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UKIYO

By

Robert Ritchie
B.A., University of Louisville, 2006

A Creative Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of the University of Louisville
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Master of Arts

Department of English
University of Louisville
Louisville, Kentucky

May 2006

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Robert Ritchie
B.A., University of Louisville, 2006

A Thesis Approved on

April 14, 2006

by the following Thesis Committee:

Thesis Director

DEDICATIONS

This thesis is dedicated to the following:

Larry Ritchie, my late father, for always being there for me in life, and who in death,
continues to guide my heart every single day

Pam Reneer, my mother, and Evelyn Ritchie, my grandmother, whose sacrifices go
uncounted but never unnoticed

Shawn Ritchie, my brother, for introducing me to the genre so very many years ago

Michael Williams, Professor of Humanities, University of Louisville, for his unwavering
support through the years; an exceptional professor, a patient mentor, and the very
definition of friend

Jeff Skinner, Professor of Creative Writing, University of Louisville, for allowing me to
pursue this project, and whose unexpected and much appreciated zeal was a constant
motivator

Josh Roberts, Jeremy Ross, Danny Sizemore, Jasmine Kendall, Andrew Willis, Tony
Merriam and Leonard Walker, Jr., friends who have borne the insufferable task of being
this writer's springboard—without their support over the years, I fear I would never have
written a page

Susan Ryan and Jon Rieger, for taking time out of their busy schedules to serve on my
committee

Magic, for adding that extra flavor to life

Dreams—they do come true, and “Happily Ever After” was never simply a trope of
fiction

ABSTRACT

UKIYO

Robert E. Ritchie

April 14, 2006

This creative thesis follows the opening story arc to a larger fiction project in the genre of high fantasy fiction. Structurally and stylistically, by incorporating contemporary contributions to the genre from Japanese popular culture, this story immerses itself in American-Japanese syncretism. This work confronts two central challenges: first, as an American writer, to faithfully integrate conventions originating from a Japanese cultural context; second, to find written analogues for conventions currently anchored to the visual mediums of anime, manga and video games.

What post-war Japan has made of the high fantasy genre increasingly saturates American pop culture. It remains to be seen how Americans will re-contextualize modern Japanese high fantasy. Working with central concepts to Japanese high fantasy, such as Murakami's superflat, Edo Period's ukiyo-e art style, and Shinto's *ch'eng* spiritual state, this story attempts to participate in a paradigm shift occurring in the visual channels of American pop culture.

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SPECIAL READER'S NOTE

This text is the first arc of a novel. Because of the spatial limitations of a thesis it is an incomplete narrative. Be advised that the following narrative is further broken due to two missing chapters, but I have included chapter summaries of the missing chapters to ensure that the reader does not get disoriented by the narrative gap. The text follows chapters 1-3, breaks for a plot summary of chapter 3's second half, along with chapters 4-5, then picks back up for chapters 6-7. This gap occurred because I initially envisioned being able to tackle the entire first arc of the novel within the confines of the thesis boundaries, in an attempt to provide some level of closure for the reader. Upon hitting the thesis boundaries after writing the opening chapters and the closing chapters, I quickly came to realize that I had underestimated the amount of material I had and expect now that when fully developed, this arc will likely exceed 120 pages. To solve this problem, Jeff decided it would be best if I focus on developing the material I already had and let the gap hang, rather than force the middle to fit both ends. Please consider the special obstacles of the novel form when evaluating the completed material.

CHAPTER I

THE PROMISE OF A BETTER LIFE

The shutters were locked tight. Dees had installed them herself, for she was not a morning person. It was part of her effort to renovate her dilapidated new home. She wasn't complaining though—she had gotten what she paid for. A fortnight's work had been enough to turn the ground floor into a presentable pet shop. But if Dees was not a morning person, she was an even worse carpenter. Slight alignment errors in the shutters allowed a thin, yellow beam of daylight to seep through, straight at her. Moaning, she rolled over to one side, shielding herself with a pillow, seeking to ignore the light and finish resting. Then an uncharacteristic noise startled her. The echo of music, laughter and shouts made her aware of two things: The Midsummer's Eve festival in Tanalia Ford had begun, followed closely by the realization that she was oversleeping for her own grand opening!

Knocking sounds echoed up to her room from the first floor. After several more raps, the first prospective customer for the Exotic Pet Lair went away disappointed. Dees lay there a moment longer, gathering her wits and allowing sleep's fog to fully dissipate. Slowly, excitement began to bubble up in her as the whirl of celebration outside started to saturate her thoughts. It was Midsummer's Eve—a day of renewal and prosperity.

After long years of wandering, today was the perfect day for Dees to start a new life within the inviting walls of Tanalia Ford. Tanalia Ford was ideal for several reasons: as a central docking place for ships sailing down the Tershi River, it was busy enough for

inhabitants to remain anonymous. More importantly, no one knew her here. Her enemies were out of reach. Tanalia Ford was far enough away from her homeland to avoid the shadows of a tortured past. The friendly population, the gentle weather, and the lively taverns would all help her move forward, Dees hoped.

She closed her eyes again, as if wakefulness threatened to let that hope escape—only to pop them open wide in surprise. A wet nose monotonously poked at her head. Before her was her constant companion, a rather curious creature. Small enough to fit in the palm of a hand, it was an albino squirrel, sporting a snowy white coat and piercing, beady little red eyes. Yet, stranger than a normal creature, he seemed mage-stitched, hyper-natural, with three tails flowering out from the top of his hind-quarters like a peacock. All three tails flicked in annoyance. The red eyes shone in agitation. He chirped, trying to capture the attention of his master and friend.

Dees shoved him aside, muttering flatly, “I’ll be up in a minute, Whittle. Go away.”

Whittle was not so easily daunted. He was hungry and bored, and hated both the same. He cocked his head sideways, deliberating on the wisdom of provoking Dees. Deciding it wasn’t necessarily a bad idea, he continued pecking at her. Dees grabbed her pillow and lazily swung at him. The pillow connected. Whittle hit the floor with a soft thud. He sprang right back up though, full of his master’s stubbornness. Whittle strutted across the floor with purpose and climbed up to the windowsill. Master and familiars’ eyes met. He waited for her reaction.

Dees warned, “Don’t you do it.”

With obvious pleasure, Whittle immediately unfitted the latch with his nose,

squeezed in behind the shutters, and shoved them open wide, bathing the room a radiant yellow. Quicker this time, with a leap off the sill, Whittle avoided the next projectile.

Bravely risking the enmity of a freshly awakened human paid off for Whittle this time, as Dees surrendered, "Alright, alright, I'm up." With exaggerated effort, the girl flung herself up to a sitting position. Whittle ran circles, enacting a mock victory dance. Dees suggested, "Why don't you dance on down the stairs and wake up the critters that are actually worth something?"

Using the bed as a springboard, Whittle leapt up to mount Dees' shoulder, where he chittered excitedly. After a lengthy yawn, Dees rose, plopped Whittle on the bed, and dug through her clothes trunk, selecting her best outfit. Today was a special day after all. She put on a white top, wrapped her shoulders in a thin, see-through throw, and tied around her waistline a deep purple sarong. She fondly admired the delicate cloth in a handheld viewing glass. One of her gypsy sisters had given her this outfit as a goodbye gift when she left the caravan, "You may leave with little money, but no sister of mine will go out into the world dressed for the stables," she'd said. The several years she had spent with the caravan were good ones. They had been kind enough to take Dees in, to shelter and care for her. Dees remembered she was almost fourteen then, but soon lost track of precise time. The music, the dances, the campfires—all energy and motion—pleasantly distracted her from the regular cycles of the world. Dees' green eyes glittered in reminiscence, then shadowed over as her mind began to drift back to a more distant, darker place. Whittle, sensing his master's mood shift, leapt from the bed and clawed on the door next to the window.

Dees snapped back into the moment, shrugged her heavy thoughts off with a

quick, if faint, smile, and strolled over to join Whittle, “A little fresh air would do some good, huh boy?” She opened the door to the second-story veranda for the first time since she had moved in. Walking out onto the balcony, and overlooking the main cobble-way, Dees inhaled a deep draught of cool morning air, basking in the peaceful serenity of the milling townsmen below. Throngs of people shifted, conducting commerce, song, and dance, in a rhythm that seemed as natural as an ocean tide. Here she was, a stranger from far away places, standing above it all, alone in a sea of unfamiliarity.

“It’s different here.” She looked admiringly at avenues of laughing folk, and at bazaars overflowing with fresh fruits, vegetables, and colorful fabrics. Children scampered to and fro, in games only they knew the names and rules to. Women exchanged gossip in cool alleyways offered by large, spacious stone homes that were capped with flat, overhanging roofs. The golden sun glazed the town in a lulling calm, and highlighted Dees’ bronze skin and flared her purple hair to a brilliant amethyst. Songbirds flittered and dove above her, chirping a soothing melody.

She caressed the solid architecture around her, “I didn’t know such a place existed, Whittle. The people seem so happy. And the air, Whittle! Smell how fresh it is!”

A high-pitched voice, like that of a child’s, entered Dees’ mind like a thought, or a second mind, “The only thing I smell in the air is spice, and clove at that!” The squirrel on her shoulder let out what might have been a sneeze, but ended up more like a squeak. Dees laughed heartily. Steam rose out of a metal chimney from the building next to hers, delivering the savory aroma of soups and fire-baked goods.

Although Dees could respond to Whittle through thought, she much preferred to

talk to him out loud. It was a small way of easing the loneliness. “Ah, now I know how to keep you from waking me in the morning—a magic circle of clove around my bed.”

“You wouldn’t!”

“Hey, it’s better than the mouse traps I was going to use. So you’re allergic to spices?”

“Yeah, but I’m more allergic to you.”

“You better watch it, boy. There’s still room for you in the display window.”

Whittle straightened up and puffed his chest out, “Ha! These peasants could never afford someone as cute as me!”

“Even if they could, with that mouth of yours, they’d bring you back for a refund by the day’s end.” Whittle looked down, genuinely hurt. Dees laughed and apologized, “You know I wouldn’t trade you for the world.” She reached a nurturing hand to the wild tuft of hair on the bridge of his nose, caressing it with her thumb. He purred in response. She whispered to her companion, “Well here we are and so it begins my friend . . . a new life, in a wide world.”

Whittle took a big whiff of air. Nope. No danger. Only clove. He sighed, “Life definitely looks easier here. That means it’ll be boring.”

Dees answered with more wisdom than she knew, “It’s a port city, Whittle, and that means a lot of things, boredom the least. Just look around at all the festivities! Today will be exciting!”

Dees wondered why she was noticing the radiance of Tanalia Ford for the first time. She had been here for two weeks, and had explored the markets on several occasions to buy necessities for the shop. But she had always walked with her head

down, traveling through alleyways, shopping only at the break and closing of the market to avoid crowds, talking to no one except the merchants with whom she had dealt with, hurrying about her business, and staying inside when she had none. She understood now. Until this moment, she had only seen Tanalia Ford as a suitable hiding place. Today was different though. Maybe it was the air, maybe it was because she was opening her store today, joining the rhythm she had been avoiding. Whatever it was, she felt connected to the city around her. Today, she realized Tanalia Ford was not a refuge, but a place to live. Really live.

Dees became aware that someone in the crowd was staring up at her. The figure wore a travel-worn cloak, with hood and hair masking any discernible features. Dees smiled and waved politely. In response, the figure ducked further into the folds of the cloak and walked quickly away.

“Huh, I wonder who that was. Awful rude of them to stare like that. C’mon, Whittle, let’s go back inside and open up.”

* * * * *

A flurry of anticipation met them downstairs. Dees, having overslept, was late for her morning routine—catering to the needs of a large collection of exotic animals. A cacophony of chirps, cheeps, begging howls, and restless bestial sounds emanated from within cages barely discernable in the dimness of the room. Gold, green and blue sets of eyes shone by their own light.

Since they had moved in, instead of opening the shutters, Dees would opt for lighting an oil lamp. It seemed to Whittle that its soft illumination only highlighted the shadows. He would chide Dees every morning because this behavior worried him. It had

become the house of a sad and scared young girl—a girl who was scared of the outside world, and sad because she had to fear it.

But today, to Whittle's absolute delight, Dees energetically opened all the shutters wide, letting in a torrent of sunlight that all the caged animals met with relief. She maneuvered through the shop, between wooden and wire cages that held a splendid variety of furry, feathery and leathery wonders—birds that shone like rainbows; two small, green, furry little rodents—gerbil-like, were passing a ball between them with the force of their will; a gray creature resembling an armadillo sang with the voice of a well-played ocarina; a rare bat hung upside down from its perch, wrapped in gossamer wings that were tinted with the silver of water roiling under a proud, full moon; in a wooden crate—Dees kept the lid off—a deceptively normal brown puppy rested in a bed of straw; and resting in a glass cage in the display window, a blue lizard plopped on a rock, little flickers of electricity coursing along its skin. Dees navigated through this wondrous gauntlet, whispering sweetly to each animal as she passed, but stopping to pet the searching nose of the brown pup, “On my way dears. Sorry to keep you all waiting for so long. I’m just as hungry as you are.”

Dees reached a side door. It connected the showroom to her kitchen. Inside, pet supplies were neatly arranged on shelves and in cabinets to the left. The right-hand side was reserved for her human needs. She grabbed a knapsack and emptied a fill of meat scraps into it for the pup; from the kitchen windowsill, a tomato for the bat. Turning to a small paper stack lying ramshackle on the dining table, she spoke to Whittle, “While I’m feeding the others, and making lunch for us, why don’t you go ahead and finish drawing those posters. I’m going to post a few more on the docks and we could probably still use

a few more in the main thorough-way. That festival outside will make for good advertisement.”

