

The Chronicles of Wetherid II

The Guardians of the Seven Artifacts

Volume 1



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® *The Chronicles of Wetherid Fantasy Series*

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Content Warning

This is a work of adult epic fantasy. While fictional and rooted in mythic tradition, it contains scenes and themes that may be emotionally intense or potentially distressing to some readers.

Specifically, this book includes:

- Depictions of **grief, trauma, and psychological suffering**
- **Fantasy combat** and scenes of **war**, including injury and death
- **Moral ambiguity**, betrayal, and shifting allegiances
- Implied or symbolic **religious elements** grounded in fictional cultures
- **Mentions of ritual magic**, summoning, and spiritual possession
- **Mild sensuality** and emotionally charged scenes between adult characters
(no explicit sexual content is depicted)
- **References to past abuse and domestic violence**, presented as part of character backstory
- Portrayals of **systemic power struggles**, political intrigue, and societal unrest

The content is presented with care and narrative purpose — always in service to character development, world-building, and the emotional arc of the story.

Reader discretion is advised.

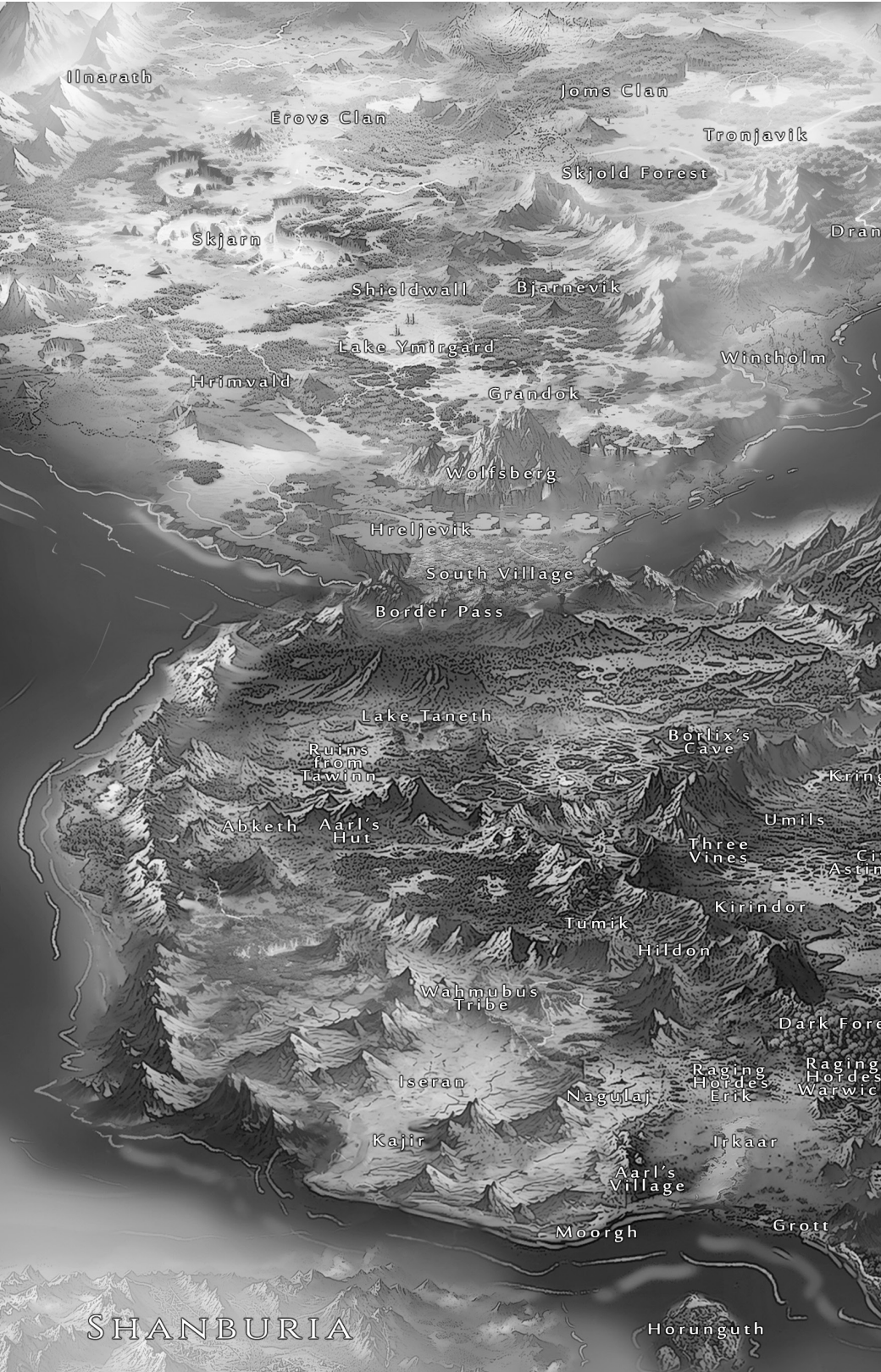
Foreword

Fantasy is more than a story — it is a journey.

A journey through worlds steeped in mystery, ancient powers, epic battles, and perilous alliances. *The Chronicles of Wetherid II – The Guardians of the Seven Artifacts* draws us into such a world: a realm where the future hangs by a thread, where intrigue shapes the fate of kingdoms, and where the line between light and shadow grows ever thinner.

This is not only a tale of heroes and their deeds — but one of loss, doubt, and the search for truth. Each character bears a burden of their own, wrestles with inner demons — and yet they must stand together against a threat far greater than any one of them.

For those who seek rich, atmospheric fantasy woven with deep intrigue and vibrant cultures — this is the story that awaits you.



Ilmarath

Érovs Clan

Joms Clan

Trenjavik

Skjold Forest

Skjarn

Drann

Shieldwall

Bjarnevik

Lake Ymirgard

Wintholm

Hrimvald

Grandok

Wolfsberg

Hreljevik

South Village

Border Pass

Lake Taneth

Ruins
from
Lawinn

Borlix's
Cave

Abketh

Aarl's
Hut

Umils

Three
Vines

Kring

Cir
Astin

Tumik

Kirindor

Hildon

Wahmubus
Tribe

Dark Fore

Iseran

Nagulaj

Raging
Horde's
Erik

Raging
Horde's
Warwic

Kajir

Irkaar

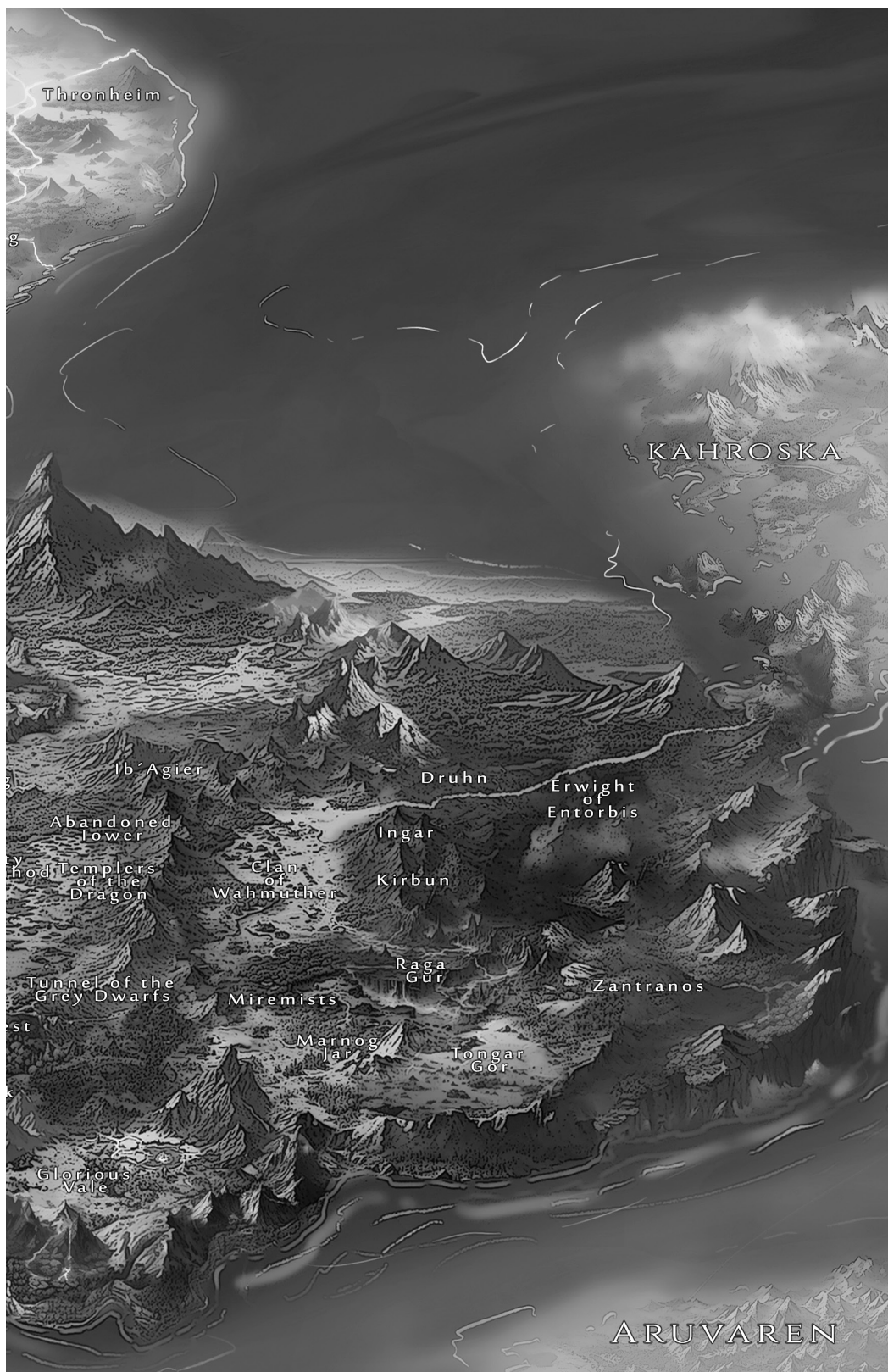
Aarl's
Village

Moorgh

Grott

Horunguth

SHANBURIA



Thronheim

KAHROSKA

Ib'Agier

Druhn

Erwight
of
Entorbis

Abandoned
Tower

Ingar

Templers
of the
Dragon

Clan
of
Wahmuther

Kirbun

Tunnel of the
Grey Dwarfs

Miremists

Raga
Gur

Zantranos

Marnog
Jair

Tongar
Gor

Glorious
Vale

ARUVAREN



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Prologue

What came before — in *The Chronicles of Wetherid: The Legacy of the Elves*

Nearly a quarter-century has passed since the armies of the Shadowlord Erwright of Entorbis marched on Ib'Agier in what would become the last great battle against the free peoples of Wetherid.

In those days, war raged as it seldom had before. With his host of Grey Dwarves, Mist Elves, Orcs, Ogres, and the Undead, Erwright sought to shatter the mighty dwarfhold of Ib'Agier — and force open the path to Wetherid's heart.

But the dwarves held fast, joined by the knights of Astinhod, the warriors of DeShadin's desert, the barbarians of Thir, and the elves of the Glorious Vale. They stood together — and they fought with honor.

At the heart of the conflict was the Book of Wetherid — the object of every faction's desire. Its missing pages, hidden across many lands and guarded by many peoples, could have granted the Shadowlord the power to awaken a force long sealed in darkness.

And for a time, it seemed he would succeed. A traitor placed the completed book into his hands.

Yet in the end, the light prevailed.

Ib'Agier bore the wounds of battle, and the bloodshed was vast. But the peoples of Wetherid remained free.

A new queen rose in Astinhod. King Agnulix reclaimed the strength of the dwarves. The desert warriors Manamii and Wahmubu, the tribes of Thir, and the Elves of the Glorious Vale stood united — and in that unity, they came to know the deeper value of loyalty and kinship.

In the shadow of war, a truth was revealed:

That though the book held great power, its truest strength lay not in magic — but in unity.

Vrenli, grandson of a wise alchemist, became its new Keeper. Once a humble soul from Abketh, he now guards the book in days of peace. His journeys — with Gorathdin, Aarl, Borlix, Werlis, and many others — have passed into legend.

The decades that followed were strangely still.

No army from Fallgar pressed westward.

No new darkness stirred.

Many believed evil had been vanquished for good.

But calm seasons often veil the brewing of storms.

And some have begun to sense that Wetherid may again stand at the edge of peril.

So it is that Vrenli — long since a father, content in quiet hearth and home — finds his world shaken once more.

One night, the sound of hooves in the dark draws him back to those he once called fellowship.

A single message shatters the comfort of peace.

Was Erwright's fall truly the end of all evil?

Or do darker forces sleep in far corners of this world — shadows still waiting to wake?

CHAPTER 1

Demonic Peril

A searing wind tore down from the volcanic cliffs of Raga Gur, scattering ash into the air and dragging behind it the bitter stench of burnt stone.

Gorzod Greyswings stood motionless at the edge of the basalt platform.

His cloak fluttered once, then fell still.

He looked down into the valley — and what he saw there burned its shape into him, deeper than he would ever speak.

Where once proud campfires had blazed, where drums had spoken through the ravines, only stillness remained.

Not silence — stillness. The kind that follows ruin. The orcs stood at the edge of vanishing.

The battle lost at Ib'Agier, twenty years gone, had marked them not with scars, but with absence.

They had marched beneath the banner of Erwright of Entorbis, chasing the glint of a promise that had never been theirs.

And when it broke, when the alliance splintered and victory fled, it was the orcs who paid the price.

Their greatest warriors were gone — not remembered, not buried.

Swallowed by a war that offered no glory.

Only loss. Only shame.

Gorzod's fingers clawed into the edge of the stone. The cold bit back.

Fury twisted through him — tight as iron. And beneath it — despair.

How long must they remain like this?

The Guardians of the Seven Artifacts

Bent. Dispersed. Bound to slow decline.

One force remained. Vast. Rooted in things older than the world, and heedless of all who named it.

It did not redeem. It devoured.

And Gorzod had found it.

“You shall be proud again,” he whispered.

His fingers traced the runes etched into the tablets — stone unearthed in the tombs of his bloodline, still dark with memory.

He knew what waited here.

The fate of his people had settled into his hands like weight.

The words carved into the rock spoke of power beyond naming — a last glimmer within the ash of all that had failed.

And a warning, too:

A force no soul born of flesh shall command.

He turned from the brink and entered the ritual hall.

The mountain muttered beneath his feet — the breath of buried fire stirring in the deep.

Ancient sigils lined the black stone walls, catching the restless light and throwing it back in fragments.

The rite he had prepared was old. And perilous.

This was not the first time he had stood here.

Each time, he had been torn — courage on one side, fear on the other.

Would he dare it now? Would it save them?

Or would it shatter what remained?

The visions always came. Not prophecy — but possibility.

They struck in flashes: radiant, and terrible.

They stirred his blood. Set his spirit shivering.

And beneath that trembling — hunger.

He had seen the orc-banner rise — across Fallgar, across Wetherid, even beyond the horizon’s edge.

A world brought low beneath their feet.

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“Extraordinary chances demand unrelenting choices,” Gorzod muttered, tightening his grip around the cold rim of the sacrificial bowl.

His jaw locked.

With a growl pulled from the gut, he cast the offerings into the flame — the charred heart of a black wolf, the bones of a fallen champion, and the blood of a Haldaki, a winged beast of the high skies.

Flames surged upward — wild, snapping — and a dense column of smoke coiled into the space above the altar.

Then — a voice.

Sharp. Deep. Like iron split in frost:

“Who dares summon me? What fool believes it can command the powers of the Abyss?”

Gorzod stepped back, the heat against his chest.

He did not flinch. He did not breathe. Then:

“I am Gorzod Greyswings, chieftain of the orcs of Raga Gur.
Servant of the ancient spirits.

I have called you, Xaroth — to open the way. That we may rule this world together.

I offer you a pact.”

A low laugh moved through the hall — slow, coiling.

From the heart of the smoke, a shape began to form — cloaked in shadow, flickering at the edges, vast and unfinished.

“A pact?” Xaroth’s voice cracked the dark.

“You know nothing of what you summon.

My power was not made for hands like yours.

And still you dare offer me a bargain — blind to what you’ve woken?”

Gorzod did not step back.

“I know what you are.

The Guardians of the Seven Artifacts

Only you can raise the orcs again.
Let us shape a new dominion — together.”
Xaroth fell still.
The silence lengthened — not empty, but watching.
Then he spoke, low and bright with danger:
“So. Not salvation, then. Dominion.
You reach far, shaman.
But know this — the pact has its price.”
The shadow thickened — breathed in — and wrapped itself
around Gorzod like smoke made flesh.
“You shall give all. Not only your soul, but the souls of many.
It will take ten moon-turns before I rise in Fallgar.
And in that time — you will feed me.
When the hour comes, I shall claim this world.
Do you accept?”
Though doubt gnawed at him, Gorzod raised his clenched
fists.
“I am ready. Speak your demand — and I shall fulfill it.”
“There is a soul of purity. That shall be the first you bring me.
And I shall aid you in taking it,” Xaroth hissed.
Gorzod’s breath faltered.
“Whose soul, Master?” he asked softly.
“Queen Lythinda of Astinhod!” Xaroth’s voice rang out like a
blow.
Gorzod’s heart raced.
What the demon demanded was near impossible.
Queen Lythinda — the most powerful ruler in Wetherid.
Her realm, Astinhod, lay far beyond Fallgar.
Her army was vast. Her palace heavily guarded.

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She was the wife of Gorathdin the half-elf — a close companion of Master Drobai — both once foes of Erwright of Entorbis.

His thoughts reeled, seeking a path.

His breath grew shallow.

He rubbed his hands in agitation.

His gaze fixed on the flames of the ritual fire.

The heat called back to him the suffering of his people — the hunger they could no longer name.

He exhaled slowly and nodded.

“So be it.”

The air in the hall began to stir.

It twisted, thickened, pulsed as Xaroth took form.

The ground quaked. Cracks split the stone. Flames licked toward the ceiling.

The veil to the soul-realm trembled — then tore.

A hum rose through the chamber — low, swelling, impossible.

And then, a sound like thunder split the world.

Gorzod fell to his knees, gasping.

With a sharp crack, the ritual fire collapsed inward.

Only the shadow remained — lodged deep in his chest.

And a terrible certainty followed:

Something had left with part of him.

— ✂ —

Two moon-turns had passed.

Far to the west, upon the island of Horunguth, in the Tower of Mages, Master Drobai stood among his adepts.

They had gathered to speak of disturbances they could no longer dismiss — harbingers each of them had felt.

The Guardians of the Seven Artifacts

At his side stood Raynarus and Elvoran — two young magi he had taken in after the battle at Ib’Agier, twenty years before.

They said nothing as they stared from the tall windows, across the broad and glittering sea.

Then Master Drobal began to speak, his voice measured, his brow drawn.

“Something dark hangs in the air,” he said.

“Some nights past, I had a vision — one I cannot cast aside as mere dream.

I saw shadows rising — not from this world.

A voice called to me, cold and old and without mercy.”

He turned slowly from the window.

“It said: *Drobal ... master of secrets.*

You are clever — cleverer than most.

But even clever men misjudge what they do not understand.

Your power wanes before mine.

I am Xarothe — breath of annihilation, blade that sunders all order.

Your world shall burn.”

His voice faded. He moved to the center table and sat.

“I saw fire — rising through blackened rifts in the earth.

Cities collapsing into the depths, nothing left but char and ruin.

Shadows moved across the land — broken shapes, crying without voices.

And over all of it, a blood-red sky.

The vision swelled — and I saw hosts beyond counting, marching beneath Xarothe’s banner, and a throne of skulls rising from a gulf of fire.”

Silence settled. He stroked his beard once, then folded his hands.

“I do not know how to name what I saw,” he said at last.

“But something is wrong.

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Each rite I perform, each word of power — it leaves me thinner.

As if something feeds. Quietly. Persistently.”

Raynarus and Elvoran joined him.

“I too have heard whispers,” said Raynarus.

“Some seers speak of dreams they cannot shake.

Others of visions they dare not share.

I have spoken with more than one.

And the name Gorzod Greyswings has passed between them — and the word *pact*.”

He closed his eyes a moment, as if steadying himself.

“I’ve seen the world shift.

In some places, beasts flee lands they once called home.

Birds fly in circles, without course — as if they’ve lost the sky.”

And the winds carry a whisper — something dark, as though from another realm.

Even the elements themselves seem unbound.”

A hush settled over the room, broken only by the soft crackling of the firebowl.

Master Drobald rose slowly.

The shadows of his cloak flickered in the firelight, as if moved by a will of their own.

He stepped toward one of the shelves, his gaze drifting across the spines.

On the fourth row from the bottom, his hand slid along the bindings — then stopped, suddenly, as if compelled.

He drew forth a book, carefully leafed through the pages, and at last returned to the table, where he laid it down with deliberate weight.

“The *Libratus Daemonae*,” he said softly — and began to read:

“Xaroth, commander of the First Legion of Darkness.

The Guardians of the Seven Artifacts

His name is like a wall of flame, devouring all — a force that, in elder ages, cast entire kingdoms into dread and ruin.

Xaroth is no mortal being, no creature of flesh and blood.

He is darkness made living, born of the deepest shadows of the soul-realm.

He is the embodiment of tyranny, enslavement, and ruin.

Where he walks, dominion follows.

Cities fall, kings kneel, and even light itself seems to wither.

His title, the World-Burner, is no legend, but a mark of flames unleashed in damnation.

They devour not only the bodies of the living, but the essence of their souls.

Nothing remains.”

He glanced briefly at Raynarus and Elvoran and drew a long breath, then continued:

“Xaroth is invincible.

His existence cannot be extinguished.

It is said that even his summoning is enough to twist the will and dreams of those who call him.

His words are a poison — slow, corrosive — that eats at the soul.”

He paused. The gravity in his voice left no doubt. Then he went on:

“The rites of summoning are lost — or hidden.

It is believed that only through a ritual of immense precision could Xaroth be drawn into this world.

And even then, no binding is known.

He cannot be destroyed — only driven back.”

His voice dropped into thought.

“I cannot say this with certainty.

But the danger I feel is real.

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If you ask me — I would say this: Xaroth is pressing into our world.”

Suddenly, Elvoran rose with a start; his chair scraped loudly across the stone.

“I’ve read of this before... but where?” he murmured — almost to himself.

He turned to the shelves and began searching the aisles, his movements sharp and restless.

Master Drobal and Raynarus exchanged a glance.

“Elvoran — what are you seeking?” Master Drobal asked.

“Wait... just a moment,” came the reply.

“It’s here, somewhere. I read once of a threat from the soul-realm.”

He searched deeper, until at last, in a corner near the floor, he uncovered a stack of books.

With a triumphant smile, he lifted a thick, dust-covered volume.

The Scholar-Chronicles of Horunguth, he murmured.

He returned to the table at once.

His hands moved swiftly through the pages — then halted.

“Here! I knew it!” he said, pointing to a passage, his fingers gliding across the yellowed lines.

“It speaks of a time in the twenty-third or twenty-fourth cycle,” he began.

“It is written that our predecessors — the mages of Horunguth and the Glorious Elves — forged seven artifacts.

Their purpose: to bind and contain a threat that rose from the soul-realm and once endangered Wetherid.

Yet the trail of these relics has vanished into the haze of history.

Some say they were stolen.

Others claim they were hidden, to shield their power from misuse.

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"The truth is lost to shadow."

Master Drobald nodded slowly, his eyes fixed sharply on Elvoran.

"Is that all?" he asked in a grave tone.

"Yes... the remaining lines are illegible," Elvoran replied.

Suddenly, he took the book and walked in quick steps to his worktable.

"Elvoran, what are you doing?" Master Drobald called out in surprise.

"Wait!" Elvoran answered.

He took a vial from a shelf above the table and used a small glass dropper to collect a few drops of the translucent liquid.

"Some parts of the page have faded, but I know a way to bring them back to light," he explained, and carefully dropped the solution onto the parchment.

For a moment, nothing appeared — but after some time, several lines slowly returned to the page.

Elvoran read them aloud.

"It speaks of an artifact said to lie in the Northland.

Perhaps it is the Crystal of Seeing.

It is said to reveal the locations of the other artifacts."

Raynarus shook his head.

"Somewhere in the Northland... That's little more than a vague promise.

And the risk of finding nothing is high."

Master Drobald remained silent. His thoughts circled visibly.

"Even so, we have no other choice.

If what is written here holds true, then this crystal may be the key to stopping the demon.

We must take the risk."

His voice left no room for doubt.

After a pause, he turned to the two men.

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“Elvoran, you will remain in the tower and continue your study of the ancient texts.

There are surely still clues buried in the old language — truths we’ve yet to see.

Your knowledge will be essential in uncovering how we might oppose Xaroth, should he truly attempt to cross into our world.”

Elvoran gave a solemn nod.

“I will devote myself to the search,” he said.

He closed the book and rose.

Master Drobald turned to Raynarus.

“You must keep watch on the orc shaman.

You’ll travel to Fallgar and see whether the rumors bear truth.

But stay hidden. We cannot afford mistakes now.”

“I will depart at once,” Raynarus said.

“I myself will go to Astinhod,” Master Drobald continued. “To find Gorathdin.

He once saved Wetherid from ruin.

If anyone can recover the Crystal of Seeing, it is Gorathdin and his fellowship.

Their strength and experience will be vital to what lies ahead.”

Raynarus nodded, but Elvoran barely heard.

His gaze had fallen back to the book in his hands — and from there, to the endless shelves around him.

There had to be more hidden in the ancient words than they had yet uncovered.

The Deed

“Laaron, I can’t go on like this,” Leandra whispered when they met in secret one evening in the palace garden.

Laaron looked at her — truly looked — but she turned away.

“I love you. But I cannot betray Queen Lythinda.”

The Guardians of the Seven Artifacts

He stepped closer, brushing a hand through her long brown hair.

“You’re doing this for us,” he said softly.

“The Governor will bring her down — and we will be richly rewarded.”

Tears slid down her cheeks. She pressed her palms to her face and turned aside.

“But at what cost? She trusts me. We’re like friends... like sisters.”

Laaron laughed — low and hollow.

“Sisters?” His voice had turned sharp.

“She is a queen. You are a handmaid. Do you truly believe she feels more than distant kindness?”

He stepped in, cupping her face, forcing her to meet his eyes.

“Think on how you’ve lived all these years. Always polite. Always composed.

You carry her burdens. You listen to her grief. You play the perfect role.

And what comes of it?

When was the last time anyone stood for *you*?”

She closed her eyes — but he pressed on.

“Now you have the chance to change everything.

You must think of yourself. Of *us*.

This is the moment.”

His voice held a trace of conviction. A glimmer of something more — as if he believed it.

He kissed her gently.

“No one will suspect. I’ve planned every step. It’s flawless.”

His tone was too casual. A shadow of doubt passed through her.

She looked at him — *should I ask?*

But then he smiled and took her hand.

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“You are everything to me, Leandra. Please... don’t worry.”

Then he placed the vial in her palm — small, smooth, filled with clear liquid.

“This is the final step. Mix it into Commander Arkondir’s wine at the feast.

Without him, Queen Lythinda will be defenseless,” he urged.

She reached for the vial — hesitantly.

“I don’t know if I can do it,” she said, her voice soft, her eyes pleading with despair.

“You have no idea what’s at stake. I gave my word to the Governor on your behalf — and he is not a man to be trifled with,” Laaron replied, his gaze fixed on hers.

Her hands trembled.

The weight of the choice pressed down like stone.

Her love for Laaron drove her forward — but her loyalty to the queen held her back.

How could she serve them both?

“And if she finds out?” Her voice wavered.

“She won’t — not if you do exactly as we discussed,” he said, a trace of impatience bleeding into his tone.

Leandra nodded — then kissed him, sudden and fierce.

When she stepped back, she slipped the vial beneath her petticoat and turned toward the palace kitchens.

There, duty awaited her.

She was overseeing preparations for the two-day festival in honor of King Grandhold’s passing — every dish, every ceremonial arrangement.

But the weight of what she had agreed to clung to her like a second skin.

How am I to do this?

Her fingers closed around the small glass vessel.

The door creaked open. A servant girl stepped inside.

The Guardians of the Seven Artifacts

Leandra flinched. Her hand darted behind her back, the vial hidden in her grasp.

The girl hesitated — her eyes catching the tension in Leandra's posture.

"All is well!" Leandra said quickly.

Her voice landed a touch too high.

"I'm just preparing the final details."

The servant paused — then nodded and turned away to resume her work.

Leandra exhaled, her eyes locked on the door as it closed.

She slipped the vial into her pocket, smoothed her dress, and forced stillness into her limbs.

Moments later, she walked the long corridors of the palace.

Music drifted toward her — soft strings, quiet laughter, the clink of glass.

The sound grew fuller as she neared the great hall.

Each step felt heavier than the last.

But her face betrayed nothing.

She opened the tall doors and entered.

The hall glowed with candlelight.

Silver gleamed. Steam rose from platters lined with roasted birds, jeweled fruits, and spiced grains.

The feast lacked for nothing.

Leandra took her place beside Queen Lythinda and Commander Arkondir — a man of broad frame and easy strength, his voice rising over the others as he spoke.

She folded her hands in her lap.

She watched him.

She listened.

You are the only thing that matters to me. Please, don't worry.

Laaron's voice echoed in her mind.

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She tried to breathe evenly, but the noise in the room pressed against her thoughts.

No one noticed the tightness beneath her smile, the way her fingers barely touched her food.

When the servants moved among the tables with fresh wine, her hand closed around the vial inside her pocket.

Arkondir turned to her, smiling faintly.

“You seem unusually quiet this evening, Leandra. Is everything well?”

She managed a smile.

“It’s been a long day, Commander. But I’m well.”

He nodded and turned back to the others.

The wine in his glass shimmered — dark, clear, waiting.

This was the moment.

Laughter swelled. No one was looking.

Her hand slipped from her lap. The vial emerged — trembling between her fingers.

She hovered above his glass.

And froze.

Fear surged through her like ice.

The vial vanished back into her pocket.

“Leandra?” Arkondir’s voice was low, careful. “Are you certain you’re all right? You’ve gone pale.”

She blinked and looked at him — her brow damp, her mouth dry.

“Perhaps you should take some fresh air,” he offered.

She nodded.

She rose.

The room swam around her as she stepped away — but she didn’t stumble.

She kept walking — out of the great hall, away from the light, into the dark.

The Guardians of the Seven Artifacts

No one seemed to suspect.

Arkondir watched her for a moment, then turned back to the conversation.

Leandra sought a moment of quiet in the garden, but the thought of Laaron would not leave her.

What would he say?

He had counted on her — and she had failed.

A tightness gripped her chest.

She pressed her lips together, forced herself to stay steady.

The night air was cool against her skin; it slowed her pulse.

She drew a breath, walked a few paces along the gravel path, then returned to the hall.

With quiet steps, she approached Queen Lythinda and bowed her head.

“Forgive me, Your Majesty,” she said softly.

“I’m not feeling well and wish to retire to my chambers.”

The queen studied her for a breath — something unreadable in her gaze — then nodded.

“Of course, Leandra. Get some rest.”

She withdrew, left the hall, and closed the arched doors behind her.

Across the corridor, she ascended the curving stair. Her steps fell soft against the marble.

Above, a long corridor stretched ahead, dimly lit.

At last, she reached the door to her chamber.

Her hand found the handle — but she hesitated.

Her throat was dry. She swallowed, rubbed her palm without thinking.

Then, after a breath of stillness, she pushed the door open.

Laaron stood waiting — arms crossed, his gaze sharp.

“Did you do everything as we discussed?” he asked.

She didn’t look at him.

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“I tried... but I couldn’t. I couldn’t do it,” she whispered.

A lump rose in her throat.

“And it was too risky. I thought—”

“Thought?” he snapped.

But he caught himself.

Soft words worked better.

He sat on the edge of the bed and watched her lean against the windowsill, eyes turned to the dark.

For a while, neither of them spoke.

At last, she said — still facing away:

“What you ask of me... it isn’t as simple as you think.”

“I know it isn’t simple,” Laaron replied. “But do you want to go on like this forever?”

She turned to him.

“I have a life here. Perhaps not perfect — but it’s mine.

You speak as if it were nothing.”

“Is it?” he asked.

Her gaze drifted.

There was no scorn in his voice — and that made it worse.

“I have duties. People rely on me.”

“They rely on the version of you you’re forced to play.

It isn’t real. *You* aren’t real.”

“Then what am I?” she asked — more sharply than she intended.

He leaned forward.

“A tool. To keep others content.

That’s what you are here.”

She wanted to answer — but nothing came.

“To betray Queen Lythinda... to kill a man...” she murmured.

“Yes. And after that — we begin our new life,” he said without pause.

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“You deserve better.”

“And what if I no longer want any of this?” she asked.

He rose and stepped close.

“Then stay.

But we both know you don’t want that.”

She said nothing.

*What was worse — that he might be right,
or that she no longer knew the answer herself?*

Laaron sensed her slipping.

So he used everything — warm words, nearness, the illusion of safety.

And in the end, he won.



The next morning, as they rose, Laaron drew a second vial of poison from his pocket and placed it in Leandra’s hand.

“This is your last chance,” he said.

Leandra took it and nodded.

“I’ll do it,” she said softly — and kissed him.

Then she stepped to the washbasin, arranged her hair, and dressed. Once her gown was smooth and her face composed, she turned to Laaron one last time.

