

Looking southward they could see the city of Haran and the forest of Elmwynd rising up further east. They turned their gaze slightly northward and could see the high walls of Enedor, the capital city, shooting up like a man-made forest. That was their destination now but, though it looked close, they still had a great distance to cover before they would reach its gates. Noon came and went, and so did lunch; but as the day was beginning to realize that it had only a few hours left, it burned more brightly than it had all day. It was then that they heard an agonizing cry from the top of the mountain behind them. It was the wail of a beast that was being sent back to whatever dark realm it came from. It made them glad, because they knew that their dear Frishina had completed her task, and that Vashrog the dracolich was dead at last.

But the fury that thundered from the mountaintop when his master found out gave them cause for concern. They rested in the grass that night, thinking about what might happen to them in the coming days. Alex worried and he knew that his friends were less than sure of themselves. They had all found themselves in a world they didn't understand, so how could they be sure of anything. But Alex thought about Father Timothy's words, 'no one knows about you. Just don't get involved and you'll be fine.' Maybe it would be best if they took the quiet road, and not reach too high. After all they had their part to play and nobody could ask them to play another, least of all, themselves.

In the morning these fears melted away as easily as the snow of Ithili did, and their minds were clear to think about the task ahead of them. "What did you and Father Timothy talk about," Jason asked him.

"Oh, nothing important. He said that the next jewel was in Aldra."

"Aldra," Felix asked in curiosity. "That's all the way to the east. That's a long way from here!" He stopped walking and turned toward them.

"Let me see that map," Jason said. Alex gave him the old map and he looked over it silently. "Look, there's one just north of here." They turned northward to the area on the map, but there was a tremendous cliff rising up in the distance, with a sparkling waterfall. Felix glanced at the map.

"That's by Lake Aradred. It's over the top of that cliff." He pointed. "There's no road near here but there is a small stairway that goes through it if you want to get to Erebaen."

"Well it seems closer. Let's go there first!"

"I don't know, guys," Alex objected. "I don't think we should deviate from our route."

"But it'll take longer!"

"I'm not so sure. Father Timothy gave this specific route to us and he received it from Mr. DeWyeth, himself." Alex had already made up his mind and continued east, followed closely by Felix. Jason didn't want to give up so quickly but, seeing as it was two against one, decided to swallow his pride and go without a fuss. Over the couple of days that they headed toward Enedor Jason didn't voice his opposition to their adhering to, what he thought to be, a longer route. At first he was just waiting for a sensible argument to come to mind, but after a while he began to realize that they had already gone too far east to justify going to Erebaen. As they drew near to the city of Enedor,

Jason finally spoke up. Although he knew he had already lost the previous battle, he had to voice his concern. For the good of the group, of course.

“Just who is this DeWyeth character, anyway? Why haven’t we ever seen him?” Alex shrugged his shoulders. He had nothing to say to that. It was the truth, and he was actually wondering it himself. “I for one, don’t trust him.”

“Father Timothy trusts him.”

“Well, I don’t see why we should have any reason to confide in someone we’ve never met when we have to keep up this veil of secrecy in front of everyone else’s eyes. If you ask me, he’s as much of a stranger to us as the... *fourth* guy we’ll meet when we get to Enedor!”

“Be careful. We might run into somebody we know!” He chuckled. “Besides, you do realize that since we’ve started this trip, we *have* ended up revealing our plans to nearly every person we’ve met, don’t you?”

“That’s not the point! I want this DeWyeth guy to come clean and show himself. Then I can decide whether I want to take his orders or not.” Alex turned to his cousin and shook his head.

“Were you born with an inherent need to stir up trouble, or was that just something you picked up somewhere?”

“What trouble? I’m just making an observation! I’m right aren’t I?”

“It’s true, you do have a point, but don’t be so judgmental.”

Felix chimed in, “I agree with Jason. This guy doesn’t sound like much help.”

“Thank you,” Jason replied with a smile.

“Well,” Alex added. “Father Timothy did say that DeWyeth was doing a lot of work on our behalf, right now.”

“A lot of work on our behalf? That’s rich! Did he get rid of the wolves in the forest before we got there, or kill that crazy skeleton dragon that almost ate us? No! If he’s off making the way easier for us, he’s doing a lousy job!” They were nearing the city now and the walls, imbed with large rough stones, were rising up higher and higher, nearly blocking out the sun with joyously waving banners.

