

Dark Crystal: Descent

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Author's Notes

There are things I did not include and wanted to go back later and change. Due to the lack of time I will need to make these changes later:

1. Directions - North, South, East & West. For lack of a better term I used these. I don't have enough information to determine which way the Sun's move to create a "Sun Up" (East) and "Sun Down" (West) or "Hub Star" (North) and "Away from Hub" (South) type of direction system. I was able to create times based on "First Sun," "Last Sun" and the like.
2. I was not able to find any information on the Cave of Obscurity, Gnarled Stonetree or the Crystal Sea. I created this information, but if canon says otherwise they need to be changed.
3. I am not committed to the character names. I like them just fine, but they are negotiable.
4. I intend to have a "Rise of the Gelflings" follow up to this book that documents the unification of the tribes against the Skeksis (politically). I also intend to have a third book about the intrigue that brings about the destruction of the Gelfling tribes (setting up for the 1982 Movie).
5. I would like to have written more, but I want to hear from the editors first before expanding further.
6. The chapters 6 through 14 are written, but they had to be deleted for the submission.

Chapter 1 – Two Gelfling

Standing outside, behind a rock, are two gelfling. They are small and are staring intently at a castle. It is called the Castle of the Crystal. It is home to the skeksis, a strange race of sorcerers that trade and work closely with the gelfling leaders. They have inhabited the Castle as long as any gelfling can remember. The castle sits in a barren plain with a road leading up to the entrance.

“Wow, that’s a big place.”

“And scary.”

“Alro, it’s not that scary. Just big.”

“Well, when you need to go in, it gets a lot more scary.”

“Tyrr is missing and the tracks lead here.”

“Yeah, but we’re not even sure they’re the same tracks.”

“The tracks on this road match the ones where Tyrr went missing. All the other tracks we found lead here. Whatever took Tyrr is here.”

“I know my sister is missing Kett. The elders said they’re looking too. I don’t want to go messing with whatever’s in that castle.”

Kett stopped to think. His best friend’s sister, Tyrr, is missing. He told everyone about where she was last seen. Kett went with the Enforcers to see what might have happened. He saw the tracks, but the Enforcers said they were Pole Walker tracks. They were not Pole

Walker tracks, that is what Kett thought. When he showed them to Alro, they agreed to follow them. That was two days ago.

“Kett! There are two large things coming up the road,” said Alro almost yelling at Kett.

“Get down.” They were hiding behind one of the few large rocks near the road and the only one next to the road. The two could hear the things moving past on the road. They made a click-chirping sound and their feet made a thudding noise almost like they walked on logs. The gelfling tensed up hoping they would not be seen.

After the things had passed they dared to take a look at what they were. From behind they looked like Heart Shells, but much, much bigger.

Alro gasped, “they’re huge. What are they carrying?”

Kett strained to see in the twilight. “I’m not sure...it looks like a net with a...um...gelfling?”

Alro was surprised, “what?”

“Yeah, those aren’t gelfling clothes, but it’s the right size and shape to be a gelfling.”

“Uh...um...ah...I think we need to go.” Fear was creeping into Alro’s voice. “We can tell the Elders. They will do something about this. I can’t believe they would take a gelfling.”

“What about Tyrr? We can’t leave her in there.”

“We won’t. The Enforcers will go get her.”

Kett was getting a little worried. "But they're two days away and who knows how long the elders will talk about it before taking action. No, we need to find a way in. Who knows what will happen by the time the Enforcers get here? Think about your sister."

Alro thought about this for a moment, "we don't even know if she's in there."

"Well, they're big and we're small. We could sneak in and look around." Kett was trying to be console Alro, but he was just as scared.

"What if we can't find her?"

"We'll go home."

"How are we going to get in?"

"What is that?!"

Something grabbed them and lifted them up high.

"What is sneaking around our castle?" It snarled.

"Um," Kett had to think quick, "we lost our Pole Walker."

"Wrong answer," the thing growled at them. "This hunt was too easy," it said and banged their heads together.

"My..." was all Kett could say before the world went black.

...

Alro was swaying from side to side. He was in a blanket or something and it felt like another gelfling was with him. He wasn't sure if he should ask Kett if it was him.

“skekTek, I found these hiding outside. You need to watch your wards.” Kett and Alro tumbled out of a bag onto the floor. Alro looked up to see a creature that looked like a dead bird covered in rugs, bones and other adornments. He gasped and started backing away, Kett started to stir.

“These are not mine, but I can always use subjects. Stay a moment; I should reward your efforts skekMal.” skekTek grabbed Kett and placed him in a cage made of twisted metal. It then grabbed Alro, put him into a chair and closed some clamps on his arms and legs.

“Uhhh...” Kett sat up in his cage, “Alro?”

“Kett! What is happening?”

skekTek had finished strapping Alro in. “Shush you, this will be over in a moment.” It walked over to some levers on the wall. It pulled one and floor in front of Alro began to open downward. There was a red light coming in between the floor and the wall. Something could be seen in the steam that moved when skekTek pulled the next lever.

When it stopped moving a crystal at the end of it lit up with a purple light and sent 3 beams into the room. Two went to the chairs on either side of Alro and the third went right for Alro's eyes. Alro gasped.

“Alro?” Kett, still waking up from a bad dream looked at the little gelfling in the chair.

“Kett,” Alro spoke more quietly, “I need help.”

The chair lit up. There were streams of light flowing through tubes on the chair to a small flask on the side. It was filling up with a clear liquid.

“Alro? What’s happening?”

“I’m...I’m...” Alro spoke with an even tone. “I’m lost...” His voice trailed off.

Kett was starting to get control of himself. “Alro! What are you doing to him?! Stop!”

“Quiet you, or I will make you quiet,” skekMal hissed. It was enough to take the fight out of Kett.

The next few minutes passed slowly. Alro just sat in the chair as the purple light pressed at his face. Kett was terrified. Something was happening to his friend and there was nothing he could do but watch. skekTek pushed the lever back and the crystal moved away from the opening. It moved the other lever which made the floor slide closed.

“Here, you are.” skekTek picked up the small flask and handed it to skekMal. “Drink it. I think these gelfling are going to be very useful.”

skekMal drank the vial and breathed in deeply. It stood a little taller; the wrinkles across his face smoothed out; its hair darkened; and even its beak looked brighter. “I

feel marvelous, what is that?" skekMal's eyes gleamed with vitality.

"It is Essence. It will give us the power to fully claim the world." skekTek spoke with a great deal of satisfaction.

"I feel like hunting. I must go." skekMal's eyes burned wild and it left as if it were already on the scent. skekTek then removed Alro from the chair. "Slave, bring this one to skekNa for learning."

Alro looked awful. He reminded Kett of his grandmother, but Alro's eyes were milky white, matching his hair. Kett now realized that the slave coming to get Alro was the same, with milky eyes, white hair and a slight hunch. It took Alro by the hand and led him out of the room.

Kett fell back in his cage, tears in his eyes. "Alro."

"Those from the chair have lost their names," came a whisper. Kett was startled out of his sorrow. There was someone else in his cage. "They are no longer aware of themselves." Kett looked around his small cage to find a gelfling there next to him.

"Who are you?" Kett whispered, remembering the skeksis was still in the room.

"Shh, we shall talk when...*he* is gone." Said the gelfling. She was beautiful, even for a gelfling. She was slight of build with white hair, fair skin and grey eyes. She would be lovely is she was smiling, but this wasn't the place for that.

SkekTek was retrieving a gelfling from another cage and putting them in a chair. It then grabbed two more and put them in chairs. It then went through the process of opening the floor and the purple beam. By then the slave had returned and skekTek sent these three off. SkekTek grabbed the flasks, put them in a cabinet, looked around the room, snarled and left.

“I’m Kett.”

The gelfling looked up, “Ayal. Home is afar off in the plains to the south.”

“I come from the forests east of here. I was looking for my friend’s sister Tyrr. Have you heard of her?”

“My time here is short and the names known are only yours. The rest have forgotten.” Ayal pointed towards the other cages. They were all empty. “Despair is for those who stand next in line to the chair.”

Kett was having none of that. “No, we must find a way out.”

“Were the cage to spring open, large creatures would surely block the path.” She pointed toward the doorway.

A large shadow could be seen through it moving to one side of the doorway and skekTek entered. It was followed by one of the large creatures Kett had seen on the road to the Crystal Castle. It was a large shelled creature with large claws, a small head with two bright eyes, and branch like feet that would have made the

tracks Kett saw in the forest. It had a basket on it's back. "You have been gone for a long time. Were you seen?"

The thing made a chittering sound.

"Good, we must be quiet about our doings." SkekTek turned to the cage on it's back. "I have not seen these before." It said as it removed gelfling from the basket and placed them in large cages along the wall. "I wonder if they will be any different. Now, off with you." The thing left the room. There were seven gelfling. It looked them over as they whimpered in their cage. "Sturdy...smelly (like all gelfling)...I must know." It quickly started placing them in the chairs and ran the draining procedure again. The gelfling were horrified. They yelled, went silent as the others cowered in the back of their cages. When it was done skekTek placed the first three near the door and then pulled three more to be claimed by the draining that would take away their names. It then sent the six off with a slave, placed five flasks in the cabinet and, seeming satisfied with itself, left the room.

Kett was full of despair. "We have got to find a way out of here."

Chapter 2 - Remembering

Alro was taken to skekMal and placed in the corner of a room to stand along with the rest of the slaves that arrived that day. SkekTek arrived sometime later, "It is time for a meal. I have no more gelfling for you."

SkekMal acknowledged skekTek with a grunt and pulled the now thirteen gelfling out of the corner. It then told them the rules and sent them off into the Castle to find work. Alro wandered around in the halls staying near the wall and out of the way. The halls were large, dark and dank. The walls were cut out of stone with stone blocks to support some places like doors and archways. There was a musty smell in the cool air. Alro was oblivious to all this when a skeksis ordered him to carry some food. Alro followed it to a large hall where all the skeksis were gorging themselves. He was then sent to take the bones to the waste. Alro wandered around for a long time till he found something that looked like the place to dump waste. He then wandered the castle some more till a skeksis told him to scratch a part of its back. Alro then followed the skeksis till it met up with another skeksis and they talked for some time.

One of the slaves reached out and grabbed Alro by the arm. It then walked off to another part of the castle. The slave walked into a skeksis room and to a table with small flasks on it. The slave, still holding Alro's hand, drank the contents of the flask. The gelfling slave caught its breath as if it was fighting back pain. It then gasped and breathed in deeply. Now panting, the gelfling realized it was holding Alro. It grabbed a flask and

turned to Alro. The slave managed to say “drink” and began to pour the contents down Alro’s throat.

Alro winced. Thoughts came rushing through him like an avalanche of ideas crushing him so he could not breathe. When he came to the surface he gasped for air like he was near death. “I’m...I’m... Aaaal...rrrr...ro.”

The slave looked at him. “I’m alive. This isn’t a dream. We must get others.”

“Others?” Alro’s mind was racing. He looked at the gelfling currently squeezing his hand. She wore a tattered bunch of rags that hardly resembled clothes anymore. She turned to Alro with her sharp brown eyes.

“Grab those flasks.” She turned to walk away, stopped and realized she was holding Alro’s hand. She looked down and let go. Confused for a second she snapped back to attention, “hurry, put them in that basket and put that cloth over them.” She grabbed another basket, then raced across the room and opened a cabinet. She was putting more flasks into her basket.

Alro covered his basket of flasks with a towel and then looked around. The room they were in was filled with a large variety of things. There were some cages with small animals in them. There were metal tools. There were a couple of levers like the one that was pulled before...*‘this is the room where the evil thing lives!’* Alro thought. “We need to get out of here.”

“Yes...wait. You need to walk like the other slaves.”

“What?” Alro was confused. He didn’t remember much after the lever.

“Walk slowly and don’t look at anything. They’ll think we’re still slaves.” She put a blanket on her basket and started to slowly walk out of the room.

“Ok.” Alro didn’t like this, but he was full of energy and he knew he had to get out of here.

They walked slowly through the hallways. Alro saw one of the slaves. Their eyes were glazed over and milky white. He tried to look more like them. He noticed that the other gelfling’s color had come back to her hair. He pulled her aside into a small alcove in the rock. “Here, put this dust in your hair. It’s too dark.”

“Good idea.” They both put some dirt and dust in their hair to make it grey. “Better?”

“Yes,” Alro agreed, “uh, what’s your name?”

She was surprised by the question, “my name? ...My name.” She had to think about it. “My name is...Ro...it’s Rhoal. My name is Rhoal.” She seemed very pleased by this.

“My name is Alro and I have a friend named Kett who is here.”

“Here? He could be anywhere.”

“I must find him. He would do the same for me.”

Rhoal thought about this. “We can, but we must go one place first. Follow me.”

They wandered around the castle for a bit. Alro thought he had seen some of these halls before. He was afraid to be in the castle, but he was more angry that they would make gelfling slaves. He began thinking, *Why would they do that? They've never attacked the gelfling before. Our leaders say to leave them alone and they'll leave us alone. Do the leaders know they make gelfling slaves?* Rhoal stopped.

"I think I remember the way now." Rhoal turned to go down a new hall.

As they entered the hall there was a skeksis shuffling along. "You there, slaves." Alro stopped. "Go and...you have a task you are doing...hmm...never a slave around when you need one. Well then, you are cleaning. Then take this with you to be cleaned and bring it back to my room." It dropped a used napkin on the basket and shuffled off.

After he turned the corner it could be heard to say "Slave, go and fetch me a..." its voice trailed off.

Both Alro and Rhoal exhaled in relief and continued their journey. They went down another corridor and saw another slave. "That one looks strong," she whispered, "we should take him." She then handed him her basket, took the used napkin on top of it and led him along the route they were taking. The slave didn't resist.

The three gelfling were walking down a corridor and up ahead they saw one of the large things that serve the skeksis come out of a side corridor. It was huge, three gelfling tall, and it was going the same direction as

Rhoal, the slave and Alro. It was moving faster than them and they slowed down a little, just because it was a bit scary. It marched out of sight.

Then they arrived where Rhoal was leading them. It was the room with the chair Alro was strapped into. Rhoal went right in and climbed up to a cabinet. Alro stopped, terrified, at the doorway.

“I don’t want to be here.” Alro said to Rhoal.

“Shh, we’ll be out in a second.” Rhoal had opened the cabinet and was taking little flasks out of it.

“Who’s there?” Came a voice from inside the room.

Rhoal ignored the voice, the slave also ignored it, but Alro stepped in to the room, looked around and saw another slave just standing there. “Did you...” Alro said at the slave.

“Alro?” Came the voice from above Alro’s head.

Alro looked up and saw a familiar face, “Kett? Are you all right?”

“Yes, are you?”

“Yes.” Alro was very excited. He climbed up the wall to the shelf about two gelfling high. “How can I get you out?”

“Can you reach the latch under the cage?” Kett said pointing to the bottom of the cage.

Alro nodded and jumped, grabbing on to the side of the cage. He then dropped, hanging from the cage and

swung to the latch, grabbing on to it. It came loose which caused him to drop. The cage door open, Kett and Ayal then jumped to the floor.

Kett gave Alro a hug. "I'm happy you're all right."

"Time to go," Rhoal walked up with a basket. "Is this the friend?"

Alro remembered where he was, "yes, let's get going."

"Here, act like a slave." She handed Kett a basket with a used napkin on top.

"Excuse me, can you help me out?" Came a voice from another cage. Ayal rushed over to the cage to let him out.

"There are too many of us." Rhoal said. "Slaves don't walk in large groups. Does anyone remember the way to the rubbish pit?"

"I do," said Alro.

"Good, skeksis never go there. I'll leave with this big guy and you," Rhoal pointed to Ayal, "and you three follow behind. Try to not be near us and look like slaves." She turned and pushed the big slave in front of her. Ayal followed.

"I don't want to wait here," said Alro, "but it looks like she's taking a different way than I remember. Here, put some dust in your hair and grab a basket." Alro then walked out of the room.

They wandered the corridors for a while. Alro was having trouble remembering the route. He then saw a two slaves walking with bones and discarded food. "Those two will show us the way," Alro whispered.

"Are you sure you're ok?" Kett asked Alro.

"Yeah, we need to be quiet. Slaves don't talk."

Kett was concerned. Alro wasn't his normal timid self. Usually he would look to Kett to lead even if he knew the best way. They followed the two rubbish laden slaves to the place where Rhoal was waiting. She was there with the big slave, Ayal and another slave. The slaves were looking around apprehensively.

"You made it. I found a friend, and it looks like you found two more." Rhoal said looking at the two slaves throwing out rubbish. "Hold them," she said as she pulled out two small flasks.

Alro grabbed one of the slaves and the other started to walk away.

"Get her to drink this," she handed a flask to Alro and then grabbed the other slave.

Alro looked at the slave, said "drink," and proceeded to pour it down the slave's throat. She caught her breath, wincing from some type of pain and then took a deep breath. Something similar was happening with the other slave.

Kett did not know what was happening. "What are you doing?" He wasn't sure what to do or how to help.

Rhoal did not turn to look, but said “we are helping them to remember.” Both slaves were breathing heavy now. Color was returning to them.

“Wh...where?” Said the slave being held by Alro. Her skin and hair returned her to a rich brown tone

“What is your name?” Said Alro to her as her gaze met his.

She looked back with her amber eyes, “I am...I...I am...Fliar.”

The other slave dropped to their knees and sputtered “I must get...home.” Color had not returned to her and her eyes were black as night.

“We will all get home,” Rhoal turned to the other gelfling, “we need to leave the castle first.”

Kett went to the black eyed slave and said “I am Kett, are you all right?”

She motioned to herself “Junn, and I am fine.”

Big ex-slave cut them off before they could speak more. “Somebody’s coming!”

“It’s probably another slave, Shar” said Rhoal to the big ex-slave, “I think we have enough for one more. Have them drink this.” She handed another small flask to Kett. “You, you and you come here.” She called over Shar, the friend she found and Alro.

Kett grabbed the slave, said “drink,” and poured the contents of the flask down their throat.

Chapter 3 - Running

After some discussion with Alro, Shar, and her friend Rhoal turned to the rest of the group. "Shar here says the best way out is through the water." she said turning to Shar.

"I member cleanin out a tunnel wif water running frough it. There was a bright light at the end."

"How do we get there?" Asked Kett.

Shar turned to Kett. "I don't member, but it's deep."

Alro spoke up, "as long as we're going down we should find something. The sooner..."

Rhoal interrupted, "we're too many. We can't be seen in large groups. Shar, Lorm and I will lead three groups."

Lorm stepped forward, his clothes were just as tattered as Rhoal, "If we keep a far enough distance from each other we can hide before we're noticed."

"Good idea. Shar, you take front, Lorm take the middle, and I'll follow in back. Who's going with Shar?" Rhoal looked at the remaining seven gelfling.

Fliar stepped forward, "I'll go with him. I'm quiet."

Alro followed, "I'll go with them." Kett thought to protest, but didn't.

"I want you and you with me," Rhoal said pointing to Ayal and the last slave they freed. "So that leaves three

to go with Lorm," she continued pointing to Kett, Junn and the other gelfling from the cages. "Go ahead Shar."

Shar and Alro picked up baskets and the three gelfling walked off down a corridor. Lorm turned to his three group members and said "Four seems too many. Kett you take him and stay a few paces back."

Kett turned to his companion and said "Kett" pointing to himself.

"Dorner," said the gelfling that Alro had let out of the cages. He was shorter, stockier than the others.

Then Lorm started off. Kett stayed a few paces back with Dorner, the slave he gave the flask to. They were far enough back that they almost had trouble seeing Lorm. They turned down some side corridors that seemed to take them farther down. They saw where two corridors meet up ahead. Just before Lorm turned the corner to the left Kett heard some chittering noises. It sounded like one of those...

One of the large creatures came from the right. Lorm stood still like a slave, but the thing went straight for him. He was unable to do anything before it went to grab him. It knocked him into the wall and he fell down. The thing was about to go for Junn, but she turned and ran toward Kett.

Kett yelled "Run!" He and Dorner turned and ran toward Rhoal.

The thing ran after them. It was bigger, but Dorner and the other gelfling were a little faster. Kett was having

trouble. He had fallen behind and the thing was catching up when they saw Rhoal ahead. Dorner said “Run! It killed Lorm.”

Rhoal didn't run. “What?” She said as she took a moment to take this information in. She looked angry, very angry. “All this, to lose him now?” She pulled a small flask from her basket and drank it just as Dorner and Junn ran past. She tensed up as if she was in intense pain and then screamed out an unnatural yell. She put her hand in the basket, pulled out something and then she ran, dropping the basket. She did not run away from the thing. She ran towards it and it was almost to Kett when she passed him. He saw a blade in her hand. He turned to stop her, but she leaped high into the air and shoved the blade through the creature's carapace.

The creature reached to grab her, but she had ripped her blade out and climbed onto its back. It spun around to try to get her. Kett could see she was holding on with one hand while thrusting the blade between its plates. Again and again she did this as the thing slowed down. Then she jumped off and ran around to its front. She thrust the blade right into where its neck would be, it slumped forward and fell apart.

She looked back at the stunned gelfling behind her, “grab that basket,” she growled. “Follow me.” She ran off down the hall with amazing speed. It was all Kett could do to keep up. Dorner carried the basket. They caught up to her with Lorm. She was holding him, “there's nothing we can do now,” She said in a shaky

voice. "We need to find the others; the skeksis are on to us."

