The fluttering moth was fascinating to watch as it enthralled itself in a morbid dance around the lantern sitting on the knife-pitted thick wooden table. Every once in a while it would ping against the metal fixture supporting the bulbous glass chimney. The moth was large and greasy brown with feathery antennae which seemed set immobile on its crown like they had been driven in by a naughty child. Sometimes it would stop and sit for a little while to consider how could it possible get to the source of its mesmerization. But no matter how long it would wait it would soon be up and trying to get the flickering small flame that would as soon give light as kill the large insect. The boy sat captured by the spectacle. But soon even that became wearisome and boring. Trying to find something to do at his house during the summer months while his father hunted became the only occupation he enjoyed, to the dismay of his mother.

"Why don't you go with the other boys of the town, Gil?" She asked pleadingly when he scampered about the room searching for those pesky mice the next day where she worked. That very question was asked frequently. Dejected, he left the house which stood somewhere out in the middle of...what? Grassy lands and infrequent trees? What could possibly be interesting about grass and trees?

He sat out on the step to the planked porch in between two boards that curled up like they expected to be sat on and rested his head in his hands. Each plank was old and worn from use and weather. Some had large splits with the grain exposing long, sharp splinters. One of the splinters caught Gil's eye, and he carefully pulled it from the rotting wood. The sharpness was not that important: it was the length. Slowly he pulled and was rewarded with a short dagger-like wood chip. Placing it in his hand, he inspected how
well it could be concealed and how well it could be directed. Yes, he could easily imagine hunting with his wooden skinning knife.

"Hey, Gil!" A voice called him as he hid his valuable new knife in his clothing. "What are you doing with that stick?" Gil looked up and saw his buddy Werren walking up the road with a small dog.

Realizing that he had been seen, Gil pulled out the wood splinter like it was a knife. "It's not a stick!" He protested. To Gil, sticks are common things that anybody anywhere could get from the side of the road. No, this was a special wooden dagger that could only be got from the Koppen's house. "It's a special wooden dagger!" He declared.

Werren looked at him like he was going to hear another one of those stories. "Gil, what are you doing today?" He decided to divert the discussion. "I was going to the stream and do some fishing. Wanna come?"

The prospect of something entirely more entertaining than daydreaming thrilled Gil like he would approach steamed tubers. "Nah. I'm expecting my Papa soon." He went back to inspecting his excellent knotty blade.

"Well, suit yourself. If you change your mind, I'll be by the Hermit's house." He started off smiling from ear to ear. That'll get him, he thought.

"Hey wait! I'm coming! I'm coming!" Gil puffed behind him. The Hermit was a bent old man that lived by himself near the caves in the side of the mountain. Why he lived near the caves was obvious to the boys: he apparently liked to go in them. They have tried to enter the caves without the Hermit knowing to find out what was so interesting about them. But somehow he always knew and would catch them.

At first, the man was scary and they really didn't want to have anything to do with
him. But after the first time they were caught, he sat them down and told them about the
caves were formed and told them why they should never go in. He showed them a good
place to fish behind his house and told them to come by anytime. Gil could not
understand why everyone did not like the old man. They always are blaming the foul
weather on him or some other misfortune.

They walked for a good ways before becoming enshrouded in trees. It seemed like
something monstrous cleared the trees many years ago and they could not grow back.
Still, the late summer buzzed about them, and the sun poked through the leafy sky. The
way getting to the Hermit was always difficult, and it usually took half a day. One hill
over the next, they walked picking up limbs and breaking them into little pieces or
peeling the old bark off. Their feet shushed and crunched over the earthy soil of leaves
and limbs from the year before.

"Where is your Papa?" Werren broke the silence finally.

"He's hunting."

"Why does he take so much time hunting? My Papa comes back after only a week."

"I don't know!" Gil flared defensively. That has been something that really bothered
Gil. Why did Papa go so long and never took me? What really hurt was that fact that he
could never go along.

Noting the tone in Gil's voice, Werren considered carefully what to say next. As he
thought, he looked about. That's strange! He looked again.

"Werren! Come on! We only have half a day!" Gil said impatiently pointing at the
sun.

Werren realized that he had stopped and Gil was up ahead of him waiting and
noticeably impatient. He looked around again. He had seen something but wasn't sure what it was. Light streamed in through the trees in curtained triangular pillars. Small insects swam through and about the light like boiling water. Large limbs cluttered the ground beside trunks wider than he could wrap his arms around. Some of the trunks showed blackened scars of fires many years prior. Still there was something missing; he could not put his finger on it. A moment later, he gave up and ran up to his lifelong friend.

Werren and Gil had known each other for many years. They had shared many play-adventures in these woods. They knew them better than they knew their own town which they loved to visit often. They resumed their trek kicking up the leaves and picking up sticks or rocks and throwing them at trees standing guard.

"What was the matter with you?" Gil asked peevedly. "Did you think that there was a ghost or something?" He laughed.

"No, dummy!" Werren snapped back. "I thought I heard something."

"Wormy's 'fraid of ghosts! Wormy's 'fraid of ghosts!" Gil sing-song teased.

"Cut it out!" He hated that name. In fact, he wondered why the Old Man gave him his name. Ever since he got the name Werren, other kids teased him with "Wormy". He really hated the way they teased him. Even though Gil was one of his best friends, he really wished he would not tease him with that name. Then he thought. "Do you want me to call you a fish, Gil?" That usually quieted him.

By then, they had reached the Hermit's shack. It really wasn't much of a shelter. There were holes in the roof and the sides were made of splinted wood and held together with twig and pitch. In fact, anyone just happening on the old hut would think that no
one had lived there for many years. The roof was slanted down one side; the boys could never figure out why the Hermit chose to build it that way. It always made it difficult to walk around inside.

The doorway was covered with a mat of thick reeds which was hung at the top. To the boys, it was not a normal door--they had to push it to the side to enter. After entering, it would slap the door frame loudly and swing for a while from the top of the doorway.

They would only go into the house when the Hermit invited them...which was pretty often. Maybe the old man was lonely and wanted to talk to someone. The boys often wondered if anyone else came out to visit him. Probably not, they would conclude, because everyone blamed him for even the weather. Still, they like him. He was the only one that told them stories about the years before the Old Man and before the Age of Crimson, he would call it.

The Hermit explained one day about the Old Man as they all sat at the noon-day meal enjoying recently caught fish.

"Why did the Old Man name me?" Werren once asked him.

