

The Voyage of Elwar Soran

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Part Three

The Way Home

Chapter 15

Do you ever wake up in the morning and find your arm is still asleep? It's numb and if you move it it's like you're wielding a dead piece of yourself. You can't control it properly and end up slapping yourself in the face with it. Then it starts to tingle, and almost painfully slowly, regains its sense of feel. That is what had happened to us. We had been asleep while the world around us had been wide awake. Now, we were slowly waking up.

- Elir Ardanwen

Official record keeper

Elir walked down the corridor with the intent of going to her cabin for a bit of sleep. She had visited the kitchen for some late night snack after spending some time in the command room, watching the ship fly through the darkness.

The crew on the open upper deck had reported seeing lights on the ground seemingly chasing after the ship. It was to be expected that the general would not want them to slip away with what he thought of as a great weapon to help rid the world of his enemies.

But those were of little concern. *The Wind Saber* would soon rise above the clouds, making any pursuit a futile venture. If those chasing assumed they would continue on their current heading they would find themselves travelling a long ways chasing something that had changed course and headed in an altogether different direction.

They might, of course, assume that they would be headed for the mountain-range they had been so interested in. The general was not stupid. He would figure it out. Even then it was doubtful he could get anything there in time to meet them in time. The Gardless did not seem to have anything that could match the flying ship in speed.

Even if they did, they could just fly over them and disappear into the clouds

again and come back later or approach from a different direction.

No, she felt the ship and her crew would be safe now as long as they did not stop anywhere for too long and were careful to keep hidden while flying.

She had thought about going to visit Yerny before turning in for the night, but seeing how late it was it did not seem likely the gnome would still be awake. She certainly did not wish to wake him up.

She froze as a figure appeared from a room that was supposed to be empty.

“Oh, hello,” said Turaiw at the surprised priestess and moved his backpack to a more comfortable position on his shoulder.



“What is he doing here?” asked Elwar and eyed Turaiw who was sitting in a chair with two crewmen on either side guarding him. They were in the empty storage room he had been using during their flight to the fortress.

Troen and Elir were huddled together with the wizard some ways away from the Gardless, though it was an overly cautious thing to do since he couldn't understand a word they were saying in any case.

“He said he forgot his backpack on-board and came back to get it,” explained Elir and glanced at the man. “The crew let him on-board only moments before we returned so they thought nothing of it. He flew with us so there was no reason to think he'd be any sort of threat.”

Troen nodded. “There is a standing order to let him go as he pleases. I never rescinded that.”

“Well, what do we do with him?” demanded Elwar. “Throw him overboard?”

The stare he got from Elir was enough to shut him up.

“We could ask what he wants,” suggested Troen. “Explain the situation to him.”

“It would be interesting to see whether he shares the generals vision,” admitted Elwar. He was curious to find out how prevalent the thinking the general had shown in his speech was among the Gardless.

Elir sighed.

“What?” asked Elwar.

The woman waved his hands dismissively. "Nothing. I'm just tired."

"No reason why we can't do it tomorrow," said Troen and looked her over with a concerned expression.

"I'd sleep more soundly if this was resolved," replied Elir

"As would we all," Elwar chimed in.

It took Elir some time to explain everything that had happened to Turaiw. His expression grew grim as she began to describe what the general had said to the troops. As she finished explaining the current situation he was in, an expression of resignation appeared on him.

"It is true that there are many who are like the general," said Turaiw quietly after a short silence. "Those who wish utter destruction. Many of our high ranking leaders are like that."

"Many of the common people must be like that as well. Otherwise the leaders wouldn't be leaders for very long," said Elir in an accusatory tone.

"It's true that there is a large portion that support the leaders, but there are also those of us who do not completely agree with them," replied Turaiw. He took a deep breath. "We all agree the war must end, but some of us think it could be done without one side being completely wiped out."

"And you're part of this moderate minority?" asked Elir after translating his reply to Elwar and Troen.

The wizard examined their prisoner closely. From what he had learned about Turaiw he was willing to believe he was not as crazy as the general was. He had always acted properly and the way he had expressed himself on many occasions lent an air of rationality and calmness to him.

Of course, he could not dismiss the fact the general had projected a similar aura around himself.

Turaiw nodded at Elir's question. She waited for some explanation, but none seemed to be coming.

"What should we do with you then?" she finally asked.

There was a long silence before Turaiw responded. From his facial expression it was clear there was some struggle to reach a decision. "The war is over for me," said the man quietly. He looked up at Elir. "You could take me with

you. To your world.”

Elir was a bit taken back by what the man suggested. “Why would you want to leave this world?”

A wry smile appeared on Turaiw. “You've seen what it is. Why would I stay? To fight for people I disagree with? To watch the genocide that will no doubt be coming?”

The expression went from a wry smile to an sombre, almost sorrowful look.

“What's there left for me in this world? I was drafted when I was but a kid. My parents died when our town was burned. I don't believe in what my side is doing. I don't want to be a part of the horrific things they will be doing.”

It was turn for Elir, Elwar and Troen to be thoughtful of what to do as his words were translated. All of them could sympathize with the man and his position. They could understand him wanting to get away from it all, but could he be trusted not to be working for the general in secret?

“Well, what do you think?” asked Elir as the three of them huddled together.

“He seems sincere enough,” said Elwar, though he added grimly, “but then so did the general.”

“We can't drop him off tonight anyway,” said Troen. “We haven't put enough distance between us and the fortress to risk it. Why not sleep on it?”

Elir found herself nodding at the suggestion despite having wanted to solve the issue right then and there. “At least he seems to be more sane. Keeping him locked here over night shouldn't be a problem.”

She glanced at the man sitting in the chair. He had an anxious look about him.

“We're all tired anyway. A bit of sleep will clear our minds and make for a better decision,” said Elwar.

With the decision made, Elir gave the news to Turaiw. The man looked relieved even if the decision had been put on hold for some time. At least he would not be dropped off right away.

Having done that the priestess made her way to her cabin like she had planned and dug herself under the blankets for a good nights sleep.

The morning came all too soon for her and with it the decision that needed

to be made. She got herself ready and ate some breakfast by the kitchen before making her way to Turaiw. There were some questions she wanted to ask of him before Elwar and Troen got around and they had to make a decision. It looked like it might be her last chance to ask some questions about the Gardless and the way their society worked.

The two guards were there, outside the door, ensuring he did not leave. She had brought with her some bread and stew for Turaiw, though she knew it was food he was unlikely to like. Perhaps by now he was hungry enough to bend his tastes a bit.

The crewmen on guard quickly opened the door for her and she stepped inside. Turaiw was laying on the floor with a blanket beneath him to offer some minimal padding against the hard wooden floor. He sat up as soon as he saw her and nodded a thank you as she offered the food to him.

The priestess found herself a wooden crate to sit on from a storage room near by and looked on as Turaiw took a tentative taste of the stew.

“Mind if we talk while you eat?” asked Elir.

There was a silent shake of his head in response.

“I’ve seen a lot of men of your race, but not a single female. Why is that?” It was a question that had been bugging her ever since they got to the generals camp.

“The women do not fight,” replied Turaiw and took a bite out of the bread. He looked thoughtful for a moment and then took another bite. “It was a tactic of our enemy at one point. Seek out and kill the women. They figured that since they couldn’t beat our military head on they would make it so there would be less of us.”

The man took a spoonful of the stew and an expression of brief disgust ran across his face, but he bore through it. “Because of that there are not many women. Those that we have are kept safe in secure locations. If they are not with child they work factories and help make us equipment to fight the war. Those expecting children are well taken care of to ensure the new life is brought to the world safely.”

After a moment of consideration, the man added, “Though some of the more

far off villages will look much more normal with both men and women around.”

It took Elir a moment or two to digest what she heard. “So your women are nothing but a living soldier factory for your people?” There was disbelief in her voice.

Turaiw shrugged his shoulders. “It was the enemy that drove us to that situation. If it were up to us the women would be free to live as they used to, but we couldn't let our enemy just kill our future.”

“If the war ended, would the women be treated differently?” asked Elir.

“I don't know,” admitted Turaiw. “I would like to think they would be, but with our leaders like they are I fear things would continue as they are.” There was a hint of anger as well as remorse in his voice. “We've made many mistakes. Some we can not undo. Some we can. I have not had a choice in most things nor has a large portion of my people.”

A sense of dread crept into Elir's mind. “Were there women inside the fortress?” she asked in a weak voice. She knew no enemy had escaped that place alive.

“There were factories there,” said Turaiw. The implications of his reply did not escape the priestess.

She almost suggested that taking the women alive would have been a wiser choice, but then realized what sort of a life would have been waiting for them in the enemy hands. She was not all together certain death would be a worse option so she said nothing.

They sat in silence for a while. Turaiw enjoying his food, Elir watching him in silence, thinking about the answers she had received.

“Why do you want to come with us?” asked Elir. “The real reason?”

Turaiw finished the stew and plopped the last piece of bread in his mouth. He took his time chewing it down. He gave Elir an emphatic look. “Were you in my position, would you stay?”

It did not take her long to shake her head.

Turaiw nodded. “The air in this world is toxic because we have made it so. There is little to no future here. There might not be one for me in your world either, but at least I will breathe in air that does not poison my mind and try to

make me a machine.”

The man caught a small smile on his lips. “And I might be of some help to you on your way home.”

There was no denying that having one of the natives with them would perhaps become useful at one point. The question still remained whether he could be trusted enough to make use of him in such spots.

Elir found herself seeking answers from the teachings of her faith. She was certain she did not want Turaiw harmed in any way. Even if he was a spy simply leaving him somewhere would suffice in solving the situation. At the same time she thought what the man would have to offer her own world. The stories, the detailed history of his world, a different perspective. There were so many things she had no doubt it would be years worth of work for several people within The Order of Salvius.

And the amount of new knowledge added to the library would be enough to fill bookshelves.

A sting of guilt hit her as she realized she was thinking of Turaiw as nothing more than a source of information. It was not the only thing she was supposed to think of. The betterment of lives was a core value of her faith. Would bringing the man back to her own world improve his life? Would he be happy there as the only one of his kind?

She found herself thinking what Braem would do in her situation. As far as she knew the man had stayed true to the teaching of the Order his entire life without wavering. His teachings had been the cornerstone of her youth and continued to serve as her foundation for everything else in her life.

“Why does a beggar look so miserable?” had Braem once asked her as they had been walking through the lower parts of Ramyn. It was where the poorest lived, where the streets were narrow and packed with people, where stores were nothing but canopy covered inlays in buildings, where the air was stale and rife with the smell of unwashed bodies, sweat, and strange herbs.

“Because they are hungry?” she had asked with the curiosity of a seven year old. Braem had held her small hand and his palm had seemed so large back then.

The man had nodded. "That is a part of it, yet you see the same ones year after year, so they do manage to feed themselves."

"Just because you live does not mean you are happy," she had replied in a thoughtful voice that seemed out of place for a girl of such young age.

Braem had raised an eyebrow and given her a surprised look. "What would you say if I told you a lot of their misery was acting?"

She had frowned at hearing that. "Why would they do that?" she had asked in a voice filled with wonderment.

"Would you give money to someone who looked happy?" had Braem asked.

"No," she had replied with little hesitation.

"And that is why they act and make themselves look more miserable than they are," had Braem explained.

"But what of those who truly are miserable?" she had asked. "I would not want to give my money to someone who was faking his troubles."

"How do you tell them apart?" had Braem asked.

She had thought on it for a while, but had been unable to come up with an satisfying answer. "I don't know," she had finally admitted.

"Would you then stop giving money to all beggars?" had Braem asked.

She had shook her head. "Even if there are those who fake it, I would still occasionally happen upon those whose misery was genuine. I would not wish to rob them of my good will even if it meant some of my money would go to those who did not need it so badly."

Braem had nodded with a smile on his face and ruffled her hair.

It had been a lesson straight from the books of Salvius. Simply because your good will might at times be misplaced was no reason not to give it. At times it was impossible to tell if it was truly deserved, but giving it did less harm than reserving it.

Elir sighed and pulled herself from the memories. She found Turaiw examining her closely.

"What?" she asked and adjusted her robe to distract herself.

"You looked like you had remembered something important," replied Turaiw and turned his gaze downwards.

“I did,” she replied, knowing that she had reached her own decision in what to do with him.



Yerny looked out the window and at the clouds that passed by under them. There were occasional glimpses of the ground, but those were so brief that he could only decide whether what he had seen was green or brown.

He had been surprised to find the ship moving when he had woken up. As far as he knew their intention had been to stay where they were for a few more days to ensure the ship was in working condition and safe to fly with.

Feeling the ship moving had been enough to get him to come out of his cabin. No one had bothered to come tell him what was going on so his curiosity had taken control and made him walk away from the gloominess he had wrapped himself into.

He had had some time to work on the mess of emotions twirling inside him and some improvement had occurred. While his guilt over the death of the crewmen had not been alleviated much, he had come to accept that it had happened and nothing he did now could change it. The only thing he could do was ensure the lives that had been lost were not in vain and that he'd continue to live to the best of his own abilities.

There was much he could still give the world, his friends, and anyone else close by.

He turned away from the window and continued his way towards the command room. He hoped to find Troen or Elwar there so he could get back in the loop on what was going on. The few crewmen he passed greeted him with warm smiles and some commented that it was good to see him up and about once more. Some expressed concern over his long stay in his cabin.

He took their greetings and concerns with a mix of emotions. On the one hand it felt good to know the crew cared for him so much and that none of them seemed bitter towards him for costing the lives of their comrades. On the other hand the attention he was getting made him feel a bit uncomfortable.

He was not used to attention.

For most of his life he had gone unnoticed, working in the shadows of others, locked away in a private room, tinkering with matters mechanical. That was what he was used to. That was what he hoped to return to once they got back home.

For now, he did his best to handle the extra attention. He nodded to thank for the words and gave brief replies to any questions asked. It was clear he was reserved and giving answers only out of courtesy, not any innate desire to let people know what he was really thinking and feeling. But it was enough to satisfy the crewmen who approached him.

The gnome sighed out of relief as he entered the command room. Hopefully there would be less questions asked by the people there. He was pleased to note that Troen and Elwar were both there and in addition there was only only Millard at his usual spot at the communication tubes along with the helmsman.

“Yerny!” exclaimed Elwar sounding a bit surprised to see the small man out of his cabin. His expression clearly told how pleased he was to see the gnome and had he not been busy attending to the ships magical properties he would no doubt have rushed to him and taken him in a bear hug.

“Hello,” said Yerny a bit sheepishly and made his way to the windows that offered a view of where the ship was going. All he could see was a white mass of clouds below and a clear blue sky above.

Troen gave the gnome a smile and a nod as a greeting as he walked up next to him. “It's good to see you out and about,” said the elf.

“I must admit it is my curiosity that has brought me out,” replied the gnome. “I was under the impression we would not be moving for a few more days, but here we are, flying.”

Troen got the implied question and explained their current situation to the gnome. He did not seem overly surprised by anything he heard, quite the contrary. It looked almost as if he had been expecting something like this to happen. Then again, he was a cynical little man so he had thought about even worse things occurring.

“I see,” said Yerny as the captain finished filling him in on the events of the last night. “And we are now headed for that mountain-range?”

Troen nodded. "We had to make a slight detour to fool the general and the men he sent after us, but we're on course now."

"And what of Turaiw?" asked Yerny and gave the captain a questioning look.

"That we have yet to decide," came the reply. "We're waiting for Rodil to get some sleep so he can relieve Elwar and we can go make our decision."

"Do you want to hear my opinion?" the gnome asked.

"We would be fools not to," replied the elf.

"Keep him with us," said Yerny in a firm voice.

"For what reason?" asked the captain, clearly curious to hear the reasoning behind it.

"He will be useful," came the reply. "He knows the lands and the habits. We do not. As long as he is on the ship and closely guarded there is nothing he can do to harm us."

The gnome gazed at the scenery through the windows for a moment in silence before adding. "And I tend to believe it when he says the war is over for him. Even if he isn't, sending him back is something I wouldn't wish for even my worst enemy."

Troen examined the gnome closely and found his expression to be a determined one. He was serious about what was being said.

"You should come with us to make the decision," the captain finally said.

Yerny had to ponder for a moment whether he was ready for it. As he already found himself outside and interacting with others it did not seem like too much of an stretch to face Turaiw and Elir as well.

The gnome nodded in agreement.

"Good," said Troen cheerfully and patted Yerny's shoulder. "But first, let's get us some food."

The gnome found himself being dragged to the small dining area next to the kitchen with the captain sitting opposite to him. A bowl of soup was brought in front of him along with a hefty piece of dark bread and a wedge of wax covered cheese before he could even say he wasn't that hungry. Still, after the first few bites his stomach awakened from its slumber and he ate everything that had been placed in front of him.

Elwar joined them midway through their eating. Rodil had relieved him from watch duty and he was now free to tend to other matters.

The three of them spent a good amount of time talking. They took their time with the food, not being in any sort of rush. Yerny found himself smiling as Elwar recounted the story of the failed flying device they had tested in Ramyn. Troen was similarly amused even if it was having fun at the expense of someone else getting hurt.

For the gnome it was therapy he had not known he needed. Simply talking with his friends and letting the story and laughter take him away from the dark thoughts in his mind was enough to make him feel better about everything. The bad things still lingered in the back of his mind, but they no longer dominated his thoughts.

Finally all their plates were empty and the last pieces of bread had found their way into their stomachs. They stood up and began to make their way to where Turaiw was being held.

They were pleased to find Elir already there, chatting away with the detained Gardless. A wide smile appeared on the priestesses face as she saw Yerny walk in. The gnome gave her an unsure smile in return, but that was more than he had given her any time she had come to visit him in his cabin.

The small room felt cramped with all the people there and made Yerny want to head back to his cabin. It reminded him too much of the room with the torturer and his assistants once they started to get something out of him. There had suddenly been a lot of people in the room bringing in papers and asking additional questions.