“Well I think that the road he picked out for us will save us a lot of time and effort in the end. I’m sure Father Timothy wouldn’t concur with the idea unless he agreed. Who knows *how* many dangers this route is saving us from.” They found the tremendous wooden gates wide open, welcoming them to a lively city full of all the civilized conveniences they could need. It was a cheering sight, indeed. The city was dense and noisy, but it had a good feeling to it, one that made them feel very comfortable. As they entered Alex took a deep breath and said, “I have a feeling that coming here may be the best thing that could have happened to us!” He turned to look down the street and saw a few men in green uniforms coming toward them.

“You three,” one of the men said. “Please come with us!”

“What for,” Alex asked in utter confusion.

“You’re under arrest!” Alex went pale and Jason turned to him with a sour look.

“Don’t... say it! Just don’t say anything...” Their hands were bound with metal cuffs and their weapons were confiscated. They were quickly and silently led to a police

car, and soon were off without attracting any attention. The three sat quietly in the backseat wondering what was going to happen to them. Luckily Felix had remembered to wear his hood, scarf and gloves. It didn't really make him a very convincing human, but at least he didn't look like a troll, though he suspected that he may have somehow given himself away and endangered his companions.

Finally one of the men in the front spoke up. "Pardon us for the abruptness of all that but we have to be very discreet."

"May I ask," Alex inquired timidly. "why we're being arrested?"

"Sorry, but we aren't at liberty to discuss it now. Everything will be explained when we get to the Governor's house."

"Governor?"

Jason looked at Felix, beside him and said, "Would you look at the way your tail is sticking out! I told you to tuck it in! No wonder they arrested us!"

"Shhh," Felix hushed, shoving his blue tail back into his belt. "They'll hear!"

"As if they don't already know! Now they think we're some kind of enemy spies or worse!"

"Thanks a lot..."

"Well it's the truth! You said it yourself! Trolls aren't well thought of!"

"Oh shut up..."

Alex broke them up. "Will you guys be quiet? I have no idea what this is about, but I'm sure you aren't making the situation any better!" He tried to take a peek up front and see the men's faces, but he couldn't get a good look. "Let's just wait and see. No matter what happens, we know we're innocent so we should have nothing to worry about."

"It doesn't matter if we're innocent," Jason said quietly. "*They* could be the spies! We could be done for already! This is *exactly* the kind of thing that Father Timothy warned us about."

"I'm not so sure..." Alex looked out at the magnificent city as they drove. You remember how shocked he was when first arriving in Armen, seeing the ancient beauty of Alinor's towns for the first time. By now he had already seen three of its lovely cities, but Enedor made him shudder at its size and majesty. Until the construction of Aldra, Enedor was the largest city in Alinor and remains the most populated. Of all the city-states, Enedor was, and still is, chief among them, home to the Alinorian senate where the governors and senators from across the nation convene. The sheer size and splendor of the old buildings found here took his breath away. The ride seemed all but too short, and Alex hoped to get a chance to explore the whole city; if they didn't wind up in prison, that is.

"Here we are," said one of the men as the car pulled over in front of a regal structure. "This is the governor's home." They were escorted out of the car swiftly and led into the grand building. Felix marveled at the inside more than the outside, having never been within a place like this before. From the polished floor emblazoned with the crest of Alinor, to the red carpeted stairs, to the brilliantly burning chandelier above, it was a place of elegance and status. He almost didn't mind being arrested. "This way,"

one of the uniformed men said, leading them down a set of stairs; the other following closely behind them. They brought them very deeply into the lower floors, descending stair after stair, until the surroundings ceased to be pleasing and became rather more functional. The stairwells were dimly lit and all around were cold metal and bare concrete.

Finally they came to a corridor and were led into a small room with a desk, some chairs and a meager cot in the corner. There were no windows except for a small square in the top of the metal door. They had reached the end of their visit to Enedor and it ended exactly where they had feared... jail. "Wait here," said the second man as he and his partner left the room.

"Isn't there a *waiting* room where we can wait," Jason asked.

"This is the waiting room..." The man said nothing further, but shut the door. The heavy groan of a lock was heard.

"Some waiting room! They could've at least left a *Housewife Weekly* or something for us..."

Felix slumped into the cot and groaned, "What're we gonna do?"

"What indeed? We've already trekked cross-country, were accosted on the street by two strong arms, and now we've been arrested in what looks to be the maintenance floor of the congressional psycho ward..." he looked at his watch. "And it's only 12:30! Goodness the myriad of other messes we could get into before dinner, if we EVER GET OUT OF THIS PLACE!" His shout was followed by stark silence. "Nothing."

"I just want to know what we did wrong!"

Jason narrowed his eyes at the troll and said, "Tail... trust me..."