Whittle unsaddled from Dees’ shoulder, onto the table. He grabbed a few flyers by the edge with his mouth, and then abruptly spit them out. He spread his feet out in an attack stance, staring at her fiercely. His tails stuck up straight in the air. He thought at her in a shrill squeak, “No!”

“What is the matter with you?”

“I hate that ink! I’m not just some tool for your convenience. I’m top pedigree, a testament to squirrels everywhere. I shouldn’t be reduced to this kind of work.”

“So you admit you’re a squirrel now?”

Whittle was taken aback, “Squirrel-like, I mean. But that’s not the point!” Now he was almost whiney, dramatically laying his face on the table and covering his ears with his two front paws, “I hate that ink!”

Dees chuckled and replied, “And I hate rodent back-talk, but I put up with it, don’t I? Look, just make nine more. I’ll wash the ink off when we’re done with breakfast. It’s water-based. It’ll come right off. I promise.”

Whittle glanced at the tips of his tails with skepticism—they were still gray from the posters he made several days ago. Dees reinforced, “Those who don’t work don’t get any lunch.”

He whimpered pitifully, aware that he had no choice. Not even his stubborn brain could resist the growls of hunger that rumbled in his stomach. So Whittle relented, dutifully walked over to a cup of black ink that Dees put onto the table, dipped his three tails into the ink, turned his back to the blank papers behind him, and thoughts of how

splendid a juicy pomegranate would taste as he drew posters for the Exotic Pet Lair.

Satisfied, Dees went about the business of caring for the animals out front.

* * * * *

Outside, Dees closed the front door and flipped a sign over. *Please Come In* became *Out to Lunch*. Then she adjusted a shoulder bag that was squirming around her waist. The ends of several rolled up flyers poked out the top, swaying back and forth. Lurking in the little meadow of parchment was Whittle, who climbed his way to the rim of the bag and peeped out.

Whittle was dreadfully embarrassed at the moment. When Dees washed the paint from his tails, some of the color remained. So now one tail was gray, one tail was blue, the other black, and all of them spindly from being wet—a condition animals universally abhor. And worst of all, he was still hungry. Turns out, they were out of pomegranates and Dees had had the audacity to think that peanuts could be an acceptable substitute.

Dees spoke to him with slight agitation, “C’mon. Get out of there.” She slipped a hand into the bag and fished around for him.

Whittle fired back, “I will not!”

“Look, I’m sorry it didn’t come out. But it’s not that bad. It’s . . . festive, and hey, we’re at a festival.”

Whittle bit a finger and Dees yanked her hand back, “Ouch! What was that for?”

He dramatically rattled, “The hun-ger . . . the hun-ger is con-sum-ing me.”

“Fine, stay in there until I can get to a fruit stand—but sit still.”

Whittle finally relaxed. Dees entered a stream of slow-moving townsmen and inched her way down the road towards the nearest fruit vendor.

CHAPTER II

THE AMAZING SHOCKING LIZARD!

From the bobbing deck of the *Lady Luck*, Arreth saw the famous pinnacles of Tanalia Ford's locks over the horizon. They shimmered silver under the full sun and open sky, a beacon of inviting comfort for weary sailors. The hot summer air made the city ripple and waver like a disturbed puddle, and Arreth fancied that he saw the tips of the pinnacles clambering above each other for attention. He ran to the prow of the ship with irrepressible excitement and leaned out over the rails, nearly lurching overboard when the small ship caught a thick rapid head-on.

A stern reprimand made Arreth turn around in childlike fear, half expecting his master to loom over him with disapproval. Instead, he met the cold eyes of the deck foreman. *Shew, master is not here*, he told himself. He was still unaccustomed to his new freedom. This was the first time he had been away from his monastery and out of his order's constant scrutiny. The grizzly foreman spat tobacco on the deck in disgust, and muttered to himself. Arreth, whose senses were heightened through constant training, heard every word: "Jump and be done with it. Crazy monks. The old ones are wise as trees, but the young ones are dumber than asses."

Arreth stiffened his composure in complete embarrassment. Remembering his breathing exercises, he inhaled sharply and exhaled slowly. He unclenched his hands from the *Lady Luck's* rails. There. He was calm now, but disappointed in how quickly his composure had buckled to two powerful emotions: desire and fear.

This journey was the final stage of his training, not a vacation. From his belt—a simple rope tied in a square knot that loosely secured his equally plain and mid-cut hakama—Arreth withdrew a scroll that from the looks of it, was older than he was. Planting his legs square with his shoulders to brace against the rocking boat, he unfolded the parchment across the banister.

It was a map. An incomplete map though, marking his monastery in the northern edge with the character for ‘rhythm’, the sprawling Hartim fields separating the monastery from the continent’s capital city, Shangril, and the great Tershi River that steered him now towards the southern edge of the map, to a small dot that had *Tanalia Ford* scribbled next to it, looking like a stenographer’s error next to the large orb that represented Shangril. Beyond Tanalia Ford? The world, a vast ineffable that to Arreth bore little difference from the empty midnight sky.

And hopefully as quiet, Arreth mused. He was glad to be arriving at a city closer to the rhythms of nature, and away from the cacophony that was Shangril. Sure, Tanalia Ford was the continent’s most bustling port city, but beyond the port, the city proper hushed to a low whisper as the southern portion of the town gave way to, well, the edge of Arreth’s map.

Surely he would be able to relax here. Arreth looked up from his map when a shadow loomed over him. His eyes followed the shadow out. Just up ahead, it connected to the base of a high-soaring pinnacle. Shooting up out of the ground at least three hundred feet, the majestic piece of architecture held Arreth in awe. He did not know what metal it was made of, but it was highly reflective, a dazzling silver that made him flinch and shield his eyes. Arreth’s gaze was fixed on the monument as the ship began to

pass it, marking their entry into the first of Tanalia Ford's two locks. As the ship passed disturbingly close to the southern bank that the pinnacle rested in, Arreth observed to his utter disbelief, that the pinnacle was not made of metal, but of luminous, high-polished stone. He continued to wonder at the sight, failing to match it up with any stone he had ever heard of, until a steam-whistle let off a shrill warning, signaling the captain to bring the ship to a lurching halt.

Jarred from his trance, and somewhat alarmed, Arreth looked around and for the first time; he noticed a shorter, younger boy standing at the rail with him. Leaning against the rail, the boy rested his hand on his chin, and stared up at Arreth with a wry smile and amused, blue eyes. A black bandanna, tied around his head like he was a pirate, was unable to completely mask his midnight blue hair, which stuck out the back, shoulder-length. The intensity with which he stared made Arreth slightly uncomfortable. Arreth asked—rudely, he realized too late, “Is something wrong?”

The boy effeminately brought his hand to his hip, looked back towards the steam-whistle, and giggled, “No . . . nothin's wrong. We just have to stop so the lock-keepers can lower the water level. Here'n a few, we'll drop down a little bit, they'll open up the other lock, and we'll slide up to the docks—wham, bam, home!” The boy accompanied his answers with animated gestures, pointing to the steam-whistle, tapping the floor of the deck, sweeping a finger towards the next lock and the adjacent docks, finishing the performance by slamming a fist onto the rail. Arreth paid little attention to what he said though, because he was thrown off balance by the feminine voice. He only caught the tail end of the boy's answer.

“Ho—home? You live here?”

The boy laughed again, fingered a hoop earring, and affirmed that yes, Tanalia Ford was where he lived. Then the boy counter-interrogated, “But you, yer certainly a stranger, no deny’n. Never seen a get-up like yours before. Wear’n a dress ‘round town like that’ll get you the stares. Folk’ll think yer a girl.”

Arreth took amused offense at the irony, but thought better of reversing the jest, “It is . . . not a dress. It is a hakama. Its loose design allows the martial artist to fight with unrestricted movement.”

The boy seemed impressed, “Fascinatin’. Never thought about dresses that way before.” Aggravated at the boy’s continued goading, Arreth looked back toward the pinnacle. He heard the boy follow up, “You know, ya ain’t supposed stare directly at it. Hurts the eyes.”

Arreth forgot about the awkwardness of the boy he was talking to and turned back to him, “What is it made out of? Who built that?”

The boy shrugged, smacked his lips, and responded, “Dunno. Was here before me, and word has it, was here before the town. We didn’t build these docks; these docks built us. Nobody knows that stone either, and nobody ever seen it anywhere else. Folk say it’s a relic, from a diffen’t age.”

Arreth was about to comment, but the ship jolted, scaring him livid. He noticed the river begin to slowly sink down (or was the bank beginning to rise?). The boy gave him a trust-me nod, “Completely normal. Don’t worry.” Arreth relaxed a little and allowed himself to enjoy the unfamiliar, visceral experience. Arreth was again dazzled with wonder as he saw the river disappear behind him. In its place, a dam surfaced, indicating that their elevation was lowering. Up ahead, the current swirled and sloshed as

the water levels evened out. Arreth finally responded, "This age is strange enough for me."

The boy looked serious now, lifting his gaze further down the river, past Tanalia Ford, past the horizon and the sun, to behold something that Arreth could not see. The boy whispered, his voice wet with longing, "I only hope it gets stranger, you know?" He turned to smile at Arreth, his eyes, once again, glittering with intensity. In them, Arreth saw far beyond his map, saw flit just within reach, a horizon that led to a world he had never walked in.

The steam-whistle blew again. The steam hung in the air for a moment, congealed, and, swept away by a sudden breeze, snatched the moment away on a lazy drift towards Tanalia Ford. Arreth and the curious boy next to him averted their gazes, both conscious of the awkward moment, and both quietly relieved at its passing. The *Lady Luck* sputtered forward again, towards the nearing docks, which while not bright like the pinnacles, were made out of the same polished and sculpted stone.

Arreth was feeling more comfortable around the boy now—he seemed nice enough, and certainly seemed to know a lot about Tanalia Ford. He could be an invaluable guide. "So what were you doing up in Shangril, by yourself?"

The boy laughed, "Visitin' my mother. Her and my father don't take up too well together anymore. He's a good man. He runs the Magic Guild in Tanalia Ford, but mother always tried to wear the robes, if you know what I mean. So when I get a chance, I steal away to the big city to see her. 'Sides, a lot more fun up there. More for me to do. I just come back early this time 'round 'cause of the festival. Only time of the year this place is all that exciting. Folk come from all 'round because Tanalia Ford, while

generally unimposing, throws some loud parties. You'll have a blast while yer here."

Arreth sighed. *So much for peace and quiet, if this party is as loud as this kid.*

Outwardly, he smiled, "So, what is yer—your name, if I may ask?"

The boy grinned further, "I was wondering when you were gonna ask me that, stranger. Alhandra. And you're?"

"Arreth—wait a minute; isn't Alhandra a girl's name?"

Alhandra brought her hands to her loose leggings and squatted down to her knees with laughter. Arreth blushed in embarrassment as Alhandra's flamboyance drew curious glances from other passengers. "Yeah, I believe it's a girl's name. Ain't you ever seen a girl before? You really are somethin'." Arreth cringed, petrified at his error. Without meaning to, he looked down at Alhandra's chest, wondering if a cruel joke was being played on him. Yes, Alhandra was not very well developed, but beneath her loose shirt, he could finally tell she was in fact a girl. "Wow, yer not gonna be very popular with the ladies: not askin' a gal's name till halfway through a conversation, not knowin' she's a gal, then starin' at her chest like it's buried treasure . . ." For the first time, Alhandra blushed, a little ashamed herself. "Well, I guess my chest does seem more like buried treasure, so I won't grudge you yer mistake."

Arreth's stomach churned. Now he felt like an idiot *and* a jerk. He was completely out of his element: every move he made, every word he uttered, came out all wrong, like in those terrible dreams where no matter how hard the dreamer concentrates, the body performs as a clumsy, unfamiliar tool. This feeling took him back years, to the time he struggled to learn his first fighting stance. Failure had met with failure. Through a haze of impatient anger and frustration, Arreth's movements were persistently choppy,

unnatural and awkward. And next to his master's fluid, graceful, seemingly effortless patterns, he felt like a damned fool. And now here he was after all those years of training, in child-like discomfort, under the heel of a girl who looked like a boy, whose mocking smile intimidated him more than sparring matches with his master, fumbling for an apology that wouldn't seem empty. But Alhandra put a finger to his lips, "Sshh. Don't worry 'bout it. Yer not the first person to make that mistake, you know. I'm not exactly your average girl."

He sensed the opening. Alhandra was giving him the chance to recover. He paused for a moment, reflecting on how he had learned to move beyond those staggering first steps towards basic martial arts. It was patience, confidence, and stubborn determination that led him to the plateau his master stood upon, but that remained invisible to him in his fiery youth. The trick to fighting was not just performing the moves, but inhabiting them, allowing them to become extensions of not just the body, but the mind. His master didn't fight; rather, he performed an elemental dance, synthesizing the grace of the winds, the firmness of solid earth, the adaptability of water, and the intense energy of fire. His master's parting words to Arreth, "In the end, as the monk's fighting style becomes an extension of his soul, the monk himself becomes an extension of nature. So go now Arreth, go out into the world and make yourself at home."

Upon remembering these words, Arreth felt a wave of calm wash over him. His art was the foundation of everything, even—he realized now—awkward encounters with girls. He stared back into Alhandra's eyes now and tried to become an extension of her. Searching deep inside her, he found the words he was looking for, "Well, there's nothing special about average treasure. I hear that buried's the way to go."

Alhandra harrumphed, "Careful boy. You're up to yer neck already." With a sigh of frustration, Arreth deflated again, thinking he had only made things worse, which he had been pretty sure was impossible. Alhandra widened her eyes, and tugged on the square-knot that held his hakama on, "You sure this thing isn't on too tight? Don't take a gal too seriously—or yourself for that matter. Lighten up and have a little fun, would ya?"