He shifted uncomfortably, prompting Elwar to take them to the matter at hand.

“I take it we've all come to a conclusion?” asked the wizard and eyed everyone in the room. Turaiw gave him an uncertain smile in return since he did not understand what he had said.

“I say we take him with us,” said Elir without hesitation in her voice. The gnome had to wonder how much the talk she had had with Turaiw before they arrived had affected her decision. By the sounds of things last night she had

almost been ready to kick him over the railing while they were flying over the cloud cover.

Troen and Elwar both seemed as surprised to hear her words.

“For what it's worth, that is my opinion as well,” said Yerny. The surprised look on Elir's face made it worth it getting out of his cabin.

The frown on Elwar's face grew deeper and he eyed Troen with some degree of uncertainty. The elf looked as calm as ever now that he had regained his composure after the initial surprise.

Elwar sighed. “Fine. I say we keep him with us as well.”

A small grin appeared on Troen. “Then it is unanimous.”

“Still, we need to keep him under guard at all times,” reminded Elwar in a stern voice. “He might well be everything he says, but we can't take the chance he's here to sabotage us.”

“I think none of us expected anything else,” said Elir and turned to translate the decision to Turaiw. There was visible relief on the man's face and the words of gratitude did not need translating for everyone in the room to understand them.

As the exchange died down Troen took the opportunity to dig out the map he had brought with him and ask their new found guide and expert a few questions about what lay ahead of them.

The flight to the mountains looked to be a week long trip and it took them dangerously close to a couple of larger cities and settlements before they'd arrive at the small village that nestled at the base of the mountains. Their plan was to try and avoid all the large cities, but depending on the weather that might be as easy as flying over them under the cloud cover and at worst it would mean taking a detour that could end up making the trip take a few days longer.

Turaiw examined the map with keen interest and made special note of one of the larger cities. “This city is called Adynu,” he said to Elir. “It is famous for the library it has. In the generals camp there was a soldier who had worked at the library. I talked with him about the valley you were interested in and he remembered seeing a map in the library that showed exactly where it was. If possible you might want to consider stopping there to perhaps find out more about your destination.”

“That sounds like a dangerous thing to attempt,” replied Elir before translating his words to the others. “We do not exactly blend in with your kind. We'd draw way too much attention. And I might speak your language, but reading it is a whole other matter.”

Turaiw shrugged his shoulders. “I never said you'd have to walk in in broad daylight. The city is far away from the most intense fighting. There won't be much in the way of military force there, especially not after the big push the general organized. And I can read the books.”

The priestess turned thoughtful looking. The prospect of additional information – an accurate map no less – and an opportunity to see what an Gardless city looked like was a tempting one to her.

“It is also heavy with industry,” added Turaiw. “On a good day there is so much smoke in the air you can't see the sky from underneath all of it.”

“We'll have to talk about it,” said Elir, though her voice revealed she was intrigued by the proposition. She started to translate the exchange to Troen, Yerny and Elwar.

It received a less than enthusiastic reception, but after some thought and argument it was decided they would consider it once they got close enough to see what the city was like. If it looked like it could be done they'd try to sneak in, but if things looked more trouble than was worth it they'd simply bypass the city.

After that Troen had only a few questions more and the discussion died down. Elir explained to Turaiw that he would be under guard at all times, but he would be able to move around certain parts of the ship, such as going to the open decks if they were at an acceptable height and he could go to the kitchen for some food and eat with the rest of the crew. He was not allowed in the command room without permission from Troen and the storage areas were off limits as well.

The man took the limitations to his freedom in stride and did not seem bothered by them at all. Mostly he seemed grateful he had even been allowed to stay on the ship. For now he was happy to get a hammock for himself and get comfortable in the room he had been given.

They left him to do that as one of the crewmen was sent to fetch him an hammock.

Troen headed back to the command room while Elwar headed for his cabin for some well earned rest after a long night.

Elir walked the corridor with Yerny. Neither one seemed inclined to start talking so they passed many doors in silence. Neither really had even a destination in mind so they ended up walking around aimlessly.

"It's good to see you outside your cabin," Elir finally said in a gentle voice as they had finished climbing the stairway that led to the covered middle deck. There were a few of the crew there, but mostly there was empty space that afforded enough privacy for the conversation.

"It feels good to be outside," replied Yerny with a faint smile. "Feels like a weight has been lifted from my chest. All thanks to a few words with Elwar and Troen."

The two of them found a couple of boxes to sit on and rested their legs some. A few spots of sunlight hit the deck from the windows on the wooden cover.

"So you're feeling better?" asked Elir.

"Are you?" countered the gnome and examined the woman next to him. From her visits to his cabin he had gleaned enough to know she had not gone unaffected by the events at the fortress. He knew full well there was a lump of darkness weighing in on her much like there was on himself.

"In the heat of things I had forgotten many things," said Elir with a hint of sadness in her voice. "Years of lessons and wisdom I did not think could help. The very essence of who I am." The priestess turned to look at the gnome and smiled. "But I have found the right path and taken the first steps on it."

"Is that why you supported letting Turaiw stay on-board?" asked the gnome. He was curious to hear the reasoning behind her decision.

"I remembered something my teacher once said to me. A lesson at the very core of my Order. It is what set me on the right path once more," replied Elir.

"I hope the path remains a clear one for you," said the gnome. He truly meant it. The priestess looked like her old self once more; curiosity in her eyes and energy bubbling from her very presence. A far cry from the gloomy woman who had been paying him visits.

"And I hope you don't lock yourself in your cabin any more, but come out

and accept our friendship like you did today,” said the priestess and gave the gnome a firm look.

“It is like a wise man once said: friends solidify even the muddiest ground,” said Yerny.

Elir burst out laughing. The gnome looked at her surprised by the reaction. The surprise soon grew to a frown.

“I'm sorry,” said Elir while trying to calm herself down. She smiled. “It's just that the root of that expression is perhaps something other than you think.”

“Really?”

Elir nodded. “And I would not exactly call the man who said it wise.”

“Well, enlighten me then,” demanded Yerny. Having apparently used the wrong expression he was keen to learn the truth of it.

“All right,” conceded Elir and grouped her thoughts before starting. “There was once a group of adventurers, friends. The six of them had just robbed the mansion of a lord of little significance. Still, they had scored a hefty amount of loot.”

“To make things even better it began to rain. And it rained hard. Like someone was pouring water from an bottomless bucket. The way they had chosen was treacherous even when it was dry, but the rain made it even worse by creating wells of mud and soon their horses were getting stuck in them. Those at the front jumped down from their horses and tried to walk, but they soon had their boots stuck in the mud and soon after that their bare feet.”

“The man riding last saw the fate of his comrades and halted in time not to be sucked in. His friends pleaded for him to help them, but instead he dismounted and threw his share of the loot over his shoulder. He could hear the hounds in the distance, the lords guards chasing after them.”

Elir went silent for a dramatic pause.

“His friends and their horses had already sunken shoulders deep in the mud. Instead of helping them he used them as stepping stones and made his way across the mud well. By that time his friends had sunken completely.”

“It was when the lords guards captured him and questioned him on where his accomplices were that he said that line: 'friends solidify even the muddiest

ground.”

Elir grinned at the gnome as she finished the story.

“That certainly put the expression in a whole new light,” said Yerny, feeling slightly silly for having used it without knowing the full background of it.

Elir patted the gnome's shoulder. “It is how language works. It is not necessarily the origin of the saying that ends up defining how people interpret the meaning of it. The way you used it is how most people these days view it and I dare say I much prefer it to the original meaning.”

Yerny smiled. “We really should talk more. I'm terrified to learn the true meaning of the saying 'a friend's hand is better than your own.'”

Elir grinned once more and started to tell the story.

Chapter 16

A friend can be a powerful thing. His mere presence can make an otherwise unbearable situation a manageable one. His words can be a source of strength and lift your moods from the deepest of pits. His touch can ease the tension in your body and give you solace as well as courage. His laughter can brighten even the darkest of days. Is there anything more powerful than that?

- Elir Ardanwen

Official record keeper

For several days *The Wind Saber* flew without encountering any problems more serious than a thunderstorm. Even that posed little threat as they flew above it and could look down from the ships windows and see flashes of light amongst the dark clouds. It was an view none of them had witnessed before and it caught their breath.

For Yerny and Elir it was a time of healing and putting their thoughts back in order. They spent a lot of time together and Elir filled that time by telling the stories of various sayings and other quirks of language than many people did not know or appreciate. For both it was a pleasant distractions and offered a way to interact with a friend.

They sometimes included Turaiw in their conversations and the man offered some stories of his own in return. For Elir those were worth more than the man could possibly have understood. Anything new she learned made her feel that much better about everything that had happened. It gave her a sense that it had all been worth it, though seeing Yerny slowly return to his old self was perhaps the biggest prize she could have hoped for.

Elwar spent many of the days tinkering with the suits and producing more light weight version of them so the crew could be on the open decks even when they flew above the clouds. When he wasn't doing that he was inspecting the ship

and the runes to ensure there were no problems from wear and tear.

During the evenings the ship turned into something else entirely. The crew was largely off duty and free to do what they wanted. Usually that meant a long supper followed by some music and story telling while sharing a few pints of beer. The food reserves on the ship continued to be good enough to allow such lavish behaviour that was uncommon for many ships sailing the seas. The fact they could resupply by landing in a forest and doing a bit of hunting gave them confidence not to start rationing the food overly harshly.

Elir was often absent from those times as she locked herself in her cabin to write down the days events. Yerny on the other hands seemed to seek out the crew and spend time with them as much as he could. It seemed out of place for him at first, but it became ever more apparent that he was living with a new found appreciation for those around him.

Everyone agreed it was a marked improvement over his period of brooding and being locked in his cabin all alone.

For Troen the days were filled with routines. Wake up, eat, go to the command room and oversee the progress of the journey. Make some course corrections and remain vigilant in ensuring the cloud cover held. There were times when they needed to go off course for a while as the winds sent the clouds in a direction they did not want to go.

Sometimes they needed to do a bit of cloud hopping which left the ship exposed for anyone to see, but only for short periods of time. From the ground they would have looked like a small, dark dot. Unlikely to draw much attention, but still possibly enough for being spotted. It was a risk they had to take to continue moving forward.

The first leg of the journey did not take them close to large cities and the countryside below looked to be void of anything but a few farms here and there and some smaller villages. None seemed like anything to be concerned about.

It was when the first large city appeared on their path that they had to be extra careful. From the parting cloud cover they had gotten their first glimpse of it. While there was a very light cover of steam and smoke covering the city they could see it expand in all directions.

Red stone buildings crammed together tightly with narrow streets that left barely enough space for two carts to pass each other. Tiled roofs and chimneys pushing out smoke with the occasionally high rising building that went beyond the two stories that looked to be the standard height for most buildings.

Then there were the large factories that were harnessed to produce weapons, tanks, vehicles and all manner of things needed for the war effort. Their chimneys rose high in the sky and pushed out a black smoke that lingered over the city like a rain cloud.

Elir stood by the railing and looked down on it all while next to her Turaiw was doing his best to not look down. They both wore the modified breathing devices Elwar had worked on so relentlessly. Troen was there as well with a helmet on.

“Is that city anything like Adynu?” asked Elir in a loud voice that the helmet she wore muffled to an almost incomprehensible metallic jumble as the wind added its own effect to it. Unlike the suit form of the system, the helmets were not airtight so you could hear better what the person inside was saying, though the voice did still get distorted.

Turaiw hesitantly made his way to the railing and forced himself to look down. They were right between two clouds which offered them a perfect view of what was down below.

“It's smaller,” said Turaiw after taking a moment to examine the city below. He was quick to take a few steps back from the railing. “Fewer factories so not as much smoke cover.”

It was hard to make out what he was saying from under his helmet, but Elir did her best to catch it all and convey it to Troen.

“Does he think Adynu will have a thicker cover?” asked Troen as he looked down on the city. Even as it stood he doubted anyone in the city could see them from under the smoke. Even if they did, they'd put it down to a quirk in the smoke cover.

Elir asked the question from Turaiw.

“Most certainly. There are so many more factories that you can barely see the sky when they're all operational,” came the reply.

"You've been there?" asked Elir.

"A few times," came the short reply as the Gardless took a few more steps away from the railing so he stood pretty much in the middle of the open front deck.

"Go inside," said Elir with some amusement in her voice. "I think we're about done here."

Turaiw gave her a nod and hastily made his way back to the door and inside the ship.

Elir returned next to the railing and Troen and the two spent a few more moments examining the city before the clouds covered it and they were left with nothing but a puffy white field in front of them.

"I suppose we'll just have to see what the city is like," said Elir as the two walked back inside the ship and took off their helmets in the small chamber that separated the inside of the ship from the outside.

"If we go there when it's dark I think we could have stopped even in this one," said Troen as he hung his helmet and the rest of the breathing system on a hook in the room following the chamber. "Through that smoke no one would have seen us."

"Still, it's risky," reminded Elir. While she wanted to visit one of the cities she was not oblivious that there was always risk involved in everything. She did not want to add another body laying next to the ones they already had in cold storage. Anything she might learn was not worth it.

Troen nodded. "And what we might gain is not certain to be worth it. We'll have to think this through carefully."

There was no argument from the priestess as they walked through the central deck towards the command room. They'd have two days to think on it before they'd arrived in Adynu. From there it would be two more days to the mountain-range and the village at the foot of it. How much longer it would take for them to find the place of legend from there was anyone's guess. It might be days or they might never find it. Maybe it didn't even exist.

None of that mattered though as they had no choice but to follow the only lead they had.

They found Yerny and Elwar in the command room along with Millard and the helmsman.

“How did it look?” asked the gnome as the two entered the room.

“Smoky,” replied Troen.

The gnome gave the captain a frown at the nearly useless answer and aimed a pleading look at Elir.

“It was like they were making their own clouds to cover the city,” said the priestess. “And Turaiw said our target city would be covered in even thicker smoke.”

“I still don't like the idea,” said Yerny and absent mindedly cleaned his spectacles. He frowned at a small bit of dirt that seemed determined to remain in place.

“Well, there are things I could do with the ship that might make it more feasible,” said Elwar. He looked pleased with himself as he said that.

“What do you mean?” asked Troen.

“Well, I can pull energy from the ship to cast my own spells,” he replied. “Creating a smoke screen around the ship to blend in with what they're pushing into the sky shouldn't be too hard nor too energy draining.”

“Why haven't you been doing that all along?” asked Elir. “If you can do something like that why do we have to jump from cloud to cloud and make detours when we could just fly straight under the cover of your spells?”

“It's not an easy thing to do or maintain when moving as fast as we are,” replied the wizard. “Making a ball of light appear is a simple thing and I can do it any time, but anything greater than that runs the risk of draining the ships energy reserves at an alarming rate.”

“A cloud of smoke doesn't sound that energy demanding,” said Troen.

Elwar sighed like only someone who is dealing with people who think they know something when in reality they have no clue can. “Normally that would be true, but I have to pull the energies from the ship. It's not designed to provide power for something outside its existing rune configuration. There's a tremendous waste of energy during the transfer that, when doing something more complicated, could draw enough energy to make us unable to fly.”

“And creating a bit of smoke is complicated?” asked Elir.

“Out of thin air? You have no idea,” replied the wizard with a voice that made it abundantly clear that things that might seem simple could be complicated under the surface.

“It doesn't sound like something we'd want to do,” said Yerny in his usual pessimistic fashion. Though they would deny it, the rest of them had been missing his viewpoint on things as it kept the rest of them from going ahead without properly thinking of the downsides.

“The risk does seem great,” admitted Elir with reluctance. The thought of an extra little something that could have helped them make a visit to the city had been a tempting one.

Elwar shrugged his shoulders. “It was just an idea if we really want to visit the city and its library.”

The discussion died down and eventually everyone returned to their normal routines. Elir and Yerny found themselves sitting at the middle deck once more with the priestess telling the origins of various sayings. Some of the crew lingered nearby, drawn in by her stories. It had started only two days ago, but already there was more of an audience than the day before. Word got around quickly on a closed ship and every bit of entertainment was precious.

For Troen his day was filled all the sorts of little things any captains day is. He ensured the crew was doing the regular maintenance on things, such as cleaning the decks as needed and keeping ropes and barrels away from everyone's feet. While that left the crew with a lot of free time the elf did his best to keep them busy so there wouldn't be time to develop any fights or bad blood that could be a ships doom if left to fester.

And so *The Wind Saber* sailed on in the sky above Ardav.

Two days went by without much excitement. Apart from Elwar singeing his beard after some careless experiment with the tools he had in his cabin and the smoke that resulted from it causing a slight panic among the crew as they feared a fire. It was the source for many stories and laughs after the initial scare went away.

The sun was starting to paint the horizon with bright colours as they got the

city of Adynu in view. The cloud cover had held thick for the past days and there had been heavy rain the previous day. They had to descent with the ship to get a glimpse of the city.

Below the clouds the darkness was more dense and the rain before had turned the ground dark. The city below looked vast and put even Ramyn to shame.

Turaiw had been right that there would be more smoke covering the city. There were a countless number of high rising chimneys and large areas that could clearly be made out to be factories. The smoke they spewed out formed a dark mist over the city and made it hard at times to see what was below them. It was almost the perfect cover for the ship were it not for the fact there were large sources of light roaming the sky above.

The lights came from outside the city and were clearly set up to catch anything flying towards it. The only reason *The Wind Saber* had not been spotted was the fact it had flown over the clouds. To their misfortune they did not react fast enough to the searching lights and one of them caught the ship and painted it as bright as a candle in the night.

It was only a moment after that when rounds of ammunition began flying around the ship. They could only think of them as being similar to those that had been fired at them during the assault on the fortress.

They knew better than to stay within their range.