For a moment she lingered, *the warmth of the night still on her skin*

—

Then she turned and left without another word, descending the stairs.

While breakfast was being laid in the great hall and the guests arrived one by one, Leandra stood in the kitchens, overseeing the cooks as they worked. She inspected the dishes in silence, correcting what needed to be corrected. Only when everything

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met the highest standards did she move toward the hall, her gaze sharp, deliberate, searching.

She spotted Arkondir at the edge of the banquet table — deep in conversation with the judge of Astinhod and an officer of his army.

Leandra approached slowly, unobtrusively, her steps calm, her breath even. Arkondir did not see her.

She let her eyes sweep the room — no one watching.

Then he set his laden plate briefly on a side table.

And she acted.

As she passed, she slipped the vial from her sleeve, tipped it, and let a few clear drops fall onto the food. The motion was swift, invisible.

Moments later, Arkondir took up his plate again and began to eat.

Leandra stood apart, watching. Her heart beat fast, rising into her throat. A few breaths passed.

Nothing.

Then Arkondir paused.

His expression stiffened. His gaze turned glassy.

A tremor ran through his shoulders — and suddenly, he lurched forward. A violent retch tore from his throat. He clutched his chest, gasping, fingers curling in spasm.

At the neighboring table, Queen Lythinda was laughing with Lady Merdiva and Duke Belmarr. But when she saw Arkondir convulse, her laughter died.

For a heartbeat she stood unmoving — confused.

Then she rose, eyes wide.

“What is happening here?” she cried.

Arkondir’s mouth opened. His face turned scarlet. His body heaved. He reached for the table — missed.

And fell.

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“Something... is wrong...” he gasped, as sweat gathered on his brow, his eyes darting, unseeing.

Then his limbs gave out.

His body stilled.

His stare fixed.

And the last breath left him.

The officer beside him dropped to his knees. He checked for breath. For pulse.

“He... he’s dead...” he whispered.

Queen Lythinda stumbled forward and knelt beside the body.

People gathered. The sound in the hall became a murmur, then a hush.

“What happened?

How could this happen?” she asked, her voice hollow.

From the back of the room, a voice rose — high, anxious:

“Perhaps he was poisoned!”

Queen Lythinda did not hesitate.

“Summon a healer!” she called.

When the healer arrived, he laid a hand on Arkondir’s neck, smelled his breath, and waited a moment. Then he rose.

“It was poison. There is no doubt.”

Queen Lythinda swayed — but before she could fall, Leandra was at her side.

She steadied the queen, slipped into the role she knew so well.

“I’m here, Your Majesty. You can lean on me.

Shall I take you to your chambers?”

Queen Lythinda looked at her. Anger flashed in her eyes — but it was not for Leandra.

Her face hardened. She shook her head slowly, as if still trying to grasp what had happened.

“No... thank you, Leandra. I will remain here.”

A dark thought stirred within her.

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What would Gorathdin say when he learned of Arkondir's death?

Was he safe? Had he reached Abketh?

Or was he, too, in danger?

Lady Merdiva and Duke Belmarr stepped to her side.

"That was murder," Belmarr growled.

"Why would anyone want to kill Commander Arkondir?" Lady Merdiva asked, her tone sharp with suspicion.

"We must find out," Belmarr replied.

His eyes were fixed on the queen.

"You should withdraw. This place is no longer safe."

Queen Lythinda nodded and followed the two into a nearby study,

where they began to speak of the terrible deed.

Leandra, meanwhile, stood beside Arkondir's lifeless body.

Her hands brushed nervously over the hem of her gown.

Her fingers were cold as ice, and guilt surged in her chest — bitter, breath-stealing.

"No one leaves the palace until we know who is responsible!

Question everyone — search everything!"

The voice of the guard captain thundered through the hall.

Guards rushed in. Orders flew.

The first guests were already being questioned.

Leandra withdrew to her chambers — and found Laaron waiting.

He stood there, composed — almost pleased.

"You did it," he said, closing the door behind her.

She sank onto the bed, exhausted, let out a breath, and loosened her hair.

"Is it truly over?" she asked.

Laaron sat beside her, clasping her hands tightly.

"Arkondir was the greatest obstacle.

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Now the path is clear.

The Governor will act soon, and we...”

He paused.

His gaze lingered on her face.

Then he smiled — almost tenderly.

“...we will leave for Irkaar in two days.

That is where our new life begins.”

She looked at him — her eyes distant, unfocused.

“A new life...” she echoed, the words barely formed.

“Yes! Everything will change.

No more court. No more duties. No more masks.

Just you and me,” he said.

He fell quiet for a moment, then leaned toward her.

“We should marry.

It’s long overdue, don’t you think?”

She turned her head slightly, as if to draw away —

but she said nothing.

At last, she gave a faint nod.

Part of her felt nothing.

His words were promises — but they rang hollow.

Still, she stayed silent, letting his certainty smother her doubt.

“I have to go now.

A meeting — someone important to the next step,” Laaron said, rising.

“With whom?” she asked, surprised.

“That doesn’t matter.

Trust me. Everything is going exactly as planned.”

He offered a fleeting smile, then left the chamber.

The door closed behind him.

She remained alone.

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Silence fell.

The room, which had once offered her refuge, now seemed to close in.

Her thoughts turned to what she had done —
and to Queen Lythinda, who had trusted her,
who had stood beside her for years.

The longer she sat, the heavier the guilt became.

Bloody Awakening

Night fell. She lay awake in her bed.

Laaron did not return.

Time refused to pass.

Her breath came short, uneven.

She could no longer bear the stillness.

Though wrapped in blankets, she felt a cold that came from within.

Restlessness took hold of her — and would not let go.

Just before dawn, she sat upright and stared into the dark.

There was no peace in her. Only doubt. Only unrest.

And yet... the longer she sat, the clearer one truth became.

It hardened.

She could no longer deceive Queen Lythinda.

"I have to tell her," she murmured.

When the first light reached the windows, she rose and left her chamber.

She made her way toward the throne room.

There, she paused.

Then — slowly — stepped inside.

Her breath caught in her chest.

She approached the queen in measured steps.

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Queen Lythinda was already seated — lost in thought.

“Your Majesty, I...”

Her voice broke.

Queen Lythinda inclined her head. Her eyes were watchful, searching.

“What troubles you?” she asked, her voice laced with concern.

Leandra swallowed hard. Her breath caught, again and again, as she searched for the words.

But before they could form, a faint hiss broke the silence.

Then — pain.

Sharp, sudden, deep in her chest.

Only in the next instant did she understand — an arrow had struck her, just below the collarbone.

A cry escaped her — short, ragged, swallowed by the next breath.

Her legs gave way.

She staggered, reeled backward. Her fingers found the shaft — then slipped away.

Blood splattered across the marble.

She sank to her knees. Her breath came shallow, trembling.

Her hands scraped across the cold stone, reaching — *there must be something to hold.*

But there was nothing.

Queen Lythinda froze.

A silent ache carved itself into her chest.

Her heart pounded. Her hands trembled.

She rushed forward with a cry — called for the guards — dropped to her knees beside Leandra.

Both hands pressed to the wound, trying to hold back the blood. But it was already too late.

“Stay with me!” she cried.

Leandra’s eyes widened, as if to speak —

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but the words did not come.
Then her gaze fell still.
As Queen Lythinda bent low over the lifeless body, another
hiss split the air.
From the shadow of a doorway, the second arrow came.
It struck the queen above the heart.
Staggering, she recoiled — breath ragged, limbs heavy.
Her hands found the shaft. Not to tear it free.
Only to touch it — *to believe it was real*.
Blood ran across her fingers. She dropped to her knees.
Then lower still.
Her eyes stared forward — unblinking — until they closed,
and her chest no longer rose.

— ✧ —

Far away, in Raga Gur, the flames in the ritual basin flared, as
if fed anew.
The red light flickered over Gorzod's rigid face.
Then — Xaroth's voice. Piercing. Alien.
“The first soul has fallen.”

— ✧ —

With a crash, the doors of the throne hall burst open. The
captain stormed in, guards behind him.
Their steps slowed when they saw the bodies.
For a breath, they stood frozen.
“Your Majesty!” the captain shouted.
He dropped beside her. His hands hovered above the queen's
body — trembling. Useless.

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“What... what has happened here?” he stammered.

His eyes locked on the blood. They would not look away.

“Search the palace! Every corridor, every chamber — the assassin must not escape!”

His gaze found the arrow buried in the queen’s chest. He reached for it — *as if to prove it was no dream.*

“Your Majesty... we have failed,” he whispered.

No answer came.

Then motion.

Orders rang out. Voices rose.

The guards scattered — boots striking stone, echoing through the halls.

Some rushed to the wings. Others vanished into the gardens.

Soon a guard returned — breathless.

“We found something — in the corridor behind the library!”

“Show me!” the captain barked, already moving.

Five more guards fell in behind him.

Together they reached a narrow passage — the floor streaked faintly with dirt and boot-marks.

An arrow shaft lay broken on the ground.

The captain crouched. Lifted it. Examined the grain.

“Same wood,” he muttered. “Same fletching. The assassin came this way.”

They followed the trail deeper.

Then — a pause.

The dust near a hatch in the floor had been disturbed.

“Someone went down here,” the captain murmured.

“Not long ago.”

With a curt nod, he gave the signal to open it.

Damp, musty air rose to meet them.

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One by one, they descended the narrow ladder into a dark vault veined with tunnels.

Once below, the captain paused, letting his gaze sweep the gloom.

“He knew exactly where to go. He’s likely already gone,” he growled, grinding his teeth.

Even so, he gave the order to continue the pursuit.



Elsewhere, Laaron moved in silence through the darkened corridors, far from the palace.

His steps upon the wet stone were precise. Assured.

In one hand he carried a parchment with a rough sketch of the tunnels. In the other — a torch.

He halted. Listened into the silence.

Only the distant drip of water.

No voices.

No footsteps.

No one followed.

His plan had been flawless.

Every weakness accounted for. Every risk sealed shut.

“Arkondir is dead. And the queen as well,” he murmured.

The thought filled him with quiet satisfaction.

No one would ever suspect his hand.

For a moment, Leandra’s face rose before him.

She had trusted him blindly. Had bound herself to him — never knowing she was nothing more than a piece in the game.

A lover, perhaps.

But above all, a tool.

And her guilt had become a flaw he would no longer carry.

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He wiped sweat from his brow and pressed onward.

Now he was bound for Irkaar — the city where ambition and betrayal moved side by side.

The Governor, who washed his hands of such matters in public, had chosen him precisely: a man without scruples.

In return, Laaron had been promised wealth. And power.

“You did it,” he whispered as he reached the tunnel’s end.

Everything lay behind him now — the plan, the dead, the betrayal.

Ahead was only the path.

And he would not look back.



By then, the throne room had filled with unrest.

The captain had returned.

Shock and disbelief marked the faces of the court.

Voices hushed as the great doors closed behind him.

His shoulders were tight with strain. His brow drawn deep.

A silence spread through the hall as a healer, two priests, and several servants bore away the bodies of the queen and her handmaid.

Darion Althoras, High Chancellor of the realm, stepped forward.

His violet tunic, embroidered in silver thread, framed a slender form.

His shoulder-length hair hung in ordered lines around his face.

He raised both hands. His voice rang solemn across the chamber.

“Commander Arkondir — a man of unshakable strength and loyalty — was cowardly poisoned yesterday.

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Lady Leandra, ever faithful in her service, lost her life this very day.

But the gravest blow is the murder of our queen — a blow that imperils the realm, and shatters the heart of Astinhod.”

A hush followed. Heavy. Trembling.

Some stared at the place where the queen had lain.

Others exchanged glances, stricken and pale.

Landgravine Seradia of Hildon pressed her lips into a thin line.

Margrave Asteran of Umlis had gone white, bracing himself against a table.

Ahnwen, the Master of Coin, usually a man of composure, lowered his gaze — and for a moment looked old.

Duke Belmarr of Kring stood with arms crossed, his face unreadable — but the rigid set of his shoulders betrayed the blow.

Only Aldion, Grand Duke of Kirindor, remained still.

No flicker of grief.

No sign of mourning.

His gaze did not linger on what had been — but on what was to come.

He turned to the captain, voice sharp.

“Have you found anything?”

The captain hesitated. Then slowly shook his head.

“We have...”

He paused.

“Two boot prints. An arrow shaft. Nothing that leads us to the hand behind it.

The investigation has only just begun.”

Aldion narrowed his eyes.

“So — you know nothing. The murderer has fled, and we grope in darkness.

That is unforgivable.”

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Darion raised a hand, cutting off the swell of voices before it could rise.

“There are no swift answers to a deed such as this.

We must proceed with care.

Accusation and mistrust will serve no one.”

Through the gathered assembly, Asteran, Margrave of Umlis, stepped forward — slow, deliberate — and came to a halt beside Darion.

The heavy golden chain bearing the emblem of Astinhod’s royal house hung across his chest like a shield.

“What we need now is unity,” he said, voice firm.

“And a measured, trustworthy course of action from each of us.”

His gaze passed over every face in turn.

Eryndor, chamberlain of the court, stood half in shadow near the throne.

His short black hair was sharply cut, and the beard at his jaw had the precision of someone who understood appearances.

The gold and silver ornaments on his robe caught the light of the chandeliers — and his voice followed, smooth and controlled, as if placed on stage:

“Unity and trust are noble aims, Asteran.

But these murders could not have happened without help from within.

How else could the killer have entered the palace, struck, and vanished?

Our first duty must be to search among our own — to find the traitor before worse comes to pass.”

Rohedan, Count of Tumik, gave a slow nod.

His brushed brown hair and gold-capped walking stick spoke of elegance, but in the dim throne light, the birthmark on his right cheek was more striking than either.

“What are you implying, Eryndor?” asked Belmarr.

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His hands rested on the pommel of his sword — strong, unshaking.

“You believe someone in this very chamber could be capable of such a thing?”

Your words walk the edge of danger.”

His snow-white hair had been slicked back at the temples and bound at the nape — the mark of a man who had seen many battles.

Eryndor spread his arms.

“How can we be certain that treachery has not already taken root among us?”

A murmur passed through the chamber — soft, uncertain.

The words had done their work: vague, but heavy with suggestion.

Belmarr rose. His voice broke through the stir:

“Enough, Eryndor.

What you sow is fear and division — the very last things we need.

We must hold to the facts.

Not chase shadows.”

Darion nodded, though his gaze remained hard.

“Exactly.

Which is why we must ask: who profits from these murders?

Who gains from the death of Commander Arkondir, the handmaid... and the queen?”

Belmarr stepped toward the dark bloodstains near the throne.

His fists closed at his sides.

“Murders like these are not chance.

They are a message — one we cannot afford to ignore.

This is an assault on all of Astinhod.”

He turned to the captain.

“Find out who’s behind it.

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This was no mistake. There's a plan at work — and we need to see it before it strikes again.”

The captain straightened.

“My men and I will do all we can.”

Ahnwen stepped forward beside Belmarr.

Tall and gaunt, with greying waves and a precisely kept beard, he looked as composed as ever.

But his voice, though calm, carried an undercurrent of strain:

“This will cripple the markets further.

The coffers are bleeding.

We must act.”

Seradia gave a quiet nod.

She stood just behind the others, as though not wishing to be seen.

Her simple robes and unstyled black hair gave her the look of someone meant to disappear in council.

But her fingers worked nervously at the embroidery on her sleeve, and her face had gone pale.

Aldion gestured sharply toward the throne.

His mustache rose with every breath.

The dark coat, lined with white ruffles, cast his figure in strict contrast — the scar along his cheek sharpening it further.

“A realm without a queen.

You all see what this is. It's not misfortune — it's catastrophe.”

Lady Merdiva lifted her chin, just slightly.

Her white-blond hair was perfect, as always.

Her ornate gown, richly embroidered and set with glittering gems, proclaimed both her status and her practiced self-possession.

Her voice carried a thread of agitation.

“The Grand Duke is right!

We must not allow the throne to remain empty.

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Astinhod needs stability — and leadership.”

She paused.

“This loss is immeasurable. A vile atrocity.”

Yet behind the mask of shock, her thoughts turned quickly — already shaping this moment to her advantage.

Rohedan, standing close beside her, nodded.

“We must urgently discuss what comes next.”

With solemn faces, the assembled nobles stepped toward the great table.

A moment of silence stretched across the hall.

Then chairs scraped softly as each took their place.

The captain of the guard moved to the entrance of the throne chamber. His men fell into position.

“With your leave,” Aldion began, “I am prepared to guide the realm through this time of crisis.

I am ready to take the throne.

You know what my family and I have made of once-humble Kirindor — now the second-largest city in Astinhod.”

His gaze slid toward Darion, calm and deliberate.

But Seradia gave him no room.

She leaned forward and said coldly,

“Don’t make a fool of yourself.

No one in this chamber will grant you the crown.

What we need is the swift appointment of a Throne Warden — nothing more.”

Some nodded.

Others murmured, uneasy.

Lady Merdiva cleared her throat with the faintest sound.

“Why should Aldion not be crowned king?

He is skilled in diplomacy and comes from a house of stature.

He is strong — and trustworthy.”

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Her eyes swept the room, measuring.

She weighed her words, calculating their cost — and gain.

To stand with Aldion now might open paths otherwise closed.

Belmarr answered her with open skepticism.

“I fail to see the need for this debate.

There is no doubt who the rightful heir is.

Gorathdin — the consort of Queen Lythinda — is the legitimate successor.

But as Seradia has said, until his return, we must entrust the throne to a Warden.

On that, we shall vote.”

“A half-elf?” Rohedan spat from across the table.

“You would let a man not even fully human rule Astinhod? That would be betrayal.”

Belmarr struck his palm hard against the wood.

“Gorathdin is more than a half-elf,” he said sharply.

“He was not only the queen’s consort — he was a trusted confidant of King Grandhold. A friend.

A hero of Ib’Agier!”

His gaze moved deliberately across the table.

“His blood does not diminish his right. Nor what he has done.”

“But it disqualifies him as king,” Aldion interjected.

His voice had turned to steel.

“This realm was built by men — and it shall be ruled by men.

A half-elf will never earn the trust of the people.”

The voices in the room grew louder.

The nobles were dividing — slowly but visibly — into two sides.

Darion raised a hand, attempting to quiet the rising tension.

Asteran stood, clearing his throat.

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“Gorathdin has shown loyalty and strength.

His absence complicates matters, yes.

But he is the queen’s husband. That makes him a rightful claimant.”

Aldion dismissed the point with a flick of his fingers.

“Perhaps we should turn to the queen’s bloodline.

Her cousins. Her uncle. There are other heirs.”

Seradia let out a dry snort.

“You mean that doddering relic who barely remembers his name?

You’d put *him* on the throne?”

She shook her head.

“Please, Aldion. If you intend to offer candidates, offer sensible ones.”

Aldion’s expression did not change.

“Better a senile human than a half-elf whose loyalty lies in question,” he muttered.

The debate surged again.

Even the guards at the chamber’s edge glanced toward one another — tense.

Eryndor rose, both hands braced against the polished oak.

“This discussion is necessary — but we are losing ourselves to division.

Gorathdin is absent.

Until he returns, his claim remains untested.”

Lady Merdiva let her fingernails drift softly across the table’s surface.

The motion was deliberate — and everyone heard it.

“Darion — what does the law say in such cases?” she asked, fixing her gaze on him.

Darion rose from the table and stepped toward one of the bookcases. His eyes moved slowly along the spines until he drew

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forth a bound volume. With calm deliberation, he returned to the table, placed the book before him, and paged through it.

When he reached the passage he sought, he paused — then read aloud:

“In the event of a ruler’s death, the crown follows a clearly defined line of succession.

First: If the deceased leaves behind a spouse, that spouse may inherit the throne. However, final confirmation rests with the Council of Regency, which must examine the marriage, any potential heirs, and the fitness of the surviving consort.

Secondly: If there are legitimate children from a royal marriage, and both parents have passed, the crown shall pass to the eldest legitimate child. Should the heir be underage, a Steward of the Realm is appointed to govern until the heir comes of age.

Thirdly: If no direct heir exists, the crown passes to the nearest blood relative of the deceased sovereign — with priority given to siblings, uncles, or cousins. The Council of Regency confirms the succession.

Fourthly: Should no legitimate heir exist, it falls to the Council of Regency to choose a new ruler by majority vote. Until a rightful claim is settled, or during the absence of a rightful heir, a Warden of the Throne may be appointed. This Warden is chosen by vote of the Council and holds office for a limited term — until the rightful heir assumes power or a new ruling is made.

During that time, the Warden holds full authority over the affairs of state, yet is bound to account for all essential decisions before the Council of Regency. The Council retains the right to review, to question, and — in cases of abuse of power or grave misjudgment — to deliberate on the limitation or removal of the Warden’s authority.”

Darion lowered the book.

The hall fell into stillness. Silence stretched between them as glances were exchanged — uncertain, knowing. Each present drew their own conclusions, but all understood the same truth:

This was not merely about law.

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It was about power.

Then voices rose — too many at once. Tension filled the air.

Aldion, Belmarr, and Seradia clashed in full voice, each insisting they alone were suited to serve as Warden of the Throne.

Words struck like blades. Accusations flew. One barb followed another until the debate unraveled into chaos.

The factions split further — for and against Gorathdin.

Belmarr, Seradia, and Ahnwen spoke openly in favor of his succession.

Aldion and Rohedan stood firmly opposed.

Amid the storm, Eryndor remained silent.

His gaze drifted across the chamber — not absent, not idle. He did not speak.

He watched.

Asteran and Darion made repeated efforts to restore calm. Asteran reasoned softly, appealing to patience. Darion cut sharply through the noise, demanding order.

But no sooner did one wave of shouting subside than another rose in its place.

Lady Merdiva did not speak. Her expression remained composed — nearly indifferent — but behind the stillness of her face, her mind moved without pause.

She would not yet challenge Aldion. His forces were too great, and Rohedan stood solidly at his side.

Together, they held more influence than she could yet contest.

But that did not mean Aldion could not be used.

She would support him — for now. Until the moment came to move in the direction that truly mattered. Her direction.

The Council of Regency consisted of nine members.

If she could draw Eryndor — the ambitious chamberlain — to Aldion's side, they would hold four votes.

A strong beginning.

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One she would not waste.

But first, the course had to be set — carefully, quietly. For herself.

And for the man who had promised her more than political alliance.

The Governor of Irkaar.

He had drawn her in months ago — not with passion, but with precision.

What began as a formal visit had become something else.

Behind closed doors, he spoke of futures. Not dreams, but plans.

A world she might rule at his side — not merely Astinhod, but all of Wetherid.

The vision was seductive.

But she knew what it would require.

Steps taken without hesitation.

Without mercy.

The deaths had not been random.

They had been exact.

Had the Governor arranged for the Queen and Arkondir to be eliminated?

The thought was dangerous. She did not dare follow it further.

This was not the moment to seek answers.

“These discussions lead nowhere! We’re going in circles,” she said at last — louder than intended, drawing eyes once more.

“Perhaps we should focus again on securing the realm, rather than accusing and obstructing one another.”

Seradia tapped her fingers against the tabletop — quick, impatient.

“Let us proceed to the vote. We are wasting time.”

Darion raised his hand, commanding stillness.

“Such a far-reaching decision requires an orderly vote.

The Chronicles of Wetherid

The law grants me the right to postpone a vote in exceptional circumstances. And this attack qualifies. I propose we reconvene in two days — to confirm the candidates and elect the Warden of the Throne.”

A moment of silence followed.

Some accepted the proposal without protest.

Others could not mask their frustration.

Aldion, who had hoped to declare himself ruler before the day’s end, looked tense — jaw set, eyes narrowed.

Lady Merdiva, by contrast, saw the delay for what it was: a gift.

Two days meant time. And time meant power — time to forge alliances, to secure her standing, to bury opposition before it could speak.

Darion turned to the scribe seated near the council table.

“Organize the vote. It shall be held in two days. Ensure that all are informed.”

Ahnwen stepped forward from where he had stood — still until now, silent.

He had followed the debate closely, spoken little, but his presence bore weight.

Once a trusted voice beside King Grandhold — and later beside the now-slain Queen Lythinda — he could remain quiet no longer.

“We must inform Master Drobai,” he said.

“He has stood near the royal line for generations.

His wisdom is essential now.”

Without waiting for agreement, he turned toward the captain at the entrance of the throne hall.

“See that Master Drobai is notified — without delay.”

The captain gave a brief nod.

He held deep respect for Master Drobai, and welcomed the command.

Without a word, he turned and left the chamber.

The Guardians of the Seven Artifacts

But just before reaching the door, Ahnwen spoke again.

“And send riders. They are to seek out the queen’s consort.

He must be told of what has befallen — at once.”

A few among the council exchanged glances — some doubtful, some wary — but none raised objection.

Lady Merdiva remained motionless.

But her thoughts raced.

The inclusion of Master Drobald was a threat.

He could undo everything she had worked for.

She would not allow it.

The Quest Begins

In the village of Abketh, deep in the lands of Tawinn, Vrenli — small of stature, like all Abkther — rode alongside Gorathdin, the half-elf, calm and watchful; Borlix, the broad-shouldered dwarf from the halls of Ib’Agier; and Aarl, the round-bellied southerner with his measured step — toward Werlis, who was saddling two ponies.

No sooner had they arrived than Gorathdin turned to Vrenli, his expression grave.

“Our world stands on the edge of great peril,” he said. “Two weeks ago, Master Drobald came to me. He had learned that the orc shaman, Gorzod Greyswings, had summoned a demon in Raga Gur. We must act — before it takes form.”

Vrenli stared at him, startled.

“What does Master Drobald expect us to do — stand against a demon?”

“There are said to be seven powerful artifacts,” Gorathdin replied. “Feared even by the dark. Master Drobald believes they may help us stop it. We are to seek them — in a small group, so we draw neither the orcs’ eyes nor the demon’s.”

The Chronicles of Wetherid

“They say one of them — the Crystal of Seeing — lies hidden in the Northland,” Aarl added. “We’re to find it. It’s said it can lead us to the others.”

“‘They say,’ ‘it’s said’ — sounds vague to me,” Werlis muttered, handing Vrenli the reins.

Vrenli took them, about to fasten his travel pack to the saddle, when something stirred at the edge of thought — faint, familiar.

The Book of Wetherid... I've read this before.

There was a passage... something about the artifacts...

He pulled the book from his satchel and thumbed quickly through its pages. Then, suddenly, he stopped.

Perhaps there is something to Master Drobal's suspicions after all.

He read aloud:

“It is written that the Seed of Life was once wrought deep in the forests of Astinhod — a place where magic lives in every leaf and limb.

The Crystal of Seeing was forged in Tawinn, where starlight was captured and shaped into the artifact.

The Golden Hammer, a relic of immense power, was born in the burning forges of Ib’Agier, where elven magic and unmatched dwarven craft were joined.

In the gentle hills of Kirindor — a land of melodies and peace — the Lute of Harmony was created. Its tones stilled the fury of warriors and quieted even the bloodiest field.

Across the wide plains of Thir, the Tablet of Laws was inscribed — a symbol of justice and order.

In the Glorious Vale, the Living Glass was shaped — an artifact of rare form and unyielding strength.

And lastly, the Key of Secrets was wrought in the desert reaches of DeShadin, where hidden knowledge was drawn into its core.

The final entry speaks only of their vanishing. The artifacts disappeared from Wetherid.”

The Guardians of the Seven Artifacts

Werlis glanced at Vrenli.

“At least that proves it’s more than legend.”

Vrenli gave a slow nod.

“No one knows where they are — or if they still exist at all.”

“Our path is shrouded in uncertainty and danger,” Borlix rumbled.

He paused, then grinned wide beneath his beard.

“But at least we’re together again!

And this sun-browed southerner’s got more meat on his hips than I ever did!”

Aarl smirked and gave Borlix’s horse a firm slap on the flank.

The beast neighed sharply, tossed its head, and lunged forward several paces.

Borlix, far from a skilled rider, clung grimly to the saddle horn and let out a dwarvish curse as he struggled to steady the animal. At last, he brought it under control, circled wide, and returned with an expression that boded no good. His narrowed eyes locked on Aarl, and his lips curled into a grin steeped in retribution.

“Can you focus on what matters now? This is not the time for foolishness,” Werlis snapped.

“A demon threatens us, and you find nothing better to do than tease one another?”

“Easy, Werlis! A bit of jest never harmed anyone,” Borlix countered with a grin.

Before Werlis could respond, Vrenli turned to Gorathdin.

“What do we actually know about this demon?” he asked, his voice low with concern.

Gorathdin cast his gaze over the group, as if ensuring they were all listening, before he spoke.

“The soul-realm,” he began slowly,

“is a place beyond our reckoning.

A realm where the essence of all things was first shaped.

The Chronicles of Wetherid

There, light and shadow contend — not in battles as we know them, but in an eternal struggle that defines the very balance of life itself.

It is a realm of extremes — brilliance beyond measure, and darkness beyond cruelty.

Every thought, every deed in our world echoes there.”

He let the silence settle, then continued.

“Among the servants of that dark are beings more powerful than anything we know — demons from the deepest reaches of that realm.

It seems Gorzod has summoned one of them.

It is not here yet — but it is coming.

And once it reaches our world...”

His voice dropped to a whisper.

“...it will burn.”

Borlix raised his axe, already imagining the blow.

“Then why are we wasting time chasing after artifacts?

We should march to Fallgar, find Gorzod, and take his green head from his shoulders!” he growled.

Gorathdin shook his head.

“It isn’t that simple.

Master Drobal has weighed it — but the risk is too great.

We don’t know whether Gorzod’s death would stop the demon.”

He paused.

“This is a delicate matter. Not a battle won with a single blow.”

Aarl nodded, shooting Borlix a sidelong look.

“You know, my friend, there are things in this world that call for wit and strategy — not just brute strength.

Though I’ll admit, in that category, you are without equal.”

Borlix grinned wide.

“Well, at least I’m unmatched in something,” he said.

The Guardians of the Seven Artifacts

Then, studying Aarl with mock gravity:

“Though, looking at you now... I’d say, when it comes to eating, you might give me competition.”

Aarl gave a dry laugh, patted his stomach, and said:

“What can I say?

True strength shows itself even at the dinner table.”

Vrenli had followed the exchange with only half an ear. His gaze remained grave. After a moment’s hesitation, he turned to Gorathdin.

“When will Master Drobald join us?

He’s not sending us off alone, is he?”

Gorathdin met his eyes.

“He will meet us in four days, at the border pass to the Northland.

He had matters yet to settle — but he gave me his word he’d be there in time.”

Vrenli gave a slow nod, then mounted his pony.

“Let’s be on our way,” Gorathdin called to the others.

Without delay, the fellowship set off, guiding their mounts toward the village square.

Though night had fallen, the place was still alive with movement. Merchant Herr Rosenstrauch and several villagers were busy tying bundles and packing goods.

“Don’t forget the healing herbs from Gwerlit — and the dried meat and cheese,” Rosenstrauch called, knotting a thick sack and handing it to Aarl.

Aarl received it with a nod, fastened it behind his saddle, and offered his thanks.

Rosenstrauch smiled in reply and nodded, satisfied.

Borlix dismounted and drew a list from his pouch, studying it with a critical eye.

“Anything missing? Ah — the furs! It’ll be cold in the Northland,” he muttered.

The Chronicles of Wetherid

“Here are five,” said Rosenstrauch, handing them to the fellowship.

Just as they stowed the furs, Molekk — the old baker’s son — came running up with a basket of fresh Everfull loaves.

“For you!” he said proudly, handing a few pieces to each of them.

The fellowship thanked the villagers warmly for their support and made their way to the nearby smithy. There, the sound of hammering rang through the air. Sparks flew as the weaponsmith Jaris worked the edge of a short sword.

Borlix dismounted again and stepped beside him, watching the work with a discerning eye.

Jaris lifted the sword into the glow of the forge-fire, where the blade shimmered in the flickering light.

“This short sword is for you, Werlis,” he said, offering him the weapon.

Werlis tested the balance and gave a brief, satisfied nod.

“Perfect for a one-armed man like me. Thank you.”

Jaris smiled.

“I know you’ve been without one since Ib’Agier. I wish I had more time — I could have hardened the steel further.”

He turned to Vrenli, who had dismounted and stood beside Borlix.

“Here’s an old map. Not very detailed — but it should guide you to the border pass.”

Vrenli accepted it with a quiet nod.

“This will help. Thank you.”

“When you’ve crossed the pass, keep as far north as you can. That’s where the towns and villages lie — or so the traders say. I’ve never seen them myself.”

He gave a short gesture of farewell and wished them a safe journey.

The Guardians of the Seven Artifacts

They rode on toward the northern edge of the village, when Vrenli suddenly halted his pony and turned to Gorathdin.

“Do you think I should bring the Book of Wetherid? Maybe it would be wiser to leave it here — Gwerlit could keep it safe.”

Gorathdin gave a quiet nod.

“That’s probably for the best. If we run into trouble, knowing the book is safe might be the better choice. It’s too valuable to risk.”

Vrenli exhaled softly and let his fingers brush across the leather binding.

“Wait for me here,” he said at last, his voice low.

He rode off alone.

The path was lit by pale lanterns that glowed faintly along the edges of the road. The air was still, save for the chirping of crickets, and a heaviness hung over the night.

The guilt still lingered.

The oracle of Tawinn, lost through his son’s innocent hands — a child who hadn’t known what he held. Since then, it had vanished. And Gwerlit had not taken it well.