The ship sidled up against the pier and after another shriek of the steam-whistle, came to a full stop. Alhandra gestured to the town before them, "Yer here! Welcome to Tanalia Ford . . . my home away from home."

Passengers began to crowd the main deck. Arreth took in the sight and the breeze, fascinated by the clean architectural break between the ancient dock and the town that was attached to it. He rolled up his map and tucked it back under his belt. He looked over at Alhandra, "So what shall we get into first?" Alhandra gave no reply. She was staring off into space. Arreth noticed her fingers tapping rapidly against the railing. She was biting her lip, in thought. He slowly passed a hand in front of her face. She gasped, startled, "Huh? Ya say somethin'?"

Arreth was about to ask her what was occupying her thoughts, but the deck foreman began turning a crank to lower the gangplank. The ear-splitting grind of un-oiled metal on metal shattered Arreth's concentration. After several, pain-inducing rotations of the crank, the steam-whistle coughed twice, signaling the passengers to disembark. The crowd tromped down the plank and slowly dissipated in various directions. Arreth and Alhandra hung back a bit so as not to get smashed on the plank. Arreth complained, "That boat makes a dying Whortle sound like a love song!"

Alhandra cringed, “Don’t yell!”

Arreth, “What?! . . . Oh.” He twisted a finger in his ear to stop the ringing.

Alhandra shook her head. After they scuttled out of the way the throng heading for the gate that emptied into town, she asked, “What were ya asking me up there a minute ago?”

Arreth, recalling his earlier question, said, “Oh, I was just going to ask what we should get into—what the?” Arreth shook his head, wondering if all the excitement of today had gotten to him. About five feet up a nearby lamp pole was the weirdest animal he had ever seen.

Alhandra turned to see what had caught Arreth’s attention. “The rodents’ve certainly gotten weirder since last time I was here.”

Arreth brought a hand up over his eyes, to shield them from the sun for a better view, “What is it? And what is it doing?”

Alhandra scrunched her face into a thoughtful mess, “Dunno . . . and dunno.”

Both stood with their heads cocked in confusion as a furry white critter with three multi-colored tails clung to the side of the pole, wrestling to unroll a piece of parchment. Plastering itself against the pole in the pose of a flying squirrel, it pushed the paper open with its nose. Reaching with a blue tail, the animal withdrew a small tack from a small backpack. Positioning the tip of the tack against the bottom half of the parchment with the blue tail, he uncurled his black tail halfway—revealing a small rock. It slammed the rock-wielding tail down. Thunk! The critter convulsed in pain as the rock missed the tack and hit the blue tail. With great effort, the creature held on without dropping the tack. On the second try, it hit its mark, firmly anchoring the paper. Now the creature had a

much easier time nailing the top tack in.

Alhandra sucked air between her teeth, “Oh gosh. The poor thing. I hope its okay.” They walked over to the animal. It wiped its forehead with one paw, puffed in relief, dropped the rock, then began shimmying down the pole. Halfway down, it noticed Arreth and Alhandra’s presence; it turned its head around to get a better look. Arreth took a step back and Alhandra laughed when they saw the critter’s face—stained red with pomegranate juice. The animal didn’t know it, but it looked like a fiendish, blood-frenzied raccoon. Its ears dropped in embarrassment, and then it leaped off the pole onto the ground, glared at them, and chirped. Somewhere else in town, Dees couldn’t believe what she heard. The animal then turned around, flicked its middle tail up in the air at Arreth and Alhandra, and stomped off toward town.

Alhandra gaped, shocked that she had just been told off by a rodent, “Looks like it’s gonna live. Fascinatin’.”

Arreth was confused, “Did it hurt its tail?”

Alhandra looked at him blankly, “No, Arreth. Just its pride, I think.”

Arreth walked over to read the sign the animal had so laboriously posted. A large, rugged traveler bumped into him and told him to watch where he was going. Arreth raised his hands up in apology and continued on. What caught his attention was a very angular drawing that looked like it had been scribbled hurriedly, and resentfully. Alhandra studied it, “Well huh. Interestin’. A blue lizard . . . those lines darting off it—electricity?”

Arreth responded, “Well, I guess so. The writing says ‘*The Amazing Shocking Lizard—only at the Exotic Pet Lair*’.”

“Well, there you go then. There’s something for ya to do.”

“For me to do? You running off?”

Alhandra shifted around, pulled a dagger from a sheath at her belt and fidgeted with it, not looking Arreth directly in the eye, “Got some business I need to take care of first. Family stuff . . . you know.”

Arreth was visibly disappointed, “Oh.”

Alhandra regained her composure, putting her hand on her hip again and smacking her lips, “Tell ya what. You go explore around a little bit. Go see some sights. Have some fun. I’ll catch up with ya later.”

Arreth reluctantly agreed, becoming a little scared that he was back on his own again. “Oh . . . okay. I’ll just be . . . walking around . . . aimlessly.”

Alhandra looked at the sky and around the pier, and then back at Arreth, “Best day for it. Nice meeting ya, and I’ll see you later.” Holding the point of her dagger, she saluted him with it, turned away and strolled purposefully to the main gate.

Arreth stumbled forward, stuttering, “Wha—wha . . . huh—how are you going to find me?”

Alhandra snickered, “I told ya. This is my home away from home. I know every street and alley. Now stop worrying yourself dead and enjoy the festival.” Alhandra walked off, leaving Arreth on the docks, alone and feeling somewhat vulnerable. He pored over the poster again. After a few moments consideration, he ripped it off its tacks, rolled it up, stuffed it under his belt, and walked nonchalantly into Tanalia Ford.

CHAPTER III

FRIENDLY COMPETITION

Dees swiped her hands across one another, shaking off the imaginary dirt of easy work. Giving the poster she had just nailed up one last look-over, she nodded. Her task was finished. Her satchel was empty and Whittle was taking care of the rest. She needed to get back to the pet shop, or she'd never make any business! She hoped that Whittle wasn't causing any trouble—she had heard his vulgar insult earlier and wondered who it was directed against. After scarfing down the pomegranate she bought him earlier, he had been all smiles, so she knew he wasn't still brooding over this morning's incident.

She decided it would be quicker to cut over to an alley and return to the pet shop through the back ways. The alleyways would keep her from getting stuck in the logjam of people filling the main street, and from being distracted by all the vendors—she had already spent too much of what little money remained on trinkets: a goldwood ring, a swan-shaped hairpin, and scented oil. Another pass through that tangle of merchants, and they'd be flat broke for sure. Whittle would probably complain about such unnecessary purchases, especially when they could have spent that money on more pomegranates for him. But she was having fun (Later, Whittle berated her for unnecessary purchases, especially when Dees could have bought him more pomegranates; Dees defended herself for having fun; she would never know that beneath his profuse and completely insincere objections, he thought that her having a little bit of fun for a change was worth every gold piece they had, and, since it had come to it—every stained hair on his tails).

In the shadow of the nearest alleyway, Dees brought her wrist to her nose, and sniffed the aroma of the new oil—Aether Dew. The scent brought back the crackle of campfires, the glitter of far off stars, the shrill squeak of reed flutes, the click and clack of dulcimers, bronze skin tracing ancient patterns under the night sky . . .

Thud! A sharp pain to the knee. Dees twirled to see a boy sprawled on the ground, slightly dazed. The boy readjusted his bandanna, and then winced in pain, doubling over to hold his elbow. Dees squatted down next to him, “Hey there. Did you hurt your elbow? Let me see it.” The boy looked at her suspiciously, then slowly held the injured part up for her appraisal. Dees carefully twisted the elbow left, then right, and finally harrumphed. “Looks like you’re going to live. It’s just a little burnt from scraping it on the cobble-stone. Just enough to teach you to watch where you’re going.”

The boy lowered his eyes, embarrassed. “Sorry, miss. Didn’t mean to run into ya.”

Dees was ashamed at having yelled at the poor child; he hadn’t meant any harm. “Well, I’m sorry for snapping at you. You just startled me.” She stood up and offered him a hand, sweetening her voice, “Here, let me help you up and get you back on your way.”

The boy smiled and allowed Dees to pull him up to his feet. He swatted a layer of dirt from his back and behind. He then extended his hand to shake hers. Dees shook it. The boy then brought his other hand up, cupped it over hers, and shook again, with more vigor, “Again miss, sorry about smashin’ into ya.” He released his grip and backed out of the alley, waving with one hand, and bringing the other up behind his head to scratch a blue patch of stray hair “Have a good day.” The boy disappeared out into the crowds.

Dees brushed her hands across one another, this time wiping away real dirt.

Something felt out of place.

Her new ring was gone.

And it wasn't lying on the ground.

Dees couldn't believe it—she'd been had! Dees hesitated. She needed to get back to the pet shop if she was going to make any business today, but her legs began moving the other way in pursuit of the vagrant. She had already waited too long to get a clear bead on where the kid went—he was fast, and had the home-field advantage. She didn't see him anywhere, but down the road, saw several people jilt suddenly, as if pushed. One man raised a fist and shouted. Dees plunged forward, hopeful. Within seconds, the same group of people jilted suddenly again, pushed—the same man raised a fist and shouted as Dees charged through them with total disregard, shifting back into the alleyways. Left, down another corridor, between a row of houses, almost twisting her ankle on ancient, uneven cobblestone. At the next intersection, Dees skidded to a halt, steadied her now-rapid breathing.

The thief was before her, about thirty feet away, casually relaxing against the wall. The rascal did not notice her yet, but was deep in thought, appraising the goldwood ring that had just moments before belonged to another. Dees took the opportunity to size up her opponent. Dees' foe had taken off the bandanna, wrapped it around the wounded elbow. The blue sweep of hair, the earrings, the fine facial features, a new set of contours at the chest Dees had failed to notice before, all combined to inform her about the true nature of the thief. Dees had learned to read people long ago—her empathic link to Whittle had rubbed off on her, heightening her sense of empathy more generally. A barrage of insights chained together in an instant. This wasn't some kid. This was an

experienced criminal, who maintained a clever disguise. Clever meant dangerous. Dees wasn't much of a fighter; years ago she had been trained in basic combat—everyone who lived in the barrens learned how to fight, and certainly she had been in her share of childhood scuffles, but she hadn't used those skills since then . . . no, not since then. Dees' will began to crack. She had little confidence in a direct confrontation. Perhaps she should let the matter rest; it was just one little ring . . .

Nonsense! Cleverness sometimes led to smug arrogance too. An exploitable weakness. And the girl down the alley wore a satisfied smile that began to eat away at Dees. The girl had made a fool of her. And now she was leaning comfy against a wall—she probably thought Dees was too gullible to even notice the ring was gone! So the girl had made a mistake that Dees could monopolize on—she was open to a sneak attack. But then, something unexpected happened.

Deep within, something stirred. Dees gasped. A feeling she had known only once before seized her. Awakened long ago by anger, since then suppressed by fear, an alien power pulsed within her veins again. 'No, not again!' Dees gritted her teeth, fought to control her emotions. But it was like falling outside of herself. Just as surely as Dees could not reverse gravity, she could not hold back what was within her. Tremulous, her body submitted to a force that would no longer be denied. In a swift burst, some loose gravel near her feet levitated off the ground, as power from the air around her consolidated to a point just outside her forehead. There, came into being a translucent, turquoise sphere, marble-sized. Dees wanted to yell at the thief to run, but had no time.

The thief, satisfied by her catch, flicked the goldwood treasure up into the air.

Perhaps, Dees thought in the space of a moment, there was still time though, to change targets. She focused her attention on the ring as it hung in the air, glittering in the sunlight. At that moment, the orb in front of her forehead collapsed into a ray and shot across the alley. Dees watched in horror, hoping for the best, fearing the worst.

The thief's eyes went wide. A blue line ripped across her field of vision and engulfed the trinket that was tumbling back down. The ring accumulated a sparkling layer of ice. Taken quite by surprise, the pick-pocket watched the frosty halo drop to the ground and shatter into innumerable pieces.

Relieved, Dees fell to her knees. The levitating stones around her became governed again by natural laws, clattering against the cobblestone. The girl down the alley regained her composure, scattered the broken ice with one foot, "Nice shot! A bit spiteful, but nice shot. So, you're a caster! A caster without staff. Absolutely fascinating. Unheard of . . . It would seem, miss, that your chicanery is stronger than mine today, and I come off the fool. "

After noting that the girl was okay, Dees panicked, looked around frantically, to see if there were any witnesses. She didn't want trouble, just wanted her ring back, wanted to run her pet shop, maybe make friends, live a normal life, leave the one her magic had caused her far behind. And now it had returned. "Damned thief!"

The thief, curious at Dees' behavior, slowly drawled, "I don't think anyone noticed."

Dees froze, waiting for the girl to run screaming for a guard. She would have to run, find Whittle, and continue running. Where? She didn't know. She couldn't go back to her caravan. The last thing Dees would do is bring danger to those who had done so

much for her. She would just go, somewhere, away from people. Dees looked at the ground, and whispered in a choked voice, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to . . . do that!"

After an uncomfortable pause, Dees finally heard the girl's footsteps. But they were not hurried. Nor did they lead away. They were steady, and drawing closer. Dees peeked up. The girl was cautiously closing the gap, unafraid. Dees couldn't fight in this state. She trembled in fear at what this girl might do to her, and what her magic, if provoked, might do to the girl.

The girl closed within arms reach, and spoke, "It was your jewelry to begin with. No need to apologize to me."

Dees begged, "Don't call the guards, please."

The girl adjusted her bandanna and laughed, "And tell them what? That I robbed you and you tried to stop me? Or maybe I could tell them that a wizard without a staff attacked me . . . Tanalia Ford doesn't employ the best and the brightest, but even they wouldn't buy that. Then again, I suppose I could get you arrested for assault with an ice cube," the girl looked over her shoulder, "but the evidence seems to be melting rapidly. The regular folk here already think I'm strange, I don't want them to think I'm an idiot."