It was a quick ascend above the clouds and above and then a matter of making some course changes to take them to safety. After that, what caused them the most concern, was the fact it had seemed like their arrival had been expected.

They knew for certain that it could not have been Turaiw. He had been watched closely and he did not have any strange devices on him. The only thing they could think of to blame was the general and that he had somehow gotten word to the city that a ship like theirs might be headed their way.

But how he could have accomplished it, short of miraculously resorting to magic, was beyond them. Even Turaiw could not provide an positive answer, though he made mention to rumours of some sort of device that could transmit

ones voice through the air over long distances.

But that was only a rumour.

He had seen no evidence of such a thing for himself, though he readily admitted that the military did a lot of research and the rank and file soldiers were not among the first to learn of – much less get to see and use – the latest in technology. It was possible the general had dug something up from the depths of all the research facilities and made use of it where he could.

What ever the case, they had to abandon the plan of making a visit to the city and its library. For Elir it was a disappointment and the way they had been cut off caused worry that there might be further problems waiting for them. Her greatest consolation was that no one had been hurt despite the close call. Had things gone badly the whole ship could have been nabbed from the sky.

It took almost a day for the crew to return to their normal duties, but there was an underlying tension that could not be ignored. Everyone knew there might be more trouble ahead. Before the incident many had thought they were free of such things.

It was late in the day after the failed visit to the city that Rodil made his way to the command room and found Yerny and Elwar there. The captain was not there which was unusual, but at least Millard and the helmsman were in their usual places.

“Elwar, I've been thinking,” said Rodil as the usual greetings had been exchanged.

“Should I worry?” asked Yerny with a hint of amusement in his voice. He received a stare from both wizards and raised his hands.

“Just ignore him,” said Elwar. “At first I was happy he was back to his old self, but now I remember how taxing it could be.”

“The magical energies in this world are getting pulled to a single place and that place is where we are now headed, right?” Rodil presented a very tight summary of their current situation and both Yerny and Elwar nodded.

“But we don't know exactly where that place is,” added Rodil, prompting another round of nods. With being unable to visit the city they had lost the chance to get the map they had desired.

“Would it not be possible to trace the location by following where the magical energies go?” asked Rodil. “The closer we get the stronger the effect should be and the more energy there should be.”

Both Yerny and Elwar seemed stunned. It was such a simple idea that it seemed ridiculous they had not thought of it earlier.

“Can we actually track the energies?” asked Yerny, sounding eager. He did not know enough of the way magic worked to know whether what was being suggested was even possible, much less how easy or difficult it would be.

“We can sense the magical energies only faintly,” said Elwar hesitantly and shook his head. “That's not enough to get anything but a very general direction.”

“What if I had a possible solution to that?” offered Rodil, unable to hide how pleased he was with himself.

Elwar raised an eyebrow. “What sort of a solution?”

“Well, when I was studying in the Towers, my master made this experiment,” started Rodil, wanting to give them the full background of his idea so they would understand it was not only his idea and that it was based on experiments that had already been done.

“His theory was that the magical energies are nothing more than tiny particles that we are unable to see,” continued Rodil with his explanation. “So he built a device he believed would make them visible.”

“You're talking about the Auska device, aren't you?” asked Elwar. He had read about it while investigating some things for the flying ship. Essentially it was a pair of spectacles with certain runes etched into them combined with a small sphere of iron with another set of runes. When those two were held by the same person they could see certain things more clearly.

Rodil nodded. “While it didn't reveal what my master wanted, it did make the energies somewhat visible. You could see them floating around in the room under certain circumstances, such as when you were performing a spell that demanded great amounts of energy.”

“There's a whole lot of energies floating around this ship,” admitted Elwar. The amounts needed to keep the ship in the air as well as the amount which it drew in was large enough to be visible with the device. Since some of that energy

was drawn out by what ever it was that stole everything in this world, they might well be able to see in which direction some of the energies were being pulled into.

“It might work,” he admitted finally and Rodil smiled as wide as anyone he had seen.

“I assume you know the runes for it?” asked Elwar and Rodil nodded in response.

“The problem is, where do we get the spectacles?” asked Rodil.

After a moment of thinking both wizards turned to look at Yerny.

The gnome sighed and dug out his spectacles from his vest pocket. “Fine, but I'd better get those back and they'd better still let me read,” he said in a stern voice. He did not reveal that he had an extra pair stashed in his cabin. Things broke so having an extra pair was the only sensible thing on a journey like theirs, even if it had cost him a fair bit of money to get the new pair.

“Don't worry. They'll be as good as new when you get them back,” said Rodil with a confident voice as he took the spectacles from Yerny. “Now all we need is a bit of iron and we can start working on it,”

“How long do you think it'll take to put in the runes?” asked Elwar.

“A day, maybe,” replied Rodil hesitantly. “I've gotten a lot better at it, but this is precision work since the runes need to be so small.”

Elwar nodded approvingly. “Let's get to it then. I'll get the iron you need.”



Millard lowered himself into his hammock and took a swig from the bottle. It was running alarmingly low on content.

“What a past few days,” complained Reyes as he stretched out in his own place of sleep. “We've barely had time to sleep.”

“Aye, the captain works the three of us to death,” said Millard.

“Just means he thinks highly of us,” said Travis from his own corner.

A silence fell into the room. Only the sounds of ropes brushing against the wood and the occasional burp from Millard broke it.

“Should never have trusted those Gardless,” Millard finally muttered and

took another swig from his bottle. "Look where it got us. Three dead and gods know what's waiting for us in the future."

"How did they know we were coming to that city?" asked Travis. "No way they have anything that goes as fast as our ship."

"Damned if anyone knows," replied Millard. "That Turaiw tried to offer some explanations, but they all sound like a bunch of hogwash to me."

"At least we've managed to keep Elir safe," said Reyes. Him and Travis had not really talked much of what had happened in the fortress. It wasn't that they'd consciously avoided the subject. There just had not been time for more than exchanging words about what was happening right then and there.

"That attack on the fortress was pure madness," said Travis quietly. "I can't believe the Gardless have been fighting like that for centuries."

"It's no wonder they ain't right in the head," said Millard. "They've grown up killing each other so they place no value on life. Bunch of monsters. Worse than orcs."

A silence fell into the room once more. They heard footsteps go by as other members of the crew found their sleeping places.

"Turaiw isn't half bad," said Travis finally. "I've spent some time with him and he seems to be quite gentle in his ways."

Millard snorted. "That general of theirs was all nice and comfy too before he opened his chest of madness and showed us what he really was."

"They can't all be like that," protested Travis. "Just like we ain't all cut throats and murderers."

"So you're saying they're all murderers and cut throats, except for the select few who feel differently?" asked Millard.

The young man nodded in response.

"Well, that's such a screwed up thought that it just might be true," replied Millard with an amused voice. He raised the bottle in his hand as if to salute. "I'll even drink to that." He took a long gulp of the fiery liquid inside.

"Best we just make our way home and have as little to do with the Gardless as possible," said Reyes. He put a little swing to his hammock with his foot. "The way I see it we ain't going to understand them and we don't need to. We just need

to get home. Anything else is just a distraction and a waste of time.”

“Couldn't agree more,” said Millard grimly and wiped his bald with his hand.

“But do we know where we're going? Weren't we supposed to get some sort of map from that city?” asked Travis. Word got around on the ship quickly. Even conversations that were supposedly secret and between just the four leaders eventually got around to the crew.

“I heard the wizards talking today. They've got some solution in the works,” said Millard.

“Oh? That's good,” replied the young sailor with audible relief in his voice. Having even a little hope was better than nothing.

“They're wizards. Saying their solution will be good is a bit premature,” reminded Millard. He was clearly in a grumpy mood, though he never had much kind words to say about wizards and their ideas. Elwar he tolerated better than most of his colleagues because the man had so far not caused too much trouble, apart from the whole idea of exploring a new world, but that could be viewed in the same light as exploring an unknown land back in their home world.

“Have some faith. Elwar and Rodil have both caused no problems,” said Reyes. He was interrupted mid sentence by a long yawn, but he continued as if nothing had happened.

“What about that time Elwar almost burned down the ship?” demanded Millard pointedly. None of them had forgotten the moments of terror the thick smoke coming from the wizards cabin had caused. There had been a loud bang that had attracted the crew and upon seeing the smoke they had called for a fire alarm. Luckily the fire had been small and the amount of smoke had been misleading.

Still, it had been enough to make the captain mad enough to order Elwar not to do experiments for the remainder of the journey. The wizard had looked sullen at hearing that, but in the end Elir had managed to turn the whole affair around so that the wizard was happy he had been relieved from yet another workload and he could fully focus on keeping the ship in shape and in the air.

“Well, there's that,” admitted Reyes. “But ignoring that..”

“How do you ignore something like that?” demanded Millard in a slightly

raised voice. "That's like ignoring an arrow in your chest and giving the shooter a gold coin for a good shot."

Travis chuckled at the debate, causing both men to fall into silence and give each other gloomy glances from their respective corners. Reyes gave himself a bit more swing with his foot. Millard shook the bottle and his expression grew grimmer as he realized there was barely any left. He put the bottle down on the floor, deciding to save what little was left for another time.

"Don't worry," consoled Travis as he saw the bald man put the bottle down. "The cook has something brewing in one of the storage rooms. There'll be booze to drink."

Millard sputtered. "That swill will be so bad even a dwarf wouldn't drink it. Ain't no comparing to this stuff."

"But it'll get you drunk," said Travis and gave the bald man a knowing look.

Millard huffed and turned his back to the young man. "Maybe if things get desperate enough."

Reyes and Travis exchanged grins. They knew the bald man well enough to know he'd be one of the first ones to bother the cook about scoring a bottle or two of what ever he was brewing up. Calling him a drunkard would have been wrong, but he was keen on a few swigs in the evening to help him sleep. Never had it prevented him from performing his duties so neither of his friends were too concerned about it.

"How long do you think it'll take for us to find a way home?" wondered Travis and gave Reyes a questioning look. It was a question that was on the mind of many in the crew.

Reyes shrugged his shoulders as best he could while laying down. Failing that, he rubbed his stub covered chin. "I don't think anyone can answer that," he finally said slowly. "Maybe what ever the wizards are cooking up will make it faster, but I wouldn't bet on us being home tomorrow. Still, if anyone can do it, they can"

The reply was not exactly what Travis had hoped for, but it wasn't a disappointment either. He had not expected Reyes to know the exact time. He knew full well no one knew it, not even the captain. What the answer had given

him was reinforcement for his own views that the two wizards would be able to get them out of the strange world they had stumbled into. Whether that happened in a week or a month didn't really matter that much to him.

“What do you think will be waiting for us in the mountains?” asked Travis once more. He was starting to feel like a five year old with all the questions, but he was unable to contain himself. He'd always been the type to ask questions and it had driven his father mad at times. His mother had been much more understanding and patient of questions.

“Who knows?” pondered Reyes. “You've heard what Turaiw has said about their legends. What ever it is I doubt it'll be as simple as us flying there and going home.”

The man sucked in air through his teeth and breathed out heavily making a whistling noise. “With our luck there will really be those..what did he call them?”

“Fireborn,” said Travis helpfully. “At least that's what Elir called them.”

“Right, them. With our luck they'll be real and not pleased to see us drop by,” Reyes finished his thought in a grim voice.

“What do you think..” started Travis, but was interrupted by Millard.

“By the gods boy, does your mind never rest?” demanded the bald man grumpily from his hammock. “Some of us are trying to get some rest.”

“Sorry,” said Travis a bit sheepishly.

“Let the boy ask questions,” interjected Reyes. “It's the only thing keeping a bit of conversation going.”

“Instead of flapping your mouths you should sleep. Failing that you better go some place else to talk unless you want my boot so deep up your ass it'll come out of your mouth,” there was little amusement behind the harsh words of Millard.

Reyes rolled his eyes and gave Travis a mischievous smile.

Neither wished to make the bald man any grumpier though so they stopped the conversation and turned to sleep as well.



Elwar squinted at the small runes Rodil had etched onto the spectacles. The lenses had to have been the hardest part. The runes needed to be so fine as to not inhibit the vision of the person wearing them and at the same time you needed to be extremely careful not to scratch them. He'd done a magnificent job on the frames as well and Elwar could not help but be impressed at the quality and precision. He could not find anything wrong in the work quality nor the form of the runes.

He did a similar inspection to the piece of iron he had acquired for the purpose. It had similar runes and the quality did not fall short of those on the spectacles. He was amazed Rodil had managed it all in a day and a half.

"This is exquisite work," he said as he handed the items back to Rodil.

They were in Elwar's cabin waiting for Yerny to arrive. They were his spectacles after all and not the right size for anyone else to wear. It would be the gnome who would wear them and tell what he was seeing.

"Thank you," said Rodil with a smile on his face. It never felt bad to receive compliments on work done and the respect he had for Elwar made it feel all the more uplifting.

"Have you tested them?" asked Elwar.

"I've looked through one of the lenses." admitted Rodil. "The size just makes it impossible to see any details. It's all fuzzy, but I believe I saw enough to know they work."

Elwar nodded. "Well, Yerny will be here soon so we'll be able to know for certain."

The wearer did not need to know magic to make use of the device. The runes could be activated by someone else while allowing the wearer to see the energies it would reveal.

The two waited for the gnome and talked about other things, like how the runes around the ship were holding up and of other matters that belonged to their domain. The pace had calmed down during the days of flying so both of them were getting regular sleep once more. It was a welcome change compared to the hellish rhythm they had had to endure while fixing the ship. It felt good to

actually have time to sit down with a friend and just talk about things that were on the mind of both of them.

It didn't take long before Yerny entered the room after a knock. The gnome wore his customary leather vest and looked like he was back to his usual old self. Gone was the gloomy atmosphere that had surrounded him after being rescued from the fortress.

The gnome inspected the spectacles with great interest and tried them on without the runes being activated. He was pleased to note he could still see through the lenses without any problems and that the runes etched onto them were pretty much invisible as he looked through them.

“Good work,” he finally said, giving Rodil another reason to feel good about himself and the work he had done.

“What do you say we put them to the real test?” asked Elwar and stood up from his chair.

“We can't test them here?” asked Yerny.

“Better to do it outside,” replied Rodil. “Just in case.”

“What do you mean?” demanded Yerny. When a wizard used words like 'just in case' it usually meant there was danger of something exploding or possibly someone losing their arm. Seeing as the glasses were worn on the head the gnome had some understandable reservations about putting them on if there was some risk involved.

Elwar chuckled. “They're not dangerous,” he reassured the gnome. “It's just that inside the ship there aren't going to be much energies just floating around. They're all focused in the runes.”

Yerny could not argue against that and followed the two wizards out of the cabin and into the command room where they had a short conversation with Troen about lowering the ship below the clouds. They were drawing close to the mountain range so it was time to take a peek in any case so there were no objections.

Soon the three of them were on the open upper deck with Yerny putting on the glasses and holding the piece of iron in his hands while Rodil activated the runes.

It was not what the gnome had expected as the runes started working. He had expected some sort of fog like streams to appear, but the magical energies he saw around the ship were more like streams of water. They looked so tangible he could almost touch them.

It was not an explosion of different colours either like he had expected. The energies were almost colourless yet still clearly visible with the spectacles on. He could see faint hints of blue, red and green occasionally, but those were a far cry from any colour he had expected.

It seemed the colour of magic was more complex than a simple assortment of different shades.

He looked around himself and saw the streams of energy flowing into the ship where the runes were pulling it in. It was like the ship was in the middle of an lake of magical energy.

As he looked beyond that and towards the front of the ship he could see streams of the energy flowing away from the ship and towards the mountain range that loomed in the distance. His vision of the streams was limited by his position, but he figured if he climbed to the lookouts nest he could see at least far enough to make a meaningful course for the ship to follow.

“Well, what do you see?” asked Elwar impatiently and glared and the gnome who seemed to be in a world of his own.

Yerny blinked, ripped from the mesmerizing sight of the flowing energies. “Ah, sorry,” the gnome said, sounding a bit confused. “The sight of it just draws you in.”

“So you can see the energies?” demanded Elwar with enthusiasm.

“I can,” replied the gnome and gazed through the spectacles once more. “It's pooling all around us like water and I can see streams of it going into the ship, but I can also see rivers of it flowing into the distance.”

“So you can tell where the energies are being drawn to?” asked Rodil with a hint of relief in his voice. It seemed that despite his earlier confidence there had been some doubts in his mind whether the device would work as intended.

“From here I can only see a short ways ahead,” replied the gnome. “But if I go to the lookouts nest I'm certain I'll be able to get us a course to follow.”

Knowing that they were mere hours away from the village the expedition the general had told them about had set off from it was welcome news that they now had a means to determine where to set their course from there.

Elwar grinned just as widely as Rodil did as they heard the confident declaration of the gnome.

“Best we tell the captain and Elir then,” said Elwar and patted the gnome on the shoulder. “Finally some good news for us.”

Yerny nodded and took the spectacles off and carefully stashed them in one of his vest pockets. The piece of iron he tucked away in a different pocket, causing the device to shut down.

He felt confident they would remain secure where he had put them. After all, he had stored his spectacles in that pocket for over an decade and they had survived some of the roughest patches in his life. Neither wizard objected to him retaining control of the device.

The three of them returned to the command room to spread the good news.

Chapter 17

Sometimes you think there is nothing more surprising or horrifying that you can run into. You think you've seen the worst the world has to offer. What you do not realize is that the world is much more complex and has an infinite number of surprises it can throw at you.

- Elir Ardanwen

Official record keeper

The village looked tiny and ordinary from afar. Having heard the tales of it there was a certain temptation to go and visit it, but with the experience they had with trying to visit the city they decided it was best to just continue flying on the course Yerny set them on.

The gnome had spent some time in the lookouts nest with the spectacles and determined where the energies were flowing. He had a clear course for the ship to follow and the few corrections he conveyed down during it ensured they remained headed for the hot spot that they could only hope would offer them a way home.