When he reached her home, he saw her rising from the garden, herbs in her hands and soil clinging to her fingers. As soon as she spotted him, she dusted them off and came to meet him.

Vrenli took the book from his saddlebag and held it in both hands — carefully, like something fragile.

“What brings you here so late?” she asked, surprised.

Vrenli drew in a breath.

“I need your help. Gorathdin and I are heading for the Northland. Master Drobol has given us an important task.”

Gwerlit gave a slow nod.

“I know. Word has reached me already.”

He held the book out to her.

“It’s too valuable to take. If you could keep it safe, I’d be at ease.”

The Chronicles of Wetherid

She studied his face, then smiled gently.

“Of course. You can rely on me.”

He passed her the book with both hands.

“Thank you, Gwerlit. That means a great deal.”

“Take care of yourselves.”

He lingered a moment, then climbed back into the saddle. The pony gave a soft snort, and with a final nod, he rode off into the dark.

Gwerlit watched him go, the book pressed close against her chest.

On the way back, the wind picked up. Heavy drops of rain began to fall from a sky thick with cloud.

“Riding in weather like this is utter nonsense,” Borlix grumbled, pulling the hood of his cloak low as Vrenli returned to them.

Vrenli pulled out Jaris’s map and shielded it with one hand against the rain.

He studied the sketched route for a while before speaking.

“If we leave at first light, we’ll reach the ruins of Tawinn by afternoon and spend the night there.

The next day we should reach Lake Taneth by midday — and from there, it’s about a day’s journey to the Border Mountains.

How long the climb to the pass will take is hard to say. Half a day, perhaps. Maybe more.”

“That means we’ll arrive in time for the appointed meeting,” Aarl said.

Gorathdin considered, then gave a slow nod.

“Let’s ride back to the village. In this weather, we wouldn’t get far in the dark anyway.”

“You can stay at my place,” Werlis offered.

The others agreed and followed him.

The village lay quiet beneath the drumming rain, disturbed only by the dim glow of lanterns hanging near the doors.

The Guardians of the Seven Artifacts

Their muted light shimmered on the drenched paths.

They rode in silence along the softened trail, rain beading on their cloaks.

At last, they reached Werlis's house, dismounted, led the horses into the shelter, and hurried inside.

As the door shut behind them, only the steady drum of rain on the roof remained.

Werlis cast off his soaked cloak and stepped to the hearth.

He knelt and stacked dry wood, striking flint until the fire caught.

Soon, flames crackled, and warmth spread through the room.

Borlix and Aarl sank down onto their sleeping rolls.

After days under open skies, a roof overhead felt like mercy.

They were asleep within moments.

Werlis, Gorathdin, and Vrenli remained by the fire.

In quiet voices, they spoke of the seven artifacts — and of the demon that sought to claim them.

At last, Werlis yawned and retired to his chamber.

Gorathdin turned to Vrenli, his voice low, his expression grave.

“Have you noticed the gifts of the Book Guardians no longer work as they should?”

Try to speak with me in thought — you'll see. It won't pass through.”

Vrenli frowned.

“That can't be.”

He closed his eyes and reached out — but the familiar link met resistance.

Like pressing against a wall of mist — soft, but unyielding.

Nothing moved. No thought crossed.

“How is that possible?” he asked quietly.

Gorathdin exhaled.

The Chronicles of Wetherid

“It’s not just us. Master Drobal says even his magic has grown... uncertain.

And he’s not the only one. Something is disturbing the balance.”

Vrenli stared at him.

“If that’s true, we’re in far greater danger than I realized.

Without Master Drobal’s magic, how are we to find the artifacts — let alone defend ourselves?”

Gorathdin let his gaze rest on him for a moment, then spoke calmly.

“He can still cast spells. But every word takes something from him.

Every use of power draws deeper.”

Vrenli swallowed.

Gorathdin leaned forward, both hands resting on the back of his chair.

“That is why we must not waste time.”

Vrenli nodded.

The fire had burned low. Rain tapped softly against the windows.

For a while, neither spoke.

Then, without a word, they rose and sought a place to sleep.



With the first light, the fellowship set out.

The rain had not ceased.

Only by afternoon did it begin to ease, and as dusk fell, they reached the ruins of Tawinn.

Before the moss-clad walls and the crumbling temple, they paused — memories rising behind their eyes.

The Guardians of the Seven Artifacts

As before, they found shelter for the night, lit a fire, and rested until morning led them onward beneath a sky cleared of clouds.

Toward evening, they reached Lake Taneth.

Its waters caught the last of the light — a golden shimmer on a silver surface.

For a moment, Werlis stood still.

“Do you think the water gnome still lives here?” he asked, nodding toward the lake’s center.

Vrenli followed his gaze and shrugged.

“Could be. He’s probably drifting somewhere between the worlds.”

Aarl slid from the saddle and loosened his horse’s girth.

“Let’s see if I can catch a few fish.”

Borlix, eager to stretch his legs, joined him, while the others began to set up camp.

They set down their packs, looked for dry places to sleep, and gathered wood for the fire.

After a while, Aarl and Borlix returned with five medium-sized trout.

By then, Werlis had lit the fire and was skewering the fish on wooden sticks, ready to roast them over the flames.

A hearty aroma mingled with the spice of the smoke as dusk settled over the lake.

As they ate, Vrenli turned to Gorathdin.

“Do you know how Brother Transmudin is faring?”

Gorathdin considered for a moment before answering.

“He was cast out of the Order of the Dragon after his betrayal.

All his positions were stripped from him, and now he lives in solitude, not far from the temple, in a modest hut.

There, he studies ancient texts and brews healing draughts, which he trades in Astinhod for food and other needed goods.”

The Chronicles of Wetherid

“And Manamii and Wahmubu?” Werlis asked, eyes lifted toward the stars.

“Manamii and Wahmubu live in Iseran.

Wahmubu maintains strong relations between the city and the nomadic tribes of the DeShadin desert.

He often travels on behalf of Sheikh Neg El Bahi.

Manamii, on the other hand, fights tirelessly against slavery and helps those who were converted to the serpent god by the Kajirs return to their old faith.

They have two children.”

“And Lythinda — how is she?” Vrenli asked, curiosity in his voice.

Gorathdin sighed and stared out over the lake before replying.

“The situation in Astinhod was already dire when I left.

Lythinda is under enormous pressure.

Trade with Irkaar — long essential to Astinhod’s survival — has nearly collapsed.

Vital goods — grain, cloth, tools — are growing scarce, and prices are soaring.

The people grow uneasy, and some nobles and merchants are placing the blame on Lythinda.”

“Why has trade come to a standstill?” Vrenli asked, frowning.

“What is the Governor hoping to achieve with this?

Irkaar is harming itself if trade falls apart,” Werlis added.

“That’s exactly what Lythinda wanted to ask him herself.

She invited him to Astinhod.”

Gorathdin took a deep breath.

“But instead of coming himself, he merely sent a messenger asking for a postponement.

Claimed he couldn’t travel due to urgent matters.

That sort of behavior isn’t just disrespectful — it suggests Irkaar is deliberately trying to destabilize Astinhod.”

The Guardians of the Seven Artifacts

He fell silent for a moment, watching the flames, then continued.

“They’re applying economic pressure to weaken Queen Lythinda.

While the people suffer, every effort to bring the opposing factions to the table fails.

There are even rumors that the Governor is receiving support from nobles who wish to see Lythinda deposed and the throne claimed for themselves.”

Borlix tossed a branch into the fire.

“These games of power always strike the common folk first.

The mighty wrestle for gold, but it is the weak who pay the price,” he grumbled.

Gorathdin turned his gaze aside, his expression tightening.

“It was no easy thing, leaving her behind in such a state.

But what else could I have done?”

“Commander Arkondir will surely support her.

He’s your friend, a man of standing, and loyal to the throne,” Vrenli offered.

“Yes, Arkondir is dependable — and his support is crucial.

But even he cannot halt the intrigues alone.”

Gorathdin looked up at the stars.

“Guiding Lythinda through this storm will not be easy,” he said quietly.

The Border Pass

Their journey continued for two days more, leading them at last into the border mountains.

Before the trail grew impassable, they released their horses into the wild.

Then they went on foot.

The Chronicles of Wetherid

At first, the land rose gently — over slopes of moss and root — but the ground soon turned steep.

Stones shifted beneath their boots, and in places they were forced to grasp roots or ledges to keep from falling.

With every step, the air grew colder.

The wind swept through the ravines — first a whisper, then a voice, rising in force.

Barren stone broke through the thinning undergrowth, and higher still, the first specks of snow shone between the rocks.

Above them, the peaks were already hidden beneath a white veil.

When they crossed the treeline, sharper gusts drove icy flakes into their faces and blurred their sight.

They tied ropes to their belts before setting foot on the narrow path ahead.

It was slick, and steep, and winding.

Gorathdin led them with care — each step deliberate.

Werlis studied the trail with wary eyes, but they stayed close, and climbed.

To the left, the drop plunged steeply into mist.

Werlis stepped on a smooth patch.

“Gorathdin, I think here is—”

He never finished.

His foot slid from beneath him — and he was gone.

“Hold!” Borlix cried — but it was too late. Werlis slid over the edge.

The rope snapped taut with a brutal jolt.

For one breathless instant, he hung screaming over the void — until a dull impact caught him on a ledge below.

“He’s down there!” Aarl shouted, both hands clenched around the rope.

The Guardians of the Seven Artifacts

“Stay calm! I’m going down. Keep it tight!” Gorathdin called, already grabbing the line.

Without waiting, he began the descent.

The wind dragged at him, but he found his rhythm and reached Werlis, who lay curled on the narrow shelf, trembling.

“Can you move?” Gorathdin asked, crouching beside him.

Werlis gave a weak nod and pushed himself up slowly.

“Yes... My shoulder hurts, but I’m all right.”

Gorathdin looked him over, quick and careful.

“Good. No rushing.”

He looked up and gave a signal.

“Pull — slowly!”

With strained breath and locked muscles, Aarl and Borlix began to haul them upward.

Once Werlis stood again on solid ground, he dropped to his knees, legs shaking beyond command.

Vrenli stepped to him.

“You were damned lucky. That could’ve ended badly.”

“I know,” Werlis said quietly, eyes still fixed on the void.

“Enough talking,” Gorathdin cut in, tightening the rope fastenings.

“We shorten the line. From now on, everyone stays close. And watches every step.”

They continued their climb. On the steeper faces, they drove weapons into the earth to anchor their grip and claw upward.

For a time, they searched in vain for a passage higher. At last, Gorathdin led them back to a marked rock they had passed before.

From there, Vrenli spotted a narrow rise leading upward — nearly buried, but passable.

The detour had cost them time. It was late afternoon when they reached the plateau.

The Chronicles of Wetherid

The ruins of a wide stone wall loomed before them — half buried in snow, half glazed with ice.

“This is the place,” Gorathdin said, glancing around. “Just as Master Drobald described it.”

But there was no sign of the old mage.

The sun hung low behind the peaks, casting pale light across the mountains — long shadows stretched across the stone.

“I can’t see him anywhere,” Borlix muttered.

“He’ll come,” Gorathdin replied.

Borlix turned aside — then froze, pointing forward.

“You see that?”

Built into the far rock face, half-hidden in drift and frost, was the entrance to a cave.

A rusted iron door barred the way — nearly swallowed in snow.

“Could be our shelter for the night,” Borlix said, and trudged forward. The others followed.

At the door, he took up his shield and used it like a shovel, hacking away the crusted snow.

Then he grabbed the handle and pulled hard.

The iron screamed on its hinges — then gave way.

Gorathdin stepped inside first, his gaze sweeping the darkness slowly.

The cave was not large — but it was dry.

He gave a single nod.

“Enough space for all of us.”

One by one, the others followed.

They set down their gear and began to prepare the camp.

Outside, Werlis built a small fire ring with stones, laid dry twigs and split wood atop it, and lit a signal flame.

The flickering glow stretched barely past the edge of the cliff.

Then he returned inside.

The Guardians of the Seven Artifacts

Gorathdin sat with his elbows on his knees, staring into the night — as though waiting for Master Drobol to appear out of it.

“It’s nearly midnight,” Werlis muttered. “Where is he?”

Aarl, seated beside Borlix on a spread of furs, turned a throwing knife in his hands and scraped a shard of ice from his bootsole.

“Perhaps he was delayed.”

“What if something happened to him?” Vrenli asked.

Borlix snorted and tore off a piece of dried meat with his teeth.

“Happened? To Master Drobol? He’s tougher than half the dwarves I know. He’ll come.”

“What exactly did he say about the artifact?”

Where was he going to begin the search?” Werlis asked.

“He didn’t know much himself,” Gorathdin replied. “Said he wanted to ask around among the Northlanders. He mentioned Grandok and Thronheim — he’d traveled there once and meant to return.”

“Did he say how we’re supposed to get there?” Werlis pressed.

“No. And I didn’t ask. He wanted to be here himself.”

Vrenli sank onto his furs.

“If he doesn’t come tomorrow, we go without him.”

“It seems we must,” Gorathdin said, glancing around the group.

“Unless someone has a better idea?”

“Going back is out of the question,” Werlis said firmly.

“If the story about the orc shaman and the demon is true, we have no choice.

We must find the artifact — with or without Master Drobol,” Vrenli added.

Borlix looked up.

“We sleep first. Tomorrow we’ll know more.”

Aarl nodded.

The Chronicles of Wetherid

“The day has been long enough.”

— ✧ —

While the fire in the cave died slowly to ash, far to the south in Wetherid, in Irkaar, a single oil lamp flickered in the deep of night.

Its dim light shimmered across carved furnishings, casting long shadows that twitched and stretched with every stir of air.

The Governor tossed in uneasy sleep.

In the dark of his mind, the voice returned — sharper now, more urgent than before:

Your plan has begun.

The murders have weakened Astinhod — but that is only the beginning.

You know your purpose. All of Wetherid shall become yours.

The words sank deeper than thought.

Before him rose the image of Lady Merdiva — devoted, smiling at his side.

The baroness is but a tool, the voice whispered coldly.

She believes she will rule Astinhod with you.

But you know the truth.

Her ambition does not serve your design.

Use her — while she serves the cause.

Let her believe she stands beside you, even as you strip the ground from beneath her feet.

The vision shifted.

Irkaar rose at its center — the beating heart of a vast dominion.

Astinhod glittered like a crownstone — while Lady Merdiva receded into shadow.

Your time draws near.

She craves power. But you — you will rule all of Wetherid.

Play your game. Pull the strings.

The Guardians of the Seven Artifacts

And when Astinhod falls... you shall stand alone at the summit.

The voice faded.

The vision collapsed.

The Governor jolted upright, gasping for breath.

The words had burned into him.

He rubbed his face, but the darkness clung.

He reached for the carafe at his bedside, poured a glass, and drank.

But no calm followed.

Instead, something else stirred — ambition.

And doubt.

“All of Wetherid...” he murmured.

The promise would not let him go.

And yet, behind it, the question pressed inward — *why now? why me?*

The words had shaken something loose in him.

“Astinhod will be mine,” he said aloud into the dark.

But even as he spoke, he felt the weight of the vow —
and the shadow clinging to it.

CHAPTER 2

The Northland

The fellowship woke beneath a sky swallowed by storm.
Snow shrieked across the plateau like an army.

The last embers had long gone cold.

Still, Master Drobald had not returned.

By midday, as the wind began to ease, Vrenli pulled a parchment from his satchel and wrote in slow, steady script:

Master Drobald —

We have moved on.

We are keeping strictly northward.

In the first settlement we reach, we will wait — or leave word for you to follow.

He placed it upon a flat stone within the cave and weighed it down with another.

Once all their gear was packed, Gorathdin gave a nod.

“Let us move on.”

They pressed forward through the chaos left by the storm, crossed the pass beyond the mountains, and looked down into a wide valley ringed by tall peaks and forests.

To the north, an endless plain of ice stretched toward the horizon — white, wind-scoured, and vast.

“This must be the Northland,” said Vrenli, lifting a hand against the glare.

Aarl stood still, taking in the landscape with quiet awe.

“I’ve never seen so much white at once.”

Borlix snorted.

“This is nothing. In Ib’Agier, we have winters so deep we dwarves have to stack ourselves just to get across the snow.”

The Guardians of the Seven Artifacts

Aarl grinned and tossed a teasing remark, and in response Borlix packed a snowball and hurled it at his back.

Gorathdin's gaze swept the valley. Then he pointed downslope.

"There's a village. Smoke from a few chimneys."

The others looked — and saw nothing.

"Are you sure?" Werlis asked.

"Of course I'm sure. If there's smoke, there are people. We should reach them before nightfall."

They began the descent into the forested reaches of the Northland.

Massive trees rose before them, their trunks wider than oaks, their bark dark and cracked. Resinous clusters clung to the high branches. Some roots thrust through the frozen soil — knotted, ridged, like the sinews of petrified beasts.

The cold hung thick among the trees, but the forest endured. Some canopies held leathery leaves that defied even the wind; others bore dense needles where snow barely clung.

Their steps crunched through the crusted snow — until a sudden sound halted them.

An unfamiliar birdsong cut through the stillness.

"Do you hear that?" Werlis asked.

"I've never heard anything like it."

Aarl nodded, eyes sweeping the trees.

The sound came again — a low, guttural cooing — and brought them all to a standstill.

Werlis squinted upward.

There, halfway up a towering pine, perched a bird — almost his height, white as the snow around it.

They exchanged glances, and moved on in silence.

With every step, the forest grew denser. The trunks stood closer now. The canopy darkened. The path narrowed.

Suddenly, Borlix stopped and pointed at the snow.

The Chronicles of Wetherid

“Take a look at that.”

Elongated tracks with short claws marked the ground.

“Snow goblins,” he growled. “Filthy things — turning up everywhere.”

“That’s just what we needed,” Aarl muttered, resting a hand on the strap across his chest, eyes shifting left and right.

“Stay together,” Gorathdin ordered, his elven eyes sweeping the trees in measured silence.

He saw nothing.

They moved on — slower now.

The forest changed again. The trees thinned. Their limbs bent low under snow. The ground leveled, hard and smooth beneath a crust of wind-hardened ice.

Then, a clearing.

A frozen lake stretched out before them — pale, silent, flat as glass.

Gorathdin knelt, running his fingers along drag marks near the edge.

“Interesting... These might be the traces of an ice ray.”

“An ice what?” Werlis asked.

“A creature that normally lives beneath the surface. Twice the size of a man.

Dangerous. It attacks anything that moves.

Its breath freezes prey, and when threatened, it hurls lightning through its feelers.”

Aarl furrowed his brow.

“That sounds... inconvenient. How do you know all that?”

“I’ve never seen one myself,” Gorathdin replied. “But I’ve read the rangers’ hunting records.”

“And what would make something like that come ashore?” Borlix asked.

“Possibly on the hunt,” Gorathdin offered.

The Guardians of the Seven Artifacts

The fellowship studied the tracks in silence. Then Gorathdin led them on.

Suddenly, he stopped again and pointed to a second set of marks in the snow.

“These are the tracks of frosthorns,” he said. “Much like red deer — but their hides are wool-covered, their antlers sculpted from ice. They glow in the dark and move in herds through the Northland valleys.”

“Are they dangerous?” Werlis asked.

“Only if they feel threatened. Left alone, they stay peaceful.”

They moved a few more paces before Gorathdin halted once more.

“Ice-shadow wolves have passed through here,” he said quietly.

His gaze sharpened.

“They’re deadly hunters. Far larger than common wolves. Their paws are wide as a bear’s, tipped with claws that cut through bone. In white fur, they vanish — and they never hunt alone.”

“That’s hardly comforting,” Werlis muttered.

“It isn’t,” Gorathdin replied. “Stay alert. We mustn’t draw attention.”

Werlis studied the surroundings. Just beneath the snow’s surface, something shifted — a dark, slender shape that blended with the white.

But when he looked again, it was gone.

Just a trick of the light?

He dismissed it and walked on.

“We need a safe place to sleep,” said Gorathdin, peering between the trees. “Look over there.”

He pointed to a massive frostheyn tree, its broad limbs cloaked in bluish wax-leaves. The silvery bark caught the last light of evening.

The Chronicles of Wetherid

“We could sleep up there. The branches look wide enough. But we’ll have to go without a fire.”

Vrenli, hands trembling from cold, gave him a skeptical look.

“And how exactly are we supposed to keep warm? I’m already freezing.”

“Maybe we could light one under the tree,” Werlis said.

“Absolutely! I’m not dying of frost out here,” Aarl added, wiping beads of frost from his nose.

Borlix laughed and shook his head.

“How will you make it farther north if you’re already shivering? It gets worse, you know.”

Aarl made a face — then hurled a snowball that struck Borlix square in the beard.

Grumbling, Borlix shook off the snow, laid down his axe, and used his shield to scoop up a heavy mound. With a wide sweep, he flung it toward Aarl — but Aarl jumped aside, laughing.

“Enough,” Gorathdin said firmly, as a spark from his flint caught in dry branches and bloomed into flame. “Keep quiet. Unless you want to draw snow goblins — or worse.”

Borlix muttered, but Werlis nodded.

“Gorathdin is right.”

Once they had eaten, Gorathdin climbed into the branches and tied a rope to a sturdy limb for the others.

Vrenli helped Werlis follow. They settled on a broad, curved branch that offered enough space to rest.

Aarl and Borlix reached the same perch at once, but Aarl was quicker. He tossed his fur down and grinned.

“This one’s mine.”

“A dwarf is no elf — and certainly no cursed squirrel,” Borlix growled as he wedged himself into a thick fork and wrapped his fur tight.

Gorathdin climbed higher than the rest and settled into a cradle of limbs, sheltered on all sides.

The Guardians of the Seven Artifacts

The weight of the day pressed down on them.

One by one, they gave in to rest — until the darkness held them, and only the wind's distant sigh remained.

— ✧ —

Night had fallen on the Northland. A haze of frost hung low over the fens of Fallgar.

The moon shimmered behind its veil — pale and blurred — as if even light feared the quiet.

Prince Sylvian lay awake in his bed in Marnog Jar.

Wind whispered through the reeds outside — thin, insistent.

But sleep did not come.

And peace would not follow.

The voice returned — sharper, more scornful.

Like a breath of frost, it slipped through the damp timbers and into his soul:

“Prince Sylvian...

The exalted Queen of the Glorious Elves looks upon you and your kin with disdain.

In her eyes, you mist elves are but shadows — unworthy to set foot in the Glorious Vale.”

The words carved themselves into his mind.

Before his inner eye, the queen appeared — seated upon her throne of living glass.

Her people knelt at her feet in violet light.

“But the vale is yours,” the voice pressed on.

“The queen is powerful — but her time is over.

You will cast her down.

And you shall not stand alone.

Soon I will bring you one who will aid you.”

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The images shifted.

Prince Sylvian saw himself upon the throne, the Glorious Elves bowed before him.

“Claim what is yours by right,” the voice whispered, silken.

“The Glorious Vale is your inheritance.

The world shall belong to the elves.”

Prince Sylvian tossed in his bed.

His breath came faster.

“There are others you must unite,” the voice went on.

“The ranger-elves of the Dark Forest — they must sever their ties to the druids.

Speak to them. Win them to your banner.”

The vision changed — trees dark and high, a forest of silence and shadow.

He saw the rangers kneel and lift their blades in his name.

“But that is not all,” the voice hissed, sharper still.

“In the North dwell elves long forgotten — the frost-elves.

Their homeland will fall. They will wander, rootless.

They will need a forerunner — one who offers them a future.”

He saw them in the vision — frost-elves walking through ruin, their icy halls melting behind them.

“Send envoys,” the voice commanded.

“Show them that you understand.

Promise them a realm — the entire North beneath your banner.

They will follow.”

Prince Sylvian opened his eyes.

His heart hammered in his chest.

Something had taken hold — not a voice, but a current, cold and deep.

He rose and tried to gather his thoughts, but the hunger it left behind would not loosen its grip.

The Guardians of the Seven Artifacts

The voice had rooted itself in him — and with it, a vision.
Of power. Of purpose.
Of a path from which he would not return.

— ✂ —

By midday the following day, the fellowship reached a clearing in the snow-bound woods.

Stumps of old trees lay hidden beneath the white, but the marks of woodcutters still showed.

“Somewhere near here must be the village Gorathdin saw. We can’t be far,” said Vrenli.

They kept their course — and before long, a settlement came into view.

Wooden palisades rose around it, tall and tight.

Beneath the gate stood an older man in a heavy fur cloak.

His eyes widened at the sight of them.

“Who are you?” he called out. “What business brings you here?”

Gorathdin stepped forward.

“I am Gorathdin of Wetherid.

With me stand the fellowship — Vrenli, Werlis, Aarl, and Borlix.

We are on our way to Grandok but do not know the way.

We ask for passage.”

The man studied them in silence.

Then he pulled a cord.

A bell rang out.

Armed Northmen emerged from behind the palisade — cloaks heavy with frost, spears gripped in hand, shields at the ready.

“Hendrik, these strangers seek the road to Grandok,” the elder said.

The Chronicles of Wetherid

Hendrik stepped closer, his long beard braided, stirred by the wind.

He eyed the group in silence.

“What do you want there?”

“We seek something,” Gorathdin replied. “We don’t know where it lies.

We’ve been traveling for days and ask only for direction — and perhaps a few provisions.”

Hendrik shook his head.

“We’re no tavern. You’d best keep moving.”

Vrenli stepped forward.

“Then at least tell us how to reach Grandok.

And one more thing... have you seen an old man with a white beard and a diamond-shaped mark on his forehead?”

The men exchanged glances. Their expressions sharpened.

“Are you here to mock us?” Hendrik snarled.

“That is not our intent,” Gorathdin said quickly. “We only need directions.”

Hendrik paused — then gave his answer.

“Two days north. On the third, you’ll reach a mountain ridge to your left. From there, head east for a day. Then north again. There are no marked roads.”

“That’s it?” Gorathdin asked.

The men turned without another word and vanished through the gate. It shut behind them with a dull thud.

“They weren’t exactly welcoming,” Werlis muttered.

“The Northlanders seem a grim folk,” Gorathdin replied. “They trust no strangers.”

Vrenli furrowed his brow.

“That was hardly a proper route description.”

“We’ll ask again at the next settlement,” Gorathdin said. “We’re bound to meet others along the way.”

The Guardians of the Seven Artifacts

Vrenli nodded, thoughtful.

But Werlis looked uneasy. When he spoke, his voice had lost its usual ease.

“I’m worried. There’s still no sign of Master Drobol.”

Vrenli drew a piece of parchment from his satchel and scribbled a quick message. He folded it and tucked it plainly between two wooden planks in the palisade.

Then they continued on.



On the third morning, no ridge had appeared — no rocks, no Northlanders, not even a hint of a path.

“I fear we’ve lost our way,” Vrenli said.

Borlix hunched against the wind.

“Wouldn’t surprise me,” he grumbled. “Without a proper road, this is nothing but endless white.”

As he adjusted the leather strap of his belt, a faint sound reached his ear — a thin, almost cheerful whistle. A tune. Hummed as if to no one in particular.

It faded in an instant, scarcely more than a breath. He wasn’t sure he’d heard anything at all.

He shrugged it off.

Werlis checked the supply pouch. The moment he lifted it, he knew.

“Maybe enough for a day. Two, if we stretch it.”

Gorathdin nodded.

“I’ll hunt. Stay here and make camp.”

No one objected. It needed to be done.

He reached for his quiver — and paused.

Two arrows were missing. Silver-tipped.

The Chronicles of Wetherid

Had he dropped them? He hadn't fired. He was sure of it.

Frowning, he searched the snow — but no trace. *Perhaps he had miscounted.*

He turned.

“Good luck out there,” Vrenli said.

“I’ll bring something back,” Gorathdin replied, and stepped into the cold.

Aarl rubbed his hands.

“He’d better not take too long.”

“As long as it’s not squirrel,” Werlis murmured.

Gorathdin vanished into the pale light of morning. His steps left almost nothing behind.

The snow gave way beneath him in silence as he moved through the white expanse.

The trail led him to the edge of a forest — half-grown silver firs and ancient ice-pines, standing in frozen silence.

Then he found tracks. Fresh.

“Frosthorns,” he murmured, studying the impressions.

He slowed, his eyes sweeping the landscape. Nothing yet in sight. But the trail was clear.

He followed it until he came upon a frozen lake, hemmed in by trees. His hand rested on the grip of his bow.

The Guardian

There at the shore, a figure knelt beside a hole in the ice.

A Northlander. Ice-fishing, perhaps.

A heavy fur cloak wrapped his shoulders. His beard was braided roughly, and his face bore the wind with stoic ease.

His eyes — cold, alert, pale as frost.

An axe and a spear lay at his side. Their blades had been used, and used well.

The Guardians of the Seven Artifacts

Gorathdin stepped forward with care, his movements quiet, deliberate.

Then — a sudden crack shattered the stillness.

The ice beneath the man gave way, and two massive ice rays burst from the black water below. Their glimmering bodies flashed in the light, tendrils flaring with crackling energy.

The Northlander sprang clear, tearing himself free as he reached for spear and axe in the same motion.

The creatures struck — swift, exact.

Gorathdin drew his bow, took three running strides, and loosed an arrow. The shot hit hard, driving one of the beasts off course. Wounded, it twisted violently.

He nocked again. Aimed. Fired.

The second shaft punched deep. The ice ray spasmed — then went still.

The other reacted at once. A blinding beam lashed from its tendrils, struck the Northlander full on, and hurled him backward.

But he rose — fast, steady.

In one seamless motion, he plunged his spear into the charging beast, tore free his axe with his other hand, and cleaved its head in a single blow.

Gorathdin lowered his bow and approached as the Northlander wrenched his spear from the corpse and and swept the frost-blown lake for further threats.

Then the man froze — his eyes fixed on Gorathdin.

“Thanks for the help,” he said at last. “I’m Thorgar. Northland Guardian.”

“No trouble,” Gorathdin answered. “I’m Gorathdin.”

He glanced at the dead rays.

“Are they edible?”

Thorgar nodded. He drew a knife from the boot beneath his furs, sliced the large rear fin from one of the beasts, and handed it to Gorathdin.

The Chronicles of Wetherid

Gorathdin accepted it with a brief nod.

“What brings you out here?”

“Ice fishing,” Thorgar replied. “Too much red meat’s not good for you. But these cursed rays...” He shrugged, as if unwilling to say more.

Gorathdin gestured toward the forest path.

“Come to my camp. We’ll talk there.”

Thorgar studied him — long, deliberate.

“Where are you from? I’ve never seen anyone like you.”

“I’m a half-elf. From Wetherid,” said Gorathdin. “I travel with a dwarf, a southerner, and two young ones from Abketh.”

Thorgar gave no reply.

“What brings you to the Northland?”

“Come,” said Gorathdin. “I’ll explain once we’re warm.”

Thorgar hesitated, then gave a slow nod. His gaze lingered on Gorathdin’s weapons.

Can he be trusted?

He shifted his grip on the spear — just slightly — and followed.

The fellowship sat around the fire outside the snow cave when Gorathdin stepped from the woods, Thorgar close behind.

Aarl was first to move. His hand slid instinctively to the throwing knives across his chest harness.

Borlix reached for shield and axe. Vrenli and Werlis rose at once.

The stranger stood a head and a half above Gorathdin — broad-shouldered, unreadable.

“Easy,” Gorathdin said quietly. “This is Thorgar. A guardian of the Northland. We met at the frozen lake. He was fighting off two ice rays. I helped.”

Aarl eased, but the knives remained in hand.

“A guardian?” he asked, not hiding his doubt.

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“So he says,” Gorathdin replied. “I invited him to join us.”

Thorgar said nothing. His axe rested loose on his shoulder. His gaze passed over each of them — careful, measuring — as theirs passed over him.

Gorathdin gestured to the group.

“These are Vrenli and Werlis of Abketh, Aarl of Thir, and Borlix of Ib’Agier.

We’re bound for Grandok. And we need someone who knows this land.”

Thorgar gave a single nod.

Gorathdin stepped closer to the fire.

“Here, Werlis. Brought something.”

Werlis took the large fin and lifted a brow.

“Fish?”

“Ice ray,” said Gorathdin.

Werlis examined the cut, gave a short nod, and slipped it into his travel satchel.

Vrenli handed Thorgar a steaming cup of tea.

He took it and sank down onto a stone near the fire.

“What brings you to the far North?” Thorgar asked at last.

“We’re on an important mission,” Gorathdin replied.

“We were meant to meet a friend at the border pass — but he never came.

Have you seen an older man lately, with a long white beard and a staff?”

Thorgar shook his head.

“I haven’t seen any strangers in a long time.”

Disappointment passed between the fellowship in silence.

“Where are you headed?” Thorgar asked.

“To Grandok and Thronheim,” said Gorathdin.

Thorgar looked up, his gaze passing slowly over the group.

The Chronicles of Wetherid

“Then you’re on the wrong path.

Grandok lies further north — and the roads there are treacherous.

Thronheim is farther still.”

“You know this land better than we do,” Vrenli said.

“Could you not lead us to Grandok?”

Thorgar crossed his arms. His axe now rested against his leg.

“Why should I help you?

The North is harsh and unforgiving — even for us.

Here, those who survive trust only their own.”

Gorathdin answered calmly, though his voice held weight.

“I understand your caution.

But I helped you when you were in danger — because I am not your enemy.”

Thorgar narrowed his eyes. He was silent for a moment.

At last, he muttered:

“For that, I thank you.

But showing you the way — that’s a risk I’m not eager to take.”

His gaze shifted to Werlis.

