave was Zeek, wordlessly. He made no mention of when exactly he would be back in the morning but the group assumed that he would wake them up whenever it was he was to return. Gerald yawned, and beat his chest like a gorilla.

"Alright, I call the guest bedroom!" He yelled as he stood up, slapped Alex on the back and began to leave the kitchen. Stopping at the passageway to the bedrooms, he turned back to Alex and Asumi and said, "If any of you hear anything at all out of the ordinary..." Gerald tapped the tip



of his nose, like that was a common gesture that everyone knew the meaning of. Responding to the confounded looks he received, he explained, "Just let me know. We can't take any changes with fate tonight. I feel trouble in the weave of things..." Gerald said, ominously. Alex recognized this warning as the same one that he had started the day with. After this he finally departed, leaving Alex and Asumi alone in the kitchen in the early evening.

Asumi turned to Alex, "What do you think? Do you think that Zeek is out of his mind? Am I the only one actually dealing with processing all this unreal stuff that's been happening in the span of one day?" Alex took to heart this question, and let it sit for a while before answering. He stared out the kitchen window to the quiet, and now dark, forest that lay just beyond the river at the border. He really could not think of anything to say, but his distant and contemplative demeanor made it appear to Asumi that he was going over several rational trains of thought before settling on the most correct one.

"I don't know." He finally said.

Asumi was dissappointed, "What do you mea you don't know? Do you ever have any gall to say anything, do anything, or make any decision? Great God Hujik, Alex, I have known you for three years and you are always a depressive, sad, lump of coal." Asumi looked at Alex for some kind of reaction to this extremely forward and blunt criticism of his character as a whole. Alex gave her nothing tangible, only a wistful stare at the space between her eyes. Frustrated, flabberghasted and, frankly, fed up - she fled from the farce of a meeting and retreated to the foyer to

sleep on the couch. Alex remained, alone, in the kitchen reflecting on his absolute inability to come out of his own skin. How come, he thought, that no matter how hard he tried and no matter how much he believed in the will of his life that he never once let it show to the outside world? What was it, he tried to puzzle out, that kept his true spirit carefully entombed inside this prison of flesh and bone? He knew the words that he wanted to say to enact his humanity and become a person alive in the world - what force caused him to maintain this distant, somber personality? Fear? Reason? Or just plain depression? Who knows, he concluded. Maybe this big mess that had been made would finally shake him out of his body and break free his suppressed spirit. He stood up from his kitchen chair and scooted it in. His knees cracked loudly as he straightened up and left towards his bedroom.

The moon was exceptionally bright that night, and Alex had trouble sleeping. One, who could sleep knowing that a nefarious, growing force of malevolence was loose in the world? And two, who could sleep with the dang moonlight happening to land right over your pillow? He slammed shut his eyelids, squeezed them so they couldn't open in the slightest, and repeated his one optimistic thought to himself. Probably the only positive thought he had had in the past twelve hours. Maybe this adventure will cause him to shake loose this shell of a dull, thoughtless person. Maybe thrusting himself in danger and putting his life on the line would allow his inner spirit to work its way towards protocolling with the real world. Maybe, at least, he could exist. With these last few thoughts on his mind, he fell asleep. That night, he dreamed of being underneath a

waterfall in the mountains in the southwest. Coming through it, he could see on the north east face of the mountain, a natural pathway making its way to the top of the mountain.

## Chapter 11

The night was almost over when a loud bang was heard outside the window of Gerald's room. He jolted awake and sat up in bed. He reached for the nearest thing that could be used as a weapon, which was the stone book end in the shape of a horse. Barely moving at all, he focused his hearing on the area just outside the window. A few minutes passed and he heard nothing at all. Slowly, to avoid making any noise at all, he flipped the covers off of him and walked over to the window. He crept up the edge, and immediately jutted his head out the window and looked around. Nothing. Looking for any source of the bang, he saw a small bush near the foundation of the house swaying in the wind. Deciding that this was the cause of the sound, he turned around to head back to bed. Standing right behind him was the digger with the sword.

"Master." said the digger, "Why did you leave me, Konna, and the rest behind?" Gerald scrambled backward and fell on his backside. He looked up at the digger, first with fear, but once he realized that for some reason Konna was still enthralled by him the fear dissipated a bit. Gerald pointed up at him.

"What are you doing here?" He questioned.

"After we killed Adam and ransacked his office, looking for the compensation funds he owed his, we decided to track you down. The rest of the diggers decided to go directly to your village, but I had seen you traveling with Alex while in the office. I alone decided to go here. Again, I ask, why did

you leave us?" Konna was pretty determined to get the answer to his question. Thinking fast, Gerald said the first thing that came to his mind.