Dees couldn't help but feel silly. The girl was right. Her fears did seem rather ludicrous.

Then the girl continued, her voice more menacing now, "Instead, I think I'll kill you."

Dees recoiled, ready to defend herself. But the girl laughed again, "I'm kidding! Gosh, you're about as bad as the monk fellow I met on the boat down here." She lowered a hand down to Dees. "Anyway, my name's Alhandra. Let me try to make amends. You

helped me up back there when I swindled ya, so let me return the favor.”

Dees was grateful that the threat was defused, but was in no mood for jesting. She accepted Alhandra’s hand, stood up, but then pressed, “Well, I’m Dees. And I guess we’re even on that, but that ring wasn’t cheap.”

Alhandra leaned nonchalantly against the wall of one of the houses, “Compensation is not a problem. I was on my way to go see my brother, Kendrick. He’s with the Guild, so he’s loaded with money. I’ve been away for a while, so he’ll be so glad to see me that he’ll fork out a payment without a grumble. I’ll make sure he gives you a little extra for your trouble.”

Dees was confused, “If you can burn money off your brother, then what the heck are you stealing my stuff for?”

“Fun, naturally.”

Dees was not amused, “Naturally. Look, I don’t really have time to go see your brother. I have a business waiting for me to run. I was actually kind of hoping that since you stole my ring, you might pay me—now. You’ve troubled me enough and I see no reason to extend that trouble to this Kendrick.”

REST OF CHAPTER 3: FRIENDLY COMPETITION (PLOT SUMMARY)

*Alhandra convinces Dees to meet her brother, Kendrick. He is a wizard with the Mageguild of Tanalia Ford, an aristocratic organization of magic-users. They find him out in the festival, performing illusions for a mesmerized audience.

*Dees is in awe at the open display of magic—where she grew up, casters are rare and magic is regarded at best, suspiciously. She is not sure what to make of this town, nor at this point, herself.

*Kendrick, a portly man of young adult age, delights in his current performance: conjuring up small colored spheres of energy, and making them dance in patterns. As children “ooh” and “ahh”, he allows the lights to interact with the kids.

*Dees squeezes her way up front to get a closer look. She holds out her hand, tracing the patterns of lights as they whirl and dive in the air. Without warning, a set of lights emerges from the palm of her hand, and mimics Kendrick’s maneuvers.

*Kendrick, equally surprised, seizes the opportunity to have a little fun. He playfully accuses Dees of challenging him to a duel. She swears up and down she was not challenging him, but he goads her into a contest—to see who can put on the best show. The audience cheers them on and she relents, indulging in her powers for the first time in years.

*After a few minutes, Kendrick admits defeat and compliments Dees on her skills. Kendrick concludes the show, and after the crowd disperses, introduces himself.

*Kendrick, like Alhandra, is amazed that Dees does not have a staff. Dees really wants to chat, but decides it is time to go back to business. Alhandra brings up her debt, and Kendrick is annoyed, but as Alhandra predicted, so overjoyed at her surprise visit that he

doesn't seem to mind. He tells Dees to go back to her business, and he'll drop by with the money and for a chat in a little while. Dees doesn't trust that he will return, but is too pressed to go back to the shop to worry about it.

*Kendrick indeed keeps his word and brings her extra money for the trouble, as Alhandra again had predicted. While they converse, Arreth, the monk from the ship, wanders into the store—steered here by the poster.

*Dees shows him around the shop and he delights in the odd animals that she has for sale. Arreth pauses at one box, where a young brown dog is on his hind legs, begging for attention. Arreth pets the animal, who excitedly licks him. Arreth wonders what is so exotic about this animal, and Dees confides in him that very soon, no box in Tanalia Ford will contain him: he is supposedly a dog of rather queer breed, rumored to be able to teleport, but thus far, has not manifested any such ability. Arreth suspects Dees is lying to him but continues to play with the puppy for a little while longer.

*After more talk about Dees' powers, and her fascination with Tanalia Ford's open wizardry, Kendrick invites Dees to come visit the Mageguild. Dees at first isn't so sure it would be a good idea, but with Whittle's insistence, she relents, and agrees to accept the wizard's offer. He suggests that she may be able to sign up, or at the very least, learn more about who she is by talking to his superiors.

*As more customers enter the store, Arreth puts the dog down and takes his leave to see what other sights the festival is hiding. Kendrick and Alhandra leave as well, and Kendrick promises to come by and get her the next morning.

CHAPTER IV

SHADOWS OF A DOUBT (PLOT SUMMARY)

*The next morning, Kendrick comes by with Alhandra to take Dees to the Mageguild.

*Kendrick shows her around some of the classrooms, and she sees many wondrous sights as education in a fantasy setting looks a little different than in our world: overworked master researchers project images of themselves into their classrooms, redefining multitasking as they work on their personal projects while teaching simultaneously; Illusionist wizards teach natural science by turning their classrooms into artificial landscapes; Summoners conjure up creatures for wizards learning how to fight.

*Kendrick takes Dees to the master's tower to meet Assistant Guildmaster Kecilin: it seems that the actual Guildmaster, Kendrick's father, is away on business. Before taking her to meet with Kecilin, he wants to show off the pride and joy of Tanalia Ford: the Staff of Hyril, an ancient and powerful artifact that has lain dormant for centuries.

*They are denied access to the Staff room because of a newly issued security threat. A large man with an ominous demeanor blocks their way. Kendrick is irritated because he was not informed of the threat earlier, and because he doesn't understand why Kecilin would place this man, Talith, a visitor from the Southern Lands, in charge of Tanalia Ford's security.

*Kecilin, a middle-aged wizard who is uncomfortably direct, comes down the stairs from the top of the tower. He intercedes, explaining to Kendrick that the Mage Senate in the capital is sending out a reclamation team to retrieve the Staff for a classified program. He

further reveals that knowledge of the program has leaked out, and spies report that a thief is on the way to Tanalia Ford, ahead of the reclamation team, to steal the Staff.

*Alhandra seems withdrawn after this conversation, and soon excuses herself.

*Kecilin says that while he is rather busy, the unique circumstances of Dees' case warrant his attention, and he will see her immediately.

*Kendrick leaves Dees with Kecilin and rushes off in frustration to learn more information about this classified program, and this retrieval team that is on the way.

*In Kecilin's office, Dees is questioned about her abilities, particularly about the absence of any record of her past. Dees, at first excited, quickly becomes nervous, then scared: the interview quickly evolves into an interrogation. The exchange concludes with Kecilin accusing her of being the thief who is trying to steal the Staff. Dees protests her innocence, but Kecilin attempts to take her into custody.

*Dees fights back, and manages to escape Kecilin. She finds her way out of the Guildhouse.

*Kendrick is sent after her. When he finds Dees at her store, they sit down to talk about what happened: Kendrick's gut tells him to believe her innocence but his head tells him to obey orders.

*Before Kendrick can make a choice, Kecilin arrives and attempts to take Dees. Kendrick gets in his way and reminds him that his jurisdiction only encompasses the Guildhouse: if he wants Dees, he'll have to go through proper channels to secure a warrant for her arrest. Kecilin is furious, but knows Kendrick is right. He agrees to withdraw, and goes to Tanalia Temple, the city's priesthood and judicial body, to apply for a warrant. He is stonewalled by bureaucracy: it will take at least a day to process his request; the most

they can do now is order her to stay within the city for the duration of an investigation.

*Dees spends the day trying to find a way to prove her innocence. Finally, she decides to sneak into the Mageguild that night to catch the real thief herself.

*While spying on the Guildhouse, she is discovered and knocked unconscious. Whittle escapes and, not knowing what to do, goes back home to try and figure out what to do next.

CHAPTER V

IN GOOD FAITH (PLOT SUMMARY)

*Dees awakens in a magical containment field. Kecilin is there, with Kendrick: Kecilin wants to rub in how wrong Kendrick was about Dees.

*Kecilin says he will deal with her after the Staff has been safely delivered to the capital; there is no theft attempt this night, further incriminating Dees. Kecilin exits with Kendrick, who seems convinced of Dees' guilt. He is disappointed.

*The next day, Whittle finds Alhandra and manages to communicate to her what happened. Alhandra promises Whittle that if he stays home and behaves, she'll bust Dees out tonight. Whittle, excited, goes home to await his master's return.

*Alhandra, the real thief, was going to jettison her plan to steal the Staff, and just find a way to keep the reclamation team from reaching the capital. Now, with the 'thief' in prison, she has another opportunity: surely the guild would be patting itself on the back so hard they would let their guard down. For added measure, she decides to recruit help.

*Alhandra tracks down Arreth and suddenly attacks him: a test to see how well he can fight. Arreth easily bests Alhandra with his years of martial arts studies. Preying on Arreth's naivety, she convinces him to help her free Dees, who has wrongly been imprisoned. She has no intentions of breaking out Dees, only stealing the Staff.

*Early that next evening, Kendrick returns to Dees' prison, unexpectedly freeing her. He has finally put two and two together and figured out that his sister is the thief; he recruits Dees to help him stop her. Since the reclamation team is expected in Tanalia Ford

tomorrow, Kendrick knows that Alhandra will make her move very soon. He does not alert the guild to the real threat: he loves his sister and wants a chance to talk her out of this without getting arrested.

*Relaxed security gives Alhandra and Arreth the opening they need to get inside the Staff room. She wears a ring that she claims her mother gave her, which masks her and those immediately around her from magical scrying; thus, she and Arreth easily bypass the alarms guarding the Staff room.

*Kendrick takes Dees to his father's office. There is a secret way into the Staff room known only to Kendrick's father, Kendrick, and Alhandra. They make it to the Staff room in time to interrupt a heated argument between Alhandra and Arreth: the Staff certainly does not look like a captive Dees to Arreth and he is angered at being used.

*Kendrick and Alhandra argue for a few minutes: Kendrick trying to understand what made her try something this foolish; Alhandra revealing to Kendrick that she was sent by their mother, who lives in the capital and sits on the Mage Senate. Before Alhandra can explain, Talith's extra security measures activate: several magically crafted statues.

Suddenly both parties are forced to fight together for their very lives. Alhandra asks Kendrick to trust her and together, the four defeat the statues and steal the Staff of Hyril.

*They flee the Mageguild and hurry to a safe-house Alhandra has readied. They must flee Tanalia Ford immediately, before Kecilin can seal off the exits to the city. They gather together supplies.

*Kecilin is in his study, researching his imagined opponent—sorcerers. Word reaches him that Dees has escaped and the Staff of Hyril is gone. Inspired by historical accounts of sorcerers wielding untold powers, Kecilin prepares for what he fears will be an epic

showdown that will require his full might—a magical dual unparalleled in recent memory.

*At the safe-house, Alhandra remembers Whittle and is guilty at having tricked him. She informs Dees, who insists they make a detour to her store to retrieve her companion.

Kendrick and Alhandra escort Dees to The Exotic Pet Lair, while Arreth takes the supplies with him to the East Bridge, where they plan to regroup under its shadow.

CHAPTER VI

FORGED BY FLAME

Garren, a young man dressed in priestly garb: white pants, silk shirt and a white, silver-embroidered jacket, walked down the corridor from Tanalia Temple's prayer room. The temple was nearly empty—it usually was during a festival. Prayer was the last thing on the minds of most of the town. Garren was emptying the censors from afternoon prayer and replacing their ashes with fresh incense for tomorrow. A phalanx of censors awaited him, lining the corridor on both sides. Once he emptied the second one, he sneezed loudly: he hated this job in particular. The censors were pungent after two hours of burning powdered incense, and they always enflamed his allergies. But there was nothing he could do about it, except fulfill his priestly duties. So he went from censor to censor, and in the prayer room down the hall, his master marked his progress in sneezes, until Garren finally was out of range. Garren knew when he was out of range, and as soon as he made it to the tenth row of censors, took a break. His sinuses were just beginning to subside when the swish of a robe alerted him that a visitor had rounded the corner. Although it was not unknown to have a late night homeless person or a broke traveler from the rivers stop by for lodging, they never entered the temple without knocking, so he was startled. Garren dropped his incense pouch and it spilled in the floor. Kecilin was standing over him, and he didn't seem very happy.

"Ah, Master Kecilin. What . . . what can I do for you?" Garren crouched down to clean up his mess.

Kecilin crossed his arms, and peered down at him through a beak nose, “I’m here again, about that problem I was discussing with you yesterday.”

Garren had many duties every day, and it took him a moment to recall yesterday’s business. “Oh yes, the sorceress.”

Kecilin mocked him, “Yes, the sorceress.”

Feeling uncomfortable, Garren tried to give him the minimum response that would allow him to leave, “Your request is still processing. I told you yesterday it would take a couple of days for the council to fully consider the arrest proposal.” Having swept most of the incense back into his bag by hand, Garren spread the remainder around with his shoes and ground it into the carpet. He continued on to the next censor, as though the matter was settled.

Kecilin was in no mood for bureaucracy and followed him. “Oh . . . and while your council carefully debates the issue, the Staff of Hyril was stolen tonight just a little while ago.”

Garren paused. “Oh, now that is a problem, isn’t it.”

Kecilin thrust his hand out to the wall and blocked his progress. He bent down close to Garren’s face, “She escaped with it. And by the time your council passes judgment on the issue, she might very well be out of Tanalia Ford’s jurisdiction. When that happens, I’ll make sure you get full credit for covering this case.”

Garren cleared his throat. He was up for promotion soon. He had been in the temple for two years, and even with a perfect resume, he had been up for ‘consideration’ for a year. If he handled this right, Kecilin would make sure he would become a Templar of the Beacon—an important job. The tasks were very much the same, but he would be

responsible for upkeeping the Beacon room, where the Holy Pillar glowed. And from there, you could only go up the ladder.