The missing arm had not escaped him.

“And to be honest — you don’t look like folk made for this land.”

Werlis met his eyes and stepped forward.

“This,” he said sharply, “is a war wound, Northlander.

I’ve survived things that would freeze even your blood.”

Thorgar lifted one corner of his mouth — a brief, barely visible smile.

But there was weight behind it. Respect.

“Perhaps you’re braver than I thought.

But what business do you have in Grandok?”

Vrenli gave Gorathdin a quick glance.

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When the half-elf nodded, he began to speak.

“In Fallgar — a distant land — an orc shaman has summoned a demon into this world.

Not a mere monster — but a force beyond comprehension.

His aim is to enslave or destroy all that lives.

His influence is already spreading. Even the North is no longer safe.”

Thorgar didn’t move. But his eyes had narrowed.

“A demon?” he asked. “We Northlanders fight many things — dragons, frost golems, snow goblins, spirits.

But demons? That’s no enemy we’ve faced before.”

“He is worse than anything you have faced,” Gorathdin said.

“That is why we seek an artifact — one said to be hidden somewhere in the North.

It may be the only thing that can stop him.”

Thorgar laughed — loud and rough.

“Somewhere in the North?

Do you even grasp how vast this land is?”

The fellowship offered no answer.

Thorgar’s gaze drifted across them.

A strange group... from a land I know by name alone.

He narrowed his eyes.

No merchants. No pilgrims.

They seek an artifact... and speak of a demon...

His eyes lingered on Gorathdin.

A ruse? A trap?

“What does this artifact look like — the one you seek?” he asked at last.

“We know only the name.

It is called the Crystal of Seeing,” Vrenli said.

Thorgar repeated the words softly, as if tasting them.

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“Never heard of it.

But if you speak the truth — the Jarl of Grandok may be able to help you.

No one knows the history of the Northland better than he.”

Gorathdin sat down beside him. His expression had grown grave.

“You must lead us. Not only our homeland is in danger — yours is, too. The whole world stands at risk.”

Thorgar’s fingers brushed along the haft of his axe. His gaze drifted into the distance.

“Or perhaps... Thronheim,” he murmured.

“There’s a library there, with the collected knowledge of the Northland.

If the Jarl of Grandok cannot help you, Thronheim may hold a trace.”

He fell silent. His thoughts were elsewhere.

It had been long since he had taken on a task worth the risk.

A Northland Guardian protects the North.

That was his purpose. His oath.

He drew a breath, lifted his head, and looked to Gorathdin.

“Very well. I’ll take you to Grandok.

But hear me — if you betray me, I’ll strike you down here in the eternal ice.

Until we reach the city, you follow my command.”

The fellowship exchanged a glance.

Then all nodded.

“How far is it to Grandok?” Borlix asked.

Thorgar slung his axe over his shoulder.

“The road is harsh. First we head back south — then northeast, through the tundra of Hreljevik.

Open land, scoured by merciless winds, where only scattered shrubs and low trees offer what little shelter there is.

The Guardians of the Seven Artifacts

Then we turn north again, into the Donnermark.

There, by Wolfsberg, lies a pass that leads to Grandok.”

“Then let’s be off,” Borlix grumbled.

Without delay, they gathered their gear and pulled their cloaks tighter around their shoulders.

When all was ready, Gorathdin gave Thorgar a single nod.

Without a word, the Northlander turned and began to lead them on.

The fellowship followed as he guided them swiftly southward.

More than once, Aarl heard a soft giggle in the distance — a bright, almost childlike sound, vanishing into the cold.

Each time, he paused, listening.

But there was nothing.

Only the wind whispering through the branches.

The landscape began to shift — the trees thinning, the ground widening.

Midway along their path, Thorgar halted and pointed to faint impressions in the snow.

“Frost elves,” he murmured, his eyes alert.

Gorathdin stepped beside him, studying the tracks.

“Who — or what — are frost elves?”

“A tribe of elves,” Thorgar began.

“Bound to the eternal ice of the North.

They dwell far beyond the reach of any land you’d call civilized.”

He paused — something in his expression tightened, as if a memory had surfaced.

“Their skin shimmers blue, like water turned to glass.

They move through snow without sound, leaving almost nothing behind.

Their eyes reflect the cold stars of the North.

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Their hair is white, silver — often braided with frostflowers and thread.”

“Sounds... impressive. I’ve never heard of them,” Gorathdin said.

Thorgar gave a slow nod.

“They are. But they are not peaceful.

Their gaze is cold — and so is their heart.

Their weapons are forged from hardened crystal ice.

Their magic makes them swift — and deadly.

Their arrows strike before you even realize you’re being watched.”

“So they are your enemies?” Gorathdin asked.

Thorgar furrowed his brow.

“Today, yes. But it was not always so.

Once, they fought beside the clans — against ice dragons, frost golems, things long buried.

Then came the betrayal. Whether it was pride — theirs or ours — no one can say.

Since then, they’ve vanished into Ilnarath.”

“Ilnarath...” Gorathdin echoed.

He held the name in his mouth a moment longer.

“What do you know of that place?”

“Not much,” Thorgar said.

“A system of caverns, vast and hidden.

At its heart stands a palace of ice, crowned by a single crystal — vast, luminous.

They say that crystal holds the soul of their people.”

“Have you seen any of them recently?”

Thorgar nodded.

“Yes. Not long ago, two groups crossed the valley.

They moved like they were hunting — or searching. For something.

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Or someone.”

Borlix let out a quiet grunt.

“I don’t like the sound of that.”

“Nor do I. They are encroaching on our lands,” Thorgar replied.

“If we encounter them, stay alert. They are skilled scouts — and even more skilled in battle.”

The fellowship continued along their path.

Gorathdin, walking beside Thorgar, gave him a searching glance.

“Do you have any idea why they’re here?”

Thorgar was silent for a moment before answering.

“Perhaps it has to do with the changes in the North.”

He looked into the distance.

“The weather is no longer as it was — it shifted some time ago.

Over the distant peaks of Ib’Agier, dark clouds rise.

They say the clouds rise from the dwarves’ great furnaces, where metal is smelted without rest.”

Borlix quickened his pace to walk alongside them, listening intently.

“These clouds drift north, bringing ashen rainstorms.

At times, the warmth rises so sharply that even the ice in the far north begins to melt.”

“And you think we dwarves are to blame?” Borlix asked, incredulous.

“That’s what people say,” Thorgar replied.

“Whether it’s true — I do not know.”

Vrenli cast a glance at Gorathdin and furrowed his brow.

“Could there be a link to Xaroth...?”

Might he be feeding the dwarves’ greed — and twisting the weather through it?”

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“That could be...” Gorathdin said slowly.

“If the eternal ice melts, the frost elves lose their homeland.
No wonder they roam restlessly across the North.”

Thorgar turned to the group.

“You truly believe the demon is that powerful?”

Gorathdin and Vrenli both nodded.

The sun stood high as the tundra opened before them.

Beside his own footprints, Gorathdin noticed a line of faint tracks running parallel to his path.

Too small for a rodent, too ordered for a bird.

Perhaps the wind had shaped small patterns?

He studied them a moment, then shook his head and trudged on.

Ahead stretched a vast desert of ice, broken only now and then by clusters of bare trees, their twisted branches glazed with frost.

Thorgar pointed ahead.

“Hreljevik!”

“Nothing but cold and wind.”

The fellowship drew their cloaks tighter around themselves and followed him.

Sometime in the afternoon, Werlis stopped abruptly.

“The wind’s getting worse,” he gasped, teeth chattering.

“I can’t go on!”

Thorgar stopped and eyed him gruffly.

“Already?”

“It’s too cold, and the wind’s too strong!” Vrenli added — he was struggling just the same.

“Fine... then we make camp here,” Thorgar grumbled.

“Where are we supposed to find shelter out here?” Aarl asked, searching the open land with narrowed eyes.

“We build one,” Thorgar replied, and took the axe from his back.

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Without another word, he began cutting blocks from the packed snow with the sharp blade.

“Borlix! Help me — the snow blocks must be as even as possible,” Thorgar called.

Borlix muttered something, set down his shield, and joined him.

Vrenli and Werlis fetched the furs from their travel bags and wrapped themselves inside them, while Aarl and Gorathdin searched the surroundings for firewood.

“There’s nothing here!” Aarl complained.

But Gorathdin pointed to two bare trees in the distance.

They made their way over and returned a while later with a few branches.

Meanwhile, Thorgar and Borlix had begun stacking snow blocks into low walls.

Aarl and Gorathdin laid down the branches and helped complete the shelter.

Then Aarl kindled a fire, melted snow in a small pot, and prepared a hot tea.

He pulled a stout bottle from his bag and handed it to Werlis.

“A strong herbal spirit. Add some to the tea — it’ll warm you from the inside.”

Werlis did so, and soon the steaming cups were passed around.

The fellowship warmed themselves by the fire and allowed themselves a moment of rest.

“That’s better,” Vrenli said, stretching his hands toward the glow.

Werlis took the fin of the ice-ray from his pack and held it over the flames. It hissed faintly as it roasted.

When they had eaten, Vrenli leaned back against the snow wall and turned toward Thorgar.

“Tell us of the Northlanders,” he said.

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Thorgar rested his arms on his knees. For a moment, he stared into the fire before answering.

“Our people are shaped by this land — hard as the ice, stubborn as the wind.

The North is harsh and merciless. Endless tundras. Frozen mountains. Deep forests.

Two great cities and scattered villages offer shelter, but to live here, one must endure — and belong.”

“We live in clans, tightly bound to our traditions.

Most of us hunt. Some tend livestock, but they are few.

We carry our history in our braids — each one marks a hunt, a battle, or something worth remembering.

Even as children, we are taught the axe and the spear.

The Northland are full of peril. Beasts, cursed things, and spirits that do not rest.”

“Our weapons are forged from frost-ore, mined in shafts beneath the ice.

The metal is hard, cold, and unyielding — like the land itself.

Above all stands the Konge in Thronheim.

But the land is vast, and unity does not come easily.”

“What do you believe in?” Vrenli asked, cautious. “Do you have gods?”

Thorgar gave a faint nod.

“We have many gods. But we do not yet know each other well enough for me to speak of them.”

Vrenli blinked, surprised — but said nothing.

Thorgar placed another branch into the fire and sat in silence for a moment before continuing.

“Our traditions are woven into songs — tales told in long winters beside the flames.

They speak of Thalgrim the Unshaken, who held the Pass of Mists against a thousand snow-goblins.

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Of Halvora the Dragon-Slayer, who brought down Akaroth with her frost-lance.

But they are more than stories. They carry who we were. They remind us who we must remain.”

“Do you speak with others beyond the North?” Gorathdin asked.

Thorgar’s expression shifted.

“Once. When we still traded. That was long ago.

Now, some clans sail beyond the sea. Not as merchants — but as warriors.

They raid foreign coasts and follow the old paths of blood.”

Gorathdin studied him. Thorgar’s face remained still — but the tone held no pride.

“You don’t sound as if you welcome it.”

Thorgar shook his head, leaned back, and folded his arms.

“I’ve said enough for one night.”

“More than enough,” Borlix muttered, dry as ever.

Thorgar let his gaze drift over the dark plain.

At last, he turned to Gorathdin.

“Take your bow. We hunt frosthorns tonight.

They rest in the dark, and the herds are plenty. Night is better.”

Gorathdin rose and gathered his weapons.

Without a word, they slipped from the shelter.

The wind met them — sharp and dry — sweeping loose snow across the frozen earth.

“The wind’s from the east,” Gorathdin said softly.

Thorgar frowned.

“And?”

A faint smile touched Gorathdin’s face.

“I’m a ranger. I know the hunt.”

Thorgar watched him for a breath, as if weighing the words.

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“Good. But frosthorns are not like others.

Even in sleep, they are guarded.”

Gorathdin moved forward carefully.

“What do you mean?”

“Their antlers,” Thorgar said, low.

“If danger comes, they begin to glow — blue and cold.

Even asleep, the herd will see.”

“At what distance?” Gorathdin asked.

Thorgar thought for a moment.

“Two hundred paces. A spear won’t get you close.”

Gorathdin nodded once.

“That won’t be a problem for my bow.”

They crept through the tundra.

The snow swallowed their steps.

Suddenly, Thorgar froze.

His gaze flicked to Gorathdin, whose eyes gave a brief greenish shimmer.

Thorgar’s hand slid toward the haft of his axe.

Gorathdin raised a hand in reassurance.

“Don’t worry. My elven sight helps me in the dark.”

Thorgar studied him for a moment. Then he gave a slow nod.

“That’s... useful.”

Gorathdin gave a faint, knowing smile.

They moved on. After a while, Gorathdin stopped and pointed into the distance.

“There.”

Thorgar followed his gaze.

On the horizon, dark shapes began to rise from the night — a herd of Frosthorns, resting on the ground.

Their massive antlers rose into the sky like glowing crystal spires.

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“Thirty, maybe forty animals,” Gorathdin estimated.

“How far?” Thorgar asked.

“Roughly three hundred paces.”

They continued carefully, their steps muffled.

As they came closer, they lowered their bodies and crept forward in a crouch.

At two hundred paces, they dropped flat and began to crawl — silent and precise, each movement weighed.

Gorathdin came to a halt.

His breath curled in the cold air.

Without a sound, he drew an arrow from his quiver, set it to the string, and pulled.

His gaze settled on a medium-sized animal at the edge of the herd.

He exhaled slowly — and released the string.

The arrow sliced through the night.

A muted sound — then the beast collapsed.

At once, the herd began to glow.

The antlers flared in icy blue, casting a ghostly light over the snow.

The herd scattered, their glow flaring and fading as it melted into the dark beyond.

Thorgar placed a hand on Gorathdin’s shoulder.

“Good shot.”

Gorathdin nodded.

Soon after, they made their way toward the fallen prey.

Among scattered tracks and churned snow, they found the Frosthorn — a magnificent beast, its white pelt gleaming in the starlight.

“You brought it down. I’ll handle the rest,” Thorgar said, drawing his knife.

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With swift, practiced movements, he opened the carcass, removed the finest cuts of meat, and tied them to his belt with a cord.

“Here. Take the haunches,” he said, handing them to Gorathdin.

The elf accepted them without a word, and together they began the walk back.

At the edge of the camp, they laid down the meat.

Thorgar covered it with snow.

The fire was down to embers, and in the shelter, all was quiet — the others already asleep.

He took a thick branch, pushed it into the coals, and watched as the flames slowly gathered strength once more.

Then, without a word, he turned and stepped quietly into the shelter.

“That’s enough for today,” he murmured.

Gorathdin nodded, set aside his bow, and withdrew into the shelter.

Inside, he wrapped himself in his furs.

The stillness of night descended over the camp, and soon he fell into deep sleep.



Far beneath the Kirbun Mountains in Fallgar, hidden beneath ancient stone, the night had not yet found its rest.

There, in a hall carved from black rock, Brumir Ironfist lay in his bed.

The darkness around him was crushing — and in his mind, a voice began to rise:

Brumir... be strong. Do not yield. Your people need a leader who will not waver.

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Brumir's face twitched — but the voice gave him no peace.

Keep all dark-iron for yourself, it whispered.

Deliver nothing — to anyone. Leave the dealings to the dwarves of Ib'Agier.

Let them believe they control the trade.

Let them dig deeper, melt ore without pause.

Their furnaces must never go cold.

The words pierced Brumir's mind — and before his inner eye, vivid images rose.

The great forges of Ib'Agier burned without rest.

The smiths labored day and night, iron hammering iron. But the gray dwarves waited — silent, still, unblinking — as their mountain poured itself into fire, desperate to meet every demand.

"I know the dwarves of Ib'Agier are your enemies," the voice whispered — calm, measured, patient.

"But let them have their triumph — for a time.

Let them spend their strength. Let them tire."

The voice grew softer, more certain.

"When the time is right, I shall deliver Ib'Agier into your hands — defenseless."

Suddenly, Brumir saw himself in a hall of gold.

Dwarves in shining armor bowed low before him.

A crown weighed gently on his brow.

"You shall rule them all, Brumir — as was foretold to your people for generations.

The traitors of Ib'Agier will pay their price, and you shall pass judgment on their fate.

But follow my design.

No dark-iron shall leave Ingar."

The vision faded. But the words remained — seared into him like molten sigils pressed to cold steel.

Brumir drew a deep breath and opened his eyes.

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Iron settled in his chest.

His path was set.

The Road to Grandok

Werlis blinked. Cold needled down to the bone.

His limbs were stiff with sleep. The fire had nearly died — only a faint red glow clung to the ash, a last whisper of warmth in the winter hush.

Gorathdin and Thorgar emerged from the shelter and unearthed their spoils from the snow. Vrenli joined them, and his eyes lit with relief when he saw the meat.

“This will keep us going for a while,” he said.

Werlis rummaged through his pouch, lifting out a round of bread to make space. He paused.

Along the edge — bite marks. Clear and deep.

He frowned.

Had someone been hungry in the night?

Or... had he eaten it himself and forgotten?

He shook his head and tucked it back.

All day, Thorgar led them forward — pushing into the wind with grim resolve. Only in the late light, after a long, bitter march, did they reach Donnersmark.

The first rocks of the Wolfsberg rose from the earth — jagged, ancient, like walls left behind by giants.

There, Thorgar led them into the mouth of a cave he knew.

“I grew up here, at Wolfsberg,” he said, gathering dry twigs from the floor and kindling a flame.

“On the far side, at the mountain’s foot, there lies a village. I left it when I was young — to become a Guardian of the North.”

Borlix grimaced.

“Wolfsberg... I don’t like places named after predators.”

Thorgar gave the faintest nod.

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“Your unease does not mislead you.

A pack of ice-shadow wolves roams these heights — led by a one-eyed wolf.”

“A one-eyed wolf?” Werlis asked, doubtful.

Thorgar gave a low snort.

“Yes. He’s cleverer than the rest. Many have tried to bring him down. None have succeeded.

Some say he passes on his cunning — generation to generation. His pack is the deadliest ever known in these mountains.”

Werlis exhaled sharply.

“Let’s hope we don’t meet him.”

He glanced at Thorgar — but the man only shrugged.

“That is unlikely. They rarely leave their territory.”

There was a pause.

Then, quietly — more to himself than the others — Vrenli murmured:

“I worry about Master Drobali.”

Borlix, already lying down, opened one eye.

“We all worry, Vrenli.

But he’s a wise one. With luck, we’ll see him in Grandok.”

Aarl nodded.

“He’s probably already there.”

Werlis rose and stepped toward the cave’s entrance — and froze.

A sound — soft, breath-like — reached him. A brief, whispering cry.

It came from just beyond the stone.

He stood still.

The silence held — but something had shifted.

For a moment, he stood motionless, listening.

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Had he imagined it?

His gaze swept the rocks beyond the cave mouth, searching for the sound's source.

Then he stepped toward the threshold.

Beneath the overhang, half-veiled in shadow, four massive wolves lay in wait.

He had nearly walked into their teeth.

His body locked. Then, inch by inch, he began to retreat.

His breath grew shallow.

His muscles tightened of their own accord.

"Four of them. Right outside," he whispered, voice taut with alarm.

Gorathdin's hand found his bow. Aarl, already silent, drew a blade from the strap across his chest.

Vrenli cast a glance at Thorgar, who, calm but alert, reached for his spear.

Borlix edged toward the cave mouth for a glimpse.

They were huge — larger than any wolf he had ever seen.

Their thick, snow-white fur was streaked with bands of bluish gray, like shadow in motion across taut muscle.

Even in daylight, they looked half-made of mist.

Their paws sank deep into the snow. Their claws left sharp, deliberate grooves behind.

Every inch of them spoke of cold and silence and pursuit.

But it was their eyes that held the danger —
not bestial, but calculating.

They didn't watch. They measured.

No growl. No flash of teeth.

Only silence. Stillness. Eyes fixed on the cave mouth.

"These aren't ordinary wolves," Borlix muttered, lifting his shield.

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Thorgar stepped forward, gaze hard.

“Just what we needed,” he growled. “Ice-Shadow Wolves.”

He turned to the group.

“We can’t hide. They know we’re here.

There’s nothing for it but to face them.”

Vrenli stepped up behind Borlix, peering past the rocks.

“Fortunately,” Thorgar said, “it’s only four.”

“Only four?” Vrenli echoed, incredulous.

“One would be enough.”

Thorgar faced them squarely.

“Gorathdin — take the female, the one on the far right.

Aarl, Borlix — the one with the grey muzzle.

The other two are mine.

Vrenli, Werlis — stay in the cave.”

“No way,” Werlis said immediately.

“Nor am I,” Vrenli added, quiet but firm.

Thorgar leveled a stare that could have frozen water.

“You’ll stay in the cave. This isn’t a debate.”

The two backed off, unwilling — but remained at the entrance, eyes on the wolves.

“Now!” Thorgar barked — and charged down the slope.

Gorathdin drew an arrow, nocked, pulled, and loosed.

It struck the female in the shoulder. She flinched.

A second arrow drove her back.

The others sprang.

They surged up the slope with terrifying speed.

Thorgar met them head-on. His spear punched deep into the chest of the first wolf.

It spasmed and fell, dead before it hit the snow.

But the second one came faster.

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With a bound, it crashed into Thorgar and threw him down.

Its jaws snapped for his throat.

Gorathdin fired again. The arrow buried itself in the beast's side — but it kept coming.

Thorgar heaved up his axe, blocked the fangs — but the weight pressed on. It would not yield.

Gorathdin dropped the bow.

He ripped the fire-axe from his back and lunged.

With one crushing blow, he shattered the wolf's skull.

Aarl and Borlix faced the last one.

Aarl hurled blade after blade — but they bounced off the hide.

The wolf leapt, slamming into Borlix, nearly knocking him down.

Borlix braced — arms straining — but the weight drove him backward.

Its teeth scraped against the rim of his shield, sharp jaws threatening to tear through the metal.

From the mouth of the cave, Werlis and Vrenli struck. They tore burning branches from the fire and hurled them at the beast. Sparks flew — the flaming wood singed the wolf's fur.

Growling, it leapt back, raised its head — a moment of weakness.

Borlix seized the opening. With a battle cry, he raised his axe and brought it down with full force. The blade cut through the animal's throat, and it collapsed, gasping, into the snow.

They were all breathing heavily, their eyes drifting across the motionless bodies.

"That was damn close," Aarl said, picking up one of his throwing knives.

"Close is enough to live," Thorgar replied. "You fought well."

"We should get out of here," Gorathdin urged, lifting his bow.

They all returned to the cave.

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Quickly, they gathered their gear, packed weapons and provisions, and threw on their cloaks.

Thorgar checked the entrance, listened for a moment, then nodded.

“Stay close. If we press on, we’ll reach Grandok by tomorrow.”

With cautious, alert steps, they left the cave and set off.

They followed Thorgar through a ravine until midday. The thought of shelter — of a warm bed — lifted their spirits.

“Are there taverns in Grandok?” Borlix asked, grinning crookedly. “I’m thinking a few mugs of mead — or a barrel.”

Thorgar gave a soft laugh — brief and unexpected.

“Of course there are. Come nightfall, the mead flows freely when the northern songs rise.”

“Then let’s move!” Borlix called out, wetting his cracked lips at the thought of a steaming tankard.

“I wouldn’t mind a proper drinking match myself,” Aarl added, grinning, and kept pace with Borlix’s quick steps.

After a time, Thorgar halted and pointed upward, where a dark opening gaped in the rock.

“Once, a great tribe of snow goblins lived there,” he said. “They used to raid this gorge regularly.”

Borlix grunted, skeptical.

“I hope they’re truly gone. My run-ins with those furry beasts back in the Icepeaks of Tawinn were enough for a lifetime.”

Vrenli smiled faintly, memories of old battles stirring. Werlis nodded absently, while Gorathdin and Aarl exchanged quiet grins.

“Those were the days,” Aarl said at last, his eyes sweeping the path ahead.

The narrow gorge opened up, and before them stretched a wide winter plain, broken by strips of forest. In the distance, a mountain rose, its peak veiled in mist. At its base nestled a city against the stone — walled high, defiant, unshaken.

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Thorgar stopped, his posture straight, as if imprinting the sight into memory. Then he spoke softly, with a note of reverence:

“Grandok. The second-largest city in the Northland.”

The fellowship looked upon their goal — the city they had sought for so long.

“We should make camp and continue at first light,” Werlis said, rubbing his tired eyes. “After a march like this, I’m not walking another half day on these feet. And it’ll be dark soon.”

“I’m tired as well,” Vrenli agreed. “And who knows if they’ll even let us in at this hour.”

“They will,” Borlix replied, crossing his arms. “There are taverns. If we get there before midnight, there’ll still be mead.”

“My thought exactly!” Aarl grinned. “A warm fire, mead, and a decent roof overhead — that sounds better than a night in the wild.”

Thorgar gave a brief nod.

“We’ll reach the city. With a clear full moon, I can see well enough to guide us.”

“And if not — I’ll see it,” said Gorathdin, dryly.

His elven eyes flashed green in the dark.

A moment of silence passed, then Werlis sighed.

“I’ll regret this — but fine. Let’s go.”

Thorgar pulled a torch from his satchel, lit it, and began to move.

“Stay close.”

Soon, the walls of Grandok rose clearer through the darkness. The snow-covered towers reached high into the night sky. Guards patrolled the ramparts, their silhouettes dancing in the flickering glow of the fire basins.

Shortly before midnight, they reached the wide square before the city gate.

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Torches burned along the walls, their light casting uneasy reflections on the massive wooden gates — bound with iron and marked with old runes.

Several guards stood at the gatehouse.

At first, they seemed indifferent. But as they noticed the approaching group, they straightened and studied the strangers intently.

“What brings you to Grandok?” one of the guards asked, his voice deep as his gaze swept over the company.

Thorgar stepped forward and extinguished his torch.

“We seek shelter for the night — and tomorrow, we must speak with the Jarl.”

The guards exchanged brief glances. From within the city came muffled voices and music — the dull thud of drums, the clatter of cups, distant laughter.

“Not the best night for strangers,” one of them muttered.

“Tonight is the Bloodbanner Festival — a day in honor of Grandok’s great battles.”

He eyed the newcomers with suspicion, but when Thorgar met his gaze with a stern look, the man hesitated. Then he stepped aside.

“Open the gate!”

The heavy wood groaned as it swung inward, slow and deliberate.

Thorgar led the fellowship through, and the view of nighttime Grandok opened before them.

Along the broad, well-trodden streets, wagon tracks and bootprints pressed deep into the snow.

Open fire basins stood at the crossroads and main roads, their flickering light casting restless shadows across the soot-darkened beams of the buildings.

The houses were long and solid, built from thick, tightly joined timbers.

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Their roofs were made of overlapping wooden shingles, covered with a thin layer of snow.

The gables bore intricate carvings — dragon heads and beast motifs jutting out over the streets.

Large wooden doors with heavy iron fittings led into homes and halls.

Smoke rose from the rooftop vents, and waxlights glowed in the small windows.

Though the hour was late, the city still breathed.

Voices and laughter echoed through the streets, and from the taverns came the scent of roasting meat and warm mead.

Outside the doors stood Northmen in heavy fur cloaks, drinking horns in hand.

The bright sound of a lute mingled with the dull thudding of dancing feet and the clinking of mugs.

Thorgar led them to a tavern well known to him.

A roughly carved sign hung above the door.

“The Dragon’s Den,” Thorgar announced.

“They serve the best mead in the city.”

As they stepped inside, a wave of warmth rolled over them.

The taproom was spacious, filled with heavy wooden tables and tightly packed benches.

Men and women with grim-set faces sat close, drinking and singing loudly to the music of a bard who played in one corner of the room.

Suddenly, conversation and song fell silent.

Curious eyes turned toward the strangers — an unfamiliar sight that held the attention of all present.

A low murmur stirred through the room before talk resumed and the bard played on.

“I’ll see to the rooms,” Thorgar said, stepping toward the innkeeper — a broad-shouldered man with a shaved head and a braided beard, who was just setting several mugs onto the counter.

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The innkeeper looked up, and his face brightened.

“Thorgar! It’s been a long time. What brings you to Grandok?” he asked warmly.

“It’s a long story,” Thorgar answered curtly.

“We need rooms, food — and mead. Plenty of mead.”

The innkeeper let out a booming laugh.

“For you, always, Thorgar. I’ve still got two rooms left. Make yourselves at home.”

Vrenli stepped beside Thorgar and addressed the innkeeper.

The man heard the voice but furrowed his brow, glancing around in confusion.

“What in Dornir’s name...?” he muttered, before Thorgar gave a small nod toward the underside of the counter.

The innkeeper leaned forward — and at last caught sight of Vrenli, who gazed up at him with a solemn expression.

“Have you by chance seen an older man from Wetherid?” Vrenli asked.

“He goes by the name Master Drobale.”

The innkeeper straightened and shook his head.

“No, sorry. No strangers here in quite a while.”

“Thank you for the information,” Vrenli said politely — though disappointment showed on his face.

The group took a free table in the corner of the room.

The bard was shifting from a lively tune to a mournful ballad — the tale of a warrior who fell battling the ghosts of the tundra. Some guests hummed along, others clinked their mugs, still others spoke in low tones, lost in their own stories.

“Now that’s what I call a proper tavern,” Borlix said with satisfaction as a tankard of mead landed before him.

“Exactly what I needed after that cursed cold journey.”

As they ate and drank, Vrenli let his gaze drift across the room.

At last he spoke, his voice low.

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“The innkeeper hasn’t seen Master Drobal. I’m worried.”

Thorgar set down his mug after a long draught.

“We’ll ask the jarl tomorrow. He may have heard something.”

Borlix grunted and raised his tankard.

“Yes, let’s do that. You worry too much, Vrenli. Tonight — we celebrate!”

Vrenli hesitated.

His gaze passed from Gorathdin to Werlis and Aarl, as if searching for reassurance.

Gorathdin met his eyes with calm assurance.

“He will come.”

“I believe that too,” Aarl added.

Only Werlis remained silent, the same concern etched in his face.

At last, Vrenli lifted his tankard and joined the toast. The mugs clinked together — and for a moment, the tension receded.

“Thorgar, tell us something about Grandok!” Borlix called.

Thorgar nodded.

“Grandok was founded in the twenty-fourth cycle by several clans.

Back then it was little more than a cluster of hunting huts and a fortified outpost.

But it grew — in strength, in wealth.

Its nearness to the mountains and the tundras made it a haven for trade, and for the hunt.”

He took a long pull from his mug, let the taste settle, then went on.

“But Grandok was never a city of peace.

Again and again, enemies came — rival clans, raiders, foreign warriors drawn by greed or pride.

Each time, the people held their ground.

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And with each victory, Grandok grew — not just in size, but in spirit.

“Today it stands as the bulwark of the North. Hard to break — yet never safe from danger.”

His gaze moved slowly around the circle.

“If Thronheim is the axe, Grandok is the shield.”

The fellowship listened as Thorgar spoke, the moments slipping by unnoticed.

Gradually, the common room quieted.

At last, they chose to retire for the night.

— ✂ —

Far to the north, frost gripped the land in silence.

But deep within the desert of DeShadin, glowing sand burned beneath a starless sky.

There, where even the night held no mercy, Sheikh Neg El Bahi reclined beneath a canopy of black silk.

He too had heard the voice.

It came again, soft and dark:

“Neg El Bahi... the desert is your home — but it need not be your cage.

Beyond the ocean lies Shanburia, land of the Dark People — rich in gold, spices, and slaves who kneel to strength.

There, they need no dreamer. Only a conqueror.”

He saw caravans heavy with treasure pouring into his cities.

Armies marching beneath his standard.

His ships cutting across distant seas.

“You need not ride alone,” the voice murmured.

“I will bring you allies — former enemies, future weapons.”

In his mind’s eye, he saw them: the Kajir — lizardfolk from the southern reaches of the desert.

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Their eyes burned with hunger.

“The waters around Kajir are vanishing,” the voice said.

“Thirst will drive them to your gates.

Let them in. Use their desperation. Shape them into your sword.”

He saw it — the Kajir kneeling.

Their chieftain’s clawed hand resting atop his in a vow of loyalty.

“Unite your host with the legions of the Kajir!” the voice commanded.

“With their speed, their venom, their will to endure — you shall break Shanburia.

They will fear you. And they will bow.”

The voice fell silent. But its echo did not leave him.

Neg El Bahi opened his eyes.

The path lay clear. He would walk it.



Late the next morning, after a hearty shared breakfast in the Dragon’s Hollow and a final tankard of mead insisted upon by Borlix, he wiped the foam from his beard with a grin and laughed.

“What are you staring at? Mead is food too!”

Thorgar only shook his head.

“Come. We must go to the Jarl,” he said.

Together, they followed him out onto the street.

The city was already astir.

As they walked the main paths, they passed workers scattering sand across patches of ice. The scrape of shovels on timber rang through the air. Narrow roads climbed the slope in sharp twists, laid with boards of sturdy pine. Doors opened one by one, and townsfolk stepped out, cloaked and fur-wrapped against the cold.

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Some cleared snow from their thresholds. Others trudged through alleyways, firewood strapped to their backs. From behind a half-open door came muffled voices. A boy set a water bucket on the step, then vanished inside.

Thorgar walked with purpose, the others at his back, threading through the bustle of Grandok's waking hours.

At a corner, they passed a smith hammering steel. Sparks burst with each blow, lighting his grim face. Smoke from the forge curled into the sky, and the sharp tang of hot iron lingered on the wind.

"The finest weapons in the Northland are forged here," said Thorgar without turning. "Every smith in Grandok is a master."

