



Midmorning lit a clear sky above the floor of the canyon. A strange calm hung over the narrow band of sweeping fields and apple groves. The river padded calmly down the center of the gorge, mimicking its twists and turns for as far as it wandered. With all of this spread out before Dareth's eyes, the low rumble of a tremor, buried deep in the earth, hardly made him take notice.

The young man huddled against the wind in his knee-length, leather jerkin and glanced up at the rim of the canyon. Even a small tremor could start rocks raining down on his head. The three cows he pushed along the seldom-used track skittered further away from the danger.

"Too close," he thought to himself. "If mother knew I was using this track..."

It was much faster this way. The other trail lay further toward the center of the canyon, safely away from falling stones, but it meandered through fields of high grass, wandering around thickets and brambles. Dareth much preferred the faster route. It was not as dangerous as all that. No one had been injured up there for as long as he had been alive. That was not so strange, as he was the only one who traveled this path with any regularity and that only when he felt certain his mother wouldn't find out.

Nothing significant fell from above. A fine dusting of sand and gravel cascaded down along the perimeter of the mighty wall. It landed harmlessly at the cliff's base, adding to eons of earth piled up in a steep slope against the weathered rock. Most of the time that was all the tremors brought on, and yet the villagers stayed clear.

"Nothing to worry about." He spoke the words to bolster his own confidence.

As he moved to push the cattle on their way, Dareth's eye picked out a large wooden post that grew up out of the sandy slope about a hundred yards away. The wood was plain and cracked from weather and age. Dareth did not need to stand in front of it now to see the names scratched into its surface, the only decoration this memorial marker bore. He had looked upon it enough times. He had stood before it, tracing the symbols that signified his father's name, only one of twenty three names scrawled over the wind-worn surface. Looking at that grim reminder of a past catastrophe, it was easy to see why no one frequented this pathway any longer. The rock slide that had killed Dareth's father and so many others took place before his birth. He knew little of the accident or of his father. His mother always grew silent on the subject whenever he broached it, and it was never brought up by anyone else. The other villagers seemed content leaving such things in the past.

Another low rumble echoed from far off and from deep down. This time a fist sized stone accompanied the rain of dust. It thunked into the sand and rolled down to rest a few feet from Dareth's leather moccasin. This time the young man heeded the warning. Waving his staff, he drove the beasts off of the path. They trampled the shrubs at the trails edge and waded off into the grass that littered the hillside. The stiff breeze that blew constantly through the canyon whipped Dareth's dark hair back from his face. He was thin, perhaps even frail looking, though one would never think it seeing the

boundless energy that poured from his wiry limbs. Perhaps he was smaller than others of seventeen years, but his spirit made up for such deficiencies.

“We’ll just have to move faster going this way,” he said to the cattle as if they had voiced argument over their new path.

His eyes wandered again to the canyon’s rim but his face displayed more awe than fear. He often used the path’s convenience as an excuse. In truth the place drew him simply by the sheer power of its presence, by the mystery of what lay above, beyond those endless, impassable cliff walls. Yes, tremors happened all the time and stones fell all the time too, but as long as one were careful...

A cow bellowed as another tremor set the landscape in motion. This time Dareth felt it deep in his groin. Genuine alarm touched his face. The shift and rattle of rocks echoed down from above, though nothing fell but another thick haze of dust.

“Haya.” Dareth waved the cows in the direction of the river. It twisted and gurgled nearly a mile off but he only needed to get far enough inland to avoid being crushed. It would take several more minutes to reach the new cattle route, even if the beasts decided to cooperate. At least that path was sure to be in the clear. The last thing Dareth wanted to do was to prove his mother right by going and getting himself killed.

He saw the break in the high grasses that signified the trail. At that same moment, a voice echoed off the rocks from behind him. He looked back in confusion. Who could be coming from that direction? No one ever came that way. He had tried many times to convince Kadnee to accompany him on his secret travels but she always renewed her promise to go the next time whenever he asked her. Besides, this voice lacked Kadnee’s sweet lilt. This voice held authority. This voice held ire. It was Daesha’s angry call that reverberated like one of those tremors over the canyon floor.

“Mother?” Dareth craned his neck and then saw her marching into the wind, her simple, tan dress plastered against her form.

“I’m sorry,” he called. “I was just heading away...”

“I’ve told you so many times, Dareth!” Her voice covered the distance easily.

Dareth turned back to head in her direction but she waved him off.

“You just stay put. I’m coming. You’re not a man yet, Dareth, not by the rules of the village. And as long as you’re not then you’ll still do what I say.”

He sighed and dropped his head, mostly to hide a grin. This was not a new litany, and it was about as far as she ever really went toward scolding him. It wasn’t much, but among the docile people of the village, it gave his beautiful mother a reputation of being fiery. No surprise to anyone that Dareth had turned out the way he did, reckless, inquisitive.

He suppressed another smile. He had no time to worry about what the others thought of him. Kadnee thought well enough of him at least. Still, he marveled that no one shared his curiosity. How could they stare up at the vast, blue ceiling that stretched from wall to wall and not wonder what lay beyond. The problem was that they never did stare up. Their eyes were always firmly aimed at the ground and that made no sense. The birds went beyond the canyon walls all the time. He saw them. So there must be something out there, but he alone seemed to care much about it.

As Daesha approached, Dareth expected to hear a small torrent of words to accompany those he had already endured. But all words and thoughts ceased in an

instant when the next shake hit the canyon floor. No far off tremor this time, but instead a full-throated roar.

“No,” Dareth began to cry out. But before the word could leave his lips, a powerful force smacked him to the ground. Tremors happened often, but shakes, never, not like this.

A shudder that began in the earth raced through Dareth’s body. A grinding from beneath the surface mixed with the discordant crunch of stone hitting stone high above. He managed to get to his knees and peer through a growing veil of dust. It was difficult to pierce the haze but finally he glimpsed his mother a short distance away, rising from where she had fallen. Daesha raced away from the danger at her back. Her eyes bulged in terror but she kept them locked on her son.

Before he realized it, Dareth was on his feet, racing toward her. He didn’t think about what he could do to help if he reached her. The earth pitched back and forth and sent him staggering along until the groaning from below erupted like a clap of thunder.

The ground before Daesha tore in half. The part where she stood bucked and sent her sprawling. She tumbled and screamed, landing in a heap only inches from the four foot wide rent that opened up in the grassy earth. Dust and rock sprayed into the air, while a thick, reddish haze belched up out of the crack. The shake knocked Dareth into the grass again. He sprawled on his face, still more than thirty feet away from where his mother now lay. He tried to rise twice without success as the bucking ground refused to let him go.

Then, almost as suddenly as it had begun, the shake ended. The earth quieted its rumbling, leaving only the cracking sound of falling rocks, then even that subsided into the sliding rattle of pebbles.

Dareth regained his feet and staggered toward the ugly sinkhole that now marred the waving grassland. His mother lay motionless at its brink on the other side. The opening stretched for at least a hundred yards and Dareth picked his way carefully along its length looking for somewhere to cross over it. Steam rose from the churned soil that filled the bottom of the gap. He was hesitant to traverse it, but soon found a place where he could leap across without trouble.

“Mother,” Dareth cried, rushing to her when he reached the other side.

He knelt down next to her still form. She lay on her side with one arm hanging out over the edge of the crack. Dareth turned her toward him and brushed her tangled, black hair out of her face. He stared into the hole. It was not deep, but it was filled with the debris that had so recently been the surface of the field. Had it been any closer, Daesha would be buried at the bottom.

“Mother?” Dareth looked into her face but her eyes were closed. A number of scrapes and bruises covered her body. Dust and gravel fell away from her hair as Dareth turned her cheek toward him. He put his ear to her mouth and felt her breath touch his cheek.

“Open your eyes.” The young man’s voice rose in pitch. She was alive but she would not respond.

“You’ll be alright. Please be alright.”

Dareth grabbed her hand between his own and rubbed it hard, suddenly she tossed her head to the side and he looked up, hope starting on his face. But Daesha still did not

open her eyes. She moaned and seemed to say something that Dareth could not make out.

“What? What is it, mother? Are you alright?”

No reply.

Dareth made a quick decision. Taking hold of her arm, he pulled Daesha up and slung her over his shoulder. He was not big, but he was strong and she was no larger than he. Rising to his feet, he staggered along the opening in the ground. He had to travel quite a distance before he managed to cross back to the other side where the cattle had regrouped after the shake and now grazed over the grass as if nothing had happened. As carefully as he could, Dareth laid his mother over the back of one of the animals. The beast complained at first, but Dareth was insistent and soon it grudgingly allowed the burden.

With that he snatched up his fallen stick and waved it at the cattle, driving them toward the river and the village that lay near its banks. She was not dead, Dareth knew. In fact, if he didn't know any better, he would almost have said that she was sleeping peacefully. He couldn't be sure what he should do, but he knew that the village medicine man, Lorvin, would probably have the answers.

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Kadnee carried a bucket in each hand. Both were so filled with river water that they sloshed their contents over her leather moccasins as she walked. She had few advantages, being the daughter of the medicine man. Getting out of mundane, daily chores was not one of them. She grumbled over her wet shoes as she reached the basin outside of Lorvin's hut. She poured the remaining contents of her buckets into the basin and sighed. There would be at least two more trips before the basin was full. She turned to retrace her steps, then her father's voice stopped her from within the hut.

“Kadnee?” the medicine man called.

“Yes, father?”

Lorvin brushed aside the curtain hanging across the door of the big hut. He occupied the largest of the grass and wattle structures in the village, though it was no more spectacular than any of the others. Its size was strictly utilitarian. As the leader of the village, Lorvin held council in his hut. Therefore it needed to accommodate all of the elder members of the village comfortably.

“Are you nearly done with that, Kadnee?”

“Not yet, father.”

Lorvin frowned and rubbed his thick belly. “There are still a number of things to be done this afternoon. I suppose you're thinking only of traipsing off somewhere with that young man.” Lorvin let his jowls droop at mention of Dareth.

“Some of these things could keep till tomorrow. We were thinking of heading up the canyon a little way this afternoon,” she admitted.

Lorvin huffed and shook his head. “You're going to find yourself in trouble one of these days, following him around on his wild jaunts.”

“Is that what you call them?” Kadnee smiled despite her father's reddening face. Then she gave him one of those looks that only worked for a daughter on her father.

Lorvin wrinkled his brow, but waved a hand in dismissal as he turned back toward the hut.

“At the least you could finish filling the basin. And watch you don’t get yourself hurt.”

“I will, father. Dareth wouldn’t let anything happen to me.”

Lorvin didn’t hear the last of her words. He had already disappeared back inside the hut. Kadnee smiled at her small victory. She picked up her buckets and turned back toward the river. As she did, she felt another familiar rumble in the ground beneath her. She hardly slackened her pace. Such tremors were nothing strange. There had been several of them on her way up from the river on this last trip. But what came next, there was nothing normal about that.

Without warning, the ground beneath Kadnee heaved, knocking her to her knees. Her buckets went flying and she grabbed at the grass as the only thing she could find for support. A rumbling grew up out of the ground stronger than any she had ever experienced in her life.

“Kadnee.” Lorvin staggered out of the hut along with three of the village elders. All of them fell to their knees as the earth threatened to toss them about like leaves in the wind. It would not let them up for several moments, during which time little could be heard over the din of the quake.

“Kadnee, are you alright?” She caught the words faintly.

The girl was terrified. But before she could formulate a response, the shaking subsided and everything became still again. She peered, through settling dust, at her father and the others. Lorvin kicked aside a patch of wattle, fallen from over the door. He slowly rose and brushed the dust from his jerkin. His broad chest rose and fell in a frantic rhythm.

“Kadnee.”

“I’m right here, father.” She sat up and waved to him. “I’m alright.”

Lorvin hurried over and helped her to her feet. He inspected her carefully to make sure she was not injured, then he turned back to the others.

“Go and check on everyone. Make sure no one is hurt.”

Kadnee caught her breath and sat down in the grass again, not quite sure yet of her own feet.

“I’ve never felt a shake like that,” she said.

“There has not been one like that since before you were born.”

“Do you think it’s over?”

Lorvin didn’t answer right away. He looked about him for a moment as if expecting something else.

“I think it is. There will probably be a few more tremors now, but nothing that we’re not used to. Come, will you be able to help check on everyone?” Lorvin turned to go. “Perhaps you should start with your friend, Dareth. No trip down the canyon today after all.”

Kadnee frowned and kicked at the dirt with her toe. Her father never wasted time with trifles. Now that the worst shake of her life was over, it was time to get back to business. She headed toward the opposite end of the village where the earth began to slope gently toward the distant canyon wall. Around her, familiar faces stood talking



together in low tones or inspecting their homes for damage. Worry quickened her steps. She knew Dareth was out wrangling stray cattle. She had no doubt he would be up near the cliff face and that was a dangerous place to be even with the usual shakes that rattled the canyon floor, to say nothing about the violent tremor that had just occurred.

Kadnee picked her way through the village. There was little within it that could sustain damage. She had barely made it outside of its perimeter when she caught sight of Dareth moving down the hill toward her. She clapped with joy at the sight of him driving the cows ahead. She bounded out to meet him with a smile on her face, but when she got close enough to make out his own sharp features, the smile died on her lips. Dareth's eyes held consternation and fear.

"Dareth," She called out as she continued to approach. "Can you believe that shake? Is everything alright?" Then she saw the figure draped over the back of the lead animal.

"Oh no." Kadnee rushed forward. "Daesha. What happened?"

Dareth's face was streaked with tears. He pushed the beasts along relentlessly.

"I was up near the cliff when the shake hit," he said. "She knew she'd find me there. She came after me. I've got to get her to your father.

"Come, I know where to find him."

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Dareth struggled to get his mother through the door of Lorvin's hut while Kadnee ran to fetch her father. He laid her down on a straw mat in the corner and covered her with a thick blanket.

Just as he finished getting her settled down, Lorvin pulled the curtain aside. The medicine man crossed quickly to the prostrate form and knelt down beside her. He placed a hand on her forehead and inspected her arms and the bruise on her cheek.

"How did this happen?" Lorvin asked. "Where was she?"

Dareth stared at the bare earth of the hut, unable to look the man in the face.

"I was bringing the stray cattle back toward the river. I took the path near the cliff face. she came after me."

Lorvin did not respond to this admission. The silence spoke much louder of his disapproval than words would have done. Dareth was saved from whatever he might have eventually said as Kadnee rushed in at that moment, breaking Lorvin's glare.

"Is she going to be alright? Can you help her, father?"

"Shh." Lorvin turned away from Dareth and fell to a closer inspection of his patient. "Get me that basin from the table over there." He pointed to the other side of the room.

Dareth moved to comply immediately. He placed the basin and a cloth next to his mother. Lorvin soaked the cloth in the cool water and wiped the dust from Daesha's face. He continued to bathe her arms and legs, wiping away dirt and blood from the numerous scratches, prodding gently at her flesh. After several minutes he looked up at Dareth. His eyes showed confusion.

"You should both go. There is nothing you can do to help right now, but stay close. I will come and get you if I need you or if there is any change."

“I want to stay,” Dareth said.

“I can understand that, Dareth. You can remain right outside if you like, but for now, I want you to leave me with her. Kadnee,” Lorvin waved his daughter toward the doorway. “Keep Dareth company outside please.”

Kadnee took Dareth’s hand and he grudgingly followed her out of the hut. They sat down on a stone bench near the central fire pit. Dareth stared at the ground for a long time. He could feel Kadnee’s eyes on him and he knew that she wanted to speak. But he also knew that she would not do so as long as his tears kept him from facing her.

When he had managed to gain control of himself, he glanced at her and shook his head. “She has told me so many times, and I never listen.”

“It isn’t your fault, Dareth,” Kadnee said. “You couldn’t know that a shake like that was going to hit.”

“It doesn’t matter. Even small shakes are dangerous up there. I’m always looking for trouble. Why can’t I just keep safe like everyone else?”

“Because it isn’t you. You’re different, Dareth. You’ve talked about what it might be like up there on the top for so long that you even have me wondering. Nobody else seems to care much, but you can’t help it.”

“It was the scariest thing I ever saw.” Dareth looked back at the wall of the canyon. “A hole opened up in the ground. She nearly fell into it.”

“A hole?”

Dareth nodded. “A giant hole. Part of the ground just fell in on itself. Dust and red smoke flew into the air, and when it cleared away, there she was, lying right at the edge. She was almost swallowed up.”

“But she didn’t fall in.” Kadnee insisted. She’s with my father and I’m sure that he will be able to heal her.”

“I hope so,” he said. “I really hope so.”

They sat there without speaking for a long time. To Dareth it seemed like forever. But eventually Lorvin emerged from the hut. At sight of the man, Dareth leapt up and rushed forward.

“Is she alright?”

The look on Lorvin’s face was difficult to read. Dareth could see nothing positive in it, but neither did the man appear as if all was lost. More than anything, his expression still held mostly confusion.

“I don’t quite understand,” Lorvin said. “Her injuries seem to be minor. She has a bruise on her cheek but it is nothing that should cause her to be unconscious like this. What was she struck with?”

“I don’t know,” Dareth replied. “I mean, there were rocks and debris falling from the cliff, but it was the hole that opened up in the ground that caused her to fall.”

“A hole?”

“Yes. During the shake a crack opened up in the ground. I was knocked down and there was so much dust and this red smoke. I couldn’t really tell...”

“What are you saying?” Lorvin snapped, startling Dareth.

“I could not see what was happening. There was just too much going on.”

“But what is it you said about the dust and the smoke? Red smoke?”

“Yes,” Dareth said. “I think so.”



Lorvin stroked his chin. He cast his eyes toward the ground. Dareth was not sure if he should continue with his narration or not, so he simply waited for some cue from the man. Without another word Lorvin turned and stalked back into the hut, leaving Kadnee and Dareth alone again.

“What do you suppose that was all about,” Kadnee asked.

Dareth shook his head. “I don’t know.”

“My father is hardly a mysterious man, but that smoke thing really seemed to throw him.”

They sat again for a long time. People passed by now and again, looking toward the medicine man’s hut with genuine concern. It was clear that news of Daesha’s plight had circulated around the village. Several offered words of comfort to Dareth, but most scooted away quickly. It was no secret to him that most people in the village found him odd.

Another hour crawled away before Lorvin emerged the second time. The first thing he did was send someone to retrieve the village elders, then he approached Dareth and Kadnee.

Dareth looked up expectantly, hoping the man would have some answers this time.

Lorvin thought for a moment before he spoke, choosing his words carefully. “She is not in danger of dying, at least not now.”

“So she will be alright?” Kadnee asked.

“That I don’t know. Her body is fine. She has a few injuries but they are not serious. It is her mind that is sick.”

“What do you mean?” Dareth asked.

“The red smoke. It can make your mind sick.”

“But you can fix it,” Kadnee said. “Can’t you?”

“I’m afraid I cannot. I don’t understand it. I have never seen this. I only know of the smoke because your great-grandfather told me of it, Kadnee. That was long ago and I hardly even remember it. I do know that she could remain this way or, if she does wake, she could end up with a mind sick that will never go away. No matter what, it will not be good.”

“No,” Dareth shouted. “You must be able to do something. You are the medicine man. You need to make her better.”

“I can’t do it, Dareth. I can bandage wounds. I can birth a child, cool a fever or ease the pain of a burn. But this, I have no experience with. No one in the village does.”

“Then what do we do?” Kadnee asked.

Lorvin scratched his head and looked intently at Dareth.

“There is one thing.”

“What?” Dareth asked. “What is it?”

“The hermit.”

Dareth stared at the medicine man in confusion. “The hermit? You mean the madman that lives down the canyon? What about him?”

“Yes, he’s crazy, it’s true. But he knows things. He may know what to do.”

Dareth did not wait long enough to hear anything else that Lorvin might have to say. He turned and bolted for the edge of the village.

“Dareth,” Kadnee shouted after him. “What are you doing?”

“I’m going to find him.”

“But he’s never come to the village before.”

“Just stay with my mother. One way or another I’ll get the hermit down here. I promise that”

The Hermit lived down the canyon along a narrow crease that broke the western wall. The distance took little more than an hour to walk. At Dareth's pace he covered the space in half that time, nearly dashing his head on a rock when he slipped in the river at its shallow crossing. Once the defile where the hermit lived came into view, he moved with more caution.

People in the village thought that the hermit lived in a cave along the defile, and why shouldn't they? Few of them ever ventured even this far from the village and those who did would never consider peeking behind the large stone that blocked most of the defile from view. Dareth had peeked, of course. He had seen the patchwork shack nestled under a shallow awning of rock on a number of occasions. He never bothered to correct his fellow villagers about the cave. To do so would only invite disapproving looks and he had enough of that already.

"So what does Lorvin know of the madman?" Dareth asked himself as he crept closer to the stone. He saw the old man now and again in his wanderings. There was never anything fascinating about the sightings. He'd seen the old man gathering fruit, collecting water from the river, carrying a trapped rabbit back to his secluded hovel. Once in a while he saw the hermit gazing down at the village from a hillside to the south. But the man never came closer than that. Dareth could feel his heart thrumming as he pressed himself against the cool shade of the stone. Mundane as his actions seemed, the man captivated Dareth. He had tried on several occasions to question his mother about the mysterious figure, but she would only smile and say, "He's a harmless old fool who isn't quite like the rest of us."

But the man knew things, that was what Lorvin had said. What things? Where had he learned them? Dareth thought he knew the answer. The hermit came from somewhere up there, outside of the canyon. This idea alone mesmerized the young man. But even if Dareth could ever have mustered the temerity to approach the hermit before, the old man always disappeared as soon as he noticed company. The hermit's message was clear. He did not like the villagers and he did not want to be disturbed.

"So what makes Lorvin think that he will help?" Dareth asked himself as he chanced a look around the edge of the boulder. The shack hunkered against the rock wall not more than a hundred paces up the defile, obscured even in plain sight. If a man wanted to remain secluded, this looked like the perfect place to be. The shack was a ragged affair. The roof missed small patches of its drooping thatch. The walls, built mostly of weaved braches over a log frame, showed disrepair as well. Patched holes did little to reveal any details of the dwelling's interior. The canyon wind worked at a few strips of clothing that swung on a line between the side of the shack and the gnarled branch of a nearby tree.

Dareth inspected the area carefully. Nothing else moved about the shack and no sound other than wind carried to his ears. Nothing to be worried about. Still, he hesitated before revealing himself. The hermit was mad, everyone had always said so. And the

thought of approaching a mad man hardly inspired confidence. But it had to be done. Dareth took a breath and was on the point of stepping into the open and marching up to the shack when a voice spun him around with a startled leap.

“What do you want?” The man Dareth had been looking for stood not five paces behind him, glaring down a long, crooked nose.

“I’m sorry. You frightened me.” Dareth tried to smile but the hermit’s thick brows remained tightly knit together.

“Serves you right. You haven’t got any business here. Do I come sneaking into your village?”

Dareth stared at the man, blinking furiously. He worked to remember the things he had planned to say.

“I’m sorry. But I had to come and see you. It’s my mother. She has fallen ill and no one knows what to do about it.”

“So why are you bothering me with this?” The hermit pushed past Dareth and trudged toward his shack, thumping a thick, wooden staff into the packed earth at each step. “Get out of here. I don’t have time to help you with your problems. Don’t I have enough of my own?”

Dareth allowed himself to be shoved aside and watched the old man’s back as he retreated. But suddenly a determination took hold of him. This man had to help his mother. If he did not, then she would probably die. The time for shyness and indecision would have to come later.

“Wait.” Dareth’s shout stopped the old man at his doorstep and he shot a look of irritation over his shoulder.

“I need your help. My mother is dying and Lorvin says you’re the only one who has any chance of helping her.”

The hermit turned about and looked closely at the young man for a moment. “Your mother?”

“Yes.”

“What’s your name, boy?”

“Dareth. My mother is Daesha.”

“Daesha?” The man narrowed his eyes. “Daesha, Dasesha, Daesha...” He leaned all of his weight on the stick in his hand and stared as if trying to make something out in the young man’s face. “You are her son?”

“Yes. She was hurt in the shake this morning. The medicine man says that he doesn’t even know what’s wrong with her. But he says that you know things, that you may be able to figure out a way to help her.”

The hermit continued to stare at Dareth well after he had finished speaking. He appeared to be considering the matter and Dareth felt a surge of hope work its way up into his throat. But the cold look that finally crept into the hermit’s eyes did more to answer the plea than his words could do.

“Get out of here, boy. I leave you people alone and you leave me alone. That’s how it has always been. No sense changing things. Now I’m going to go inside and you’re going to leave. And don’t come back here. I’m busy. I’m always busy.”

With that the hermit turned on his heel and stomped into his shack, yanking the curtain back in place once he was inside. The tap of his stick still thumped rhythmically from within.

Dareth froze in an instant of dread. Lorvin had been perfectly clear. There was nothing he could do. It was the hermit or no one. A tear collected in the corner of Dareth's eye. He thought of trying to drag the old fool but, bent and frail as the man appeared to be, he frightened Dareth.

"Why won't you help?" Dareth called out. "What have we done to you that you stay out here all by yourself?"

"I said get out of here," came the reply from within.

"I'm not," Dareth shouted, suddenly knowing the truth of his words. If this man was Daesha's only hope then, by the wings of the seer, Dareth would not leave this place alone. "I'm staying right here." He sat down on the ground and folded his arms stubbornly. "I have nowhere to go. If you're not going to help my mother then I have no one to go to anyway."

There was no response from the hut.

"Please!"

A few rapid thumps echoed out of the shack and the curtain was thrust aside. A rock, nearly the size of a man's fist came whizzing out of the dark opening. The stone was well placed and would have struck Dareth full on the head if he hadn't seen it coming and scrambled to one side.

"I said get out of here. I'm no medicine man. And I don't want to have anything to do with any of you. If your medicine man can't fix her then there is little that I could do for her anyway. Now I have more stones in here and I don't think you'll be able to dodge all of them. If she's bleeding, bandage her up, if she has a broken bone, set it. That's all the help I can give you. Now go home."

"If only I knew what to bandage," Dareth said. "But the medicine man can find nothing wrong with her. She lays in the hut and moans and moans but there is nothing to heal. She is burning up though and we have no idea what to do."

There was no response from the hut at first. Then, slowly the curtain was drawn aside again and the hermit tottered back into view.

"You say there is no damage to her body?" Curiosity peaked his tone. Dareth did not know what to make of the sudden reversal, but he saw a glimmer of hope so he followed it.

"Nothing, she lies in fever and moans things that no one can understand."

"When did this happen?"

"It was during the shake."

The hermit hobbled back toward Dareth. There was a gleam in his eye and he moved as swiftly as his bent leg would carry him. "Where was this. Did anyone see?"

"I was there. I was herding some stray cattle up the canyon toward the village. My mother doesn't like me to be up that way and she came after me. That's when the shake hit. At first it was small, but then the earth shook violently. It was hard to stay on my feet. The ground broke apart between us. I was still far away but my mother was right there near the crack. She nearly fell in. There was so much dust and smoke in the air that

it was hard to see her at first, but when I found her, she was lying on her back, staring up into the sky. I got her back to the village but nothing has changed.”

By the time Dareth finished explaining, the hermit stood beside him again. An odd light shone in his eyes where the angry indifference had been only moments before.

“The smoke you saw, it was red, was it not?”

“Red?”

“Yes, the smoke.” The man bent his eyes close to Dareth and he could smell the hermit’s stale breath in his face. “Was the smoke red?”

Dareth stammered. There had been so much dust in the air. He had been so worried for his mother. He remembered telling Lorvin of the smoke and he had indeed described it as red.

“Yes. Yes, I think it was red. What does that mean?”

The hermit did not answer. Instead he wheeled about and raced as quickly as he could back into the shack. This time Dareth had no intention of letting the man go. He followed close behind but didn’t even make the doorway before the hermit dashed through it again, an old leather pouch clutched tightly in his hand.

“Let’s go.”

“You’re going to help?”

The hermit looked at the boy. His eyes now showed a measure of concern that had not been there before.

“I am going to try. I can promise you nothing.” He then turned and began to hobble toward the entrance to his little cleft. Dareth kept close on his heels.

“You know what’s wrong with her then?”

“I do.”

The old man did not offer any further explanation. Despite his limp, he moved swiftly. Dareth had difficulty keeping up.

“Well what is it, then?”

“Call it poison.”

Dareth wrinkled his brow. “What do you mean? Is it poison or isn’t it?”

“Not exactly, but you can call it that.”

The rest of the journey was spent in silence. Dareth did not quite know what else to ask and the hermit did not offer up any information himself. They moved quickly and the grass huts of the village came into view less than an hour later.

“Lorvin has her in his hut.” Dareth ran forward, leading the way through the collection of squat, dwellings, every one of which looked exactly the same. They reached the medicine man’s large hut but not before the hermit’s mysterious presence prompted a number of worried looks from passer’s by. Dareth pulled the leather flap from in front of the doorway and a meager bit of candlelight spilled out onto the grass at their feet. The hermit had to duck his head to enter the small opening.

Inside the air was very close. Lorvin crouched in front of a still form lying on a straw mat. The medicine man removed a dampened cloth from Daesha’s brow and dipped it into a bowl beside him, then looked up when Dareth entered.

“Did he come?” Lorvin asked, before seeing the scrawny frame of the hermit crowd in, behind the young man.

“I did.” The hermit gazed at the prostrate figure before him.



Dareth stepped aside to allow the old man room to pass but the hermit made no attempt to approach Daesha. The area within the hut was not cramped and, though Lorvin's ample form took up much of the space beside the mat, there was more than enough room for the old man to inspect the patient.

"What are you going to do?" Dareth asked.

The hermit still did not say anything, though Lorvin too looked on him with the same questioning glance. At length he straightened his bent form and focused his eyes as if coming out of some reverie. He hurried forward and knelt down beside the still form, fumbling for the pouch he had brought.

"You two get out."

Lorvin got up to go but Dareth protested.

"No. I want to be here."

"Dareth," Lorvin reached for the hermit's arm. "Perhaps it would be best."

"No." Dareth snatched his arm away. "I want to know what's wrong."

"Headstrong boy." Lorvin's voice was thick with scolding. "Won't you ever learn? Why did you have to be so near the canyon wall? She never would have gone after you if..."

"I have changed my mind." the hermit's voice rang with measured coolness. "The boy must stay with me. But you get out." Without looking at Lorvin, the old man pointed a bony finger at the doorway.

Lorvin hesitated only a moment, then bowed his head and stepped out into the growing darkness.

A lone candle sputtered on the nearby table. Two others sat idly next to it. These the old man now lit from the first. He carried one back with him to the mat, knelt down and held it close to Daesha's sweat-soaked brow. He turned and put his ear to her mouth listening and feeling for her breath. It came in fits and starts, at once shallow, and then almost panting.

"Keep up with the cloth, boy. It will help with the fever at least."

Dareth took up the rag and dipped it into the cool water that sat in the bowl beside him. Gently he wiped his mother's brow. She had a painful looking scrape on her left cheek and he dabbed at that too. Other abrasions covered her arms and legs, a bruise on her left thigh had turned purple, but none of it explained her condition.

"What is it? What has happened to her?"

The old man struggled to untie the leather strap that held his pouch closed. "You said that when the hole opened up, red smoke billowed up out of the ground."

"It was hard to see. There was a lot of dust in the air and things were still moving about quite a bit... but yes, I'm sure of it."

"Yes, yes." The old man alternately nodded and then shook his head. "No doubt. But how strong? You see, that is the real question."

Finally he managed to pull the strap free from the pouch. He tumbled it over onto the blanket covering Daesha's stomach. The contents consisted of three small bits of dried plant, each about the length of Dareth's pinky and of a pale purple in color.

"What is that?" Dareth asked

“Root, of course. It’s root. But will it be strong enough? That I don’t know.” The hermit plucked two of the roots up and put them back in his pouch. “We’ll save those. If one doesn’t do it then the rest won’t help. Get me a fresh cup of water.”

Dareth did as he was told, grabbing up a wooden cup and dipping it into the basin of water near the door. He carried it back to his mother’s side while the old man broke the remaining root into smaller pieces.

“Not the strongest, that’s for sure. Not bad but still, if it was deeproot we’d know. Of course that could kill her too.”

“Wait.” Dareth grabbed the man’s hand. “Is this stuff dangerous?” His voice sounded nearly frantic to his own ears.

The old man looked intently at Dareth for a moment. His creased face appeared to soften. He gently pulled his hand free of Dareth’s grasp and continued his work.

“Dareth,” the hermit said. “Your name is Dareth.”

“Yes.”

“You know, Dareth, I am not from around here.”

“I didn’t think you were.”

“And this root, you can’t find it around here either. This is all I have left.” He looked at the crumbled bits of plant matter in his palm almost lovingly.

“Not that I have much use for it around here. Still, sometimes..” He stared down at his open hand, lost again in his thoughts.

“But you said this could kill my mother?”

“Hmm? Oh, no. Nothing to worry about. It will either wake her or it won’t.”

“It will wake her? So she’s sleeping?”

“Sleeping? Well, yes you could say that. Alright, lift her head.”

Dareth slid his hand beneath his mother’s neck and raised her head as the hermit placed the tiny crumbs of plant between her lips. Dareth then put the cup to her lips. At first he thought she would not drink, but she did so from habit and the medicine went down with barely a cough. He watched, hoping that her eyes would flutter open immediately, but knowing that would probably not happen.

“What now?”

“We wait.”

They both sat in silence for several minutes but Dareth could scarcely keep still.

“Would it help to go up to the Seer? People don’t go up to the statue much anymore, but if it could help.”

The old man chuckled and shook his head. “You can go if you like, but it’s the root or nothing. No amount of praying is going to help. either way it will be a while before we know.”

“I think I’ll go anyway.”

The hermit waved a hand dismissively. “Be my guest. We aren’t going anywhere.”

Dareth looked again for a long moment at his mother. Nothing had changed. Her head still rolled back and forth and occasionally a soft moan would pass her lips. He wondered briefly at the trust he was placing in this stranger, but there was no one else. Quickly he turned and brushed through the curtain. The night outside hit his cheeks with its chill. Fires dotted the village and kept the darkness at a comfortable distance. He

walked alone toward the outskirts of the village, again toward that massive pile of earth that rose up a thousand feet into the sky.

He couldn't remain in that small hut anymore. Lorvin's words still scratched at his mind and he couldn't help the guilt that flooded in along with them. If only he had kept clear of the outer path. Always reckless. That was the problem, and now look what he'd caused. Daesha had not been hit by a falling stone but perhaps something worse. And what did it matter? If he'd been where he should have then she would be alright.

He picked his way out past the last of the huts and strode up the path that ran along the wheat field toward the canyon wall. The cliff face swept back at this point and a pair of outcroppings protected the flat section of earth below from falling debris, even when the tremors knocked gravel loose from high above. Doubtless that was why the gods of the past had chosen that spot to place their Seer.

Dareth watched the statue loom larger before his eyes as he approached. Even in the darkness it was easy to pick out the tremendous height of the thing. Carved from the living rock of the canyon wall, the statue rose thirty feet into the air. A broad, round base took the place of legs and supported a torso that started thick and tapered toward the middle. The stone then broadened as it reached up to support a spherical stone, perfectly smooth. No face adorned the head of this mammoth figure. Its only other features were the broad, flat wings that jutted out at right angles from the shoulders where arms might otherwise have been.

Dareth climbed to the little plateau and knelt before the Seer. He placed his forehead in the dirt and begged his wish to the statue.

"Make it alright. Bring her spirit back." His lips moved, though no sound escaped as he repeated his prayer over again.

The circle about the base of the statue, once kept meticulous, was now choked with weeds and dirt. People did not come here anymore. Lorvin came on occasion to seek for those messages of impending danger that once came from the totem. Things had been quiet for so many years. The one time that disaster had struck, the Seer had remained silent. Twenty three people died in the slide that killed Dareth's father. That catastrophe ensured the old shrines fate. The Seer had failed to warn them.

Dareth's eyes began to ache. Then tears spilled into the dust and a heavy sob wracked his frame. He rocked back onto his heels and wiped the dirty streaks off his face. He had spent his life without a father, was he doomed to live without a mother now as well?

"What will I do?" He spoke more to himself than to the totem. "I'll never go near the cliffs again. That I swear."

Even as he said this, Dareth knew that his oath was worthless. If only the world above didn't tease at the edges of his imagination so. If only he didn't feel so penned in there on the canyon floor. In places, groves of apple, ash and willow peppered the waving grasses. The river gurgled, gently down the middle of the gorge and animals of every kind gathered at its banks. This paradise stretched for miles and miles in both directions. Yet only a couple of miles separated the two piles of earth from one another. Those towering bluffs told a very long story, with their broad bands of varying hues. Each spoke a different tale of what had come before and they would always draw Dareth back. No

one else shared his admiration. Kadnee sometimes feigned appreciation, but then Dareth would begin to wonder out loud about what lay at the top.

“The sky, you fool,” she would say. “It’s right there. Can’t you see?”

Dareth stared again at the bald face of the Seer and frowned. It would be easier, he had always thought, to glean an ounce of comfort from the idol if eyes looked back into his from that blank face, even though they be only cold stone. Whoever had crafted the statue so many ages ago had little more imagination than the canyon’s inhabitants today, though none of them would ever think of crafting anything that favored beauty over a utilitarian purpose.

As mundane as the carving was in appearance, there was much to wonder about it. Dareth often imagined taking the Seer’s call. It was not unheard of, though it had never happened as far as he could remember. Every child knew there was a chance that one day the cryptic message from the Seer would come bearing only his name. When that day came the child belonged to the Seer. He was left at the base of the statue and from there, whisked away forever to no one knew where. The tale frightened most children into behaving. But for Dareth, it only piqued his curiosity.

Dareth’s mind turned back to his mother. At one time the Seer protected the people of the canyon. It warned them of the flooding river. It warned them of fire and drought. The Seer told them when to fear the shakes but there had been no warning about today just as there had been none eighteen years ago. So how could Dareth draw even a meager bit of hope from the icy stone figure?

Dareth stood up and turned his steps back toward the village. He had gained little from his trip, save for a small distraction. He could not stay away from the hut any longer.

“Perhaps enough time has passed,” he said. “Perhaps the madman’s plants have done their work.” But the churning in his gut tried to convince him otherwise.

Comarin the hermit rocked back and forth on his heels. He rubbed the pouch containing his last pieces of root between two bony fingers.

“Not much hope really, I guess,” he muttered to himself. “No sense wasting these others if that one didn’t work. Besides, you never know when I might need em myself. Not that I’d begrudge it to you, of course.”

The old man squinted in the candlelight and bent down close to the sleeping woman’s face.

“Your name is Daesha.” He smiled. “Pretty name. Yes, and it is you isn’t it?” With one finger he brushed the woman’s hair out of her too familiar face. “I haven’t been out there alone that long, you know. I’m not all that mad, not yet. But what can I do? You need the deeproot and I haven’t got it. No way of getting it either.”

Comarin picked his stick up from where it lay beside him and jammed it into the dirt floor of the hut. It jittered under his weight as he hauled himself up. He crossed the room, refilled the wooden bowl with water from the basin and soaked the cloth again. The river water was so cool against Daesha’s hot brow that she gave a little moan and turned her head away from his touch.

“Shh. Yes, I don’t blame you.” He wiped gently, almost lovingly at her face. “What do you see, I wonder? Can’t say I don’t envy you just a little bit.”

Comarin cocked his head and listened intently. There was no sound other than the wind that nightly blew through the canyon, but the old man shook his head as though he disagreed with what it said.

“I’m old. Not right in the head, you know. What would I be able to do?” He pondered a moment more. “It will come down to the boy, I suppose. He seems a puny young thing.”

Comarin returned to the basin three more times, but he kept his thoughts to himself after that. The girl might hear what he was thinking. One could never know.

It took longer for Dareth to return than Comarin had expected. He didn’t mind. He liked sitting alone with the woman. Eventually Dareth poked his head through the curtain, unsure if he should enter. Comarin waved him off and hobbled to the doorway. He tossed the curtain aside and pulled his cloak tight about him as he stepped into the wind outside.

“Is it working?” Comarin pitied the look of pleading that tinged Dareth’s eyes.

“At this point, it is not working.”

“Well how long do we have to wait?”

“We could wait longer,” Comarin said. “We could certainly wait longer.”

“But will it help?” Dareth grabbed hold of the old man’s arm. “Will it do any good?”

“It will not.” Comarin tried not to be abrupt, but Dareth’s eyes registered shock at the words. He had been holding out hope for more positive news. The young man’s hand dropped away from Comarin’s arm and he staggered back a little as if he had been struck.

“So, she is dying?” Dareth’s voice sounded hollow.

“Dying?” Comarin cocked his head to one side. “Oh no. She is not dying. She is dreaming.”

Dareth stared in utter confusion. “Dreaming? What is that?”

Comarin shook his head sadly. Usually he felt irritation with these simple people. Then he would remember that their ignorance wasn’t really their fault and his irritation would turn to pity. Now, as he stared at the confusion and pain on Dareth’s face, he could not help feeling anything but sadness.

“Think what it would be like to see things, just as if you were awake but with your eyes closed. Those things that you see are not part of the real world, but instead they are the manifestations of all the things you might want, things you might fear. Do you understand?”

Dareth furrowed his brow and thought hard for a moment. Then he nodded hesitantly. “I think I do. It sounds like what I feel when I am looking up at the cliffs. I feel like I can almost see what lies beyond, even though I know that I couldn’t possibly”

A glimmer of hope sparked in Comarin’s eyes. Could this canyoner really understand what he meant? “Yes, yes. That’s it. Well, not exactly like that. But you are close, my boy. Closer than any of these other fools could ever get.”

“Close to what?”

Comarin went on. “Your mother is not going to die, not as long as she is kept fed and taken care of. But if she cannot be awakened then she may as well be dead. We need the deeproot.”

“But you said the root could not help.”

Comarin scoffed at the pouch he still held in his hand. “Not this, no. It’s the smoke, you see, the red smoke. Your mother was heavily exposed. Not a bad thing, really. Any less and she may have ended up insane instead. That would be worse.”

“But if the root won’t help her...”

“The deeproot. The deeproot” The old man held the pouch up close to Dareth’s face. “This is nothing. This is child’s play. Anyone could get hold of this.”

“Then what do we do?”

“We? We do nothing. I do nothing, anyway. But you...” Comarin trailed off. His eyes fixed on a point in the empty night sky. He was remembering something from very long ago.

“What?” Impatience crept into Dareth’s voice. “What am I supposed to do then?”

The old man still did not respond. He just stared over Dareth’s shoulder, lost in his own thoughts.

“Speak,” Dareth shouted. “What can I do, I’ll do it. Just tell me.”

His words brought Comarin back to the present. The aged eyes focused again on the young man’s face.

“You? Oh, you need to leave. You need to find it. I thought you might have figured that part out for yourself.”

“But where? Where can I find it?”

Comarin grinned. “Can you not guess?”



Dareth turned slowly and stared up at the black pinnacle of the cliff looming out of the darkness at his back. He looked back at the hermit with the question writ large across his face.

“Indeed,” Comarin said with a chuckle. “And you should probably get started right away.”

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Dawn struck shortly after the hermit had made his proposal. Dareth spent some time trying to get more out of the old man, but his instructions remained brief and incomplete. Now afternoon covered the canyon floor and Dareth had slept little in between times. He rummaged through the contents of his pack, considering the items that would be important enough to bring along. He dropped a loaf of bread inside and tied a second water skin securely to the side of the big, leather satchel. A bundle of sticks lay nearby as well. The hermit had insisted that Dareth would need this as there would be little to burn once he left the canyon. Dareth grumbled again at the old man’s lack of detail. The hermit had already returned to Lorvin’s hut to look after Daesha. Very little of what he had said made sense, but he had been especially cryptic about what he wanted Dareth to do.

“Fissures,” the man had said. “East from here, across a range of low hills. You’ll know it well enough when you get there.”

“But what do I do when I get there?”

“You’ll find someone who can help you with that. My memory is spotty. Now leave me alone. Go get yourself ready.”

Dareth had done just that, unable to confront the old man further. At any other time he would have pelted the hermit with questions about the world above. He had spent so long imagining it, but now his mother’s plight drove him to distraction. His questions would be answered soon enough, though his journey was to be one of necessity rather than discovery.

“He’s not from the canyon, that’s for certain now,” Dareth thought to himself. “But what is he hiding that he doesn’t want to talk about it?”

Dareth shook his head in disgust. “I don’t know what I’m doing trusting this old fool.”

He grabbed up a leather wrapped package of dried jerky and tossed that into his pack next to the bread. “But what choice do I have?” He hardly even knew what he ought to be packing. All the hermit had said was that he should have food enough for three days at least.

Suddenly another pack smacked the ground beside Dareth’s own, startling him. He turned around to find Kadnee looking down at him, a smile coloring her delicate features.

“What are you doing?” Dareth asked.

“Come on. My father told me what you were planning. Did you think I was going to let you go up there by yourself?”

“No.” Dareth picked up her pack and thrust it back at her. “You are not coming with me.”

“Says who?”

“I do.”

Kadnee smiled and dropped her pack again.

“Sorry, that’s not good enough.”

“Then your father. I’m sure he would agree with me…”

“Of course he would. He already thinks you have been affected by that madman and half lost your wits yourself. But you wouldn’t dare tell him.”

“And why not?”

“Because I don’t want you to,” Kadnee said. “Listen, you have been talking about what might be out there for as long as I can remember. And you’ve got me thinking about it too. If you’re going, then I am too. It wouldn’t be safe for you to go all by yourself.”

Dareth remained silent at first, but finally he nodded grudgingly.

“Alright. Actually, I’m glad. I was a little worried. But I’ve never even been able to get you very far from the village. What makes you want to come now?”

“This is a little bit different than your little adventures, wouldn’t you say? I hate seeing Daesha like that. If something can be done then I want to help. So how are we going to get out of the canyon? I didn’t think there was a way.”

“There is, at least the hermit says there is. And if anyone would know then it would be him. Can you get hold of some more food without anyone noticing? I need to leave before first light but if your father gets wind of the fact that you’re coming along before then, it will be impossible.”

“I’m already packed,” Kadnee said, pulling open her satchel and revealing its contents. “Bread, jerky, even a cheese I snatched from old Varn when he wasn’t looking. He’ll never miss it.”

“That’s perfect,” Dareth said. “We’ll need a few more water skins, but that should be easy enough. I want to go up to the Seer and see if I can find this trail the hermit mentioned so we know where we’re headed in the morning.”

The two adventurers stowed their packs behind a bush near the edge of the village and wandered out past the fields toward the stone idle near the cliff face. The trail leading up to the Seer was wide and had been well worn at one point. Now the grass and brambles encroached on its edges. There was little traffic these days up to the Seer. Most of the village stayed clear of the canyon walls altogether. The Seer rested in a spot that was relatively safe from rock slides, but most felt it wasn’t worth the risk. Aside from the medicine man, who still occasionally wandered up there in search of the scrolls of portent that magically appeared in the statues base, Dareth was the only regular visitor to the place. The young man found it difficult to believe that a secret way up the cliff face somewhere near the idol existed that he had not discovered by now.

Dareth and Kadnee approached the mammoth stone figure with its faceless head. even as the afternoon drew to a close. Enough light still spilled over the western wall to show off the face of the cliff behind the idol clearly. He saw nothing new there. He’d studied it many times before, more so even than any other part of the canyon wall on this side of the river. He had spent less time exploring the western wall and would have thought that to be the best place to find a way up if any existed. But the hermit insisted that the way could be found here.

The two of them first approached the Seer, bowing in pious fashion. Then Dareth rounded the massive base to inspect the cliff face behind. Kadnee, less familiar with the hallowed, ancient place, moved forward and touched her hand to the smooth stone of the statue's base.

The first several times that Dareth walked along the wall, he saw nothing new. It appeared to be the same massive, daunting obstacle that it had always been. But on his fifth round, pacing back and forth, he caught sight of an irregularity in the stone face some twenty feet up on his left. He moved to get a closer look when he heard Kadnee call out from behind him.

"Dareth, come here."

The young man returned to the other side of the statue. He saw Kadnee standing at the very foot of the Seer and looking at something intently in her hand.

"What is it?"

"Look what I found." She held a small wooden box pinned under her arm and waved a piece of parchment in the air toward him.

"Where did you get that?"

"It was in the recess." She indicated a narrow, round depression set in the stone of the statues base at about eye level. The hole resembled what could only be the navel of the seer and it was there, in the little wooden box that Kadnee held under her arm, that the messages of portent made their mysterious appearance.

"Perhaps I should put this back," Kadnee said. "It's really for my father to collect these."

"No, wait. We'll take it to him. Don't you think he should have it right away?"

Dareth looked over Kadnee's shoulder as they both inspected the rough scrap of paper. Their effort proved useless, however, as neither of them could decipher the strange markings that covered its surface.

"Come," Dareth said. "We'll take it back to the village with us and leave it where your father can find it after we've left. If he knows we were up here together this evening he may grow suspicious."

Kadnee nodded her agreement and rolled the parchment back up. "Did you find anything?"

"I did, I think. Come see."

He led Kadnee around behind the Seer and studied the rock wall. The light was dimming quickly and he had some trouble relocating the irregularity, but finally he caught sight of it and pointed it out.

"Do you see? I think there is a ledge up there. It's barely visible. Do you see?"

Kadnee squinted at first, then her eyes lit up. "I do. But how will we get up there?"

Dareth scooted up the steep incline at the foot of the wall and followed the line with his eyes to the right. Then he pointed with a grin at a jumbled pile of stones that lay against the side of the cliff several yards away. Each stone, larger than the one before, sat in near perfect alignment and intersected the faint trace of the pathway just before it petered out against the cliffs hard face.

"The old man was right," Dareth said, a giddy feeling growing in his stomach.

At that moment a low groan echoed along the perimeter of the towering barrier. The stone table surrounding the idol shivered beneath their feet. Dareth looked up, studying the pits and crevasses above. The rustle of dust and a few clattering rocks sounded from a distance but nothing fell over the protected space. He turned with a smile toward Kadnee, but it faded quickly when he saw the fear that brimmed in the girl's eyes. She still watched the heights, cringing, though the tremor had subsided without harm.

"It's alright." He spoke with a confident tone. "Just a small tremor. We're fine here."

Kadnee backed away a couple of steps despite Dareth's reassurance. "I know," she said. "I'm just not used to being so close."

"Let's head back to the village. We need to start early and I want to see my mother before we go."

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A number of people gathered outside of Lorvin's hut. Comarin winced at the sound of their voices penetrating the thin grass walls.

"They're concerned about you, I know," he said to Daesha's sleeping form. "But are any of them crying for you, my dear? I doubt that."

The woman tossed her head to one side. A giggle escaped her and Comarin's eyes darted to the curve of her lower lip.

"Still beautiful," he said. "It isn't all bad, is it? I've said that I envy you. What do you think of that?"

Daesha let out a sigh and Comarin smiled under his dirty beard. Then the noise from without grew to a distracting level. Others had joined in the din and now it sounded like a crowd chattering endlessly.

