



Fate of Eric

v5

*Moonstone Community Event
25 July – 18 Sept 2022*

Fate of Eric: Moonstone Community Event

Eric is more than a mere squire. Queen Diana has sensed it. Priestess Gwendoline has seen it. Baron von Fancyhat has always known it. Eric has power in his blood that lays dormant, waiting for ancient and powerful magics to awaken his potential.

But what does that mean? And how can Eric help Tauber during one of its darkest ever times? All the factions know is that he must be recruited at all costs, so that he will fight holding their banner!

Conclusion

The Fate of Eric Community Event has now concluded and our hero's fate is sealed!

In the following pages you can read the complete story by V.G. Thorne including Eric's final decision in Part 5: *A Year and a Day*, beginning on page 22. You can also find his full colour concept art and play-test card (subject to changes!). We welcome all players who took part in The Fate of Eric to give this new character a try and feed back your thoughts. We've found your suggestions invaluable already and long may that continue.

As well as some internal play-testing, work on the sculpt will begin immediately so keep your eyes on the [Moonstone Players Group](#) on Facebook, as well as our [Instagram](#) feed and [Discord](#) for progress updates!

Before you enjoy the story, I want to thank everyone personally who took part in the event. We had a staggering 237 games submitted which completely blew our hopes and expectations out of the water! The buzz was electric throughout the whole duration and once again I felt truly blessed to be a part of the greatest gaming community I've ever known, with good natured rivalry and banter providing daily entertainment. Thank you all!



Tom Greenway, Moonstone Designer

Part 1/5: A journey begins

The fox watched the top of the Wizards' Tower rip apart, her expression quizzical. She sat as two figures shot out of the door, a blue cloud pouring after them glittered into nothingness. A lone figure soared into the Tower, followed by another three marching across the open space at a slower pace.

Curious, she thought.

The eclipse-orange sky had been overtaken by blue, with pieces of the destroyed moon hurtling towards the land as sparkling trails. From the top of her hill, she dispassionately watched the streaks and waited for the eventual sound of approaching footsteps. Cocking her head, she listened to three sets of feet on a gravel path. Mumbled voices. A cackle. Then Zorya was at the top, the grin on her face melting away when she saw the fox.

Zorya hissed. "Stay away, fox!"

The fox stared at the witch in amusement.

Antonia joined her sister, her cheeks ruddy. "Oh dear, you best stay away."

The fox merely blinked.

Finally, Danica joined the others and thrust her palm outwards towards the fox. "Begone, odious phantasm, there is nothing for you here!"

The fox looked at them each in turn, stood, and trotted away, tail swishing. The three pairs of eyes followed her as she sauntered down the hill, her mouth open in a dog-like grin.

Very *curious*, she thought.

The human and the faerie-goblin were making so much noise it was very easy for the fox to find them. The faerie-goblin, or Herbert as she'd heard him called, was gentle footed but seemed to like the sound of his own voice. The human, Eric, was quiet but tramped through the undergrowth like a giant.

The fox sat in the shade of a large tree and watched them pass by, discussing someone called Gwendoline. They didn't see her and she silently trotted after them, passing them easily she sat regally in a ring of holly. They passed her again. She repeated her chase twice more. *I'll have to be more conspicuous*, she thought and sat in a thicket of hemlock, her tail flicking.

Herbert spotted her and pushed his hand back towards Eric, his expression worried. "Oh, now that's not a good sign."

"What isn't?"

"That fox."

Eric peered at her and scratched his head. "Why isn't the fox a good sign?"

Herbert gave him an incredulous look before carefully examining her again. "Foxes are bad luck, always up to no good,

and can draw *things* to you. Bad, spirit, type things."

The fox cocked her head and did her best to look sweet.

Eric smiled and their eyes met for a moment. "It doesn't look that bad to me."

What was a moment to Eric was a rush of a magical vision to the fox and she panted her surprise.

Herbert shook his head and stalked forwards, beating his wings and flailing his arms.

"What are you doing?" Eric laughed.

What does it look like?" Herbert muttered then shouted at the fox, "Go on, get out of here! Shoo!"

The fox waited until he was in striking distance then stood suddenly and scampered off into the vegetation. *Oh, oh my. No wonder the witches wanted to keep me away.*

They had been walking for hours and finally the sun was setting. Eric was tired, his legs hurt, and he was confused about what had happened these past days and weeks. Streaks of debris from the moon were still careening across the sky, giving the woods a flame-orange glow as they passed.

"This'll be a good spot for a camp," Herbert said cheerfully.

Eric nodded weakly and plonked down onto a log.

Herbert raised an eyebrow. "Go and gather some firewood while I clear the space and get things sorted."

"Do we have any food?"

"That's what I'll sort." Herbert grinned.

Eric hauled himself to his feet and wandered into the nearby trees, accompanied by Herbert's cheerful whistling. The sound grated his ears, so Eric walked until the whistles were barely audible and stopped in a hollow surrounded by large oak trees. He began to gather wood while he pondered what had happened.

How did the Census journey turn into... Whatever that was? I still don't understand what was going on. Were the Elrich working against us the whole time? Did they cause the eclipse or cure it?

He grasped a furry stick and yelped in surprise, scrabbling away he dropped the wood he had collected. The fox looked at him and he thought, *It can't be smiling at me but somehow it looks amused.*

"Shoo..." Half-heartedly he waved his hands towards the fox. To his surprise it stood and trotted away, around a thick oak trunk. He leant to his right to watch it scamper off but didn't see any movement up the embankment. He paused, listening for footfalls, but there was still nothing.

Slowly he crept around the tree, looking at the roots for the small fox-shape in the shadows. Sandled-feet came into

view and Eric yelped, stumbling backwards into a blackberry bush.

"It's quite rude to shoo people, you know?" The red-haired woman smiled, her large amber eyes sparkling. Leaning against the tree she looked relaxed, the ribbon-like whisks of her skirt gently waving around her legs gave her an ethereal air.

"I didn't... That is... What?" Eric frowned, untangling himself from the thorny grip.

She scrunched her mouth in a sideways smile and hopped away from the tree. "Never mind, Eric, it doesn't matter." Her accent was unusual, Eric couldn't place where she was from.

"How do you know my name?"

"May I call you Ric instead? It's far friendlier and I'm sure we're going to be firm friends."

"Ummm..."

"Thank you, Ric!" She strode forwards and took his arm, her long red hair brushed his shoulder and he caught the scent of wild roses.

"You're welcome." Eric found himself being led by her further into the forest. When they reached a clearing dappled with golden sunlight she stopped and turned to face him, her amber eyes boring into his own.

"What are you doing, Ric?"

"Fetching firewood..."

She sighed. "I don't mean this evening, I mean in your *life*."

"What? What do you mean?"

"You want to be a knight, don't you?"

"How did... Well. Yes." Eric scowled and felt his stomach bubble with discomfort. *How does she know all this?*

Gently she took his face in her soft hands, the scent of roses wafting towards him again. "I can help you, Sir Eric of the Glade." He looked into her eyes, birds singing and insects vibrating around them, saluting the first sunset for many weeks. It would have been romantic were it not for the knot of worry in his chest.

He whispered, "Why?"

"There is magic in your blood, Sir Knight. It's not my place to tell your tale, but the path you choose in the coming months will write the future of the whole of Tauber."

"Me?"

"Yes, you."

"But... Why? How?"

"Do you wish to walk your path? To be guided and shown the bends in the road ahead?"

"Yes, well, I think so..."

She grinned. "Excellent. You will have three tasks that will show you the paths you can choose; then you may make your final choice. I vow, Eric of the Glade, after a year and a day, you will have everything you need to become a knight."

Goosepimples ran up Eric's arms. "I don't understand."

Her smile dwindled and looked sad. "You will."

He stepped out of her grasp and narrowed his eyes. "Why should I trust you?"

She laughed, a pealing pleasant sound.

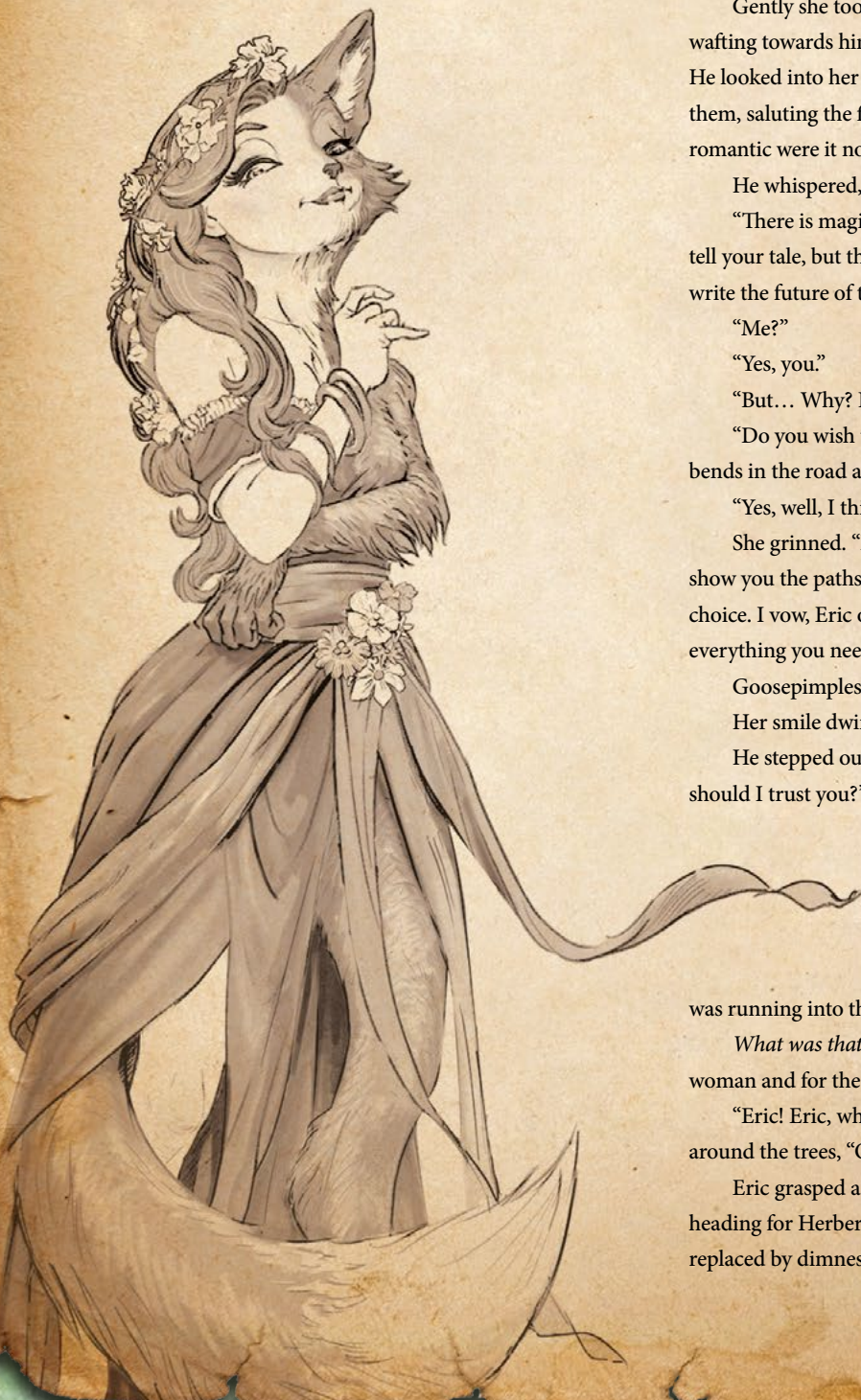
"Oh, Ric. You shouldn't!" She spun away from him, her green skirts flaring sending petals from her flower belt cascading behind.

Eric flinched and when he looked back a fox was running into the bushes, the young woman nowhere in sight.

What was that all about? He thought, scanning the trees for the woman and for the many birds that were still singing.

"Eric! Eric, where are you?" Herbert called, his voice rattling around the trees, "Oi, Ric!"

Eric grasped a few sticks and jogged back into the trees, heading for Herbert's voice. The golden light from the sunset was replaced by dimness among the trees as night marched closer.



Part 2/5: The first task

After five days of meandering, Old Calders and Eric emerged on the path from the Wyrddwood and wandered towards the estate gates. On their journey from the Poppycock mansion near Sunrise City they had taken advantage of the space to train, talk about soldiering, and get to know each other better. For the past hour they had been sharing jokes and Eric's cheeks were sore from smiling.

Calders could barely contain his wheezing laugh as he said, "That's not a goblin, it's me son!"

Eric snorted and laughed heartily, rubbing tears from his eyes with the heel of his hand.

"Afternoon, Ric! I was wondering where you'd been." Herbert Growbottom fluttered down from a tree onto the path in front of them.

"Herb!" Eric grinned and embraced his friend. "It's so good to see you! It's been, what? Three months since the Tower?"

Herbert nodded. "And then a week of putting up with your ugly mug."

Eric laughed and pushed his friend away. "And your incessant chattering."

Herbert examined his friend. "Being back home agrees with you Ric, do you actually have some muscle?"