“I suppose we could work out a deal. If you were to apprehend this lady, I’m sure you could hold her until the council has made a decision. At that point, we would have to listen to them: if they required her release, you’d have no alternative but to comply.”

Kecilin grunted, “That would do for now. Get the necessary papers.”

Garren lowered his voice, “There are no papers for that.” He scooped some incense from a bag in his hand and filled up another censor. “It stays under the rug, until you get your approval, then wham, your allowed to imprison her, which will have already been done.” Garren smiled at Kecilin.

Kecilin smiled back, “Thank you for your cooperation. I’ll see you tomorrow.” He moved his arm so that Garren could continue refilling the censurs.

Garren stopped him, “Oh no. I must accompany you, to make sure you follow procedure.”

Kecilin threw his head back in disbelief, rolling his eyes, “Procedure. Of course. I wouldn’t want to violate procedure. Come then, and hurry. My spies are tracking them.”

Garren abandoned his chore and together, they left the temple.

* * * * *

Talith materialized on the roof of the Mageguild’s main tower. He was pleased. At last he had found her again. Long ago, she had sealed away her own power somehow, and incidentally thrown him off the search. The irony amused him. Years had been spent looking for her again, and for all his effort, she had come to him. His quest could finally continue. He was curious though, whether or not she had stunted her own potential with

such self-hatred. A test was in order.

He held a clear crystal sphere in his hand. Kecilin had just contacted him through its companion about his success in enlisting the temple's permission in apprehending the thieves who had stolen the Staff of Hyril. A blue glow around the orb's surface dissipated, signifying that it was powering down. He had his orders, Kecilin had told him.

From Talith's vantage point, he could survey the entire city, which was largely quiet now, full of carefree townsfolk winding down in anticipation of another day's festival mirth. Everything seemed smaller from up here, and he felt greater. He was aware of the illusion of power generated by height, but wondered how far that illusion extended. How small did he seem to the stars that glittered above him, and were they truly greater than him? Soon he would know. For he did not need the illusion of power to work his will; his power was quite real.

And he had his orders. Talith laughed out loud. He raised his hand out, spread his fingers wide, and curled them down as if grasping air, and Tanalia Ford fit within that grasp. Was that an illusion? Tonight peace would be thrown down. It would start here. Good a place as any, he supposed; but soon, he wished to share his burden with the rest of the miserable little creatures who scoured this pathetic world. But Talith was not without sympathy. He understood why so many cling to so much illusion. He understood the horror of truth intimately. He would allow the residents of Tanalia Ford one last night of tranquility—their ignorance earned them that much.

For some reason, whether it was the Staff's will or another's, neither Kecilin nor Talith could locate the thieves exactly. A magical barrier was veiling them. Kecilin reported that they had a visual of them going into the girl's store, but that wasn't enough.

He had to isolate their spirits to target them, and something was keeping him from doing so. Luckily Talith was great enough for a different strategy . . . they would not escape his influence. Talith began a ritual, uttering words of power this age had long forgotten. He projected his mind across the entire city, singling out Kecilin's group for exception. To each their own dream, he commanded, and an explosion of psychic energy burst forth from the tower and rippled across Tanalia Ford. Like dominos, those still awake in Tanalia Ford fell asleep where they were. None would awaken unless he bid it.

Could she handle that?

* * * * *

On the east side of Tanalia Ford, Arreth waited under the ancient stone bridge that traversed Lun, a calmer, narrower river that forked off from the Tershi River, and steered deep into the south. Lun fed the springs that dotted this resort town. Arreth decided to squat down on the ground next to the water. The soft slosh of the waters against the soil was a welcome invitation to meditate. He cupped some in his hand and let it roll down his head, face, and body. While waiting for the others, Arreth thought he could best use the pause to consider his options.

What the heck am I doing here? None of this is any of my business! Admittedly, it had been fun so far—he'd done more the last two days to wet his youthful desire for adventure than he could have imagined. But it had been overwhelming too—Alhandra, the festival, the weirdo pet store lady, the excursion at the Mageguild, becoming a criminal . . . As interesting as today had been, Arreth had to admit that being chased by an angry wizard he didn't even know, to help out people he didn't even know, might not be the path his master had intended. He had been looking forward to a relaxing week, but

was now a wanted criminal! He didn't even have the chance to try out the hot springs yet. He *was* going to do that tomorrow. He was grateful for Alhandra's company, and felt sorry for the sorcerer lady's predicament, but after carefully considering the events of the last two days, he knew it would not be wise to get involved further. He knew what needed to be done. He would wait here a little while for Alhandra and her friends to get here, thank them for the wonderful adventure, and move on. He had helped them already, probably more than he should have. How did he even know he was helping out the right side? Maybe these people were in the wrong after all. He'd say his goodbyes and go. He wasn't really sure where, but following the Lun south sounded like the best idea since it seemed to him that the rest were going back north. And with angry wizards in pursuit, he would make the first wise choice he'd made since arriving here—going the opposite direction.

He was daydreaming about where the Lun would take him when a strange force washed over him. Arreth experienced a violation he had never known before—someone feeling at him from the inside out—and he resisted with everything that he was. It was like a microburst of wind, only in the mind. Suddenly Arreth felt sleepy. He drifted down the river Lun, and on the horizon all sorts of wondrous sites invited him to dwell among them. If he had not already been meditating, Arreth knew that his consciousness would have been instantly swept away into the fantasy. But he was grounded; he was centered. And very few things in the world can uproot the focus of a monk in a state of perfect mind. As it were, Arreth almost succumbed to the unknown intruder, but with great effort, he maintained control of himself. As Arreth's mind briefly wrestled with Talith's, he saw a birds-eye view of his assailant standing atop the highest tower at the

guildhouse, arms raised to the sky, his grasp encompassing the entire city. Arreth felt an old and terrible power emanating from that being, and for the first time in his life, knew true fear. The image passed in an instant though. Arreth blinked, and now saw only the bottom of the bridge; heard only the sloshing of the moving river. The terror remained.

Arreth waited for the others to return for a little while longer. What if Alhandra and the others had been discovered, and were taken prisoner? What would those people do to them? Arreth felt sick for them, yet, if something had happened, what could he do? He had gotten lucky against those statues. He could fight, but he was no warrior. And he was no hero either. Arreth gazed down the southbound Lun, as it calmly rolled away from the tumultuous rapids of Tershi. *Master said my path would be hewn by choice, and here, at this ford, I face my greatest yet.*

He knew which choice was right, but instead, began walking south, along the coast of the river Lun.

* * * * *

The city was quiet; no people stirred except Kecilin and his party. He had rounded up two wizards to assist him, and Garren led the way through what now looked like a ghost town, visions of a promotion dangling in front of him. The occasional bark of a dog cut the silent and cool night air; here and there, the phosphorescent glare of a cat, or an even less appealing port-side vermin, flitted across the road, or cowered back into alleyways, at the company's passing. Garren found the remarkable silence odd on a night falling as it were, on a festival week. He had no knowledge of Talith's spell, but he was beginning to feel uneasy. Kecilin stopped them in front of the Exotic Pet Lair. All was quiet inside—like everyone else in town, Talith's magic had knocked the fugitives out

cold.

Kecilin smirked, “Well priest, this is her lair.”

Garren snickered at his pun. “Seems like a mighty dangerous place. We better be careful here. No telling what kind of monsters lurk within, right? I’ll just go knock, and ask her to come quietly.” He straightened his jacket and approached the door.

“Oh, she’s there, which is why it is time to reduce this store to kindling,” Kecilin snapped his fingers. The two robed figures that had accompanied Kecilin—one stood to either side of him—braced against their staves and began chanting.

Garren recognized the field they were invoking and whirled around in amazement, “What the heavens do you think you’re doing? Stand down immediately!” Kecilin’s men ignored him; red runes of arcane energy manifested in front of their staves. Garren raised his hand in the air and began calling on his god for assistance, but before the request could finish escaping his lips, his entire body constricted at a single syllable uttered by Kecilin. Garren fell to the ground, conscious, but unable to speak or move. Kecilin was unapologetic: “Detainment already failed; overwhelming force will not.” His aides screamed one last emphatic word, releasing the energy that had been building up in the center of the runes. Garren couldn’t believe what he was witnessing.

Inside the pet shop, Dees’ pets chattered and rustled anxiously. Instinct alerted them to danger. There was a brief red flash, followed by a spasm of panic from the helpless animals. Two red orbs of swirling energy smashed through the windows. Then the showroom of the Exotic Pet Lair exploded in a carpet of flame. The trapped animals screamed in pain. But only briefly. Most were consumed in an instant; a few suffered a little longer. Gone was the Incredible Shocking Lizard. An instinctive release of

electricity did nothing to defend against the threat that bore down on him. The silvery bat was ripped from its perch. The psionic gerbils roasted in a bed of burning litter. In melted cases and splintered cages, all that remained of the colorful troupe of wondrous creatures were little black bundles of charred bodies. Those closer to the fireballs' point of origin were disintegrated into innumerable particles of ash, coating the showroom in a swirling snowfall of violated innocence.

And one lucky survivor. The little brown pup, who had been peeping over the edge of his wooden box since the arrival of Kecilin and his party of assassins, vanished into thin air a single breath before the searing shockwave included him in its embrace. A few blocks away, in a quiet little alley, he reappeared, befuddled by the change of scenery. Frightened, confused, he curled into a ball and wept. He thought of the giant with the gentle touch, who had handled him yesterday. He thought of Arreth—of comfort and safety. Poof! He vanished again.

Upstairs, Dees, Alhandra and Kendrick remained in an unnatural sleep. Neither they nor anyone else in Tanalia Ford stirred at the raucous explosion. Everyone was sharing the same pleasant dream that Talith wrought, ignorant of the unfolding nightmare. Whittle was awake though. Talith's magic had no power over the squirrel—only humans were currently under his sway. Ever since his companions had passed out so suddenly, Whittle had been trying to rouse them. At length, he had given up, until the bang downstairs propelled him into urgency. Now he pawed frantically at Dees' arm. No luck. Parts of the floor swelled and burst open into gaping maws of whistling heat. Whittle retreated to safety, behind Dees' dressing chest. Geysers of ash and ember sprayed up and rained down on the motionless trio. Now Whittle dove back into action,

swatting Dees' face with his tails, yelling into her mind to awaken, trying as hard as he could to ignore the painful stings of debris singeing his fur. Still nothing. Desperate, he swiped her across the face with one paw, drawing blood. No response. Thick and poisonous columns of smoke curled up into the room with an acrid scent of sulphur and burnt fur and flesh; a carpet of fire snaked its way up the stairs; Whittle began to cough and choke. Still his friends lay, unaware of their danger.

Outside, Kecilin watched his bonfire with chilling calm.

One of Kecilin's aides shifted nervously, chanced a query, "What about the Staff of Hyril?"

Kecilin gazed steadily into the blaze, "The Staff of Hyril is made of stronger magic than yours. We will recover it from the rubble intact, I suspect." With a roar and an outward belch of superheated air, the fire sank into the main structure, eating through its old wood hungrily. It now wrapped around the entire bottom floor and clawed its way upwards.

Kecilin's other aide was more bold than his friend, "Master, I understand the importance of recovering the great relic, but why do we resort to lethal force? We have always been a peaceful guild."

"She casts with no staff, escapes magically secure holding cells, manages to steal the most heavily guarded weapon throughout the land, and strong as it is, my magic cannot track her. And her true capabilities are still unknown, though history teaches a little about their destructive potential."

"So you fear her."

The blaze crept up the balcony and into Dees' room. The entire shop was now a

massive torch against the night sky. Against this backdrop, Kecilin cast his bold aide a venomous glare, “We can’t leave anything up to chance. There still exists in this world, vast stretches of land scarred by the reckless powers of the sorcerers of old . . . entire landscapes broken by single spells. . . against such horrors, a little pet lair is no great loss.”

The sound of the second-story floor collapsing interrupted Kecilin’s haunting response. The entire pet store now gutted, its skeleton burning in the night. Kecilin seemed satisfied now, “It is almost done.”

* * * * *

With every step Arreth took, he felt guiltier. He had been able to deflect Talith’s mental attack, but he knew no defense against the thoughts of Alhandra that now flooded him. It was weird: he had never been this worried about someone before. As if the world were telling him to go back, a cool wind blew north, at his face. He kept walking though, and he lowered his head because he was ashamed.

Then a sudden noise startled him. It sounded like one stroke of a chime, right behind him. Arreth turned to confront a dog—the little brown pup from the pet store.

“Whoa! Where did you come from, little fellow?”

The dog whimpered, turned around and ran back a few steps, then re-faced Arreth, and barked. Arreth was confused; he simply stood there in curiosity. Then to Arreth’s surprise, the dog suddenly vanished and with that same chiming sound, appeared again right at his ankle. Arreth jumped a little bit. The dog whined further, and pawed at his legs. Now Arreth knew something was wrong with the animal. He knelt down and put his hand to its forehead. He sensed fear. Incredible fear and urgency. Then Arreth put

two and two together.

The pet store! That's where the others went! There was no telling what was happening to them all right now. But he stood up, "Go on, get on somewhere. There is nothing I can do." He turned and kept walking. A heartrending, desperate yelp made him turn around again, "Don't you understand? I can't help you. This is bigger than me. If you want to live, then follow me. If not, then scat."

Arreth continued walking away.

The dog appeared in front of him this time, jumped up and nearly pushed him down. Arreth yelled, "Crazy mutt!" This time, the dog became discouraged, and cringed. Arreth looked into the dog's eyes and saw pain and loss reflected there. Pain. Loss. Alhandra. The sudden thought of Alhandra dying, of her boundless spirit fading away, made Arreth weak at the knees, and his stomach churn. Something within him changed. He no longer cared about what was down the river Lun. He no longer cared about the hot springs. Or his own life. He was consumed by the desire to make sure Alhandra could continue hers.