"Oh, enough." The hermit dragged himself from his stool and swept the curtain aside. He marched out the door with his voice already raised.

"Enough. Quiet." Comarin waved them off. "Certainly you are concerned, of course, of course. But you are also jabbering and that is not good for her. More importantly it isn't good for me."

The collected villagers, taken aback by the assault, dispersed meekly, only to collect again twenty yards away.

"Don't worry," Comarin said as he turned to duck back in the doorway. "I'll let you know..."

Before he could disappear back inside the hut, he spied Dareth out of the corner of his eye, shuffling in from the edge of camp with a shifty look about him. Beside him strode the medicine man's daughter with an equally furtive expression. Comarin stopped and waited for the pair to reach him.

"And where have you been off to, I wonder?"

"I went to see," Dareth said under his breath.

"And you took her?"

Dareth looked at Kadnee, then back at Comarin. "Yes. She is coming too."

“Ahh. Well, you see, I thought you would be going alone.” Comarin tapped a finger on the edge of his nose as if contemplating a dilemma. “Yes, I think it would be best if you went by yourself.”

“Well he’s not,” Kadnee said before Dareth could open his mouth.

Comarin glared at the girl for a moment. Then he grinned and flipped a hand in the air. “What do I care. You’ve got a spark in you anyway, girl. I suppose that should count for something. Although I imagine your father might feel more strongly about it.”

“I can’t tell him,” Kadnee said. Her defiant tone melted away as quickly as it had flared, replaced by a look of pleading. “You mustn’t tell him.”

“Me? No. Who am I? None of my business, really.”

Comarin glanced down and noticed the scrap of parchment that Kadnee still held in her hand.

“What is that?”

“What?” Kadnee asked.

“The paper, what is it? Let me see.”

The girl looked down and opened her hand, remembering the message she carried.

Comarin snatched the parchment out of her hand and rolled it open. His eyes roamed over its contents and he looked up at the two young people sternly.

“You took this from the Seer.”

“Well...” Dareth began.

“Never mind. I don’t care to hear. I will pass it along for you.” Without waiting for an argument, Comarin stuffed the paper into the collar of his robe.

“You can read it?” Dareth asked.

“Of course I can read it. Do you think I’m a fool?”

“But no one else can read it, except for Lorvin.”

“That’s because you’re all fools.”

“Well what does it say?” Kadnee asked.

“Never you mind. I’ll give it to your father once you’ve gone. He can read it to you when you get back. Now leave me alone. Dareth, go and see your mother. You’ll be leaving soon enough.”

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Light and shadow took turns dominating Daesha’s watery view of her surroundings. Something so strange about the landscape, unfamiliar, yet she knew it well enough. Still, it seemed new and unreal, as if she regarded everything familiar from a new vantage point. The trees down by the river wrestled with the canyon breeze in their usual fashion. It was she that seemed to be different. She felt, somehow, not really there.

People wandered in and out of the scene. Villagers she knew well marched along arm in arm with strangers, and when had a stranger ever set foot in the village? Daesha knew everyone there was to know. How could she not? Fewer than a hundred villagers lived between the walls of the canyon. Not hard to remember that many faces. Otherwise there was just that fool of a hermit.

Everyone smiled and waved politely, whether she knew them or not. She waved back. No sense being rude.

Something else struck Daesha as rather odd. Dareth showed up far more often and from far more directions than one person should. One minute he strolled along near the river bank with Kadnee by his side and then there he was, sneaking around the corner of Sarmen's hut with that furtive look of his, ready to dash down the canyon, no doubt.

"Dareth." she called after him using her angry voice but he didn't respond.

"Hardly like him," she thought to herself. Maybe Dareth was full of strange ideas, but he had always been a good boy. Now he had become a fine young man, and usually, he still listened to his mother.

Over by the fire pit Dareth chopped at a log.

"Not running off after all," She called.

But how silly of her to think of him still as a boy. Though he was small and thin, his muscles pulsed as he swung the axe over his head. His hair, damp with sweat, flung across his handsome face with each blow. Not a boy anymore.

Daesha thought to take him something to drink but standing proved very difficult. She felt so heavy. Her limbs felt as though she were pushing herself through sand. Her eyes grew wide. A sense of alarm began to fill her as she strove against the pressure.

"Are you feeling any better?" Lorvin spoke up from beside her.

Daesha forgot her efforts and turned to greet him. She hadn't noticed Lorvin approaching, and he was not the stealthiest of men. But he was kind, and he was the medicine man. If she didn't think him dull she might have had him for herself. How much time had passed since the slide that killed her husband? Lorvin's wife had been lost to childbirth not long after. And how much time after that before she had started noticing his sidelong glances? If she had not remained completely oblivious to them, would he have persisted?

Now as she looked at Lorvin again, she wrinkled her brows. It wasn't him at all. How could she have mistaken? It was the hermit sitting there grinning at her, not five feet away.

"You?" she said.

"Who else?"

"I never thought I'd see you come down from your cave."

"I don't live in a cave." His smile was pleasant.

"Well, whatever it is." She looked down at the grass between her folded legs. How very green it looked.

The hermit said nothing for a while. Daesha knew he was there. She felt him sitting close, but she did not look up again.

"It won't all be pleasant," he said at last.

"What?"

"Sometimes it will seem very dark. You'll feel lost. Just try to remember, you haven't really gone anywhere."

"And where should I go?"

"Oh, lots of places. Not all bad. Some of them wonderful. Some like you've never imagined, but others..." He made a mock shiver. "Terrifying."

"You are an odd man. I don't quite understand you."

"Yes, yes. I just thought you should know."



“Thank you,” she said. Then things went dark around her and she lost herself again.

The chill air reddened their cheeks as Dareth and Kadnee started out into the dark morning. Lorvin had been with Daesha most of the night after Dareth left, so it wasn't difficult for the two of them to avoid his notice. The medicine man alone knew that Dareth planned to leave, and even he did not know the youth would be sneaking away before sunrise, with Kadnee in tow.

The travelers retrieved their stowed packs and crept past the fields with quick and silent steps. They pulled their cloaks close about them as wind whipped at the wheat-grass. The Seer waited for them, hunkering silent and brooding as ever on its plateau against the steepening side of the cliff. Now that the two were about their business, they wasted little time. Dareth thrilled to the feeling of Kadnee's hand grasped tight in his own. He could not imagine what it would have been like rushing alone along that path.

They made their way to the boulders they had already identified. Dareth scrambled to the top of the smallest one and reached a hand down to help Kadnee up. Together they leapt easily over the short distance that separated them from the next stone. He looked over the side closest to the wall and stared at the ground ten feet below. On the other side of the rock, the distance stretched to nearly twenty feet, as the grit deposited by millions of years fell away rapidly. The final stone sat higher still. A bulge in the rock wall made the jump difficult, but a little twist to the left and they clambered up safely. When they stood securely at the top of the largest stone and looked toward the Seer, the great statues flat wings stretched out almost level with their eyes.

Dareth glanced toward Kadnee and saw the worry in her eyes, but there was also a wonder that tinged them and kept him from asking again if she were sure of what she was doing. He turned about and inspected the rocks above his head. To his displeasure, the thin line of the protruding shelf eluded his gaze against the rough background of stone above it.

"I don't see it."

"What do you mean?" Kadnee said as she fell to inspecting the wall as well.

"Once I knew where it was I could see it clearly from down there," Dareth said.

"Come to think of it, I'm sure I've been up on these rocks before, and I don't remember seeing a ledge up there, even in broad daylight."

Only about three feet separated the stone on which they stood from the rock face, and they could take little more than three steps back without tumbling off the deep side of the stone. The angle was terrible and they had to bend their necks upward to try and find the evidence of the pathway. Wherever it was, the rocks behind it blended perfectly.

"The hermit told me as much," Dareth said.

"Well, what did he say to do about it?"

"He said to jump and trust that it would be there."

Kadnee looked down. "That's pretty far down. It's going to do more than hurt if we can't hold on."

“We’re about to climb to the top of this cliff,” Dareth said. “We had better be ready to handle more than this. I’ll go first.”

He tied the straps on his pack tight over his shoulders and crowded the back edge of the boulder. With a deep breath and only an extra moment to steel himself, he took two quick steps and leapt over the intervening space. His grasping fingers clawed at the wall above, as his body slammed into the unyielding sandstone. To his shock and delight, he felt them catch on the lip of the invisible path while his feet gave him enough purchase against the rough rock to let him struggle safely over the edge.

He lay briefly on his back, panting and staring at the wall above him. The mighty cliff overhung the head of the path, which began as little more than a wide, horizontal crack. It was no wonder the thing was nearly impossible to see from below. He lifted his head and looked between his feet at the continuation of the crack and saw that it widened perceptibly, even as it cut across an outcropping and disappeared on the other side.

“Dareth,” Kadnee called from below, a note of fear in her cry. “Are you alright?”

“Yes. I can see the trail from here.” He rolled onto his stomach and situated himself as best he could in such a confined space. He poked his head over the lip of the ledge and smiled down at Kadnee.

“There you are. Help me up.”

He reached a hand over the side and grabbed for the girl as she bounded forward and reached for the shelf. The space could not accommodate both of them comfortably. Dareth had to scoot up the path a bit before Kadnee could climb up entirely. They crawled along the widening gap, the rough leather of their jerkins protecting their knees from the scraping stone. Then, as the overhang above them arched upward and receded, they managed to rise to a crouch. By the time they passed behind the idol’s head, they walked upright, single file along the shelf.

Dareth glanced back at Kadnee every few seconds as they both pressed against the cliff-face. She looked frightened, but she never paused. Their feet shuffled over the worn path. It continued its narrow way for the better part of a mile before it eventually broadened, rising slowly as it went and still they continued. Dareth looked down to the floor of the canyon often, noting how it dropped ever further downward until looking made him dizzy. They had traveled far enough that he didn’t recognize the landscape below. He had roamed farther from the village than most, but they were beyond that now.

“This is getting scary,” Kadnee said at length. “I knew it would be high up, but I guess I didn’t imagine the knot in my stomach.” She waved her hand toward the empty air beside them.

“It’s alright. The hermit’s directions have been right so far, and he says that after a while, we will find an opening in the cliff. From there we can climb most of the way inside the rock, away from this fall.”

“Most of the way?”

“He doesn’t seem very good with details,” Dareth said. “I think we’ll have to just wait and see after that.”

“I’m not sure crawling through these cliffs is going to feel much safer, especially if a tremor were to hit.”

Before much longer, the hermit's words came true. A thin crack appeared in the wall, barely big enough even for Dareth's frame to squeeze through. He wondered if it might not be the wrong place. But one look at the rest of the trail revealed the answer. The path crumbled away against the rock wall shortly beyond the opening. If this was not the way then they had seriously miscalculated. He turned a black look at the crack and considered Kadnee's words. A tremor, while they were inside, under those tons of stone would be disastrous.

"Can we make it through?" Kadnee asked. Her eyes registered doubt as she sized up the hole.

"It's black in there," he replied.

"And if there's a shake?" she asked again.

Dareth still had no answer for that. He pulled his pack from his back and rummaged through it, pulling out a pair of sticks wrapped on one end with pitch-soaked wool. A few sparks from his flint and he managed to get some dried weeds to smolder on the ground. From there, he got the torches lit and handed one to Kadnee while he poked the other inside the opening to inspect it.

"It's much wider inside," he said, sticking his leg through and sliding the rest of his body in behind to prove his point. Kadnee followed close behind, and soon the two of them found themselves standing in a low chamber that continued past the influence of their torchlight. The air within the crack hung damp and thick, but the wind blowing outside was blunted here and it made for a warmer, quiet environment.

The trail Dareth located continued straight ahead as the floor of the cave rose ever further into the darkness beyond. They moved along the corridor slowly, keeping close to one wall, and traveled on that way for the better part of an hour before any significant change in course occurred. By this time Dareth thought they must be at least a mile into the face of the cliff and quite far from the canyon itself. There was no doubt that the village would be long awake by now and well aware of their absence.

"If your father disliked me before," Dareth said. "I guess he should hate me by now."

He could see Kadnee's soft smile in the dancing flames of her torch. "You did not force me to come along."

"I doubt he will care much about that."

At length, their course ended in front of a pile of stone and gravel that appeared to have tumbled down from the ceiling centuries ago blocking any further movement forward. The cave-in revealed a recess in the moist earth above and, when Dareth climbed up onto the pile, he stared into another black corridor. It cut back over the top, the way they had been following and continued back toward the canyon.

"I am starting to lose track of time in the dark," he said. "It's probably mid-morning by now. Maybe we should stop here for something to eat and then we can move on."

Kadnee showed her agreement by plopping down on a rock and flipping open her pack. They ate briefly, their torches stuck in convenient crannies among the tumbled rocks. Dareth looked around him while they ate, marveling at the millions of tons of earth that lay on all sides of them.

“Is this the adventure you imagined it to be?” Kadnee asked around a mouthful of bread.

“I don’t know. We’ll see when we get up there.” His eyes remained on her long after the echo of his last words died away. How horrible it would be, sitting in this dark place all by himself.

“I can’t believe you came.”

“And why not?” Kadnee asked.

“Because you tell me I’m crazy whenever I talk about it.”

“I just don’t understand why it bothers you so much. It’s everyone else who says your crazy.”

“That makes me feel better.” He watched Kadnee giggle and wash down a crust of bread with a pull from one of their water-skins. He marveled at how lovely she looked in the light from the sputtering torch. It was hardly the first time he had considered it, but her father’s disdain for him had left little room for much else.

“We should go,” Kadnee said. “The air in here isn’t very good and the smoke is beginning to hurt my throat.”

They took up their things and climbed the avalanche of stone to the opening in the ceiling above. From there they continued on their new course back toward the canyon. It meandered much more than the previous path had done. As a consequence, Dareth and Kadnee trudged on far longer than they had anticipated before tasting the scent of fresh air from ahead. Soon their third torch began to dance in a stiffening breeze. A hint of daylight teased them from a long way off and did not grow perceptibly until their final torch sputtered menacingly.

For Dareth, the trail didn’t end soon enough. He grew sick of the sooty closeness, even though the alternative meant having to stare down that dizzying height again. The torches had been a poor replacement for the sun and Dareth’s eyes now stung from the daylight pouring through the broad opening. He took Kadnee’s hand and they stumbled over stones and pitted earth out onto a sweeping precipice.

Kadnee stared out across the expanse of the canyon floor, the awe she felt at its vastness written plainly in her face. “Dareth, look.”

But Dareth already stood in amazement over the panorama below. He marveled at the view that lay between himself and the western wall of the canyon. At the bottom little more than two miles stretched between them. Up here where wind and weather had played their parts, eroding the once sharp edges into a gentle curve, the distance seemed endless.

“Hey,” Dareth said. “I can see the village. We’ve traveled all the way back up the canyon.”

He pointed out the tiny huts, nestled beside the apple grove. The orderly pattern made by the structures surprised him. He had always imagined the village sprawling down the hillside toward the river. From here he could see how little of the hillside it actually covered. He looked down to where he judged the Seer to be, but from this distance the statue vanished among the ridges and spurs along the canyon wall.

“It’s amazing,” Kadnee said. “But do you feel that, in your stomach?”

Dareth nodded. He knew what she meant. When he looked down he felt as if his stomach were twisted around inside. He didn't care for the sensation, but at the same time it thrilled him.

"We must be nearly to the top right now." He looked up at the blue canopy that hung over the rim of the cliff above. It looked so near that he could almost reach up and put his hands on it. Staring up did no more to quiet his gut than looking down had done and he felt himself waver a bit.

"What now?" Kadnee asked.

"Well, the hermit didn't really have much to say after this. He says he's climbed it but he had other means."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Dareth shrugged.

"And he has done this more than once?"

"I guess so. But if he can do it then so can we. We'll have to figure our own way."

The two of them inspected the cliff face, searching for some sort of pathway from the ledge. Nothing promising presented itself.

"It isn't as steep here as it was below," Dareth said. "And the rocks are much rougher. We can climb this the rest of the way, don't you think?"

Kadnee looked at the same area of the cliff and scoffed. "Are you serious? It looks alright here," she pointed above her head. "But what about up there at the top? I don't like the way that looks. We had better wait anyway. The sun is nearly over the western wall. We'll never make it before dark."

"You're right. We'll sleep here. My legs are sore anyway." Dareth dropped to the ground. "We can rest up and finish the climb when it gets light."

They rummaged through their packs for blankets and huddled together just inside the mouth of the cave where the wind could not reach them. The hard-packed earth made for a harsh bed, but after the arduous climb they slept as though they curled up on their own mats at home. Even in sleep he was aware of Kadnee's closeness. The shape of her seemed to pierce the dark emptiness of his unconscious mind. It made him warmer still and a smile touched his lips. He woke at one point when night had laid a black hand over the landscape below and found her nestling close against his chest. He flexed his arm and drew her still nearer. She seemed, somehow, to keep the fear and worry just at the edge of his thoughts rather than overwhelming them entirely.

When morning glowed through the cave mouth, Dareth stirred and winced at a crick in his neck. The sun would still be hidden by the cliff face behind them for hours. The brisk shadows in the cave made his arms and legs ache even more from the previous day's exertions. He stretched every muscle in his body and rubbed the blood back into his calves. The pain in his raw fingers and palms made him wince. He spat into his palms and rubbed them together to relieve the ache.

"I'm starving," Kadnee said. She groaned and crawled out from under the warmth of the blanket. She found her pack and immediately dashed back underneath. After a moment's searching she came up with a pair of apples.

“Here you go.” She tossed one to Dareth. “Maybe just this for now. I’m a little worried that we don’t really know how long our trip is going to take. Who knows when we’ll have more than what’s in our packs.”

Dareth only nodded. He too was very hungry, but he couldn’t argue the sentiment.

They sat wrapped in their blankets and enjoyed their scant breakfast as the growing light eased some of the tightness in their limbs. When they had finished Dareth fell to inspecting the rocks around the cave mouth until he thought he had found the best possible path upward.

Kadnee stowed their blankets. She stood up and looked over the gorge once again, inching forward until she stood within a foot of the edge. Dareth turned to see her shivering with the thrill of vertigo. He left the wall and joined her at the point of the rocky shelf. He thought he detected a bit of longing in her eyes as they fell upon the tiny village far below.

“Are you ready?”

“Not much choice, is there?” she replied.

Dareth looked down at the village and idly wondered if anyone down there who happened to be looking, might be able to pick them out against the immense face of the canyon wall. He worried briefly over his mother, lying there in Lorvin’s hut, one of the identical tiny dots that peppered the grasses near the river. Then he consciously put it from his mind and turned back to the cliff face to begin the ascent.

He tried several handholds before finding a suitable one and reached for the first craggy shelf above him. The weathered surface gave many false paths among the useable juts and outcroppings of stone. With a grunt, he hauled himself up the first few feet.

“Keep close behind me. There is bound to be a ledge or something up there that we can’t see from here.”

Kadnee did not say a word but simply followed. They moved slowly. The climb was not arduous. Here and there the uneven rock provided a level patch large enough for them to rest their aching arms and legs. Still, the rough surface bit into their fingers and pained the already raw flesh.

For nearly two hours they climbed in this fashion. Dareth began to gain a sense of confidence about the remainder of their climb. He still could not see a way up the last thirty feet or so, but he felt sure that the course would present itself once they got closer.

They rested for a long time atop a large boulder pinched in a wide crevice of the rock wall. Dareth did not look around him until he had caught his breath. Once he did, he saw what it was that he was looking for. A thin ledge ran across the cliff face at a gentle rise about fifteen feet above their heads.

“There is our path,” Dareth said, pointing out the ledge.

“It looks fine. But how are we going to get up there?”

He puzzled over this. Kadnee was right. The boulder lodged in the crack at the top of the sloping rise. It looked like that worn vestige of a great chunk of the cliff face that had fallen away at some point in the distant past, leaving the exposed surface above it nearly vertical and smooth as a river stone when compared to the rough surface below.



“Alright,” Dareth said. “We’ll climb up this crack as far as we can. That way we will at least have this rock under us.”

“I don’t know, Dareth. This looks a lot worse than what we have already done. And at least down there, I didn’t feel like my muscles were going to freeze every time I looked down.”

“I’ll tell you what,” Dareth said. “You go first. I’ll be right behind you.”

“What good is that going to do?”

“I’ll break your fall.”

Kadnee tried to return his grin, but he could see the fear written across her face.

“We’re nearly there now. Look how far we’ve come. It looks like that ledge will take us the rest of the way to the top so this is it. It’s going to be easy from here.”

Kadnee inspected the rocks in front of her once more. “Alright then. Let’s get it done with.”

With that she grabbed hold and hauled herself up, feeling for purchase with her foot. She stretched her other arm as high as she could. Dareth followed directly behind and kept his body pressed close to the rocks. It felt as though the wind might peel him away at any moment if he lost even a bit of his concentration.

They climbed slowly, but they did not have far to go. Within a few minutes, Dareth could see the edge of the ledge above them, but he could also see from this new vantage that it did not begin until several feet to the left of where they climbed.

“Dareth,” Kadnee called out from above. There is nothing here. How are we going to get over there?”

Dareth stopped inching upward and craned his neck. He studied the face of the stone, but the stretch above then was unusually smooth. Then he looked to his left. There were some promising holds there, below the shelf, but Kadnee would have to backtrack in order to reach them.

“You’ll have to come back down to where I am. I’ll move over here and you come down and follow me this way.”

The first step was not an easy one. Dareth stretched his left arm as far as he could in order to reach a safe hold. His position was precarious, especially with the wind gusts threatening. He remained there for much longer than he should have. All of his weight rested on his left leg and after several moments of not moving, that leg began to tremble under the tension. He tried several times to transfer his weight to the hold his left hand had found, but his body refused to immediately obey the directions of his mind. Once he felt the threatening wind die down a bit, he committed himself and pushed off with his aching right leg. A sigh of relief escaped his lips when he had himself safely pressed against the stone out of Kadnee’s way.

“Alright,” he said. Now come back down and follow me this way. That first move is tricky, but after that it looks alright.”

Kadnee climbed down to where Dareth waited and he pulled himself up several more feet to clear the way for her.

“Dareth, I can’t do that.” Kadnee stared off to her left, trying to find something better to grip.

“You can,” he said. “I just did it. All you need to do is wait until the wind dies down a little.”

She reached out a cautious hand and grabbed hold, but did not move right away.

“I don’t think I can.”

Dareth looked down. Both his feet rested on a large outcropping and he felt relatively secure. From where he stood he could see a jutting section of stone just over Kadnee’s head.

“There, above you, on the left. Do you see?”

Kadnee looked and swung her hand upward. She grabbed hold and pulled herself to the left, finding secure footing below Dareth. From that point, they proceeded upward with relative ease until Dareth reached a point just below the ledge. Here the rock protruded outward. He raised a hand and grabbed at the edge, letting go with his toes and hauling himself up onto the safety of the shelf. Then he turned around and reached a hand out for Kadnee. She clung to the rock only a few feet below.

Kadnee lifted her leg and pushed herself upward, stretching her arm out to grab at Dareth’s proffered hand. Her fingers brushed against his, but then a strong gust rolled across the cliff and Dareth felt a sickening shuffle of crumbling stone just below Kadnee. Her leg shot out from under her.

Kadnee screamed as she skidded down the face of the cliff. She clawed at the jagged stone, managing to gain purchase and arrest her fall. She stared up at Dareth with terror filling her eyes.

“Kadnee,” Dareth shouted. “Hold on. You’re alright. Just keep moving.”

He lay down on his belly and reached as far as he could but the girl had dropped several feet and he could not reach her.

“I can’t move, Dareth.” Kadnee’s voice trembled with fear. She clung there, pressed tight against the wall, her muscles frozen.

“Reach your hand up!”

“I can’t!”

“You have to,” Dareth screamed.

Kadnee glanced up at him. Only now the look on her face spoke of resignation rather than fear. That look caused the hairs on Dareth’s neck to stand erect. Then, as another gust of wind kicked up, he watched in dreadful awe as the girl’s fingers lost their purchase and she pitched backward into empty space.

Dareth’s scream mingled with Kadnee’s own. He watched her drop toward the boulder below but they were no longer directly above it. Her body hit the edge of the big rock and bounced out over the canyon floor, where it shrank, ever-so-slowly and disappeared amidst the crags far below.

“Kadnee! No!”

Dareth screamed her name over and over again. He stared down in horror for what could have been hours, long after she was lost to his view and still he screamed. He screamed until his voice broke in his throat and nothing but a hoarse sob came out.

Dareth still lay on his belly atop the narrow ledge. He buried his face in the dusty ground and wailed. He did not move for a very long time. Eventually, the shock quieted him and he lay for even longer in a state of absolute silence. It was not true. It could not

be true. More than once the thought crossed his mind that he should throw himself after her. He would meet her at the bottom and somehow, miraculously, everything would be alright. It was simply too horrible to believe that what had just happened could be true. She had come for him. She had come to help him and now she was gone.

Perhaps an hour passed before he managed to lift himself to a sitting position. He leaned his back against the wall behind him and drew his knees up to his chest. Grief made all the aches of his body cry out in unison, but none of them compared to wailing that continued deep in chest.

“My fault,” he said. “First mother and now Kadnee. And it is all my fault.” he became aware of rancid taste in his mouth and realized that, at some point, he had spilled the meager contents of his stomach onto the ground beside him.

After a time, Dareth looked along the pathway that led up to the rim of the cliff only twenty feet above. So close they had come. He dragged himself to his feet and trudged up the path like a dead man, hardly aware anymore of the yawning drop beside him.

Dareth wrapped his fingers around a horn of stone that jutted out from the edge of the bluff. His fingers bled and threatened to lose their grip, but his other hand reached out and clawed at the level surface beyond. He strained the muscles of his arms and unbent his tired knees. With a final effort he pushed the rest of his torso over the edge and dragged himself onto the weed-strewn rim of the great canyon.

He didn't move for a long time after that. A warm wind rushed over his body as he lay there with his eyes closed, his body wracked with sobbing. So recently Kadnee had been beside him and now he could only imagine her broken body down there at the very bottom, somewhere near the silent statue of the Seer.

Dareth pounded the earth with his fist. He wailed in his grief as a pair of gulls swooped overhead and cried out in reply.

"So close," he said to himself when he could manage the words. And she had come because of him.

"What do I do now?" He thought briefly of going back down. Surely he could follow Kadnee quickly enough. But then his mother would be lost too.

Dareth opened his eyes and looked down at where he had come from. When they took in the immensity of his new vantage, they nearly popped from his skull. He slowly raised himself to a sitting position and stared in awe across the expanse of the mighty canyon. With all his life spent in the narrow confines at its base, the unbroken view across the endless distance to the other side made him shudder. He stretched his neck over the rim and peered down into the gorge. The huts of the village, not even pebbles in the grass from this distance, sat in a swath of green that kissed the edge of the spindly river. The river itself, thin as it seemed, trickled in a ribbon from his left and continued for as far his vision carried. He could see all of the hills and trails and ditches he had spent his life exploring. He scoffed at the tiny spot of land that encompassed all of these wanderings.

"I can't believe." He rose and backed away from the precarious edge. "Even in my own home I have seen nothing. I never imagined it to be so big."

Dareth watched a hawk float above the green meadow below. It circled in hypnotic spirals, searching for movement in the grass. Even the slightest trembling of a field mouse could not escape the bird's view from the sky. Dareth had always envied the hawk and pitied the mouse. Now the bird turned and turned again far below him and he found himself envying the mouse a little more.

Although his black thoughts blunted some of the wonder of the canyon, Dareth could not deny its beauty. It took him a long time to pull his attention free of it. At length he cast his eyes in a wide arch until the canyon lay at his back. Here he met another amazing sight. In the distance a range of low hills reared their heads. Flat earth lay between here and there, but it was not the bleak landscape that filled Dareth with amazement. It was the sky that drew his gaze. Here and there thin streaks of cloud broke the endless field of blue that arched from horizon to horizon above his head. Dareth tried

to fathom how, after climbing so close to that canopy, the clouds could still be so far out of reach. He'd imagined that he would be much nearer to the sky once he'd reached the top of the cliff.

The hills in the distance did not seem especially interesting in themselves. Seeing them backed by the same blue that had always been reserved for the space above, however, brought utter bewilderment to his mind. The sky had always been something one had to look up to see. Now it stretched out in all directions and he felt as if he could march out into it and continue forever.

The howling of the wind whipping over the canyon reminded Dareth of where he was. He took several cautious steps away from the edge into the daunting open space between himself and the hills. Pulling his cloak closer about his body, he moved more boldly now, though he suddenly missed the close comfort of the canyon walls. He hobbled perhaps twenty more feet and then pulled the pack from his aching back and threw it to the ground. He knelt down and took stock of his provisions. Half of them had gone to the bottom with Kadnee and that had included a good deal of their food, but he still had plenty of bread and jerky. He had water. And when he dumped his pack over a flint tumbled out onto the ground.

Slowly, Dareth set about ripping weeds out of the ground. There were no trees or bushes to work with but he managed a nice pile of brush and had it crackling to life before evening cast itself across the strange scene. He worked in silence and his mind was as empty and desolate as the land around him.

By the time he had finished, Dareth found he could almost stomach the thought of food. He ripped a chunk of bread from one of the loaves he had left in his pack. The sound of the updraft in the canyon roared at his back, but here the breeze blew soft over the sparse earth.

"Would have helped if the old man had been able to tell me how far I have to go." The hermit had said to bring three days of food and water and to head for the hills. But as Dareth stared at the darkening shapes on the horizon, they looked to be little more than a few hours away. He wondered what lay beyond them and how far away it lay.

He ate half of the bread and put the rest back in his pack. Better to be safe. He grabbed at the edges of his cloak and pulled them tight around him. The blanket had gone with Kadnee as well. He lay back on the ground and stared at the stars that had begun to blink down from above. Again he marveled at how distant they still seemed to be. He and Kadnee had climbed for so long and still there was so much farther to go.

Kadnee. She never wanted to come, not really. She'd done it for him. She'd done it to help his mother. And now she was dead. Tears came again to Dareth's eyes. Sleep followed much later. He was jolted awake twice by tremors that rumbled underground from far off. After the fitful night, the sun poked its head up over the rim of the hills in the distance and fell across his face. For a moment he forgot where he was. The breeze felt so calm and warm that he thought he could almost be back in his hut with his mother outside at the fire pit preparing the morning meal. A red glow streamed through his closed lids and his eyes fluttered open. It was strange to see the sun rising there out across the plain. The smell of the morning cooking fire disappeared as the memory of his plight returned with every twinge that his aching muscles evinced. Dread and fatigue rolled over him again. The past few days came back to his thoughts. So much had happened because

of his foolishness and there was no way that he could fix it now. Even if he succeeded in bringing back the deeproot it would not bring Kadnee back.

Dareth rubbed his eyes and regarded the hills that were to be his destination. “No sense waiting,” he thought.

With a sigh he pulled himself up and stretched his knotted limbs. His legs felt like water from the climb he’d endured the day before. His hands ached and crusted with blood in places. He pulled open his water skin and splashed a few drops of the precious liquid into his palm. The coolness of it soothed the abrasions on his knuckles and fingertips.

Dareth ate sparingly again, despite the groaning in his stomach. He had no idea how long it might be before he found anything else to eat. He didn’t even know where to look. There was no river to provide fish, no trees or bushes for the rabbits and squirrels to hide among and not a fruit tree anywhere in sight.

The hermit had said the hills and, looking about, that seemed to be the only possibility for sustenance anyway. So Dareth collected his few belongings and started off toward them, unsure what to expect once he reached them. By midmorning he missed the cool wind of the canyon. Though it did not appear that he had climbed that much closer to the sun, its rays beat down on him relentlessly. There was nothing to sweep the heat away. He drank from his water skin far more often than he would have liked and somehow, just like the sky above the cliffs, the hills in the distance appeared to retreat at least as quickly as he advanced toward them.

The grinding hunger in his stomach refused to leave him alone. He waited as long as he could before stopping to eat. When he did, he ate sparingly and washed the dry bread and jerky down with only a few drops of water.

By the time the sun had crossed over the canyon at his back, Dareth found himself no nearer to the hills than he had been before. The openness of this plain played tricks on his eyes.

“How can I know where I’m at in this ridiculous place?” he asked himself in despair. “It’s endless.”

He looked back in the direction he had come. The only thing that proved he had even moved was the fact that the canyon now lay far behind him. He could barely see the far edge of it scrawling a darker line across the desert. The sparse vegetation that had grown along its edges could not be seen here where the earth beneath his feet held no moisture at all. Cracked veins ran through the dirt like an intricate web. The only blessing now was that the sun did not stand directly over his head, pouring its unbroken heat on top of him.

At that moment Dareth felt the familiar buzz of a tremor roll through the ground. It was stronger than usual and it made him stop in his tracks. The slow vibrations seemed to be getting heavier. He looked about him with alarm growing in his eyes. This tremor did not feel normal. It did not feel like the remnants of some stronger shake from far off. It was building in volume.

He crouched down and looked all about him. There was nothing nearby. The earth spread out flat before him in all directions. There was no danger of falling stones here. He waited for several seconds until the rumbling subsided, then he rose to continue his journey. No sooner had he regained his feet than a sound as of two giant boulders



smashing into one another pierced his ears. Without warning, Dareth found himself flying through the air. He landed in a heap on the ground, his shoulder bearing the brunt of the fall and painning him terribly. He covered his head and did not move. Fear kept his eyes clamped shut and he did not open them until the groaning of shifting earth faded away beneath him.

For several more minutes Dareth remained still, his face buried in the dusty ground. When he did raise his head, the landscape around seemed subtly different. The network of fine cracks that separated large chunks of earth had shifted. The chunks of ground, already a jumbled mess, looked as if they had been dropped from a great height and had fallen back nearly into their ill-fitting places, but not quite. His heart still pounded.

Dareth thought of the rent in the earth that had nearly swallowed his mother. He marveled at the awesome power that surged beneath him, mostly hidden, but capable of such destruction when it chose to make itself known. He did not move for nearly an hour, his ears and his whole body attuned to air around him, waiting for a repeat demonstration of the land's strength. When he had finally convinced himself that all would remain quiet, at least for a time, he continued.

Dareth stopped moving before night fell. His apparent lack of progress sucked away even the meager confidence and energy that remained to him. He opened his water skin and dripped a little of the liquid onto his tongue. The skin was nearly empty now and the water inside no longer tasted cool and sweet. It was warm and tasted too much of the leather that contained it, but at least it brought a certain amount of relief to his parched throat.

Dareth had no fire that night. He had nothing to burn. He wrapped himself tightly in his cloak, surprised at how quickly the heat could disappear when the sun left him alone in the night. The boon of sleep hardly came easily. He dozed at times, but more often than not, he lay tensed in his cloak, rubbing his arms and legs to keep warm. By the time morning came again, his eyes burned from lack of sleep and lack of water. He lay for a long time wrapped up on the ground. He didn't move, even as the warmth of the growing day began to seep into his bones.

Dareth pulled himself up eventually and looked into his nearly empty pack. A fine thing it would be for him to die now, exposed and starved. He sighed and bit into his last chunk of bread. If he didn't reach those hills today then he would surely die. This thought did not surprise or upset him. Sometime during the night he had accepted the truth of it. What did it matter anyway?

Daesha's face floated before Dareth as he swallowed the last of his water. If he died then she surely would. That was the only reason to keep going.

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A pair of farmers waved a cautious hello at the old man as he tottered past the field. Comarin grumbled a reply and redoubled his speed.

"These fools," he said. "These fools should be up at their precious statue. Think this happens every day, do they?"



The Seer loomed ahead. Large as it was, it dwindled to the size of a plaything before the jagged backdrop of the cliff. The ground rose steeply here and Comarin wheezed as he climbed. Dareth had been gone only a day, but if ever the Seer would say anything about the matter, it would be soon. And if the villagers were too stupid to go and see, Comarin would have to do it himself.

When he reached the statue, he did not fall to his knees. Instead he wheezed again, coughed and spit in the gravel. Then he limped up to the figure and peered into a narrow round hole four feet up from its base. Darkness shrouded the interior of the aperture. Comarin reached inside and heard the scrape of wood as he slid out a small, round box. The plain wooden surface showed years of wear. The only carving was that which allowed the lid to fit securely over its base.

Comarin pulled the lid free and opened the box.

“Empty.” He sighed. “Too soon, perhaps.” He replaced the box in its aperture.

Comarin turned to go, but then spied something out of the corner of his eye.

“Who’s that?” Perhaps all these villagers were not fools after all. Someone had come, or perhaps they had only been following him.

“Stop hiding there by the rocks, I see you.”

Comarin approached a pair of ancient boulders that rested near the base of the cliff. Still his stalker did not move. As he rounded the corner of the larger stone, he saw the reason why. He knew this girl, Dareth’s companion. She lay in a tangled heap against the side of the stone, half upright but bent and broken, her sweet young face a mess of blood.

Comarin shook his head.

“Ah no. No, no, no.”

He sat down in the dirt and regarded the corpse.

“You were a good one, you know. You had some spirit, didn’t you?”

He glanced back at the Seer. “Is this your message, then?” He cocked his ear but got no response. “Not a good one. No, not good at all.”

Comarin sat a while longer in silence. He wondered if perhaps Dareth’s body lay somewhere near here too. But he banished the thought. Impossible. He didn’t even need to look. Dareth would come back. He would survive. He had to.

“Better get you back.” Comarin pulled himself up. “You’re small enough, I imagine I could handle you. Or maybe I can get those fool workers to help.”

He trudged back to the fields and let the workers there know what had happened. The two men returned with him and regarded the girl’s body sadly. They asked no questions. They simply wrapped her in her cloak and carried her down the hill to the village. Comarin studied their somber quiet as they went, with a feeling of disgust growing in the pit of his gut.

Everyone gathered together once the workers laid the girl outside of Lorvin’s hut. The medicine man had not been in but someone fetched him and now he hurried toward the crowd, pushing his way through the others to get to Kadnee’s side. At first he inspected her carefully. He listened at her chest for the beat he knew should be there. But there was no mistaking the truth. The poor, frail form was already half stiff from death.

Comarin stood nearby, studying the medicine man. True, Lorvin was the wisest among these people. It was he that gathered the messages from the Seer for the benefit of

the village. It was he that the rest of the village looked to for what little leadership their simple lives required. But most important was the fact that he was this girl's father. Comarin waited for the grief that must surely overtake the man.

A tear did slide down Lorvin's cheek. It hung for a time at the tip of his nose before it dropped into the grass at his feet. But then he wiped his eyes and looked up at some of those standing nearby.

"We must prepare her for burial. Please have the women begin to clean and dress her. We will place her to rest beside her mother down by the river."

The villager's all moved to do their part, but before they could take even a few steps, the hermit whacked his stick on the ground with a resounding thud. Everyone turned back in surprise and saw anger and disbelief smoldering in Comarin's eyes.

"Is that all? Is that all you will do?"

"What do you mean?" Lorvin asked in genuine confusion.

"This child is your daughter, is she not?"

"Yes."

"Then I say you are as dead inside as she is outside. Where is your grief?"

Lorvin glanced back at the bloody form in the grass but his face remained expressionless.

"Come on, let it out. I want to see. I want to see you care."

"You think I do not care?" Lorvin asked.

"No, I think you do not. What is the matter with you? What is the matter with all of you?" Comarin grumbled again and turned to stomp off. He made it only a few steps and then whirled about angrily.

"Call me crazy do you? Call me crazy because I stay out there all by myself?"

"You do not know me," Lorvin said. "How can you say such things to me? You do not know how I feel."

"Oh, I know you." Comarin spat in the grass with an air of disgust. "He says I don't know him. I know him. There is something wrong with all of you. Why don't you scream?"

With that the old man tilted his head up to the sky and let out a pitiful wail. Then he fell to his knees and began to sob as if the child had been his own. He did not stop for several moments and no one moved during all this time. They simply stared at him, assured now if they had not already been before, that the hermit had lost his wits entirely.

"You see," Comarin said through his tears. "I am not the crazy one. You people are missing something." He wiped his face and stood up again.

"Not your fault, I suppose." Comarin smoothed his dirty robes. "Not that boy's fault either, though. You remember that."

Comarin pulled a rolled-up scrap of parchment from his sleeve and flung it toward Lorvin.

"Here, I've been meaning to give you this." Then the old man turned and stomped toward the hut where Daesha lay in her deep sleep.

"Can't blame Dareth," he muttered to himself. "Can't blame him at all."

The gathered crowd watched the old man go. Most still looked confused at the nature of his tirade.

“Go ahead,” he called back over his shoulder. “Bury her. Don’t listen to me. Grieve how you want. I’m an old fool anyway. And when you are done, send someone to move the boy’s mother to her own hut. She will be this way for some time. You will want your own hut back, I’m sure.”

Comarin lifted the curtain at the door of the hut and disappeared inside. When the eyes of the villagers were no longer upon him, he let out a ragged breath.

“Ah, you are a fool, Comarin.” He went over to the woman lying on the mat in the corner. “I know you think so, don’t you, my dear. Or perhaps worse than a fool.”

He shook his head sadly. “I should not have done that, I know. But I couldn’t help it. I don’t blame young Dareth for hating it here. You know that’s what it is don’t you? He hates it here. They are all so simple.”

Comarin stroked the woman’s hair gently.

“But you were different, weren’t you? You and that son of ours.”

Comarin smiled knowingly. “What? Did you think I could not guess it? Always underestimating me, you people are. Yes, and now I’ve sent him off. But it is for the good, believe me. I’m not such a fool as that. I know a few things.”

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Dareth stumbled over the cracked ground. His lips and eyes burned in the heat. He thought lovingly of that last drip of water he had taken only an hour after dawn. The sun now bore down from directly above. The hills finally appeared to have crept closer and the canyon had finally disappeared in the distance behind him. He looked up to see that he was not entirely alone. A few carrion birds wheeled about overhead, waiting.

Dareth tried to laugh but his throat refused to allow anything more than a rasping cough. He thought through a haze. He could well imagine why the birds might look down on him in expectation of their next meal.

He reached up and drew the hood of his cloak further over his head to escape the painful glare. Despite the heat, he could not bear the sun beating down on him anymore. If he could just make it until the sun went down, he felt certain he could gain the safety of the hills in the cooler temperatures of evening. His stomach cramped with hunger and his limbs felt like stone. He found himself stopping more and more often to rest.

“How could I have wondered for so long what it must be like up here,” Dareth thought. “I imagined there would be more than this.”

Suddenly, a bit of broken earth seemed to leap up from the ground and snag his toe as he dragged it over the rough surface. He went down face first into the dust and did not move for some time.

Eventually he rolled over onto his back and checked the progress of the birds above. Apparently they were still wary for they did not immediately swoop down to collect their prize. Dareth chuckled. His brain felt hot and he could not think clearly. Despite the heat, he suddenly felt very comfortable lying there on the ground. At least his feet did not ache so much.

“I’ll just rest for a bit,” he thought. “No use exhausting myself when I can make much better time after evening hits. I’ll wait until then.”

The more logical part of his brain shouted in his head at his foolish plan but Dareth just didn't have the strength to listen.

"Later," he thought. "Things will be so much easier later, after some rest."

Despite the warnings of his own wiser self, Dareth did not move again. It was so hot and dry, and unconsciousness seemed so cool by comparison. He gave himself up to it with a reckless pleasure.

Biera stirred the contents of the little clay pot with a stick. The smell wafting up from the stew made her stomach rumble in anticipation. She covered the pot again to let it simmer a bit longer over the hot coals. Kindling was scarce out on the cracked earth but she carried enough of the sulphurous stones to suffice for her journey. Now that it was nearly over, she felt no need to conserve. A hot meal and warm hands would cap the last night of her trip well and allow her to return to camp in high spirits.

Biera pulled her dark hair out of her eyes and tied it back with a leather strap, then leaned back against her pack and relaxed.

“Grifis will want to know why I didn’t get back tonight,” she thought. “I’m sure he’ll forgive me when he sees what I’ve brought along with me.”

Biera had made many journey’s over the badlands outside of the fissures. It was nothing new. Still, she loved getting back and not just for Grifis. The wind rider treated her well, but she had fallen in love with the deep ravines and the winds that raced madly along their depths. She had left her canyon home while still young. She didn’t miss it. If it weren’t for these necessary trips she thought that she would probably be happy never setting foot in a canyon again.

She picked up the water-skin beside her. It sagged, emptier than she would have liked, but she had nothing to worry about. She would be over the hills and back to the camp before noon hit the next day. She tilted the skin and took a small sip. Her last skin had gone into the pot with the meager vegetables that remained in her pack. It was a good thing that the people of Eaglehook canyon had not been stingy with their offerings.

A few more minutes and the aroma of the stew curled its way to her nostrils. It was too much to bear. She reached back and pulled a cup from her pack. She dumped a portion of the broth into the cup and swallowed it down, chewing on the thicker chunks with relish.

A satisfied sigh escaped her lips as she emptied the cup. She eyed the remaining contents of the pot, then dumped it into the cup as well. Slowly she unbent her knees and rose to circle the pit of coals, then bent over the lumpy form that lay beneath her blanket.

“Hey.” She prodded the figure gently. “wake up.”

She had to poke a few more times before anything stirred under the blanket. Then a hand poked out and brushed the covering aside to reveal the face of a handsome young man. At first she had thought him only a boy, but now that his face no longer flushed with heat and she had got some water into him, he didn’t appear to be much more than a few years younger than she.

“Time to wake up. I’m guessing you’re pretty hungry.”

The young man looked at her in confusion. He propped himself up on one elbow and licked his dry lips. Biera tossed him the water skin. Without a word he grabbed it and began to drink greedily.

“Hey, slow down,” Biera said. “That’s all we have left and we still have to get over the hills in the morning. Besides, I managed to get a good deal of water in you, but I couldn’t quite figure out how to chew for you so…”

The girl held out the cup of stew. Again the young man took up the proffered gift with gluttonous abandon. He swallowed the entire contents, not bothering to chew the small chunks of vegetables. Then he lowered the cup and stared at the girl with a wary look in his eye.

“Thank you.” His voice croaked.

“Sure. What’s your name?”

“Dareth.”

“I’m Biera. So, Dareth, I’d love to know what you’re doing out here on the cracked earth by yourself with no food or water.”

Dareth rubbed his hands and held them closer to the warmth of the coals. He stared at the glowing embers as if he were trying to collect his thoughts.

“I had food and water when I started out.” He dropped his eyes into his lap. “And I was not alone.”

Biera gave a nod as if she were not surprised by the news. “Dead?”

Dareth nodded and stifled a sob.

“Sorry to hear.” She passed the skin back over to him. “Here, a few more drops won’t hurt. And you could use it.”

“Thanks.”

“But still, I can’t fathom why you’d be out here. You’re no rider, that’s for sure. I know most all of the riders and you are definitely not one of them. You really have no business being up here. Where did you come from?”

Dareth looked around him as if trying to get his bearings. Finally he pointed behind him.

“The Great Canyon. Back that way.”

“The Great Canyon?” Biera arched one thin, dark brow. “You mean Crescent Canyon?” She giggled. “Well, I don’t know if I’d call it great. I’ve seen bigger.”

“Do you live up here?” Dareth asked. “On the cracked earth?”

“Are you kidding? Nobody lives up here. Not exactly the most hospitable place, if you haven’t noticed.”

The young man blushed and nodded in agreement.

“Look, Crescent Canyon may not be the biggest canyon, but it’s pretty well impossible to get out of it, unless you know what you’re looking for. So do you want to tell me how you got out?”

“A hermit. He lives up the canyon. He told me how to get out.”

Biera drummed her fingers on her knee. The young man made very little sense. The canyon folk never came up out of their holes.

“Well Dareth, you seem a lot more adventurous than your kin. I’ll give you that. But you said that you were not alone. Who was with you, the hermit?”

“No. It was Kadnee, my friend.” The boy buried his head in his hands. “She fell from the cliff face. I couldn’t stop it.”

Dareth’s shoulders rose and fell with the sobs that wracked his frame. He rocked back and forth on his heels. Biera didn’t say anything at first. She just let him feel his

grief, though even that surprised her about Dareth. He actually cried for this friend he had lost. So unlike a canyoner.

Eventually his tears subsided. He wiped a dirty hand over his face, leaving wet streaks of brown across his cheeks.

“I’m sorry for Kadnee,” Biera said.

“I shouldn’t have let her come. I should have listened to the hermit. He told me I should come alone.”

“Come where? Where could you possibly have been going?”

“I’m not sure. All he said was to climb the cliff and head toward the hills. He said that beyond the hills I could find deeproot. I need it to help my mother.”

Biera sat up straight. The look of surprise showed plain over her face. “Deeproot? What do you know of deeproot?”

“I don’t, really. I only know it’s supposed to wake up my mother. The hermit says she’s dreaming, though I don’t quite understand what that means.” Dareth’s eyes lit up. “Wait, do you know of Deeproot? Can you get me some of it?”

Biera chuckled at this. But of course, the young man had been serious.

“I know where to find deeproot, but can I get it for you? Absolutely not.”

“Why not?”

“Because I value my life, that’s why. You really don’t seem to know what you’re talking about. Who is this friend of yours that told you about all of this?”

“He isn’t my friend. I never really spoke to him before yesterday.”

“It sounds as if you trust him pretty well.”

“What choice do I have?” Dareth asked. “He was the only one down there who could tell me what to do. Everyone else... well I don’t really understand everyone else down there.”

Biera studied Dareth carefully as he stared into the coals. A thin smile played across her lips as she did. Finally he had said something that made sense to her. She knew exactly what he was talking about.

“Well, Dareth of the Crescent Canyon. Perhaps you’re not as far from where you should be as I thought. Though this hermit of yours makes me curious. When we reach the fissures tomorrow, you’ll speak to my man, Grifis. He will doubtless have questions for you.”

“But I need to find this deeproot,” Dareth said. If you can’t help me get it...”

“Don’t worry about that. Grifis can help you with that if anyone can. He can go deeper than almost anyone I know.”

A look of confusion spread over the young man’s face but Biera was sleepy and didn’t feel much like explaining. There was too much this kid didn’t understand.

“I’m going to get some sleep. You should do the same. Being unconscious for most of the evening is not the same thing and we’re going to want to reach the fissures before noon so we can avoid the worst of the heat.”

Dareth wrapped the blanket around his shoulders and lay back on the hard-packed earth. Biera watched him for a minute longer. He did not close his eyes. Instead he stared up at the stars, lost in his own thoughts.

“Strange indeed,” the girl thought as she rolled away from the coals and closed her eyes.





The girl, Biera, shook Dareth awake roughly. He opened his eyes and looked about him but nothing seemed to have really changed since he had closed them. The sun still hid somewhere below the horizon and the air still hung close to the ground, crisp and frigid. He sat up and rubbed at his eyes. His throat ached for water but it was nothing like it had been before.

“It’s time to move,” Biera said as she busily tossed her few belongings back into her pack.

Dareth slowly stood and shook out the blanket he’d been using. He handed it over to Biera and the girl stowed it away as well.

“Not much to eat.” Biera tossed a small purple fruit in his direction.