Calders laughed and ran the back of his hand on Eric's cheek. "Aye he does and look at this 'ere stubble."

Eric waved him away, laughing, his cheeks tinged pink.

"Looks like I'll have more competition with the ladies now, eh?" Herbert winked, causing Eric to blush further.

Calders held out his hand. "I assume you're Herbert then? Eric told me about your adventures; I'm Old Calders, but you can call me Calders."

Herbert took the man's forearm. "I'm Herbert, and you can call me Herbert."

Chuckling, the three men strolled towards the gates, feet crunching on gravel.

"It's nice to see you Herb, but why are you here? I'm surprised to see you at the Baron's home."

Calders nodded. "Aye, I never thought I'd see a... goblin? Faerie?"

"I like 'faelin' myself, as I'm the best of both worlds."

"A faelin here, given the Baron's... ah... feelings... about both races."

"It seems the eclipse and its fallout did the factions some favours, even if the truce is *unsteady*. In any case, Queen Diana and King Cuthbert have been working together on a special gift for the Celebration of the Accords Grand Ball."

"Isn't that two months away?" Eric muttered.

"Yes, but it's a *very* special gift. They're trying to make golden eggs."

Calders scratched his head. "Eh? Why's that?"

"Something about a symbol of the sun... Anyway, the duck that lays the eggs—"

"Duck? Why a duck?" Calders snickered.

Herbert looked at the two men with wide eyes.

"Why a duck, Herb?" Eric grinned, intrigued by his friend's silence.

"Religious reasons... Anyway, the duck has been snatched by a giant or something and I've come here to ask for assistance."

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"Of course, I'd be happy to help our Dominion associates." The Baron smiled and leant back in his chair.

Herbert nodded graciously. "Thank you, Baron von Fancyhat, you are most kind. The King and Queen thought that perhaps Eric would be a good choice to complete this mission."

Me? How exciting! Eric thought, chewing his lip he tried to keep the excitement from his expression.

The Baron scowled at Herbert and rested his chin on his fist. "Did they?"

"Yes..." Herbert looked confused.

The Baron examined Herbert for a long moment, his eyes narrowed.

What's that about? Eric wondered.

Eventually the Baron nodded. "Fine, Eric please assist in this matter."

"Yes, Sir." Eric gave a small bow to hide the broad grin that spread across his face.

When Eric straightened the Baron was staring at him, his eyes a swirling amber. *His eyes are normally brown!* Eric gasped, eliciting a glance from Herbert.

The Baron said, "You're going to need some help. Do you choose Herbert or Calders?"

Does that mean more than it sounds? Eric thought, frantically, *It is Herb's mission, so maybe I should keep things simple.*

Eric tapped his leg and said, "It would make sense to ask Herbert to help, as he has the Dominion's knowledge about this issue."

The Baron smiled and said, "Excellent." He stood and walked to the window, where he swayed and caught himself on the sill.

"Sir, are you alright?" Eric asked, ready to spring to help if it was needed.

The Baron shook his head and turned to them, his eyes back to their normal brown. "Yes, yes. I stood too quickly is all."

Eric nodded, *That was all very strange, I hope he's alright.*

The Baron cleared his throat and continued, "The

weather looks good, so I'd suggest you head off immediately to make best use of the light."

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The pair re-joined the road Eric had just left, although walking northeast away from the Wyrddwood where the surface soon became pot-holed and rough. Before long the road had shrunk to a stony pathway, barely wide enough for them to walk side-by-side.

"Are you sure it's in Gribblebog?" Eric asked, dreading the pungent scent of the place already.

"Queen Diana did some sort of tracking spell and said it was over here, so it seems like a good place to start."

Eric nodded and said, "Alright, we should trust that I suppose! Have you spent much time with the Queen over the past few months then?"

"Yes, a bit. The faeries seemed quite excited to see me, so I've been talking a lot with Fraya, Belladonna and a few others about what went on with..." Herbert gestured at his body.

"How about the goblins? How did they react?"

Herbert laughed. "They were confused for a while but don't seem to care now! I think they're mostly jealous that I can fly."

Herbert has been around the Queen, maybe he knows something I don't about what's happening in Tauber. Eric pursed his lips and eventually asked, "Were you at the Machburg Council meeting two months ago?"

"Was that the one where Queen Diana and Goblin King Cuthbert disappeared?"

"And the Baron."

"Ah yes... I wasn't there but I'd heard rumours. What happened?"

Eric chewed the inside of his cheek but decided to speak openly. "The core members of the Council have been meeting regularly to discuss everything that happened with the eclipse, and the Elrich—"

"Have the Elrich been seen since by the way?" Herbert scowled in thought.

"No, our group was the last to see them. Although Gertrude said the Tower has been rebuilt and there is some sign of life, no one has dealt with them for a while. A lot of people have gathered moonstones and want paying."

Herbert laughed. "Anyway, what were you saying about when all that lot were taken?"

"Me and the other attendants were waiting outside their rooms, ready to escort them to the council chamber, only none of them appeared. I went looking for the Baron and found his bed empty. I told Gotchgut and he stomped to the Dominion's rooms to rip someone's head off, and found all of them in the same position."

"Oooh intriguing! Any sign of what happened?"

"Nothing. Queen Diana's guards, Wasp and Vespa, were missing too. They showed up a few hours later with lumps on their heads the size of apples, with no memory of why they were outside

or what was going on." Eric thought back to their dazed expressions and the panicked fluttering of their wings.

Herbert whistled. "How strange... What happened next?"

"We were all on edge for two days, you could have cut the tension with a butter knife. Then the three of them strode out of the council chamber like nothing had happened, we hadn't even seen them go inside! When we asked, they said they were on Council business and had been somewhere secret. Then we came home."

"I heard a rumour that the Leshavult were to blame."

Eric gulped. "The Leshavult?"

Herbert whispered, "The witches."

Eric shuddered.

After a few moments of silence Herbert asked, "What happened next?"

"Not much. They talked about the Librarian's latest findings on whatever it is she's researching. They all looked tired and stressed when they left, and the Baron..." Eric glanced at Herbert, wondering if he had said too much after all.

Herbert eyed his friend. "Go on."

Eric sighed and said, "The Baron kept giving me really odd looks the whole way home."

Herbert pursed his lips. "Odd like how?"

"I don't know, he just kept staring. Then when we got back to Fancydale he stepped up my training. Even sent me to Sir Poppycock's estate to train with his soldiers, which is where I've just been."

Herbert looked thoughtful. "Maybe it's because of what we saw at the Tower?"

"Maybe."

"Nothing else weird has happened?"

Eric thought about the strange woman with fox-like amber eyes and the vow she had made to him. "No, nothing else."

"Weird. How was Poppycock's place anyway? Did you learn a lot?"

Eric grinned. "I did, I learnt so much from the soldiers and knights there. I feel a lot more confident than I did before."

Herbert glanced at the wooden hilt at Eric's hip. "Do you think you'll be a knight soon?"

Eric ignored the glance. "I hope so. What was so nice about the trip was how they all treated me the same as them. Loads of the people there are estranged from their parents or are orphans like me, so we understood each other. I got on really well with a woman who could wrestle even the biggest soldiers. Her father was killed on Skrimbald and her mother died of a fever on the way to Tauber, so she's like me and didn't know her parents. She was raised in that Nunnery in the northwest and was training with Poppycock's men to... Why are you looking at me like that?"

Herbert was grinning like a madman. "Oh no reason, it's just nice to hear about a friend *getting on well* with a lady."

"It wasn't like that..." Eric cursed his reddening cheeks.

"Mmmhmmm."

Eric scowled. "She would have been more interested

in me if I were a foot taller with bigger muscles, or possibly even Gertrude!”

Eric stomped off, feeling Herbert's eyes on his back. *Sometimes I wonder if Grub was better company, even if he was weird.*

Herbert soared over his head and landed on the path in front of him. “I'm sorry, Eric. I didn't mean to tease you when I can see it meant a lot to you.” He held his hand out.

Eric grasped Herbert's arm. “Apology accepted. Shall we forage some food on the way? I don't fancy camping in Gribblebog so it might be best to sleep and rise early.”

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“Herb...?”

“Yes, Ric?”

“What did you mean yesterday by ‘religious reasons?’” Eric stepped over a fallen tree branch and trotted to catch up with his friend.

After a restless night on the edge of Gribblebog they had risen with the sun to better see the driest path. After two hours walking, they found a small village of giants and trolls called Boggerton. A giant had sold them some warm bread and directed them to the north west, towards a hermit's home saying they'd heard some quacking there a few days ago. It had taken another hour to get this far and they were both tiring.

Herbert stopped and drank from a water skin. “Religious reasons?”

Eric followed suit with the water. “Something about a duck.”

Herbert stared at his friend, then looked around them. He quietly flew into the air and completed a small circuit of the boggy trees. He touched down and stared at Eric again.

“Do you promise to keep this a secret if I tell you?”

“Of course!” Eric leant forwards eagerly.

“I mean it. This is secret goblin stuff; I could get in trouble.”

“I promise on my future knighthood.” Eric raised his hand.

Herbert snorted. His expression flickered with regret immediately.

Eric scowled. “What was the snort for?”

“Sorry Ric, I didn't mean that the way it sounded. I'm just tired.” Herbert sighed.

“You're my friend Herb, so I hope you'd tell me the truth.”

“Well... I reckon you could be a knight now, but the Commonwealth...” Herbert trailed off and drank again.

“The Commonwealth, what?”

“They don't see your true potential, even when I was Grub I could see it! Or, if they do see it then they're keeping you as a squire for their own greedy reasons. Fancy that is probably the most selfish person on Tauber, so I wouldn't put it past him to keep you down for no good reason.”

Eric sipped from his waterskin to hide the discomfort on his face. A pang of pain twisted his insides as his friend's words wrangled a long-established fear.

“Oh, I'm sorry Eric. It's true though. Diana might have gone about it a strange way, but she knows your true worth. If...” Herbert folded his lips and looked away.

“If what?” Eric watched his friend carefully.

“If you were to join the Dominion, you'd be a knight immediately. Probably a noble too.”

“I don't want to join the Dominion nobles though, they're the bad guys!”

“Good and bad aren't as clear-cut as the Commonwealth has taught you, surely what happened a few months ago showed you that?”

The image of the Duchess flashed into Eric's mind and he thought, *She is very powerful and I reckon she's beautiful under that mask. Being her champion might be exactly what I need.* Eric looked away from Herbert to hide his blush, his insides wriggling with discomfort and forbidden interest.

Softly Herbert continued, “The Commonwealth has clouded your brain with some strange notions, the Dominion is a lot freer with ideas and opinions. Besides, you could join the fae or the goblin court, we'd both look after you.”

They unnerve me a bit too... Or is that excitement I'm feeling instead? Eric gulped some water to hide his betraying thoughts.

“Just think about it. You could be a Faerie Lord, a Noble Champion, or a Goblin Chief. By my wings, if you like water, then you could even be a pirate! And you could be taught *magic*, Ric.” Herbert's hand glowed with soft purple light and he reached down to touch Eric's wooden sword. The light seeped into the wood leaving wisps of smoky indigo magic behind.

“What did you do?” Eric asked eagerly.

“I've enchanted your sword, so you'll have more luck with it than you do now.”

Eric looked at it closely and thought, *That sounds pretty good.*

“Keep in mind the Dominion could teach you that spell really easily. Then we could teach you how to *fly*.”

Eric chewed the inside of his cheek. “Flying sounds fun but... I like being human...”

“You wouldn't have to do what I did and change your entire body! There are other ways to fly.”

Eric chewed his cheek thinking, *And if I were with the Dominion Humans I definitely wouldn't have to change myself.*

Herbert sighed. “Just... Think about it. You deserve to be a knight and... I'd like my friend to fight by my side in whatever is coming. There have been reports of... *things*... crawling around dark places. What if the Elrich did something a few months ago? Woke up something that they can't control?”

Eric looked at his friend's worried face. “Alright, I'll think about the Dominion, I promise. In exchange for one thing.”

“What?”

“Tell me about the duck.”

*

They could smell the giant's hovel long before they could see it. Quietly they moved up and watched him, sleeping in the afternoon sun. It was warm for mid-autumn, so he was spread out on a large stone, legs carefully folded but arms sprawled above his head. They stood silently and heard faint quacking from inside the hut.

"What do you reckon we should do?" Herbert whispered.

Eric glanced at his friend and stared at his unusual amber eyes. "I think we go with Dominion tactics, let's keep moving and keep hitting him to sap his energy. Then we grab the duck and run."

The amber eyes twinkled then were replaced by Herbert's normal, slit irises. "Sounds good to me! You go that way, I'll go this way, and we start our attack when you see vines grow all over him."

Eric nodded and scuttled further to the right as Herbert circled to the left. In the moments of stillness Eric thought about what his friend had said. *Maybe the Dominion would be a good choice for me. I like the way they fight, and they probably would make me a knight right away. Maybe even a noble if I joined up with the humans, I never dreamed of that! And Herb's right, it would be nice to fight alongside a true friend. Maybe even fly alongside him too...*

Green vines tangled over the rock and the giant, cracking and popping as they grew at great speed. Eric launched himself from his hiding place, running full pelt towards the giant that was only just waking.

