

A collage of various items from the Destiny game series. At the top, a colorful skull with rainbow patterns is visible. Below it, there's a piece of grey armor with blue and purple accents. A large, ornate sword with a yellow hilt and a white blade is the central focus. To its right, a black and gold weapon is partially visible. In the bottom left, there's a blue gauntlet. The background is a mix of metallic textures, red and white patterns, and circular emblems. The text 'CHRISTOPHER LAPIDES' is at the top, and 'DESTINY HERITAGE LOST BOOK III' is at the bottom.

CHRISTOPHER  
LAPIDES

DESTINY

HERITAGE LOST  
BOOK III



The blade sliced through the giant's armor and stomach as if they were made of parchment. Blood splattered the ground and the giant keeled over in pain and shock. When its head came close, Callobus swung again. The blade sliced through the giant's throat. It gasped in surprise and feebly clutched at the wound. Then it fell over, struggling to stay alive.

Callobus did not watch the giant die. He just turned and brought his wand out once more. He aimed up the mountain, surprised to see a giant only a few yards away. It appeared another had been on its way down. The third and final giant was still up top, standing near the pile of stones.

"Grab him!" the giant bellowed.

Callobus let loose another bolt of lightning. The giant in front of him ducked and the bolt flew up the mountain. It slammed into the pile of boulders, blasting it to pieces, sending shards flying. The giant nearby, caught completely by surprise, stumbled and fell, rolling down the hill. Callobus gave a shout of satisfaction, but his voice caught in his throat as he suddenly realized what he had done.

The pile of stones he had blasted fell forward with a crash, breaking apart the snow bank that sat underneath. The large boulders continued to roll down the slopes, shaking apart a portion of the mountainside. Then the entire mountain seemed to shift. Suddenly, tons of snow, rock, boulders and ice were rumbling towards him.

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CHRISTOPHER  
LAPIDES

# DESTINY

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HERITAGE LOST  
BOOK III



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# DESTINY

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Thanks to all the fantasy authors that have come before me.  
Your relentless desire to share your minds and creativity  
with the world, and myself, has truly inspired me  
and made me what I am today





# PROLOGUE

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The day was calm and Solaris was bright, his warmth actually reaching the barbarians who were outside. Many took a few moments to bask in the rays of sunshine, but enjoyment never lasted long in the camp of the Wild Blades, especially with the talk of war soon coming to the Plains.

Every man woman and child was busy—crafting armor, forging weapons and creating other items that would soon be used for battle, to shed the blood of their enemies. All thought of the Great Hunt had been forgotten. Only battle sat on their minds. The conflict that would soon be upon them was nothing they feared for the Blades never feared battle. Indeed, they reveled in it and the anticipation drove them like no whip, speech or berating ever could. They didn't need to be encouraged. They didn't need to be inspired or pushed. Just the thought of driving cold, hard steel into the flesh of another was all the motivation they needed. This conflict was something that was long in coming, something that every tribesman had looked forward to for a long time. It was also something that they had brought on, something that they had started and intended to finish, with the bodies of all that dared to defy them lying in bloody pools at their feet.

Trees crashed to the ground, pickaxes slammed into rock and forges raged like never before. Hammers fell on steel, shaping it into tools of destruction. Axes cut into wood, chipping away bark and timber to create arrows for bows and handles for weapons. If anyone were to walk by the camp of the Blades, they would hear shouts of anger, growls that promised death and other noises that foretold the coming of something terrible. Animals fled from the sounds, insects buried themselves in the dirt or rock and birds took flight, looking for a new home far from the frightening noises. As the barbarians labored away, the

very land around their home seemed to shudder, but it also lay in silence, not a single gust of wind blowing, in fear of what was about to happen.

Gore Scarsbrawn stood and watched as his people worked, day and night, to prepare their tribe for the battle to come. He could hear the trees of the Crystal Woods falling to the ground, he could smell the scent of burning coal and hot metal wafting from the forges and he could see the desire to kill and fight on the faces of every tribesman that walked by him. He himself carried that desire, to run across the Plains, seek out those that had fought against his tribe and put an end to them once and for all, but preparations had to be made first. Weapons needed to be forged, plans drawn up and strategy, even for barbarians, had to be made. Then they would march across the land and bring pain and death to any that stood against them.

Their actions, their sudden rush to war, had all been brought on by the Mystic, the woman whose guidance and advice was always heeded. Gore still remembered the prophecy she had recited to their most hated enemies, the True Fists. Why she had chosen them, Gore did not know. All he knew was that the information was too important for him to leave the Fists alive. After killing them, he had returned home to share what he had heard.

As soon as he had repeated the prophecy to his chieftain, they had begun preparing for war with the Fists. Though the Blades were the most powerful tribe in the Plains, the Fists were the only ones that could match them in size and strength, so the chieftain said that they were to be eliminated first. Then the other tribes, after seeing the awesome power of the Blades, would either submit to their rule or be destroyed. It would be glorious and Gore knew his tribe would quickly rise to its rightful position as rulers over all barbarians that lived in the Plains, but the chieftain's decree and order had been made almost a month ago and still they were preparing.

The men in the camp were restless but went about their duties without question. They rose with the sun every morning and went to work, stopping only to eat and sleep when night fell over the land. The women did much the same, preparing meals, cleaning tools and making sure their children were also hard at work, the boys working with the men and the girls with the women. The Blades had never been so busy or worked so hard, even before battles in the past. A great change was coming to the tribes, one that would alter the land, and the people, forever.

Why do we not march? Gore had asked himself many times in the past weeks. They had enough warriors and more than enough weapons and armor. What were they waiting for? he thought, and *only* thought. He dare not voice his concerns to his chieftain for to do so would be fatal. No one in the Blades,

even Gore, considered by many as second in the tribe, dare question the orders of the great Brock Axebane.

Brock was their god, a terrible, vengeful god that did not take obstruction or defiance from his people. Gore had seen firsthand the price of Brock's displeasure. They had lost many tribesmen, their own people, to his vicious axe known as Chasm Cleaver. To avoid his wrath, they did as they were told.

He is waiting for something, Gore knew. He is waiting for the bloodlines that the Mystic spoke of, bloodlines for which Gore had been watching God's Axe Gorge.

After he had told Brock of the prophecy, the chieftain had ordered him to watch the Gorge for outsiders and to bring any foolish enough to enter the Plains to him. He had done just that, sat and waited for weeks, watching the Gorge with a handful of others for something or someone that he thought would never come. But, to his surprise, someone did come. It was just not what he expected.

He had expected warriors, fighters or even nomads, but not a single man, a man who was wearing nothing but a simple robe. The outsider had been alone and he was puny, with flimsy arms, a scrawny body and the look of one who has never done manual labor. He looked too small to wield a simple sword, let alone one of their large blades. He carried only an odd-looking staff, topped with a glowing skull that was constantly changing color. How he had made it as far as he did, shocked the eight Blades that watched him. Amazingly, the small man had made it through the Gorge without rousing the isteraz that lived there. How he had done so was still a mystery to Gore. All he knew was that the strange man was an outsider and had to be taken to Brock, but trying to force him to do so proved to be a mistake.

The man wielded magic, power that Gore had seen only one other person use, and that was the Mystic. It made him and the other men uncomfortable and reluctant to approach him, but Brock's orders had been clear and no one wanted to disobey. Had they known the outsider was such a proficient user of the mystical arts, they never would have confronted him so.

Their assertive approach cost three Blades their lives in a matter of minutes, the men being killed by the wondrous power. The magic the man wielded called forth bolts of lightning and balls of fire that he threw from his very fingers. Gore had never seen such a thing and he was quickly humbled by the display. He and his men quickly backed off, holding their attacks. They almost retreated completely, but luckily, the man had held back throwing any more magic and they were able to speak to him without incident.

The outsider, having an air of superiority around him regardless of being

well over a foot and a half shorter, demanded to be taken to the leader of the barbarians. His arrogant and condescending tone made Gore want to plant his jagged-edged sword into his face, but he held back. He asked a few questions but the man would answer to none but his chieftain, so Gore relented and agreed to the man's demands. Truthfully, Gore was a little relieved for it seemed that the man's wishes and his own were closely related.

That confrontation had been four days ago. After they reached the camp, news spread quickly of the strange man that Gore had brought back from the Gorge. Barbarians quickly gathered to gawk and stare at the outsider that had come to their home, but they quickly went back to their duties as Gore yelled and shouted at them to keep working. They jumped at his voice and did as they were told, though many whispered curses under their breaths. Gore ignored them all and led the man to Brock.

Now, Gore stood outside of Brock's tent, menacingly eyeing any barbarian that even glanced in his direction. He was ordered to stay there to prevent any from eavesdropping on the conversation between the chieftain and the outsider. Though he was only supposed to guard, he also listened to his chieftain and the powerful man that had come into his home.



Brock Axebane sat in his large chair, fist against his chin, staring at the strange man standing before him. He studied his green robes, dark red eyes and strange, skull-topped staff that appeared to be covered in red and white veins. He saw rings, wands and other items of power, all of which the chieftain knew carried magic. He knew immediately that the man standing before him was what the people outside of the Plains called a wizard, a being that could call forth the same mystical energies that the Mystic commanded. Though he appeared weak, feeble and very young, Brock knew that the man before him carried power. He had killed three Blades after all and was not someone to underestimate nor was he someone to treat lightly.

Unlike other tribal leaders, Brock was not ignorant in the ways of magic. He had been outside the Plains, once for almost an entire year, learning of the outside world. He knew of wizards and priests, druids and paladins, and other beings that were able to call upon the mystical energies that surround all living things. He had learned long ago to respect the ancient art and all those that wielded it, but he also loathed those people for he saw them as cowards. They threw their powers of death and destruction from across the battlefield instead of meeting their enemies face to face. Regardless of what he thought, the man

before him carried power and he was intrigued.

This man carries himself as if he is ruler of all he sees, Brock thought to himself. He appears confident, strong and fearless, traits that Brock associated with himself, but if he thinks he rules me, the chieftain then thought to himself, he will sadly be mistaken.