"The Old Man is the governor of the town and it is considered luck to be named by an official." Then the Hermit smiled a toothless (any remaining teeth were black and rotten) smile and straightened his back as he sat on the floor. The old beard, long and grey streaked, moved with his chin as chewed the soft white meat. Without swallowing, he began: "The Old Man I knew well, yes! He and I would travel the lengths of the sea in search of adventures--like you two search these woods. We were together and could never be separated. Yes, times like those one could not easily forget! Finally, he wanted to stop traveling and start a family. But, where did that leave me? I could not just go on
by myself, so I went a long with him.

"One day, I was walking in the forest and came upon this beautiful maiden bathing herself in a small pool in a stream. Like a gentleman I should have turned my eyes and let her have her peace, but the temptation was too great. I watched her lovingly. She turned and saw my gaze and quickly dropped herself into the water so that I could not see her beautiful curves.

"My dear Sir, I would not have you watch me as I bathe! Please leave me!' She chided me. Ashamed, I turned away and walked away from her. Still, that incredible beauty stung my mind and clamored my heart. I could not leave her; I had to go back! I returned but found that she was gone. I had to find her!

"I searched and searched. Finally, one day I found her--or I should say that I found them, my friend and the maiden walking together in the town street. It was then I learned that my friend, my brother, had betrayed me. He married the little wench and assumed the governorship. Because he became the governor and knew that I would be the only one that could keep the office from his dirty hands, he exiled me to this place from whence I can never leave." He finished in anguish. The boys looked at him pathetically and yearned to help him. They had known him for a long summer, then.

"Huja! Are you there?" The boys called at the door. No answer. They called again: "Huja, where are you?" Again, no answer. The boys looked at each other, shrugged their shoulders, and proceeded around the house towards the stream to fish. The path they followed was unlike the one they followed to the Hermit's shack is was well worn and unencumbered by branches and ground growth. The foot worn path looked like it had been swept exposing the hard mud-packed, rock-strewn surface.
When they reached the water's edge, they sat down on the ground and began preparing the hooks. Rather than bringing the tackle along with them, they always left it near the shore next to a tree. This certainly cut down the tedious carrying needed. The hooks were short pieces of bone painstakingly carved into sharp hooks that could be lashed to long strings. The Hermit enjoyed carving the hooks for the boys claiming that he had a special way of doing it so that they would have plenty of success. The boys never doubted him--especially since they never went without. It was more fun just catching than keeping, so they let most of the fish go.

The worm guts and rotten wood they used to bait the hooks covered their hands and made them smell a little gamey. Gil was the first to cast out. He settled back to enjoy the warm, shady sun. Werren took a little longer to get the hook just right. Since they always had success, it became more of a game to see who could get one first and who could get the largest. A moment later, Werren made a long cast. It flew out long, tugged as it reached the end, and landed with a "plook" into the small stream eyelet. The string slowly disappeared from the surface of the water while the piece of wood held it afloat. He settled back to sleep.

It didn't take very long for the drowsy warmth to lull him to dreams. The still air held him close and sung its lullaby. Soon they were both fast asleep. Gil dreamed of playing with his father out in the field near his home. They tossed a ball to each other. Gil reached high to catch a tossed too high. Miraculously, it came to his hands and he tossed it back. But, there was no one there to catch it. He looked around trying to see where his father had gone. He awoke frustrated and hurt. He looked up at the still water and wondered where his father could be.
Werren awoke and noticed Gil playing in the mud at the shore with his toe. He saw the expression on his friend's face and chose not to ask. He himself was disturbed by a dream of feeling that someone was watching him. The feeling was too real. Deciding to concentrate on the fishing and getting something a little respectful. The last couple times Gil caught more and larger fish than he did. He simply could not let that happen again—there was no way he was going to get discouraged! Gil and he have been fishing together for too long for Gil to know any more than he did. Luck. That's what it is all about.

"I wonder where the Hermit is," Werren wondered aloud. He looked about seeing nothing. That was strange. The Hermit always knew when they were there.

"Don't worry about him; he's always been able to take care of himself." Gil shrugged off the suspicion. "He's probably in one of his caves--looking for gold! Yeah, that old man must be busy hauling in his find." They sat quietly for a while thinking about the old man knowing that wasn't true. He's been looking for that vein of wealth for many years--longer than the two boys' ages together. The Hermit would talk about getting the "motherlode", he would call it. They never knew exactly knew what that meant but were afraid to ask. The old man never was very patient with youthful ignorance. Still they assumed that the motherlode had something about the gold vein.

There was one time they sat around the small fire outside as he spoke about the day he found a small vein near the bottom of the cave. He excitedly described each step he took to carefully pull out the nuggets. He made it sound so easy, so effortless. That's what got the boys to try going in the caves themselves. They wanted to have the same success as the old Hermit. But, somehow he found out. He confronted them before they even entered the cave.
"Where do you two think you are going?" The Hermit demanded as he stood in front of the cave with a shovel blade up in his hands. "You can't go into there! It's dangerous! It's my gold!" The ferocity was frightening to them they backed away. The Hermit realized that they were scared--of him--as he looked at their faces streaked with terror. Werren was the first to turn and run away. Gil was not far from him. They still could hear the Hermit's voice calling them back and apologizing. The boys didn't go back for a long time.

When they returned, the old man looked much older. When he saw them afar off, he called them. That was one of the few times they saw him smile; it creased his face showing all the lines around his eyes and mouth. He looked so old! It was strange: from then on, he seemed to want to spend more time with them. He even carved the hooks they were now using. They knew now not to go into the caves the Hermit claimed. Still, they were curious what lay hidden in its dark recesses.

Werren was about to doze back into a hazy slumber when the stick he held twitched slightly. Immediately, he was awake and gave a slight tug--it tugged back. Oh, it was going to be a big one! He knew it. Carefully, he reached up and pulled at the line to bring in his quarry. His excitement alerted Gil, and Gil watched expectantly. Soon the fish was in sight. It turned left then right, trying to free itself from the line. With a quick tug, Werren landed it, and it began to twist and hop around like it was sitting on a hot frying pan. He got it! It was the largest too! Werren was so excited that he almost lost control as he picked up the fish in triumph. Gil scowled and turned back to his own too-peaceful line.

"Isn't as big as the one I caught last time," Gil tossed a stone in the eyelet.
Werren knew not to say anything at Gil's taunt. He just smiled and did not let his friend's anger effect him.