With a bellow the giant pushed himself off the rock, snapping the vines beneath his great bulk. He placed a knobbly foot on the muddy ground as Eric reached him and dealt a painful welt to his shin. The giant squealed once, then twice as Herbert's wicked looking sequiturs opened a long cut across the giant's face.

The giant's warm breath reached Eric a footstep later. It smelled like chicken bones left in the sun too long, then blended inside water that had been used to boil cabbage. Eric gagged and pushed ahead. *His breath is terrible! I'm sure my hair is on fire from that stench!*

Eric made it to the hut and ran around the back, listening to the giant bellow and breaking free of more of the vine ropes Herbert had created. *Magic really is fun!* Eric thought, his grin fierce even as he panted.

Rounding the corner, he sprinted for the giant; *I really wish I had more than this stupid wooden sword.* Purple magic glittered over the wood and Eric laughed gleefully, his eyes set on the giant's back. He raised his sword high and used the rock to spring up towards the giant. Indigo magic flared and his sword bit through the giant's leather jerkin, tearing a long cut from shoulder to hip that ripped a scream from the giant.

Eric landed with a huffed breath and sprinted for the trees where he started his mad dash. Waving, Herbert streaked past him, there was a thump of magical impact and the giant bellowed his rage.

The breath hit Eric again, making him sway as he ran. He gasped in air, trying to clear the stench, while heavy footsteps pounded the ground behind him. In horror Eric felt his legs stiffen with tiredness. *Please move faster, please move faster!*

Fingers as thick as piglets grasped the back of his jerkin and lifted him into the air, his tired legs hanging limply beneath him. Behind Eric the giant rumbled a laugh, his rotten breath clouding around Eric's wooly head.

"Who's dis den? Waking old Durgon from 'is sleep?"

Eric squeezed his watering eyes closed against the foetid breath, *Ripped in two, swallowed, or gingivitis-ed to death? I don't know which is worse!*

A crack behind him made Eric crane around, trying to see what was making the giant wail. Then the fingers let go, sending Eric plummeting to the ground fifteen feet below.

"Gotcha!" Herbert cried, swooping down and grabbing Eric's waist before he could hit the mud.

"Yeeeeees!" Eric laughed, tucking his arms against his chest and lifting his legs out straight behind to help Herbert's flight.

Herbert banked hard at the treeline, sending them back towards the shouting giant that looked tired but fierce, dark blood dribbling off his chin. Herbert shouted an incantation and more vines wrapped around the giant's legs, sending him sprawling into the mud with a whoosh of putrid breath.

The faelin soared over the giant, through an open window, and into the hut. He banked hard towards a rickety table, where a rusty cage held a duck nestled among four large golden eggs.

"Ready Ric?"

"Ready," Eric said with determination, arms outstretched towards the cage.

Herbert grazed the top of the cage and Eric grabbed the cold metal, clutching it against his chest. The duck quacked unhappily and flapped her wings.

Then they were out of another window, over the giant and back into the treeline. The giant bellowed behind them, still thrashing in the mud trying to break free. Eric howled with pure joy, bare branches whipping around them as they soared.

*

The fox watched the faelin, human, and duck fly through the trees. Her eyes sparkled and one of the golden eggs disappeared from the cage, materialising in front of her. Scents of old money, and freedom tickled her nose.

One path is open to you, Eric of the Dominion. I wonder if the others will be as compelling.

Gently, she picked up the egg in her mouth and trotted through the trees, ignoring the angry yells of a giant set on vengeance.

Part 3/5: The second task

Running the freezing washcloth over his prickling skin, Eric clenched his teeth with displeasure. His muscles ached, echoes of intense sword practice the day before. *At least after all this increased training I can see a difference*, he thought, poking at the burgeoning muscles on his stomach.

He shrugged into his shirt and fastened the old leather belt around his waist that held the wooden sword, denoting his status as squire. Herbert's words rattled around his head, *Was he right? Will I forever be a squire if I stay here?*

Eric shook his head to clear it and trotted out of his room, up the stairs and across the large hall towards the Baron's office. He knocked and opened the door after a moment's hesitation, revealing the Baron sat at his desk scribbling through paperwork as usual.

"Baron, would you like—"

The front door slammed open behind him, and a loud voice boomed over the howling wind outside. "Scoundrels! Knaves! Where are you, Archibald? I need your aid!"

As quick as a whippet, the Baron was out of his chair and rushing towards the hall. "Guillemot? What's happened?"

Sir Guillemot Poppycock strode inside, and the two men embraced. "Those sea slugs have got her, Archie! We need to go and save her!" As Poppycock straightened Eric could see his knobbly knees tremble.

"Please, come into my office; Eric, fetch him a drink. Do you have men with you, Guille?"

"Thank you, Archie. Yes, they're passing the carriage and the pig to your stable hands."

Eric rushed to a cabinet, pouring dark liquid into a glass the aromatic scent of Stromm Brandy wafted up to him. Carefully he gave the glass to the now sitting Poppycock, who grasped it in shaking fingers.

Watching the door eagerly, Eric was thrilled to see Old Calders and Sir Hogswash jog into the house. Eric waved to them, and the men walked quietly inside, joining Eric to stand at the rear of the office.

"Hello lad," Calders muttered and Clemency nodded a greeting.

Their attention snapped to Poppycock who had slammed the empty glass onto the desk. "You have to help me Archie, they've taken her!" Poppycock's eyes were intense.

Sitting back behind his desk the Baron steepled his fingers, asking, "Guille, tell us slowly who's taken whom."

Nodding, Poppycock ran his hand over his face. "I've been busy for the past few weeks investigating strange goings on in the waters off Sunrise Bay. Ermentrude knew the signs and realised that I'd be distracted for a while, so decided to take a little trip navigating around Tauber. She completed her journey around our southern shores without issue, and according to all reports the good old *Salty Drop* made excellent time to Machburg." He twisted the glass on the table, lost in thought.

"What happened next, Guille?" The Baron asked softly.

"The ship left port a few days later, heading around the northern coast to complete the circuit. For some reason that barnacle-cursed captain decided he wanted to visit Treasure Trove, so took them through the archipelago..." He looked at his hands.

"That's not normally a problem, is it?" The Baron asked.

"It wasn't a problem, not until recently, but now the route isn't as safe as it once was. And she..."

"What's happened, Guille?"

"Archie, my wife has been captured by merfolk!"

Eric's eyebrows shot up. *I've always wanted to meet a merperson.*

"Why? What is it they want?" The Baron scowled.

Poppycock roared, "To *negotiate!* The cheek! Instead, I'm going to slit all their throats and throw them into the sea. Will you help me?"

The Baron nodded sadly, his expression distant. "Of course I will, but it might be best to send someone else rather than go ourselves."

"I want the satisfaction of seeing the light leave their eyes myself! I'm going to cut off their fins and feed them to the sharks, pull out their teeth and—"

"This is an insult that won't go unpunished, Guille. However, do you want to get her returned *safely?*"

Poppycock ran his hand over his hair and took a deep breath. "Without question! Please, you have to help me get her back safely. I don't know what I'd do if she... I trust your advice Archie, I really do. Can we not rough them up a bit though?"

The Baron plucked at his bottom lip in thought. "No, not yet. Instead, we send someone to treat with them. To negotiate her release and then we deal with whatever has been agreed later."

"Alright, who should it be? I'll give them full authority to speak on my behalf, if you think that's best."

The Baron's eyes settled on Eric, their colour shifting to amber. "I think you're best suited for this task, wouldn't you agree Eric?"

Eric's heartbeat quickened. "Yes, I'll do whatever I can to bring her back safely."

Poppycock's face paled then turned purple. "The *squire!* I need someone with a calm head and combat skills, should things go wrong. What does this *boy* know?"

The Baron smiled, amber eyes sparkling. "He has learned a lot these past six months and has my full trust to walk this path, should he choose to take it. It will be dangerous though, with threats both seen and unexpected."

"I can do it, sir." Eric stepped forwards and bowed before he continued, "But I will need help."

*

Eric wiped boar spit onto his trousers, Trotter's loud crunching next to his ear a merry accompaniment. The day was still young, early morning light flickering through the bare

treetops breaking up the last patches of moonstones still clinging to darkness. Kuku, Calder's beloved chicken, clucked contentedly, her breath puffing into the cold air.

After spending a day and evening in each other's company, the soldiers walked in companionable silence. Eric thought back to the last traipse through a forest with a friend and frowned. *I wonder if what Herbert said was true? Will I really never be a knight or a noble while I'm a member of the Commonwealth?*

"Groat for your thoughts, young squire," Clemency asked from his saddle.

"Oh, i-it's nothing." Eric averted his gaze, staring steadfastly at the frosty road.

Calders snorted. "We'll be walking a little while yet, you might as well tell us."

"Well... How much longer do you think it will take for me to become a knight?"

"Clemency best answer that, I'm still a lowly soldier." Calders chuckled.

I don't think he's really too upset about that, Eric thought, puzzled.

"It took many years, young Eric. It was only after I found Trotters here that I was able to prove myself sufficiently skilled." Clemency scratched the boar between the ears, eliciting a satisfied squeal.

Maybe it won't ever happen then, Eric thought sadly. He scratched Trotter's side absently, the fur rough under his fingers.

Watching Eric, Clemency's moustache bristled. "What I can say is that the Baron keeps his word to his people. He vowed that you would be a knight one day, and I believe you shall."

"Really?" Staring into the middle distance, Eric's eyes shone.

"Absolutely! A fine knight in shining armour atop a noble steed, riding into the fray for your lord's honour and fighting evil." Clemency sighed. "There's nothing better."

"Oh, do you think I could be a noble too?" Eric had to stop from skipping down the road with excitement.

Calders' chuckle quickly quashed his enthusiasm. "The likes of us will never be nobles, lad. The Poppycocks and Fancyhats and all the rest of them, they're born nobles. Then the likes of Kaufman, he's a businessman what's made a fortune from his brain."

"Oh..."

Calders glanced at Eric and softened his expression. "We're soldiers and knights, defending our lords, our people, and our homes. It's what we're meant for and there's nowt wrong with that. Don't you forget that, lad."

Eric fiddled with the hilt of his wooden sword. "Why do you think the Baron will make me a knight, Clemency?"

"Because of the promise he made." Eric missed the stern glance Calders threw up to Clemency at those words.

"What promise?" Eric was puzzled.

Clemency shifted in the saddle. "He gave his word to train you as a knight when you came into the household. A lot of the servants heard him, so it made its way around your household and onto other noble families' households too. It's how we know about it."

"Oh, I hadn't realised he decided to make me a knight that long ago."

Calders said, "Aye, if he were to turn away from you now he'd be breaking his word and no noble likes to be shown up as a liar."

"Then why hasn't he given me a better sword yet?"

Calders laughed. "Anything can be a weapon if you use it right! Let's stop a short while and see what we can do with that sword of yours." Calders led Eric to a smooth stone and sat down, letting Kuku out of her carrying pouch to stretch her legs.

"We're not too far from the coast now, I'm going to see what I can see." Clemency nodded to the two soldiers and trotted into the trees.

"Right lad, let's have a look at that weapon of yours."

Gingerly Eric placed the hilt of the wooden sword in Calders' outstretched hand. Eric expected Calders to laugh, instead he examined the weapon closely, handling it like it was finely honed steel.

"Can you do anything with it?" Eric asked quietly.

"Mmmm." Calders rifled through a pouch at his side, retrieving a whet stone he smiled at Eric.

"But... That's for metal weapons, this is wood."

Calders flipped over the stone to reveal a rough surface. He smiled at Eric and began carefully rubbing it along the wooden blade. Eric watched as rough splinters fell away, the wood taking on a gentle sheen as its edges were smoothed. They sat in silence while Calders worked on the flat of the blade then moved to the edge, carefully running the stone repeatedly downwards.

"Here, feel," Calders eventually said, holding the sword towards Eric.

Eric frowned and ran his thumb across the edge of the blade. "It feels sharp!"

"It's certainly sharper than it was." Calders smiled and continued to work on the blade, asking, "How long have we been doing this?"

"About an hour, maybe?" Eric said, looking to the sky for the wan sun behind a sheet of white clouds.

Calders held the hilt to Eric, who took it and peered at the blade with a grin. "It's wonderful!"

"It takes a long time and careful attention to turn a plank of wood into a working sword. Don't forget that, young squire." Calders winked at him.

Before Eric could reply, heavy footfalls crashed through the forest behind them. The two men readied their swords, staring into the dimness.

From among the trees Clemency bounced atop Trotters and called, "Follow me, I've found something!"

*

"That definitely looks like some sort of prison, there's some lumpy caves and I can see iron bars at the mouths." Calders scratched his chin.

Eric squinted at the island at the end of a long, shallow causeway, breaking waves stretching up towards the flat platform. "Are there any guards?"

"Not that I can see on the surface, but if it's merfolk then they'd be under water." The two men crawled back

from the cliff edge and told the still-mounted Clemency what they'd seen.