Though Brock was waiting for the bloodlines the Mystic had prophesied would come, he quickly realized that this man, Druzeel he had called himself, was not one of them. He couldn't be for he carried none of the traits of the tribes. He was small and wielded magic. No one of the Plains, except the Mystic, had ever wielded magic. The only magic they used was their weapons, weapons enchanted centuries ago, passed down from the chieftains of old. Though the stranger had the demeanor of a Wild Blade, he was an outsider. So why was he here? Brock said to himself.

On the other side of the tent, Druzeel watched the large man studying him, sizing him up, and did his own evaluation of the barbarian chieftain.

He was huge, almost an entire foot taller than Callobus, with muscles that one would find on a desert giant. The man's body radiated power and strength, and based on the scar decorating his bald head, Druzeel knew that this man was not to be taken lightly. He needed to be treated with respect or Druzeel risked being on the receiving end of the gargantuan double-bladed axe that sat right next to the wicked throne. The weapon was almost as large as he was! The barbarian chieftain would not be as easily intimidated as the others, if at all, nor did he appear that he would allow someone to talk down to him. Druzeel had to be careful when speaking to him if he wanted to be accepted. Once he was, he could start the slow process of manipulating the man into becoming his pawn. Truthfully, he had already started for spells of charming and enthralling were already coursing around him and no doubt working on the large man.

His eyes were hard, his nose wide and his beard was thick and dirty. Red tattoos painted his body and face in various places and his mouth held a permanent look of contempt. His armor reminded Druzeel of Callobus, for it was a composite of leather, steel and straps, with large pieces of metal protecting his shoulders and knees and odd-shaped patterns covering the rest. There was no symmetry to the armor, but apparently, it was effective for the man was still alive. He did find it strange that the chieftain would leave any part of his body exposed. The land was frigid and even with the spells of warmth Druzeel had around him he still felt the bite of the cold.

Besides the large barbarian sitting in front of him, he studied the rest of the tent out of his peripheral vision. He saw the bones and skulls of the

animals the chieftain had killed. They were trophies, he knew, which the man displayed to show his greatness. Seemed that they are not above vanity, the wizard thought to himself. He made sure to make a mental note of the various types of creatures that called the Plains home. It seemed that the weather was not the only thing that someone had to be fearful of.

Besides items of triumph, the rest of the tent was rather plain, covered in furs, hides and skins. A few pieces of furniture dotted the room and a small fire, which sat between him and the chieftain, kept it warm. It smelled unclean, which it was, but the scent didn't seem to bother the large man.

"Strangers are rare in these lands," the chieftain said, cutting through the silence. His voice was deep, like the sound of stones rolling down a mountain. The very walls around them seemed to tremble when he spoke. The powerful voice again reminded Druzeel that he was not dealing with just a simple man. This man was a warrior, a force of nature that could fall upon him without warning.

"So I have heard," Druzeel responded, his eyes now focused solely on the chieftain. He spoke calmly, keeping his voice level. He did not want to give the impression of disrespect.

"Have you now?" Brock responded. The two men just stared at each other then, neither averting their eyes. The chieftain was testing his guest, seeing if he would back down under his intense gaze, wanting to know if he was as weak as the other men he had tested. Druzeel just met the gaze head on and never wavered. After almost a full minute of silence, the chieftain spoke again.

"You know of our people and our land, and about the isteraz, which you successfully avoided waking."

Druzeel listened to his words. He didn't know what an isteraz was but guessed it was the arctic worms he had read about. After hearing that the large creatures still existed, he was glad he had cloaked his passage with magic before entering the Plains.

"So," the chieftain continued, "what are you doing here? Why have you risked your life to come into our land?"

Druzeel almost smiled. He liked the chieftain's straightforwardness. It was a refreshing change from his last associate, the assassin he had left behind in Lornstone. He knew the question was inevitable and had prepared a story for anyone he had encountered. He was just thankful that he had been met by barbarians with a mentality that closely matched his own and not someone who shared Callobus's beliefs. Regardless of who had met him, he had a story prepared for either type of thinking.

Brock kept his eyes on the wizard. He thought he saw one of the corners

of his mouth raise to form a smile, but it quickly went away. Was that an expression of arrogance or something else? Brock would not hesitate to kill this man if necessary, but he first wanted to find out what he was doing here.

“I come seeking knowledge and power,” Druzeel answered truthfully. He figured that dealing with a man such as the one before him, being blunt was the best course of action. Brock just kept his face expressionless.

“Do you know what happens to those seeking knowledge in the Plains?” Brock asked without emotion. “Their bones are sitting in piles of isteraz dung, deep below the Gorge. Or their bodies sit frozen somewhere in the lands on the outside, the weather proving too much for them to handle. Whatever their fate, they foolishly tried their hands at the Plains, and lost.”

“But I am no fool,” Druzeel responded.

“I know,” Brock said, surprising the wizard. “You came prepared and are seeking more than just information that will sit in a book and gather dust. You carry power and seek ways to increase it. That alone has kept you alive, but if you wish to stay that way, you will need more than just the will to survive while in our homeland. You will need the strength to do so.”

Druzeel eyed the man carefully, unsure if he had just been threatened. Brock stayed in his seat, giving no indication of his intentions. He sat in silence, waiting for a response.

The man is obviously not just some stupid barbarian, the wizard thought. He is intelligent and wise, qualities that Druzeel had not expected among such primitive people. It was a welcomed surprise, but also troubling for it made his task to control these people much more difficult. The others may fall for his deceptions, but the chieftain would easily see through them, so he had to try a new approach. He had to display his fortitude. He also did not like being threatened, even if it wasn't intentional.

“If you wish for more of your warriors to die,” Druzeel said cautiously, “then by all means, I shall give you a test of my strength.” He eyed the chieftain, throwing a menacing look his way, but the man was as solid as stone.

“You have made it this far,” the barbarian replied, “so I know you carry strength. I just want to know what you plan to do with it. What more power do you hope to find in this desolate land?”

“The greatest power there is,” Druzeel replied without hesitation. “Barbarians.”

Brock eyed Druzeel dangerously, his eyes boring into him. The wizard just stood confidently, matching the intense stare with one of his own. Druzeel knew he may have just crossed a line but he had taken the measure of the large man before him and knew he was different than the others. He would think



before he acted, at least, that was what Druzeel hoped.

“Well, you have found us,” Brock said with growing suspicion. “Now what is it you plan to do?”

The small amount of tension that Druzeel held fled from his shoulders. He took the fact that Brock was still talking instead of reaching for his axe as a good sign. Either the barbarian was actually intrigued, or the charms that Druzeel had managed to cast before entering the tent were actually working. Whatever the reason, he could now share his vision with Brock, at least the vision he wanted the man to hear, and start the process of bringing him and his tribe under his control.

“Only what I feel you want,” Druzeel said.

“And what is it that I want?”

“Domination!” the wizard replied. “To crush your enemies, watch them grovel at your feet and be ruler over all you see.”

Druzeel was voicing his thoughts, his own desires when he spoke. It was what he wanted, what he almost had, before Callobus and his sorceress wench had destroyed everything. It was also what Bazmal had promised him those many, many years ago when the cambion had first taken Druzeel, just a young ambitious wizard then, under his wing. Little did Druzeel know that those promises would be long forgotten, as would he.

Never again would Druzeel be someone’s lackey. Never again would he take orders from anyone but himself. He would be the master. He would be pulling the strings. He was well on his way to achieving that goal. He just needed to convince Brock and his tribe to go along.

Brock eyed the wizard, hearing the desire in the man’s voice for all the things he had just spoken of. The wizard wants all the same things that I want, Brock thought to himself, only it sounds like he wants it on a much wider scale. True, the leader of the Wild Blades eventually wanted to spread his control out of the Crystal Plains into other lands, but first he had to control the Plains and all that lived within. That would not be easy, especially against the giants of the Great Ice, but Brock held no doubts that he and his people would eventually be victorious. Perhaps with the wizard, he could achieve his goal that much faster.

But he had to be careful. He had learned much about those that wield magic. They were greedy, ambitious and calculating, many times to the detriment of all those around them. He knew he could handle the man in front of him, but if the wizard suddenly turned, it could very well set Brock’s plans back and harm his tribe. He would rip the man to shreds before that happened.

Then there was the prophecy. There was still no sign of the bloodlines the



Mystic had spoken of. She had never been wrong, but he couldn't wait forever. The Fists would eventually march against him and he wanted to be the first to strike. After killing their chieftain, it should be easy to break them. Now, with the wizard here, it should be even easier.

"It sounds as though you want the same," Brock finally said.

"Men like us usually do," Druzeel replied. He knew that the man before him had similar desires and ambitions. If he could relate to him, his charm magic would work that much easier.

"So why do you not have it already?" Brock asked, trying to see how the wizard would take such criticism. "Though you appear young, I sense that your appearance is a clever deception. You are much more skilled and wiser than what your outside visage suggests."

The man is much more intelligent than I originally thought, Druzeel said to himself. He's trying to anger me, trying to see how I will react.

"You are as wise as you are strong," Druzeel said. "Indeed, I am much older than I appear, being many decades older than you. Just one example of the power I hold.

"As for why I do not rule over all," Druzeel continued, "I have had the misfortune of working with people who were incompetent fools and lacked the ability to do what was necessary. Thankfully, their incompetence will no longer be burdensome."

"And you cannot achieve your wishes alone," Brock said.

"Few can," Druzeel replied. "It is the plight of the powerful that they must sometimes rely on the weak to achieve their goals."

"Indeed," Brock said with a knowing smile. He had felt the same many times during his reign over the Blades. "Life would be much easier if one could conquer on their own."

Druzeel nodded. "Yes, but there are few, if any, that can and I am not a god."

"But I hear the desire to be one."

"Indeed," Druzeel replied with a smile. Brock leaned back and held one of his own, but the expression quickly vanished. My magic is working, Druzeel thought, but his resistance is strong. It's going to take a little longer.

Brock leaned forward and studied the man closely. He held all the qualities of a Wild Blade—ruthless, strong and aggressive. He found himself liking the man, which was odd in itself for Brock liked no man. He put up with them because, like the wizard, he needed them to strike out at his enemies. Perhaps he could put up with the wizard for some time, but he wasn't done questioning him just yet.