"Nice catch, boys!" Came the voice from behind them. They turned to see a man walking up to them. He was tall and had black wavy hair which rested thickly on his black-brown cloak. His chin was thin and sharp, his eyes dark and unyielding. "What are you doing here? Aren't you a little far from your home?" He grinned without kindness or humor.

He stepped closer to the trembling boys. They were frozen in place staring agape at the intruder. "You can't imagine how easy it was to follow you here to your friend's shack," he continued. His voice sounded like he was talking while his nose was plugged. The sound was very grating and unnerved the boys more. "The old Hermit was so easy to kill. He was so old and feeble. Oh, he tried to defend himself, but he was slow. It was like playing with an old, grey mouse--and I was the cat. I kind of liked it."

Gil remembered his trusty wooden knife and gained some courage. The man stepped closer, and Gil grabbed the trusty blade from his tunic. The man stopped, considered and began to laugh. "You really think you're brave, don't you?" he sneered. Gil realized how foolish he had been and dropped the stick. He backed up to the waters edge. Werren was already there beside him. "Do you want to see what a real weapon is? I'll be happy to show you." He reached into cloak and pulled out a long dagger. Its blade glistened brightly in the sunlight mesmerizing Gil.

"I told you I heard something!" Werren whispered to Gil.

"Huh?" Gil blurted stupidly. He watched the blade--it was so beautiful, so perfect.

"Remember as we walking out here? I sai..."
"Silence!" The man cut in. "Now, how shall I kill you two? It has to be fun."

"Why did you kill the Hermit?" Werren asked getting a nerve back.

"If it mattered to you, the Old Man told me to do it. But, difference does it make? Your knowing will not help you. But, yes, maybe it would help me." He stopped for a minute and considered. "I will tell you why the Old Man hired me to kill, and you will try to do something about it. I like it. Hunting down one boy would be too easy but two? Yes, that would be challenging."

The boys saw the fish lying dead on the ground. Glancing at each other, they bolted from the water's edge and ran away from the man. They heard loud laughter behind them which made them run faster. Time passed and the boys tired and slowed to a walk.

"What are we going to do?" Gil said still panting.

"I don't know. I don't think he's following us. Have you heard anything?"

"What are you talking about? You were the one that heard him before! After all, this whole fishing idea was yours!"

"Well, boys, why are you panting? Did a ghost scare you two?" The Hermit's voice startled the boys, and they looked around to the source. Seeing the old man, they ran to him and hugged with relief. He struggled to get out of their clasp. "Now, what was that all about?"

"A tall dark man said that he killed you!" Blurted Werren.

"I'm not dead! At least, as far as I know. Now, who is this man that claims to have killed me?" He smiled in amusement.

"I am," the dark man stepped out from one of the trees.

"How did he...?" Werren asked perplexed.
"What do you want, Man?" The Hermit peered at him suspiciously.

"Greetings from your brother, Huja!" The man said drawing his knife. "I knew that if I terrified your little friends I could finally find you. You always seem to know about them, don't you?"

"What do you want? What have I done to you?" Huja cried.

"You have done nothing to me, but to your brother you must have done much, because he wants me to kill you. Now, let's make this easy--I'll let the boys go in exchange for your heart," he persuaded.

"No! You know that the boys are now a threat because they know who will have killed me and why. I will not let that happen!" Huja reached into his cloak. Just then, there was a streak in the air. Huja doubled over and fell to the ground. His body heaving heavily once then...nothing. His eyes shut and all expression left his face.

"You murderer! How dare you!" Gil rushed over at the assailant but encountered nothing and ran right through the shadow. In amazement, he tripped and landed face first with a loud thud. The assassin turned to Werren.

"You can make this easy or hard. Do you want to die slowly or fast?" The soft, calm tone in the assassin's voice played tricks in Werren's mind. It would be nice not to suffer wouldn't it? After all, there isn't anyone around to help for a long ways. How could he combat this man who has killed twice right before his own eyes. Oh, but he would miss his own mother and family. With a snap, Werren realized what was happening. He looked around being almost oblivious for...how long was it?

He jumped when he saw the assassin only five feet away from him. He was carrying a needle. What could he do with a needle? Something told him that he did not want to
know. He turned to run, but felt a sharp pain in his neck. Blackness enveloped him.
Loud dripping of water awoke Werren. He opened his eyes and looked about--no light. Must be night. Oh, how angry his parents were going to be. *Oh, my head!* He thought as he moved it. He tried to let his eyes get accustomed to the new light, but they would not. It was so dark! He has never experienced full darkness before and it felt crushingly heavy. He felt the ground. It was hard and covered with rocks. Moving was difficult because his legs and arms did not want to respond. Where was he? He didn't remember anything more than fishing with Gil. Then he remembered, and a lump in his throat grew--his friends were dead by some man. But why wasn't he dead? He remembered the needle. What could have possibly been on the needle?

Managing to get on his hands and knees again, he felt around more. Dirt and mud covered his hands. He lifted his hand and smelled it. The odor was rank and putrid like feces. Then he noticed it, the air smelled of ammonia and feces. He wrinkled his nose and wished silently that this were all a very bad dream that he could wake up from. He sat down on the floor and sulked.

After sitting for a while thinking about food to the point that his stomach growled hungrily and the tears would no longer come, he decided to learn as much about his surroundings as possible. By then his head did not ache as much and his hands apparently were willing to do his bidding. Getting on his hands and knees again he crawled what seemed to be straight for a yards and found a stone wall. Carefully, he etched his fingers along the mortar until he was standing up. The mortar was gritty but crumbly from dripping moisture. Stooping down again, he forced himself against the wall and crawled to the other end of the room. As far as he could tell, from one wall to the next was about nine feet. He moved from one wall to the adjoining wall by following
the wall he was at carefully until he found the corner.

Just then, he saw a flicker of light on the wall he was searching. He looked at the source and saw light streaming in from a small opening in the other wall. There was a loud shifting and a clang of metal as something was inserted in a wooden-sounding door. The door swung open and Werren hid himself from the light.

"Get the boy!" A gruff, mucous-laden voice growled.

A man walked up to Werren and grabbed him like a sack of potatoes before he could move. The light was difficult and hurt Werren's eyes. The man then dragged the boy out of the dirty cell. In the hallway, Werren was bound at his arms and feet and was picked up and carried over the shoulder by the guard that grabbed him in his cell. After several stairs, they walked down a narrow hallway into a room with many lights. Up to this point, Werren's eyes had gotten used to the new light. But the light in the room was far too bright and he had to close his eyes again.