Borlix lingered a step, his eyes on the anvil. He ran his fingers across a bundle of rods and nodded.

"Very fine quality," he grunted.

The smith returned the nod in silence. Borlix rejoined the group.

The road climbed toward the upper district. They passed a wide square where merchants called out in harsh voices, their wares piled on heavy tables. Thick pelts, smoked meats, salt in white slabs. Knives with horn-carved hilts, frost-hardened berries in baskets.

"This is the heart of the city," said Thorgar. "Everything needed is traded here — and often more."

They paused a moment as Vrenli slowed near a stall where small amulets, shaped from horn, lay in tidy rows.

"Perhaps I'll bring something back for my wife in Abketh," he murmured.

Thorgar's voice nudged him onward.

The path ended at a wide stair carved into the rock. At its crest, the noise below faded. The air was clearer. The buildings here stood low but heavy, with thick stone walls and narrow façades — built not for comfort, but to withstand siege.

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Watchtowers marked the corners. Guards stood along the walls, unmoving but alert.

Groups of armed Northlanders passed them at steady pace, faces grim beneath helms of fur and metal.

To the left, a training ground opened between two halls. Young warriors sparred under the eye of a broad-shouldered captain in frost-steel armor. His cloak was lined with bear fur. Spears turned in perfect rhythm. Axes struck wood in heavy beats, their impacts echoing in the cold.

They moved on, past workshops where leather was being stitched, shields mended. An old man bent over a breastplate, threading thick straps through rings lined with fur. Several damaged shields lay beside him, their wood split and torn. A boy — perhaps an apprentice — polished spears and whispered questions.

And then, at the street's end, the seat of the Jarl rose before them.

Its stone walls were fitted so tightly they bore no seam. The architecture was vast, almost solemn in its weight. Along the roof-beams, carved wolves and dragons watched the horizon, their hollow eyes catching the pale light.

Two great pillars framed the entrance. Beneath the overhang, braziers burned low. Between them stood two guards, clad in heavy furs, their armor worn by years and winters alike.

They held their spears upright. Round shields hung beside their legs. Their stance was ready. Their eyes did not waver.

"We must speak with Jarl Arik the Strong," Thorgar said, calling out before the gates.

"Who are you?" one of the guards demanded, voice raised.

"I am Thorgar, Guardian of the North," he replied.

"I bring strangers who must warn the Jarl of an approaching danger."

The guards studied the group with narrow eyes. After a brief pause, one turned and disappeared through the heavy doors.

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Moments later, he returned, footsteps quick.

“The Jarl will receive you. Come.”

They passed through the gate and followed a long corridor carved into stone.

Torches flickered in iron sconces along the walls, casting restless shadows across the rough-hewn surface.

At its end, a vast hall opened before them.

To the left stood long tables of dark wood, flanked by benches and set with jugs of mead, earthen cups, and bowls heaped with bread and meat.

To the right — racks of weapons: spears, axes, swords, and shields, each ordered and gleaming in the firelight.

Above hung trophies of the hunt: the antlers of frosthorns, skulls of ice-shadow wolves, the feelers of deep-ice rays, and furs stretched tight from beasts that had tested northern steel.

At the far end of the hall, upon a raised dais, hung a crimson banner embroidered with snowflakes and a silver dragon — the proud sigil of Grandok.

Jarl Arik the Strong

He sat high on a great chair carved from northern oak, arms set firm upon its sides.

His presence filled the hall before he spoke a word.

Snow-white hair fell over his shoulders, and his beard was braided in careful knots, held fast by plain metal rings.

He bore the marks of a life without ease — not hidden, but carried openly: the lines of battles fought, of burdens chosen, of years held fast for the sake of his people.

A thick wool tunic covered his frame, overlaid with a cloak of wolf fur clasped across his shoulders.

At his side rested a battle axe, the shaft worn smooth by a lifetime of use.

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Beside it stood a round shield, darkened and scarred by countless blows.

The fellowship stood still as the Jarl's eyes passed over them — cold, sharp, and measuring.

Thorgar stepped forward and gave their names.

“What news do you bring me?” Arik asked. His voice was low — but weight carried in it.

Thorgar gave a nod to Gorathdin, who stepped to his side.

“We have come to warn you of a great danger,” he said.

“In Fallgar, an orc shaman has summoned a demon from the soul-realm — a creature of darkness.

He presses into this world, and if he breaks through completely, not only Wetherid, but all the realms will fall under his shadow.”

The Jarl leaned back. His brow furrowed with doubt.

“A demon?” he asked. “Tales for winter nights. Such things do not concern me.”

“I speak the truth,” Gorathdin said firmly.

“Already his power reaches across the mountains. He stirs unrest, distorts the elements, and feeds greed in distant lands. That is why we are here.

If we do not act, the Northland will fall as well.”

Arik said nothing. His silence stretched, his expression unmoved.

“You truly expect me to believe such a tale?”

He gave a dry laugh. “Even the children of Grandok would not be so easily deceived.”

Before Gorathdin could answer, Vrenli stepped forward.

“We did not come here to speak of legends,” he said.

“Master Drobald of Horunguth sent us. He is no dreamer. He saw what rose in Fallgar and meant to meet us at the Wetherid border — but he never arrived.

Have you seen him? He could confirm all we say.”

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At the name, the Jarl straightened — if only slightly.

“Master Drobald,” he repeated. The doubt had not vanished — but it had weakened.

Vrenli gave a single nod.

The Jarl fell silent, his gaze lingering on the strangers before him. When he spoke again, his voice had changed.

“I knew him in my youth.

A man of great wisdom.

When he spoke, it carried weight.”

“Then you have seen him?” Aarl asked.

The Jarl shook his head.

“No. He has not been in Grandok for many years.

If he were in the city, I would know of it.”

Aarl lowered his head.

Borlix grumbled something under his breath, while Werlis and Vrenli exchanged a brief, wordless glance.

Their hope of finding Master Drobald here had been dashed.

Silence settled. Then Thorgar lifted his gaze.

“Jarl, what Gorathdin says is true,” he said firmly.

“I saw frost elves moving freely through the land, as if searching for something.

And there are reports — the weather in the far north is shifting.

It grows warmer. The ice is beginning to thaw.”

The Jarl gave a slow nod.

“I’ve heard of the frost elves as well — and of the grey rain.

Perhaps there is truth in what you say.”

He leaned forward, his gaze drifting across their faces.

“But how can I help you?” he asked at last.

Gorathdin met his eyes without hesitation.

“There are signs of seven powerful artifacts — relics that may be our only chance to stop the demon.

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One of them is the Crystal of Seeing.

Master Drobald believes it lies hidden somewhere in the Northland.”

The Jarl raised a brow and looked at Gorathdin with open skepticism.

“That is a very vague description.

How do you hope to find anything if you don’t even know where to begin?”

Gorathdin nodded.

“You’re right. We know little.

The crystal was stolen from Tawinn many cycles ago — sometime between the twenty-second and twenty-fifth.

Old accounts claim it was carried north.

But beyond that, nothing is certain — not who took it, nor why, nor where it rests now.”

The Jarl fell silent. His brow furrowed.

He sank into thought.

“That was the age when dragons still flew over the North,” he said slowly.

“Perhaps...”

He broke off, hesitated, then stood.

The heavy wolf-pelt draped over his shoulders shifted as he moved toward a massive chest near the wall.

The hinges creaked softly as he lifted the lid.

He reached among old books and scrolls until his hand found a timeworn volume.

He drew it out with care. For a while, he turned its pages, reading slowly.

Then, solemn, he returned to the table.

“The Shieldwall,” he said, reverently, holding the book before him.

“You might begin your search there.

The Guardians of the Seven Artifacts

That fortress was more than a bulwark — it once guarded the treasures of the early Konge.”

Thorgar straightened, his attention sharpening.

“The Shieldwall? I’ve never heard of it.

Where is this fortress?” he asked.

“A few days’ journey from Grandok.

My advisor Omgard will show you the way — he knows the route better than any man still breathing,” the Jarl replied.

The fellowship exchanged glances.

The Jarl called out once, a sharp word.

Moments later, a stooped figure entered the hall, moving with deliberate care.

In his hand he held a staff, carved from twisted root.

A gray tunic hung from his shoulders, its sleeves long and heavy, concealing his hands.

At his belt hung several pouches, and a dagger with a curved horn grip.

Without a word, the group followed him to a wide wooden table where a large map had been spread open.

Omgard placed a hand upon it and marked a point with a trembling finger.

“Here is where your path begins,” he said. His voice, though aged, was clear.

“You will cross harsh and unforgiving ground — where one misstep may be your last.

The journey will lead you through narrow ravines, wind-swept heights, and frozen wastes, each bearing dangers of its own.”

His hand moved onward.

“Here — beyond the Echo Gorge — you’ll reach the Ridge of Winds.

Beyond that, the crossing of Lake Ymirgard.”

At last, his finger came to rest near the end of a long valley.

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“There lies your destination — the Shieldwall.”

Borlix raised an eyebrow.

“Sounds like a welcoming sort of journey,” he muttered.

Omgard gave a slight shrug.

Then he turned to Gorathdin, reached into a small wooden box, and drew out a plain, unmarked amulet.

“The Frostneedle will guide your path,” he said.

“It always points north, no matter how thick the snowfall or how fierce the winds rage.

Even in deepest fog or absolute darkness, it never strays from its course.”

Gorathdin accepted the amulet and turned it in his hand.

The casing was round and flat, forged of blue frost-steel — cool to the touch.

Within, a fine, gleaming needle held fast to a single direction, steady no matter how he turned it.

“Take this map with you as well,” Omgard said, rolling it carefully and handing it to Thorgar, who stood beside him.

The Jarl let his gaze linger on the group, then returned to his chair and sat with weight.

“You’ll be given shelter for the night — and supplied with furs and provisions.

May your journey be successful.”

Then he turned aside.

“Call the Council of Elders. We have matters to settle.”

The fellowship offered a silent nod and left the hall.

Outside, the wind had grown sharper.

Snow curled down the streets in ragged spirals, and the wooden beams of the buildings moaned under the pressure.

A guard awaited them — his cloak pulled tight, his face unreadable.

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He looked them over briefly, then gestured toward a house across the lane.

Without a word, he led them there, opened the heavy door, and stepped aside.

Inside, the air was warm.

A modest hearth flickered in a stone recess, and the room smelled of meat, smoke, and herbs.

On a rough-hewn table stood steaming bowls of stew, a jug of water, and a basket of coarse bread.

The fellowship sat down without ceremony.

Spoons struck bowls. Bread was torn and dipped, and silence filled the space between them.

Vrenli stirred his spoon through the broth, slowly, as if his thoughts might rise from the surface.

"I wonder where Master Drobali is.

It's been days already — and still no sign."

Werliis bit off a piece of bread, chewed, and wiped his mouth on the back of his hand.

"Something must have happened."

Thorgar ladled a second portion into his bowl.

He blew on it once, took a bite, and spoke only after swallowing.

"In the Northland, a sudden shift in weather can delay a man for longer than expected."

"It's been *many* days," Werliis objected. "It can't just be the weather."

Borliis eyed his bowl and muttered dryly, "We'd best accept it — we're on our own."

Gorathdin's gaze wandered across the table.

"I fear he's right.

We should stop waiting for Master Drobali.

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Whatever's happened — he won't catch up."

"Or something happened *to* him..." Aarl said quietly.

Vrenli pushed his bowl away.

His appetite had vanished.

Borlix stretched, his chair creaking beneath him.

"I could go for a jug of mead. Who's coming with me?"

Aarl raised his hand with a grin.

"I'm in."

"Thorgar?" Borlix asked.

Thorgar glanced out the window, then shrugged.

"Why not?"

They threw on their cloaks and made their way toward the Dragon's Hollow.



A rhythmic knock stirred them from sleep the next morning.

Outside, the sound of wagon wheels creaked across the frozen ground, and the wind rattled softly against the wooden walls.

When Werlis opened the door, two Northland women stepped inside — arms laden with thick furs and fresh provisions.

Their voices were quiet, almost hesitant, as they wished the travelers well.

Werlis and Borlix thanked them with smiles and light words — enough to earn a blush before the door closed again.

Shortly after, they set out.

For two days, they forced their way across the barren expanse.

The wind did not rest — rising, falling, returning with greater fury.

The snow betrayed them — soft and yielding one hour, iced and treacherous the next.

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Their boots sank deep or slipped sideways.
Progress became a battle of inches.

The Echo Gorge

On the third day, dark stone formations began to rise along the path ahead.

The wind relented, and with it, their pace grew easier.

By midday, they reached a gorge flanked by cliffs, steep and sheer on either side of the road.

Between those looming walls, the snow lay deeper — and the silence felt wrong.

The group came to a halt as Thorgar pulled out Omgard's map, his brow furrowed in concentration.

The others waited — tense, wordless — for his judgment.

"This must be the entrance to the Echo Gorge," he said at last.

"Looks dangerous."

His voice had fallen low. His gaze swept the slope.

"Speak softly — if at all."

They advanced.

The stone walls gave back every sound — softly at first, then more sharply.

Their steps slowed. Each movement became deliberate.

Borlix walked beside Werlis, his fingers brushing the haft of his axe.

Thorgar watched him from the side, eyes narrowed.

Then it happened.

Borlix slipped — just a slight shift on an icy stone.

His axe scraped the rock, metal grating against stone.

The sound broke the air.

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It shot through the gorge, caught between the cliffs, and echoed back in growing layers — louder with each return.

What began as a scrape rose into a low thunder, then a pounding roar, rolling through the pass like something alive.

The ground shuddered beneath them.

From above came a deep, splintering rumble.

The fellowship looked up —

White mass tore free from the cliffs.

“Watch out! An avalanche!” Gorathdin shouted — but the roar swallowed his warning whole.

“Move!” Thorgar bellowed, his voice knifing through the sound.

They ran — but the snow fell too fast.

The gorge was too narrow.

The avalanche struck.

Then — silence.

The snow pressed against Vrenli’s body like a weight without mercy.

Every movement brought pain.

His chest throbbed. The air was thin.

A faint sound broke the silence — scratching, faint, almost imagined.

Then, above him, something shifted. Not by his doing.

Grains loosened and fell. A thin pocket opened — barely wide enough to breathe.

Not far off, Borlix struggled, face tight with effort, his limbs pinned.

Then, with a jolt, his head broke the surface.

He gasped, sucking in the cold with greedy lungs.

“That... was far too close,” he muttered hoarsely, breath ragged.

“By all the halls... I scraped the stone.”

The Guardians of the Seven Artifacts

Werlis surfaced next, snow spilling from his shoulders.
His eyes locked on Borlix — sharp, furious.
“That could have killed us!”
His voice struck like a whip.
A little ahead, something moved beneath the snow.
Thorgar’s arm burst free.
With one heave, he pulled himself out, rolling to his side with a growl.
“Nothing buries me that easily.”
He brushed off the snow.
Aarl and Gorathdin emerged nearly together.
Aarl coughed, wiping snow from his face.
Gorathdin searched the slope with his eyes.
“Where is Vrenli?”
A sound — muffled, strained.
Then a voice, faint beneath the snow.
“Here!”
“Dig! Quickly!” Aarl cried.
He threw himself down and began tearing at the snow with bare hands.
Gorathdin dropped beside him, wordless, digging.
Moments passed — long, brutal.
Then Vrenli’s face broke through.
Pale. Gasping.
He blinked at the light. Drew breath with effort.
“That was the last moment...”
His voice was barely a whisper.
Aarl seized him by the shoulder and hauled him free.
Borlix lowered his head.
“I’m sorry. I’ll be more careful. But this damned path is narrow,” he muttered.

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They gathered again — breathless, shaking.

Shock still clung to every face.

Thorgar looked up.

“This ravine forgives nothing,” he said curtly.

“From now on, we tread with care.”

Borlix gave a silent nod.

Thorgar drew the map from his cloak and studied it in the fading light.

“There should be a path leading up... somewhere around here,” he murmured — but no sign appeared.

Gorathdin let his gaze drift across the broken stone.

“We should split up and search,” he said.

Reluctantly, the fellowship agreed. They divided.

They stood at the foot of the mountain, where a narrow snow-covered plain stretched outward, hemmed in by jagged cliffs.

Beyond it, a sparse pinewood rose in dark silhouettes, etched sharp against the evening sky.

Gorathdin, Vrenli, and Werlis stayed close to the mountain wall, tracing the rock for any sign of a pass.

Thorgar circled a massive outcrop, while Borlix moved toward the edge of the trees.

Aarl turned in the other direction — into a shallow depression where the snow lay deeper.

Night fell quickly.

The cold sharpened, biting through Aarl’s soaked clothes. His breath came hard. He shook his head.

“This is pointless. There’s nothing here — and I need a fire,” he muttered.

With heavy steps, he turned back toward the meeting point.

But when he arrived, the place was empty. The others had not returned.

Then — a voice behind him:

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“Aarl, over here! I found something!”

He turned. Borlix was barely a shape in the dark.

“A snow goblin cave, just ahead,” Borlix whispered.

“Right between those two pines — that’s the entrance.”

Aarl stepped beside him and looked.

There, between the rocks, a pale opening flickered.

Inside, something moved.

“We need to warn the others and get out of here,” Aarl whispered.

But Borlix shook his head.

“No more than ten. We can handle them — and sleep dry.

Get the others. I’ll stay here.”

Aarl gave a reluctant nod and turned away.

But before he could move far, he saw two shapes appear in the dark.

“Werlis? Vrenli?” he whispered.

“Yes, here,” Werlis replied.

“Shhh! Be quiet,” Aarl hissed, raising a hand.

“What is it?” Vrenli asked, voice low.

“Borlix found a cave,” Aarl said.

“There are snow goblins inside. He wants to fight them and sleep there.”

“That’s far too risky,” Vrenli warned, glancing into the dark.

Then his eyes widened. Two green glints moved in the distance.

“Gorathdin is here,” he whispered, lowering his head to better see the shape approaching.

Gorathdin stepped out of the dark — calm, silent.

He listened as Aarl explained.

Then, after a breath, he nodded.

“If there are truly so few... we can manage it.”

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Werlis shook his head.

“This is madness,” he hissed.

At that moment, Thorgar emerged behind a stone — his shadow stretched long across the snow.

“No sign of the ascent,” he said.

“Did you find anything?”

They shook their heads.

Gorathdin told him of the cave.

Thorgar listened. Then nodded once.

“Then let’s finish these beasts.”

Aarl led them back to Borlix, who crouched behind a boulder and pointed forward.

“Just there. Do you see the firelight?” he whispered.

Gorathdin and Thorgar cast a quick glance in the direction Borlix had indicated, then nodded.

“Borlix, you and Thorgar take the lead,” Gorathdin said quietly.

“I’ll stay close behind and cover you with bow and arrow. Aarl — watch over Vrenli and Werlis.”

Aarl gave a silent nod, his hand slipping toward one of the throwing knives strapped across his chest.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Werlis muttered.

“We’ve fought snow-goblins before — or did you forget?”

Gorathdin gave him a hard look.

“I haven’t forgotten. But I won’t risk more than I must.”

Without another word, he raised his hand and gave Borlix and Thorgar the signal to move.

Borlix advanced first, shield raised, fingers tight around the haft of his axe.

Thorgar followed close behind — left hand steady on the shaft of his spear, right gripping the axe at his hip. His eyes never left the dark mouth of the cave.

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Gorathdin stayed one pace back, bow drawn, an arrow already resting on the string.

Borlix was the first to step inside.

The flickering fire threw restless shadows across the vaulted ceiling. From deeper in the cave came a low, wet murmur.

The snow-goblins were crouched around a small flame.

Their bodies were squat and sinewy, their limbs tight with coiled strength. Thick, shaggy hair covered their faces, hands, and feet — a wild shield against the cold.

Over this, they wore the skins of mountain goats and snow hares.

But two stood apart.

One wore fox fur. The other, the pelt of a lynx — a mark of rank.

Each gripped a staff of frozen ice in clawed hands. Their black eyes watched the fire, unblinking.

Then one raised his head.

Sharp teeth slid past his upper lip as he spotted Borlix.

Muscles tensed. A growl rumbled in his throat.

Then came a shrill cry — sharp as glass — echoing off the stone.

Borlix charged, shield up.

The first goblin lunged — claws spread.

Borlix slammed the shield into its chest, hurling it backward.

The creature struck its head against stone — and did not rise.

From the shelter of a niche, Gorathdin loosed his first arrow.

A sharp twang, a soft impact.

One goblin clutched its chest, staggered, and fell.

Thorgar moved to Borlix's side, axe ready.

Above them, on a narrow ledge, a goblin crouched — and leapt.

Its claws reached for Thorgar.

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But the axe met it mid-air. The blade tore through fur and hide.
The body struck the ground with a dull thud.
The others hissed — sprang apart, regrouped.
The one in fox fur lifted his staff and slammed it to the ground.
A freezing gust swept through the cave — halting them for a breath.
Gorathdin moved fast.
Before the cold could seize him, he drew and fired.
The goblin turned — too late.
The arrow took him through the heart.
His staff fell. His body followed.
Borlix braced as another struck his shield — claws snagging against iron.
He drove it back, raised his axe, and brought it down.
The goblin dropped. Another came — wilder, faster.
Borlix sidestepped, swung wide, and split it clean through.
Beside him, Thorgar caught a spear strike on his axe.
The wood shattered. He lunged, and drove the goblin to the stone.
Only two remained — standing between them and the far wall.
One was small, emaciated. The other held a staff of ice in bony fingers.
They gave the fellowship a look of pure hate — then fled.
“Two got away,” Gorathdin called, lowering his bow.
Before his voice had faded, two strangled cries rang through the cave — then silence.
Moments later, Aarl stepped into the chamber, Vrenli and Werlis behind him, weapons still drawn.
None of them spoke.
The snow-goblins lay still, broken among the rocks and shadow.

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The fight had lasted only moments.

And it had ended without mercy.

The fire in the center of the cave smoldered low, casting flickering patches of light across the stone floor.

In one corner, a pile of bones lay scattered — tossed without care, remnants of their meals.

Beside it, a heap of musty furs served as bedding, barely more than rags.

Werlis grimaced and covered his nose.

Borlix snorted.

“I’d sooner sleep outside than in this stinking hole.”

Aarl raised an eyebrow.

“Wasn’t it your idea?”

Borlix grunted and shook his head, muttering under his breath as he began stripping off his gear.

Without another word, he grabbed one of the goblin corpses by the ankle and dragged it toward the cave mouth.

A dark smear of dirt and blood trailed behind him.

Thorgar watched him for a moment, then spoke.

“Don’t leave them here. The stench will bring scavengers.”

Borlix halted and shot him a glare.

“And your suggestion? Dig through frozen ground?”

He kept walking.

“Or should I haul them through the night and snow — cross-country?”

Thorgar shook his head.

“Not that. I know you’re tired. But we need to be careful.”

“Best to burn them,” Gorathdin said.

The others nodded — reluctantly.

Werlis stepped forward and pulled a glowing branch from the fire.

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“I’ll get one started,” he said, and disappeared outside.

Aarl and Vrenli followed, searching near the trees for dry wood.

Meanwhile, Gorathdin, Thorgar, and Borlix carried the corpses out of the cave.

Behind a low rise, they heaped the bodies where Werlis waited with the flame.

Once the pyre was built, they set it alight.

The fire caught fast — devouring the thick goblin hair first.

Dark smoke curled into the sky.

A biting stench spread through the clearing.

Borlix grimaced.

“Worse than I thought,” he muttered, wiping his bloody hands on his trousers.

Werlis, Vrenli, and Aarl were the first to return to the cave.

The stink lingered, but exhaustion pressed heavier.

They spread their furs around the fire and lay down without words.

Gorathdin and Thorgar stayed behind, watching until the last blackened shape collapsed into ash.

Only then did they return, stretch out on their blankets, and close their eyes.

Vrenli woke several times in the night.

Something tickled his nose.

Just a stray hair, maybe.

He shifted the blanket, adjusted his head — but the itch stayed.

Only when he sneezed did it pass, and afterward, he slept undisturbed.

The Ridge of Winds

At first light, Aarl was the first to stir.

He noticed at once: some of his dried meat was missing — not much, just a few ragged pieces.

He had left it beside him.

Some animal?

He looked around the cave, into the corners, behind the gear — but saw no sign of rat or claw.

Soon after, Borlix stirred.

He rose, threw his cloak over his shoulders, and stepped into the cold without a word.

The air stabbed his lungs, but it was still better than the smell that clung to him.

He grimaced and tugged at the hem of his cloak.

“Blasted filth... Everything stinks of those beasts. And I barely slept a wink.”

He was about to turn back inside when his eye caught something odd —

two slender fir branches stuck upright in the snow.

They were crossed slightly, the tips pointing upward.

Instinctively, he followed the direction they marked.

A few steps on, barely visible beneath the crust of snow, he spotted it — a narrow trail winding along the slope above the cave.

He frowned.

Could that be the trail we missed yesterday?

He didn't hesitate.

“Out with you!” he shouted. “I’ve found something!”

Werlis and Vrenli emerged first, rubbing sleep from their eyes.

Gorathdin came next, then Thorgar.

Last was Aarl.

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Borlix pointed toward the rise.

“There’s a path up there.”

Thorgar pulled out the map, let his gaze move across it, and compared it to the land around them.

After a moment, he gave a slow nod.

“That might be it. It leads in the right direction.”

“Maybe we should eat something first, before we set out,” Werlis offered.

His voice was still thick with the chill of morning.

But the others only shook their heads.

“Ugh. No appetite,” Borlix muttered.

“My stomach turns just thinking about food right now.”

Aarl grimaced, clutching his side.

“Same here.”

Werlis gave a quiet sigh.

“Then let’s pack.”

They returned to the cave and gathered their gear.

Once all was ready, Thorgar led them out and climbed the rock wall above the shelter.

They followed the steep path that wound through broken stone — at times no more than a slanted edge of ice and gravel.

Every step had to hold. The slopes on either side dropped off into sheer, unseeable depths.

They searched for purchase on jagged rock, reached for ledges slick with frost.

More than once, snow gave way beneath their boots, plunging down into the gorge and vanishing from sight.

The wind pressed hard against them, howling through the gaps and clawing through every seam in their clothing.

“This isn’t getting any better,” Thorgar growled as he hauled himself over a ledge.

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No sooner had he spoken than Vrenli slipped on a patch of ice.

His arms flailed — and Gorathdin caught him just in time, pulling him back from the brink.

Near the summit, the storm struck full force.

They huddled against the rock and pushed forward slowly.

Snow lashed their faces, erasing every trace of the path.

Their fingers grew stiff, aching with every motion, as if the blood inside them had slowed to a crawl.

Werlis rubbed his hands together — but the feeling wouldn't return.

Aarl clenched his fists, but his limbs responded sluggishly, as though they no longer belonged to him.

Vrenli's lips had turned blue; his cheeks burned from the cold.

Borlix rolled his shoulders, trying to shake the numbness from his arms.

At last, Gorathdin drew Omgard's amulet from his pouch and studied it closely.

Then he looked up.

"We're not going north anymore.

Looks like we'll have to skirt east."

Thorgar squinted into the snow, scowling.

"Damn it... I think we're off course.

There's no way through here."

His eyes swept the storm-lashed terrain.

"We need shelter. Over there."

He pointed to a wide cleft in the rock, its walls glistening with ice.

"Let's rest there. I need to check the map."

One by one, they crawled inside.

The wind still screamed through the cracks, but the narrow space offered at least a fragile shield.

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For a while, none of them spoke.

They sat — drained, frozen, held still by the cold.

Thorgar unrolled the map and spread it across his knee.

He smoothed the parchment with a gloved hand and traced the pass routes with a finger.

“We need to go farther west,” he said.

He tapped a point.

“We should try from here.”

Gorathdin leaned over, let his gaze pass across the lines, and nodded.

“Yes. You’re right.

There’s a fork marked there.”

When the wind finally eased and night had not yet fallen, they stepped back out into the white.

Between two jagged cliffs, they found a path — narrow, sunken, like something torn into the rock by old storms.

Suddenly, Thorgar halted.

His body stiffened.

His eyes narrowed.

“Do you hear that?”

The group froze.

Something rumbled through the mountains — distant at first, then stronger.

Snow slid loose from the cliffs above.

A tremor followed — low, steady, alive.

“Another avalanche?” Vrenli asked, glancing up.

Thorgar shook his head slowly.

“No... this is different.

As if something vast were moving.”

Before anyone could speak, something rose at the far end of the pass — massive, like the mountain itself had come awake.

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Rock and ice sheared from its limbs as it stood.

The thing stepped forward — shaped of frost, its body vast and glimmering, veins of pale blue pulsing beneath a surface like sculpted ice.

With thunderous strides, it came pounding across the jagged terrain.

Each step sent shivers through the earth — hairline cracks laced the frozen stone.

“A frost golem...” Thorgar whispered, slowly drawing his spear from his back.

“Stay calm. If we move quietly, we might be able to pass beneath it.”

Borlix gave a quiet snort.

“Quietly beneath it? Are you out of your mind?”

“Do you have a better idea? Want to turn back?” Thorgar shot back.

Without waiting, he moved on — each step cautious, each breath a hush.

Then — a crack.

The ice beneath Aarl’s boot gave way.

The creature froze.

Its massive head jolted around.

Two glacial eyes locked onto them.

A roar — deep and jagged — tore through the air.

Thorgar pointed ahead.

“Run!”

They bolted — but so did the golem.

Its stride devoured the snow. With every blow of its feet, shards of ice exploded outward.

“This won’t work!” Gorathdin shouted, halting mid-run.

“We have to stop it — or it’ll overtake us!”

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“With what?” Aarl gasped, eyes darting between the beast and the cliffs.

“That thing’s a mountain of ice!”

Gorathdin pointed up the slope.

“The rocks. I’ll strike from above.”

Swift as breath, he climbed.

His boots found holds in the ice, his hands never faltered.

Thorgar drew back and hurled his spear.

The tip struck — and glanced off, useless.

But the golem turned.

Borlix stepped forward, axe and shield in hand.

“Over here! Come on, you icy brute!” he bellowed.

The creature struck — a fist of solid ice crashing down — but Borlix was faster.

He threw himself behind a boulder. The blow shattered the ground where he had stood.

“Keep it distracted!” Gorathdin’s voice rang from above.

The fire-axe in his grip glowed brighter with each breath he drew.

He reached the ridge.

Below, Borlix, Werlis, and Vrenli shouted together, drawing the golem’s focus.

It raised one massive arm and brought it down — but the fellowship scattered in time.

Then Gorathdin leapt.

The fire-axe blazed in the wind. Flames burst outward as the blade struck the golem’s neck.

The sound of shattering tore through the air.

A fracture spread — fast, wide — and a burst of glowing frost sprayed into the sky.

The golem’s head hit the ground with a hollow thud.

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Its body followed — splitting, collapsing, breaking apart into a thousand jagged shards.

The fellowship halted, breathless.

Snow clung to their cloaks. Their lungs burned from the cold and the run.

For a moment, none spoke.

Gorathdin stood slowly, the axe still warm in his grip.

“Quick — before another comes,” he said.

Thorgar picked up his spear.

He cast one last glance at the shattered giant. Then he turned and led them out.

The passage narrowed — and then opened again.

A plateau spread before them, high and wind-blasted.

A path climbed beyond, steep and narrow, the mountain rising jagged all around.

With each step, the wind grew crueler.

It cut through wool and leather, through cloak and breath.

Soon, they could no longer stand upright.

The gale howled like a thing alive. They hunched forward, fighting for each step.

Every movement became a struggle.

Werlis and Vrenli suffered most — their smaller frames caught like leaves.

Twice, Aarl seized their cloaks and held them fast before the wind could take them.

Then Thorgar stopped. He leaned into the rock, bracing himself.

“This is the Crest of Winds!” he shouted, his voice breaking through the roar.

He pointed to the blade-thin ridge that ran like a line of snow across the summit.

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“We have to cross it!”

“The wind’s too strong!” Borlix bellowed from behind.

His shield was buried in the snow, his body crouched low behind it.

He did not move.

“Then we crawl!” Thorgar roared, dropped to the ground, and began to move forward on his hands and knees.

One by one, the others followed, dragging themselves across the crest.

Inches at a time. Breath by breath.

They fought the wind until, at last, they reached the far side.

As they rose slowly into the gale, the world opened before them — a sweeping valley of snow, vast and gleaming, reaching into the haze at the horizon.

It looked majestic.

And merciless.

Thorgar pointed toward the slope that fell before them like a sheer white wall.

“This is our way down.”

The descent was steep — slick and broken, riddled with treacherous holds.

“We’ll rappel,” Gorathdin said.

He anchored a rope to a jagged boulder and checked the knot, then began to descend with quiet precision.

One after another, they followed.

Thorgar and Borlix moved with heavy steadiness.

Vrenli and Werlis struggled against the wind that pressed them into the stone.

Their fingers were numb; every grip on the rope was a silent battle.

Aarl waited above.

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When the others had reached the ledge below, he freed the knot, coiled the line around him, and came down last.

Step by step, they lowered themselves into the frost-shadowed depths.

The cliff swallowed them whole — and then released them.

They stood at the base, breathing hard.

The slope loomed behind them, taller now from below.

Borlix braced his hands on his knees and grunted.

“Solid ground... at last.”

They rested only briefly.

Vrenli, Werlis, and Aarl sank to the snow, opened their waterskins, and drank with silent desperation.

Gorathdin and Thorgar remained upright, eyes sweeping the treeline.