He caught the morsel up and inspected it curiously before taking a bite. The skin of the small fruit broke open and juice flowed into his mouth. The cool, sweet syrup soothed his angry throat. He quickly finished the fruit, licking his fingers greedily when he was done.

“What was that? I’ve never tasted anything like it.”

“That’s because there is nothing like it where you come from. You can only find Keryli fruit in the fissures. This fruit keeps us alive.”

“Do you have any more?”

Biera shook her head. “You’ll be surprised at how long that one little fruit will last you. I have a little bread left, but we’re going to wait until later for that. We still have at least half a day of travel ahead of us and I hadn’t anticipated feeding two.”

Dareth was disappointed. His stomach still moaned, but he felt far better than he had the day before. He stretched his aching muscles and inspected the sores on his hands. Then he watched the girl as she finished gathering her things. She appeared to be only a few years older than himself, but there was confidence in her movements that made her seem older. Her demeanor put him at ease and he allowed a little smile to cross his face. Perhaps he would survive this ordeal after all.

“I want to thank you,” Dareth said. “If you hadn’t come along, I’m sure I would be dead by now.”

“That’s true enough.”

“Not that it would matter so much for me. But my mother, if I can’t get what I came for then she will surely be lost. And it will have been my fault.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that,” Biera hefted her pack. “After all, it’s you that’s up here risking your neck to save her, isn’t it?”

“Yes, but... well, thank you anyway.”

“Sure. But if you really want to thank me, you can carry this.” She tossed the pack in his direction.

The move surprised Dareth. He caught the worn, leather satchel and slung it over his shoulder. Meanwhile, Biera grabbed up another leather pack. This one was wide and flat and nearly as tall as she was. She strung the strap over her chest and let the strange package ride across her back.

“Are you ready, Dareth?”

“I guess I am.”

“Good, let’s go.”

They traveled over the cracked earth toward the elusive hills ahead. Those hills loomed much larger than Dareth had imagined when he’d first caught sight of them from the brink of the Great Canyon the morning before. They moved at a stiff pace that nearly exhausted Dareth. He didn’t complain, but he secretly marveled at this girl’s stamina.

The sun rose over the hills about an hour after they started out. The coolness in the air dissipated almost as soon as that burning orb spread its influence over the barren ground. Dareth caught himself thinking about the Keryli fruit more than once. How he wished he had just one more of those sweet, purple fruits. Already his tongue felt dry and thick in his mouth.

The foothills approached at an alarming rate. Dareth remembered being baffled by their stillness the day before when he thought he would never reach them. Occasionally he found himself running to catch up with his guide. His legs still ached from the arduous climb up the cliff. He didn’t dare complain about the pace. Soon the dry, broken landscape gave way here and there to a few scattered shrubs. The ground began to rise slowly, and before he even realized it, they were among the hills, picking their way through patches of short brush and stunted bushes.

The earth rose even higher around them but Biera followed a pass through the hills so the ascent was far from arduous. They were not long among the hills. It was perhaps another hour and then Dareth spied flat ground again ahead of them.

“What is this?” Dareth asked in confusion. “I thought our destination was just beyond the hills.”

“That it is.”

He cocked his head and stared out across the expanse again.

“I don’t see anything. How much farther do we have to go?”

“Oh, we’re nearly there now.” Biera stopped and raised a finger, pointing straight ahead of them. “Look again.”

Dareth stared. It was difficult to make out anything as the landscape wavered in the heat. But soon he caught sight of a jagged gash in the earth that stretched from his left and wriggled along the barren plain out of sight. It was so narrow that it almost did not show at all from this distance. In fact, if it weren’t for the vegetation that grew along its edge, Dareth would have missed it entirely.

The travelers moved on and, as they approached, Dareth saw that a number of other cracks spread out like a web across the plain. More low hills poked their heads up here and there, hiding the full extent of the expanding network from his view. He could well imagine from what he saw that the whole of the network was extensive.

“The fissures?” he asked.

Biera nodded.

“You see over there?” she said, pointing in the direction of the black line that had first become visible.

Now that they were closer, he could plainly make out what it was that she meant. A collection of large tents crowded up against the nearest finger of the fissure.

“That’s our camp. Grifis will definitely be back by now and so will the others... unless, of course, they had to stop and save some half-dead wretch who was foolish enough to venture out on the cracked earth by himself without being prepared.”

Dareth blushed, but he caught the good-natured smile that played across the girl’s face and he relaxed. He found himself nervous at meeting this man, Grifis, though he knew nothing about him. All he cared about was that the man could help him find the deeproot. That was all that mattered.

As they approached the encampment, a figure emerged from the nearest of the tents. Dareth could barely make out any features but Biera recognized the figure immediately.

“Grifis,” she cried.

At the sound, the man turned in their direction and raised a hand in welcome. Biera rushed forward to meet him. Dareth approached more slowly, feeling like the intruder that he was. His discomfort was not checked by the strange look that spread over the man’s face as he bent his ear to hear the girl’s words and followed her pointing finger toward Dareth.

Dareth thought he felt a shiver as he stared back at the rough-hewn man. He quickly realized that it was just a tremor working its way out of the ground and up through his spine.

Grifis stood well over a head taller than Biera and she had to stand on her tiptoes to kiss his rough cheek. His hair was a mass of red streaked with gray that faded into a bristling beard across his chin. It fell into his face and partly obscured a leather patch that covered the man’s left eye.

Dareth remained several paces off, squirming with discomfort as Biera explained the situation to Grifis. After a couple minutes he sighed with relief to see a wide grin transform the gruff face into a mask of friendly greeting. Grifis stomped toward him with an arm raised in welcome.

“How are you my young friend,” Grifis said. “Welcome to the fissures. You bring a lot of mystery along with you. Come inside and have something to eat. I want to hear everything.”

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Grifis scratched under his beard and turned his good eye to peer directly at the kid once he’d finished his tale. A candle lit the table between them and cast a weak glow through the rest of the tent.

“This man, this hermit,” Grifis said. “How old did you say he was?”

Dareth shook his head. “I don’t know. I would say that he’s younger than old Varn, Kelric’s grandfather. That’s the oldest man in the village.”

“And his name?”

“His name?” Dareth looked surprised. “I hadn’t thought about it. He’s the hermit. People call him the madman sometimes. I don’t know his real name.”

Grifis pondered, chin in hand. He drummed his fingers against his cheek and focused on the candle’s flame.

“It’s curious,” he said. “Dareth, the Seer, the idol at the base of the cliff, have you ever heard of anyone being called by the Seer?”

“I know what you mean, yes,” the boy replied. “But the Seer has never spirited anyone away that I know of. Those are tales my mother heard as a child. She told them to me and that is all I know of them.”

“Your Seer does not speak much does it?”

“We were warned once when the mountain snows melted early and the river overflowed its banks. Another time there was a fire that raged through an apple grove and nearly reached our village. That is all there has been as far back as I can remember.”

Grifis smiled “Those are terrible things, to be sure. And I imagine a few lives were lost.”

Dareth nodded.

“But more were saved, I’ll wager. And it’s a short list of catastrophes. Far worse happens out there, shakes you wouldn’t believe, shakes like that last one that hurt your mother. They happen all the time and much worse too. It sounds like a nice place to be, your canyon, despite what’s happened.”

“I don’t know,” Dareth said. “I spent all my time wondering what it was like outside of it.”

“Yes.” Grifis tore his gaze away from the candle and looked back at Dareth, who had lost himself in the flame as well.

“Your friend, Kadnee. She shared your curiosity?”

Dareth did not take his eyes from the flame. “Not exactly. She was happy in the canyon, like everyone else. But at least she used to listen to me when I would start talking foolishly. She only came for me.

Grifis saw a tear escape the corner of Dareth’s eye and roll down his thin cheek. So frail the boy looked, and yet he had crossed the cracked earth almost to the foothills without aid until Biera had found him. He had strength in him, that much was clear. But the whole affair left Grifis in the grip of confusion.

“You must get some rest. You come looking for the deeproot and that is a tall order. What you are after is not going to be easy to obtain.”

Dareth’s eyes showed disappointment. He remained silent.

Grifis slapped his hand on the table to break the melancholy mood. “But we will talk about how to accomplish that in the morning. You can sleep on my cot over there in the corner.”

“What about you?” Dareth asked.

“Me? I like to sleep out under the stars. The wind that coming off of the fissure is warm, even at night, and its comfortable out there. But if you want your privacy...”

“No,” Dareth said. “I’d like to stay nearby, if you don’t mind. But not just yet. I think I would like a little time to myself.”

“Actually that isn’t such a bad idea. I’ve got a little something I should do right now anyway. The others are out by the fire pit having a laugh. I’ll be there soon enough too. Come and join us when you’re ready.”

Grifis gave the boy a reassuring smile and ducked through the flap, snapping up his broad, flat glider pack on the way. The sun had vanished outside and four of his crew, which consisted of six wind riders in all, gathered around the fire just as he had said,

chuckling and passing a jug around between them. Instead of joining them he wandered toward the fissure's edge a hundred yards away. The dark, jagged crack blinked up at him, its depth shrouded in a thin, red mist. He tasted the faint, salty-sweetness of the air that rose up from below.

"You're a mystery my young friend," he said to himself. "And I'm not used to mysteries."

He stood at the brink for a long time, contemplating what he had learned. More and more the face of the hermit from Dareth's tale kept rising to his mind, at least the face that his brain had given the character when he had heard the tale. At length Biera broke away from the fireside and joined him, slipping her small hand into his own.

"What are you thinking of?" she asked.

"Not sure. Something's nagging at me"

Grifis flipped open the flap that covered his pack and pulled out two long, flat, triangular wooden frames, the long sides of which curved gracefully toward the tip. The frames were covered over with an extremely thin sheeting of leather and had two posts extending from their squared off ends along with several leather straps.

"What are you doing?" Biera asked.

"Oh, I'm just going to head down for a bit." Grifis put the two frames end to end with the posts overlapping one another and bound them with the smaller straps that dangled from them.

"You're going down now? But it's dark outside."

"I know well enough where I'm going. Besides, you know I can't stand a mystery."

Grifis lifted the entire long contraption over his head and let the square central frame formed by the overlapping posts rest comfortably across his back, while the wings extended out nearly two feet beyond his arms length on either side. He grabbed the large straps that hung at his shoulders and hips, and tied them diagonally over his broad chest. Then he bent down and kissed Biera on the forehead, smiling at the disapproving look that still filled her eyes.

"Don't worry. I won't be gone long. After all, we have a guest, don't we?"

"Yes, we do. And what are we going to do with him?"

"Well, his mother lies in a mad dream because of the smoke. So we are going to help him save her, of course."

With that the wind rider turned and regarded the yawning chasm before him for only a moment. Then he grabbed hold of a pair of long thin straps that dangled from the tip of each wing and took a running leap out into space. The heavy updraft that tore through the fissure picked him up almost instantly and carried him gracefully along the length of the crack and out into the dark night.

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Dareth left the tent some time later and timidly approached the group around the fire pit. He did not see Grifis among them but Biera sat with the dusty, weather-beaten lot. As he came near she tipped the jug and then wiped a sleeve across her mouth.

“There you are.” she thrust the jug at the man next to her, a wiry looking fellow, and waved Dareth into the circle.

“Have a seat,” she said.

Dareth squeezed in beside her and nodded a nervous hello to a thick, baby-faced young man on his other side.

“Dareth, This here is Mav.” Biera stuck her thumb toward the wiry man with the jug.

Mav raised the jug in salute and tossed down a long swig, passing it next to the sharp-eyed man who sat across from the girl.

“That’s Woren. He takes care of all our equipment.”

“A pleasure, Dareth,” Woren said. “You have any questions you come and see me, you hear? Don’t pay any attention to what these other fools have to say, especially Belder.” Here Woren reached over and punched the baby-faced man beside him gently on the arm.

Belder only grinned larger than before and snatched the jug from Woren’s grasp, upending it for several seconds. When he had done he let out an explosive sigh.

“It’s that old fool you should be ignoring,” Belder said. “He thinks because he was born out here on the fissures that he has one up on the rest of us.”

“All I’m saying is that I’ve been around a while and I know a thing or two,” Woren said. “Belder is still green. He has only been out of the canyon five years.”

“And yet I can go as deep into the fissures as you can any day,” Belder retorted.

“Not a chance.”

“Will you two shut up?” Mav reached over and tugged the jug from Belder’s grasp. “I swear, it never ends.” He leaned across Biera and thrust the bottle at Dareth. “Here you go, kid. Try some of this. It’ll make you strong.”

Dareth looked blankly at the jug. “It will?”

“No, it won’t.” Biera laughed. “But try it anyway.”

With determination, Dareth took up the jug and put it to his lips, tipping it until the warm liquid rolled out onto his tongue. Immediately he broke into a fit of coughing. He couldn’t believe that something so sweet could burn so badly.

“It’s Keryli, isn’t it? That purple fruit?”

“It is,” Biera said. “That is also Woren’s handiwork.”

The wind rider gave a mock bow. “I hope you like it. This isn’t my best batch, but it works in a pinch.”

Dareth took another sip and then passed the jug along. It came around to him several more times and he began to feel heady. They had a weak wine in the canyon that Lorvin produced from blackberries, which had given Dareth the same sensation, but this stuff felt far warmer going down. Before long Dareth laughed along with the rest of them, though he never seemed to be quite sure what the joke was about.

These wind riders fascinated him. The way they yelled. The way they laughed. The way Belder jumped from the worn log that served as his seat and broke into pantomime, mimicking some affectation of Woren’s that got the rest of the circle roaring with glee. They were all so unlike the dour villagers at home.

“Now Dareth,” Belder said after a time. “You must tell me about your home. I haven’t been long away from my own canyon and I can’t say I miss it, but there are moments.”

Dareth studied the young wind rider through watery eyes. The man looked to be no more than a year his senior.

“You lived in a canyon?”

“Most come from the canyons” Mav answered. “Not too often that riders have brats of their own.”

“I never even knew there were other canyons like mine,” Dareth said.

“Oh, I remember that,” Belder said. “It can be pretty secluded down there, and nobody really gets it.”

Dareth looked back at the man with a glimmer suddenly touching his eyes. Belder had just said what he had always felt living with the villagers of the canyon.

“Is that why you left? Because no one understood you?”

“Well, that didn’t hurt, but no. I left because the Seer called me, same as you.”

“The Seer didn’t call me.” Dareth looked at the others blankly.

“Not the Seer, of course,” Mav said. “That’s all just for the villagers to swallow. But you got the message, right?”

Dareth turned his attention to Biera for help. In his drunken state he hardly understood the question. The others turned toward Biera too.

“Was he not called?” Woren asked. “I thought you collected him?”

“No,” Biera replied. “I found him out on the cracked earth.”

The circle had grown silent compared with the boisterous atmosphere that had only moments ago pervaded.

“And so what?” Biera continued. “You weren’t ever called either, Woren.”

“I was born here.”

“Well, Grifis knows all about it and he is handling it so what does it matter to you fools?”

“Oh no,” Mav said. “It isn’t going to hurt us one bit. But what about the kid?”

“Leave that to me.” Grifis’s booming voice echoed from behind a large leather tarp that stretched between two poles and blocked the fire pit from the worst of the ravines drafts. Grifis rounded the tarp and dropped his pack, grabbing the jug from Woren and draining what remained of it at one go. He rubbed the wine from his beard and then rubbed his one, red-rimmed eye as well.

Dareth looked back and forth between Grifis and his crew. He grew uncomfortable at the situation.

“I don’t have a problem with that, Grifis,” Woren said, reaching back and grabbing another jug that sat on the ground behind him. “It’s just damn strange, that’s all.”

“I know it. But you guys just take care of the usual tomorrow. I’ll take Dareth out and we’ll see how it goes.” Grifis then turned to Dareth. “And you’ve probably had enough of Woren’s liquor for tonight. I’m just warning you, I’ll be waking you early. I want to take you over to the fissure in the morning.”



Dareth nodded his assent and wobbled as he did so. He felt ready for sleep indeed. Biera furnished him with a blanket and he curled up, right there, beside the fire. Within minutes he was fast asleep under the stars.

Dareth stood with Grifis at the very brink of the fissure and stared down into the crack. Perhaps forty feet separated the two sides of the rift. A faintly sulfurous odor drifted up and mingled with another vague, sweet fragrance from below. He tried to judge the depth of the chasm but shadows shrouded the bottom.

Grifis chuckled at Dareth's nervousness. "After the climb you made out of Crescent Canyon, this shouldn't be such a daunting picture."

"That view of the canyon was the first time I'd ever seen such a thing." Dareth tore his eyes from the dizzying sight. "I never had much need to look down before. I was always looking up. Besides, I have told you what that climb out of the canyon cost."

"Ah, Yes. I'm sorry."

"It's alright." Dareth said the words but his thoughts dwelled on the horror of that day, so that he had nearly forgotten the man standing beside him for a time. Finally, "So do we need to climb to the bottom to get the root?"

"I wish it were that easy."

Dareth looked again at the sheer wall that descended into the gloom. "What do you mean by that? It doesn't look easy."

"There is no deeproot here. We'll have to travel further along the fissures. The deepest cracks are farther to the east."

"Oh," Dareth said, pointing his gaze out across the network of cracks that disappeared in the distance. "How long will it take us to get there?"

"Well, that depends on how you want to travel." He smiled and unslung the strange flat pack that rested over his back. Then he called out over Dareth's shoulder. "Did you get them?"

Dareth turned to see Biera approaching with her own pack on her back while she brandished another in her upraised hand.

"Yeah. Woren took a look at your old rig and patched it up a bit," she said.

Dareth watched in bewilderment as Grifis pulled a pair of hide-covered, wooden panels from his pack and began to strap them together into one long blade-like frame. The wind rider fastened it to his back and took hold of the straps that hung from the ends. He pulled on them and flexed the tips of the blades downward.

At once the purpose of the strange machine suddenly dawned on Dareth and he shook his head in disbelief.

"Wings? You're going to fly down in there? Is that possible?"

"Well, I've been doing it my whole life so I certainly hope so," Grifis replied.

"What did you think it meant to be a wind rider?"

"I guess I didn't much consider it."

Biera dropped the extra pack she carried on the ground at Dareth's feet. Then she began to outfit herself in the same fashion.

"There is your pair," Grifis said. "It's an old set of mine that served me very well for a long time." He grabbed up the pack and began to assemble the two halves.

“Me? Oh no.” Dareth raised a hand in protest. “Look at those things. How would they even hold me up? I wouldn’t know the first thing about it.”

“Look at you, kid. I’m willing to bet that I weigh nearly twice what you do, and these things are able to hold me up with no problem.” He thrust the glider at Biera. “Here, help him get this on.”

“I don’t think so.” Dareth could already feel the squeamishness begin to grow in the pit of his stomach at the thought of stepping off the edge of that yawning opening.

Despite his protests, Dareth allowed the girl to reach her arms around his waist and attach the straps across his chest.

“Listen, I understand how you feel,” Grifis continued. “A long time ago I stood just about where you are now and said the same thing to my mentor. But that was a really long time ago and I’m telling you, once you get the hang of it, it’s the easiest thing in the world.”

“But what about before I get the hang of it?”

“Alright. I’ll make you a deal. You stand here and watch me cross the fissure. If I make it across, then you need to follow me. If, for some reason I should die along the way, then you’re free to turn around and march back home without what you came for.”

“Couldn’t you just go and get it for me?”

Grifis grinned. “Now where would the fun be in that? And I thought you had a sense of adventure.”

“But I don’t…”

“I’m telling you, you’ll never stop thanking me for this,” Grifis interrupted. “Now grab hold of those straps on the end there.”

Dareth did as he was told, though at first his mind raced for some excuse not to. This was crazy. Surely he would be dead in moments if he followed the big man’s advice. Who was this wind rider anyway? He knew nothing of the man. The hermit had pointed Dareth in the direction of these strange folk, but for all knew the hermit was a madman himself. Was he going to trust this big man? Did he have a choice? He flexed the wings by pulling the straps inward toward his body. They felt very awkward. They were heavier than they looked and that only caused his fear to deepen. He tested the wingtips again, first flexing one then the other. He swept them around in a circle to feel the way the thin hide cupped the air as he moved.

“I just don’t see how this is going to work.”

“Here, let me show you.”

Before Dareth even knew what was happening, Grifis turned and raced toward the edge of the fissure, leaping fearlessly out over the pit. Dareth’s heart leapt into his throat at the sight. For an instant it seemed as if Grifis hung out there, motionless, and then he fell down out of sight. Dareth shrieked in horror. He crowded the brink and blinked downward as if there might be something he could do to stop the man’s fall, but before another second passed, Grifis floated back up into view, graceful as a swan. The wind rider flexed his left wing and turned in a wide arc that carried him over the intervening distance to the other side of the chasm. Once there, he pivoted his arms and settled lightly to the earth.

Dareth opened his mouth wide. He turned a bewildered look on Biera, who only laughed at the incredulity written across his face.

Despite the awkwardness of Grifis' big frame, he handled the wings like a sparrow. After his perfect landing, he turned back to stare at Dareth from across the expanse of the fissure with a smile that nearly split his grizzled face in half.

"Okay, now your turn." Grifis had to yell in order to be heard over the updraft that poured along the fissure.

Dareth shook his head vehemently. He'd just seen the wings at work, yet he still could not fathom how these thin, frail contraptions could keep someone from plunging headlong into the pit. He did chance another step toward the edge and peered down once more.

"Come on." Grifis called out. "Just keep the wings level with the ground. Don't make me come over there and push you off. It wouldn't be the first time."

Dareth glanced at Biera who nodded her assent.

"How do you think I got out there the first time?" she tested her own wings and stepped to the edge. She did not leap off as Grifis had done. Rather, she simply fell forward with her arms outstretched. She dipped low into the crack and then swooped upward until she floated a good twenty feet above the level of the ground, though directly below her, the distance was unknown. Biera then described a wide circle and dropped neatly to the ground beside Dareth.

"Now you." She urged him forward. "Believe me, Grifis isn't kidding and it's much nicer the first time if you're not thrown."

Dareth couldn't stop looking down. He would feel a lot better about it if he could see the bottom from where he stood. He held onto the wing straps so tightly that his knuckles turned white. His eyes closed and opened several times before he was able to decide that he would rather see where he was headed if he was going to die. The wind blew stiffly into his face. Then, with a plea to the Seer that he might survive this ridiculous ordeal, Dareth stepped off of the edge and felt the jarring rush of gravity as it pulled him downward. Instantly, terror seized hold of him, but he remembered to keep the leather-bound frames level. He could feel them dragging the air as he fell and, though it seemed to last a very long time, it could really have only lasted a second or two. Then the walls of the crack stopped rushing past him and he felt himself buffeted upward. The rushing along the fissure sent him sliding crosswise. He teetered precariously on a wind gust, fighting with each new blast to keep the contraption he was strapped to from flipping vertical and sending him down like a stone. He rocked back and forth until he found some sort of balance. It only took a moment, though it seemed like an eternity to his overwrought imagination.

Once Dareth gained a semblance of stability, he chanced a glance at the far side of the fissure. The rim lay only about twenty feet above his head. Already the distance was shrinking as an updraft bore him aloft without any effort on his part. Unfortunately, it did not seem interested in carrying him toward the other side. Instead he floated along the fissure, heading further and further from where Grifis waited, and he had no idea how to change his course.

"Yank on that strap on your right."

Dareth barely heard the wind rider's bellow over the rush in his ears. He inspected the hide covered wings. A grin spread over his face now that he realized that his demise was not imminent. He didn't relish the idea of upsetting his balance by following Grifis's

instructions, but he hardly wanted to find himself miles away either. He began tugging on the strap, gently at first, and then a little harder. The pressure bowed the flexible tip of the frame, giving it less surface area. Almost instantly the gale snatched at the edge of the downturned wing and ripped it off its horizontal plane altogether. Dareth dipped to his right with a frightening jolt and nearly let go of the strap altogether. For a second he hung there in midair. Then, like a rock he shot downward, madly trying to right himself and gain some small amount of purchase on the air to arrest his fall. He succeeded in part, slowing the speed of his descent, though he failed to completely check his fall before the ground raced up to meet him.

The fissure did not appear to be as deep as his overwrought nerves had led him to believe, and he now had only a moment to decide if that was a good thing or not. Forty more feet he fell. Though the glider did help to slow his progress a number of times, it seemed impossible how quickly the whole thing took place. Wrenching pain tore through his knees when he hit the ground. He nearly toppled head-over-heels but the leading edge of the glider dug into the sand and brought him to an abrupt halt. He came to rest in a heap against a boulder at the bottom of the shaft.

Dareth did not open his eyes immediately. From high above he could hear Grifis laughing uncontrollably. Slowly he took stock of the pains that riddled his body. His knees hurt terribly. Scratches criss-crossed his limbs, and his head had collided non-to-softly with the boulder beside him. He sat up and inspected himself further. He ran his fingers over his arms and legs, tracing the scratches. He rubbed his knees and bent them back and forth. A grin spread over his face at the realization that he still lived. He stood up and tested his knees. Already the numbness was leaving them. He rubbed at the lump on his head. That would take a little longer to get over.

Looking up at the ribbon of sky visible at the top of the crack, Dareth marveled at what he'd just done. He had dropped at least 80 feet altogether. He replayed those few moments over in his mind and still it did not seem quite real. For only a few moments he had actually flown.

Grifis's harsh laugh still echoed down to Dareth. Now he saw the man leap off of the edge of the fissure again and float downward, spiraling lower and lower as he came. Grifis landed with a grace that seemed incongruous with his rough appearance.

"I trust you're alright?" He had not finished laughing but succeeded in containing his mirth to a knowing grin when he saw the look of awe and wonder that spread across Dareth's face.

"Enjoyed it did you?"

"Well, I nearly killed myself."

"Not so," Grifis said. "This shaft is perfect for beginners. It isn't too deep and it has a good wind gust. You just need to learn a little control, that's all."

"So where do we find the root?"

Grifis shook his head. "Oh, there's root down here, but it's like I said, it isn't what you're after. There are a few shallow caves back that way where root grows, but it's far too weak to be of any use."

Dareth frowned. "So why did you bring me down here?"

"I didn't. No one told you to fall. You did that all by yourself. I just wanted to get you flying. This crack is good for that, but we'll need something far deeper than this if

you want root that will help your mother. Those places are nearly impossible to reach without sailing the fissures.”

A moment later, Biera floated to the ground beside them. “As long as we’re down here, maybe we could collect some Keryli fruit.”

“Why not?” Grifis said.

“Come on, Dareth.” She waved a hand and started off along the floor of the fissure. “The caves are this way.”

Dareth followed along, marveling at the environment he now found himself in. He had always thought the canyon to be oppressive, its massive walls rising up on either side, but now that he had been out in the open for several days, the closeness of the rocks to his right and left gave him a certain sense of comfort. The ground they walked over crunched with much gravel and sand. Very quickly the sweet smell Dareth had caught from above began to overpower the odor of sulfur that hung in the shadows of the pit. He recognized the scent as belonging to the purple fruit he had taken such a liking too.

Within minutes they came to a narrow opening in the rock wall to their left. It had clearly begun as a natural formation, but the opening had also been widened and smoothed out as if for ease of passage. The sweet odor emanated from this opening and Dareth was surprised to see the vegetation that crawled out from the cave in long, twisting vines over the otherwise barren ground. The leaves of the plant were nearly white as was the vine itself. They clustered together along its length. Small, lavender flowers grew in clumps, and at the center of each clump lay the deep purple of a Keryli fruit.

Dareth’s mouth began to water at the sight of the succulent morsels. Over the past couple of days he had grown very fond of the Keryli. Without waiting for instructions, he pushed past his companions and drew his little flint blade, intent on getting hold of as much of the fruit as he could carry back up to the surface.

“Wait,” Grifis cried.

Dareth stopped abruptly, startled by the alarm in the man’s voice.

“You can’t just walk up on them like that.”

“Why not?”

“Look a little closer at the opening.”

Dareth did as he was bid but saw nothing out of the ordinary.

“Do you see the smoke?” Biera asked.

He looked again, squinting his eyes at the dark crag. This time he saw it, barely. A faint, red haze rose up into the air from the mouth of the cave.

“Wait here.” Grifis moved forward without hesitation. He reached down and grabbed up a vine, then followed it to the opening and ducked inside.

Dareth looked toward Biera with a puzzled expression.

“I thought it was dangerous.”

“For you. Not for him.”

Within a few seconds Grifis emerged again. He carried the vine along with him. The end he held in his hand trailed several dirty root tendrils. He cut off a piece of the root and wiped it on his pants, then held it out to Dareth.

“Eat this.”

Dareth looked at the root. It had very nearly the same color as the vine itself, but with a faint, purplish hue. He took it from Grifis and inspected it more closely.

“This is the root?”

“It is,” Grifis replied. “But very weak. The Keryli thrive on the smoke. They can’t grow without it. The more smoke, the stronger the root. That is why the strongest root is found in the deep fissures, where the smoke bubbles up thick.”

“And I have to eat it?”

“Don’t worry,” Biera said. “It’s not bad. A little bitter, but otherwise pretty good.”

Grifis pointed back at the haze that drifted up from the cave mouth. “Not much smoke there. Still it can be dangerous. You’ve seen what a heavy dose of the smoke can do. The root has the ability to protect you to a certain extent, though it works better for some than for others.”

Dareth raised the small bit of plant to his mouth and took a curious nibble. He rolled the root around on his tongue for a moment. It had an underlying flavor like that of the fruit, but Biera had been right about its bitter taste. He swallowed what was in his mouth and then the rest of it at Grifis’s urging.

“Alright,” Grifis said, once Dareth had gulped the last of it. Now you can approach, but be careful. If you start to feel too heady, I want you to get away.”

“Will it put me to sleep like my mother?”

“No. Not in such small concentrations, but it can make you sick. You could end up in a delirium for a few days.”

Dareth looked back at the cave. He felt unsure of this and it showed clearly on his face.

“Don’t worry,” Biera said. “We will be right there if you start to feel woozy.”

“Besides,” Grifis added. “You trusted me with the glider and look, you’re still alive, aren’t you?”

“Alright.” Dareth sighed and moved forward, following close behind his two companions.

As they neared the cave mouth the smoke became easier to see in the air about him. It drifted upward and dissipated quickly in the stiff wind that blew through the declivity. Dareth realized once he had gotten close enough, that only a portion of the sweet odor came from the fruit on the vine. Most of the odor seemed to come from the smoke itself.

Grifis and Biera began cutting the Keryli fruit off of the vines. Dareth joined in, popping a few in his mouth here and there and savoring their syrupy juice.

“Tell me,” Dareth asked. “Why is it that you did not need to eat the root before you approached?”

“This is nothing,” Grifis replied. “Just a small seep. That’s where the smoke breaks through the earth. We’ve been exposed enough that something like this has little effect. If the smoke were thicker though, we would need the root as well, and much stronger than these.”

“How do you feel?” Biera asked.

“I’m fine.” But even as he said it, Dareth began to notice something strange about his vision. He looked up at the ribbon of sky above him. Against the blue he could easily



make out a pattern of tiny, black spots that whirled about in front of his face. He also began to feel a bit heady and had to stand up straight and take a deep breath.

“On second thought, I do feel a little strange. Not bad, but strange.”

Then something very odd happened. Something shifted in Dareth’s mind and suddenly he no longer regarded the wind riders. He looked on some other place. It was a nighttime place and unknown to him. An orange glow broke the solitude of the night scene and Dareth knew the source of the light immediately. Flames lit the hillside below him. It was not the tame, controlled light of a campfire, but monstrous, wild waves of fire that marched along the hillock, kicking up too much smoke to allow a good view of anything. His discovery of the flames below came so abruptly that it caused him to gasp in shock.

“Hey,” Grifis shouted.

Dareth turned at the sound and instantly his vision vanished in the hazy light at the bottom of the fissure.

“What was...” He looked around him in confusion, trying to find what he had only just been looking at. Nothing in his surroundings suggested that any such place existed. Certainly there were no flames in evidence.

“What was it?” Grifis asked. “You see something that isn’t really here?”

“Yes. There was fire.” Dareth continued to glance about suspiciously, certain that he would see flames licking out of some crack up the way. There was nothing.

“Fire,” Grifis continued. “Makes sense.”

“Was it real?”

“Oh yes. Just not here and not now.”

“What do you mean? Was it a dream?”

Grifis and Biera looked at one another in surprise.

“What do you know of dreams?” Grifis asked.

“Nothing. Only it’s something the hermit said was happening to my mother because of the smoke.”

“The hermit?” The wind rider furrowed his brow at mention of the mysterious figure.

“Yes. Is that what it was?”

“No. Dreams are nothing. Hopes, fears, past experiences. But the smoke. The smoke brings things that are yet to occur. How’s your head? Hurt a lot?”

“No. Not at all. Should it?”

Grifis smiled and shook his head. “No. That’s good. I had a feeling you’d be fine. Come on, though. You don’t want to overdo it. After all, you’ve never been exposed...”

The man’s words were cut off by the sound of cracking stones that came almost before the telltale wobbling beneath their feet. All eyes turned upward.

“Stay by me.” Grifis’s voice was calm.

He pressed against the rock wall behind them and scooted along it until he stood under a bulging overhang of heavy stone. Biera and Dareth followed closely behind him.

“With the walls so close,” Grifis said. “The rocks bounce all over the place. You can never be quite sure where they are going to hit.”

And the rocks did fall, some of them larger than Dareth’s head. The shake had not been a strong one, more than a tremor certainly, but much of the loose earth from the

craggy walls came raining down. Dareth marveled at the calm with which his companions awaited the end of the episode. If he had been amongst the people of his village it would have been chaos.

Eventually the dust settled and Grifis peered upward, searching for any precarious stones that looked ready to fall. He quickly satisfied himself that all was safe and led the others back to the Keryli bloom.

They gathered up the fruits they had collected and headed back toward where they had first landed at the bottom of the fissure. A little further on, the rock wall on the right juttied out a good distance to form a narrow ledge about seven feet above the floor of the fissure. A boulder lay against the base of the wall and provided a perfect stepping stone up onto the ledge.

They traveled single file, as the ledge was not wide enough to accommodate more than one of them at a time. Dareth noticed as they climbed that some of the path appeared to be natural, while other sections seemed to have been cut away by hand. At one point they reached a spot where the ledge simply ended. Here a rope of twisted Keryli vine hung down from a similar ledge perhaps ten feet above their heads. After essaying this obstacle, the remainder of the journey followed this second ledge without stopping, until the group found themselves again on the surface looking down into the depths of the fissure. Dareth marveled. How could a place like this have existed, all this time, and he had never even imagined.

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Comarin hobbled down the hill toward the fields. His daily ritual of checking for messages at the Seer had resulted in the same empty box, just like every other day.

“Foolishness,” he said. “Utter foolishness. These people have grown too complacent. Another shake or two might actually wake them up.”

The hermit watched the workers in the field as he passed. None of them appeared at all concerned, but what should he expect from them? Even if they had the capacity to understand, they would never be able to fathom what the boy, Dareth, might be going through and what it might mean for them.

“Not that I have been much use trudging up here every day. Not even sure what I expect. So how can this medicine man have the slightest idea? These people have never even seen the smoke. For good or bad, they are ignorant.”

Comarin walked along, so engrossed in the field workers and his own thoughts that he did not notice Lorvin approaching until the medicine man was almost upon him.

“Good afternoon.” Lorvin tried for a pleasant smile, but it had little effect on the hermit’s demeanor.

“I don’t see what is much good about it.”

Lorvin sighed and shook his head. “No, I suppose not. It’s just what we say.”

“You should reconsider.”

Comarin moved to pass by and continue on his way toward the village, but Lorvin placed a hand on his arm. Comarin looked at the hand, then up into the eyes of the medicine man. There was something in those eyes that stopped Comarin and peeked his interest.

“You don’t much care for me,” Lorvin began. “I can’t say I understand why.”

Comarin shook his head. “It is not you in particular.”

“All of us then. But why?”

Comarin considered ignoring the question and passing on, but that look in the other man’s eye still held him. A spark shone there that did not often show itself in the eyes of the canyoners.

“I am conflicted.” Comarin pulled his arm away gently but he did not retreat.

“There is something missing in you people. But I can’t blame you for that, can I? No, I cannot. And yet I can hardly stand to look in your eyes when I have seen real life.”

“I do not understand.”

“Of course you don’t. And how could you?”

“Make me understand.”

“How can I do that? How can I say what it is I see, or rather what I don’t see. If I ask you what it is you see in my eyes, could you tell me?”

“Yes,” the medicine man replied. “I see madness.”

Comarin chuckled. “Of course. Yes, that is what you would see. And you wouldn’t be wrong. No, that is quite right as a matter of fact. But it is not the first time you’ve seen such a look is it?”

“No.”

“Dareth, yes?”

Lorvin nodded.

“Yes. And with me you might be right. I am far gone. I’m spent. But Dareth, he is not mad, though I shouldn’t expect you to be able to understand the difference.”

“But I want to understand.”

“Why? Why is it so important to you?” The hermit scratched his head. This man’s behavior confused him.

“Because my daughter is dead.”

Lorvin’s voice was still flat and controlled but there was an edge to it. Comarin thought for a moment that the man was going to start yelling at him. The idea of it made a corner of his mouth turn up. The look went unnoticed by Lorvin.

“My daughter is dead and you have accused me of feeling nothing for her. You are fond of calling us all fools, but I tell you that if you think I have no heart, then it is you who is the fool.”

The old man stared at Lorvin. Then, suddenly, he tilted his head back and burst out laughing. The spark in Lorvin’s eyes intensified and his nostrils flared, but his voice remained calm and flat.

“You choose to mock me.”

“No,” Comarin said quickly. “No, no, no. On the contrary. I am glad to hear you speak this way.”

Comarin grunted and eased himself to the ground right there on the pathway. He motioned for Lorvin to join him.

“Tell me,” Comarin continued. “You are the medicine man. You are the one who passes for leader in your village. You are responsible for bringing the predictions of the Seer to your people.”

“That is true.”

“I have been among you five days. Yet in that time you have not been to see the Seer. Why?”

“I was heading there now. Mostly it is futile. The Seer is so often silent. It is to my eternal shame that I allowed the message you brought to me to remain up there at the idol as I did, but that was the first in a very long time. I suppose I grew complacent.”

“I have been there every day since Dareth left,” Comarin said. “I am beginning to see why it is you have grown complacent.”

The hermit turned and regarded Lorvin for several seconds. The medicine man squirmed a bit under the weight of his piercing, dark eyes.

“What is it?” Lorvin asked.

“You are right.”

“What do you mean?”

“I am the fool, not you.” The old man played idly with the grass between his feet. “I may accuse you of having no spirit but you know, I used to believe in things once. I am no more passionate than you, am I? I have been hiding out there by myself for so long and for what, eh? Can you tell me that, for what?”

Lorvin did not respond.

“You are concerned for the woman, Daesha?” Comarin asked.

“Of course I am. Do you think that Dareth will succeed? Will he be able to bring back what we need to help her?”

“Don’t know. I keep hoping the Seer will reveal something, but all we can do now is care for the girl and wait.”

Lorvin looked at his companion.

“I have not thanked you for your help.”

Comarin waved away the medicine man’s gratitude.

“Nothing to thank me for yet.”

“You have asked me if I care,” Lorvin said. “And I will admit, with my daughter taken from me, I almost wish that I had no feeling left in my heart. But why is it that you seem to care so much?”

Comarin did not answer immediately. He sat thinking about it for quite a while.

“Why indeed,” he finally said. “She is kind, isn’t she? The woman, Daesha. There is kindness in her.”

“Yes.”

“I suppose that’s reason enough.”

Lorvin seemed to weigh the words for a moment. Then he gave his head the barest of nods and turned his gaze toward the waving stalks of grain along the edge of the path. Comarin too lost himself in their hypnotic motion and neither of them stirred again for quite some time.

Dareth lay on the cot in Grifis's tent. Mid-morning poured through the open flap, but still he did not stir. He stared up at the reaching shadows that collected in the apex of the tent, deep in thought. Memories played over the smooth, hide surface overhead. A remembered dream. He had woken from it nearly an hour since and still he lay there, trying to see it again. It had been a dream of Kadnee again. This time it was pleasant. A recollection of a faraway time when she'd pulled him into the river, jerkin and all.

It was not a memory, not exactly. Subtle differences existed in the way the light hit the water, in the pitch of Kadnee's laugh ringing off the canyon walls, a rare thing among the sober villager's, and of the content of Dareth's own thoughts as he looked at her. She had never laughed quite like that, though if one were to hear laughter carried over the air in the canyon, then it would likely belong to her. He remembered that episode well enough, but now it had changed. Now he could not quite separate it from the wanderings of his sleeping mind and it made the whole of it better, more vivid for him.

Biera poked her head through the tent's opening. Dareth was too lost in his own thoughts to notice her presence.

"Hey there."

Dareth flinched out of his reverie and sat up in surprise at Biera's knowing grin.

"Are you coming out? Mav has roasted a rabbit for breakfast."

"Oh, yes. I was just coming."

"You get used to it, you know."

"Get used to what?"

"Dreams." She inched her way a little further into the tent. "Pretty soon it's just a normal part of waking up. Sometimes there will be those that really make you think, but it's all just your imagination looking for something to occupy itself. There isn't anything in them. You need the smoke for that." She smiled and ducked out of sight as quickly as she had come.

Dareth stood and stretched. All the scrapes and bruises he had collected since leaving home, now showed signs of mending well over the three days he had been with the riders. He had begun to grow used to the delicious ache of his muscles from the gliding and climbing Grifis had him doing.

He smoothed a tousled mess of dark hair out of his eyes and followed Biera outside. The riders that Dareth met on his first night had been joined by two of their companions over the past days. Now Grifis's entire crew gathered about the fire, laughing and talking lazily while the scent of cooking meat floated around the circle.

Grifis cleared his throat when he saw Dareth coming and all eyes turned on the youth.

"Well, it isn't noon yet. Are you sure you're ready to get up? I could come wake you for dinner."

Dareth reddened. He waved to the collected group, then sat quietly all during the meal, choosing to listen, enraptured by their talk rather than babble on himself. At the

circle in his own village he had often been accused of babbling, but these riders, their banter and raucous laughter still shocked his ears. Once or twice words were pointed at him and he responded politely. He still sensed a certain amount of reservation in the meaningless questions, as if the gathered group were still not quite certain of his status. He had trouble following much of what the wind riders said amongst themselves. They spoke of catastrophes, many of them, but with such an air of nonchalance that Dareth imagined they were discussing the flavor of their food.

When the meal ended they melted away, one after another until only Dareth and Grifis remained.

“Where are they going?” he asked.

“They all have their tasks of the day. Some are off to gather sulfur coals. There’s a nice pocket of them up this fissure a few miles, and we’re running low.”

“But there is plenty of brush around here to burn.”

“Yes, but try hauling a bundle of wood out onto the cracked earth and see how far you get.”

“You travel out there often?”

“All the time.” Grifis laughed. “You don’t think that Biera was out there for a stroll when she came across you, do you? We travel along the fissures where we can. But that can only take us so far.”

“And where do you go?”

“Wherever we need to. Everywhere.”

The two watched in silence for a time as one of the riders stood over near the fissure, tugging on the straps at his chest. The man had only arrived the day before and yet the pack that nested atop the glider on his back looked full enough to accommodate another prolonged trip. The man raced toward the edge and launched himself out over the abyss.

“Take Porlis there,” Grifis said. “He’s going west to Horsehead Canyon. There are a few villages down in that canyon, much like your own. But they get bad shakes all the time. Lots of people die. It’s not like we can save everyone. But if we can warn them in time, then we can avoid the worst of it.”

“He’s warning them?”

“Yes,” Grifis said, scraping the last morsel of rabbit stew from his bowl and shoving it into his mouth. “And the closest fissure will get him to within about thirty miles from the canyon. He can glide maybe half that distance before he loses his altitude. He’ll have to walk the rest of the way. Of course, on the way back he has to walk the entire distance. So you see, we need the sulfur stones for when we deliver the messages.”

Dareth furrowed his brow. He guessed at the meaning of the man’s words but could hardly believe the truth of it.

“What messages do you deliver to the canyons?”

Grifis smiled as though he had been caught with his hand in someone’s pocket.

“Yes, my young friend. I’m sorry to be the one to tell you, but your Seer is a fraud. And so are all of the other Seers across this broken land.” He wiped a paw across his greasy beard and regarded Dareth. “You had it pretty easy in that canyon of yours, you know, compared to some. It isn’t just the canyons either. There are deep valleys here and there as well. There are even a few communities that live along the fissures, but they

aren't many, as the smoke can be dangerous if you can't handle it, and most people can't."

"You deliver messages to them all?"

"Well, no. Mine isn't the only band of riders. One of the best, though. There aren't many of us, all told, but there are enough."

"So all of these people think they are getting divine words?"

"People seem to listen a lot better that way. Some cling so tight to their stone idols that we dare not be seen for fear of disillusioning the entire lot of them. Others know the truth. Not everyone is as isolated as you in Crescent Canyon. I came from a place called Iron Rock Canyon a long time ago. People there knew something of the riders, saw them on occasion."

Grifis looked into the embers of the fire, remembering some other time. "A lot of shakes there too. Smoke even took some people now and then. More than a few kids were called from there." The rider's eyes returned to Dareth as if he were recalling himself from another place.

"Come on." Grifis rose and picked up his own glider pack as well as the one that Dareth had been using. "Do you fancy a ride?"

Dareth grinned. He thought of the first flight. It had been exhilarating for a few minutes just before he fell. He'd had better luck over the next couple of days.

"You're not thinking of excuses right off. That's a good sign," Grifis said. "Let's go. You need the practice. I want to take you along this fissure a ways today. There's a deeper crack a little further north. Now that you can keep in the air for more than a few minutes, we can glide down in there. It's not a difficult descent but the smoke is thicker. That can make it tricky."

Dareth slowly donned the glider, remembering the basic instructions Grifis had given him over the past few days.

"Grifis, you said that most people can't handle the smoke at all, even with the root."

"That's right."

"But the other day you took me right to that crack where the fruit was growing."

"I did," Grifis admitted without apology.

"What if I had died?"

"You wouldn't." Grifis spoke with conviction. "You were never called so I couldn't be sure, but if you couldn't handle it then you'd be mad soon enough anyway. The smoke rises up out of most of these fissures all the time, though it is very thin by the time it reaches the top. People can't stay near them for long."

"Still," Dareth said. "You might have been wrong..."

"I might have been," Grifis interrupted. "Then I would have made sure to apologize while you were still able to understand me. Would you rather I had not taken you down?"

Dareth thought about the dream he had awakened from that morning, the dream of Kadnee.

"No. I'm glad of it."

"Good. Then take this." He pressed a small leather pouch into Dareth's hand.



Dareth studied the worn and creased pouch. A loop at the top wrapped around a small, stone bead sewn to the other side and held the opening closed. He pulled the loop free and peered inside. Several of the dried, purplish roots from the Keryli plant lay inside, their waxy surface rubbing a bitter odor into the leather. He refastened the string and tied it to one of the glider straps across his chest. When he looked up from this task, he saw Grifis already bounding toward the ledge.

The wind rider dipped first and then soared upward on the updraft that poured through the narrow crack. He rose up to about thirty feet above Dareth's head and circled around gracefully, waiting for his companion to join him.

Dareth stared down at the jagged edge beneath his toes. He felt anxious to experience the exhilaration he knew would come with a leap. Still, though he had accomplished it a number of times already, his body took some convincing before it would obey his command. He felt the strong draft as it blew up into his face. The wind itself seemed almost palpable, like he could grab hold of it and drag himself upward into the sky. He imagined as much as he stepped from his perch and stretched his arms out to let the wind heave upward against the thin surface of his wings.

The rush of falling crowded out all other sensations for an instant. Then the draft caught him and pulled him out into the center of the fissure, as it simultaneously dragged him along, toward the west. At first, he did nothing but try to keep the wings of his glider on a level to avoid the painful plummeting he had experienced once before. Soon enough he found himself racing along, the rider's camp rapidly growing more faint behind him. The fast-moving air crowded out all other sound in his ears, and in the rush he forgot everything else except for himself and the madly racing panorama beneath him. Unable to contain his excitement, Dareth screamed with joy. His own voice whipping over his ears and disappearing behind him.

"Now you're getting the hang of it."

Grifis's voice surprised him. To be heard over the din, the man must have screamed out loud from very nearby. Dareth chanced a look back and saw the wind rider matching pace just above and to his right. Dareth had nearly forgotten about his companion in the excitement.

"Now, bank left and follow me," Grifis called. With a smooth motion, he swung about toward the far side of the fissure and swooped back around to complete a full circle, finishing in the same place he had begun.

Dareth still fought to keep his wings on a level. A nervous glance to his left showed his knuckles white on the strap at the tip of the wing. Cautiously he gave the strap a small pull and immediately dipped to the left. He released pressure and righted himself, now on a new course, rolling at a diagonal toward the edge of the crack. This move bolstered his confidence and he gave the wing another, stronger pull while keeping his right arm stiff against the gale that held him up. Again he tugged on the strap and swung about. This time he held the curve until he came full around and flew straight along the course of the fissure.

Miles passed beneath them easily as they rode along the chasm. They practiced rising and falling, at times dipping deeply so that the broken edges of the crack nearly rose up to engulf him. At other times, the features of the ground blurred with distance as they soared high into the sky.

They traveled along the fissure like that for a good hour. Grifis's camp lay long miles behind them and by that time Dareth could control his movements quite well. He still pulled his wing straps cautiously, always afraid that he would go tumbling. Such a tumble from this height would hardly end in a few cuts and bruises.

Grifis had ensured that Dareth's first flight would be a relatively safe one. The wind rider must have known the boy would fall. But now, even when they dropped deep down into the crack, Dareth could see no bottom.

At length he spied another mammoth break in the landscape approaching fast. It intersected with their own fissure at an odd angle, creating a jumble of broken stone and a swirl of dust where two powerful gusts slammed into one another from different directions. Dareth could see the turbulence kicking up in that narrow intersection and he wondered how he would maintain control in such a place. He glanced to his left where Grifis glided along, unperturbed.

Just before reaching the intersection of the two great fissures, Grifis stretched his wings and rose up very high above the level of the ground. Then he swung about and flew over the edge of the fissure until he was again over solid ground. The updraft disappeared from beneath his wings and he immediately lost altitude. However, there was enough lift under his glider that he could have flown several more miles without any danger of hitting the earth. Long before that happened, Grifis pointed himself toward the intersecting crack and entered into its own wind stream. The rider rose into the sky again and continued on in his new course, having totally bypassed the turbulent intersection.

Dareth watched this maneuver and copied the wind rider. He felt a moment of discomfort when he lost the push of the air from beneath him, but he did not stall and immediately pitch forward toward the ground. He simply caught up his breath and held on until he felt the comfort of the wind return.

The fissure over which the pair now sailed was significantly wider than the previous one and Dareth could see a hazy warmth rising up from below. A sweet scent hung in the air that held him aloft. It smelled of Keryli. The scent made him think of the fruit and his stomach growled despite the rabbit stew that filled it.