"It's better to not have the leader of the group stick around with the group, less they become a target of a coup or a weak point for an external enemy." Gerald seemed to convince Konna of this lie. Konna relaxed a bit, and grabbed at the hilt of his sword.

"Understandable. In any case, let's get you back so you can relay instructions to us. We were unable to retrieve the gold from Adam so that must mean the delegate from the Holy Camp in the north western city of Apolymn is holding on to it. We have decided to venture forth tomorrow morning. We need you to come and give the word - as some of the group is conflicted. Some of them, even, believe that you have been taken by agents of the Holy Camp and are being held hostage, and some of them want to leave you behind. Come, and set these matters of debate to rest."

Gerald felt a sudden guilt for having so much responsibility falsely laid at his feet. He looked at the long sword hanging near the well toned and muscular thigh of the digger, and decided that his weapon of a stone horse head was no match. He stood up, and looked at Konna in the eye. Putting on his best impression of a confident version of himself, he spoke.

"Well put. I will travel with you. Lead on."

"Good to hear," Konna said, "My horse is hitched just outside. Should we kill the rest of the members of this household before they awaken and raise alarm?"

Gerald immediately said, "No!" Konna looked at him, surprised at his concern. Quickly, Gerald sobered up his countenance and added, "We shouldn't. It would leave too much of a stink, and it would incur trouble. These folk are simple. They mean no harm."

Konna responded, "Always wise, with ready council when needed." And led Gerald out through the window and on to his horse. As he galloped away, Gerald looked back at Alex's house, wondering what sort of trouble he had gotten himself into. He also wondered how he could, if he could, work his way back to travel with Alex and help with his task. For now, he turned forward as Konna led his horse towards the pit, once more. Gerald quickly looked down and spied at the saddlebag slacking on the side of Konna's horse. Inside was a dagger, a helping of rope, and a small wooden buckler. A possible kit he could use to escape and make is wake home. He thought to himself that it would be best to dispatch this guy before he returns with him. The right time did not come for this action, though, and he continued to ride. Over the horizon, the black sky began to turn a dark red. If he was to act, it would need to be now.

## Chapter 12

The next morning, when Alex woke up, Zeek was rustling around in a large pack of hiking and camping equipment.

"You're finally awake... a late riser, I see." Zeek, exhaled, and turned toward the room that Gerald had been staying in, "I can't say the same for Gerald."

"What do you mean?" Alex said, as he sleepily yawned and sat down. In front of him on the table was a breakfast lovingly made for him by Sharon, he assumed. Fine toasted bread, soft-boiled eggs, a few strips of golden brown bacon and a cup of black coffee. A great breakfast, and no one would argue otherwise. "Did something happen last night? Gerald get up and cause you to wake up too early?" Alex asked through a mouthful of bacon bits and egg bits and other kinds of breakfast bits.

"No. He's gone." Zeek said over his rustling and banging of a packing procedure.

Alex immediately stopped chewing and looked in Zeek's direction, surprised. "Gone? You mean..."

"He beefed! He got up and skidaddled! He scrambled! High tailed it out of here!"

"No no no, that can't be." Alex said, putting his fork down on the plate that still held most of his breakfast, "That doesn't sound like Gerald at all. That can't be what happened - there must be some sort of explanation. Gerald isn't a-"

"Coward! That's exactly what he is. Listen, I don't blame him, and you shouldn't either." Zeek put the travel bag aside so he could get a good line of sight to make eye contact with Alex, "You were never under the spell of the Shibboleth as he was. You don't now what sort of things that wicked rod made him see. Possibly unfathomable visions of doom or even worse." Zeek made another exasperated sigh and flung the travel bag over his pillow, "Even I have no idea to what extent that thing had a hold over him and his imagination... which, may I remind you, was already off the rails to begin with!"

Asumi entered the room, already dressed and ready to go. She spoke to Alex, "You are ready. Is Gerald ready? Zeek?" She turned to Zeek hoping for some sort of confirmation of Gerald's appearance.

"No. He's gone. Left us. I was just telling Alex the whole thing." Zeek said to an increasingly distracted crowd, "But this may actually be for the best. There was also no way of telling how deep that Shibboleth was able to burrow into Gerald's sensory system. We may have had a spy right here in our midst."