Dorner said "they went to the left" and she was off. They ran hard to keep up.

Kett was really falling behind. He came around a corner just to see them turn down another. This one was longer. He could see them in the faint light when two more creatures came around the corner in front of them. She ran right past them. They turned to follow Rhoal which allowed Dorner slip past, but the other gelfling was not so lucky. Kett was far enough back that the creatures didn't notice him. He followed them in their pursuit.

"Pshh, that was close." Came a whisper from behind Kett. He turned to see two very black eyes staring at him. "Let's go before more come," said Junn as she ran past.

They went down one corridor, and then another, all the while Kett could hear the chittering of the creatures in front of him. He smelled a new smell. It smelled bad and it was getting worse. He was passing a small corridor when an arm grabbed him and pulled him in. It was Alro, "this way." They ran down the small corridor to another where they found the rest of the gelfling. They were looking through a doorway.

"I found him," Alro whispered, but no one was listening.

"There's anover, now there's free," Shar was at the front.

“This is no good. We don’t have time to find another way out.” Rhoal said barely maintaining a whisper. She was shaking like she was ready to attack. “We have no other choice,” she said not talking to anyone, “here, drink these.” She handed a small flask and a knife to Shar, Alro, and Junn. They looked at the flasks. “Drink them. Now.”

“No, wait.” Said Kett, but he was too late. All three drank the flasks. Alro and Junn doubled over in pain. Shar tightened up and then opened his eyes in a wild stare. Rhoal looked over at the other two who were catching their breath, “Go, now!”

Rhoal charged out of the hallway into the large room. She screamed that same scary scream from before. Shar, Alro and Junn seemed to come to their wits. “Follow me,” Shar said and charged into the room. The rest followed.

When Kett entered the room Rhoal was leaving through a doorway to the right and two creatures were following her leaving one in the middle of the room. Another had entered from the left. The room had a large trough along the back wall. There were pipes coming out from all the walls above and ending above the trough where they emptied their contents. They were held in place by a spiderweb of metal threads that seemed to flex as one poured out more filth into the trough.

Shar was running for a pipe between the remaining two beasts. It looked like it led out of the trough. As the creatures closed in, Shar charged the one on the left.

Junn and Alro charged the one on the right. Fliar was now in front and said "follow me." She jumped across the trough followed by Dorner, Ayal and Kett. They entered the pipe and Kett stopped at its entrance to look back for Alro.

Alro had attacked the creature head on, running up its arm and shoving his knife right through its armored plate. His knife had gotten stuck and the creature had a hold of his leg and was trying to pull him off.

Shar had fared better. His creature was slowing down. "Go for their necks!" Kett yelled. Shar went right for where its neck would be and the creature slumped over throwing him to the ground. It fell apart into pieces of shell.

Alro was not able to do anything, but the thing slumped over anyway. It then fell apart with Junn standing in the middle. She smiled.

From the far end of the hall they heard, "Go!" Rhoal was running back in from the doorway she left through. They all waded into the pipe.

The smell of refuse and filth is far from a pleasant one, but if bearing its heavy aroma buys a desperately sought after freedom it can smell sweet as spring bloom. That being the case, some of the gelfling had thrown up. None had spoken since they entered the tunnel in fear of opening their mouth as well as giving away where they had gone. The flow of the filth slowly carried them forward. Ahead there was a light at the end of the tunnel. Fliar was not sure what to do and she dropped out the end, followed by Dorner and Ayal.

Kett strained his eyes to see into the bright light streaming in. Before he knew it he was falling, his eyes didn't adjust before he splashed into darkness. It was disorienting and he had just figured out which way was up when something slammed into his head and the darkness surrounded him.

Kett woke up coughing and gasping for air. "Is he alright?" Came a voice from a ways off.

"Yes, I think he will make it," said a more familiar voice.

"Good, pick him up. We need to go now," said the first voice.

"Alright, come on you." Kett, still coughing and sputtering, didn't fully realize he was being picked up.

He was carried for a little ways before he was aware enough to figure out what was going on. He was being carried (he could see the ground moving), he was wet and he was a little groggy. "Uhh..." he managed to get out.

"You ok?" Said the person carrying him between breaths, "when I didn't see you down there we got worried. I think Shar landed right on top of you." He was breathing quite hard.

Kett recognized the voice, "Alro?" he wheezed out.

"Catch your breath. I can't carry you for long," said Alro.

Kett thought about this, he felt his mind coming back to him. He looked around. There was a couple of other

filthy gelfling also carrying gelfling. Kett took a few deep breaths and said “I’m good, let me down.”

Alro said “are you sure?” And then stopped to put Kett down.

“Yeah, my head hurts, but I can go.”

“Let’s go. We need to get out of here before those things come.”

Alro started marching quickly on the path they were on. Kett started walking too. He looked back to see a great evil face where the filthy water came from the castle. There was a pool at the bottom and a small stream leading away from it past where they were walking now. The stream on one side and a steep canyon wall on the other made it easy to figure out which way to go, but it also made it easy to follow.

Kett turned his gaze back toward the group. Alro was a ways in front of him. He had to pick up the pace to catch up because Alro was moving quickly. There were more in front of Alro, but Kett couldn’t easily see them all. “We need to get out of this ravine.” Kett’s voice became quiet. He now realized his voice echoed off the canyon walls.

Alro said quietly back “yes, but we need to get distance first. We don’t want to get caught while climbing.”

Kett didn’t feel like continuing his conversation. He didn’t feel well and keeping pace made him out of breath, not to mention a splitting headache. They walked for a while. Kett watched as the gelfling who

being carried were put down to walk on their own. He counted seven other gelfling. He heard some talking ahead. It looked like Rhoal was talking to Shar and Ayal. She was pointing ahead to the right and the left. Shar had a few things to say and pointed left. Kett looked ahead and saw that the canyon was not as deep as before and that it split up ahead.

Someone bumped into Kett, he turned to see Junn standing there with her head hung and her hand shading her eyes. "Sorry," she muttered.

Kett looked back to see Ayal nod at what Shar was saying and Rhoal turned to the rest and said "We're going to the left, but we need to go right first."

They continued along the canyon wall to the right. The stream dropped a bit to their left. Rhoal slid down the smooth rock to a small ledge next to the stream. She then hopped across the rocks to the other side of the stream. The rest followed. The rocks were easy to navigate.

The group headed back down the banks of the stream a little and headed quickly up the other canyon. Kett was exhausted. They had been almost running since the tunnel. Shar pointed up to an alcove about four gelfling up. They all helped each other to make the difficult climb. Just as Alro was climbing in Fliar said "shhh, I hear the creatures."

She was right. From where Kett was sitting he could see the dark things moving in the shadows along their path. They all moved farther into the alcove, away from sight. Fliar stayed near the front to keep watch. She then held

up both hands and then three fingers, there were eleven of the creatures in the canyon. She got down low so she wouldn't be seen. She held up two hands then moved them apart. With her right hand she showed four fingers then she pointed down. Once the four were past she turned to the group, "we must stay here and be quiet. More might come."

Rhoal looked like she was thinking about this. She looked around to see what people were thinking and seemed satisfied with being quiet for now.

After a short time Fliar motioned for everyone to be quiet. She looked at where the four went and her eyes followed them back to the main canyon. She held up one hand again. The gelfling stayed silent in their alcove of rock.

Fliar then said "they're gone."

Rhoal let out her breath. "Good, let's climb down. We need water."

After the climb down the gelfling took advantage of the water Rhoal had mentioned. There was a stream flowing back into the canyon from their side canyon. They all took a moment to clean wounds, and wash some stink off. Then it was up the canyon and out onto the plain. The last two Suns were approaching the horizon and they could see forest in the distance.

Rhoal pointed her hand toward the forest, "we cannot stop till we reach the forest. We can hide there."

Chapter 4 - Division

Eight tired gelfling walked into the forest to find a place to rest. The last sun was setting as they looked. "That looks like a good spot," Ayal pointed to a thicket of trees near a stream. They refreshed themselves in the stream.

"Our city is close to here. We should go there to tell the elder's what the skeksis are doing," said Kett removing his shoes and jacket for washing.

"Your people trade with the skeksis," Rhoal growled, "what makes you think the elders don't know?"

"They wouldn't let the skeksis take our people."

Alro cut in, "Kett, they wouldn't search for Tyr. Why wouldn't they search for her, unless they already knew?"

Kett thought about this, "If that's true, what can we do?"

"We can kill the skeksis," Rhoal said bluntly. "Come up to the trees when you're done. I have something to share." Rhoal took her wet things, climbed up the bank of the stream and hung them up on a nearby tree. She then went into the thicket of trees. The rest followed.

The space between the trees was thick with tall soft grass. The cool evening air moved through the trees. They sat in a circle, "hold hands, we must dreamfast" Rhoal said as she held out her hands. They placed their hands on hers and their minds were filled with recent

experiences. "Focus on my face, my eyes have no color, I have no name..." Rhoal's voice trailed off.

They all were aware of her eyes, seeing from a nameless face. Some remembered the sensation, for others this was new. The slave stood motionless in a room with a skeksis. It was a big room it was an important skeksis. Another skeksis entered, the gelfling shuddered, they all knew skekTek. "My lord," it hissed, "I have been searching and I have found something."

"What is it skekTek? I have no time for your experiments today."

"SkekSo, lord, you asked about the Mystics."

This caught his attention. skekSo turned to look at skekTek, it looked up and down skekTek, "what have you found?"

"I think there is a link between us and the Mystics. We cannot attack," skekTek braced for the reaction to his words.

SkekSo's eyes widened then narrowed. "Hrrrr....how important is it that we do not attack?"

"Imperative...I-lord," skekTek gulped.

SkekSo rose up tall in anger, "How?" He lowered his voice gaining composure "...sure, are you?"

"Enough...emporer."

"Hrrr..." skekSo turned in thought; "sss" he did not like that thought; "Rrrraahhh!" He liked this one better, "we

must isolate them. Those who can speak must fear the Mystics and stay away from them. Tell skekNa what I want (if he does not already know). He will hiss my word on the winds.”

“Yesss, my lord,” skekTek bowed and backed out of the room.

They could all feel skekTek’s words scratching at Rhoal’s mind. They were important. Rhoal let go of the other gelfling and they were back in the forest. They all looked at each other wondering what it meant.

“The skeksis cannot kill the Mystics,” Rhoal finally said, “it would mean their own deaths if they do. If we want to stop the skeksis...we must kill the Mystics.” This sent their minds racing.

“What if that’s not what he meant?” Kett wondered aloud.

“Of course that’s what he meant.” Rhoal quickly responded.

Kett was a little startled at this. “Well, they could be talking about magic, or possessions. The link doesn’t have to mean life.”

Rhoal responded, a little louder this time. “Did you see the fear in their eyes? Why would they cut them off? Why would they not attack?”

“I don’t know, but I don’t know the Mystics or anything about them. Do you?”

“My grandma knows,” said Shar, “she might know a way to kill them.”

Kett looked at Shar “we don’t even know if they need to die?”

“Why are you protecting the Mystics? If we kill them...wait...you’re protecting the skeksis. Is that why you wanted to talk to the elders?”

“He doesn’t know,” Junn said quietly.

Rhoal looked at Junn and said “what?” Then looked back at Kett.

Shar spoke up, “you’re right. E didn’t sit in the chair. E didn’t lose his name. E won’t understand.”

“I understand that they did something very wrong and should be punished,” Kett was feeling a bit defensive. *What did I do wrong?* He thought.

Fliar moved toward Kett, “yes, punished. Maybe his elders work with the skeksis, but maybe we can find another tribe that will help?”

“The hand of skeksis reaches far,” returned Shar, “we move trade across waters for dem.”

“Yes, who can we trust then,” Junn said quietly to Rhoal.

“Junn is right. We cannot leave this to the leaders that are corrupted. We must kill the Mystics,” said Rhoal.

Kett wasn’t sure where this was going. “We need more information...”

“Kett, shh...” Alro decided to speak, he then turned to Rhoal, “what can we do then?”

“Don’t shh me Alro, I can...”

“Enough!” Rhoal’s voice echoed. “I am going to put an end to these skeksis. If you are with me, we must leave now. If you are with them, you can stay.” She stood up and marched back toward the stream. Shar, Junn and Fliar quickly followed.

Kett’s head was spinning, “what just happened?”

Alro stood up and looked over at Kett, “she’s right, you know. They corrupt everything they touch. The skeksis must be stopped.” He slowly turned to follow Rhoal.

“Is it the right plan?” Kett called after him.

“It’s the only plan.” Alro walked out of sight.

“Anger clouds the mind,” Ayal said to Kett, “time brings clarity.”

“I don’t think so, look,” Kett pointed between the trees. He could see them walking away, “they’re leaving.” Kett got up to follow. As he got closer he was going to call for Alro, but he was knocked to the ground.

“I don’t know what you have planned, but I can’t trust you,” Rhoal got off of Kett and started to walk towards her group. “Don’t follow us.”

“I’m going to stay with Alro.” Kett said as he followed her.

Rhoal turned around, “you don’t belong with us. You don’t have the resolve and since you won’t stay...” She lunged at Kett pushing him backwards where he slammed into a tree hitting his head. As he fell down dazed he could hear a chittering noise. Someone grabbed him by the arm and dragged him upwards.

Kett was laid down in some grass. He wasn’t sure what was going on, “uhh...my head.”

“Shh, danger.” Ayal whispered as she put her hand on his shoulder. He could hear the chittering noises of the skeksis monsters.

“Stupid Garthim! You rushed in and scared off my quarry,” hissed what sounded like a skeksis. “Don’t stop now. Get them!” The sounds of large things crashing through the forest could be heard. “Sss, they’ve trampled the gelfling tracks. We need sentinels with more finesse.”

“Yes, well you can let skekUng know you disapprove” came another, quieter voice.

“No, skekUng will be angry enough at the loss of garthim at the castle.” It took a few more steps.

“Hrrr...there is nothing to find here.” The first skeksis could be heard walking off.

Kett waited to hear the other moving. Did it already go? He couldn’t tell. He looked over at Ayal. He could barely see her in the darkness of night. He saw they were in the tall grass near the thicket of trees. Ayal didn’t move. *She thinks it hasn’t left either.* Don’t move, it was hard to breathe.

“What are you two doing?”

Kett leaped a mile. It was the stocky gelfling that Ayal saved from the cages. “Shh, is it gone?”

“It left with the other. They went the same direction as Rhoal. Are you alright?”

Kett looked around, “yeah. I guess so. My head hurts something awful.”

“She hit you good.”

Kett rubbed the back of his head, then he remembered, “Alro! He’s with her. I need to go after them.” Kett checked to see if he had his shoes and jacket.

The gelfling grabbed his arm, “we can’t follow them. We could hardly keep pace to get here.”

“It is prudent to think for others are not” said Ayal quietly.

“She’s right and with that bump on your head you’re not going to make good time going anywhere.”

Kett’s shoulders dropped, “what can I do? Alro is in danger.”

“From the looks of things, he can handle himself,” said the gelfling.

Kett turned to him, “that’s the thing, uhh...,” he looked at him, “what is your name?”

“Nobody bothered to ask. It’s Dorner.” He smiled a big grin.

“Oh...uh...Kett.” Kett paused for a moment staring at Dorner.

Dorner decided to get things moving again, “So?”

Kett started again, “oh...yeah. So, Alro can’t handle himself. I had to convince him to leave the forest looking for his sister. He is not himself. I think it has to do with the flasks.” He thought for a moment, “Either they have changed him or they will wear off. Either way he’s in trouble.”

“But what do we do about them skeksis?” Dorner said seriously.

“Well, I think Rhoal might have had a point. Our city is close to the skeksis and our leaders do a lot of trade with them. If the skeksis have been taking our people, the elders might know about it. So we cannot go to them until we have more information.”

“Keepers of knowledge, granted as a title to those who other times called Mystics” Ayal said quietly.

“Right? We know there is a link. We should find out what it is.” Kett thought out loud.

Dorner decided to help him think, “Shar said his grandma knows about them Mystics. He said his people move trade across waters. Sounds like Quanrull, maybe she lives there too.”

“You’re right,” Kett said excitedly. “All roads lead to the Mystics, but how do we catch them?”

“I live in the swamp. We can get a boat there and take the river to Quanrull. It will be nice to get home,” said Dorner.

“It’s as good a plan as any. What do you think?” Kett turned to Ayal.

She nodded.

“Let’s go then. Dorner, lead the way.”

They traveled a short while and since it had been such a long day they agreed it would be better to get some sleep. They found a good place to hide and settled in. The sounds of the forest lulled them to sleep.

Chapter 5 - Ærlorn

Rhoal felt they were making good time. After running from the Garthim they headed straight for the river city Ærlorn. As morning approached they arrived at the walls of the city. The gates were open, as they always were. She stopped and turned to the group, “Remember, we tell no one what we know. Now all we need is fresh clothes, some food and we can go to Quanrull.”

“Leave the clothes to me,” said Junn.

“I can get passage on a barge to Quanrull. They will want us workin, but dey will feed us,” said Shar.

“I have a friend in town. I can get us food for now and other supplies,” said Alro.

Rhoal turned to Alro. “No, you are from this area. We don’t want the elders to see you alive. Go around the city and meet us by the docks. I will get us food and supplies. Fliar, you’re with me.” Rhoal turned quickly and they headed for the gates.

Ærlorn is the city built by the Forest Clan and has become the center of their culture. Because of its proximity to the Castle of the Crystal, they are the chief traders with the skeksis. Nearly all goods that go to the skeksis pass through Ærlorn.

Alro took a path around the city through the homes built near the walls. The walled city wasn’t large and it had grown since the walls were built so that most of the Woodland Clan lived outside the city in the forest. Alro

was hungry. He discreetly picked some mushrooms and roots from a garden. As he approached the dock side of the city he could see the grand bridge crossing the river. He took the small path leading up to the bridge road which led along side the city walls. It was only a short walk from here to the river docks.

Alro then saw a large gelfling coming from the dock. It was Shar and he motioned to come over. "I found a captain dat will take us."

"We should stay here. They would most likely take that road to get to the docks," said Alro pointing toward one of a few gates in the wall.

Shar and Alro waited for a while when they saw Rhoal, Fliar and presumably Junn coming through the gate Alro had pointed to. They were carrying small sacks and were in different clothes. Junn was well covered in clothes including a large hood. She walked up to Shar and said "I hope these fit," handing him clothes and then threw Alro something, "here, in case it rains." Alro saw it was a rain cloak and put it on.

Shar went off to change. While he was gone Rhoal handed out bread. When Shar came back they all huddled together. "I found a captain who needs workers. E's been delayed since last night. E has three barges an e has pilots for the first two. I can pilot the third, but I need a night pilot," Shar looked around.

"I can do it," said Fliar.

Shar nodded, “good. Den da rest of you will be lab’rers. The cargo need to be on dem barges as soon as possible.”

“Let’s go then.” Rhoal said as they made their way to the docks. They were built from large blocks of stone sunk into the river bank. Boats could come right up to the street that led into town to unload their wares.

They spent the next hour moving clay jars, large baskets and some animals onto the long, wide and flat boats. Once the boats were loaded, they untied the boats and pushed them away from the docks. The river current grabbed hold of the boats and carried them along. The pilots stood at the back of the boats with long poles. Fliar and Rhoal were on the rear boat with Shar. Alro and Junn were on the middle boat with a pilot. They all realized they hadn’t slept since the Castle and fell asleep with little difficulty.

As night fell, Fliar and Junn took over piloting their boats. The journey was peaceful. They drifted along the wide river. “It’ll take us a little over two days to get there and we left yesterday morning. So we should arrive today before last sun,” said Shar.

Rhoal didn’t like this answer, “this was a bad idea, this is too slow.”

“We needed food and safe passage. Those big creatures would be able to sneak up to us at night,” said Fliar. “This is slow, but they will not catch us here.”

“I know, it’s still too slow.” And she was right. They lazily drifted all the way to Quanrull’s river docks a bit

after midday where they were expected to offload the cargo to a nearby building. The first sun was close to setting before they were finished.

As Rhoal returned to the boat to see it was empty she threw up her arms and said “finally.”

The captain came up to them and said “I’ve never seen cargo offloaded so quick. You earned your pay.” He handed them small bits of light blue crystal.

As they put the crystal away Rhoal looked over at Shar, “let’s go see that grandmother.”

Chapter 6 - Family

In the morning Dorner, Kett and Ayal started their journey again. Kett found some leafy bushes that were safe to eat. "Pluck the leaf quickly before it curls up. That way you won't have to chase it." He told them.

Traveling was slow through the forest. They came across the main road between the gelfling city and the Crystal Castle and decided to avoid the roads in case Garthim were patrolling. By midday they had found other edible things, but they were still hungry. Dorner said if they push on they should reach his village after nightfall. They arrived at a wide, slow moving river. Kett was about to swim across, but Dorner stopped him.

"Why swim when we can floon?" He went up higher on the riverbank and started grabbing some thick plants with big leaves. "Grab some," he told the other two. While they were grabbing some he went down to the water's edge. He made some low sounds near the water surface and a few big round things swam up to him. He seemed so glad to see them and made some cooing sounds as he scratched their chins.

