

Last Chaos - The Story of Eternal Dawn

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Chapter 1

My first Adventures as a Rogue

I've never been out of the city by myself before. I have trained with my grand father and father for a few years now, practically since I was old enough to walk. Father told me about the old days, many generations ago, about the beginning of the war with evil, but that's a family secrete, and I'm sworn not to tell anyone.

I just volunteered to help protect the city from the wild and dangerous beasts that can be found everywhere out side the city walls. The city merchants sold me this nice new shiny crossbow and some light leather clothing to protect me. The cross bow wasn't very big or powerful, but it was mine, and I was really proud of my new weapon. I asked the city guards what to do. They just smiled at me and said all you need to do is walk through these gates, find some nice little monsters, aim your little weapon you have there at them and pull the trigger. If you aim well, you'll be fine. If you don't, hope you know how to run real fast. Then he laughed at me.

So, as I was on my way through the gate, this big knight in shinning armor and glistening twin blades comes up to me and says, "Whatcha doing kid." And I looked up and said, "Going out to kill monsters, sir." Then he looks me up and down, well mostly down as I'm short, but I'm still growing. He chuckles, says something about sending kids out to do a man's job, gives me some small potion bottles and says with a laugh, "Here kid, take some healing potions. You might need them out there."

I wasn't too comfortable with volunteering in the first place, but now I'm getting kind of scared. Big strong knights need shinning armor out there. And everyone is laughing at me. Well, I'll show them. It's my family's sworn duty to protect the lands from evil. I'm going to be the best monster killer ever in all of Randol, maybe all of Iris.

So through the gate I go. It's not long before I run into some fierce foxes. I aim and shoot with my cross bow, and three shots later, dead fox. Hey, this is pretty easy stuff. I'll clean all the monsters out in no time. But everywhere I turn there are more of those evil foxes. I keep killing them, two or three shots each and I move on to the next one. Then I see wolves all a round me. I keep aiming and shooting. Foxes, wolves, and then dire wolves, all falling in rapid succession before my cross bow. I'm getting better at this as my experience grows.

Then I see a wolf going berserk. I immediately think I got to take that wild beast out. I aim and shoot, two, three, four shots and he's on top of me. I keep shooting and that berserk wolf eventually dies, but that really hurt. Good thing I'm a fast healer, so I haven't needed to use any of those healing potions the laughing knight gave me.

Then I see a real prize, a Pandora's box. I've heard you can find real treasure in those boxes. So I aim, in one shot, the box pops open and out comes a huge beast. Well now I've done it, I let a huge beast out to terrorize the country side. I got to fix this. So I aim, shoot, and keep shooting. That beast sure is fast, he's on top on me in no time. I keep shooting, and he's tearing me apart. I start gulping down those potions and they help, but I'm in a losing battle. I keep shooting as fast as I can. I run out of the beasts reach, turn and shoot some more. But he's on top of me again in a flash. I can feel the life just draining out of me. I think about just running away, back to the city as fast as I can, but I think of that knight laughing at me. I'm the one who released this monster, it's my responsibility, I got to fix my own messes. So bravely, I shoot a few bolts, I run back a little and shoot some more. It seemed like forever, then suddenly, one of my bolts pierces his beastly fur and flesh, he lifts his head up high and lets out an eerie howl, and slowly drops to the ground. I'm not sure that was a good experience, I really need to improve my skills before I try that again.

I've won the battle. Badly wounded and nearly dead, I limp over to the bloodied dead carcass and find a treasure in gold coins. Wow, with this I hurry back to town. Now I'm going to get a bigger cross bow, and better protective gear. Now that I've had a taste of adventure, I was hooked. Now I knew my dreams of being the best monster killer in all of Iris would come true. Father and grandpa will be proud of me. I just need to improve my skills, get some more experience and I'll be in some of those old dungeons cleaning out the monster mobs better than anyone.

After picking up some nice new gear, I found a nice farmstead not far outside Randol that needed a few more hands. They said even my little hands would be a help. I always kept me crossbow with me, there were always wild monsters trying to invade the farm. Do a few chores, kill a few monsters. That was the way most days went while I was living there. Who could want for more.

It wasn't until days later, after having vanquished hundreds, thousands of evil beasts, that I realized just how much work being a hero really is. I'm getting lots of experience at killing these mobbing beasts, and my skills are improving all the time. But this sure is slow tedious work, I wanted to get out there and do some real monster killing. But someday I know, I WILL be the best, I WILL kill every last one of these evil monsters. The people of Randol, and all the other wondrous and evil infested lands, WILL be free of evil. The people of Iris WILL be able to live in peace. Some day, maybe many long tedious days from now, but I WILL get it done!

Everyone will remember the name Tara the monster killer.

Chapter 2

Eternal Dawn

There was a warm breeze from the south, unusual for this late in the year. There was a faint smell of pine trees and leaf mold in the air. The leaves were blazing in full color, and were just beginning to blanket the forest floor in their autumn colors.

Fronius was on the side of a heavily wooded hill. The woods were dark, the trees immensely tall. Very little light reach the ground despite the late afternoon sun. The sound of insects was hidden by the many other noises. There were the sounds of wolves surrounding the entire area. In a large clearing in the valley at the bottom of the hill was a lonely farm house, barely visible through the trees.

Having trained to fight evil since he was a small child, Fronius knew it was his duty to protect the innocent occupants in the farmhouse below from the encroaching doom as the wolves, and dire wolves closed in. Fronius could see some werewolves in the evil pack.

So preparing himself with great attack and healing potions, Fronius, and his lovely wife and companion Suzieq descended on the unsuspecting beasts.

His glittering dual swords, and her quick bow, laid great swaths of death among the evil minions, sending them to the final embrace of the land. But even though their might was great, Fronius received many wounds from the foul beasts. If not for the healing powers of his companion, even the heroic Fronius would have been overcome by the sheer numbers of evil creatures.

With quick shots from her bow, the fearless Suzieq did away with evil on one side, and supplied cooling healing waves for her beloved Fronius on the other side.

Nearing the end of their strength, the heroes finally reach the farmhouse. Exhausted, they look out and see never ending swarms of evil. Dismayed, but brave, they know they will continue the fight, but so out numbered, they knew they have no chance to defeating the huge masses of evil surrounding them.

Earlier in the day, inside the old but well kept farm house the, the farmer's wife looked out over the surrounding fields.

She saw little Tara skillfully guiding the horses back from the pasture. She had been a godsend when she first showed at their doorstep, hungry and tired. There have been increasing numbers of dark creatures threatening the farm the past few years. Everyone was well trained in various weapons, even the farmer's daughters. Little Tara's skill with her crossbow had been a great blessing to their little farmstead. They were losing more and more of their livestock every day. But since Tara arrived, they haven't lost as much as a small chicken. She cares for all the farm animals better than most care for their own children.

However, today was different. Shortly after the noon meal of lamb, fresh bread and goat cheese, the howling started. Thousands of wolves, dire wolves and berserk wolves descended on the small farmstead.

Little Tara was on her way back from the fields, bringing the young horses back from their morning in the pasture when she saw the legion of evil descending on the lovely farmstead. She knew she was late for lunch, but she loved being out in the unusually warm late fall sunshine. Tara quickly rushed the horses into the barn and secured the door. In a flash, she pulled out her shiny crossbow, and shot as fast as she could reload. She was getting faster every day. Dozens of wild beasts fell before her onslaught, but still they came.

The farm's alarm bell started ringing and everyone on the farmstead came out with their favorite weapons. Many of them had real weapons, swords, bows, axes, even a magic staff. Some had only old rusty swords, others had pitchforks or long knives. Many of the evil beasts fell, but not as fast as around Tara and young, but powerfully muscled, Benji with his quick dual sword action. Benji told Tara he had been training since he was little, hoping someday he would be a Knight. His father had

told him it was important to be able to protect yourself and others.

A little off to the left, one of the farm workers who Tara never saw actually doing any work was taking out a good number of the beasts trying to surround her. She had arrived on the farm just a few days earlier, talking about adventures. She used magic, with purple balls of death flying from her staff. Tara didn't like Mora, she thought Mora showed off far too much of her voluptuous curves. She didn't like the way all the men in the farmstead looked at Mora; and especially when she got too close to Benji.

Within a short time of the first onslaught of the evil beasts, the valiant defenders of the farmstead were quickly overwhelmed. The farmer, his family and all the farm workers bravely fought their way back to the farmhouse, protected by the farmer's wife's healing and uncle's defensive magics. They were used to defending their little homestead, but this onslaught was beyond anything they ever dreamed they would face.

Now, the farmer's family and farm workers huddled in fear, using the last of their magic to protect the farmhouse from the invading wolves. They knew they only had a few minutes left before the wolves broke through their last defenses.

Suddenly, they could hear battle sounds from outside. The screams from dying wolves filled the air.

Suddenly, several of the occupants of the farmhouse burst forth, swinging axes and swords, impaling beast after beast with quick arrows and bolts from bows and cross bows. Encouraged by the heroic actions of Fronius and Suzieq, the frightened farming family decides they must act now, or all will be lost.

With the number of defenders now greater, the heroes and new but inexperienced combatants begin to turn the tide in the battle. The evil minions invading Iris fall in ever growing numbers.

Finally, after what seemed like hours of battle, the doom which had been surrounding this simple farmstead is defeated.

The exhausted and wounded heroes and their new fellow warriors receive a last round of the cool healing powers of Suzieq and the farmer's wife. As they look up, they realize they have fought through the night.

As dawn rises, they also rise. Many of the former farm workers, now becoming warriors, put forth their hands, clasping each others hand in one great handshake. Together they all swear to continue the fight against evil throughout Iris until all evil has been defeated and the peaceful farmers and town folk can once again live in peace and enjoy the beauties of the lands.

On that morning, as dawn rose over the lands of Iris the great alliance known as EternalDawn was born. They swore an oath to be eternally united until the last of the darkness of evil was driven from all the lands of Iris.

Chapter 3

Velpist Rising

The sky was overcast, thunder rumbled deeply in the distance. Beneath the noise of the storm was a faint sound of another kind of storm, one not heard in many years, but not yet loud enough to frighten the humans living above. A clank of spear on shield, a barely audible ring of plate armor as the dark army moved quietly through the long forgotten underground passages. A low thump of pounding boots, a faint swish of rotting moldy wrappings slowly grew louder from deep under ground.

All the homesteads and farms around the old ruins had ignored the gray crumbling stones that were once a feared fortress temple for the evil northern witch king. The evil king was defeated millennia ago, and the legends told of many years of peaceful prosperity. In those days, all of Iris was green, with fragrant flowers and rolling green hills filled with the sounds and smells of contentment. Even the poisonous lands of Strayana were beautiful and prosperous in the days after the fall of the witch king. A bell had been hung from the ruins, and rung at the winter and summer solstice to celebrate the change of seasons, had given the ruins a new name, Belfast. The residents around the temple had forgotten the real reason for the bell, which was to be rung by guards around the temple to warn of attacking evils, to warn everyone to prepare for attack, or to flee impending doom. That guard had long since been forgotten, and concern for the evil the ruined temple signified was discarded.

Abandoned, and nearly forgotten, the evils that once inhabited Velpist Temple slowly gathered deep under the ruins. Some mysterious dark power was at work. In the millennial since the fall of the witch king, a darker, more menacing evil has been slowly growing. In darkness the returning minions were growing in numbers, working forges deep beneath the old ruins, silently, growing in strength. Now following a greater evil seeping through the land, the dark monsters below ground, and above, grew in numbers and in deadliness. The surrounding population feared the growing numbers of evil creatures invading their peaceful villages and farms from the surrounding woods and hills. Few gave thought to the harmless old ruins.

Camouflaged by the deep rumbles of the thunder, the undead mummies, zombies and skeletons slowly climbed the dark hidden passages of the ancient dungeons.

One last long rumble of thunder and untold numbers of evil beasts stormed forth from dark openings that had once been massive doors to the horrifying dungeons.

Several leagues south of Velpist, a band of merry warriors camped, enjoying stories of their wonderful, and dangerous, battles in the few months since they first gathered together in alliance against evil. In those intervening months, the fearless band know only to themselves as EternalDawn were eternally united in their battles against evil. Many of the growing numbers of hideous beasts, monsters, and other mutations of evil had fallen to the ever growing band of valiant defenders of Iris. But they had never faced what had been stirring in the underground darkness that was now streaming forth.

The great Healer Suzieq had sensed a growing evil in the area. Despite warning the local inhabitants, they were scoffed at. "Evil dungeons hidden around here?", they were told by the locals, "You've been dipping into the hard cider a little too much. We're just simple farmers, tradesmen and women, and merchants. Other than a few nasty wolves in the night, what evil could be interested in such a harmless community as this?"

The heroic general of EternalDawn, the mighty knight Fronius, had tried his best to unite the residents to be prepared for the evil the wise Suzieq knew was coming. Having little success of convincing the

people of the coming darkness, little was done to prepare for the danger as the beasts from below crossed the unguarded fields around the community.

Once again, as happens every night, an eerie silence settled over the residents of Iris as they entered their evening slumber unawares of the approaching danger. The peaceful silence rested in the dark evening air as the monsters prepared to ravage the countryside.

However, scouts from the ever vigilant EternalDawn saw the approaching evil and gave warning to the rest of their gathered troops.

The evil creatures crept slowly toward the unprepared village. Their dark master had prepared them well to face the simple residents of this peaceful countryside. While the attacking hoards were confident of their overwhelming numbers against untrained farmers and unprepared merchants, and their long prepared surprise attack, they were unprepared for the fierce onslaught of the well seasoned warriors of EternalDawn.

Positioning his troops wisely, the fearless Fronius led his troops into battle, feinting first from the east with a few archers. As the undead evil turned to crush the measly few archers, the knights and titans attacked from both north and south, smashing the dark hordes as a hammer ringing on anvil. Accompanied by several talented sorcerers and mages, numerous spells fell among the enemy. Quick volleys of bolts from rangers and rapid dagger work up close by assassins brought panic to the beasts of evil. Breaking ranks, their dark shadows began to flee in all directions, recklessly swinging their dark weapons long forged in the deep dungeon's furnaces.

Hoping to escape, many of the dark undead fled west, seeing little fighting in that direction. Just as they began climbing a long steep hill, the remaining straggling dark forces saw the crest of the hill above them suddenly come alive.

Tara was standing next to Benji. He had been her beast friend since she first met him when she first arrived on the farm. She hated that Mora was so close to him. Mora had been pestering Benji for days, trying to get his attention, and it was really bothering Tara. She wasn't sure how she felt about Benji, she just didn't like Mora wiggling her barely armored curves at him.

As the band of warriors with her on the hill saw the dark undead creatures fleeing up the hill, she heard Kar, with his low grumbling voice order them to attack. She was getting used to his unusual accent. Not from Iris, he had come here only a few years ago from a place called Illian, a thousand leagues to the south. He said his family was originally from Iris, but left many years ago. He had heard about the rising darkness in Iris, and with his aging father's blessing, returned to protect his ancestral homeland.

While taking numerous injuries from the overwhelming numbers of evil, every member of EternalDawn fought on courageously, receiving constant and soothing healing from Suzieq and the rest of the valiant healers. Their expertly wielded bows rained death upon the undead beasts while sending out their healing spells to all members of each party.

As dawn approached, as it did every day on the troops of EternalDawn, the last of the undead finally lay down, finally dying for good. The warriors gathered together, weary from the battle against the most fearsome beasts they have so far faced, shouted once again their pledge, "EternalDawn, Eternally United against all evil." The rising sun of dawn awakened the village, just as they were learning how close they had come to death. Seeing the grisly carnage nearly surrounding their formally peaceful

community, they learned that the insults they had poured on Fronius and his warriors were a sign of their own folly, almost bringing disaster upon themselves. Seeing the dangers that were spreading across the lands, several of the braver members of the community joined with Fronius, repeating the Eternally United pledge.

Chapter 4

Velpist Falling

The large campfire in the center of the sprawling field crackled merrily, flames reached high into the air. The flickering light illuminated the faces of many tired warriors gathered around after the previous day and night's battle. Healers around the camp were exhausted from their long day of labors, unable to continue with the many minor injuries still being nursed. Over a dozen smaller camp fires were spread around the large field, each surrounded by more weary warriors, a bare league from the center of the day long battle, which had just ended at dawn.

Sir Fronius was off to the side talking with the leaders of the nearby villages.

On the other side of the fire, one of the captains and a weary mage, the fearsome Knight Kar and the undaunted mage Mora sat among the band of warriors, watching the dancing flames, ignoring their few remaining wounds. They would heal on their own, saving the limited magical energies of the Healers for more serious injuries.

"You do believe they're all dead?" asked the young mage, with a sparkling twinkle in her eye. She didn't mind fighting and killing evil monsters, she just wished it wasn't so dusty and dirty, and washing mummy blood out of her beautiful armor was very annoying.