Elir spent her time writing down a detailed description of the device Rodil had put together. There was certain to be applications for it later on, and if not, it was an important piece that directed the journey they were on. If things went as they hoped, it would be the key to the door that led home.

Elwar and Rodil returned to their usual routine and maintained the runes on the ship and oversaw that everything remained as it should as the ship flew across the skies. The mountains below were snow capped, rocky and void of any place where the ship might have a soft landing should anything go wrong.

Seeing as they were over mountains void of any habitations they flew below the clouds, though as some of the mountains towered higher than that, they found themselves having to make some evasive moves and fly around them.

There was little risk of being seen by anyone of consequence.

The biggest danger they faced was the weather. The mountains funnelled air and caused strong currents of wind that gave *The Wind Saber* perhaps the toughest challenge it had faced so far. Keeping it flying steady and a safe distance away from any mountain face it could smash into made for a full time job for the crew. Even at night they had to struggle at times to retain control.

But the crew had had time to make itself familiar with the ship and how it behaved. Even the strongest gusts of wind were met with calm composure as everyone knew what they needed to do and where they were needed. The crew worked furiously to keep the sails from ripping and folded them up as needed while the two wizards worked the runes to keep the ship stable and the helmsman kept the heading straight.

There were a few moments of horror as some lines broke and the main sail went flapping with the wind, but even that was brought under control by the quick and skill-full action of the crew.

For Turaiw the days spent flying across the mountains were the worst he had experienced on the ship. Despite their best efforts the ship rocked and sometimes seemed to free fall enough to cause a small jolt. It was worse than being in a ship on water. Every time he feared the ship would crash down on the unforgiving ground below.

He locked himself in the small quarters he had been given and laid in his hammock. That seemed to help smooth the ride a bit as it went along with the movements of the ship slightly better than standing on your own two feet. Even then it was enough to make him lose his appetite and turn his skin in a grey colours that made him look sickly. His only consolation was the book he had with him.

It was the third day after they had parted from the village. The winds had calmed down as they had gone deeper into the mountains. It was almost unbelievable to see the rocky peaks continue for so long.

Yerny had climbed to the lookouts nest once more to ensure they were on course. Rodil had activated the runes on the spectacles and the piece of iron so that he could make use of the device. The nest was of comfortable size for the

gnome, but for a normal human it would have been barely enough space to be comfortable. The enclosed space made a circle around the main mast so the lookout could see in every direction while being protected by the rune covered outer shell. The windows offered a perfect view to the outside and the gnome could see mountain tops all the way to the horizon.

He looked on as the ship navigated through the maze of canyons and lower ground between the sky touching mountain tops. Through his spectacles he saw the streams of energy and the way they flowed from all around and merged into a great river that slithered on in the maze.

He was wholly unprepared for the sight that appeared before him as the ship turned a bend and arrived at what looked to be a valley several versts across. The mountains sloped down and eventually evened out to an unnaturally smooth slate with only a few rock formations blemishing it.

But that was not what caught the gnome by surprise.

It was the structure that dominated the valley. The dull grey of it gleamed in the sunlight that bathed the valley. It was obviously built of metal and rivalled the surrounding mountain tops in height. He could see several extensions emerge from the rounded shape of it and form what looked to be platforms reserved for landing ships that dwarfed *The Wind Saber*. You could have fit six of the magical ships on one of the platforms and still have plenty of space for people to walk around and unload cargo.

There were no obvious signs of life that the gnome could see, but more importantly he could see that the magical energies were flowing straight into the structure. As he looked into the distance he could see rivers of energy flow to the valley from all directions. There was so much of it that it pooled into something resembling a lake that rose high around the structure.

They'd found what they had been looking for.

Yerny went to the communication tubes, but realized the ship was already coming to a halt. He decided it was best to just climb down so he could see what the others thought of it. Having put on his helmet just in case, he opened the hatch and started to climb down the mast, closing the hatch after getting out of the nest. The wind grabbed him and made him cling tighter to the handles and

stairs leading downwards.

Below he could see crew gathering on the front deck to get a closer look at the structure and the valley. He hastened his pace and made it down to the shell of the middle deck and made his way to the lower deck and from there inside the ship. The crew he encountered were abuzz with what they had ran across and a few tried to ask him some questions about what he had seen from high up. He had to politely refuse to answer and plead that he was in a hurry to the command room to let the captain know.

He rushed through the ship and up the stairs to where he hoped he would find everyone. He was pleased to see Elir standing next to the captain, looking out the windows. Elwar was still at the control though he was glancing outside as well to catch a view of the structure. Even Millard had made his way to the windows, away from his usual post at the communication tubes. The only one fully focused on his duties seemed to be the helmsman.

“It's what we've been looking for,” said Yerny.

Everyone turned to look at him.

“What did you say?” asked Troen. He looked slightly amused.

It was only then that Yerny realized he was still wearing the helmet. Cursing, he removed it and repeated what he had said. The news were received with excitement, but at the same time the uncertainty was visible on everyone's face. None of them had expected to find such an structure at their destination. Of course, they had expected something, but not a structure that seemed impossible to build and dwarfed everything around it,

“Well, that's good news,” said Troen firmly, hoping to instil some positive vibe to the situation.

“There seemed to be a bunch of landing platforms on the side of the tower,” said Yerny with the implication that he thought they should land on one of them and go explore the structure more closely.

“I wonder who built that thing,” said Elwar as he walked away from the controls and to the windows to get a better look at the thing.

Elir and Yerny exchanged looks. It was obvious they were both thinking the same thing. The legends of the Fireborn just might prove to be true.

“More importantly, now that we're here, will the ship recharge enough to open a portal home?” asked Elir to steer the conversation to more pressing matters.

“Not very quickly. Not while that thing is active,” replied Elwar. “Assuming it is what's causing this.”

“There's an entire lake of magical energies below us,” said Yerny. “Even if we land in the middle of it that wouldn't be enough?”

Elwar considered it for a moment. If there was an excess amount of energy that what ever was gathering it could not take in then it just might be possible to siphon enough of it to power the opening of a portal. But the ship would still need to contend with the power that drew the energy. It would be slow and he was uncertain whether the ship would be able to contend with the siphoning power at such close range.

Finally, he shook his head. “I think our best chance is to try and stop the energy siphoning device.”

“Investigating that structure seems like the thing to do then,” said Troen with a slightly worried voice. It was not hard to understand why the hint of it was there. They had no idea what the structure was, who built it or what was inside it.

One thing was obvious to everyone in the command room; the Gardless were not capable of building such an structure. In fact they were uncertain anything they knew could have erected such a structure.

Looks were exchanged and one by one everyone nodded to the idea of exploring the building. It seemed like the only logical choice and leaving the tower unexplored while they waited for the ship to recharge, which could take weeks with the tug of war it had to deal with, was most certainly unwise.

The captain ordered the ship to move forward once more. He wanted to get closer to the structure and circle around it a few times to get a closer look at it. Landing right away did not seem like the wisest choice given the uncertainties involved.

Having given the instructions the group moved to the open upper deck so they could observe without obstructions. The air in the valley seemed thicker

than elsewhere in the mountain range, possibly because it was much lower than the mountain passes they had flown through. Not having to wear helmets was a relief as it left them much more free to look around.

At the same time each one of them wished they had more clothes to wear. The wind made the air seem even more chilly than it really was and even though many of them were wearing at least two layers of clothes they felt the wind sneak in and brush their skin.

They gathered at the ship's railing and examined the structure as the ship circled around it. They could all see the extension poke out of the building and make a round landing platform that looked designed just for that purpose. There were even some markings to help spot it and land a ship in the middle of it. It made them even more suspicious as to who had built the structure.

The Gardless had no flying vehicles that would need a landing platform.

They could see windows dotting the side of the structure all around it. Some had light shining out of them while others were dark, but they all had one thing in common; they could hardly see anything on the inside. Part of it was the distance they were flying at, but there also seemed to be something in the way the windows were made that rendered them almost impossible to see through from the outside.

Elwar could feel his skin tickle as they flew around. He could feel the surrounding energies that wallowed in the valley. It made him feel uncomfortable as if he was underwater trying to gasp for air. He did his best not to think about it and distracted himself with the examination of the building in front of them.

As they began their second turn around the structure they had a much better idea of the scale of it. A quick estimate by Elwar and Yerny had the structure at over three thousand feet high, which was enough to put it from the base of the valley to rival the tops of the nearby mountains. The diameter was a much harder thing to estimate as the structure was much wider at the base than at the top, but even the base had to be a thousand feet wide. At the height they were circling it the diameter was still measured in hundreds of feet.

The massive scale of it was hard to comprehend or appreciate.

Exploring the entire thing would not be a small task. If they could even get

inside it. So far they had not spotted any obvious way inside, but the landing platform likely had some way inside. That is, if they were such things.

“That thing really eats away your determination,” muttered Yerny.

The others couldn't argue against it. It seemed a daunting task. If the means to shutting down the device were inside the structure then it could take them weeks just to find it. After that who knew how long it would take to figure out how to do it safely.

The way Elwar figured it there was so much magical energy focused around them that simply destroying the structure or the device could bring about catastrophic results. It was something even he was not willing to risk. They would have to figure out some legitimate way of accomplishing the shut down instead of using brute force.

They completed the second round around the structure. It didn't offer them much new information so they decided to forego the third round and instead head for one of the extensions that offered a place to land.

They watched as the grey metal structure got closer and closer. They could start telling apart little details of it; seams between plates of metal, nuts and bolts that held everything in place. Seeing those put them slightly more at ease. They were familiar things and anyone using them could not be that different from them.

The wind made the landing a bit tricky and they had to adjust their position several times and wait for a strong gust of wind to pass before they could land the ship. More precisely, get it close enough to the metal surface below them that they could tie the ship down and leave it floating. The first of the crew to step foot on the structure did it with ropes in hand and tied the ship down to metal rods that were sticking out at the edge of the platform. Other than those the platform looked as smooth as an icy lake.

It took a while longer for the actual exploration team to set foot onto the platform.

In her cabin, Elir changed out of her robe and back into the trousers and shirt she had used during the excursion into the fortress. She hesitated as she took the Rune Caster out of its box. She had not touched it since she had put it

away. She wanted to leave it behind, but knew well enough that it could be the difference between someone from the group getting back alive and seeing someone die once more.

She stuffed the weapon in its holster and strapped it around her waist. She picked out several pieces of ammunition for it and stashed those in the leather loops on the belt and the pockets of her cape.

Having made her preparations she made her way to the open front deck where the others had already gathered. Turaiw was there along with Yerny, Elwar, Reyes, Travis and a few other sailors. They all had weapons with them; swords, bows and some even had the Gardless weapons they had been given by the general. There was still some ammunition left for them and they were far superior to bows and swords.

Elir took a moment to explain the situation to Turaiw and why he was being asked to come with them to explore the structure. They hoped he would be able to tell them whether something was made by the Gardless and perhaps he'd have some idea who had built the thing.

The man looked nervous and his eyes were wandering all around the scenery. Elir figured he was remembering the legends about the place and fearing they would be facing the same fate as those who had wandered into the territory before. She could not deny that the stories were in the back of her mind as well, though she doubted they would turn to be true.

“Everyone ready?” asked Troen and gave everyone an appraising look.

There were nods and a few short agreeing answers and no objections so the group headed out and lowered themselves onto the platform.

It felt odd to walk on a surface made entirely out of metal. The ring of everyone's steps sounded unnatural compared to the soft voice of the ships wood. The howling wind did not make matters any better as the group gathered together and started towards the structure. They could not see any obvious entrance in the wall they were going towards nor were there any windows near by that they could look through.

It was slow progress as they were extra careful and took their time to inspect everything they ran across. They'd formed almost a wedge with the crewmen in

the front and everyone else in the middle, protected by the bodies of those in front. It was not an intended formation, just something that happened on its own due to the personalities involved.

Even with their careful approach they were all caught by surprise when a portion of the wall before them slid to the side, opening a doorway. The surprise was further enlarged by the figure that stepped onto the platform from inside the structure.

Its steps rang out heavily as metal hit metal. The suit it wore was made of grey plates that covered the entire body of it. There were small seams in between plates, but it was impossible to tell what the material beneath was made of. It wore a helmet that made it impossible to make out any features of the wearer. The rounded helmet had two black pieces of what looked to be glass in the front, no doubt serving as points of vision for who ever was inside the suit. The neck area was covered in the same material as the joints between each plate. It flexed as the head turned to get a good look at the entire group standing no more than fifty feet from it. It was an imposing figure that stood as tall as any man Elir had seen.

Before the group could gather itself the figure reached down to the belt it had around its waist and pulled out what looked like a weapon. It pointed it towards the group and fired.

A blue ball of crackling energy shot out and and hit one of the crewmen standing at the front. The man burst into blue flames and screamed in pain and horror. He ran away from the group in panic while two of his friends followed him, trying to put out the flames.

Elwar did not even realize he had began drawing runes in the air even as the orb was still on its way. He completed the web before their new found enemy could fire another round and a cone of fire shot out towards it. The flames engulfed it completely.

He had to admit to being slightly surprised his reaction had been so quick and even more that the spell had worked. Apparently there was enough magical energies around to allow even runes drawn in air to work.

He turned to look at the crewman who had been lit on fire and saw him

rolling on the ground while his friends tried to stifle the flames with their shirts. It looked like their efforts were not having much effect. He began weaving another web of runes, hoping to douse the man with water.

He was so focused he did not see the figure emerge from the flames.

Elir's hands were already in motion as were the others in the group. Weapons were pointed, bowstrings pulled back and arrows let loose. None of them seemed to have a noticeable effect on the figure and the bullets and arrows bounced off like they were hitting a solid rock wall.

The priestess grabbed one of the bullets from her belt without looking which element it was for. She did her best to load the weapon as quickly as possible. She was somewhat hindered by Travis fussing over her and ensuring she was not in the line of fire for the creature. Finally, she managed to put in the bullet and ready the weapon. She took aim at the suited figure, hoping she would hit it squarely in the chest. A moment of panic hit her as she saw it raising its own weapon once more as it cleared the flames.

Saying a quick prayer in her mind she pulled the trigger and sent the bullet flying. Unlike all the rounds she had fired before, this one did not activate before striking its target. There was an audible rush of air and the figure was sent flying through the air. The flames behind it were put out as the air pushed it backwards.

With a loud bang the figure struck against the grey metal of the building, some forty feet from where it had stood before. The wind held it upright against the wall for a moment before dying down. The figure slumped to the ground limply.

“Quick! Tie it up while it's down!” shouted Troen the moment he saw the effect Elir's attack had had.

Men rushed to the suited figure and quickly tied its hands and legs with sturdy ropes. They looked around nervously and while they acted quickly they made certain to be careful with their knots. They could only hope the rope would be enough to restrain it.

A splash of water finally silenced the screams of the crewman who had been on fire. They were replaced by low moans of agony. Elir rushed to get a look at

how bad the injuries were. The moment she laid eyes on the man she knew he would not live long. His body looked much like those she had used the fire bullet on. She was horrified that the man was still alive. The pain must have been beyond anything she could imagine.

The expression on the men gathered around him told everything. They knew they would be losing another comrade.

“Is there nothing you can do?” asked Troen from Elwar as the wizard got to the gathered group. “Your magic works once more, right?”

The wizard took one look at the charred man laying on the platform. He shook his head with sorrow. “There's a limit to what can be done,” he replied. “All I can do is ease his pains.”

The man on the ground let out a loud moan and his hands and legs shook. Elwar quickly knelt down beside him and drew some runes in the air. The soft glow of them seemed to ease the pains and he slipped away into a peaceful silence.

They watched in silence as his breathing calmed down then began to slowly become less frequent and finally stopped completely. Elwar let the runes disappear as it happened and stood up. The men around him muttered prayers for their fallen comrade.

Troen looked ready to cut off some heads as he turned to look at the still unconscious figure that had emerged from the structure. Three men were guarding it with swords in hand, their blades pointed at the neck of the thing.

“Carry him back to the ship,” instructed Troen and the men quickly found some pieces of clothing to wrap the charred corpse in and began to haul him to the ship. With four bodies their storage space for the dead was getting uncomfortably full.

Elir and Elwar followed the captain to where their attacker laid motionless. Reyes and Travis followed them.

Turaiw and Yerny were already there, the gnome inspecting the weapon that had been used against them. Turaiw looked shaken up and was crouching next to the slumped down figure. It looked like he was trying to see inside the helmet.

“Can we get that thing off it?” asked Troen after taking a moment to examine

their fallen enemy.

Yerny put down the weapon. It did not look that dissimilar from the Rune Caster Elir had been wielding. The gnome began to inspect the suit along with Elwar, hoping to spot some mechanism that would allow them to at least remove the helmet.

The flexible material around the neck seemed like the best place to start, but upon closer inspection they found it to be seamless and offering no place from where to start taking the suit apart. Finally, as they turned the figure over, they found cracks on the back of the helmet that opened into latches and allowed them to open the suit.

With great care and caution they undid the bindings that held the helmet in place and lifted it off. It was surprisingly heavy and it took with it the material around the neck.

The blast of heat from inside the suit made everyone close by take a step back. It felt like their hair would catch fire just from the heat of the air. The wave passed quickly and those nearest took a curious step forward to see.

What was revealed underneath had all of them worried.

It looked like it had a skin made of brown stone. It had cracks in it and through them it looked almost as if there was a fire burning inside. Its eyes were closed and there did not seem to be any hairs. It made its face seem like as emotionless as the rock its skin resembled.

It did not take much for everyone to realize what they were looking at. Those that did not figure it out on themselves only had to get a glance at the horrified face of Turaiw to realize it.

Fireborn.

"I hope those ropes are strong," said Yerny as he realized what they were dealing with. Like some of the crew, he began to look around nervously. Who knew how many more there would be and when they would appear and attack.