"No," Alex said, rising and going over to the door. He knew it was sealed shut, but he still felt the need to tug on the handle. "This doesn't seem right at all! If we had broken a law, we would've been taken to a *jail*! Why then are we in the basement of the *governor's* house?"

"You know," Jason returned with a terrified look. "Listening to you say it that way... it's sounding worse and worse... and really creepy!" He shuddered. They had waited for quite a while, when one of the men opened the door, with the loud clang of the lock undoing itself, and stepped quickly inside as if he had his trajectory all mapped out. He didn't even look at the three prisoners as they stared at him, waiting for news of what was going on. But the man said nothing, and quickly grasped Alex's satchel from the floor beside him, whisking it out the door again before they could react. "Hey!" All three of them leapt to their feet but the door was locked when they got there.

"Give that back," Alex shouted, banging on the door and pressing his face up to the window. He could see the man out in the corridor, passing the bag to the other guard, who brought it into a nearby room without delay.

"I knew it," Jason yelled. He slammed his back against the wall and slid to the floor. "We screwed everything up!" Alex was disheartened. It was hard to believe but it looked like Jason was finally right. They had been captured and their jewels confiscated. Whoever these people were, they knew all about the three companions.

Nothing happened for over an hour. They just sat and worried about what was to come of their mistake. They nearly expected to hear the apocalypse occurring around them as they waited. At last, they heard the lock clanging back and forth and set their eyes on the door.

Felix rose to his feet and bent over, saying, "I'll charge the guy when he opens the door and you two get out while he's down..."

"Felix..."

"Get ready, one... two... guys?"

"Never mind that." The door opened and, to their surprise, a well-dressed man came in, bearing Alex's satchel in his hand. He closed and bolted the door behind him and sat down in one of the chairs.

"Well," Felix said straitening out again with a huff. "Glad you guys are so eager to get out of here." He returned to the cot and sulked in the corner.

"Hello boys," the man said quietly, with a friendly air. "Sorry we had to do this."

"*Why*," Alex asked concernedly. "did you have to do this? Just what have we done wrong?"

"Oh nothing really," he replied, lowering the bag to the ground beside the chair. "Except that you decided to come here today."

Jason leaned over to Alex and said, "These people are nuts."

"Just what does that mean," Felix asked, sitting up and leaning forward in a threatening way.

"Simply that today was not a good day to be wandering the streets of Enedor, though it is fortunate that I found you so soon. We had been waiting for you at the gates for a couple of days now, but were worried we wouldn't find you in time."

"In time for what," Alex asked, putting on his best tough guy façade.

"In time for the Prime Minister's arrival. As long as you're down here, I pray he'll be none the wiser." They gave him a blank look. Things were starting to sound more complicated now. "I'm sorry. I still haven't explained to you why you're here." He emptied the three jewels onto the desk. "I know what these are and I know who you are." He reached down to grab them but stopped suddenly. They could read in his face that he wanted to pick one up, but either couldn't or wouldn't. It seems it was true that only a Pendragon could touch them. "The Prime Minister knows who you are as well, and he's been searching for you. That's why I had to find you first and hide you here. He's in Enedor right now and until he leaves town I can't let you go."

"You mean you don't want the jewels?"

"No. But *they* do. I have no doubt that they have spies combing the whole countryside for you; following your movements, keeping tabs on you. When you get the last jewel, they'll be right there... just waiting."

"If you aren't working for them," Jason asked. "then who are you?"

"I'm sorry," he said with a smile. "In the rush I seem to have forgotten to put everything into the rightful order. I haven't even introduced myself. I'm Edward Stanton, I'm the governor of Enedor... hopefully not the last. I received a call when you left Mimvael, I'm just so relieved that I caught you before the Prime Minister did."

“Wait! What stool pigeon told you where we were?” There was a knock on the door and Governor Stanton sat upright.

“Oh, come in!” The guards undid the lock and someone stepped through the doorway.

“Am I interrupting,” the visitor asked, closing the door behind him.

“Not at all, Timothy.” A slight laugh escaped the governor’s mouth. “Perfect timing, in fact! We were just talking about you!”

“Nothing bad, I hope,” Father Timothy said with a warm smile. The old man was hardly recognizable in civilian clothing.

“Not really. This lad here was just saying something about you being a stool pigeon.” Father Timothy knew immediately who he was talking about and gave Jason a good-humored glower. Alex was ecstatic to see the good priest with them again, like a breath of fresh air. Jason, however, was a little glum.

“You mean the fourth person we meet in Enedor... is *Father Timothy*?”