"C'mon," Dorner waved to Kett, "give that floon some of those leaves. It's their favorite, but they have to get out of the water to reach them up there." Dorner gave the floon in front of him a few leaves. When Ayal came down Dorner pointed at another. "Hold the leaves over their backside like this." The floon turned around to get the leaves. "Now step lightly on their back." Dorner stepped on the back of the creature. It was about one

gelfling's height, wide. It was surprised at this and started to swim away from shore.

Kett moved the leaves so the floon would turn around. He then stepped lightly on its back. The floon was similarly surprised and swam quickly away from shore.

Ayal did the same and they were moving out into the river. Dorner got down on his hands and knees and started stroking the floon's head making low sounds while holding the leaf in front of its face. Ayal tried to do the same, but she couldn't make her sounds as low.

Kett wasn't as balanced on the floon and so he dropped to his hands and knees. This really startled the floon and it took off across the river, honking as it went. "Whoooo wo wo wo wo!"

"Stroke his head like this!" Dorner yelled, trying to help, but Kett was more concerned with not falling.

When the floon got near the other side of the river it made a sharp turn throwing Kett into the river. The water on that side was shallow so he stood up. He was not happy.

Dorner tried not to laugh, but then broke into a loud guffaw. Even Ayal was giggling. Kett finally gave in. It was pretty funny. "You meant to do that." Kett yelled at the floon who was now eating the leaves Kett dropped.

By late day they were well into swamp and Dorner had found some fungus for eating. Ayal and Kett were not so impressed, but they ate anyway.

Well after the suns had set Kett was exhausted and hungry “Should we find a place to sleep?”

“No, it’s not that much farther.” Dorner would have been annoyed at all the ‘are we there yet’ questions, but he was too excited being in the swamp near home. “I’ve seen a few homesteads, we should be close.”

Homesteads? Kett didn’t remember seeing anything. “Good, I could use a rest.” His head was pounding. They had been walking through the swamp for a long time. The journey would have been much worse if they didn’t have Dorner to help them avoid the bad spots. Kett noticed he was walking on a well worn path.

“We’re here. It’s home.” Dorner sounded relieved. Along the path the vague shapes of houses could be made out in the darkness. It was quiet because it was late. The other gelfling were asleep. They passed many houses and they came to a large open area. “My home is over there.” It was hard for Kett and Ayal to get excited, they were so tired. Dorner picked up the pace anyway.

He knocked at the door for a while before they could hear some talking inside. “Who is it?”

“Its me, Dorner.”

“Dorner? Dorner?!” The door flew open and a gelfling about the same size as Dorner came out. He gave Dorner a hard look as if trying to figure out who was pulling a prank at this hour.

Another gelfling came from behind with a stick that glowed orange on one end. “Dorner!” She screamed and threw her arms around him, light and all. “Where have you been?” She said between sobs. “We thought the swamp got you.”

By this time a few more gelfling had come out of the house and descended upon Dorner. After the hugs had subsided Dorner said “I’ll tell you after food.”

Food, this was music to Kett’s ears.

The crowd started to usher him into the house. “Wait, these are my friends,” he said and everyone turned to look at the strangers. “This is Kett and Ayal who saved me.”

Kett managed to get out a “hi” before he was swept up by the crowd into the house. He passed through a short hall into a large room. It was hard to make out as there were only two orange sticks to light it.

“Here, have a chair,” Kett heard before having a chair placed under him.

“Yes a chair,” said another as they placed a chair followed by an Ayal next to Kett.

Some took up chairs nearby while others made busy near the middle of the room. Soon a fire began to grow and the room was easier to see. It was round with a pit for a fire in the middle. There was a roof with a large, round opening above the fire. Dorner’s family were sitting down around the fire. Dorner could be seen opposite Kett. He had a grin from ear to ear, “Kett, Ayal,

this is my family.” He pointed to an older man next to Kett, “My sire, Flam; aunt..,” his hand moved around introducing each one and each one nodded accordingly. There were at least fifteen gelfling in this house, many more than at the home where Kett grew up. “...and this my lovely sister, who’s in the market for a mate,” he said pointing at her as she came out of another room with a basket, Dorner smiled wryly.

“I have a gelt already, Dorn,” she replied and gave Ayal the basket.

Another basket was placed in Kett’s lap by an older female, “eat up. Dorner says you’re hungry.”

“Oh, and that’s my lovely Mother.”

“And she’s not in the market,” said the old gelt next to Kett. This received a hearty laugh from the group. “So where are you folk from?”

Kett was examining the contents of the basket looking for something familiar. “Oh, uh. I’m from a village near Ærlorn.” He decided what he was holding was a hornroot.

“Woodland Clan, eh?” Said Flam.

It was definitely not a hornroot. “Uh, yes. We were out...”

“On the river,” Dorner cut in, “they had stopped for the night when they heard me. I was in a rollop pit and couldn’t get out. Luckily they made enough noise in the swamp that I heard them and yelled.”

Kett was trying something else that was actually yummy. Dorner's story surprised him, it was that or the fact that the yummy thing in his mouth moved.

"Good thing he don't know his way around a swamp," said the brother. He seemed proud of the joke.

Dorner's mother spoke up, "and where are you from, frail one? Looks like you haint eaten in days."

Ayal was picking apart some small leafy thing. She seemed startled that someone noticed her, "Home is afar off in the plains to the south."

"Mmm," Dorner's father said mulling her answer over, "Vapra I think. You are a long ways from home."

Ayal seemed a bit taken aback by this. None of the other gelfling she had spoken to at the Crystal Castle knew anything about the Vapra. She was trying to finish a very chewy mushroom of some sort when Dorner interrupted, "she was with a group trading in the Ærlorn."

Dorner seemed a bit uneasy, "well, we've been walking all day and they're exhausted. We should let them get some sleep."

Dorner's father, Flam eyed Dorner for a moment, "yes, plenty of excitement for one evening. You all get to bed," he stood up shoing the younger gelfling out, "go on, get." A collective disappointed "aw" came from them as the shuffled off to various doors, stairs and halls around the big room. He then motioned for Dorner to come over and he sat back down next to Kett who

was slowly chewing a branch he was still deciding if he liked.

The room settled down as the two visitors, Dorner, his father sat near the fire. The other remaining person was Dorner's mother who sat removing the outsides of some plants in a basket.

"Vapra don't trade with the Woodland Clan," Flam said quietly looking at Ayal, "and where are the others that went hunting that night?" He turned back to Dorner.

"We were caught by the skeksis," Dorner returned in a hushed tone.

Flam's eyes grew wide, "skeksis? What fool story are you..."

"They took us too," Kett said, "we were taken to the Crystal Castle."

"What say you Vapra?" Flam looked at Ayal.

"The skeksis play with life and gelfling are their pieces," she said.

Flam turned back to Dorner who nodded, "It's a bad story, but we need to stop them. Kett, my father is the leader of the elders. He needs to know." Kett and Dorner then told Flam about the chair and what happened to the gelfling that were in it. They told him about the garthim and their escape. They told him about Rhoal, Alro and where they went.

Flam thought about this for a bit. The room was silent except for Kett chewing. He decided he liked the branch.

Flam sat forward, “you’re right, we need more information. Let’s get you three to Port of Quanrull. I’ll deal with protecting our people here.”

“You know, I think I like this branch.” Kett said satisfactorily.

Flam looked over, “that’s a skewer.”

...

They stayed the night at Dorner’s home. There were enough rooms to keep them in.

“We have plenty of boats to get you round the swamp...where’d I put that...but a river’s a different story,” said Flam as he pottered about the closet. He was gathering up useful items for Kett, Dorner and Ayal. “You need something that’s a...oh, I haven’t seen that since...a...a bit narrower.” He came straight out and walked across the great room. The suns were up so now Kett could get a better look around. The building was a cross between ‘meant to’ and ‘it was just lyin there.’ It had been added onto a few times. There were a few trees growing out of it for shade and support. “Oh ho ho, Dorner, you remember this?”

“Oh, yeah. I wondered what happened to that.”

Flam had a long impressively adorned thing. He held it aloft as if it held some great importance. He then

dropped it down the back of his shirt and started scratching his back. "Oh, oooh. That's the spot."

Dorner watched Kett roll his eyes, "Father! Important things?"

"Yes, I think the rest would be out back. Can you get that?" He motioned to Dorner who went down a hallway. "C'mon, we need to get you down a river," he motioned to Kett and Ayal to follow as he went down the short hall to what Kett thought was the door they came in last night. It was. They walked out into the open area in front of the house. There was a large grass covered clearing with some larger houses around it and a tower that stood taller than the trees. Flam was walking along the side of the clearing toward another house. It had a fence in front of it. "Ruddy?! You workin in your garden?"

An old gelt popped his head up. "Ayep, what can I do for ya?"

Flam leaned against the short fence, "one of the boys is goin river fishin. You still got that longboat?"

"Ayep, tied up o'er Gummins."

"You gonna need it? They bein boys and all."

"A-nope, haven't used it this season. It's all yours."

"Appreciated sir," Flam started walking back to the house.

"Ne'er got the hang o'river fishin," said Ruddy and he turned back to his garden.

Flam turned to Kett, “well, we got ya a boat anyway. What’d you find Dorn?”

“Some water skins, carryin skins, sleepin skins...aaand some cooked skins.” He said looking at the mess of things he was carrying.

“Well, give them to your friends and get that basket from your mother.” Flam turned to Kett, “C’mon. Let’s go get these things to the boat.” He grabbed another large basket from the front of the house and started walking down the path.

Another gelfling was sitting in front of his house, “Flam,” he said.

“Med. How are them roots?” said Flam.

“Deeep.”

“That’ll keep the Flierts off them.”

They walked a bit further and “Flam.”

“Terp, where’s your pants?” The gelfling was clearly wearing pants.

“It’s hoop day.”

“Hoopty hoo to you then.” Flam said with a smile. It seemed everyone knew Flam. Luckily he made conversation without breaking stride and soon enough they turned off the main path onto a small bit of dirt past a home on poles above the water. The path led to a large log laying in the swamp. The top was well used and flattened out. The old branches were gone leaving

nobs where a few wide boats were tied up. "It's still floating, good," said Flam as they reached a long, narrow boat. It was half a gelfling wide and five gelfling long. He put his basket toward the back then turned to Dorner, "put it there." He pointed toward the middle. "Have you used a riverboat?" He said to Kett.

"No, not really."

"Then you get in the middle. Dorn take the back. Which leaves you for up here." Flam led Ayal by the hand and helped her into the boat. He stepped back and looked at them, "Oars, you need oars." He walked over to the other boats and grabbed 4 oars and handed them over. "You need to paddle on the opposite side of the person in front of you. If they switch, you switch." Kett and Ayal nodded and Flam stepped back looking at them as they sat there. "Well? Go on, paddle out to the river. Get us some information."

Ayal and Kett started paddling while Dorner steered. "You know the way right?" Flam said to Dorner.

"Yes, father."

"You be careful."

"Yes father."

"Your mother'll kill me if you don't come home."

"Yes father."

"It's ok to switch sides when you're paddling."

"Yes father."

"The easy way is the best way."

“What? Yes father!”

“Eat those skins soon, they’ll spoil.”

“Goodbye father!”

Getting out of the swamp was a little difficult. Some places the water was very shallow and they had to get out and push the boat. Then they found a side stream and it was much easier going till they got to the river. They hardly needed to paddle to make good time. After midday they were passing under the Grand Bridge at Ærlorn. As they came out the other side, the river docks could be seen with the city castle and other tall buildings.

“Is that your home?” Dorner asked Kett.

“No, I live in a small village over there.” Kett pointed to the other side of the river.

“We live so close, but I’ve never seen the Ærlorn,” Dorner said.

They traveled down the river. They passed some boats that traveling upstream. They watched the forest go by. Dorner pointed out some river animals as they went. Kett helped him with some that didn’t go near the swamp. At the setting of the last sun they got out to stretch their legs since standing up in the boat was liable to get them wet. Dorner showed Kett how to steer the boat and they switched out. At night they tied themselves to shore and slept in the boat. In the morning they were off again.

Chapter 7 - Quanrull

Quanrull is built on a rocky island that the Black River delta grew around. The surrounding wetlands are not the best place for building cities or farming and there are not enough trees to build houses, let alone ships. What Quanrull lacks in resources it makes up for in location. It is the best place to have ocean-going ships meet river-going boats and it's relative isolation from the land also makes it the perfect place to neutrally trade wares. As a result, Quanrull is small, wealthy and independent from all other nearby lands. Quanrull depends upon them for resources and they depend on Quanrull for safe trade.

The Black River splits as it reaches Quanrull with the main, deep channel going to the right and a much smaller distributary, called the Shoretrull which branches to the left. Rhoal and her gelfling companions had left the Shoretrull docks into the Trull District where many of the residents were from Ærlorn, though sections representing Spriton and Drenchen could also be found there. Rhoal saw what looked like a Spriton banner outside an arms store and felt the pull of home. "So where is this Grandmother again?" She said.

"She lives in Quanrull proper. Sifa only live on ships and inside Sifa walls," Shar said with pride.

Soon they arrived at one of these Sifa walls. It was tall with a small entry and a guard standing out front. "State your business," he said.

“I’m here ta see my grandmother along the fifth road. These four are wif me.” said Shar who stood just as tall as the guard.

“One wif four, very good,” he turned to the four and said “you are guests ‘ere,” and then motioned for them to enter. As they walked past he looked up and made some hand signals.

While they were walking down the tunnel Alro asked “what was he doing with his hands?”

“E was tellin the guards on the wall not to shoot you,” responded Shar. Alro thought this was funny, but Shar wasn’t smiling.

The end of the tunnel opened up into a long street heading uphill to what looked like a castle. All the buildings along the road were tall, three houses high, with some as high as five. They were all impressed including Rhoal who said, “This makes Ærlorn look like a small village.”

All the side roads curved away from the main road. They turned down one of these. The road was narrow with narrow buildings on either side. The ones on the left had small gardens sunken below the street with a small bridge to their door. The buildings on the right had steps leading up to their doors. It was at one of these that Shar stopped. “Dis is it,” he said quietly. He stared at the door for a second and then knocked.

The door opened and a tall, regal looking gelfling. She stared at Shar for a moment and then her eyes began to smile. “G’ma,” he said and embraced her.

“We thought you was lost to the sea,” she said, “but I told dem there was no wave you couldn’t break.” She then looked down and saw the other four gelfling.

“Who are your little friends?”

“They helped me when I was in need.”

“Well, den. Everybody in and sit. Sounds like we’ve got a lot to talk about.”

Shar led the way in through a hall which opened up to their left. There were halls and staircases in this small room. They went left into a hall and left again into a room with benches around the walls. “Have a seat,” he said and sat down. The five of them were looking awkwardly at each other when they heard a squeal in the distance and the pounding of feet. Suddenly appearing in the door was a tall and very lovely gelfling who looked quickly around the room. “Mel!” Shar said as he stood and wrapped his arms around her.

“I thought we’d lost you.”

They exchanged hellos and questions about people, things and places. Shar’s father and brothers were out at sea. Mel had decided to work at the counting houses. Grandma had arrived with a very large and wide plate that had food on it. Shar turned to the others and said “these are my friends. This is Junn...”

“I am Alro,” he said as he stood up and bowed to Mel. She smiled courteously.

Shar continued, “yes, Alro, Junn, Fliar and Rhoal.” They all nodded as he said their names. He then turned back and said “this is my Grandmother and my sister.”

“Nice to meet you.” Rhoal said looking a bit impatient.

Shar noticed and said “G’ma, we need to talk wif you.”

Shar’s grandmother turned to Mel and said, “Melorie, fetch our guests water.” Once she had left, grandmother turned back to Shar, “Need to talk with me? Must be important to be so formal.”

Shar blushed. He could never hide anything from G’ma. “Well, yes. We need to get some information and you...”

“We need to find the Mystics,” Rhoal interrupted, “We need to...their help.”

“Mystics you say? Not much talk of dem round da port, but you know your old G’ma knows a fing or two.” She paused to think, thought better of it and then turned to look at something else. “Hmm...” she said starting a new thought. She mulled this one around a bit and she stood up, “wait here.” She left the room.

Shar looked nervously over to Rhoal who looked impatient. “She’ll know. She always knows,” he said reassuringly.

Mel returned with a large platter with cups and a pitcher of water. The room was quiet. She looked around to see a way she could stay in the room. “‘Ere we are,” came a voice from down the hall. Mel turned to leave.

“Um...” was all Alro could get out before she left. His eyes followed her as she did. He looked back at the others. Shar was not smiling.

“Yes, this will tell us,” said G’ma as she walked in with a small open book in her hands. “I went wif my mate on a riverboat. Went up da Shard once. E says ‘ere that some Dousan were on the boat,” Fliar looked up. G’ma continued, “E talked wif dem about magic, crystals and Mystics. E says they know crystals, but if e wants to know about magic and Mystics, e should go to the Crystal Library.” She closed the book. “Most wat I ‘ere is legends ‘n tales, can’t trust stories. I say if you want Mystics, go to the Crystal Library.” She stopped and looked at them as this sunk in. “Well, evenin’s on. Let’s get you supper.” She walked out of the room.

“What do you know about the Dousan, Fliar?” Rhoal said startling Fliar who was lost in thought.

She looked over at Rhoal, “what?”

Rhoal leaned forward, “I saw you when she mentioned Dousan. What do you know?”

Fliar looked uneasy. Her amber eyes looked at the others who were looking at her. She gave in “I am Dousan. The skeksis found me on the shores of the Crystal Sea. I know about the Library of which she speaks.”

Rhoal looked satisfied, “How do we get to the Library?”

Fliar thought, “the only way I know is going from the Castle of the Crystal.”

“I know another way,” Junn’s low voice crept out from her hood. “Boats go up the Shard river to trade with the Grottan. We can take the Dust pass to the Crystal Sea,” she turned to Fliar, “that would be much faster than forest or the plains.”

Rhoal looked at Fliar, she shrugged. “So, we must get a boat going up the river,” Rhoal thought out loud. She looked over at Junn, “are those your people, the Grottan?”

Junn looked a little surprised, “yes. Yes they are.”

“Seems I picked the right gelfling,” Rhoal said satisfied. “Let’s talk of this tomorrow morning. Tonight we should rest. I want to leave early, very early.”

Mel, popped in (much to Alro’s delight) “we have starters up. Come,” she motioned for them to follow. They crossed the hall into a room dominated by a long table with chairs along its length. There were platters of small cooked foods already on the table. They sat down to eat. Later G’ma and Mel came in with cooked meats, roots and other fruits. “Tuck in!” Said G’ma.

They were entertained by G’ma’s tales of Shar’s father, grandfather, brothers, and some stories about Shar. Shar guffawed and laughed with his sister, grandmother and the rest. It was a rousing good time. Alro asked Mel about her crazy stories and she told him all about work at the counting house, finding the missing shard in the ledgers and other similarly boring things. He was enchanted by all her money talk as he gazed into her green eyes, freckled skin and hair like orange thatch.

“All this counting would be hard for Alro without fingers, eh Shar?” Rhoal said with a wry smile.

“You bet yer brown locks,” said Shar as he ripped apart a large piece of meat. Alro turned red as the Rose Sun.

They chatted for a bit more and Mel got up to put away some dishes. Alro thought to offer to help, but thought better of it. Mel came back in and said “I’m going to get some sleep. You need anything G’ma.”

“I’m fine dear. Go up,” she replied and Mel left. “So, how’d ya help me boy, Rhoal?”

“Not much to tell. He was stuck in a bind and I helped him out. He’s since helped me so I think we are even.” She looked over at Shar.

“Yeah, you know me.” He said nervously. “We should pro’ly get to bed. Early day and all.”

Shar turned to Alro, “let’s clean up. I fink yer sleeping wit me.”

G’ma showed the other gelfling to guest rooms downstairs. “Mind doubling up?” She said to Rhoal and Junn, “this front room has two beds.”

Rhoal looked at Junn who gave no protest, “fine with us.”

“There’s water in that room there,” she instructed and then turned to Fliar, “I’ve a room for you, here.”

“Thank you very much for your hospitality,” Fliar bowed to G’ma.

“A pleasure m’dear,” G’ma returned the bow.

The beds were more comfortable than they had had in a long while (for some, never) and sleep came easily.

...

“Come, get up. We must go.” Rhoal said poking her head through Shar’s door.

“Hrrmmm?” Said Shar.

“Yes, now. Get ready, let’s go.”

She similarly woke the others and they gathered up supplies and left. Shar and Junn hadn’t quite woken up yet when they started down the street. They were approaching the gate when Shar said “no, we cannot go through that gate. This way.” He turned left down a side street. “Only the main gate is open before the first sun is up.”

No one was out on the streets. They turned right onto the main road which took them to the main gate. It was taller and wider than the other gate with large towers flanking it and lit by burning torches. “State your business!” Said the guard loudly.

“Gettin an early start at the docks. They was my guests for the night.” Shar called back.

“Right.” Another guard came out of a small doorway in one of the towers. He went to the big door and, pulled a long lever attached to a crossbar that allowed him to open one side of the gate. “Gelfs, throoo-ooo!” He called and a similar sounding call came from

somewhere else, which had a quiet echo from another direction. He motioned for them to go through the door and handed them a torch.