A couple of the crew instantly inspected the ropes and ensured they were properly tied.

"What do we do with..it?" asked Elwar and eyed their prisoner with a curiosity that many of the others were lacking. Only Elir was as open minded

about the situation as the wizard.

Troen looked around. They were right next to the wall of the structure and there was a ways to walk over open plane to the ship. Dragging their prisoner there would take some effort and there was no telling whether it would have friends coming to help. Then again, the ship would at least offer some protection while remaining where they were would leave them open against all sort of attacks.

“Perhaps it's time for a strategic withdrawal,” the captain finally suggested. “Drag that thing with us to the ship and we'll fly off with it so we can think on things a bit.”

It did not take much to get everyone to agree to that proposal. The sudden attack had shaken everyone and dampened their desire to explore the structure. They would need some better preparation to do that and perhaps their prisoner would offer them some helpful information.

It took four crewmen to drag their prisoner with any sort of speed while the others formed a protective circle around them. Everyone was on edge and looking around a bit wild eyed. Worst off was Turaiw who was mumbling to himself. Elir tried to make sense of it, but could not hear clearly enough what the man was saying. If she didn't know better she could have sworn they were prayers.

They were halfway back to the ship when the crewmen carrying the captured thing yelped out and let it fall down to the platform. It soon became apparent why they had done it.

The prisoner had woken up.

Flames licked its skin from the cracks of its skin and the ember like eyes examined its captors with what could only be considered murderous hostility. There was a frightening sort of beauty about the creature as the flames formed into what almost looked like hair. It struggled to get free from the ropes, but thankfully the knots held and it didn't have enough strength to break the bindings.

They could only hope the suit would contain the flames so the ropes weren't burned.

It noticed Turaiw and nailed its eyes on him. The man let out a small yelp

and looked petrified.

“*Morhenra*, why are you here?” the creature said in almost perfect Gardless. Only the first word was something neither Turaiw nor Elir could understand. Its voice was deep and had the sort of hum that any large fire produces. It took another look around at the stunned faces surrounding it. It turned to Turaiw once more. “Why have you brought these others with you? They are not of this world.”

“Why did you attack us?” asked Elir. The others turned to look at her, but she could only shrug her shoulders. The question had left her lips without her thinking.

The Fireborn laughed, or at least that was how they interpreted it. It was like someone had thrown a sap laden log into a fire. “This is a place of the *Naredain*. You have no business here.”

Elir translated the response to the others all the while the Fireborn stared at her with its glowing eyes. It was unsettling to say the least. Finally it turned its attention back to Turaiw and repeated the original question.

“As you said these others are not of my world,” Turaiw replied with a shaky voice. “They came from another world and are now stranded here.” The man swallowed hard before continuing. “It is this structure that is the reason why they are stuck and why they are here.”

Again, the Fireborn laughed. It looked past the Gardless and at the ship hovering behind him. “Such primitive use of the energies. Such waste. You do not deserve to go home.”

“Deserve it or not, we are going home,” said Elir firmly after translating its words. “If you wish this structure to stand after we are done you will help us by shutting down what ever is pulling in all the magical energies.”

“You have no idea what you are dealing with,” the creature replied and the flames on it flared up a bit. A sign of irritation?

“Then why don't you tell us so we can decide for ourselves?” the priestess demanded. She met the Fireborn's gaze with steady eyes and did not back down an inch.

“You are nothing but specks of dust to me,” it replied with a crackling in its

voice that could have been a sign of amusement.

“Well these specks of dust beat you and tied you down,” said Elir calmly. “We are capable of much more than that.”

Her words were once more received with laughter.

“Elwar, why don't you conjure up some water and dump it on this thing?” asked Elir. It seemed like the logical assumption; a being of fire fearing water. It would partly explain why it wore such an elaborate protective suit. A larger part was likely that it offered protection against any and all threats its wearer might face.

“What? You want to torture it?” asked Elir in a surprised voice. It sounded highly uncharacteristic of the priestess.

The look on Elir's face was one of shock. She had not expected her suggestion to be seen in such light. “No, you dolt,” she replied quickly. “I just want to scare it.”

“Why not just use this then?” asked Elwar and produced a water container from under his robe. He shook it and the sloshing water could clearly be heard even by their prisoner. Its eyes nailed themselves to the container that very moment and you could sense a change in its attitude. The arrogance had melted away some and a little bit of humility took its place.

Elir took the container from the wizard and opened it. She took a long gulp of water from it, ensuring their prisoner got a good view of the flowing water. She turned to the Fireborn and grinned. “You want some?” she asked in Gardless.

The flames flared up a little, but settled down quickly. “You would not dare,” the Fireborn replied. Clearly it had thought about the situation and reached the inevitable conclusion in its mind. Elir was pleased to note that its voice had toned down the arrogance.

“Wouldn't we?” asked Elir. “We are stranded in a world that is foreign to us and you hold the key to our way home. You think there is anything we wouldn't do to get home?” her voice was void of emotion. It was an act, but she performed masterfully at it.

The Fireborn seemed to think on it for a moment and gave Elir the opportunity to translate their exchange to the others.

“Do you think we'll really get something out of it?” asked Elwar as the priestess finished her translation.

“We have to try,” she replied and got a nod of approval from both Troen and Yerny. Turaiw was still looking horrified at the entire situation while Reyes and Travis seemed to take everything in stride.

“What if we get nothing?” asked Elwar. “Will we really resort to torture?”

Elir hesitated. She had meant it when she said it was only a threat. But what choice were they left with if the flaming figure didn't co-operate? They would be stuck in this for far longer than any of them wanted. Still, she had to rely on the teachings of her Order. There was no room to torture anyone in them, not even someone who just killed one of your comrades.

Finally, the priestess shook her head. “I don't think that is who we are, is it?”

“Not after all we have been through,” added Elwar with a relieved voice. He had worried that his friends might have grown cold and willing to do such things after everything. And they were so close to getting home that desperate measures might suddenly have become acceptable.

“Let's hope the threats are enough to make our prisoner talk,” said Troen and aimed his eyes at the fiery creature. He glanced around the group with a slightly worried expression. They were out in the open, even more vulnerable than they had been by the wall.

“If he doesn't talk soon we'll drag him to the ship and take our time with it,” he added. The words made some of the crewmen feel more at ease. They had begun to fear they would be standing out in the open for the rest of the day.

“What do you want from me?” asked the Fireborn. There was more curiosity in its voice than fear.

“We want to know how we can shut down what ever it is that's gathering all the energies into this valley,” replied Elir.

There was a laugh once more from their prisoner.

“You can't shut it off,” it said with glee. “You will have to destroy the entire structure and die in the explosion that will inevitably come from it.”

“Why have you made it that way?” asked Elir with genuine curiosity. It

seemed like madness to construct something you could not shut down.

“That is the degree of our commitment to gathering the energies for our use,” replied the Fireborn. Its eyes burned as it stared at Elir.

“What do you need the energies for?” the priestess demanded. What could demand such massive amounts of it?

“To make the world whole again,” came the reply from the prisoner.

Elir turned to look at Turaiw as the man let out a whimper. The horrified look on his face was beginning to borderline on madness. She turned her attention back to the Fireborn, hoping the reaction by Turaiw to be based on simple myth and not reality.

“What do you mean by that?” she demanded.

There was what she could only believe to be a sigh. “You do not know. None of you do,” the Fireborn shook his head. “The world was shattered when it began. Where there had been one there were now many. The elements split into their own worlds while some seeped through to this one. We used to be of the plane of fire, but we were spat into this cold world by a series of unfortunate events.”

“We gather the energies from many places so we may make the world whole again. We need the energies to bring the plane of fire here. After that we will have enough to bring all the other planes together into one. That is how it should be.”

The sheer scale of the Fireborn's plan was hard to comprehend, let alone the full implications of it, but even on first hearing of it it was clear that what they were aiming to do would mean the destruction of the world as it currently stood.

It took a moment for Elir to fully recover from the stun the story had delivered. A bit hesitantly she began to translate it to her friends and as she did the same sort of expression grew on each of their faces. Not even in their wildest nightmares had any of them seen such an possibility open before them.

It would be utter destruction if the Fireborn could deliver on their plan.

“Grab that thing and let's get back to the ship,” ordered Troen grimly. He looked less disturbed by the threat than anyone else in the group. His words pulled the rest together as well and the crewmen grabbed the prisoner and began hauling it towards the ship.

The rest followed, the story of the Fireborn weighing in their minds, but still

more worried about finding a way home.

Chapter 18

How do you react to the knowledge that someone is looking to destroy all that exists in all the worlds? All the planes of existence? When you know they just might have the means to do it? The scale of such an event is beyond any one persons imagination. You can not wrap your head around what all it entails.

So you end up not worrying about it. You focus on things you can actually do.

- Elir Ardanwen

Official record keeper

“**S**o what do we do?” asked Troen. It was a question that had been thrown around a lot in the hours following their return to *The Wind Saber*. Few were the times it had received any sort of an viable answer.

They had taken off from the platform as soon as everyone had gotten on-board. The crew had taken the loss of yet another member with a certain degree of apathy which was a bit worrying. Were they getting used to losing their friends?

The ship now circled the structure at a safe distance. Some features of the structure had become more apparent as they rose up to the same level as its top. Looking at it downwards revealed it to be a bit like an artichoke in that there were multiple layers to it and the central section was the tallest. On top of it they could see an array of long, metal poles and discs. What they were was anyone’s guess, but no one thought them to be mere decorations.

There had been no visible response from it to the capture of one of its inhabitants. It was almost as if there was no one else there. Or maybe they just did not care about the loss of a single member. It was unlikely that the incident had gone unnoticed by others inside.

The leader group had gathered in the command room to ponder what to do. Their prisoner had been secured in one of the empty storage rooms and was

under heavy guard with buckets of water nearby. They still had no idea whether water had any effect on the Fireborn, but at least it seemed to unnerve the creature so they kept lots of it close by, just in case.

Elir and Elwar had spent a few hours questioning it further, hoping to get some hints on what they could do to make it home. They had basically ignored the revelation of them wanting to destroy everything in existence. That was something they could do nothing about in the current situation.

It had not been a completely fruitless conversation. They had learned some important things and a few nuggets of information that just might give them a chance to get home.

“Our reluctant passenger did give us a few bits of information,” replied Elwar while looking on at the structure from the windows.

“Such as?” asked Yerny. The gnome did not look overly shaken up by the events. Not like Turaiw, who had closed himself in his quarters while mumbling prayers.

“Well, for one, that we can't shut down what ever that thing is,” said Elwar and pointed to the large metal structure.

“That's not exactly helpful to us,” pointed out Elir and brushed away her braided hair. It had dangled down her chest.

“It does remove an option from us. We don't need to waste time to consider it any more,” said Elwar. “But more importantly, we did learn that there are *some* controls inside that structure.”

“How does that help us?” asked Troen.

“If there are control that means we can direct the energy gathering process in some way,” explained the wizard enthusiastically. “We might be able to direct more energy to the ship. We might be able to use the controls to open a portal with the structure instead of our ship.”

“That is if we first get inside that thing and then have time to figure out the controls,” pointed out Yerny. Even the first part seemed like a tall order considering the earlier events. For all they knew there could be hundreds of Fireborn inside the structure, all armed and armoured similarly to their prisoner.

They would have no chance against such force.

“We have to try, don't we?” asked Elwar. They had little options left. They had found what they were looking for and now they had to figure out how to make use of it. They had no other leads, no other places to go look for a key. This was their only way home.

The others looked a lot more hesitant than the the wizard. They knew that any attempt to get inside the structure was likely to lead to more deaths. How many would they be willing to sacrifice to get back home? They were not the Gardless who could throw hundreds of lives away just to gain a foot of ground from their enemy.

“How would we get inside the structure?” asked Troen, hoping finding the answer would take the thoughts away from the second part of the plan.

“We know there's a door,” said Elwar. “It's only a matter of finding it and figuring out how to open it. And we have someone who can tell us all of that.”

“I doubt we'll get that information just by asking,” said Yerny pointedly. While the prisoner had given some information, there were subjects that were met with a stone wall of silence. The only reason the controls had been mentioned was because it was unlikely they would get inside in the first place.

“It doesn't hurt to try, does it?” asked Troen.

“Not like we have anything to lose,” added Elir.

There was a moment of silence as everyone contemplated the situation. They needed a decision on what to do for they could not keep circling the structure forever. Either they would try and enter it or they would have to fly away and search for an alternate way of getting home. The latter of the options did not look too appealing to any of them.

In the end the decision was made.

They would try and get the information from the Fireborn.



The group cautiously made its way towards the tower. The Fireborn walked in the middle of them, its hands tied, but they had made the concession of letting him walk on his own. They could not afford to waste time in carrying it and at the same time they were forced to take it with them.

No one else could open the door.

Getting the information had taken countless hours of persuasion and intimidation from Elir and Elwar. Even then they were not entirely certain they were not being lured into a trap by their prisoner. He – at least that's the conclusion they had come to as for its gender – could well have planned to lure them inside so his comrades could set him free and, in turn, take them as prisoners.

Reyes and Travis led the group and were closely followed by the usual leadership crowd and the rest of the crewmen who'd been chosen for this incursion into the tower. They looked around nervously, weapons in hand. They were determined not to be surprised this time.

Elir had the Rune Caster drawn and loaded with a water element infused bullet. Her customary adventuring clothes were seeing use once more and her braided hair was tied tightly behind her so as to not get in the way.

Elward had made preparations and had several spells at the ready that he could throw at anything coming their way.

Yerny was perhaps the least prepared in the group. He did not have any weapons nor could he wield magic. Then again, it was unlikely he'd be much use in battle anyway due to his size. That, and he was not exactly the fighting sort of personality.

Troen stepped along with confidence and void of the reluctance some the crewmen were showing. Of course, it was an act to give the men a good example to follow. Deep down the elf had all the same doubts and fears as the rest of them.

They had tried to get Turaiw to come with them, but the man had refused to leave his cabin. He was terrified of the consequences going into the tower would have on them and even tried to talk them out of it. He reiterated many of the legends surrounding the Fireborn and how few if any ever returned to tell the tale of encountering them.

In the face of not being able to get back home, his argument fell on ears that had already heard the arguments and discarded them. So they moved without him.

They reached the grey metal wall without incident and quickly spread out so everyone was hugging the wall. They left an space where the door was and Elir instructed their prisoner to do his thing and open it.

He had claimed his suit combined with himself was the only way to open the door. If they took the suit off him completely it would not work as it required the heat produced by him as well as some intricate control that even Elwar would be unable to achieve with any sort of fire magic.

The prisoner pressed his suit covered hand against the wall and focused. The flames around his head flared up and began a mesmerizing dance until they calmed down as quickly as they had started.

The door opened up silently.

The group entered cautiously. They were pleased to find that the room they entered was large and well lit. There were metal crates and shelves lining the walls which made sense for it being the first room out of a landing platform.

The full extent of the Fireborn's plan and reach still eluded them, but what they had uncovered was enough to make them realize they were not dealing with a group that was confined only to Ardaw.

To the Fireborn sailing through the darkness was as ordinary as sailing the seas. They were spread out over a multitude of worlds and used each of them to harvest the magical energies. The exact numbers eluded them, but the sense that they were dealing with something far greater than any of them could imagine remained strong for all of them.

"Where's the control room?" demanded Elir from the prisoner. There were two doors leading out from the room, in opposite directions. The crewmen had already taken aim at both, ready to take down anyone coming through.

Reyes and Travis flanked the priestess, both looking grim. They did not like her coming along, but as always it seemed she was irreplaceable to get things done. It was a trait they were starting to hate as it made it that much harder – and dangerous – to uphold the promise they had made.

The prisoner nodded towards the door on the left. "That will take you to an corridor that will lead to the control room." His voice crackled like a fire made from wet wood. Clearly, he still had reservations about playing his part in the

whole thing.

They moved on through the door. It slid open without their prisoners assistance and without anyone touching it. All they had to do was get close to it and it opened itself. Had the Fireborn not insisted that nothing they did used magic they would have not believed it to be anything else but that.

Now, they wondered how it was done.

The door led to a corridor wide enough to let five people walk next to each other. There were lights on the ceiling that lit up the entire length of the way. They saw windows that showed them the outside as clearly as if there was nothing in between them. How they could make it so you could not see inside from the outside was a mystery, one that Yerny found most intriguing. He examined the windows as closely as he could without falling behind the rest of the group.

There were doors lining the inside wall. The group took great care as they passed them so as to not cause them to automatically open. They did not wish to find themselves facing even an surprised Fireborn who could still raise an alarm.

There was an odd feeling atmosphere inside the structure. They could hear silent humming noises all around them and there was a smell in the air that was foreign to them. Contrary to their expectations the inside of the structure was not hot and it seemed as if though there were devices in place to keep the air from getting too warm as they could see grated openings in the walls that pushed out cooler air.

It made for a comfortable feel.

“Why is it so cool in here?” asked Elir of their prisoner in a hushed voice. “I’d have thought it’d be hot.”

“Hot or cold doesn't really matter to us,” replied the Fireborn in its crackling voice. “For many other things it does and a cool temperature is something a lot of things can handle.”

She had to wonder what other things he meant, but did not ask. It was not exactly the ideal place to start a conversation and she had already drawn a frown from Troen as their prisoner had answered in his normal tone of voice instead of a hushed one.

The hallway curved along with the outside of the building and seemed to continue on around the entire structure. They were starting to suspect that if they walked on long enough they'd end up right back where they started.

“Where's the control room?” demanded Elir at the behest of Troen as they had walked for what seemed like forever.

“Just two more doors and we'll move off the corridor,” replied the Fireborn.