“So you come here seeking barbarians to act as your own personal army?” Brock asked, feigning anger. He wanted to put the man off guard, to see what his answer would be, though he already had a good idea of what he would hear.

“Do you think you can just come to my home and take control?” Brock continued, his muscles flexing. “Did you think we would not fight? You wish to use us for your own gain!”

“Far from it, I assure you,” Druzeel responded, seeing the ruse for what it was. It was so poorly done that he knew his magic had succeeded. “I seek a partnership, offering my services in exchange for your own. Whatever troubles your tribe, which just being escorted through your camp I heard of coming war, I can help you be victorious.”

“Do you not think we will be victorious without you?”

“I *know* you will be,” Druzeel said, “but the loss of life will be great. I can assure that your warriors will stay alive, become stronger and stay in battle far longer than any warrior they face.

“And in return?” Brock asked, putting up a calming expression.

“We will expand your empire once you have captured the Plains and spread our might over the rest of the world. Believe me, mighty Brock, I have been used before and have no desire to do so with you.”

Druzeel watched the barbarian carefully, gauging his reaction. The man seemed to calm himself and the tension visibly left his body. Druzeel could tell he was thinking about his offer and the advantages of having magic to throw against his enemies.

“You will use us,” Brock said in a calm voice, drawing a confusing look from Druzeel. For a moment, Druzeel thought his magic had suddenly failed.

“But,” the barbarian continued, “I intend to use you as well. Together we will spread destruction over the land and overthrow our enemies. With our steel and your magic, we will be an unstoppable force. But,” Brock then said, seeing a smile on Druzeel’s face, “this is my domain and while here, you shall do as you are told.”

“Of course,” Druzeel said, though he did not intend to follow anyone’s orders but his own. He would listen to Brock but only he would decide the best course of action. It seemed his spells were not absolute after all.

“This is your land,” the wizard continued, “your home and your domain. I am not familiar with the dangers or customs so I will submit to your superior wisdom. I am sure that once we are in the world outside of the Plains, you will look to me, for my knowledge of that land may be superior to your own.”

“We’ll see,” was all Brock said. No matter what the wizard said, Brock knew he would not yield to him. He is too much like me, the barbarian thought.

He is strong-willed and aggressive, but he will listen or die. There was no reason to threaten either for both men knew what would happen if a conflict arose between the two.

“Gore!” Brock suddenly shouted, actually startling Druzeel. The large, scarred man entered the tent and stood before his chieftain, right beside the wizard.

“Yes, my chieftain,” the man said, eyeing Druzeel with a look that said he hoped his chieftain was going to order him to kill the man.

“Prepare a tent for the wizard. He shall be with us for some time.”

Gore turned his head and looked at Druzeel in anger. Druzeel saw death in the man’s eyes and knew right then that he would one day probably have to kill the man. It appeared the barbarian did not like to share his place.

“Yes, my chieftain,” Gore finally said, through clenched teeth. “Where shall I put our...guest’s new home?”

Brock saw the look on Gore’s face and Druzeel caught a slight smile. So, the chieftain likes misery on anyone’s face, not just on the faces of his enemies, the wizard thought amusingly. It appeared he had made a good choice, though he really did not have one when he had entered the Plains.

“Anywhere he wishes,” Brock said and gave the man a hard look. Then he dismissed Gore as he would an unsatisfying meal. The scarred man scowled. Then he turned, gave a hard look at Druzeel and left the tent.

“I am honored, great chieftain,” Druzeel said with a bow.

“You should be,” Brock responded sternly, standing for the first time since Druzeel had entered the tent. The man was even larger then he originally thought, with muscles like rocks and arms like tree branches.

“Now go,” the chieftain said. “Prepare yourself. War shall be here before you know it and another test will begin.” Druzeel gave one more bow and left the tent. Brock watched him go.

This strange man was definitely going to speed things along and help in the destruction of his enemies. Brock knew the value of magic, unlike the other tribes, and he would use it to bring new glory and power to his tribe. Afterward, if the wizard wanted to conquer the outer lands, then so be it. They would fall under his axe as well and the Wild Blades will rule forever. If the wizard ever got out of control, then he would die. Brock would find new magic in the outside world. He learned long ago that there was an unending supply.

As for the prophecy, if the bloodlines ever showed, he would destroy them. Brock and only Brock, the barbarian thought, will decide the fate of the tribes, not some ancient descendent of a people long since gone. And if he had to destroy every man, woman and child on the Plains to do it, to bring the Blades

to new heights of power, then so be it.



Druzeel exited the tent and saw the scarred man barking orders to nearby barbarians. It appeared he would have nothing to do with the construction of Druzeel's domicile. His voice held anger and frustration even ordering others to have the thing built, but regardless of his hostile feelings, he was following his chieftain's orders. He is loyal to his chieftain, the wizard thought, and does as he is told, like a dog, but even dogs sometimes bite the hand that feeds them. Druzeel knew he would definitely have to keep a close eye on the large man. Perhaps in the coming war, the man would meet with a tragic accident. A smile came to Druzeel's face.

Dozens watched Gore stomp through the camp. Bodies quickly moved out of his way and he disappeared around a large rock, but his ranting and raving could still be heard.

The Blades then turned in Druzeel's direction. He saw anger, confusion and hostility, but he also saw fear, fear of the man that had just walked through the camp, and of their chieftain. It was fear of retribution that drove this tribe, not loyalty. Brock had complete control over these people and they would do anything he ordered because they feared punishment, not reward. This style of leadership, if one were to call it that, was similar in the way that Druzeel had run things in Shadowspar.

Druzeel could not help but smile once more. Soon, when he had charmed the chieftain completely, the barbarians would soon be doing anything that *he* ordered. Then, when Callobus and Mileena showed in the Plains—which Druzeel was certain they would—he would turn Callobus's people against him and watch as he was crushed under the wave of fists and steel. How sweet it would be. He would have his revenge yet.

"Where do you want your tent?"

The voice drove Druzeel's thoughts to the back of his mind. He looked up and saw two large barbarians, each in black leather armor, standing in front of him. Each was decorated in red tattoos just like the chieftain and every other barbarian he saw. They also wore scowls that told him they were not happy with their current assignment, but Druzeel knew they would do as they were told.

"Next to the chieftain's," Druzeel said. Another smile came to his face then. Gore would be furious after seeing his tent so close to Brock's, which is why he was having it put so close to the chieftain's. If he could drive a wedge

between the two men, then he would quickly become the second of the tribe. There would be no separating him from the chieftain then.

The barbarians walked off to build his new home. Druzeel held no doubts that he would probably have to fix their work for the way they moved told him they were not exactly going to do a good job.

Oh well, he thought to himself. He would do whatever he had to to tame these people. Then he would harness their power and build his army, an army that will charge over the land and destroy any that stood against him. He would have his kingdom. Then, he would have the world.



Many days away from the camp of the Wild Blades, across the Crystal Plains and high above the land, sat a large cluster of jagged rocks known as the Great Ice. They jutting up from the White Rocks like frozen fingers, as if a god's hand was thrust up from underneath Terrial, stretching towards the sky. More ice than rock, they rose hundreds of feet into the air and gleamed brightly in the light of Solaris, sparkling like crystal shards. The blue tint that clung to each pillar almost blended in seamlessly to the sky behind it, masking the shards from the world. If not for the black pieces of stone that ran through the columns like twisted veins, they would be all but invisible on a clear day.

If not for the intense cold, cold that would kill even the most hardened barbarian in a matter of minutes, the ice would have melted long ago, but freezing winds, deep snow and frigid air had preserved the columns of ice and stone for centuries.

They stood just as they had the day they were formed from the surface of the world—tall, strong and unmovable. Even now, the winds cut through the narrow pillars, crashing against the surface, trying to topple the fingers of Terrial. Snow piled up at their bases, trying hard to cover the thick columns and bury them forever, but it would take centuries of unrelenting snow to make it to the top of the thousand foot high structures. Regardless of the elements, the Great Ice stood strong, blasting away the wind and ignoring the mounds of snow as if they were nothing but dust and cobwebs.

A gust of wind snaked through the spaces between the great structures. It split dozens of times and flowed into the hundreds of caves that painted the surface of the columns. As it entered the deep holes, a sound like that of a banshee's wail echoed off the hard walls. It was deep and foreboding, but not a single soul stood outside to hear it. However, inside, the frost giants that made the Great Ice their home heard the deep resonance, but they ignored it for they

were far used to the chilling discord.

The breeze continued through the tunnels, brushed against rough walls and shards of ice that hung from the ceiling. A frost giant, fifteen thousand pounds of thick skin and tough muscle, stepped into the tunnel and felt the gentle draft flow over his blue skin. He breathed deeply and continued through the tunnel without stopping, his twenty-foot frame stomping down the hall.

The wind continued unabated, twisting and winding through the maze of tunnels that the giants had carved out over the centuries. Its life was almost over but it flew through the air, uncaring of where it was going or what it was touching. Finally, after many minutes of floating carelessly within the home of giants, it emerged into a gigantic circular cavern and dispersed, its life finally spent. Not a single giant that stood within the room noticed its passing.

Eight of the large humanoids stood in the room, talking about the recent events in the Plains. Their skin was as blue as the odd rock that lined the Blue Rock River and their beards, some being so board they completely covered their chests, were as white as the snow that surrounded their home. Armor similar to what the barbarians wore only many times larger, decorated their bodies, arms and legs. Some wore helmets lined with spikes, antlers or horns while others kept their heads bare. Long white hair decorated the crown of most but two were completely bald, their heads reflecting the flames from the torches that lined the room.

Deep voices echoed throughout the chamber, shaking the very walls, walls that were thick with stone and ice. The giants had hard eyes, many as white as their beards or as blue as their skin, and they held curiosity and a lust for battle. Accusing fingers and curses were thrown back and forth. Very soon, if the debate was not calmed, fists and weapons would be next.

There would be no damage to anything in the large chamber if a fight erupted for hardly anything sat within. Only a few pieces of stone furniture, carved to resemble chairs and tables, sat near the arguing giants. They were as hard as the walls and could taking a strong punch or rough hammering without showing so much as a single crack or scratch. For the large female watching and listening to her arguing people, she hoped the strength of the furnishings would not be tested, at least not today.