"The Baron put you in charge, Eric, so what do you suggest?"

Clemency asked, rubbing on one of Trotter's ears.

Eric pursed his lips. "I think we should try and talk to them."

Calders nodded and said, "Aye, I've heard they can be aggressive. If we rush in, Ermentrude might take the brunt."

"We can't have that!" Clemency thumped a fist into his palm.

Surprised, Eric asked, "Do you know her well then?"

"She's a good friend of mine and Jeremy's, not that Sir Poppycock knows."

"Oh?"

"She joins us for conversation when her husband is away and she has nothing else to do. She and Jeremy have been knitting a blanket together, he'd be devastated if anything happened to her... She's a quiet and kind person, and doesn't deserve to be murdered by brine-brained fish people!"

Calders nodded. "Aye, she is that. I don't know her as well as you two, but I couldn't ask for a kinder mistress."

A real-life damsel in distress! Eric suddenly realised he was on his first truly knightly mission.

Carefully Calders picked a safe route down fallen rocks to the craggy beach, then over large stones to the sea. The tide had begun to run out, the shallow causeway stretched below them with only a toe-depth of water over the sand. They hopped down to walk between the retreating waves towards the island.

It's a long way, Eric thought, watching the water and staring at the island so far ahead. The sea spray was cold; shivering in the icy breeze fear wriggled in his stomach like an eel.

As they reached the centre of the causeway, four muddy-green heads with sharp cheekbones and long fins emerged from the surf on either side of them. Large almond shaped yellow eyes shone, the central black pupils had shrunk to a pinprick in the light. Twisted, sharp shell-tipped spears pointed in the group's direction. The merfolk growled, the water around their throats vibrating.

Eric stepped forwards, swallowing his nerves he called, "We're here to represent Sir Poppycock whose wife you have taken. We have his full authority and wish to treat with you on his behalf."

The vibrations stilled, but the large eyes remained fixed on the group. A tall figure stepped to the edge of the island ahead of them. She was over six feet tall, with high cheekbones like the others and the same fins that looked to Eric like pointed ears. Her waist-length hair was deep green like seaweed, which matched the colour of the silky tunic that hung to her calves, cinched at the waist with a simple blue cord. A large stone hung around her neck, glowing like sunlight through clear water.

She extended her webbed hands and said, her voice rasping, "Welcome, land-walkers. My name is A'ohi, I am Mo'Hatu or Queen of this Shoal. You may treat with me."

The group exchanged glances and strode forwards. Five heads and tips of spears appeared behind A'ohi, watching the group splashing towards the island in silence.

When they eventually arrived, Eric could see steps roughly hewn into the rocky side at irregular intervals. Eric began scrambling up the slippery steps, seaweed lying limply either side of the route.



"Ta-ta for now Trotters, I'll be back soon old boy, no need to fret," Clemency said, his voice carrying from below. Trotters huffed a miserable breath and Kuku clucked loudly, irritated that she had been ignobly left in one of Trotter's saddlebags.

A crab scuttled across Eric's path into a limpet encrusted hole, so he paused to check Calders was still behind. The old tracker smiled reassuringly, and Eric continued his climb.

At the top he pulled himself to standing and helped Calders up the final step. Waiting for Clemency they paused to look around the top of the rock. It was uneven but relatively flat, providing a large platform that easily held the two parties at a distance. A'ohi was stood slightly in front of the five other merfolk, each with their own shining necklace. Behind them sat Ermentrude Poppycock, bound in rough ropes, damp and shivering. A rusty iron door stood open into a craggy cave not far behind her. A second gate was closed, and Eric couldn't make out what was behind its bars.

Clemency pulled himself to the top with bandy legs, stood and said, "My apologies for the delay, Mo'Hatu. My steed is nervous of water."

The merfolk croaked chuckles and A'ohi said, "Your apology is accepted. Now, tell me who you are and what you hope to achieve this day."

Eric swallowed, scanning the gathered merfolk his attention was caught by one at the rear with amber eyes. She smiled mischievously at him and winked.

Buoyed, Eric strode forward and announced, "This is Old Caldery, expert tracker and wise guide. My other companion is Sir Hogswash, knight of the Poppycock household and a man of honour. I am Eric... Squire... of the house of Fancyhat,

representative of the Baron and of Sir Guillemot Poppycock. I speak with their authority in all matters. I wish to retrieve your prisoners and reach an agreement with you, to stop this happening again."

Eric smiled politely and thought, *Where did that come from? I bet Gertrude would be very proud of me right now!*

Alohi scrutinised him, her large eyes shining. "Is it usual for a pup to be presented for something so serious?"

Undeterred Eric continued, "My lords felt that by coming themselves they may present a more aggressive front. We are valued members of their households; our loss would come as a huge blow."

"Indeed." Alohi folded her arms and drummed her fingers with gentle wet slaps.

Eric bowed.

Alohi squinted at him. "Very well, let us treat Eric *Squire*. The Commonwealth fleet has changed its usual route and now sails too close to the Shrine. Kai'ana disapproves. She will wreck your ships, as well as our homes, with her displeasure. We tried to discuss the matter with the captain of the Poppycock boat, but what was it he said, Alla'pai?"

A broad chested merfolk stepped forwards and with a deep rasping voice said, "I believe it was, 'May Gary shrivel you in the sun, fish turd, Wise Mo'Hatu.' He bowed but kept his eyes on Eric.

Eric's mouth dropped open and before he could think anything he said, "That's terrible!"

Surprise flashed over Alohi's face. "You do not think this funny? Many of the crew did. It's unfortunate so many of them drowned before they could reach shore and share their little joke." She smiled, revealing pointed teeth behind her plump lips.

"I'm so sorry, that's so rude of them! Of course the ships will change their route."

Urgently, Calders whispered in his ear, "What are you doing?"

"Getting his wife back," Eric whispered back.

"You don't have the authority to change the course of the entire Commonwealth fleet!"

Eric stared at the merfolk with amber eyes. "Today I do," he said resolutely.

"Is there a problem?" Alohi's toothy smile stretched wider.

"No, not at all, Mo'Hatu." Eric strode forwards and gave a deep bow. "I swear on my upcoming knighthood that the Commonwealth fleet will no longer sail so close."

Eric remained still, listening for an answer that eventually rasped above. "Very well, Eric Squire of the house *Fancy Hat*. You may take this woman and have our assurances that no more ships will be attacked before the next moon. If nothing changes, we will begin our attacks with all the power of Kai'ana's righteous fury behind us."

Eric stood, stretching out his hand. *This is it! I'm about to get Ermentrude back!* Movement behind the second barred gate caught his eye and he stared at three figures urgently waving bound hands at him.

He dropped his hand before Alohi had reached him, saying, "Who else have you captured?"

The smile vanished from Alohi's face. "More trespassers in sacred waters. They claimed the rudder had broken on their ship."

"May we see them?"

Alohi pursed her lips and nodded to one of the four merfolk. The fifth, with the amber eyes, was nowhere in sight. The merfolk strode to the gate, unlocked it with a rusty key and it swung open with screaming hinges.

Three bound and bedraggled gnomes stumbled out, huddling around Ermentrude.

A female gnome with blond braided hair called urgently, "Please, help us!"

Wait, I recognise her... That's Joanna, a princess of some sort, we can't leave them here, Eric thought furiously and quickly said, "We'll take them too."

"You came here to discuss *her* release." Alohi pointed at Ermentrude and hissed, the fins on her head quivering.

Calders strode forwards and placed a hand on Eric's shoulder. "Aye, that we did and we've done that. Come on Eric, let's the four of us head home."

Eric spun to Calders and said quietly, "What? No, we can't leave them here!"

Calders lowered his voice and said, "Aye, we can. They're not who we're here for."

"But they're Commonwealth too."

"Aye, they may be, but we—"

"No," Eric shrugged away from Calders and said loudly, "We're taking them with us." He strode towards the captives, his pulse pounding in his ears.

"Halt, land-walker!" Alla'pai shouted.

Eric's pace slowed and he frowned. "But we agreed to discuss the release of *all* captives, I merely want to—"

Alla'pai hissed, lowering his spear he rushed Eric, who twisted out of the way. Drawing his own sword, Eric pirouetted and opened a long cut across the merfolk's back. Alla'pai grit his teeth in pain, jabbing the spear at Eric again. Eric didn't move fast enough this time and the twisted point pierced his shoulder.

At that, Calders barked, "Clemency!" The two older men ran forward to engage the other merfolk with furious cries.

Pulling the spear tip from his shoulder with a gasp, Eric glanced across and saw the gnomes frantically rubbing their bonds on the rough rocks. *That's it, we can do this!* Eric thought with a rush, ducking a clumsy punch from Alla'pai, then a quick kick from the merfolk followed by another downward punch. Grunting with pain Eric rolled to one side and stood in a fluid motion, running his sword along the side of the merfolk's knee as he did.

Alla'pai hissed in frustration and launched himself at Eric, who didn't move quickly enough this time. Taking advantage of Eric's sluggishness, Alla'pai wrapped his fingers around Eric's throat and squeezed.

Pain flashed through Eric's neck, and he clawed impotently at the merfolk's moist fingers. His pulse thudded in his ears, the blood flowing slowly, and he couldn't catch his breath. He started to panic, thrusting his hands towards the merfolk he tried to go for the large eyes, but he was too far away. Desperately, Eric grabbed at the shining stone that was hanging a few inches from his face.

The brittle cord snapped and Eric flung the stone away with a rubbery arm, sending surprise and panic flashing across the merfolk's face.

Then Eric could breathe again, the pressure on his neck gone and Alla'pai no longer in sight. Eric shuddered in a breath and coughed, scrabbling further away to get out of the merfolk's reach.

Instead, Eric watched Alla'pai convulsing on the ground, his legs fusing together into a long, whipping tail. The illusion of hair and the tunic disappeared, leaving him bald and bare chested. The green and grey scales all over his body shivered, like loose sand blown in the wind. Alla'pai pulled himself across the rock quickly, gasping for air through straining gills on his neck. With a last heave he disappeared over the side and Eric heard a loud splash below.

Everyone had watched what happened in shocked silence, the thought of fighting forgotten. As one the merfolk disengaged, hissing at the humans, and formed a small ring around Alohi.

Eric turned to the captives, his throat burning he rasped, "Come on, we need to—"

The female gnome pulled Ermentrude and Joanna to her and ran towards the edge of the island. A misshapen backpack hummed and spluttered, propelling her into the air as she jumped. They dipped down then gradually picked up altitude, shooting towards the beach, the engine groaning with effort.

Oh, that's helpful... Where did she get that from? Eric thought woozily.

"Come on!" Calders called, running for the steps.

The male gnome held a large hammer aloft and started running, Eric fell in beside him and the four of them sprinted for the steps down. Clemency disappeared over the side, with Calders not too far behind. Eric stopped to let the gnome go first; glancing over his shoulder he watched the merfolk jump off the side of the island, releasing strange screeching calls as they did.

Eric scrambled down the steps then jumped the last couple, landing heavily on the causeway. Grasping his bleeding shoulder, he scrambled to his feet and began to run. Clemency and Trotters were already a third of the way along the causeway, ducking spears hastily thrown in their direction. Kuku squawked her defiance too, leaving a trail of white feathers. Calders and the gnome had a good head start on Eric but all three of them were ducking spears and arrows.

Then the buzzing gnome flashed past, grasping Calders and the last gnome with a shout of triumph. Eric watched the gnomes kiss, sending them dipping towards the sea.

"Oi, watchit!" Calders shouted. They gradually gained altitude, soaring towards the shore. The pilot dodged a thrown spear and the machine in the backpack buzzed with effort again.

Eric sprinted. He pumped his legs as fast as he could, panting breath catching in his sore throat. He could see Clemency on the beach ahead and realised he was halfway there. *I'm the only target now though*, he thought, terror making his legs move yet faster.

He saw a spear from the corner of his eye and he ducked; then a second and third followed quickly. He dropped to the sand to roll, an arrow grazing his back, then he was up and sprinting again.

A third of the causeway to go, we might make this! He huffed a painful yet cheerful breath and stared longingly at the frantically waving figures on the beach. *They're cheering me on!* Pride washed over him and he smiled.

Registering pain in his side, his smile faltered and he dropped

limply to the sand. A shaft was poking out from underneath his ribs and he gingerly pulled it out. The coral tipped arrow glittered red in the faint sunshine. His vision swam again. He pressed his hand against the wound and fumbled in his pack for his familiar healing salves and bandages. His fingers worked on their own, his mind foggy with pain. He lay there gasping, the merfolk calls and cries getting louder.

Here endeth Eric the Squire, he coughed.

A faint voice carried over the rolling waves and merfolk shrieks. "Get up Eric! Yer as tough as old boots, you can do it! Come on!"

A knight would never give in... Eric narrowed his eyes and pushed up from the sand. He stood on shaking legs, cheering and shouts faintly reaching him on the wind. He stumbled forwards, his feet only managing a shuffling run, his head swimming.