Laughing quietly, the grizzled Kar says, "All be gotten and dead? ... yea we do got them. But if you do be thinking them dead back thar in that bloody field do be them all, you do be a bit mistaken. The slimey pits down thar do be a breeding more foulness than do fit in that bloody field we a fought in yesturday."

Cautiously, the weary mage asks, "So, you think we're going in?"

Laughing a little louder, so a few nearby warriors turned and looked, the grizzled knight shakes his head. "A going in... yea I do a think we be a going in. Gotta spend a few days a training them thar green recruits a coming in from thar villages," the knight said, looking toward the village leaders in heated discussion with Sir Fronius. He continued, "We do be busy a teaching them the grip end from the business end o' the blade before we a let then do try sticking one o' them thar zombies." The older knight almost laughing himself off the log they were sitting on. Mora laughed quietly, enjoying the unending jovial spirit of the warrior beside her.

Settling back comfortably on the log, Kar then looked seriously at the mage, "Yea, I do believed after a day or so a discussing the whole matter, we do be deciding to go in. Or else these a poor villagers will be a seeing the same sight over agin, and us do be off to some other place. Don't think we do got a lot a

choice in the matter. We a go in and get 'em, or they do a be coming out agin a getting some poor villagers in thar asleepn'."

"Think there'll be any decent fighters in this new group" asked the mage, also watching Fronius and the village leaders with a disapproving look at the straggle looking new fighters nearby.

"Good fighters...", repeated the seasoned warrior, "there always do be a few good fighters from these here villages, they a don't survive long without a few good swords a protectn' them. They be some good fighters a joinin' us... once we train 'em up a bit. Those that do trip over their own sword, they do be going a back to the village. We're not needin' no one accidently a stabbing a good fellow warrior in the back in a fright first time they do see a real zombie," the knight starts chuckling softly again.

"Maybe after a bit 'o trainin' here, those we be sending back do be better when a time comes and they do need a sword defending them selves and thar loved ones."

He continued, "The rest o' us, we do be going in, and the gods a willn' we do be a coming back agin."

The two experienced fighters enjoyed each others company for a while longer before turning in for the night, peacefully enjoying the cool night air, knowing they would all be side by side in the heat of battle all too soon. Mora was surprised she enjoyed the grizzled knights company, he was not like the men that usually attracted her interest, like the very handsome Benji. She had tried spending some time with Benji during the day again, but that annoying Tara was always popping up.

A few days later, plans were set, the warriors of EternalDawn, seasoned and newly trained, break camp and prepare for the onslaught in the dungeons of Velpist.

Sitting tall upon his mount in his gleaming armor reflecting the morning sun, Sir Fronius repeats his instructions to make sure everyone obeys, for there own safety. "Everyone stay in your party... "

The plans were set at last nights meeting. Finalizing the plans agreed upon by all the captains, Fronius says, "Every party should have a few good close in fighters, and couple long range fighters, and at least one Healer. I want everyone going in coming back out, and in one piece." He knew, as did everyone listening, anyone who falls to the evil below would be hacked to pieces, which is always a real challenge to even the best Healers. "And every party needs at least one magic user, a Mage, Sorcerer, or Night Shadow should be in every party. We don't know what their going to throw at us down there, but we know it's not going to be pretty. And communication is key. If any party gets in trouble, they are to contact me immediately, so I can send help."

Having already established a forward command inside the massive, dingy, entrance hall to Velpist, the rest of the warriors slowly entered through the narrow, nearly hidden, crumbling ancient gates of the Velpist Dungeon. Once inside, Fronius directs each party down one of the many dark passages leading to all corners of the massive dungeon. Resistance in the early chambers is light, mostly zombies wandering aimlessly, many looking more ancient then the dungeon itself, making easy targets for arrows and bolts, and the occasional magical blast. The knights and titans in each group getting weary of watching others having all the fun hope for some better targets for there bright blades of swords and axes.

In one party, the older knight Sir Kar and the younger Benji discuss their coming battles, so far just watching the rogues, healers and mage have most of the fun so far. "Pretty easy so far," says the younger knight. "Don' you be a getting to confident thar, a plenty a fightn' yet do be ahead for us," the

seasoned warrior warns, with a grin and quiet laugh, patting the handles of his still sheathed twin blades.

Suddenly, without warning, faster than an eye can follow, the warrior draws his blades, and without turning swings towards the opening to the left of where the party was approaching. Before anyone else can even react, a skeletal skull rolls on the floor between the party members. "See, you do be needing to be keepn' all your eyes open for these a sneaky bags o' bones," he laugh's as he charges into the passage way.

The rest of the party using as much Haste as they can, follow closely behind the seasoned warrior, now leading with a ferocity he saves for the toughest battles. After a short charge down the hall, removing a few more skeletal skulls from the rapidly collapsing "bags 'o bones," the party arrives in a broad chamber, brightly light by many torches lining the walls. The room is filled with deadly skeletons, many wielding swords, other larger skeletons skillfully wielding lances.

Taken by surprise, many skeletons crumble under the onslaught of the warrior and his party. The knights and titans barreled through the center of the room, crushing every skeleton in there way. The assassin Jalien slipping quickly in and out of the crowded areas of the room takes out many more with her quick sharp daggers. A Night Shadow in the party gathers crowds of skeletons around himself, and all of the evil creatures near him crumble to dust under his powerful magical blasts.

The great arched openings on the three other walls of the great chamber suddenly fill with swarms on skeletons, zombies, and mummies, including a dozen powerful Skeleton Sergeants. While most of the room has already been cleared by the party's initial onslaught, the incoming swarms threaten to crush the warriors. The older knight yells above the sound of battle, "I do think it be a time we be a calln' to Sir Fronius for a bit o' help." The Healer, between releasing an arrow, and casting another healing spell, sends a frantic message to the command post at the Velpist entrance. She relays the response, "Fron says we've got to hold out by our selves a little while, there's fierce battles all over the dungeon. He'll send help as soon as he can."

The older knight, seeing they will be slaughtered if they stayed in the open center of the chamber, calls for the party to fall back to the hallway where they came in. From there, with the narrow entrance to the large chamber they were now in, they could hold off the swarming masses of "bags 'o bones" and "piles o' rags" as Sir Kar called them.

From the middle of the hallway, the warriors held bravely. Sending out de-buffing spells and killing waves of magic, and arrows and bolts as fast as they could reload their weapons, only a bare handful of the evil creatures could make it more than a few feet into the hallway. And these were easily taken out by quick sword, ax and dagger action. The more they killed, the more the evil appeared to spawn out of the floors and walls. Soon the numbers of attacking hordes swelled so that even in the partially protective hallway, it appeared the warriors would soon be overwhelmed again.

"You think we do retreat, thinkin' help do not be comin' in time," shouted the older warrior to his party. "Hehe," chuckled the Night Shadow, "we got them right where they want us, I'm not giving them another inch," he shouted above the noise of battle.

Suddenly there was an explosion and bright flashes from across the chamber. The quick assassin Jalien said, "I'll check that out," and she was gone, invisible to everyone.

A few moments later she reappeared at the side of the seasoned warrior, as he jumped in surprise.

"Dang, I do never be gettin' use to you rogues a popin' in and out like that," he exclaimed. She let the party know that a small party was trying to fight their way in from the other side of the chamber, but were taking a lot of damage, "Looks like reinforcements are here, we better go rescue them." Tara and Jalien both disappear, and a few moments later several of the mummies blocking the center of the doorway collapse in a pile of rags. Looking up past the carnage Kar and Benji see Tara and Jalien giving each other a high five, then quickly turn and more mummies and skeletons collapse around them. A tight wall of skeletons forms up just past the quick rogues, but just as they are about to strike a larger red, then purple ball of energy envelops them while Mora, standing behind Benji chuckles.

So, with arrows, bolts, swords, and axes flying, magic spells blasting away, Sorcerers with their scythes and their Elementals pounding away, the party fought their way back into the large chamber, torches still flickering on the walls. On the far side the small party of four had just made it into the chamber and were being smothered by an shattering assault of skeletons, mummies and zombies. Many of their foes had joined the battle against the newly arrived party. With their enemy distracted by the new arrivals, the older knight led his party across the room, demolishing all resistance. Skeletal bones disintegrated to dust and moldy mummy rags littered the floors as the party quickly cleared their side of the chamber.

The small party on the other side, lead by Sir Fronius himself, were completely surrounded. They were holding their own for the moment, but against such staggering numbers of enemies, they were fully on the defensive. All their energies were being spent on shield spells, and constant healing spells from Suzieq, Sir Fronius' eternal companion. Birgetta and Kena looked to be near exhaustion from expending so much of their magical energy on their own heal spells to offset the damage their own party suffered. Seeing the dire straights of their fellow warriors, the older knight and his party flung themselves at the rear of the enemy. Quickly the smaller party was able to switch from all defense to a devastating offense. The enemy, like being crushed between a hammer and an anvil, was quickly obliterated.

As the last of the skeletal bones were crashing to the floor, the two parties meet, in victory, in the middle of the large chamber. Surrounded by the devastation of their foes, the two parties clasped hands, and exchanged quick hugs.

"It do be good you come to rescue us. Your distractin' them bones and rags was all we do need to make a pile o' dust out o' them," the older warrior laughed.

"We came as quickly as we could, there are still battles like this little one here still going on all over this dungeon. Up for some more fun? There's another party two chambers over that needs some help," asked Fronius.

"Of course we do be up for more," the older warrior laughed, "we do be Eternally United. Where do be that chamber with our fellows in it?"

So continued the historic Battle of Velpist. Within a few more hours, the weary warriors were roaming empty halls, searching for the last holdouts among the undead evils of Velpist. With no more evil spawning anywhere in the great dungeon, Sir Fronius called all the parties back to the main entrance chamber.

Standing at the head of the stairs near the dungeon exit, the proud Sir Fronius greeted all his warriors, back from the grueling battles, "Awesome work everyone. Gratz to us all. Now back to our camp for some well deserved rest and festivities"

As they left Velpist, Tara had daggers for eyes, watching Mora walking happily next to Benji.

Mora, exhausted from the days battle, turned and seeing Kar only a few steps behind her, smiled quietly to herself. Benji seemed oblivious to all her attempts, maybe it was time to target a new conquest.

Chapter 5

The Other Side of Velpist

(see NOTES at the end of this chapter for the answers, what was that question again?)

It was a cloudless starry starry night. Two weary fighters sat around a small smoldering camp fire. It had been a disastrous day. Barely escaping with their lives from the previous day's battle, they watch the remnants of their meager dinner in the dirt next to the fire.

"Grot, u dink day all gon", one fighter moaned softly, watching the trees around them for any sign of their enemy, cringing at every moving shadow.

"Grrr, yer, day all gon," Grot mournfully groaned back, making a slashing sign across his neck, "yer, it's da seven circles for dem all." Then an evil gleam reappeared in his eye socket.

"Har," Grot then chuckled, "crazy hot way down there. Specilly dat last one, real inferno, har har." Gert sat there, mornin' the loss of all his former companions, looking down at Grot's rusty, bloody, notched sword, and at his own blood free battle axe, gnawing on one of the few remaining bones from their late dinner. It had been a disastrous day for Gert, he had finally made some friends that didn't laugh at him all day, and now they were all gone.

"Err, Gert, yas wanna go back ta da Temple an' see waz left?" Grot said teasing and poking a nervous Gert.

"Yer crazy, na, nat me dar ol' buddy, I'z not goin back dar fer nuttin," mumbled Gert, looking around suddenly and shivering, expecting the shadows to leap out at him. "By da way, Grot, we been a runnin' all day, where da heck aw we."

"We is lost dar little buddy," moaned Grot. Thinking back to the battle in the Temple, "Dar I'z was, just eatn' an old rat, and in bursts all dis shiny armor and flashy steel. Dar was pretty purple and green lights a flashin' all over da room. Den I sees dat all me good pals a burstin' ta pieces. I look up at good ol' Yorick, and I see one a dem shinny blade a going between hiz shoulders and hiz skull. I stop a lookin' an' swings me good ol' blade a few times, and it gets good an' bloody, and den I dives on to da floor. I get burried under crumblin' bone and dem stinky rags. I look over and dar poor Yorick skull. Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him well! Den just dusty gone." Grot's body shakes slightly, dusty tears in his eye socket, as he morns Yorick's passing.

Gert looks at Grot with a puzzled look, "Grot, you didn' know Yorick, dat was Horatio."

"Har, den dat oky doky, never did like dat Horatio," as Grot starts laughing like his usual self. "It wouda been a good day fer that Stygian ride there ol' pal," said Grot still teasing, giving Gert a little nudge .

"No Grot, I can't do dat, I got no pennies. He wanna let me on da boat wid out pennies"

"Har, dats right u pur fool, you was talking where dat Wilson and Heath heard ya. Shoulda never said ya only need a 5 percent mur fer da level, they done tax the udder 95 percent from ya, har har, day taken even yer las' two cents," Grot said laughing out load now. "Besides dar ol' pal, day wanna let you on dat boat anyway, you an me, we're a going to da seven circles wid the rest of our folk. Wad you axpectin', da guy wid the arrow in his heal to come hiz self an escort you on da boat, har har."

Looking more fearful then ever, Gert starts shushing Grot. "Ay, quiet dar Grot, one a dem witches gonna hears you come turn us inta fuzzy fireballs or sumptin."

At that Grot just started laughing harder, slapping his boney knee; falling off the stone he was perched on. "Great balls o fire der ol' Gert, ain't none a dem dar witches 'round here any where now, day all off wid da rest a dem monsters wit da shinny pointy swards 'n axes."

Picking up another bone from the dirt to gnaw on, Gert says quietly and seriously, and with a little fear still in his voice, "I ain't nevar going back ta dat run down old Temple, nuttn' but a heart a darkness now. I'm a going back over to dat place in da desert, none a dem monsters bodder us over in good ol' Procyon, yer tink?" Gert asked hopefully, thinking back to his old home, not really looking forward to returning.

Suddenly, Grot looks around, studying the dark shadows surrounding their camp fire. "Shhs dar ol' Gert, I hears sumptin," says Grot, looking cautious for the first time since they left the old Temple behind. He slithers off his rock and disappears into the shadows, creeping through a few of the surrounding trees. A few minutes later, he slithers back, "Lookin' like we gettin' some elf bones ta chew on tonite there ol' pal, dar a three young pretties a passin' by. We a going get you my pretties, har har," says Grot, rubbing his boney hands together, with a dangerous gleam in his eye socket.

Gert, still looking cautious, but a little hungrier, says "Bah, bones, bones, a whole bag a bones to get my temple back."

"Thought you juz said you ain't never going back to dat nasty, dirty, wet hole, filled with the ends of worms and an oozy smell."

"But I like dat oozy smell and tasty worms, besides it was a dry, bare, sandy hole, and that means comfort," Gert moans, sounding very home sick for his adopted home.

"Well, I don' know 'bout you, I miss second breakfast so I wan' second dinner. I'm a gettin' me some elf tonight," Grot says, picking up his blood crusted rusty sword. "Ya comin', or ya lying der wid your messy little rat bones."

Gert sat a minute, looking to see if Grot was growing hair on the tops of his feet and looking in the dirt at the poor remainders from their sparse dinner, licks his lips, and slowly stands, picking up the

splintered handle of his old, but sharp, axe. "I'm a comin', I guess," he mumbles reluctantly, wishing he had one of those rings so he could sneak off in the other direction.

Peeking through the trees at the three women watering their mounts in a stream, Gert whispers, "Whereya dink da rest a dem monsters at, Grot." Gert looks around, hoping to see five more, five being the highest he could count, any more than five was still five. If there were enough of them, he could convince Grot to sneak back to their own little camp fire.

"Grr, I dink day on da plain, ... da plain a wholes day travelin' dat way," Grot said pointing east.

"Day look dangerous, Grot. Look at da faries on der shoulders, dat one fairy looks really big Grot."

"You worry 'bout tiny faries, ur coward. Dem little dings can't do nuttin, you don't know nuttin'," growled Grot quietly.

"I know nothing, nothing," he squeeks and turns away quickly. "I not worried 'bout da farie, it the lady under da farie wit da big shinny bow dat looks scary, Grot." Then he sighs, knowing the inevitable is about to happen. He lays there, hidden in the shadows of the trees, thinking as hard as his little bony head lets him, then says, "I know sumptin' 'bout life, the universe and everything. I been in deep thought and da Ultimate Answer is forty-two." Not bad for someone who can only count to five.

"Forty-two what, ya skull head, dat not an answer if you don't got a question," Grot chortles.

"Forty-two is how many a us it will take to fight dem witches down dar," mumbling to himself, knowing that if he follows Grot, after the ultimate answer will come the ultimate end.

They watched the three women in the clearing below in silence for a few minutes. The moon was shining in the cloudless sky. As the mounts waded in the stream little waves heaved and fell with a splash as of molten silver, breaking the image of the moon into a thousand morsels, fusing again into one, as the ripples of laughter die into the still face of joy.

They lay under the cover of the trees listening to the young women talking.

The elven Healer says, "General Fronius wanted to get there today, but I told him the troops needed a few more days rest. Poor Tara was exhausted, almost to tears, she wanted to go home after yesterday's battle."