Dareth followed his guide onward, travelling for nearly another hour along this new course before Grifis gave any indication that they were nearing any destination. At one point the man stretched his wings out and quickly jumped several feet into the air, dropping back and ending up just above the place where Dareth flew. Dareth thought that a neat trick and he couldn't fathom how Grifis had accomplished it. But he vowed that he would learn even as he craned his neck upward to catch sight of his companion.

"You have the roots I gave you?" Grifis shouted down to him.

"Yes."

"I want you to eat two of them. We're going to drop down into this shaft. Try to stay in the middle. Even this wide, it's sometimes hard to judge how close you are to the edge. If you manage to scrape a wing along the rock wall then, well, just don't."

Dareth did as he was bid. Letting go of the left strap, he steadied himself as he reached for the pouch that dangled from his chest. At first he was afraid of not holding on tightly to the wing strap, but he soon found that, as long as he maintained his equilibrium, the wing remained rigid and kept him on a straight course. He fumbled to open the pouch

one handed and remove the roots quickly so that he could grab hold again and regain that lost sense of control.

Dareth let go one more time and popped the bits of plant into his mouth. He sucked on the bitter root and looked for Grifis, who had pulled back into a position just ahead of him. The wind rider dropped slowly. He kept very steady and remained in the exact middle of the chasm. All Dareth had to do was to stay directly behind his guide. Very quickly the walls of the fissure closed in on either side of them. As Dareth looked to the left and right he felt a small wave of panic. The fissure had appeared wide enough, but the draft here was so harsh and unpredictable that it looked as though his wings would brush one side or the other at any moment. If it did, he would find out how deep the crack was very quickly. After that, he made an effort not to look at the walls. Instead he kept his eyes on Grifis, dropping when he dropped and adjusting to the right or left when he saw the wind rider doing it.

At length Grifis pointed out a dark shape that marred the surface of the chasm wall on the left some distance ahead. It took flying another hundred yards before the dark smudged revealed itself as the mouth of a cave. Long, white vines, clustered with purple flowers crawled out of the opening and fanned out in a corona all around the mouth of the cave.

At this point Grifis waved Dareth on ahead of him and Dareth caught the man's shouted words as they sailed back to him on the wind.

"We'll land there. Pass by me and circle back. There is only room for one of us to land at a time."

Dareth now saw that there was a neat but narrow shelf in front of the cave mouth and as he swung by he watched the wind rider turn at a dangerous angle and head straight for the wall that he had, up until that point, been so eager to avoid. Just before smashing headlong into the unforgiving stone, Grifis pulled hard on both wing straps. The wind caught up heavy under the concave surface and slowed Grifis until he hung almost stationary in mid-air before he dropped gently to his feet amongst the vines, the free ends of which spilled over the rock ledge and swung in the wind.

Dareth rose up above the top of the fissure and swung around in a wide arc to drop back down in ahead of the cave mouth. By the time he neared the spot again Grifis already had his glider removed and leaning against the inside wall of the opening. He stood within the shadows waiting for Dareth to follow.

Dareth held his breath and curved nervously toward the jagged face of the fissure. It was the same maneuver Grifis had taught him to land at the top of the fissure, pull up short and drop down. It just seemed much more immediate when solid stone was rushing at you.

Dareth came in perhaps a little lower than he should have. He pulled up short just fine but nearly broke his shins against the ledge before scrambling to safety. Grifis roared with laughter as Dareth skidded to a halt near his feet, but the young man barely noticed the scrapes on his knees. His heart thumped far too fast to notice anything so mundane. He stood upright with a victorious grin lighting his face.

"Well done, my friend," Grifis said. "Now get those things off, will you?"

Dareth worked the straps over his chest free and took in a deep sip of the aroma that surrounded him. The white tendrils of the Keryli vine covered much of the ground at

the cave's mouth. Thick, purple fruit hung over the ledge and dangled toward the abyss below.

Grifis knelt down and pulled a patch of Keryli away from the stone, exposing the purplish roots, then yanking them free of the earth. He produced a flint blade from his belt and cut away the precious roots, placing one in his mouth and handing another to Dareth.

"Take this, in case the others weren't strong enough. It's best to be safe."

Dareth placed the plant in his mouth and sucked on the bitterness. Then he saw Grifis pluck a swollen fruit from a vine nearby and plop that in his mouth as well. Dareth followed suit, blanketing the unsavory taste of the root with its sweeter counterpart.

"Alright. You ready?"

Dareth nodded and plodded into the cave mouth after the wind rider.

"Won't we need a torch or a coal or something? it looks awfully dark in there."

"We aren't going far."

Just then the wind rider came up short. The halt was abrupt enough that Dareth ran into his wide back. They had gone no more than a dozen paces into the cave. Despite the short distance travelled, Dareth felt a change in the atmosphere immediately. Before, the air had been thick with the odor of the Keryli, but it had still been fresh from the constant draft that swept by the opening. In here though, a red haze roiled over the faint light that poured in from the cave mouth. Dareth tried to breathe normally, but he found he had to make a conscious effort to suck in a useful quantity of the heavy atmosphere. Instantly he felt heady, just as he had the other day when they'd been collecting the fruit, only much more powerful.

He glanced around the chamber, his brain already nearly as foggy as the air about him. It surprised him how much he could make out despite the puny amount of light leaking in. The opening itself was perhaps twenty feet in diameter but only rose perhaps two feet higher than Grifis's head. Here and there Dareth could see tiny spouts of smoke bubbling out of cracks in the rough walls and floor. He tried to make out the source of the light that reflected off of the haze. From what he could tell, the glow emanated from the smoke itself.

Dareth wandered further into the chamber and this time nearly tripped over Grifis, who had sat down on the floor with his back resting against a rugged and uncomfortable looking stone. Dareth watched Grifis for a moment, waiting for a sign of what he should do next, but the man simply stared at a large, pyramid-shaped outcropping that sprung up in the center of the room. Grifis now seemed oblivious to his presence. Dareth shrugged and followed suit. He found himself a nice place to rest his back and sat down on the floor of the chamber. He wondered briefly what he should expect. Though he already felt woozy, as he had on the previous occasion, it wasn't much more than one might feel sitting too close to the campfire for too long. He thought to speak up and ask Grifis if there were anything in particular he should be watching for, but he never seemed to get around to uttering the words. Soon the red haze swirling around his head appeared to thicken. He fancied that he could see individual belts of smoke describing intricate patterns in the air before his face. He thought suddenly that it really resembled water more than smoke anyway, the way it whirled and flowed like the choppy and dangerous parts of the canyon river during the mountain snow melt. Then Dareth corrected himself.

For who had ever seen water of this eerie, red hue? No, the smoke more resembled twisting curls of blood, except that blood did not glow like this, and it did not increase in brilliance as one stared at it, until you could see quite as comfortably as if it were broad daylight in the chamber. Only by now Dareth was not looking at the chamber at all.

What Dareth did see felt very much like the dreams he had been having in the nights since his first exposure or, even more so, the brief vision he had had on that occasion. This time, however, he felt his conscious mind become involved in the process in a way that it had not done before.

There was no telling when Dareth forgot about the man sitting next to him, or when he lost track of where he was or even who he was. He only knew that he was screaming... and then he was not. He was laughing, in fact, though he couldn't quite remember what the joke had been or who had told it. The villagers were not much for jokes. Perhaps it had been Comarin.

"And who, by the Seer, is Comarin?" Dareth asked himself.

"How should I know," another voice seemed to reply.

"A crazy old goat, that's who," came yet a third voice.

"Who asked you?"

The conversation grew heated and Dareth couldn't keep track of all the participants, though he had felt sure only a moment ago that they had all been himself. The haze retreated a bit from in front of his eyes. Some of the whirling rings deepened in color and others grew quite bright. In between them all, snatches of scenes clung together in a patchwork of color like so many wet, autumn leaves on the ground. Dareth picked out one particular leaf among the mosaic and studied it as best as the whipping, whirling surroundings would allow. He was looking from high above down into the canyon, a vantage that was still so new to him. Always he had been looking up. Still, though he had little experience with the sight, he could easily make out that this was some other canyon than his own and some other village that lay nestled at the bottom. The picture jittered and twitched so much that Dareth might not have noticed the earth shake had it not been for the avalanche of dust and rock that suddenly broke free from the northern wall and lumbered like a charging beast down to envelop an entire third of the once peaceful village.

Dareth heard someone scream a warning. He thought it foolish that anyone should think the villagers would hear such a cry from way up at the brink of the canyon. The terror stricken cry broke forth again and Dareth looked all about him to find its source. It wasn't until he put a hand to his mouth that he found his own lips curled back and his own throat belting out the hoarse cry.

Quickly Dareth threw a hand over his own mouth to stop his ridiculous screaming. But no sooner had he done so, than he felt himself jerked suddenly to his feet and dragged, stumbling through the mist to the opening of the cave mouth. As his eyes were torn from the carnage in the canyon, they chanced to a light for an instant on another scene. Fleeting, like the beat of a wing and then the sensation of breaking. Something, somewhere, breaking.

Then there was the stinging jolt of a slap across Dareth's cheek. A raw feeling there. It had not been the first blow. Dareth raised his head, bleary eyes focusing in on the figure before him. The wind blowing through the fissure, warm and moist, felt icy after

the closeness of the smoke cave. Dareth's head began to clear and he realized that it hadn't been his own hand clamped over his mouth at all. He recognized the calloused surface of the open palm in front of him, ready to deal another blow. The sight cleared what remained of the cobwebs.

"Wait," Dareth cried as he flinched away.

The wind rider's dusty face peered into his own, his one good eye searching for recognition in Dareth's roving gaze. Grifis cracked a grin as a recollection of his situation spread over Dareth's face.

"There you are," Grifis said. "I was worried you weren't going to come around."

"Why? How long was I out?"

Grifis gave Dareth a curious smile. "Not long, kid. Not long at all."

He took his glider from where it leaned against the inside of the opening and began to fasten it together. "So, what did you think?"

"I don't know what I should think."

"I don't know either. Been a long time since my first time. It was a little different than this. Anything pop out at you? It doesn't always, but sometimes."

"Well, Dareth began timidly. "It was as if there were things happening around me, things from other places like before, only much stronger. There was a horrible accident. A landslide."

Grifis chuckled gleefully. "You saw it then? Yes. Silvercliff Canyon." He slapped Dareth on the back. "And don't worry. That didn't happen. But it will. You saw the future, kid."

Dareth gazed up at the ribbon of sky above, pondering Grifis' words as the man flipped out his knife and began cutting away sections of vine to get at the roots.

"May as well not come back empty handed. Come on. We have a nice long flight back."

"Grifis," Dareth said.

"Yeah?"

"This is not deeproot, is it?"

"This? No. But I had to see what you could do. You don't dive for deeproot alone and there's none in my crew who could go so deep."

Dareth eyed the man. "But even you can't do it. That's what you're not telling me. You aren't strong enough either." Dareth said these last words with a surety, though he was uncertain where the knowledge came from.

Grifis stopped what he was doing and stared at Dareth, dumfounded.

"I saw it," Dareth said, slowly realizing the fact. "If you go down, you die. I saw that."

The wind rider slowly nodded. "Yes, it's true. I know it. But that's alright. There's someone else who might be able to help."

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Daesha trembled as she looked up at the canyon wall, so close in front of her. She seldom came to this place. She came more often than most, usually chasing after Dareth, but sometimes just to remember.



A post stuck up out of the sandy slope. The weathered wood showed no embellishments, only the names scraped across its fading surface. Daesha made certain to look at them all. She could not read the symbols but she knew well enough which had belonged to whom. And, though she lingered longer on the symbols that spelled the name of her husband, she wanted to remember all of her lost friends.

The wind kicked a bit of dust in her eye and she wiped it away. She gazed up at the sky between the crest of the two great walls of the canyon. How strange it looked, all undecided over a coming storm.

Daesha turned away from the memorial post. It held only part of the memories in its cracking surface. Those were the memories of a kind and gentle man. But those memories did not calm the uneasiness in her heart, as she looked upon the daunting cliff face. Another recollection did that for her. The recollection of a man, handsome, wild, frightened and mysterious. Once his presence broke through the veil of her mourning she didn't fear the crumbling walls. She had stayed in their shadow for days with him, caring for him, in a place where none were likely to discover. They would never understand.

Then he was on the ground beside her. His hair, bone-white, fell in wild rings over his scraped and bruised face. His eyes burned with an inner glow and roamed over the landscape, unable to find a place on which to rest. She cared for his ruined leg. The intensity in his eyes lessened, but he raved still of smoke and visions and things that she could not hope to understand.

"You're kind," he said once to her and he had looked, at that moment, to be in his right mind.

"I'm curious," she replied.

"That is rare, but don't bother with me. I was too late. I could have warned them."

"What do you mean?" Daesha looked at the sky again. It had decided on the storm. The wind grew angry.

"Look to your son."

"What?" Daesha wrinkled her brow. Why should he mention Dareth?

The man nodded in the direction of the memorial post and Daesha turned her head. The slope looked the same, only it rose to cover all but the last few inches of the post.

Daesha saw the situation in an instant. She leapt to her feet and scrambled up the slope. The sand scooted down the hill, robbing her progress, but eventually she reached the memorial. It could hardly be seen under the debris. All of the names lay below the drifting scabble now, but a new symbol had been scratched into the surface of the wood at the top. Daesha could read it no more than she could read the others, but she knew what it represented. She did not need the hermit's words to tell her that her son lay buried beneath that mountain of sand.

"No," Daesha screamed.

She fell to her knees and began to paw at the sand. Every handful she scooped away was replaced by more, sliding down from above. No matter what she did, she could not seem to make any progress.

The hermit's voice rose above the wind from where he still sat at the base of the slope.



“I said it would not all be pleasant.”

Daesha stopped for a moment, confused by his words. They made little sense, but somewhere in the back of her mind they stirred up a memory. She wasted little time on it. The memorial seemed to be disappearing beneath the ever growing pile. Dareth was in danger. She still could save him. Daesha dropped back to her knees again and began to dig. But somewhere, as if in another time or place, a hand gently wiped a cool cloth over the heat of her sweat-soaked brow.

“Grifis, how could you?” The girl’s tone was heavy with ire.

“How could I what?”

Biera slapped the big man ineffectually on the chest and stomped to the other side of the tent. Grifis knew the mood and he had learned over the past few years that the best tactic was to play dumb.

“You sent that boy into Pyramid Cave?”

“It all worked out.”

Biera threw her hands in the air. Her face turned that light shade of red that Grifis would never admit, made him tickle a little bit inside.

“I’m not your little student anymore, so stop treating me like I am. I may have been twelve when I was called, but that was thirteen years ago. You didn’t take me into Pyramid Cave until last year.”

“So?”

“I was delirious for three days after that.”

“But you see, that’s just it.” Grifis reached out and grabbed her around the waist. “He came to almost immediately after I got him out.”

“Got him out.” She shoved against his chest non-to-convincingly. “You had to drag him out of there. Doesn’t that tell you something?”

Grifis let his arms fall from about her middle and forced himself to contemplate his own rash actions.

“Yes, it tells me something.”

“You could have made him a vegetable. He wasn’t even called, and either way, nobody goes from a mere fruit patch to something like Pyramid Cave.”

“You’re right,” he said, switching to another tactic, he had learned to deal with her anger. “But you see, it all worked out. He’s strong. So what if he wasn’t called? Besides, I’m not so sure anymore that he wasn’t.”

Grifis remembered the glassy look in Dareth’s eyes. He’d recognized it for what it was. Not only had the kid seen, he had been able to comprehend. Now that was the good part.

“He saw the avalanche at Silvercliff Canyon. The same thing I was able to see, but that’s not all.”

“What do you mean?” Biera asked.

“He told me that I couldn’t help him. Do you believe the nerve? He said I was not strong enough to help him get the deeproot for his mother.”

“Well, he’s right isn’t he?”

He growled under his breath. “Yes, he’s right.”

Grifis stroked his chin. He went through the act of weighing different options even though he really knew of only the one. The process made coming to the eventual conclusion seem more like a choice and less like a necessity. Where else could he take the kid? If he could have avoided the trip he would.

Biera waited impatiently as Grifis drummed his fingers on the table. She knew the only available option as well. His puzzling over it only stretched her patience.

“Just say it,” she said.

“I’ve got to take him.”

“To Vesri?”

“Where else?” he repeated out loud, throwing his hands in the air.

“To the bottom of a deep fissure, that’s where else. He isn’t called. You know how Vesri feels about that.”

Grifis pounded a fist on the table, causing the candle flame to shudder and nearly go out. “Do you see any other choice? She is the only one who could hope to take him, and without the deeproot his mother will die.”

Biera scoffed at these last words. “Oh, well it’s refreshing to see such concern for a canyon dweller.”

Now Grifis’s face heated up. His good eye squinted and he poked his finger at the girl accusingly. “Now look here. If I don’t give a damn about those people then what have I been doing all these years? Don’t tell me I don’t care. What do you think this is all about anyway?”

Biera placed her hand over his mouth, and then replaced it with a soft kiss. Grifis kept quiet and let it happen. Clearly she realized that she’d gone too far. No sense making a battle of it. His cot was awfully cold when she chose to sleep in her own.

“I’m sorry. Of course you care. It was silly of me to suggest otherwise.” Having repaired the damage, Biera floated away to the other side of the tent again and pulled the tie from her thick, dark hair. “I’m just saying it isn’t going to be easy to convince Vesri.”

“I know it, especially as close as she and I are. But what else is there? I promised the kid. I’m going to take him in the morning so I will need you to deliver the message to the Seer at Silvercliff.”

“I can do that,” She sauntered back toward him letting her hair fall in front of her and brush over his face as she lowered herself onto his lap. “But I would much rather go with you. Why not send Mav or Belder?”

“You know you’re the only one I trust with a prophecy like that. But there’s nothing to keep you from meeting me there when you’re done.”

“I think I will,” she said, laying back with him on the cot.

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Dareth’s first concern was for the people of Silvercliff Canyon. He had never met them before, but in his mind the village was exactly like his own, populated with the same faces. Those people had never been overly kind to him, but they were the only people he knew, the only people he had ever known until now.

Grifis shoved the tent flap aside and poked his head in. “Are you about ready? We have a long trip ahead of us and I’m sure you’d like to get it over with as soon as possible.”

“Yes,” Dareth said, grabbing up the pack that Biera had prepared for him.

Grifis led Dareth to the brink of the fissure. They stopped at a well worn spot where the crack stretched a good distance across, giving ample space to get off the

ground and maneuver into the wind. Dareth donned Grifis's old wings. He fastened the straps across his chest, still unused to the feel of the rig on his back. He was becoming used to the feeling of being in the air, but there was always a small sense of disbelief over what he was about to do each time he readied himself to leap off into empty air.

Grifis went first. He took a running jump and caught the gale under his wings almost immediately, twisting in a spiral while he waited for Dareth to follow suit.

Dareth licked his lips. The anticipation beforehand was the hardest part to overcome. Once he got into the air, the thrill was enough to erase any misgivings he might have felt over the danger of the feat. This time he dropped only fifteen or twenty feet below the lip of the fissure before he managed to catch wind and bring himself back up.

They sailed on for a very long time. They traveled in the opposite direction from that which they took toward Pyramid Cave. If possible, the landscape that spread out before Dareth was even more fascinating. The wind gusts blew strong and they were able to sail far above the surface of the earth. Dareth could see for many miles in all directions and everywhere he looked the earth stretched out in dusty, broken chunks. In many places he felt certain that the inky blackness of the fissures covered more of his view than the land surrounding it.

The travelers did not stop until late afternoon. By then Dareth's arms ached from the constant grip he held on the wing straps. His stomach complained from neglect. Grifis disappeared along the edge of the fissure for a while, leaving Dareth to get a few sulfur coals going. When the man returned, a hare hung limply by the ears from his fist. Dareth's mouth began to water at sight of the creature. He loved the Keryli, but that and the hard bread that made up most of the fare they had brought along with them would be well set off by the flavor of meat.

Within half an hour the hare sizzled on a spit over the coals and the two men huddled in the lee of a large stone to escape the wind. They warmed their hands over the coals as the temperature dropped swiftly with the setting sun.

"This place we're going," Dareth asked. "What makes it so different from the places near your camp?"

"It isn't called the Deep for nothing," Grifis said. "The smoke is trapped deep under the earth. The further down you go, the thinner the veil between here and there. Some riders think that if you go deep enough, you'll come to a place where the earth stops and there is nothing but the smoke."

"And you have been down there?"

"I've gone into the Deep a couple of times, but no one has ever been down that deep and come back to tell."

"So how do you know about the deeproot? How do you know that it will help my mother?"

"Your mother is not the first to suffer like this," Grifis said. "There are other canyons and most of them suffer shakes all the time, sometimes bad ones. There have been a handful of cases like your mother over the years."

"And the deeproot worked for them?"

"For some it did. Not always. Not all had the chance to try it. It is nearly impossible to reach. We had a quantity from the last time someone went so deep,

but that was depleted long ago. We can't get them the deeproot if there is no one who can get to it."

"But you had it before. Someone was strong enough to get at it."

"It was brought up from the deep by the very person we are now going to see."

"Vesri?"

"She is very strong. She can handle much, but even she could not go down alone. It was a long time ago when she brought root up from that place and she didn't do it alone back then." The glowing, sulfur coals glinted like a memory in Grifis's eye. "My best friend was with her, but he is gone for good now I think."

"So then what hope do I have?" Dareth spoke in despair.

"Never say that. We'll talk to Vesri. We'll see what can be done. You don't want to give up before we have tried."

They finished the rest of their meal in silence. Dareth could not help but dwell on the difficulty of the task before him, despite or perhaps because of, Grifis's half-hearted words of encouragement. The wind rider claimed that the woman, Vesri, was dedicated to helping the canyon folk. But she had not been inclined to risk her life again to delve into the bowels of the earth for this deeproot. He wondered what might be different now. Why should she help him? He wrapped himself in a blanket beside the warm coals and tried not to think about it. His aching bones and exhaustion made the chore easier. Within moments sleep took him.

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"I can't move, Dareth." Kadnee's voice trembled with fear. She clung there, pressed tight against the wall, her muscles frozen.

"Reach your hand up!"

"I can't!"

"You have to," Dareth screamed.

Kadnee looked up at him. Her eyes showed utter terror. Then, as another gust of wind kicked up, Dareth watched the girl's fingers lose their purchase and she pitched backward into empty space.

Dareth's scream mingled with Kadnee's own as he watched her drop toward the boulder below, but they were no longer directly above it. Her body hit the edge of the big rock and bounced out into space, where it disappeared below.

"Kadnee! No!"

Dareth sat up, a scream on his lips. The light of still shouldering sulfur coals greeted him instead of the horrifying depth of the canyon he expected to see. He stared around him in confusion, trying to place where he was.

"It's alright, Dareth," came a voice from beside him.

He turned and focused on the man beside him, sitting on a blanket, warming his big hands over the coals.

"What? What's happening?" Dareth asked, his voice nearly hysterical.

"Don't worry. You were having a dream, not a good one from the sound of it."

"A dream? No that wasn't the same as before."

"You were seeing things that are not here, right?"

Dareth nodded and shivered at the memory of what he had just relived.

“It was Kadnee, my friend. She fell from the cliff.” Dareth wiped at his eyes. “She wanted to help me get the deeproot for my mother and she died because of it.”

Grifis nodded knowingly. “They aren’t all pleasant. Dreams don’t show the future the way the smoke can, but they do tell us something, even the bad ones.”

“But I don’t want to see that again.” He stifled a sob. “I don’t want to experience that again. I don’t want to dream.”

“Can’t help that, my friend. Some will be good and some bad. You’re not going to be quite the same from now on, I’m afraid. Maybe you needed to remind yourself of the girl.”

Dareth looked up at the sky where stars burned cold above him. How could he need reminding? Was she not in his thoughts practically every waking moment? Did he need his sleep to be plagued as well? He watched again as Kadnee fell, then shook his head to clear the awful sight from his mind.

“I don’t want this. I don’t want to see the future.”

“Oh, you won’t. Not in your dreams,” Grifis said. “Your dreams may show you what has come before, both good and bad. Or it may show you what you wish or desire, but none of it is real. You can never see the future in your dreams. That can only happen with the trance. It can only happen with the smoke.”

Dareth could not return to sleep despite the fact that morning still lay a few hours off. He lay with his blanket pulled up to his chin, staring up at the canopy above him. So strange that the sky should look so much the same as it did from his canyon home, when everything else around him was so completely different. He and Kadnee had sat looking up at those stars on many nights, he wondering out loud about their origins and she listening to him the way no one else ever would. By the time the sky began to brighten, Dareth decided his dream had really not been all bad. His thoughts of Kadnee since waking had been of happy things, and those were pleasant memories to relive.

Dareth and Grifis got an early start and sailed over the fissure all day again without stopping. Dareth marveled at the extent of the great network of fissures. A few days ago he could not have imagined that the world stretched so far. Now that he soared high above the land he found it easy to envision not only the fissures but other canyons as well, other villages like his own. Dareth’s universe had expanded in recent days to a point where his mind could simply not contain the enormity of it. And these riders, people like Grifis and Biera, people like Vesri, they watched over it all.

Dareth was glad when they stopped for the day. He had not thought it possible that his muscles could complain louder than after the first leg of the trip. He didn’t mind the pain. It felt good to stretch out in front of the coals once they made camp for the evening.

“How much farther do we have to go?”

“We’ll reach Vesri’s camp early tomorrow,” Grifis replied. “We’re nearly there. We could have pushed on and made it sometime late tonight but I didn’t see much point in that.”

“No,” Dareth agreed, rubbing his arms. “Tomorrow is fine.”

Just then a tremor shook the ground beneath them. One of the sulfur coals tumbled off of the pile and rolled onto the bare earth, trailing sparks as it went. Dareth

would hardly have noticed the disturbance but that the look on Grifis's face showed more than a little caution.

"What is it?" Dareth asked. "That wasn't much was it? We get tremors like that all the time in Crescent Canyon."

"No you don't." Grifis kicked the errant coal back over with the others and then scraped a pile of dirt over the stones with his boot. "If you're out here long enough you get to know the difference between an isolated tremor and the precursor to something bigger."

The ground grumbled again, stronger this time. Dareth followed Grifis's lead, grabbing up their belongings and stowing them in their packs.

"But what are we going to do?"

Another shake stopped Grifis from answering right away. Dareth stumbled and nearly lost his footing. His arms pin wheeled and he dropped the pack he carried to the ground, spilling half its contents.

"Hurry and get that stuff up and get your rig on," Grifis said. The best place to be when there is a shake is up in the air."

"You want to fly now?"

"If the ground won't stay still then it's best to stay away from it, wouldn't you say?"

A low ridge protected their site from the wind blowing off of the fissure. A few loose stones and a hail of dust rolled down from the ridge as the next shock kicked at the ground. Dareth worked frantically to get his glider strapped on. He worried over taking off under such conditions, but Grifis was right. He wanted to be far away from the surface.

Dareth's fear mounted as they made their way to the edge of the crack. Twice he was knocked to the ground as it began to heave and jerk in a chaotic dance. Grifis looked unperturbed by the event. He chuckled at Dareth's antics and caught him by the arm, helping him to stay on his feet the rest of the way along.

"Come on, kid. I guess we'll be getting into camp early after all."

The rider launched himself over the fissure. Dareth followed suit as quickly as he could manage. He wanted to be away before he went reeling again so close to the edge of the chasm. Once airborne, the gliders gained altitude quickly. Dareth gazed down at the ground laid out before him. He might be safe from falling objects, but watching the ground quake from above, where he could see the effects several miles, made the sweat rise on his neck to be whipped away by the icy chill of the night wind. The roar became deafening, and along with it came concussive waves of energy that blew through the air and washed over Dareth in his flight. They threatened to knock him off of his balance and send him spiraling downward if he did not concentrate on maintaining absolute control.

He looked up to see Grifis rising even higher. He followed even before the rider called down for him to do so.

"Those shock waves can take you right out of the sky if you aren't careful," he cried. "Best get as high as we can to get away from them."

The initial shake lasted for nearly two minutes. Two minutes watching the ground undulate like a cloth drying on the line. Here and there fresh cracks opened up in the



ground, hairline breaks that gobbled sand as they spread open. In other places the earth seemed to fold over on itself, churning up dark, steaming soil from beneath. By the time they had reached the top of the altitude they could manage on the updraft, the waves of pressure from below seemed hardly noticeable, like standing in the white water at the river and fighting to keep his feet in the flow.

Nearly an hour passed before the last tremors settled down and the ground returned to the solid stillness that Dareth was used to seeing. He glanced ahead of him to where the other glider swung along the black scar. Grifis did not appear to be ready to land and Dareth hoped that the remaining distance would not be great. Their meal had been interrupted. Dareth felt both fatigue and hunger. He hoped that Vesri would receive him well when they arrived, but right now all he really cared about was laying down somewhere out of the wind where the ground beneath him remained still.

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Smoke swirled lazily in the thin space between two massive rock walls. The figure that spun in the air between them rose and flitted expertly in the limited space. Her wingtips came near to the unforgiving stone several times, but she always angled away at the last moment, staying on course and rising in fits and starts. It was hard work to catch the updraft so far down inside the deeper fissures.

Vesri pulled hard on her wing straps. Her glider scooped at the meager wind underneath her. She looked up briefly and saw two other figures careening in the air above her, up where the wind blew strong and the walls pulled away from each other. She smiled. There was a certain comfort in knowing that others were nearby, even if it was only false comfort. If she ran into trouble down here, her companions would be unable to help. All of the riders under her control were veterans to be sure, but none of them could withstand the strength of the smoke at this depth. That ability belonged to her alone, and she needed to take great care when exercising it.

A few more well placed wing beats and Vesri felt the density of the red mist around her begin to fall away, only a little. Her lungs made room for the cleaner air that filtered down from above. Telisan saw her rising and called out, launching himself from a crack in the wall above to join the other two riders.

“How about it?” Telisan cried.

Vesri shook her head in an exaggerated way so that the gesture could be seen from above. No new tragedies on the horizon. Good news of course, though it made for a wasted trip to the depths and a couple of days to recover. She didn't often dive so deep, but her last visit to the crack that Telisan had just quitted had given her some clues. She saw the slide at Silvercliff. The vision hadn't been strong as Silvercliff was far off, in Grifis's territory, but she'd seen it all the same. She gave the one-eyed wind rider a moment's thought. They might have their differences, but at least she knew that if one of his territories was in danger, it would be well dealt with.

It wasn't Silvercliff that had sent Vesri to the depths. There had been that other thing, that thing she could not quite hold on to, softer even than the far off Silvercliff premonition. She'd grasped only a taste of it, enough to pique her curiosity.

Vesri continued to rise and the clean air came like a welcome boon to her lungs. Her stubbornness was legendary and perhaps she had stayed down too long. The hidden thing had continued to nag at her. She felt close to an answer. But no. She had waited for as long as she could, until the white spots began to explode in front of her eyes, until the aroma of Keryli became so sweet it made her want to wretch, and still there was nothing of consequence to help solve the puzzle.

Vesri flew past the crack where Telisan had been waiting. The others were nearly to the top of the fissure by now, but Telisan still circled, waiting for her to catch up. “You’re only human,” she remembered him saying to her more than once. “You can go too far just like anyone else.”

“If I did, there’s nothing you could do about it.” Her reply was always morbidly honest.

“They fared no better,” Vesri thought to herself, the turmoil in her gut lessening with each breath of untainted air. She felt a hint of embarrassment at the vanity her thoughts brought on, but it was true. Deep dreams were for her to see, no one else could do it. She never suffered confusion about the meaning, the purpose, the scope of a vision, at least not usually. And that’s what made her so mad.

“Perhaps it was nothing after all. But I felt certain...”

Telisan swooped to meet her now. A broad smile played over his handsome lips. The man was at least ten years younger than she and, as she returned his smile, she wondered again if he was only with her because of who she was, because of what she could do. What did it matter if he was? He slept in her bed all the same.

“Did you find what you were looking for?” Telisan asked once they had alighted on the ground at the top of the fissure.

“No.” She stomped her small foot in a mock tantrum and nearly fell over.

“Whoa,” Telisan said, reaching out a steadying hand. “I don’t see how you can navigate those fissures in your state and then, when you land, you can’t even stand up straight.”

“Practice.”

Telisan wrapped an arm around her thin waist and pulled her to him. He moved to brush her thick white hair out of her eyes but he scarce had the opportunity.

Without a thought, Vesri brought her balled fist up and landed a stinging blow across Telisan’s cheek. He stood nearly two feet over her and weighed perhaps twice what she did. At fifty years old, perhaps she should not have been able to subdue him so easily, but her time along the fissure had hardened her, and the delirium still fogged her brain. It would do so for at least a few more days.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” She said as he staggered backward, holding his hurt mouth. “you shouldn’t grab at me like that when I’ve just come up. I can’t think straight.”

“I guess not,” Telisan said, spiting blood at the ground and nursing his pride. “Why don’t you give me a holler when you’re feeling more yourself.” With that he stalked off, pulling at the straps of his glider as he went.

Vesri slipped out of her own harness. She smiled a little at the man’s retreating form. She hadn’t really meant to do it. It was true that the delirium was on her. Even now the dusty camp wavered in the air before her, and her legs felt watery beneath her weight. She hadn’t meant to do it, but it still brought a faint smile to her lips.

“These men are all the same,” she thought, stumbling toward her own pale tent. “They all think they have something to prove. If they can’t dive as deep as I can, well at least they can bed me.”

She made it to her tent and pulled aside the flap, using it to steady her as a wave of dizziness came and went.

“Well, not tonight.” She threw herself on the lumpy cot. “Tonight it’s going to be just me.”

Vesri prayed for a black, empty sleep to overtake her. She did not get what she wanted. Instead she suffered vivid dreams that alternately pushed and pulled her through sleep, eyes burning. Her head burned too, and the pain blurred the line so that she couldn’t tell if she was conscious or not. It was endless. It seemed endless anyway, until Telisan stalked in, boots scraping the earth far louder than they should have.

“Vesri?”

“Go away, Telisan. Go sleep in your own tent tonight.”

“That’s not it,” she heard him say through a fog. “We’ve got visitors.”

Vesri lifted her head from the extra cloak she had rolled up as a pillow. She moved too quickly and regretted the pain that lanced across her eyes. Telisan’s words intrigued her. A visitor was a rare thing.

“Who?”

“Grifis, and he’s got some kid with him.”

She sat up and glared at him as though he’d spit in her face.

“A new rider? Impossible.”

“I never saw him before,” said Telisan.

Vesri shook her head. “But how?”

“Called, I suppose.”

“Don’t you think I would know about it?” She snapped. “The boy is sick?”

“He looks well enough to me. Come see for yourself.” With that he turned and stomped out of the tent.

She threw a curse after him. Things within the tent did not remain still, but she managed to rise and rubbed the back of her neck with a slender, calloused hand. She reached into a basin on the low table in the corner and splashed her face with water, rubbing it into her eyes to ease the redness.

Vesri smoothed her white hair flat and stepped outside to greet the travelers. As leader of the crew, custom required it. Grifis stood near the central fire, gathered with Telisan and a few of the others. She craned her neck to make out the figure that crouched so close behind Grifis’s elbow. Small and wiry, but no face that she could yet see. She took a deep breath and steadied herself, then advanced on the group.

When Grifis noticed her approach he gave a perfunctory smile. He excused himself from the others and moved to meet her halfway.

“Vesri.” They embraced for a tense moment. “You’re looking well.”

She laughed. It was almost certainly a lie. She could well imagine the dark circles, the exhaustion rimming her eyes. And she could see that he knew at once that she’d been down...down deep.

“Did you find anything?” he asked.

Vesri eyed him. It would have been nice to have something to boast about.

“Nothing.”

“I don’t see what it is your looking for down there anyway. You get wind of just about everything in some of the shallower places. What’s the point?”

“Are you concerned about my well-being now?” Vesri asked.

“Just professional curiosity.”

“The point is, how will I know if I’ve missed something otherwise? What if it’s something important and its buried too deep to find anywhere else?”

Grifis let out an exasperated sigh. “It’s not just you, you know. You’re not responsible for the lot of them...”

“Well they certainly aren’t responsible for themselves,” she broke in. “They’re like sheep.”

“But we carry a little of the burden too, you know. Not just you. Why would you try and kill yourself? You don’t think you’ve saved enough lives?”

“Oh my. Grifis, you are worried for me after all.” She let sarcasm drip into her words. “I hope you didn’t come to give the same old lecture. I’ve heard it enough times already.”

Grifis’s eye softened. “No. No I didn’t.”

“Good. Then maybe you can explain that kid standing over there.” Vesri rubbed at her head. The strain of standing was causing lights to flash in front of her eyes. She needed to lay down, but she also needed for Grifis not to know how bad she felt.

“His name is Dareth.”

“And who heard the call?”

Grifis looked at the ground rather than face her searching eyes. “I could say that it was me but you would only call me a liar.”

Vesri shook her head in anger. “Of course I would. He wasn’t called. If he was called, I would know it, or I would feel the truth of it. But I didn’t feel anything.”

“So what,” Grifis countered. “Look at him.”

Vesri did look at Dareth now for the first time. Pale, thin. Not unlike herself at that age.

“He’s a canyon dweller. You can’t just bring one of them here. They can’t handle it. We’re supposed to help them, not drive them mad. How did you get him here? How many roots did you have to shove down his throat?”

“He flew with me,” Grifis said. “I’m telling you, he belongs here.”

“From what canyon?”

“Crescent.”

“Crescent?” Vesri looked incredulous. “How did he even get out?”

“There was a quake a couple weeks ago. A smoke pocket opened up and caught his mother in the haze. She lies in a coma and he has come for deeproot.”

Vesri’s eyes widened. She suddenly realized what the man had come to ask of her.

“You want me to help him get it? I’m sorry, but weren’t you just reprimanding me for diving so deep?”

“I know. It’s a lot, but there is a very important reason...”

“Sorry, I’ve only just come back from down there and I’m afraid I was a little too dazed to remember the deeproot. I can’t do that alone and you know it. Are you volunteering to dive with me?”

“No,” said Grifis. “I was thinking of Dareth.”

Vesri stared at him blankly. Her brain was muddled. She couldn’t maintain focus very well, but she felt certain she had heard him correctly.

“You wish to drive him mad then? Listen to yourself, Grifis. You’re starting to sound like my brother.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” said Grifis.

Vesri focused her feeble attention on Dareth again. He looked back at her this time. As their eyes touched each other, something itched at the back of her mind. Something stirred the visions that had so recently roiled among the swirling tendrils of the smoke. Then came an almost audible snap, and a piece of the puzzle fell into place.

The elusive premonition that haunted Vesri seemed suddenly to have shape. At first she smiled with a sort of victory. She didn’t like mysteries she couldn’t solve. Now she had the answer. This canyoner was the answer. But when Vesri tried to consider the question, the dark confusion returned. There was no context, no question for her new found answer to go with. Her smile faded as a hundred other mysteries crowded into her fevered head to replace the one.

“I need rest,” she said. “Leave me alone for now.” She turned and stalked off even as Grifis began to respond. Damn etiquette. She could barely stand. This situation was going to take a lot more thinking, and she just didn’t have it in her.

“Wake up, kid.” Grifis kicked Dareth’s foot where it poked out from underneath the thin blanket.

Dareth realized without opening his eyes that the earth was grumbling again. When he did open them, he shut them again immediately. The earth settled and a pale glow touched the sky, but the sun still hid over the horizon. He tucked his foot back under the blanket and pulled the worn, bit of cloth tight around him to combat the chill that the dying fire let in. Cold seeped up from the ground as well, and his pack made for a hard pillow.

Grifis prodded him again, this time hard enough to convince Dareth that he wouldn’t be ignored.

“What are you doing?” Dareth asked, rubbing the sleep from his eyes and peering at the wind rider. Grifis pulled the straps of his pack tight and dropped it on the ground beside him.

“I’ve got somewhere to go.”

“Go? We’ve only just gotten here,” Dareth protested. “We don’t even know if that woman is going to help us. We can’t leave now.”

“We aren’t. You’re staying here.” Grifis crouched down in front of him. “Vesri was half delirious last night when I spoke to her. She looked pretty bad, and she may be that way for a couple of days. But once she comes around, I’m sure everything will be alright.”

“You never said anything about leaving. I don’t know any of these people.”

“I’ve only just decided on this little trip. I didn’t know I was going myself until about an hour ago. Besides, you hardly know me all that well either, or had you forgotten?”

“But I trust you.”

“Do you? Remember the pyramid cave? How would you feel if I told you that I didn’t have any idea whether or not you were going to come out of there a gibbering idiot?”

Dareth squirmed uncomfortably at the thought. “But I didn’t.”

“No, you didn’t, did you?” He grabbed his pack and slung it over his shoulder. “And that’s the thing. That’s why I’ve got to leave for a while. And that’s why I’m sure that Vesri will have no choice but to help you get the deeproot. She’s the only one who can do it, you know. I can’t help you, at least not with that.”

“But I don’t trust her. I don’t think she likes me. Did you see the way she looked at me last night?”

“Vesri doesn’t like too many people. But she has dedicated herself to averting tragedy for the people of the canyons. She considers it her personal mission and she’s pretty zealous about it. When she’s in her right mind, she’ll be fine.”

Dareth met Grifis with a pitiable stare.

“Look, Biera is supposed to meet us here after she delivers the message at Silvercliff. She’ll probably be here before Vesri comes out of her tent again, and I’ll be back myself in four or five days. You’ll be fine.”

Grifis slapped him on the arm and gave an encouraging grin. Dareth watched as he rose and headed toward the fissure with his glider tucked under his arm.

He slid his head back under the blanket, trying to return to sleep, but he couldn’t. His mind moved too quickly. He wondered what he was doing here, in a place that he hadn’t even known the existence of a couple of weeks ago. The memories of what it had been like in the canyon, his canyon, plagued his thoughts. He thought about his mother, still lying there in endless sleep, waiting for him to return. Waiting for him to save her.

Dareth hadn’t cried much since leaving the canyon. Living among the villagers at home had made him good at suppressing his feelings. He had cried that first night after Kadnee fell, nothing more. But the tears began to fall now. He didn’t blubber. They were quiet tears. Tears that no one would notice if he kept his head under the blanket and didn’t sob much.

A few minutes later Telisan ducked out of his tent and blew a warm breath over his hands against the morning cold. Dareth rubbed at his eyes with the corner of the blanket and feigned sleep as the man approached and grabbed up a handful of brush.

Telisan tossed the brush over the dying embers in the fire pit. The flames came to life again and he rubbed his hands together.

“The cold ground treated you well, I hope,” Telisan said.

Dareth peered out from under the blanket, then scooted up to a sitting position and stuck his hands over the fire’s renewed flame.

“It was alright.”

“Good, good.” Telisan stared at the boy for several minutes before continuing bluntly. “So Grifis says that you weren’t called. Is that true?”

Dareth shrugged. “If you mean, did the Seer send a message for me, then no.”

“The Seer, yes.” Telisan chuckled.

“I don’t know about all of that. I just want to get the deeproot for my mother.”

“Ah yes, your mother. She was exposed to a smoke pocket, is that right?”

Dareth nodded.

“You aren’t too used to shakes over there in Crescent Canyon, are you? Not the big ones anyway.”

Dareth shook his head.

“Must be a nice place to live.”

He thought about it. Grifis had said the same thing to him. He surprised himself to find his head nodding agreement. It was a nice place to live. He hadn’t thought so when he’d been there. Now he would give anything to be back there, living the mundane life of a herder.

“Well, you weren’t called. That ought to drive Vesri right crazy. She likes to know everything that’s going on. Most of the riders who have been called in recent years, it was she who heard it. And if it wasn’t her then you can be damn sure she knew something about it anyway.”

“She’s strong then?” Dareth asked, still not entirely certain what such a statement meant. “Grifis thinks she can help me get the deeproot.”



“She’s strong. If anyone can dive for the deeproot it’s going to be her. What I would be more worried about if I were you, is the idea that you can follow her down there. She has been doing this forty years. It takes a long time to be able to do what she does and most will never get that far. There have been people who have tried to match her before and they went insane trying.” Telisan shrugged in a casual way. “Maybe you are meant to be here, even though you weren’t called. You made it this far and you look alright to me. But if she needs a second to get the deeproot, I’d look someplace else if I were you.”

“But Grifis says there is no one else who can do it.”

“As far as I know, he’s right. But that doesn’t make it any less dangerous for you, kid.”

“I don’t know anything about being called. I never even knew about this smoke until a few weeks ago.” He furrowed his brow at the big man with grim determination. “But if that’s what I have to do to save my mother then I’ll do it.”

Telisan laughed. “You’ve got guts, kid. That’s the first thing you’ll need, so you’re on your way.” He grunted and rose to his feet. “Look, I don’t like waking up to an empty stomach so I’m going to find something. I imagine you could eat, am I right?”

Dareth nodded.

“Good, You’ll be in better sprits after anyway.”

The wind rider stalked off in search of food and Dareth sat thinking about what he’d said. “A nice place to live.” It was not how he had ever thought of the Great Canyon. He had never been content. But now he’d give anything to tuck his head under that blanket and wake up in his own dull hut in the village. He did stick his head under the blanket, but he stayed right where he was.

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So much twisting and turning going on wherever it was that Vesri floated just then. Not an unfamiliar place, but one doesn’t get used to this. It was not the concrete touching dreams of the smoke trance either. Not those you could push into, past your own experiences to touch something else real, something else not yet formed. No. This was tamer than that, but Vesri knew her art. She knew there could be answers found here as well. She knew there were connections to be made, even after the smoke was far away. Things she might not have noticed at first.

Here and there bits of her latest puzzle flitted among the inconsequential majority of flickering vignettes. There were pieces that glowed brighter than the rest, no doubt. But the obtuse edges didn’t fit together quite right. She got the distinct impression those edges were worn, and that was the problem with dreams. They were only a copy, and an imperfect one at best.

The fever in her head gave way to a cold sweat. Vesri crawled out from under the vivid dreams, her muscles aching with the effort. She groaned and sat up from her cot, the thin, sweat-scented blanket falling to the floor. She brushed a hand through her tangled white hair and smacked her lips at the taste of her tongue.

The flap on the tent flew aside, revealing an unwelcome streak of daylight. Telisan stepped inside with a grin on his face.

“Well, well. Look at you,” he said. “Back so soon?”

Vesri glowered at him, but the look melted to a soft smile as he handed her a cup of cool water. She tilted it back and savored the cleansing swallows that cleared the taste of days from her mouth.

“How long?” she asked when she had drained the cup.

“Not long, really. Day before yesterday.”

Vesri looked at the thin, scabbed crack in Telisan’s lower lip. She pursed her lips as the memory floated up.

“So sorry.” She reached up with a finger to trace the sore spot.

“No worries.” He grinned. “You hit like a girl.”

She smiled at him, but even now other things were floating up, flashes and words that took their time shuffling into proper order. When they did, Vesri’s face registered immediately. Instantly her lazy calm vanished.

“Where is Grifis? He was here?”

“Yes, he was. Gone now.”

Vesri felt a moment’s relief. She had no idea why. Grifis didn’t visit often. They got on well with each other...once. But that had been a long time ago, hadn’t it? And whose fault was that? Probably best that he left without speaking to her.

Vesri furrowed her brow. She knew that wasn’t quite right. They had spoken, hadn’t they? About what? And then she had it.

“Dareth,” Vesri said. Her voice was flat. “What about that kid?”

“Oh, he’s still here,” Telisan said. “Grifis left him. The boy says Grifis will be back for him in a few days, but doesn’t know where he’s gone.”

“What? Why?” Vesri stood up. In her anger she hardly noticed the dizziness. “Why would he do that?”

“Don’t know. The kid’s alright though. He wanted to do some gliding so I took him to the fissure up by Black Rock.” Telisan chuckled. “He’s pretty good, you know? I mean he’s rough. But he’s only been gliding a week or so. Pretty damn good.”

“I don’t care,” Vesri snapped. “He’s not called, is he? I remember that much.”

“No, but Grifis took him to Pyramid Cave, first time.”

Vesri turned a sour look at him.

“That’s what he says.” Telisan shrugged. “I’ve been in there before, and Dareth told me about what he saw. Sounds right to me.”

Vesri didn’t say anything. She was thinking about Dareth. She remembered seeing him briefly. She remembered looking into his eyes. There was that look, the dreams, the smoke trance, something from way back in her memory, all combined together and then she saw again the piece that had fallen into place.

“What is it, Ves?” Telisan asked as he saw the light start in her face.

She didn’t answer right away. Instead she leapt from the cot and grabbed her glider, the same worn and reliable wings she’d been using for the better part of nine years. She snatched her root pouch from the low table beside her cot as well.

“Where is that canyoner now?”

“When I left him he was still doing circles around Black Rock.”

“Well, when he gets back, you keep an eye on him. Do you hear me? Don’t let him go anywhere else. I want to see him.”

“Fine. But where are you going?”

“I’m going for a dive.”

Telisan stood up in protest but Vesri was already through the doorway and heading for the fissure’s edge.

“Are you crazy?” he cried, matching her mad pace. “You’ve only just recovered from a delirium. Or maybe you haven’t quite recovered.”

“I’m fine.” She hardly noticed his words. “I don’t need to go deep. One of the shallower caves will do fine. Just do what I said. When he comes back don’t take your eyes off of him.”

Vesri unslung the two halves of the glider and bound them in place, then tossed the rig over her shoulders and began to fasten the straps. Telisan just stood there and smoldered at her. She rolled her eyes at his look, there was no time to deal with it just then.

“Just do it, Telisan. I don’t need to explain myself to you, do I?”

Vesri didn’t wait for an answer. She leapt from the lip and shot downward, the surface falling away at an uncanny speed. She reached thirty feet deep before ever turning her wings into the whistling air beneath. She glanced back to where she’d been standing and saw Telisan, still watching her as she went. No time to think about that now. The surface world fell away from her mind as swiftly as it shot away overhead. She swam in her element now and she navigated it with a skill and grace that was unmatched.

A crack lay nearby, only about ninety feet deep, but it would suffice for her purpose. She nearly had all of the pieces worked out and she found they fit into a much older puzzle. It was a puzzle she had almost forgotten about. No, that wasn’t true. She could never really forget that one. Three days ago she had gone down near to the limit of what she could take. She thought that the trip had been useless. But then she saw the canyon, Dareth. Perhaps it was chance. But Vesri saw things that were yet to come. She didn’t much believe in chance.

The crack loomed ahead of her. Thick, ropey vines of Keryli clung to the walls, painting an undeniable symbol of the smoke across the wall of rock. There was nothing special about this particular seep. The smoke leaked through veins in the stone with little real vigor, but it was all Vesri needed.

Despite her speed, she dropped gracefully against a jutting stone to the left of the opening. No ledge existed beneath this opening, so Vesri had to maneuver herself into the crack with her wings still strapped to her back. She got herself wedged in with both feet and shrugged out of the harness, leaving it stuck right in the opening. Then, with her teeth, she loosened the knotted strap that held closed her small, leather root bag. She stuck a large, bitter piece in her mouth and sucked at it.