A distant buzzing grew louder. *I hope that's not my heart stopping or one of them spears...*

Then the gnome had him in her strong grasp. "Oh, sorry, I'm sorry! I hope I didn't hurt you? Please don't die! Loci, Joanna, move out of the way, I'm gonna land!"

The wind was cool on his face, groaning Eric tried to look at the view but instead his vision went black.

*

Trotters released a trump that was so foul it would have rivalled Doug. Eric's eyes flew open and he coughed, making his side flare with pain, so he gasped and his throat seared. *This is terrible*, he thought miserably and slumped back down to lean on Trotters again, which made his shoulder ache.

"I'm pleased you're awake already, Eric." The woman's voice was soft and quiet, Eric didn't recognise it. Peering over a fire he realised it belonged to Ermentrude Poppycock.

"Oh my lady, I—" He tried to move but his cold and aching muscles wouldn't listen to him.

"Please don't move," Joanna said from the other side of the fire with a wince.

"Alright," he rasped and felt for his waterskin. He looked around the camp for the others, carefully sipping the cool water, but it was only the two women and Trotters left with him. Kuku was settled by the fire too, a gently snoring feathery lump.

Ermentrude smiled and said, "Don't worry, Calders and Clemency have gone looking for more firewood and some food."

Joanna also smiled at him. "Belle is flying Loci back to their home, so they're safe too. I need to discuss a matter with the Baron, so I'm going to join you on your trip back to Fancydale."

Eric nodded. *At least everyone else got out without being hurt.*

"Thank you for saving all of us," Joanna said. She threw more wood onto the fire, sending orange embers floating into the cold night air.

"It's what any knight would do," he croaked and drank deeply to mask a blush.

"Your companions would have left us behind though." Joanna couldn't hide the anger in her voice.

Eric shrugged stiffly, unsure what to say and reflected on

her words. *I thought the whole point of being a knight was to protect people? Joanna and the other gnomes are Commonwealth, they are our people, so why did Calders want to leave them?*

"Leave poor Eric alone, he's had a difficult day." Ermentrude leant over him and adjusted his blankets. She was petite with dark hair and blue eyes that were bruised with tiredness, but her face was gentle. Eric stared at her; she looked nothing like her husband.

"Have we met before, my lady?"

Ermentrude chuckled. "No, but you're squire to my husband's best friend and so I know who you are, young Eric. Hopefully you'll come and see me the next time you train with some of our soldiers?"

Smiling, Eric nodded and closed his eyes, the warmth of the fire slowly thawing his limbs.

Ermentrude handed Joanna a blanket and said to Eric, "It would be lovely to get to know you better, you clearly have some skill in diplomacy as well as fighting. It's always so nice to see a young man improve and excel. You would have made your mother proud today, Eric."

A cold, familiar weight landed on his chest, forcing his eyes open with a start. "Sorry, what did you say?" He couldn't look at her, so stared at the stars far above.

"I said, you would have made your mother proud. And Joyceann of course, she was so fond of your mother."

The icy weight beat in time with his heart; he was surprised by how calmly he asked, "Did you know my mother well?"

"Not well exactly, but I saw her a few dozen times over the years when the Fancyhats came to visit; Sara was handmaiden to Joyceann Fancyhat of course. Sara was quiet and very kind, and she would join us, Joyceann and I, for tea. Then one day someone else arrived with Joyceann and I asked, 'Where's young Sara Dolen?' and she said, 'Gone to work somewhere else'. She didn't say where and she looked so sad I didn't ask.

"Joyceann was killed a few years later, I feel so sorry for Archibald losing her like that. But then you came along a few years after *that*, and the Baron had a way to honour his wife by taking in Sara's baby. Such a sad tale, but look at where you are now." Ermentrude smiled down at him kindly, unaware the revelations she was so casually spilling were stabbing into his heart.

"I didn't know her..." Eric swallowed, his throat tight, and thought, *I didn't even know her name.*

Joanna stared into the fire and said, "I only have faint memories of my parents, so I understand some of that pain. I was lucky to have my aunt and uncle though, and it sounds like you have been well looked after by the Fancyhat household."

"Yes..." Eric croaked, thankful his sore throat hid the emotion in his rough voice. The two women stared into the fire and Eric turned his gaze back up to the stars. Realisation chilled him as he thought over the revelations. *They all knew her, they must have done. Flintlock, Calders, Hogswash, all the old soldiers. All the old knights... And the Baron. All these years—*

"We managed to catch a couple of eels and found some wild vegetables," Calders said cheerfully, wandering into the firelight.

"Ah Eric, you're awake, how are you feeling?" Clemency asked, settling down to prepare the vegetables.

"Cold."

Eric shuddered and pulled the blanket up to hide his face, his mind racing. *They all know. They all know who my mother is. They might even know who my father is. Why didn't any of them tell me in all this time? Why didn't the Baron say something? At least I know now that he will make me a knight, but do I really want to align myself with him? Can I trust him anymore? Can I trust any of them? Maybe Herbert really was right about the Commonwealth all along.*

The betrayal sat coldly in his chest, making him shiver. Gingerly he rolled into a ball against Trotter's flank and squeezed his eyes closed. He willed sleep to come, tears silently sliding down his face.

*

A seagull plonked down onto the island, cold waves throwing spray over its surface again and the causeway hidden beneath the sea. The stars twinkled above in the clear sky, illuminating the rocky surface. The seagull's shape shivered and unfurled into a humanoid fox. She shook her body, fluffing her fur and puffing out her tail. Softly she padded over the rocks, looking for something, skirts swirling gently in the cold breeze.

Grinning, she squatted down and pulled a glass bottle from a pouch at her side. She dipped the bottle into a puddle, filling it with sea water. She held it up to peer at her quarry, watching small pieces of seaweed swirl within water reddish with merfolk blood.

Something caught her attention on the mainland, and she stood, staring into the distance. She stayed still for several long moments, seaspray tickling her face. With a shake of the head she shoved a cork into the top of the bottle and carefully put it inside her pouch.

She sighed deeply and scanned around her; turning her attention out to the waves she noticed a head. Reflective eyes shone in the darkness, watching.

Wiggling her fingers she called in Merish, "Coo-ey!"

The shining eyes narrowed and she threw back her head, laughing heartily. Her form folded and she became the seagull again, soaring up and over the waves. Passing over the merfolk her dark eyes glowed orange and she dropped a fizzing magical mote from a tucked foot.

The burning ember scalded the merfolk who hissed, "Leave us, Dranyer the Pesterer!" The merfolk dove beneath the waves to cool their singed fin.

Dranyer the seagull cawed her amusement, turning towards the mainland on more important business.

She honed in on the well-hidden campsite and passed over it, staring down at the lump huddled under the rough blanket. Dranyer circled around, still staring downwards and thought, *A second path is open to you, Eric of the Commonwealth. Does it glitter as much as it once did?*

The lump remained curled beneath the blanket and Dranyer soared south, towards the Wyrdwood.

Part 4/5: The third task

Eric swallowed a mouthful of *Bilge Water*, the golden ale's hoppy flavours wrestling with his tongue. Miserably he stared at the cloudy liquid, forcing his thoughts towards fighting techniques, weapon maintenance or tracking skills, anything that wasn't what had been plaguing his mind for months.

He flicked his eyes to the source of raucous laughter, a table where Flintlock and Gotchgut had retreated to play a game of Heathstead Hold'em Poker with a group of sailors. They laughed again as one of the sailors triumphantly scooped his latest winnings across the table.

"It aint over yet!" Flintlock rubbed his hands together and leant forward to scrutinise his next hand.

Eric stared back into the ale and twisted the tankard.

"Groat for your thoughts, Eric," Agatha said, wiping a plate with a white cloth.

Sipping the ale Eric muttered, "It doesn't matter."

Agatha wandered down the bar closer to him and lowered her voice, saying, "You're usually so cheerful, something clearly does matter."

He plucked at the tankard's handle. "Have you ever worried that you've been doing the wrong thing your whole life? Or caring about the wrong thing?"

A wry smile spread over her lips. "After this place nearly burned down last year, I thought I'd wasted my life as a tavern keep. First, I thought I was destined to die, then I was saved. Then I never thought I'd ever recover what I'd lost, but people joined together and helped me rebuild."

Eric stared at the ale.

Sighing, Agatha rolled up her sleeve, revealing pink skin beneath that looked like melted candle wax. "Life leaves its scars, Eric. It's not easy, but I believe if you're meant to do something the path will be clear to you."

Eric's eyebrows shot up and he met Agatha's gaze for the first time. Bitterly, he thought, *Her eyes are still blue, not amber... Maybe that was some proper advice and not some nonsense from the fox woman.*

The front door opened on squealing hinges and Agatha eagerly looked to see who had walked in out of the spring storm. Eric twisted round to watch the Baron stalk inside, taking in the surroundings with a grimace.

Eric turned back to his ale. *I thought I'd have a bit more time to myself.* Agatha gasped and the room behind Eric drifted into silence; intrigued, he peeked over his shoulder and was surprised to see a troll hunched just inside the doorway.

Wooden antlers and a mossy mantle pressed against the ceiling. A particularly ripe mushroom puffed a cloud of orange spores, leaving a stain on the fresh paintwork. The troll looked grumpy, his ears and nose large and drooping, which at least made

his protruding teeth seem less formidable. Green swirls whirled across his skin, most of which was on show, although his large, tattooed belly hung over a leather loincloth. His nails and toenails were greenish-grey and had all manner of dirt stuck beneath them. Deep green stones hung around his neck and topped his gnarled staff, which he was leaning against heavily. He sniffed, wiped his nose on the back of his hand and looked at the Baron.

"What can I get you, sirs?" Agatha smiled at the pair.

The Baron swept forwards, ignoring Agatha and glaring at the other patrons, who went back to whatever they were previously doing. The troll remained hunched by the door, looking bored.

"Ah Eric, I hoped you would still be here." The Baron grasped Eric's elbow, guiding him off the stool and to the side of the bar where it was quiet.

"Just doing as asked." Eric smiled thinly and thought, *I wish my stomach would stop churning every time I see him, it's so annoying.*

The Baron returned the thin smile. "I have to go back to the Council chambers soon, we only have a short recess while the non-essential members leave the building—"

"Oh? Is there something I should know?" Eric asked, knowing what the answer would be.

To Eric's surprise the Baron paused before replying, "No, not at the moment. Very soon though, I think. Things are moving more quickly now..." The Baron frowned and looked troubled.

Without thinking, Eric said, "If I can help, I will."

The Baron examined his squire. "I know, Eric, we'll see... But in any case, I have a task for you now. One that I think you'll benefit from a great deal."

Despite his earlier misgivings, Eric eagerly asked, "Oh, of course, what is it?"

"I'd like you to accompany the troll to Bumbleton."

*

Eric stamped in a puddle, sending the water splashing onto his other boot. Furiously he thought, *The Baron's just trying to get rid of me for a while. I did what he asked me to, I saved Ermentrude! I did what Popycock said, and they both seemed happy about the whole thing at the time. He kicked a large stone off the path, sending it spinning into the undergrowth. It's not my fault the Commonwealth navy has to re-route around the archipelago, they shouldn't have been sailing near the Shrine in the first place! Now I've got to babysit this stupid troll.*

The troll huffed behind him. Eric glanced over his shoulder, the wax hood of his cloak and the relentless rain obscuring much of his view. What light there was had started to fail, casting more shadows over the troll's face. The troll's expression was as grim as it had been when they first started walking.



Suddenly the troll stopped plodding, irritably splashed the end of his staff on the muddy road surface and walked into the trees.

Rolling his eyes, Eric stomped after the hulking figure.

The troll's staff softly illuminated the trees along a path he was taking, then it disappeared as he strode inside a small cave. He lowered himself onto the floor, crossed his legs and placed the staff beside him. Eric scuttled inside, shaking water from his wax cloak as he removed it and hung it on a small stony outcrop.

The troll pulled dry sticks and kindling from the pack he had been carrying, placing them in the mouth of the cave. He muttered a short phrase and fire bloomed.

"You can use magic to make fire?" Eric gasped.

"We've been walkin' in silence for hours while anger roasted yer brain. I reckon ya could have started that fire just by lookin' at it." The troll's voice was deep and clear, he spoke nothing like most of the other trolls Eric had met.

"Errr..." Eric stared at him in disbelief.

"Now, are ya gonna talk about whatever's making ya a pain in the arse to be around? If not, go back to Machburg so I can be in better company - me own."

Eric plonked down onto a low rock and stared into the fire. "I'm sorry I've been rude, Mr..."

"My name's Knoll, none o' that Mr nonsense. An' yer Eric, right?"

"Yes, that's right." Eric smiled and held out his hand. Knoll rolled his eyes but carefully placed his own calloused hand in Eric's.

"Now, why've ya got a face like a smacked bum? Ya wonderin' why yer babysittin' an old troll down to a tiny farmstead when ya could be... what? Playin' wiv ya sword?"

Eric blushed. "I wouldn't quite put it like that..."

"Hmmm. Well, I'm goin' to harvest some rare fungus that only appears at this time o' year, which I put in me healin' salves. But don't worry, I don't need help, so ya can go on home." Knoll pulled a large radish from his bag, tossed it into his mouth and crunched loudly.