The young Rogue Jalien answered quickly, a knowing little smile on her face, "But Suzie, those tears weren't from exhaustion. Tara! Home. She wouldn't go home, she's been following that young knight she's had her eye on, I heard her say something about 'I'll think of some way to get him back! After all, tomorrow is another day!'"

With a warning look on her face, Suzie tells the young Rogue, "That's a sensitive subject," silencing the Rogue. Then Suzie continues, "Well, I still think we need more time for the troops to rest."

The bright young Jalien answers quickly again, "People assume that time is a strict progression of cause to effect, but actually from a non-linear, non-subjective viewpoint, it's more like a big ball of wibbly-wobbly, timey-wimey..."

The dark haired Mage puts a hands to her head, covering her ears, then chuckles, "Please stop, you're hurting my head." Then looks at the rogue with a sly smile and says, "I'm not so sure Tara is going to get what she wants, she wears good running shoes and armored shirts and pants and Benji's looking for short skirts and high heels," as she quickly looks down at herself. "Anyway, Tara better work quick if she wants a chance, I hear the General wants us in Prokion by the end of the month."

When he heard this, Grot leaps to his feet. "Day not takn' good old Procyon too, I's got some good friends and family in Prokyon, some a dem not even UnDead yet. When I was dar last it was the best of times, now it gonna be the worst of times. Day not gonna see da Light of Procyon's torches, it gonna be Darkness fer dem."

Gert, knowing Grot had never really been to Procyon, sadly shakes his head, "Dis is it den."

In fury at hearing of the threat to his supposed, and imaginary, friends in Procyon, Grot stands, grips his sword tight, and charges in a frenzied wrath.

Gert watches him lead the charge, then reluctantly follows, clutching his sharp clean axe to his chest, knowing the world was never meant for someone like him.

As they charge down on the supposedly helpless women, he hears the Rogue say, "O Suzie, please don't shoot them. Let us have some fun."

Suzie, laughing out load, says, "You two have some fun, not worth even picking up my bow for only two miserable little creatures."

The Rogue pipes in quickly, "Only two. Where's the mobs. I want mobs." While she favored using daggers for quick slicing action, she was impatient to get the battle started, so she picked up the crossbow she had been borrowing for fun. Then even quicker, "MobsAndMobsAndMobs" as she expertly loaded a fire bolt into the borrowed crossbow.

"Calm down there, little missy," Suzie said, trying to reign in the enthusiastic rouge, "you young rogues always looking for more than you can handle, then look for a nice healer passing by to pull your behind out of trouble. Hopefully you'll learn as you get more skills and experience."

Gert sees the mage lift her staff, and the rogue lift her crossbow, and yells to Grot in a worried voice, "I don't think we're in Velpist anymore, Grot. Dem witches look even scarier here."

Grot yells back over his shoulder, "What, me worry!" as he hears the mage yell, "Im going to cast your pointy ears back to Vulcan."

As Grot turned back, he saw a purple light surrounding him and could feel his skeletal body exploding beneath his bony skull. The last thing he hears is Gert's feeble moans. "Grot, I can't move Grot, save me Grot."

Gert's eyes meet the Rogues eyes, and sees glee in them, "I got a bad feeling 'bout this," he moans.

He looks down at his feet and sees Grot's skull rolling to a stop at his feet, smiling, looking back up at him still wearing that evil grin. The fire bolt explodes in his chest, and with his dying breath Gert says, "Gort, look at da mess you got me into, I'm dink I'm gonna kick ur dead head all da way back to da

Mars Hotel, where ever dat is."

Gert had always thought he was a lucky orc. He had left Procyon hoping for a quieter place with less of those humans fighting over all his friends, kill stealing from each other. He had found a nice quiet hole in Velpist where no one bothered him, and he bothered no one. Having never hurt anyone in his short UnDead life, he just wanted his old little hole back. Being different from all the rest of the UnDead in Velpist, he was left pretty much alone. His only friend had been Grot. And now, the last of his blood flowing from his veins, Gert laid down next to his never used battle axe, and next to Grot's grinning skull, and died, again.

NOTES:

I tried something different, I tried to make this Chapter almost like a game. I quoted, or used things from some other books, shows, and songs. Got some of the lines from mom from some old stuff I never saw (for those a bit older than me), hope you enjoy. Find and figure out all the things I put in, maybe google can help with some. I'm not even sure where they all come from, but I remember reading them from somewhere.

Answers (hints)

1. Starry starry night, from a song by Don McLean, see #25 below
2. Seven circles, reference to Dante's Inferno, which had nine circles including a very cold day in hell
3. Crazy hot way down there, line from an Elvis Presley song
4. Where da heck aw we, from an old TV show called F Troop
5. Yorick! I knew him well!, from Shakespear, actually it was Horatio wasn't it?
6. Stygian ride, and pennies, the final ride to hell on the River Stix cost 2 pennies, Homers Iliad and Odyssey
7. Wilson and Heath, and 95% tax, Beatles song
8. Guy wid the arrow in his heal, Achilles, he paid his two pennies for his ride on the Stix
9. Great balls o fire, line from a song
10. A heart a (of) darkness, title of a book
11. Going to get you my pretties, Wizard of Oz, the movie not the book
12. Bones, bones, a whole bag a bones to get my temple back, think of rivets and The Heart of Darkness
13. Nasty, dirty, wet hole, filled with the ends of worms and an oozy smell, and dry, bare, sandy hole, and that means comfort, Opening lines from The Hobbit
14. Second breakfast, Lord of the Rings, the movie not the book
15. Growing hair on the tops of his feet, more reference to The Hobbit
16. Wishing he had one of those rings, another reference to Tolkien (I really like The Hobbit and LOTR)
17. Five being the highest he could count, any more than five was still five, Watership Down, read it and you'll never think of rabbits the same way again
18. da plain, ... da plain, from an old TV show
19. Ultimate Answer is forty-two, Hitchhikers Guide to the Universe (What IS the question?)
20. Little waves heaved and fell with a splash as of molten silver..., from Fantasies, a old story about fairies that inspired Tolkien
21. Tara! Home. ... 'I'll think of some way to get him back! After all, tomorrow is another day!', Gone

With The Wind, both movie and book

22. "People assume that time is a strict progression of cause to effect, but actually from a non-leaner, non-subjective viewpoint, it's more like a big ball of wibbly-wobbly, timey-wimey...", Dr. Who, the ninth one I think

23. She wears good running shoes and armored shirts and pants and he's looking for short skirts and high heels, parody of a Taylor Swift song

24. It was the best of times, now it gonna be the worst of times, Tale of Two Cities

25. The world was never meant for someone like him, from Vincent, a song by Don MacLean

26. MobsAndMobsAndMobs, they way Gnomes talk in Dragon Lance

27. I don't think we're in Velpist anymore, think of Kansas and Dorothy

28. What, me worry, Alfred E Newman from Mad Magazine

29. Im going to cast your pointy ears back to Vulcan., Star Trek

30. I got a bad feeling 'bout this, don't remember where this is from?

31. Dead head all da way back to da Mars Hotel, think Greatful Dead

32. Last of his blood flowing from his veins, Gert laid down ... and died, from a sad war song, and she threw the letter away.

Chapter 6

Ambush

There was a buzzing in the air from the many small insects in the dry desert air. The insects had followed them from the herb gardens just a short ride from the city gates. The three warriors were returning from harvesting medical supplies for the mounts and other helping pets in preparation for the planned assault on Prokion Temple, a large stronghold for the evil forces that had taken control of most of the lands in the east of Dratan.

"Hey, isn't that Sir Kar and little Tara over there," asked Kena pointing to the right as the three adventurers topped the low dusty hill in Dratan, with the city visible in the distance to the left. Two small figures could be seen riding their mounts in the distance, raising little dust clouds as the hoofs pounded the dry sandy ground beneath them.

"Yes, I think so. Looks like they are headed towards that large dust cloud just ahead of them. Just like Kar, always out looking for trouble, and finding it, but why is he bringing little Tara with him?" responded Suzie, with a hint of concern in her voice. "Hope he doesn't plan on going to far, it's dangerous only a league or so further down that road. Prokion is not far in that direction."

"Um, Suzie, I don't think that's just a dust cloud," said Birgetta hesitantly, clutching her silver bow and loosening the arrows in her quill.

Just then Suzie could see about a dozen goblins storm out of the dust cloud, heading strait for Sir Karomin and Tara. "Sir Kar," she started screaming as she spurred her mount into a gallop towards the pending ambush. She knew she would not reach Sir Kar and Tara in time, they were still far down the road. Within a few moments, the goblins and two warriors clashed, raising clouds of dust around them, quickly becoming lost to sight.

It was only a few minutes later, but as Suzie and her companions arrived at the spot, they saw a number of goblin carcasses sprawled in the sand, but no sign of Sir Kar or Tara. "Mor, Bir, search the area

quickly, we must find them," she orders her companions. "They may be injured and need healing."

They search the area in vain, finding no sign of either fellow warrior. Riding at top speed, they see no further signs of the fleeing attackers. They found just a few more dead goblins along the road to the south east. "They must have been taken captive. They're headed for Prokion, probably teleported," as she looked at the end of the trampled trail they had been following. "We have to tell Fronius, get this assault moving immediately." Suzie turns her mount around and starts heading for the city gate. As they speed back to the city, Suzie tells her companions, "Goblins are known for torturing and not for keeping captives alive for long. Not very bright, they usually torture by head butting you to a slow death. I'd hate to have one of those filthy things smacking his head into me, the stench alone is enough to kill."

A few hours, and a huge pile of Memory Scrolls later, Fronius and his troop of warriors reach the end of the valley where the entrance to Prokion sits. Killing the last few harpies around the entrance, they all safely make it into the dreaded temple.

Doing a final check of supplies, Fronius makes sure each party is fully stocked with potions. Noticing one party is short a member, Fronius asks, "Where's Benjamin." The party leader tells Fronius, "We couldn't find him in the city when we were preparing to leave sir, last we saw, he was talking to Tara. She looked very upset, and he turned and walked away from her." Finishing his check on the party, Fronius responds, "Another one missing, let's hope he's still back safe in the city."

Fronius starts sending parties into the dingy halls and chambers of Prokion. Each party returning shortly later, all with the same story, "Sir Fronius, the temple is nearly empty, we found only a few monsters, most of those were wounded and cowering in corners."

More concerned than ever, Fronius, Suzie, and the other seasoned warriors and leaders in the troop all wonder together, "What horror has been released in this dreadful place, even the monsters have fled in fear."

Having checked, and cleared most of the temple of the few remaining cowering monsters, Fronius knows that the last few chambers, deep in the bowels of the Temple are the last areas of the Temple not yet taken by his troops. "Well, if anything remains alive in this dreadful place, it's in those last chambers. Let's hope we can take whatever boss monster we find down there." With several of the most powerful parties following him, Fronius leads the troops to the deepest chambers.

As they approach the final large chamber, the troops hear shrieks of horror and pain. They see flashes of magical energy, and clouds of dust from the doorway just a few feet ahead. As they approach cautiously, a fierce Orc Sergeant bursts from the doorway, running towards them with sword drawn. As he flies toward them, he flings his sword down and falls on the ground before them, screaming and shaking, "Save me, please save me, it's horrible in there." Being an evil orc, Fronius quickly separates head from shoulders with a swing of his swords, and then inches slowly towards the chamber door, thinking aloud, "What horror could frighten an orc like that."

They slowly, cautiously, reach the entrance, and hesitantly peak in, and upon seeing the the dreaded and terrifying boss monster of Prokion, Fronius starts laughing.

Fronius, Suzie, and the handful of shocked warriors enter the chamber to find Sir Kar, Tara and Benji easily handling the dozen remaining orcs cowering in the far end of the chamber.

Sir Fronius walks over to Sir Kar, and asks, "Sir Kar, what are you doing?"

"What do be taken you a slow poken' folks so long to be getting here. Me, Tara and Benji here do be a playin' a fun game a poke the orc while we do be a here a waitin' for you."

Fronius looks around at the carnage left by these three warriors. "But why did you come here with just the three of you?" questions Fronius, thinking about all his now useless grand plans of storming Prokion with all his troops.

Sir Kar laughs and continues, "We do be out on a little stroll about the city, Tara and Benji do be a needn' a little talkin' to. Then a little band a goblins do ambushes Benji and starts a carryin' him away. Guess they a liken' his shinny armor. Goblins always do be likin' shinny things. Little Tara do be getting all upsets, her precious handsome Benji bein' in trouble, so she a charges them by herself. Not a good idea to be gettin' a little rogue like Tara upset." Benjamin and Tara smile at each other. Sir Kar continued, "I a do be a following the little lass, and well, long story short, we do follow the goblins here and do rescue Benji, then here we do be a havin' some fun a pokin' these here pesky orcs, waiting for you to show up."

Chapter 7

Temple of Forgetfulness

I looked over the fog filling the room, seeing the tops of hairy legs and hoary backs rising above the mist, with vague shadows barely visible beneath the foggy white hinting at the massive bulk of the hideous eight legged creatures. The flickering torches lighting the moss covered stone walls, making strange angular stick shadows on the surface of the mist, glowed pale red over the numerous hairy legs.

Their appearance was as frightful as the poor terrorized warrior described. He was shaking and weeping just outside the massive temple, muttering, "The legs, the legs, don't touch the legs. They're everywhere, everywhere, how can you not touch them. I ran," he hesitated and shuddered, "and ran, and ran, but still they came, from everywhere, hundreds of them. They just kept coming." He sat there huddled on the ground weeping and shaking. He continued mumbling about "legs" and something about "the others, lost..." as we prepared to enter the temple.

It's no wonder this place is called the Temple of Forgetfulness, once you've been here, all you want is to forget you ever even thought of entering this foggy fortress in the middle of the desert. Rumors had this evil place as the home of the jumping devil himself. And into this horror was our mission. From within these walls, two of the great leaders of the dark one's minions directed the butchering attacks on what was left of the good people of Dratan. Our mission, find them and destroy them. Simple! And from the mists and shadows we could see below, spooky and repulsive.

We only had a small party. We were told that a few may succeed, where a large party would only result in massive slaughter, with us on the losing side. Two brave knights, two healing archers, a wizard pumped on adrenalin, and two rogues - experts at crossbow and devastating assassins daggers. We had practiced a lot together the past few months. A small, quick party, for a quick entry, quick kills, and quick escape before the massive forests of hairy legs were even aware of our presence.

I'm Mora, the mage, bursting with energy from the platinum adrenalin. I wait with patience, watching those hairy legs stirring the mists below, for Sir Kar's signal to enter the stagnant foggy mists below.

The rogues have already disappeared entering the mists for a quick surveillance. Once they return, we all enter, and hopefully all will return.

Little Tara pops back first, next to Benji as usual, appearing almost giddy with excitement. At least she doesn't look at me like I'm an Orc any more, since we had that long talk, and I let her know I was not interested at all in her precious Benji. At least not any more anyway, he only has eyes for his little Tara. "They're harmless," she explains in her quick bright voice, "just like we were told. If you don't touch them, they don't even know you're there. We went in a few rooms, found a few all by them selves in one dark corner, and took them out." You could see the sparkle in her eye as she thought back on the carnage she left behind. "Touch one, all them around come for you. Leave them alone and they're harmless. Except some magic slayer guys, you gotta watch them, they can see you and attack. But if you're fast, you leave them behind easy. Like slugs." She giggles, with a little twinkle in her eye as she looks up at Benji, and he smiles looking down at her bright face. Crazy rogues have no fear sometimes, until they get in over their head, which they always seem to do.

Magic slayers, ha. I'll show them some real magic, if they get in our way. I'm certainly not going to rely on this adrenalin to keep me safe.

Tara gave us the directions for getting through the first few rooms, and says we can wait on some stairs while she and Jalien check a few more rooms for the best way through. "Everyone ready, we do be going in as soon as Jali do be back," Sir Kar growls in his deep gravelly voice. "Straight, then right, then left, then up the stairs, and then we do wait, and no one of you do be a hero and be getting us in unneeded mix-ups with these fancy bugs. We all do be going in, and we all do be coming out. Benji, you do be a staying with Mora, Kena and Birgette so's they do be a kept safe and we do be kept buffed. Mora, Kena, Bir you do be a keeping us buffed and hopin' we don'a be a needin' any healing from Miss Kena and Bir. And do be staying away from them leggy critters."

There were children's fairy tales about this ancient temple, about the monsters that ruler here, even why the damp fog filled the lower chambers. With those horrid children's stories floating in my head with dread, we prepared to enter those cold calm mists, swirling around the hundreds of massive legs, fearing that the truth was even worse than those ancient children's fables. Thinking back to those added to the fright we felt standing above the fog. An ancient dread filled our senses, and we new it was real, and we knew it emanated from deep in within these ancient walls.

Jalien, the assassin pops in, tells us pretty much the same as Tara already said. The Sir Kar, speaking softly, says, "OK, in we do be goin', stick together, move fast, and don't be a touchin' any of those pretty beasties."