They advanced nervously and entered through the door they were pointed to. There were strange writings on a sign that was very visibly attached to the door, but even for Elir it was impossible to interpret what it said. It led to a small room with a table and some chairs. It was striking to see the creatures of fire still used similar sort of furniture, albeit they were made from some other material than wood or metal. All they could guess was that they were made of some sort of ceramic material that was more sturdy than simple clay.

The room had one door leading out of it on the opposite side, which would take them deeper to the core of the structure. There was barely enough room to fit the entire group to where they were now so they quickly proceeded further ahead, following the instructions of their prisoner.

The following room was much larger and reminded them of some sort of an assembly hall a royal palace might have. While it lacked the abundant decorations any such place would normally have, there was the unmistakable atmosphere that you were waiting to see someone – or something – important.

The roof was high above them and even in the well lit surroundings it was difficult to tell the details of it.

“We have to go up,” said their prisoner, jolting everyone out of their awe of the room they had entered.

“How do we do that?” asked Elir. There were no staircases visible.

“We use those lifts,” replied the Fireborn and pointed to a group of cylindrical tubes that disappeared all the way up through the roof above. They were large enough to fit ten people in at once and there was a row of five of them on the wall.

Elir conveyed the message to the group and they advanced on the strange looking contraptions. They found one of the tubes empty and without a floor. As

Elwar braved it and looked down, he had to say he could not see where the bottom was nor where the roof was.

On all the others they found a platform that fit the tube so perfectly it might as well have been the permanent floor. They crammed as much of themselves into a single tube, but even then they had to split up. At the same time, both groups pressed the button they were instructed to on a control panel on the wall.

The floor began to push upward, taking them with it.

“Not that different from the transport discs we have at the Towers of Magic,” noted Elwar as the disc hummed upwards at a speed that made them all feel the pressure at the bottom of their feet. The Towers of Magic used stone discs that were moved by air elementals to transport people up and down the tall structures. “Of course, ours work without buttons,” he added with a slight feel of superiority.

The remark made Yerny roll his eyes.

Still, it was yet another impressive thing that worked without magic. Another mystery that would nag all of them for accomplishing such feats without the use of magic seemed impossible.

The lifts came to a halt and everyone moved out cautiously. Both of the discs arrived at about the same time which was a good sign. It would have been a perfect opportunity for their prisoner to try and separate the group.

They had arrived at a room that looked almost identical to the one they had left, albeit it seemed smaller, which made sense since the structure narrowed down as it went higher. Still, it gave them a moment of pause to consider whether they had actually moved at all.

“How much further is it?” demanded Elir as the crewmen spread out to secure every inch of the room.

“Just two more doors,” replied the prisoner once more. It seemed their destination was always two doors away.

“You better not be leading us to another 'two doors away',” said Elir in a voice that teemed with suspicion and accusation. Yerny was close enough to hear her words and gave her a concerned look despite not understanding the words. She simply shook her head to indicate there was nothing to worry about.

The Fireborn seemed to smile briefly and the flames danced around his head a bit more vigorously, but other than that there was no reaction out of him, save for pointing out the next door they should go through. There were five doors to choose from so they were lucky to have him along to guide them. Otherwise they would have ended up wandering the corridors for who knows how long.

“This place gives me the creeps,” whispered Travis as he and Reyes made their way towards the door. They were the lead in securing any doors they had to pass through.

Reyes could not help but nod in agreement. “It's way too empty for something this big,” he whispered back. “How come we haven't seen anyone else?”

“Exactly,” agreed Travis as they got close enough to the door for it to open. “It's like a ghost ship drifting at sea.”

They hushed down as the door opened and peered through. Both gripped their Gardless provided rifles tighter. It was another small room with tables and chairs and other furniture you might expect to find in any merchants office.

“Empty,” muttered Travis. “Why are they always empty?”

The two moved into the room to ensure it really was empty. They looked under the tables and prodded every corner that might hide something or someone.

They found nothing.

“You think our prisoner's the only one here?” asked Reyes as the two motioned for the rest that it was all right to come in.

Travis spluttered. “Wouldn't put it past it seeing as how things have been so far.”

Both men got a meaningful eye from Troen as he walked past them. His sensitive ears had heard every word they had said. While he shared some of the same thoughts they had been too noisy to his liking. He expected better from the two men.

The room only had a single door leading out of it which meant their goal was behind it – assuming their prisoner had not lied to them. Elir found her heart racing as the men began to move towards the door to open it. What was behind it

would be their salvation. Provided they could figure it out.

She glanced at Yerny and Elwar, the two who were most likely to have a chance at cracking it. The Fireborn would be unlikely to offer them much assistance in figuring out the controls. A few hints was the best they could hope for and even that would be stretching it. Given that Elir was having trouble reading even the signs on the doors it was unlikely she would be able to read any sort of instructions that the controls might have on them.

But they had to try.

The sound of the door sliding open pulled her from her thoughts and forced her to focus on the present once more. She saw Travis and Reyes enter the next room and a few moments later they signalled the rest of them to come through.

The room was nothing like they had ever seen before. The wall opposite to the door was dominated by a huge window that gave a panoramic view of the outside. They could see there was a large landing platform right outside, much larger than the one they had landed on. You could have fit ten *Wind Sabers* on the platform, back to back, and still have room for more.

Why had the Fireborn not instructed them to land on it? It looked to be closer than the one they had used. Elir shook her head. Too many things to distract her from matters at hand.

The room itself was staggered, slowly descending in sections. Each section had rows of tables and chairs as well as images and text seemingly floating in the air. They could see lines of text run by on one screen and images from empty corridors flick through on another.

Each table had all sorts of buttons on them, some flashing, others a dull grey. Much of it was incomprehensible to the small group that had barged in. They felt like ants as they began to realize how large the difference between them and the Fireborn truly was.

“Which ones are the controls for the energy gathering?” demanded Elir of their prisoner after having come to grips with what she was looking at.

“All of them,” came the amused answer from the Fireborn.

Elir's heart sank. There were tens of stations that could each need tinkering to get the result they had come seeking. Even the most optimistic person would

have broken down in tears upon hearing it. There was no chance they would be able to change anything according to their desires.

She shared the grim news with the rest of the group and watched as Elwar and Yerny went over some of the controls. She tried to make sense of the writings on the see through screen and buttons, but it was no use. The text was nothing like she had seen before.

“How are we supposed to figure this all out?” she asked of Elwar and Yerny.

The two exchanged concerned looks, a clear sign neither of them was feeling overly certain they could figure it out. “We've only been at it for a few minutes,” said Elwar trying to sound calm and certain. “It could take days to get to the bottom of it all.”

“Do we have that much time?” asked Elir. She could not help but think they were not really alone in the structure and that staying for any prolonged period was certain to call trouble to them.

“We'll have to make enough time,” said Yerny firmly. “We have no other choice.”

“And how do you propose we do that?” demanded Elir. She was not happy about how uncertain and poorly planned the expedition had become. They had expected much simpler controls that were concentrated into one or two spots. The complexity of it had thrown all the plans out the window along with the bath water.

She looked around herself and saw various crewmen exploring the large room. Some had gone to the large window and were looking out at the scenery and the huge landing platform. She saw Reyes and Travis standing together and talking, no doubt sharing the same concerns she had about their long term stay.

“We'll just have to take things as they come,” said Elwar in a calming voice. “You can't plan or prepare for everything. That much we should have learned on this journey.”

The priestess had to admit that if the journey had one lesson it had taught them, it was that plans could fail no matter how well they were thought out and prepared for. Something unexpected could always happen that yanked the carpet from under you.

"I still don't like being forced to improvise," replied Elir grumpily.

"Come with me," said Troen as he got next to her. "Leave the two of them to work in peace."

Reluctantly and with a deep frown on her face she followed the elf to the large window that offered a spectacular view. Even in their present situation she could appreciate it.

"Don't worry. We'll figure this out," the captain said and gave her an encouraging smile. "They'll figure it out," he added and looked towards Elwar and Yerny who were busily hovering over the control stations.

"If only our prisoner was more co-operative," sighed Elir and scowled at the Fireborn. There were four crewmen nearby it. It seemed more interested in what Elwar and Yerny were doing than anything else. Perhaps it feared they might actually figure out the controls.

"Well, there's not much we can do about it," said Troen, knowing full well that they could use the water threat, but that the morals of the people involved would not allow for it. No matter what the Fireborn were or what they were planning, torturing the information out of him did not sit well with any of them.

"I could still try talking to him," said Elir with slight hope in her voice. "It's not going to hurt anything."

Troen nodded and watched as the priestess made her way to the prisoner. He doubted she would get anything new out of him, but like she had said, what would they lose by trying? Only time and that was something they had enough to spare.

"How are things looking, captain?" came a question from behind him. He did not need to turn around to see who it was. The voice of Reyes was familiar enough for him.

"It's looking like it'll take a while," he replied and turned to look at the man. He found Travis standing there right next to him as well, which was no surprise. The two seemed nearly inseparable and given everything they had gone through, it was not surprising such a comradely had formed between them. Add in Millard and you had the three men of the crew who would stand together against anything thrown at them and they'd do it with equal determination.

Troen considered Elir to be lucky that she had gotten such men to feel so protective of her.

“Do you think this’ll be our ticket home?” asked Travis as he looked out the window. There was a mixture of anxiety and wonderment on the young lads face.

“I hope so,” replied the captain, not wanting to give false hope to the men. Being too optimistic had a way of landing you in trouble later on.

The answer seemed to satisfy the young man and they stood in silence for some time before all of them noticed the same, worrying thing.

A ship was landing on the platform outside the window.

It was not made of wood nor was it a sailing ship. In fact, calling it a ship at all seemed misleading. It looked to be made of the same material as the structure they were in. It was hard to tell the shape of it as it started to cover much of the view the window offered. By their estimate it left almost no room on the large platform it was landing on.

The best they could determine was that the craft was vaguely triangle shaped with bumps and out reaching parts to it. It was landing with one of the long sides towards the structure while the nose looked to be pointed away from it. They could see hatches open at the bottom of it and metallic legs protrude out of them to make it stand on the ground.

There were no visible windows on. They could see small jets of fire rush out in places, no doubt to slow the ship down as it neared the platform. Had they been outside the roar of them would no doubt have been deafening.

“So much for having time,” muttered Troen in awe as he watched the craft touch down.

The rest of the expedition began to notice the landing monstrosity as it blocked the sunlight that came through the window and slightly dimmed the room. Everyone dropped what they were doing as their attention was drawn to watch in awe at the massive flying thing.

“What is that?” demanded Elir from their prisoner as she recovered from the initial shock.

The Fireborn laughed. “My crew,” he responded in a voice that sounded like a raging forest fire.

"I don't understand," said Elir. "Explain."

"I was here alone," admitted the Fireborn. "I was the lone guardian because the rest of the crew was needed elsewhere to tend to an..emergency. Now, they have returned."

Cold shivers ran down the priestesses spine. They had been played for time. They had been lured away from their only means of escape and split into two groups that were unlikely to hold against so many on their own.

It all made sense now.

How it had been so easy to fly to the structure and how they had seen no one despite circling around it several times. With all they had seen she had no doubt they would have something that could have shot down their ship with little trouble. Why they had not encountered anyone else was instantly explained and made her feel like a fool for not questioning that fact more.

"You lied to us!" she accused their prisoner, though she knew it to be futile. It would not change anything.

The Fireborn simply laughed.

Elir looked around herself helplessly. She saw the crewmen point out the window at the craft and many of them gathered in small groups. To her relief she saw Reyes, Travis and Troen walking towards her.

To her surprise it was Reyes that first spoke.

"Is he talking?" the man demanded with a voice full of foreboding.

"No," admitted Elir with slight worry as to what the man was getting at.

Reyes held out his hand and Travis placed a water container on it. The man popped it open looked at Elir with as serious an expression as she had ever seen on anyone.

"Tell that thing that unless we get what we want I will pour this water on him," said Reyes with certainty in his voice.

"You can't be serious," said Elir in a firm tone. She was not about to condone the use of such tactics, even in the face of the current situation they were in.

Reyes grinned wickedly, "I'm as serious as I get. Either you tell him or I pour the water without giving him the chance to save his skin."

Elir gave Troen and Travis a pleading look, but neither of them offered any

sort of support to her position. They were both in cahoots with Reyes it seemed. She had thought she knew all three of them to be better men than that, but it seemed that when it came right down to it, they would falter on their principles.

If they even had them to begin with.

“Fine, I’ll tell him,” she said in a voice that left no doubt in the minds of the men that she was not pleased.

The Fireborn turned apprehensive as he heard the threat, but refused to offer any more assistance to them. Elir told the three men as much.

“Fine, if that’s the way he wants to play it,” muttered Reyes and brought the water container over the Fireborn’s head and poured out some water. It sizzled as it hit the flames and the Fireborn seemed unconcerned, but as the water kept pouring and found its way to the cracks of its skin the effect was immediate and drastic.

The flames around its head pattered out and screams of pain began to emerge from its lips. Where the water was being poured, new cracks appeared on its skin and made the water even more effective.

“Stop! Stop! I’ll help you!” the prisoner screamed and Elir quickly told Reyes to do so.

“How do we get enough energy to our ship now?” asked Elir from Elwar who had walked over as the screams had started. The situation had changed and they no longer had the luxury of being able to wait around for the ship to recharge in a normal fashion.

“If the structure can draw energy it would make sense that it can put it out as well,” pondered the wizard. “Our best bet is to have it point as much energy as it can to *The Wind Saber*. That should make the re-charge process much quicker.”

Elir nodded and started to ask the prisoner the questions. As she did, she glanced out the window. The craft had now fully landed and a door had opened with a ramp that led down to the landing platform. She could see several suited figures emerging from inside, though it did not look like they were in a hurry.

“Yes, yes, it can be done,” the Fireborn muttered, his otherwise fiery voice sounding muddled. The flames around his head had not returned. Instead, there

was smoke rising from the cracks in his skin,

“Then make the needed changes,” said Elir in a firm voice and allowed Reyes and Travis to lead the prisoner to the controls. “And don't try anything clever,” she added as the Fireborn went to work pushing buttons and entering commands that quickly scrolled away at the screen before them. “We've got plenty of water.”

It disgusted her to fling such threats, especially after seeing the effect the water had, but the dice had been rolled and fighting against it would only be detrimental in the present situation.

She was not about to become the person who prevented their return home.

The Fireborn grunted something she could not make out and continued to work. They moved to another control station as he indicated his work to be done on the current one. Thankfully it did not seem to take him long to put in all the commands that were needed.

The crewmen looked around nervously and guarded the door as their prisoner worked to send them home. They were wary whether he'd come through for them after being treated in such a way, but there was no choice left.

It seemed they never had much in the way of choices.

Perhaps even more nervously the crewmen at the windows looked on as more and more suited figures emerged from the craft. So far they had counted thirty of them and it did not look like the vessel was even beginning to empty out. How many were there? Given the size of the thing and the structure there could be thousands and when even a single one could give them enough trouble. They would have no chance against all of them.

“He done yet?” demanded Yerny as he looked on nervously at the army that was marching out onto the platform. He had no desire to encounter even a single one of them and they were quickly running out of time to sneak out unnoticed.

“One more left,” replied Elir as they moved to the last of the control stations. It was apparent in her voice that she shared the same sense of urgency as the gnome did.

“How are we going to get back to the ship?” asked Yerny, directing the question to Troen.

The elf had a moment of concerned look on his face. Would they be able to

return the same way they came in without running into the returning Fireborn? Then again, what other choice did they have? They knew of no alternate route and trusting their prisoner to guide them through another way was risky at best. If there even was another way.

“We'll just have to re-trace our steps,” the captain finally said. “I'll send a couple of men in advance to ensure the route is open.” He was quick to gather a few volunteers and send them off ahead. It didn't look like the main group would be much behind as the Fireborn was working surprisingly fast now.

“Let's hope those on the platform stay there for a while longer,” said Yerny. He was relieved to hear the crewmen at the window say that so far they had seen no one enter the structure. It seemed they were all just gathering on the platform and not in any hurry to get inside. Maybe they wanted to stretch their legs after a long flight.

Yerny knew that feeling all too well after being on *The Wind Saber* a long time without solid ground to walk on.

It was a tense few moments as they waited for the unwilling prisoner to finish his work. The only noises in the room were the steady humming of the various machines, the tapping of the keys as the Fireborn input the needed commands and the few nervous words exchanged by the crewmen.

“I'm done,” their prisoner finally said and took a step back from the controls. Elwar stepped in to examine what he had done, though he was far from certain that he fully understood what had been done. Some of it had been very familiar and he could grasp what was being done, but some had been so far beyond what he had ever seen that there was no way to be certain the Fireborn had done what he had said he would.

Still, maintaining some resemblance of understanding might keep him on the straight path.

“What energy the structure collects is now being directed at our ship?” demanded Elir to ensure their wishes had been understood and executed as hoped for.

The Fireborn nodded. The flames around his head were slowly starting to return, a sign that the damage done by the water was slowly but surely being

undone. Still, the new cracks in its skin remained.

Elir glanced at Elwar, hoping the wizard would be able to confirm that their prisoner had indeed done what was promised. She got a shrug of his shoulders as a response along with a less than certain nod.

“How long until we can open a portal with our ship?” asked Troen from the wizard.

“With the energy amount this structure moves about, we probably already can,” came the reply. The only reason it took *The Wind Saber* weeks to gather enough energy to open a portal was the fact it had to pull in the energy from its surroundings, which usually had a very limited amount of it. Here, the very air was saturated with it and now that the structure was actively pushing it all towards the ship, it would not take long to recharge fully.

The captain nodded with approval. It was likely they would have to get moving the moment they got on-board the ship.

“Let's get moving then,” he said and the crewmen began to take formation.

“What do we do with him?” asked Elir, referring to their prisoner.

“We take him with us,” said Reyes in a grim voice. “If it comes down to it, we can maybe use him to get through his buddies.”

Troen nodded approvingly. “At least as far as our ship. After that, I don't think we have a need for him.”