Then they advanced — into the forest.

The pines stood close and tall.

Exposed roots coiled from the earth like ribs of some long-dead beast.

Branches sagged under frost, bending low enough to force them down or aside.

Aarl stepped on what looked like solid snow — and vanished.

There was a muffled curse, a rush of powder — and he was gone, swallowed by the drift.

He landed in silence.

For a moment, he did not move. His breath rose in clouds.

Then he sat up.

Beneath him, the snow gave way to earth — and something more.

Laid out before him were tiny caches: twigs, moss, nuts, and berries, arranged with clear intent.

Around him, narrow tunnels branched outward — rootlike, woven through the dark.

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“Thorgar!” Aarl called.

The Northlander stepped to the edge and looked down.

“Looks like you’ve found a Nivling chamber.”

Aarl raised his arms.

“Just get me out of here.”

Thorgar knelt, took hold, and hauled him upward.

The snow gave under Aarl’s boots, but Thorgar’s grip held firm.

“What in all the realms are Nivlings” Werlis asked, stepping forward as the others gathered.

Thorgar studied the group — as if weighing how to begin.

“Nivlings are small folk,” he said. “Tiny. No taller than a lemming. Humanlike in shape. They wear pale fur cloaks that let them vanish in the snow. Wild white hair. Blue stripes across their faces. Strange to look at — and rarely seen.”

He glanced toward the hole.

“They dwell beneath the snow. In tunnels — deep and many.

They stay in hollows like this one.

Some say there’s a great city below the ice, where their clans gather once a year.”

He straightened.

“They rarely come to the surface. Only to forage or hunt.

They live on berries, mushrooms, moss — and sometimes snow hares. Birds too, on occasion.”

“Their weapons are minute. Wooden spears. Stone knives no longer than a finger. But they’re quick. Far quicker than you’d think.

They move without sound.

You might catch a flicker at the edge of your vision — and when you turn, nothing’s there.”

Werlis raised a brow.

“Thieves?”

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“Some call them that,” Thorgar said.

“Supplies vanish. Food disappears. But they take only what they need.”

He paused.

“Others speak of strange sounds — whistles, laughter — but never a face to match.

Only snow. Only silence.”

“But there are also tales of travelers who lost their way... and suddenly found markers set before them.”

Aarl grimaced.

“That explains a lot. The bite marks on my dried meat...”

Borlix gave a low snort.

“And the twig-arrow pointing toward the ascent...”

Gorathdin glanced toward his quiver and gave a slow nod.

“The shrieking near the cave mouth was a warning — about the ice-shadow wolves,” Werlis added.

Thorgar nodded once. For a moment, silence settled over them — not tense, but thoughtful.

The strange sounds. The missing rations. The tracks in the snow. It all began to make sense.

But why did they help us?” Vrenli asked quietly.

Thorgar shrugged.

With one last glance behind them, they moved on.

As they walked, the trees began to thin. More light filtered down through the needled branches, and gradually the view opened.

At last, the forest gave way — and they halted.

Before them stretched a wide, snow-covered plain. In the distance, a herd of frost-horns moved slowly across the white.

Thorgar unrolled the map and studied it briefly before pointing north.

“Lake Ymrigard is about half a day’s journey from here.”

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Gorathdin followed his gaze and gave a small nod.

“We should spend the night here. The trees offer better shelter than the open plain.”

No one objected.

The weariness in their faces said enough. After the long descent, sleep had become more than a wish — it was a need.

Thorgar, Gorathdin, and Borlix set to work building a rough shelter from thick fir branches, while Aarl and Vrenli gathered what dry wood they could find.

Soon a fire was burning — modest, but warm — casting flickering light over the camp.

Werlis rummaged through the packs and began preparing a small meal. As the darkness fell around them, the fellowship sat close to the flames and ate in silence.

The fire hissed softly. And over time, calm returned — a rare stillness that settled like a breath finally released.

Once the food was gone, Aarl drew a small flask from his pouch.

A sharp scent of herbs rose as he uncorked it. He took a sip, then passed it to Thorgar.

The Northerner hesitated, then drank. The fire burned down his throat — but something else kindled too: a faint smile.

“We’ve been traveling together for days,” he said, handing the flask to Gorathdin.

“Time you told me something about yourselves.”

Gorathdin took it, turned it in his hands, then passed it to Borlix.

His gaze lifted. His voice grew quieter.

“I’ve spent my life between two worlds — a half-elf, never fully at home in either.

My father is High Druid of the Darkwood. My mother a ranger.

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But I never truly belonged with the druids. Nor with the rangers.”

He paused.

“Then I met Queen Lythinda.

What began as a meeting at court became more.

She is queen now. And I... am her husband.”

Thorgar raised an eyebrow.

“A half-elf — consort to a queen?”

Gorathdin shrugged.

“She inherited the throne when her father died. I stand beside her, but I do not rule.”

Thorgar nodded slowly.

“So — a warrior. Not a king.”

Gorathdin let his gaze fall to the fire.

“Twenty years ago, during the war against Fallgar, I met the others.

We were sent on a long mission — and we fought at Ib’Agier.

Against Erwright of Entorbis. Against his armies — ogres, mist-elves, orcs, gray dwarves, and the dead.

That battle left its mark on all of us.”

“True,” Werlis said, his voice low.

Ib’Agier had left more than memories. It had left wounds.

His hand brushed the empty sleeve where his arm had once been — a motion less of pain than of defense, as if warding the past away.

“That’s when I lost it.

A Moogher — one of the deep-sea spawn — sprayed me with acid.

Master Drobal had to amputate the arm.

It saved my life.”

Thorgar studied him.

“And yet you learned to fight on.”

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“What choice did I have?” Werlis replied with a crooked smile.

He fell silent for a moment, then added, more quietly:

“Sometimes I can scarcely believe where I’ve ended up.

I come from a small, quiet village — Abketh, in Tawinn.”

His eyes wandered over the fellowship.

Aarl gave a slow nod.

“I know what you mean,” he said. His tone had turned thoughtful.

For a while, he said nothing. Then he looked to Thorgar.

“I’m from Thir. Fishing village by the Southern Sea, near the desert of DeShadin.

But an accident forced me to leave.

I lived alone then, not far from Werlis and Vrenli’s home.

We’d only just begun to grow close when we met Borlix.

Snow goblins attacked him in the Ice Mountains. We helped him out.”

“Ridiculous,” Borlix grunted, shaking his head as red hair whipped about.

“No one saved my life. Those snow goblins? I could’ve handled them.”

Aarl grinned but said nothing.

Borlix crossed his arms and leaned back.

“I never liked relying on others.”

Then he turned to Thorgar.

“I come from Ib’Agier.

My father wanted me to take his place as Paladin. I refused.

So they exiled me. Abstinence, prayers, no women? Not my world.”

Thorgar leaned in slightly.

“And yet you became a Paladin.”

“I did,” Borlix said with a shrug.

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“But on my own terms.

I earned that title on the battlefield at Ib’Agier.

King Agnulix agreed.

What matters is that I keep my oath. My way.”

Thorgar gave a faint smile.

“So you’re a Paladin who doesn’t live like one.”

Borlix smirked.

“That’s one way to put it.”

Then Thorgar’s gaze shifted to Vrenli.

“And you?”

Vrenli met his eyes.

“Since our last journey, I’ve kept the knowledge of Wetherid and the Starborn alive.

My grandfather traveled far.

He knew ancient places and writings. Their meaning... it’s only now becoming clear to me.”

He smiled faintly.

“But if I start telling it now, we’ll still be sitting here at sunrise.”

Thorgar nodded.

“Then tell us another time.”

“I will,” Vrenli said.

“But next time, Thorgar — I want to hear more about you.

You’re one of us now. One of the fellowship.”

Thorgar paused, as though he hadn’t expected to be spoken to like that.

Then he picked up a heavy branch, weighed it briefly, and threw it into the fire.

With a dry crack, it caught, and the flames surged higher.

He let his gaze sweep the circle — quiet, unreadable — and settled briefly on Vrenli.

Then he nodded.

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“Yes. Another time.”

CHAPTER 3

A Vacant Throne

While the fellowship departed from Abketh, Astinhod stood without leadership.

In the throne hall, the air was heavy with tension — weightier with each hour that passed.

The Council of Regency sat in their places, patience frayed thin, nerves laid bare.

For days there had been no agreement. No resolution.

Only argument. Only delay.

Master Drobal stood silently at the edge of the chamber, watching the storm unfold at the great stone table. If Astinhod falls, or comes into the wrong hands, all of Wetherid would be weakened and unable to withstand the coming threat.

“How long is this to go on?” asked Darion, his gaze sweeping across those assembled.

“The people are waiting. The state is waiting. And we go in circles.

Not one vote has reached a result.

Each day that passes weakens us.”

“The realm is already weak,” Aldion retorted, his voice sharper than necessary.

“What we need now is the courage to decide — not endless debate. The people need strong leadership.”

Belmarr’s jaw tightened.

He pushed back his chair slightly and leaned on the table with both hands.

“Strong leadership?” he echoed, his voice rising.

“You want control — over council and realm. The people have never mattered to you.”

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Lady Merdiva slowly raised an eyebrow and fixed Belmarr with a piercing gaze.

“Such personal attacks are neither helpful nor appropriate.

The council must choose a Warden of the Throne — not fall prey to petty quarrels.”

Belmarr was about to reply, but Seradia cut in first.

“Enough. We need a solution.

If you give me your votes, I will ensure that order is restored.”

Belmarr sat back down.

A few around the table exchanged glances, but Seradia’s words left little impression.

The unrest lingered.

Then Master Drobald stepped forward — deliberate and unhurried.

His gaze passed slowly over the council before he spoke.

His voice was calm, but carried weight — enough to still the room.

“Eight days,” he said, and let the words settle.

“Eight wasted days — of debate, and nothing gained.

The realm stands still. The people suffer.

We can no longer afford this silence.”

Ahnwen, close confidant of the royal family, gave a slow, thoughtful nod.

“Master Drobald is right.

Each day we delay makes the crisis worse.

Trade with Irkaar has all but collapsed. The people grow restless.

The throne is empty.

We cannot wait any longer.”

Aldion gave a quiet, dismissive laugh — but the tension in his eyes betrayed him.

“What did you expect, Ahnwen?

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Belmarr and Seradia cling to their candidacies.

Neither will yield.

Eryndor and Asteran abstain every time.

We will never reach a decision this way!"

Lady Merdiva exhaled — slow, sharp.

"What is it you hope to gain with your candidacy, Seradia?" she asked, her voice thin with calculation.

"You have one vote — your own."

"If Eryndor and Asteran would finally see that neither Belmarr nor Aldion is fit for the Warden's mantle, things would look very different," Seradia replied, turning pointedly to the two men.

Eryndor rolled his eyes.

Asteran said nothing. He sat still, gaze distant.

Darion straightened.

"Let us proceed to the vote.

Perhaps today, one candidate will secure a majority."

A murmur of assent moved around the table — not without hesitation.

Darion rose to his full height and looked around the circle.

He waited a moment, then spoke with formal tone.

"Who votes for Grand Duke Aldion of Kirindor?"

Aldion stood with practiced ease; his presence filled the chamber.

His hand rose — swift, assured — and Lady Merdiva's followed. Then Rohedan's.

Darion waited a moment longer.

No others moved.

"Three votes for Grand Duke Aldion," he declared, his tone flat.

"Who votes for Count Belmarr of Kring?"

Belmarr raised his hand.

Darion followed.

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Ahnwen gave Belmarr a short look — and added his vote.

Again, Darion let the moment pass before speaking.

“Three votes for Count Belmarr.”

He continued.

“Who supports Margravine Seradia of Umlis?”

The question dropped into the room like a stone.

Only one hand moved.

Seradia’s.

The moment stretched.

The council exchanged glances — hesitant, uncertain.

Seradia folded her hands on the table.

Her posture remained upright, composed — but *she could feel the time slipping away*.

“One vote,” Darion stated at last.

A faint breath escaped him before he continued.

“The obligatory counter-question. Who abstains from voting?”

Asteran slowly raised his hand, without seeking approval.

After a pause, Eryndor followed.

“Two abstentions,” Darion said, reaching for his quill to record the result.

Then he read it aloud.

“Three votes for Aldion. Three for Belmarr. One for Seradia. Two abstentions — no majority has been reached.”

A collective sigh passed through the chamber.

Aldion stood.

“As expected. As long as some here would rather place their hopes in weak leadership — or refuse to take a stand at all — we will never reach a result.”

Restlessness spread.

Voices around the table grew louder. Debate flared anew.

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Master Drobale rose slowly.

He raised no hand, gave no sign of reprimand — yet as he began to speak, the chamber fell silent.

“Today’s vote has shown once again that we cannot move forward without compromise.

I ask you, honored members of the council: search your hearts. Speak with one another.

Come to agreement — for the sake of the realm and its people.

I do not speak to offend.

Each of you may — indeed must — decide freely.

But a change must come.

We cannot go on like this.”

His gaze moved through the hall.

It lingered for a breath on Seradia, Asteran, and Eryndor — not in accusation, but in appeal.

“This leads nowhere.”

“Words alone will not break us from this deadlock!”

Belmarr’s voice rang sharp.

“As long as certain parties here continue their maneuvering, nothing will change in the next vote either.”

His eyes flicked to Lady Merdiva.

“Games?” she said, voice composed, gaze hardening for a heartbeat.

“I act as you all do — in the interest of the realm.”

“The realm,” Belmarr returned, “has little to thank your interests for.”

Voices rose again.

Debate flared.

Accusations crossed the table.

Some shouted. Others leaned back in silence, shaking their heads, wearied by the stalemate.

Master Drobale remained silent.

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Darion struck the table several times with the flat of his hand.
“I ask you, ladies and gentlemen — compose yourselves.
This gathering is adjourned.
We will reconvene tomorrow at the third bell.”
A low murmur followed, but no one objected.
Chairs shifted.
One by one, the council members rose.
Some exchanged last words.
Others left the chamber without a backward glance.
Master Drobald watched as they drifted into small groups and passed through the towering doors of the throne room.

Hidden Designs

Alone now in the vast and empty hall, Master Drobald let the day pass before him — measureless and slow.
The endless argument had brought no clarity.
With each hour lost, the danger deepened.
The balance of the realm was starting to crack.
He could feel it in the air.
It was no longer only Gorathdin’s claim that hung in the balance.
Xaroth’s shadow was growing.
He knew: there could be no further delay.
At last he turned from the chamber and made his way toward the tower — the one place of quiet and order during his stay in Astinhod.
He climbed the stairs, opened the door, and stepped inside.
Books lined the walls. Scrolls and instruments filled the shelves.
The light that entered through the arched window was pale and still.

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He sat at the central table, drew a fresh sheet of parchment toward him, and reached for a quill.

With practiced strokes, he began to write:

Elvoran — the situation in Astinbod is worsening.

I need you here. Swiftly.

He rolled the parchment with care, sealed it with red wax, and slid it into a narrow metal tube.

Then he stepped to the window and gave a sharp, piercing whistle.

Moments passed before a falcon appeared on the horizon, wings stretched in solemn flight.

The bird answered the call and alighted on the stone ledge.

Master Drobald stepped forward and stroked its feathers gently.

“Faithful friend,” he murmured, fastening the message to the bird’s leg.

“Take this to Elvoran. Fly swift and sure.”

The falcon let out a sharp cry, leapt from the sill, and climbed into the sky — strong, steady, sure.

Master Drobald watched its flight until the bird vanished at the horizon, bound southward for the island of Horunguth.

For a time, he stood unmoving by the window.

Then he turned and made his way toward Darion’s chambers.

The air struck him at once — dim light, and the weight of disappointment unspoken.

The debate in the throne hall had left its mark:

fatigue traced Darion’s and Ahnwen’s faces, and their shoulders bore the strain of unresolved conflict.

Master Drobald offered a brief nod in greeting.

“Today brought nothing but deadlock,” said Darion. His voice was worn thin.

“They’re blocking us at every turn. We’re not gaining a single step.”

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Belmarr rubbed his temples.

“Aldion and his circle know exactly how to stall us,” he said.

“But that’s only part of it. Eryndor and Asteran sit like spectators.”

Master Drobald nodded slowly.

“Eryndor is waiting — he’ll move for the strongest offer. Your last conversation with him, Belmarr, made that clear.

Why Asteran hesitates is harder to read.

Perhaps there are reasons we have yet to perceive.”

He paused, then continued, quieter but firmer:

“We must find out what they are.”

Belmarr looked to him.

“Speak with Asteran, Master Drobald. You’ve known him longer than any of us.”

Master Drobald stood in thought, weighing the silence.

Asteran was cautious — but not indecisive.

And yet his hesitation remained strange.

Only a direct conversation would bring clarity.

At last, Master Drobald gave a slow nod.

“It is time I spoke with him.”

As the conversation continued behind him, he took his leave — quiet-footed, his mind already elsewhere.

He would find Asteran. Whatever the day might bring.



At that same hour, in another wing of the palace, the flicker of candlelight, the open bottle of wine, and the scent of lavender oil hinted at a late visitor in Lady Merdiva’s chambers.

She had prepared carefully — the final touches complete just moments before Eryndor entered.

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Her gown, sheer in places and expertly draped, clung close to her form.

Her hair was swept high with studied elegance.

The lines around her eyes had been softened — not erased, only veiled.

Eryndor's gaze passed over her — brief, but perceptive.

Her allure was undeniable, even if her youth lay far behind her.

The contrast between them was clear — and Eryndor took quiet pleasure in it.

"I thank you for coming," she began slowly.

"It shows you take your duties seriously. Especially in times like these."

Eryndor inclined his head, a faint smile at his lips.

"I was curious what you had to say."

She reached for the wine — graceful, deliberate — and poured.

"These past days have made one thing clear," she said.

"Our position is fragile. The council is divided. The realm needs stability.

And you, Lord Eryndor... you could provide it."

Eryndor accepted the glass. There was a flicker of amusement in his eyes.

"You want my vote?" he asked, as if surprised.

The irony was too light to be missed.

Lady Merdiva smiled — calculating, but not without charm.

"Of course. You are a man of reason. Of foresight.

Surely you understand what your position means."

He leaned back with ease, his gaze drifting about the room before returning to her.

"And why," he asked, "should I give my vote to Aldion?"

Lady Merdiva rose with flowing grace, every movement controlled, each gesture shaped with purpose.

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She knew his gaze would find her — but gave no sign she noticed.

Her poise, her beauty, her position — these were her weapons, and she was resolved to wield them with care.

“Because he can lead the realm,” she said, calm and certain.

“His experience, his alliances — all that he brings serves the good of the realm.

And I know that a man like you, at his side, could shape something lasting.”

She stepped closer. The space between them thinned. Her voice dropped to a whisper.

“You could be more than a council member.

Support him, and I will see that you gain influence, wealth, and stature far beyond what you now possess.”

Eryndor regarded her with a faint smile and set his glass aside.

“A tempting offer, Lady Merdiva.

But you know as well as I — words are rarely enough.

Speak with Aldion. He must be more... specific.”

She understood what he meant.

With smooth precision, she moved closer still, laying a hand on his shoulder, letting her fingers rest there — just long enough.

“Then let me show you I have more than words to offer.”

What followed was a night shaped by desire and indulgence.

Lady Merdiva believed she was drawing him in — binding him to her will.

And Eryndor let her believe it. He enjoyed the game, but never gave himself to it.

He saw her age, but it did not trouble him.

To him, it was opportunity — a pleasure without obligation.

— ✂ —

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When the first slant of sunlight touched the floor, Eryndor rose and dressed.

Lady Merdiva watched him from the bed — composed, as always, but her eyes searched him for any sign of change.

“Eryndor,” she whispered.

“I hope you see now that what we share could be more than a mere exchange of votes.”

Eryndor turned to her, a soft smile playing at his lips.

“Lady Merdiva, you are truly remarkable.

But my decision is not yet made.”

She sat up slightly. A flicker of displeasure touched her eyes.

“Not yet?”

He stepped closer, face unreadable.

“I’ll decide when I know it brings the greatest advantage.

Until then, I take pleasure in weighing my options.”

He left without another word.

Lady Merdiva remained behind, her thoughts quickening.

She had believed she had won him — but Eryndor was more layered. And more dangerous.

He’s playing a deeper game than he lets on.

When she had composed herself, she made her way to a chamber in a remote wing of the palace.

There, Aldion and Rohedan were already waiting.

The door closed behind her with a dull thud.

A map lay on the table near the window, half-covered by scattered documents.

Aldion stood before it, arms crossed, gaze fixed on the parchment.

Rohedan sat nearby, eating grapes from a shallow silver bowl.

Aldion looked up, brow furrowed.

“Did you speak with Eryndor?”

Lady Merdiva gave a curt nod.

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“He’s more clever than I thought — more calculating.

He wants specific promises. Not words.”

“That means?” Rohedan asked, pausing mid-bite.

“Gold. Lands. Maybe a title.

He’s not just speaking to us. He’ll hear what Belmarr has to offer too.”

Her voice had cooled as she lowered herself into a chair.

“He knows exactly how valuable his vote is.

And he intends to spend it well.”

Aldion tapped his fingers along the map’s edge.

“Promise him whatever he wants. We need his vote.”

Rohedan stood and stepped beside him.

“But Belmarr is the real threat,” he said quietly.

“He has Darion, Ahnwen, and Master Drobol behind him.

They’ll do whatever it takes to place Gorathdin on the throne.”

He paused, then added:

“Until then, Belmarr wants to act as Throne Warden.

Seradia and Eryndor — they’re just obstacles along the way.”

“He wants part of the power — and the wealth that comes with it.

She, meanwhile, clings to her hopeless candidacy — and no one understands why.”

Aldion’s expression barely shifted.

“Then we’ll see to it that she withdraws.”

There was no room for dissent in his voice.

“There must be no further vote while her name remains in the running.”

Lady Merdiva regarded him coolly.

“That will not be easy. Seradia has nothing to lose.

How do you propose we make her withdraw her claim?”

Rohedan leaned back, a crooked grin on his lips.

The Guardians of the Seven Artifacts

“You always have a plan, Lady Merdiva.

Is there perhaps a weakness we could exploit?”

She fell silent. Her fingers traced the edge of the table, slow and thoughtful.

“Oh, she has one...”

Her voice was distant, reflective.

“She stands to lose a great deal — if she doesn’t succeed soon.”

Rohedan raised a brow.

“What exactly do you mean?”

A thin smile flickered across her lips.

“Leave that to me. I have an idea.”

Aldion exchanged a brief glance with them both.

“Do what must be done. Next time, I want results.

Seradia must end her candidacy — whether she wishes to or not.”

“And what of Asteran?” Rohedan asked.

Aldion dismissed the thought with a wave.

“Asteran is a coward — and a fool besides.

First, we deal with the other two.

As quickly as Darion would like, there will be no majority.”

Lady Merdiva nodded, offered a measured farewell, and left the chamber.

Her thoughts were already turning toward Seradia.



Eryndor had long since returned to his own chambers.

After refreshing himself, he wandered the palace corridors with slow, deliberate steps.

Memories from the night before returned unbidden.

The Chronicles of Wetherid

Every touch, every glance from Lady Merdiva had been precise — calculated.

“Lady Merdiva thinks she can purchase me cheaply,” he murmured, his gaze drifting over the shimmering rooftops beyond the windows.

But I know my worth.

As he passed a side corridor, the sound of voices halted his steps.

He moved closer, soundless.

Two palace guards stood speaking in low tones.

“Darion... an attack, you say?” one whispered.

“Yes. In his chambers,” came the reply.

“He was wounded, but drove the bastard off. The bastard fled through the window.”

Eryndor stood still and let the words take root.

An attack on Darion.

This is more than a warning — this is escalation.

He continued, thoughtful.

— ✂ —

Darion sat in his chamber, facing the captain of the guard across a narrow table.

An oil lamp cast flickering light across the fresh bandage on his shoulder.

The pain was bearable — but the questions gnawed at him.

Why?

Who?

Before them lay the assailant’s weapon — a flawless dagger, unmarked, originless.

“Do you believe someone ordered the attack?” the captain asked.

The Guardians of the Seven Artifacts

Darion nodded once.

“I believe so. But I doubt we’ll ever know who.”

The captain exhaled slowly.

“I’ll begin interrogations. We’ll search for clues.

The attack has already made its rounds.

They’ll expect you to speak before the council.”

Darion frowned and touched the sore spot at his shoulder, distracted.

“Of course. We can’t afford to let it pass.”

The captain gave a curt nod.

“I’ll see the hall prepared, inform the others, and ensure order is kept. The number of guards will be increased across the entire palace area.”

Darion watched him leave, saying nothing.



At the same hour, Master Drobai passed quietly through the southern wing.

The conversation with Asteran could not be delayed much longer.

He knew the man often walked the palace gardens — morning and evening — and so his steps turned there.

Asteran was already seated on a bench beneath the pavilion, his hands resting loosely on his knees.

The wind moved gently through the hedges, and a cool floral scent drifted on the air.

He looked up as Master Drobai approached and greeted him with a silent nod.

“What brings you to the garden?” he asked calmly.

The Chronicles of Wetherid

Master Drobald came to a halt before him, studying him in quiet thought.

“I wished to speak with you.

It seems to me you observe and reflect more than most.”

Asteran tilted his head. His shoulder-length hair fell across the front of his plain tunic.

“Sit, and tell me what weighs upon you.”

Master Drobald hesitated, then took the offered seat.

“Belmarr needs your vote. Time is short.”

Asteran turned his gaze toward the distant palace wall.

“I am well aware that time is short.

And I understand why everyone believes my vote decisive.

But I have my reasons for holding back.”

Master Drobald furrowed his brow, yet said nothing. Asteran continued.

“The choice of who shall become Throne Warden must not be made in haste.

Even though I’ve known many of you for decades —

in times of crisis, even the steadfast may act in ways we do not expect.”

He turned to face him fully, his grey eyes steady with quiet resolve.

“I will not cast my vote until I have truly seen the motives of all.

It is not only a matter of what seems right in this moment — but of what will endure.

A single misstep could plunge the realm into greater peril.”

Master Drobald folded his hands.

“Asteran, your caution is just, and your judgment wise.

But in times such as these, there can be no perfect choice.

A decision — even a flawed one — is better than none.”

Asteran leaned back, his gaze wandering the garden.

The Guardians of the Seven Artifacts

“Perhaps you are right.

But until I am certain the realm will benefit, I shall remain cautious.

Some may call that indecision.

I call it duty.”

Master Drobald gave a slight nod.

“I understand your position.

But remember — time does not favor us.”

A stillness fell between them.

Only birdsong moved within it.

At last, Asteran slowly straightened. His movement was heavy.

“I will consider it.

We should return to the throne room — it is time.

You heard what happened to Darion, did you not?”

He stepped ahead. Master Drobald rose and followed.

“No — what do you mean? What has happened?”

“There was an attempt on Darion’s life.

An assassin struck at dawn — in his own chambers.

Fortunately, he missed.”

Master Drobald drew in a sharp breath. His expression darkened.

“That must not be. How is he?”

“He’s recovered well. Just a wound to the shoulder.

He intends to speak to the council himself.”

Master Drobald quickened his pace. The hem of his cloak whispered across the gravel.

Asteran followed, his step slower.

At the steps before the throne hall, they met Darion as he ascended.

The bandage on his shoulder was clearly visible.

The Chronicles of Wetherid

Master Drobal stepped forward, concern in his face.

“Darion, how do you fare? Is the injury grave?”

Darion shook his head.

“No — only a surface wound. Nothing to worry about. But...”

His gaze shifted between the two men.

“What happened bodes ill. This was no random act.

Someone is trying to destabilize the council.”

Asteran stepped forward, his face grave.

“Who would have reason to do such a thing?”

Darion sighed.

“That is the question. The guard captain is already investigating, but like the coward’s killings, no trace has been found.”

As they entered the hall together, the murmur of voices faded into silence.

Lady Merdiva, flawless in her coiffure, cast a glance toward Rohedan — a silent signal to remain still.

Darion took his seat, his expression stern.

“Someone attempted to kill me today,” he began.

“And I do not believe it was a coincidence.

It was a targeted strike — meant to destabilize this council. And the realm.”

Ahnwen leaned forward, his voice cutting like drawn steel.

“That was an assassination attempt.”

“Or perhaps it was merely a random attack,” Aldion offered coolly. “A thief, maybe?”

Ahnwen turned sharply.

“A thief? Who slips past palace guards, climbs a window, tries to kill Darion — and vanishes without a trace?

You cannot be serious.”

Lady Merdiva rose.

The Guardians of the Seven Artifacts

With graceful steps, she crossed the floor — every motion measured, deliberate.

“We must not leap to conclusions,” she said, her voice calm, almost chiding.

“Why would anyone want to assassinate Darion?”

I see no clear motive.”

Her gaze moved across the chamber — slow, searching — as if testing each face.

Belmarr gave a short, dry laugh.

“We all have some idea who might benefit.”

Rohedan folded his arms.

“And what exactly do you mean by that, Belmarr?”

Are you implying someone here would stoop to this?

Accusations like that are dangerous.

Do you have proof?”

Aldion placed both hands on the table, fingers splayed, as if bracing against the weight in the room.

“Proof or not,” he said, his tone sharpened, this was an attack on a member of the council.

Under my leadership, such a breach would never have occurred.”

Master Drobal watched him in silence.

His face remained composed, but his eyes sharpened — weighing, measuring.

“You mean to say, Aldion,” he asked at last,

“that had you been Throne Warden, this would not have happened?”

Is that what we’re to understand?”

Aldion exhaled through his nose — a quiet scoff.

“Those were not my words,” he said, brushing the remark aside.

The Chronicles of Wetherid

“But I do wonder — and surely I speak for others here — why you are even present.

You are not a member of this council, and yet you take the center of the floor.

By what right do you involve yourself?”

A murmur ran through the chamber.

Darion and Ahnwen exchanged brief, surprised glances.

Master Drobol remained steady.

“My right, Grand Duke Aldion, is not a title — it is a charge.

The mages of Horunguth have long served the royal line of Astinhod.

We are not judges. We are guardians.”

Aldion leaned back, a faint smile on his lips.

“Impressive words. But still irrelevant.

This concerns the realm’s future — and you hold no vote.”

Before Master Drobol could reply, Darion rose.

His gaze swept the chamber until the noise quieted.

“Aldion,” he said, firm and direct,

“your words distract from what matters.

Master Drobol has shown, these past days, that his knowledge is exactly what we now require.”

“That may be...” Aldion said coolly.

“But wisdom is not legitimacy.

This council governs — not those who advise from beyond its walls.”

Master Drobol rose in turn.

His hand closed around the staff. His posture did not waver.

“Aldion,” he said, his voice sharpened to a blade,

“I remind you: decisions born of ambition and vanity will drive this realm to ruin.”

Aldion gave a short laugh.

The Guardians of the Seven Artifacts

He opened his mouth to speak — but froze.

A voice rang in his mind. Cold. Commanding.

Do not test me.

My legitimacy is my power — a power entrusted for the defense of Wetherid.

His eyes widened — just slightly.

Then he recovered.

“We shall see,” he murmured.

His hands had closed into fists.

The mobilization of my army is no longer avoidable.

Master Drobál’s gaze lingered on him a moment longer.

He knew the conflict could no longer be averted —
but the time had not yet come to fight it openly.

Darion waited until the room had stilled.

Then he pushed back his chair and rose, drawing every eye.

“The law grants me authority to postpone a vote in exceptional circumstances.

In light of the attack against me, today’s election is deferred.
We will continue tomorrow.

Use the time wisely.”

A murmur of assent passed through the chamber, shadowed
by Aldion’s skeptical stare.

But no one spoke against it.

All knew — even today, no majority would have been reached.

Darion cast one last look across the council

— then turned and walked away from the throne.

Without another word, the members of the assembly
withdrew.

Aldion, Lady Merdiva, and Rohedan were the last to follow.

No glance passed between them.

Once in the corridor, Aldion quickened his pace.

The Chronicles of Wetherid

The sound of his heels rang sharp against the stone.

“That was a farce,” he said coldly.

“Master Drobal holds sway over this council — or so he believes.

But tomorrow, we’ll need a strategy.”

He stopped short and turned to Rohedan.

“And you...”

His voice dropped — low, deliberate.

“...see to it that Darion’s assassin leaves Astinhod.

Better still — make sure he doesn’t live to speak.

We cannot afford witnesses.”

Rohedan stood still. His face betrayed nothing.

But his fingers tightened once around the head of his cane — then relaxed.

“You ask much, Aldion,” he said, his voice unusually flat.

A breath passed. Then, more quietly — and with force:

“But I know what’s at stake. I’ll take care of it.”

Aldion stepped closer.

“I hope so. Because if anything goes wrong...” — a pause — “...you’ll be the first to fall.”

Rohedan inclined his head. Just slightly.

“You may rely on me,” he said — a shade too curt to sound like assent.

Lady Merdiva let her fingers glide idly along the seam of her gown.

Then she took one step toward Aldion.

“We cannot afford such confrontations,” she said calmly.

Her voice was even — commanding, but not combative.

“Our goal is to take control of Astinhod. Mutual threats endanger everything.”

Aldion waved her words aside with a curt gesture.

The Guardians of the Seven Artifacts

His gaze remained on Rohedan.

“See to your henchman,” he repeated — then turned.

His eyes flicked toward Lady Merdiva. The glance was sharp — edged with calculation.

“Sometimes I wonder who truly holds command in this room,” he murmured.

Then, louder:

“And what of Seradia? Have you dealt with her?”