Gorortha, or the Ice Empress, as the giants called their matriarch, sat on her throne of ice and watched the bickering. Usually she would sit for hours and watch the males argue well into the night—it amused her so—but due to recent events, she knew she had to put an end to the conflict and point her people in a certain direction.

“Enough!” she shouted, filling the room with her deep voice and causing

the stalactites above to vibrate in agitation. The males immediately went silent and all eyes turned to their leader.

She sat upon an ice throne, carved directly from the walls of the cavern. It was plain and featureless, consisting of blocks of ice. The only distinguishing feature was an image of the sun, carved into the backrest. It sat solid and immobile, much as their leader had just moments ago.

Gorortha stood from her chair when she saw every eye fixate on her. She held her broad shoulders back and stood as straight as a sword's blade, proudly displaying her twenty-two foot frame for all to see. Her deep blue skin absorbed the light, making it look like smooth stone, but her armor, made of a mixture of steel and leather, shined brightly in the flames. Anytime the situation called for it, she made sure to show her strength and power to remind the men that she was in charge, though none of them dared dispute her. She was taller than many of the males of her clan and much taller than all the other females. Females were usually two to three feet shorter than the males, but not Gorortha. She was taller, and in many cases stronger than many of the male giants.

Corded muscle covered her entire body. Her legs were thick and her arms were long and strong. White hair, with just a hint of turquoise, flowed down her head and ended just above her waist. Her eyes were ice blue and as hard and unyielding as any male in the clan. Her nose was wide and flat, having taken many hits over the decades and the bones of her face were sharp yet she still managed to carry a small amount of femininity. Humans would call her homely, but never to her face.

Dozens of scars painted her body and she proudly displayed them for they were a mark of honor, strength and experience. She carried plenty of all three. Of the eight males in the chamber, only one was scarred more.

"You bicker and moan like humans!" she said, taking strong steps toward the gathering. The males parted before her like a sea being cut by a skiff. She strode through the middle, towards a tunnel leading deep into their home. Many thought she was going to leave, but she stopped and turned, eyeing each male with a gaze of impatience and irritation.

Something was riling the barbarian tribes of the Plains and talk of war among the humans had quickly spread throughout the Great Ice. Giants were constantly speaking of the battle that was sure to come and what their position in it would be. Some thought they should charge into battle and put an end to the barbarian threat once and for all, but others wanted to stay out of the conflict, content to let the humans destroy themselves. Before Gorortha had silenced them, the eight males in her chamber, considered the wisest among



the clan, argued about what the rest of the clan had been speaking of—their role in the war. None of them could come to an agreement so once again, it was up to their matriarch to make a decision. Whatever course she chose, every giant knew the Plains would soon be changed forever.

“War is coming to the barbarians,” she said.

“So we should let it come!” said a giant named Fand. He was always quick to speak, sometimes before he thought of what he was saying. Though he always looked forward to a good battle, he thought they should let the humans fight amongst themselves and kill each other. The giant next to him, a heavyset male named Turgorg, nodded in agreement.

“Let them kill one another. It will be easier for us to eliminate them from the Plains when their numbers are lessened.”

“Always looking for the easiest way,” said Varond, the only giant in the clan that carried more scars than Gorortha. He reveled in bloodshed and no matter the odds he would rush into battle to spill it. “A coward you are!” he roared.

Turgorg lunged at the male, eyes wide in outrage and fury, but before he came close, the others around the two intervened and pulled him back. There was shouting and arguing again for a few moments but they calmed when Gorortha thrust herself in the middle of the argument.

“Silence!” she bellowed. “How long have the barbarians been fighting each other? Still they exist! Though their numbers have dwindled over the years, so has our own. We can sit and watch them kill each other for a hundreds years and still there would be humans in the Plains.

“But,” she continued, seeing mouths opening for arguments, “we can also not risk uniting the tribes against a common enemy, as with what happened last time we chose to attack the tribes.”

Many years ago, the giants had moved against the Mighty Hearts tribe after they had come too close to the Great Ice for Gorortha’s liking. It appeared her clan was on the midst of destroying the Hearts, but other tribes had come and spoiled their victory. The giants lost many great warriors that day and had to retreat to the Great Ice to lick their wounds.

Her clan could destroy many of the tribes if the battle was merely her people against a single tribe, but when united, the barbarians could overpower her giants. Some tribes, like the Fists and the Blades, were almost too large to move against at all. In order to succeed, they needed to pick off the smaller tribes first. Then they could move against the others. Now, the time seemed right, for the two afore mentioned tribes had started to fight one another. Their confusion and uncertainty gave Gorortha the perfect opportunity to move



against the other tribes of the Plains and eradicate them.

“We take the entire clan,” she said, seeing the death and destruction in her mind. A smile came to her face.

“And leave our home undefended?” Hailton asked, the shortest of the group.

“Undefended against what?” Bargorch said. He was the thinnest of the octave but his stringy physique also made him the quickest of the bunch. “No barbarian can survive in the Great Ice and even if the yetis or rirraled try to move in while we are gone, we have more than enough strength to defeat them.”

“We move against one tribe at a time,” Gorortha said, alleviating some of the fears she saw displayed on the faces around her. “After each battle, we return here to gather our strength. Then we move out again, each time carrying death and destruction in our hands. Each tribe we eliminate leaves one less to band together. We save the Fists and Blades for last.”

“Some never moved against us,” Churgo said. He was the eldest and considered the most intelligent of the group. He spoke little, preferring to voice his concerns and opinions only when everyone else had their say, so when he spoke, everyone, even Gorortha, listened.

“Perhaps they could be convinced to move against their rivals,” he continued. “The Blades hate the Fists. The Skins and Arms also hold hatred in their hearts of the other tribes.”

“A sound idea,” said Hagogl. Another gaunt male, he only spoke to agree with those he saw as the most powerful, like Churgo and Gorortha. His opinion was valued the least but he was quick and skilled with his axe.

“We cannot trust any human,” Dederq said, a bulky giant who held more fat than muscle on his body. Though flabby, he was extremely strong. “They will use any moment of weakness to move against us.”

“Yes,” Gorortha replied, “but the hate-filled tribes will not involve themselves when they see it is their rivals that we are slaughtering. Only when they perceive us as a threat will they move against us.”

“Which they will once they are the only ones left to battle,” Turgorg said.

“Maybe,” Gorortha said, “but we have the Great Ice to protect us. Unlike last time, if they unite and come for *us*, we shall make sure they bring the battle here, on our ground, not theirs. Should they prove stupid enough to brave the Great Ice, we will destroy them like the others.”

Heads nodded in agreement, even the skeptical ones. Gorortha knew then that she had convinced them all, though she really didn't have to. Her word was law, but it would be easier if everyone agreed with the course of action.

It prevented any unnecessary killing, which she had to do in the past. She was taking caution this time, placating the nervous males, but also promising blood, satisfying the urges of Varond and those like him.

“Now go,” she said loudly, drawing their attention to her once more. “Prepare our people. We march in two days.”

“Which tribe shall be the first?” Varond asked.

“The most difficult to find shall be the first to fall for they are furthest from any help,” she said.

“The Wanderers,” Dederg said with a smile. He carried a special hatred in his heart for the roaming band of barbarians. He had battled Balk Bladesedge, the chieftain of the Wanderers, in the past, confronting the man when he had been out hunting ice lions. The man had wounded him and his tribe had driven Dederg away. Since that day, he had been hoping for revenge.

“The Wanderers,” Gorortha replied, confirming his thoughts. The giant male smiled and hurried from the room, enthusiasm in his steps. The others shared in his mirth and left the chamber, already ready for battle. They would prepare the other giants of the Great Ice.

Gorortha waited until she was alone and walked back to her throne. She moved to the side and eyed her mystical axe, the weapon she called Shard.

One side of the weapon was an axe head, with a series of sharp protrusions coming off its edge. The other held a vicious curved spike. Down the very center of the head was a sliver of stone that was the color of ice. The stone wasn't actually on the surface of the weapon, but running through it, encased within. As she came closer, the rock pulsed with energy, as if sensing her presence, making the rest of the axe glow with a blue hue.

The entire head looked to be one single piece, but a thick strip of fur lay wrapped around the center, hiding any split. The handle was a lone piece of jagged bone. Leather was wrapped around a large portion of the middle, but a blue stone sat exposed near the top and bottom of the leather, showing that it was encased inside the handle, similar to the axe head. Large pieces of sharpened metal sat on either side of the weapon, holing the two pieces together.

Finishing off the mighty axe was a single rune, carved into the very bone, near the base of the handle. It too glowed with power, promising pain to any that came up against the giantess.

The Ice Empress had embedded Shard into many creatures of the Plains, both barbarian and monster alike, and into a few giants that had been too bold or foolish to come against her. The magic that coursed through her axe assured that any feeling its bite would be blasted from the face of Terrial.

“Too long have you lain dormant,” she said to the glowing weapon as she lifted it up to her face. “The time has come to wet your blade with the blood of barbarians.”

Shard just glimmered in silent response.

# CHAPTER 1

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The ground heaved beneath their feet and they were flung high into the air. Dirt, snow, ice and rock went with them, obscuring their vision and filling their sight with stars of muddy black and dirty white. The world abruptly turned upside down, their stomachs rushing to their throats. The sky appeared below them and the snow-covered ground was suddenly far above their heads. Then the surface of the Crystal Plains, and the chasm below, rushed up to meet them. Actually, it rushed up to meet only one of them.

As soon as Mileena started falling, the magic in one of the rings she wore, a ring given to her by Farthos, flared to life. Instead of plummeting into the gaping hole below her, she slowly floated down, as if she were a feather riding a gentle breeze. Callobus, however, fell like a stone.

“Grab hold!” Mileena yelled, thrusting out her staff, which she somehow managed to hold onto. Luckily, Callobus had been thrown above her when the isteraz had broken through the ground. As he rapidly approached, she held out her staff for him to grab hold.