The crewmen surrounded their prisoner once more and began to shove him towards the door. Elir looked on helplessly as the situation went further and further away from her comfort zone. Torture, using a prisoner as a shield; these were things she would have expected from lowly orcs or other creatures more close to beast than man, but here she was among men who she had felt immense respect for, doing these very things. She could not help but feel shame for it.

In a gloomy mood, she followed Reyes and Travis out of the room and through the smaller one into the large hall. Before leaving, she took a last glimpse through the window to see yet more Fireborn coming from the craft. She could see a large crowd of them already standing on the platform.

It was a crowd she did not want to face and it made her think that perhaps taking their prisoner with them was not such a bad idea after all. It might save

everyone's life.

They went down with the transport tubes just as they had gotten up with them. All the way the nervousness grew as they knew the further they got the higher the chance they would run into the returning Fireborn.

The fact they had not already come into the structure was a miracle unto itself. They had to have seen *The Wind Saber* parked at one of the landing platforms. Maybe they assumed the single guardian they had left behind had dealt with the matter. They had little reason not to think that.

There were sighs of relief as the transport tubes came to a halt and they found the large hall as empty as when they had passed through it the first time. The crewmen quickly spread out and went on to ensure the way was clear. It was a small miracle they remembered which door they had come through. They had passed through so many in places looking exactly alike.

They did not linger as they had when coming inside. Now, they wanted out as quickly as possible so there was no time to stop and admire something. At a brisk pace they made their way across the large hall and off through the small room to the corridor that led back to their ship. All the while they were alert and on their toes for any sign of the returning Fireborn.

As they passed the windows dotting the corridor they glanced outside despite knowing the platform where the craft had landed was high above them and could not be seen from there.

They were all a bit surprised they made it back to the small room that separated the platform they had landed on from the inside of the structure. Given that the Fireborn had landed much higher it was perhaps expected that they had not had time to get to the lower levels of the structure yet. Maybe they had even missed *The Wind Saber* and that's why they had not been in a hurry to get inside.

"Finally a bit of luck," muttered Yerny loud enough for everyone in the room to hear him. The remark was met with relieved laughter as they began to realize they had made it. It relieved the tension that had been building up all through their venture inside the structure.

Still, as the crewmen opened the door and the familiar shape of their ship came to view, Elir could not help but feel that home was still far away.

Chapter 19

The Fireborn were a mystery. Their claim of not using magic made everything they had accomplished that much more jaw dropping. They were doing things we could not even dream about. One can not help but feel like a newborn baby when faced with the advances they have made by using mechanical devices instead of the power of magic.

I can only hope they never find our world for it would spell disaster for us all.

- Elir Ardanwen

Official record keeper

They had abandoned their prisoner outside on the platform. He was once more tied down so that he could not move, but his comrades were bound to find him sooner rather than later. They would certainly be curious where the sole guardian had disappeared and begin a search immediately.

It had not taken long for the exploration group to board the ship and fan out to their usual positions. As they did so those that had remained on the ship shared how they had seen the Fireborn vessel approach and land high above. Millard and Rodil had had to use some stern words to keep a few of the crew at bay for they wanted to fly out the moment they saw the huge craft appear on the horizon.

Every crew had such men; those willing to abandon their comrades to save themselves. Usually a few stern words were enough to give them the courage they needed to face what they wanted to run away from.

“How do our energy levels look like?” demanded Elwar as soon as he got on in the control room. Elir, Yerny and Troen followed closely behind him.

Reyes and Travis had both gone on to see to their normal duties in getting the ship ready for flight.

“It's amazing,” said Rodil sounding perplexed. “One moment they were as

level as always then the next they shot up and went all the way to the top within minutes.”

“Well, it seems our prisoner was not lying after all,” said Yerny. The relief was evident on the faces of everyone in the room. They could well have been tricked and now they would have been stuck in this world for who knows how long.

“You made it happen?” asked Rodil, still sounding a bit surprised. Clearly, he had not put much faith in the expedition being able to accomplish it so quickly.

“I’ll tell you all about it later,” replied Elwar and pushed himself to the metal sheets and examined what the runes were telling him.

“Get the ship in the air,” ordered Troen and took his customary place by the windows.

“Aye, captain,” echoed Millard and began to convey the orders. It did not take long for men to be buzzing along the deck and climbing the masts to unfold the sails. They could only hope they would be able to slip away unnoticed by the Fireborn. Who knew what they would be able to throw at them.

“I suggest giving the protective runes as much power as we can spare,” said Elir. “We don’t know what they can shoot at us.”

Troen nodded at the suggestion and Elwar did as instructed. The runes outside shone a bright blue as power rushed to them. The wizard actually had to be very careful in how the energy was being distributed. The structure was pushing so much of it at them that overloading the metal cubes was a distinct possibility. The quick recharge might have already weakened some of them so he took no chances and applied every change only after careful consideration.

“All decks reporting ready,” came the voice of Millard.

It had only taken a few minutes for the crew to get everything ready. It was an testament to their abilities as well as to the situation they were facing. No doubt everyone had squeezed out every last drop they had in them to get ready as quickly as possible.

“Let’s get airborne then,” said Troen and gave Elwar a nod. The wizard took a moment to adjust some of the runes and then activated the ones that would lift

the ship from the ground.

It was not the gentle climb they had grown accustomed to. It was a forceful lift that felt like it pushed their innards to their feet and forced them to grab a hold of what ever they could to remain standing. The strong push lasted for only a moment for Elwar was quick to struggle to the controls and adjust the power, but it was still enough to send many of the crew to their knees and staggering around the decks.

“What happened?” demanded Troen from the wizard who was furiously adjusting the controls.

Elwar shook his head. “The structure keeps pumping energy to us and it's causing some surges in power. It's difficult to contain them without risking breaking something.”

Troen cursed under his breath. “All right. Just try not to get us killed,” he finally said and directed a stern look at the wizard.

“I'll try my best,” replied Elwar and returned to monitoring the metal slates with Rodil. It looked like it had turned into a two man job with the problems they were facing.

During the short burst the ship had risen a considerable amount and the platform had been left far below. The wind picked up and snapped the sails to their usual puffed out curve and pushed the ship onward. The helmsman had already put them on a wide turn that would take them away from the structure and towards the mountains they had come from.

Suddenly, the ship was rocked by what sounded like an large explosion. It tilted enough to send men sliding down decks and making others grab for anything solid they could hold on to remain upright. It took a while for the ship to correct itself once more and allow the crew to get back to their posts.

“What was that?” asked Elir as she pulled herself up from the deck. Her shoulder hurt like someone had brought a smiths hammer to it thinking it to be red hot iron.

Yerny groaned and tried to get up, but after his vision blurred for a moment he decided it was best to remain laying on the deck for a bit longer. His head throbbed, telling him he had hit it hard on something. “That's what I'd like to

know too," he muttered.

Elwar and Rodil were scrambling to get back to the metal slates. They had both been thrown from them and they had slid against the wall in a pile of limbs and robes. They checked over things with a quickness that could be brought about only by circumstances that felt life threatening.

"What happened?" demanded Troen, adding his voice to the chorus wanting to hear an explanation. "Has the ship been damaged?"

"We got hit by something," said Elwar with a concerned voice. "But the protective runes are holding. Mainly because of the extra power we're getting from the Fireborn structure."

It was a disturbing thought. Had they not been receiving the extra energy, would the ship have been damaged?

"Report from the front deck," came Millard's voice. The bald man had a scrape on his head that was bleeding, drawing a red line down his forehead, past his right eye and down his cheek all the way to this chin.

"Let's hear it," said Troen.

"The Fireborn structure has opened fire on us," said Millard and listened for more of the metallic voice echoing from the communication tube. "It's the same sort of energy our former prisoner used against us. It hit us, but the protective runes seemed to be able to repel most of it. They're reporting injuries due to the tilting of the ship."

"They're onto us then," said Troen in a grim voice. Their hope of getting away unnoticed had been crushed. It meant the ship would be under fire until they got far away enough from the structure to open up a portal home. It also meant they would not have much time left until they figured out they were feeding energy to the very ship they wanted to pluck out of the sky. They would shut it down the moment they figured it out and that would mean the ship might not be able to withstand the fire coming against it.

"How long until we can open a portal home?" demanded Troen.

"A couple of minutes and the ship will have made the full turn," reported the helmsman.

The front of the ship had been facing the Fireborn structure. To open a

portal they needed open space. They could not open it when facing something solid like a mountain face or the metal structure. It just would not work and could result in some catastrophic, unforeseen consequences that no one would like to see.

“Do your best to avoid their fire,” instructed Troen and returned to the windows to try and get a look at what was going on outside. The helmsman did his best to carry out the order, but he had limited speed and space to work with – more hits were likely to land on the ship.

The ship shuddered and tilted once more. Troen and Elir could see an energy flash across the wooden cover of the middle deck. The runes shone brighter than they had ever seen and – as far as they could tell – they had escaped with no damage once more.

Yerny groaned on the deck floor and pulled himself up. The blurred vision did not come this time and he managed to pull himself up to the windows in time to see last of the energy dissipate from the middle deck.

“The power they wield is frightening,” he muttered, catching the attention of Elir and Troen.

“Not enough to take us out,” said Troen confidently. He watched as the ship slowly turned and the structure began to slip to the side. It seemed to take forever for them to clear it and the increasing rate of fire they were being subjected to did nothing to help that feeling.

Elir had trouble mustering as much confidence in their situation as the captain did. She could not help but think they were not subjected to the full power the Fireborn could throw at them. They were probably surprised the ship had resisted their actions thus far.

The ship shuddered as yet another energy bolt struck it, followed closely behind by another. The rate of fire was increasing and made for a bumpy ride, but the protective runes seemed to be holding steady. The structure was now almost completely off their field of vision and they were faced with nothing but the mountain range in front of them.

“Can we open the portal now?” demanded Troen. Despite his confidence in the ships ability to survive what was being thrown at it he did not want to risk it

and a quick escape was the best option available. Besides, getting home was high on everyone's list.

“Just need to finish up the calculations,” replied Elwar as he worked furiously with Rodil over a sheet of paper riddled with numbers and all sorts of figures.

“Do it quickly. We don't know what they'll throw at us next,” said Troen. He was worried because the Fireborn had stopped shooting at them. The silence and smooth flying felt eerie after the rough ride they had had.

An uncomfortable thought entered Yerny's mind and he hobbled over to the metal slates. While he knew little of magic, he did understand the controls. Elwar and Rodil were too busy with the calculations to pay proper attention to what the controls were telling them.

It was as he had feared.

“They've reversed the effect of the structure,” he said in a grim voice and loud enough for everyone to hear.

“What?” demanded Troen as Elwar and Rodil abandoned their paper and took a look at what the gnome had pointed out.

“It's true,” admitted Elwar after a moment. “They're now pulling energy away from us instead of feeding it.”

“At this rate we'll be where we started in no time,” added Rodil grimly as he watched the energy levels sink lower and lower.

Troen cursed. “Make sure we open the portal before we run too low!”

The two wizards returned to finish their calculations. The ship was shaken by an energy blast and even in the command room they could hear the sound of wood snapping. They were no longer protected by the additional energy and the protective runes were not enough after the constant barrage they had endured earlier.

“Are you ready yet?” the captain demanded as another bolt of energy shook the ship. Luckily, this time they did not hear the sounds of wood breaking.

The wizards spent one more moment on the paper before replying. “We're ready,” said Elwar loudly to overcome the sound of yet another strike hitting them.

“Then open the damn thing and get us out of here!” shouted Troen. There was actual concern in his voice as it was becoming clear the ship could fall apart any time. The constant bombardment had done its job and weakened places sufficiently.

Elwar quickly put in the needed commands while keeping an eye on the energy levels. They were getting close to being too low to even open a portal so he worked as quickly as he could and hoped that would be enough.

As the blue shimmer of the portal opening began to appear in front of the ship everyone felt a wave of relief go through them. Now it would be too late to stop them, and more importantly, they were on their way home. After enduring everything the new world had thrown at them, they would finally get to return home.

The Fireborn continued to fire on the ship, but it was not enough to stop what had started. The portal opened completely and *The Wind Saber* slipped into it like a lover would slip from under the bed sheets on a cold morning.

It was not until the ship was completely inside that most of the crew realized they were safe and headed home. Even Elir felt a bit surreal as she watched through the windows at the swirling blue through which they were travelling.

Then it disappeared and she had to blink a few times to get used to the lesser light. As she regained her vision the sight before her almost made her tear up.

There were the familiar floating layers of Ramyn; the high walls, tower tops and the majesty of the imperial palace. The sun made the river below glitter like newly fallen snow.

It was home.

She couldn't help but let out a laugh with a mixture of disbelief and joy. She could hear everyone else in the room let out similar noises and finally it turned into genuine laughter of joy. Turning around she saw Elwar hugging Rodil and laughing as if he were a twelve year old boy who had just seen his little ship made of bark survive the torrents of the local stream.

Even Yerny could not hide his delight and he was shaking Troen's hands vigorously with a wide smile on his face. The captain looked equally pleased to be

back in their own world. Millard and the helmsman were engaged in a similar joyous embrace as Elwar and Rodil.

“We did it,” said Troen finally as the spontaneous celebrations began to die down. “By the gods we did it. We're home.” The relief in his voice was so evident that it resounded with everyone in the room. The tension of the minutes of frantic escape was lifted with those simple words.

“Let's land this ship,” the captain said, echoing the feelings of everyone on board.



Elir felt more comfortable sitting in the chair than she had felt anywhere else during the past two days. After *The Wind Saber* had touched down in the very harbour it had departed from the crew had been in a whirlwind of celebrations and meetings.

They had been paraded through the streets of Ramyn like war heroes and the crowds had cheered just as loudly, despite knowing very little of where they had been and what they had done. Of course, rumours had already started to circulate at that point, some exaggerated and some inaccurate while others were surprisingly truthful.

You couldn't keep a sailor's mouth shut for long once you hit home port.

Elir had been rushed to meet all sorts of people she never even dreamed of getting the opportunity to see in person. Yerny, Elwar and Troen had been with her in all the events as had Turaiw. The Gardless garnered a lot of attention and Elir was needed to translate his words.

They had gotten to meet the Advisory Council and give them a quick account of their journey. While they had brought with them some samples of plants and other life they had encountered – Turaiw being the most prominent of them all – Elir could not help but feel the Advisory Council would rather have seen them return with cargo holds full of gold and other valuables.

Perhaps most amazing had been meeting the emperor during a formal dinner and getting to exchange a few words with him. He was surprisingly curious about their journey and asked some questions few would have had the mind to ask. Of

deep concern to him were the Fireborn and he was not alone in that. The Advisory Council had taken the news of them seriously and were considering what measures needed to be taken to secure the empire against such a threat.

Now, most of the official celebrations had died down. Of course, there were still invitations landing on her doorsteps from every which directions; from nobles and wealthy merchants to simple scholars seeking her time to learn more of the world they had explored. They were too impatient to wait for her books to be duplicated by The Order.

Now, as she sat in Bantahelms office, she could forget the demand the outside world had for her and focus on answering the questions the senior priest had.

Just as the emperor, out of everything they had encountered, he was most curious about the Fireborn. Elir had told what little she had learned from their prisoner, but that was barely enough to answer the most basic of questions while raising several more.

Bantahelm sat across her, behind his desk, looking thoughtful. He had just heard everything she had to say about the Fireborn and it was hard to swallow it all in one go.

“It’s a miracle you made it home safely,” the senior priest finally said.

She had not really thought about it in the heat of the moment, but they had truly gone through something that should have left more of them dead, if not all of the crew.

“We must have gotten help from a higher power,” admitted Elir. “What we went through seems like something pulled out of a minstrel’s tale.”

A small smile appeared on Bantahelms face. “I have no doubt there will be songs and stories about your journey for years to come.”

Whether that was a good thing or a bad thing, Elir had yet to decide.

“In any case, these Fireborn. Do you think we should worry about them?” asked Bantahelm. The question was a serious one.

“Given what we know of them, we should at least be cautious,” said Elir. It was not usually the domain of The Order of Salvius to worry about such things, but in this case it seemed everything they held dear and holy was threatened. “If

their ultimate goal is what was stated to us, we will run into them sooner or later, and preventing them from accomplishing their goals is in the interest of all.”

Bantahelm nodded. “I would tend to agree, though what we can do seems limited. And I fear many will not sacrifice a thought on them until they're knocking at our door.”

“We have taken but the first steps into this larger world,” said Elir in a steady voice. “Yet, already, we have encountered things that are far beyond our understanding. What more will we find as we explore more? And given our findings, should we even do that?”

Bantahelm gave her an appraising look. “I would expect a priestess of our order to always be in favour of exploring.” There was no accusation in his voice, despite the words.

“Some knowledge will make you lose sleep at night,” she said.

“Yet now that we know of the Fireborn, we can keep an eye out,” replied Bantahelm. “Before we were ignorant and would have been taken by surprise.”

He was of course correct, but part of Elir still thought it a bad idea to arrange any further expeditions to explore Ardaw or any other world. The Fireborn were bad enough. Who knew what other terrors would be waiting for them.

Bantahelm saw the topic was not something the young priestess liked talking about, so he changed the subject.

“Your books have been retrieved from the ship and are in the hands of our scribes,” the priest said, hoping it would distract his guest from the heavier thoughts. “It is our hope to have the first copies on the shelves within a few weeks.”

A few weeks was a quick schedule and would mean many of the drawings she had included in the books would not be present, but then many of the books would serve their purpose well enough as text only.

“That is good news,” said Elir, thankful for the change in subject.

“There has been great demand for them before hand,” explained Bantahelm to shed light on such an hasty schedule. “We've had to turn away several scholars already.”

It made the priestess smile. The fact her work was so sought after gave real

value to her efforts. "Let's hope I have been detailed enough in my work," she finally said humbly.