Lady Merdiva gave a faint smile.

“I have already made the first arrangements.”

Aldion nodded and turned his gaze to the corridor window.

“Good. A decision must be made tomorrow — and it must be in our favor.”

“And what of Eryndor?” Rohedan asked.

Lady Merdiva remained composed.

“I will speak with him tonight.”

She paused. Her voice, when it returned, was calm — but certain.

“But we must ensure he sees us as the only serious option.

Pressure — but subtle.

He must believe our victory is inevitable.

And as agreed, I will promise him whatever he demands — for now.

Leave him to me.”

Without waiting for a reply, she turned and vanished into the half-lit corridor that led to her chambers.

She spent the rest of the afternoon in preparation.

First, a bath.

Then she chose a fitted gown — simple, but deliberate.

She wore it with ease.

Before the mirror, she added color to her lips and eyes — careful strokes, no excess.

The Chronicles of Wetherid

At last, her perfume — a trace of rosewater, soft, unmistakable. No sooner had she finished than a knock came at the door — soft, but clear.

“Eryndor,” she greeted him warmly.

“I am pleased you accepted this invitation as well.”

“You don’t make it easy to refuse, Lady Merdiva,” he replied, sinking into the chair.

His gaze settled on her — cool, but not without amusement.

“But I do wonder how many invitations you’ve sent these days.”

Lady Merdiva offered a thin smile.

“Only those that truly matter.”

She stepped closer — her movements smooth, yet deliberate.

“So you truly think you can keep watching the scales tip — just to choose the strongest side in the end?”

Eryndor leaned back, arms loosely crossed, his posture at ease but his voice edged with provocation.

“And why not? I’m in no rush like Aldion or Belmarr.

A wise player keeps his cards until the moment is right.”

The air between them thickened.

Lady Merdiva stepped closer, her voice rising — sharp, controlled.

“A wise player also knows when caution becomes cowardice, Eryndor.

Your restraint might be read as betrayal — and both Aldion and Belmarr would make you answer for it.”

Eryndor stood.

His gaze turned flint-hard.

“Traitor?” he said.

“You’re bold to say such a thing to me.”

Before she could answer, he seized her — hands on her arms, force tight beneath his fingers.

The Guardians of the Seven Artifacts

But she did not move.

No flinch. No recoil. Only stillness.

They stood like that — the moment wound taut, the silence nearly audible.

Then she tilted her head. Her lips curved — faint, dangerous.

“You’re dangerous, Eryndor,” she said, voice low.

“That makes you enticing.”

Her fingers rose — sliding along his neck, slow as smoke.

He held still, tension drawn across him — then broke.

She pulled him to her.

What followed was fierce.

Not calculation.

Not seduction.

A clash — of want, of will, of power barely contained.

When they lay beside each other at last, breath still unsteady, Lady Merdiva’s voice returned — soft as wind across glass.

“You could have everything, Eryndor.”

There was promise in her tone. But more than that — weight.

“Aldion offers title and land. Rohedan, gold.

I offer you something no one else can.

Safety.”

Eryndor turned his head. A weary smile touched his mouth.

“You are persuasive, Lady Merdiva.

But you know I’ll still think on it.

And unless I see it sealed — it’s just talk. Like last time.”

She took his hand — the gesture soft, the grip firm.

“Don’t take too long, Eryndor.

Aldion gave me his word that your terms will be met.

That must be enough.

And he won’t wait forever.

There’s another vote tomorrow. Think carefully.”

The Chronicles of Wetherid

Eryndor rose. He smoothed his robe and let his gaze linger on her a moment longer.

Then, without a word, he left the chamber.

His footsteps faded into the corridor's hush.

Lady Merdiva sat in stillness, her gaze drifting through the quiet room.

Then she stood, crossed to the wardrobe, and swept a cloak around her shoulders.

With brisk steps, she left the palace — and made her way into the city.

Her destination lay hidden in a narrow alley.

A disreputable tavern.

And within it, a sun-darkened southerner already waited.

By Any Means

In the early hours of morning, Seradia sat bent over ledgers and documents, her eyes heavy with numbers and names.

The news was grim.

She had long suspected it.

But now the truth lay open — quiet, final, undeniable.

Then came a knock.

And before she could answer, the door opened.

Lady Merdiva entered — with the ease of someone who no longer asked permission.

Seradia did not even lift her head.

“If you’ve come to urge me to withdraw — you’re wasting your time.”

The door clicked shut.

Lady Merdiva stepped closer, her gaze flicking over the papers sprawled across the table.

The Guardians of the Seven Artifacts

“Oh, I’m not here to waste time, Seradia.

I’ve come to offer you a choice.”

Seradia folded her hands atop the wood. Her face remained unmoved.

“A choice? Name one that isn’t twisted to your will.”

Lady Merdiva gave a thin smile.

“Your financial situation is no secret. And your influence wanes.

But that is not your greatest concern.”

Seradia returned the smile — measured, deliberate.

How does she know? Perhaps she’s bluffing. But even if she speaks truth... she cannot have proof.

“What exactly are you implying?” she asked at last, her voice even, cold.

Lady Merdiva tilted her head slightly.

“I think you already know.”

Seradia’s fingers drifted to the edge of a parchment. She traced it once.

“And? What then? If I refuse to withdraw, will you stand before the council and conjure some revelation?”

“I will do what must be done,” Lady Merdiva replied, her voice quiet — and edged in frost.

“But I offer you the chance to keep control.

Step down willingly. Support Aldion.

And your name remains untouched.

No one need know what I know.”

Seradia leaned back slowly in her chair.

“An interesting offer...”

A pause. Neither moved.

Then she stood.

“...But no.”

Lady Merdiva’s smile vanished.

The Chronicles of Wetherid

“That would be a mistake.”

Seradia gathered the documents from the table.

“That may be.

But if you thought threats would make me yield — then you never knew me.”

Lady Merdiva regarded her for a long moment. No flicker of change crossed her face.

Then she turned and walked to the door.

There, she paused.

“You will regret this, Seradia.

Soon.”

And then she left.

Seradia sat again, her gaze drifting through the chamber — unfocused, still.

She knew Lady Merdiva would act.

The only question was when. And how.



When the midday bell rang, the throne hall began to fill.

On the day’s agenda stood the next vote for the Throne Warden.

But the voices in the room were hushed. The usual feints and skirmishes of court speech had fallen away.

A servant entered the hall and walked directly to Darion.

Without a word, he handed over a sealed parchment.

The wax was dark red — the sigil unfamiliar.

Darion turned it once in his fingers, then snapped the seal cleanly.

He read in silence. His face gave nothing away.

The Guardians of the Seven Artifacts

The servant lingered a moment, offered a slight bow, and withdrew.

One by one, the council members took their seats.

As Seradia sat, she could feel them — the eyes of Rohedan, of Lady Merdiva, of Aldion.

They did not glance. They *watched*.

Deliberate. Quiet. Certain.

She kept her gaze fixed on the polished wood of the table.

Her fingers laced together. She exhaled — once, slowly.

Near the window, Master Drobal sat unmoving.

Yet his gaze, for just a moment, flicked to Lady Merdiva and Rohedan.

They spoke in whispers. Their postures calm. Too calm.

A chair scraped back.

Rohedan rose and placed his hands on the table's edge.

“We should begin today's council with a matter of urgency.”

The murmurs died.

“Serious accusations have been brought against Margravine Seradia of Umlis.

And they must be addressed.”

Seradia did not speak at once.

When she looked up, her expression was calm. Not surprised — only watchful.

“What accusations?” she asked.

Rohedan's voice held steady.

“It is alleged that you maintain contact with smugglers from Irkaar.

That you seek to bring intoxicating substances into the realm.

Such an act would be no mere breach of etiquette — but of royal law.”

The words fell like iron. Calculated. Cold.

Seradia felt it — the weight of every gaze shifting toward her.

The Chronicles of Wetherid

She allowed silence to settle. Then, with steady breath:

“That is a baseless claim. I have never collaborated with smugglers.

Whoever spreads such talk traffics in rumor.”

“Perhaps,” Lady Merdiva said — a faint smile barely visible.

“But rumors of such weight are far too grave to dismiss.”

Then, without warning, Belmarr struck the table with the flat of his hand.

“This accusation is absurd, Rohedan! Seradia has always served the realm with honor.

Though I stand against her, I must protest in the strongest terms.

This is nothing but a transparent attempt to sway the council.”

“No one here is swaying the council,” Rohedan retorted.

Darion straightened and raised his hands in a calming gesture. Then he turned to Rohedan.

“These charges must be addressed — that is clear. But I hope you have evidence.

Because if your accusations prove unfounded, there will be consequences.

For you.”

Rohedan met Darion’s gaze without flinching. His answer came slowly — almost deliberately.

“The proof will come.”

Master Drobald had followed the exchange closely. Seradia remained composed, yet he had noted the brief hesitation before her replies — and her reaction had been anything but surprised.

She expected this.

“I have nothing to hide,” Seradia said calmly.

“I will face the accusations. But until proof is presented, I insist that my candidacy remain valid.”

“That is unacceptable,” Lady Merdiva objected at once.

The Guardians of the Seven Artifacts

“As long as this remains unresolved, your candidacy must be set aside.

It is the only way to preserve the integrity of this council.”

Some members exchanged quiet remarks, while others remained still. Darion ran his fingers along the table’s edge, tapped briefly, then straightened. His gaze found Master Drobol.

The old mage already knew what was coming — another delay.

Darion rose.

“Seradia has the right to prepare her response to these accusations.

It is only fair that all facts be known before a decision is reached.”

He waited a moment, then declared firmly:

“Due to the severity of these charges, the vote is postponed until tomorrow.”

A quiet snort rose from somewhere in the room. Belmarr exhaled deeply, while Ahnwen drew in a sharp breath. Seradia folded her arms. Asteran rubbed his chin. Discontent hung in the air, accompanied by low murmurs.

Eryndor, by contrast, sat motionless — his expression unreadable.

But not all were displeased. Rohedan leaned back, a faint smile playing at the corners of his mouth. Lady Merdiva turned the ring on her finger slowly, watching the scene unfold with visible satisfaction. Aldion let his gaze drift across the chamber — pleased with what he saw.

Then chairs were pushed back. Subdued conversation rose as the first council members stood and made their way toward the exit.

Ahnwen and Asteran exchanged quiet words. Belmarr rose, a resigned look on his face.

Eryndor waited for the right moment.

The Chronicles of Wetherid

As the others withdrew, he stepped — seemingly by chance — toward Belmarr. It was not an attempt to persuade; he knew Belmarr valued principle over strategy.

But Lady Merdiva needed to see that he had made the approach.

He exchanged a few meaningless phrases with Belmarr — spoke of the council's outcome, of the next vote. Not too long, not too familiar. Just enough to convey the image of a conversation.

As he neared the exit, he took his time. Passing Lady Merdiva, he lowered his voice.

“Aldion needs to be more specific. I want binding assurances.”

For a moment, her expression shifted — a flicker of displeasure — but she recovered quickly. She gave a brief nod, turned, and left the hall with Rohedan and Aldion.

Only Master Drobale remained seated at the window, his gaze fixed on Seradia.

She sat motionless, hands clasped upon the table.

Only after the last sound had faded did he rise slowly and step toward her.

“Do these accusations hold any truth?” he asked.

Seradia looked up, tears shimmering in her eyes.

“No!” she burst out, shaking her head. “It’s a lie! I had nothing to do with it!”

He studied her closely, without reproach in his eyes.

“Are you certain?”

The weight in his voice left no doubt — he expected the truth.

Her lips trembled. She searched for words.

“No... I mean, yes! I’m certain. It isn’t true.”

A single tear slipped free and rolled down her cheek. She wiped it away quickly.

Master Drobale nodded slowly.

“Good. Then the truth will come to light.”

The Guardians of the Seven Artifacts

Seradia lowered her head.

“I know.”

Master Drobald stepped back, allowing a silence to settle between them.

“The realm needs those who stand for the truth — now more than ever,” he said at last.

Seradia lifted her head slightly, then gave a slow nod and rose to her feet. With a distracted motion, she smoothed her clothes, as if trying to shake off the weight of the moment. Then she turned and left the hall with measured, deliberate steps.

The heavy doors closed behind her.

Master Drobald remained still for a moment longer, then made his way to Darion’s chambers.

His companions were already waiting when he entered. Darion looked up, his hands clasped before him.

“That was another setback,” he said bluntly. “If the charges against Seradia are confirmed, we lose yet another supporter of Gorathdin’s claim.”

Master Drobald took a seat slowly.

“I spoke with her. She claims she is innocent.”

Belmarr furrowed his brow.

“That may be, but her word alone is not enough. If the accusations hold — or if someone has tampered with the evidence — then Asteran’s vote will matter more than ever. You must speak with him.”

Master Drobald gave a thoughtful nod.

“I’ve already spoken to him. He hesitates — but he listens. I’ll speak with him again tomorrow.”

Darion looked up.

“And Eryndor?”

“He is watching...” Master Drobald said quietly. “He will align with the stronger side — of that I am certain. Our task is to show him that we are that side — unified and resolute.

The Chronicles of Wetherid

So far, he has shown no signs of being corruptible. But since his talk with Belmarr, he has not reached out. That surprises me. I had thought him different. Perhaps I was wrong.”

Belmarr leaned back and crossed his arms.

“You must speak with both — Asteran and Eryndor — before the next vote is called.”

Ahnwen gave a nod of agreement.

“Belmarr is right. We cannot afford to stand without a majority again,” Darion said firmly.

Master Drobal stroked his beard and exhaled.

“I will see to it.”

He rose, left the chamber, and made his way toward his tower, his mind adrift.

As he entered, he let the door fall shut behind him. Without pause, he climbed the stairs.

At the top, his eyes moved across the high shelves. He stepped toward one, drew out a worn volume, and brought it to his desk. There, he sat — and read.



Lady Merdiva did not know of Master Drobal’s thoughts — nor he of hers.

At that very hour, she sat with Aldion and Rohedan in the chambers of the Grand Duke.

She laced her fingers together and leaned forward slightly.

“Eryndor approached me just as we left the throne room. He wants clear written guarantees — precise and binding.”

She paused, then turned to Aldion.

“I had thought, after our last conversation, that he understood such demands would earn your displeasure.”

Rohedan shook his head.

The Guardians of the Seven Artifacts

“Has he lost his mind? If word of this gets out, we’re finished. I thought you had him under control, Lady Merdiva.”

She lifted her eyebrows slightly.

“Eryndor knows very well that he holds leverage over us.”

Aldion let his gaze drift as he weighed how to gain time. The army’s preparations in Kirindor had already begun — but full strength would take longer.

Every day was worth its weight in silence.

He stepped to his desk and beckoned the others closer.

A map of Astinhod lay spread before him, its edges worn.

“Then we must take this step. We have no choice.”

His finger moved along a marked region of land.

“Eryndor will receive this territory once I am the Throne Warden.

And the title of Count. But we keep everything as noncommittal as possible.”

Rohedan stepped back and leaned against the wall, arms crossed.

“A title without an official signature?

If Eryndor has any wit, he’ll demand more.”

His eyes drifted over the map.

Lady Merdiva placed one hand on the table, her gaze following the lines traced across the parchment.

“He’ll be content — for now — so long as he sees something tangible.

We don’t need a full charter. A seal and the right wording will do.

Eryndor must believe he gains more from us than from Belmarr.”

Aldion gave a slow nod.

Rohedan drew a small pouch of gold from his cloak. The coins clinked faintly as he moved.

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“Give him this. Let it serve as proof of goodwill — a taste of what awaits if he votes our way tomorrow.”

Aldion let the pause linger before reaching for a small pot of wax.

He melted a few drops and let them fall beside the mark denoting Eryndor’s future holding.

Then he wrote the letter of appointment and pressed his personal seal onto both — a plain emblem, far from the official seal of the Grand Duke.

He must understand what’s at stake. And no one must be able to claim we made him promises.

Lady Merdiva offered a thin smile and took both map and pouch.

“Eryndor wanted something tangible — now he has it.

I will make it clear to him that the rest remains at risk, should he test our patience.”

Aldion watched her a moment longer, then added curtly:

“And see to it that Asteran’s voice is not left unheard.”

She gave a brief nod and left the chamber.

With measured steps, she crossed the high halls of the palace, the soft chime of her jewelry marking each footfall.

The corridors lay in quiet shadow, but she knew them without light.

Before she could face her next conversation, a precaution had to be taken.

To walk openly with documents and gold would have been careless.

And so she returned to her chambers.

There, she placed the pouch and the letter into a concealed compartment behind the wall panel.

Then she stepped out again, the door falling shut with quiet finality.

She paused.

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Asteran was always cautious.

A conversation with him could not be rushed.

Each word, each gesture — weighed.

At last, she made her way through the corridor, passed beneath the arch of gilded stone, and entered the palace garden.

The moon had risen. Soft light fell across the stone paths and sculpted hedges.

The leaves whispered in the evening breeze.

The pavilion stood apart — screened by tall bushes — but through the branches, she could already see Asteran's silhouette.

As ever, he sat upon the stone bench, his gaze fixed upon the garden, as if searching for something no one else could see.

"Good evening," Lady Merdiva said gently as she stepped into the pavilion.

"I hope I'm not intruding?"

Asteran turned his gaze toward her.

"Lady Merdiva. Out so late?"

"At times, one must tend to matters of importance — even at night."

She smiled faintly and took the seat beside him.

"I thought we might speak. Alone."

Asteran nodded, though his posture carried a trace of unease.

"And may I ask... about what?"

She regarded him evenly. Calm. Careful.

"I wonder why you've not made your position clear. What is it that holds you back?"

He leaned back, his eyes catching the moonlight with a flicker of silver.

"One does not choose lightly — not now.

To me, only one thing matters: to do what is right, at the right time.

For the Crown of Astinhod. For the realm."

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She let his words hang a moment before answering:

“That is honourable.

But I wonder — what defines that right moment?

After all, we pursue the same ends, do we not?

Stability. Strength. The kingdom, protected.”

Asteran raised an eyebrow but said nothing.

Lady Merdiva caught the shift in tone and offered a warm smile.

“I remember well when Queen Lythinda was still a child.

It was my privilege to guide her in the customs of the court, and to care for her often.

Her father, King Grandhold, held my family in high regard.

He often sought my counsel — and I always endeavored to serve him with wisdom and care.”

Asteran watched her, his face unreadable.

She continued:

“And Arkondir...”

She paused. The memory pressed too close.

“We spoke often. His loyalty, his mind — they always impressed me.

His loss struck me deeply.

I do not mourn a commander alone, but a friend.”

Asteran gave a slow nod, as though accepting part of her words.

“So — the realm could always count on your wisdom?” he asked. There was an edge beneath the calm.

“I have always tried to serve my country,” she answered, quiet now.

“And I hope you see how much I strive for unity and stability — just as you do.”

He was silent for a moment, then rose and smoothed the folds of his tunic.

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“I will consider your words, Lady Merdiva.

But my decisions will be made for the realm — not for private interests.”

She straightened, gaze locked to his.

“That is precisely what I ask of you.

Make your choice for the realm.”

As Asteran left the pavilion, Lady Merdiva remained still for a moment, watching his retreat.

Did he believe me?

Doubt stirred beneath her composure.

But at least she had made him think — and that was a beginning.

Night had long since fallen over the garden, but one matter remained.

She still had to speak with Eryndor.

She turned toward his chambers.

At the door, she paused — then knocked.

After a moment, it opened.

“What do you want at this hour?” Eryndor asked, surprised.

“Come with me,” said Lady Merdiva.

“I have what you asked for.”

Without another word, he stepped into the corridor and followed her.

They walked in silence through the marble halls until they reached her chambers.

She locked the door behind them, crossed to a wall panel, opened it, and withdrew a small chest.

She placed it on the table and opened the lid, laying out its contents — a map, a sealed scroll, and a pouch of gold.

Eryndor took the pouch, weighed it in his hand, loosened the cord, and looked inside.

“It’s not much,” he said calmly.

“A token of goodwill.

You will receive tenfold — once you vote for Aldion.”

He hesitated — but said nothing.

Instead, he unrolled the map and examined the marked region.

He noted the seal in passing — then reached for the scroll.

His name was written there. And beneath it — a title: Count.

But when his eyes found the seal, his brow darkened.

Frowning, he lifted the parchment to the lamplight.

“This seal...”

He let the words hang. Then his voice hardened:

“This is not the seal of the Grand Duke.”

Lady Merdiva paused — then met his gaze.

“What did you expect?

The Grand Duke’s seal would be of no use to you.

This is Aldion’s private seal — the mark of his word.

Only after he has been named Throne Warden may he grant official lands and titles.”

Eryndor considered this.

She’s right. Aldion would have to be chosen first. So this is more than just talk.

“Very well,” he said at last, with a short nod.

“This is more concrete.”

Then he looked up again, voice low and cold:

“But do not forget — you are not the only ones.”

Lady Merdiva exhaled slowly. Her patience had thinned to its edge.

“Eryndor, do not overplay your hand. I warn you.”

Her lips pressed together.

For a moment, she considered keeping him that night — then let the thought pass.

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“I think it’s best if you leave now,” she said.

Eryndor gave a small shrug.

“As you wish.”

She opened the door, stepped aside, and he left her chambers.

— ✂ —

At dawn the next morning, as the first pale light touched the palace windows, the halls stirred awake.

Servants moved with quiet purpose. Council members prepared for the hearing — Seradia’s defense, set for midday, followed by the next vote.

As was custom, Lady Merdiva, Rohedan, and Aldion gathered in Aldion’s opulent chambers.

Heavy curtains hung half-drawn. The room glowed with muted light.

Aldion stood at the long table, papers spread before him.

“I’ve taken measures to undermine Gorathdin’s claim,” he said, sliding several pages toward Lady Merdiva.

“These letters imply a link to the murders. Not proof — but enough to sow suspicion.”

Lady Merdiva picked one up, brushed her fingers over the parchment, and read in silence.

A faint smile curved her lips.

“You never fail to surprise, Aldion.”

“They don’t accuse him directly,” Aldion said.

“But they raise just enough doubt. Doubt gives us the edge we need.”

And buys more time for my army.

Lady Merdiva set the letter down again.

In the corner, Rohedan shifted in his chair.

“Master Drobald will speak for Gorathdin,” he said. His voice held a note of caution.

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“He’ll demand irrefutable proof — and we have none.”

Lady Merdiva turned to him.

“That doesn’t matter.

We’re not here to convict Gorathdin.

We’re here to plant doubt — and doubt spreads on its own.”

She allowed herself a sharper smile.

“Today will serve us well.

Seradia will fall.

And Gorathdin will stand accused.”

While the three continued their preparations, Master Drobal made his way through the morning corridors toward Eryndor’s chambers.

He knocked.

After a moment, the door opened.

Eryndor’s eyes widened — just slightly.

“Master Drobal? I wasn’t expecting you.”

“Whom were you expecting, then?” Master Drobal asked, tone mild.

Eryndor glanced down the corridor and didn’t answer.

“What can I do for you?”

Master Drobal did not break eye contact.

“May I come in?”

A pause. Then Eryndor stepped aside and gestured toward the interior.

“Please. Come in.”

They sat at the window table, overlooking the garden.

Sunlight touched the glass, soft and golden.

Master Drobal leaned in slightly, his voice calm and unhurried.

“Eryndor, I’d like to know why you’ve abstained from every vote.”

Eryndor hesitated. His gaze slid sideways.

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“Belmarr hasn’t convinced me,” he said.

“Nor has Aldion. Or Seradia.

Although... Seradia’s candidacy likely won’t matter much longer.”

“Not yet,” Master Drobal corrected.

“She is to be heard today.”

“Ah. Yes... of course.”

Eryndor waved the thought aside.

“I had nearly forgotten.”

But Master Drobal did not shift, and did not let him pass.

“What exactly do you hold against Belmarr?

You know as well as I do that he has served the throne loyally — and would continue to do so.”

Eryndor raised a brow. His expression remained untouched.

“That may be your view, Master Drobal.

To me... he’s too rash. Too forceful.

He acts as if the right were always on his side — and I do not share all his views.

Frankly, some of it belongs to another age.

The times have changed.”

Master Drobal folded his hands on the table.

“And Aldion? What is your view of him?”

Eryndor considered briefly.

“A strong man. Capable. Determined.

But perhaps too quick to act.

I’m not certain what direction his rule would take.

He is... difficult to read.”

Master Drobal studied him closely.

“So you’re still undecided about who you’ll support?”

Eryndor gave a thin smile.

“First, I will wait for Seradia’s hearing.

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Then I will consider further.”

Master Drobald let the words hang a moment.

“And where do you stand on Gorathdin?” he asked directly.

Eryndor lifted a hand in quiet refusal.

“He is the husband of the murdered queen.

What am I to make of that?”

“I mean — do you support him as rightful heir to the throne?”

Master Drobald pressed.

Eryndor leaned back and folded his arms.

“I have not yet considered it.

First, the matter of the Throne Warden must be settled.

Then the succession.

One thing at a time.”

Master Drobald felt the evasion — smooth and practiced.

He slips like a serpent.

“What might hasten your decision?” he asked.

“Time is short.”

Eryndor fixed him with a level gaze.

“There are many things that could influence my decision.”

“And those would be?” Master Drobald asked, calm but unwavering.

Eryndor’s smile returned.

“Perhaps an enemy attack.

Or a stroke of fate.

Much can change a landscape.”

Master Drobald said nothing.

He hides well behind that mask. But pressing further would be a mistake.

“I thank you for your candor, Eryndor,” he said courteously.

He stayed a while longer, speaking of stability and unity — but Eryndor offered little beyond polite nods.

When Master Drobald rose, his gaze turned toward the window.

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In the garden pavilion, he caught sight of Asteran — alone, hands folded, still.

I must speak with him.

He excused himself and left the chamber.

But when he reached the pavilion, Asteran was gone.

His eyes swept the gravel paths and trimmed lawns.

The garden stretched wide — a quiet maze of tall hedges, narrow arches, and winding walkways lined with white, violet, and pale pink bloom.

No garish splendor — only a restrained, meticulous grace.

Scattered among the paths stood marble statues, half-veiled behind foliage.

Water murmured everywhere — small fountains, and a long rectangular pool that caught the sun.

He followed the paths — checking each turn, each alcove, behind every hedge.

But Asteran was nowhere to be found.

At last, he returned to the palace.

He knocked at Asteran's door. Waited. No answer.

His brow furrowed.

"Where has he gone?" he murmured.

He made his way to Darion's chambers and knocked.

After a moment, the door opened.

"Would you happen to know where Asteran is?"

He kept his tone measured.

"I've been looking for him — garden, rooms, nowhere to be found."

Darion shook his head.

"No. I haven't seen him at all this morning."

Master Drobald allowed his concern to show.

"I spoke with Eryndor earlier.

Nothing new — he still refuses to take a position.

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But something about him unsettles me.

I can't name it."

Darion leaned lightly against the doorframe.

"Did you make him an offer?"

Master Drobalo slowly shook his head.

"No. I wasn't certain — and thought it too dangerous."

Darion sighed, the sound soft and shallow.

Weariness flickered in his features.

"Then let us hope we reach a decision today.

We'll meet soon in the throne hall.

Until then, I'll make ready for the council."

Master Drobalo gave a curt nod and turned to leave.

But the thought of Asteran clung to him.

He returned once more to the councilor's quarters and knocked. No answer.

Then back through the garden, retracing his steps — listening, watching, pausing at each corner.

But Asteran was nowhere.

Of all days... and he vanishes. That cannot bode well.

As the morning passed and the sun climbed higher, he made his way to the throne hall.

He was among the first to arrive.

Lady Merdiva and Aldion entered soon after — composed as ever, with a bearing that bordered on defiance.

Then Asteran appeared.

He stepped into the hall with slow, even strides, and as he passed Master Drobalo, he offered a polite smile.

At least he's here now. I'd feared he might not show at all.

I must speak with him before the vote — during one of the breaks.

Darion entered moments later, his gaze sweeping briefly across the gathering.

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Without a word, he took his seat at the head of the table and waited.

When silence settled, he spoke.

“Today we address the accusations against Margravine Seradia of Umlis,” he said, and paused.

“After that, we will vote again — in hopes of finally reaching a result.”

Before he could continue, Rohedan’s voice rang out:

“Why is Seradia here?”

His tone was sharp, his eyes fixed on her with open suspicion.

Seradia met his gaze without flinching — chin slightly lifted, her posture calm.

Darion straightened.

“Did you truly believe a single allegation would suffice to expel a council member from this hall?”

Rohedan leaned back, the tension still in his face.

“You are, of course, correct... I merely thought...”

His voice softened.

“...given the vote today, it might be wise to involve only those of unimpeachable standing.”

Seradia gave a soft snort.

“I have committed no wrongdoing,” she said firmly.

“The accusations are baseless — a brazen lie meant to block my candidacy.”

Lady Merdiva leaned forward slightly, her voice cool and composed.

“That may be. But it changes little.

No one here can say with certainty whether you are still to be trusted, Margravine.”

Master Drobald stepped to her side, his tone calm, almost quiet.

“I fear that was the very point of the accusation.

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In my view, there isn't a single piece of evidence to support the claim."

"Nor to disprove it," Aldion said.

His gaze was cold, resting on Seradia.

"She can no longer be trusted. That is enough for me."

Darion shook his head — but before he could respond, two guards stepped into the chamber.

Their boots echoed across the stone.

Their expressions carried urgency as they approached the throne.

"Forgive the interruption, my lord," one of them said, voice steady.

"There is a man outside who wishes to make a statement. It concerns Margravine Seradia."

Darion's expression sharpened.

"Bring him in."

The guards withdrew.

A hush followed — tight as breath.

Most of all, it gathered around Seradia.

What has she come up with this time?

"You lying viper! You're despicable! You old witch!"

Her voice trembled — not with fear, but with fury hot enough to burn.

Darion's voice cut through the uproar like a blade.

"Silence!"

Lady Merdiva turned her head, offered Seradia a cool smile, and went on — untouched, unshaken.

"When one of my servants reported the meeting with this man, I returned to Seradia and improved my offer.

But this foolish woman refused it."

Seradia burst into tears.

"Yes — I spoke with him!

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He made me an offer, and I turned it down!

I never wanted any of this!

I have committed no crime!”

Then she fixed her gaze on Lady Merdiva, voice low and venomous.

“She is lying.”

Lady Merdiva met her with perfect stillness — only the faint trace of a smile, almost pitying.

Darion rose. His eyes swept briefly to Ahnwen, then to Master Drobald.

“In light of the statements from Lady Merdiva, Margravine Seradia, and the witness,” he said, his tone formal,

“there is no evidence of a crime.

No harm was done, and no law appears to have been broken.”

He paused.

“However, we must now address the question of trust.”

The words struck Seradia like a slap.

A hush passed through the chamber.

Master Drobald remained still — but his eyes revealed disappointment, heavy and sharp.

Darion called upon the council to vote.

Hands rose — more than enough.

Darion gave a slow, solemn nod.

“Seradia’s candidacy is hereby declared void,” he said.

“You may no longer take part in the negotiations held in the throne hall.

Perhaps it would be best if you withdrew from court until these matters are resolved.”

Seradia gave no reply.

She turned. Her head bowed.

Tears streaked her face as she left the chamber.

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The eyes of the council followed her until the doors closed behind her.

Then Darion turned to Kaaron. His expression had grown cold.

“Guards. Arrest this man and place him in the dungeons — on charges of trading in forbidden substances.”

Kaaron’s eyes flew wide.

“What? The dungeon?”

His voice cracked.

“It’s the margravine who should be thrown in the dungeon — not me!”

Darion crossed his arms. His reply was quiet, but iron.

“What did you expect, Kaaron?”

You walk into this chamber, accuse a margravine — and expect to walk free as a dealer of contraband?”

The guards moved in.

Kaaron fought them, struggling, shouting — but it changed nothing.

At the last, all that remained was his glare.

And he turned it on Lady Merdiva.

“Bitch!” he spat.

Lady Merdiva met his eyes. And smiled. Cold as glass.

Fool.

They dragged him from the hall.

For a long breath, silence held the room.

Then voices stirred — a scatter of whispers, swiftly smothered, as Aldion rose.

He stepped forward and slowly unrolled the parchment scrolls.

The Accusation

“Lords and ladies of the council,” he began, his voice grave,

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“before we proceed, there is one more matter that can no longer be ignored.”

A ripple of unease passed through the hall.

Aldion’s voice rose — loud, steady, and deliberate.

“There is evidence suggesting that Gorathdin may have been involved in the recent murders.”

He pointed to a folded letter laid before him on the council table.

The reaction was immediate.

Master Drobald folded his hands before him.

His gaze fixed on Aldion as his voice cut through the rising murmur.

“Evidence? We have letters with no verified source.

Any skilled hand could have written them.”

Lady Merdiva leaned forward slightly. Her voice was soft — but edged with challenge.

“Can you say with certainty that these letters did not come from Gorathdin?”

Can you truly take that weight upon yourself?”

Master Drobald stepped toward the table.

His eyes passed slowly over the scrolls.

“I guarantee nothing — save the pursuit of truth.

And the truth is this: these letters prove nothing.

They show only how far some will go to sow mistrust.”

A long silence followed.

Then Darion spoke, voice low and formal.

“This assembly will reconvene in the afternoon.

The accusations against Gorathdin will be weighed in due order.”

Lady Merdiva, Aldion, Rohedan, and Eryndor rose and left the chamber.

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Their eyes met briefly — sharp, appraising, unspoken lines drawn.