Irritation flashed through Eric's brain. "Then why did the Baron ask me to join you then?"

"Ol' Fancyhat said yer a skilled healer and thought ya might appreciate learnin' some new recipes. I might not look like much to a hot head, but I'm one of Tauber's finest healers." Knoll chewed on another radish.

"Oh..." Eric ground his toes into the compacted earth.

Knoll poked at the fire with a long stick. "Spit out whatever ya want to say before I die from suspense."

"Oh, um... The Baron... Did he really say I was a skilled healer?"

Knoll's small eyes bored into Eric's and earnestly he said, "Yup."

Nodding, Eric's shoulders relaxed as some of the tension left his body. *Maybe the Baron does still have faith in me. Maybe I can forgive him over time...*

Knoll dropped the stick on the ground and the pair stared into the small fire.

Feeling rude and growing uncomfortable in the silence, Eric eventually blurted, "I went on a shortcut through Darkwood once, would it be quicker to get to Bumbleton that way?"

Knoll scoffed. "Ya met the fauns, didn't ya? If ya met the Cultists, ya probably wouldn't be sittin' 'ere, they don't like visitors to that Temple. Although at least then I'd have some peace..."

"Aren't you associated with the Leshavult though?" Eric indicated the horns on top of Knoll's head.

Sighing, Knoll said, "I'm a Worshipper of Leshavit, aye, but I'm not a Cultist."

"There's a difference?" Eric frowned and scratched his head.

Knoll rolled his eyes again, breaking a thick stick in two he grumbled, "They teach the young rubbish in books and how to stab fingers, but not about the Old Ways."

"You could teach me though?" Eric smiled, an unexpected eagerness settling into his chest pushing the last of the tension away.

Knoll stared at Eric with narrowed eyes. "Are ya really interested, or are ya messin' wiv me?"

"I'm interested, I promise!" Eric held his hands up.

Knoll smacked his lips, rubbing his chin he said, "Them of us what are Worshippers follow Lesh and other gods, believin' in balance and have a love of nature. Them Cultists lean more towards decay, chaos and death—"

Eric felt something stir in his guts, a wriggling interest that stoked his attention, desperate to hear more.

“—They believe that Leshavit will rise again to consume us all.”

“That sounds bad...”

Knoll grunted. “Not bad, just different.”

“Are some of the Cultists bad though?”

“Some of the Cult are a bit zealous, makin’ ‘em unstable or unreliable rather than *baaad*. They all protect their Temple though, from everyone except them what worship Lesh somehow, and that does make ‘em dangerous I s’pose. The ones what get their magic from Leshavit are the ones you gotta keep yer eye on.”

“Does your magic come from Leshavit?”

“Sort of. Some of His Followers and Cultists get his blessin’ more directly though.”

“Does that mean magic is something I could be taught then?”

Knoll smiled, the firelight flicking over his face. “Yep, magic is somefin’ ya can learn if ya have a feel for it. Though many races use magic on instinct and other folk receive blessin’s from powerful Bein’s.”

“Powerful Beings? Like who, or what?”

“Leshavit, Araun, Kai’ana, the Well Maidens, Bakker, Dranyer, Rhysa, Tam Wheatfield, Taulada, those are a few... Do any of them names mean anyfin’ to ya?”

Eric pursed his lips. “Well, Araun is Lord of the Deadlands, so everyone knows about Him. And we still do Well Dressing ceremonies in Fancyle for the Well Maidens, but I thought it was just a superstition?”

Knoll smiled at the flames, reaching into his pack he rooted around and pulled out something on a string. “A gift for ya, young Eric, seeing as yer interested. Don’t go losin’ it mind, and don’t fink this means we’re friends.”

Knoll tossed the item over the flames and Eric grasped it from the air. A small, carved stag skull stared up at him. The pale wood was warm in the firelight, green beads on the cord shining. Without thinking he pulled the necklace over his head. Running his thumb over a carved symbol on the forehead he felt a sensation of beastly eyes watching him protectively.

Eric’s pulse pounded in his ears, and he felt himself being drawn towards the world Knoll was describing, like a moth to a candle. “You said the Cultists believe Lesh will return to consume everything, what do you believe?”

“That more than just Leshavit will return, though not to consume but to embrace us. The truf is probably somewhere in between though. Now, will ya stop your annoyin’ questions so I can get some shut eye. Don’t know why I ever agreed to go on this trip wiv someone else, I’m not gonna get a moment’s peace for days!”

*

“Are we not going into Bumbleton itself?” Eric asked as they left the path towards the town and started to scale a low hill. Unlike the previous day it was sunny and warm, Eric had removed his cloak

and rolled up his sleeves.

“If we was goin’ there, I’d’ve taken us there. No, the fungus grows in the ruins in the woods.”

“Oh? What ruins are those?” Eric asked excitedly.

Knoll looked to the sky and mouthed something Eric didn’t catch before saying, “Stormguard, the old capital of Tauber. Bumbleton was originally built there, but the land wasn’t fertile enough, so they shifted all the buildings west.”

Plodding upwards Eric pondered, *I didn’t know there was an old capital... I wonder what that’s all about? I don’t think Knoll would like me to ask though... Maybe Flintlock can tell me something?*

They crested the hill and descended again, striding towards the wood. Eric tripped and stumbled a few steps, peering into the grass he spotted a large stone poking through the soil. He bent to pick it up, but it didn’t move. He rubbed some of the mud from its surface, revealing a weathered, carved flower beneath his thumb.

“Are these the ruins?” Eric called, pointing at the stone.

“No.” Knoll strode through the treeline into Darkwood.

Eric jogged into the trees after Knoll, sliding to a halt his mouth fell open. Large stone slabs and ruined walls were scattered throughout the woods, soft grey glowing in dim light. Spindly, sickly trees had grown up and through many of the old buildings, and dark ivy grew rampant.

Knoll had stopped by one tree, holding a branch between his hands he was muttering a low chant. The woods were strangely quiet around them.

Grasping the stone at his neck Knoll released the branch and bowed his head. “There, we should be a bit safer.”

“Safer from what?” Eric touched the carved stag skull at his neck.

“This is a wild place, it’s always best to be prepared.” Knoll stepped over a wall and gestured for Eric to join him before he disappeared behind it.

Eric scrambled over the wall, carefully dropping down on the other side so that he didn’t trample anything.

Knoll had his hand gently cupped around five thin lumps protruding from the ground. “Ghost’s Hand mushrooms, this is what we’re ‘ere for.” He pulled a crude knife from his belt and dug it into the soil, cutting a circle around the mushroom. Carefully he lifted the fungus, clearing the black soil to reveal a shape that resembled a pale hand stretching upwards with clawed fingers.

Eric shivered. “What do you use it for again?”

Knoll gently placed the fungus in a large pouch hanging from his belt. “Very powerful healin’ potions and salves, this one mushroom will make about ten measures. Needs to be heated to make it effective, though. Now, don’t sit still starin’ at me with ya mouth open, go and find some more.”

The eerie white of the mushrooms were easy to spot in the dark soil and shadow of the woods. They took it in turns to spot or lift the mushrooms, handling them with great reverence when they did.

After several hours, Eric stood to stretch his back and looked towards the edge of the wood. A bolt of panic fizzed as he thought, *All I can see is trees!*

"Knoll, do you know the way back out?"

Knoll stood and stretched his own back. "Yep, course, it's that wa—"

Crack! The fallen tree trunk Knoll had stepped on snapped under his foot. The ground beneath was in fact a rotten wooden floor, which collapsed under the sudden weight, sending them both plummeting into darkness below.

Eric felt his left shoulder connect with a rock and he cried out in pain, then he was rolling down something gritty, before careening off into nothingness again, another wooden platform disintegrated as he landed on it, nothingness, then a pile of soft soil and leaves broke his fall. He kept his eyes squeezed shut as dirt and wood rained down around him. His pulse echoed in his head with the rush of adrenaline.

"Ya alright, Eric?" Knoll coughed from not too far away.

Eric opened his eyes and saw blackness. "I'm not sure, I can't see anything!"

Knoll muttered something to make the stone in his staff glow faintly, providing gentle illumination in the dark cavern. Eric looked around desperately, there was no sign of where they had come from. He sat up with a howl, his shoulder screaming with pain.

Knoll scuttled over, a cut on his forehead leaking dark blood. "Hmm, you've dislocated it. Me pack's gone so I don't have nuffin' to help with the pain." Knoll felt inside Eric's own small bag and pulled out a simple scarf, which he turned into a makeshift sling. "Let's get out of 'ere and I'll take a proper look at your shoulder when I've got more light."

Eric nodded, nausea flaring at even that small movement. "Can you see a way out?"

The crystal glowed brighter, and Knoll surveyed the walls of the cavern. "I can't see where we came from but there's a crack over there, let's try that."

*

They had stumbled into a maze of old stone tunnels, with no logic behind what led where. Many times, they went in one direction only to have to retrace their steps and try something else. The pain in Eric's shoulder made it feel like an eternity of trudging, he had no idea how long it had actually been.

Clusters of moonstones helped to light their way, the lack of daylight making them as big as Eric's head and deep blue. Knoll's staff and the glowing moonstones occasionally illuminated carvings on the stone walls. A common motif was a carving of a man's head wearing an old-fashioned helmet and crown, which Knoll said was something to do with the old King. Eric no longer cared about history, his shoulder hurt too much.

Eventually Eric's legs couldn't carry him any further and the

pair settled into the nook of a rock to rest. Sleep came in fits and stops for Eric, plagued by strange dreams of shadows being eaten by green light. He awoke the next morning stiff, nausea pulsing in time with the pain in his shoulder.

With genuine sympathy on his face, Knoll ground up one of the Ghost's Hands mushrooms between two rocks. Eric swallowed it down with the last of the water, he didn't have the heart to tell Knoll that it didn't help much.

They began trudging through the darkness again and pressed on for at least an hour before Knoll hoarsely whispered, "Stop."

"What is it?" Eric asked sluggishly.

Knoll turned his head, his ears moving, listening all around them. Gingerly Eric rubbed his face, then stopped as he heard something too. They both held their breath, listening.

Eric whispered, "That's definitely armour, a couple of people are running in it. There are boots too, although not from a trained army as the steps are all out of time. Something wooden maybe? It sounds like sticks hitting the ground..."

Voices reached them too, no words, only moans and guttural cries. Eric felt goose pimples erupt all over his body and Knoll went pale.

"Run!" Knoll gasped and grabbed the front of Eric's jerkin, pulling him into one of the tunnels as he ran.

Eric winced in pain but knew he had to keep going, the strange sounds echoing behind them were slowly catching. He kept his eyes on the swaying, low glow of Knoll's crystal and did his best to dodge stalactites. Eric grasped his necklace as he ran and thought desperately, *Leshavit help us!*

They rounded a corner, then another; running up a gentle incline their panting breath an accompaniment to their heavy steps. Eric felt lightheaded and pushed his legs on, with no way out in sight.

Suddenly the tunnel opened out into a cavern, light winking at them from the far side. *We're finally going to get out! Leshavit helped us!*

"Stop!" A female voice screamed from shadows in front of them. Knoll slid to a stop and Eric bumped into him, crying out with pain.

"Raegan, fank Lesh, it's me, Knoll!" His crystal flared brighter, and he stepped forwards.

"Do you know him?" Another voice called from Eric's left and he scanned the darkness for the source.

"Yes, he is a Follower. Kalista, hold your magic for what's behind." Raegan called, her voice echoing around them.

A third voice chimed in with a giggle, adding, "How interesting, Leshavit sends us aid in the form of someone you know, Raegan."

"Gwendoline?" Eric stumbled around Knoll towards the sound of the third voice, making out the faerie's form in the soft light.

Gwendoline muttered something and soft light bloomed from crystals around the chamber. Stood atop an outcrop she opened her wings and drifted down, her expression stunned.

"Eric? It really is you! What are you doing here? How

did you get hurt?"

Screams and howls reverberated through the tunnel they had emerged from, and Gwendoline pushed Eric behind her into the lee of a large stalagmite. Grasping his wooden sword, Eric stared down the tunnel.

A warband burst from the darkness there, like rippling shadow; watching them emerge with disbelief Eric thought, *I must have concussion or some sort of brain injury.*

Leading the way was an armour-clad soldier wielding a short spear, except where its head should have been was a salivating boar's head. It squealed its anger, gnashing its teeth at them.

Behind was a skeleton, wearing a single greave, running at them wordlessly flanked by six other partly armoured skeletons. Their bones rattled, scraped and rasped against the stone as they ran.

A figure covered in a sheet appeared, its head a teetering horse's skull on a long neck. Its eyes glowed sickly yellow and the jaw clacked open and closed. Grasping hands wriggled distended fingers tipped with long claw-like nails.

Dozens of tiny *things* swarmed around the warband's feet; they were unusual items or animals with short legs, yellow magic glittering on their surfaces. They chirruped and squawked as they ran.

Eric squinted into the dimness and watched a crossbowman decked in chainmail duck behind a large shield. The crown motif they had seen in the tunnels was painted onto the shield's surface in sticky black, but where the man's head once was a skull stared out with hollow eyes.