They walked through the tunnel and the door behind them closed and they could hear it locking again. They passed under a portcullis and they could hear the door in front of them being un-latched. They went through that door and Shar handed the guard the torch. He then continued down the main road. "Cleee-aar!" They could hear being yelled and echoed behind them.

Alro felt it safe to say, "I've never seen anything like that."

"We get all kinds ere in port. Can't be too carefull." Shar replied. He turned to Rhoal, "Where are we going?"

"We need a ship to go up the Shard. What kind do we need?"

"A small sea-going boat should handle voyage to the delta," said Shar as he thought, "And it should be good for the river as well."

"Where would we find one of those?"

"They dock them at Deescon, we can find a captain for it in the Scon District."

"I want to see one," said Rhoal.

"Sure, left at the dock road and we're there."

They continued down the wide, main road through an ornamental gateway and then left onto the dock road

to the Deescon. Shar turned to the group, "Dis is where they dock the sea going ships."

Rhoal continued to walk down the docks. There was a worker sleeping here and there and a few guards marching, otherwise the docks were empty. She slowed down by a few ships.

"What're ya lookin for?" Shar asked.

"The right kind of boat," she replied as she continued to walk. "What about this one?" She turned to Shar.

"Yeah, this might work. Not sure who the captain is." Shar said looking the boat over. It was one of the smaller boats tied up at dock. It was about 6 gelfling long with a single mast.

"Will it make it up river?" Rhoal asked.

"Yeah," Shar wasn't sure where she was going with this.

"Alright, let's take it." She pulled out a knife and started walking toward one of the ropes. Junn followed suit and pulled out a knife.

"Wait, what?" Said Shar.

Rhoal stopped, sighed and turned to Shar. "We don't know where we're going. We don't know how far. We also don't have the money to pay a captain to be patient with us. And patience costs."

"But, you can't just take the boat," Shar knew the value of a boat to its captain.

She started walking toward him, "I thought you understood. This is important. They must be stopped. We cannot delay anymore."

"I can talk to the captain," he was grasping at straws.

"I don't have time to argue this with you. Are you coming or not?" She stopped looking fiercely up at him.

"I can't steal a boat," he said mustering up some resolve.

"I knew you wouldn't follow through," she hissed in anger, then turned to the other three. "He is staying here, anyone else want to stay?" She said marching toward them. They sheepishly stepped aside, "good, can you run this boat Alro?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Come with me. You two, untie the boat."

Shar stood there not knowing what to do. What they were doing was important, but Rhoal was doing it wrong.

Rhoal and Alro climbed aboard the boat and found the one gelfling sleeping on board. Rhoal threw him off the boat. Junn and Fliar had pushed the boat away from shore and climbed aboard. Alro went to the back, "we need to row out to sea."

Junn and Rhoal grabbed oars, put them out into the water and started to row. As the boat pulled away Rhoal yelled back "give my best to G'ma."

Shar decided to leave before the guards were alerted.

Chapter 8 – Hospitality

As the third sun was beginning to set Dorner said “who, would ya look at that.”

“Look at what Dorn?” Kett turned his head to see.

“That’s a Drenchen mark if I’ve ever seen one,” he said as he steered the boat toward the shore. They approached a large group of bushes with a log sticking out from behind them.

“Careful,” Kett said as it looked like he might run the boat into shore.

The leaves and branches moved out of the way before they ran into them. On the other side they saw a small pond surrounded and covered by vegetation. There were a few boats tied to logs in the water. They were similar boats to the one they were in. “I knew it,” Dorner said, very satisfied with himself.

Kett was a little annoyed, “you mean you weren’t sure? We could have crashed into something hard” he said as he looked back to see the leaves moving back into place.

“But we didn’t,” Dorner smiled, “we can stay here tonight. Nothing like a Drenchen hospitality.” He hopped out of the boat onto a log and tied the nose of the boat off. “Besides, the dauphin leaves don’t like to be touched.”

Kett sighed, “I guess it’s better than sleeping in a boat tonight. What do you think Ayal?” She nodded.

They grabbed a few things and started off down a path through the swamp. It wasn't long before they saw a house or two, then many more. "Odd, no one's out," said Dorner, "they must take their supper seriously here."

They saw an open field ahead in the twilight and a gelfling walking by. "Ho there," said Dorner.

The gelfling jumped a mile, "What? Who's there?"

"Just travelers looking for food and sleep," said Dorner with a smile.

The gelfling backed up and yelled, "Glud! Git over here, we've strangers!"

Glud came walked over and said, "who are you?" He was big and a bit menacing, as gelfling go.

Dorner wasn't smiling anymore, "whoa, I'm from Flonnen, up-river and these are my friends."

"Flonner, eh? How's old Ruddy doing?" The old gelt asked warily.

"Back in his garden. Fishin' ain't his thing," Dorner said seriously. He and the gelt looked at each other for a moment.

"Haw, I knew he didn't have the bones for fishin," he extended his hand to Dorner who took it. "Sorry cousin, can't be too careful these days. Let's get you some eats. You can stay at Olma's place. She's got room to spare despite herself," he laughed at this. Glud agreed with a

hearty laugh as they walked over to a large house or tree or rock depending on how you looked at it.

They knocked at the door and a very large gelfling opened the door, "Yarry!" She said.

"Whatcha got cookin tonight Olma? I've got hungry folks here," said Yarry.

"Wouldn't you know it. Make a pot of stew and people show up." She said as she waddled back inside. They all followed and she had them sit down at the table and she went to a big pot over a fire. Yarry grabbed a stack of different sized bowls and brought them over to Olma. She filled them up chattering at Yarry about his gate. They both came back to the table, "Stew's on," she said as she plopped bowls of stew in front of everyone.

Kett was squished against the table as she leaned in to put his bowl in front of him. He took a look at the thick, lumpy green liquid and thought better of trying it. Dorner dug in, along with Glud, Yarry and Olma. *Well, it can't be as bad as bugs*, he thought and tried a bite. This was the best thing he had put in his mouth since he left home. He dug in.

Olma prattled on about folks in town and funny things they had done. Yarry would trade off with funny stories and tall tales. "So what had you so spooked when we got here?" Dorner asked.

"Well, one of Glud's friends had a run in with some spooked landstriders. They told him there was somethin bad moving along the mountains. So it got me thinkin,

landstriders don't spook easy. Somethin bad's out there" he said with added doom and gloom.

Kett and Ayal exchanged a knowing glance. Dorner said, "Hmm...well? The mountains are half a day's walk from here and no one bothers the swamp, right?"

Yarry thought about this, "I guess so, but Glud here's gonna take watch anyway." Glud nodded.

They talked a bit longer till Glud and Yarry left. "You need beds tonight?" Olma asked.

"Yes Olma," Dorner said.

She put them up in some old bedrooms of children long gone. "Don't let Yarry's creatures get ya." She laughed and waddled off to bed.

Kett awoke early and roused the others to leave. As they were gathering up their things Olma waddled in with a bag. "I can't let you leave hungry. Take this," she handed Dorner the bag.

He looked in to see something that agreed with him, "thanks!"

Kett thought about paying her and put a small bag of crystal on the table. He changed his mind, then picked the small bag off the table and handed it to Olma, "I found this in my pack, I didn't need it." He turned and left with Ayal and Dorner.

She took the bag without looking in it. Olma knew there was crystal in it. "Visit anytime," she said.

Dorner smiled at Kett, “already getting the hang of Drechen manners I see.” Kett smiled.

They walked down the path to where their boat was tied as the first sun was rising. They untied it, leaves parted, and they snuck out into the river. “We should be there before supper,” Dorner said, “sooner if we paddle hard.”

“Supper it is then,” said Kett.

They traveled down river through the delta to Quanrull. It was quite a sight to rural gelfling like Kett and Dorner. “Where do we go?” Asked Kett.

“Don’t rightly know,” said Dorner as he scanned the shores. “I see riverboats over there, so that way?”

They pulled the boat up to a floating wood platform on the Shoretrull Docks. A tall thin gelfling in a vest with pockets and a satchel came and said, “Dockin fee please.”

Kett fished around for blue crystal and said “how much?”

The gelfling pulled a small scale from his satchel and said “two beans.” He then pulled a small wood object from his vest and put it on one side of the scale.

Kett placed blue crystal on the scale till it balanced. “Thank you,” said the gelfling. He put away the crystal, wooden weight, and scale all in their proper place and then pulled out a small book. “Name?” He said with a black stick in hand.

“Kett.”

“Origin?”

“Um...” Kett turned to Dorner not sure what he wanted.

“Flonnen, and doncha forget it,” said Dorner.

“Biz’ness?”

Dorner stepped on dock, “Trade.”

“Ow long you stayin?”

“Tonight and tomorrow.”

“Enjoy your stay in Quanrull.” The tall thin gelfling put his book away in his satchel, put the black stick away in a pocket and walked away.

“Dockmasters are stuffy folk,” Dorner said as he turned to Kett. “Ok, we’re here. Now what?”

“We find Alro and the others. They were going to see Shar’s grandmother.” Kett stopped to think.

“This is a big town, Kett. How are we going to find them here?”

“I don’t know. If we split up to look around and come back here at last sun, maybe we’ll have a better idea.”

Ayal nodded at this. Dorner said, “it’s as good a plan as any.” They left the docks and onto a main road that follows along the length of the docks. They could see the decorative arch that led into town.

“I’ll take the main road. Dorner, you go that way, Ayal that way?” Kett asked. They nodded and Kett walked through the arch. The street was full of gelfling of all sizes and colors. Some were hollering about their wares, others were buying and most others seemed to be going somewhere.

Kett looked around for anyone he would recognize. He passed stores selling pottery, leathers, cloth and other raw goods. As he went up the road he passed stores selling refined goods and crafted items. Even further he came upon stores with rare and valuable items, then what looked like expensive places to eat and sleep. Each one of these groups of businesses seemed to have sister businesses on the streets leading away from the main road and the main road was a place of prestige for them. He was pulled out of this thought by the aroma of food. There were places selling slow cooked foods, uncooked foods and some that seemed devoted to spiced drinks. He also realized that he was at the end of the road, or the beginning.

There was a large wall dividing this portion of the road from what might lie on the other side. It had a large door in it with serious looking warriors standing up straight in front. Kett decided Shar was not that way and was turning to go back when a tall filf came from the big doors. She was very lovely and Kett’s eyes enjoyed following her as she went past. She immediately went into one of the houses of food and quickly emerged looking around, almost worried.

Maybe she needs help? Kett thought as he started walking towards her. She quickly walked into another

place of food and drink. Soon after she came out with that same look of worry on her lovely face. Kett was walking up to her when someone said “Melorie! How are ya?”

“Tauna!” She said to the tall older firt, “lookin for Shar. Seen ‘im?”

“E’s in town? Naw, haven’t seen ‘im,” she said and Mel continued looking. “Keep an eye out, I will!” She called after Mel.

Shar! Thought Kett. He was glad to have a reason to follow this Melorie. He followed her as she went to two more drink houses, but she did not come out of the third. He decided to go in. The people inside were rowdy, loud and some were singing. Kett looked around for Mel and saw her talking to a gelfling that, from behind, looked like it could be Shar. He walked over.

“Time to go ‘ome Shar,” Mel was saying to Shar.

“She juss leff...took it, sshe did...,” Shar sounded odd.

“Who took what?” Kett said to Shar.

“den...den it leff me...I’m not...” he then started to cry.

“Was it Rhoal?” Kett asked.

“Who’re you?” Mel turned to Kett.

“I am Kett, a friend of Shar’s,” he smiled. He found it hard not to smile at her.

“You’re no friend I know.”

“Kaaaale? Iz dat you?” Shar had stopped crying.

Kett turned to Shar, “yes, it’s me, Kett. Where are the rest?”

“Dey leff. Wit a shup...shap...ship.”

Melorie stood there not sure what to do.

“Where did they go Shar? Shar?”

Shar had looked away, but he was back “Duss Pass. Anover drink! And one fer me mates ‘ere.” A tall gelfling brought over three mugs.

“No, thank you,” Mel held up her hand. The gelfling set down two mugs and left.

“Where is the Duss Pass?” Kett was still trying to talk to Shar. Talking to Ayal was easier than this.

“Dey wen up da Shod to Duss Pass,” he picked up his mug and drank the whole thing, “an den dey...dey...” his eyes widened and then he fell forward onto the table.

Someone from a nearby table said “four down!” and there was a cheer from the crowd.

“Ugh, now I got to lug ‘im ‘ome.” Said Melorie.

Kett looked at Shar, then at Melorie. “Is he dead?”

“No, but he’ll wish he was tonight. Spice nightmares are never fun.” She turned to the gelfling that had brought the drinks and said “what’s the tab?” She proceeded to pay the gelfling and then returned to the table, “ok,

Shar. Time to go,” she said as she put his arm around her neck and tried to lift him.

Kett decided to help and put his other arm around his neck. Shar was heavy. They dragged him out of the shop to the big doors leading into the upper city. “E needs ‘elp ‘ome” she said to the guard. He yelled “oy, we gotta sleeper” and two more guards came out and took Shar.

Mel turned to Kett, “thank you. Good luck on your travels,” she said politely and left with the guards.

Kett was feeling pretty good about himself on the way back to the docks. He found Shar, got some information and helped a lovely fult. After the third sun had set Dorner and Ayal showed up at the boat.

“Didja find anythin?” Dorner asked the other two.

Ayal shook her head.

Kett said “I found Shar.”

Dorner was surprised. “Really? What about the others?”

“They’ve left on a ship.”

“Where are they going?”

“Up the Shod to the Duss Pass.”

“And where’s that?”

“No idea.”

“He wouldn’t tell you?”

“It’s a long story and I’m hungry. Let’s find a place to stay for the night.”

Dorner smiled, “I can help you with that.”

They stayed at lodging in the Trull District. Dorner had found the Drenchen part of town. Kett told them about the spiced drinks and the wonders of the main road. They had decided that they need to find out what ‘up the Shod to the Duss Pass’ means tomorrow. In the morning they asked the owner of the lodgings if they knew what ‘up the Shod to the Duss Pass’ meant, but they did not know.

“You need to find a navigator. They have offices down by the Deescon. Go down the main road and go left after the arch on the Dockway. Can’t miss em. They have big crystal windows and a double triangle on the front.” He traced the triangles in the air.

“Thank you much,” said Dorner and paid the gelfling. They took a side road all the way to the main road next to a shop with wood contraptions. Kett led them down the busy road to the big decorative gateway and turned left onto the Dockway and found a few businesses with big crystal windows and double triangles.

“Which one?” Kett asked.

“I don’t think it matters. How about that one?” Dorner pointed to one that had blue triangles.

“Looks good to me.” Kett went in. The light from the big windows lit up the place. There were more windows in

the roof. There was a big table and a big wooden thing in the back that held rolls of leather or fabric.

“Can I ‘elp you?” A tall gelfling got up from behind a boxy table.

“Yes, uh...do you know what it means to go up the Shod to the Duss Pass?” Kett asked lamely.

“No, not as such. What do you need? A map or to charter a navigator?” He looked at Kett expectantly.

“Um, no. We...” He now realized Shar didn’t give him much to go on. Kett looked over at Ayal and Dorner, they looked back at him. He looked back at the tall gelfling. “Well, we have a friend who was leaving to go somewhere and they said up the Shod to the Duss Pass,” he thought about this, “he did have a lot of spiced drinks last night.”

“Hmm...Duss Pass, Duss Pass. ‘E could mean the Dust Pass,” the gelfling wandered over to the rolls and looked for the right one. He pulled one out and unrolled it on the big table. It was covered in colors, lines and words. “Ahh yes, see ‘ere?” He pointed at a part of it, “this is the Dust Pass aan...this looks like the best way...ah, Shard River. Was that wot ‘e meant?”

“Go up the Shard to the Dust Pass?” Dorner asked.

“I guess so.” Kett was thinking, “where are we?”

The gelfling pointed, “here.”

“And what is that and this?” Kett pointed at some markings.

“Those are the Claw Mountains and the Shard Forest.”

“Is this the Black River?”

“Yes. Hmm...,” Kett thought for a second.

“Do you want to buy the map?” The tall gelfling asked.

“It’s really big. Do you have a smaller one?”

“Yes, but it does not have as much detail,” he went to another room and returned with a small roll. “Will this do?”

Kett looked it over and then looked at the big map, “this will work.” They paid for the map and left.

“What’s going on Kett?” Dorner asked.

“Well, we’re here in Quanrull. Rhoal and the others are going to the Dust Pass here and they’re taking the Shard River here.”

Dorner and Ayal looked over what he was pointing at.

Kett continued, “we need a bigger boat to go from Quanrull to the Shard River Delta and then go up the river. I’m no good on a boat and we need to catch them. Is there a faster way?”

“We might walk faster than they can go up river.”

Dorner suggested.

“But this is all forest.” Kett pointed to the area between the Shard river and the Claw Mountains, “if there are no roads, we won’t catch them. If only we could fly.”

The three Suns rose in Dorner's mind, "Landstriders!"

"What?" Kett looked up at Dorner.

"Landstriders. Yarry said there were Landstriders near their village. They run so fast it's like they fly."

"Yeah, too bad we can't ride them," Kett looked back down at the map.

"We can. I can talk to them," Dorner said with a big smile.

"Really?" Kett looked up surprised.

"Don't be so surprised. My people are always in harmony with the animals."

"Well, what do you think Ayal?" Kett turned to her.

"Swift as the wind," she said quietly with a smile.

"Alright then. Let's go. We might make it to the village by last sun." They went to their boat and paddled up river. It was harder work moving the boat against the current, but the boat was much lighter than it was when they started their trip. It was well after last sun before they arrived at the hidden boat cove. They knew they weren't coming back to the boat for a while so they made sure they removed all their things from it. Tired and hungry they walked through the village to Olma's. Kett knocked at the door and Olma let them in. They had a short meal with Olma and told her the wonders of Quanrull, which she enjoyed thoroughly. Then it was late and she put them up for the night. In the morning

they asked Olma where Yarry and Glud were. She pointed them on their way.

Kett knocked at Glud's door. They could hear his heavy steps approaching the door. He opened it and looked out. "It's you," he smiled.

"Yeah, we're just passing through," Kett held up his stuff as proof. "That night we came Yarry said you had seen some Landstriders nearby."

"Yup."

"Can you tell us where we can find them?"

"Not sure," Glud thought, "they wander."

"Do you know where they wander?"

"Um, I'll show you. This way." Glud walked past them toward the middle of the village. He walked over to a big tree with steps on the side. "Up here." He walked up. They went up many stairs from platform to platform built on the tree till they were at the top. The platform was high enough to give a great view over the swamp. When they were all there he pointed towards the mountains. "See where the mountain begins? They pass through there a lot."

Kett looked where he pointed. The mountains trailed off in the distance, but not far off he could see where they began. The first small mountain tapered off into the swamp and he could see the river to the left of the mountain. "So they pass between the river and the mountain?"

“Yup.”

“And they stay near the mountain?”

“Yup.”

“Then that’s where we need to go. Thanks Glud.” He smiled at him.

“Yup.”

Kett went down the stairs. “Bye Glud, tell Yarry we missed him,” said Dorner. The three gelflings left headed toward the base of the mountain.

“It looked closer from the top of that tree,” said Kett. It was almost midday. “Are you sure we’re going the right direction Dorn?”

Dorner looked around at their surroundings, “Yup, it’s that way, but I want to eat.”

After eating they continued on and the trees began to thin out. “This looks as good a place as any,” said Dorner looking about. “If we go any farther we’ll be climbing mountain.” Dorner held his hands to his mouth and started making some trill noises with his tongue. He did this for a while before a few Landstriders showed up. “Stan-ya tamar,” he said as he clicked his tongue. “Dolbar, stan-ya tamar.” He called after them nicely and they came closer. They had long legs, long ears at their shoulders, whiskers and bulgy eyes. There were five of them and they made a light grunting noise as they approached. “Stan-ya, stan-ya,” Dorner said calmly.

Kett was impressed, “wow, I don’t think I’ve seen one of those before.”

“Well, let’s go before they change their mind.” Dorner got up on a stump next to one of the Landstriders and climbed on to it. “Kett, try that one. Say stan-ya,” Dorner pointed toward another Landstrider that was next to a rock.

“Ston yay,” Kett said and climbed on. There was another next to that same rock.

“Try that one Ayal,” Dorner said.

Ayal smiled, “swift as the wind,” she said quietly as she climbed up.

Dorner said something to the Landstriders and off they went. They traveled away from the village passing the mountain to their right. They traveled between the great forest and mountains into the desert near Claw Mountain. They traveled till last sun when the Landstriders wanted to sleep.

In the morning they continued on. Kett would look at his map from time to time. “Just beyond the next ridge we should see the Dust Pass.” As they rounded the mountain spur they saw a slope of dirt going up to the side of where two mountains meet. They could see a pass between them. “There it is, the Dust Pass.”

Chapter 9 – On The Water

“This would be easier if Shar were here” said Alro.

“So? We can’t make the sails work. We’ll be fine once we’re on the river,” Rhoal growled.

“We didn’t need to take the boat. We could have found passage.”

“And how much time would that have wasted?” Rhoal raised her voice, “well? How many more gelfling have been taken? How many more will be taken? I was testing Shar’s resolve,” Rhoal moved toward the front of the boat. “If, he wasn’t willing to go this far, what would happen if the skeksis threw a slave in our way?” She looked around at her shipmates. “They will take our friends,” she looked at Alro. “They will take our families!” She looked at Junn then quietly she said “they corrupt everything they touch. And we have the knowledge to stop them. We cannot fail, we will not fail, who will stop them?!”