As we descended the ramp into the mist, and passed the first of the giant monsters, I could see venomous green streaks covering the immense backs of their dark, grisly, loathsome, bloated bodies and streaking down their repulsive, powerful legs. I could see the long coarse, bristling, black hair covering each of the eight legs with the top joints of their legs rising a few feet above our heads. There was a slight hissing noise coming from each of the arachnids, which, if you listened closely, sounded like "yesss Barrren Eeissse" as if they were constantly in communication with their master. The mist was undulating around us as we walked quickly, rising at times to our necks. Not far in front of us I

could hear the splashing and gurgling of a fast flowing waterfall. That much water would be a great blessing in the dry desert surrounding this temple, if it wasn't surrounded by such dangerous evil.

After passing through the first chamber, we rush down the hall, passing a magic flinging slayer so quickly he barely had time to launch two small spells at us, doing no damage. We left him in the dust, or should I say mist, and pass a waterfall. We turn right, then left, passing more massive arachnids even larger than those we've already past, rising many feet above our heads. We were like a darting ship in the stream of gruesome arachnid traffic flooding down the hall. We rush past another slayer, again with no damage to our party, and we find the stairs rising out of the mist. Here we wait while the rogues again scout ahead.

After waiting just a few feet above the mist for a short time, rogues pop up next to us. Tara tells us about the next few rooms and the beasts she found there. "Ooh, their really nasty, and hideous, with two heads, twice as many targets," she proclaims quickly, almost bubbling with excitement. "We had to take out a few, they attacked as soon as they saw us. There aren't too many of them, they should be no problem if we attack first, and fast." She lifts her xbow, pretending to let out several quick volleys.

We proceed forward a little slower, and cautiously. Sir Kar spots the first of these hideous monsters, more than twice the height of Sir Kar, with two heads and some spiked armor over a body that looked like it was made or assembled from parts stitched together, rather than naturally born, with long red sutured scars covering their massive bodies. The name given to these monsters in children's stories, hadians, does nothing to describe the true hideousness of these creations. The armor appears to be more part of the creature, imbedded in their bodies rather than something worn. We approached silently, any noise we made masked by the clanking of heavy chains attached to their waist. Once close enough, Birgette, Tara and I release our ranged attack. Before any of our party could get closer, the beast crumples in a bloody mess on the dungeon floor. We continue through the dungeon, passing room after room filled with equipment ingeniously designed for brutal torture, knowing that if we failed in our mission, those rooms would be our painful homes for the short remainder of our lives. We continued through smaller chambers and hallways, and in one room we could see more torture chambers above and below us, and possibly more passages trailing off to some other unknown abominations. As we cautiously, but quickly, pass through these halls, we continue taking out several more of the two headed giants, including several larger hadians, head and shoulders taller and much more heavily armed and armored than the rest. We continue to be careful not to touch the many hairy spiders we pass, and move swiftly past a few more slayers with little trouble.

Suddenly, turning a corner, we found ourselves in a huge well light chamber, lined along the walls with massive statues and altars to evil. We are charged by several of the hadians at once, and we all have plenty of bloody action to keep us busy for a while. After some quick healing, we carefully travel around the room, passing altars smoking with evil incense and monuments as much as 30 feet tall. Then we notice her, close to the far end of the massive hall, surrounded by nearly a dozen of the two headed creations of various massive sizes.

There she is, Barren Eise, massive and gray, with six eyes looking out at the lands of Dratan, seeing all her servants for dozens of leagues in all directions. From here she presides over her many minions, wreaking havoc about the lands. The old children's fables say she was once a powerful witch, of great intellect. She was greedy for power and knowledge, and strong in magic, but never satisfied with her meager accomplishments. Her greed and insatiable desire drove her to greater knowledge and power, and control of all those around her. All those who knew her feared her, even her servants. Her real name was quickly forgotten, and to everyone she was simple known as The Baroness, hinting at the

name she now bares. Over time she became less human, and more cold, evil intellect. It is said in those children's fables that in her youth she was a great beauty, but her greed drove her to seek wisdom far from what was available from her teachers and peers. Even then, she was far seeing. In her search, she found an ancient evil, long banished from all the lands. But still with plans to return after the fall of the witch king he had sent many millenia ago, his mind was ever looking into the lands. Her mind seeking outward for power, they met and conspired great evils for the lands of Dratan. With his power, the once beautiful witch was transformed to the powerful and evil creature we now beheld. Now all that is left is evil intellect, contained in the many eyed massive grayness. It is for her that the temple is filled with dampness, to protect her from the dryness of the deserts, and the devilish fires deeper within this evil place.

Hiding in the shadows of one of the altars we make our plans for our attack on this colossal grotesque monstrosity that was once almost human, for nothing that was ever completely human could become what we now observed. We decided to attack from the north wall, where only one of the largest hadians stood guard before the most massive of the altars in the chamber. We strengthened ourselves with potions and buffs, and prepared our attacks, both magical and physical, and some of our best debuffs. She was so concentrated on watching her far flung domain that she was blind to the approaching danger below her six eyes. We approached carefully, removing from existence the lone defender that we passed, and then we all released our attacks at once on the hideous, vast gray mass.

Instantly, we were blasted with massive magical attacks; electrical energy from her powerful mind surrounded us boring painful jolts through us. We fought for what seemed like ages, taking continuous damage, with Kena and Birgette pouring healing energy back into us between attacks. As we attacked Barren Eise, her defenders came to her rescue, diverting some of our energies from her to repel and destroy all those that entered battle with us. Finally we saw her energy level dropping, and her hovering mass slowly sank to the dungeon floor. Sending out her last electrically charged attacks, she quietly settled on the cold stone, and one by one, all six of her eyes closed. The last of the eyes looked straight at me with venomous hatred, as she uttered with her dying breath, "You have beaten me, but you do not know the power of the evil you resist. There can be no victory against his greatness." The last eye closed, and all was suddenly silent. The eerie echo of that silence brought us back to alertness of all our surroundings. In that silence, we looked upon the carnage around us in amazement, and stepped back into the shadows to recover our strength.

The first formidable target of our mission vanquished, we looked across the chamber and saw the hall leading deeper into the temple fortress.

Cautiously we moved across the chamber and into the hallway, as we had on our trip into the chamber. We avoided the spiders, and destroyed a few hadians before they could launch their attacks upon us. Our battle became more intense as we passed through the next large chamber, encountering both hadians and slayers. Staying close to the left wall, below the flaming torches lining the walls, we were able to avoid most of the beasts in this chamber without too much damage. As we neared the next hallway we could see a glowing red light shining in the distance, and increasing hot dry air flowing toward us, quickly removing the dampness around us from the previous chambers.

Shortly after entering that blazing hallway, we encountered the first of the devils we would need to pass to reach our final target. We survived the blazing attacks from these jumping devils with occasional use of our healing potions and soothing healing spells from Kena. So far, other than the destruction of the Barren Eise, my massive destructive attacks were barely needed next to the quick attacks of the rogues, and the attacks of the rest of our party. Now facing these devils, we were all pressed to our full

abilities to remove these fiery fiends quickly as we continued down the increasingly oven like hallway. Actually it was more like a stone bridge over the fires of hell, as we could see red lava below us with flames leaping up along the far walls of the chamber around us.

Gratefully, the hallway was short and the battles quick. Turning a corner, and crossing a final bridge, we entered another large chamber through a massive opening flanked by 60 foot tall monuments to the great evil lord that rules this temple. Less massive than the Barren Eise, but taller and more powerful, surrounded by the magical power of black fires, was the greatest devil in Dratan out side of Theos' Tomb, the Blood Terrain. It is from this chamber that the dread we have been feeling has is origin.

As we entered the chamber, a dozen of his temple guards, including the fire casting devils, two headed beasts, and slayers all attacked at once. As soon as the battle started, dozens of the largest of the hairy spiders also descended upon us. From the center of the room, the Blood Terrain waited, smiling, upon our pending destruction. We had learned much in our many battles up to this point, so while we were very hard pressed, we were able to best all that was thrown at us.

After a long battle, we were alone in the room, just the seven of us and the Blood Terrain. He was smiling no longer. He flowed smoothly down from his throne platform toward us, swirling black fire around himself. We prepared ourselves as best as we could in the few moments before he was close enough to attack. Then the Devil's hell itself was unleashed upon us. With little time to think of the attacks my party was delivering, and receiving, I threw everything I had at the devil. Every spell I learn since childhood under the watchful eyes of my parents was hurled from my staff. Every spell I knew, or even thought I knew, I speed toward the beast. Using magical amulets always kept around my neck on fine silver necklaces, I was able to suction some of the beasts own magical energy to keep fueling my own magical attacks. The black fires from the beast were taking their toll, singeing me to my very soul. And I knew everyone in my party was suffering the same pains, and through the pain they, like me, continue to attack with every speck of life within us.

Then, after an eternity of pain, there was sudden, unexpected silence. I saw a smoldering towering black mass on the dungeon floor before us. I looked around, and down at myself. Embers still glowed on our armor, I could see smoke rising from each of us showing the last residues of the fiery blasts from the devil. I knew we were all nearly spent, closer to death then we've ever been before. And the sudden silence was overpowering, almost deafening with the absence of noise.

In the intensity of the battle, our attention was wholly on the beast before us. As we recovered from the searing heat that had emanated from the foul master of devilry, we looked around the chamber, and behind us toward the chamber entrance, and realized that all the denizens in the temple were streaming toward us, with many more entering the massive entrance to the chamber.

After taking out the two leaders of evil we were sent to destroy, we looked at the growing mass of monstrosities entering the chamber and realized we may have won this war, but it looked like we would loose the battle.

Seeing the growing mobs, Sir Kar yelled, shocking us all back into action, "It do be now or we do be never a leaving this place." With a great battle scream that shocked not only the mobs, but us as well, he lead us into battle. Sir Kar leading the charge into the mob, with Benji at his side, we all threw ourselves into battle. Tara, the normally perky, bight rogue, was total intent on piercing any monster than came near her Benji. Jalien quickly slide between monsters delivering massive damage with quick dagger strokes. Kena and Birgette were busy, sending out healing spells between every fiery and

piercing arrow. Already weary and battle worn from a long day already in the evil temple, we continued to fight on. Barely able to lift my staff, I continued to blast every monster in front of our charging party. At first we made significant progress, with the mobs streaming one way, and us charging in battle the opposite way, we passed nearly through the mobs of devils, two headed beasts and slayers. We had nearly made it back over the blistering hot, gray stone bridges over the fiery hell we passed on our way in, and were nearly through the doorway to the next great hall when we saw a great sea of eight legged monsters waiting for us. Unable to take the heat of the hellish chamber, they waited for us in the next chamber, blocking the only way out.

Just before we burst through the mass of hadians and slayers, Sir Kar yells, "Don't be touchin no spidy legs in there." Good thing Sir Kar yelled, I was about to incinerate the first five behemoth arachnids that got near me. As we passed the last slayers, and entered the next chamber and the forest of legs, the battle suddenly ceased, the two legged beasts left behind, unable to pass their massive bodies between the spider legs as easily as us. Unable to find us without our initiating the attack, we move quickly unhindered by the spiders. We carefully weave between the spiders, down the next hall, through the deceased Barren Eise's now quiet chamber, and through the next hallways. We enter the rooms filled with devices of torture, and find our way again blocked by dozens of hadians. Exhausted, we were not looking forward to more battles. Little Tara, actually looking serious for a change, says, "We can go up this way," pointing up a flight of stairs to the left, "it leads to a walkway that crosses the room to the other side. I checked it out on our way in, it was mostly clear."

So up the stairs we go. The down the walkway we pass a repulsive smelling opening to the left that passes deeper into the dungeon and down a ramp. Our way is straight ahead, but suddenly Tara and Jalien both say quickly, "Wait here, be right back." They start toward the left, and disappear as they reached the beginning of the ramp. Just like rogues to go popping in and out when the rest of us would like to be moving ahead. Just a few minutes later, even though it seemed much longer, Jalien pops back in and tells Sir Kar she needs help carrying the survivors. Apparently the companions of our friend from the Temple entrance are still alive, but unable to escape on their own. So we all go to the left, and down the ramp. In a large chamber filled with spiders, and more statues and altars, we find some prison cells that Tara had already broken opened, tending to the three prisoners. Kena and Birgetta rush in, perform some healing, and with our help the survivors stumble out of the cells. We all make it back up the ramp.

As we help them trough the hallways, and down the stairs, we tell them about their friend we met at the entrance. Their party leader says, "If you're talking about that worthless party member of ours, he is no friend. He started a battle with the spiders, got them all riled up, and got trapped. We rescued him, and got into trouble our selves helping him. Then he sees we need help, and he flees like a coward. Last time we let any one of them join our party, they are a rather shamelessly loathsome and inconsiderate group."

As we pass through the final few hallways and chambers, carefully avoiding the spiders and rushing past the last few slayers, we get back to the entrance, and back out into the welcomed crisp night desert air of Dratan. Our mission completed, and all back safely, we all collapse in exhaustion, except Tara who is back to bubbling with excitement, holding Benji's tired hand, looking like she's on a nice walk through the woods.

I looked over at Kar. While usually grouchy before a battle, he was usually entertaining after a battle. I was looking forward to our nightly talk around the campfire tonight.

Chapter 8

The Doom of Theos

The Tomb of Theos

Stepping out into the sunlight from her dim tent, Mora looked at her newly forged weapon and armor that she had spent the last weeks crafting. She was pleased with the fit, and the knowledge that she was much better prepared for the increasing challenges she knew lay ahead. She thought to herself about their progress in the war against the shadowy forces of evil. They had been roaming the wide dry lands of Dratan for weeks, finding many new hordes of evil at every turn. Harpies, Goblins, Dragons, Giants, Golems, and other fiends all fell as easy prey before their attacks.

Days were becoming routine, boring, almost tedious. See a monster, kill a monster. She longed for the war to be over, but knew it had really barely been started. She would see this war to its end, it was her family obligation. Everyone had greatly advanced their skills, and even the most powerful evil creature in the land had become but a speck of effort. Mora's wizarding skills were greatly improved, able to deliver massive amounts of damage more quickly than ever. Nearly everyone in General Fronius' forces had powerful newly crafted weapons and armor. After donning her new soft layers of protection, Mora stepped out of her tent into the bright sunlight to see how it looked in full light. She looked about her at the assembled camp of the entire forces of Eternal Dawn. The lines of tents were far too straight. Everywhere she looked, everything was a perfect mess, and perfectly boring. The road was filthy dirt. No matter how well she kept her tent clean, there was sand and dust in everything. The small camp fires between every other tent fumed foul smelling smoke as the troops prepared the meager mid-day meals. She longed to be back in the city, with her comfy furniture, and where the food was decent and everything was clean.

"Just my luck," she thought as she looked across the dusty dirt road. Tara and Benji were just walking by at that moment. Tara stared at Mora with those sparkling green eyes of hers as if they were daggers, and Mora was the most evil thing she had ever seen, and she inched up closer to her precious Benji. No matter how often Mora told Tara she was not interested in Benji, Tara would never believe her. He was handsome, with closely cropped hair, bright blue eyes and a strong jaw, and he would have made a lovely addition to her conquests. She had however, long ago now, showed some interest in him. But she knew Tara would never forget that short time of interest, but he was already totally devoted to Tara; Mora knew there was nothing there for her, he had eyes only for Tara, and she quickly moved on to other interests. She thought about Kar, but moved on quickly on to her other interests. Kar was an great battle companion, but more than that was not an easy thought for Mora.

Tara was walking through the well ordered army camp, down the neat and wide main dirt road that bisected the camp into two halves. The tents were well ordered, the way they should be, in clean neat columns that stretched back at least 6 rows on each side of the road. Everything was in perfect order. Many of the troops were busy preparing their noon meal around their neat small cook fires. The smells of camp life left Tara longing to get back to her own tent for a wonderful repast before returning to the wild lands around the camp for more target practice.

With Benji at her side she was beaming with happiness. She was excited over the events of the past

few weeks. See a monster, kill a monster. It was great. Every day brought unending target practice to keep her shiny new crossbow busy. With her newly crafted armor, she fearlessly waded through the waves of monsters, killing everything that moved, and even a few things that didn't move.

Life had never been so enjoyable. Except when she saw the witch Mora. And just then she saw the temptress coming out of her tent with her new skimpy so called armor, trying to seduce every handsome man in the army with all those curves. Well, Tara would never let that most evil of beasts ever get near her Benji again, as she carefully steered him away from Mora's tent.

Everyone in the camp knew there was a power to the far south west which must eventually be faced. All knew that day was coming near. General Fronius, and his handful of battle commanders, were making plans for the next adventures in cleansing the lands of Dratan. Even though Prokion to east and the evil fortress of Forgetfulness that controlled much of central Dratan had been vanquished the land was still possessed with a foul evil. That evil came from Theos the Great. Dead for millennia, his evil still radiated through the land. No matter how many deadly creatures the army of General Fronius destroyed, there would always be more, until the power of Theos was broken. In their travels they even found some of the remaining ruins in the far north west of Dratan, all that remained of the once great empire once ruled by Theos. That great empire, having vanished millennia ago, was ruled, according to the old stories, by the dearly beloved leader, Pharaoh Theos the Great.