Felix leaned over to him and said, grinning, “How does it feel to *always* be wrong?”

“What a gyp! Can’t fate cut me some slack even once!”

Alex chuckled with relief and replied, “I think fate just cut us *all* a whole lot of slack...”

“More than you know,” Father Timothy said sitting down. “More than you know. You were this close to running into the Prime Minister! If he had discovered you were here, he would have reported your position to the enemy and sent spies after you immediately!”

“Wait,” Jason said suddenly. “I thought there was no Prime Minister in Alinor!”

“There is now,” replied the governor. “He was only elected a few days ago and already he’s going to use his position to thwart you.”

“But who is he,” Felix asked.

“He *was* the Governor of Cathadon, but was recently chosen as a top candidate when it was decided a Prime Minister should be instated.”

“Who decided that?”

“He did. He has many senators on his side and the rest he has following him out of fear. As you may have guessed he’s an Orinost supporter and he’s vowed to use the nation’s laws to gain possession of the jewels, however he can. So far, I and my friends in the senate have done what we can to slow the process but there’s little more we can do. He has too much support already and every day he gains more authority. If we could just catch him in some act that would show everyone who he really is, perhaps we could eject him from office. But the people see him as a force for good and I fear by the time he reveals his true motives it’ll already be too late. If he gets a hold of those jewels he’ll hand them over to the enemy without a second thought.”

“Where are they,” Alex asked. “This enemy you’re always talking about. If there’s some power other than the Prime Minister and his supporters in the government, then *who* and *where* are they?”

Father Timothy spoke up. "I've told you about Vargoth, the colleague of mine who started all this. Well he's gained support as well; who knows how much and from whom, but I shudder to think! To answer your second question we don't even know where they are, but I've already shared my concerns with Governor Stanton and he's voiced them before the senate and the governing committee."

"So far," the governor picked up. "they've fallen on deaf ears. The Prime Minister won't allow the Alinorian Military to take action, for obvious reasons! General Corvino is a close friend of mine, but he's powerless to help if the government has restrictions on his ability to mobilize! So far the only defense measure the Prime Minister has ordered is for all the cities to be locked at nightfall. It seems like a small effort to keep the people safe but, conveniently, it also makes it considerably easier to get three young men exactly where he wants them."

"Military action," Alex repeated. He turned to Father Timothy. "Do you really think war is on the horizon?"

"I don't know. But if they can't get the jewels by trickery, they'll take them by force. Just how much force Vargoth has, I have no idea. Hopefully Matthew will be able to tell me in his next letter."

"Oh yes," Jason retorted with a scowl. "Our *friend* Matthew." Alex jabbed him with his elbow, and silently reminded him of what he had said earlier about DeWyeth being no more trustworthy than a perfect stranger who turned out to be Father Timothy. "Sorry. I guess I did misjudge him. After all, his route landed us in just the right person's hands."

"Were you thinking of changing your route to save time?" Jason nodded awkwardly. "Well now you know how important it is to stick to our advice. It could mean the difference between success and failure."

"Well Father," Governor Stanton said, suddenly standing. "I think you all have some catching up to do, so I'll leave you and have some food sent down. You boys must be hungry."

"We are," Jason replied eagerly. "But do we have to eat down here like mole men?"

"I'm sorry but as long as the Prime Minister is here you can't risk crossing paths with him. He'll be looking for you, but tonight he's returning to Cathadon. You'll be able to come up then. In fact I have a favor to ask of you. I'll tell you about it when I get back." He smiled sadly and moved toward the door.

"Wait, where are you going?"

"To meet the prime minister at congress." He paused. "I can't be aggressive as long as you boys are here, but hopefully... soon. I'll see you later." With that, he left and it was just the way it had begun, with old friends. Gone was the talk of political warfare and troubled times. The three boys and the old man ate until their troubles dissolved.

"You're doing very well boys and your journey is almost half over!"

"Yeah I guess so," Alex said. "But I had no idea there were so many people working against us!"

“Not *so* many. There are also many, *many* people working for you! You’re well taken care of, I assure you.” He started to laugh. “Why, if the prime minister only knew how close he was to catching you!”

“If he knew, he’d turn around and come back for us,” Jason said sarcastically.

“But don’t you see? It was close, through no error of yours! But the fact remains that you were properly protected! The timing was perfect! DeWyeth expected all of this and prepared for it accordingly. They may think we’re stupid, but we’re not! We’ll show ‘em, right?” Jason smiled.

“Right.”

“That’s the spirit!”