“We will!” They all shouted.

“Die skeksees...” Rhoal lost her balance and sat down, clutching at her chest.

“Are you all right?” Alro stood up and moved toward her.

She held up her hand and coughed. “Whuuh...” she tried to say something. The rest did not move because she had her hand up. She gasped and drew in a large breath. She struggled to stand, “I am fine...I’m a little

tired.” She moved to a more comfortable spot and sat down.

Alro offered her water which she happily drank. Shortly after Alro fell back against the side of the boat gasping for air. He looked panicked. Rhoal put her hand on him, “it’s alright, wait it out. Hold on, hold on. Now breathe.”

He took in a long breath, “what...” he breathed heavily “what was...that?” His breathing became easier, “it was like being in the chair again.”

“Here, have some water,” Rhoal handed Alro water and then looked at the other two. “Sit with him Junn. Fliar come over here.” Rhoal moved to another part of the boat. It wasn’t long before Junn was similarly afflicted.

Fliar looked confused. She didn’t understand what was going on. Rhoal noticed her confusion. “You did not drink the second flask” Rhoal whispered in her ear. Fliar shook her head.

Junn was being held by Alro. She cried bitterly, “it is gone away. We are lost.”

Rhoal looked up, “No, not lost. We understand the pain caused by the skeksis. No one should endure this.” She sat down between the oars. “They will pay,” she growled quietly and began to row.

By the end of the day they were still not at the river. “We had better find a place to stop and rest for the night. Let’s try over there.” They rowed to the shore and tied the boat to a nearby stump. They slept quietly in the grass at the top of the beach. Sleep came easy.

“Get up, get up! The second sun is already rising.” Rhoal said impatiently. They drug themselves up and down to the boat which had to be pushed a long way to the water. They took out a lot of things to make it easier. They loaded it back up once they got it near the waves. They were getting ready to push when Fliar screamed. They looked around and saw two Garthim moving through the grass toward the beach.

“Push!” Rhoal yelled and they pushed. “Push!” She yelled again and they pushed. “PUUUSH!” She screamed and they pushed the boat into the waves. They stood in the waves pushing their boat while Fliar climbed in. The Garthim had gotten to the wet sand. Rhoal noticed, “Go, go, go!”

Fliar had put the oars in the water and was trying to move them by herself. Junn and Rhoal had climbed in to help. Alro was at the front of the boat still pushing it from below as his head went under the waves. The Garthim went for him as he jumped at the boat to push it farther. It grabbed his arm and pulled him up. He reached for his knife with his other hand fearing he might not make it. When he opened his eyes Rhoal said “give me your other hand.” The Garthim were half covered in water and dared not go deeper.

Rhoal pulled Alro up. He could hear the chittering of the Garthim behind him. “Keep rowing, before they learn how to swim!” Alro said. He and Rhoal went to help Junn and Fliar.

Rowing a boat backwards is not the best way to move a boat. Alro realized this, “Turn the boat around.”

As they turned it around Rhoal got an idea. "They can follow us on shore," she said loud enough for the other gelfling to hear, "turn the other way." They turned the other way. "Back to port!" She yelled. "They can't get us there!"

"What are you doing?" Alro said quietly.

"She's bluffing," said Junn quietly. "They might get the bright idea to beat us there."

They rowed away from the shore back toward port. The Garthim stayed parallel to them on the shore.

"They're still there," said Alro.

"Patience," said Rhoal, "if we keep rowing away from shore eventually they won't see us."

"And we won't see them," Junn grumbled.

"We've seen them work. We can count on them being stupid enough to fall for it."

They continued almost till midday when they could no longer see the shore or the two deep purple dots. "Ok, let's head for the Shard." They turned the boat around and continued on their course.

After a long time they decided to head to shore, it took longer than they thought and they turned around a few times till they saw a bird. Then they headed to shore and it was nearly last sun before they saw the river. As they entered the mouth of the river they saw a lagoon to the side of the river with wooden docks built out into it and held up by wooden posts. The town was built

around this lagoon and they could discover that all the buildings were similarly built on wooden posts. They pulled up to an empty dock.

“We need to find a place to stay.” Rhoal said.

“Leave that to me,” said Junn as she hopped out of the boat and into town. The rest stayed behind to tie the boat up. As they left the boat a tall thin gelfling walked up to them.

“Dock fees, one bean.” He pulled out a small scale and a small wooden weight which he put on one tray. Rhoal put some blue crystal on the other tray. “Stayin long?” He asked.

“Just the night,” said Rhoal.

“Enjoy your stay in Shardsmuth,” he said and walked off.

“Now, what?” Asked Alro.

“We wait for Junn.” Rhoal walked to the beginning of the dock and sat down to wait. After long wait Junn returned. “It’s well after last sun, where have you been?”

“It was worth the wait,” she said with a wry smile. “I’ve got a nice place for us.” Junn then took them to a building that was nicer than the ones around it. They walked in to a place where people were sitting, eating and having a good time. “These are my friends” she said to the gelfling inside.

He looked at them and said “this way.” He took them to a table in an alcove with chairs around it. Soon after they brought food, a lot of food, which they were too hungry and tired to properly appreciate. When the meal was done they were sitting lazily around the table.

“I need sleep,” said Alro.

Junn called over one of the gelfling that served them. “Can you take them to where they can sleep?”

“Yes. This way.” He said.

“Wait, you’re not coming?” Rhoal asked.

“Nope, I’m gonna have some fun first,” a wicked smile could be seen under Junn’s hood before she wandered off.

Rhoal, Alro and Fliar followed the gelfling upstairs and down a long hall with many doors. The building was much larger than it looked from the front. “These four rooms are yours. There is water at the end of the hall. Good evening.” He said and walked off.

They each picked a room. The rooms had comfortable beds and a lot of crystal all around the room. It wasn’t long before they were all asleep. Late in the night Jun came stumbling into Alro’s room. She was laughing, “whoooo.” She fell into bed.

“Huh, what?” Alro said.

Junn snuggled up to Alro and said “Mmmm, yoos warm. Whaz you doon in my room?”

Alro was still a little groggy. “Your room...wait...this is my room.” She didn’t respond. He sat up to look at her and she was already asleep. He got up, tucked her in and went to Junn’s room to sleep.

They were woken at first sun by a gelfling that brought them food. After they had eaten and cleaned up they gathered up their gear and went to the dock.

“Here, I have some better bags for you all,” said Junn as she handed them bags made of skins with straps to wear over the shoulders.

“These are really nice Junn, thanks.” Said Alro.

Junn smiled, though Alro could not see it, “not a problem. We’ll going on foot at some point. These will help.”

“I think we should call our boat Lorm,” Rhoal said.

“He was the one we lost in the Castle, right?”

“Yeah, he would’ve liked being on a boat. He always said he wanted to see the Ocean,” she said, nostalgically.

“You knew him before?” Asked Fliar.

“Yes, we are from the same village. We were out hunting for Morn when we were grabbed by garthim. I was last in the chair, I watched his name taken. At least he knew it when he left us.”

They were climbing into the boat when they heard, “there she is! Stop! Theif!”

Rhoal looked at Junn, “what did you do?”

Junn smiled sheepishly, “kept my resolve?”

“You can yell at her later, let’s go,” said Alro untying the boat from the dock.

Rhoal turned to grab an oar, Fliar was untying the back of the boat.

There was a group of gelfling running up the dock now. Fliar finished untying the rear of the boat.

“Push!” Said Alro and they pushed. Rhoal used the Oar to push them farther from the dock. She pulled in her oar just as they arrived where the boat was moored.

“Come back here thief!” They yelled at Junn.

“Bye bye,” she waved at them cockily.

Not to be deterred four of the gelflings ran up the dock to a long narrow boat.

“They’re coming after us?” Junn said a little surprised.

Rhoal sighed and turned to Alro “we need to row.” They started to row and the other boat was being pushed away from dock. Alro and Rhoal got into a rhythm and they were working hard.

The other boat was getting oriented and turned toward them. It was long, shallow and very narrow with a narrow log attached and floating next to it so it wouldn’t roll over. They had three gelfling rowing the boat.

“Are they gaining on us.” Junn said, worried.

“Yes,” said Fliar at the rudder. The boat finally made it out of the lagoon and started upstream. They were fighting the current. Rhoal and Alro were rowing hard. The other boat was slowly catching up.

After a while Rhoal said to Junn and Fliar, “quick, you two take the oars.” They quickly traded places with Rhoal and Alro.

“This boat...is not..made for...speed,” Alro said panting.

“You might as well give up!” Said the gelfling on the front of the other boat. He was holding a big three sided fishing hook with a rope attached.

“What...about...the sail?” Came a small voice between breaths.

Rhoal could feel the wind on her face coming from the ocean. “Fliar, you’re brilliant!” She said as she went to the mast to untie the sail. Alro went over to help. They nearly had the sail untied when they heard a loud chunk! At the back of the boat. The three sided hook had caught the back of the boat. Alro and Rhoal exchanged glances, Alro nodded and moved to the back of the boat.

“Give up, we have you!” The four gelfling were standing up in their boat and started pulling the rope.

“Not yet you don’t,” said Alro as he took out his knife and started cutting the rope.

“Then we’ll have to overtake you.” He returned and the other three gelfling sat back down to row. The front gelfling continued to pull the rope. Alro looked back and Rhoal had raised up the wooden beam that held the top of the sail which had caught the wind and the boat surged forward nearly pulling the rope out of the other gelfling’s hand.

Alro looked back, “it’s time for us to go,” he said as he finished cutting the rope.

The other gelfling worked hard to catch up. Junn and Fliar switched again with Rhoal and Alro to row and they moved a little faster than the other boat. They were soon tired from rowing, but so was the other boat. The sail increased the gap enough to cause the other boat to give up.

Rhoal turned to Junn, “next time, tell me when you get important people angry.” Junn nodded.

They continued up the river. Sometimes they had wind and sometimes they had to row, but they always had to move forward or the current would take them back to the sea. They passed two small villages during the day, but they didn’t stop. At last sun they tied their boat to the North shore and slept in the boat. The second day had some good wind in the morning, but it died out by midday.

They had been rowing for a while when Alro said “this would be easier if we still had...the energy.” Alro thought about how they were full of energy to fight the garthim in the Castle.

“Well, we don’t. So we just need to row,” said Rhoal.

“For how long?” Asked Junn.

Rhoal thought about this, “I’m not sure. I need to climb a tree.” They looked for a sufficiently tall tree and brought the boat to the side of the river. They waited while Rhoal went to climb the tree. At the top she saw the mountains to the south. She could see Claw Mountain and where the next two mountains met. Far up the river she saw smoke, probably another village. She came down and back to the boat.

Alro looked up to see her, “well?”

“We might be there by last sun?” They all looked a little disappointed, but they continued on. The sides of the river began to rise up and soon they were in a wide ravine. As last sun approached they saw a stone bridge high above the river spanning the gorge.

“There must be a settlement nearby to build a bridge like that.” Rhoal said as she looked up. Ahead there was a sharp bend in the river. As they rounded the bend they were hit with the spray from the immense waterfall in front of them. They could see the rays of the last sun shining through the mist above the gorge.

“Look,” said Fliar. She was pointing at a very large stone arch that was easily as wide as their boat was long. It was even tall enough that their mast would make it through. As they came closer they could see boats inside.

“I guess we go in” said Rhoal. They rowed their boat in to the small harbor. It was a large, long cave with two rows of natural stone columns holding up the roof with an open passage between them. There were some barges and long boats to each side of the main passage. They rowed their boat to where they could see a gelfling standing in a window to the right, watching them. They tied up the boat. “I think this is where we need to leave the boat,” Rhoal said and they packed up their gear.

Alro walked over to the gelfling in the window. “Where are you from?” The gelfling asked.

“Quanrull,” Alro answered.

“Two beans for the boat and one for the upper,” he said.

Alro gave him some crystal and he weighed it on a scale that had three beans on the other side of it.

“How long are you staying?”

Alro was about to answer, but Rhoal cut him off. “Two nights” she said.

“We will need to move your boat. Take this,” handed Alro a small wood disk with a character etched in it.

“When you are ready to leave bring that back to us so we can get your boat.” He wrote some things down and moved a wooden disk from one hook to another on a wall covered with hooks and disks.

Alro turned to Rhoal who was looking around for where to go next. The gelfling got up and came out of his room

behind the window. "Come with me to the upper." He went down the walkway toward the front of the cavern and walked through a doorway there. The group followed a ways down this stone hallway. There was some light coming from crystals set into the wall, but it was no brighter than the sky outside. The gelfling stepped into a small alcove to the right and waved his hand toward the end of the hall, which was covered in wood and dark. The gelfling turned and looked at them, waiting. "Well? Get in."

"Oh," Alro said and walked to the end of the hall, followed by the rest. The floor was wood and sounded hollow.

"Stay at the back. Enjoy your stay in Dipoh Falls." the gelfling said and made a large thump noise in the alcove. That's when the hall in front of them dropped and the small room they were in became dark.

"What's happening?" Said Fliar through the rhythmic rumbling.

"You know as much as me." Said Alro.

"I think we're moving up." Said Junn, and they were because before long the wall in front of them looked like it dropped revealing a well lit room with windows and a doorway in front of them. They left the room and they were outside at the end of a street that stopped at a short wall to their left.

"Wow, look at this," said Alro leaning over the wall. The others came over and saw the gorge with the waterfall to the left and a sheer wall of rock beneath them. The

twilight from the last sun lit up the mist from the falls in a beautiful array of colors. They stared in wonder for a while till Rhoal said "I guess we could stay here for the night." After a day of rowing that was a welcome thought to the travelers.

They traveled down what looked like the main street going through town. There were some shops along the road selling various everyday goods from food to clothes. The buildings were all made of wood with a lot of decorative shapes carved into the wood. When they arrived at the center of town there was a large round pool inside of a short wall. In the middle of the pool was a stone column with water spraying out of the top.

"Look at that!" Said Alro, "is it magic?"

"I don't think so," said Rhoal.

"Then where does the water come from?"

"I don't know." Rhoal shook her head. "Let's find a place to stay."

"How about over there?" Said Junn.

Rhoal looked where she was pointing. It was a building that had four levels with lots of windows. gelfling could be seen eating through the ground windows. "Ok, but no tricks. We need to walk tomorrow and the wind won't help us move faster."

They entered, paid for a meal and rooms to sleep in. They enjoyed some music being performed by some minstrels. Some of the gelfling got up and danced to

some of the more lively tunes. When they finished eating they went up the stairs to find their rooms.

“Where are you going? We need to go up two more.” Said Junn as she went up a second flight of stairs. Other than the Castle of Crystal, most buildings were one level, possibly two. But four levels was uncommon.

“Junn, you go with Alro. We’ll stay in here,” said Fliar.

“Why Junn?” Asked Alro.

“Because I heard about her late nights and I want to sleep,” Fliar said with a wicked smile.

“Afraid I’ll be too much fun?” Said Junn and walked into her room. Their rooms were not nearly as nice as those in Shardsmuth. They had two beds per room and one large window looking across the town back toward the falls.

They woke up the next morning and went downstairs to grab a bite to eat. “We should find out the best way to the Dust Pass from here,” Rhoal said.

“This is Dipoh Falls. The south road will take us there,” Junn said. “My family has done trade here before.”

“South it is then.”

After breakfast they packed up some food and took the south road out of town. It was a broad covered in dirt with forest to either side. There were small streams that crossed the road from time to time, but there were bridges crossing each one. By midday the forest had

thinned and they could clearly see where the two mountains meet with a pass between them.

As they approached the pass Junn walked up to Rhoal, "There is a better way through, Rhoal. Follow me." Junn took them off the road on a smaller path that followed the side of the mountain. It curved around to a place that could not be seen from the main road. A hole in the mountain could be seen.

"What is that?" Asked Alro.

"The Cave of Obscurity. My home."

Chapter 10 – The Pass

Kett, Ayal and Dorner stood at the entrance to the dust pass. It curved out of view in front of them so they could only see a little ways in to the canyon. The stones in the pass were smooth like those in a riverbed, but there was no river to be seen. There was only a long, dusty path.

“What do we do now?” Asked Dorner.

“I don’t know. This was where they were going and there’s no way they beat us here traveling on a river.” He thought about this, “do we go through or is this where they wanted to go?”

“You are only stopped by what you place in the way,” said Ayal.

“She’s right. We need to go through the pass.” Shar said.

“Well,” Kett mulled this over, “lead on.”

Dorner took the lead and walked into the pass. The ground was fairly level from side to side with a slope upwards as they walked. There were boulders and large rocks here and there and all vegetation looked like it had been dead for a long time. As they were coming around a boulder a gust of wind blew a bit of dust at them. They covered their faces.

“I guess that’s why they call it the dust pass, eh Dorn?” Kett said as he pulled his arm away from his face. Dorn was not there. “Dorn?” He continued walking around

the boulder. Someone grabbed his arm and pulled a bit of cloth across his mouth. This pulled him back, he fell off balance and a few more hands immobilized his arms. He realized he had been pulled into a cave and could see the entrance in front of him and what looked like two gelfling standing in the doorway pulling Ayal in.

Kett could hear Dorn trying to yell behind him. “MMM! MMM!” Kett said in response. As they moved deeper into the cave it became darker and darker till he could not see. Kett’s hands were bound behind him and something tied around his head made it impossible to talk. He was being gently pushed from behind and when he hesitated the pushing became more intense. Kett heard someone in front of him say “take them to the lower warren.” The three bound gelflings were frightened and with good reason. No one spoke, only the echoes of their shuffling feet reminded them that others were near them and somehow able to see. They knew not who or how many were with them, only that the strangers were in control. They walked up, around, down, this way and that. There was no way of knowing where they were. And then the pushing stopped. Something happened to the ropes on Kett’s hand and then he heard a scrape, clang behind him like something had closed.

Kett struggled with the ropes around his hands and they came off. He then pulled the cloth off from his mouth. “Dorn? Ayal?” He asked the darkness.

“Mmm!” Said Dorn near to him followed by a “Mmm” from Ayal a little farther away. Kett found Dorn. “I’ve got you,” he said and went for the ropes on his hands. It

was hard to find how it was tied without seeing it, but he got them off and started inching toward Ayal.

“Ayal?”

“Mmm?” She said. She repeated “mmm” a few times as he made it closer.

Dorner removed the cloth from his mouth and asked “what’s going on? Who are they?”

Kett found Ayal and then removed her ropes. “I don’t know,” Kett thought about what to say next, but they knew as much as him. Ayal put her arms around Kett as he removed the cloth around her mouth. Kett sat down on the floor and Ayal held on. She let out a sniff and Kett felt a tear on his arm. It was dark and scary so he held her too.

Dorner could be heard shuffling around the room.

“There’s a door where we came in,” he made a couple of chunk noises, “it’s locked.” He shuffled more, “it’s a round room,” thump, “oh, here’s a...bed? Yeah, it seems like a bed.” Shuffle shuffle, tap, “there’s a stone thing,” sniff, “ugh waste.” Shuffle shuffle, thump, “and this...is another bed.” Shuffle shuffle, “and I think,” shuffle, “yup back at the door.” Dorner thought for a bit, “So what do we do now?”

“I don’t know, wait?” Kett said, “they didn’t give us much to go on.”

“You’re right, s’pose it wouldn’t hurt to ask.” Shuffle, “Hey! Can I talk to someone?” Dorner yelled through the door. “Hello? Anyone there?” They waited, but no response. “I guess we just wait.” Shuffle shuffle shuffle,

thump, creak. “We still have our bags, so they can’t be too bad.”

“You’re right,” the feeling of dread subside a bit, “I’ve got my bag and so does Ayal.”

Ayal let out a sniff and said “yes.” She made her way over to the nearby bed to sit down. Kett decided to do the same. And then they waited.

Dorner didn’t like the silence. “So, you’ve seen my home and people. What about you Kett? What’s your home like?”

“My home? Uh...well. I told you I live near Ærlorn on the other side of the river. It’s a small village with a stream running through it. Our houses are built in the trees. We hunt and gather food from the forest. Not much to tell, really.”

“You got a firt you’re sweet on?” Kett could almost hear Dorner’s smile.

“Uh, yes? I mean I did like one gelfling. She was sweet and kind and her eyes sparkled when she smiled.”

“Aww, were you serious?” Said Dorner.

“Uh, well.”

“You were serious, ha haa.”

“No...we...we weren’t serious,” Kett said quietly. “I had wanted to get her alone to talk and tell her how I feel. So I asked her to meet me by the tall stone at last sun. Mother wanted me to take down some skins so I was

late. I heard her scream in the forest. When I got to where the scream came from she wasn't there. I found some tracks and followed them. They headed back toward Ærlorn. I ran back to the village and told the Elders. They said there was nothing they could do at night and it would need to wait till morning. I took Alro and we followed the tracks. They led us all the way to the Castle where the skeksis caught us."

Dorner felt like a floon for bugging Kett. "Do you think she's there?"

"I don't know. If she's there, she's probably a slave. I want to go back, but I need help and to get that help I'm going to need more information." He thought about this and said quietly "that's why we need to find the Mystics before Rhoal."