As one the most skilled of all the mages in the camp of General Fronius, Mora knew the plans were nearly complete; they would soon descend upon the green lands surrounding his Tomb, and face the most immortal enemy they could ever imagine. All of General Fronius' top leaders were there for the final strategy meeting before the army broke camp the next day and descended into the only green lands left in all of Dratan. Mora thought it would be nice to get out of the dry dusty desert air, she thought her skin would turn to leather if they stayed here much longer.

Suzie was at the meeting as the greatest healer, and wisest adviser and companion to General Fronius. With her was Kena, a very talented healer and archer, as was Birgette with her silver bow, the greatest archer Mora had ever seen. Sir Kar was there, as leader of the knights and titans, with Beni near him listening intently as the battle plans were solidifying. There was also a pair of sorcerers, whose magical talents would be needed in the coming days. To round out the battle planning group was the assassin Jalien, and of course little Tara. Mora thought Tara was the most talented ranger in the army, but that didn't stop those bolt sharp green eyes from feeling like they would tear through her flesh if she glanced the wrong way at Benji.

"OK, here we all are in one place making some nice plans," Tara thought. "Lets finish and go out and shoot something," she thought impatiently. "Maybe start with Mora," she almost started giggling to herself.

She knew Mora was a very talented mage, and would never hurt her, but that didn't stop her imagination. In fact she would defend Mora, and everyone else in camp, with her life if needed. It was her family obligation, and secret, to defend the lands of Iris, and all of its citizens. She just wished Mora was a little farther away from Benji, maybe the other side of camp would be almost far enough.

The plans were nearly complete. She knew she, and many of her fellow rogues would be the first ones sent into the most dangerous areas in the coming campaign. They would be scouting out the dangers ahead, and taking out a few key monsters along the way. Softening up the enemy for the rest of the troops, and then they would join in the real fighting. Just the thought of the coming battle made her tingle all over with excitement. She knew without her and the rest of the rogues, the battle would be much more difficult for the army, maybe impossible. But as much as she enjoyed the encounters with the evil monsters, she knew it was no game. This was life and death serious. And she was intent on keeping all of the army alive, and the enemy dead.

The night wore out, Mora stood outside her tent in the cool predawn air listening to the morning desert crickets. She stood there alone in the waning light of the moon, as day came on coolly before the heat of the desert day began. The quiet of the night, with the fading of the moon and the stars, died and day dawned bright in a cloudless sky. The glorious sun rising seemed like a message from Creation that they would be delivered in the coming battle with death's dominion in the green lands of Theos the Great. She thought again, as she did every morning, of the promises she had given to her parents to never give up the battle against evil, a family obligation going back many generations.

The battle plans were nearing completion, and General Fronius began moving all of his forces down into the green lands of the Wafe and Sphinx, who protectively surrounded the great tomb of Theos. Even wading through these hordes of evil, it was still see a monster, kill a monster. The wafes were human, or at least mostly human, but appeared to wander around almost mindlessly. That is until you attacked, then they all descended on you like locust. Looking into those human eyes, Mora felt a great sadness in their destruction wondering what evil had been done to them to turn them into such mindless defenders of the lands around Theos. She was especially saddened at the killing of the Wafe Peelers, with their magical ability they could easily have once been distant cousins. She thought again, as she had many times since her battles against evil began, where could her cousins be.

It was a long, winding, treacherous trip through the green lands as the troops approached the great pyramid of Theos, his long standing tomb. As the troops passed through the lands, General Fronius left many of his troops behind to continue the battle for these green lands, while he and his core team continued onward to the great tomb. As his forces arrived at the tomb, the remaining troops numbered less than three dozen, half under the command for General Fronius, and half under Sir Kar. Several hundred were left throughout the green lands, hopefully enough of a distraction to keep the attention of the powers within the tomb from concentrating its full malevolence upon the parties entering the tomb itself. The tomb looked grim and gruesome, reaching high over their heads. Built with still bright yellow stones, each at least the size of a large horse, it was an impressive monument to death.

As the gathered forces entered the great monument, everything changed. They were nearly overwhelmed with the stench of death. The smell of rotting flesh and foul wrappings was nearly overpowering. What was bright, and almost pristine appearing on the outside was quite the opposite on the inside. While outside was alive and brilliant green, once inside everything looked far to close to death. The walls were time-discolored and chipped yellow stone, with dust encrusted mortar. The sconces on the walls were rusty, dank iron, and tarnished brass, giving a feeble flickering light. The railings lining the stairs before us, likely once gleaming brilliant, were now clouded and tarnished silver rails and scrolls which gave back the feeble glimmer of light from the sconces. The floor was dusty gray flag stone, with a few fading footprints from previous, and likely dead, invaders into this dank tomb. The effect was worse than could be imagined, miserable and sordid.

This was far worse than the worst Sir Kar found in the Temples of Velpist and Forgetfulness, and they were still just in the entrance, with no signs of evil around them, other than the decay flaking from the walls and deadly stench.

As the gathering large party moved down the hall, they could see a more brightly lit chamber in the distance. Along with the growing light was the growing sound of shuffling and scraping, portending the creatures they would soon encounter.

The seasoned troops entered the first chamber and began the well practiced "see a monster, kill a monster." The task was the same tedious work for the rest of the troops, while Tara jumped to the task with gusto, like she was having the best time of her life.

One of her fellow troops came from behind to help her with one of her kills. In response, she glowered back at him saying, "Hey, no kill stealing, that was my monster." She then quickly moved on to the next zombie.

Hordes of dusty gray zombies surrounded each member of the party, trying to isolate each from the aid of the others in their party. They worked in unison, a sure sign of some greater evil in control of the tomb and its protective inhabitants. Each zombie had foul wrappings hanging from their tall boney but powerful bodies and each was emitting ear piercing screams as they swung powerful clawed hands at the heads of the invaders with deadly accuracy.

Fronius quickly found that his troops could never defeat these zombies. Even as they were killed, every destroyed zombie was quickly replaced with another fully animated dead and deadly creature.

This was anticipated in their plans. They never expected to kill every monster in the tomb, but to battle their way through, until reaching the main objective, the final resting place of Theos himself. After successfully battling their way through the zombies, and even more vicious mummies, the troops came to a fork in the passages. They split forces, General Fronius leading half through the ranks of Sphinx to the right, Sir Kar leading the rest toward more foul mummies to the left. As always, with Sir Kar went Mora, Kena, Jalien, Birgetta, Benji, and Tara, as well as nearly a dozen others.

Sir Kar and his party found a large gathering of mummies, these were the most ancient and powerful they had yet seen, covered in deep gray wrappings. They were not the fastest attackers, but they were crafty. Mora saw their attacks long before they landed, but land they did. She was unable to block most of their crafty swings, and was bleeding profusely despite her continuous use of hemostatic cures. Every time she thought she would be victorious, she would suddenly feel her life's blood flowing freely onto the cold stone floor beneath her feet. Each member of the party suffered greatly at the swinging hammer like hands of these fiends. But none suffered more than Mora, even with her new armor, having the least defense from these vicious attacks. Kena and Birgetta spent most of their time healing the party, but they were still able to get in some deadly shafts from their quick bows. Birgetta's accuracy with the silver bow, as usual, was unmatched by any archer in all Iris. Brightly burning braziers in the corners of the largest rooms provided not just bright light, but also made the rooms uncomfortably warm, mixing stinging sweat with the free flowing blood. Tall statues of Pharaoh Theos lined the walls in those once grandiose rooms, stretching to the high callings. It was a long trip down those crowded corridors and enormous brightly lit halls, made of the same huge yellow stones we saw from outside the tomb. But unlike the outside stonework, the stone walls were aging poorly in the presence of the radiating evil within, chipped and cracked throughout, spreading dust and debris across

the corridor floors. Their quick footsteps stirred up clouds of dust from the ancient great floor stones.

They finally came to the largest room they had yet seen, with a large surprisingly clear pool filling the center of the room. The water sparkled in the torch light. At the far end, water splashed into a smaller pool sounding almost like laughter. It was a most unsettling sound in such an evil place. They could hear General Fronius and his party coming quickly from another passage into the large room. They continued to struggle forward, hearing behind them the troops of General Fronius following closely behind. Here the battle became even more intense as the party was assaulted with powerful magical attacks.

The worst part of their struggles was getting past the many archers, peppering them with stunning arrows. Their progress through those crowds of archers was long and tedious.

Finally they came to a long ornate staircase, with long stone banisters leading into the lowest level of the great tomb. There, among many gruesome and foul creatures similar to those they had already passed they found a new evil. Everyone had heard stories of this creature since childhood, and her evil beginnings in lust and greed. Blocking many of the passages they needed to pass to get to the heart of the tomb they found the Sphinx Commanders. The first one Mora saw froze her to her bones.

The Commander looked at Mora with cold, hard blue eyes and all Mora could see in those eyes was death. The Commander was drawn to life, she cared greatly for life, but was obsessed with only on how she could take it, and replace it with death. She would then add that life to the power of Theos, adding another undead to the ranks of soldiers within the Tomb. The Commander did not rush, moving slow but steadily over the sand. She left no foot print on the sand with her clawed feet as she glided steadily toward Mora on broad dark wings, and long whip like tail flicked back and forth behind her evil body. Mora stood her ground, knowing the Commander's attack would be vicious. She looked around, every member of her party was busy with their own battle. She knew she would be on her own in this battle.

The Commanders had an ancient long known story, which began with the once beautiful Queen Theodoras. Her story, told to children to frighten them, is a story of excess. She loved her king, the Pharaoh Theos himself, too much. She loved life too much. She loved power, especially the power over others extraordinarily too much.

Many centuries ago there was a great and wise ruler, Pharaoh Theos, with the wise Queen Theodoras at his side. He ruled with kindness, generosity, and wisdom, and was well loved by all the people of his realm. She manipulated everyone around the Pharaoh with subtle lies. She had bright blue eyes that peered through you, looking deep within your very soul. Once you looked into those eyes, it was nearly impossible to look away. She measured every inch of you with those piercing eyes, measured you down to your bones. There was a longing in those eyes. As Queen to the Pharaoh, she had almost unlimited power. Nothing was beyond her merest wish. Yet looking into those eyes, there was a deeper, insatiable desire. She had an unquenchable desire for life beyond what could be attained as a human. As others before, and after, she fell into the trap of a much greater evil.

With her most powerful witches and elementalists, and unknowingly aided by a darker power, she devised a way to gather almost unlimited power over all the people of her Pharaoh's great empire. But in doing so, in gaining what she believed was eternal life and power, she had to give up life, the life of her beloved Theos. She chose the love of power over the love of her beloved. In casting the powerful spell, her life was merged with that of her beloved, along with the lives of all the inhabitants of the

empire, leaving her with a great life force, and leaving most of the green lands of Dratan a desert wasteland. Her new life force so great that she used it to divide her now enormous power into over a few dozen powerful creatures. Each was greater than any elemental, more durable than the hardest stone, each filled with a portion of the malevolent life-force of the queen. Collectively she is the creatures we know today as the Sphinx Commanders. Together, they encompass all the greed and lust of Theodoras, the once beautiful but always greedy Queen. Individually, each of her parts was death to anyone who she found near her beloved's tomb. Each was alike, except for rumors of one great Commander, a devil known as Darkmind Terrain. No one had ever seen such a creature or knew how their power was connected, at least no one who ever returned alive. The only rumor of how to defeat the collective Commanders was to destroy the focal point of the Queen's power, the preserved body of her beloved Pharaoh.

As Sir Kar and his party continued over the dry sands, General Fronius and his party arrived, descending the long broad staircase on the other side of the sandy basement. As they each approached the heart of the tomb from opposite sides, they found, fought, and destroyed nearly a dozen Commanders. Each battle was joined by a dozen more of her servants. Sir Kar hurried their party forward, he knew they must hurry; any delay and the destroyed Commanders would be replaced by more, needing to be defeated again. The evil life force could not be diminished by the destruction of any of her many dissociated parts.

Each battle required the full powers of each member of the large invading party. Finally, Sir Kar and troops were joined with General Fronius and company at the far back of the tombs basement where they found an unadorned simple stone entrance to a dark corridor. Even as they approached, they could feel the waves of evil flowing over them from the ominous doorway.

The battle down that long dark hallway was the most difficult so far. Up to that point, they had faced only one Commander at a time. She knew the invading force was getting close to her beloveds resting place, and tried to block their way with several of her vitriolic, dissociated parts at once. The combined parties thought they had battled fiercely before. But nothing in their experience was like this, nothing in their long trip through the tomb, nothing from any of their many previous battles since Eternal Dawn was first formed. Even the devils in the Temple of Forgetfulness were child's play next to this battle.

The large combined party filled one end of the corridor with General Fronius and Sir Kar in the lead, facing the dozens of tombs denizens filling the space before them. Several of their party fell under the onslaught. If not for the healing and resurrecting powers of Suzie and her healers, they would all be doomed, cursed to join the ranks of the defenders in this cursed tomb, in service forever to the dissociated Queen Theodoras.

Finally, the troops made it through the never ending corridor, and entered a large dim gray granite stone room. It was octagonal, with a walkway all around the wall. Dim braziers around the room provided a feeble light and made the room stifling hot. Along the inside banisters of the walkway were pillars stretching to a high gray doomed ceiling.

There was the relic in the center of the room, lying on a black marble slab under a stone canopy. The Sarcophagus of Theos himself. From this monument of death radiated the power of the Tomb. Every dead creature in this temple of death gained deadly life from this spot. Surrounded by a dozen Commanders, with those staring malevolent blue eyes of death, every member of General Fronius' troops knew their final task in this dreadful place may be their last.

The room was not large, less than half of the troops could enter the room, the rest continuing the battle in the corridor. From the encircling walkway, there were three short stairways down to the center of the room, one of the stairways directly in front of the entrance. Fronius with several strong knights and titans and Suzie at his side went straight, but at the bottom of the stairs was instantly engaged with three Commanders and could make no progress toward the Sarcophagus. Sir Kar went to the left with Mora, Kena, Jalien, Birgette, Benji, and Tara. The rest of the party went to the right. After quickly dispatching a lone Commander on the left, at the next stairway Sir Kar and party quickly descended and attacked the Commanders blocking Fronius from behind. Smashing, like a hammer on an anvil, the Commanders reeled under their combined blows. But even as these three were defeated, more descended on the party from both sides, and from above.

As the three Commanders blocking Fronius were defeated, Fronius ordered his three large titans forward. As the surrounding Commanders were held off, the three titans released an explosive pummeling with their destructive battle hammers onto the sarcophagus. The first blows merely bounced off and resounded like huge bells, releasing sparks that flew past the canopy and up to the dark reaches of the dome above. The titans continued delivering massive blows and finally their overwhelming bludgeons reached the dark stone sarcophagus that sounded more like hammers on stone than the clanging of great bells, as the blows began weakening the powerful protective magic that enshrouded the sarcophagus. After at least several hundred battering blows, the sound of cracking stone could be heard, and the floor beneath their feet began to tremble. The rest of the party, still in deadly battle with the Commanders, could barely maintain their footing as the floor began to heave and the sarcophagus continued to disintegrate under the mighty blows of the powerful titans.

Blood mixed with sweat as the battle raged in the furnace like heat of the room. Weapons were becoming too heavy to lift, much less swing damaging blows. Legs were wobbly. The battle could not last much longer.

Suddenly, with a blinding light and deafening roar, the sarcophagus exploded, knocking everyone off their feet. Large stones lay everywhere, and stone dust filled the air. Everyone got up as quickly as possible, fearing their prone positions would leave them as easy prey to the Commanders. But, upon rising, they could see no Commanders. Just the remnants of stone upon stone surrounded the troops. Amongst the rubble could be seen several of the unblinking blue eyes of the Commanders. The battle was won, or so they thought.

With apparent victory fresh, the troops covered in dust slowly left the Sarcophagus room, cautiously, not knowing what effect of the destruction of the sarcophagus would have on the rest of the tomb. Memories of the difficult escape from the Temple of Forgetfulness were still fresh on Sir Kar's mind. General Fronius knew these evil fiends would try to surprise them with at least one last danger. In the dark corridor Fronius found the rest of his party, stunned at the sudden lack of combat, every monster here also crumbling to stones and dust with the destruction of the sarcophagus.

They left the corridor, and entered the sandy tomb basement. As the last party member stepped upon the sand there was a sudden dimming of the light. Suddenly they were surrounded by great blasts of black fires and powerful electrical blasts like great lightning bolts from above. Those of the party still standing saw the great and powerful Darkmind Terrain descending from above, raining devastating magic attacks down upon the troops. Only quick work from the healers saved the troops from near instant defeat. Those troops still standing joined battle as best they could. They could tell the battle, if it could be won, would be long. Throwing everything the remaining troops had appeared to have little effect on the great devil. No one knew where this devil came from, or how it was connected to the evil

Queen Theodoras, but Fronius believed it was the true power behind the evil queen, and the tomb of death that she created.