Vesri hardly needed to turn and crawl along the short path to where the red haze leaked out. She could already feel the effects of it spewing in small, pulsing spurts from a dozen small cracks in the deeper part of the opening. The twisting, swirling visions flowed close behind.

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“The jug is empty,” Comarin said, tipping the object in question upside down to prove his point.

“Yes.” Lorvin’s response came slow. “Yes it is.”

“I have to say, I’m going to miss it.” Comarin tossed the jug over his shoulder. It plopped down into the sand a foot from the Seer’s base. When he heard it thud, the old man leapt up and capered about, then laughed until a cough wracked his lungs.

The corners of Lorvin’s mouth turned up in response, and Comarin jammed his stick into the ground with an air of indignation.

“Damn it, man. I’ve made some good fruit wines in the past, but this is by far the best batch yet. Will you at least have the decency to pretend you are enjoying it?”

Lorvin stared at Comarin, trying to formulate a response to the outburst.

“I’m really quite dizzy, you know.” he finally said.

“Hah,” Comarin cried. “Well that’s something then, isn’t it? Thought I might bring some spirit out of him. That’s what I thought, but at least he’s dizzy anyway.”

Comarin resumed his seat, still grumbling. It wasn’t the first day the two men had remained at their post past dusk. Nearly a ritual now, they inevitably found each other walking past the fields each afternoon. Comarin stomped along until he noticed Lorvin hurrying to catch up with him. Perhaps the companionship was important to the medicine man, now that his daughter was not with him. Comarin always shrugged and tolerated the company. No need to be rude. And, though he tried to deny it to himself, he had grown to like it.

Now Comarin looked at the village leader, sitting on his haunches with his head resting precariously between two meaty hands.

“Doubtless thinking of his daughter,” Comarin said under his breath. “A fool I was to think he might feel nothing simply because he could not wail for her. I’m the fool, really. I should pity him for not knowing what to do with the pain.”

“Remember your daughter, my friend.” Comarin said suddenly to his companion.

Lorvin looked up, surprised. “I was only just thinking of her.”

“Good. Then let us hope that tear in your eye is for her and not for my profession of friendship just now. It’s just something one says, you see?”

Lorvin nodded and the old man dropped his gaze to the earth.

“I have no daughter, but I had a sister once. Don’t much remember my parents as we were both called young. But there was always my big sister, you know.”

“And she is dead?” Lorvin asked.

“She? I think not. She became very strong. I don’t doubt that she still lives. But you miss my point. She is dead to me.” Comarin thought about his words. “Or I am dead to her. Much the same thing. You see, we both were strong once, with different ideas.”

“You had a falling out?”

“Oh, who haven’t I had a falling out with?” Comarin asked in a huff. “Had one with you didn’t I? Do you know, I managed to put out my best friend’s eye in rage once?”

Lorvin shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

“Yes, you got off easy. I couldn’t look at what I had done to him after that. And I couldn’t speak to my sister again either.”

“Why not?”

“We both saw things, you see?” Comarin said. “We saw things in a way that I could not begin to make you understand, but we disagreed over the meaning of what we saw, so we quarreled.”

Comarin laughed at his own words. “Quarreled, I say. Foolish me. Really we fought until both of us were nearly dead. But I survived. She did too, I’m sure.”

“Why do you tell me this?” Lorvin asked.

“Only to show how silly I am. My advice to you is to remember your daughter who is gone, while I have forgotten my own kin who yet lives.”

Comarin stared drunkenly at the faceless statue that loomed above them both.

“Another day and still no word from you, you miserable heap of stone.”

“You speak so to the Seer?” Lorvin said.

“If you knew him the way I did you’d understand. Come on, let’s go back and check on our lady. She must be missing us by now.”

“And you really think that word of Dareth will come from the Seer?” Lorvin steadied himself and rose to his feet. “He has delivered his messages so rarely and they have always concerned great happenings.”

“It will come through the Seer or not at all. Of that I’m sure. Though which it will be, I can’t quite say.”

The two men started slowly down the steep slope and across the field, leaning together for support as they went.

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Atop a large stone near the rock wall, a short distance from the lonely statue of the Seer, a figure hunkered in the shadows. He watched two men stumble down the old path toward the canyon dweller’s village.

Not until they had disappeared around the bend did the man rise and leap from his stone to another beside it and closer to the ground. As the moonlight hit him, the glint of one good eye twinkled along with the grin that lit the rest of his face.

“You crazy rascal,” Grifis said.

He hopped to the third stone and then the ground, his boots striking the earth with a solid thud. He dropped a pack from his back and knelt down to dig through its contents. At length he pulled forth a narrow, wooden tube, corked at the end. Grifis pulled the cork free and slid a parchment from out of the tube. He leaned toward the moonlight and reread his handiwork.

“Didn’t I know it?” Grifis said as he finished with the scroll. “Didn’t I know it would be you all along, old friend? I’d have thought you a tottering old man by the look of you, but your tongue gave you away.”

Grifis remained kneeling there, considering. Then he reached into his pack again and pulled out a thin, charcoal stylus. He rolled the parchment out over the surface of his pack and bent down to scratch several more symbols across the bottom of the page. His addition complete, Grifis rose and rolled the scroll tightly as he approached the base of the statue. The wind rider reached into the recess in the stone and pulled out the little wooden box that resided within. He placed his message inside the box and returned it to its place. Then he quickly remounted the stones and made a blind leap to the shelf above.

As he crawled toward the a point where he could stand erect, Grifis couldn't help but laugh. Things had grown a little bit clearer.

Dareth could no longer see Telisan soaring against the backdrop of the afternoon sky. The rider had taken the currents back southward toward the camp to check on Vesri. Now that no eyes looked on him, Dareth began to flit about in the air, enjoying the freedom. Telisan had brought him to a place where several narrow cracks criss-crossed each other in close proximity. Dareth rose and fell, arced and swooped from one current to the next. For a while he practiced those things that Grifis had taught him in the few days before they'd left for the deep places. As he soared near to those deep places now, he saw little to impress him beyond what he had already witnessed. Certainly the cavernous cracks tumbled down into an inky blackness, but so too had the fissures near Grifis's camp. Were these really so much deeper?

Dareth made no conscious effort to do so, but he found himself dipping down between the close walls of the fissure more and more. Each time, he went a little deeper and stayed a little longer, scanning through the black for a glimmer, something that would give away the great depth of the opening. Before long something did register in the corner of his eye, low on the western wall of the fissure. The soft, purplish luminescence of Keryli. Once it came clear, Dareth noticed two or three more blooms spotting the dark walls on either side. He fingered a pouch tied to the strap of his glider. He still had some of the root that Grifis had given him.

"Don't be a fool," Dareth said to himself. He floated past the first glowing patch, but the second loomed even closer, higher up on his right and still more enticing.

He considered what he had learned. These roots had been deemed by Grifis to be strong, gathered from deep places. Not of the deepest. But still, these cracks in the walls of the fissure here, none of them could be considered deep.

In the end his curiosity could not be assuaged. Dareth changed course and aimed for the next seeping crack he saw. He could just investigate, see if it was safe before going any further. The opening Dareth selected was not deep at all. A well formed ledge ran beneath the opening, partly natural and partly chipped away long ago by human hands. This crack saw regular use. Dareth could see that. He landed easily and crouched down, pulling free of his straps.

Keryli lay sprawled over the rough stone. The thickening vines disappeared into the opening. The fruits here grew smaller and paler than those at the pyramid cave. Dareth plucked one and sank his teeth through the skin. Sweet.

He gazed at the crack in the rock wall with excitement. A soft mist of red wafted out and curled around his head. He considered his last experience. Grifis had been next to him then, and the wind rider had carried him. No telling if he would be able to get himself out if he had to. He opened the pouch and selected a large dark piece of root from it. He studied the plant before placing it in his mouth. Nothing special about it really. It looked little different from the roots and tubers that went into the stew at home, but there was no mistaking the bitter taste of it. It bit at Dareth's tongue in a strangely pleasant way. It had no physical effect on him other than the possibility that it dulled his fear of



the dark opening. Once he felt the root crush between his teeth, he suddenly knew there would be no danger for him hidden within the blackness of the hole. The others may have worried about his calling, but at this moment he knew that he was meant to be here.

Dareth lodged his glider between a pair of stones and crouched down low to fit through the small hole, for that was all this crack proved to be. The whole opening extended perhaps four feet into the rock and cut down another four feet. A thin film of scummy water, collected slowly over the years, filled the base of the hole. The thick vines sprouted from the stone around it. Smoke bubbled from two tiny cracks near the surface of the puddle. It was not a strong flow, steady and thin, but as soon as Dareth put his face down into the thick of it, he felt a familiar shifting of his perspective. A pair of slowly churning, crimson trails thickened about his eyes. Soon the whirlpools twisted stronger and the edges of each began to interfere with the other. Shards of light flickered in the spewing overflow, and images wavered within them like the dreams he had been experiencing each night. Some of them he recognized, copies of those that had appeared to him at the pyramid cave. Some came clearer, more vivid, while others appeared as though through a rippling current. Eventually he began to see patterns here and there. It was as if he stood in ten places at once, seeing ten different and distinct scenes, but the pieces of each were all jumbled together. The experience made him dizzy, but he felt a certain amount of control that he didn't remember having before.

He remained within the cave for a long time. He had no idea, when he emerged, how much time had actually passed, but the light above had dimmed perceptibly. The updraft rolling through the fissure cleared his head almost immediately. The visions remained. Very little of what he had seen made any sense at all, but the pictures were clear. Now that he was away from the dizzying effects of the smoke, some of the details crystallized. He remembered seeing the canyon he'd seen before. The canyon at silver cliff, Grifis had called it. Only this time he had seen hundreds of figures huddled in a cave near the base of one of the cliffs. The destruction he had seen before was still there but the huts that fell under the weight of the tumbling stone now stood empty. A goat pen near the edge of the village lay buried under debris but no animals died under the crushing weight of the earth. They too occupied the cave, hunkering along with their human masters, waiting for the catastrophe to end.

That was the clearest picture that had come to him. He felt a flutter in his chest as he thought about it. Somewhere within himself, he knew that what he had seen would come to pass. He knew that Biera had reached them with her warning and that the canyoners listened.

Despite the elation that this revelation gave Dareth, there was something else, something that pulled down heavily on his thoughts without revealing itself to them. It was something that hid among the more scattered pieces. Something he couldn't put together. Whatever it was, it felt dark, as if it was something to fear. That part needed no interpretation.

Dareth clasped his glider back over his shoulders with mixed feelings. He remained so deep in thought about it that he didn't even think about the distance that yawned below him as he leapt from the crack and caught the updraft, swinging out into the center of the fissure and rising slowly back toward the surface. He broke past the lip of the fissure and above the surface again, still very near to the cave he had chosen. He

sailed along with the sun dipping toward the flat earth on his left. Several miles still remained between him and the rider's camp.

At one point Dareth watched as the earth rattled from a shake below him. Nothing very strong, but the jagged edge of the fissure crumbled away at the jostling. It was true what Grifis had said about being in the sky during a shake. It was the safest place. There was even something strange and awe inspiring about it, as if one were apart from the world and its shuddering.

Dareth thought about Vesri as he approached. The woman had not emerged from her tent for the entire two days he had been at the camp. She would come out soon enough. Telisan had assured him of that just this morning. Would she help him? Dareth remembered the look she had thrown at him. The memory of it inspired little confidence. Grifis claimed she was delirious from the smoke and that, if she had any reservations, she would feel differently given time to recover. He didn't quite understand about the delirium. He hadn't experienced anything like that.

Seeing the figure of Telisan, waiting for him at the place where the two of them had taken off from that afternoon, did little to assuage his worry. The man waved him over and Dareth immediately shifted to approach.

"Enjoy yourself?" the wind rider said once Dareth had alighted next to him.

"I did. I don't think I will ever get used to the feeling of it."

Telisan smiled. "Sadly, you will. It isn't always so new and exciting. I wish I could feel it again the way you are right now."

"I don't suppose there has been any word from Grifis or Biera?" Dareth still felt leery to speak too much with this man of Vesri's.

Telisan shook his head. "Not a word yet. Vesri has come around though."

Dareth looked up with little surprise on his face. He had both hoped and feared as much. He didn't look forward to facing the strange little woman on his own. Perhaps a bit longer and Biera would be there. True, Telisan had been friendly enough over the last few days, but he would surely side with Vesri in any situation. There would be no support there if Dareth needed to convince the woman to help. Why had Grifis chosen to leave at such an inopportune time?

"Has she said anything about me?" Dareth asked.

"She mentioned you, yes." Telisan looked back behind him where a few low hills hid the bulk of the twisting fissures and the camp.

"Do you think she might help me get what I need?"

"Dareth, Vesri is a strong woman. She has been at this a long time, and there is hardly a prediction that is made, even as far away as Grifis's territory, that hasn't had her hand on some of the most important pieces. She is amazing. I am in awe of her, a little smitten too, I don't mind saying." He looked gravely at the boy now. "But such power has its price. She bears responsibility for many, many people, at least in her own mind. These are people she feels can't care for themselves, and in many ways she is right about them. But is the woman entirely in her right mind? I can't say she is, not really."

"What do you mean?"

"She came around. But still there was a shining in her eyes. Something she had pieced together still held her and it was strong enough to send her right back down to the

smoke. But before she went down, she bade me find you. She told me not to let you out of my sight. Something about the way she said it didn't sit well with me."

"Are you saying she is not going to help me?" Dareth asked. Despite his previous doubt, he couldn't believe it. "Why?"

Telisan shook his head. "You don't understand. This isn't about whether or not she will help you get to the deeproot. I'm certain she won't."

"Then what?"

"I think you need to get away from here," he said. "You need to get away quickly, before she comes back up and finds you."

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Comarin marched up the pathway with Lorvin by his side. The previous day's drunk made his head heavy on his bony shoulders. The trip had become a daily ritual with the two men. They moved silently. A certain solemnity pervaded their mood at these times. Their trip was always in vain but Comarin liked having a purpose. Walking in silence to the Seer made him feel as if he were doing something more than just sitting in the tent beside Daesha, whispering words of encouragement to a woman too far gone to hear him.

Comarin looked at the man who walked beside him. Lorvin needed the distraction as well. He spent nearly as much time with Daesha, and when he wasn't there, he could be found down by the river, sitting next to Kadnee's fresh grave. The man still did not shed his tears, but Comarin knew better than to question his love.

Despite the empty face of the Seer, Comarin fancied the thing had begun to taunt the two men over the last several days. He felt no reverence for the deity and he suspected that Lorvin's reverence had flagged in the face of recent events. Still, the idol held a certain sway over them and they felt a renewed hope for something each time they made the trip.

Comarin took the lead today. He dug his walking stick into the soft sand at the base of the cliff and pulled himself up toward the platform in front of the statue. The hermit's old eyes picked out something strange immediately. The dust sprinkling the platform around the statue had been disturbed. Comarin was certain he had left an empty wine bottle beside the base of the Seer, and now there was no sign of it. He glanced back at Lorvin, but the medicine man didn't seem to notice any difference. He just stood idly by, waiting to hear the same news they had gotten every other day since Dareth had left. "No news. Perhaps tomorrow."

Comarin looked toward the opening in the base of the statue. He could see the end of the ancient, wooden box that resided there. It looked the same on this occasion as on any other, but then it would, wouldn't it? He hobbled forward and reached his fingers into the hole. The box slid out with a scrape and Comarin pried the lid free.

A yellowing scrap of parchment lay within, rolled tightly and unraveling a bit once the lid came free. Comarin let out a gleeful whoop before he could stop himself, and Lorvin instantly came awake from his reverie.

"What is it? Do you have something?"

“We do.” Comarin dropped the lid of the box in his excitement as he removed the scroll and pulled it open. The hermit’s eyes rolled over the contents of the message and he nodded with understanding. His gaze lingered long on the last of scrawling symbols. It looked as if it had been scratched there as an afterthought and had little to do with the rest of the note.

“Stay awhile,” the last line read. A simple message, requiring little interpretation, though the hermit felt sure that this portion was meant for his eyes only. It was written in rude, cryptic characters that would hardly be recognizable to the barely educated medicine man of Crescent Canyon.

“Well?” Lorvin asked, impatience coloring his voice.

“He’s made it. We know that much.” Comarin handed the message to Lorvin. He has found those who can help him, but we still don’t know how long we may have to wait.”

“Lorvin took the paper and read over it himself.

“What is this portion at the end? The strange characters?”

“Can you not read that?” Comarin asked. “Yes, I was confused. I don’t recognize that part.

Lorvin looked at the hermit. Comarin couldn’t be sure the man believed him, but Lorvin did not press the matter.

“You should take this back to the village with you,” Comarin said. “People will want to know.”

“And what about you?”

“Me? Oh, I think I am going to stay for a while yet. We know Dareth is safe now, don’t we? Or at least he was a few days since. I’m going to remain here a while. I have some things to think about.”

Lorvin hesitated. The medicine man seemed little convinced that Comarin was not up to something, but he hadn’t the conviction to pursue it, so he rolled the parchment back up and tucked it in his sleeve. Comarin retrieved the box from the ground and replaced the lid. He gently wiped the dust away before sliding it back into place.

“I will take the news back to the village,” Lorvin said. “Take your time here.” Lorvin turned to go but he looked back at Comarin immediately. There almost looked to be a smile on the dour medicine man’s face.

“This is good news, is it not?”

“It is indeed.” Comarin assured him. He watched the man hurry down the path toward the village.

He waited for Lorvin to disappear entirely then settled himself down on a low rock and waited. Nothing happened immediately. In fact the hermit began to grow impatient.

“I’m all by myself now. You can come out, or do you enjoy keeping an old man waiting?”

At first no sound answered Comarin’s words, but then a low chuckle broke from the top of a large stone near the cliff face.

“Old man? Have you been stuck so long in this canyon that you are beginning to believe your own lies?”

Comarin glanced up at the stone. He recognized the voice on the spot, but made no move to investigate or to respond. A shadow stretched out from the stone as the figure atop it rose. Still Comarin did not move.

The rough thump of boots hitting the earth sounded, as the man jumped down from his vantage and stomped toward Comarin.

"I'll admit, you look it. But we both know you're no more than twelve years my senior."

Now Comarin glanced up for the first time. The man eyed him from barely three feet away.

"That only means you're getting old too. Not my fault, is it?" He pointed off to where Lorvin had disappeared around the bend in the path. "Your message? I guess I should have figured it would be you, Grifis."

The wind rider chuckled again and sat down on the stone beside Comarin.

"Did you not think, once you sent that kid up top, that I wouldn't guess who the crazy old hermit he kept going on about might be?"

"Wasn't a secret really."

"No, but the way you ran off. I didn't think I'd be seeing you again."

"That was the plan."

The two men sat silently for a while longer. Despite the years that had separated their last meeting, neither of them could think of just what to say to the other.

"Nice place you chose here," Grifis said at length. "Quiet. Not a lot of shakes."

"It was hardly on purpose," Comarin replied. "I was out of my mind when I ran off from the deep place. I was delirious. Luck brought me here after I nearly died out on the cracked earth. I flew down here at night and probably still would have died if a girl hadn't found me and cared for me."

"Your sister looked for you for a long time. She went down deep a lot after you left. I'm not sure if she felt bad over what happened or if she was still angry and feared that you might do something."

"Pig-headed as Vesri is?" said Comarin. "More of the latter I'd guess."

"Probably."

Comarin turned a quizzical eye toward Grifis. "And what about you? Have you been looking as well? Have you been waiting for retribution?"

"Retribution?" Grifis stared back with a look of surprise spread over his grizzled face. "What, for this?" He lifted the patch over his left eye and exposed the pink, scarred surface beneath where the orb should have been. Grifis laughed out loud when he saw the hurt look in Comarin's eyes.

"Do you think I have been harboring hatred for you all this time over my eye?"

Comarin didn't respond. He just turned his gaze back to the ground between his feet.

"I have another, you know. Besides, I don't blame you for that, at least not entirely. Vesri is just as much to blame, the smoke, and of course there's me. I should have just stayed back and let the two of you kill each other instead of jumping in the middle of it. My own fault really."

"You're too kind, old friend. But I haven't forgiven myself, even if you have."

“Don’t tell me that’s why you have hidden out here all this time with these canyoners.”

“No,” Comarin replied. “That’s not all. I couldn’t leave if I wanted to. That last time when Vesri and I went down, bragging about who could find the bottom, I knew she was stronger than me. Wasn’t she always? But I couldn’t help myself. I had to beat her, I always wanted to and never could.”

Comarin looked toward the Seer but his thoughts focused on a faraway landscape. “Neither of us should have made it out of that fissure on that day. As it was, we came out intent on ripping each other to shreds, out of our minds.”

“I remember it well,” Grifis said.

“I have thought every day of what I did to you in my madness at that moment, Grifis.” Comarin shook his head. “By the time I made it to this canyon, even then I could tell that I would never be the same. The smoke has ravaged my body as well as my mind and left me old and feeble. The canyon people have left me well enough alone until recently. I’ve given them no reason to try and befriend me. But then the girl fell under the power of the smoke.”

“Dareth’s mother?”

“Yes,” Comarin continued. “The girl who helped me when I first came here. I was raving then, wasn’t I? But she helped me. And let’s just say that my thanks was less than gentlemanly.”

“A lot of guilt for a man who was never too fond of responsibility.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to kill me?”

“You may have taught me everything I know,” Grifis said. “But if you’ve been waiting around for me to find you and take back my lost eye, then you are thicker than I remember, scrambled brains aside. How have you gotten this far with all your parts still about you anyway?”

“Now see, there’s the problem,” Comarin said. “Vesri was always the one who wanted to martyr herself for these fool Canyoners, as if they would all be dead without her. I did it for of the elation, the knowledge, the adventure.”

“Sounds like someone else I know,” Grifis said.

“The boy, Dareth.”

“Yes.”

“He’s my son, you know.”

Grifis nodded. “As soon as I found it was you who had sent him, I’d have guessed it, even if the smoke hadn’t already told me.”

Comarin didn’t look surprised.

“Will you be able to help him to get the root?”

“You know I can’t,” Grifis replied. “For what it’s worth, I think he can do it. The smoke likes him very much. I think with Vesri to help him...”

“Vesri?” Comarin interrupted. “No, she won’t help him. Has she seen him?”

“I left him with her. She is the only one who could hope to...”

“No. She won’t.” Comarin stood up and paced back and forth. “No, you see, it’s coming back around and she believes something else.”

“What do you mean?” Grifis asked, his eye showing concern at Comarin’s agitation.

“The vision. When we went as deep as we could go. The pieces of the premonition were so powerful, pieces I have never been able to quite put together, but now they are starting to make sense. Only Vesri saw it differently. That’s why we fought. If she knows of Dareth’s strength then she will not be happy, will she?”

“You don’t think she would harm him, do you?” Grifis asked, taking his feet. “She and I haven’t been on the best of terms since you left, but I hardly think...”

“I don’t know what she might be capable of. If the premonition has haunted her as it has me, all these years, she may be just as zealous about stopping it as she was before, more so.”

“Of stopping what? What is this premonition?”

“I have been away from the smoke for a long time, Grifis. I hardly remember anymore, especially as I didn’t really know much, even then. Mostly now it is little more than a feeling, like what has been happening recently has a certain familiarity. But I assure you, my friend, If it ever comes clear to me, I’ll be sure and let you in on the secret.”

Grifis grasped the hermit by the shoulder. “I had best be off. I no longer trust my judgment in leaving Dareth at Vesri’s camp. I want to get back as soon as possible.”

“Fine. Take care of him.” Comarin grabbed the wind riders arm with an almost desperate strength. “But make sure he gets that root.”

“I will.”

” I am glad we are reconciled, old friend.” Comarin spoke these last words to the wind rider’s back as he leapt to the stones and the hidden pathway above them.

“Never doubt it, my friend,” came Grifis’s reply.



Vesri reared up out of the deep fissure. Her eyes still blazed with the influence of the smoke. She had not gone deep so the madness stayed away. She had known it would not be necessary to plumb the depths. The picture had needed only a bit of nudging, just enough, and now she understood...something. Now she had something to grasp.

She swooped over the rim, searching for Telisan, but he was nowhere in sight. With haste, she turned back into the updraft and followed it north toward the camp. When she alighted in the brush twenty yards from the lip of the crack, she dumped her gear without bothering to stow it. The dirty, familiar camp appeared as it always had. Telisan and the others gathered at the campfire. As she approached, they all laughed at something Telisan said. He laughed the loudest until he caught her piercing stare.

Telisan cleared his throat. "Excuse me, friends. I fear the fun may be over for the evening."

"For you maybe, Telisan," someone called.

Vesri's gaze smoldered as he rose and strolled over.

"Where is he?" her voice was a hiss.

"Don't know."

"I told you to find him." She felt the sting of her nails dug into her palms.

"You did, I know. But I had no luck."

She whirled on him. "Don't play games, Telisan. You don't know anything about this."

"You're right." Telisan's voice remained cool. "I have no idea what you're talking about. In a fit of rage you ask me to locate Dareth and bring him to you. I don't know why. But I couldn't find him so it doesn't much matter."

"Don't act so smug, you fool," Vesri said. "This is not a game. I've been working on this one for a long time."

"Working on what?"

Vesri glanced over his shoulder at the other riders gathered around the campfire. Already the altercation was turning into a scene. She thought about hitting him in the mouth again. The thought of seeing blood drooling down his chin enflamed her ire. Her voice grated like ice.

"This premonition, I went down deep to get it. And now I see some of the pieces begin to fall into place. That boy wasn't called. I've seen it. He is a danger."

"How so?" Telisan retorted. "You say you've seen the visions. If he's such a menace, then how?"

"You know it doesn't work that way." The muscles in her face worked hard to maintain composure.

"Listen," Telisan said, placing a hand gently on her shoulder. "You've only just recovered from a deep exposure. Then, once you came around you went right back down. I just think maybe you should get a little more rest."

Vesri snatched his hand away and snarled. “You think this is delirium? I have been waiting seventeen years to piece this one together. I lost my brother over this vision. And you, stupid fool, are going to make decisions based on what? Get out of my way.” She stormed past him and snatched up her gear. “I don’t need you anyway. I know where to look for him. I saw that much.”

“So what?” Telisan said. “What will you do? Are you going to kill him, Vesri? He’s hardly more than a kid.”

The man’s words fell on deaf ears. Vesri had already leapt from the brink of the great crack.

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He was no fool. Dareth had no intention of ignoring Telisan’s warning. The man had been nothing but kind to him over the last few days. And if he didn’t trust Vesri, it only proved the truth of what Dareth had sensed himself. The look in the woman’s eye when she saw him had been enough to do that.

He pondered his situation with hardly a notion of where he might go? He could try to return to Grifis’s camp, but the wind rider was not there and neither was Biera. Home to the canyon would be near impossible, and he would not let his mind wander that way. That way meant failure.

“No, mother,” he said to himself as he gazed down at the sweeping fissure below him. “I cannot come home yet.” His best hope would be to stay nearby until his companions’ return, and then count on their aid against Vesri.

Dareth rode the wind away from Vesri’s camp. He moved more slowly than perhaps he should, considering Telisan’s warning. But something else pulled his mind away from haste, something that slowed his pace and urged him to turn back. The deep place lay in the other direction. It could not be seen but Grifis had pointed out the location of the huge fissure on their way into Vesri’s camp.

Dareth glided along in an erratic path, gazing from his vantage over the many black crevices that zigzagged across the dirty plane. The fissures stretched in all directions, crossing one another here and there, leaving pitted and broken chunks of land in between. Just beyond view, along one of those craggy pathways, lay the deep place. It called after him now as the only logical direction to take. He thought back on the visions that had assailed him in Pyramid Cave. One had certainly been clear enough. Grifis would never survive a trip into the nether regions of The Deep. The wind rider had already helped him tremendously, but he could not help with that. So Dareth saw no use in waiting for the man. Vesri would not help, that too was clear.

“If I need the deeproot,” he said to himself. “I’ll just have to go after it alone.”

With the confidence of a newcomer, oblivious to the intricacies of his task, Dareth committed himself to his new course of action and swung toward the north, passing just below the rim of a wide, easy fissure to avoid detection. The haze wafted up from below in thin rivulets. Usually the wind obliterated the mist and it went unnoticed. But here it twisted in a constant stream, bubbling up from the depths and riding the same gusts that Dareth trod along the cavernous passage. Keryli clung to the walls of this fissure in thin strands, sparse and tenuous, but spread out in huge swaths over the walls, giving the

entire corridor an eerie glow under the red mist. He followed the fissure for perhaps a quarter of an hour before he noticed the residual smoke growing so heavy that it began to play with his thoughts. Steep, rocky hills hunkered over the rim of the cliff. They grew steeper as the fissure continued its course. Somewhere hidden behind those hills lay the deepest of them all, and there would be deeproot within it. He knew that he would need to land before he got there. He had none of the lesser root that would protect him on his way down. He could already feel the effects of the ambient smoke and there was no doubt that it would become stronger long before Dareth reached his destination. He made for the rim at the highest point of the hills and landed where he could look out over the other side.

The deep place lay below him. The hillside on which he stood fell quickly away in a dusty slope that ended at the very lip of the deep. He looked behind him. The fissure he'd been following meandered in every direction. It split off here and there into smaller courses, but the main course plodded on out of site and joined the deep place somewhere far off to his right. From here, the dark chasm of the deep looked like a black scab, jagged and angry across the face of the land. He couldn't see its end in either direction, though it narrowed significantly on the left and grew to nearly a mile wide on the right. The smoke seeped up along the entire length of the giant tear, adding to the wavering of the horizon that the heat had already cast over the cracked earth beyond.

Dareth reached into his pouch and pulled out a dark purple root. He had almost no experience with the stuff. He didn't know how strong it would need to be, but he felt that what little remained of the root Grifis had given him would not be enough. It should be strong enough to keep him safe for at least part of the way. He would have to find a place down in the crevice he had just been following to gather more root.

Placing the root in his mouth, Dareth sucked on it for a moment and then turned back toward the rim of the fissure he had quitted. He scanned the dark interior for a cave far below. It was hard to pinpoint any concentration of the Keryli glow since the luminous vines draped themselves over much of the fissure's walls. It looked to be thicker in a few spots and Dareth launched himself for the nearest of these. As he sank lower into the earth, floating down like a leaf on the wind, his eyes grew more accustomed to the dim glow, and he saw that he had chosen well in his destination. The patch of Keryli he approached emanated from a sharp, horizontal slit in the wall of the fissure. It loomed short and gapeing, and it spewed red smoke in thick, spurting plumes. He could see little to land on, but he managed to stall near the edge of the wall and grasp the edge of the break with his hands. He clawed at the vines and dragged himself to a sitting position, cradled in the gash, its billowing contents fuming into his face. He didn't stop to remove his glider. The fruit grew thick on the vines, even here at the mouth of the opening, and the roots stuck up out of the rock, thick and purple.

Dareth grabbed his knife from its sheath and dug the tip into the ground around one of the roots, working it free and cutting it from the vine. He did this several more times until his pouch bulged with the dark, greasy roots.

Dareth wondered as he worked, what Grifis would think of him being here. The rider would say he was a fool, that's what. He'd say he was going to get himself killed, but what choice did he have? No one else could help him, or would help him. And the

hermit had said to get the deeproot. If he wanted to save his mother he had to get the deeproot.

The smoke rolled over Dareth and he began to feel the flashing brilliance of vision washing over his imagination. He feared hanging over the yawning depth below him while his mind was otherwise occupied. Grifis had had to carry him out of Pyramid Cave. How could he control his glider if he found himself in the grip of delirium? He could not stay much longer in this place without the visions taking over, but something in him longed to remain. It longed to experience the dreams that only came in the presence of the smoke. He had to shake off the desire and focus on his purpose.

He placed one last piece of the root in his pouch. It wasn't deeproot but it was about as close as one could get, and it would hopefully be enough to get him where he needed to go in order to get at the real thing. He resheathed his blade and pulled the strings of his pouch tight. Then he pushed himself from the lip of the opening and let himself fall, catching the wind gracefully after several feet to rise back toward the surface and regain his earlier vantage over the deep place beyond. Once he landed again on the hilltop, he stared at the daunting scene before him. His mind still whirled from the exposure. For several long seconds he breathed in the clean air, and then studied the pouch in his hand. Now he was equipped. Perhaps he lacked the experience to be as afraid as he should be. There was nothing for it, but to try.

Dareth took one last cleansing breath and turned toward the task at hand. Before he could take a step, a swooping mass fell out of the sky and knocked him to the ground.

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Vesri didn't have to search long. She had a very good idea about where Dareth might be, and the canyoner was too much of a fool to think that his actions might be all too predictable, especially for someone who could see into the future.

She followed the fissure north that led to the deep place and caught sight of the canyoner as he descended into the crack. She watched him clinging to an opening below. She marveled at his ability to withstand the smoke that poured from the opening. Until that moment, Vesri had only half believed what Grifis had said about the kid's ability.

It made little sense to her. Even if he had been called, acclimatizing oneself to the red smoke took a very long time, usually requiring several months or more just to be able to handle a fruit patch with the merest trickling of smoke. Even these minor seeps could be enough to send the uninitiated into days of severe illness and delirium.

Yet here was this canyoner, allegedly exposed only a few times. Yet he hung down there, cutting roots away from the rock and taking a heavy outpouring of smoke full in the face with little apparent effect. Vesri approached slowly, waiting for him to peel away from the wall and tumble end over end into the abyss below.

It didn't happen. Instead the youth finished his work and sailed up out of the fissure onto the hilltop where he could doubtless see the deep place stretched out before him. The boy hadn't even looked back or he surely would have seen her approach.

Vesri came on slowly. She still puzzled over what she would do. She called him the End Bringer, or so she had always done, though she only knew him now that she saw. But the rest was still only foggy. After seventeen years of visions, this one remained so

much more elusive than the rest. Shards of visions, delivered over years and only in the deepest places she could go, that was all she had to work with. From that very first time when she and Comarin had tempted fate in a stupid challenge...Vesri shuddered, though the wind that swept past her was warm and thick. She had not been alone in the deep. Comarin had seen the same thing, and nearly went to sleep for good too. But how different it had all seemed to him. His face had twisted in confusion when she mentioned the End Bringer. Oh, how they fought.

Now the End Bringer stood before her, a skinny, wraith of a man, young and foolish. Hardly what she had imagined him to be, but hadn't she been right? He pretends not to know the smoke but how can that be? It must be a lie. She floated down, silently.

Dareth still craned his neck over the hill, marveling at the site of the deep. He looked like little more than a boy, but how could that be? So much power. Something inside her told her that he could unleash a storm.

Vesri tried to argue with herself. If Dareth leapt into the deep, he would end up a gibbering idiot. But she had seen enough to know the truth. She had pieced enough together to believe that Comarin had been wrong all those years ago and that she had been right. Could she do something about it?

The wind blew strong up on top of the hill where Dareth stood. Even if the wind did not blow so loudly, the canyoner would not hear her, so ghostly was her approach from above. Yet something told him. Something at the last moment turned his head. Already she had aimed her boot at that head, but now Dareth jerked out of the way and she struck his shoulder a numbing blow instead, landing deftly beyond him.

Dareth cried out in pain and fell to his side. His glider wing dug the earth and stopped him from falling to the ground. He stared around him wildly, uncertain where the blow had come from.

Vesri gave him no chance to reorient himself. She took the barest instant to release her gear and shrugged it to the ground. Then she launched herself at him again.

The boy rocked back from another blow. This time Vesri's boot connected with his face. Still his wingtip dug into the ground and flexed, pushing him back at his attacker. She struck at him again, but this time Dareth managed to get his arm in front of him and the wing that held him gave an unhealthy crack when it took his weight.

"Stop," he screamed as she threw herself upon him. "What are you doing?"

Vesri swung another kick but she had tried that move one too many times. Dareth snaked out his hand and snatched at her foot when it came near, tumbling her over on her back. Her head struck the earth and her jaw struck a jutting stone. Blood erupted from her lower lip, but she hardly noticed it as she scrambled to her feet, cursing.

"Who do you think you are?" she said. "You have no idea what you're doing."

Dareth backed away, finally gaining his feet and freeing the trapped wing. He tried to fumble with the straps to get the gear off, but Vesri kept coming, pressing him back down the hillside.

"You're very strong. I see that. I don't deny it. But you know nothing. And it is going to be all your fault."

"What? What?" Dareth cried.

"I don't know." Vesri screamed the words, as ashamed of them as she was baffled. The words did not deter her. Instead they spurred her on. She pulled her knife

from its sheath and held it in front of her. She thought she saw a touch of the smoke swirl in front of her eyes and it maddened her. Life over the fissures was rough, but she had never killed anyone before. She used her knife for cutting root. Her job was to save people, all those people in the canyon who were too docile and blind to protect themselves. But she had to do it. And she did, willingly. If she had to kill this canyoner to keep all her people safe, she could do that. It didn't matter that she didn't know Dareth, didn't know what he might do to harm anyone, didn't know what she might say about it afterward.

The surprise that covered Dareth's face, when he saw her brandish her knife, melted quickly. Determination replaced it, and the canyoner pulled his own knife free. He touched his swollen left eye gingerly with his free hand.

"I don't even know you, lady," Dareth said. "But I knew I didn't like you the first time I saw you." He stood straight despite the obvious trouble his left shoulder gave where her first blow had landed.

"Now look, I've pretty much decided that I'm doing this. I get that you don't want to help me, and you seem to be the only one who can. But why do you care? I just want to help my mother. Leave me alone."

Vesri heard him rambling, but she didn't really listen to what he was saying. She was thinking of Comarin.

"Did my brother not mention me?"

"What?"

Suddenly she hurled herself at him. Dareth raised his arm to block her but that only put him in the path of her swinging blade. She felt her sharp flint bite into his flesh. He screamed. Vesri instantly struck again, but this time her blade ripped into the leather membrane of his wing as he wrenched himself away.

Dareth stumbled down the hill away from his attacker. He held his bleeding arm to his stomach and raced away, blind with fear.

She recovered herself and followed, chasing him toward the fissure that had brought them both. There was nowhere else for him to run. The tip of his left wing dangled where the frame had cracked and the tattered end of its membrane fluttered in the wind. She reached out and grabbed at the wildly flapping fabric. She gave a strong yank on the wing and Dareth, nearly at the edge of the crack, twisted and stumbled. His wing snapped where it had cracked before. The canyoner swung his arms in a cartwheel, trying to keep his balance on the brink. But the weight of his ruined gear yanked him over backwards and he pitched into the space beyond.

Vesri watched him fall. Her mind filled with a strange blend of horror and satisfaction. Dareth dropped away without uttering the slightest sound. It was like watching a ghost flit away into the black night.

It took only a few seconds for Dareth to disappear in the abyss below, but Vesri stared after him for nearly an hour without moving. She wasn't quite sure what to do next. She felt no relief from the itching of her unsolved premonition. She felt no calm. She felt no satisfaction. Instead she found herself questioning her own powers, wondering what she would say to Telisan and the others. It was clear they would not understand why she had to do it. She didn't even understand all of it herself.



When Vesri finally pulled herself away from the edge of the fissure, she didn't go far. She still could not think of what kind of an explanation she would give for Dareth's absence. She wrapped her cloak about her and huddled up against the lee side of a large stone. Her face hurt where the blood flowed from her lip, and she was exhausted.

"Better to stay here for now," she thought to herself. "Perhaps I will know what to say tomorrow."

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Daesha cowered at the roar that came up from deep in the ground. Hot dirt and steam shot upward from an opening that had not existed a few moments earlier.

"Where is Dareth?" she thought to herself. "Where is my son?"

Daesha peered into the darkness, but despite the overwhelming din that assaulted her ears, her eyes gave very little useful information about her surroundings. Still there was a strange sense of familiarity about the episode.

Stones fell about her head. She could not rise for the constant rattle of the ground beneath her. She looked down and saw that she had avoided being struck thus far. Yet her limbs felt as if they were half-buried in the newly churned soil and rock. She strained against her weird paralysis. She had to find Dareth. Something screamed in the back of her mind that he was in very real trouble. She cared little for her own safety. She just had to get free so that she could find Dareth.

Suddenly the hermit was there and Lorvin as well. They stood nearby. Neither of them moved to help her up. They just watched her flounder on the ground, shaking their heads.

"Not much use, is it?" the hermit asked.

"Help me," Daesha cried.

The two men took no notice of her words. They only continued to stand by and look on, shaking their heads.

"It was a mistake trusting this to that young man." Lorvin spoke in his usual dull tones.

"It was worth a try," replied the hermit. "Besides, there was no one else."

Daesha felt the fear that gripped her move aside, replaced by a rush of anger and frustration. These two fools were doing nothing. They stood by and looked over her as if she were nothing more than some unfortunate accident, past the point of remedying. Strangely, they seemed little affected by the chaos that surrounded them all.

"A brave lad." The hermit's voice was calm and quiet, yet somehow it carried to her ears over the drowning din of the quake.

"A fool, you mean," said Lorvin.

"Stop it," Daesha screamed. How could they speak so of her son? Where was Dareth?

The pair continued to ignore her words. They gave one last solemn shake of their heads and turned from her, stealing away from the scene with uncanny speed.

Daesha wanted to follow them. She wanted to scream after them that her son was alright, that he was coming for her. The words never came out. Her throat suddenly felt



as frozen as her limbs. The men were already gone, and even had she been able to rise, she had no idea which way to go.

The roar began to subside about her. She could now hear the sound of her own sobbing. Daesha lay her head back on the warm, soft earth beneath her and looked up into the sky. She could barely make out the black line of the cliff above her. It blended almost perfectly with the starless night that stretched like a canopy over the canyon.

She pushed herself to ignore the dread that had overtaken her thoughts. She pushed herself to believe that everything would be alright. With roving eyes, she studied the scene above her. She knew not what she hoped to find there, but something told her that succor lay in that direction, if only she could hold on.

“I’m here Dareth,” she said to herself. “It’s not too late.”

The vision haunted him, more than any other, especially now that he had the dreams at night. That one frozen moment when he had grabbed for Kadnee's outstretched fingers and found empty air instead. Now Dareth felt that same frantic, clutching frenzy with his whole body. Everything in his field of view tumbled and fell away at a dizzying pace.

The face of the woman, Vesri, twisted in a malevolent stare. Or it may have been fear that wrenched her mouth into such a grimace. Either way, it was the thing that Dareth kept his eyes locked upon as he shot downward into the fissure. It took only an instant before the walls of the chasm swallowed him in the dull glow of Keryli.

Almost as if by instinct, he twisted himself into the position that Grifis had taught him and that he had quickly become familiar with. He grabbed for the strap of his good right wing and caught hold of it, hauling the wing in to cup the strong wind underneath it. The left wing flapped uselessly, slapping his hurt chest and threatening to rip off entirely in the gale. His right wing was more effective than he could hope. It caught hold of an updraft and arrested his fall, but without the help of his left, he ended up spinning out of control in a spiral that ended at the solid rock wall. Three times on the way down his body slammed into the unforgiving stone. The last time he managed to hold on to the rough surface for a few precarious seconds before sliding and losing his grip again.

That last drop proved to be nearly forty feet and Dareth tumbled and scraped the entire way. The cliff wall petered out into a steep slope so gradually that he hardly knew, in his half-conscious state, when he went from falling to rolling uncontrollably down the sand bank at the bottom.

He came to rest with his face pressed into a trickle of dirty water. A meager stream ran down the center of the narrow corridor and it tasted of the Keryli that misted the air. Every inch of his body screamed. He felt the wetness of blood seeping into his jerkin in at least two places. His left ankle roared with pain. He had to look down at his foot to make sure it hadn't been shorn off in the fall. Already the thing had swollen to the point where it threatened to burst the bindings of his boot.

One other pain competed with the overwhelming agony of his foot, unnoticed until he tried to reach for his ankle. Suddenly a piercing pain twisted in the muscle of his left arm. He howled. Colors flashed over his eyes before the darkness came and led him away from the world and all of its pain.

It couldn't have been more than a few minutes that Dareth was out. His arm still screamed and he soon realized that it was not Vesri's knife blow that caused so much pain. His bicep was impaled on an exposed splinter of his left wing-rib. He lay awkwardly on the remains of his broken wing. That made it nearly impossible to wriggle himself slowly from off of the great sliver of wood that pierced his muscle.

Once he got his arm free, Dareth felt a rush of elation, as though he had exorcized some evil demon from his body. He lost consciousness again. In fact there were hours that he lay, moaning with his head rolling aimlessly. He woke to find the pain still

unbearable and fell blissfully back into the protecting arms of oblivion. It could not last forever. There came a time when his mind insisted that he cope. He felt no lessening of his discomfort, but his brain refused to let him shut down again. He didn't open his eyes right away, afraid to see any of the many injuries that riddled his flesh. Instead he took stock of his situation by feel, slowly testing his body inch by inch. Much of it seemed to be in bad shape.

Once his inventory was complete, Dareth chanced to open his eyes. He stared up at a thin crack of day far above him, and suddenly he began to laugh. It hurt him everywhere to do it, but still he laughed. He couldn't help himself. After all, he was alive, wasn't he?

"How can it be?" His own voice sounded like gravel in his throat.

He turned his face back to the ground and lapped at the muddy water that trickled near his ear. It tasted foul and he drank it greedily. After about a quarter of an hour he tried to move for the first time. He rolled himself gently to the left and dragged his body up against the steep bank of the little stream. A wave of nausea accompanied his effort, but he fought it off with the confidence of a man who had cheated death.

"I should be dead." Saying it and feeling the pain as he spoke somehow made the truth more real.

Dareth sat for a long time with his back against the slope. He felt no urgency to go any further. Everything seemed peaceful at that moment. He watched the red mist float lazily up toward the distant surface. Here and there faint glimmerings offered themselves to his mind. Weak smoke visions, vying for attention with the dull pain that had turned into one single throb enveloping his whole body.

It occurred to Dareth that he should have the root. He lifted his good right arm and found the pouch still tied tightly to the straps of his gear. He fumbled for a long time at the knot, finally enlisting the aid of his teeth to navigate the more intricate parts. The pouch fell open to reveal the roots that he had so recently collected. He had no shortage, and it was bound to be a strong root. He would need it in this place, so close to The Deep.

Dareth placed one of the roots in his mouth and chewed slowly. His throat still felt so dry that he couldn't swallow the thing. Again he drew from the stream. The root tasted bad, but he savored this one and enjoyed the nourishment he imagined the plant gave him, as much as the protection it gave him from the smoke. There was no telling when he might have anything else to eat.

Dareth slept. Real sleep. Not delirious unconsciousness, but real, restful sleep. He felt a little better when he woke. His muscles were stiff, but they allowed him to sit up a little more, and he was able to inspect his more serious wounds. The rip in his arm was painful but not deep. It nearly joined the gash that Vesri's knife had made. He managed to pull the wooden splinter completely away without passing out. Another bloody spot on the lower chest of his jerkin covered a nasty, grated wound across his stomach and lower chest from where he had been ground along the wall of the fissure on his way down. Blood beaded on the raw, exposed flesh that had been meant to hide three layers down. The rest of his skin peeled in little curls around the edges of the wound. The side of his head hurt too, but Vesri had done that.

More than anything else, his ankle throbbed, shouting its drumbeat pain in time with the pounding of his heart. That pain made him want to swoon all over again. It was dull and constant and excruciating.

Dareth sat up tenderly. He pulled his left foot up towards him. The movement hurt. He loosened the laces that held the boot tight around his calf. The knot had tightened as the flesh beneath now bulged and fought against the constraining leather.

After much work, Dareth managed to get his boot free and he felt some small relief. He bathed his ankle in the water of the little stream and cast his eyes over his surroundings. What he could see shone under the eerie glow of the Keryli vines, stringing along the walls above him. The top of the fissure loomed so far above, that it could hardly be distinguished from one of the luminous vines. The walls themselves projected upward with little more than twenty feet between them. He looked along the length of the fissure as well, but it twisted away in both directions so that barely more than twenty yards could be seen from where he sat.

Dareth lifted his ruined left wing from the ground beside him. The rib was snapped more than two feet from the tip and the leather membrane over that part of the wing was in ribbons. He thumbed the sharp point of the rib. His blood covered the thin shaft where it had entered the muscle of his arm. He tore the end of the wing away and stripped the leather from the broken part of the frame. Then he unfastened his jerkin at the neck and peeled the shirt gingerly off of his shoulders and down over his arms. He cupped some water in his hand and doused the puncture on his arm. Then he ripped a strip of leather and wrapped it around the muscle. Once in place, he twisted it tightly to stop the flow of blood, though his arm pulsed from the pressure.

The raw wound on his stomach was harder to deal with. He soaked his jerkin in the stream and pressed it against the wound. He repeated the process several times until the sting began to dull a little. Then he lay back against the bank again, exhausted by his meager efforts.

The bitterness of Keryli root still lingered on his lips. The mist roiled about him thinly, and with it came a certain euphoria that was not altogether unwelcome in his current condition. Here and there, especially in those moments when his mind felt sluggish and foggy, he caught little flashes of other places. Smoke visions, he knew, for he was certainly awake. The visions were weak, but they were there.

It was a very long time before Dareth thought to move from where he lay. He slept several more times first. In the end, the empty groaning of his stomach got him going.

“This root is not going to do it,” he said. “There is bound to be fruit within reach somewhere down here.” He glanced in both directions, trying to see if there were something that made one direction appear more promising than the other. In the end he opted for going North as that was the direction of The Deep, and that was where he had been heading before his run in with Vesri.

He looked up often at the opening, high above as he half crawled, half hobbled along the bottom of the fissure.

“Wish I could see the sky,” he thought to himself.

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It was early morning when Vesri sailed over the fissure near her camp and came to rest on the brink. Most still slept in their tents, oblivious of the meager dawn light. Vesri had hoped as much. She wanted nothing more than to clean herself up and sneak into her own tent, provided that Telisan was elsewhere.

It was not to be as simple for the wind rider as she had hoped. Two figures squatted by the fire pit in front of the windbreak, rubbing their hands against the cold morning mist. One of them glanced in Vesri's direction as she approached. It was Telisan, who nudged the person beside him and unbent his tall frame.

The other figure rose and pulled a hood from off of her head. Vesri recognized Grifis's little whore, Biera. The young woman looked angry, but Vesri had little concern for a whelp such as she.

She ignored them and made for her tent. Telisan called after her and swiftly moved to intercept. She could hardly pretend she had not heard, so instead she turned toward them with a black look in her eyes.

"The canyoner has disappeared thanks to you," Vesri lied.

Telisan stopped short, surprised.

"You could not find him?"

"No, though I searched everywhere from here to The Deep. Now I'm tired and I'm going to sleep."

"Wait," Telisan cried. "I followed his course back toward Grifis's camp for as far as I thought he might have made it, but I came across nothing either."

"Good," Vesri said over her shoulder. "Perhaps he has gone back to his canyon where he belongs."