“Father,” Alex asked. “Do you have any idea what this favor of the governor’s is?”

“Uhh. I do. But I’ll let him explain. It’s really none of my business.” He glanced at the watch on his wrist nervously.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, but it is getting a little late. I hope he gets back soon. If not, then maybe it would be better if I told you now.” He leaned in a little as if to privatize his words, despite their being isolated in a cell together. “Governor Stanton has a very tragic problem. His young son, Aaron, disappeared last week.”

“Disappeared?”

“Without so much as a trace to follow. Poor boy is no older than thirteen. Who knows what happened to him...”

“That’s terrible,” Jason replied. “Can’t anyone do something?”

“Are you kidding? The son of the governor goes missing? You can be sure the state has exercised its full power in searching for him. That is until the governor from Cathadon, a certain fellow by the name of William Darbis, convinced the senate that it was a matter for the regional police alone, and since then, the manpower behind this search has been considerably lessened. No progress either.”

“This Darbis guy,” Felix asked with a scowl. “He’s the Prime Minister?”

“Unfortunately, yes. To make matters worse, this curfew he’s instated prevents anyone from venturing out at night, losing many hours of investigation every day.”

Alex was deeply troubled by this news. Not just because a young man was missing, but because it had the stench of conspiracy all over it. “Do you think the government had something to do with his disappearance?”

“I don’t know, but Stanton’s daughter was convinced that her younger brother was taken by something evil. Of everyone involved she’s been the most active and determined to find young Aaron.”

“So,” Jason began. “Our task is to find Aaron, right?”

“No,” came a forceful answer from the doorway. Governor Stanton had just entered, removing his jacket and placing it on the door handle. “I couldn’t ask you to undertake a task as hopeless as that.” It was clear now from the care and stress in his face that he held out no hope of ever seeing his son again. “But I fear to lose both my children. This morning Sarah went out again in search of her brother. I begged her not to go,



especially with all that's been happening, but once she has her heart set on something, neither earthquake nor hurricane can drive her back... or monsters..."

"Monsters?" They looked at each other warily.

"She swears that he was taken eastward, and said she was going to search Elen Din."

"What's Elen Din?"

"A cemetery dead east of here. I don't have the heart to tell her that Aaron is as good as gone." He paused for a while. "I don't know if I have the heart to admit it even to myself. But even if I did it wouldn't convince her. She's young and still remembers what it feels like to have hope. Not like me."

Suddenly, Felix leapt up with an angry grunt. "And I don't see why she shouldn't! You're gonna give up on your own son just because things haven't gone well? I don't blame her for runnin' off on her own! I'da done the same thing if *my* brother were lost!"

"There are stories that a terrible monster lives in Elen Din... Sarah is a young woman of fantastic resolve, but she's still just a little girl! I've lived in this country long enough to know that most of the faerie tales told here are based on very real things, and whatever is in that cemetery is..." He sank into his chair. "I just don't want to lose her, and unless someone brings her home now I'm certain that I'll never see her again." When he looked up, his eyes were sullen and worn. "Please, just bring her home. She's all I have left."

"That isn't a problem governor," Alex said calmly. "We'll do everything we can to help." Father Timothy had been observing silently, just now echoing his response with a nod.

"Meanwhile," the governor said, standing and looking directly at Felix. "I am going to do what I can to convince both the Prime Minister and the senate to revitalize the search for Aaron." In just a few moments his eyes became charged with determination. "And if the Prime Minister wants to stand in my way, I swear I'll have him out of office by tonight... somehow, I'll do it." Looking at him now, they knew he meant it. "You have about six hours before the gates close for the night, but I'll make certain they don't lock them on you. It isn't very far and it's a straight path so you'll have plenty of time."

"Thank you. We'll be as quick as we can."

"Just..." He paused uneasily. "Just be careful."

"We will." With that, they packed up their things and made ready to leave. Alex was about to grab his satchel with the jewels, but the governor gripped it first and drew it away from his reach.

"I will keep the jewels here as... collateral." Alex could tell that he felt almost ashamed to say it, and a silent gesture from Father Timothy finally assuaged his reluctance to concede. He nodded in agreement.

"I understand." Jason and Felix were not so convinced, but they had learned to have faith in Alex's judgment when theirs failed them. They left with noiseless glances at one another, as the guards led them out of the cell and upstairs.

Now Governor Stanton and Father Timothy were alone. “Don’t worry, Edward,” the priest said with a smile. “They’ll find her.”

“It isn’t even her I’m worried about. It’s all of us... I have work to do Tim.”

“We all do...”