Arreth extended a beckoning hand to the dog. The dog popped up on all fours, wagged its tail excitedly, and approached. Arreth patted the dog's nose, and scrubbed its forehead. "Okay. You win. Let's . . ."

Before he could finish, Arreth faintly heard the ring of a chime and the sensation of moving quicker than thought.

* * * * *

Whittle gave up. He could barely breathe and was nearing exhaustion. He had been scurrying between his friends, using his tails to extinguish small fires from their

clothing that were ignited by the embers flaking down upon them. Every time a new flame sparked, he would rush over and swat it out. But now the situation was past critical: the smoke was suffocating his tiny lungs, the fires were cropping up with greater frequency, the pain from his burnt tails was now unbearable, and the floor supports were creaking and groaning. Soon the floor would give way, and they would all be pitched into the furnace below. Finally, he limped over to his master (his paws were also burnt), and curled up under her chin, resigned to die.

Whittle didn't know if it was smoke inhalation, or if he was already dying, but as he closed his eyes, he fancied that he saw the Staff of Hyril shimmer faintly by Dees' burning bed. He struggled to open them again—he was getting very sleepy. No, he hadn't been imagining it! The staff was glowing dull silver, and it brightened as he looked on, so bright that it hurt. One rune flared white, causing Whittle to flinch. Then he felt something move behind him.

Dees shifted.

Alhandra and Kendrick stirred a moment later.

Talith's hold was broken.

All three of them struggled to awaken, a process hindered by fits of coughing and choking. Whittle however, had nothing left to give. He lay there, hoping. The only other contribution he could make to their effort was to update them on their situation so that they might act immediately. He weakly thought at Dees, "Sneak attack . . . burning down . . . trapped," then passed out.

Dees understood, rose to her knees, and related this information to the others, who were as confused as she was. She looked down at her singed friend with sympathy,

“Good work, buddy.” She scooped him up and put him in her inside jacket pocket. He was limp. The gravity of that sobered her into action.

Dees crawled over to her bedding chest to look for some extra sheets, but it was beginning to burn. Quickly she fired a ray of cold energy at it. The chest sizzled and hissed, but was cool to the touch when Dees reached to open it. She flung out a couple of sheets and instructed the others to use them to fight the fire.

Alhandra smacked at clots of debris to retrieve the Staff of Hyril, which was no longer glowing.

With one hand, Kendrick used his robe to cover his mouth and nose, filtering out the smoke, leaving one hand free to pick up a sheet and slash at the fire like an amateur swordsman. In a different situation, his wild flailing would have been humorous. A gout of fire spat out at him from the wall, almost knocking him into one of the gaping holes in the floor. In frustration, he decided to change tactics. He threw his sheet at Alhandra and instructed, “Put this on before you choke to death, and give me my staff!” Alhandra was right beside it, so she kicked it over to him, and put the sheet around her mouth as he instructed.

“Now then.” Kendrick began chanting, but the black cloud of smoke all around him stole his breath and the spell sputtered midway through. He stomped in anger and cursed, but froze as the floor beneath him growled and whined. Dees, who was now busy trying to kick away the debris blocking the exit to the balcony, looked back at him, “Don’t do that!”

Kendrick didn’t know what to do, “It’s no use. This blaze is healthier than my lungs at the moment. I can’t do anything.”

Dizzy from lack of oxygen, Dees stopped her attack on the debris, “Me neither. I can’t budge this at all.”

Alhandra panicked, “Then what can we do?” Dees and Kendrick looked at each other, and remained silent. They were both thinking the same answer: nothing. Alhandra understood, and sat down with tears in her eyes, “I’m sorry for draggin’ y’all into this. Mother was a fool for trusting me with this mission.”

Dees responded, “Don’t take the blame for Kecilin; he did this, not you.”

Kendrick said nothing, was busting his brain to figure a way out of this.

The sound of a chime interrupted his thoughts, and in their midst stood Arreth and a dog. Arreth’s entrance was met with stunned amazement. He took in a deep breath of smoke and doubled over, but quickly recovered, “What’s the situation?”

Dees was quick on the return, “Imminent death. Glad you could join us.”

“Well, I wasn’t going to, but your furry little friend here insisted. Besides,” he looked at Alhandra, “I couldn’t just abandon you.” Alhandra didn’t know what to say, and there was no time anyway.

The floor started to quake; the grind of breaking supports split the ear. Kendrick gritted his teeth, “Thanks! Looks like you brought just enough weight to speed us on our way!” The floor opened up underneath Dees’ scorched bed; it dropped down to the ground level and disappeared in the flames. Alhandra reeled backwards into the hole, but Kendrick was quick enough to pull her over to him. The floor continued to keen underneath them. It was buckling.

Arreth looked for a weak point in the wall, thought he found one, and assumed an attack stance, stretching his back leg out, and crossing his arms over his face, “Then I’ll

have to shift my weight somewhere else.” *You only get one chance at this Arreth. I hope the structure is weak enough.* “Master, I choose *this* path!” The others had no idea what he was talking about, but watched in awe as the sinewy young man twisted his hips, his muscles summoning all the energy they could. Arreth sprang off the ground, slingshot across the chasm where Dees’ bed used to be, and extended his foot in a graceful flying kick—straight into the wall. Through the wall. Through the night air. Onto the roof of the one-story restaurant next door.

Arreth trembled. He could feel a pincushion of splinters embedded in his flesh. His torso was lacerated, his skin ruby red from the heat and streaked black with charcoal. Ash and blood mingled painfully. Wincing, he looked back and saw an opening in the side of the pet shop; his friends streamed out, landing haphazardly around him. The dog blinked in at his side. Yes, they *were* his friends, weren’t they? Despite the pain that wracked his body, Arreth was elated. *So this is what it feels like to make a difference.*

The others drank deeply from the cool night air to refresh their nearly suffocated lungs. Dees withdrew Whittle from her jacket and pattered his back vigorously. She feared it was too late for him, but after a brief and terror-filled attempt to revive him, her small friend jerked to life, and crawled around the roof coughing, the pungent scent of charcoal and smoke causing him to vomit. The pup walked over to him and cleaned the ash from his face. Dees was still shaken, but Kendrick reassured her, “He’ll be okay I think. A familiar’s spirit is as strong as its master’s. He just needs a few minutes, like the rest of us.” Relieved, Dees rose and approached Arreth. She gave him her profound thanks, and a proud clap on the back. Arreth cringed, his face twisted in pain, but he resisted screaming aloud. He shot her an acid glare and Dees, suddenly understanding

her error, threw her hands up and moved her lips in a silent apology. Kendrick was next on his feet and stepped over to assist Alhandra to her's.

Dees finally had a little time to collect her thoughts. Everything had happened so quickly that she had been acting instinctively. She looked at the pup, now bonding with Whittle, and was amazed. *So you made it through.* As if the beast had heard her thoughts, it paused from grooming Whittle to look at Dees and whimper. Dees looked over her shoulder at her pet shop: the burning promise of a better life. She was filled with fear and anger. Everything she owned was in that shop, and now it was gone. All gone. The pets. Her belongings. Nearly Whittle. Nearly her own life. Peace.

Stoic, resolute, Dees walked over to Alhandra, who had risen but was leaning on Kendrick for support. Kendrick looked to Dees for welcome assistance. Dees reached out . . . and snatched the Staff of Hyril from Alhandra's weakened grasp. She turned away, marching towards the opposite end of the roof. Kendrick was taken aback, "What are you doing?"

Dees, at the edge of the roof, looked down into the side-street that connected to the main road at her left. Down and around, and then there would be Kecilin. Then there would be reckoning. And then? She didn't care. She slowly twisted to face Kendrick. The light of the fire and the darkness of the night mixed together on Dees' visage in a dance of shadow and flame that hardened her soft features. The runes on the Staff of Hyril began shimmering faintly like distant lightning before the onset of a storm.

Kendrick could feel the crackle of unknown power within her. He hadn't noticed it until now. Could Kecilin be so wrong about her? Dangerous magic was not his specialty: pain, suffering, power . . . he just couldn't understand why anyone could, or

would, abuse such a wonderful, and wonder-creating gift. For Kendrick, magic was the extra flavor to reality that gave it color, brought it into relief, that reminded him that life was sacred and blessed. Every spell was life in the palm of his hand and a promise that it was special. His arcane sensitivity was not attuned to this kind of magic . . . he wished now he hadn't cut so many evocation classes. He couldn't read this situation. He couldn't measure Dees and he couldn't evaluate Kecilin's choice to use force. What would he do next?

Dees hopped off the roof and vanished from sight. The others followed, free of the doubt that settled on Kendrick: Arreth moved into action; the dog slung Whittle on his back and blinked out; Alhandra pushed off Kendrick and disappeared over the edge.

Kendrick quickly found himself alone. Time was moving rapid-fire, from decision to decision. Thought was a slow traveling partner, and could not keep up with this night. Reluctantly, Kendrick plunged into the next series of decisions and he knew, deep inside, that they would define who he was. He didn't know what he would do next . . . he only prayed that he could live with them.

Kendrick jumped down to the street below.

* * * * *

Kecilin was getting nervous. For all his boasting, he had expected fireworks—some sort of resistance! He had at least a dozen spells ready for this encounter. Now he wondered if he had overestimated her. Still, even if he had been wrong about her power level, he knew he was absolutely right about her threat level. Sorcerers were too dangerous to let roam wild. But what to do about the priest . . . Kecilin had hoped the sorcerer would come out swinging, proving her danger to Garren. But this docility . . . if

Garren reported this, the temple would hang him to dry. And what if she had somehow escaped? He would need the guild's support to find her before she caused any damage, and if they found out about tonight they would give him none.

He evoked the protection field and called up an orange rune: fire. Red particles of arcane energy sprinkled down upon his aides. He ordered, "Go inside and find them." Warded now from the flames, they strolled into the pet shop to search for the suspects.

Kecilin silently counted to three, then evoked another field. Garren's eyes widened. *Null magic!* Kecilin called up the rune of dispelling and tapped it with the head of his staff. Screams from inside the pet shop notified him that the wards had been undone. Kecilin squinted and looked away. He didn't like resorting to these tactics, but it was for the greater good. After the screams died down, he turned back down to Garren. "I agree this business is distasteful, but I must see it through."

Kecilin invoked the gravity field, and called up the rune of levitation. He tapped that rune with his staff, and Garren began to lift into the air. Kecilin stretched one hand out and readied to command Garren into the flames. "In war, there must be casualties."

"I couldn't agree more!" echoed a girl's voice from down the road.

Kecilin turned just in time to see several small balls of white energy streak through the air and pummel into him. One caught him in the chest; another punched him in the face; a third splashed onto his hand. Kecilin howled in pain and lost the concentration his spell required: Garren dropped back to the ground.

A block down the road Dees stood her ground, the Staff of Hyril glowing hot. As Kecilin sized her up, her companions fell in behind her. Kecilin smiled at the circus arrayed before him: an instable magical weapon in the form of a woman, a half-naked

man, a tomboy vagrant, a mangy mutt and a three-tailed squirrel. A brief pause ensued; no one moved; no sound but the snap and crackle of the burning store. Then Kecilin spoke, “Well, look what crawls out of the flames of this exotic pet lair. An entire circus: I should’ve known you couldn’t steal the Staff alone, sorcerer, but I never imagined an entire conspiracy.”

Kendrick wearily joined their ranks. Kecilin was genuinely surprised, “You too, Kendrick?” He seemed to hesitate, but then added, hoarsely, “So be it.” Only Kecilin noticed the uncertainty in Kendrick’s step. Nevertheless, forged by fire, they huddled together, standing Kecilin down. Kecilin sensed the energy between them all—their spirit was strong. But their bodies were already brittle. *It will be easy to break them.*

Dees had not expected to cast whatever it was she just cast. She didn’t know what to expect really. She had never entertained her powers until the other day, much less nurture them. She didn’t even know how she did it. She had pictured the last spell she had seen: Kendrick’s Dancing Lights. The staff lit up at that moment, and the dancing lights had appeared, as imagined, but they transformed into wads of energy and hurled into Kecilin. Whatever they were, they hit, and that’s all she cared about now—hitting him over and over again.

Dees split the silence, “Take him down!” She pointed at Kecilin. Adrenaline rushed through her veins, into her fingertips, and another volley of energy missiles sped towards her target; eager for a piece of Kecilin, her friends lunged forward, hoping to follow up the missile attack and end the battle in one swoop. From his inert position, Garren could not assist them, but he could do what he did best: pray, and although he didn’t know these people, he prayed for their victory.

Kecilin was no longer off guard. He twirled his staff around to catch Dees' spell—the energy shots connected with the staff and dissolved. Alhandra was close behind. All of her momentum was focused on one jab with her dagger. One word activated a rune on Kecilin's staff; he disappeared and Alhandra stumbled through the space he had just been in. A breath later, he reappeared in the same spot, and without taking his eyes off the others, stabbed Alhandra in the back of her head with the butt of his staff. He never liked her anyway. She tumbled to the ground face first. Arreth and the pup were next in line. Arreth ran straight at Kecilin; the pup was at either side of him, rapidly blinking in and out, from side to side, in an effort to confuse the one who had slain his friends. Kecilin did not have time for any more magic; he hopped back, raised Alhandra to her feet by her hair, and hurled her down in front of Arreth. Arreth's reflexes were quicker: he jumped right over top of her, pushed one foot out as hard as he could, and because Kecilin had just disrespected Alhandra's dignity, aimed for the throat. The dog vanished and reappeared behind Kecilin's shins, deciding that Kecilin could use a taste of his own medicine. Arreth connected. Kecilin, tripped by their team attack, sailed backwards through the air and skidded across the cobblestone. His robes ripped, and normally that would have angered Kecilin, but at the moment, he was too busy struggling for breath.