They were quiet for a while.

Ayal spoke up, "Sense of time is lost when there are no suns in the sky to track and no moons to follow. If one cannot see the remains of the day's activities the idea of 'when' becomes difficult to follow."

"Mmm," said Kett in agreement.

"Ayal? Tell us of your home."

"Home?" She said, as if trying to remember some long lost place. "Home. So far it is just a memory now. The world beckoned and I responded to the wanderlust, breaking the chains of comfort to experience the knowledge which at that point had only been retained. Far across the rippling grasses, beyond to the sea, I

traveled and met gelfling who welcome those deemed comely with generosity. Take to the waters I was told, they hold the wonders and a calmness only balanced by their rage. Broken, left to fend, introspection brought forth knowledge and an ancient friend in that remote place where gelfling rarely tread. Though, that rarity provided a possibility that was fulfilled in gelfling also braving the wet wilderness to my unwanted refuge. Once again returned to a path that could lead where comfort might be reclaimed, ill fortune again set itself upon my journey. I was removed to a once Castle of Crystal awaiting my fate...and fate delivered me again to the hands of friends." Though they could not see it, she smiled. "Life's journey will not end before its time, it can only be diverted."

Kett and Dorner were silent as they listened to her musical voice spin a story they didn't fully understand. The sound of her voice was comforting. Dorner thought to ask her to tell him more of her homeland when they were interrupted.

"You three," a voice came through the door, "what is your business in the pass?"

"We planned to meet someone on the other side," Kett responded.

"You had business in Dipoh? Then they are expecting you. What goods do you trade?"

Kett was not sure how to answer this. "Uh...we have no goods with us."

“I can see that, but you must be coming to buy. Who were you to meet?”

“Uh...” Kett really didn’t know what to say. He put his hand on Ayal in case she had any suggestions, she didn’t and Dorner wasn’t saying anything. “Shar, we were meeting Shar in Dee-pot. To buy...to buy.” *What do they want to hear? If I say the right thing will they let me go?* Kett thought.

Dorner realized Kett was floundering, “dishes and pots for food shops.”

“Hmm...” the gelfling behind the door said as he thought. “At what price did you agree to pay this Shahr?”

Kett thought quickly about how much it might cost. Dorner said “we hadn’t talked price yet. That’s why we were comin in person.”

They heard some whispering behind the door. And then they thought they heard them walk off.

“What was that about?” Kett asked.

“I dunno. Figuring our value? They don’t want money, cause I’ve still got mine,” said Dorner.

“Do you think they want the dishes and pots?” Asked Kett.

“Maybe.”

“We shouldn’t say more about it, in case they’re listening,” warned Kett.

“Yeah, they didn’t make much noise comin or goin.”

They sat quietly for a while wondering to themselves what their captors meant to do with them.

“Ssst...”

“Was that you?” Dorner asked.

“No, wh...”

“Ssst...” came the sound again interrupting Kett.

Dorner got up and moved toward the door. Shuffle, shuffle, shuffle “who’s there?” he said quietly.

“Are you for or against the Grottan?” Came the whisper.

“Don’t know what the Grottan is,” Dorner whispered back.

“Right answer, I’ll get you out.” Slow clunking could be heard in the door. Kett and Ayal stood up and shuffled toward the door. “Shhhlach,” said the door mechanism and the door slid slowly in, quietly creaking in the process. “You must trust me, hold hands.” They held hands. The gelfling took Dorner’s hand and pulled him along. “You must be silent,” he whispered to them.

The four gelfling moved slowly in what sounded like a hall. They heard a quiet *tap-tap* of a rock down the hall and the gelfling stopped them. A short time later they heard a quiet *tap* of a rock and they started walking again. The tapping and stopping happened a few times during their walk. At some places they could make out

shadows, but it was difficult at best. The gelfling brought them to a stop (no tapping this time) and they heard the scraping of stone against stone.

“We are safe. I am Gurnal and you are with the Grottan” said the gelfling who was leading them.

“What is going on?” Kett asked.

“You were taken by the Grutton. They rebelled and have been taking travelers for some unknown reason. We have decided to frustrate whatever plans they have with you till we can reason with them. Do you know what their plans are?”

“Nope, but they sure did wanna know what we’re up to” said Dorner.

“They asked about what we came to trade and who we were trading with” said Kett.

“Hmm...,” Gurnal thought, “I’m not sure what that means, but I will pass it to my elders.”

Another gelfling spoke “the elders want to talk to them.”

“They do?” Said Gurnal.

“Yes, take them to the small table.”

“I guess you are to speak with an elder, come with me” said Gurnal as he took Dorner’s hand. They walked through corridors and rooms. After a while they could hear other gelfling talking as they passed through. From time to time they could make out shadows, but

everything remained dark till they entered a room that had a little light in it. They could see a table and a door opposite the one they came in. There were large crystals in the walls and on the table that gave off a little light. Enough to see at least.

“Starlight,” said Ayal sounding relieved.

“Sit and make yourselves comfortable. Have some food” Gurnal said as another gelfling came in and put two bowls on the table. Gurnal and the gelfling then left them alone.

“Mushrooms,” said Dorner tasting the contents, “and I think this one’s something to dip them in. It’s slimy.”

Kett was wary of trying new food and reached in to the bowl slowly trying to see what was in it. “Most Surfars don’t like our food. Give it a chance, it might grow on you,” said a gelfling that had just walked in. “The Grutton took you from the pass?”

“Yes,” said Kett pulling back his hand.

“What business do you have in the pass?”

“Well, we were hoping to meet someone on the other side.”

The gelfling sat down, “really. That is interesting. And who might that be?”

“We uh...,” Kett thought about this for a second, he looked over at Dorner. “We were hoping to meet some gelfling coming from Quanrull.”

“Gelfling, hmm? That’s strange,” she said building up to something, “you are not Dousan and they’re the only ones who trade through this pass.”

Kett, Dorner and Ayal looked surprised.

“What were you really meeting them for? Are you aiding the Grutton?”

“No sir, we didn’t. We don’t have anything to do with the groo-tuhn,” Kett said panicked. “We’ve been looking for our friends for a while.”

“Yeah,” said Dorner, “after we escaped from the skek, oof.” Kett kicked Dorner under the table.

“Escaped, from the skeksis?” The Elder thought about this. “Go on,” she prodded.

Kett gathered his thoughts, “We escaped from them and they have been hunting us with their garthim.”

“That would explain why you came from that side of the pass. Why are you really here?” She asked. Kett wasn’t sure how to answer. She was looking for an answer he could not give or did not know.

Ayal stood, “*Knowledge leads me forth,*” she said with emphasis, “In times past there were legends of those who were called Mystic. I seek them,” Ayal spoke.

“Aah, you are a seeker,” the Elder said relieved. “It has been a while since we have had one pass through our caverns. You do well to protect her,” she said to Kett. “The Mystics, hmm...you seek the Gnarled Stonetree.”

“The Gnarled Stonetree?” Said Kett.

“Yes, it is said to point the way for those who know how to look. Travel from the pass, through Dipoh and beyond to find it.”

“Time holds us all captive,” said Ayal as she bowed.

The elder rose and said with a bow “May you shake its chains.” She turned to Kett and said “Gurnal will lead you to the other side of the pass.” The elder left.

“A seeker?” Kett said to Ayal while he thought back to the stories of his youth, many of which involved those who were stirred up to go and seek wisdom. They would often end up finding adventure and getting into trouble only to be delivered by the unseen hand of luck.

Ayal shrugged.

Gurnal returned. “Come, we must go or you will not reach Dipoh by last sun.”

Chapter 11 – The Crystal Sea

“Skeksis?” Said Junn. She wasn’t sure she heard the guard right. After a good night’s sleep in the darkness she had missed for so long she wondered if she was still dreaming.

“What was that?” Said Rhoal looking around. It annoyed her that she couldn’t make out enough from shadows to figure out where she was or who she might be facing.

Junn made her way over to Rhoal, Fliar and Alro. “One of our merchants saw skeksis near Quanrull.”

“When?” Asked Rhoal.

“Three days ago.”

“They’re hunting us. I thought the Garthim at the sea were a chance meeting,” Rhoal said to herself. “This changes things. We’ve been wasting time. We’re not taking this seriously enough. We must go.” She grabbed Junn “now!”

“How did they find us?” Asked Alro.

“It doesn’t matter. They can, and that’s all we need to know.” Rhoal thought for a second, “we can’t walk fast in the dark. We need light.”

“Light is forbidden in our home,” said Junn.

“Then how can we see?”

“I might not be able to let you see, but I can give you my memory of the halls.” Junn led the others to a small

room and placed their hands in hers. "Let us Dreamfast. Your eyes cannot see the beauty herein..." she said as laid before them were halls of great beauty. Filled with crystal that gives off light, the path they should take leads through halls upwards. There were side tunnels leading into homes where families lived and grottos where fungus and other growing things were cared for. They were led into a large chamber with hanging rocks reaching like teeth to their match on the floor. *The Great Hall*, Junn thought. They could all feel her longing to be home and safe. Other thoughts and memories came flooding in from the other three about the beautiful things they all missed in their homes. *Focus on the Great Hall*, she thought. They turned their attention to look and see a waterfall cascading down to a pool that is crossed by a bridge that will lead them beyond to other halls with less crystal. These were less traveled paths that lead to a chasm with an ancient crystal bridge that looks like it had grown there. The halls became even darker till they arrived at a door of blinding light. "There, that is the route we must take."

"This is what you see when you walk these halls? Your home is more beautiful than I would have ever imagined Junn." Said Alro.

"It's sad that you will miss most of it. We should dreamfast again someday and share the beauties we have seen in our homes" Junn said wistfully. "We should go. I can hold your hands and we will move much faster." She took them to the grottos where they could gather food, then to the Great Hall where they collected water. Fliar said, "Because the crystal sea is short of water." They then hastened through the halls

and felt the wind of the chasm and the ring of their feet on the bridge that crossed it. Eventually they arrived at the door that provided the blinding light they saw in the dreamfast. It took a few minutes for their eyes to adjust.

“By the looks of it, the morning is half done and if we move we can make up some time” said Rhoal as she jogged down the hill to the dirt covered plains below. As the rest caught up she said “where do we go from here Fliar?”

Fliar looked around, “we should head directly away from Claw Mountain. We should be at the Crystal Sea by last sun.”

Rhoal pushed them for the rest of the day. At last sun they still had not arrived at the Crystal Sea. Rhoal saw the others were exhausted. “We should find a place to sleep.” They fell asleep easily.

Rhoal woke up happy to be awake before first sun. “Wake up. Wake up! We need to find the sea soon.” They struggled to get up, but they were soon on the move. As the twilight approached before first sun the sea could be seen spread out before them. There was a thin haze across the top of the sea. Alro was curious and walked to the moving crystal and reached down to touch it. It was so light it felt like the soft hair of a Tryl, it was almost not there. He could see its bits falling through his fingers.

Fliar called “Look!” And the first sun peeked over the horizon causing the sea to explode in a flash of color and swirling patterns. It reflected so many colors it was

a wonder the light could contain them all. Junn shrieked and fell to her knees holding her hands over her face.

This was enough to shake Alro from his crystal induced haze. "Are you all right?" He asked Junn.

"Ugh, yes. It's my fault. I should have known not to look," she said annoyed.

"There's a trade village not far from here beyond those rocks." Fliar pointed to some rocks that jutted out into the sea.

Alro led Junn who was not able to see where she was going. They walked a well worn path over the rocks which opened up into a village made of small stone blocks.

"Let me do the talking and negotiation. My people do not trust outsiders" said Fliar. "Come, we should go to the docks. The sailors should be preparing to leave." She led them through the maze of streets till the buildings gave way to the wide expanse that was the crystal sea. They could get a better look at it now. It glowed with swirling colors and patterns that they could almost make out before they turned into something else. The sea was also covered in a light haze that stopped any one crystal from shining, only the glow from all the crystals had shown through it.

"What are we doing?" Said Jenn, still covering her face.

"I will have to show you what I see sometime," said Alro.

“Come, you need shrouds,” Fliar led them into a shop full of clothing. “We must cover you up, to protect you from the crystal. Fliar quickly outfitted herself. She had tall shoes, long pants, and a shirt that covered her arms and neck. She also had a scarf that was tied loosely. “I will be back. She will help you find the right clothes” and out she went leaving Rhoal, Alro and Junn to figure out clothing.

“Some of the old gelts on the boats have skin like leather and lungs made of crystal, but you foresters need covering” said the shop keeper as she helped Junn to find clothes that would fit. She was a little stockier than the other filts.

The shopkeeper was still picking out clothes when Fliar walked back in. She went over to Rhoal, “they will not let outsiders ride with them. I can go on my own and return with what we are looking for.”

Rhoal did not like this, “what? You mean to leave us here to wait for the...” she glanced over at the shop keep that was helping Alro with a hooded vest. “Leave us to wait for them to catch up to us?”

Fliar whispered back, “I could be back by tomorrow, midday.”

“That is not good enough. We must all go, are you trying to get out of your responsibility?” Rhoal moved closer and said with sternness in her voice “you will get us on that boat.”

“But, but we were not invited,” Fliar said quietly.

“Then, go and tell them that we are invited.” Rhoal said menacingly.

“Your turn!” Said the shop keeper as she walked up to Rhoal, “ooh, you have such lovely green eyes. I have a clasp that will match.”

Fliar looked down and nodded. She left the shop.

“What was that about?” Asked Alro.

“She lacks the resolve,” grumbled Rhoal.

“Do you have a closet with no windows?” Asked Junn.

“Sure, over there.” The shop keeper pointed to a door. Alro led her to it, “Here’s a mirror,” he said.

Rhoal was being handed layers of clothing to put on. “Is this really necessary?”

“Oh, yes. The crystal is like narb’ns in your bed. You’ll itch and hurt all over. Now go try those on.”

Junn came out of the closet. “I look cute. These clothes are great.” She did look good. The dark greys in the boots, belt and tunic with the light colored fabric of the shirt and pants worked well with her pale skin and white hair. She pulled up the hood and was able to open her eyes a little.

Rhoal came out of the dressing room in browns and tans. She was a strong gelfling in very good health and this outfit covered, but did not hide it. “I look silly,” she said.

“Much better than the baggy things you had before. You look good,” said Alro.

Rhoal flushed rose and said “we need to go. Where is Fliar.”

“Here is your payment,” Alro gave the shop keeper all he had. She looked it over and seemed satisfied.

Alro and Junn walked out after Rhoal. “Ugh, this isn’t like the forest or the swamp. It’s too bright.” Junn said. Alro took her hand and led her toward Rhoal, who had found Fliar.

“They have agreed to take us, but they are leaving now so we must go” said Fliar. Rhoal nodded and Fliar led them to the dock where something was bobbing in the crystal next to the dock.

“Is that the...boat?” Rhoal said trying to make out what she saw. It looked like someone had turned a boat over and grew tall crystals out of it. The gelfling on the dock were loading a few things on to the boat and tying them to the pillars of crystal coming from it.

Fliar smiled, “It’s not a boat. It’s a tourmele. Boats would fall apart, but tourmele live in the Crystal Sea. They swim through it.” She turned and leaped onto the huge beast. Rhoal decided she was ok with this and jumped aboard. The back of the creature looked like wood made from stone. They helped Junn get on board and they all sat down at about the middle of its back.

“You ready?” Asked one of the three gelfling sailors.

“Yes” said Fliar. The gelfling walked to the end near the

shore and tapped his staff on the creature's back. A large broad head rose up out of the crystal. He spoke some words to it and the tourmele heaved its body around and they started moving out to sea.

The sea had a haze of crystal dust that hung over the sea about one gelfling high. It glowed with the reflected light of the crystal sea. No matter where they looked, it was bright. Alro and Rhoal quickly realized why they needed the hoods and scarves to cover their eyes, nose and mouths. The tourmele moved in a slow rhythmic motion creating quite a current with its long powerful tail. From time to time it would let out a low "Mmmphh..." It was a long morning with little talk, though they were grateful they didn't need to walk or row to get where they were going.

...

"Look!" Said one of the sailors. It was past midday and he was pointing out over the sea. Rhoal, Fliar and Alro strained to see. In the distance something rose out of the sea. Fliar drew a breath, "Primat" she said with awe. As they drew closer they could see the towers of crystal and rock shooting out of the sea. White smoke could be seen rising up from the city creating rainbows from the light reflected in the crystals.

They approached a large archway made by two very large crystals crossing each other at the top. Four tourmele could fit end to end across the width of the opening. The harbor was surrounded by tall cliffs dotted with windows, doors and crossed by paths leading every which way. Despite the cliffs the harbor was awash with

light from many directions, diffused in a way that it didn't blind. There were other huge pillars of crystal that crossed above the harbor forming the supports for a roof.

"Let's get off...now," said Fliar as they pulled up to a dock. Rhoal took hold of Junn and they all leaped to shore. "Quickly, follow me" Fliar said as they quickly walked across the short flat area between the docks and the cliffs. She was headed for a staircase and up they went, then down a long wide corridor where they paused. "Good, I don't think they saw us. Let me check to see if we're being followed." She went back to the opening to the harbor. The others looked at each other. Alro shrugged. Fliar returned "we weren't followed" she seemed relieved. She looked at the others "keep your hoods on. No one must see who you are."

"Who are we then?" Asked Rhoal.

"Outsiders...," Fliar looked around. "Come, let's go to the library." They traveled up one path, through a corridor, up another staircase, up and up they went till they they emerged onto a large area open to the sky and surrounded by tall crystal pillars. The crystal pillars had been carved and shaped at their bases to hold businesses and lavish homes. Pillars of steam rose from behind the buildings all around. It was all very different from any other place they had seen. As they walked Alro noticed that every gelfling looked a lot like Fliar. They had her darker skin and shiny black hair.

"There is the library," Fliar said quietly. The building they were walking toward was an enormous, six sided

crystal with arteries of stone flowing through it creating a natural lattice that both blocked and let in light. They entered a beautifully carved entrance into a large hall supported by columns. Paths could be seen off to each side filled with books. They walked down this short hall to a large six sided atrium. Six levels could be seen above them.

“I’ve never...never...never...never...never...” The echo made Alro stop. They all stopped and looked at him. He decided to whisper “I’ve seen books before, but I’ve never seen so many.”

Fliar whispered back, “every family generation writes their story. They are stored here along with all our knowledge. If the Mystics are to be found, that knowledge is here...I’ll be right back, stay here.” Fliar walked off.

The mix of crystal and stone in the ceiling and walls allowed them to see things clearly without being too bright. Even Junn felt more comfortable here. There were statues of gelfling in different poses lining the main hall probably depicting important characters in their history. Soon Fliar returned. “There are some books that might have what we are looking for. They are this way.” Fliar led them into the maze of books to a staircase that took them down a level. It was darker down here. They walked till they had reached wherever Fliar wanted to look. She then started looking through books, “hold this” she handed a book to Alro.

“Is that the book?” Rhoal said.

“I’m not sure, take this one too. And this one.” She grabbed books as she went. “Go put them on the table over there. At the end of the shelved hall was a small area with a table and chairs in it. Fliar gathered about twenty books with the help of the others. There were a few small statues that looked like open books on the table. She set down a book on one of these and said “let’s get looking.”

“You can read these?” Alro asked.

Fliar was a little surprised, “of course, can’t you?”

“No, I think one of our elders can,” said Alro.

“What about you two?” She asked the others.

“We didn’t have much use for them at home,” said Rhoal.

“We sing our stories,” said Junn.

“Well, I guess it’s up to me then” said Fliar and she delved into the books piled on the table. Alro watched her fascinated with so many old books. What did all the writing mean? What did they say? He watched as she placed the folding part of a book on an odd statue, pull down one side toward her and look at the writing in the first few pages. Still holding the back of the book she would release pages till she got to the one she wanted. Then she would rest the back of the book on the statue and look at the pages for a while. Junn took a nap.

Alro decided to take a book and look at it like Fliar. It made no sense. *How could these little scratches mean something? A lot of them are the same. How can you*

talk about different things with the same scratches?

Alro thought as he tried to make sense of the book. He tried another. This one had drawings in it. He wasn't sure what they were drawings of and thought: *Even the drawings don't make sense.*

"Can you hand me that book," Fliar asked Alro while Rhoal paced around the table. "Stay near me Rhoal. Outsiders are not wanted here." Rhoal grumbled under her breath. Fliar looked through book after book till she says, "I think I found something."

"Finally, we can go." Said Rhoal relieved.

"No, I found a passage that says 'Of the Mystic's home, the Gnarled Stonetree knows the way.'"

"What does that mean?" Said Rhoal impatiently.

"It means I need to find out about the Gnarled Stonetree," Fliar said reaching for another book.

"Ugh," said Rhoal as she sat down and put her head on the table.

Fliar sifted through more books till she said to herself "Jidal took the path past the Shard to the Stonetree...Jidal!" she said as she got up and walked quickly down one of the shelved halls of books. Rhoal raised her head in interest, but Fliar returned with a few more books so she put her head back down. Fliar continued through these books till she said "this is it...I've got it. Look," she said pointing to the top page of the book. Alro and Rhoal came to look over her shoulders. "See, the stone tree has these markings?"

They saw what looked like odd shaped bark and below it criss crossing branches. "Jidal says this is old script that says 'gaze high to see below' and these branches show a map of sorts. He then says 'Where two valleys merge the stone will point the way.' That's the answer" she said proud of herself.