They stopped in the middle of the room and the boy was dropped to the floor. After a minute, he squinted at the figure standing immediately before him. All he saw was a shadow, but still he could tell it was some very large man with gaudy ornamentation. His waist was very wide and almost eclipsed Werren's view of his face.

"Well, what do we have here?" Said the man to no one in particular. "Were we caught stealing the food of the royalty?" Just then, one of the guards stepped up and put his face next to the speaker. "Oh! So you're the one that saw my assassin kill my unholy brother! We have a surprise for you! But first, where is the Hermit's book? Tell me! you little louse-infested slime!" He kicked the boy hard in the stomach. "Take him away!" With that, Werren was picked up again and carried over the shoulder back to his cell.
When they returned, the guard placed Werren on the ground--instead of dropping him. Within moments, the cords were loosened and the guard was gone. After the door was shut and a loud bolt was thrown, Werren waited for the darkness to envelope him again. But, the cell was not completely dark. There was a little light over in the corner. With some effort, the boy got up and walked painfully over to the light to look at it. It was white and had no flame; in fact, it was cold like the wall.

"I wouldn't touch it if I were you," came the voice in the corner. Werren turned sharply to the voice. Instantly, his body complained at the sudden jolt, and the boy winced. "So, I see you have met the 'honorable Old Man'! Joa, that is how he greets all of his captives."

"'Joa'?" Werren asked.

"Means 'yes' in my tongue. I come from the Elidret Mountain range to the south. Do you know about the Elid people? Comnit? I am one of them; I am here, because the Old Man wants that land. I am Aspen. Come, sit over here. Let us talk."

"What is the light?" Werren asked changing the topic. He was taught long ago that someone who is willing to give his name quickly should not be trusted, because that is probably not his name. He walked over to the swatting man but would not allow the light to shadow him.

"Sallumni--magic. You don't want to touch it, because it might not like you and kill you," he responded matter-of-factly. "Also, it is likely to be offended and deny us light."

"How can magic have feelings? I thought is was a power like fire."

The man looked obviously surprised. "You have never seen magic, before?"

"Of course, I have!" Werren lied.
With that, the man nodded knowingly. "Well, Forgit, you know that magic has its own will and might not obey your commands. It is important that you convince it that you have a stronger will. Otherwise, it will control you."

"What is 'Forgit'?"

"'Experienced One' or 'Wise Man'," Aspen answered with a smile.

Realizing that he was acting like a fool, Werren relented and sat down near Aspen.

"How do I learn about magic?" Werren asked.

"You merely ask."

"You know magic but are still here?"

"Some magic is only so strong. I do not know very strong magic. I only make light," he said resting his head against the wall. They both sat crouched against the wall for a short time.

"Doesn't light make heat?" Werren imagined being able to use the heat to escape by burning a hole in the door. He was a little surprised that Aspen had not tried to escape with his magic.

"Not my light," he responded flatly.

"Will you teach me?" Werren asked timidly but curiously. Well, if I am going to be here for a while I might as learn something that I may use later, he thought.

The man looked at the boy pensively, like he was sizing him up. "The first step in using magic is knowing the source. Magic comes from another space, like our own, but running with it. Do you understand?"

Werren furrowed his brow and shook his head. How can a space run with another space?
"Can you imagine another world like our own which looks like this one?"

"I guess. Is there another world like this one? Is there another me?"

"There may be, but that is another topic. This other world is where the magic comes from. Once you open the door to that power you have to govern its usage or it will use you."

"How do I 'open the door'?" The idea of using magic excited Werren. He imagined using it to impress his friends and doing tricks.

"First, you must understand that it is only to be used for helping others and that you must be calm at all times. I can teach you how to open the door, but it is up to you to learn how you can use it," he advised. Then with a note of caution, he said, "Lastly, once you have opened the door, you must never enter it."

* * * * *

"Sire, what shall I do with him?" The dark assassin asked.

"Kill him. He is no use to us now."

"But Sire, the Hermit still lives. Perhaps we could use him as an exchange."

"Jegger, I will get the book with or without the boy. That wretched hermit-brother of mine will not hold out on what is rightfully mine," the Old Man said pulling at the hairs in his white beard. Then, pausing for a moment, "Maybe you're right. Maybe we could use the boy as bate for that wretched worm."

"'Fish', Sire. You mixed a metaphor."

"Oh, whatever!" He waived it off like bad breath. "You know better than I do concerning those matters." The scowl on the Old Man deepened as he turned and walked away. After a few steps, the Old Man stopped and turned to Jegger. "Wait for three
days," he said putting up three fingers. "That will be good enough for the Hermit to know who has his little friend. No harm must come to the boy until after we have the book."

With that, the Old Man turned back and left the room with his ornate cloak following behind him.

Jegger watched the Old Man leave and shook his head. *That man is incredible!* He thought. *Someday, my friend, you will have enough enemies to fill your castle beyond its borders. Then, where will you be?* Jegger turned to look out the window. The sky was clear and cloudless, but he felt strangely unfamiliar with that sky. It seemed to mock him with its smug optimism. *I was hired to get a book from an old hermit who is worth nothing to this kingdom. Now, I have to kill a child.* He looked down to his thick belt strapped around his waist. There, tucked neatly at his side was the sheafed dagger. Reaching down and grabbing the handle, the knife appeared suddenly in his hand. He moved into an attack position, blade in front and his left eye looking over his clenched fist.

Relaxing his stance he looked at his blade he used so many times to kill for the Old Man. Turning it in his hand, he watched its beautiful curves--its deadly point. Absently, he sheaved the knife and turned back to the mocking sky and thought back to the scene in the woods. *Why did the Old Man want me to leave the Hermit and the boy? What is he planning?* At the time, killing the witnesses made more sense than letting one go and capturing the other. But killing the boy now? That is senseless.

* * * * *

"Ouch! That stings!" Gil yelped. "Don't you have anything that doesn't hurt so much!" He reached up and touched the sore lump on his head. What a fool he felt like!

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Slipping on the ground and hitting his head--what more could possibly go wrong?