Alex, still a world away inside his mind imagining exactly what could have happened, perked up, "Let's get a move on. You're right, it could be for the best. After all, like I said, it was completely out of character for Gerald to just get up and leave like this. He is not a coward, no matter what you think Zeek. This leads me to believe that another agent foreign to him and us was controlling his action and motives. That's the only logical explanation, and a pretty reasonable one given the circumstances." Alex felt a surge



of confidence and then continued, "So what's the plan? Go on without him, I assume. Are we departing now?"

Zeek nodded, and took a large piece of parchment out of his inner coat pocket. He layed it down on the table and, with a tap of his walking stick on the table, it unraveled itself out flat on to the table. A map lay on it, showing the three quadrons of their world. A visible red mark was in the top left portion of the map -- and it lay right on top of where the city of Apolymn was.

Zeek motioned to announce his plan, "We will go first to Apolymn. There is a record there of where the staff of Hujik was last seen, if it has been at all. Usually that record is forbidden for any lay person or even priests of the Order, such as myself, to lay eyes on. But, I reckon if we bring that," He motioned to the Shibboleth that lay on the ground in the corner of the kitchen, "and inform the council of Apolym what is going on, then they may make an exception."

Alex nodded, "Yeah, sounds like a plan. Do you need me to get anything before we had out?" Zeek thought for a second, wondering if he actually did need anything. He could not shake the fear that something may have happened to Gerald. Alex and Asumi would be devastated if one of them had already so early in their adventure succumbed to the enemys' aggression. After a couple minutes of thought he finally responded to Alex.

"No. Let's head out."

Alex got ready to go, and then Sharon came in to the room. "Alex," she said, "You are leaving now?"

"Yep, it looks like it." Alex said, as Asumi and Zeek left the kitchen through the back door out to the garden. They were obviously very eager to get a move on.

"Well, I think I should give you something. Hold on." Sharon shifted backwards and returned down the hallway. She beckoned for him to come. His sister led him to a room that neither of them had ever bothered to go in for several years: Their late parents' room. "It's in here. I know you probably don't want to go in, but-"

"No." Alex said, "No, I mean. I do. I should. I'm not sure if I'll ever be making my way back home. I should at least go in and pay my respects so I have no regrets."

Sharon nodded and opened the door. Inside, the room was just how it was left back on the night three years ago when both their parents passed away. It was a sickness they succumbed to, some plague that ravaged the camp. It seemed to target the older population, older meaning anyone over the age of 18. Luckily for them, Alex and Sharon were still in their early to mid teens. But also unluckily for them, their parents were not. Alex looked around the room and spied at the neatly made bed, and well organized desk. His mother was a scribe for the Highheart local official. She would write his official letters for him, with her skill in calligraphy, and she did all her work at her desk. His dad was injured when he was younger, so he never really knew what he did. Sharon walked over to the bed and pulled something out from beneath it. It was a bracelet, made of gold and studded with a rainbow of colors in gems.

"Dad was supposed to give this to you when you turned twenty three. But, I think now is best." Sharon said as she handed it over to him.

Alex took it and held it in his hand. It had a weight too it, but still it was beautiful. Out of all the things that he owned, this one was probably worth the most amount of money. It looked incredibly priceless, anyway, and he was surprised to learn that it was in his house this entire time without him knowing of it.

"Thanks, Sharon." He said.

"No, it's not from me. Thank dad." She replied.

Alex nodded and the two of them stood in silence together in their parents' bedroom, remembering as best they can the fondest familiar memories they had together.

After a few solemn minutes, Alex got up and headed for the door without saying a word.

"Be careful out there." Sharon said, distantly.

Alex looked back at her over his shoulder, but she was not looking at him. He nodded to himself, and left out the back door to join Asumi and Zeek standing ready to go. They were discussing logistics, and were eager to get this journey started.

## Chapter 13

The group set off from Alex's house and headed north. They did not have any sort of transportation, and so it looked like they were mostly traveling by foot. Alex took his time with his pace, and rarely tried to catch up with the other two when he fell behind, which was often. Instead he relied on the two to stop and wait for him to catch up. In other circumstances, he would be embarrassed by this infantilizing situation, but his mind was preoccupied. He was up to his crown in thoughts about his parents, and also about Gerald. He did not really know what Gerald was up to, but he had a sinking feeling in his stomach that it was no good. For some reason, and it could be his encounter with Gerald while he was still in the Shibboleth's grips of power, but he felt like he could trust Gerald less now. Maybe. He hadn't really decided on it as a whole yet, but he felt like, in the back of his mind, that Gerald had the capacity to screw them over. Well, anyway, he has not yet done that so Alex decided to put away that train of thought. His parents were a more bland story, but his encounter with their frozen in time bedroom was still causing him some writhing pain back in the confines of his imagination. Things should have turned out different. They should still be alive. He still can't really accept with a straight face that his parents were taken away from him at such a young age. But then again, what's the point of being mad at Fate for things that were long past? Asumi called out to Alex to hurry up. They were again far ahead of him, waitin for him at a turn that went around and circumvented a small wooded area of the plains they were