"What does that mean?" Rhoal asked annoyed.

Fliar looked up at her, "hmm...we need a map. I'll be back. Do not leave this spot. Alro, put these books away," she said as she left.

"How do I know where they go?" He said, but she was gone. He did his best to find those places missing books.

Fliar returned with rolls of cloth. She pushed the book statues out of the way and rolled one out. "This is about where he said the Gnarled Stonetree was. He said it was this way, through the dust pass to where the valleys...they might be here," she said as she pointed at another place on the cloth. She rolled it back up again. She looked through her other rolls till she found one she liked and rolled it out on the table. "If we continue along this direction we see the little valleys going toward the Castle." She stopped. She then crouched down to look at the map from the edge of the table. She stood back up and put her finger on the map and said "here! Here is where two valleys meet and it lines up with the tree and the pass" Fliar said triumphantly.

"So...do we know where to go now?" Alro asked expecting the answer no. It wasn't.

“Yes. I just need to write this down.” She looked around and then let out a sigh. “I’ll be right back.” She got up, collected some maps and left.

“Augh,” said Rhoal, “we don’t have time for this” she said as she kicked a chair over.

She returned with a small piece of cloth and a black stick. She carefully drew some things on the cloth using the stick. She then rolled up the cloth and said “let’s go. We can’t leave tonight, but I know where we can stay.” They went back up to the main hall and out to the open area in front of the library. Fliar took a different route around the area. She looked toward the center where two round lights were on the ground. “First sun’s down,” she said and they turned down a sloping path which curved in a circle as it went down. The inner walls of the path were crystal and inside the crystal looked like it was full of clouds moving up. The path straightened out into a hallway with a large doorway at the end.

The doorway opened up into a huge, six sided cave. Three walls of the cave had steam rising up along them as they curved inward to a large hole in the top where three large pillars came down to a pool on the ground. The whole cavern was humid and the other three walls between the steam were terraced with plants growing on them. The large crystal shafts that came through the ceiling above the terraces provided a lot of light.

Alro slowed down taking the scenery in. “This is beautiful” said Alro.

Fliar grabbed his hand, “we have no time to be gawking like outsiders.” She led them to a hallway between a terraced wall and a steam wall. The hall ended at another hallway and they turned right. This hallway was wide and there were alcoves to the side that reminded Alro of the front porches in Ærlorn. They went into one and Fliar knocked on the door. An old filf opened the door and gasped at the sight of her. “Shh, inside first” Fliar said and dragged Rhoal in. Alro and Junn followed. Fliar led them to a room with comfortable looking pillows and cloth on the walls.

An old gelt was sitting on one. He turned, looked, gasped and stood up “Oh my...my...” tears welled up in his eyes. The gelfling from the door came in “Our daughter is home!” She embraced Fliar. “My precious flower,” her father said and wrapped his arms around them. They held her. “We thought the crystals had claimed you. No one returned.”

“It is a long story, but I am here now.” Fliar said.

“Yes, yes” said her father who then turned to the others. “Thank you for returning our daughter.”

Fliar’s mother gasped, “out-outside?” She said in a hushed tone.

“Yes mother. These are foresters.” She said pointing to Alro and Rhoal as they removed their hoods and scarves.

Fliar’s mother walked closer to them and took their hands. “So pale,” she said to herself. “You are welcome here.”

“I guess that makes me a cave-er then?” Said Junn as she pulled down her hood and scarf. Fliar’s parents were aghast to look at her. She stared back at them from her pale face and white hair with her eyes that looked like two black orbs. She rarely took her hood off. Even Alro and Rhoal were staring.

“These are my parents Shriya and Dhruv,” Fliar said while everyone was gawking at Junn.

“It is like gazing into the night sky,” said Fliar’s father, Dhruv.

“It is wonderful to meet you,” said Shriya as she took Junn’s hands. Junn flushed a bit at all the attention.

“I must get you some food,” said Dhruv as he left the room.

“Come, sit,” said Shriya and they all sat down amongst the pillows. “I can’t believe you are home. When none of the others returned we thought your tourmele went deep.”

“There was a storm, but he got us to shore,” Fliar said and Rhoal gave her a look. Fliar thought for a second. “Uh...I was the only one left when we got to shore. The tourmele left to ride out the storm, but I was lost.”

“That sounds terrifying, Fliar.”

“It was. I wandered for days and found forest. That is where I found the foresters. They took me with them on their travels which led them here,” she paused to think for a second, “...and since their business is not done I need to go with them.”

“But you’ve just returned home,” said Shriya sounding a bit crestfallen.

“We will be done soon enough and then I’ll come back,” said Fliar reassuringly. “So how are things here? What of Prachi?”

“Your sister has traveled to Port Vatkara to pursue learning there. On her last visit she had a gelt named Kapil in tow. He was quiet and very good looking?” Shriya said with a smile.

Fliar smiled back “quiet eh? Not that he could’ve gotten a word in with her,” she said with a laugh which was echoed by her mother. “What of father?”

“Oh, he still spends his days on the terraces. ‘No one will be able to resist my bron at market this year,’ he says.”

“And you?” Asked Fliar.

“Me? Well, with you and Prachi gone I didn’t have much to do so I started helping around the ward.”

“The’ve elected her ward voice!” Dhruv said from the other room.

“Mother! That’s wonderful. You always know what’s best and now everyone can benefit.”

Shriya blushed, “oh now, it’s not so important. Every cycle I need to sit in on city meetings and listen to them drone on about aqueducts, reclamation and other boring things. I think I was elected because no one wanted the job.”

Rhoal had settled in to some pillows in the corner by this point. She had consigned herself to the fact that she would not be leaving till morning. She was still impatient about it, but at least she was comfortable.

Alro and Junn were listening to Fliar and Shriya chat. "Such a different life here in Primat. Books and studying and being voted for. It's nothing like home," said Alro quietly to Junn.

"I'm still getting used to it being bright all the time," said Junn as she put her hood back up. "At least the nights are beautiful. So many little crystals in the sky."

Ayal was reminded of the caverns. "Your home is very different too. Always inside, never seeing the suns, or green plants." Alro thought about this for a moment, "I had never been far from home until Tyrr was taken. Kett convinced me that we should go find her...and now she's lost somewhere in the Castle. Or even dead." He said more quietly.

"She might still be alive," Jun also said quietly. "When we are finished we can go back to the empty Castle and get her."

Alro thought about that, "I guess we will be heroes. I wonder how gelfling will treat us?"

"Who wants brun puffs?!" Said Dhruv as he walked in with a large round plate. The plate had little balls on it that had steam coming off of them.

"They look hot," Alro said not expecting plants to steam like that.

“Of course,” said Dhruv, “you would not like cold brun puffs, and because I made them, no one will find out.” Dhruv came out with more food and they all ate. Dhruv told them stories about his plants and how they are the most sought after in the market. He talked about all the new recipes for brun, djol and other vegetables he grew on the terraces. Shriya spoke of all the new plans for the city and how they are going to build a new stone arch for the main entrance to the ward. Alro and Fliar listened intently to the stories and Junn seemed aloof while Rhoal brooded in her corner.

The crystals lighting the room slowly went dim as it became late. “Well, it’s late mother and we need to leave before first sun tomorrow” said Fliar.

“Hmm...you can sleep in your old room and if your friends do not have a place to stay would they mind sleeping here?”

Fliar looked around and wasn’t surprised to see no objections. “They would be fine with it.” Shriya brought in some blankets and a few more pillows and the gefling covered themselves in comfort.

...

Before morning Rhoal managed to wake up and rouse the others. They got ready, put on their hoods and scarves, and Fliar carefully led them to the docks. “Wait here,” she said as she left them in a small corridor near the docks. They could see her on the dock floor talking to some gefling near one of the tourmele. She returned and said “you are children of an important artisan in the city. The sailors are not to talk to you out of respect.

Let's go." They went down to the docks, hopped aboard the tourmele and soon they were on their way.

"That was a little too easy," whispered Rhoal to Junn.

"Nothing comes easy to us. I wonder what she did?"

The trip from Primat was like the trip to Primat. The haze of crystal dust above the crystal made it difficult to see very far. Junn was completely blind in the dazzling light of the Crystal Sea. Fliar would get updates from the crew, Alro was impressed by it all and Rhoal brooded.

When they arrived at the port it was midday. Rhoal was ready to go she walked through town quickly. At the middle of town there were gelfling in tent like structures selling goods. "A market," said Fliar excitedly.

Rhoal picked up some supplies at one of the tents that caught her eye. She handed them to Alro and Junn.

"Where's Fliar?"

"I think she's, yes she's over there" said Alro.

Rhoal went to get her, "come on, we need to go."

"Oh, sure" said Fliar.

As they were leaving the market Rhoal saw Fliar lingering at one of the tents looking at the goods. Rhoal walked over. "What are you doing? We need to go."

"Oh, hi Rhoal" Fliar looked up. "I need to talk to you."

Rhoal pulled her away from the other gelfling. "What do you want to talk about?" She said impatiently.

Fliar looked a bit sheepish. “Well, I found the way to the Mystics for you. I’ve helped you get this far. I don’t think you need me anymore. I should go back to my home. I belong there.”

Rhoal turned red and tried to keep her voice calm, “what do you mean? You’re going to leave us like Shar and the others? Are you going to be a traitor like them? If you quit the skeksis win. We need to see this through so our families will be safe. Do you understand?”

Fliar nodded, “yeah, I guess you’re right.”

“Now let’s go before the skeksis discover us.”

At the edge of town they stopped at a well to refill their water. Fliar was far behind. “Stay here, Fliar has fallen behind,” Rhoal said to the others as she went back to Fliar.

Fliar looked up and said “Rhoal, I’ve decided to go.”

“Shh,” Rhoal said. She walked farther from Junn and Alro. She pulled Fliar into an alley between houses and said “What was that again?”

“I’ve thought about it and I should go home. I’m not a fighter,” Fliar said sadly.

“I knew it. You *are* working for them. I knew you’re heart wasn’t into it. What will they give you for our capture?”

Fliar looked surprised, “What? No, I didn’t...”

“Don’t lie to me. You were the one who wanted to go to the Library alone. You’re the only one who could read the books. You even made this map and now you want us to follow it without you. Where does it lead Fliar? Hmm...what waits for us there?”

Fliar’s eyes were tearing up, “Rhoal, no. I didn’t...”

Rhoal had pulled out a knife and lunged at Fliar. She pinned her to the ground with the knife at her neck. “I need to know what waits for us at the end of the map, Fliar. Will the skeksis be there?”

Fliar was terrified, tears streamed out of her wide eyes as she looked at Rhoal. “No, I...”

“Skeksis, Fliar. Will they be there?”

“No, there will be no skeksis.”

“No traps?”

“No traps,” said Fliar through her tears. “Rhoal, please let me go home. I don’t belong here.”

“If you go back they will find you or you will find them. I cannot take that risk.” Rhoal said pulling the knife away from Fliar’s neck. Fliar let out a sigh of relief. Rhoal tensed up and shoved the blade right through Fliar’s chest into her heart. Fliar’s eyes widened in shock and Rhoal removed the knife. Fliar desperately reached to Rhoal for help her eyes full of pleading. She tried to speak, but she could not. Fliar gasped for air till her arms lost their strength and fell away from Rhoal.

Rhoal stood up, tears in her eyes, “the skeksis will pay for this evil.”

Chapter 12 - Stonetree

“Whoa, would ya look at that? The water is just jumping up on its own.” Dorner said as he pointed to a small pool of water in the middle of Dipoh. It had water coming out of the top cascading down to a pool.

“Wow,” said Kett.

“You’re the second group this week impressed by that fountain. It’s the pride of the town. Some say if you throw your blue crystal in and make a wish, it will come true” said an older gelfling passing by.

“Oh yeah? We’ll see about that” said Dorner as he began fishing through his pockets.

“Put your crystal away, Dorn,” said Kett as he turned to the old gelfling. “Excuse me, did you say second group?”

“Yes. I guess some people haven’t seen a fountain before.”

“Who were the first?”

“Well? There were three or four of them, different folk. They spent a lot of crystal over there.” The gelfling pointed to a tall building.

“Thank you,” said Kett. He turned to Ayal and Dorner, “that was probably Alro and the others. They must’ve figured out where to go. We need to hurry before they make any mistakes they’ll regret.”

“Well, the Grottan said the tree was beyond this town. We should keep going that way” suggested Dorner. The

other two nodded and they were on their way. They came to the edge of town and there was a short wall that was on either side of the road up ahead. As they were walking past they noticed that the ground opened up on other sides of the walls.

“Whoa, would ya look at that!” Dorner said as he walked over to the wall to look down.

Kett joined him, “this is taller than the Grand Bridge at *Ælorn*.”

It was tall enough to make Dorner back away from the wall, “too high for me. I’m...a’goin to the other side.” They were on their way again, soon the road turned sharply to the right, but there was a small trail going the direction they were told go. “It looks like this should be the way” said Kett. Soon the last sun set and the stars began to show.

“I think we might be off course,” Kett said. Ayal walked past him. He looked at Dorner, shrugged and followed Ayal. She stopped in a small clearing looking up at the sky, then she kept on walking. “I guess she can follow the stars” Kett said to Dorner who nodded.

It was very late when Dorner said “I need some sleep.”

“We’ve traveled pretty far. We can sleep till morning and find out where we are” said Kett.

They slept where they stopped. Kett woke up at first sun, “lucky that” he said. “Wake up, I’m going to climb a tree to see where we are.” He looked around for a suitably tall tree and made his way up. He could hear

Dorner say “he’s pretty good” while he was climbing. High at the top of the tree Kett could see over most of the trees in the forest. He could see the mountains beyond Dipoh and the forest all around him and when the mountains were at his back he could see a tree. A very large tree, much taller than those in the forest, “that’s got to be it” he said and began his climb down.

“What did you see up there?” Dorner said when Kett was almost to the ground.

“Well? I saw a big tree.”

Dorner snorted, “wow, what’s the chance of that?”

“No, I saw a tree big enough to build a town in.”

“Oh...” said Dorner as he thought about a town in a tree, “wow. That’s a big tree.”

“It’s not far. If we go that way we’ll get there.” Kett pointed a little to the left of the path they were following. “So, if we follow the path for a while and turn left...”

Dorner was already walking, “sounds good to me.” It was a short while and they saw the path split ahead. They took the one to the left. The forest became darker before they emerged from some bushes into a dark, open area.

“Whoo, would ya look at that? That’s what the base of a tree would look like if I was a little bug.” That tree base was a wide twisted, grey, bumpy wreck of a tree. It was nearly a tree high before it split into two trunks holding

up a massive canopy of leaves. None of its branches were straight.

“This has got to be the Gnarled Stonetree” said Kett.

“Now we need to figure out where the message is.” The tree looked like it could have been covered in symbols, but if there were, it grew that way. They walked around the tree, looking at different spots and discovering messages only to doubt what they thought they saw when they examined it closer.

“I see a collip root!” Said Dorner.

“We’re not looking for collip roots” said Kett.

“Oh, right. That looks like a bread roll.”

“Really? ...no, that’s just a knot.”

“That looks like a mushroom.”

“Are you hungry Dorn?”

“Yeah...why?”

“No reason.”

They went back and forth with misses and hits that turned out to be misses. They had missed Ayal who went another way around the tree. Kett almost bumped into her as he came around. “Oh, hey Ayal. I didn’t see you there.” She was looking straight up. Kett looked up too, “what do you see?” She laid down and stared for a bit. Kett started walking around the tree again. He looked over at Ayal on the ground. She had brought her

hand up near her face and she was tracing things in the air with her finger. Kett decided to walk back over.

“The glyph speaks ‘up.’” She said.

“Hmm, what?” Kett said as he approached.

“The waterway, the passage through, the scars...wounds cross and the marker tells by the fruit.”

“Did you figure it out?” Asked Kett.

Ayal nodded.

“You know where to go then?”

She nodded again.

“Is it back to the pass.”

She smiled, then nodded.

“Back to the pass Dorn!” Kett yelled over to Dorner.

“Did you find it? Cause I found another collip root, I think it’s a pattern!”

“No, Ayal knows the way.”

“All right Ayal. You got it before me. Did you follow the collips?” He asked her. She didn’t answer. “I bet it was the collips” said Dorner as he watched her pick up a fallen fruit from the ground.

They were on their way back to the pass. “We’re making good time. We could be at the bridge by midday and at the pass by last sun.”

It was a little after midday when they arrived at Dipoh. They bought some supplies with what little crystal they had left and made their way down the road to the mountains. They were nearly there when the road had turned sharp to the left and then after a short ways it turned sharp right again. Kett gasped and in an urgent whisper he said “look!” The open sky above the road allowed them to see what looked like garthim on the side of the mountain. “Quick, hide” Kett said and they moved closer to the trees, almost out of view of the garthim.

“I see skeksis and garthim,” Dorner said.

Kett strained to see, “yeah, and it looks like they’re going through a door in the mountain. Are the Grutton helping them?”

“If they are we should tell the Grottan” said Dorner.

“You’re right. Let’s go.” They stayed out of sight of the skeksis and their garthim and made their way, quickly up to the Dust Pass. They took the trail that leads right to the cave of obscurity. When they found the cave they walked in as far as they could go and used their hands to feel their way along.

“Who are you?” Came a voice from the darkness.

“We had spoken with an elder and we have returned with important news for her. Tell...uh.” Kett was trying to remember the name.

“Gurnal” said Dorner.

“Yes, Gurnal, that we’re here.”

“Wait here.” The voice said. They waited and soon Gurnal arrived and said “Important news, eh?”

“Yes,” said Kett. “skeksis, with the...gruddin?”

“Grutton?”

“Yes, them. We saw the skeksis entering a doorway in the mountain on the other side of the pass.”

“How many?”

“There were two skeksis and several large minions.”

“That’s no good,” said Gurnal. “I must tell the elders.”

Kett stopped Gurnal before he left. “We need to make it back through the pass. Can you help us?”

“Um, yes! Take them to the Great Hall. I’ll meet them there” he said and left quickly.

The remaining gelfling sighed, took Kett’s hand, and said “come with me.” Kett reached out for Dorner or Ayal. He got Ayal and she had Dorner. Walking through passages is never fun, but it’s less fun when your guide doesn’t mention steps or other obstacles. He seemed annoyed with the whole thing, but eventually they were in the Great Hall. Or at least they thought they were. It sounded big from the echoes. “Stay here” said the reluctant gelfling. They waited some time before Gurnal showed up.

“Sorry to keep you waiting. I had to vouch for you with the elders. They are not happy, but that’s not your problem. Let’s get you to the other side.” He took Kett’s

hand and led them out of the Great Hall. Gurnal was a much better guide. He let them know about obstacles and from time to time he would describe where they were. He said things like “that noise is a waterfall,” “the reason you feel wind is we are really high,” and “don’t touch anything in here, it might kill you.” They refilled their water on the way.

“This is the doorway to the outside. I leave you here. Good luck in your travels seeker.”

“Darkness brings light never before seen” said Ayal before she turned to leave.

“Thanks Gurnal, good luck with the gruh-tones,” Kett was never good with names.

They emerged into the night. Kett, Dorner and Ayal walked down the hill toward the scrub at the bottom. There was not much vegetation on this side of the pass. Dead stumps and small groups of bushes dotted the landscape. They trudged on quietly, it had been a long day.

Ayal heard noise coming from behind. She looked back to see black smudges coming down from the hill behind them. “Garthim,” she said quietly and grabbed Kett’s arm. She pulled him to a nearby group of bushes.

Dorner noticed and followed. “What? What is it?” He whispered. Ayal reached out and turned his head to look out of the bushes. “Garthim,” Dorner said in a low whisper.

The garthim were moving much faster than the Gelfling were. Between the two garthim in the front was another thing that could only be a skeksis. The gelfling froze by the sight of it. "I smell gelfling" it grumbled as it stuck it's nose in the air.

"Everything out here stinks of gelfling," said another behind the first.

"The open air has washed some of it away. I want to eat and sleep" said the first.

"We should find a good place to stop" said the second and their conversation trailed off as they got too far for the gelfling to hear.

"They are going the same way we are" whispered Dorner.

"I know," whispered Kett.

"What do we do?"

"I don't know. Follow them? We might get a better idea of the direction they are headed if we do."

Garthim are not quiet things, they take no mind of what might be underfoot, crashing through whatever might be there. It is doubtful if the gelfling needed to see the skeksis to follow them, but they were quite aware of when they eventually stopped.

"There," Kett whispered as he moved toward an old hollow tree stump. Once they were inside Kett peeked out to see what the skeksis were up to. They were milling about doing something and they lit a fire. The

garthim could be seen standing in a circle around the fire.

“It looks like they’re stopping for the night,” whispered Kett. “We should get some sleep too.”

“I guess that’s as good an idea as any” said Dorner as he turned to make himself comfortable.

Chapter 13 – Valleys

“We’ve been walking for too long. I need sleep” said Alro.

“Wait” said Junn.

Rhoal stopped and looked at Junn. “What is it?”

“I see a light. It could be a fire.”

“My bones could use a little warming” said Alro.

“Let’s check it out,” said Rhoal and held out her hand for Junn to lead the way. As they got much closer Junn stopped and crouched low. She motioned for the other two to join her. “I think those are garthim” she whispered.