"Oh, quit that whining! It will be uncomfortable for only a while. You have a pretty nasty lump there; it takes this salve to help it heal. Soon I will have to understand why my brother wants to kill me. I can't imagine it is for the gold--there really isn't very much to fight about." Then seeing the expression on Gil's face: "You can allow an old man to sing a little louder than he should, you know." He went back to scooping thick lumps of ointment and carefully wiping it on the sore. Doing it with his left hand was difficult and clumsy, but perhaps his right hand was the only thing that saved his life. Fortunately, just as he was trying to get the talisman he kept around his neck, the assassin through the knife and striking his hand. It was easier to play dead for a little while.

"But, you told us...the gold..." Gil stammered.

"Let's not get into that. We have to figure out what has happened to turn my brother's attention back to me." The Hermit finished putting the salve on Gil's head and placed a large, off-white bandage over the still-bleeding sore. "Now hold that until it stops." Gil reached up and touched the bandage and winced again. "I have not been in town for a long while and have not been able to follow the gossip. Can you tell me what has been happening that might relate?"

Gil shook his head and then winced again as the pain swam around in his head.

"Well, I guess we will have to ask him, won't we?" The Hermit declared conclusively.

This took Gil completely off-guard. "He wants to kill you, and you're going to ask him 'why'?" Gil was certain, now, that the old Hermit had lost his senses. He had seen it in his own grandfather before he died. It was so strange to have his grandfather call him the name of his uncle who was long dead from a logging accident. Now, he expected this
old man to start babbling too.

"Sometimes it's best to find out the reasons directly--this is usually unexpected and will take the enemy off-guard." The Hermit explained. "Besides, my brother and I have a unique relationship; sometimes, we have to scare each other to get the other's attention."

"Well, you certainly put me off-guard. I don't think it is smart to approach someone who is trying to kill you and ask him 'why'. In fact, I think that is downright stupid."

The Hermit frowned, and Gil looked down. "You are also forgetting that Werren is missing, and is probably with him. We need to make sure where he is. And you don't need to worry about that old-windbag brother of mine--we go way back. And," he smiled with twinkle, "we'll have an audience. He won't dare to harm us then!" Then, after a short pause, he said: "We have a ways to walk. Let's go!"

* * * * *

"Well, Old Man, have you been able to show your lineage?" The woman in the tall hat stood calmly. She knew that he hadn't. If he doesn't prove his lineage within five more days, the kingdom was hers. It was customary in this land that the women own the land and all of the rights to it. The men are allowed to direct the use of it. She knew it was a matter of time before she would own this kingdom along with several others.

"Gernalda, you have to give me more time! If you will bare with me for seven more days, I will reward you more than the worth of the kingdom. But, in order to do this I must have more time!" The Old Man wrung his hands in feigned worry and concern. Yes, I don't doubt for a minute that you want this kingdom, miserable whore! But, you cannot have it! Because I will soon have the key that will keep it out of your greedy hands! After a moment's pause, he continued: "If you will give me the extra days I need,
I will promptly show you the proof you need to allow me to retain the governorship."

"You may have your two extra days. But if you do not have documentation of your correct lineage, I will have to take possession of my sister's kingdom and turn you out," She conceded. "Speaking of which, where is my late sister's body? Have you arranged for a decent burial?" Having refused a seat she stood a few feet from the Old Man. She was finely dressed with gloves and an overpowering perfume. The perfume was so strong that when the Old Man greeted her, he almost coughed and gasped for air after kissing her hand.

"Oh, yes! Yes, I have. I have not yet announced to the people that she has died. When they learn, they shall very be distressed. I would like to choose the appropriate time to inform them. And you are most kind to let me the time I need." He smiled plasticly and led her to the doorway.

*   *   *   *   *

"You're fooling me!" Werren said disbelievingly. "I have to perform a ritual to please this magic?" The idea of magic was interesting, but this tack was beyond reasonable belief. The idea that magic has a personality was far enough but performing a ritual? Ridiculous!

The critical disbelief did not shake Aspen. He pointed again to the drawing he had scraped on the floor. "Magic holds a will like our own, but to use it, you must understand it and strengthen your will. If you do not trust it, it will not work as well for you. The ritual you must perform is to concentrate on this figure--that is all."

"Concentrate." Werren said like he was being asked to hammer a nail in some mud. Well, it couldn't hurt. Neither he nor I have anywhere to go for now. He looked at the
circle with the three triangles in it and stared at it for a long time. Soon his eyes grew
tired. "This isn't working! How can something so stupid like this make magic work?!"
He exclaimed impatiently while throwing up his hands and sitting heavily on the ground.

"You did not look at it for very long. You must block out everything and listen only
to your heart while staring at the drawing," He explained. "Your desire must be equal to
the commitment."

Werren eyed him for a little while then got up and started looking at the walls. They
were no different than the ones that were in the first cell. He was able to see the ceiling
for the first time and wished that he hadn't. Mold and slime dripped from large cracks in
the brickwork. No wonder Aspen didn't stand up straight in this place.

"Have you tried digging yourself out of this place?" Werren asked as he inspected
the ceiling. "This stuff is crumbling into mud; it shouldn't be that difficult."

"Yes, but I discovered why the guards do not care whether I do or not. We are
surrounded by water. If we dig, we drowned," he responded without emotion.

Werren continued to walk around and stopped in front of the small light source in the
corner. **What is it?** He wondered. Curiosity overcame him and he reached up to touch
the light.

"No! Do not touch...!" Aspen yelled and jumped to his feet.

Before Aspen could reach Werren, Werren started feeling something tugging his
finger pulling him toward the light. His senses screamed that he was being pulled down,
but his mind could not fathom it--it was not down! With his other hand, he tried to drag
his captive hand from the carnivorous light but to no avail. He grasped a crumbly wall to
try to hold on but found it too wasted to support anything. It simply dissolved into a
streak of gritty mud as he was pulled into the light. Before long his elbow disappeared and he started feeling the immense cold of the light envelope him. He reached pleadingly over at Aspen but saw that his companion had backed away and was gesturing something in the air. The light grew painfully bright as it reached up and started enveloping the panicking boy. Werren tried jerking his arm, but each time pulled him deeper and deeper.

The room stretched and twisted before his eyes. "H-Help me!" was all that Werren managed before the light engulfed him, and he flashed out of sight. The light returned to the small source that it was before its feast. Aspen fell to his knees, prostrated himself on the filthy floor, and began to weep bitterly.

A loud clamoring sounded outside the door. Aspen ran up to the light and clasped it in his palm until it disappeared. Just as the door flung open, he squatted down and cowered before the guard. "I told him not to do it! I told him....!" He wept uncontrollably.