Finally, a knight emerged. He strode around the tower shield, his dark armour intricately inlaid with shining filigree. He opened his skeletal jaw, thrust his gleaming sword forwards, and bellowed.

The three women cried their anger in reply, Knoll's deep rumbling shout a fine accompaniment; then the four Leshavult hit the creatures with their magic, sending flashes of light dancing over the rocky walls. Eric heard at least two bodies fall.

Gwendoline flew forwards, grasped one of the skeletons and threw it hard into a wall, leaving it to crumple to the ground.

Three skeletons rushed for a woman with antlers, she clapped her hands then pushed outwards with great effort. Loose stones and dust flew away from her in a ring of flashing green magic, colliding with the skeletons and sending them spinning away.

Knoll brought the end of his staff down on two of their skulls with satisfying crunches. Then he turned his attention to the tiny things, crushing them in small groups with staff and foot when they got too close.

A faun glided over Eric's head, muttering, and weaving her fingers in a complex motion. The boar knight below her squealed, raising its spear it began to rush towards Eric. Vines and brambles wound round the boar's legs, thorns ripping into its skin sending blood spraying.

Eric gagged from the stink of the thick, dark blood.

The faun twisted her hands, tightening the vine's grip on the

boar and wrenching it to the ground. It squealed once more, but the sound was cut off. The faun floated away to find another target.

Gwendoline intercepted a skeleton and shouted, "Eric, look out!" She sent it hurtling into the rock not far from him, where it impacted with unsettling snaps.

Eric didn't notice, he was distracted by the crossbow bolt sticking out of his chest. It glowed faintly with crackling yellow energy, which was pouring into the wooden necklace resting against the bolt.

I didn't even get a chance to hit anything, Eric thought numbly, gasping in a bubbling breath. His knees buckled, sending him slumping to his side, his shoulder and chest bursting with pain. He grasped the necklace, which was warm like a summer's day and thought, *At least I'll get to see you soon, mum.*

*

The darkness was a void, nothingness forever. Eric felt no pain and was at peace. He turned his attention around himself but saw nothing and no one.

Oh. Maybe we don't see our loved ones when we die. I thought you met everyone again in the Deadlands?

DO YOU WISH TO BE DEAD? The painful booming voice echoed all around him.

Ow! Yes! Eric tried to push his non-hands over his non-ears, but all was blackness.

DO YOU TRULY? FOR I SHALL MAKE IT SO.

Eric floated quietly in the dark for a moment. *No, I don't want to be dead, I have more to do.*

YES.

Oh... I wasn't expecting that response...

NO.

So... Um... What now?

YOU MUST SEE THE LIGHT.

Eric examined the void and saw nothing. *What light?*

There was no reply.

Well, that's irritating... Maybe if I'd asked Knoll more questions, he could have prepared me better for some sort of light. Or maybe Gwendoline really did care and had seen some good in me, so she could have taught me more if I'd stuck around? Even Herb, I bet he could have taught me something! Calders, Clemency, Flintlock... Oh, Gertrude, I wish you were here. The Baron too, I suppose. He has taught me a lot. And maybe he did do the best for me.

He examined the void again and saw nothing. *At this rate I'll never get to see the fox-woman and tell her my choice. I'd always been too afraid and been led by others before, but now I'm ready to make my own choice. Whatever happens, even if she has been lying to me, I know I need to help people before I go to the Deadlands.*

A point of emerald light flickered in the distance and raced towards him. A cacophony of growls, like every creature on Tauber calling at once, galloped with the light. Eric stood tall and waited. The light stopped above him more than an arm span away, the

sounds now rumbling around him.

Beneath the cascading light a towering figure emerged, dressed in a patchwork of leathers and furs, with a long green woollen cloak. Green lights stared down at Eric from the eye sockets of a large stag's skull, a wreath of ivy around His neck weaved up around His antlers. He held a staff as thick as a sapling in one hand and His other rested on His chest in greeting.

He tapped His gnarled staff against the non-ground, the hollow boom dropping the animals into silence. The top of the staff began to smoulder.

I HOPE TO SEE YOU AGAIN, SIR ERIC. MAKE YOUR CHOICE WELL AND WITH YOUR HEART.

Leshavit thrust the smouldering end of the staff into Eric's chest. The blackness was replaced by emerald fire and the smell of burning.

*

Eric opened his eyes and his vision was sharper, although tinged green, the scent of wood smoke filling his nose. He rose from the ground in one sleek movement. He swept the sling from his arm, grasped the boar's spear from the ground and strode forwards as if in a dream.

In front of him the faun screamed and collapsed, the horse-skull creature bearing down on her prone form. Eric thrust the weapon through the skull and the shrieking creature crumpled in a cascade of bone fragments. Eric strode on.

A few paces away a bald, rotund rat-like creature honked discordant music from a flute that replaced its nose, and waved a shortsword with glee. A helmet with squat legs hopped behind in time with the music, sharp barbs glinting on its sides. Eric stabbed the spear down and through the tiny things, making them pop into motes of yellow light.

The crossbowman fired, Eric simply leant out of the way.

Eric clutched his carved necklace and closed his eyes. He took a deep breath and released it, sending a wave of green magic swirling out and away like feathers on the wind. The magic wave hit the remaining creatures in the cavern and they buckled, lying motionless.

The ornately armoured knight had withdrawn from his fight against Gwendoline and Knoll, ducking behind the crossbowman they both avoided the magical wave. He said something in a guttural language and another bolt came careening towards Eric's face from the crossbowman. Eric swatted it out of the air as if it were a lazy fly.

Then Eric was at the shield, which he ripped from the ground and tossed aside. Grasping the crossbowman with his left hand, he thrust the spear through its torso with his right. Stinking sticky blood poured from the wound, and the creature went still. Eric dispassionately dropped it in a heap.

"You will see more of us yet soon," the ornate knight rasped, then turned and ran.

Pointing after the knight, Eric said calmly, "But not you." A dazzling dart rocketed from his finger, striking the knight between his shoulder blades with a flash of forest green. The knight collapsed to his knees, shuddering and wailing eerily. The wail dissolved into silence and he fell forwards with an echoing clang.

Eric turned and strode out of the tunnel, the scent of burning wood still strong. He scanned the cavern, looking for further prey, his vision emerald.

"Eric..." Gwendoline shook her head in disbelief, yet her smile was radiant.

The green tinge began to fade at the same time his mind began to clear. The pain from his shoulder started eating back into his attention, wincing, he sat heavily on the stony ground. He looked down and was surprised the bolt was still embedded in his chest. *That's twice in a few months I've been shot. At least I'll have some interesting scars.* Tiredness washed over him, and he couldn't keep his eyes open any more.

*

Rain pattered on the roof, waking Eric from comfortable sleep in a warm bed. He didn't open his eyes, choosing to lie in darkness and take stock of any bodily complaints. *Shoulder feels a little sore, but it's definitely back where it's supposed to be. Chest hurts, but that's also nowhere near as bad as it could be...* He swallowed, his throat dry.

"You've been asleep for a few days, you best drink something."

Eric opened his eyes and smiled at Gwendoline. "It's nicer waking with you here, rather than Knoll," he rasped.

Gwendoline helped him sip some water then said, "He's visited you every day, but I asked him to fetch more healing ingredients from his home. As Priestess I outrank him here, so he had to listen to me."

"Priestess? Where are we?" Eric scanned the dim room, which was simply furnished but comfortable. The structure itself was wooden, with a thatched roof high above his head.

"Tjaldhiminn. Well, the village that surrounds the Temple in any case."

Eric frowned. "I've been allowed near the Temple of Leshavit?"

"Of course, after what you experienced during the battle, even Raegan likes you."

Eric nodded, *I don't really know what that means...*

As if reading his thoughts she said, "Raegan is the faun you saw. Trust me, she's difficult to please!"

Eric nodded again, his expression sobering. "What happened?" Gwendoline beamed at him. "You saved us! We were attacked by—"

"No, not then. Last year. With you and us, and the witches."

"Oh." Gwendoline fiddled with the rough edge of a blanket and sighed. "I thought we were helping Leshavit to rise again, so I was sent to delay you all getting to the Elrich. Turns out we were wrong and something else happened."

Eric's guts began to wriggle. "What was it, do you know?"

She chewed her lip. "The Elrich unleashed something. That Librarian, Tabby, said it was the First Elrich or King Chernitt, or something else from long ago. He's incredibly powerful. We've been hearing more and more reports of those strange things, those *Shades*, appearing. We've been fighting what we've found, but the Council just aren't doing anything or telling anyone about it."

Eric thought about all the secret meetings the Baron had attended. "Why not?"

"I think it's because they're afraid and because the Elrich haven't been seen since this happened. No one knows what to do, they're all scared – the Baron, Queen Diana, the witches – all of them. We need to be ready to fight because something's coming and it's going to be terrible."

Eric considered her words for a long moment. He believed her. He felt a pang of homesickness too at the mention of the Baron. *I can't believe I miss him, but I really want to see him. Flintlock and Calders too. Herb, I hope you're nearby as I could do with a drink and a chat.*

Quietly Gwendoline said, "I thought I was doing the right thing by Leshavit. I'm sorry I hurt you. I didn't expect to like you as much as I did, or to..." She fiddled with the blanket some more.

"To what?"

Gwendoline looked him in the eyes. "To see your true potential, Eric. You're going to be a knight, I've seen it. What sort of knight, fighting for whom or fighting against what, I don't know. I've seen you in green, purple, and yellow colours, doing incredible things. You will have a choice to make soon, and I thought you should know everything before you do."

He stared at her eyes, which were their usual purple.

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

"I'm checking your eyes aren't amber."

She laughed. "Amber? What like a stone?"

"No, like a fox."

Her smile disappeared and surprise crossed her face. "Have you been speaking to Dranyer? To a fox or a fox-woman?"

He didn't reply.

She smiled faintly again. "I knew you were important, Eric. Be careful with her, she is a trickster after all."

Eric closed his eyes and sighed. "What now?"

"Well, you can rest a bit more. The potions Knoll has given you will make you sleepy, so you can stay here as long as you like. Then you're welcome to see the Temple before you go home."

He looked at her again, excitement stirring. "I can see the Temple?"

"You became Leshavit's vessel for a short while, you will forever be welcome at this Temple."

Trickster Week had ended five days ago and Dranyer's hangover wasn't abating. The faeries knew how to throw a good party. She had enjoyed taking the form of Butterfingers, acting so out of character for him that the fae would be gossiping for months.

She'd stayed in a warm den watching Eric's adventure unfurl, pleased that she didn't have to interfere at any stage this time.

Eventually she mustered the energy to teleport herself next to the Temple. She stared in the direction of Eric's hut and thought, *Now the third path is before you, Eric of the Leshavult. Are the petals beneath your feet plump and fragrant, or shrivelled and rotting?*

Her fur rippled as her disguise settled in place and she now looked like cow-faced Klaus. She crept inside and wrinkled her nose at the highly scented incense, her stomach turning. Quietly she snuck to a corner and scanned all the different censers and incense burners. There, at the back, was a goblet-shaped clay burner, simply decorated with red glaze. She grasped it and thrust it into a pouch at her side, then grabbed a bowl of the pungent incense and tipped it alongside.

She spun to walk towards the exit but Raegan stood in her path, watching, expression stony. "I don't know who you are, but you are not Klaus. Your disguise... You have chosen... poorly." Raegan's hands moved quickly, and green magic fizzed noisily around Dranyer's head. The illusion of Klaus disappeared, leaving an anthropomorphic fox in his place.

"Hey, hey, hey! I'm nursing a hangover here!" Dranyer cried and rubbed her forehead, grimacing.

Raegan's eyes grew huge, and she backed away. "Dranyer! What...?"

"Just... Don't worry about it, alright?" Dranyer *tsked* and sauntered out of the Temple.

Raegan ran after her and stopped just outside the doorway, keeping her distance still. "Dranyer, wait!"

Dranyer stopped, her back still to the Temple and her tail swishing.

Raegan fumbled for something to say and awkwardly asked, "Why did you take some of our incense?"

Sighing, Dranyer turned and folded her arms. "You wouldn't understand. Just give it a few months... Actually... Maybe a bit more, and it'll all make sense. Now, I have work to do. Do you mind?"

Raegan shook her head and watched Dranyer disappear without a hand movement or muttered word. One minute the fox-woman was there, the next she was simply gone. Raegan took a shuddering breath and turned, falling over a bucket that had somehow appeared behind her. Her robes went flying and she struggled to untangle herself, the bucket clattering underneath her. She scrambled to her feet and ran into the Temple, the sound of Dranyer's laughter following her.

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Part 5/5: A year and a day

"Eric, the Baron wants to see you," Smitherington-Smythe the butler called from the gateway into the firing range. He waited until Eric acknowledged his words with a wave then pointed his nose in the air and scurried off.

"Come back when you're ready, lad," Flintlock smiled and carefully lifted the large musket rifle from its stand.

"Oh dear, I wonder what that's all about..." Eric wiped sweat from his forehead, the skin slightly tender from the searing summer heat.