Asteran remained behind. He stepped closer to Darion.

“We must counter these accusations without delay,” he said, his tone urgent.

“It is unacceptable that the consort of a queen be so brazenly defamed.”

Darion sighed — long and quiet. His features stayed grave.

“We’ll do everything we can to expose the lie.

But we need time.

No one expected this — and not today of all days.”

Asteran shook his head.

“It is disgraceful, what’s unfolded here these past days.

As if the three murders weren’t enough.”

He turned, as though to leave.

“One moment, Asteran,” Master Drobal called.

Asteran paused and looked back.

Master Drobal stepped closer.

“You see it as I do — how Lady Merdiva, Aldion, and Rohedan will stop at nothing to claim power.”

Asteran gave the faintest nod.

But his posture offered no commitment.

Belmarr rose and crossed to him.

“Will you not raise your voice at last?

Or would you rather watch as Aldion leads the realm into ruin?”

His gaze locked on Asteran — waiting.

After a pause, Asteran replied:

“I will answer you in the words of King Grandhold.

A conflict is like a storm.

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One may feel tempted to flee — but wisdom lies in standing still, reading the winds...

and then choosing the right path.”

He gave a brief bow and left the chamber with slow, measured steps.

Belmarr shook his head.

“I do not understand him.

What more must happen before he takes a stand?”

Master Drobald let Asteran’s words linger — then turned slowly from the door.

Ahnwen struck the table with his open palm.

“These letters are forgeries!

And still we know — lies are often louder than truth.”

Darion leaned over the documents, reading each line with care.

“That’s precisely their aim,” he said tightly.

“They don’t need proof — only doubt.

If Eryndor or Asteran begins to waver...

and if we fail to disprove this quickly — and word reaches the people — we face a far greater threat.”

Master Drobald nodded slowly.

“Rumors are a dangerous weapon,” he said, eyes narrowing on the letters.

“They’ve been forged with care.

We must examine them again — perhaps we’ll find a flaw.”

His gaze shifted toward the royal writing desk.

Then to Darion.

“You must have letters bearing Gorathdin’s own hand.

We must compare the signatures.”

Darion gave a curt nod.

He stepped to the desk in the corner, opened a drawer, and drew forth a parchment.

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He laid it on the table.

Master Drobal skimmed the contents — then bent closer, studying the signature with care.

“I need time to examine them in greater detail.”

Without another word, he took the parchments and left the chamber.

His steps were steady as he made his way through the corridors and up the spiraling stair.

At the top, in the solitude of his tower, he spread the letters across his worktable — and began to study.

Time passed.

— ✂ —

By afternoon, the council had returned to the throne hall.

The weight of the morning lingered in the air, pressing on brows and darkening glances.

Master Drobal entered last.

He said nothing. The parchments rested firm in his hand.

He leaned against the windowsill and waited.

Aldion’s voice cracked through the stillness.

“Why these constant delays, Darion?

The letters are clear — Gorathdin was involved in the murders.”

Master Drobal turned. His eyes fixed on Aldion.

“Truth requires scrutiny.

I asked for time to examine the letters properly.

Call it a delay, if you like — I call it caution.”

“Caution?” Aldion scoffed.

“You’re only stalling!”

Master Drobal ignored him.

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He raised the parchments to the light pouring through the window.

Some in the chamber watched with curiosity. Others frowned, arms crossed.

Lady Merdiva stepped forward, her voice taut.

“What are you doing?”

You won’t find anything that disproves the evidence.”

Master Drobal did not look at her.

“Patience, Lady Merdiva.

There are marks that only strong light can reveal.”

He stepped to the table, laid the parchments down with care, and extended a hand.

“Quill, ink, and a blank sheet — if you would,” he said, glancing at Ahnwen.

A ripple passed through the room — uncertain, questioning.

But Ahnwen rose without a word.

He crossed the hall, opened the drawer of the writing desk, and placed the materials before Master Drobal.

“I would like to show you something,” Master Drobal said quietly.

“Another trick?” Aldion called.

“You waste our time.”

But Master Drobal said nothing more.

He seated himself beside Belmarr, dipped the quill, and began to trace the name — Gorathdin.

The scratching of ink against parchment filled the chamber.

No one spoke. No one moved.

When the copy was finished, he set the quill aside.

Then he reached into his pouch and drew out a small magnifying glass.

Bending over the page, he examined his work.

Then the letters.

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When he looked up, the glass still in hand, his voice was quiet — but unshakable.

“Look here.”

He raised the glass, so the council could see.

“These three signatures on Aldion’s letters are perfectly identical.

Not a single deviation — not even the faintest irregularity.”

Aldion crossed his arms.

“And?” he said, his tone defensive.

“What does that prove?”

Master Drobald spoke gently — but the words carried weight.

“It proves that no living hand signs their name the same way twice.

Not even a scribe trained from childhood.

There is always a change — in pressure, in curve, in the smallest flick of the wrist.

These... are not signatures.

They are copies. Reproduced with perfect control. A skilled forgery.”

Murmurs spread through the room — some hushed in disbelief, others turning to study the letters anew.

Master Drobald reached for the formal scroll Darion had handed him earlier.

He placed it beside the accused documents.

“This,” he said,

“is a signed decree from Gorathdin himself.

It will serve as our comparison.”

He pointed with precision to the signature.

“Here — the ‘G’ in Gorathdin.

See that blot of ink? The quill paused — just a breath — before finishing the curve.”

Then he gestured to the other letters.

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“Now look.”

“But these here are flawless. No hesitation, no irregularity — they are, quite simply, perfect.”

He set a magnifying glass on the table.

“Examine them for yourselves.”

The council members leaned in, bending over the documents with growing suspicion, eyes narrowing as they studied the signatures.

“This is absurd,” Aldion snapped.

“You believe your reading of ink blots constitutes a defense?”

Master Drobald turned to face him, gaze steady, unmoved — almost inviting.

“If you do not trust me,” he said, “then I ask you — here and now — sign your name three times.

Show us that your own hand can do what you accuse Gorathdin of.”

Aldion froze. His face tightened.

“I will not be made a pawn in your little performance.”

Ahnwen stepped beside him.

“But you’re willing to wager a man’s life on these letters?” he asked.

Belmarr’s voice followed — quiet but firm.

“If you’re so certain, then prove it. Or admit the letters are a lie.”

Another wave of whispers stirred around the chamber.

Aldion hesitated.

Then, with a grim expression, he reached for the quill.

He signed his name three times on a blank parchment, each stroke heavier than the last, and slid it across to Master Drobald.

Master Drobald took the glass and examined the signatures in silence.

After a moment, he set it down.

The Chronicles of Wetherid

“Exactly as I expected,” he said quietly.

“What?” Darion and Aldion said in unison.

Master Drobald lifted the glass again.

“At first glance, they appear identical. But under closer scrutiny, the differences are plain.

The curve of the A shifts slightly each time. The stroke in the N thins in the second.

Now look here.”

He placed the forged letters beside them.

“These three signatures are perfectly, unnaturally identical.

There is no doubt — they are forged.”

A burst of voices rose — some gasping, others calling out, others still protesting.

Darion stepped in sharply.

“Where did you get this letter?” he asked, eyes locked on Aldion.

Aldion’s chin rose. His voice turned guarded.

“They were lying at my door this morning.

I found them as I stepped out.”

Darion did not blink.

“You expect us to believe you simply found them there?

That stretches belief.”

Belmarr let out a short laugh.

“To me, this is nothing but a pitiful attempt to escape consequence.”

Ahnwen’s tone was cool.

“It’s hard to imagine Aldion placing himself in such a trap by accident.

We should focus on the larger issue: this was a clear attempt at manipulation.”

“This is most improper,” Lady Merdiva broke in.

“Aldion is being condemned here without a shred of proof.

The Guardians of the Seven Artifacts

Yes, the letters are forged — but who is to say they weren't planted, precisely to discredit him before the council?"

Rohedan rose at once.

"I demand an investigation!" he barked.

"The Grand Duke of Astinhod is being accused of dishonor — I will not allow that to stand."

Darion exhaled through his nose — sharp, controlled.

"What would that accomplish?"

"There's no solid proof of who forged or planted the letters. But if you insist..."

He let his gaze rest on Rohedan — then Aldion.

Neither said a word.

Rohedan waved a hand, muttered something beneath his breath, and sat.

Eryndor's gaze drifted across the chamber, watching every flicker, every breath.

Then Asteran stood.

"In this overheated atmosphere," he said, voice calm but firm, "no judgment worth its name can be made.

I propose we delay the vote until tomorrow.

What we need now is clarity — not more heat."

Darion passed a hand over his face.

"Another delay?" he said, voice low with disbelief.

Eryndor spoke without hesitation.

"Asteran is right.

We must first absorb what's happened today."

"First Seradia, now this accusation against Gorathdin — it's too much to ask for sound judgment tonight.

Wouldn't you agree?"

Darion sighed and glanced toward Master Drobai, who merely gave a slow shrug.

The Chronicles of Wetherid

“Very well. We reconvene tomorrow at the eighth bell,” he said at last, then exhaled long and deep.

Eryndor and Asteran were the first to leave the throne hall, followed in silence by Lady Merdiva, Aldion, and Rohedan.

Master Drobale, Darion, Belmarr, and Ahnwen remained.

They stood motionless, unspeaking.

For a while, the chamber held nothing but the hush of breath and stone.

Then — without agreement, without haste — they rose and walked in solemn steps to Darion’s chambers.

Inside, Darion said nothing. He loosened the bandages at his shoulder, drew a long breath, and leaned back against the cushioned chair.

At last, he looked up.

“Does anyone want a glass of wine?” he asked.

“I think I need something to steady my nerves tonight.”

The others nodded in silence.

Darion opened a narrow cabinet and took out a round-bellied bottle and four crystal glasses — finely cut, delicate in the light.

With calm hands, he poured the deep red wine and passed the glasses one by one.

“I’m glad you exposed the deceit, Master Drobale,” Darion said, lifting his glass.

“Especially before it had the chance to spread. The consequences might’ve been far worse.”

Belmarr nodded in quiet agreement.

“Worse would be putting it mildly,” Master Drobale replied, his eyes resting on the wine’s surface.

“The battle isn’t won yet. I only hope Asteran casts his vote for Belmarr tomorrow — and that Eryndor begins to see how Aldion’s grip is slipping.”

“I hope so as well,” said Darion, taking a measured sip.

Master Drobale fell quiet.

The Guardians of the Seven Artifacts

I wonder if all these debates and intrigues in the throne room are truly where my time belongs.

Should I not be elsewhere by now?

A trace of doubt flickered across his face — but he masked it quickly.

Ahnwen leaned back, his fingers resting lightly on the arms of his chair.

“I think we’ve earned a quiet end to the evening,” he said.

“Tomorrow will be long.”

Darion nodded, setting his glass aside with care.

“An excellent suggestion, Ahnwen.

A little more rest will do me good.”

Master Drobald placed his half-full glass on the side table and rose.

“Rest well. I’ll see you at first light.”

With a slight bow of the head, he made his way to the door.

Ahnwen followed.

Together they stepped into the corridor — then parted ways.

Master Drobald turned toward the tower.

His footsteps echoed faintly along the stone.

At the door to his study, he paused, drew a quiet breath, then entered.

He set down his cloak, lit a candle, and seated himself at the table.

For a time, he did not move.

Then, slowly, he leaned back — reviewing once more the plans he had laid for the day to come.

— ✧ —

The Chronicles of Wetherid

The sun had only just risen.

Its light filtered through a veil of cloud, soft and slow.

A breeze stirred the garden trees. Scattered servants moved quietly through the palace grounds, clearing the last traces of night.

The paths had been swept. The marble walls shone.

The flowerbeds bloomed in full color — roses, violets, pale clusters of starwort.

A scent hung in the air — fresh, sweet, a breath of stillness.

But within the throne hall, the hush was heavier.

Chairs slid across the floor in slow rhythm.

Robes rustled.

Murmurs passed like wind among stone.

Master Drobal stood by the window, his gaze turned outward.

A lone bird rose beyond the palace wall and vanished into the sky.

The air within the chamber felt tight with waiting.

No one spoke of it, but all knew: this day could tip the balance.

As the council settled into place, the voices fell away.

All eyes turned toward Darion — just as the heavy doors swung open.

The captain of the guard entered at a brisk pace, his expression dark.

Conversation broke off at once.

He stepped to Darion's side and bent low to whisper something in his ear.

Darion's expression darkened. A flicker of disbelief passed across his features.

He rose and gestured for Master Drobal to join him, speaking in a hushed undertone behind his hand.

"The captain reports that Aldion has mobilized his army.

It's already marching toward Astinhod.

The Guardians of the Seven Artifacts

I received a message days ago — something about troop movements in Kirindor...

but I didn't question it.

A mistake."

Master Drobals face tightened. His eyes grew grave.

"I did not expect this. That he would go so far..."

"What is it you did not expect?" Lady Merdiva's voice cut through — cool, inquisitive.

Master Drobals looked at her — but gave no reply.

Instead, he turned to the captain and pulled him aside.

"Alert the army. They must be ready to defend Astinhod at once.

Strengthen the palace guard — include the watch on the throne room.

We must be prepared for anything," he whispered.

The captain bowed and departed.

Master Drobals turned back to Darion, paused, then faced Lady Merdiva.

"Did you know Aldion has mobilized his army — and that it is already on its way to Astinhod?"

A flicker of surprise crossed her face — brief, then gone.

Inside, her thoughts churned.

That traitor. I never should have trusted him.

She leaned back, cast a fleeting glance toward Aldion, and returned her gaze to Master Drobals.

"No. I knew nothing of it.

But in times like these, can it truly hurt to have a stronger military presence in Astinhod?"

Her tone was measured. Too measured.

Master Drobals saw through her.

His eyes remained cold, while she weighed how best to contain the fallout.

The Chronicles of Wetherid

If Aldion turned to force, the blow might strike her with him.

But if he succeeded — she could still stand beside him as a strategist, not a conspirator.

Aldion pushed back his chair and rose.

With unhurried steps, he moved around the table, letting his gaze rest on each of them in turn.

Then he spoke — calm, composed.

“Yes. It is true.

My army is on its way to Astinhod.”

The words cracked like a whip.

Heads turned.

A chair scraped across the floor.

Voices overlapped — disbelief surged through the chamber like a flood.

Outrage followed.

Darion rose again, his eyes fixed on Aldion.

“Why does your army march on the capital while we are still choosing the Throne Warden?

This is no precaution — it’s a threat.”

Aldion raised a brow. His reply came smooth as polished steel.

“No, Darion. It is protection — for Astinhod, and for the realm.

If you choose to see that as a threat, then perhaps it speaks more to your intentions than to mine.”

Master Drobald stepped closer to the table.

His voice remained even — but it carried weight.

“If you seek to protect the realm, then why did you not inform this council?

Why do your troops move in secret, as though there were something to hide?”

Aldion paused. His gaze met Master Drobald’s.

“I have nothing to hide.

The Guardians of the Seven Artifacts

But you forget — safety is not built on speeches.

It is forged in action.

And while others talk, I act.”

“Deeds that endanger us all,” Ahnwen countered, voice sharp with fire.

“What happens when your troops reach the city?

What is your next move?”

Aldion smiled faintly.

“My men will ensure that no enemy — from without or within — threatens this city.

What follows is up to you.”

For the first time that day, Asteran spoke.

His voice was deep, slow — and implacable.

“An army at our gates. A council ruled by doubt.

And a vote still delayed.

It is a disgrace.”

He sat again.

Lady Merdiva let her gaze drift across the room before she rose and stepped calmly beside the table.

Her posture remained composed — but her gaze moved with cold precision through the room.

“Perhaps we should take a brief recess,” she said, her tone even.

“So that each of us may reassess the situation.

Let us continue this discussion in the afternoon.”

Darion looked at her, narrowing his eyes.

He had no desire to allow another delay.

But before he could speak, Master Drobald stepped quietly to his side and whispered:

“Better still — postpone until tomorrow.

If need be, we convene at first light.

The Chronicles of Wetherid

We need more time.”

Darion hesitated — then raised a hand to call the room to order.

“Given the circumstances,” he said, his voice firm,

“and the tension we all feel, I propose we postpone the vote until tomorrow morning.

We must take time to assess the situation fully — and return to this council with clarity.

We meet again at dawn.”

He swept the chamber with his gaze — measuring the faces.

They nodded — some curtly, others with visible relief.

Master Drobale, Darion, Belmarr, and Ahnwen departed the hall together.

Not long after, the captain entered with several heavily armed guards.

Together, they made their way to Darion’s chambers.

No sooner had they arrived than Darion tried to fold his arms — but a sharp pain flared in his wounded shoulder.

Instead, he clenched his hands and turned to the window.

“He intends to intimidate to intimidate us with his army — that much is clear.

And if that fails, he’ll use force without hesitation.”

Master Drobale sat slowly, drawing a deep breath.

“He won’t strike immediately. But the mobilization is a message. Plain. Intentional.”

“If we do nothing, he’ll lay siege to the city,” Belmarr said, turning to the captain.

“He’ll turn the people against us.”

“How strong is our defense?”

The captain answered without delay.

“The city holds close to three thousand soldiers.

The field army numbers around twenty-five hundred.

The Guardians of the Seven Artifacts

My personal guard brings another five hundred.
The fortifications are sound — they'd hold under siege.
But an open battle beyond the walls... would be a gamble."
Darion frowned.

"A siege would break morale. Our supplies are already stretched.

If Aldion stirs unrest, we may fall before a single sword is drawn."

Master Drobald gave a single nod.

"That's precisely his plan. He knows he can't breach the city — not by strength.

But if he surrounds it... if he turns the people, we'll be powerless."

He turned to the captain.

"Begin preparations for a siege.

Secure provisions for several weeks. Call up the garrison.

But quietly — no panic."

"How long until Aldion's forces arrive?" Ahnwen asked.

The captain's voice lowered.

"They may be here by morning."

Master Drobald made a swift gesture with his hand.

"See that everything is in place. Keep us informed."

The captain saluted and left.

Once the door had closed, Master Drobald turned back to the others.

"Tomorrow, we press Aldion harder.

We force him to speak plainly — or trap himself.

If we can draw out the truth, we charge him with treason."

Belmarr nodded grimly.

"We must withdraw our trust from him. That will force his hand.

The Chronicles of Wetherid

He'll reveal himself — sooner than he intends.”

Darion stood.

He reached for the heavy Book of Imperial Law, opened it, and laid it upon the table.

Together, they bent over its pages — searching for the clauses that still offered them a way forward.

— ✧ —

At the same time, Lady Merdiva entered Aldion's chambers, Rohedan at her side.

No sooner had the door closed than she turned sharply toward Aldion.

“What were you thinking — sending your army to Astinhod without informing us?”

Rohedan's expression darkened.

“You're putting pressure on the Council, Aldion.

That may have consequences — for all of us.

Was it not agreed we would act together?”

Aldion remained still in his chair.

He let the silence stretch — then smiled, sharp and unbothered.

“We've wasted enough time.

This Council hesitates. It debates. It delays.

It was time someone acted.

And truly — why are you so upset?”

His voice turned cold, the words like cuts of ice as his gaze moved between Lady Merdiva and Rohedan.

“You should be grateful you have me.

My army is the only thing that truly puts pressure on Astinhod.

You'll thank me yet — when I rule this realm.”

Lady Merdiva's eyes widened, just briefly — a flicker of surprise.

The Guardians of the Seven Artifacts

But she mastered herself at once.

“Thank you?” she said, voice cool as stone.

“What you intend is not what we agreed upon.”

Rohedan crossed his arms, his tone hard and flat.

“This is an unforgivable breach of trust, Aldion.

Do you seriously expect me to support a war?

You’re mad if you think I’ll stand by you.”

He shoved his chair aside and strode from the room without another word.

“Rohedan, wait!” Lady Merdiva called after him — but he did not turn.

Aldion raised a hand in casual dismissal.

“Let him go. He’ll calm down. What choice does he have?”

Lady Merdiva paused.

Her thoughts whirled — it was rare that her plans faltered so quickly.

And yet her features remained composed.

She straightened her spine.

“And what if your plan fails, Aldion?

What if you cannot take Astinhod?

They’ll drag you in chains, strip you of name and land.

Have you thought of that?”

Aldion leaned back, his eyes gleaming.

“My plan will not fail,” he said.

“Arkondir is dead — and his army has no leader.

He was their mind, their direction. Without him, they’re little more than noise.

And the guards of Astinhod?

Too few. Too weak.”

Lady Merdiva shook her head, slow and deliberate.

“You’re mad, Aldion.”

The Chronicles of Wetherid

And yet, she stepped closer.

A faint smile touched her lips.

She placed a hand at his neck and kissed him.

Aldion returned her kiss. His hands were firm. Possessive.

“I take what is mine,” he whispered, voice low and dark,

“just as I take you now.”

Later, she adjusted her clothing with precise, restrained movements.

No passion lingered in her face — only the cold discipline she wore like armor.

Aldion watched her in silence.

“Go now. I need to be alone. There is much to consider.”

She offered him a small, unreadable smile and turned to the door.

But behind her eyes, she seethed — at Aldion’s arrogance, at Rohedan’s retreat.

The game is not done. And I have not yet played my final piece.



As night fell over Astinhod and the palace lights grew dim, the shadows of the soul-realm began to stir.

Xarothe did not sleep.

He wove his schemes through darkness, shaping them with care.

For some time now, he had whispered into chosen minds — dreams that burned, futures that glittered with power, paths soaked in quiet ambition.

And tonight, the voice sharpened.

The next step had begun.

Aldion tossed in his sleep.

The Guardians of the Seven Artifacts

The voice came cold and close.
“Aldion... the time has come.
You are the savior of this realm.
No one else has the will.
The others waste their breath on words — but words will not
save a kingdom.
Only strength will.”
Before his inner eye, visions rose.
He saw himself upon a throne of splendor.
A golden crown on his brow.
A hall of voices silenced before him.
People bowed in awe.
“But your enemies are watching,” the voice whispered.
“Master Drobol and Darion — they conspire in silence.
They speak of unity. But they sow division.
They would break your will, piece by piece.”
The shadows deepened.
“But you are stronger.
Your army is near its full strength.
And soon...
Your will shall bend them — or shatter them.”
The visions shifted.
Asthod burned.
Aldion stood untouched in the flames — a king amid ruin.
You shall reign, whispered the voice.
Sweet as poison.
Act at last. Leave no room for doubt.
Asthod is yours — it will obey you.
Aldion jolted upright, breathless.
The images still burned behind his eyes.

The Chronicles of Wetherid

He forced his breath to slow. But his heart refused.
Unable to sleep again, he lay still — eyes open, lost in dark.

— ✧ —

In the ritual hall of Raga Gur, a whisper rose through the flame.
Xaroth's voice — searing hot, like iron melted in wind.
The orc shaman sat motionless. His eyes were blank, his body still.

Only his mind remained — bound to each word, as they
burned themselves into his soul.

Gorzod... the time has come.

The peoples of Fallgar must unite — under your command.

No more division.

Orcs, mist-elves, gray dwarves, ogres, and the dead — all shall follow you.

You shall forge an army that falls upon the world like a shadow.

“Yes, Xaroth,” Gorzod whispered.

His eyes glistened with the heat of zeal.

“I will send messengers to the rulers of Fallgar.”

The flames roared one last time. Then Xaroth's voice fell silent
— and withdrew, deep into the hidden chambers of his power.

All his nightly visitations had borne fruit.

The seed had taken root.

Xaroth could feel them — the fractured thoughts, the restless
ambitions of those he had touched.

Each one different. But all now drawn into motion.

Aldion and the Governor would clash.

Prince Sylvian and Neg El Bahi would bring their own storms.

Far to the North, smoke from the forges of Ib'Agier rose,
thickening the air — shifting the cold.

The Guardians of the Seven Artifacts

And Gorzod...

He would build the alliances.

Together, their steps would shake the world.

And pave the way.

The world shall burn, Xaroth hissed —

his voice a blade of wind in the dark.

Astinhod in Peril

Dawn broke above the palace.

Cool air drifted through the open windows.

Soft sounds stirred the waking corridors.

Eryndor sat still, eyes unfocused.

The news of Aldion's approaching army left no rest in his thoughts.

If he really intends to use force... then why would he still need me?

The thought gnawed at him.

Gold, lands, titles — all I've negotiated would mean nothing.

He could simply take what he desires.

His jaw tensed.

And if I side with Belmarr — but Aldion prevails?

Then I lose everything. My standing. My name.

He shook his head once, faintly. But no solution came.

His gaze slipped toward the garden pavilion.

And Asteran?

He, too, remains silent.

If he casts his vote today — against Aldion — everything could unravel.

I should speak with him. Just in case.

He stood, drew his cloak over his shoulders, and left his chambers.

In the halls, the palace had begun to stir.

Glossar

Glossary of Names, Places, Powers and Creatures

A

Ahnwen – Council member of Astinhod and trusted confidante of the royal family.

Abketh – A small village in Tawinn, within the realm of Wetherid.

Aarl – One of the companions. A southerner from Thir and a skilled knife-thrower.

Aelvor Frostshadow – Lord of the Frost Elves and consort of Zelivra.

Aldion of Kirindor – Grand Duke and council member of Astinhod; later a central figure in the kingdom's political turmoil.

Arkondir – Former High Commander of the armies of Astinhod. Deceased.

Astinhod – Royal capital and kingdom in central Wetherid.

Asteran (Count Asteran) – Elder nobleman of the Astinhod Council.

Azrakel, the Soulbinder – Ruler of the Undead in Zantranos, Fallgar.

B

Belmarr of Kring – Council member and contender for the title of Thronewarden.

Borlix – One of the companions. A self-declared dwarf paladin from Wetherid.

Brumir Ironfist – King of the Gray Dwarves in the Kirbun Mountains of Fallgar.

D

Darion Altheras – Senior councilor and head of assembly in Astinhod.

DeShadin – A vast, arid desert southwest of Wetherid.

Druhn – Fortified town in Fallgar, near the ancient stronghold of Entorbis.

E

Elvoran – Apprentice to Master Drobald.

Entorbis (Erwight of Entorbis) – An ancient noble house long at war with Wetherid.

Eryndor – Council member in Astinhod, politically indecisive and swayed by Lady Merdiva.

F

Fallgar – A realm of orcs, mist elves, gray dwarves, ogres, and the undead. Harsh and fractured.

Frost Elves – An ancient people of the Nordland, dwelling in vast ice caverns.

Frosthorns – Horned beasts of the Nordland, known for their massive antlers and uncanny awareness.

G

Gejel – A renowned wood-elf ranger from the Dark Forest. Father of Juhva.

Glorious Elves – A luminous and reclusive elven race dwelling in a hidden valley of Wetherid.

Gorathdin – Half-elf and widower of Queen Lythinda. One of the central companions.

Gorzod Greyswings – Orc shaman of Raga Gur. Summoner of Xaroth.

Grandok – Second-largest city in the Nordland.

Gromak – Ogrish warlord of Wahmuther. Known as Ironhide.

H

Haloyan – Cousin to Prince Sylvian of the Mist Elves.

Høvding of the Shieldwall (Trenjov Icewind) – Mythic leader in the ancient Shieldwall chronicles.

Horunguth – Island home of Master Drobal. Center of magical study.

Haldakies – Mystical winged creatures, akin to great raptors. Only mages of Horunguth can command them.

I

Ib'Agier – Dwarven city beneath the mountains of Wetherid.

Ilnarath – Hidden capital of the Frost Elves.

Irkaar – Harbor city in Thir, governed by a local steward.

J

Jarl of Grandok – Ruler of Grandok in the Nordland.

Jonjar – Hesir (village elder) of Tronjavik.

Juhva – Young elf of the Dark Forest. Daughter of Gejel.

K

Kirindor – Grand duchy in Astinhod. Homeland of Aldion.

Konge – High King of the Nordland. Sovereign of Thronheim.

Kyrintha – Consort of Prince Sylvian. Mistress of venom.

L

Lady Merdiva – Baroness of Astinhod. A cunning noblewoman.

Laaron – Agent of Irkaar's steward. Former lover of Leandra.

Leandra – Queen Lythinda's handmaiden and former confidante.

Queen Lythinda – Slain ruler of Astinhod. Wife of Gorathdin.

M

Marnog Jar – Capital of the Mist Elves in Fallgar. Ruled by Sylvian and Kyrintha.

Master Drobal – Mage from Horunguth. Discoverer of Xaroth's summoning.

N

Mist Elves – Shadowy elves of Fallgar. Known for their spider mounts and poisons.

Nivlings – Tiny, elusive beings living beneath the snow. Move like shadows; their nature wavers between thievery and aid.

O

Orveng – Scholar in the court of Konge Stojvar Icegaze in Thronheim.

P

Plonjar – A Nordland guardian stationed in Thronheim.

R

Raynarus – Apprentice to Master Drobal. Wanderer of Raga Gur and beyond.

Reljevk – Commander at the Shieldwall fortress.

Rohnog – Scholar in service to the Konge.

S

Shieldwall – Ruined fortress in the Nordland. Once a royal vault.

Seradia – Margravine of Umlis.

Skjold Forest – Mythic woodland of exile.

Skjold – A giant exiled by the gods of the Nordland. His name lingers in myth and forest.

Snorri One-Eye – Treasurer of the Konge. Shackled in disgrace.

Snow Goblins – Small, furred, and aggressive creatures that dwell in the high snows.

Steward of Irkaar – Ruler of Irkaar. Holds power through force.

T

Tawinn – Region of Wetherid. Includes Abketh.

Thir – Coastal town near the desert of DeShadin.

Thorgar – Nordland guardian and companion.

Thronheim – Capital of the Nordland. Seat of the Konge.

V

Vrenli – Companion from Abketh. Keeper of the Book of Wetherid.

W

Wahmuther – Steppe-region of the ogres in Fallgar.

Wetherid – The western realm. Heartland of the known world.

Werlis – Companion and childhood friend of Vrenli.

X

Xaroth – Demon of the Soul Realm. The World-Burner.

Z

Zelivra Iceglance – Envoy of the Frost Elves. Consort of Aelvor.

Zantranos – City of the Undead in Fallgar. Domain of Azrakel.

Key Objects and Powers

The Seven Artifacts – Relics forged by the Glorious Elves and the magi of Horunguth to resist Xaroth:

- Crystal of Sight
- Tablet of Law
- Lute of Peace
- Seed of Life
- Living Glass
- Golden Hammer
- Key of Secrets

Chronicles of the Shieldwall – A recovered tome found in the ruins of the Shieldwall. Contains lost truths.

Dark Iron / Shadow Ore – Rare dwarven metal, used in forging weapons and magical devices.

Entorbis / Black Riders – Raider legions tied to the house of Entorbis. Artifact seekers.

Falgoer – Ancient northern name for Fallgar.

Frost Ore – Pale blue metal prized in the Nordland.

Hesir – Title for a village elder in the Nordland.

Deities and Creatures

Dornir – Father-god of the Nordland. Wields the Rune-Axe.

Veija – Goddess and consort of Dornir. Keeper of the Horn of Blood.

Aesgar – Son of Dornir and Veija. Warrior-god of the Runed Spear.

Frost Golems – Ice-bound giants awakened in times of peril.

Ice-Shadow Wolves – Titanic wolves of the Nordland, cloaked in cold and silence.

Ice Rays – Spectral fish-like beasts that skim snow and sky alike.

Dear Readers,

With *The Chronicles of Wetherid II – The Guardians of the Seven Artifacts*, the first volume of this journey comes to an end — but the story is far from over.

To me, fantasy is more than magic and battles. It is the characters who breathe life into the world — through their doubts and conflicts, their hopes and sacrifices. A world does not come alive through its size alone, but through its details, its history, and the people who inhabit it.

Together with the companions, you have crossed frozen wastes, uncovered long-buried secrets, and stood against intrigue, war, and uncertain alliances. You've witnessed trust forged, losses endured, and choices made that shape the fate of entire realms. And perhaps, along the way, you've asked yourself which path you would have chosen in their place.

Yet as vast as Wetherid and Fallgar may seem, the world reaches far beyond them. Beyond the Southern Sea lies the vast domain of the Dark People. To the east stretch endless steppes where rider-clans fight for survival. And in the distant southeast, the winds still whisper of a lost age among scattered island shores.

Thank you for joining this journey — for immersing yourselves in this world, for walking beside its heroes (and villains), and for following each step with eagerness — perhaps even impatience — as the story unfolded.

But this is only the beginning. One artifact has been found. The true struggle lies ahead. What comes next? What must be sacrificed? What alliances forged — and what betrayals still wait in the dark?

I look forward to meeting you again in the next volume.

May your curiosity never fade,

Christian Dölder

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And of course, to **Bobi**, my dog — who faithfully dragged me into the woods for at least an hour every morning while I wrote... or rather, insisted on it.

About the Author

Christian Dölder, born in 1975 in Carinthia, Austria, is a fantasy author with a lifelong passion for storytelling. From a young age, he was drawn to the creation of imaginary worlds. Influenced by the works of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, and Robert Jordan, Christian began crafting a fantasy saga of his own.

He sees himself not as a writer, but as a storyteller.



His debut novel, *The Chronicles of Wetherid: The Legacy of the Elves*, was published in 2024 and has since drawn a loyal readership. With this book, Christian invites readers into a richly detailed world of magic, intrigue, adventure, and complex, human characters.

Known for his immersive storytelling and the depth of his world-building, Christian draws inspiration from the forests and mountains of Austria, where he spends much of his time.

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