traveling through. Asumi stood, looking heroically. She had still her sword by her side and watched Alex bumble his way up the side of the hill. His constant weariness was beginning to rub off on her, and she too was starting to yearn for the easy life of a slothful attitude. But that was never her slice in life. Raised by a camp ran orphanage, she was never one to easily let an opportunity slip by. Being weak was not an option for her, and indecisiveness a trait that she was fully convinced that she could not afford. A raw deal in life creates a crafty player, she always thought. Still, her job at the quarry as a servant to the literal pit boss was one of embarrassment, though it paid well enough to buy bread. The fact that she was in that situation was, no doubt, the result of her gender. What sort of man sets a woman to dig all day every day? None, assumed Adam, probably. She was now, though, finally allowed a sort of leadership role in her life. Zeek seems to have seen in her a more assertive personality and has been frank with her on his plans and opinions of success and failure. She was enjoying this new found trust from another human. This gift would not go to waste. She looked back out towards Alex being the slothful idiot he always is, and stomped down to fetch him up by his arm. Grabbing him, she began to haul him up as a mother would haul a slow kid in to timeout.

"You need to really get a move on. What's with you? You do realize we're in a literal life and death situation here?" She said, out of patience, to Alex.

"Life and death?" Alex said.

"Listen," she set Alex down and began to talk to him out of ear short of Zeek, "What do you think happened to Gerald?"

He didn't just run away. He was abducted, I've decided. Abducted through some remote influence. Probably some left over magic from handling that Shibboleth for so long. Now you need to believe that too. We won't be able to effectively work together if we aren't operating in the same mind frame of urgency." She explained to Alex.

Alex nodded as he was tugged along by Asumi. It was not like she was actually that strong, or had that much mass on him. She pulled him on through determination alone. Once he was placed back at the group, Zeek pointed out over the horizon. There was a small gray speck that he was drawing their attention to.

"The city of Apolymn. You can see its library tower from here. That is our destination... but first," Zeek moved his finger across the horizon and pointed towards a stack of rocks forming a pathetic looking mountain, "We should venture over to my place to get a better form of transportation."

"You live all the way out here?" Asked Asumi.

"Yes, of course. A priest of Hujik can not despoil himself with a metropolitan lifestyle like the one you enjoyed in Highheart." He replied.

"Metropolitan?" Asumi asked, "I hardly think Highheart is metropolitan seeing as how we have ten households and a subsistent farm."

Zeek waved away her wave of reason and walked over towards the pile of rocks. Approaching it, one could see inscriptions written all along the outside of this small mountain. In a dead tongue, and in a puzzling script, the

writing wrapped the entrance of a cave. The outside of the cave had two sconces, long abandoned, and a broken old sign that said, in quite plain common speak, "Stay Out!"

"Zeek, why do you choose to live out here?" Alex asked again.

Zeek replied, "As I said, it is better for the soul to live outside of the comforts of a wretched society. And, I am able to find as much quiet study time as I like living this far away from anyone else. No one can find me if they have to ask me a question about some trouble they're dealing with." He stumbled in to the mouth of the cave, and waved his hand in the air. Immediately a bright blue light sprung to life and floated in the middle of a medium sized cavern.

"I would have thought you would be more than open to answering questions, especially those coming from the faithful." Alex said.

"That's where you're wrong, boy." Zeek said with a tired animosity, "In many questions, the answer lies in the asking. Even if I gave advice, it would not be heard. The ideas men want to hear are ones they find already in their head. So, I decided to not waste my time just listening to people talk to themselves. Instead, I teach when I want and I lead when I need. Now, where did I put that..." Zeek dug through a mountain of artifacts. He tossed a priceless looking rug here, and chucked an ancient looking lamp there before finally emerging from his hamster like digging activity with a small, bronze looking box. "Ah hah, I've found it!"

He set the box down on the cave floor and pressed a button on the left side of it four times. Four small horse figurines

popped out and laid on their side. Zeek picked these figurines up, laid them outside the mouth of the cave and said a few words. Immediately, they transformed from porcelain to flesh and grew to eight times their size until they were full sized servicable mares.

"Pick one, and hop on. We will be in Apolymn by nightfall." Zeek said, with a wide grin on his face.