His eyes were wide in helplessness as he stretched his hand out. Amazingly, he still held onto Dragonsbane in his right hand, so he desperately reached out with his left as he fell by. He didn’t see the yawning space below him or care about the small bits of stone that pelted him. He only focused on the staff and as soon as he felt his palm slap against its wooden shaft, he closed his fist and took hold. Unfortunately, the magic in the ring was only meant for one person, so when Callobus’s over three hundred pounds of muscle and armor piled onto the ring’s magic, Mileena was yanked forward almost as fast as he fell.

The staff was almost torn from her hands. The wood slid against her palms, bringing a burning sensation, but she gritted her teeth and managed to strengthen her grip just as he grabbed on. The sliding stopped but the pulling

continued. Now, instead of slowly floating downward, she was falling just as fast as he was. She felt the magic trying to take hold, but he was just too heavy.

Mileena looked at Callobus and saw the frustration on his face as they fell toward the chasm. Then his eyes found his fist. He realized if he did not let go, they would both perish when they hit the bottom.

“Don’t let go!” Mileena shouted, sensing his intentions.

“I will not let both of us be killed!” he shouted back as the wind whipped by his ears. They were both being pelted with the debris as, for some reason, the bits of rock and ice seemed to actually fall by them. The magic of the ring had not completely failed, but it wasn’t enough to prevent injuries either.

“Just shut up and hang on!” she said in frustration. She would not let him kill himself. Where he goes, I go, she thought.

Callobus knew to listen to her and tightened his grip. He turned his head and looked below just as the surface of the Plains sped by.

He saw a large cavern filled with ice and rock over two hundred feet below. The floor was dotted with stalagmites of various sizes, composed of both rock and ice, assuring that their sudden stop would indeed be painful, if not fatal. He then shifted his gaze to where the worm had fallen but saw nothing but a large hole in the side of the cavern wall. It appeared the creature had burrowed away from the cavern, escaping a gruesome ending. He noticed a dozen other such holes, spread all over the walls.

Before he could think of the implications, chanting suddenly filled the air, piercing the noise of the wind rushing by. He turned his head and saw Mileena, eyes closed, doing her best to cast a spell before they hit. Callobus didn’t think she would make it if the ground was quickly approaching.

Mileena’s eyes opened just seconds before they hit the rocky bottom. She screamed out the last words of her spell. The magic gathered within her body, burst from her hands and bolted up her staff. Callobus felt the spell flow into him and quite suddenly, he was no longer falling. The sudden halt in midair jarred his bones and actually made him drop Dragonsbane, but the weapon only had a few feet to fall before it hit the ground. Mileena did not stop as abruptly. Her descent just suddenly slowed to a peaceful fall once again and she gently settled into Callobus’s waiting arms.

“They don’t get much closer than that,” he said with a smile. Mileena shared his expression, but when a small rock bounced off her head, she looked skyward and all merriment left her face.

“Oh dear,” she whispered. Callobus looked up and saw what appeared to be half the surface of the Plains falling towards them.

“Go!” he shouted and dropped her to the ground. He forgot that he still

floated a few feet from the bottom of the chasm but Mileena hit the ground running. Callobus willed himself to the ground, knowing what type of spell Mileena had cast on him, and grabbed Dragonsbane. Then he was up and running, right on Mileena's heels.

They ran as fast as their feet would carry them. The ground was rough and uneven but they managed to maneuver around the large shards of ice that stuck up from the floor with relative ease. Small debris pelted the ice around them. Stone and bits of ice bounced off Callobus's armor and Mileena's skin. They stung but neither one of them stopped knowing that to do so would mean being crushed to death.

"There!" Callobus shouted, seeing a small cavern to their right. They adjusted course and jumped just as the huge mounds of rock crashed into the cavern's floor.

The entire chamber shook and the ground trembled underneath them. A plume of mist and dust exploded into the air and cracks suddenly appeared in the ground. When the chunks of ice hit, they shattered, sending pieces of varying sizes flying in all directions. Large shards chased after the fleeing couple but they dove down the small tunnel in front of them just before the jagged pieces reached their bodies. The pieces flew just overhead, missing by mere inches, and slammed into the wall, piercing the surface as a sword would flesh.

Mileena hit first, landing on her shoulder and rolling down the thankfully smooth cavern floor. Callobus came next and rolled behind her, coming up into a sitting position and sliding along the slick surface. Back in the cavern, the debris crashed into the hole they went through and sealed it shut. As the two slowly slid to a stop, they were cast into darkness. The tumult lasted a few more minutes then everything went silent. The only noise was the heavy breathing from the couple as they regained their breath from the rapid escape.

Chanting suddenly filled the area and a bright green light sprang to life from the gem on Mileena's staff. It bathed everything in an emerald glow.

They were in a small tunnel made mostly of ice but bits of dark stone peaked through in some areas. The ceiling lay eight feet above. The tunnel continued forward about twenty feet then curved around, angling, to both their relief, up towards the surface. They knew it would be a rough journey for they were at least two hundred feet underground and probably had a hungry isteraz looking for them. There could be more than one as well, so they wasted no time and got to their feet.

"Are you all right?" Mileena asked, seeing Callobus rubbing his shoulder where he had hit the floor.

“A little sore and cold, but I’m fine. Are *you* all right?”

“Much the same,” she said with a smile. “Are my warming spells holding?” Before they had entered the Plains, Mileena had cast a variety of spells on Callobus to keep him warm. The furs only did so much in the extreme environment. Mileena wore a magical band that kept her body at a comfortable temperature, no matter what clothes she wore, so she didn’t need her spells. The band had been a gift from Farthos before she and the ex-assassin had parted ways.

“Yes,” he said. “I have a feeling I would feel the cold no matter what magic or clothes I wear.” Mileena nodded for she felt the cold’s touch even with the band around her wrist.

“It’s a shame the tunnel is shut,” she said. “The spell of levitation on you will last for a while yet so we could have just floated out of here.”

“Well, let’s not waste any time then. Hopefully there is another cavern close by.” However, Callobus doubted it for he did not see any open areas on the surface. They would most likely have to climb out of the hole they were in.

The two started walking down the tunnel, weapons out and ready in case there was something else underground besides the giant worms. Erot had spoken of many dangerous creatures that made their home in the Plains but neither Callobus nor Mileena knew where they lived or what they looked like, so they were going to be ready just in case.

Callobus was immediately uneasy, disliking the close quarters of the underground pathways. He felt boxed in and confined, just as he had when he was in the tunnels underneath the Kilmor Desert, yet the cold somehow made it worse. At least in the desert it was warm. The ice and cold was just downright irritating. Mileena could care less either way. She lived most of her life underground and was accustomed to the close quarters. In fact, she was actually more at home under the earth than out in the open, though she had gotten used to the wide-open feeling. Whatever their feelings, both knew they had to get to the surface, so they pressed on.

The path curved to the right and inched upwards ever so slightly. The tunnel was a combination of smooth floors and jagged walls. Like many underground passages, it was wider in certain areas and smaller in others. Being so tall, Callobus had to duck and crawl under low hanging pieces of rock and ice. Even Mileena had to get on her hands and knees in some places. It was tiring, irritating and uncomfortable. The only thing that brought them relief was the fact that the trail was taking them up towards the surface, but around the next bend, they came to something that took a little bit of that relief away.

Mileena saw it first, having rounded the bend ahead of Callobus. She

stood still in surprise, staring at the wall with a mixture of worry and curiosity. Callobus saw her expression and he turned to see what she was looking at. When his eyes fell upon the remains, he also went rigid in surprise.

A skeleton sat on the ground, its back leaning against a large piece of rock. It was frozen solid in a stance of restfulness, perfectly displayed. It was almost completely bare. Only a few pieces of what looked like leather armor remained in tatters around its chest and legs. The couple looked at each other then moved forward for a closer look.

Callobus suddenly realized that the skeleton was larger than an average human, even larger than himself. In life, this person would have stood about seven feet tall, with broad shoulders and long, powerful arms. It was then he knew he was staring at the remains of a barbarian. Unfortunately, with the body being encased in ice, there was no way to know for how long the person had lain in its icy prison. It could have been a few years to many centuries ago. Callobus just cursed and studied the body in wonder.

“What happened to his arm?” Mileena said.

Her voice snapped Callobus out of his daze. He looked at the skeleton’s right shoulder and saw that the entire right arm was gone. His eyes scanned the skeleton’s chest and he saw a large portion appeared melted, as if splashed with some type of acid. Then he noticed what appeared to be the remnants of a weapon of some kind, right near the right leg. It also appeared partially melted.

“Acid of some kind?” Callobus asked, looking at Mileena.

“It appears so.” Mileena searched her mind for everything she had heard of the Plains and the large worms. “Didn’t Erot say the isteraz spat some type of corrosive liquid?”

Callobus vaguely remembered hearing something similar. Great, he thought to himself. As if the worms weren’t dangerous enough! He gave the skeleton a final look then continued down the tunnel. Mileena followed close by, a spell of protection against acid quickly forming in her mind. She cast the spell twice, touching Callobus and herself, and moved on.

They continued on their path, climbing up steep, jagged slopes of ice and rock and through narrow tunnels that made Callobus fidget in irritation. He bumped his head a couple of times but managed to stay focused and concentrate on getting out of what he felt was a cold, unwelcoming prison.

Up ahead, they heard what sounded like wind passing over a small opening, almost like a whistling sound. Neither one of them thought they had reached the surface but hope spread through their bodies and they hurried forward.

They emerged on a ledge overlooking another large cavern, this one a little larger than the one they fell into, but instead of nothing but open space,



hundreds of bridges and columns of ice and stone hung in the air. The bridges were rough, uneven and stretched in all directions, many reaching all the way across the cavern, hundreds of feet wide. The columns, many of which served as the bridges' support, were jagged and looked like they had almost melted at one point in time, but the intense cold assured their survival. Some columns reached dozens of feet into the air while others were only a few inches tall, no more than a mound. Callobus and Mileena quickly studied the odd architecture and saw at least a dozen bridges that lead up toward other tunnels. There was no way to know if any led to the surface. It appeared that the tunnels above put them only fifty or so feet from the surface of the Plains, but they couldn't be sure.

"Can your magic direct us to the surface?" Callobus asked.