"Notify the Old Man that the Hermit's boy has escaped!" The guard standing before the shaking man barked at his companion at the door. Then turning back to the whimpering mass, the guard shook his head. "You wretch of a man! What happened to the boy?! Tell me fool, or I will have to punish you!" He yelled raising his flail.

Aspen covered his head with his arms and wept more loudly. "No! Please do not hurt me! He has gone through the Door! Has gone through!" He blubbered with his head down and his hands over his head.

"Don't talk to me in riddles, wretch!" The guard raised his whip, paused, turned and stormed out of the cell. The door closed and bolts were thrown.

* * * * *

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After packing a few items in a couple bags, the Hermit and Gil headed out for town. Expecting their parents might be a little upset, the Hermit insisted they stop off at their homes and make sure that no one was too worried.

Gil stepped out of Werren's house with the same perplexed look as he had when he left his own home. "No one is there! The fire was burning, but everyone was gone! Where do you think they have all gone?"

"I don't know. Maybe we will find out in town. Come on!" The Hermit thought back to the assassin. He did not tell Gil the whole story about what happened back at the meeting. How selfish he felt! When he played dead with a little magic, he had forgotten completely about the boys. Or, was it that he didn't want to worry about them--only about himself, like he has done so many times for so very long. Now, Werren is missing, and he had to lie to Gil about what happened.

As they walked in silence, Gil noticed that the Hermit was a little troubled, but Gil decided not to say anything. He looked around and noticed a wagon out in the middle of a field. Not even a horse was in the harness; the harness leaned against the wagon--carefully like someone expected to use it again soon. It was not unusual to find things like that left derelict when it was old and doomed to collapse, but this was in good condition. The material covering the high-walled sides looked good and without a single tear. The metal fasteners were clean and had little rust. In fact, it looked rather new. Leaving him to wonder why it was abandoned.

"Huja?" Gil decided to break the silence. Seeing the Hermit's gaze, he asked, "Why would anyone leave a wagon like that?"

Somewhat lost in his own thought, the Hermit just shrugged and kept walking. He
glanced over at the wagon a couple times, stopped, considered, and scratched his beard.

"That is strange," he declared finally. "Why would someone leave a perfectly good wagon like they were in a hurry."

"But what about the harness?"

"What about it?"

"That doesn't look like anyone was in a hurry to put it down."

"Have you ever picked one those things up?" the Hermit asked. "Those things are pretty heavy—you want to be careful when lifting them and putting them down. No, everything else was done in a hurry. But, what would scare people out here? And, why would no one be at your homes?"

"A forest monster?" suggested Gil.

"No, they wouldn't have taken the horse because of the panic. They knew they had a little time." Still playing with his beard pensively, he said, "How are things with the other kingdoms?"

"Kingdoms? There are only two other kingdoms now besides our own—one is the Meckellin," Gil said. Then, when he noticed the Hermit's expression, he said, "You mean that they are coming?"

"We don't have much time," he said as began walking quickly towards town. "I assume the gate is still working after all of these years."

"What gate?" Gil hurried belong behind him.

That stopped the Hermit in his tracks. "Aren't the gates and walls around the town still up?"

"Well, sort of. They have been falling down, so the Old Man ordered for them to be
rebuilt. They have been torn down in parts, but nothing has been built. The gate was the first to be torn down." Gil puffed a little as he rested.

"You need to run a little more, my boy," the Hermit placing his hand on the boy's shoulder. Then seeing the boy's glance, he snatched it off in embarrassment. "So the town is not safe. Where can we go? Do you know the ruins over by Mount Hittylee?"

The boy nodded still panting. "That's where we will have to go." He started northeast in a fast walk.

"But, that is so far!" Gil exclaimed finally catching his breath. "And...what about Werren?"

That stopped the Hermit. He felt so guilty about letting Werren be captured. But, was he now doing it again? No. In order to save Werren, they needed to survive too.

"We'll get him later. Come on!" He said gruffly.

Gil didn't like that tone but decided that it was better that he get the help of the Hermit than to be all alone.

*   *   *   *   *

"So, the boy has escaped. That will not matter--Huja will come for him anyway. And when he does, the book will be mine and I will not lose the kingdom to some ugly, perfume-dipped whore!" the Old Man said to an empty room after the report came.

He sat there at his chair playing with a small glass bobble when the captain of the guard burst in the door of the Old Man's room. He was partially uniformed with various straps dangling from the shoulder and waist. The only strap that was fastened was under his chin holding the helm in place. Startled, the Old Man dropped the toy which disintegrated on impact with the floor. Flustered, the Old Man barked, "What is the
"Old Man! The Meckellin have been seen approaching the boarder of our land. They are heavily armored and are headed for our city. We do not have sufficient men to defend our land, and we are unprepared to defend the city with the walls deteriorating, Sir!" He had taken off his helm and cradled it in his left arm.

"What is the condition of the gate?" The Old Man demanded.

"Non-operative. It is resting against the wall. I have ordered to have it installed and secured, once all of the people from the surrounding areas are within the walls. I have also commanded guards to be concentrated on the wall breaches."

"Very good. How long before the Meckellin arrive?" the Old said as he found his ornate seat again.

"About ten hours. They seem to be taking their time," the captain responded questioningly. "Sir, we are weak but not that weak. We have the advantage--if we attack first!"

"Good! Yes, they're assuming too much. Take one hundred men and hide half of them in the forests here and the other half here," he said getting up and pointing at a map on the table. Then seeing the look on the captain's face, "We have to use surprise in order to get the upper hand. They have entered our land, therefore we have to defend any way we can. If that means using ambush, so be it. Also, close the gaits in two hours. Notify the people that if they are not all within the walls by that time, they will have to seek shelter elsewhere."

"Yes, Sir!" the Captain shouted. Then with a nod, he turned and left the room.

The Old Man stood there for a few moments studying the map. Why would they be
taking their time to an almost-sure conquest? It would be foolishness to believe that they are over-confident. Could they be waiting for something? The Old Man stopped and smiled.

"Guards!" He barked.

* * * * *

They passed through the field one which the wagon stood. Within a short while, the wagon disappeared below the verdant, grassy hill. Trees stood sparsely here and there, mostly to shade the livestock and their keepers. The wide, open, hilly fields stopped suddenly against forests that surrounded the town wall. Those trees that stood were very large and old. Some of them had huge dead sections with new growth struggling to overcome the decay. The road that trailed behind them was one of two that led to the town. The way the town was placed seemed like more of an afterthought than a junction of two roads that led to other villages. Still, it grew and attracted all types of merchants.