"He would not do that." Biera spoke for the first time.

Vesri stopped and turned toward the girl. "And how would you know that?"

"Did he have the deeproot?" Biera asked.

"Of course not."

"Then he didn't go back."

Vesri smoldered. Then she flipped a hand as if to brush the problem away.

"I don't care where he has gotten off to. He is not anywhere near The Deep and that is all I care about."

"Why?" Telisan asked. "What did you see that caused you to fear that kid so much?"

"He is the End-Bringer."

"But what does that mean?" Telisan said, exasperation thickening his voice. "Do you even know?"

"I know enough. I've seen enough."

"Comarin saw it too, didn't he?" Telisan called after her. "Only he saw it a little bit differently, didn't he?"

Vesri wheeled around, anger flashing in her stare.

"You are a fool," she yelled. "Do you think you can interpret the visions better than I can? You couldn't even go deep enough to see what I have seen. Comarin tried it. He went deeper, too deep."

"But what did he see?" Biera asked.

“How should I know? He was delirious when he came out, we both were. Why don’t you ask your man, Grifis. He was there. I imagine he knows better than anyone.”

“I would be happy to.” Biera stepped forward.

Vesri watched the look of quiet deference harden on the girl’s face.

“You tell me where he is and I will do that.”

Vesri put her fingers into the corners of her eyes and tried to rub away the pulsing in her head. These questions, endless, when all she wanted to do was get away, to think, to make sense.

“How should I know where he has gone? I was incapacitated when he left. The canyoner and I never passed two words, but maybe if you find him he can tell you.”

Then, like a flash, one of those slivers of vision that often hid unseen in her mind now dug in and made its presence known.

“Or perhaps I do have an idea,” she said.

“Where?” Biera asked. She crowded forward and forced Vesri back a step in order to keep the distance between them.

“I said perhaps, perhaps. I didn’t say I know. But perhaps he has gone back to where Dareth came from.”

“Why?” asked Biera.

“Dareth wasn’t called,” Vesri replied. “Or so we think. But maybe Grifis thinks he was, and maybe he thinks he knows by whom.”

Vesri snapped about, done with the discussion. She marched away, daring them with the aggression of her gait to follow.

Telisan did. He hurried after her and snatched at her elbow before she could manage to disappear into the tent.

“Now just hold on,” he said, pinching her elbow hard and turning her around. “You’ve got a pretty good idea about what Grifis is up to, but you’re not quite sure where Dareth is?”

“So what?”

“I saw you when you came up from that hole last night.” Telisan spoke under his breath so Biera could not hear from where she stood. “It was scary. You looked scary. And you knew what you were after, like you were hunting. You expect me to believe that you couldn’t find him? Seems it should have been easy enough for you.”

“I don’t care what you believe,” she said, yanking her arm away. “I did see something concerning him and it led me to The Deep. For all I know the kid went through with it by himself and failed.”

“How could you know he failed?”

“Because I would know if he succeeded, and I don’t.”

Telisan stifled a frustrated gasp. “So help me, Vesri, if I find out you did anything to that kid...”

Her eyes burned with anger and indignation.

“How dare you talk to me that way. I have saved the lives of millions.” Her voice cracked as she spoke. “I have given my whole life to keep these people safe. I’ve sacrificed. I wouldn’t do something like that. I couldn’t see it all fall down.”

“See what fall down?”

Vesri looked back at Telisan. She had momentarily forgotten that she was speaking to someone else.

“I mean to say that I would not betray the people of the canyon and deny them their prophets. If someone has the gift then he must use it.” She lowered her eyes to the ground, unable to look at him. “Find Dareth and if you do I will help him. I will take him for the root myself.”

“What?” Telisan looked hopeful. “And you’ll help look for him?”

“Yes, but give me a while. I need some time.”

Telisan grabbed her around the waist and squeezed.

“Indeed.” He kissed her on the nose. “Get some rest.”

Vesri stepped into her tent. She sighed. The man was a fool. Almost as foolish as those people she had sworn herself to protect. He would never be strong enough to understand.

Vesri lay down on her cot. She smiled a little when she thought of Telisan. He was a fool it was true. But she thought he really did fancy her a little bit. Why else would he so easily convince himself that she could ever let the End-Bringer survive.

Now Vesri closed her eyes and tried to convince herself. She tried harder than ever to decipher the elusive pieces of the daunting puzzle. She had done the deed now, hadn’t she. She had killed the canyoner. Now it was more important than ever to prove that she had been right all along.

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A dark shape circled over the fissure near Vesri’s camp. The camp looked deserted. The fire was out in the pit and no one stirred among the tents. Grifis strained his eyes to see some movement but there was nothing.

He swooped in low to the ground and landed lightly at the edge of the camp. Still he thought someone should be there. It was not normal that everyone would be out on their various chores all at once.

“Hello?” he called out. No reply.

“Dareth? Biera?”

The sound of the wind rushing over the fissure was the only thing that met his ears.

“Vesri,” he called.

“Here.” Vesri’s voice came from behind, startling him.

He turned around and regarded the wind rider. Comarin’s warning stuck in the front of his mind.

“Where is the kid, Vesri?”

“Not sure,” she replied. “I never really had the opportunity to speak with him. I went into the fissure yesterday. When I came out again he had gone. Much like you did, Grifis.”

“I had an errand. It couldn’t be helped.”

“Don’t talk about it with such an air of mystery,” Vesri said. “I know what you were about.”

Grifis looked suspiciously at her. “And what is it you know?”



“I know that Dareth may have been called after all. I know that it was my brother who sent him.”

“I should have guessed you would know as much,” said Grifis. “Does it surprise you that he might warn me against you?”

“Does it surprise you?” Vesri retorted. “We did not leave each other on the best of terms, did we.?”

Grifis looked at her without speaking for a moment. He tried to size her up. He tried to fathom whether she would be capable of doing harm to Dareth.

“Where is Dareth, Vesri?”

“I told you, I don’t know. I don’t think I made it a secret that I had no intention of helping him get his deeproot.”

“And why not? I would think you’d jump at the chance to go down there.”

“If you spoke to Comarin then I’m sure there’s little I could say that would help you see my side of things. I have been trying to convince you for seventeen years.” Vesri smiled mischievously. “Tell me. Is he still mad?”

Grifis’s eyes flashed. He took a step toward her. He wasn’t sure what his intent was, but he found it hard not to grab hold of her throat and throttle her. Instead he turned and moved away several paces until the urge subsided.

“Vesri, so help me, if you have done anything to harm that boy, I will break your neck myself.”

“Don’t threaten me, Grifis. You see I have everyone out looking for him. Perhaps you should join in the search instead of standing there guessing over what might have happened.”

“And why are you still here?”

Vesri shrugged. “I was out all night. I only returned a few hours ago. Besides, somebody has to be here in case the canyoner comes back this way.”

Grifis stared at Vesri through narrowed slits. He knew there was something in her words that didn’t ring true. There was something just a little too nonchalant in her tone. But he had nothing that would prove it. He had had no premonitions, no flashes of insight that might support the feeling in his gut.

“It’s hard for me to believe that someone with your level of talent can’t see even a flash of something that could help locate Dareth.”

“I saw,” she said. “I saw The Deep, and I searched all up and down it. I tell you if he’s there then he has gone in, and if he has done that then, well, there isn’t much to be done about it now is there?”

This time Grifis couldn’t contain himself. The contempt in Vesri’s voice was too much for him to handle. He turned and came at her with lightning speed. A look of shock covered her face as he grabbed hold of her jerkin and dragged her small frame nearly off the ground. His breath puffed in her face as he spoke.

“I’ve warned you, Vesri. You may be strong down there,” He jerked his head toward the fissure. “But up here there is nothing to keep me from killing you if I find out there has been foul play.”

Vesri’s eyes held a look of actual terror, though only for a moment. She was wholly unaccustomed to being spoken to this way, and Grifis could tell that she only half-believed the threat.

“Do you think I am kidding? Do you really think that you are not expendable? You think the rest of us couldn’t continue on, get the job done without you if we needed to?” He turned and spat on the ground at her feet. “You aren’t that special.”

“Are you quite finished?” Vesri asked. She still seemed little impressed, though Grifis felt a shudder run through her as he loosened his grip.

“I’m going to retrace our path back toward my camp. Perhaps he tried to head back there.”

“You can do what you like. I told you that I had a vision of him near The Deep. Telisan has already searched in the direction of your camp, but if you wish to waste your time, go ahead.”

“Just let Biera know where I have gone when she returns.”

Grifis turned and stomped toward the fissure, grabbing up his gear as he went.

“And we aren’t done with this conversation, Vesri. You can be sure of that.”

Dareth made no more attempt to move from where he lay until the next morning. He could only measure the passage of time by watching the thin line of day far above him fade away and eventually return. His own body didn't know the difference. He spent hours alternately dozing and waking, breathing through the pain, whimpering softly if he moved the wrong way.

He rubbed his leg constantly. The swelling had not improved, but with his boot off, his constant massage gave him a small amount of relief. It was the groaning pain of hunger in his gut that finally got him up from where he had lain all night. His stomach balked at the thought of using the roots for sustenance. Dareth had eaten two more over the course of the night, but they didn't help his hunger. They did, however, keep the dull confusion of the smoke from overtaking his thoughts.

Dareth's mouth watered at the faint scent of Keryli fruit that tinged the red haze around him. His hunger could no longer be ignored. He moved in fits and starts, sliding and crawling and hobbling toward The Deep. It was as good as the other way for all he knew. Besides, if it came to it, at least he could throw himself in rather than going mad from smoke and starvation. The progress he made seemed maddeningly slow. He could not use his left leg at all. The stretch of the fissure, he could see, extended perhaps twenty yards before it twisted to the left and blocked the view of what lay beyond. He covered the distance in little more than an hour only to find that corner revealed another stretch in every way identical to the one he had just traversed. He glanced up to where he could see the Keryli vines stringing along the walls that crowded him on either side. Sweet purple fruit taunted him from above. But then, almost as if in answer to an unconscious desire from his mind, one of the plump Keryli broke from its vine and tumbled down to the sand below. The fruit rolled down the bank and came to rest in the water not five feet from his boot.

He crawled forward then, faster than he so far had been able to move, and snatched up the food with the ferocity of a wild beast. The fruit bulged as big as his fist and it oozed juice on one side where the fall had split its delicate skin. Dirt and sand from the ground clung to the wet, pulpy parts. Dareth bit into it with relish. He closed his eyes and let the juice coat his throat. He thought about his time out on the cracked earth only a few weeks before. For a couple of days he'd had almost no food or water. If it hadn't been for the woman, Biera, he would surely have died. He cast his eyes around the weird, narrow space of his surroundings.

"Is that what I have to look forward to now?" he thought to himself. "To starve down here? Because there sure won't be anyone coming down for me."

Dareth stifled a laugh at the ridiculousness of his situation. He regarded the vines above his head again. The Keryli hung, thick above him. This surely wouldn't be the last one to fall. The water in the stream tasted horrible but he had been drinking it since the night before and he didn't feel any more ill because of it. Perhaps he would not die of

thirst or starvation. But he was trapped. There was no way around that, and that left little room for positive thought.

Having something in his stomach helped a little. His leg seemed to hurt just a little bit less because of it. And the next bend in his path seemed to be not so far distant. Who knew what that turn would reveal.

Dareth traveled along in this manner all the rest of what passed for day in that place. He found several more fruits in his path that had fallen down from above. They all showed various amounts of decay. A few were edible. He slept when he was tired and he rested his leg as much as he could. As best as he could tell, it seemed to be another two days before he found the cave.

By then Dareth had graduated to limping along with his back against the canyon wall and making much better time than he had before. A jutting stone hid the black mouth of the cave from his view until it loomed directly in front of him. An hour prior he had come across three ripe Keryli and had considered rationing them with the idea that his luck might not be so good later on. Now, as he looked at the ropey, white vines creeping out of the low opening before him, he was glad that he had instead decided to slurp down the fruit. For here was plenty, right on the vine and right here at the bottom where he could pluck it at his leisure.

Something more arrested Dareth's attention at sight of the cave, more than the bounty of food. A thick, steady flow of smoke drifted out of the hole along with twining vines. It made his eyes gloss over as it wriggled toward him. He felt a strong desire to enter the cave. Rapidly the sensation grew into a need. The visions seemed to draw him forward. His hunger and the pain in his leg might have masked it until this point, but the half trance that had fogged his brain during his long trip from where he first had fallen now reached up and gripped the back of his neck. Answers lay within. Answers to what, he didn't know, but did it matter? He was trapped down here at the bottom of a fissure. What else was there for him to do? Continue in the way he had been going? Where would it end? Better to sit and lose himself in the roiling chaos within the cave.

The crack in the wall ran up rather high, but it was narrow. He took great care with his injured leg. It was not easy to climb the steep bank up to where the rock split and allowed the red mist to spill forth. In the end he resorted to using the Keryli vines to haul himself up. Finally he reached the mouth of the cave and dug into his pouch for the roots he had collected. His questing fingers told him that only four or five remained. He inspected the withered plant carefully. He knew very little about such things, but each time he tried such a thing it was done with the knowledge that his assumption of the root's power was little more than a guess. If he were wrong it would be too late once he found out. Hopefully it would serve.

He popped the root in his mouth and wrinkled his nose over the now familiar taste. Then he pulled himself the rest of the way up the bank and looked into the cave. In the shadowy dim in which he had been traveling these past days, the opening loomed blacker than all else around it. The opening had no carving or other work done to accommodate visitors like Pyramid Cave. That cave had been commonly used over many years. Looking at this ancient stone, buried so far below the surface, he doubted if human foot had ever trod within the hidden place.

“Well then.” He smiled, liking the idea of being the first to make use of the mysterious cave. “I should name it, I think.” He scratched his head for a moment and then he had it. “The Cave of Pain.” He chuckled. Pain was just about all he had been able to think about lately. Not surprising, his choice of epithets.

The red smoke spit out of several different cracks in the wall of the chamber. It hung in thick curls on the still air within the cave. Dareth reached into the opening and grabbed hold of a heavy vine, pulling it up from its anchoring roots, exposing them to his knife. He cut them away and collected the roots in his pouch, immediately placing one of them in his mouth and gingerly sliding himself inside the dark hole.

There was no immediate shift of consciousness. The change came as a gradual drowsiness, then a not unpleasant jolt. Smoke and root fought, one to bend reality and the other to hold some semblance of it together. He slid down against a wall. The smoke rolled thick around him. It was difficult to see through, but eventually he began to see things flash over the billowing surface. At first the visions were bright, fluttering impressions in the corner of his consciousness, then they took on shape and color but still they were quick as raindrops before his eyes. Sometimes the drops formed puddles that had enough body to make out something in them, but even these were scattered and without context.

Dareth relaxed into a crook of stone his back had found. The air within the cave was still, warm and thick. The flickering made him feel out of control, like he was sliding down a steep bank or falling again...falling as he had so recently done, as Kadnee had done. His falling brought no fear along with it. He knew somewhere in the back of his mind that, for many, it would bring much fear. For him there was none. There was only a sense of wonder and an itching at that old curiosity that had always held so much sway over him. Here were answers to all of his wonder. He could make little sense of any of them, but here they were.

\*Often certain pieces of the tapestry caught Dareth’s particular attention, once for the shade of blue that touched the sky and another time for the heat that rolled off a cooking fire. Now and again panoramic, canyon vistas splashed across the smoke. He saw many different places, convinced of the reality of each. So much like his own home they were, but subtly different. He saw more than one version of the Seer, the silent stone sentinels that delivered the cryptic messages that Dareth now knew began their infant lives in such close and roiling places as this.

Many familiar faces came and went among the prism of flashing visions. Not all the premonitions were grand, earth shattering affairs. He watched Daesha laugh in the warm glow of a camp fire. Past or future? It was impossible for him to tell. The hermit also crept around the sides of his thoughts, stepping into the corner of his sight here and there like a taunting child who wants to be chased.

It was these personal images that drew Dareth’s attention more and more as the hours dragged on and he made no move to leave the cave. It was these ghosts that swam out of the mist and took on greater clarity until Dareth could no longer say for certain what was there and what was not.

Daesha said something to him then.

He turned and looked at her, but she had already drawn away and he hadn’t heard what she said.

“Mother? What was that?”

She still spoke. He could hear her back in the smoke where she sat, but she was not talking to him anymore. He looked around, wondering where his hut was? He had grown tired and felt like it was time for bed. Perhaps that was what mother had said, that it was time to rest.

“Can’t tell you anything you wouldn’t be able to learn by yourself, you know.”

Dareth turned and stared into the hermit’s glittering eyes.

“I sent you, I know it. You think I don’t know that?”

“I know you do,” Dareth said, not sure what the man’s point was.

“Well don’t be snappy, boy. Now, did I make the right choice? That’s the question. Maybe you know the answer. I don’t”

“No, I don’t,” Dareth said. “And I wasn’t being...”

“It’s alright, son.” Daesha sat next to him. “He’s sweet. A little odd, but sweet still.”

“Who?” Dareth asked.

“Comarin, silly.”

“I don’t...”

“I say yes,” Kadnee said from Dareth’s left.

He turned to her and his breath caught in his throat. She was so clear. Her smile was exactly right and he forgot that it wasn’t her.

“I mean, think about it,” she continued. “You come all this way to save your mother and that’s only the start.”

“How can you say that?” Dareth argued. “Look at me. I’m stuck at the bottom of a fissure, and you’re dead.”

Kadnee didn’t answer. She wasn’t there anymore. Nobody was there, and the visions continued. They started to bombard his brain, stinging like driving hail, and he knew that it was time for another root.

At some point Dareth realized that his stomach was howling. He had no way of knowing how long he had been sitting, but the side he rested on had gone numb. He slowly crawled toward the entrance of the cave. When he reached the fruits that bulged on the vines near the caves mouth, he yanked them free and sank his teeth into the luscious skin of the Keryli. He gorged himself until his stomach felt as if it would burst. Then he turned and crawled back to his little nook and fell further into the swirling trance.

Daesha returned after a time and Grifis too, but it was Kadnee that Dareth waited for. And then she was there, sitting on the shelf of the canyon with him, just outside of the subterranean passage that led up out of Crescent Canyon.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

Kadnee turned and looked at him in confusion.

“What are you talking about?”

“You fell.”

“So. I’m here now. It must not have been too bad.”

“No, but you’re not here. At least I don’t think so.”

She grinned at him. “Alright, maybe not, but still it’s much the same. You’re where you need to be.

“And where is that? Trapped at the bottom of a fissure with a ruined wing.”

“The Deep. I’m talking about The Deep.”

What of it?”

“I can show you.”

And suddenly they were falling, both of them. And Dareth found it almost fitting that he should end his life this way. Cowardly, that he had ever let her come with him. But still, they were falling and there was no apparent end to the sensation. Then again, as he watched the sheer walls race by him, he realized that it was just him after all. No Kadnee. The wind buffeted him so strongly that he nearly dashed against the stone wall and was just as quickly ripped away from sudden death only to tumble back again. He found it difficult to make sense of the surroundings when one tumbled in a pitching, rolling free-fall.

The smoke swirled thick all around him. Somehow he understood that he was not seeing the smoke that cradled him in his Cave of Pain. This was the deep smoke that tossed him so easily about like a leaf in a gale.

“So close,” Kadnee said though she was still nowhere to be seen.

Dareth tried to turn his face away from the depth that now swallowed him, but the sight was not real and he could no more turn away from it than he could stare at the back of his own head.

“How do you know this?” he asked Kadnee, who sat with him on the stone shelf. “You have never even left the canyon?”

She looked at him as if he had said something very silly.

“It isn’t just me, you know.”

Suddenly, Vesri sat next to him. A crooked smile bent the corners of her mouth up in a sly but attractive gaze. Dareth leapt up and slid away from her, his leg shooting pain at the sudden move.

“Relax,” Vesri said. “It’s just what you need. There is no good or bad in it.”

“You are doing the right thing, son.” Daesha sat in Vesri’s place. “Keep watching. Keep thinking. It will come to you soon enough.”

Dareth listened. He crawled to the opening several more times to sate his hunger. Four days later, when he finally left the cave, he limped out with a smile spread wide over his face. His ankle was much improved, his head felt clear. There was no trace of the delirium one might expect from an exposure such as the one he had experienced. And most important of all, he had a plan.

Dareth climbed down from the Cave of Pain and looked back at the insignificant opening.

“Not the Cave of Pain anymore,” he thought to himself. “From now on I’ll call it the Cave of Hope.”

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The scattered drops of sight that cascaded over Vesri in the dim light of Crooked Cave, held little that was new to her. She caught glimpses of a fire somewhere in the south. Not her area but she saw the visions no less. She caught early signs of a calling



from a canyon in the east as well. Again, it was out of her domain and some other rider was probably near to finding out the name of the would be recruit.

What Vesri did not see, what she looked for with painstaking diligence, was sign of that old puzzle. The half-completed mystery would not show even a glimmer of its elusive surface. Vesri gnashed her teeth at the mundane pictures that swept over her. With such a large piece falling into place, she had hoped for more. She looked toward the exit of Crooked Cave. She considered the cave further down, it called to her from fifty yards below. She knew the power of the smoke at that depth could help her. It was there that she would begin to see the real visions, the peeled-back, raw slices of dream that could reveal whole swaths of the truth at one time.

Vesri turned away again. She had considered the deeper places many times over the past several days, but fear kept her from them. She had only just recently recovered from her last excursion.

“And if the others find out about the canyoner?,” she asked herself. She would need her wits about her. If she were suffering from delirium then she would be entirely at their mercy.”

“A waste of time.” she turned to follow the twisted pathway that gave the cave its name, up to the narrow ledge overlooking The Deep. She spit a stray piece of root from her mouth and picked up her gear from where it leaned against the side of the rock face.

The wind from the gorge slapped wildly at her face. As so often happens, the wind helped to swirl a few of the tiny grains of remnant dream, unnoticed around the larger objects, and let them settle to clarify the whole.

“He’s alive.” Suddenly she knew it with every part of her being. A wave of panic washed over her. She hadn’t really wanted Dareth dead. Perhaps it was for the best that he still lived. But how? What if the others found out what she’d done? Or worse, what if Dareth made it to The Deep?

“Stupid woman,” Vesri said to herself. “To think it would be so easy to alter things?” She strapped the front of her harness together.

“But why not,” she continued as she launched herself into the void before her and caught an updraft toward the surface. “That’s what I do isn’t it? Change things? Alter them? Save people who otherwise would be extinct by now?”

When Vesri reached the surface she swooped toward an intersecting fissure, making sure to avoid the one where Dareth had fallen, she thought, to his death. She watched that place now as if he might come screaming out of the dark crack at any moment to exact his revenge. But nothing came, nothing save for the swirling dust along the fissure’s broken fringe.

She reached camp within the hour, landed at the brink and unstrapped her gear. She did not turn toward the camp right away. Instead she stood looking out into the chasm for a long time. Eventually she sat with her small feet dangling over the sharp lip of the fissure, her lips moving nervously as she went over the things she had seen, heard, smelled, tasted in the cave. She combed every moment with practiced skill to see if there was anything she might have missed.

When she could no longer keep eyes from the licking campfire, she craned her neck around the wind-break and found Telisan sitting there, just visible behind the leather

tarps. He had moved so that he could look at her, and he eyed her now, though the look on his face was difficult to fathom. Fear? Mistrust? Pity?

It surprised Vesri how much she hoped he would get up and come to her. But he wouldn't. He hadn't come to her in days. She'd have counted that a blessing most of the time. Now though, she wanted to lay down in his arms and pretend she was a little girl living in the canyons, with no worries beyond getting through her daily chores. That would be nice, wouldn't it?

Vesri looked away again and stared across to the other side of the fissure. A barren table of land stared back at her. It stretched for little more than a mile before other fissures streaked out of the horizon and broke it to pieces. Even as she lost herself in the broad open space before her, her mind went through its routine all on its own, rifling through memories and visions to find the tiny piece that told her the reason, that told her why it should all be so frightening. At first she had striven to find that answer because she needed to justify what she had done. But Dareth lived. She knew that down in her bones, and she still had to stop him.

"It wants," she thought to herself, then sat up with brows arched high. Something had touched her just then. She reached after the thought.

"It does. There's something there. It wants."

Vesri licked her lips trying to make something of the random vision, but to no avail. She gasped, exasperated, and put her head down into her lap.

When she looked up again he was there.

"Are you alright?" Telisan asked.

Vesri did not respond. She simply nodded her head like the little girl she had imagined herself to be.

"You seem lost."

"Oh, I am. Aren't you?"

He smiled. "I have to say, I can't really see your point of view. And you don't seem to be able to explain it to me."

"You know how it is, Telisan. You don't get all the answers right away."

"No, I don't. And neither do you. But one thing about you is, you do get them eventually. You always do."

"And yet you don't trust my instincts."

"You're building on a puzzle from seventeen years ago, a vision that nearly got you and your brother both killed. You're talking about a higher purpose and I just can't swallow that. As far as I can tell, we are the higher purpose, we riders. We keep the canyon folk safe and that's all there is to it. Dareth is strong, maybe stronger than you. He could do a lot of good. So he wasn't called. He should have been."

Telisan sat down next to her and put his arm around her. She let him do it. She needed the closeness just then. She could curse him for a naive fool later. She needed the companionship too much.

But he was a fool. There seemed to be no way of changing that. They were all fools... all except her.

The ankle felt much better now. Dareth managed to wear his boot, as long as he only strapped it loosely. The Cave of Hope lay a grueling day's journey behind him. Not a bad pace. A breeze kicked up from the north and sent tears streaming back on his face. He had nowhere else to go. The Deep lay somewhere in front of him. He didn't know how much farther it might be, so he continued into the bite of the growing wind. The tips of his wings could no longer be seen protruding from the top of the pack across his back. A Keryli tumbled out of it, squeezed out by the abundance of fruit Dareth had tried to stuff inside.

The surroundings changed little. He became numb to the maddening sameness of the pathway around every turn in the crack. With almost no daylight filtering down from above, every hour looked exactly the same as the one before it.

He sat down for a well needed rest and cupped his hand into the little stream that still traveled alongside him. The water tasted no better than it had before. He pulled the wing pack off his back and laid it across his lap, unfolding the flap and throwing it back. He dumped the fruit onto the sand in front of him. The wings still lay inside their sheath. The tips hid down inside the bag. Dareth reached in and pulled them out, admiring his work. The glider frame remained as it had been, but now both wings had been trimmed by nearly two feet. Dareth ran his finger along the edge of the left wing. It had been the one damaged by Vesri before his fall. The end now formed a clean line from which all splinters had been shorn away, and the tattered section of cloth was gone. He had trimmed the right wing to match. All in all, they looked to be a meager hope for escape, and Dareth felt a certain amount of trepidation mixed with his pride, despite his visions in the cave.

He ate a fruit and chewed on a bit of root. The ambient smoke always threatened to bring confusion. He leaned back against the slope of the stream's bank and stared up at the patterns of Keryli spotting the walls. It was lovely in its way, once he stopped thinking of it as his prison. But the reverie didn't last for long, and then he was thinking of Daesha again, and Kadnee. Although he had seen them only a short time ago in the cave, and they had seemed so real to him, it had not really been them. It felt like ages since he had left the canyon.

"What a strange place to be," he thought to himself. "A few weeks ago I would never guess that a place like this existed, and now here I am trapped."

The thought might have made Dareth chuckle if he hadn't already had it a thousand times. When he left the cave the day before, his spirits had been high, but his confidence ebbed the further he got from there in space and time. He rubbed his eyes and thought of Vesri, the way she had looked that first time he saw her, like she was only half there. It had seemed like the more important part of her was still off in whatever cave she had been crawling through. He wondered idly if that was the look he had in his eyes now. Certainly he had been exposed long enough and strongly enough, but all he really seemed to feel was a certain amount of light headedness and an immense fatigue.

“Will this ever end?” he asked, kicking at the sand with his good foot. “It’s all the same, for miles and miles. Every rock.”

Dareth pointed out a large stone that sat resting against the left wall of the fissure up near the next jagged turn. Hadn’t he seen that same stone a dozen times before? He looked at the stone again and it suddenly occurred to him that, in fact, this rock was actually rather unique in the way it balanced there against the side of the fissure. Still a certain familiarity tugged at his mind. He studied the rock carefully, stood up and craned his neck this way and that. Then he approached, coming around to the front side of the stone.

Suddenly it became clear. He had indeed seen this very stone, but not on his journey through the fissure. He had seen it in the cave. He had regarded it from the very spot where he now stood. The image of it hung in his brain and it compared perfectly with the physical representation before him.

Dareth looked toward the next bend in his path with a new hope. He went back to where he had left his things and gathered them up. Limping at the fastest pace he could manage, he passed by the leaning stone. Then navigated a pile of smaller stones that had been knocked loose from high above, sometime in the ancient past. Once he gained fairly level ground on the other side, he was able to see around the corner. The fissure continued for perhaps another hundred yards. Then the rock walls, the sandy bottom, the dirty stream, all of them fell away in a jumbled mass, swallowed by the immensity of The Deep.

Dareth only got a clear view for a moment. The gale that poured into the crack from the greater opening beyond was tremendous. He had been feeling it’s diminished effect for a couple of hours, but now, met with the full force of the driving wind, he could not help but turn his face away.

The wind made it loud in the defile, and the sudden dropping away of the mighty walls he had become so accustomed to, only heightened the untamed nature of the place. Dareth inched forward down the slope. If it weren’t for the wind pushing him back, he would have been afraid of losing his footing on the sand and dirt and skidding off the edge into nothingness.

The far wall of The Deep loomed beyond the walls of the fissure in which he stood. It did not appear to be far off. He’d had the impression that The Deep would be colossal in span as well as depth. In truth it appeared not much different than some of the wider fissures he had flown over in recent days. But the volume of air that roared through that space could not be compared, the weight of endless miles pushing ever upward.

By the time Dareth reached a point where he could chance a look over the edge, he had started to think that his plan might actually work. He stared up and down the length of The Deep. There were no twists and turns in its length, as there had been in his meager tributary. It ran straight for as far as he could see, until the two sides kissed each other far off in the distance. He looked up. With the greater width of The Deep, he could see more than the narrow band of daylight he had lived with for the last several days. Still the surface was lost in the miles above him.

Smoke raced along the updraft, thick below him and thinner above. He could see it spouting from a hundred different places along the length of the walls. Keryli spread

throughout. In places it was so thick that the stone beneath was entirely hidden by the vines.

Dareth backed slowly away from the edge. He leaned against the rock wall and slid down to a sitting position. Slowly he pulled the altered wings from their pack and inspected his work again. He hoped that the updraft from The Deep would be strong enough to hold him aloft, even with his clipped wings. If it were not, he would be visiting the bottom much sooner than he had planned.

Dareth fastened the wings to the frame and threw the gear over his back, strapping it in place. He stayed close to the wall as the wind pouring into the defile was already pushing him around a great deal with the wings attached. He checked for the root pouch at his chest and stepped carefully to the edge again.

There was no way to prepare for something like this. He closed his eyes and imagined the first leap he had taken a few weeks earlier. There had been a sixty foot drop beneath him then, and his glider had been intact. He had been well rested and healthy at the time. It was that moment he pictured, as his feet left the safety of solid earth, first one, then the other.

The tips of his wings barely extended past his outstretched arms. The straps, clutched tightly in his fingers, stretched less than a foot to the ends of the wings. They felt like inconsequential weapons against the yawning fall below. They caught the wind in a helpless, buffeted way at first. Dareth whirled toward the racing smoke clouds that streamed by beneath. Then, just as suddenly, he was tossed like a leaf out away from the wall of The Deep and he felt his wings catch hold of something briefly, enough to arrest his fall and scoop him up. He might have just as easily been carried in the other direction and been ground against the hard stone surface. So the experiment proved that he could get lift, but it said little for the amount of control he would have over his own movements.

Dareth's path through the air took many fitful turns. Alternately he experienced the sickening sensation of freefall and then the uncontrolled sensation of being whisked about by forces far beyond his control. Never once did he feel steady. Never once did he feel safe. His body flitted about in the center of the great fissure. It was all he could do to keep himself away from the rocks until he had gained altitude, and that was happening very slowly.

During those elusive moments when Dareth could spare attention to his surroundings, he marveled at how far the two walls stretched above him. They were, of course, as deep as the fissure he had spent the last week in, but looking down from here was the true miracle. The distance seemed endless, like another horizon stretching out below him. It worked as something of a deterrent to his fear that Dareth could not see the bottom. It felt more like he was perpetually suspended there, in the middle of the earth. He tried to focus on a particular spot on one of the rock walls to gauge his movement. It was difficult to make out differences in the vast expanse of stone, especially with the smoke roiling past all the time. But it appeared as if he was actually gaining altitude ever so slowly.

It took nearly an hour for Dareth to master the idiosyncrasies of the shortened glider, even then control was spotty at best, and he constantly had to keep steady or he would lose the slim balance he had on the bucking drafts. He was fairly exhausted by

then and the crack of light above had been growing ever so slowly. Soon Dareth realized that he would probably die of exhaustion if he tried to fight the wind much longer. He had been avoiding the danger of the cliff walls the entire time. Now he scanned them for a suitable place where he might hope to land and rest before attempting to rise any further on his handicapped wings. Luckily, many cracks and openings winked their black eyes across the stone surface, withered and pitted as it was. He located a suitable spot a little below him on the far wall.

With some difficulty, Dareth got himself pointed in the right direction and dove straight for the black hole ringed with a corona of Keryli vine. His only chance was to aim and shoot quickly. If he tried to flutter about and land gently on the rim, he would doubtless be smashed before he could hope to complete the maneuver. His aim proved to be true. He hit the wall hard, but he managed to claw at the vines and take hold before bouncing out into the gale. He scrambled to the safety of an extremely narrow ledge and lay on his stomach, filling his starving lungs with oxygen and marveling that he still lived.

Dareth rubbed at the ache in his bandaged left arm. The straps of his wings had sometimes felt like they would rather tear his arms from their sockets rather than be cowed. His chest heaved for a long while and his face burned from the scraping the wind had given it.

The rest did him some good. A modest amount of smoke issued from the open crevice at his back, but Dareth had no desire to enter the space. His complete saturation in the stuff for so many days and all of the ambient smoke that existed within The Deep proved enough to keep him heady. This weak seep did little to compare. Yet, out of habit, he removed another bit of root from his pouch and placed it between his lips. He looked up and then looked down. Perhaps it was Dareth's optimism, but he suddenly fancied he could see a marked improvement in his position. It gave him hope, and when he leapt back out into the gale to continue his upward progress, it was with a new sense of inevitability. He would be free soon enough. He did not need the dull flashes of vision that flickered over him to tell him that.

Dareth rode the wind, not gracefully. He pitched about like a dust moat, but always he ended up a little higher than he had been before, a little closer to the surface. As the canopy of sky between the fissure walls grew, he could make out morning light pouring into the rim of The Deep. His heart leapt at the touch of light on his face. The walls confining him began to slope outward long before he reached the surface. Soon the two massive piles on either side of him resembled more a pair of steep mountains than the beginnings of a slide into a bottomless pit.

Along the western side of the crack, a shallow fissure broke through, spouting water down in a cascading spray that lost itself in the great distance. The sides of the small fissure were pitted and scored with boulders and jutting shelves. Dareth saw his escape in the natural ladder that the terrain offered up. Exhausted as he was from his tedious ascent, he held back none of his last strength aiming for the fall that spewed from the tiny fissure.

Dareth's boots splashed down right in the middle of the stream. He favored his good leg when he hit and rolled onto his left side in the water, grunting at the jab of pain in his arm. The stream turned out to be rather weak. It had appeared much stronger as it



sprayed out into nothingness, but it was cool and sweet and a welcome change from the trickling filth that had been his lot down there in the bowels of the earth.

When he had drunk his fill, Dareth waded to a flat stone that poked off of one wall of the fissure. Little more than fifteen feet separated the walls here, and the climb began right away. There was no level ground at all on which to prepare, save for the stone he now occupied. He lay down on the rock and grinned up at the sun, its golden rim just visible above.

He was free. There was a climb to make yet, true. But he had made it out of the depths of the earth on ruined wings. Time enough to finish his ascent later. He was exhausted. His left ankle hurt from the landing he had just made and for the first time in days, he breathed air that wasn't choked with red smoke. His head felt clear but raw, exposed, as if a layer of flesh had been torn from all his senses and they were tender to the world around him.

"Rest," Dareth said to himself. "You're alive. Now just rest."

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Grifis rubbed his eyes and leaned back against the uncomfortable rock. He stared out across The Deep with a sense of despair.

"Four days," he thought. "Four days I've been searching. It's hopeless."

Grifis had travelled between Vesri's camp and his own, twice now. With that option exhausted, he had come to The Deep yesterday to take up his search there. Now, as he scanned the endless length of the mighty fissure, he wondered how long he should wait before returning to Crescent Canyon and informing Comarin that Dareth had failed in his task.

"I never should have left him. It was so stupid."

Vesri's face floated before Grifis's mind again for the dozenth time that morning. They had known one another a long time. They had been friends... more even than that. They had been on the opposite sides of many issues, but never in his life had he felt like killing her the way he did now. She denied any wrong doing, but his gut told him a different story. Still he would do nothing. How could he without proof of her treachery? He could not accuse the most powerful wind rider alive of murder, could he? But where would the proof come from? If Dareth had gone into The Deep, whether by choice or by malice, there would never be any sign of him again.

Grifis stood up and splashed some water over the sulfur coals that had kept him warm in the night. He lifted his eye patch, rubbed the soft scar beneath, and inspected the view one last time.

"Another pass couldn't hurt, I think. Further north this time."

His gear lay on the ground a short distance away and he ambled toward it, with his good eye still glued to The Deep. He feared that the moment he looked away would be the moment he missed some sign of Dareth's presence. Upon later reflection of that moment, Grifis thought how fortunate it had been that he was so diligent. For it was in that very instant that he spied the barest movement along the lip of a tiny crevice on the far side of The Deep from where he stood. A spray of water poured from the fissure into The Deep, it was one of three such falls that he could see just from where he stood. The



sight was common enough, but it was not the falling water that caught his eye. Something had fluttered there. Partway up the side of the crack he thought he saw something flutter in the wind.

Grifis tried not to allow hope to cloud his thoughts too much. He ran for his gear and buckled it in place with urgency. Before another minute had passed he flew over the surface of The Deep, fighting against its harsh drafts toward the far side. The wind buffeted Grifis in every direction. In all his years he had crossed The Deep only a few times. It was a difficult passage and there were few who ever did more than pass over it.

He chanced an instant's attention to look below him. He had gone down once, which was more than most had ever done. He remembered the feeling, thinking that his best friend and the woman he loved both lay dead at the unknown bottom. They had foolishly thought to test wills against one another. Grifis followed nearly an hour after Comarin and Vesri had flown. By then he had felt certain they must be dead. But when he had tried to go after them, he had found his efforts practically worthless. Grifis had no hope of reaching them. He had returned to the surface, dejected, certain that he would never see either of them again. He had been wrong. They had come back. But it had been the end of things as they knew them.

Now Grifis studied the defile before him, searching for what his brain almost dared not tell him might be there. This time he would not fail. This time he would find his young friend.

Just then, a figure stood erect at the top of the rocky split in the wall of The Deep. Grifis was near enough that he recognized Dareth instantly. The wind rider could not contain a shout of joy. He saw the figure atop the rocks turn toward him and one arm went up in a wave of greeting.

Grifis laughed out loud and swooped low to make a landing near to where Dareth stood waiting, bent over and out of breath. He could see from where he was that Dareth hardly looked healthy, and he had no idea what the young man might have been through. But to find him alive in this place was a miracle, not to mention in possession of his senses. It was no wonder Comarin had called the kid to The Deep, it was only a wonder that it had taken so long.

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Vesri's head rested on Telisan's chest. It rose and fell steadily with his breath. They still sat near the edge of the fissure together. She had almost lost herself. She had been thinking of when she had been called, both she and Comarin. She had been seven at the time and he only five. From such a great distance she could no longer even see what lay in her memory before that. Life in a canyon, life with a family, life anywhere other than here on the rim of these fuming cracks was not even a memory for her anymore. She had never minded it. Even after Comarin had disappeared, she always had her duty. The riders that came before her had told her the canyon folk were simple and that she was different from them. It would never be otherwise. She had her place. That was the way life worked on the cracked earth. The land waged a constant war on mankind. The wind riders were the only protection that most had.

Telisan's heart thumped beneath her ear. She pressed herself closer to him. It felt nice. She had never taken Telisan to bed for love. He was young and handsome. He liked her power. There were others before him and they were all the same, everyone since Grifis anyway. That was a long time ago.

Vesri reached up and combed her fingers through Telisan's thick hair. Perhaps he too was different after all. The match had worked for both of them. She could hardly complain about his attentions. Now she began to see a different side of the man. She could almost believe he had genuine feelings for her. She still considered him a fool and this only corroborated her opinion. Yet she felt a childish sense of glee to think of it.

Vesri frowned at the idea that she was going to have to continue lying to him about Dareth. Telisan wouldn't understand. He wasn't willing to take her premonitions on faith and that raised her blood.

"Keep perspective, old girl," she thought to herself. "After all, you did it. You forced Dareth over the edge and left him for dead."

Vesri shuddered. She had seen the visions, and even with that she couldn't yet convince herself that what she had done was anything other than a moment of sheer madness. How could she expect to convince Telisan?

"But the boy is alive," she thought.

She squirmed uneasily against Telisan. She had figured this much out, Dareth lived. And if he still lived then he could make it back and tell everyone what she had done. Where would she be then? Their minds would be poisoned against her, all of them.

"Um..."

"What is it," Telisan asked.

She lifted her head and sat up cross-legged beside him.

"You have been questioning my abilities to interpret over these past few days, since Grifis arrived with Dareth."

"I told you, it's a very old puzzle you're toying with, and you have gotten yourself exhausted lately by going too deep too often. You don't need to do all of this yourself, you know. Other people have premonitions. Others can piece things together."

"But you don't understand. This puzzle, it's the biggest of them all. It encompasses all of the others within it. It's the truth, and if you haven't glimpsed it then you will never be able to understand my actions."

"I don't understand the way you feel about Dareth, I told you that. But it can all be alright. We will find the boy and you can reconcile. Nobody is going to force you to help him obtain the root for his mother, but I think..."

"I found him, Telisan."

"What?" Telisan drew back from her as though he had just been bitten.

"I lied. I found him the other day, heading toward the deep. We fought."

Telisan's eyes narrowed to slits. "What happened?"

"He fell from the edge of a fissure."

"Without wings?"

"Broken." She searched his eyes for some semblance of understanding over her confession. There was none.

Telisan got up and took several steps away from her. His body exuded disgust. He shook his head in disbelief.

“So you’ve killed him after all. You filthy, heartless bitch.”

“No. He lives.” Vesri’s voice filled with desperation. Suddenly it seemed all important that this man understand her. She couldn’t bear the burden by herself any longer.

“How can you be sure?”

“I have seen enough to know that much,” she replied.

“Where?” Telisan stormed over to the fire pit and snatched up his gear. “Where is he?”

“He’s not there anymore. He’s made his way out.” Vesri’s own words surprised her. She hadn’t realized she knew that.

Telisan shook his head. “Of course he has. Why else would you tell me the truth if you didn’t think I was going to find out soon enough anyway?”

“It isn’t like that, Telisan. I didn’t mean to do it. I was mad. If you knew what I know then you would understand.”

“You don’t even know what you know.” Telisan screamed into Vesri’s face.

A red flush of anger rose up in her cheeks. No one screamed at her like that, ever. But she checked her ire. She needed him to understand. She desperately needed someone to share this puzzle with. Comarin had been the only other one with even an inkling, and he had gone mad.

“I’ll get the answer,” she cried. “That canyon is a danger to everything we know. That much is true, and I will find out why.”

A sly grin played over Telisan’s lips as she finished her words.

“Why wait?” he said. “You know, I am very curious about this whole thing. You keep saying that I don’t understand. Well I want to understand. I want very badly to understand what could turn you into such a monster.”

Vesri nearly hit him then. Her temper neared the boiling point, and she dug her nails into the palms of her hands to keep from smashing him in the face with her fist.

“So let’s go,” Telisan said, tightening his harness straps and heading for the brink.

Vesri turned in shock.

“What?”

“Come on. You’ve got me really curious now. I want to go to the lower cave. Maybe then I can get some insight, like you.”

If his plan had not been fraught with so much peril, Vesri would have scoffed at his sarcasm. But instead she rushed after him and wrapped her arms about his waist.

“No. You can’t. You’ll go mad.”

“I can handle it.” Telisan yanked himself free. “I’m not new to this, you know. I’ve been doing it quite a while. I’ve been meaning to get down there sooner or later anyway. You know, try it out. Now seems as good a time as any.”

“Don’t be a fool, Telisan. Is this how you want to get back at me? By sending yourself into permanent delirium? Many have tried to go down there and failed.”

“You think I want to get back at you?” he retorted. “Oh no. I want to be able to believe you. I want to be able to know there is a reason why you would try to kill someone when you have sworn yourself to saving lives.”

“Telisan, don’t do this.”

They stood at the lip of the fissure now. She held fast to his arm, but he yanked it out of her grasp with ease and threw himself off of the ledge, diving straight down and not leveling out until he was practically lost to view below.

Vesri rushed madly for her wings. She threw them on and leapt from the edge almost before she had gotten herself strapped in. She dug a root from her pouch as she shot downward and veered toward the upper cave. Telisan would have to stop there to collect the root he would need for the lower cave. She knew he did not have any of the stronger variety that might have at least some hope of protecting him from the thickness of the red smoke down there. She had none of the stronger stuff either and would have to stop on the upper ledge herself.

As Vesri came to within sight of the upper cave, to her dismay, she watched as Telisan completed his task there and jumped again into the fissure to continue his descent. She thought about following straight after him, but going to that depth with only weak root to stave off the more dangerous effects of the smoke, was a sure road to disaster.

She landed on the ledge of the upper cave only moments after Telisan had quitted it. He threw a look of grim determination back at her as he descended. She didn't waste time trying to yell after him. Even if he could hear her over the scream of the wind, she knew it wouldn't stop him. She had seen this before. Some rider gets it into his head that he is ready to handle the deeper caves. Sometimes things turned out alright. Vesri herself had had to make that decision and she had come out of it. But more often the attempt ended in disaster. Most riders would never be ready for such things, and Vesri knew with a sure conviction that Telisan was one of those. He was a good wind rider, a strong one, but he had reached his limits. Vesri knew such things. She didn't know how she knew. Perhaps spending so many years with the smoke had given her a certain amount of empathy with it.

She wasted no time with delicacy. Vesri tore her blade from its sheath and cut away a thick section of Keryli vine from the wall beside her, yanking the roots from where they dug into tiny cracks in the fissure. She cut the purple roots away, tossed one of them in her mouth, the others into her pack and then she was off into open space again falling after Telisan.

She could not see him descending below her. The lower cave loomed near. Telisan had no doubt already made it inside.

"Fool," she said under her breath. "How can you be such a fool?"

The smoke rolled past her in thick swaths by the time Vesri reached the lower cave. It was not The Deep, but this fissure called itself home to some of the most powerful seeps outside of The Deep itself. It was the reason that Vesri made her camp at this place. Few others could take advantage of such places.

She looked into the opening. Through the vines and the heavy smoke that flowed continuously from the hole, she could just make out the figure of a man sitting just within. She stepped inside, ducking her head beneath the low opening, and sat down beside him. She chanced a sidelong glance into his eyes as she did. So far everything seemed alright. Telisan sat, already in a deep trance, though he could only have been within the cave for a couple of minutes. Still, there were no tremors, he seemed to be in control of his visions thus far. His staring eyes held a look of mystified wonder as he

watched scenes play before them that were doubtless ten times as vivid as any he had before experienced.

Vesri shook her head as she felt the visions begin to swim around the edges of her own consciousness. She was not here for the visions today. She found it near impossible to fight them down here, but she steeled herself against them and concentrated on Telisan. Everything seemed fine now, but if he stayed down too long he could have much more than a few days of illness to contend with.

“I don’t know what you think you will find out down here,” Vesri said. There was only a small chance that Telisan would even hear her in the throes of trance.

He turned his glowing eyes on her. He was smiling.

“I never knew. I never knew it could be this strong.”

“You’ll find nothing about that old puzzle. It isn’t strong enough, not even down here. It was The Deep where I found the first pieces of that premonition. It was buried very deep.”

“The Deep,” Telisan said as if he were speaking through a dream. “Fine. Let’s go.”

“What?” Vesri cried. “Are you mad?”

He stood up wavering as he did so.

“I want to know what’s going on in your head. I’m fine, don’t you see? You didn’t think I could handle even this and I did. I can handle The Deep too.”

Telisan turned back toward the cave mouth and stumbled toward it, reeling like a drunkard. He reached the opening and staggered against the stone, smacking his head against it with a resounding whack.

Telisan.” Vesri shouted, rushing after him, but he was already out of the cave.

“I’m alright.” He called after her as she came out onto the ledge where he was fumbling with his gear, trying to make sense of the straps through his confusion.

“You’re not. We’ve got to get you out of here now.”

She reached for his gear, trying to help him with it, but Telisan would have none of it. He yanked the glider from her and gnashed his teeth.

“I’m fine, I said. I don’t need any help from you.” He looked into her eyes and there was a strange mixture of anger and wonder in them. Both quickly gave way to the wild look that came with delirium.

Vesri stepped back. She had seen that look too many times. She had experienced it herself often, but not like this. Never like this. This was the look of a dead man.

Telisan finally got his straps untangled and he threw the frame over his back. The move taxed his waning balance and he staggered back toward the lip.

“Telisan, be careful.” She grabbed at his arm to keep him from pitching over the edge.

He yanked away from her again, turning toward the emptiness behind him. His movements looked heavy and lumbering. He lost his footing and went down on his side, rolling onto his stomach barely a foot from the edge.

Again Vesri reached out for him, but this time he did not resist. In fact Telisan did not respond at all. He simply rolled limply toward her as she pulled him.

“Telisan,” she cried. His head lolled to one side. His eyes stared off in no particular direction. The wonder had not left them. They were frozen in that awful look between understanding and madness.

“Telisan,” Vesri screamed at him. She slapped his face hard, hoping for some kind of response. There was nothing.

“Why did you do this?” Still she screamed at him. “You’re such a fool.”

There was no conviction in her voice as she moaned this accusation once more. What did Telisan’s foolishness matter now? Vesri had seen this condition enough times to know it. Even deep root would not save him now. He had fallen into the endless delirium. At first he would just be comatose. But as time went on, his dreams would become more and more poisonous, until he spent the rest of his days locked in a terrifying sleep from which he could never awaken.

Vesri rubbed the smoke from her eyes. It surprised her to find her fingers wet with tears. She did not want to cry. She did not want to care. A black look came into her eyes.

“Dareth,” she said to herself. “It’s that canyoner. I knew that nothing good would come of his showing up, and now look. Are you convinced now?”