"Arreth, duck!" Arreth heeded Dees' warning, and knelt just in time: another volley of energy zipped over his head. Kecilin lamely held up an arm to defend himself and got burned once again. Arreth scrambled back over to Alhandra, to see if she was okay. She was conscious, but rubbing the back of her head.

Dees continued issuing battle orders: "Kendrick, finish him!"

No response.

Kecilin staggered back up.

Dees looked back, desperate, "End it!"

Kendrick's staff was held out in an attack stance, but it was vibrating. Kendrick was shaking. Dees had no idea what was wrong. "Kendrick . . . now! What is wrong with you?"

Kendrick fumbled for an apology, "I . . . I . . . can't . . ."

Arreth rushed Kecilin, to head off his opening, but the wizard held out his staff, swiftly invoking the field of wind. A grey wheel of runes cycled around in front of his staff. Kecilin isolated a rune and smacked it with his staff, right in Arreth's face. A cylinder of high-pressure air fired from the field, catching Arreth and the pup by surprise. Alhandra jumped up and caught Arreth, but the sheer velocity of the incoming wind threw them all back down the road near Dees and Kendrick. Alhandra absorbed most of the impact, but was grateful to return the warrior's kindness: thrice he had shielded her from harm, and the ground would have torn Arreth's now-blistered skin apart. Immediately, Kecilin uttered more arcane language, and the wheel of runes turned purple. He threatened, "Well, if my wise student has nothing to add, and the rest of you can do no more, then I believe it's time to wrap things up." Kecilin activated a rune, and a lightning bolt streaked down from the clear sky, landing in the middle of the battered group before him. Tendrils of electricity snaked around everyone except for Kendrick, pinning them to the ground in pain.

Kecilin, in control of the situation again, spoke calmer now, "If you don't move, it will hurt less."

Dees crawled forward, cursing at him, but a shock from the electrical bindings kept her from advancing further. She squealed in pain.

Kecilin, unmoved, continued, "I don't know whether it is fear or loyalty that stays your hand Kendrick, but I am disappointed that you have been running around behind my back with these idiots. I have warned you time and again that your sister would get you into trouble if you didn't become your own man and make the tough decisions that responsibility requires. Sure enough, she has led you to betray your guild . . . but if you walk away now, I will look past this and give your father a favorable report when he returns home."

Dees looked back at Kendrick, flinched as she got zapped again, and tears rolled down her cheek, "Kendrick . . . what are you doing? Stop him . . . he's going to kill us."

Kendrick struggled to ignore her; he cleared his throat and addressed Kecilin, "What are you going to do with them? They should be imprisoned, not executed. I understand you are afraid of her, but the courts should levy judgment, not you. This isn't our way."

Kecilin lowered his voice to a menacing croon, "The wild one has already escaped from prison once. And your sister stole the Staff of Hyril, a high crime if ever one was committed under my watch. I admire your ability, naïve as it may be, to try to understand the sorceress, but she cannot help what she is. You may love your sister, and you may feel sorry for the other one, but their actions have carried them beyond your control. Out of respect for you Kendrick, I give you a way out. Just walk away . . . there is no shame in obeying your duty. Just walk away."

Kendrick was still shaking. Power. Battle. Loyalty. Fear. He had never dealt with

any of them before, and he was terrified of making the wrong choice. Dees pleaded one last time, “Please . . . you said you trusted me . . . and now I’m trusting you . . . we all are.”

Kendrick tried to be stern, to be his own man. He was much better at being kind, light, and merry. Wielding authority was alien to Kendrick, and in his hands, it came across hollow and insincere, “I said execution is not our way!”

Kecilin was no longer asking, “Walk away now . . . or suffer their fate.”

Alhandra sneered, “Don’t be a fool brother. He doesn’t respect you. He’s just afraid of dad! He knows what’ll happen to him if he kills his only son. It’ll look too much like a coup.”

Kendrick was being pulled too many different directions to think clearly. Now another influence fought for control. *Dad. If only he were here . . . what would he do?* For starters, Kendrick knew his dad would never have gotten this deep into trouble; he would have taken better care of things much earlier.

With an unexpected growl, Kendrick slammed the butt of his staff into the cobblestone. It stopped quivering. Kendrick pushed away all the influences nagging at him. Kecilin’s mind was confused, but he had spoken one truth tonight—Kendrick had to be his own man. It didn’t matter what his father would do in this situation . . . his father wasn’t here—Kendrick was.

“I walk away . . .”

Kecilin smiled, “Good.”

Kendrick wasn’t finished, “I walk away from no friend.” His friends accepted a shock from Kecilin’s bindings to smile at him in relief. Their approval empowered him.

Kendrick quickly invoked the field of fire. Kecilin responded likewise. In frustration, Kendrick fumbled for the words to activate the one rune on his wheel—he had not used this magic for years, and never outside of school. Finally the words he needed came to him . . . too late.

Kecilin had already found his spell, and the words for Kendrick's fireball died on his lips as he choked in their moment of need: a red ball of energy hurtled straight at them. There was nothing Kendrick could do to stop it. He had failed, and the cost would be their lives.

Kendrick could have escaped, but didn't; he closed his eyes, accepting responsibility for his hesitation. He braced for impact. A sound caused him to reopen them. It wasn't the roar of an explosion . . . it was a soft and familiar voice, chanting words of power from the rooftop of the restaurant next to him. He opened his eyes and gasped. Was he dreaming?

A tall and plump figure stood at the edge of the roof, robed in Mageguild blue, arms and legs spread out, a golden staff held high. Kendrick recognized the words of nullification issuing forth from the newcomer's lips. The looming man reached an arm out. As he did so, his arm's shadow stretched across the cobblestone below, intercepting Kecilin's fireball only a couple feet from Dees' face. As Kecilin's spell passed through the shadow of the man's hand, the man on the roof clenched a fist; the shadow responded likewise, crushing Kecilin's spell. A shower of red particles drenched Dees and her friends, fading harmlessly into the night.

Kendrick cried out, "Dad!"

The man's voice boomed from above, "A little quicker on the draw this time,

son!”

Kendrick gave his spell another shot. Kecilin was too befuddled by this turn of events to respond. This time, Kendrick did not falter, and a red bead burst forth from his rune wheel and hit its mark. An eruption of magical fire engulfed Kecilin. He wailed in pain as his robes caught on fire. Cursing at them, he tapped a rune on his staff and vanished.

Where Kecilin had been, a circle of flame, with nothing left to feed on, slowly dyed out on the cobblestone. There was no trace of the wizard. The electricity pinning the others vanished as well and they slowly rose. Kendrick’s father dropped down from the restaurant with a heavy thud.

Dees scrubbed her head, “Who’s that?”

Alhandra replied, “Fascinatin’! Yoren, our father.”

After dusting himself off, Yoren approached and spoke to them in a perfectly out of place, merry voice, “Well, that was a close one, wasn’t it?”

Kendrick took two steps back.

His father furrowed his brow, “Why do you recoil?”

Before Kendrick could offer a reply, the balcony on Dees’ shop creaked and groaned. Alhandra remembered the priest who was paralyzed beneath it. She pushed her father out of the way and dashed over to him. The balcony teetered; its supports broke. Alhandra scooped the young man up and out of the way just as the balcony crashed down.

After giving Kendrick a long stare, Yoren observed the fire. “Yes, I suppose I should do something about that, before it spreads to the other buildings.” He chanted

some words, activating a brown field of runes. He selected one and above the pet store, a green and brown rift split the sky: a stream of sand issued down from the rift, like sand from an hourglass, quenching the blaze in a roaring hiss. Dees watched forlornly as most of the shop collapsed under the weight of the downpour. Kendrick put his arm on her shoulder to comfort her. He couldn't imagine what she was going through. She looked at him meekly, forcing a smile.

Yoren walked over to the man in Alhandra's arms, "Hmm, a young priest of Tanalia Temple. Paralyzed." He dispelled Kecilin's curse. "And who might you be, young sir?"

After thanking Alhandra, Garren groveled, "My name is Garren. I am an acolyte with the temple. I'm sorry! I didn't know he was going to do what he did. I didn't mean to cause all of this."

Dees heard Garren's testimony and came at him, grabbing him by his jacket, "Cause this? You did this?"

Yoren pulled her away from him, "Calm down, sorcerer. You are the last person here who can afford to overreact. With your powers, action without understanding can easily lead to ruin." Dees withdrew, a hidden pain throbbing inside of her. He had accidentally struck a vein.

Garren brushed himself off and continued, "I said I'm sorry. I only gave him permission to apprehend you for questioning. I . . . I never expected *this*." Garren gestured grandly at the war zone around him, "I tried to stop him, but I couldn't." Garren walked over to Dees and put his hand on her shoulder, "Please, accept my apology miss. I made a mistake; I never anticipated these consequences. And I thank you, for saving my

life earlier. He was going to toss me into the flames, like the others.”

Dees nodded, but said nothing. She felt guilty because inside she knew that had she known this earlier, she would’ve waited for Kecilin to finish with him before attacking. Whittle, finally recovering, was still weak; nevertheless, her thought surprised him . . . and worried him. *Dees . . .* Dees looked over at her companion. She scooped him from the corner of the restaurant—he had hidden there when the battle began. *It didn’t happen Whittle.*

Kendrick was curious, “What others?”

Garren’s face wore genuine sympathy, “Two other wizards from your guild, I’m afraid.”

Kendrick’s jaw dropped, his pudgy cheeks flush with fury, “He . . . his own guildmates? My friends . . . and call me a traitor?”

When Yoren heard this news, his merry face flashed with anger, then bent in sorrow, “I guess I arrived too late to help everyone then.” He rubbed his chin, troubled. At length he spoke to the skittish priest, “You are a witness to his crimes, Garren. You are no longer safe here either. He will hunt you, as he will hunt them.”

Dees was skeptical, “Kecilin? But didn’t you just kill him?”

Yoren grimaced, “That fireball didn’t kill him. He teleported away while the getting was good.”

Garren responded, “Yes, I saw that. I know he’ll come after me. And I’d like to come with you all. I owe this lady a debt now, for her loss and for saving my life . . .”

Alhandra harrumphed, “More like yer afraid to go back to yer temple after what happened here. They’ll throw ya out on yer robes for this, won’t they?” Alhandra closed

in on Garren and put her knife to his quivering chin. Her eyes glittered with mischief; she smirked with smug satisfaction as the skinny acolyte lost all composure. "And on your own, yer Kecilin food." Garren gulped at the way Alhandra said 'food'.

He blushed, but found the courage to stand up to her, "Tanalia Temple would never throw anyone out for being imperfect; unlike your aristocracy, we're not ashamed of those who fail to meet . . ." he looked her up and down, "expectations." Alhandra, self-conscious now about her irregular appearance, withdrew, stiffened. For the first time, she felt a little embarrassed about the way she looked. Glad that he had made her retreat, but surprised to find himself speaking this way to someone who had just saved his life, he tried to be a little more gracious. "But yes, yes....you're right. Of course I'm afraid. I don't want him to find me, and if he does, as I was trying to say, I'd rather trust to my brothers at Temple to protect me."

Alhandra cocked her head sideways, narrowed her eyes and Garren threw his hands up in apology, "Don't get me wrong! All of you held your own. In fact, you fought like heroes out of the old stories. If it weren't for all of you, I'd be . . . Kecilin food, as you say." He looked now at Yoren, "And yes, Master Yoren, he will want to come after me, but I believe I'm thinking straight when I say that if I go back to my Temple, I risk injury; but if I travel with you, injury will *certainly* find me. It has certainly found you all well enough already. No offense, but I'd be better off with my own." He looked now at Arreth, and winced as he imagined the pain the burned boy must be in. "You know, you all could stay at the Temple tonight if you wish. You could pretend to be homeless vagrants from the docks. No offense to the sorcerer, but Tanalia Temple is a little more fortified than a pet shop. I fear there would be no trouble there

tonight. And the Beacon, I could use it to heal your wounds. . .”

Everyone smiled at that prospect when a sound caught their attention, a sound whose return was more ominous than its previous absence: Tanalia Ford stirred once again—doors opened; citizens, still groggy from Talith’s spell, and confused, stumbled outside and exchanged gossip, attempting to piece together what had happened. Those nearest to the pet store began to gawk at the steaming wreckage; surprise spurred a ripple of gossip that would reach across the entire town before the night’s end. Several people approached the group, asking them if they were okay. One bystander yelled for someone to wake the Temple priests up. A couple kids bolted into action, eager to lend a helping hand, and even more eager to have an excuse to stay up later.

It didn’t take long for the owner of the restaurant next to Dees’ pet store to arrive. The bearded old man rushed over to his property to inspect the damage. While the party was busy interacting with the newly wakened citizens, some of them offering assistance, others wanting answers, Yoren fearfully eyed the Mageguild’s main tower, which peeped above the cityscape across town. “Talith dropped his enchantment!”

The restaurant owner returned in hysterics and pawed at Dees, “My restaurant! Look at the damage to my restaurant!”

Dees pushed the man off of her, looked over his shoulder at the building. Indeed, the collapse of her store had knocked in the adjacent wall to his restaurant; yet, compared to her property, the restaurant was in good shape. Dees, in no mood to comfort someone else, yelled at him, “Oh yeah?” She pointed at the wreckage that had been her job and home, had been her very future, “Well guess what? Now you can expand!” She raised the Staff of Hyril and he cowered away back into the crowd. Dees turned back to Yoren and

shrugged, not understanding his fear, “That’s a good thing, right? Maybe he retreated, since we dealt with Kecilin.”