Foods of all types filling the air with the smell of fresh-baked bread or pastry. Butcheries that would slaughter livestock and sell the meats fresh or in jerky. The boys watched one day as the entrails from a slaughtered cow slid down the floor of the mill and into a large heap of fleshy garbage. At first, watching the cow be slaughtered was interesting—until that point. It took Gil many weeks later before he was able to stomach helping his mother prepare fresh meat for supper. Before, gutting and cleaning was so different at home and near the stream, because everything was smaller (and didn't stink as bad as the butchery did).

Yet, the markets where people brought foods, tools, clothing, and toys and sold them in tents or in buildings were always entertaining. All intrigued the boys in the past.
Now that has all changed, it appeared to Gil. His home and Werren's home were mysteriously empty. Werren was missing and was probably a captive of the Old Man. The Old Man wanted to kill the Hermit. (The Old Man always seemed to be kindly to everyone--but, what happened? He didn't remember being named by the Old Man, still if Werren was given a name by the Old Man, he surely had been also.) And, now, the kingdom was being invaded. Home is not as simple as it used to be, he thought nostalgically.

He continued walking looking every once in a while at the Hermit who was leading the way. Gil had never gone to these ruins mostly because they were too far away--and, he had heard all types of stories about them. Most of the stories seemed far too exaggerated to be believable. Still, the thought of going to a place where most people are afraid about made him want to return to his vacant home and await his mother and father. For a minute, he let himself wonder about his Papa. Silently, he wished.

"Tell me about the ruins," Gil broke the long silence.

"What is there to tell? They're ruins. Nothing much was there the last time I saw it."

"Well, I have heard stories about the place. You know: ghosts, demons, sacrifices... I just wanted to know if they were true," Gil shrugged. The stories started to come alive in his mind as each player in the arcane scene committed each unspeakable act he heard from the towns people. The people of the town were always telling stories about some place or another. Some stories remained the same while others became more horrifying and captivating to listen to.

"Idle gossip. You know as well as I do that there is no such thing as demons," he said. "We will find lots of wild animals there because everyone is afraid of it. Sure there
have been people that have tried to explore the ruins and found nothing. So, rather than
being embarrassed by coming back empty handed, they tell fantastic stories how they
almost had gotten the treasure--if it hadn't been for some monster. Still, it is because of
the stories that get told and heard that we are going to hide there. No one will be willing
to looking for us there."

They walked on in silence. Sure, that quieted some Gil's fears, but a few stories were
so detailed that they seemed too realistic to ignore or overlook. He had only lived in the
town of Ponsale and had never visited any place very far, but something didn't feel right
about all of this.

"What about the people that built the ruins," Gil asked still not completely satisfied
by the incomplete answer he got.

The Hermit laughed audibly, then said, "People don't mean to build ruins, they just
end up that way. That happens, you know, to almost every town. That will happen to the
town near you live eventually, if the trading routes change like they did for Hittylee. That
is what basically decides the fate of a town: the traders. If the traders don't want to come
to sell their goods and if they are not interested in the goods the town wants, they will not
come and the town will eventually deteriorate."

"But, what made the traders not want to come to Hittylee?"

His question was left unanswered as they closed in on the forests before Mt. Hittylee.
They were dark and foreboding with small black birds flying in and out of them. The
trees grew so close together that it was difficult to see further than a few feet. In fact, the
leaves from the trees above blocked most of the light so it looked like they were standing
in front of night. Gil look far above the line of trees and saw the mountain standing
grassy green above the forest. Above that, a bright, snowy peak reached up into the clouds.

Gil had not really taken notice of the mountain before now, because it was so far away. Now it looked impressive and inviting. On the other hand, the forests did not look that inviting. They almost shouted audibly for them to go back and travel clear of this land. Now, Gil was pretty certain he did not want to go to Hittylee.

*   *   *   *   *

After the guard left the cell, Aspen looked up from his crouched position and watched the room lose its light. He waited a long time listening until the clacking footfalls were no longer audible. Then he got up from his crouch and felt his way over to the corner. Invisibly, he lifted his hands cupping them in front of him and whispering a short, whistley chant. A small light appeared and grew brighter above his cupped palms. The light touched and caressed his hands and face as he completed the chant. He stepped towards the now-visible corner where the holder waited patiently. But, the light grew brighter. He stopped and grimaced at the disobedient light. In the foreign tongue, he chided the light, and it dimmed slightly but soon was glowing brighter again. Again, he commanded it to remain small so that it would not bring those sadistic guards again. Waiting a moment like he was listening to a barely audible song, fear began to mingle in his face. Stepping back, the light left his hand and floated freely as it grew brighter and brighter.

Aspen fell back and began reciting his well-learned ward of protection as he covered his eyes from the brightness. Suddenly, there was a painfully bright flash that shadowed this bones through his flesh. Then the room went black again.
He uncovered his eyes and let them adjust to the small light that floated above the dimly glowing body of the boy on the floor. Getting up, Aspen took the light in his palm again and coaxed it back over to its holder. Once satisfied that the light would stay, he went over to the body and touched the neck. *A pulse--faint but there.* He sat down next to the unconscious form and lifted the torso onto his lap. He inspected the face and saw a white scar on his forehead. Brushing the hair with his hand over the new scar, he pulled the boy close and cradled him quietly with the light against his back.

*   *   *   *   *

When the captain returned, he had his straps all neatly done and hidden in his battle dress. His helm had a large plume resting on the top more for decoration than function. "Sir! I have dispatched the men and they are hiding in the western forests to the north and south. I estimate that the enemy will enter the forests in five hours."

"Good! I want your best commanding officers to direct the ambush. You are to remain here and supervise the defense of this town. Have you sent spies?" the Old Man asked.

"Yes, Sir. They are traveling to the east by way of the forests and should return in about an hour."

"Send five more spies to the west and have them cut around behind the armies to discover their number. I think that the enemy is waiting for something nearby. And I would like to know what that is," he ordered confidently.

The Old Man's tone made the captain look at him carefully. "Do you know what they are waiting for, Sir? I would help...."

The Old Man put up his hand and the captain stopped. "Yes," he said reassuringly, "I
think I do. But, I cannot tell you just yet because I am not sure. In any case, knowing what that is will not help us at all." He turned away with his hands behind his back. Then after a short pause, he said, "Also, send that old hag-of-a-sister-in-law of mine an embassy telling her that if she wants this kingdom intact, she had better send some military help."