Vesri fought down a wave of hatred. She stood and took up her own gear. The smoke pouring out of the cave began to play with the edges of her vision. The last thing she needed now was to be laid up for days in delirium. Dareth still lived, and now Telisan was as good as dead. But she still had a chance to do something to fix at least part of it. She still had a chance to find Dareth.

With her glider securely strapped to her back and with little ceremony, Vesri bent down and kissed Telisan’s brow. The look on his face was eerie. His eyes stared at something very, very far away and there was a soft smile on his lips. The look was misleading. He was not really there.

She reached under his body with her small arms and heaved as hard as she could. At first Telisan moved only a little. Then, with another powerful push, he rolled over the edge and plunged downward, end over end until he became lost in the red mist and darkness below.

“There’s no point in it, Grifis,” Dareth said as he finished devouring the half loaf of bread that Grifis had given him. After four days of living off of Keryli, the dry bread was a blessing, and it wasn’t the only boon Grifis brought with him. The wind rider made for a surprisingly skilled healer. Dareth’s ankle had been wrapped with deft precision, and his other wounds had been cleaned and tended to.

“The woman tried to kill you,” said Grifis.

Dareth nodded and a grin touched his lips.

“Do you find that funny?” Grifis asked.

“No, no. Just happy that she didn’t succeed.”

“Well, she’ll answer with her life.”

“It isn’t that simple.”

Grifis looked at his young companion, confusion written large across his face.

“How could it be any more simple?”

“Before you left,” Dareth replied. “I had no idea what it was you people did, not really. You could have explained it to me until the end of time and still I would not have understood. But now...” Dareth stopped to gaze down into the maw of The Deep beside them. “Now I know. I experienced it. I have seen a lot over the past few days. I have seen what you do for the canyon folk. Without the riders they wouldn’t survive. Vesri is responsible for much of that.”

“That doesn’t give her free reign to do as she pleases.” Grifis cried indignantly.

“Do you think that’s what she did, what she wanted? No, it’s the visions that have her. She saw something, at some point. Something that scared her about me.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because I remember what her face looked like as I was falling away from her into that fissure. It was horror on her face. Not pleasure, not satisfaction, nor even indifference. It was real horror.”

“You think she did it by accident?”

“Accident? No. I think she was horrified at what she felt she had to do, and that she was actually doing it.”

Dareth shook his head as he worked through it. “Who knows. For all we know she could be right. Isn’t she usually?”

Grifis couldn’t help but laugh at this.

“Indeed she is. Always has the answers first. But this puzzle is old. If she found anything about you, she found it in The Deep and we just don’t know how much we can trust that. The visions are strong but the mind is very weak after experiencing it.”

“I know,” Dareth replied. Again he looked into The Deep, a kind of longing in his eyes. “That’s why it’s even more important for me to get down there. The visions I have seen so far have taught me a lot, but more than that, it has left me a thousand questions. If I can get down there, I feel like I can get some real answers.”

“About what?”



“Everything. About the smoke, about the canyons and the shakes...about me.”  
This time Grifis did not laugh. This time he looked grave.

“No doubt in my mind that you’re a rider, kid. I’d clout you over the head and drag you away from this place if I hadn’t just seen you drag yourself up from a week-long stint in the thick of the smoke without so much as a headache.”

“Oh, my head hurts plenty.”

Grifis smiled. “The point is, I have no idea what you’re capable of. I know I won’t try to talk you out of going down. But I wouldn’t be letting Vesri off so easily. You see, I was there when she started on this crazy puzzle over seventeen years ago, and she wasn’t the only one who saw those visions.”

“The hermit,” Dareth said.

Grifis drew back in surprise. “You know about him?”

Dareth smiled. “I told you, I have learned a lot in the past few days.”

“Then you know who he is?”

“I know he was a rider. I know he is Vesri’s brother. I know he’s the reason you lost your eye.”

Grifis touched his patch and nodded. “His name is Comarin, and he’s your father too. Did you know that?”

Dareth’s head snapped up, his eyes wide with shock.

“No, I didn’t know...” he began. Then a few pieces fell into place and he arched his brow, nodding in understanding. “Of course. It makes sense.”

“He saw the same things she did,” Grifis continued. “In fact, he may have seen more. He went deeper.”

“But you just said that we can’t trust that. Going deeper could mean he’s just a little more insane than she. I don’t know him well, but what I do know about him is that he isn’t all there.”

“He is sane,” Grifis said. “I’ve been to see him. That’s where I went when I so foolishly left you in Vesri’s hands. I had to know if it was he who sent you to the fissures. I suspected it by things you said, but I hadn’t seen Comarin in seventeen years. I had just about convinced myself that he was dead.”

“And you think he is sane?”

“I know it. Of course, Comarin is only realizing it himself now. I think he found it easy just to hide out and forget about this puzzle, forget about the fight with his sister, forget about me. No. You can still see the marks of the smoke on him. He is older than he ought to be, his hair has gone white like Vesri’s from that ordeal. But his mind is back if indeed it ever left.”

Dareth thought about the memorial marker that stuck out of the ground near the rock wall in Crescent Canyon, the marker that bore his father’s name along with all the others. But that wasn’t his father. It had been Daesha’s husband. Now he considered the man that had sent him up the cliff to help her, his true father. Thinking about it now, he remembered the look in the man’s eye when first he saw Daesha lying there in the hut, the smoke sleep of the uninitiated heavy upon her. The hermit had never cared a wit for any of the canyon folk. He had made sure that was clear. But his face had betrayed him in that moment, and the memory of that moment made Grifis’s news easy for Dareth to believe.

“Why did my mother never say anything to me?” he wondered out loud. “I can’t understand it. She always told me that he had died.”

“I can’t help you there, kid.”

Dareth reached over and placed his hand on the man’s shoulder.

“Thank you, Grifis. You have been a good friend to me.”

“Well, I like you. Did right from the start. Now that I know, I guess it’s because you reminded me of him. Hell, you remind me of myself too.”

“Well there is still something you can do for me, if you’re not too tired of coming to my rescue.”

“Name it.”

“Your wings,” Dareth said.

“My wings?”

Dareth nodded. “I’m sorry for what happened to the ones you gave me. They got me out of The Deep, only barely. But they’ll never do to go down inside. I need the control. I need your wings.”

“What?” Grifis cried. “You want to go now?”

“I don’t think I should wait. I don’t want you going after Vesri, but that doesn’t mean she’s done coming after me.”

“Listen, I don’t know why you’re not lying in a puddle of your own drool right now. Anybody else would be after what you just went through. It makes me less wary about you going down there. But if you plan on taking that risk so soon, well that’s just mad.”

“But you said yourself, Grifis, I’m alright. No delirium. I don’t understand it either but there it is. I need answers and my mother is still lying there in a coma. If there’s one thing these past days has taught me, it’s that I can handle The Deep.”

Grifis studied his young friend for a long time. Dareth could see the wheels turning in his mind.

“Fine. You go. But even if you are as strong as it seems, stronger even than Comarin or Vesri, you can’t go it alone. I will second you. Give it a little time. We’ll get another glider and...”

“No,” Dareth cut in. “You can’t do that, Grifis. You can’t handle it.”

“Well, well. Look who’s head has gotten a little too big. Did you forget who first took you down?”

“It was you, Grifis, I know. And it was that very first time that I saw what could happen to you, don’t you remember? It didn’t take The Deep to see that vision. It was plain, right on the surface of things. You know it as well as I do.”

Grifis jumped up from the rock on which he sat and stalked over to the brink, looking down into the mist below.

“Damn it, Dareth, it’s madness. No one goes down into the deeper fissures alone, to say nothing of The Deep itself. They always have a partner who doesn’t enter the seep unless there is a problem. Those are the rules. And that’s because people go insane otherwise.”

“I know it.”

Grifis waited for something more from Dareth, but nothing came. If he said more, it would give the wind rider more to argue against. As it was, Grifis could do nothing but take up his glider and hand it over.

“I’m going to be right here when you come back up. And you better come back up, because I don’t fancy the idea of sitting out here on The Deep waiting for you all night long.”

Dareth smiled. “Thank you for that. I’ll be back. I promise.”

He strapped the wings on and cast a glance into blackness below. He probably should not have done so. It would have made it easier for him to appear brave in front of Grifis, but the truth was that fear bubbled up strong and hot in his throat. The visions he’d had in the Cave of Hope told him that he could handle something like this, but that knowledge didn’t assuage his fear one bit.

“You’re still favoring that hurt foot of yours,” Grifis remarked as he observed Dareth limping. “Are you sure you don’t want to wait until you have rested up properly?”

“I can’t.”

“I know,” Grifis threw up his hands in defeat. “Listen, it’ll be pretty thick down there, tough to see. Stick by the far wall, over there.” He pointed out the place about half a mile along the length of the rim. “There are seeps where you can find root all the way down. That’s where Vesri and Comarin went down.”

The two men clasped hands.

“I’m glad to have met you, kid.”

“I’ll be back, Grifis.”

“I know you will.”

Dareth turned back to the brink and leapt off before he had another opportunity to stare into that endless depth and lose his conviction altogether. He looked back to see Grifis gazing after him and waving.

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Even now the wind rider could hardly believe that the boy had actually taken the leap. But there he was, dropping slowly, gracefully down through the mists that eventually thickened to a solid floor of smoke, far, far below. Grifis tried to imagine how much farther the actual bottom must be, if a bottom actually existed. Most believed there wasn’t one. Most believed it was just the smoke, layer upon endless layer of it. He never had much of an opinion either way. As he looked after his young friend, he saw no reason to wonder over it now. What did it matter? Bottom or no, it was a deadly place.

Grifis thought back over the years, over the people he had known that took that plunge. Some had returned from the upper caves and recovered. Some had not. Only Vesri and Comarin had returned from deeper down. He remembered how that had turned out. After the fight Comarin had disappeared. Vesri had spent nearly three months in the delirium and her hair had gone pure white. At that time there was none stronger or more experienced than the two of them.

He watched Dareth take another turn and sink still further. Soon Grifis would lose sight of him altogether among the twisting arms of smoke that danced about one another. It would have been easy for Grifis to believe that Dareth was lost. That he would never

again return to the surface to see the sun. But something told him that was not so. It wasn't a vision that gave him this premonition. This one came right from his gut and he trusted it.

At about that moment, something caught the rider's eye on the horizon. Grifis reluctantly took his gaze from the fast disappearing figure below to satisfy his curiosity. When he realized what it was, the smile that had been playing over his lips faded into horror and dismay. A glider approached, fast and low, headed straight for The Deep and for Dareth.

Even had he not recognized the small, deft form, he would have had no doubt as to who steered the wings. He cursed his lack of a glider. What could he possibly do now?

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When Vesri saw Grifis racing along the brink on the far side of The Deep, waving his arms wildly, she knew that she was too late. Looking down toward her destination, she corroborated the truth of it. Dareth's glider had just disappeared into the thicker smoke below. A cry of rage and fear escaped from her lips and was as quickly torn away by the wind that screamed up from The Deep, breaking past her in her mad dive. She hadn't consciously decided to follow, but she didn't slacken her pace or bother to pull up at all. She was half buried in the mist before she realized what she was about.

Grifis had already disappeared high above her. She wondered if he had been trying to shout a warning to Dareth, or if he had been trying to get her to stop so he might reason with her. It didn't matter much either way. The canyoner was long gone, and she was far past reasoning.

A wave of panic washed over Vesri as she descended. She had been here before, and that was what made her so scared. If it had been her first time she would not have understood just what it meant to be there in smoke so thick that she couldn't see the walls on either side of her. For all she could tell, she simply fell through empty space and would do so forever, never finding a place to rest her feet.

Quickly Vesri tried to get her bearing and head for one of the walls. She wouldn't be able to go much lower with the root she had collected from the fissure near the camp. It was strong root, but it would be as nothing down here. She would need to find a seep soon or she would not be able to follow. Her only consolation lay in the fact that Dareth would have to do the same. If he didn't then he would surely never return, and then her problems would be over anyway. She worried that he would not be easy to find in the low visibility, but she had seen where he had entered and she knew where nearly all of the upper seeps were located. She would find him soon enough.

Vesri dropped so quickly that she practically outran her own eyes. Like a thick fog, she could see through the smoke for a distance of about thirty yards in any direction. But when one shot downwards at the rate she fell, thirty yards passed by very quickly. If not careful, she could dash herself against the wall of The Deep before she ever knew it was nearby.

The closest seep to Dareth's position approached swiftly. She knew that Grifis was familiar with this seep. It was about as deep as he had ever gone, still far too deep for most. The man would doubtless have told Dareth of it, and she had no doubt that he was

there even now, cutting away root for his descent. Even that root would not be strong enough. She and Comarin had had to stop three times on the way down to gather stronger root. Those were the depths that Dareth would be seeking.

Suddenly that first seep came into view, hardly more than a crack in the wall, though a precarious ledge, barely wide enough to provide footing, spanned the width of the break. The Keryli vines that crawled out of the crack looked to be nearly as thick as her wrist.

Vesri saw no sign of Dareth and it shocked her not to find him clinging there. Could it be that he had already been and gotten what he needed? No, it would have taken longer than that. The canyoner must have thought he could make it down to the next level. She scowled as she thought of it. He may have been right. The fissure he had fallen into had been a very deep one, even when compared to the one near her camp. If he'd managed to survive not only the fall, but the ambient smoke down there, then he could handle these depths with root from that place.

Vesri twisted about several times, unsure whether to follow directly or not. In the end she knew that she could not afford to try it. She had gathered plenty of root after committing Telisan's body to the bottom, but that wouldn't do. Even in her fear she would not be that reckless. She had no desire to experience the delirium like she had on that other occasion so long ago unless she absolutely had to.

Vesri made her landing. She pulled her blade free with one hand, as she held on tight to a horn of stone to steady herself. The thick vines held fast to the rocks, but she completed her task as swiftly as she could, tossing the first and second root into her mouth and cutting four more in case she needed them before she could get to the deeper seep.

She only remained for a few minutes. She was very good at this. When she had what she needed, she fell away onto the roaring wind and made for the next stop in her descent. Dareth would not dare pass up that one. If he did he would probably lose control and simply drop out of the air shortly after passing it by.

As Vesri approached the next bloom of Keryli, she craned her neck to catch sight of him. The crack from which the smoke poured was a nearly horizontal gash in the rock that ran for at least thirty feet. The bottom of the break jutted out past the upper section leaving easy footing all the way along. Dareth crouched near the farther side of the cleft. He sawed at a heavy vine, trying to get it free. Vesri almost shouted out loud with excitement at seeing him. Even if she had, the howling gale would have ripped the sound far away long before it could reach Dareth's ears. Yet something alerted him. Something told him that Vesri approached. For in that instant he chose to cease his labors and gaze upward directly into her eyes.

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It was like something he had seen in a dream. When Dareth looked up and saw Vesri bearing down on him, her Keryli knife still grasped tight in her fist, her bone-white hair whipping about her head like madness itself. He had only seen that face on a few occasions. He remembered the first time. She had been beautiful, despite the obvious age in her face and the dark look that dominated it. He had seen none of that beauty on their

second meeting. On that occasion her look had held the same livid expression that stared back at him now across the intervening space, and that space was closing fast.

Dareth looked into his pouch. It contained only one of the thick, purple roots. He had already eaten two others, but he was afraid that was hardly enough to get as deep as Grifis had told him he would need to go. He looked again at the wind rider approaching. There was little choice. She would be on him in a matter of seconds. He held his own knife. He might possibly fight her off, but he no more wanted to kill anyone than he wanted to lose his own life.

Dareth had no decision to make. It was time to go. He abandoned the root he had started digging for and jumped onto the wind, sailing down and away from the approaching glider. He glanced up long enough to see if she planned to pursue him. Relief washed through him when he saw her alight on the ledge. Vesri was an experienced flier and he merely a novice. He would never be able to escape her without a good lead, but even Vesri could not tempt The Deep without being prepared for it.

Dareth had the added problem of not really knowing where he was headed. Grifis's scant directions were not much to go on, and he had no time to waste. Dareth would have to trust to fate. He continued to descend rather than circling back. After all, The Deep must be riddled with seeps.

The ambient smoke thickened to a heavy fog and passed him on the driving wind. Without that wind constantly sweeping the rock face clean, Dareth would have no idea where the danger lay. He strained his eyes to make out a spot where a jet of smoke billowed forth. A more obvious landmark would be the vines creeping over the walls like a web. So far only weak, spindly vines that fed off the ambient smoke came into view. No trace of the thick vines that Grifis had told him he would need to find in order to get at the deeproot.

Dareth blinked. A flash of light briefly obscured the redness. He shook off the vision and the confusion that began to hum softly in the back of his mind. He grasped the pouch around his neck tightly. Only the one bit of root that was strong enough to handle this, and already he was feeling the effects. More blinking scenes and more cobwebs in his brain. He shook his head, focusing his attention on keeping the wings of his glider level.

Still not finding anything in the direction he headed, Dareth cut back on his path, hoping to find something further below. The visions needled his brain. He wondered how much longer he could keep them at bay. Here he felt nearly as lost as he had in the Pyramid Cave, but he wasn't resting comfortably against the wall now. One wrong move here could dash his brains against the stones.

He yanked his wing straps inward to get at the pouch around his neck. The maneuver temporarily arrested his fall, jerking upward so that he nearly lost the root in the process. Another yank on the straps and he managed to dump the contents of the pouch into his mouth, swallowing the purple root, as well as the few other weaker roots to gain what little help they might offer.

Dareth scanned the wall with a manic need. When he looked above to see if there may be any sign of Keryli bloom there, horror overtook his face. Vesri's demon form dropped swiftly toward him. At first he thought it another vision. How had she found him in that smoke? At almost the same time something else caught Dareth's attention. A



black patch, quite large, revealed itself in the crannies of the rock below him. Around the darkness, the unmistakable tangle of vines spread out in a halo.

Even as Vesri neared him, Dareth marveled at the plant that clung to the wall. The vines were as thick as a man's arm. The purple flowers covered them in giant blooms that held on despite the wind tearing constantly at them. Dareth didn't think. He didn't look back to see how near Vesri might be. It didn't really matter anyway. He would make it before she was upon him or he would not. As it turned out, he did make it, but not by much.

The base of the opening protruded outward several feet and Dareth came in on the ledge so fast that he practically tumbled head over heels, coming to a stop several feet inside the opening. Instantly he turned around to check the progress of his assailant. Vesri was coming in for a landing and, despite her experience, Dareth thought she looked to be about as out of control as he had been himself.

He wasted no more time on her. He leapt for the nearest vine and attacked it with his blade. The smoke poured past him from the opening at such a volume that it seemed to have substance, like a waterfall spilling into the depth that stretched, miraculously, still further down. The confusion in his brain mounted. It was a good thing that solid earth now held him up. If he had remained in the air even a few moments longer, he would doubtless have lost control and shot down into oblivion.

He found little room to see what lay in front of him, around the slivers of vision that danced constantly in front of his eyes now. He fought to maintain control and cut through the vine. The skin of the monster plant resisted his efforts mightily. He imagined Vesri was right at his back by now, but he could not stop his work to worry about that right now. If she slipped her dagger between his ribs where he crouched then it would all be over, but if he didn't get at this root, and soon, it wouldn't matter one way or another. The sweetness of the Keryli stung his nostrils and the smoke poured into his lungs, thick and powerful.

Dareth watched as a fire raged through his village. He screamed as he saw people fleeing from the blaze. He could not tell if his scream had been real or just another part of his imagination. Some of those he saw didn't make it. They fell under the bright fire and twisted in agony as the blaze ignited clothing and blackened flesh. Dareth knew the vision would flash away as quickly as it had come and so he searched frantically for his mother among the fleeing figures and the bonfires that sprang up around the unfortunates. Not a face among them looked familiar to him and he realized with a guilty relief that the village was not his own, but one very much like it. He didn't know what canyon the doomed village might lie in, and before he could endeavor to find out more, the vision left him, replaced by others. Some of them were mundane and others, while not as clear, equally as horrible as the first.

Dareth's heart felt sick at some of the things that blinked in front of his eyes. He wanted to pursue some of those visions, try to piece together the puzzles that he might be able to warn them. They might yet be saved with a message to their Seer. But these thoughts distracted from his true purpose, and he had to shake off the urge in order to get that root free. It was almost there.

Suddenly the last stubborn bit of the root separated from the vine and he grabbed it and shoved it into his mouth, sucking its bitterness even as he fell onto his back. The



effect came almost immediately. The root could not erase the pounding visions, but it did return some control and some understanding back to the reasoning part of his mind. He wondered fleetingly why Vesri had not attacked him yet. Doubtless she had fallen to the same task as he had done immediately on landing. He rolled his head back and forth for several seconds, pushing away the premonitions. Then he lifted his head and looked toward the caves entrance.

Dareth saw Vesri right away. She had not advanced any further into the cave, nor had she fallen to collecting the all important root. Instead, she knelt on the ground, her head down on her lap in a slouched posture, her white hair falling onto the stone floor in a messy halo. It took him a long time to even consider what she might be doing. His brain felt so muddy. He shook his head hard again and some ability to reason began to return. The root in his mouth tasted so bitter that it burned the inside of his cheek where it nestled.

Vesri raised her head slowly. Her eyes blazed like suns as she glared at him, but Dareth could see that it was not really him that she saw. She still held her blade in her fist but now she relaxed her grip and it rolled on to the ground from her limp palm. She tried to rise then. It was a pathetic attempt. She managed to get one foot under her. Then she transferred her weight and began to stand. Her legs quivered and failed. Then she pitched forward onto her face, moaning along with the howl of the wind whipping past the cave mouth.

Dareth could see well enough that the woman was in a bad way. She would never be able to get to the root she needed to survive. He could already feel the need to get more of it into his own system. He unstrapped his rig and rolled onto his stomach, pushing himself up onto his hands and knees. The vine he had worked free still had several of the dark purple roots growing out of it. He began to cut away another of them. That one came away much more easily now that the vine had been pried free.

Dareth ate that root right away and felt the flush of sanity take a stronger hold. He wasted no more time. He began to work on the plant with a frantic haste. He would need more himself soon and he still needed to gather what he would need for Daesha. He knew that he would not be able to hold the stronger visions at bay for much longer. Pretty soon, no matter how much root he swallowed, he would have to submit to them until they ran their course.

Dareth managed to get five more of the precious roots into his pouch before his attention was again taken by the woman who lay at the entrance. Her moan had grown louder, and now it rang out above the wind. He considered her possible fate.

“Perhaps she deserves it,” he thought through the fog. The woman had cast him into the depth only a few days before and left him there to his fate, dead for all she knew. It would be justice to let her languish there until she expired, maddened and starving on the floor of a cave deep in the guts of the earth. But the idea seemed repugnant to Dareth. He could not just let her perish. His conscience refused the proposal, though his mind justified it easily. In the end it was his conscience that won out. He crawled slowly toward her. No more than twelve feet separated them, but the distance felt like miles to Dareth, whose muscles responded as if he were travelling through quicksand.

When he reached Vesri, Dareth struggled to roll her onto her back. Then he forced her jaws open, dropping one of the roots into her mouth. By force of habit the woman

began to chew on the plant, but her eyes remained unfocused, staring up at the low ceiling of the chamber. He gave her a second root and then turned back toward the vines. That was all the aid he could afford. If it didn't help her then there was nothing more he could do.

Dareth regained his earlier position and got two more bits of root cut away before reality became too obscured by visions for him to function anymore. He slumped against the wall of the chamber and gazed toward the inner part of the cave, toward the place where the river of smoke poured forth from the rock. And then reality went away altogether.

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Red. Billowing, maddening waves of thick, roiling red swirled across Vesri's field of vision. She had no idea where she was. She had no idea how she had gotten there. The visions that assaulted her were nothing new, but the strength of them, the sheer power of them took her back many years. They tossed her about like a plaything on the driving wind even though Vesri felt solid stone beneath her. The two sensations were opposed to one another, and yet the feeling raised no more confusion in her already addled brain.

A fire raged through the northern part of Swan Canyon. Vesri had seen pieces of this vision before, but only now did she realize where and when the fire would strike. She must send a warning. That vision swept away as quickly as it came and was replaced by another, by several. They piled up one on top of the other so that even Vesri, with all of her strength and experience had trouble separating them.

And then there was the canyoner, not as she had seen him in those few instances over the past several days, but as she had seen him long ago. He was a shadowy, mysterious form, the face obscured by the red mists even as little glimpses peeked through.

"And what is he doing?" Vesri asked herself.

Falling, falling into the center of the earth it seemed. Then came the explosion, that massive shattering explosion that put any shake she had ever experienced to shame. The wave of heat and stinging light rocked her back through the empty space where she hung. Vesri screamed. The shock of the explosion did not tear the sound from her parched lips. It was the dread in her gut that did that.

This vision swept away as easily as the others had done, and suddenly Vesri became aware of the bitterness in her mouth. Even with her years of experience, she couldn't place it. Her mind was too far gone for that. The ground beneath her prostrate form took on more substance at the touch of that bitterness though, and the premonitions bounced around the inside of her mind with far less ferocity. Some semblance of her plight made it through the veil. The cave flashed in front of her briefly, at first just another vision like the others. But then it strengthened, took on some kind of washed out reality.

Dareth was still in the cave. Her blazing eyes allowed that much through. He slumped against the wall and stared off, wide eyed into the depths behind them. But something looked different about the canyoner from what she had seen before, something benevolent where she had previously only seen a blight, a danger, an unbearable mystery.

Vesri had little attention to give to her surroundings. She began to understand the taste of the root in her mouth and, though she still could not quite place her situation, she realized enough to know that she would be lost forever in a matter of moments if she could not find clean air to breathe right away. Something like light flickered off to her left. It could very well be nothing more than the fire in Swan Canyon, but she had no choice. She began to crawl toward it. There was a slim hope that the mouth of the cave lay in that direction, and if it did then she had to reach it. She just had to.

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Dareth heard the explosion. He felt the searing heat and the rush of power that shot upward like lightning reversing its course and cracking the sky. He rode along with it. There was no mystery about it, no shadowy uncertainty. He swam in the midst of it, blinded and moving endlessly upward. Everything seemed to be backward. The light that surrounded him quickly faded away far above and was replaced by an inky darkness, not the darkness of night, but rather the darkness of oblivion. Dareth raced toward it, out of control. A chilling fear gripped him as he climbed. He just knew somewhere deep inside him that if he reached that black canopy above, he would join it and become oblivion himself.

Dareth tried to turn his face away, but it felt like trying to move a stone with his mind. He fought the paralysis with superhuman effort, twisting and squirming in the grip of his fear and his fatal course.

A mote of light above accompanied a snapping of something in his mind. The blinking visions still existed, superimposed over the black canvas above and now it took on a stronger existence. A strange pressure on his buttocks and his back resolved itself and he knew with a flash that he sat on the floor of a cave deep in the earth. Dareth tried to think how he might have forgotten that important fact, but already things had begun to fall away, to reveal the truth of his plight.

Something rested in Dareth's palm. Without realizing that he knew what he was about, he lifted his hand to his mouth and placed the root between his lips. He gazed about the cave. Flashes of vision still obscured parts of the scene, but he was able to gather his thoughts enough to know what he needed to do. He was alone in the cave. He half remembered that had not been the case but he could not remember why he felt that way or who might have been with him.

One thing that Dareth remembered very clearly was his ultimate purpose. He grabbed hold of the pouch around his neck and felt the three roots that remained within through the soft fabric. Not even The Deep could erase the memory of his mother lying in deadly sleep. Now Dareth understood the world she walked through, and he felt more than ever that he needed to return to her, that he might free her from the bonds of that other world and return her to this one.

The cave mouth yawned on his left. He could see it clearly from where he sat, though it wavered in his vision in the same way the horizon had done when he was out on the cracked earth, starving and dying from thirst. He also saw his gear lying on the ground nearby. He leaned forward and grabbed the tip of the right wing, barely within reach. He dragged the rig close and lifted it with weakened arms, fumbling with the

straps. Then he staggered to his feet, wincing at a sharp pain in his ankle as he donned the rig. The task had become fairly easy for him over the past few weeks but now it felt like the most difficult thing he had ever done, to get those straps tied about him. He didn't wait to be done with the ordeal before stumbling to the mouth of the cave and onto the ledge outside of it.

Dareth gazed upward, trying to see even a tiny crack of light from above, but there was nothing. The scene reminded him too much of his recent vision, and a wave of fear washed through his blood. He suddenly felt like he might never leave that ledge, and that place in the deepest part of the earth would become his tomb. He looked down and saw no more in that direction than there was above. He shook the confusion from his mind and considered his options. He could remain, in which case he would surely die, but not before he languished in a continual dream, eventually unable even to reach out for the sustenance of the Keryli a few feet away.

His other option was to fly, to jump off of the ledge and hope. He might be able to operate the wings. He wasn't sure. At least his death would be swift if he could not, unless The Deep truly had no bottom. In that case he would simply fall forever.

Out of habit Dareth offered up a prayer to the Seer and then stepped, one foot after another into the wind. It caught him up instantly and he had to fight hard with his own mind to keep the wings on a level and find the updraft that would push him slowly back toward where the sunlight held sway over the earth.

Grifis wrung his hands until they ached. He longed to do something with them, but he was helpless. He remained as near as he could shuffle toward the sloped edge of the yawning Deep, staring down into the mist and trying desperately to find some sign of Dareth's return. Had it been three hours now that the kid had been down? It seemed longer than that. Had Vesri caught up with him? She hadn't returned either.

Even if he could expose himself to what lay below him, his shoulders missed the familiar feel of a rig across his back. Grifis could not fly. Vesri's camp lay far from here on the opposite side of The Deep. So what could he do? Biera knew where he had been searching, and she would come looking for him soon enough.

"Perhaps I'll see neither of them again," he muttered. Deep down Grifis felt a tinge of truth to that thought.

Then he saw a figure sailing along one of the smaller fissures toward the point where it intersected The Deep.

"Biera." He recognized her easily. "At least I won't have to wait alone."

Once Biera got nearer, he rose and waved his arms above his head to catch her attention. Almost immediately he saw her change course, rise up high to avoid the harsher winds that tore along the surface of The Deep, and cross toward him. In minutes she stood by his side, listening to his account of the events that had transpired.

"He should have been back by now if he made it," Biera said. "Don't you think?"

"I do. I'm afraid that she either got to him or, more likely, they've both succumbed to the smoke."

"You think that Vesri would do harm to Dareth?"

"She already has," Grifis replied. "She lied about not finding him before. She attacked him, tried to kill him. She knocked him into a fissure and left him for dead."

Biera's eyes were wide with disbelief. "I don't understand it. Vesri has always been a little scary, I'll admit, but not in that way. I only mean that I never quite understood her. But she has always dedicated herself to her job, and that was saving people, not killing them. What happened to her?"

"I can't tell you. I understand it about as much as you do, but I know what she is capable of. I was there before, when she and Comarin returned from down there and I tell you, if I hadn't been there to stop them, they would have killed each other. I never quite knew what it was all about and I still don't get it for sure. Comarin disappeared after that, and Vesri would never talk about it. I have a better picture now that I have found Comarin, but as to Vesri's side of the story, I'm still completely ignorant."

"How long were they down there?"

"Vesri and Comarin?" Grifis sighed. "Little more than an hour, and they were in a bad way when they came back. Dareth has been down almost three times as long now."

They stood there together, looking down into The Deep as if it were a grave. For surely it was one many times over.

"So how long do we wait?" Biera asked.

“I’m not giving up,” Grifis replied. “But you should go back to the camp. Let Telisan and the others know what has happened and bring back a rig for me.”

“Haven’t seen Telisan. Some of the others said he went down with Vesri. In fact this is the first I have heard that she wasn’t still with him.”

Grifis moved to respond, but just then something grabbed at his attention from the corner of his eye good eye. He snapped his head toward The Deep, and what he saw filled him with dread. A glider rose up, fitfully from out of the smoke. It twisted back and forth erratically on the strong wind. Even from this distance Grifis could tell that it was not Dareth.

“Forget the rig for now,” he said. “I’m going to need to borrow yours.”

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The wind threw the glider about like a leaf. Vesri barely knew where she was, but she had been doing this for many years. She hardly needed her mind to control her flight. Her muscles knew what to do on their own. If they hadn’t, she would have been dashed against the wall of The Deep soon after leaving the ledge. Her mind still played visions over the backdrop of smoke. She could not remember where she had been, why she had been there or who she had followed to get there. But she remembered the visions. She remembered the awesome strength of them. She had never felt them so strongly before.

Something scratched the back of her mind. That wasn’t entirely true. She had felt visions like that before. She just couldn’t remember when it had been.

Vesri reached a point where light actually penetrated and she could see the Keryli blooms on the walls clearly now. She looked up toward the surface and saw daylight. A wave of relief rushed through her. She couldn’t place the reason for it, however. Had she been in some trouble? It was hard to tell. The confusion was on her but that had happened many time before, though not quite like this.

As Vesri watched the rim of The Deep slowly creep toward her, her body again took over. It guided her to the near side of the crack without her mind quite realizing where she needed to be. Her eyes burned with the ambient smoke, and her ears roared with the sound of the gale that pushed her aloft. All of her senses suffered in the assault. But she was aware enough to know that she needed to reach solid earth before she fell right out of the sky.

She had something important to do. Had she done it already? She could not remember. But it didn’t matter now. Now the only important thing to do was to get herself up out of this hole, and that she did.

The mist still sailed past her, but much thinner now. Beyond the rim she could see clear sky, even through the lens of her delirium. She made for it, sucking in the first breath of clean air she had tasted in what seemed like ages. It didn’t help to clear her mind any. She was too far gone for that. But at least she would not sink deeper into trance.

Once Vesri broke above the surface she turned off the path of the fissure and swooped down toward a wide promontory nearby. She landed fast and heavy, tumbling forward and scraping her knees in the process. She hardly noticed the pain, laying still for a long time, face down in the dirt. A sense of relief washed over her, but it seemed to



come from a long way off. She still had no idea where she was or why. The world still moved as if she were in flight. Her confusion only became stronger when she suddenly felt a strong hand grab the back of her jerkin and yank her upright.

A man bent over and stared into her face. He was so close to her, and he looked very, very angry. A patch covered one of his eyes. His hot breath stung her nostrils.

“What have you done, Vesri?”

She looked at him closely, trying to place his face, but the delirium still blazed in her hot brain and her eyes still burned with it.

The man shook her and she went limp in his hands.

“Where is he, Vesri? If you have done anything to him.”

The churning fire in Vesri’s eyes died down just a little for a moment and a touch of recognition entered them.

“Grifis?” she said. “Grifis, what happened to your eye? Where is Comarin? Did he make it? Did he make it back up?”

The man holding her looked into her face for another long moment, then he shook his head as if in disgust and dropped her back onto the ground. Despite the bright light of the sun shining full in her face, darkness reached up from the back of her mind and dragged Vesri back down below.

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The light above gave Dareth a new hope. He thought that he would never find his way up out of The Deep. He had thought his previous experience extreme. It could not compare to the depths he had gone to this time. Vesri had disappeared. He wondered if she flew somewhere above him or if she had fallen. For all he knew, she could be falling still.

As submerged as he had been in the maze of visions, Dareth began to feel the cleansing effects of clean air instantly. A fire still raged in his brain, but even in the cave itself he had managed to get hold of his concentration and aim toward getting out.

A mid-afternoon sun greeted him once he had finally gained enough altitude to be able to see it. He instantly headed for where he knew Grifis to be waiting. The Keryli’s sweetness faded from his nostrils, replaced by the thin dry heat of the cracked earth. A figure stood on the rock where Dareth had left the wind rider but he saw even from this distance that the figure was not Grifis. He fought off confusion. Had he been mistaken about Grifis’s presence? His brain still played tricks on him. But no. It was Biera who occupied that rock now. A quick scan showed Grifis now about half a mile away on the same side of The Deep. The man crouched down over a prostrate form.

Dareth called out as loud as he could but the wind would not allow his voice to travel beyond it’s influence. He changed course quickly, aware enough to understand the situation right away. Vesri had made it back to the surface, and Grifis had found her.

In mere seconds Dareth flew beyond the steep drop and rode the lesser drafts that rolled up the side of the embankment beyond. This time Grifis heard his call and looked toward the sky to find it’s origin.

The man let the figure on the ground slip from his grasp and settle back to the earth. He turned with wild enthusiasm toward Dareth, waving his arms about in the air.



Dareth dropped to the ground and knelt down taking a long deep breath and rejoicing over the feeling of solid earth under his feet again.

“Dareth” Grifis cried. “You made it.”

“Yes.” Dareth’s voice croaked out of his parched throat.

Grifis knelt beside him. The rider pulled his water skin from his belt and held it up for Dareth, whose fingers shook too badly to do it himself.

“I don’t believe it. I’ve got to say, I thought you were lost.” Grifis looked back at Vesri, unconscious on the ground several yards away. “I thought she had gotten to you.”

Dareth nodded, swallowing another sip of the sweet water. “She followed me down. She was right behind me when I entered the cave.”

Dareth tried to stand but his knees still trembled and Grifis grabbed hold of his arm, coaxing him back to the ground.

“Just stay down. You’re not in that much of a hurry. Did you get it?”

Dareth dug into his pouch and pulled out one of the deeproots. He held it up with a smile and Grifis took it from his hand, holding it close to his good eye and nodding in appreciation.

“Yes. That’s the stuff alright. So purple it’s nearly black. Root this strong can counter just about any amount of delirium.”

“It didn’t help her.” Dareth pointed toward Vesri.

“I think it did,” Grifis said. “She would never have surfaced otherwise. What I don’t understand is why you’re not in the same condition.”

“I don’t know,” Dareth said. “I was pretty lost while I was down there, but I wasn’t in nearly as bad of shape as she was when she landed. That’s the only thing that kept her from attacking me, I think. Otherwise she would have been able to do anything she wanted to me.”

“But she came up before you. I thought she had finished you off for sure.”

“Yes. She was lying unconscious when I fell into the trance. When I came out of it she was gone.”

“Well, she won’t be happy when she wakes... if she wakes. Once I tell the others what she has done they won’t be sympathetic.”

“You’ll watch after her then?” Dareth asked. “I need to get back to my canyon.”

“You want to try to fly over the cracked earth now?” Grifis shook his head in protest. “You’ve only just come up from The Deep. That’s something most can never even do. You need time to recover first.” Grifis pointed to Dareth’s trembling fingers. “Look at you. I doubt you could keep hold of your wing-straps.”

“I’ll be alright. Already I have been away much longer than I had hoped. I know what my mother has experienced now, and as amazing as it is, I can’t imagine how horrible it would be if I couldn’t escape from it. I have what I came for and now I’ve got to get it back to her.”

Grifis stared into Dareth’s eyes, hoping to sway his conviction with the look. But Dareth remained steadfast.

“You won’t be convinced?”

“No.”

“Fine. I think I could believe you capable of just about anything at this point, kid. But I’m coming with you.” Grifis shaded his eyes and gazed out across the rim of The Deep.

“I can see Biera already headed this way overland. She will be here in a few minutes. When she gets here, I’ll tell her to look after Vesri. We can stop at the camp and send the others back here to get them back. Can you hold off long enough to do that?”

Dareth smiled and nodded. “I would be happy if you would come with me, Grifis. Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me. I’m just looking for an excuse to see an old friend again.”

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They sailed along the thin pathways of the fissures toward a long finger that stretched out toward Crescent Canyon. Dareth followed Grifis’s lead. They rose up as high as they could go on the updraft. Once they left the fissure behind, they would only have the dry air of the cracked earth to ride on, and that would hold them aloft for only a short while.

Dareth felt a rush of exhilaration. He had grown used to the sensation of flight. Now, however, he was heading home. He had what he needed to help his mother. He only hoped that all was still well with her. The hermit would not let anything happen to her, though. Comarin, his father, would not let anything happen.

As Dareth passed over the dry and barren land between the web of fissures and the canyon that held his home, he thought back over the past few weeks. He had learned so much about the world that he had never imagined. It only served to strengthen the feeling that had pulled at his heart for as long as he could remember. Far more existed beyond his tiny little village, and he knew deep down that he was meant for it. One of the visions that had come to him in The Deep still tugged at his thoughts. He worried over the people in that other canyon. He’d seen them burning. At first he thought it was his own people, his own village. Knowing it was not didn’t lessen the sense of responsibility he felt. He knew something. He might be able to help them.

A call from Grifis, brought Dareth’s attention back to the present. The man sailed very close, a little ahead and to the left of where Dareth flew. He looked down and saw the broad line of Crescent Canyon ahead. The vast rent in the earth appeared to be incredibly wide when compared to the fissures. Dareth could not believe how far they had managed to glide over the cracked earth. It had taken Dareth nearly three days to cross it, and he had almost died trying. If Biera hadn’t found him, then his carcass would even now be lying down there, picked clean by the carrion birds.

The riders flew low. Their gliders had been losing altitude steadily over the last three hours since they had left the updrafts of the fissures, but Dareth guessed they would have no more than a few hours walk before they reached the rim of the canyon.

Evening threatened to become night as the sun raced to drop over the far side of the canyon. At least Dareth and Grifis would not have to face the heat once they landed. The cold of night would be almost as a bad, but Grifis had collected some sulfur coals when they had stopped at Vesri’s campsite, along with food, water and a few other supplies that would help them on their journey.

The pair ran out of wind just about the time that night fell. They landed on the dusty earth and Grifis set to work on the coals. They ate and Dareth tried to get some sleep, though his mind would hardly let go enough to allow it. He slept fitfully and his eyes were wide open when the sun peeked out behind him in the morning. They wasted no time, but packed up their camp and started on their way before the heat could begin to accumulate.

Within another two hours, Dareth felt the stirrings of the breeze coming off of the canyon. It dampened the growing heat and a short time later the travelers stood on the edge of the great canyon, staring down at its lush, green floor. Dareth marveled over the trees, the river, the grass that waved in the stiff wind. He had grown used to seeing nothing but Keryli and the tangled bracken that littered the rims of the fissures. The sight filled him with joy and a certain sense of nostalgia. He began to wonder what had ever possessed him to want to leave such a place.

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Biera sat in silence, waiting for someone from camp to arrive with a rig for her. She wasn't sure how they were supposed to get Vesri back to camp. The woman lay on the ground, not quite unconscious. Her head lolled back and forth, and once in a while she spoke in a slurred, confused voice. Nothing she said made any sense, at least not to Biera.

The girl could hardly believe the turn of events that had brought them to this point. Vesri had always been deserving of the utmost respect. She was a legend among the wind riders. Now Biera acted as her guard. She studied the woman's slight form. Small and delicate, despite her obvious age and the effects of years in the fissures, it was hard to imagine being afraid of this woman. But Biera had been frightened of her strength, her abilities.

The girl leaned forward and gazed into Vesri's face. The creases in the woman's skin deepened with a sour look and then smoothed again, but never remained still. Too much passed behind her closed lids. Biera had some idea of what the experience was like. She had never been down deep like that, but all riders had pushed their own limits. They had all had a first time. Biera's first time had put her on her back for nearly a week. But Vesri, it was hard to imagine a power that could put Vesri in such a state.

Biera stood and scanned the skyline again.

"What was taking them so long to get here?" she asked herself.

She kicked a stone down the slope and watched it tumble down to the lip of The Deep and drop out of sight in the mist. Now that place scared her. She'd never consider going down there, no matter what. And yet the place held so many questions, it was hard not to wonder.

Biera rose and wandered down the slope a bit. The wind slapped against her face uncomfortably, but it felt as if it were holding her back from the yawning hole, and that settled her stomach. The sweetness of Keryli came up so strong on that wind that it made her heady. She felt the draw of the smoke. It beckoned to her, but her fear was stronger. She stopped herself about forty yards from the lip of the crack.

"Perhaps someday" she thought.

Until then Biera could settle for the more tame premonitions. She would be content with adding her small pieces to the larger puzzles. She was doing her part to help the people of the canyons.

She stood gazing into the mesmerizing void below for some time before she remembered that she was expecting relief from Vesri's camp. With a sigh, she turned back up the short slope to where her charge lay. Still no sign of anyone coming from the direction of camp.

When she reached the high ground above the slope, Biera stopped short. Her breath caught in her throat. Instantly she broke into a run. She stopped and dropped to her knees at the place where the body of the wind rider should have been. All that remained now were ruts and scrapes in the sand where the woman had lain.

"This is not good," Biera said, throwing her hands to her face. "This is really not good at all."

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The fever burned as strong as ever. Vesri flew practically blind. Her instincts kept her aloft and she knew where she was headed. Somewhere in the back of her mind she still held onto enough of reality to steer her glider in the direction of Crescent Canyon. Even if she had not been able to guess where the canyoner would be headed next, she had seen enough to know the answer. In fact, she had seen much more than that.

"I have to find that canyoner," The thought drummed in her brain.

It seemed to Vesri that she had been saying the same thing to herself for a very long time now. And, though her mind wallowed in the murky dark of delirium now, she finally understood why. Those missing pieces, the ones that had haunted Vesri for so many years, had lain in that deep place, waiting for her all this time. Now she had them. She had no time to waste.

Vesri had delivered messages to Crescent Canyon herself, long ago. But it was not this familiarity that guided her course. She simply flew, knowing that in the end she would be where she was meant to be. And Comarin would be there too. Her brother, long thought dead. Perhaps she had even wished him dead once or twice. How could she not? He had lost his mind, had he not? But now... now she had to find Comarin. He would be with Dareth. She had seen that too. But how would either of them receive her? No doubt with the point of a knife. She would have to risk it. She had waited too long to see the final shape of this premonition. It overshadowed everything else she had ever done with her life. If only she could get some control over her senses, reign in her thoughts just a little, she might be able to plan. She might know how to handle the situation. She was always the one who handled things. She was always the one who put everything together. She had done so this time too, but her eyes blazed so strongly to let her enjoy the feeling that always accompanied the epiphany of a premonition resolved.

Vesri sailed high above the narrow fissure that stretched out toward Crescent Canyon. She flew so high that her wings threatened to stall. She would need the altitude to cross as much of the cracked earth as she could before having to resort to traveling overland. In her state she would not survive for long in the harsh climate that existed on the surface. From the height at which she sailed, she could see the canyon looming, long

and dark in front of her. At times during her approach, she tried to remember why it was that she needed to reach that place. At other times the reason was crystal clear. But either way she never faltered in her path. She never slowed her pace or questioned her purpose. She just flew onward.

“Come on now,” Comarin said, holding a wooden spoon topped with cold stew close to Daesha’s lips. “You’ve got to have some of it. Are you trying to make this difficult for me?”

He had her head propped against a folded blanket so that he could feed her. The ritual had become easier over the weeks, but she had a way of tossing her head at just the wrong time in the throes of some unpleasant dream. He had cleaned stew from his sleeve twice this afternoon already, each time throwing her a suspicious glance.

“Anyone who calls me stubborn has not met you. You don’t give Lorvin so much trouble, I’m sure. Not that I blame you for having it out for me. But I’d rather you wait to take it out on me in person.”

Daesha let a soft giggle escape from her lips. The hermit arched his brow. He leaned forward and looked into the woman’s face. It was a coincidence of course. The dreams of smoke coma were not all bad. She would not be laughing at him. Still, the laugh hurt his pride just a little bit. He couldn’t help it.

“Well, I’ll tell you what, Lorvin might make a better nursemaid, but I’m the better conversationalist. Do you deny that?”

He listened for a repeat of her soft giggle, and this time it was its absence that hurt his pride.

“I think it comes from all those years talking to no one but myself. I can’t imagine having a better conversation than that.” He considered his words and promptly changed his mind. “That’s not quite true. This is better. This right here is much better than that.”

Comarin put down the stew.

“You’re not going to eat this right now, are you?”

He timidly touched the softness of Daesha’s hand where it rested on her belly. He weaved his fingers into hers, fearing that she would immediately draw her hand away. She did not. In fact, he thought, he might even have felt her squeeze a little. Whether she had done so or not, the thought of it brought a smile to his creased face. The look melted years from his countenance, and caused him to sit just a bit straighter beside her.

“Shouldn’t be too long now,” he said. “I know I say that just about every day, but it’s bound to be true. Dareth will be back, you’ll see. I think I have seen the truth of that. It was an awfully long time ago, and I wasn’t quite in my right mind at the time, not that I’m there now. But everything seems to fit.”

Comarin heard voices outside of the hut. He threw a scowl toward the doorway. He could handle Lorvin’s company, but he still preferred to be left alone with Daesha than to have to speak to these canyoners too often. Usually they left him well enough alone, but now the voices without raised up to an alarming level.

Comarin craned his neck to hear what was being said and he thought he recognized the voice of the medicine man. Yes, it was indeed Lorvin, but with a voice so raised in excitement that it was almost unrecognizable.

“That’s strange.”

Comarin considered getting up and going to the door. If it was nothing important, a sour word would be enough to disperse the gathering outside and allow him some peace and quiet. He rose to do so when Lorvin burst into the room, his face flushed with exertion.

“Comarin.” The medicine man spoke with a heavy breath. “Come. You need to see.”

“What is it?” Comarin asked as he reached for his stick, but Lorvin was already out the door again.

The hermit pulled the curtain aside with a certain amount of irritation. What could possibly be so important? He saw Lorvin racing across the camp’s central compound to join a group of villagers gathered near the northern edge of the village. All of those in the group had their eyes cast upward, many shading their view from a sun that was just then clearing the cliff wall and pouring out onto the canyon floor.

Comarin glanced upward, but his aging eyes could pick out nothing against the layers of grey and brown that stratified the stone above them. He hobbled over to where the others gathered, watching all the while. Though he saw nothing at first, Comarin was no fool. There was only one reason these canyoners would be staring so fixedly into the sky when most of them hardly gave the rim of the canyon a second thought on any other day. Then, as he came abreast of the onlookers, he saw it.

Two figures floated on the wind, high above the canyon floor. They appeared black against the backdrop of the cliff face. To observe them casually, one might think they were nothing more than a couple of geese, but they were far too large for that.

Comarin looked to Lorvin and saw that the man stared back at him, a knowing smile cracking the venire of his deadpan face.

“Is it Dareth?” the medicine man asked.

“Either that or it’s someone come to tell us where we might find his body,” Comarin replied. “Let’s hope it’s the first.”

“Alright,” Lorvin turned to the gathered crowd. “Let’s get back to our tasks. “Don’t you worry about this. I’ll head up to the Seer and see who these visitors might be. No need to worry.”

The villagers did as they were bid, though not without question and with much chattering among them. This left Lorvin and the hermit standing alone at the edge of the village, watching the slow descent of the figures in the sky. The medicine man shifted uneasily beside Comarin. He felt Lorvin’s nervous excitement answering in his own bones. But he refused to believe anything until he had seen it for certain.

“Let’s go,” he said. “They won’t be able to make it all the way to the village. Besides, if it is Dareth, and if I can guess who is with him, they’ll know better than to come near the village. They’ll prefer to stick near the Seer and keep away from too much attention.”

“Let’s go then.” The medicine man started up toward the pathway running past the field and leading up to the Seer’s statue.