No one could tell how long the battle continued. The healers did their best at healing the fallen and wounded. After what seemed like an eternity, the troops could see the monstrous devil weakening. Still the battle raged for more eternities. Then suddenly, in a great cloud of blackness, the devil fell. In its fall the entire party was lost in a blinding darkness. Slowly, the darkness dissipated and was pierced by the dim basement torch light. Fleeing quickly from that battle, but making it no further than the sweeping stairs at the entrance to the basement, the entire party collapsed with exhaustion.

As they rested, the deep rumbling that started with the attack on the sarcophagus, appeared to deepen. Looking up Sir Kar could see long cracks spreading in the ceiling high above the basement sands. Jumping up he shouted, "Every body do now be gettn' your butts up and do be runnin' or you do be never a leavin' this here forsaken place."

Everyone looked up and saw the growing cracks, and bits of stone beginning to fall from high above them. As instructed, butts started moving quickly up the broad staircase. The way up and out, though tedious and long, was much quicker than the way in, no longer having any monstrous obstacles slowing their way.

Still it took many long minutes, or was it hours, to get back to the entrance, chased close behind by cracking stone, rumbling floors, crumbling roofs and clouds of spewing dust. Upon leaving the now ruined tomb, and joining up with the rest of General Fronius's army, they learned it was nearly 2 days that they had been battling without a break in that bowel of hell.

After battling side by side through the eternities within the tomb, now that the battle was over, Mora was on one side of the large army, and Tara with Benji at her side, was at the far side of the army, being sure to keep the witch Mora as far away as possible.

Dranat has been cleansed, as has most of Juno. We knew there was still a hidden danger deep beneath Juno, much too near Randol. Sir Kar had bravely ventured into the secret mines west of the city only to discover evil even beyond his ability. He even refused to let little Tara sneak in and spy around the deep caves saying the evil there was beyond even little Tara's great talent of sneaking into even the most secure places unseen, and safely return.

There was also the wide lands of Egeha, and Strayana, and Mondshine. The evil there was worse than the mostly small twisted beasts, or hordes of undead the troops of Eternal Dawn have so far encountered. Those lands they must venture to next contained much more lively and powerful creatures, many containing great magics of doom and destruction. Dangers they would gladly venture into for the good of all the people of these great lands. In the back of her mind and fresh from their battle with the Darkmind Terrain, Mora continued to hear the Barren Esie's dying words, "There can be no victory against his greatness." She thought "There must be victory." She owed it to her ancestors who lost so much so many years ago.

Chapter 9

The Defeat of Egeah

It was a pleasant trip to the little village of Aaron in the north east corner of the forests of Egeah. As usual, thought Mora, General Fronius was dispersing his ever growing and ever victorious army over the lands to begin the removal of the foul monsters sent here by the evil darkness. Our own little band of warriors was assigned the northern paths, to travel across and wipe out all evil we saw, and which we found out later was just a little warm-up for our real mission. Our group had been together since the early days of our battles. We've had our differences, especially between me and Tara. But together in battle we were a great fighting machine, no other party came close to our combined abilities. I've even gotten quite fond of cranky old Kar, not that he was that old, only a couple years older than me. And apparently his family was originally from Iris, fleeing to the far south only a few decades ago. I almost felt like we were all a family. It made me think of my real family, and the reason I was here in this battle. Papa said our family had been preparing for this battle for many generations. Each generation developing new skills and better magic to use with our battle techniques. He said I was ready, he would have liked to join the battle, but he was far too old to face these monsters. He said I just needed to wait for our cousins to call us together for battle. Well, I don't know about cousins, but I felt like my companions were as close a family as anyone could get.

The lands we were being sent out into for battle were quiet. It was a lush, healthy green land. It was a deceptively nice forest that we entered as we left the village and its few brave merchants behind. We wound past the meager defenses protecting the little trading town, but apparently little evil came close to the village being close to relatively safer lands to the east and north of Egeah.

The first signs of evil were the vile looking boogles. Their faces were truly one of the ugliest things I've ever seen. Some ignored us, others attacked on site, but they were all clumsy fighters and were easily dispatched.

We found some monstrous stinging bugs, and a few were quite vicious, the females of course. There were baby apes, more than twice our size, and their over protective mothers that were twice as big again. They didn't look particularly evil, but they ferociously attacked, and so we had to deal with them. We all had plenty of action to keep us busy. Each of us attacking our own monsters while watching the backs of all our party members. We had become experts at sharing buffs with each other to keep our entire party at peak fighting form though out every battle. However, today, little Tara looked bored. At one point I heard her mumble, "These guys die too easy, where's the real monsters." I was hoping these would be the worst we would find here, but I knew that was a little too optimistic.

We heard that some of the parties General Fronius had sent out to the south were finding many creatures far worse than those we were finding here in the north. There were many monstrous scorpion type bugs, and deadly magic casting Azers. There were malevolent, savage demons, some of them on huge mounted behemoths, and also perilous, spectral malignant spirits that swarmed from all directions with smothering deadly magic.

As I was thinking of the dangers those other parties were suffering through I could hear Tara still complaining, "They're having all the fun, why can't we be killing giant scorpions and nasty ghost things?"

I was pretty sure we would get our own turn at some nasty critters before we were done here, and as it turned out, I was right.

Cleaning up the northern parts of Egeah was pretty easy; we got back to the village after just a few days. None of the other parties would be back for days yet. I was ready for a rest, Tara was not.

Neither was General Fronius ready for us to take a break, apparently our mission so far was just a warm up. Fronius had something big planned for us.

We didn't even get 15 minutes of rest, and General Fronius came over with that smile he always has when he's got something really nasty planned, thinking that winning smile of his would make us say yes to anything he asked. The bigger the smile, the more dangerous the mission. And he was wearing his best smile today. I could tell this was worse than the usual nasty missions he had planned for us. So could Tara, she looked ready to burst with excitement as she watched him walking over to Sir Kar. She was all but dancing circles around Benji, taking pretend shots with that dangerous looking crossbow. The rest of our party just watched in silence as he talked quietly to Sir Kar. I watch Kar's face, and I knew this was even worse than that smile of Fronius hinted at.

Then General Fronius gathered us all together. All he said was to go see the merchants, pick up all the Potions we could carry, then talk to Teleporter Sath, and she would explain everything to us.

Teleporter Sath looked nervously at us. She said she could get us into this little tower near the village, and there was a little monster on the tenth floor who everyone thought was the chief captain and commander controlling the forces we were fighting throughout Egeah. "Take him out," she said "and the rest will just fall apart without his guidance." As soon as she said tenth floor, I was pretty sure "little tower" was likely a poor description. I also knew the little monster would be something nice, like the Darkmind we tickled to death in Theos Tomb. I wasn't looking forward to it, but it was a job that must be done. I also knew we were the best party to send on an impossible mission.

Lust Trum

When we first entered the tower, it was was much like many of the other dungeons we had encountered so far. It was an ancient stone monument to a far gone and forgotten greatness. Iron sconces on the walls provided feeble but adequate light. Then we saw dim magical energy that provided an eerie blue light in some of the chambers and corridors.

It wasn't long before we realized this wasn't like any of the other dungeons. The twisting and turning corridors, all looking alike, quickly became confusing. Every chamber we entered looked much like every other chamber. Only the unnatural looking vines, growing in the glow of the eerie blue magical light, and changes in the debris and scattered rocks on the floor, gave any sign we weren't stuck running in the same circle. After we got lost for the dozenth time, we began leaving marks on the walls and stones we found in the maze-like monument. Each corridor and chamber was filled with the most aggressive creatures we had found so far. They were especially aggressive to our pets, so we had to keep them unequipped and forgo their protective and strengthening energies. Every turn, every step through a doorway, brought a mob of monsters upon us. At first the small wights and archers were merely an annoyance as they swarmed around us. They were quickly removed from our path with quick staff, sword, arrow, dagger and bolt action. Tara looked like she was having a blast. For the rest of us it was that same old "see a monster, kill a monster."

As we slowly found our way though this maze, frequently retracing our steps, we eventually found our way to upper floors, and the bats. Six foot tall bats with huge wingspans nearly blocking the crowded corridors. I hate bats, and they were every where. They were a most disgusting creature, descending on your head from every direction. I was told that bats don't go after your hair when I was young. Well, they were wrong. These bats went after hair, faces, necks, and backs. They were especially fond of my long braided hair. It got so annoying I had to put my lovely braid up inside my helmet, really annoying. I repeat, I hate bats. Tara of course thought they were great. They way they fluttered

unpredictably, she laughed and said, "These are great target practice" as she unleashed volley after volley at their fluttering black wings.

We continued through the maze like corridors, and after many hours of constant combat, during which we found many staircases both up and down, we slowly made it to the upper floors of the Tower. On the way to the eighth floor, the worst creatures of darkness we had encountered were a huge black caped beasts with a massive slashing weapon. I wouldn't call it a sword, just an enormous dark piece of deadly steel far larger than Kars bright double swords. It took several of us to bring them down, while the rest of our party kept removing the many wights and archers peppering us with blows while we fought. Eventually, one of the staircases brought us to the eighth floor.

On the eighth floor, we entered a quiet chamber with no mobs. After a short rest a few of us ventured into the hallways and found the nastiest creatures so far. Many were magic casters which inflicted quiet a bit of damage; it seemed like some could blast their magic attack through solid walls, hitting us before we even knew they were there. Tara downed a magic defense mineral and dove right in, clearing the first few halls almost single handed. She was in her element, bolts flying with amazing accuracy in all directions. She is a frightening creature and amazing killing machine when she gets in her battle zone.

We found one strange area on this level, rooms filled with silent harmless appearing statues. That is unless you got too close, they gave quite a painful jolt if you carelessly wandered near any of these strange statues. We all tried to destroy one together, but it simply absorbed the full might of our attacks. We were all very grateful these statues decided to remain still for our target practice, if they were mobile, they would have been indestructibly dangerous. That was when Kena called us back to the entrance hall to this level. Kena and Birgetta had stayed behind in the entrance chamber to this floor to recover their magic power from spending eight floors in this monstrous tower healing the rest of us.

Apparently Kena found another stairway off the hall that lead to a higher level. Level nine. We knew from the teleporter that our destination was the tenth level, so we knew we were getting close. We also were sure the easy battles were over, we would need all our skills from this point forward. Even Tara seem to get a little somber as we entered level nine. We all proceeded a little slower, a little more cautiously.

Mora watched the rest of the team as she walked next to Kar, making sure she kept the entire party magically buffed. In front of her were Kena and Birgetta with their gleaming bows, ready to send out cooling healing spells to the entire party or deadly arrows at on coming beasts. Jalien was on Mora's other side with her gleaming daggers always ready. Leading the party down the hall was Benji with little Tara at his side. We had only gone about half way down the first hall way.

Then we saw the boxes. Stupid little harmless boxes laying on the floor everywhere. We started to pass them, looking further down the halls for a real danger, when suddenly the boxes all attacked. Boxes! Nothing like being safe, calm, assured that the danger is ahead, when suddenly you're being gnawed up and down every limb by hundreds of fangs and claws reaching out of harmless boxes. We weren't expecting them to attack so we all took a lot of damage before we could respond to the sudden threat. Boxes! I think I hate them more than bats. Did I tell you how much I hate bats? The evil darkness really faked us out this time.

After that, we blasted every box we saw before it could move. No more stupid boxes looking for a kneecap snack.

As we traveled down the never ending corridors, every monster Kena saw got hit with Freeze arrows, while Benji and Tara finished it off. Usually Tara killed it first with her snare and fast crossbow. Kar and Jalien were the rear guard. Far too often Mora would see Kar spin around, twin blades flashing as some beast tried to sneak up on us. Every time Kar ran back to attack one of the sneaky beasts, Mora would spin also and strike as fast as she could, sometimes even striking before Kar. A magical blast of Freeze, then Sloth. Then a destructive blast of terra earth. That would usually leave it as an easy kill for Kar's and Jalien's quick blade action. Jalien would rush the monster with Kar, daggers flashing, and the monster would quickly be destroyed.

After traveling through the ninth floor for a long while, we entered a large chamber with a fiery alter to some god of darkness in the corner. There were only a few of those nasty boxes in the room and they were quickly dealt with. The party was about halfway through the room when Mora saw Kar with his familiar spin to attack something behind us. Suddenly, as Mora turned to see the monster Kar had just turned to attack, she saw more than a monster. The half chamber behind her was filled with monsters. Kar and Jalien charged the beasts. As Mora spun to help Kar, she saw Tara's crossbow begin an onslaught of the swarm of monsters entering the chamber from the far side. She heard Tara scream something unintelligible as Benji charged the mobs. Mora could hear the healers bows rapid twang as they unleashed a shower of arrows into the mobs of monsters. Mora counted the beasts surrounding Kar and Jalien quickly, nine still stood strong against them. Good, she thought, nine is the perfect number for her chaos nova. First she carefully aimed two flame attacks and left all nine damaged, then quickly unleashed a chaos nova, a very dangerous spell if used incorrectly, but deadly to the enemy when unleashed at just the right moment. A few more slashes with bright blades and all nine monsters were down.

Spinning quickly, she saw the rest of the party was in trouble, far worse outnumbered. Quickly, Mora unleashed killing spells taking out several of the beasts that had Benji pinned against a wall unable to swing his blades. Tara, also attacking the same beasts, turned briefly and gave Mora a quick smile. Now with some room, Benji's flashing blades pummeled the beasts. Jalien was already popping in and out slashing startled beasts with her quick daggers. Tara charged into the battle and Mora couldn't even see little Tara, surrounded by towering mobs around her; but Mora could see the magic flashes from Tara's special piercing arrows. Mora sent a few killing spells toward the mobs around Tara, then concentrated on the mobs closing in around Benji again. A few more monsters had entered the room behind them keeping Kar and Jalien busy. The battle was intense, but lasted less than 15 minutes, and the room was again clear.

So far the trip though the dark tower had been fun. Tara especially liked the bats, the way they fluttered unpredictably made them great target practice. See a monster, kill a monster. And she saw lots of monsters here. She was beginning to get tired, but they had finally made it to the ninth floor. She had just taken out one of those neat boxes. Who would of thought, monsters in a box, she hoped she could bring one home to play with when they were done here.

Suddenly, she saw a huge mob of monsters entering the large chamber from the corridor in front of them. There were a lot of them, she thought as she started releasing bolts into the crowd of monsters, more than she had seen at one time since they entered this tower, and some of these looked pretty nasty. Benji charged them, Tara screamed to him, telling him which monster to attack first, and Benji's blades quickly worked on turning the monster into mince meat. Tara loved to watch Benji's blade action, she knew they made a great fighting team together.

Then she saw Benji get pinned against a wall by a crowd of monsters, without enough room to swing his blades. Tara blasted her crossbow at them as fast as she could. Then she saw a few of those closest to Benji crumple under a powerful purple magical blast. She glanced over her shoulder and gave a quick smile to Mora for helping her Benji, "as long as it's just killing monsters" she thought. Then she dove into the thickest part of the battle, to be closer to her Benji.

Kar was proud of everything they had accomplished so far. More than half of all Iris was nearly monster free, as a result of General Fronius and his army. He knew his mom and papa would be proud too. This is what his family had been preparing for all these generations, at least on papa's side. Mom was more interested in becoming a grandma, Kar thought as he glanced over at Mora. Mom would love to see Kar bring home a lovely young lass, and start a family of his own. With lots of grand children for her to spoil, Kar smiled at the thought of children. "Well, Mora do be a lovely young lass," Kar thought as he walked next to her down the dim corridors in the flickering light of the flaming sconces on the wall. "She do be a great fighter, and lovely too," he thought. He briefly remembered their many nights talking together in the cool evening air while sitting around the camps cooking fire. He knew she would rather be in a nice comfortable couch with a roof over her head. And less dust, Mora didn't like all the dust covering up her beautiful mage outfits. But Kar knew she was a real trooper, as much as she disliked the dirt and the battles and monsters, she was always dependable, always there to watch your back. Maybe some day he could bring home a lovely woman like Mora, and start a family. And share the family secret like papa shared his secret with mom many years ago.

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Back in formation with Kar and Jalien on each side of her, Mora watched the party as they continued through the ninth floor corridors. Through a large ornate doorway we found a large chamber, larger than any we had found so far. It was like a temple within the tower. There was a broad plaza around a large square wall lined with monstrous statues and ramps to a center court yard, with a fiery lava fountain in the center. The chamber was filled with hundreds of monsters, including many of those boxes. The fiery fountain was surrounded by ghostly creatures you could see through, each with many faces almost visible. We had already encountered a few of these ruthless ethereal monsters, and they were deadly with dreadfully annoying blinding spells. Sir Kar quickly spoke up, "This do be a room we don't want to be spending any time in, we do be moving on and leaves this place be." Looking at those monsters around the lava fountain, we all quickly agreed, quickly left the chamber unnoticed by the mobs, and quickly continued down the corridors.