"I can find a general direction that will eventually lead us to the surface, but the tunnels are so close that I cannot guarantee it will be accurate. We'll get there eventually, but we may get there quicker by relying on instinct rather than magic."

"I guess it's the hard way then," Callobus sighed. Sometimes it's better to use your brains than to rely on the mystical energies, he thought to himself. He sometimes felt that people relied too much on magic to solve their problems, like they could not live without it. Indeed, entire kingdoms had been built using magic and people's lives had been saved because of it, but what would happen if it ever failed? Callobus shook his head. Questions for another time. He cleared his mind, picked a random bridge and the two carefully made their way skyward. It was only five feet wide so they watched every step.

Suddenly, a rumbling sounded from just behind them and a blast of hot air shot out of the tunnel they had just emerged. Bits of ice and stone fell from the wall. The bridge they stood on vibrated and an audible cracking echoed through the air.

"Run!" Callobus yelled and the two took off up the bridge, no longer caring how wide it was. Unfortunately, the surface was slippery and they had a hard time finding sturdy ground. Mileena cursed as she slipped, but caught herself and managed to move on.

Behind them, a large portion of the wall cracked as if it was made of glass. Another blast of hot air, as well as a good amount of water, shot into the cavern, washing over some nearby columns and a small bridge. They visibly shrank as their surfaces liquefied under the heat. Water started to drip to the ground below but it slowed as the intense cold went to work on quickly refreezing the surfaces. Then the wall completely fell apart as an isteraz emerged.

Chunks of the wall fell forward, smashing through bridges and columns

alike, instantly pulverizing the structures. A rush of freezing mist and air puffed toward the ceiling. The sound was deafening and it only increased when the worm came through and fell to the ground, twenty feet below. It hit with a thunderous boom, shaking the entire cavern and cracking the ground below it. More structures fell, crushed under its massive bulk. Mileena slipped as the bridge shook and pitched toward the side, but Callobus quickly caught her. He steadied her and urged her on. Her feet found purchase and she scrambled up the bridge. Behind her, Callobus followed, but when the worm below them roared in frustration, the waves of sound slammed into the bridge they were on and cracked the ice.

The surface below his hands and feet started to crumble. He braced his feet and leaped forward, trying to get away from the ground that was falling away from him. Mileena turned at hearing his grunt of surprise and saw him flying forward.

He slammed into the bridge just as the portion he was laying on fell away. Luckily, it snapped at the end of a column. Any further up and it would have completely fallen away, taking him with it. Unfortunately, he had not gone far enough and started to slide backwards.

“No!” Mileena shouted and slid down the bridge, hand aiming for his. She never made it and had to watch helplessly as he pitched over the end.

Callobus fell back and expected to plummet to the ground below, to become the dinner of the creature sitting beneath him, but to his surprise, as soon as his body left the bridge, he just hovered in midair, as if an invisible hand was holding him up.

Mileena’s spell is still active! he suddenly realized. He looked down and saw the worm below him, but it was rapidly approaching, using its length to extend its body toward him. He looked above and saw a handful of bridges within easy reach.

“Come on!” he said, reaching for Mileena. She looked up and realized what he meant to do. Then she ran and jumped into his arms. He caught her easily and willed himself upwards.

As they rose, they heard a roar from the isteraz. Then they heard a strange sound, like a rush of water being squeezed through a small opening. They looked down and saw a stream of purple, steaming liquid coming right at them.

An image of the melted skeleton suddenly came into Callobus’s mind and he willed himself higher, as fast as the spell could carry them. He shot up like an arrow, speeding toward the ceiling. The acid just missed the bottom of his boots and fell back down, coating the surrounding structures. There was a loud sizzling and the smell of salt water. Everything the purple liquid touched

dissolved and melted away. The worm just bellowed in rage as its intended victims got further away.

Callobus looked up and saw the ceiling racing towards him. He willed himself to a stop, but this particular spell didn't just stop when ordered. It had to slow down first. He winced and he leaned over as his back hit the ceiling with a loud thud. He almost lost his hold on Mileena and the air was blasted from his lungs, but he shook off the pain and quickly cleared his head. He looked over and saw a bridge, a thicker bridge, just below him to his right. He gently dropped Mileena and she guided him over with her staff where he willed himself to the ground.

The couple heard another roar and the chamber shook once again. They peaked over the ledge and saw the isteraz crashing through more of the structures. The spiked protrusions were white hot and steaming, melting any ice they came in contact with almost immediately. Then it crashed into the wall, burrowing through it and disappearing into the ground once more.

"We have to get to the surface before it does," Mileena said. If the creature caught them underground again, they doubted their luck would hold.

They ran across the bridge and into the tunnel, Mileena's glowing staff leading the way. Thankfully, the path they choose curved up, but it also turned sharply to the right. They didn't care as long as it continued to rise.

The tunnel was curvy, cutting through the ice like a side-winding snake. They noticed many other tunnels breaking off from the one they moved down, but they paid them no attention and just stayed on course.

Like the other tunnels they had traveled down, the journey was slow, with each of them having to lean over, crawl and, in once instance, even get on their bellies to move on. It soon became apparent that they had chosen the right direction for the tunnel slowly transformed from one consisting mostly of ice to one mostly of stone. Since they were moving to the surface, they surmised they were somewhere under the mountains. In just a few long strides, the ice had all but disappeared and they saw a spec of daylight around the bend ahead of them. They hurried, hoping the isteraz had not yet beaten them to the surface.

They emerged on the side of the White Rocks, a few feet above the surface of the Plains. The opening was narrow and they had to crawl around sharp pieces of rock to make it through. A small pile of rocks also sat in their way, hiding the exit from any on the outside.

Once they were free of the underground maze, they never slowed. They just ran into the gorge and towards the Plains. Callobus turned and looked for the chasm they had fallen through. He saw it many hundreds of yards behind

him. It had not felt like they had traveled that far but he knew underground, distance had an entirely different feel than on the surface.

Not yet twenty yards from where they had left the mountains, the ground just behind them started to rumble and shake. The area also started to warm considerably, the snow at their feet slowly melting.

“This thing is not going to let us go so easily,” Mileena said, sprinting from the area that was about to heave and explode when the worm emerged.

“Hit it with powerful spells,” Callobus responded, taking Dragonsbane in hand and activated the magic of his armor. “Keep hitting it with magic as I work on its body.” After he almost doubled in size, he grabbed his helm and placed it on his head. “If this thing wants a fight, we’ll give it one.”

They both knew the chances of success was small for in the story that Erot had recited to them, the strange traveler had said it took fifteen barbarians to take down one of the worms. They were just two, but they were strong and had Mileena’s magic to aid them, something the barbarians did not have.

The ground cracked and steam shot into the air, spraying the area with droplets of water. The rumbling and trembling became more intense as the creature neared the surface. Then it broke through, sending rock, stone and ice high into the sky. When the debris came back down, Mileena and Callobus were waiting, easily avoiding the large chunks of stone and shards of ice. When the largest pieces had settled to the ground, Mileena started to chant. Callobus just growled and rushed forward, Dragonsbane humming through the air.

The large body of the isteraz slammed to the ground, sending more strong vibrations along the surface and pounding the snow below it into thin cakes of ice. The pointy protrusions lining its body glowed in intense heat, causing the snow to melt. Its large mouth opened and it sent out a bellow that shook the mountains. The antennae around its mouth twitched and wiggled in agitation, tasting the air and searching for prey. It did not have to search for long. In fact, it didn’t even have to move for its prey was striding forward, eager to meet it.

The worm shifted to face Callobus head on and a gush of purple acid suddenly flew from its mouth. The wave of indigo went straight at him. He never wavered, never paused. He just continued forward, trusting completely in Mileena’s magic.

The acid washed over him, but not a drop of the purple liquid touched his skin. It just slid off him as if it was water hitting an oil-covered surface and splashed to the ground. The loud sizzling of it eating through the snow and then the ground beneath sounded loudly in Callobus’s ears, but he ignored it, and the nauseating smell, and raised his sword for a powerful strike. The isteraz let loose something that sounded like a growl and moved forward to

swallow its stubborn target whole.

A thunderclap echoed throughout the Plains and for an instant, the front of the worm lit up in a flash of white light. Then the lightning bolt that exploded from Mileena's raised staff surged into the creature, just above its mouth. A dozen antennae suddenly went rigid. They writhed in pain and blackened as the magic surged through them. Then they went limp, hanging lifelessly from the worm's mouth. The monster bellowed in pain and anguish, all thoughts of attack and hunger driven from its simple mind. The only thing it knew now was pain, burning pain that it had never experienced before.

As the realization entered its well-hidden brain, Callobus ran up to the side of its massive body, carefully avoiding the steaming protrusions, and swung Dragonsbane around in a powerful arc. The enchanted blade parted the rubbery flesh easily and blood as dark as night spilled out and turned the white ground black. Steam quickly formed when the warm liquid met the cold snow. Unfortunately for Callobus, the only reaction he received after the attack was a slight twitch of the skin around the wound. Other than that, the worm hardly flinched. He expected as much for the creature was massive. The injury was the equivalent of a pinprick to him, but he knew if you shove in enough pins, eventually even the mightiest warrior would fall.

As Callobus reared back to swing again, Mileena started casting her second spell. As the words left her lips and her arms waved through the air, she saw the worm's attention had shifted to her. It pushed its massive bulk along the ground and came at her. She was a good distance away but the isteraz would cover the gap quickly. She had this one spell and perhaps one more before it reached her.

Mileena carefully weighed her options against the isteraz. She doubted spells of force or sound would do much against a creature of such size. She also knew acid-based magic would have little effect for it was most likely immune to such attacks since it spewed the corrosive substance from its very mouth. Spells of cold she also ruled out, so she stuck to the basics: lightning and fire.

She thrust her staff out and let the energy she gathered come forth. A cone of fire exploded from the gem and flew at the worm's mouth. The antennae wiggled and twisted suddenly, sensing the coming danger. The creature shifted its bulk but the spell traveled too fast for it maneuver out of the way.