“I’m glad to see you with so much enthusiasm, my friend,” Comarin said. “There’s hope for you yet.”

The two men kept their eyes on the descending fliers as they passed by the fields. The wind riders had seen them coming, for when they dropped low enough, they quickly



turned in a graceful arc. Then they swooped down low over the field and dropped lightly to the earth not twenty yards away.

Comarin could not hide the grin that lit his face.

“Grifis,” he called out. “Back so soon? And with a friend this time.”

Dareth moved forward to greet him, shuffling his weight away from his left foot. He did not look like a boy anymore. He was still a slight youth, but the way he grasped Comarin’s arm. And his eyes. Comarin knew those eyes very well.

“You’re alive,” he said. “I can stop feeling guilty about sending you off on a fool’s errand.”

“I have what you asked for.” Dareth fumbled for the pouch around his neck. He pulled it free and passed it over to Comarin.

The hermit loosened the opening and peered inside. He poked a thumb and forefinger in and drew forth one of the purple roots like the precious thing that it was.

“Heh heh. Yes, yes, that’s it. That is it.” He gave Dareth a sly grin. “How did you do it, my boy? Not Vesri, surely.”

“No.” Dareth dropped his gaze. “I’m not sure what will become of your sister. She came after me when I went down. She was trying to stop me. I gave her the deeproot while we were in the cave, but...” Dareth looked back at his companion. “Grifis says she may never come out of it. I’m sorry.”

“Ah, sister,” Comarin thought to himself as he studied Dareth’s gaze. “I can well imagine what you put this boy through. And he apologizes to me.” He waved a hand dismissively. “Don’t be so sure about my sister.”

Comarin gave Grifis a wry smile. “But surely you didn’t get this old fool down in that hole with you. I’m sure he’d be gibbering like an idiot right now.”

“Dareth went alone.” Grifis came close to them. “He had no second.”

Comarin perked his thick brows. “Alone. Well, that was foolish, of course. Necessary, I’m sure, and nothing I wouldn’t have done. But that’s amazing, and no sickness? No delirium?”

Dareth shook his head.

Comarin wagged his finger at the youth. “And you know something, don’t you? You have seen something. Well. We must talk. We really must talk. But first, you’re tardy. I think your mother has been waiting long enough for you.”

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Dareth waited around the hut for a while, but that quickly became tedious. He was not surprised to find his feet carrying him back up to the giant blank statue near the cliff. Comarin had kicked him out of the hut. In fact, the hermit had barred the door to everyone but Grifis. Even Lorvin had to remain without, much to the medicine man’s irritation.

It was no mystery to Dareth, why he always sought the Seer when he had to think. The place had always been secluded. Most of the villagers never went there. Yet, even now that he knew the mystery of its portents, there still hung an aura of divinity around the place.

As the stone figure came into view around the bend, Dareth's eyes unintentionally sought out the point above him where Kadnee had been. Where she had held on in those last few moments before she had fallen. Only a few weeks had passed but so much had changed since then. Dareth felt so different now. He felt older, sadder. His unbounded curiosity hadn't flagged, but it had encountered some unpleasant rewards.

The Seer looked different to him as well. There was nothing about the stone that had changed, but the eyes that beheld it bestowed far less reverence upon the figure. The mystery had broken. The truth had been revealed and he had seen the future. He had become the Seer and the statue looked more like a great doll, a plaything for the villagers to make believe. But the messages were real, the omens, the visions. They were deadly real.

Dareth climbed the slope toward the flat surface around the base of the statue. He saw nothing out of the ordinary at first. But then the sound of shifting gravel attracted his attention. Something poked out from behind the bulk of the statue. Dareth moved closer, trying to place the object that hid so well in the long shadow of the monolith. He stepped to one side and saw the long arc of a wing, twisted upside down, the delicate surface torn against the sharp edges of stone protruding from the rock wall.

Shocked, Dareth began to rush forward, but immediately caught himself. The rig had tangled up behind the Seer, but there was no body strapped into the harness. He looked cautiously around him. Only one scenario entered his mind that would explain the glider's presence. Then a hoarse cough drew his gaze to the far side of the statue.

The woman slid into view, leaning heavily against the base of the idol. Vesri's left temple swelled under a purple stain. She looked at Dareth with blazing eyes. Her left leg dragged behind her, refusing to help support her weight. She clutched a blade in her hand.

Dareth took a step back. He did not have his own blade. It lay back in the hut with Comarin.

"Vesri," he said. "How did you get here? What do you want?"

The woman did not reply. She moaned in pain and lurched away from the support of the statue in his direction. Dareth moved to block her knife thrust, but to his surprise he saw the flashing object fly from her hand and go clattering across the stone. Vesri fell into his upraised arms, sobbing.

"Comarin," she said, pain and emotion choking her voice. "Comarin, I found you. You don't know what I did."

"Vesri." Dareth could not think of what to do. He shook her gently and her head bobbed about uncontrollably on her sagging shoulders.

He pushed her away from him, helping her to the ground. Vesri slumped down, still sobbing quietly. He managed to disengage himself and then ran to retrieve her fallen blade. By the time he had scrambled back to the wind rider, it was clear that she would be no threat to him. She could not even hold herself erect on her own.

"The fire," Vesri was saying when Dareth returned to her. "Have to send a message. They're going to burn."

"Fire?" The word sent a chill of something remembered in the back of his mind and then it came to him.

"The fire, yes. I saw that too. But where? Where will it be?"

“Swan Canyon.” Vesri’s words sounded hollow, like she had no idea she was speaking. “But when? I don’t know when?”

“When?” Dareth repeated. Then suddenly it came to him. He knew when it would happen. He wasn’t sure what it was that told him, but when he thought back on his experience in The Deep, the knowledge lay right there in plain sight along with all the rest of the jumbled visions.

“Yes, Swan Canyon. In two weeks time.”

Somehow it didn’t seem to matter to Dareth that he had never before heard of Swan Canyon. The information sounded right to him.

“They will need a message.”

“But that’s nothing, Comarin.” Vesri wailed. There is more than that.”

Vesri lifted her head from her hands and glared into Dareth’s eyes with her own hot orbs. For a moment, the fire cooled and her body ceased to shake. An instant of recognition passed between them.

“Dareth,” Vesri said and her face lit up with a strange light.

“Yes.”

“You made it.”

“Yes”

Her smile broadened still further. “Did you see? Did you feel it?”

Dareth thought for a moment. He knew what it was that she meant, though he had hardly been able to piece together some of the deeper pieces of his vision.

“Some, I think.”

Vesri nodded her head vigorously and the madness ignited in her gaze again.

“I’m glad, Comarin. I’m glad you’ve made it. I missed you.”

She put her head into Dareth’s lap. He did not try to stop her. He looked at the blade in his hand. It was no doubt the same blade that she had attacked him with before. He could easily take retribution for that pain. But the idea hardly had time to form before he banished it from his mind. What would be the purpose? He had gotten the root. His mother would live if all went as it should. And whatever it was that Vesri had seen in him, she had either changed her mind or she was too far gone to be any threat.

“Come on,” Dareth said, lifting the woman’s frail form off the ground and laying her over his shoulder. His ankle still gave him some trouble, but she was small enough that he would be able to handle the journey down the hill to the village. Comarin would want to see her, Dareth felt certain.

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A bowl steamed with hot water on the table beside Daesha. Grifis had brought the water straight off the fire outside the hut. Then he had gone off to find Dareth. The deeproot steeped in the piping liquid and it was ready for Comarin to administer. The hermit sat next to the woman’s still form taking in the intoxicating scent of the tea.

“Shall we see?” he asked. “Whether all this was worth it?”

Comarin took a clean cloth from beside the bowl and soaked it in the mixture. Then he held the saturated cloth to Daesha’s lips. He squeezed the precious liquid onto the surface of her tongue.

At first, she didn't respond. The tea just trickled down the side of her cheeks. But then her tongue darted out and caught one of the errant drops that tried to escape. Her throat rose and fell, trying to swallow more of the liquid. Comarin complied immediately, squeezing a greater quantity of the medicine between her lips.

He sat there for a quarter of an hour, slowly feeding her in this fashion until the bowl stood empty. He had no idea whether it had done anything at all. She had responded, of course. But Comarin had been giving her water in this way for weeks. There was nothing to tell him that she was ready to wake from the sleep.

"I thought it might work," Comarin said to himself. "If it doesn't then nothing will. Either way, I'm sorry that it has come to this. My fault, of course. Isn't all of it my fault?"

He placed the empty bowl on the table beside him and stood up to pace the dirt floor.

"Not that I haven't been trying to make up for things lately. I have, you know. I might have spared you the whole thing, but how can I change that now?"

The scent of Keryli from the brew sat thick on the air in the hut. It took Comarin back many years. He remembered the madness that had gripped his brain. The same kind of madness that Daesha had been locked in now for these few weeks.

"It fits, I suppose, that it should fall to me to try and bring you back to health. Let's only hope that I can do a better job with you than you were able to do with me. After all, I came around, but I was still a bastard."

The woman's head rocked to one side and she whimpered softly. Comarin crossed the hut quickly, hoping the movement might be a sign. But there was nothing strange about these movements. She settled back instantly into what appeared to be nothing more than a pleasant sleep. There were dreams behind her eyes. Comarin could see them in her softly fluttering lids.

"No," Comarin said, sitting down again and taking her hand in his. "Not all bad, is it? I remember what it was like to taste the smoke, to get lost in the visions."

The hermit closed his eyes and tried to summon those visions. He found it difficult. His dreams had even waned of late. They still came every night, but more and more they seemed pale and washed out. They would never completely go away, he knew that. That was something the smoke had given him that could not be taken away. Still, the dreams were not the same as the wild visions that spoke the future. Those were gone. Comarin knew his own mind. And though he no longer thought himself mad, he knew that he would never again be able to plumb the depths of the fissures.

"Leave that to Dareth. He can manage that well enough on his own."

Comarin still sat with his eyes closed, searching for the premonition that would tell him if the root would work, if all of Dareth's efforts had made any difference. Then she spoke.

"You've come down from your hiding place."

Daesha's voice cracked from disuse. She barely spoke above a whisper, but Comarin's eyes flew open and he saw her gazing at him with a healthy blush on her cheeks.

"You're awake." He could think of nothing more to say. He had hoped for this, but he had not planned for it. Suddenly his gnarled hand holding hers felt far too familiar.

He slowly relaxed his grip and pulled it away as if he might accomplish the task without her knowing.

“Was I asleep? I almost felt that I was in another place. I remember it.”

“Yes. You were dreaming.”

“Dreaming?”

“Yes. You’ve been sleeping, right here, for a long time. And while you were sleeping your mind took you someplace else. Not someplace real, but real enough in its own way I suppose.”

“Where is Dareth? Where is my son?” Daesha tried to sit up, but she barely lifted her head from the mat before a wince of pain laid her flat again. She raised her fingers to her temples to rub away the pain.

“Oh yes. You don’t want to get up just yet. As I said you have been asleep for some time.”

“Dareth was up by the cliffs again. I tell him all the time to stay away from there, but he never listens to me. His father...my husband was killed up there.”

Comarin looked away. he choked on something in his throat. “Yes, I know. I remember it.”

“You do?”

“Yes. And you remember me, of course. How could you not?”

“Can I have some water?” Daesha tried to sit up again. This time, with Comarin’s help she was more successful. He adjusted the blanket behind her so that she could lean back against it. Then he hurried to the basin and scooped a cupful of water.

“I remember,” she said after taking a long sip from the cup. “You were quite out of your mind when I first found you up there by the cliff. I don’t know why I was up there. I guess I wanted to see the place where it happened, the slide I mean. But there you were, bleeding all over and raving about smoke and your sister and... what was it? The end bringer?”

“I was out of my mind.” Comarin leaned forward. His face was earnest. “I didn’t know what I was doing. You must believe me.”

Daesha looked at him in surprise. “What do you mean?”

Comarin did not answer right away. He cast his eyes on the dirt floor of the hut. He had had seventeen years to ask forgiveness of this woman. Now he had no words.

“You know that I brought a message, a message that warned of the slide that killed your husband and your friends. I couldn’t make it in time.”

“You said as much back then. But I didn’t understand what you meant. I still don’t. How could anyone know such things but the Seer?”

“That’s just it,” Comarin said. “I knew and I failed. That might have been excused. How I used you. That was inexcusable.”

“Used me?”

Comarin nodded, daring to look into her eyes. He did not see the flash of anger he expected in them. Instead her face broke into a smile and she let out a little giggle that started her coughing. She took a sip of water and arched her brow.

“I saw you drop into the canyon from above. I had never seen anything like that before. You were hurt and you were raving. How long do you think I was out there taking care of you before you wandered off?”

“Well, I don’t know. That night you bandaged me up, I remember that. You fed me. And I remember you leaned over me to adjust my bandage. You were lovely. I was out of my mind.”

“Four days,” Daesha said.

“What?”

“Four days I stayed out there taking care of you. I set up a little camp near the Seer. I wasn’t sure what the others would say if I brought you back to the village. For four days I stayed with you. I listened to you talk. Mostly it made little sense to me, but sometimes it was beautiful. I listened to you talk about a world that I could not even imagine. It wasn’t until that last night that anything happened. At times you were rough but mostly you were gentle, and I was not unwilling. I suppose I was lonely.”

Comarin stared at Daesha. His mouth hung open and a tear dangled near the end of his thin nose.

“I...I don’t recall.”

“You were gone the next morning. I wasn’t too surprised. You still spent much of your time raving, and I didn’t know how to help you. Still I was sad to see that you had gone. No one saw you again for four years. Then folk started seeing this hermit now and again who haunted the canyon north of the village. I thought it might be you, but it was another two years before I caught sight of you myself. Dareth was nearly six by then and you wanted nothing to do with the village. I assumed you had forgotten me altogether.”

“Forgotten you? No.” Comarin’s mind raced over his own tattered memories of the time he had spent with her. Could he have been wrong all this time about what had happened between them? Could the shame that had kept him a recluse for so long have been entirely imagined?

“I guess that’s why I was always so worried about Dareth.” Daesha continued. “He was always so curious, so different from everyone else in the village. I thought it must be you in him. I could never keep him away from those cliffs.”

Comarin’s face had begun to glow. He sat up straight and brushed a hand through his mess of white hair.

“He is a good boy. And, yes, I imagine there may be a bit of me in there. Not all bad I hope.”

“You have spoken with him?” Daesha raised her head from the mat in surprise and touched the ache in her temple as she did so.

“Well, some. He has been away.”

“Away? What do you mean? He can’t have been gone so long. I know how he wanders.”

“Ah.” Comarin considered how to put this. “Well, you see, that’s the thing. It’s nearing a month.”

“A month?” Daesha cried. “What are you saying? Where is my son?” She tried to rise again but she was too weak.

Before Comarin could respond, the curtain was thrown aside and Grifis poked his weathered face into the hut.

“Ah, the lady is awake I see. Dareth will be happy to hear it.” Grifis bobbed his head. “How do you do. The name’s Grifis.”



The wind rider accepted Daesha's smile as a reply and turned instantly to the hermit.

"Comarin, I think you'd better come with me. You'll want to see what the kid found up by the Seer."

"What is it, Grifis?" Comarin only half heard his old friend's words. He still gazed at the woman. "I'm busy just now."

"Oh, you'll want to see. Trust me."

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Half a dozen villagers had screwed up the courage to gather near the prostrate form on the ground by the fire pit. Dareth still knelt beside the woman. He could well imagine what was going through their minds as they eyed the white-haired figure. None of them ever saw strangers. Up until that morning the hermit had been the most mysterious figure that any of the canyoners knew. Now there was this woman, lying in their midst, not to mention the wild-looking man with the patch over his eye who now led the hermit to where the woman lay.

Dareth stood up as they approached. He saw the look on the old man's face transform from one of curiosity, to recognition and then concern.

"Vesri?" Comarin knelt down by her side. "Look at you, hair gone as white as my own. What's happened?"

"I don't know," Dareth replied. "She followed me when I went for the deeproot and somehow made it back to the surface before I did. She was in a bad way when we left the fissures."

"Vesri didn't exactly want to help us," Grifis said. "But you guessed that much would happen, Comarin."

"Yes."

"I can't understand how she managed to get here." Dareth said.

"Are you kidding? My sister?" The hermit chuckled. "It doesn't surprise me a bit." He turned toward the onlookers. "Lorvin?"

"Yes?" The medicine man pushed to the front of the gathered group of villagers.

"Can we put her in your hut? There is a bit of root left. It will do her good."

"But what of my mother?" Dareth asked. "Is it going to work?"

Comarin smiled broadly. "Why don't you go and see for yourself?"

Dareth's breath caught in his throat at the words. He hardly dared to wish, but the hermit beckoned him toward the hut while Grifis hefted Vesri's limp body over his shoulder.

"Go on," Comarin said. "We'll handle this. She's asking after you."

Dareth walked slowly toward the hut. His palms were wet with perspiration. He barely believed Comarin's words. He had to see her awake and alert with his own eyes before he could really believe that the ordeal had come to an end. His nervous fingers fumbled with the curtain and tossed it aside. He stepped into the dim interior. Daesha sat on the mat where she had been before, but her back was propped against the grass wall and she smiled at him when he entered.



“There you are.” Her tone was casual, as if it had been only hours since they had last spoken.

Dareth rushed forward, his haggard face breaking into a expression of joy and relief. He favored his good leg as he approached and Daesha noticed right away.

“Dareth, what has happened? You’re hurt.”

“It’s nothing, mother.”

“Nothing?” She reached up and touched his cheek with her soft hand. “Look at your face. It’s all bruised. What have you been doing?”

“A lot has happened over the past few weeks.”

She looked at him inquisitively. “Ah, yes. I keep forgetting. I thought it was yesterday that I found up by the canyon wall again, where you didn’t belong.”

“That was nearly a month ago.”

“And you didn’t listen, did you.” She smiled warmly. Her voice no longer scratched in her throat and her color looked almost normal in the dim light of the candles on the table. “I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised. I always expected something like this out of you.”

“Mother, you wouldn’t believe what it is like up there. It’s a different world.”

“Oh, I have an idea. Daesha dropped her eyes. “You see, the hermit. I met him once, long ago, before you were born...”

“I know about him.”

“You do?” Daesha asked with a note of worry in her voice.

He nodded.

“Well then we have no more secrets. I knew that he had come from outside. I saw him fly down out of the sky. I couldn’t believe my eyes when I saw it. I stayed with him for four days, nursing him back to health. During that time he spoke of things that made my head spin around. At first I thought they were just ravings. He was quite out of his mind. But as the days passed, things he said began to fit together, began to make sense. I was sad when he left. I had grown very fond of him and his strange words. But then I found out about you. No one in the village suspected anything. Your father... my husband died in the slide only a few days before. But as you grew up I could see that part of him in you.”

“Why did you never go to him and tell him? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“He left me the next day. I didn’t see him again for a long time. You were so big by then and I was never sure how much of his mind had returned. As for you, I always thought it would be safer if you went on believing your father died in the slide. I was afraid of you turning out like... Comarin?” She laughed. “Can you believe I did not even know his name until a few minutes ago? Anyway, I was right to be concerned, wasn’t I? I’m not around a few weeks and what’s the first thing you do? You go traipsing about outside the canyon.”

Dareth laughed out loud and Daesha joined him. He took hold of her and held her tight against him as though she would disappear if he did not.

“Well, I’m back now, you see? And just in time too.”

“Yes, but you’re not a boy anymore. Only this morning...at least to me it was this morning, you seemed so much younger, so much more innocent. I know you went out

there to help me. Comarin told me as much. But that's over now, isn't it? I'm alright now. So there should be no more need for such dangers."

Dareth furrowed his brow.

"I don't think it's that simple."

"Why not?"

"I have learned things," Dareth said. "Things about this world. Things about myself. The future doesn't just happen, you know. It's meant to happen. Maybe you were meant to find my father so long ago. And, though it hurt me to think of you lying here the way you were all this time, I think that was meant to happen too."

Dareth dropped his gaze to the ground.

"You know, when I left here. I didn't go alone. Kadnee came with me. She didn't make it out of the canyon. She fell from the cliff face when we were almost clear."

Daesha's face went pale. "Oh no."

"I have been trying to see why that part of it needed to happen for all of this to come about, and that makes me angry. But I have stopped blaming myself, at least for the most part."

"Oh poor child. Perhaps it was better for me that I slept through it all."

Tears began to roll down Daesha's face. Her breath caught in her throat and she threw her arms about her son.

"Oh Kadnee, poor child. I had thought the two of you would be married someday." She broke off, her voice dropping back down into the hoarse whisper it had been when she had first come awake.

"Oh, but what is wrong with me? Everything feels so strong. It hurts somewhere inside me, but I cannot locate the pain"

"It's the smoke, mother. It has freed you."

"What do you mean?"

"Your emotions. Your feelings. The smoke has given you the ability to express them. It's like the pictures you saw in your mind while you were sleeping. Dreams, they are called."

"But why would I want such a thing as that?" Daesha said, stifling back another heavy sob. "This feeling is horrible."

"More horrible than holding it inside and never being able to let it out?" Dareth said. "Besides, they are not all bad, these emotions."

"You have felt this?"

"All my life, I think. It's what made me so odd to everyone else. You may not agree with me now, but I believe I would miss these feelings if I lost them. There is so much that the people in this canyon have never been able to experience. They have been deprived all this time of something that could strengthen their lives. Emotion, imagination, creativity."

"But what does that have to do with you?"

"Everything." Dareth sat forward and fixed his mother with an earnest gaze. "That's why I said that it wouldn't be so simple to go back. I don't think I can ever go back to the way things were. I don't think any of us can."

“You sound like a grown up,” Daesha said, resting her hand on her son’s arm. “Now help me up. I think I have been laying in this hut long enough. I need to see Lorvin. I have to offer my condolences for his daughter.

Dareth took his mother by the arm and guided her up off of the mat and toward the doorway of the hut where she had lain for so long. She shuffled unsteadily on her feet at first, but by the time the sunlight touched her face at the entrance, she could move on her own and she walked out into the village as though she had recover from little more than a poor night’s rest.

Grifis looked on as Comarin slowly worked the warm liquid into Vesri's mouth with a cloth, just as he had done for Dareth's mother. Vesri was not in a smoke coma, however. She thrashed at times, yelling out things, sometimes intelligible and other times not. Her eyes often remained open and the fire fairly poured out of them.

Grifis rose and held down the woman's arms, while Comarin tried to squeeze the last of the tea between her lips. She jerked her head about, spilling a good portion of the liquid down the side of her face, but some of it made its way into her mouth and it seemed to calm her momentarily.

"If that doesn't do it," Comarin said. "Now it's up to time or nothing at all. She's poisoned pretty badly. I think she's about as bad off as I was when I first came here."

"So, how many of you are there?" Lorvin asked, from the corner where he sat, huddled as far from the woman lying on his mat as possible.

"Not many," Grifis replied "Little more than a hundred of us spread over the entire network of the fissures. It makes for a busy job."

"So few," Comarin said. There were nearly twice that many when I left."

"Well, you know how often things happen. That hasn't really changed, and we still lose the younger ones to the smoke the same as we used to. But now, hardly anyone ever gets the call. Fewer are able to handle the smoke these days it seems, and those who are able just can't take it as well. That's why I was so shocked to find your boy."

Lorvin glanced back and forth between the two wind riders. "Your boy? You mean Dareth?"

Comarin hesitated at first. "He is my son. Does it surprise you?"

Lorvin considered for a moment. "No. It makes perfect sense to me now. I know Daesha always wanted my Kadnee for her son. I never told her as much but the thought of it always filled me with consternation. I never quite understood him. Now I think I should have been proud to have him as a son.

Lorvin settled back down to staring at the floor of the hut. His mind, having surfaced briefly for this exchange, now sank back down into the well of his own thoughts. There were no tears in his eyes, no expression of anguish on his face, but Grifis sensed something from the man. It was something that hid deep within him, endlessly twisting but never coming to the surface.

"You see what I have finally come to understand, Grifis." Comarin leaned forward, whispering to his friend so that the canyoner might not hear their words. "It only shows what a fool I am. That I have been in this canyon with these people for so long and have only now begin to understand the real problem. All these years, even as a rider...especially as a rider, I have looked on these simple people with disdain. They have no emotion, no feeling, no spark of life or imagination. That is what I always thought. But now I see the truth."

“And what is that?” Grifis asked. Comarin had read his mind. He had only just been thinking the same thing about this lonely man who grieved so quietly for his lost daughter.

“Imagine,” Comarin began. “Feeling everything as we do, as strong as you or me. In fact, stronger I should think. Imagine feeling all those emotions, those desires to express oneself, but never knowing how to do it. Can you comprehend the pain of always being filled with these feelings without ever being capable of setting them free?”

Grifis rubbed his rough face between his thumb and forefinger. The thought seemed frightening indeed. He thought back to his own childhood, before he had been called. The people of his village had been the same way. His own mother had looked on him with seeming indifference when he was left alone at the idol on that night he was taken away to the fissures. He himself hardly uttered a sound. He had been nearly as docile and somber as the other villagers, even at the young age of seven.

“This woman.” Lorvin spoke up again. “She brings the messages to the Seer, like you?”

“Like Grifis here,” Comarin said. “That hasn’t been my job for quite a long time.”

“And it is this smoke that helps you to know what is to come? The same smoke that made Daesha sick?”

“It’s the same, but it doesn’t work like that with everyone.”

“But this woman, your sister. It is the smoke that has done this to her as well, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” Comarin admitted.

“It seems to me that this smoke is a very dangerous thing.”

Comarin shook his head. “It isn’t that simple, my friend. If I could explain to you what dreams are. If I could make you understand the wonder that could be yours as you watch the sun rise, not only watching it rise but imagining where it goes at night, what force causes it to roll across the sky each day. This is something that has never occurred to you, isn’t it?”

“It is the sun,” Lorvin replied. “It is there in the day and it keeps us warm. What more is there to wonder about?”

“That’s it, isn’t it?” Grifis half stood, beginning to understand some of what had driven his two friends apart all those years ago. “Some of what you said back then. It made little sense at the time, but now I begin to see what it was that you wanted. You were talking about exposing people to the smoke on purpose.”

“That was my argument back then,” Comarin said. “I was quite convinced of it at the time.”

“And now?” Grifis asked.

“I don’t know anymore.” The hermit took hold of his sister’s hand. “Vesri saw nearly as much as I did and she was convinced that I was mad. I don’t suppose that was in question. But it doesn’t prove that I was wrong. You see, there was a piece that came to me, a realization. It was something that I don’t think Vesri got. If she had, she might have felt differently.”

“And what is that?”

“It’s the smoke. When you go down deep enough the visions become clearer. If you go down deep enough you start to recognize the voice that is speaking to you.”

“The voice?” Grifis asked. “What do you mean?” He looked at Lorvin, whose gaze was even more confused than his own.

“The smoke,” Comarin said. “is alive.”

“What?”

“It’s alive. And it’s trapped. It wants to be set free.”

Grifis stared at the hermit. It made perfect sense, of course. But he had never quite thought of it in that way before.

“So the smoke is speaking to us. It’s telling us what it wants and we are doing it? But why? What does it want from us?”

“She.” Dareth’s voice came abruptly from the doorway of the hut. Everyone turned toward him as he entered, helping Daesha along with a hand on her elbow.

“What you mean to say is, what is it that she wants,” Dareth repeated.

“She.” Comarin grinned. “Of course. I should have gotten that.”

“I don’t understand any of this,” Lorvin said. “If you get these premonitions from some magical smoke, then why not come to us with your knowledge? Why rely on the Seer to deliver your messages?”

“Don’t worry about not understanding,” Grifis said. “Believe me, you are not as far behind the rest of us as you might think. As for the idols, part of that can be explained by tradition. Many things happen in one way or another simply because they always have. But I also think that the deception was necessary.”

“How could it be necessary to deceive?” Lorvin said flatly.

“If I had come into your village a month ago and told you of the things that would happen here, would you have believed me, a stranger, an outsider? Without the element of deity, our warnings would fall on deaf ears.”

The medicine man gave a slow nod. It was true. He could not deny it.

Dareth helped Daesha to a large cushion that sat against the wall of the hut. Lorvin approached and mustered a smile as he greeted her.

“You cannot imagine the joy I feel seeing you up and about, Daesha. This son of yours is quite exceptional.”

“Thank you, Lorvin,” Daesha replied. “You seem surprised at this news, but for me he has always been so.”

“Indeed.”

Grifis turned his next words to their prior focus. “What are we talking about here with the smoke? Is it content with us keeping the canyoners out of harm’s way or is there more to it than that?”

Comarin chuckled. Grifis knew he was oversimplifying the whole thing.

“If I knew that, then Vesri and I would never have had anything to argue over, and you would still be looking out of two good eyes.” The hermit looked to Dareth. “Maybe you know the answer.”

Dareth shook his head. “No. I got an inkling of it. I felt such a strong desire for relief, a longing to be free. But free of what? And how to go about it, that I don’t know. I need to go back to find out.”

“Go back?” Daesha spoke up, her surprise and displeasure thick in her voice. “Why would you go back to that place now?”

“He must go back.” A gravely whisper came from the mat on the floor. All eyes turned toward the figure laying upon it.

The woman’s voice struggled to come out of her parched throat. Despite this, her tone was measured and contained none of the raving madness that had so recently colored it. Vesri lay in the same position she had been, but her eyes were open and almost focused.

“He can’t stay here. He has to finish what he started.”

“Vesri?” Comarin leaned over and gazed into her face.

Vesri rolled her head to the side and took in the sight of her brother standing beside her.

“Comarin, it’s you.” She smiled weakly. “I had hoped you were still alive somewhere.” Her eyes filled with tears and her voice went thin and reedy like a little girl’s. “I have made a terrible mistake, Comarin.”

“Don’t talk right now.” He placed a hand on her forehead. “We can straighten this all out later. There is time.”

“No.” Vesri tried to sit up as though she had just remembered something of the utmost importance. “No we don’t have time.”

Grifis stood up and took hold of Vesri’s shoulders, pushing her gently back down onto the mat.

“Don’t worry. That’s all in the past. You can explain yourself tomorrow.”

“No. You don’t understand. I had a premonition. There is going to be a disaster.”

“\*”You mean Swan Canyon,” Dareth said. “Yes, I know. I saw the visions as well. When I found you, you managed to tell me where the fire was going to happen. It is still a week off.”

“The fire, yes.” Vesri pressed at her temples as if she could draw out the thoughts inside. “I remember. But that’s not it. It’s here. There is going to be a shake right here, a bad one. And it is going to happen tonight.”

As if to corroborate her words. A tremor suddenly shook the ground beneath their feet. Vesri looked around the room desperately and her eyes fell on Grifis.

“Grifis,” she cried reaching out and grabbing his jerkin. “What have I done? How could I have been so wrong? Telisan is dead, you know.” She buried her head in his chest and began to sob as if she had not just pronounced a deadly omen on the village.

“Vesri,” Grifis said. “It’s alright. We can talk about all of that later. But you need to tell me what you saw. How bad is it? Where can we go to be safe?”

Vesri heard the words. She raised her head and looked up into Grifis’s face. Then looked around the room again. Everyone stared at her expectantly.

“Vesri?” Grifis repeated.

“Now! It’s to be now. This village is not safe. There is a field near the idol.”

“The wheat-field,” said Comarin. “Yes. If we are not to stay here in the village near the river, that would be the safest. Grifis, you’ve got to get everyone up there to where Lorvin and I met you when you arrived. Dareth can help you.”

Grifis disengaged himself from Vesri’s grasp. He put her hands in Comarin’s and turned to Dareth. The young man looked to his mother with a question in his eyes.



“Go,” Lorvin said. “I will see that your mother gets there safely. You just get everyone else. I no longer need the Seer to convince me that I should listen to these people when they say something is afoot.”

Grifis and Dareth did not wait for any more words. They both raced out the doorway.

“The quickest way to the fields is that way,” Dareth pointed up toward the eastern wall of the canyon. “Follow the path toward the Seer. There will be people at the north end of the village with the flocks and others down near the river.”

“Fine. You take the river. I’ll make sure everyone between here and the fields gets to safety.”

Grifis bounded off without wasting another moment. He ran through the village at full speed, shouting at the top of his lungs. He encountered a number of villagers who looked on him with expressions of shock and a little fear. Some even turned and fled in the opposite direction when they saw him charging toward them. These he had to chase down and convince that he was trying to save their lives, not harm them. Most of the villagers still wore looks of mistrust, but they were too cowed to argue with the big man. By the time he reached the edge of the village, Grifis had at least thirty people straggling behind him, men, women and children. Too afraid to trek up to the field on their own, they chose to stick close by the wind rider, who at least seemed to know what he was doing.

The party turned along the edge of the village and struck out for the eastern end, and the pathway leading up to the fields. In that moment, a tremor hit the canyon floor, strong enough to knock Grifis from his feet. The ground came up and smacked him hard on the head. He rolled himself over and looked up at the cliff face in a daze. One of the village men bent over him. Phantom lights played over the man’s face and Grifis felt a wave of nausea. He fought back the confusion that threatened to take hold of him and sat up. Others lay on the ground about him.

“We need to hurry,” Grifis said to himself. “Vesri was right. This is going to be a big one.”

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Dareth picked himself up off of the ground. That tremor had been strong. Aside from the shake that let loose the smoke on Daesha. The villagers of Crescent Canyon had not experienced more than rumblings from far off. But this tremor spoke from directly beneath Dareth’s feet. It began deep down in the earth, but it was here, not some shock from miles away, and it was creeping toward the surface.

By the time Dareth neared the river. The villagers were already well aware that something was amiss. They had lived with the shakes all their lives. They knew that this felt different. Most of them remained frozen where they stood. Unable to think or to act in the panic of the moment. Dareth yelled as loud as he could for everyone to follow him. His voice acted as a beacon and people began to gather around him. He shouted instructions to the men and sent them on their way as he continued on toward the river. Not all of the villagers had heard or heeded his call. And he was not going to leave there until every last person was safe.

Three more times tremors hit the canyon, and they seemed to center on the river. Dareth scrambled through the brush, shouting his warning. Only now he had to compete with a deep rumbling that sounded like far off thunder, but continuous and vibrating through the earth. At length he saw that the river bank was clear. The last of the villagers tore through the grass uphill toward the village and the field beyond. Dareth ran directly behind them, looking with fearful eyes at the clustered, grass huts as he passed them, and at the damage that had already begun there. The last shake knocked thatch loose from the roof of one of the huts and the grass had fallen into a nearby fire. Already the base of the hut smoldered, but Dareth could do nothing. He just kept running.

Figures flocked into the field from all directions. Many ran ahead of Dareth, but others still straggled in fearful confusion. Dareth could see a growing knot of people collecting in the field ahead. They were not far away. They would all make it safe, he thought, even the stragglers. In all more than eighty people trampled the tender grains of the small field. Dareth breathed a sigh of relief, even as the earth bucked beneath his feet, tossing him through the air and depositing him in a heap on the ground.

Suddenly a shriek rang out from the vicinity of the huts. Dareth rose, his ears still ringing from the roar of grinding earth. He was groggy from his fall, and peered through a growing haze of smoke. When the fumes first touched his lungs, he nearly sighed with relief that it was not tinged with the scent of keryli, that it did not dance in scarlet ribbons about him. He quickly saw his mistake. This black and acrid variety would be just as deadly. It billowed from the roof tops of several huts where orange tongues of flame licked over shutters and doorways. Dareth tried desperately to pierce the haze and locate the source of the scream as it rang out again. Then he saw something, movement in the doorway of one of the huts. The roof of the place had not yet caught but flames danced in a ring atop the structures surrounding it. The figure that huddled there belonged to a young boy.

“Kelric,” Dareth said. Grandson to old Varn, whose unwittingly donated cheese had fed he and Kadnee on that first day, deep in the bowels of the canyon wall. The boy was absolutely frozen with terror.

Dareth quickly looked to the people gathering in the field. They would be safe. He trusted Vesri’s vision about that. He could even see his mother standing among them with Lorvin helping her to navigate the knot of confused and frightened villagers. Daesha saw him too, and she called out to him. But even then Dareth turned in his tracks and darted for the burning huts at the edge of the village. The child would not be left behind as long as he could still do something about it.

A loud grinding echoed up from below constantly now, drowning out every other sound. Dareth picked his way carefully among the burning huts toward the child who sat curled up with his head between his legs, unaware that he was on his way to help. The ground refused to remain still. It heaved and jerked, tossing Dareth about in a wild dance, forcing him to move in fits and starts. By the time he reached the hut, the roof had caught and thick chunks of thatch fell to the ground in front of him. He ducked into the doorway and grabbed the frozen child, lifting him off the ground and covering the boy’s mouth and nose with the sleeve of his jerkin.

Dareth looked toward the field. The path appeared to be mostly clear. A few huts stood between himself and the open. They were all ablaze, but only partially and there

was room enough to run between them without getting hurt. He gathered his strength and hefted the child in his arms. He turned to go, but the ground bucked again. The roof of the hut where he stood collapsed inward, spilling flames and burning brush into the doorway. The frame suddenly sagged. A thick support from one of the walls splintered and crashed across his back, spilling droplets of flame into his hair and under the collar of his jerkin. Kelric cried out, but Dareth kept his feet, grunting at the searing pain as the brands bit into his flesh.

He staggered out of the village proper and up the rise toward the field. Several figures dashed toward him from that direction, Grifis in the lead. Lorvin, moving swiftly on his portly legs, brought up a close second. Dareth didn't stop moving. His legs felt leaden and the child in his arms seemed far heavier than he ought to be. His own back screamed where the support had hit him. He blinked through the pain.

Nearly in a daze now, Dareth felt the child lifted from his aching arms, and then he himself was plucked from the ground and tossed like a feather across a large shoulder. The world was all upside down. The village crackled with flame behind him and the earth did not stop its rumbling and heaving.

Grifis dropped Dareth on the ground once they had reached the tangle of villagers that cowered in the field, watching with blank stares as their homes burned to the ground. They were helpless to do anything about it, but they lived. Too much open space separated the village and the field for the fire to easily jump.

Dareth glanced at the cliff face just as the earth shook again. Several large stones splintered away from the cliff face and fell, spinning and bouncing down the side of the wall. One such stone, easily as large as one of the village huts, bounced off of a jutting spur and collided with the top of the Seer even in its naturally protected niche. The head of the massive idol disintegrated into powder from the impact and the upper part of the statue toppled from its base and cracked into several pieces in a heap on the ground.

Dareth looked on in horror at the destruction. He could hardly believe his own senses. The Seer, that had stood for ages as a silent protector, had been reduced to a dusty pile of rubble in a matter of seconds. He tried not to sob. He remembered what was really important and took his feet to try and get an idea of those present in the field. He found Lorvin already taking careful count.

"Everyone is here," the medicine man said, wiping sweat and dust from his face. "It is amazing, but everyone has made it out alive. It came on so fast. And we have not had something like this for as long as I can remember. We were fortunate indeed."

"Was it fortune?" Dareth wondered as he looked around the gathered faces and found who he was looking for huddled under a blanket next to Comarin. He staggered forward, fighting with the continuing shakes, though now the earth was settling slowly back into a fitful slumber. Vesri looked up at him as he approached. Her face held a strange blend of anguish, fatigue and a touch of the madness that had still not completely loosed its grip on her mind.

"You saved these people." Dareth's voice choked in his throat. "You saved my village."

"It's what I have always done," Vesri replied. "It's what I thought I was doing when I attacked you. You can't understand, but..."

“I do,” Dareth interrupted. “You forget. I have seen it too. I have heard her voice and I know what she wants.”

“You have seen what the smoke did to your mother. What if the same thing happened to everyone. What if it were freed. There is not enough deeproot in existence that could help even one village if that happened.”

“But you don’t know that is what would happen.”

“You’re right, I don’t. I thought that I did.”

“We need to find out. We need to understand the end of this thing, don’t you think?”

Vesri nodded weakly and a smile touched her cracked lips.

“I will help you. Whatever you need, I will help you.”

“Then we might have a chance.”

Comarin leaned over and touched Vesri on the shoulder. “I’m glad to see you well, sister.”

Dareth marveled at how nearly the two resembled one another now that he saw them sitting side by side. He had previously thought the hermit to be much older than Vesri. But now, even with his hair messed and dirt smudging his cheek from their ordeal, Comarin seemed to have dropped nearly twenty years off of his frame. He had a glint in his eye and a straightness in his back as he stood now. His walking stick had fallen to the ground in the mad rush from the village. But the hermit seemed perfectly happy standing on his own.

They watched the fire as it tore through the village, finishing its task of leveling every last structure. The quake that had started the destruction subsided and an eerie silence reigned behind the crackling flames in the village. Dareth looked around at the faces of the villagers and the wind riders alike. Many gazed at the bright flames, mesmerized, but Dareth felt a sense of relief permeating the crowd. Everyone knew what their fate would have been if they had not vacated the village. The Seer was destroyed. The cliff base was littered with a new layer of rocks and debris. The village was no more and the trees and bushes on the river bank were torn and broken.

Smoke poured up into the evening sky. Not the red mist of the fissure, but the more mundane variety. And as Dareth watched it curling into the darkening sky, he could not help but feel the blame for this. Now that the smoke had found him. It was not going to let him go. The village would not be safe if he stayed.

Morning came to the canyon floor with a gray indifference. The sun had not yet topped the eastern wall. A black smudge of smoke had only recently been scoured by the night wind from the air hanging over the village, but soot still blackened the earth there. Not a scrap of the thatched huts stood erect. Most of the villagers were already out gathering wood and brush to begin rebuilding. The huts would be resurrected in a matter of days. The possessions the villagers had cherished over the years would be harder to replace, but they had been few anyway. The canyoners were not a nostalgic lot. But with all of that gone, it was a blessing to know that the people had survived.

Dareth stood on the level table of land that abutted the eastern wall of the cliff. The broken remnants of the Seer lay scattered over the area, and pieces had rolled down the path to the edge of the field. Lorvin hunkered near the edge of the platform inspecting a chunk of sandstone that might have belonged to one of the idol's wings. Meanwhile, the riders picked through the rubble near the statue's base.

Vesri bent closer to the earth and peered at something amongst the debris. Then she reached down and shifted a few stones, lifting a small cylindrical box. She raised it over her head and picked her way out of the pile of stones.

Comarin and Grifis joined her and the group gathered around the ancient box. A large crack nearly split the lid in half. One wooden hinge was pulverized, leaving the box malformed and unable to close.

"It doesn't really matter," Lorvin said as he approached the gathered riders. "We hardly need this pretense anymore. If ever a wind rider comes to our canyon with news, he won't find any skeptics."

"Fair enough," Grifis replied. "But I reserve the right to visit, premonitions or not. I refuse to be known as nothing but a harbinger of doom."

"You are welcome, any of you, whenever you wish to come," Lorvin said.

"Yes, well, perhaps we should take a little more care next time." Vesri's voice was still thin and hoarse, but she remained mostly lucid.

"What do you mean?" Lorvin asked.

"The smoke," Comarin said. "The shakes happen because the smoke is trapped in the earth. But it seems to know where it is going. When it finds someone who can help it, it doesn't let go of that person. It seeks them out. It has found Dareth now and it will follow him. You have three powerful wind riders here in this canyon where they have no business being." Comarin shook his finger as if scolding a wayward child. "It is not just the edicts of a false religion that have kept the wind riders at the fissures all these years, though we hardly knew the danger ourselves."

"But Dareth has lived here all his life," Grifis said. "And you have been here for years yourself."

"Dareth was hidden before. Now she has found him." Vesri said.

"As for me," Comarin continued. "I'm spent. I have nothing left for the smoke and it... she knows it."

They all turned and gazed at the hermit.

“And that is why you won’t return with us to the fissures?” Dareth asked.

“I may have been here seventeen years, but I am just now beginning to settle in. I can give the smoke nothing more. That last time broke me, I’m sure of it. Besides,” Comarin leaned over, poking Dareth with an elbow and cupping his hand over his mouth so that Lorvin might not hear. “I think your mother fancies me. I can hardly leave such a thing behind, now can I?”

Comarin’s face took on a serious expression and he motioned Dareth to one side.

“Listen, my boy,” he said when they were alone. “You need to be careful.

According to Grifis you’re virtually impervious to the smoke. That only makes things more dangerous for you. Because you may never know your limit until it’s too late.”

“I’ll be careful.”

“Just don’t be stupid, that’s all. I know I’m a bit late with the advice. I’m still going to plead madness as an excuse for that one. But I’m sorry about not being around for you while you were growing up. A damn shame, it was. Maybe you would have gone into all of this with your eyes open. Maybe your friend would have lived, I don’t know.”

Kadnee’s face swam before Dareth’s eyes at Comarin’s words. Would all of this have still come to pass if she had not been sacrificed? He could not see how it would have made any difference. But he was fast learning that the threads of fate were far too twisted to follow them all.

Dareth glanced back at Comarin. He watched the man’s eyes search for more to say. “You don’t need to explain. You hardly knew of me.”

“I saw you with your mother now and again. I’m no fool. No, I can’t make any excuses about that, unless you’ll take cowardice as an excuse. Even if I had known for sure about you, I can’t say things would have been different. No, it’s a good thing things are passing on to you. I think you’re better suited to it than I ever was. Oh, I was strong in the smoke to be sure.” He gave a smug grin. “But it has taken a bit more time to gain some strength of character.”

Comarin put his hand on Dareth’s shoulder and glanced up at the rim of the canyon far above. “You get those answers, and when you do you let me know what they are. I may be done with all that, but there’s still no one who loves a good puzzle more than I do, except perhaps my sister. And you’ll get no more trouble from her.”

“Do you think not?” They both looked toward Vesri who sat on a broken stone, stroking the small, wooden box in her hand absently.

“I know her mind. She is still afraid of letting loose the smoke on the world. But she has seen the importance of it now. She has been listening to the smoke all her life. I think she has realized that it’s no time to stop now. But you watch after her.” Comarin wagged his finger. “She won’t be just right for some time, I can tell you that. She’ll need your help.”

“I promise, but you must promise to do the same for my mother.”

“Are you kidding?” Comarin answered with feigned indignity. “It’s me she’ll be taking care of. But don’t you think of going anywhere just yet. She’s on her way and I want you to let her know that I’m going to need some looking after.”



Comarin smiled down his crooked nose and Dareth saw that his eyes were quick and merry. He was taller than Dareth, now that he stood up straight. He seemed a far younger man than Dareth had once taken him for.

It was at that moment that Daesha's sing-song voice echoed from the head of the pathway. Dareth smiled sadly. He would need to say goodbye to her now, and to the canyon as well. The idea surprised him. He was going to miss this place.

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The box was dusty and splintered in Vesri's hands, but there were parts of it still smoothed with age. She ran her fingertips over these spots. It helped her stay focused. It was not easy. Easier than she had thought it would be, easier than before, but still...

Dareth stood before Comarin. His slim muscles looked taut with readiness and excitement. He wore not a trace of the delirium on him. It would have amazed her, but she had seen things now. There were at least some answers for her now. How they could spawn so much more wondering, that's what befuddled her mind now. Was there no end? An errant vision swept its fingers over her and she went away for a while, seeing and hearing other places. It didn't last long. Then she saw the canyon woman arrive and Vesri was where she belonged again.

Dareth moved to greet Daesha, while Comarin turned toward Vesri. His face begged invitation. She breathed deep and gave a weak smile. Comarin accepted the feeble gesture and approached.

"You will be safe up top, I suppose."

"Grifis and the boy will be with me. I imagine they can keep me out of trouble."

"Ah, but trouble follows you, dear sister." Comarin grinned to prove his jest.

"From what I've seen it follows us all, doesn't it?"

"That it does." He invited himself to a seat beside her. "And that's how I know. If the smoke truly seeks out those that are strong with it, then I know I'm done. I've been hiding out here for years with nearly nothing of the shakes. I'm free of it, or it's free of me, much the same."

"Is that what you want?" Vesri was confused. Could someone desire to be free of the smoke once they had experienced it?

"Yes, I think I do."

"If you had stayed, you might have come back to yourself sooner." Vesri was almost talking to herself. "I think it gets easier. I waited so long to go back down, but now that I have, something healed that has been broken in me since before."

"You are well then?"

"Me?" Vesri scoffed. "No. Other things have broken in the process."

"It was not just the smoke that kept me away, Vesri. If it had been only that, I think I would have been strong enough to cope. But do you not remember how we fought? I know that I could have killed you. I'm sure you were capable of the same. Could it really have done that to us?"

"If you had been in the fissures these past years, you would not be surprised."

She tried to smile again. She wanted to seem pleasant. There were so many years between she and her brother now. Clearly he wanted something from her, some kind of



healing. How could she tell him that every word she was forced to speak was tedious. She cared little for reconciling old wounds. Not that she hated him. She never had. It was just that human relationships held little importance anymore. Only the smoke captured her thoughts now, more so than ever before.

“As I recall, Comarin, we were always more rivals than siblings.”

“Yes,” he replied. I was always trying to compete with you. But I’m done with that now. I think I will be most happy right here.”

He stole a look at the canyon woman talking with her son as he spoke these last words. There was a smile on his face when he turned back toward Vesri, but was there something else in his look? Did he believe what he said? It almost looked like there was still a spark of fire deep in the black of his eyes. Then again, perhaps that was just the delirium dancing so close to the edges of her own sight. It was creeping on her again. She braced herself. It would pass soon enough.

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Daesha had tears in her eyes.

“I’m sorry. Ever since I woke from that sleep I haven’t been quite myself. Everything feels so strong inside me. It is not just the being somewhere else when I am sleeping.”

“The dreams, yes,” Dareth said. “Grifis tells me you may always have them.”

“Well, I don’t mind that so much. To tell the truth, they were rather pleasant last night.” She brushed her fingers over his arm. “I can’t say I completely understand why it is that you have to go back to that place.”

“I know, I know. How many times have you told me to stay away from the cliff face?”

“But you don’t listen.” She wrapped her arms around her son. “I’ll blame Comarin for that.”

Dareth held onto her like it was the last time that he would ever look on her again. For her, they had never parted, but for him they had already been separated for many weeks. It was cruel that he should have to leave her again so soon.

“We should be off,” Vesri said. “Before we bring another shake on this canyon with our presence.”

The wind riders gathered their provisions. They hefted their glider packs over their shoulders and climbed up onto the first of the three large stones that led to the pathway up the face of Crescent Canyon.

Dareth turned back to look once more down into the land of his birth. The rolling grass and the sparkling river, twisting its way through the center seemed familiar and beautiful. No longer did he look upon them as the mundane trappings of a great pen. Now it was simply another part of the mystery, a mystery that the smoke had revealed only tantalizing hints of. And wasn’t it in his nature to want to find the answers? If the smoke wanted to speak to him then he would go to where he could find her, and he would listen. Even now he felt her tugging at him, like a tidal ebb.

Lorvin raised his hand in farewell and Daesha blew kisses. Dareth returned the wave and looked to the hermit one final time. Comarin, wind rider of the smoke, cocked

his head and gave a salute. Then Dareth turned and followed his companions up out of the canyon to begin their journey back across the cracked earth.