A short time later, we entered a long empty room with an long altar along the wall. Opposite the altar was a ramp up to the next floor. We had finally made it to the tenth floor.

We were in a large, circular towering room, with a dim light filtering in through a sky light far above. We could see a few bright clouds passing over head, it looked like a wonderful sunny day outside. Within the dim chamber, we saw many of those ethereal multi-faced monsters, but walked quietly past them, unnoticed. Across a ramp, into the center of the room, we saw our goal. The Iludeteirun, a monstrous devil with huge malodorous purple wings. This was the nefarious and vile commander wreaking destruction across Egeah. Surrounding the great sorcerer beast was a half dozen of his most powerful minions, the Arch Lich, masters of magic and darkness and several of the blinding ethereal Nivas monsters. We had encountered a few of these Lich's, sorcerers in ragged purple robes with dark faces and a dim purple magical aura. We knew they were deadly, and we knew we would need to battle all six while also fighting the Nivas, as well as the evil boss sorcerer of devilish darkness, all at the same time.

Fully prepared with potions, and skills at the ready, we passed beneath serpent topped arches and quietly crossed the ramp and lined up near the wall across from our goal. We each quickly prepared our opening attack spells, when Birgetta was attacked by a Lich. Time for waiting, planning and preparing was over. After the first volley at the Iludeteirun, Kar, Tara, and Mora continued the attack on the boss while the rest of the party worked on the Lich's and Nivas. Everyone was sharing buffs and healing as quick as we could between attacks. Even with all our protecting skills and potions, I could see everyone's life being drained away by the annihilating attacks from the loathsome monsters. Each of us suffered from repeated attacks of blindness, making targeting the beasts difficult.

Slowly, the Lich's and Nivas fell under our pounding attack. But we knew if the battle lasted much longer, more Lich's would appear to protect their master. It seemed like the Iludeteirun had a never ending life force, but after an eternity we could see it begin to weaken. All the original Lich's were gone, and so far only two more had come to it's aid, so we were able to concentrate nearly all of our attacks on the evil boss. Each of us had to take a brief rest from the battle, nearly all the life drained from us, to recover. The healing spells were no match for the damage being dealt to us.

We saw four more Lich's and a couple Nivas moving toward the ramp, and we knew once they crossed the ramp and entered the battle we would need to flee, or die, leaving our enemy victorious. I unleashed every spell I had left. I saw all the others dealing as much damage as possible as fast as possible. None of us were leaving anything left to continue the battle, it was now or never. Suddenly, a huge black cloud surrounded the Iludeteirun, and it crumpled to the stone floor. As his form collapsed, we heard a groan say, "Master, Master, I tried. You will need to destroy what I could not. " The Lich's and Nivas, startled at the sudden loss of guidance from their evil leader, stopped briefly, but then continued their slow but steady trek to the central chamber where we all stood exhausted. Even without their leader, they were still intent upon our destruction. It was again Kar's grizzly voice that got us moving, "Them blinding, behemoth brutes do be a heading our way, I do think we be going this other way. Unless you folk want to stay and play some more blinders buff." He laughed a bit as he started grabbing shoulders and pushing us along toward a ramp opposite the approaching Lich's. We slowly, and exhaustedly, charged around the circular chamber to the single exit ramp to the ninth floor, down the ramp, and at the bottom of the ramp we all collapsed. Gratefully, the long altar room we collapsed in was still empty, even one of those nasty boxes could have finished us off in our current state. After a few minutes, we recovered sufficiently to stand up.

The battle was over. We were exuberant at our victory. Everyone was hugging everyone else. I turned and gave a warm hug to the large muscular knight next to me, then realized it was Benji, and saw Tara staring at us. I looked back at her for a moment, smiled, opened my arms to welcome her into the

embrace. I could see the daggers in her eyes change slowly, soften, replaced by a smile like I have never seen from Tara before. We had been through a lot together, and I think the icy wall between us was quickly melting. She bound toward us and dove into the embrace, and the three of us hugged. Tara was amazingly strong for such a little thing, nearly crushing the wind out of me. I even heard Benji grunt as Tara squeezed us both. I was sure at that moment that I was finally forgiven.

After a couple minutes we all released our hug, I turned and hugged the next in line, another well muscled knight. Sir Kar. His embrace was powerful, warm, and yet still gentle. And something more. I looked briefly in his sparkingly bright brown eyes, and it felt like my insides just melted. A shocking and new feeling for me. I don't remember what meaningless stuttering words we exchanged, but I remember as I moved to the next warrior that my knees nearly gave out on suddenly wobble legs. "Just tired from the long battle," I told myself. The next few hugs were a blur as I could still see Kar's eyes. I wasn't sure if I was thinking of rushing back to him to kiss him, or stab him, for the wild thoughts suddenly running through my mind.

One thing I did know, something was different. Everything was different. The Tower was defeated, all of Egeah was defeated, Tara no longer hated me. And Kar; what was I to do, to think, about Kar. I knew I would need to have a long talk with him later, patting my long knife strapped to my waist wondering which answer I would be giving him to my questions?

We still had the long battle back to the first floor and exit from the cursed Tower of Lust Trum, but that battle should be easy now, with the way clearly marked on the way in, and the monsters without the guiding influence of the great and evil Iludeteirun. Hopefully all the other battles around Egeha were done also, General Fronius better not have one of those smiles when we get back to the village.

Chapter 10

The Battle for Strayana

In days long past, long forgotten, from which only myths survive comes a tale of prosperity and bewilderment. In lands which today are monuments to savagery, where the skulls and bones of many innocent victims are now worshiped, was once a land of commerce and art.

In a market in Regalsville, in the center on the great green lands of Strayana came all the great merchants of Iris. Being in the center of all Iris, it was said that all roads lead to Regalsville, a city so long destroyed that even it's name is now known to but a few.

In a secret tale, passed only by word of mouth for fear of being discovered comes the story of the true end of Regalsville, the devastation of Strayana, and the beginning of the destruction of all Iris.

A young squire was tending her masters horse and gear at her masters little camp, a league north of the large and prosperous Market of Regalsville on a fair spring day. The Knight that she served was in the Market today with their pack horse buying supplies and making arrangements for the long campaign he had planned in the wild mountains in the far north. He was planning to visit the lands of the ancient and defeated Witch King, to make sure there was no sign of the evil Dark Lord, the Witch King's master, who has tried for many millennium to invade the magically rich lands of Iris.

As she lay half dreaming near her masters gear in the shade of a great beech tree, the squire looked to

the north, through the sunny spring glades lined with daffodils, over the field of primroses and little white starry shapes, almost thinking of the wonderful flowers as beautiful little fairy creatures filling the sunny fields. In the distance she saw a large black figure mounted upon a massive gleaming ebony stallion passing through the starry fields, and as passing leaving a deathly wilt among the beautiful flowers in his wake. With face deep within his black hood, she could not make out any of his facial features, except the gleam of light from each of his dark eyes. The breeze barely touched his long flowing black cape. Other than the light from the eyes, and the sun gleaming off the ebony coat of the large stallion and the silver trim of the harness, the figure traveled slowly through the meadow like a great menacing shadow.

Quickly hiding behind the great beech tree, behind sheltering leaves and smelling the sweet odor of the leaf mold covered ground after the winter thaw, she watched the dark rider pass; her heart filling with dread as he neared, and the oppressive weight of dread lifting as his shadowy figure passed and drew away.

Quickly burdening her masters mount with his armor and twin blades, she mounted and quickly galloped toward the Market leaving her own trusty and beloved steed hobbled at their little camp. Giving the dark stranger a wide birth, knowing her master would be anxious to hear of this approaching danger as soon as possible, she arrived at the Market before the stranger could have arrived, with his slowing trotting mount.

The young squire quickly found the brave knight at a fruit sellers stall. He looked startled at her sudden and frantic arrival, but after a few quick words of explanation, the knight quickly armored himself and, with his powerful twin blades, was ready at the entrance to the Market when the dark clad stranger arrived. Upon his great stallion, clad in gleaming armor, he was an impressive sight, the very symbol of chivalry. The knight quickly told the squire to hide, after explaining briefly that this evil knight must be a servant of the Dark Lord he had taught her about.

At the dark strangers appearance, a feeling of dread spread through the Market, among shoppers and sellers alike. There were very few men of arms about, just two young halberd equipped guards at each market entrance. The prosperous market was always a peaceful place. The whole area around Regalsville was prosperous, with very few poor, and there was seldom any theft or other crime, so there was rarely need for more than the few young guards.

As the dark intruder entered the Market, the brave mounted knight blocked his path. Many of the buyers in the north end of the market quickly finished their purchase or discarded their shopping and moved south toward the south gate, and a hasty exit. Many of the sellers began closing up the tent flaps of their stalls, and peered out through small slits between the tent flaps at the pending confrontation.

As the brave knight's mount cantered nervously to the right, the knight spoke loudly, in a commanding voice, "Hail goodly knight, welcome to the Market at Regalsville. May I inquire as to why we are graced by your visit."

The dark knight responded in a deep, gravelly booming voice, "I have come at my Lords bidding to see what goods are here that he may expect to acquire upon his arrival." The young squire, magically protected from most attacks by the power buffering spells administered by her master, watched as she was directed from behind a stall near the north gate.

The dark knight continued, "It appears there is little here that my Lord will be interested in, but as instructed, he asked me to leave this." And with a bright flash, followed by a deepening shadowy darkness, the young squire saw the mighty steed of the brave knight flare his nostrils, then scream in pain as its powerful legs gave way beneath its massive and powerful body. She watched her brave knight and master crumple to the ground, crush beneath his mighty steed. She looked around, and everyone in the Market had also swooned at the dark knight's magical attack, she alone withstood the onslaught protected by the brave knight's last buffering magic.

The dark knight looked around, threw his head back, and a grumbling deep sound erupted from him, an evil laugh that felt like ice in the young squire's veins. The dark knight saw the brave knight lift his head, but saw that he was unable to escape the burden of his fallen mount crushing him. "My master was right, these fools have set no defense, this rich land will be an easy conquest," he rumbled after a few minutes of his bone-chilling laugh. "When we are done, no one will even remember the useless existence of these fools. Once defenseless Strayana is gone, the rest of Iris will fall with ease." He then continued his evil laugh.

The brave knight, knowing his squire was still alive and nearby, said, "Your Master will not win. We will be prepared for you when he comes again." The squire, still listening from a distance, was not sure what her master meant by "again," and began thinking about everything she had been taught about the Evil Lord.

Being confident that he had utterly defeated all others around him, the dark knight continued to talk aloud, to impress himself upon the fallen knight. "They will be defeated one by one. Only if they join forces, mixing their skills and talents, can they be a threat to my Master. This heart of Iris was the only real place of power. This land of richness and magic, mostly unused magic it appears, this center of all Iris has to be destroyed quickly. Without Strayana to unite the other lands, my Master can defeat those other worthless specks at his leisure. Only here in Strayana were the people strong enough, was the magic of Iris powerful enough, to be a real threat to my Master. Only if they had been prepared and united, using their skills together in a single united force, was there enough strength to defeat my Master. The power he uses today through me will leave him weak and powerless for many years, but he will slowly regain his power with time, and with his blessed decay, all the lands will crumble under his unending weight. Once all of Iris is defeated, he will be able to step through the portal from his blessed dark realm and rule here in person, where he will be invincible. His power that I spend here these next few days will consume me, but I gladly give my last breath to my Master, may he rule forever."

Through the darkness of the evil knight's spell, she saw his dark form dismount, walk to the side of the fallen knight, and with a swift two strokes, behead both fallen mount and rider. Suppressing a scream of anguish and the pain that pierced her heart, she quickly fled through the north gate, concealed in the evil knight's spell of darkness. She knew the knight and his black shadow would continue through the Market, and all of peaceful Regalsville, spreading his spells of death.

She ran as quickly as she could, holding back the waterfall of tears building up within her. Following the path of death in the formally beautiful flowers made by the dark knight's passing, she quickly ran the league to where she first saw the approaching doom, and found their little camp. She gathered all her belongings, and everything of her beloved knight's possessions she could carry, including a couple daggers and a small crossbow. It was only now, after he was gone, that she fully admitted to herself how much he had become a part of her heart, surprised and saddened of how she now thought of him as beloved. Side by side with him, day after day as his faithful squire, she had been afraid to admit to

herself how much in love she had become. But now with his sudden death, she could barely stand the pain of her broken heart.

But she knew she had no time to grieve, not yet. The surrounding towns and villages needed to be warned. A peaceful land like Strayana, unprepared for the spreading evil, could be destroyed even before it knew it was being attacked, just as those poor souls, and her beloved, were back in Regalsville. Along with the prosperity shared by all, there was also great power in Strayana, if only it had enough warning to prepare itself. She mounted quickly, and fled like the wind to the lands south of Regalsville. She was afraid that, since the dark knight had come from the north, it was probably already too late for those poor souls in the north.

She sped through the lands of Strayana as fast as her mount could run without collapse. Ever where she turned, every village, town and nearly every small farmstead was the same. She warned the few she found but death spread before her faster than she could ride. Even in her home village, everyone she knew as she grew up, family and friends, all dead. League by league, the pain in her heart grew. The area of effect of this dark knight's spells spread faster than she could travel. How could he have destroyed so much so fast. After several days of traveling, she entered the peaceful green pastures Dratan to the southwest. Here, beyond the southern borders of Strayana, life appeared unchanged. At the first little village south of Strayana, she told what she saw. The villagers ridiculed her, how could the great Strayana be destroyed in a few days, the delusions of a little girl. No one believed her, so she left, finally breaking down in tears, uncontrollable sobs heaving from deep within her soul, in pain that can not be described. She found a few more small villages, but they treated her the same. In unbearable loneliness she returned to her destroyed homeland to see if there was anyone else left.

As she again entered her homeland Strayana, a light rain began. Not a pleasant, cleansing rain of spring, that brought life and welcomed new starry flowers to spring forth, but a rain of stinging pain. Each drop was like a stab of evil piercing her skin to the bone with a malicious delight. Instead of beautiful flowers filling the fields with their intoxicating fragrance, as the rainy days passed the lands grew wild and dangerous.

She found a few survivors, people who were away from village and farm traveling the former beautiful lands. But even the few farmsteads that had appeared undamaged were abandoned. As each traveler arrived home, each found the same destruction as was seen over and over again by the young squire. As the days and weeks passed, she gathered more straggling survivors, many near death from starvation and bewilderment and the unthinkable destruction around them.

While the evil knight was not seen again, having completed his destruction in just a few days, other strange and dangerous creatures began appearing, killing some of the few remaining survivors. Even some of the formally great and peaceful trees that provided pleasant shade in the heat of the summer began to rise up and attack the survivors.

Many of the survivors also began to change, becoming more wild, more like the changed lands of Strayana. They gathered in a protected area, surrounded by deep, river filled ravines or impassable hills, and started a new village in the dark misty land. Day by day, many of the survivors became more and more wild. At first they survived on killing and eating the new wild creatures in the areas around the new village. The young squire, and a few of her followers, were able to find some less loathsome food in the increasingly wild lands. While many of the survivors became more and more like the changing lands of Strayana, the young squire and her few followers became outcasts. One day, the villagers attacked one of her followers, falsely accusing the poor victim of theft. The poor young

person was accused, declared guilty, killed, and then devoured by the now cannibalistic villagers.

The young squire, now looking at herself and her few followers as the future food supply for the increasing crazed villagers made plans, and in the night all fled for cleaner lands to the south. Not knowing what to expect, anything had to be better than the poisonous, lunacy that had now saturated everything that was left in her beloved homeland. The evil knights destruction of all Strayana was more complete than even his dark Lord could imagine.

By now, wild stories about the destruction of Stayana had spread though out Iris. Most who ventured into the formally beautify lands never returned. None of those who did survive their trip to the wild lands left unscathed, bringing with them tales of horror. It was a shunned and feared land now. No one wanted anything to do with the evil and deadly lands, all believing they were safe in their nice green and sunny lands, untouched by evil. The powerful Pharaoh of the rich green lands of Dratan declared Strayana as evil and ordered his people to avoid the land to the north, and anything to do with it.

The young squire and her small handful of people finally arrived in the unspoiled lands outside of Strayana. Upon finding out who they were, where they came from, every village, town, and even small farmstead fearfully chased them away with sticks, stones and even bright swords. No one would listed to the young squire about the warnings gleamed from the dark knight's apocryphal declarations on that first evil day. Everyone believed Strayana failed of it's own fault, it's own excesses, and bred it's own evil. Everyone believed Strayana got what it deserved, and all believed themselves safe from such evils. The young squire, now a dispirited rogue, and her small band were able to find a small unpopulated area in the rocky hills many leagues north of Juno, even north of the rocky lands of Merach. From that day on, they never told anyone where they came from, keeping it as a family secrete, passed down through dozens of generations. After a few generations, as they were able to blend in with the rest of the population of Iris, they saw the evil growing in the land. Knowing the evil would continue to grow, knowing their warnings would only fall on deaf ears, they quietly prepared their small but growing family for the battle that they knew must one day be fought. At first they all stayed together in a unified family. From the youngest age, all the descendents of that small band were trained in all the arts of sword, ax and bow, and in spells for defense and massive destruction. Bidding their time for the season of battle, they trained and waited, generation after generation. Even as spreading evil forced their village to disperse, they held their family secret, and continued to prepare for the day of vengeance.