“Garthim? They caught up to us quickly” said Rhoal.

“Can you get a better look? You’ve got better eyesight than the garthim. You should be able to get close enough.”

“Here I go” said Junn as she snuck toward the fire. Soon she returned and said “I see two skeksis and three hands of garthim. I know one of the skeksis. He is the collector.”

“The collector? Hmm...” Rhoal was thinking. “What would he be willing to leave the Castle to collect? I want his bag of things. We should sneak in. Junn, you sneak around the other side and get their attention. Once they head your way use your eyes to find a way to escape them. Alro, you and I will run in and grab

whatever looks useful. We'll meet back on the path to the rock."

Junn said "got it" while Alro gave a not so enthusiastic "uh-huh."

Rhoal and Alro crept up as close as they dared and waited. Junn eventually gave a trill screech that roused the garthim. They started their chittering noises and moved toward the noise. Junn jumped up and down barking noise at them. The skeksis got up a little confused. "Where are you going?" One said, "what have you found?"

"This is it, go" Rhoal said to Alro as they swiftly ran to the area around the fire. The second skeksis was wandering toward the garthim as the gelfling flew into the firelight. Rhoal descended on one sleeping matt, Alro the other. "I have something, let's go" Rhoal said to Alro. "Me too," he said and got up to leave.

"So do I," screeched the skeksis as its hand caught hold of Alro. Alro struggled to get free. Rhoal ran up from behind and came down hard on the arm of the skeksis causing it to let go.

"Run!" Said Rhoal as they ran as fast as they could from the camp.

The commotion had woken up another. "Kett, I see Rhoal" said Dorner.

"What?" Kett moved to look out, "and Alro. What are they doing?"

"Getting away, it looks like."

“Where did the garthim go?”

“That skeksis is screaming for them.” The other skeksis came into the light of the fire followed by a stampede of garthim.

“I hope they get away.”

“I think they have.”

“I wonder where the rest are?” Asked Kett, “weren’t there four of them, minus Shar?”

“I don’t know, but that might make it easier for us.”
Said Dorner.

They watched the skeksis for a while. They were really angry about something.

...

“Let me see that bag,” Rhoal said to Alro. “Here, look in this one.” Rhoal fished around the bag while they walked.

Alro fished in his bag, “wow this feels like a *lot* of blue crystal. There’s some odd trinkets in here. I think this is a cup and I’m not sure what this is.”

“If you don’t think it’s useful, leave it in the bag” said Rhoal.

Soon Junn walked up, “what’d you find?”

“A lot of blue crystal,” Alro held up a bag.

“I can work with that” Junn said as she took the bag.

“Now that the skeksis know we’re here, they are not going to let us rest. We need to travel through the night. Junn, lead the way” said Rhoal before she handed Junn the crude map Fliar had drawn.

“Finally, some traveling at night” said Junn as she took the lead. They kept moving, but the moon had set so it was difficult to see where they were going. Junn would give them instructions like “walking between trees,” “small ditch,” and “burrows” to let them know about obstacles that were in their path. As twilight was forming on the horizon they arrived at a gully about two gelfling deep.

“This goes about the same direction we’re going,” said Junn as she looked at the map.

“No, that’s too obvious. They would expect us to follow it. Let’s climb out the other side and take the surface route.” They found an easy way down, but getting up required a little more work. Alro climbed up and lowered his hand to help the other two. They still had to climb up, but it was much easier.

“You’re good at climbing” Junn observed.

“I grew up in a forest. Climbing trees is what we do” said Alro smiling.

As the first sun came up they could see the landscape was much more barren. Soon after the gully they found some boulders. “We can sleep here for a while, but we should get going again by midday” said Rhoal. Junn and Alro settled in and took a nap.

...

The skeksis settled down and slept, as did Kett, Dorner and Ayal. First sun had come and gone before Dorner said "they've left. We slept too long."

"Hrrmmmm?" Said Kett as he rolled over near where Dorner was peeking out. There was a smoking fire, but no skeksis or their garthim. "floon cake! We need to get going. They can't have gone far, the fire's still burning."

They gathered up their belongings and started out following the trail of the garthim. They did cover their tracks which made them easy to follow. It was nearly midday when they arrived at a gully. Kett looked down, "look, deeper down the valley. Garthim." He was right, the garthim were following the gully as it became deeper and turned gently to the right. "We should wait till they're out of sight before we climb down. Their trail should be easy enough to follow."

"Birds catch their prey from the sky," suggested Ayal.

"Mmmhmm," said Dorner looking up. "What?"

Kett thought about this, "she's right. We can look down on them from the other side of the valley."

When the garthim were far enough they climbed down the gully and climbed up the other. Then they followed the edge of the deepening gully trying to find the skeksis and keep them in sight. After they found the skeksis they followed them till Dorner said "Kett?"

Kett was watching the skeksis. "Yeah," he said.

“Kett?”

“Yeah?”

“Kett?”

“What?” Kett stopped and looked at Dorner who looked a bit worried. He was pointing across what was now a ravine. Kett turned to look and he felt his heart sink. There in the distance, was the Castle of the Crystal.

...

Rhoal woke up and glanced at the sky. It was later than she wanted to wake up. Annoyed at this she turned to wake up Junn and Alro only to find they were already up and eating. “It’s about time” said Alro.

“Why didn’t you wake me up?” She asked as she quickly checked to see where her bag was.

“You seemed tired. We thought we’d let you sleep” Alro smiled.

Rhoal had found her bag, and then she decided to pull out some food. “We don’t have time for sleeping” she grumbled. “Let’s go.”

They had been traveling away from the ravine, but it was almost last sun when they could see the ravine getting nearer. “I thought we weren’t going the same direction as the valley?” Rhoal asked Junn.

“We are not. That’s a branch of the valley that we need to cross.” When they arrived at the ravine the suns were down and Junn said it’s about ten gelfling deep,

but it gets shallower if we head that way and we might find a way down.” They turned right and followed the ravine till they found a good place to cross. “Now we head this way” said Junn looking at the map.

It was nearly first sun when they they arrived at another gully. “If we follow this valley we will come to a place where another valley meets it. The rock pointing to the Mystics is there” said Junn.

“We’re close” Rhoal said excitedly.

They climbed down into the gully which deepened as they followed it. After a while the right wall of the valley became less jagged and tall than the other side. Soon they were where two valleys meet. Rhoal said “finally, now we can fulfill our destiny” she looked around excitedly. “Where is the rock? There was supposed to be a rock.”

“This is the right place” Junn said holding the map.

Rhoal took the map. She looked at the valleys, at the sky and at the rock around them. “It’s gone” she said. She flushed red “it was Fliar! That treacherous Dousan! She *was* working for the skeksis. We followed the map she made...wait, you followed the map she made” Rhoal said turning her attention to Junn. “Did she tell you to take us the wrong way?”

Junn lifted up her head trying to see from under her hood. “What, me?”

“Yes, you. Who else was leading us with Fliar’s map.”
Rhoal was taking steps toward Junn who likewise was taking steps backward.

Alro looked around for a solution and he found one.
“Look, those rocks have been shaped to make a road.”

Rhoal stopped. “What?”

“See, the valleys meet pointing that way. The ground is flat like an old road going that way. I think the Mystics are that way.” He said pointing that way.

Rhoal thought about this. She looked at the two valleys behind and the one valley ahead with a road. She then looked at Fliar’s map. “This had better be right” she said and started walking down the road into a deepening valley.

Junn breathed a sigh of relief.

...

Kett kept his eye on the skeksis and their garthim as they moved quickly at the bottom of the steep valley. They moved quicker than Kett was used to walking. He, Dorner and Ayal were having difficulty keeping pace. It didn’t help that they had the Castle staring them down. It seemed to add an unseen weight on their minds, slowing them down. Not that it mattered much, Kett had come to an impass. The deep valley had a large branch that gouged the landscape to their right. The skeksis continued straight on their course down the valley, ignoring the new gorge opening to their right.

Kett realized they would need to cross the gorge to keep tracking the skeksis like they had.

“What do we do Kett?” Asked Dorner as he looked down.

Kett looked for a way across and then looked down. “I guess, we need to climb down.”

“I can’t climb down that. I’m built for swamps, not mountains.”

“I’ve climbed trees almost this tall, I’ll coach you on the way down. Are you up for it?”

“Yeah, as long as you find an easy way” said Dorner reluctantly.

“Do you think you can handle it Ayal?” She nodded.

“Good. First, let’s find a good path.” Kett wandered around the edge, stepping on outcroppings to get a better view. After a while he seemed satisfied with what he saw. “This looks like the easiest way down. There’s a ledge a ways down we can rest at. Come on Dorn, you can do it. Just follow me.”

Dorner got down on his hands and knees and backed himself down the way Kett had started. He was struggling to get over the ledge. Once he got past that it was easier. He got stuck trying to find a foot hold.

“Down and to your left” said Kett.

“I can’t see it.”

“Just feel around for it with your foot.”

“I don’t feel it,” Dorner said a little panicked.

“A little bit farther.”

“My hands are slipping!” Dorner was panicking. That was when something happened neither Dorner or Kett expected. Ayal landed on Dorner’s back as if she had jumped from a ledge behind him. Only there was no ledge behind him. Having an Ayal on his back caused him to fall off the cliff. “Kett heeelp!” He screamed.

“Dorn!” Kett yelled as both Dorner and Ayal fell. They quickly turned so Kett could see Ayal and that’s when he saw her spread her wings and float to the ground. Dorn was stunned.

“Are you ok Dorn?!”

“Uh...yeah. How did you do that?” Dorn said as he turned to Ayal.

“You can fly?” Asked Kett.

“To the Vapra was given a maiden with wings to protect her people. To her children was passed the gift that danger might not trouble them.” Ayal said as her wings disappeared under her cloak.

“Can you get Kett?” Dorner asked.

Her cheeks flushed. “The castle cannot see that the maiden survives.”

Dorner nodded. “Kett! Come on down, we need to catch up.”

Kett continued climbing down. It wasn't long before he was at the bottom of the gorge. "No time to catch my breath. We need to find those skeksis." They left and after Kett was ready they picked up the pace. They were tired, exhausted and weak by the time they saw a garthim. "Hide," Kett whispered. Dorner and Ayal moved to the right behind an outcropping.

Kett moved forward and to the left where he could peek ahead through a crack in the rock. He saw the garthim standing around the two skeksis. It looked like there might be another valley branching to the right. A skeksis was examining the ground looking around. The other was watching. The skeksis stood up and talked with the other when a flying thing that looked like a bat landed on its hand. The skeksis looked at the bat for a few moments, then waved its arms around and pointed toward Kett. Kett ducked, terrified he was seen. He could hear the garthim coming. *Did they see me?* He thought and looked over at Ayal and Dorner. He held up his hand and moved it with his palm pointed down. He mouthed the word *hide* and waited. Two garthim passed, followed by a skeksis and they continued down the valley. Kett did not move, he barely dared breathe till they went around some rocks.

Kett let out a sigh of relief, then stood up to see what the other skeksis was doing. They had left, but which way? Kett motioned for Ayal and Dorner to follow him. "There is another skeksis with the rest of the garthim, but I'm not sure which way they went. So be careful" he said quietly as they approached the place where the two valleys meet. As they drew near Kett moved next to the cliff so he could peer around the corner into the

other valley. It was empty. He then moved to where the skeksis was examining the ground and looked ahead into another valley. He could see the skeksis with its garthim moving forward as the valley dug deeper into the landscape.

“Look up that way,” Dorner said as he pointed to the right. There were garthim moving on the ridge to the right of the valley. “If Rhoal is ahead those garthim are going to cut them off.”

“Which way should we go?” Asked Kett.

“We should cut them off too. I’d rather deal with garthim than a skeksis” Dorner said and looked at Ayal. She nodded.

“If you two agree, then we must go” said Kett and they climbed up the short valley wall to the right.

...

Rhoal had been in a bad mood since the meeting of two valleys. She had complained about the route they were taking saying things like “the valley is too deep,” “it curves too much,” and “we’re going too slow.” She was marching quickly when she stopped suddenly.

Alro nearly bumped into her. “What...”

“Shh,” Rhoal interrupted him. “There” she said as she pointed at a rock falling. Alro gasped. Above where the rock fell garthim could be seen coming down a path to the valley floor. “It’s an ambush. Back, find a place to hide” said Rhoal and they turned around and hurried back up the valley. It wasn’t long before they came

around a bend to see more garthim. “Back, get your knives,” she said as they ran back toward the first group of garthim.

As they ran she fumbled through her bag. Junn stopped when they saw the first group of garthim coming. “Now what?” She asked frantically.

“Drink this.” Rhoal handed Alro and Junn familiar flasks and then grabbed one for herself. They all drank and doubled over in as if in pain. The familiar sensation rushed over them causing them to yell out in fury. Rhoal leaped into action charging the first garthim. She ran up its claw and driving her knife between its head and carapace, then without waiting she clambered over the top of it as it collapsed.

Alro and Junn charged forward to engage another to the right of the first Junn moved to get out of the way of a claw when Alro came in from her left to shove his blade between the head and neck of the beast. He was removing his blade when a garthim to his left swung its massive claw right at him. Junn screamed “No!” and shoved Alro out of the way only to have the sharp point of a claw run right through her middle. She gasped as the garthim then lifted its claw and she came with it. Struggling against the pain she saw the eyes of the beast and went to shove her blade through the nearest one. She missed, but still managed to get between the neck and the head.

“Junn!” Alro yelled as Junn slumped over with the garthim, the claw still through her.

The last garthim fell into pieces as Rhoal turned to look back at Junn and Alro. She saw Junn and the claw.

“There is nothing we can do for her now, we need to go before they catch up!”

Alro went to Junn and put his arms around her to hold her up. “I...I got it.” She said.

“You’re going to be fine” Alro lied as he gazed into her black eyes.

She looked back at him and said “the...stars...” her eyes slowly closed.

Rhoal grabbed Alro, said “we will mourn when the skeksis mourn,” and they ran ahead, past the trail that led down from the ridge.

Kett saw them run past and looked back to see what they were running from. They could see the four piles of shells and a gelfling still being held by one of them. He ran over to help and saw the gelfling run through by the claw. Not knowing what to do he tried to get her loose. She stirred “kill...Mystics...” she whispered as she passed out.

Kett looked back at Ayal and Dorner with tears in his eyes. Death was not something he had seen. Ayal had picked up what looked like a gelfling bag. “What is that?” Kett asked. She was about to look in when Dorner said “Garthim!”

Kett turned to look. Garthim had come around the corner and were heading for their location. They ran as swiftly as they could.

...

“Stop!” Yelled the skeksis and the garthim stopped pursuit. It had not seen Kett, Dorner and Ayal running away. “What?! Only one gelfling dead?” Junn made a noise. “Not dead yet?” It picked her and she gasped as the skeksis pulled the claw from her and tossed it to the side. “Where are they going?” It asked.

“You...arre...dead...” she managed to get out.

“Bahh, filthy creatures” it growled as it threw her to the canyon wall. “Spybat, find and return” he told a bat like thing and it flew away. That was when he saw Dorner go around a corner down the valley. “You are letting them get away? Get them!”

Chapter 14 – Find the Mystics

“They stopped” said Dorner.

“I don’t care...we need to...keep going” Kett said between breaths.

“Yes...but slower.”

“Yeah,” Kett slowed down to a fast walk, but they didn’t get to rest long.

“Garthim!” Dorner yelled as he looked back. They began to run, but the garthim are much faster. As they turned a corner Dorner yelled “Ayal, save Kett! Fly!” Ayal was between Dorner and Kett. She ran a little harder jumped, spread her wings and grabbed Kett. She fought hard to get him to the top of the valley where she dropped Kett.

Kett rolled and nearly fell back down. He looked back to Dorner to see a garthim fall over, but two more swarmed on top of him. Kett just laid there staring in disbelief.

“Oh, no!” Gaspd Ayal standing on the edge. This shook Kett’s stare. He stood up and pulled Ayal away from the edge and held her. Kett ached in ways he had never felt. He tried to think of something else and thought of the black eyes of Junn, then Alro. “Alro!” Kett said straightening up. “We need to save him.” Kett began to run along the valley away from the dead garthim, Junn and Dorner. Ayal followed.

They would look down into the valley from time to time. The garthim caught up and passed them. As they came to a bend in the valley that turned left, they could see it turned sharply right again. "We can catch up here," said Kett as they walked away from the edge of the valley toward where they saw the valley turn left yet again. They arrived at the outside corner of the turn and looked into the valley where they could see two gelfling walking. "Alro, he's alive!" Then Kett looked back to the left where he could see the garthim turning the corner. "What can we do? They're on them." Kett said to Ayal.

She opens the bag she picked up and pulls out a small flask. Kett looked at it. "That was what they drank to get their names back...and what they drank before they killed the garthim..." his face lost a little luster "...and what made Alro walk away from me." He looked back, Alro and Rhoal had stopped to fight the garthim.

"We have to do something" said Kett and he ran along the top of the valley toward Alro. His feet then left the ground as Ayal had picked him up. They glided down into the canyon toward the garthim attacking Rhoal and Alro. Kett pulled out a knife and said "drop me on that one" pointing to the garthim on Alro. He watched the garthim hit Alro hard throwing him to the wall of the canyon. Kett dropped on the garthim and the impact was enough for his blade to pierce the garthim shell causing it to collapse into pieces.

The garthim next to him fell by Rhoal's hand and she moved to her right to engage another. As Kett got up he turned to see another garthim behind him. It swats him

with its claw throwing him to the canyon wall. He can feel consciousness beginning to leave him as he sees Ayal attempt to fight the garthim only to be caught in a claw and thrown to the canyon wall next to him. Stunned but not out he struggles to process what is going on in front of him. He sees rhoal strike and injure skeksis and then knocked away by one of the two remaining garthim. Alro somewhere yells and the clattering of garthim shell could be heard. He then looks to Ayal, who is not moving, and sees a small flask that had fallen out of her bag. "No," he manages to say as he grabs the flask, opens it and drinks.

Kett's throat quivers at the touch of the liquid essence of a gelfling. His mind is thrown into another world where time moves so fast that the happenings are nearly incomprehensible. Like a dreamfast he sees himself through someone else's eyes. There is laughter as she says to Kett "you are so funny." Then the thought is taken to Alro in another place and time "I don't know. He is really nice, and handsome." Kett's face is smiling as she says "yes, I'll meet you by the tall rock." The last sun had gone and something stirred in the forest. It grabbed her and she screamed. They put her in a chair, she cried "Mother! Father! Help me! Alro...Kett..."

Kett was pulled back to reality as if bursting forth out of deep water. He regained his breath to say "Tyrr." Newly motivated he leaped to his feet to see a garthim turning away from the Ayal it just threw to the wall. He ran at it, quickly moved between its side and claw, turned and shoved his blade between the neck and the head. He stepped aside as it fell apart in front of him.

Kett turned and he could see the bleeding skeksis walking toward a bleeding Rhoal who was backing away on the ground. "This is where you die, gelfling" it said.

Kett without thinking charged the skeksis, leaped up and grabbed it around the throat. He carved at it like he was removing a branch from a tree. It fell forward with a horrible sound like screaming, but it pierced their souls.

Rhoal was surprised to see Kett, "Wh-what? How did you?" Rhoal stood up, clutching at her bleeding side. "You followed us?" She looked down at the dead skeksis then back at Kett. "You were going to kill us. You wanted the power for yourself."

Kett's head was still spinning. "What? No, I just..."

"You drank the essence. I see it in you." She looked back at the skeksis. "They gave it to you." She pulled out something from her jacket. She drank a flask and barely shuddered.

Kett's eyes looked past her and widened. "No..."

"I'm going to send you to your skeksis Masters!" Rhoal yelled and stopped. Her eyes grew wide. She turned to look behind her and Alro stuck her again in the side. "But...we..." said Rhoal as she stumbled and turned to face her attacker. Alro looked hurt and very bloody. "You...you're all traitors!" Rhoal spat and lunged forward to attack Alro. She fell into him and he thrust his blade into her again. He helped her to the ground while she still struggled to fight, but the fight was

leaving her as quickly as her own blood. "Save...all..." she managed to say and then spoke no more.

Alro stood there bleeding and dazed. "She became poisoned inside..." he said.

"Alro," Kett said and embraced his friend. "You are alive," he said, tears rolling down his face.

"I guess I am." Alro said. His head still spinning from the battle.

Kett pulled back, "I thought you might...but you're ok now."

Alro smiled, "I need to sit."

Kett helped him down. Then he remembered another, "Ayal." He looked around and saw her stirring on the other side of the canyon. "I'll be right back." He ran over to Ayal, "are you all right?"

"It is a hazy morning, but the afternoon approaches."

Kett smiled, "you sound all right." Kett walked Ayal over to Alro and set her down. "You two rest. I have work to do." Kett then picked up Rhoal and walked back down the canyon to the inside of the turn. He dug two deep holes. He placed Rhoal in one and then went to retrieve Dorner. He brought Dorner back and placed him in the other hole. Alro and Ayal joined him as he filled in the holes.

"We should go back to bury Junn" said Alro. "She deserves as much. They buried her at the meeting of two valleys where Alro said she'd be "under the stars."

As they stood staring at her grave Alro asked “what will we do now?”

Kett looked at Alro. “We go see the Mystics.”

THE END