Yoren looked over at her with an incredulous look that reminded Dees of an expression her mother used to give her as a child, when as children often do, she would make observations that were downright silly. Dees blushed in embarrassment, fancied that she saw the word *IDIOT* scrawled across the wrinkles on Yoren’s bunched-up forehead. Despite Yoren’s rebuking expression, he responded very politely, “A spell of that magnitude no doubt requires complete concentration . . . he let it go so he could manage another task . . .”

Dees, catching on, finished his sentence, “. . . like coming after us?”

Yoren confirmed with a nod, adding with much urgency, “We must go, now! I’m sure I speak for everyone, young acolyte, when I say we appreciate your invitation; but I fear no temple in Ukiyo could deny this Talith entrance. I would not bring trouble there for all the health in the world.” He glanced over at Dees and Arreth, “Too many innocents have been drawn into this already.”

Kendrick led the way, “The bridge then, East of here. It was our original destination. We can go there, like we had planned, and wait the night out. We’ll have to trust that ring of yours Alhandra, to veil us till morning.”

Garren’s heart pulled at him to follow, but he couldn’t do it. He was no hero from old stories; only an onlooker. In the battle against Kecilin, he had been nothing more than a silent cheerleader. Thankfully Yoren had removed the paralysis that froze his body. But Yoren had not detected the paralysis that remained within. He wanted to follow, the safety of the temple was too great a temptation. He waved bye to them as Kendrick

rounded everyone up.

Kendrick nodded to Garren, “Your decisions are yours to make. Good luck, Garren.”

Garren found himself offering aid as his saviors dashed away, “East Bridge? In the morning, I’ll bring you some medicine! Good luck!” He couldn’t just let them go with nothing; he did owe them. It would be downright ungrateful for them to risk their lives for him and he simply wave them off because he was afraid. He would help them, but he wouldn’t get involved. No way! Patting himself on the back for what he’d do for them in the morning, Garren returned to the Temple in a hurry. He was afraid of Kecilin. He was afraid of Talith. But most of all, he was afraid of something else, that only he knew. He needed to talk to his masters; he needed access to the Beacon. He was afraid of what had happened to the souls of those two poor mages Kecilin had tricked. Their souls left their body, but they didn’t Ascend. They had simply vanished. He was afraid his religion wouldn’t have an answer for that . . .

CHAPTER VII

SOME KIND OF COMFORT

Dees and the others bolted for the bridge, the threat of a power as large as Talith's finally sinking in. Their passage was occasionally hindered by a thickening crowd, but they pushed through when necessary.

Finally, Alhandra realized the problem with their strategy, after she took note of several people pointing at them, "Split up! If we all run to the bridge as one parade, everyone in town'll know where we're at." Taking initiative, she dove off on her own into a side-street. Arreth was going to object—after all, the last time they had split up, the result had been less than impressive—when Dees said, "Good idea; Arreth, you go that way!" and pushed him into the next alley. Arreth's dog blinked him out of the way of the wall he almost smacked into.

One by one, they thinned out and reconvened many blocks later, trickling in under the East Bridge until a little while later, everyone was nestled safely underneath, the din arising in Tanalia Ford now gone, the burble of the river Lun audible between their out-of-breath pants.

For a while, no one dared speak, for fear of giving away their position. This end of town, so close to the docks, was almost dead this deep in the night. The furor spreading throughout town was now safely several blocks away, but they took no chances: Dees and Kendrick posted up at either side of the bridge, nervously peering back down the way they had come, waiting for Talith to come strolling towards them. He

never came.

Yoren finally bid them to relax, “I think we made it without being detected.” He spied the pale full moon, riding low on the horizon to the south. Looking the other direction, the sky was beginning to lighten. “Come, rest awhile; morning is not very far off and none of you will be any good to the other fatigued.”

Finally confident that the coast was clear, everyone began to settle down. Alhandra lay down on the hill they were on and fidgeted with her dagger. Kendrick sat with his head bowed. Dees sat down and studied the Staff of Hyril. It was plain, its light gone once again. Arreth sat down in the grass, but cried in pain a little. He began meditating, to take his mind off the heat radiating through his body.

Yoren studied the hill they were on—it ran from the base of the bridge down to the river below. Picking a spot, he began whispering words of power. Kendrick raised his head, “What are you doing?”

Yoren smiled, “Making a campfire.”

Alhandra rose, “You’ve lost your mind! Why don’t you just send Talith an invitation?”

Yoren disregarded her, continuing to cast. He conjured up a purple fire on the ground. It was very narrow, and not very tall, resembling a pilot light. Dees blinked in wonder: the fire was silent, cast no extra light, did not burn the grass, but shed enough warmth to make her draw closer—beside the river, the breeze was chilly, and her exhaustion made even that uncomfortable. Yoren grinned, pleased that he could offer a distraction from her problems, “A darkfire. Those in need of stealth need not sacrifice the comfort only a gentle campfire can bring.”

Wonder pulled Dees' taut, forlorn lips into a smile. The darkfire in front of her was a welcome contrast to the bright blaze that had consumed her store. Curious, she dared to pass her hand through the flame—it didn't burn her. "Neat!" Whittle reluctantly peeped out of Dees's pocket: he was still in a lot of pain, but he couldn't resist seeing something that was neat.

Yoren chuckled at Dees and Whittle's child-like wonder, "Not very good for cooking snacks I'm afraid, but it keeps the cold at bay."

Alhandra shook her head and asked Arreth about his burns.

"It hurts . . . a lot."

Alhandra felt sorry for his suffering—it was her fault for dragging him into this; Arreth least belonged in this whole mess, yet he was the one who had been injured the most. He had been nothing but good to her since she met him on the boat down here, and she had made fun of him, lied to him, used him. She walked down the hill to the river and pulled off her bandanna, something she never did in public. She shook out her hair, knelt down to the water's edge and saw her reflection in the moon-lit river water. She paused, taken by how much more feminine that simple action had made her appear. She shoved her hand through the reflection, breaking the image apart, soaking the bandanna in the cool waters. First she held it up over her head, looked up at the starry sky and squeezed some of the water out. Sweat and ash ran off her face—instant refreshment. Then she submerged the bandanna a second time and walked back up the hill to attend to Arreth's burns.

He was grateful for her assistance. He hissed through gritted teeth as she patted his arms and chest with the makeshift rag, but it relieved the heat so he didn't complain.

The dog thought Alhandra had the right idea, so he trotted down to the bank and dived in covertly, avoiding a loud splash. He paddled around in circles for a minute, looking more like an otter than a dog. After a quick bath, he returned to Arreth and laid down, his nose in the monk's lap. Alhandra peered up at him, "Well, you certainly found a loyal friend. What ya going to name him?"

Arreth had absolutely no idea yet, "Persistence? I don't know." They shared a small laugh. He continued, "I'll sleep on it. If he ain't going anywhere, I should consider a name." He reached a hand down to the scruffy mutt and received a few lazy licks.

On the other side of the darkfire, Yoren had sat down beside Kendrick, glancing at him steadily.

The son lowered his head. After an awkward silence, Kendrick finally spoke "How much did you see?"

"Enough."

"Enough to be ashamed of me."

The large man's face softened, and he fidgeted with the golden circlet on his head, "Enough to know that I raised you right, and that one day, the Mageguild of Tanalia Ford will be entrusted to a good man."

Kendrick peered up, tears in his eyes, "I almost got us all killed!"

Yoren put his hands out to the fire, "You did the best you could, and that is more than most attempt. I am saddened Kendrick, by many things I have discovered while I have been away, but you do not disappoint me. You never have." Yoren draped his robed arm over Kendrick's shoulder, "Son, a father can try to teach his children many things, but in the end they have to let go and see what happens." At this, the man peered over at

Alhandra. She had moved away from Arreth and lain down in a level spot on the hill. She was flipping her dagger up in the air and catching it, but now she caught it one last time, sheathed it, and rolled over, looking away from the others. “Often, parents don’t get to see what happens. I had that wonderful opportunity tonight Kendrick, and I saw my son become a man.”

Kendrick knotted up his eyebrows, as if he didn’t quite understand, somehow doubted his father’s praise. He looked away, over his shoulder, at the lightening northern sky.

Yoren reached over to Kendrick and hugged him tight. Although she would never admit it, Yoren knew Alhandra felt left out, so he called her over to him. She rolled back over, pretending to be irritated, and scooted across the grass to her father’s other side. He pulled her into their embrace with his other arm. He addressed her now, “Now you, little rascal, you and I need to have a long talk . . . we all do,” he said more seriously, peering at the others. But seeing only exhaustion, he decided the matter should wait until they had had a nap, “But grave matters can rest until daylight I suppose.”

Dees watched their exchange silently. *So this is Kendrick’s father . . . yes, the resemblance is striking.* She wasn’t just talking about the weight; the mage’s face bore the wrinkles brought about by a lifetime of jubilant smiles. And he was smiling now. Despite the mage’s light expression, he commanded a majestic presence—power slept behind his smiles and shining eyes. Kendrick had inherited that presence a moment ago, when he stood up to his teacher. Dees privately admired Kendrick: born of sincerity, his courage made him regal. Whittle heard Dees’ thought and replied, “Yeah, as regal as a two-hundred pound birthday magician can get.” Dees laughed and teared up a little,

“That’s not very nice, Whittle.” She was laughing at his joke; she was crying because if Whittle was awake and popping off again, then he was going to be just fine. A weight crumbled off her shoulders—

Kendrick’s father heard Dees laugh, released his children, and moved over to her, “So you are the one all the fuss is about.” He moved to shake her hand, “You don’t seem so bad. I am Yoren, Guildmaster of Tanalia Ford. Although my apologies mean little here,” he gestured up at the old, moss-covered stone arcing above them, “huddled as we are like hobos, I am deeply sorry for the way my guild has treated you.” Dees mumbled a thank you. Yoren glanced at her staff. “The Staff of Hyril has not been activated in hundreds of years . . . it would seem it has been waiting for you.”

“What’s it want with me?” She dropped it in the grass, drawing back, as if it had tried to snag her.

“Who knows? We wizards don’t know everything. There are many powers in this world beyond our understanding. The Staff of Hyril has always been one of them.”

Dees looked down at it in fear, “How . . . how powerful is it?”

Yoren smiled, “It was crafted by the greatest wizard who ever lived. I could cast Detect Magic on it, show you the glow of its power, but it would be as bright as the dawn, and that is the last thing we need right now.”

Dees smiled again, “For sure.”

Kendrick butted in, “I was thinking. Maybe in the chaos of the fair tomorrow, we can chance slipping back into town, to re-supply before heading out.”

Dees asked where.

Alhandra responded, “To Shangril. The capital. To bring mother the staff.”

Kendrick grunted, "And the reclamation team from the capitol is scheduled to appear in Tanalia Ford tomorrow." He looked back at the northern sky, whose inky blackness was smeared with light blues. Kendrick corrected himself, "Later today, rather." He paused, as if considering whether or not he should speak his next thoughts, but nodded to himself, apparently deciding to continue, "So that means we'll have them after our tails too. And for what, Alhandra? What exactly does mother need this for?"

Alhandra unsheathed her dagger and began fidgeting with it again, "I don't know. She didn't tell me."

Arreth opened his eyes, narrowed them, and studied Alhandra. No one saw him, but if they had been watching, they would've seen suspicion. He threw in his two gold pieces, "Well, the sooner we get some sleep, the sooner we'll find out." She may have made amends, but Arreth was smart enough to not necessarily trust her.

No one argued with Arreth's pointed hint; they were all so very tired. Yoren laughed, "Don't worry. I'll keep watch over all you children. It'll be like years ago, back when your mother and I were still together," he looked lovingly at Kendrick and Alhandra, "before you squirts got so big, and," looking gruff at his daughter now, "stubborn." He began to stare deep into the darkfire, "I used to sing you both to sleep every night, the same damn lullaby every time." A slight chuckle, then: "by your sister's request." He included Dees and Arreth in a sweeping gaze now, drawing them in like a true storyteller, "once I could get them two in bed long enough to hear it, that is." Once he was sure he had their attention, he turned to his son, who finally looked to be in a lighter mood, "Kendrick, you'd want to see those absurd little Dancing Lights every time; I'd have to cast that thing two or three times before you finally settled down." Kendrick

hid a blush. “And you Alhandra, you’d make me play hide-and-seek. I’d look everywhere, but I never could find you . . .” His expression grew more distant; Dees heard the tone of regret in his voice. “. . . You were always so very good at hiding from me.”

Alhandra shifted again, moving back over to the place she had been, and lay back down with her back to them all. She smiled to herself—refused to let her father see it—and replied, “Yeah, well just spare us the lullaby tonight, dad. I’d like to keep the few friends I’ve got.” She laid her head on her hand and tried to drift off into sleep.

The others were not far behind. Arreth slept sitting up, propped against one of the supply backpacks, afraid to lie in the grass—in his condition, it would’ve been like laying on a bed of nails. Dees curled up close to the darkfire, and Whittle even closer to it. Kendrick used his robes for a cushion, and his sister a little off from the group, outside the darkfire’s warmth. Only half an hour later, Yoren was left alone with his darkfire. It had become his favorite spell of late. As he stared at the flickering purple tongue, he too moved his hand through it, “Yes sorcerer, neat and still warm . . . but somehow empty.” When he was sure no one could hear him, he whistled that old lullaby Alhandra had just forbidden him to sing; he whistled until dawn, searching his memories for his daughter and the mother she had chosen to live with all those years ago. He wondered if any of those memories contained any truth. Alhandra wondered if her father knew she was awake, listening fondly to every single note.

CURRICULUM VITAE

NAME: Robert Ritchie

ADDRESS: Department of English
University of Louisville
Louisville, KY 40292

DOB: Louisville, Kentucky – August 3, 1981

EDUCATION

& TRAINING: B.A., English and Humanities (Modern Culture)
University of Louisville
1999-2004

AWARDS: Morris Bein Award for Excellence in Humanities
2004