The flames crashed into the side of its mouth, burning more of the antennae and blistering the soft skin immediately. The smell of cooking flesh permeated the area, but luckily, Mileena was too far away to smell it. However, Callobus almost retched when the scent reached him. He held back the bile rising in his

throat as he opened another deep gash on the side of the worm's body. Blood painted the ground once more, but as before, the isteraz gave no indication he was there. It just writhed in pain as the flames burnt its flesh.

The spell finally faded, its magic spent. A large black mark and a dozen more dead antennae now painted the face of the isteraz. It growled, straightened itself and surged forward. Mileena started another spell.

Callobus followed beside the creature, hacking and slashing at its body. He had to think of something that would turn it away from Mileena if they were to have a chance. The only thing that had managed to hurt it was her spells. If it reached her, all was lost.

He studied the strange glowing protrusions on the side of its body. They were as long as his legs and just as wide. They appeared as shards of jagged ice, deep blue in color, but at the moment, more than half of them were glowing white and giving off heat so intense it made him sweat. He knew the isteraz used the strange spikes to burrow through the ground, so why were they glowing now? he thought to himself. Perhaps they were a defense mechanism, used to ward off prey. If that were the case, maybe they were as sensitive as the feelers around its mouth. Only one way to find out.

He carefully aimed Dragonsbane where the spike sat against the rubbery skin and thrust. The blade sank in but hit something hard just below the surface. Callobus grunted against the resistance and pushed. He heard a crack as the blade broke through and sank in, slicing through something hard. The result was almost immediate.

The isteraz roared in pain and suddenly stopped its forward movement. The flesh around the sword blade went rigid and hard. The spike that had been glowing hot went cold and returned to its original deep blue color. Dark blood gushed from the wound, but so did a blue, sparkly liquid that steamed as it came in contact with the cold air. It hit the snow, letting off a hiss of heat. Callobus was mesmerized by its shiny characteristics, but tore his eyes from the snow as the wall of flesh in front of him suddenly started to move toward him.

The creature actually started to roll its body, to crush the source of the sudden pain in its side. Callobus went to yank Dragonsbane from the wound but the tightened flesh around the blade held it firmly. He pulled again to no avail.

Callobus knew if he left the sword in, it could be crushed, possibly broken, under the worm's tremendous weight but to stay where he was meant instant death. It was a difficult decision but he let go of his sword and started to run. Seeing the speed at which the worm started to turn, he knew he would not be

able to get away before it reached him, but he ran anyway.

Mileena, in the midst of casting, saw the worm start to shift and roll towards Callobus. She knew, even in his enlarged form, he would never outrun the worm before it landed on him, so she altered her casting and called upon a different spell.

The energy of the fire spell she had been weaving slowly changed. She altered her words and weaved her hand and arms in a different pattern. New energy, cold energy, welled up inside her and flowed up her arms. It coursed through her fingers and her staff, making the gem on top flash in bright white. When she finished the words, she pointed her staff directly in the path of the rolling worm, carefully releasing her spell as to not catch Callobus inside the area of effect.

The particles of snow on the ground became rough and solid, coming together to form small patches of ice. Two dozen fist-sized circles of blue quickly sprang into being on the ground just behind the fleeing steps of Callobus. Then, as the magic worked, each one suddenly elongated, becoming a six-foot spike of ice in a matter of seconds.

The isteraz must have never sensed the danger for it kept on rolling, right onto the spikes. The magical ice stood resilient and sunk into its flesh. Dark blood painted the snow and the worm roared. Its circular movement came to an abrupt stop, just before smashing Dragonsbane flat. Callobus skidded to a stop and turned. He watched as the isteraz quickly changed course and reversed its roll, coming off the spikes. Two dozen holes, each leaking dark blood, decorated its side. The beast growled in pain. Then, in an amazing burst of speed, it slid forward, right at Mileena, who was just starting another spell.

The quick maneuver caught her by surprise. She went to back away but suddenly realized that she had no chance of getting away from the creature, or its mouth, which had opened wide to swallow her hole. She dove to the side, trying her best to get out of the way. The antennae twitched and wiggled, appearing like demented arms yearning to embrace her. They looked like the pale arms of a withered old man, just many times longer. There seemed to be no bones or joints to the things so they moved with complete freedom, like a whip. A clump of white hair, greasy and disgusting, sat on the ends of each one. The hair also seemed to have a mind of its own for it squirmed and wriggled as it came close to her, sensing her presence.

She tried to crawl away, to escape the revolting things before her, but they were too fast. She felt hair wrap around her leg and a handful of the wicked appendages snagged her arm. Then she was pulled from the ground.

The surface of the Plains sped away from her as she was lifted into the air.



The worm raised the front of its body, coming completely off the ground, and wiped its head back, trying to flip her into its mouth. She felt the grip of the antennae loosen and her body started to shift inside the gaping maw, so she did the only thing she could and grabbed hold of the very things that had grabbed her in the first place.

The worm shook and made quick jerking motions, trying to get her inside its mouth, but Mileena held on for dear life. She thought it odd that every time her body was flung upwards, she found she hung in the air for a few seconds before slowly coming back down. Then she realized the ring that Farthos had given her, the one that prevents her from falling, was actually helping in keeping her out of the worm's mouth, but it was only a matter of time before she slipped inside.

Callobus watched in horror as Mileena was yanked from the ground and shaken like a doll. He knew he had very little time to grab the worm's attention, to get it to come back down before it ate her, so he ran back towards its body.

He grabbed Dragonsbane and pulled with all his might. At first, the blade held firm, but eventually, it slid free. A gush of the sparkling fluid came with it, splattering the ground. The worm groaned but whether it was from him or its failed attempt to eat Mileena, he could not tell. Regardless of the reason, he swung and opened another gash on the worm's side. As before, there was no reaction, so he aimed for another spike. This time, he sheared through the spike itself.

The hard protrusion, this one not radiating heat at the moment, split like parchment, being no match for the enchanted blade of Dragonsbane. More of the glimmering fluid gushed from the broken spike, but this time it was alone. There was no blood following it. The worm didn't react either.

Damn! Callobus thought to himself. There was no way he could do enough damage to gain its attention. One person was just not enough, unless they had magic like Mileena. He had magic, just not the kind he needed. Now he understood why it had taken so many barbarians to bring one of these creatures down.

Intense heat drew his attention. The spikes all around him started to glow. He felt their energy and knew that if he had not been wearing Gladius's Wrap, which offered some magical protection against the elements, his skin would have blistered. He still took a step back, the torridness making him uncomfortable, regardless of his armor.

Mileena's scream split the air. He looked and saw the worm continue to rapidly shift its head, relentless in its attempt to finish its intended meal. Callobus had to do something. But what?



Suddenly, only one option came to him. He had to rage, to use the strength and power of his curse to bring down this beast.

Why had the thought just suddenly come to him? He had not even felt the rage since being reunited with Mileena and his sword in Lornstone. The thought had just suddenly popped into his mind. Could the rage be gaining strength and I just don't realize it? he thought to himself. Or was it something else? He had a strange feeling that the sudden thought, urge even, to call upon his curse had come from the very land around him. It was as if the Plains themselves felt the power running through him and desired to see it displayed. Or perhaps it felt the danger he and Mileena were in.

But I made a vow, Callobus thought. I cannot! The consequences and pain I may cause is just too great. I could kill...

He suddenly stopped. He took a quick look around him and saw only empty land. There was nothing within a hundred miles of him. Who could he unintentionally hurt? Mileena? Not likely. They both knew of the power she held over his curse and even if he was to approach her, she knew what to do to avoid his wrath.

For his entire life, he had feared his curse, knowing the damage, destruction and pain he could cause while in the throes of the rage, but that had been when he was surrounded by loved ones. That had been when he had lived in cities, traveled through towns and journeyed with the people he cared for. There was nothing around him now. He stood in a land of emptiness, a land of nothing but ice, rock and stone. There was no one he could hurt, nothing he could destroy and Mileena knew what to do to be safe from him. So what was he waiting on?

Another scream reached his ears. He looked up and saw Mileena still being tossed around, hanging on as if her life depended on it, which it did. Seeing her dilemma made Callobus's decision rather easy.

Callobus called out, reaching to the rage, to the thing that had plagued him for most of his life. He pictured battle. He pictured Druzeel and anything else that made him angry. He felt his face grow warm and his heart start to race. With a gasp of surprise, he quickly felt a familiar itching creeping along the edge of his mind. By the gods was it fast! In the past, when he had called upon his curse, he had received no response. But now, it answered with eagerness and hunger. It was as if it had heard the call of the Plains as well.

His vision was suddenly bathed in crimson light. He felt adrenaline pump through his veins and his body start to grow. His arms and legs expanded. His chest widened and veins bulged all over his skin. His grip tightened on Dragonsbane and the vial inside the hilt flashed. Soothing magic flowed into him, dismissing all exhaustion from his body. He growled in satisfaction. Then

his crazed eyes focused on the mound of flesh in front of him. All thought left his mind then as the rage took complete control.

The roar that came forth from him rivaled that of the isteraz. It echoed throughout the Plains and seemed to shake the very mountains. Callobus sped forward and leaped, jumping almost ten feet off the ground. He swung Dragonsbane in a powerful overhead chop when he came down, opening the worm's side all the way down to the ground. A wave of blood poured from the wound, drenching him in the sticky fluid. He growled in satisfaction and moved in for another attack.

The isteraz definitely felt that one for it bucked like a horse and threw its head skyward. Mileena heard Callobus's roar of rage and a pain suddenly grabbed her heart when she heard the man she loved succumb to his curse. But why? What happened to bring it forth? Was he hurt? Had he been wounded? Unfortunately, she had to push the questions aside. Right now she had to concentrate on getting free.

When the isteraz whipped its head back, Mileena let go of the antennae, knowing the motion would fling her into the air. She was indeed sent flying, like an arrow shot from a bow, and she flew towards the clouds. When she reached the zenith, she started back down, as light as a feather. She looked below her and saw the worm still in the throes of anguish. Then it twisted to face the new threat.

Callobus had cut two more gashes before the isteraz had come back down and started to twist. The creature slowly moved its body to curve around and get at him. Callobus either did not see or care for he just kept cutting, making deep grooves in the white flesh. He was soon standing in a deep pool of steaming blood and glimmering goo. In his attacks, he had removed three more of the blue spikes, bringing loud cries of pain from the isteraz. He himself growled, yelled and shouted in rage as he sliced the white wall to ribbons. But then the worm had finally turned and came at him.