All the while, evil spread through the land. Imperceptible at first, over the next three thousand years it consumed nearly all of Iris. Finally, some of the remanding people of Iris were finally willing to rise up and defend what little remained, with a hope of taking back some of the lands fallen to evil. At the heart of the defenders was a deeply held family secret.

Plans were being made to begin the cleansing of her ancestral homeland. Nearly all the sources of evil power had been defeated in all the rest of the lands of Iris. All that remained for cleansing were the wild and poisonous lands of Strayana. General Fronius and his seasoned battle leaders were busy with all the plans. As far as Tara knew, she was one of the few last remaining descendents of those ragtag survivors of the downfall of Strayana many years ago. She had great pride knowing it was her great mother from those few survivors many generations ago whose blood still ran strong in her veins. She

like to think of that young squire as the first, and greatest, of all the rogues to ever live.

She was alone with her family secret. She did not even know who else were her distant cousins. The family that grew out of the survivors from those dark days became scattered among the rest of the people of Iris in the generations after the fall of Strayana. Their new homestead that they built among the rocky hills far north of Juno was overrun by the spreading darkness. That area is not even considered as part of Iris by most people any more. That must be when the darkness was beginning to regain its strength after its destruction of her homeland. It appeared its first attack from its returning strength was aimed directly at their little family. So the family had to again flee. Afraid that in some future attack from darkness they would be utterly destroyed, they agreed the family should disperse, but to carefully still train in secret. They all made oaths to preserve the truth, to pass it from generation to generation, and to prepare for the battle to come. They must all train hard, perfecting all their skills, and pass those skills on to all succeeding generations. It has been many generations since the cousins had scattered amongst the people of Iris, she just hoped they were all still faithful to their oaths, that they too were still training for the great day of battle she knew was coming quickly, that she wasn't the only one left. But how would they be able to come together, to work together combining their talents to defeat the darkness. She had no idea where any of them were or how to find them. Her father had just said to be prepared, when the time comes, they will find you.

Tara had to be careful to not reveal her Strayanian ancestry, anything connected to Strayana was still looked upon as evil. She was even afraid to tell the love of her heart, her beloved Benji. She had joined the ranks of Eternal Dawn to complete her training, which she started under her father's instructions when she was but a small child. She knew that, at times, she was a little too enthusiastic about her fight against evil, but she wanted to be the best. She looked forward to the day she could hang up her crossbow, and begin a new life. But until all evil was removed from all of Iris, it was "See a monster, Kill a monster." She looked over the hills in the predawn twilight, as the reddening sky gave the landscape an amber hue, wondering where her distant cousins were.

General Fronius gave all the troops final instructions, and sent them out in scouting parties to survey the lands surrounding the dark misty town they found in Strayana where they found a few hardy merchants. There were no other inhabitants that they found. Just piles of skulls and bones, looking like monuments to the ancient evils of Strayana. As usual, Tara and Benji took the lead in their party, with quick little Tara quickly getting ahead of the rest of the party. She was anxious to destroy the evil that had infested her homeland. The party quickly destroyed the few evil trees and mud piles they found. Even Tara thought the poisonous mud piles were disgusting and she hated spending her powerful bolts killing mud. "Give me something good to kill, like a dragon," she thought, smiling to herself.

Suddenly, Tara was stunned and silenced, unable to run, unable to use any of her skills. She was surrounded by the vicious living trees, while nearby she saw neon colored spiders and the fangs of swamp trolls dripping with delight as they approached her tender flesh.

Mora knew Tara had sped ahead of the rest of the troops too fast. As usual she saw Tara ahead in a clearing surrounded by the evil beasts, but unlike Tara she was just standing stiff as a tree. Closing the

distance as quickly as she could, hearing Benji's battle cry from ahead of her, she unleashed every spell she had prepared. Depleting her entire store of magic, she too was now far too vulnerable to the surrounding dark forces. But her attack had stopped the advance of pending doom on little Tara. Quickly recovering from the snaring and other spells from the evil monsters, Mora saw Tara unleash attacks on the surrounding monstrous forces in a rapid blur. By that time, Benji was at her side and was dealing massive damage standing protectively at Tara's side. Mora's store of magic replenished itself in rapid fashion, as usual, and she too started dealing massive amounts of damage as the rest of the party joined her. There were plenty of monsters on all sides to keep all party members busy.

They all continued through the poisonous lands of Strayana, and each felt a sense of silent watchfulness. They could tell they were being followed, but were unable to see the foul creature. As they left the foul smelling trolls behind they ran into an even greater evil, dark harpies which barely resembled their less monstrous cousins from Dratan. These were the most loathsome creatures Mora had yet seen. Their skin was a mottled gray, diseased and cadaverous. They wore a blindfold over their eyes on their heavily tattooed face, but still attacked with deadly accuracy. Their dull yellow hair sticking up on a narrow band on their gray heads looked like wild snakes, poised to grab unwary passersby. Large dull gray earrings, the same color as their skin, hung from each malformed ear. Their bodies appeared stitched together, as if formed from the parts of many creatures. It brought back memories of the Hadrians they encountered in the Temple of Forgetfulness, but also for some reason they reminded Mora of the magically demented Wafe Peelers. It appeared they were assembled from both human and monstrously abnormal harpy parts. Their feathers were an even deeper gray, with a putrid oily sheen, with shades of lighter gray and black at the edges of their broad wingspan. Their constructed bodies were designed only for one thing, killing, leaving unnecessary parts such as arms off their winged bodies. As Mora and her companions passed among them, the Harpies attacked in swarms from all sides with sharp disease-crusted gray talons.

Mora could see them gliding gracefully from all directions toward them, with a smell of death preceding their attack. Their screams were filled with painful blinding magical energy, piercing the calmness the party tried to maintain during battle. As the Harpies died under the massive attack from each party member, the evil Harpies collapsed in a bloodless puff of greasy feathers. Even dusty old mummies had more blood than these evil creatures.

That's when Mora noticed the enthusiastic sorcerer that had also followed them. What a fool he is, with neither the skills or experience to take on these monsters. He had tried to join their party before, but his skills were not developed enough for the dangerous missions General Fronius sent Sir Kar and his party. As the sorcerer tried to catch up to our party he was suddenly surrounded by three Harpies and appears to be losing his life quickly. Luckily for the Sorcerer, Kena was near him quickly and saved him with quick arrows from her bow.

They were quickly clearing the area of Harpies, approaching what appeared to be a bridge in the distance. That was when an unseen attack hit them, a poisonous magical attack that felt like a bleeding spell that hit them all at once from an unseen foe. Sir Kar quickly shared some magical shadow powder and suddenly, they could all see the descending evil. They could all now see the huge misty dragon that was viciously attacking them. They began to return battle, and suddenly, another great dragon appeared, looking like fiery blood. They were the largest beasts they had seen in all their battles across Iris, several times larger than the great devil that nearly destroyed them all in Theos Tomb.

The blood dragon was bearing down on Mora from behind as she battled a dozen dark harpies in front of her. Tara saw the dragon just in time to unleash her snares and a barrage of bolts, just before the great gray talons were able to sink into Mora's back.

Sir Kar, seeing that this battle may be greater than they can handle by themselves, ordered the Sorcerer, being a fast runner, to bring word to General Fronius about the two dragons. Behind the dragons they could see the bridge lead to a small island, with the path fully blocked by the beasts. Seeing the dragons blocking the path, Sir Kar knew they must be protecting something important on that island.

Each behemoth had a heavy, spiked club like tail, which they used with great precision, swinging at all party members within it's reach with electrically charged blasts. Their skin was thick like armor and their backs and shoulders were covered with heavily bone like plates and spikes. The huge heads, bigger than an entire Grand Red Dragon, had large heavy horns longer than Sir Kar is tall.

One of their mighty gray wings could have covered our entire party, yet they did not look large enough to support these mighty beasts huge bulk enough to fly. Their wings were ragged and diseased looking, like everything in Strayana. Their enormous clawed feet stamped the ground in the entire area as they tried smashing the life out of our party. They appeared to be brothers, or sisters, who can tell the difference with dragons. The main difference was their color, a misty cadaverous gray with a slight pink bloodless cast for one and a fiery blood red and gray for the other.

Mora watched both dragons as she delivered slowing spells to reduce the damage the beasts were dealing to the party. As the party battled the great dragons, great fountains of fire continuously erupted from the gullet of each monster, spilling forth upon all of us through jaws big enough to swallow horse and rider whole. Only our protective buffing skills and potions, and cool healing from Kena and Birgette protected us from a rapid demise.

Suddenly Mora heard little Tara scream, "Where are my cousins, we need them now," and she charged the two dragons for closer action with piercing bolts from her cross bow, hitting both monsters with each shot. As she continued her devastating assault on evil, she continued with what sounded like a battle cry, "For invading Strayana, the land of my ancestors, you monsters will die."

The entire party was stunned by Tara's cry about cousins and ancestors. She continued her crushing attacks, appearing tiny beneath the huge dragons, while continuing to scream the battle cry, "For Strayana, land of my ancestors." Benji was the first to join the battle cry. Then the rest of the party joined in the battle cry, Sir Kar, then Kena and Birgette, and then Mora, "For Strayana, land of my ancestors." From little Tara's battle cry, Mora knew she must be one of her long lost cousins. As the rest of the party joined the battle cry, Mora was increasingly shocked, "All cousins?" she thought.

Mora looked over her shoulder and saw two other parties approaching. She was sure they too had heard the battle cry. Would they join in the battle, or with disgust for descendents of Strayana, leave them to die? As if reading her mind, many in both parties join in the battle cry, "For Strayana, land of my ancestors."

After a long battle, with little damage done to the monstrous dragons, Sir Kar and the rest of the party

see two new parties arriving, battling their way through swarms of Harpies. He was shocked by little Tara's battle cry, but instantly, his pride welled up within him and he joined his cousins declaration. He could see General Fronius and Suzieq leading one of the arriving parties, with the sorcerer following closely. They continued the battle with the two denizens of dark shadows, while the two newly arrived parties join in the battle. He did not care what they thought, he continues the battle cry, "For Strayana, land of my ancestors."

Even more shocked, he heard the two newly arriving parties join in the battle cry. Holding back tears from his grizzly eyes, he redoubles his efforts to destroy the deadly dragons, thinking about fighting side by side with his cousins all these years and not even knowing it.

The battle lasted long, but with little damage to the combined three parties, the dragons fall in fiery heaps. As each beast tumbled over in it's death throws, the earth trembled under the weight of the dying beasts.

Behind the now dead dragons they could all see a bridge leading to a small island. On the small island in the very center of Strayana, which was apparently being protected by the behemoth dragons, the parties find a small entrance to caves hidden below the poisonous lands. While appearing to be below ground, these caverns were brightly light, as if above ground, and were filled with areas of lush, but poisonous, forest growth much like the rest of the lands of Strayana above. And the same poisonous rain continued to fall, even in these deep caverns.

Many of these evil creatures appeared as spirits of their own party, with many of the same weapons and skills. It was almost like fighting amongst themselves and they entered battle with these doppelganger copies of themselves.

After battling dozens of titan, knight, rouge, healer, and other deadly doppelgangers, they continued through more caverns with many more dangerous monsters, including many Golems. Many parties had joined the underground battle, so the uncounted beasts fell in ever increasing numbers. Even a great beast with a petrifying attack, and even more deadly beast throwing massive flame attacks that were more deadly than the two great dragons defeated outside the cave entrance. After what seemed like days, probably because it was days, the last of the beasts fell, and all sounds of battle diminished throughout the extensive caverns.

Throughout the subterranean battle, Sir Kar and his party could hear the same battle cry, "For Strayana, land of my ancestors." Nearly every member of nearly every party had joined the chant. The same thought ran through each of their minds, "Could all these be my cousins?"

As they all exited the massive cave through the small entrance, spilling out again onto the increasingly crowded small island at the center of Strayana, Mora saw that many more of the army's parties had arrived, with some already crossing the bridge to the small island. Nearly the entire army must be here now, on or surrounding the island, after wiping out all evil beasts across Strayana including other underground caverns. The rumble of the battle cry grew as more and more of the army joining in, screaming, "For Strayana, land of my ancestors."

As they continued to scream what they believed to be a victory cheer, a large oval of darkness appeared

on the edge of the island across from the bridge, towering over 30 yards high. The blackness of the oval was filled with a myriad of tiny stars, each glittering faintly for a brief time and fading, only to be replaced by more faint tiny stars. It is a Portal, a rip in the reality of time and space to the dark lands filled with black fire of the Dark Lord who, for 3000 years has, been the master behind the attacks on the lands of Iris.

Angered at the destruction of so many of his followers, the Dark Lord is determined to destroy the army of Eternal Dawn himself. As the Dark Lord tries to step through the Portal in what appears as a last desperate attempt to stop General Fronius and his army, he can only put forth one hand and one foot. Without having defeated all of Iris, and nearly all of his minions destroyed by General Fronius and his army, he is unable to fully bring his entire darkness through the portal. Even that small intrusion into Iris is enough for the Dark Lord to deliver massive shadowy magical attacks on the gathered forces. However, all the troops, now sharing enormous numbers of buffering and healing skills, easily withstand the fiends desperate attacks.

All the knights, titans, rogues, and night shadows in the surrounding troops attack with their full force. By this time, nearly all of the army has arrived, with more approaching. The air is filled with the same battle cry, "For Strayana, land of my ancestors." The mages and sorcerers combine their magic to push back at the intruder, forcing his massive darkness back into his portal. The healers throw all their might into closing and healing the rip in time and space that was the portal.

Together, with all of their combined skills and experience, the army succeeds in forcing the evil Dark Lord back into his own dark plane, sealing the portal against any return.

As it turned out, after word spread among the troops, it appeared more than half of all Eternal Dawn were distant cousins, all reunited to take back their ancestral home of Strayana from the spreading darkness. Some how, all the distant cousins were drawn together, under the great leadership of General Fronius. The strength of Strayana, passed down through the generations, was brought together. United, they had combined all their skills and abilities, utterly defeating the darkness. Banning it from not just their ancestral home in Strayana, but from all of Iris and all the lands in their plane of existence. They had won, just as the evil knight had said so many years earlier, by standing eternally united.

General Fronius stood before his victorious troops, with his biggest smile of all. And everyone knew this smile did not mean more battles, it was a smile of true joy.

The Ending

Tara sat next to Mora. She had wondered her entire life where her cousins could be. Now she knew. As her father had said, "When the time comes, they will find you." These past few years, fighting side by side with her through many dark battles, unknown to any of them, they were a family united.

She had grown very close to Mora during these past few years of fighting side by side. They had saved each others lives more times than she could remember. How different she felt now, compared to her memories of the early days when Mora first joined the battle with Eternal Dawn. She remembered the

fear, anger, even hatred she felt toward Mora when they first met, and the months after showing interest in Benji. Now she felt like Mora was a close sister rather than a distant cousin.

She looked longingly at her Benji, then said to Mora with sadness, "But if we're cousins, then we can't marry." Mora almost laughed and said, "Maybe you haven't heard enough about our past, Tara. Didn't your father tell you most of those first ancestors were not related at all. They formed a family, and yes there were some marriages within those early survivors. But most marriages over the generations were with outsiders, people who were not even from Strayana. We are mostly cousins just in name, and the closest any of our blood touches must be many of generations in the past by now. You and your precious Benji are safe to marry, now that we have defeated the darkness. Just as Suzie and Fronius are safe with their marriage. And the cute sorcerer Kena saved from the last embrace in yesterdays battle, I saw Kena watching him closely. Even though he's one of our distant cousins, he looks quite handsome to me. I can see Kena and him getting together on a more permanent basis." Mora was staring in the direction of Sir Kar, who was talking to General Fronius. As Sir Kar finished, and began turning from Fronius, Mora got up, telling Tara, "I got some unfinished business with a certain scruffy knight."

And the days of Iris passed in bliss for many years, with friends greeting friends, and young couples marrying, and future generations being born, living and playing free of fear from the Dark Lord in the beautiful lands of Iris.

That is until the rise of the next great evil shadow rises! Wait until our mighty warriors return to Juno, and Randol, and see what awaits?

I really enjoyed writing this story and I hope you enjoyed it too :))

cast

Fronius, knight and general

Suzieq, The Healer and leader

Kena, the healer

Mora, the mage

Jalien, the rouge assassin

Birgetta, healer with silver bow

Sir Kar (Karomin) brave grizzled knight

Tara, the Ranger

Benji (Benjiman) the young knight

Gert and Gort, evil minions