"From what I have seen, you have done a superb job," assured Bantahelm. He glanced at the hourglass on his table. The sands were running low. "I'm sorry I have to make this meeting so short," the senior priest said. "I would have liked to talk with you more, but I have to be going to an Advisory Council meeting."

"It's all right. I have someone I must meet as well," replied Elir as she stood up. The two exchanged a few more words before Elir exited the room.

Leaving Bantahelm's study was unnerving for her.

The acolytes who usually waited in the hallway to see their masters now paid more attention to her than the doors they were staking out. They wanted to hear the stories in her own words. She found herself rushing through the hallway as quickly as she could without looking like someone trying to run away. She turned down any questions some of the more courageous ones asked her as politely as she could, but she was certain some would view her as arrogant after receiving her reply.

She breathed a sigh of relief as she came to the main hall of the library. At least there it was unlikely anyone would bother her due to the code of silence.

There was someone she wanted to find and the library was the most likely place she would find him. Despite being back for several days already the pace had been so hectic that she had not had time to see Braem. He was the single man she most wanted to see and seek council from.

She went to the clerks desk and quietly inquired whether Braem had been seen that day. To her relief she was informed the man was at a quiet corner of the library, out of the way of everyone. They would have the privacy they needed and talking would not be frowned upon as there was unlikely to be anyone else around.

She wandered the narrow, bookshelf surrounded corridors to find the corner her mentor had chosen for himself. As she looked at the shelves the realization hit her that her books would soon be there and that they would be enough to fill more than one shelf.

It was an honour that put to shame everything else she had received during

the days of being back home.

She found the familiar figure hunched over a book at a small table in a peaceful corner of the library. A single lantern brought light to the windowless corner and left much of the details surrounding them shrouded in darkness. She was relieved to see the man turn a page. At least he had not fallen asleep once more.

“Have you left this building even once while I was gone?” asked Elir in a soft voice as she walked over to the table.

Braem looked up, surprised, but a smile quickly appeared on his face as he realized who it was that was talking to him. “I might have gone out a few times to eat,” replied the man with mirth in his voice.

Elir took a seat next to him and they both just smiled at each other. One might have expected a deeper reaction from both, but their relationship had never been close in the physical sense. Expressions were enough between the two to convey everything both felt.

“I hope you've done more than read books as well. Sitting all day isn't good for you,” added Elir. The customary rituals of greeting between the two always involved her concern for his well being.

“I see the journey has done nothing to stifle your insufferable concern for my well being,” said Braem dryly.

Elir grinned. “On the contrary. It has only made me realize how much I value you.”

Braem gave her a glare and closed the book he had been reading. The leather cover had cracks in it and the pages looked yellow. It was an old book and Elir had little doubt that Braem had been examining it more closely to determine whether it needed a new copy.

“I have heard some wild stories about your journey,” said Braem and stroked his beard with one hand. He looked concerned.

“Many of them likely pale to the reality of it,” replied Elir. Her voice was heavy with regret and conflicting emotions.

“I can see something is bothering you,” Braem pointed out. As Elir turned to look at him she saw the expression she knew to mean her mentor was there,

ready to listen and offer advice.

She poured her heart out.

She left out details for the sake of time and skipped some parts, but when it came to the things that bothered her she spared no details and gave him all the doubts and fears she had experienced and still carried with her.

Braem listened with the patience of a stone. He did not interrupt her nor did he ask any questions. There was no sense of judgement about him and when Elir finally finished telling him everything he gave her a moment to gather herself since digging up the memories had had an impact on her.

“Do you know the story of Keln Ranperi?” asked Braem of the priestess, who shook her head in response.

“I'm not surprised,” continued the older priest. “It is rarely told any more, but for your situation it is perhaps a fitting reminder.”

The man coughed discreetly before continuing. “Keln Ranperi was a member of the Order of Salvius. He was fond of nature and devoted much of his time to the study of various animals. He roamed forests observing the behaviour of sometimes dangerous animals such as bears and wolves. Because of that he carried with him a bow at all times, just in case. He never intended to kill an animal, just scare them away by shooting an arrow close to them. Still, due to practice he was quite skilled with it.”

“He also had a wife who travelled with him on many of his trips. She was a like-minded person and they both enjoyed the trips they made together. It was on one of such trips that Keln was faced with a decision similar to what you have had to make.”

Braem gave Elir a sympathetic look. The priestess had a look on her face that was very familiar to him. It was the face she made when she had been drawn in and the only thing on her mind was listening and remembering every word being said. On a seven year old it had been a peculiar sight, but on woman nearing twenty it seemed as natural as a smile.

“Keln and his wife had just began to make camp on a summer evening after a day of walking. She had gone to the nearby forest to gather some firewood while Keln was busy setting up their tent for the night,” Braem continued the story in a

vibrant voice that gave weight to just the right parts.

“Keln had his bow next to him and he quickly grabbed it and cocked an arrow as he heard rustling from the nearby trees. He spun around only to be faced with something all together unexpected; his wife with a knife to her throat and a bandit behind her with a tight grip around her. Keln demanded that she be released, but the bandit was not willing to do so. He asked him to drop the bow and hand over all his money.”

“But Keln knew better than that. He had heard the stories of this bandit when they had passed through a nearby village. He never left anyone alive even if they handed everything to him. At the same time he was keenly aware that there was little he could do besides sinking an arrow in the man's head, but that went against the teachings of Salvius. What could he do?”

Braem asked the question, expecting an answer from Elir. It was an important part of telling a story with a teaching. You needed to get the listener involved and make them think of what they would do.

“There's not much of a choice,” said Elir after a moment of consideration. “Either you shoot the bandit and act against your faith or you watch your loved one die.” The priestess shook her head. “No matter what you choose, you disregard something that is important to you.”

“You could try and talk the bandit out of killing you and her,” suggested Braem, but Elir quickly shook her head at the idea.

“While words are powerful when used properly, there are people who can not be swayed by even the most persuasive plea,” said Elir. “By the description in the story the bandit is just such a man. Both Keln and his wife would end up dead.”

“What do you do then?” asked Braem.

“You shoot the bandit,” replied Elir.

“Why?”

“Because protecting those dear to you is instinctive. It's at the very core of being what we are.”

Braem nodded approvingly. “These rules, these teachings of Salvius, they are important and we should strive to live by them, but no one is foolish enough to think we will all be perfect and always follow every rule, especially when someone

we care about is in danger. When the time comes Salvius will judge us all and he is not void of sympathy nor understanding. He will understand the difficult choices we have had to make.”

Elir nodded and even smiled a bit. The words of her mentor were like ointment on a fresh wound. He had always had a knack for easing her mind. “So what did Keln do?” she finally asked, curious to hear how the man had resolved the situation.

“Keln was a man of faith,” said Bantahelm. “But he was also a man who loved his wife. He let loose the arrow and hit the bandit in his throat. His wife could struggle free before the bandit could do more than cause a shallow cut on her throat.”

“I'm glad they both lived,” said Elir, feeling she had gained a greater understanding of what it meant to live and how faith and teachings were not necessarily the only nor the right solution to every situation.

“And I'm glad you're back home along with all of your friends,” said Braem, putting an emphasis on the friends. Seeing her worrying over others and even compromising her beliefs for their benefit made him proud, for what was belief without having it tested? Even if you failed those tests, in the eyes of your faith, you were a stronger person for it with a better understanding of yourself and the surrounding world.

Elir smiled. It was a genuine one that lit up her entire face. “How about we get something to eat?”

“Now?” asked Braem and glanced at the book he had been reading.

“I promised to meet Turaiw at his place and take him out,” explained Elir. The emperor himself had ordered the Gardless be housed at an inn of decent quality in the merchants district. Two guards were with him to ensure his safety, but his movements were not restricted. Many people sought to talk with him and because of that he was not housed in the imperial palace nor the nobles layer of the city. It was understood that any information he could give was worth recording and sharing with the scholars of the city.

It also provided Elir with an endless source of translation work that the emperor paid for.

Braem's eyes lit up. He was just as eager to pick the brain of someone from another world as anyone else. "Well, perhaps I can leave my work for an hour or two," he said sounding reluctant and grabbed the book from the table.

"I'm sure it's a sacrifice," said Elir dryly and watched as the old man stood up and carefully placed the book back in its place on a nearby shelf.

"Shall we?" asked Braem.

The two left the temple to meet with Turaiw.



Elwar was unaccustomed to the attention he was getting. It was not so much the attention from the nobles and the recognition he was getting for making their exploration journey possible.

No. It was the women.

Suddenly, where ever he was invited to, a flock of young women surrounded him and asked to hear of the adventure with wide eyes and ample flashing of their cleavage. There were gentle brushes against his hands, locks of hair being toyed with and all sorts of other, subtle and less subtle, advances that had always been reserved towards other men.

Now they were being directed at him and he had no idea how to respond.

So he began refusing invitations to parties and refocused on working on his next project. That still left him the invitations he simply could not refuse. To certain people you simply did not say no unless you wanted to make life difficult for yourself. Besides, many such people were potential sponsors for his next big idea so making an effort to get on their good side was trying to ensure a future for his own work.

It was one of these forced parties that he was returning from. It had been much like the other parties and his throat was sore from all the talking. The only saving grace had been that Troen had been there sharing the burden of telling stories. At least he had attracted most of the women and left Elwar with the more sensible portion of the guests to entertain.

He had also had some time to talk with the captain and find out what his plans for the future were. Since arriving the small group had scattered and not

really seen each other outside the official celebrations. It saddened the wizard to some extent, but at the same time he was happy to once again have at least some time for himself and the experiments.

Troen on the other hand had found himself out of a job. The emperor had claimed *The Wind Saber* for himself and the imperial navy. Since the elf's old ship had been wrecked he was now without a vessel to captain, though several merchants and nobles had approached him with proposals. Still, he had been paid well and had no need to work for some time so he was considering visiting his homeland. He had been away for a long time.

In his slightly drunken state the elf had admitted that Nala Temera owed him a ship and that he was thinking of collecting on that debt. As a member of the elven High Council she was certainly in a position to fund a ship of any kind with ease, perhaps even more so than the Ramyn empire.

At that time Elwar had not given it much thought, but now, as he walked through the streets with slightly unsteady steps, an idea began to develop in his mind. A drunken grin appeared on his face as more of the idea formed, took shape and began to fill the nooks and crannies of his mind.

Oh, how brilliant it would be.

His steps hastened and it did not take long for him to reach the Towers of Magic and cross the bridge. He took a transport disc to the first residential floor and stormed through the corridors until he found the right door. He slammed it open without knocking and entered the room.

"Yerny, wake up!" he shouted loud enough to wake up everyone in the nearby rooms.

The gnome snapped awake and shot up into a sitting position and looked around all wild eyed. As he realized it was only Elwar, a grumpy expression grew on him.

"You do realize it's the middle of the night, don't you?" the gnome demanded. He noted the slightly drunken appearance of his master and the frown on his face deepened. Yerny had never been much of a party goer and after the initial ceremonies he had chosen to retire from the spotlight and return to working behind the scenes. It suited him better.

"I have an idea," said Elwar enthusiastically, completely ignoring the protests presented at him. He summoned a small orb of light so they didn't have to talk in darkness..

Yerny groaned. An idea, in the middle of the night no less. But he knew it would be quickest to just listen to what Elwar had to say. "What is it?" he asked and rubbed his eyes.

"I ran into Troen at the party tonight," said Elwar as he took a seat in the single chair in the room. "He told me he's owed a ship by the elven High Council."

"And?" asked Yerny after a moment of silence.

"And I think we should use that to form a company," said Elwar. "We can use the designs of *The Wind Saber* along with all the improvements we have in mind and we'll be the first ones with a flying ship outside the imperial fleet. We can start a company to transport goods and people to anywhere in the world. Just think of it. With the profits we'd be free to do anything we wanted. Any experiment we can come up with!"

Even half asleep Yerny had to admit the idea had potential. Coming from Elwar it was a surprisingly mundane and sensible proposition.

"With the backing of the elves, maybe we can even build the ship from elf wood!" mused Elwar excitedly.

"Did you ask Troen whether he'd agree to something like this?" asked Yerny.

Elwar blinked. "No, but why wouldn't he? It's an opportunity of a lifetime."

"He might not want to be tied down like that. He is sort of an wanderer," reminded Yerny.

Elwar waved his hand dismissively. "It's us. Of course he'll go for it. He knows he'll be free to sail with the ship while we manage the other aspects of the business."

"Perhaps you should ask him before getting too excited," said Yerny. "He might refuse."

"But you can't deny the potential of it," replied Elwar, not wanting to give up on the idea just yet nor even put it to rest until he spoke with Troen.

"No, no I can't," admitted Yerny.

Elwar continued to lay out his plan for a fair bit longer, robbing the gnome of

the rest of the nights sleep.



“That hit the spot,” sighed Millard in a content voice as he lowered his tankard of beer and let out a burp. It felt good to be drinking something of decent quality instead of what they had had to be content with on *The Wind Saber*.

“Can't argue with that,” said Reyes from opposite to the bald man. He had a similar tankard in hand and a bit of foam stuck to the moustache had had began to grow.

“Got to say, it feels good to be back home,” added Travis and smacked down his tankard with a loud bang of the table. Millard had convinced him to try something stronger than beer and it was starting to show.

“And we got Elir home safely,” the young sailor continued. He took pride in the fact that they had repaid the priestess without her even knowing it. Though they had not seen much of her since their return they still held fond feelings for her.

The two older sailors nodded silently in approval of the younger man's remark.

They were at one of the better quality taverns that dotted the harbour side streets. It was a quiet time of the day so no one had come to pester them for a story and it suited them just fine. They were there to spend some time together and discuss, instead of entertaining others.

The table they were sitting at had the remnants of a meal. An entire roasted chicken picked to the bone, a few potatoes left on the large platter along with a slice of bread. They had enjoyed better meals ever since getting paid just as handsomely as they had been promised. If they chose to, they would not have to work at all during the coming winter.

Since returning, their life had been a lot more peaceful than those of their leaders. They did not get invited to parties and the official ceremonies passed by quickly. Occasionally they would be asked to share stories as they went to certain taverns, but other than that they were left to their own devices.

“What do you suppose the captain's going to do?” asked Travis after taking

another gulp of the clear liquid in his mug. He grimaced afterwards, but soon smiled happily as the warmth spread through his insides.

They knew Troen was now without ship. There had been some grumbling from the crew as the emperor had swooped in and laid claim to *The Wind Saber*, but there was not much they could do about it. He had after all funded it so claiming it did not belong to him would have been ridiculous.

“You mean you haven't heard?” asked Millard and downed the last of his beer. He waved for one of the women serving drink to bring him another.

“Hear what?” asked Travis.

“Troen and Elwar are putting together a shipping company,” said Millard.

“How will they manage that? They don't have enough money to buy a ship,” protested the young sailor.

“Apparently the elven High Council owes Troen a ship,” replied Reyes and eyed Millard as he dropped a coin to the girl who brought him his drink.

Travis tried to whistle, but managed to only blow out air from his mouth. Looking a bit embarrassed, he took a sip from his mug and grabbed one of the potatoes from the platter. He took a big bite out of one end and was pleased to find the insides still lukewarm.

“The way I heard it they plan to build the same sort of ship as *The Wind Saber*,” said Millard. “Only with all the improvements that crazy wizard and the captain have thought of.”

“Where'd you hear that?” asked Reyes. While the three of them were close, they did not see each other every day any more nor did they live together, so they heard different things from different sources.

“I ran into Yerny down by the harbour,” explained Millard. “He was getting some things from *The Wind Saber* that Elwar had forgotten he hid in his cabin. He told me about.”

“You think the captain will remember us and ask to join the crew once that ship is done?” wondered Travis.

“The way he worked us, I doubt he has forgotten about us,” offered Reyes. It was true. Out of all the crew the three of them had been worked the hardest and they had gotten the most responsibilities. And they had not failed the captain so

it was likely he thought well and highly of all of them.

“A quiet winter and then off to a new adventure in the spring with a new ship,” said Travis with a wide grin.

“There better not be any black eyed murderers and walking torches this time around,” muttered Millard.

All three men burst out laughing and ordered some more drinks. The day was still young and they had gold to spend.

One can not overstate the importance of the Elwar Soran expedition. It changed the world in ways no one at the time could foresee, but those of us looking into the past can see.

Some say it would have been better if he had never set out on the journey with *The Wind Saber*. These are the sort of people who believe that if you do not know about something, it can not harm you.

I tend to call them fools.

The dark times that followed would have happened regardless of Elwar Soran. Their treatment of the Fireborn was inconsequential to the war starting. The driving ideology behind them is not compatible with the rest of the sentient beings living in this world.

The conflict was unavoidable.

Given what has happened it is very easy to get bogged down in the bad things that have taken place. It's easy to forget the good things that have come out of it. It's easy to forget the improvements steam technology brought about as it gained more widespread use. It is even easier to forget the immense leaps in technology that the raging conflicts brought about as people sought ways to improve their lives and ensure the safety of their loved ones.

This is something many seem to forget: magic is an art for the few while technology benefits the masses.

That is why the shift has happened. Where things used to be accomplished with magic, much has been replaced with technology. Magicians are a rare breed, but anyone can operate a machine if given the proper instructions. It was an inevitable shift as we took our steps into the larger world. The few could no longer support us all and we needed tools to fend for ourselves.

It has allowed us to expand beyond our wildest dreams and build relationships with beings that are both fantastical and horrifying, familiar and welcoming. We have built something that is beyond what our ancestors could have ever dreamed of.

It is humbling to think much of it can be traced to what a single man came up with and a small group of adventurous individuals set out to accomplish. It is

quite possible that we would not be here today had Elwar Soran not pushed the boundaries of magic and discovered what he did.

Who else can claim such an accomplishment to their name?

– *Severnus Gredor*

Excerpt from The History of The Union