Flintlock shrugged. "You've been training hard for nearly a year, maybe he wants to talk to you about that?"

Excitement alit in Eric's belly. "You think so?"

Flintlock shrugged again, "Maybe... You better put a shirt on before you go to see him though!"

Eric laughed and scooped his shirt from over the fence. He caught the eye of a stable-hand and she quickly looked away. *Was she staring at me?* He thought and shrugged into his shirt, tucking it into his trousers. *Maybe that was the fox woman?* Carefully he pulled the carved stag skull necklace from under his shirt, looking for her. She didn't appear again, so he shrugged, waved at Flintlock and strode back towards the house.

After squinting in the sunlight, the dim interior of the house was a stark contrast. Blinking his swimming vision, he wandered to the office and knocked.

"Enter," the Baron barked from inside.

Eric pushed inside and closed the door quietly behind him, then strode to stand in front of the Baron's desk. The Baron glanced up, yet his ledger kept his attention.

Discomfort and apprehension battled in Eric's stomach, he distracted himself by rubbing at the dirty yellow spot on his skull necklace. The unusual magic had pierced his chest a few months before and left no mark on his skin, yet this necklace remained stained.

The Baron cleared his throat and said, "Are you quite well now, after all that business a few months ago?"

Eric released the necklace. "Almost, but not fully."

The Baron kept his eyes down, still scribbling in his book. "I wanted to thank you for your help over the past year or so—"

Eric was so surprised he thought he would fall over.

"—It's been a bit of a whirlwind, so I've not really had time to say anything."

"Thank you, sir," Eric grinned.

"Yes, well..." The Baron finally placed his quill on the table and closed the book. "There was something else I wished to discuss with you in any case."

Pride glimmered in Eric's chest and he couldn't help but grin wider. "Of course sir, how can I help?"

"You've been training hard for many months, many years in fact, and you're almost ready to become a knight."

Disappointment started chewing at the pride. "Almost, sir?"

"Oh yes, I think a few more months will see you there. By then, the Council will be ready to discuss certain matters about Tauber with you and with the broader population."

"Alright..." Eric frowned.

"For now, I wanted to talk to you about your demeanour these past few weeks."

"My... demeanour?"

"Yes, ever since you got back from that Cult you've been aloof with me and other people in the household—"

Eric clenched his jaw thinking, *Yes, because it's difficult to tell people in the Commonwealth that you were a vessel for a god they don't understand.*

"—Then in the past few days I've had complaints from people saying that you've been looking at them strangely. Staring too long into their eyes and making them uncomfortable—"

Eric felt like his heart had stopped, disappointment and embarrassment smothering it into stillness.

"—You need to think about the proper way a knight should behave and consider taking off that... necklace." The Baron flicked his hand at Eric's chest and sat back in his chair.

Eric took a deep breath, considering how to respond. "And what about the *behaviour* of others within the Commonwealth? You raised me to believe in integrity, that the Commonwealth are the good guys, yet Calders wanted to leave the gnomes on that island!"

"Calders was doing what he thought was best, so that you could rescue Ermentrude. Given the cost to the Commonwealth as a result of that mission, perhaps you should have listened to him."

Eric shook his head, anger simmering, and he blurted, "When are you going to tell people about those Shades that have appeared? How many people have they attacked while the Council has done nothing?"

The Baron rose in a fluid motion, his cheeks pink. "How did you know about that? It's a Council secret!"

"I know quite a few secrets now, *sir*," Eric stared at the Baron, folding his arms to mask his shaking hands.

The Baron looked confused, then paled and turned away from him. "I think you best go and resume your chores, *squire*. We should continue this conversation later."

"Fine," Eric turned, opening the door a crack.

"Eric..."

Eric looked over his shoulder at the Baron. The older man looked tired.

"Whatever you think might be going on," he sighed, "You really will be a knight soon. I promise."

"I know," Eric said, closing the door behind him.

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Eric took himself into the Wyrdwood under the pretence of collecting firewood. He marched through the undergrowth, ignoring fallen branches, striding towards a small lake in a clearing. He'd visited it many times as part of his training and he thought, *Hopefully it'll be quiet and I can go for a swim.*

By the time he reached the lake sweat had soaked through his shirt and he pulled it over his head, discarding it in a pile by a tree.

"It's nice to see you too, Ric."

The voice took him by surprise, and he spun towards the sound. The young red-haired woman was sitting under a hawthorn tree, eating wild strawberries. She smiled at him and gestured for him to sit near her.

He scrutinised her for a long moment then strode across and sat down opposite her. "Your name is Dranyer, isn't it?"

She popped another berry into her mouth. "Yes, it is."

He thought for a moment, watching her as she chewed on the strawberries. "This human woman appearance isn't your true form, is it?"

She smiled more broadly, showing surprisingly pointed canines. "No, it isn't. Although, I can take many forms."

Her skin quivered like heat haze and suddenly Herbert was eating berries, then his skin shivered and Belle, the gnome with the backpack, was there. Her skin shivered again and Kalista winked at him, her antlers swaying. Her skin shivered a final time, and a fox-woman was sat in front of him. Her body was covered in soft, orange fur, her face a pointed fox's snout and a fluffy tail curled into her lap; yet her hands were dexterous like a human's, which she demonstrated by throwing another berry into her mouth. She was wearing the same fern green dress as her human guise.

"Is this it? Your true form?"

She shrugged. "This is the form I favour, although no mortal has seen my true form."

Eric leant away from her and asked, "What are you?"

Dranyer laughed and said, "Get Knoll to tell you the next time you meet."

"Gwendoline said you're a trickster, is that true?"

"I do like a giggle." She winked at him, throwing a strawberry upwards she snapped it out of the air and chewed it happily.

"What have you done to me over the past year?" Eric asked miserably, his hand on the hilt of his wooden sword.

"Oh Ric, please. I've not done anything to you, you've done it all yourself."

"But you appeared sometimes... Took over people I know."

"Yes, but only to nudge you or show you that something important was happening. I wanted to make you think."

Eric scowled. "That doesn't make any sense. Are you lying to me?"

Dranyer held his gaze for the first time and anger glimmered there. "I may be a trickster, but I'm not a liar. Not about things like this, in any case."

Eric looked away from her eyes and thought, *She might be lying about lying... But for some reason I want to trust her.*

She brushed her hands together and made a satisfied sound before looking at him seriously. "Sir Eric of the Lake, it's been a year and a day since we first met. Are you ready to make your choice?"

Nerves jangled his stomach, but his voice was steady as he asked, "What choice?"

She chuckled. "You cannot trick a trickster, you know what choice you must make."

Dranyer brought a simple leather bag in front of her and rifled inside. First, she lifted out a golden egg, followed by a duck feather and carefully placed them on the ground between them. Next, a glass bottle of faintly reddish water. Finally, a large handful of pungent incense consisting of dried herbs, flowers, and chunks of resin.

He looked at the items in turn, memories dragging feelings through his body. *What a year it's been.*

Dranyer held a red glazed goblet towards him and said, "Eric, take this goblet of the squire and we will prepare you for your knighthood."

Eric stared at the goblet in silence and shook his head.

Her head twitched in response, and she narrowed her eyes.

Taking a deep breath Eric said, "I'll do this if you tell me one thing."

"I make no bargain until I know what it is." Her smile was brittle.

"On this path you've nudged me along I've discovered my mother's name. Do you know my father's?"

Her smile broadened into an unsettling grin. "Ah you wish a trade? I'll give you his name, but not in exchange for this." She gestured at the items in front of her.

"Why not?"

"You will find this without me. It'll take longer and be more painful, but helping you make a decision gives me very little reward."

"So... Why are you doing it then?"

Dranyer placed a hand on her chest and fluttered her eyelashes. "For the good of Tauber."

Eric looked at her sceptically.

"Alright, because it's fun to get involved in the Big Things on Tauber. That, and by helping you I'll be upsetting some that want to try and coerce you and your decision; I think it's important for people to have free will and it's always fun to mess with those who like to be in control." She giggled and her tail flicked excitedly.

"Alright, fine, I believe you. What do you want in return then?"

She ran her hand under her chin. "Oh, now this is a secret, Ric. A secret can only be bought with another secret."

Eric frowned. "I don't know any secrets... Not interesting ones, in any case."

"You could owe me a secret." She smiled sweetly again, her tail still flicking.

"Alright... In return for three questions!"

"Agreed, that's simple enough. Do you promise also?"

"I promise."

The air around them fizzed and Eric felt tingling across his skin. Dranyer clenched her fist, drawing the magic from the air, and the tingling stopped.

"The promise is bound; you will pay me with one secret when I ask for it."

"I will." Eric nodded.

She gave him a knowing smile and said, "What are your three questions?"

"What is my father's name?"

"Kennet Brown."

Eric rubbed at his forehead, overwhelmed by such simple information.

"Next question, we don't have all day."

"Oh, ummm, how did he know my mother?"

"They met when they were both in service at the Fancyhat household. Kennett Brown was a butler to Archibald Fancyhat, Sara Dolen was handmaiden to Joyceann Fancyhat. Final question?"

"Does... Did he know about me? Before he left?"

Dranyer pursed her lips, an usual expression on a fox's face. "He knew Sara was pregnant but left before you were born. There, three questions done and done!"

Squeezing his eyes closed, Eric rested his head in his hands. I know so much after years of knowing nothing!

When he sat up straight Dranyer was holding the goblet towards him. "It's time, Eric of the Lake. You must choose your path."

He took the goblet from her and felt magic tingling across his skin again. "What must I do?"

She held the golden egg out to him and said, "The Path to Eric the Formidable, tell me why you would walk it."

Eric took the egg and looked at it while he said, "The Dominion have always been drawn to me, in their own strange ways. I could learn magic, but with the freedom of thought and action, and I could be a noble one day. Most importantly, I respect my friend Herbert and would like to fight by his side." Instinctively he broke the egg into the goblet, thinking about what he had said.

She handed him the bottle of water. "The Path to Eric the Brave, tell me why you would walk it."

Eric considered the water and the merfolk blood inside, which he now knew the reddish brown to be. "The Commonwealth are my family. I've always wanted to be their knight, always felt it's the path of goodness. It's the logical choice." He poured some of the water into the goblet, his vision blurry from unspilled tears.

After a moment Dranyer held out a handful of the incense. "The Path to Eric the Enlightened, tell me why you would walk it."

Carefully, Eric took the incense and inhaled its scent. "I was Leshavit's Chosen." He smiled and dropped the incense into the mixture.

Dranyer regarded him for a long moment then handed him the duck feather and instinctively he stirred the gloopy mixture in the goblet. He thought about everything that had happened over the past year and wondered what would come next. Dranyer muttered

something in an unusual language while he stirred, the magical pressure building.

Green sparkles danced from the mixture and Dranyer cupped her hands around Eric's. He stopped stirring and they both stared into the swirling mixture, magic thrumming around them.

Gently Dranyer guided him to standing. "Eric, in order to complete this ritual you must cast aside your life as a squire. You must be reborn through the lake." She looked down and waggled her eyebrows at him.

Eric smiled, surprised he was no longer embarrassed, and unbuckled his belt. He pulled it from around his waist and grasped the dangling scabbard, nostalgia nagging at his core. He drew and examined the wooden sword, it was still sharp after Calders' ministrations. He could remember how it received every scratch and dent, and the dark blood stains that never quite came out from the grain. He clutched it to his chest, smiled sadly, then tossed it into the lake. He finished stripping and stood, surveying the mirrored surface of the water, the sword sinking to the bottom.

On the opposite bank an enormous elk appeared, lowering his head to drink the cool water. Eric watched him drink, the strength in his powerful muscles clear even from this distance. Yet, he was graceful and calm, a truly noble beast. The elk lifted his great head, his eyes meeting Eric's for a long moment.

The wooden necklace around Eric's neck grew warm, glowing with soft green light. Without looking, he grasped it and lifted his fist to rest on his lips.

Dranyer stepped beside him and asked softly, "Do you wish to remove the necklace?"

Eric shook his head, smiling he said, "No." The necklace glowed brighter, hot against his palm, and he laughed heartily.

Eric's laughter was sucked into a gasp as Dranyer poured the mixture from the goblet over his head. He thought, *She better have done this for a good reason!*

"Eric of the Glade, Eric of the Lake, Eric the Enlightened. You have made your choice. Enter the water and when you emerge you will be a true knight." Dranyer nodded to him and took a step backwards. A grin spread across her face and she watched him intently, her eyes sparkling mischievously.

The mixture was sticky and slid slowly down Eric's hair and over his skin, but it was warm and smelled of woodlands, rain, soil, clear air on a summer's evening, woodsmoke, and mushrooms.

His necklace glowed green, the wave of pulsing light brighter with each flash. The light spread to the mixture and then onto his skin, Eric lifted a hand to examine his glowing arm. Smiling he closed his eyes and felt his mind go quiet for the first time in a very long while.

Eventually he strode into the lake, brought his glowing arms above his head and dove into the cool water. It was dark, still and quiet, and he let himself think, *My choice is the Leshavult and whatever that may bring.*

TO BE CONTINUED . . .