The gaping maw and wriggling antennae came toward him. It roared as it closed in, but Callobus just turned and screamed back, letting the rage drive him. As the hair-tipped appendages reached for him, he swung.

Eight of the things dropped to the ground, the severed ends squirting blood all over. The worm growled and on instinct alone, its head went back from the sudden pain. Callobus turned away and continued to cut into the rest of its large body.

Just then, Mileena touched down on top of the worm's body. As soon as she hit, she started sprinting towards the head, a spell forming on her lips.

She zigged around the steaming spikes and carefully balanced herself as

the worm shifted and moved. The surface was soft and her foot sunk a few inches into the soft flesh with each step she took, but she reached the head quickly, just as the isteraz was reaching for Callobus once more.

She saw him briefly then and knew he was completely immersed in his curse. She didn't understand why though. He was covered in blood, but none of it was his own. No wounds decorated his body. So what happened to bring the rage to the surface? she thought to herself. Perhaps her being almost swallowed brought it on. Whatever the reason, the extra strength coursing through his body was allowing him to actually deal damage, wounds it could feel, to the colossal creature.

When Mileena reached the end, just a few feet from the antennae and the large opening that led to oblivion, she leaped, flinging her body skyward and out towards the Plains. She turned in midair and flung her staff towards the worm's mouth, a mouth that was quickly closing in on Callobus.

A small ball of flame sped from the end of her staff and raced down the gullet of the isteraz. It disappeared in the darkness.

As Mileena floated down to the surface, she wondered what had happened to her spell. Then the darkness turned to day as the fireball exploded, filling the entire opening with searing flames.

The isteraz howled in pain, sending streams of smoke and goutts of flames high into the air as it spasmed in pain. Its body writhed as its insides were cooked. The back portion shook and twisted like a snake whose head had been cut off. Unfortunately, the portion that Callobus had been hacking away at suddenly rolled, right toward him.

"Cal!" Mileena shouted as the white flesh hit him. He never saw it coming and Mileena lost sight of him as the isteraz rolled over.

"No!" she screamed in anguish, knowing that even fully enraged, Callobus would be hard pressed to survive something so massive crashing down on top of him. What pained her even more was that it was her attack that had caused the worm to roll. She had to act fast if he had any chance of survival.

Anguish turned to anger and Mileena started casting another spell while backing away from the creature. A lightning bolt exploded from her staff and slammed into the isteraz. It roared again and shifted its bulk to come around to face her. What does it take! she screamed to herself in frustration and started another spell.

The worm turned fully and let loose a stream of acid. Mileena never moved and just let it wash over her. Her protective wards did their job and the acid slid away without harm.

A stream of flames left her hand and smashed into the antennae around its

mouth. Two dozen flopped lifeless against the opening and the isteraz roared once more. It suddenly surged forward and Mileena quickly realized that she had nowhere to go. She started another spell, intent on giving the beast one more lashing before it smoothed her.

Suddenly, the isteraz stopped and bunched up in pain. It let loose a sound that could only be called a scream and rolled in pain. Mileena stood dumbfounded as its body twitched and then went rigid. It bellowed in pain once more. Then the loud bays of torment turned to choking sounds as a river of blood suddenly started to pour from its mouth. It tried to roar, tried to let loose one last screech of agony, but only a hoarse wheeze came forth. Mileena let loose her spell, a blast of energy that tore away more of the antennae. She backed away then, not sure what was happening.

Finally, after what seemed like hours, the mighty creature went still and its mouth lulled open. All life left its body and the spiked protrusions turned cold.

Mileena stood in front of it, not sure what had happened. Her mind then turned to Callobus and she ran forward to where she had last seen him, but stopped when a sword burst through the side of the worm's body. She backed away and watched as Callobus emerged, covered in blood, entrails and other odd types of fluid. She saw that he was whole and unharmed, but also realized that the rage still held him.

She immediately went to the ground, laying her staff flat and holding her hands out in front of her in a nonthreatening manner, but Callobus never saw her. He just raised his head towards the sky and shouted in triumph. Then the rage left him, completely receding from his mind. His body shrank to normal size and sanity returned to his eyes. He took a moment to look around, trying to figure out where he was. When he realized that he was alive, that the worm lay dead around him, a smile formed on his lips.

Mileena looked up and saw that he had returned to his original self. She stood and carefully walked over to him.

"Are you...all right?"

Callobus turned, just now noticing her, and smiled. He knew she wasn't just asking about injuries, but about the rage as well.

"Yes," he said, dismissing the magic of his armor. "I'm fine."

"What happened?"

"Well, I fig—"

His words went cold in his throat and his eyes widened in surprise. Mileena saw the look on his face and soon realized that he was not looking at her, but behind her. She turned, staff raised to combat any threat that may present itself. What she saw froze her as solid as it had Callobus.

Ten large men stood a dozen yards from them, wearing expressions similar to their own. They looked surprised, shocked and amazed. Armor made of a mixture of hides, leather and steel decorated their bodies. Furs sat on broad shoulders and wide chests. No man was shorter than seven feet and each held hundreds of pounds of hardened muscle. Weapons as large as Dragonsbane hung on their backs, though some sat in unsteady fists. Their faces held heavy beards, battle ready eyes and mouths agape in wonder.

Mileena took a few steps back, wanting to be closer to Callobus. He came forward to meet her and was soon at her side. The two just stared, hoping that the men were not here to harm them.

Nervous eyes fell on Mileena and she soon found herself being studied, as any animal does when it sees something it does not understand. The men looked at her staff, clothing and every other item she wore. She did not feel threatened but the scrutiny made her shift uncomfortably.

Callobus just stood in silent shock. These are barbarians! he realized. I've found them, he then thought to himself. Or more appropriately, they've found me. Could I be descended from some of these men? Are these my ancestors? He looked at their faces and bodies, seeing that their physiques matched his own. They were just taller and carried a little more muscle, muscle that looked to be able to crush rocks.

But then he saw their eyes and noticed they were not really looking at him, but at Mileena, with curious expressions. For some reason, the looks unnerved him and made him uncomfortable. He looked to Mileena and saw that she felt the same.

But the scrutiny did not last long for their eyes soon turned to the carcass of the isteraz. Their faces showed wonder, shock and confusion. Soon, whispers started to pass between the men. Callobus and Mileena just stood silent, wanting them to make the first move. They did not have to wait long, but the questions that came were a little confusing.

"How did you do this?" asked one of the men as they came closer, his hand motioning towards the isteraz. He had a long black beard and carried a large sword. His clothing was simple but his eyes shown wisdom and experience.

"What?" was all Callobus could manage, a bit relieved that they spoke the same language. He looked at Mileena but she also wore a look of confusion.

"Did you have companions the worm killed?"

"No," Callobus responded, growing more confused with each passing moment. "It was just us." More whispers and gazes of astonishment passed through the men. Looks of disbelief also painted their faces.

"I'm sorry," Callobus said, interrupting the hushed conversations. The

barbarians turned in his direction. “But is something wrong?”

“We know not,” said a large man with a thick red beard. A couple of scars ran down the side of his face and he had a giant hammer strapped to his back. “Never have so few, let alone outsiders slain an isteraz. Long have we fought the great ice worms and always do many warriors die before we can bring the beasts down.”

“We saw flashes of light and blazes of fire as we approached,” said another man, this one wearing plates of steel over his chest and sporting a narrow yellow beard. “What manner of weapon do you wield to bring forth such power?”

“Not mine,” Callobus said, “but my companions.” All eyes turned to Mileena and she got that uncomfortable feeling again. She saw nervous eyes and uncertain faces.

“My spells helped bring the creature down,” she said. When she saw looks of confusion, she continued. “Magic.”

A collective gasp passed throughout the group of barbarians. Some even took a step back, eyeing her with caution. Fists tightened around hilts and weary looks crossed their faces.

Callobus tensed, seeing their reaction. He even came forward a step, putting himself in front of Mileena. Did they not have magic? he wondered. He watched the men whisper among themselves and caught the words ‘Korgoth’ and ‘Mystic’. Were those people or places? Whatever they were, he could see that things were quickly getting out of hand. These men obviously did not come for battle, at least not battle with them and he wanted to keep it that way.

“We mean no offense,” he said, hands stretched out in peace. No matter what his gestures, covered in blood and entrails as he was probably didn’t help the situation, but he didn’t exactly have time for a bath at the moment.

“There is no offense,” said the man that had first spoken. His tone was apologetic but carried a small amount of worry. “We have known only one being to use the mystical energies, and that is the Mystic. Besides her, magic is shunned by our people, unless it resides inside of a weapon or item.”

“I assure you, we mean no harm,” Mileena said, trying to calm their fears.

“Why have you come to the Plains?” the man with the scars said, his tone showing irritation and impatience. The others around him went silent, their eyes practically begging for an answer.

Callobus looked at Mileena. She nodded and he took a deep breath.

“I have come seeking the barbarians of the Crystal Plains, whose ancient people I am descended from.”

He saw looks of shock, surprise and skepticism. Whispers began again

among the barbarians. Once more, Callobus heard the names he had before. He also caught the mention of dreams and something about a vision or prophecy. Whatever it was, it was important and he got the feeling that many of the men before him thought those visions or dreams could involve him.

The barbarians separated minutes later and turned toward him. The one with the scars looked him in the eye. He regarded the scar Callobus carried only briefly then spoke.

“You will come with us.”

Callobus narrowed his eyes. Though he was getting exactly what he wanted, to find his ancestors and learn more about them, he still did not like the tone of the man’s voice. It was threatening and harsh.

“Do we have a choice?”

The man seemed to stand up straighter and puff out his chest. The others behind him tensed and hands slowly rose to the hilts of their weapons.

“No,” the man said with finality.

The last thing Callobus wanted was a confrontation with the very people he had come so far to find, so he nodded. Mileena looked to him with a worry-filled expression. He just stood by her as the barbarians surrounded them and started to lead them into the Plains. He hoped he had not just agreed to be led to his death.