With that information, the captain raised his eyebrows and looked questioningly at the Old Man.

"Dismissed," said the Old Man without turning to face him.

"Sir!" The captain straightened, threw his chin up, and left the room, his heels clacking on the stone floor.

"What are you expecting?" Jegger asked as he stepped out from the curtains. He brushed the dust and cobwebs from his dark cloak only to make the smudge worse as the webs formed little balls that he could not get off. After a minute of futile wiping, he gave up and looked at the Old Man's face expectantly.

"It's my 'dear brother!'" he growled. Then he threw up his hands in exasperation, turned, and paced. Rubbing his hands, he said, "Oh, I should have known! I should have known!" He stopped with a fierce expression. "I should have known that traitorous man would seek help from our enemy! You should have killed him with those larvae!"

"Old Man," Jegger said in not a very respectful way, "you were the one that told me *not* to kill them. If you want loyalty, you must place blame where it belongs." Although there was not much emotion in his voice, its flatness made the Old Man stop his attack and reconsider.

"Find the boy and kill him," he said after he sat down heavily and began to run his
fingers through his beard. Then his voice turned blacker as he said, "Then you will report back to me, I have a job for you."

* * * * *

"Come, we must find the old road," the Hermit said after taking his eyes off of Mt. Hittylee and headed west. "The old trade route must be nearby. I remember it going in here somewhere along here..." Huja peered in through the gloom as if trying to see if anyone was willing to let a customer into a store after closing time.

"Huja, what will we find in there?" Gil asked very apprehensively. He looked in the woods too wondering if there was some indication that the inhabitants were going to let visitors to enter. The darkness intrigued the boy as he peered in and wondered, How could anything see in that darkness--especially at night?!

"Just follow me," the old Hermit said. Then, he stopped, reached into his cloak and pulled out a short dagger. He reached back to the boy without looking, expecting the boy to take it. "Do you know how to use this?" he said, as he resumed his search.

The boy swallowed hard and took the blade in his hand. He always wanted a knife to play with, but he got the distinct impression that this wasn't play. Fragilely he said, "S-sure! I-I know," he voice trailed off. The knife felt heavy in his hand, but he was certain that it weighed the same as some of the knives he used to gut and clean chicken. He looked at the knife and at the Hermit who was still wandering along trying to find the stupid path that lead to the doomed ruins. What am I doing? This is too much!

"Huja?" Gil called weakly.

Lost in his search, the Hermit ignored him.

"Huja!"
"What! Can't you see I trying to find a pearl in gravel?" He stopped and looked at the boy who was about ten feet behind him. "Come on, boy! We have to get in here before someone sees us!" The boy didn't say anything. He just stood there shaking.

"What's the matter, boy? Are you okay?"

"I-I'm not sure..." Confusion and fear streaked his expression. With the knife drooping in his hand, Gil stood there pathetically in indecision.

Feeling the awkwardness and not knowing exactly what to say, Huja walked up to the noticeably frightened boy. "Before we can save Werren, we have to save ourselves. On one side, we have the armies. I don't think it will be a very good idea to meet up with them right now. If we were to go away from them, we would have to deal with the Old Man who wants to kill me. Personally, I don't think that is very hospitable. And at the moment, if we see the Old Man, I don't think we will have the protection of a crowd. We will be safer here for a while--and, if we're brave, nothing can stop us!" Then, placing his hand on the boy's shoulder reassuringly, he said, "I think I have found the spot. Are you ready?" The boy nodded quietly. "Then, let's go."

* * * * *

Passing the guards unnoticed was easy, as Jegger light-footed down the hallway. He was trained by the best assassins and thieves in the land for many years. But, as with all training, his soon ended and he had to find employment that would give him the challenge he desired and the money he needed. Well, working for the Old Man certainly paid well but was never very challenging. In the past, he didn't have to be secretive around the guards, but he wanted to be well practiced for times like this when he did not want to be seen. The guards were very alert, but at times their attentions were easily
Killing for a purpose makes sense, but killing a boy made little sense at this point, because no benefit could rationalized. He had to hide Werren where it was safe for a while. The smokey, flickering torches cast long shadows as a longer shadow moved from doorway to corner. Reaching the cell doorway, Jegger checked again to see if anyone saw him. With a touch, the bolt and lock opened freely and silently.

He stepped in to find light in the corner and a man cradling the boy. Surprised to find the boy here, he expected to have to interrogate the cell-mate. But this made his search a lot easier...well, he hoped.

With a motion, he got the man's attention. The man started and reached into his cloak. Jegger stood with his hands out defensively and motioned not to make a sound. With an effort, Jegger gestured an escape. He was surprised to find that the man was not willing to cooperate. In fact, he was not very happy at all at the prospect. He kept signaling "No!" to Jegger.

Time raced as Jegger finally convinced the man to carry the unconscious boy through the doorway behind him. He could not understand or believe why a prisoner would want to stay imprisoned, but he did not have the time nor the patience to ask. He had to get that boy out before the Old Man were to discover what was going on. There would be no reason why the Old Man would suspect him of being disobedient, but he did not want to chance it.

As he led the escape, he watched for other eyes. From corner to shadow Jegger led the man as they made their way through the dungeons. Every once in a while, Jegger's hand flew up as a footfall neared and passed by.
"Who goes there!" a cry rang out. Jegger immediately pushed the man and boy into a black corner and signaled to face the corner.

"It is I," Jegger announced, as he stepped from the shadow.

"Jegger, you fool!" The voice brightened with a heavy laugh. "You need to practice—I heard you that time." The guard considered and said, "What are you doing here? You normally do not like being near cells. Are visiting some of your old friends and acquaintances? Be careful around here or may have to join them," the voice soured a little.

"May you not sleep so soundly if I do," Jegger said with a low growl. Just then, a small thorn landed in the guard's forehead. With that, the guard wheezed quietly and collapsed to the floor. A large purple-yellow mark grew around the embedded thorn. Shortly, the guard's pallor fell stone grey and his eyes glassy opaque. Lifting the feet, Jegger dragged the corpse into the shadowed corner and covered him with a black cloak.

"We do not have much time," Jegger whispered to the man when he returned. "This way." Walking a little further he reached an elbow in the passage. Placing his hand on the wall, he pushed a small stone and part of the wall dissolved leaving a dark passage. They entered and the wall re-appeared behind them. A flame appeared in the air, and black smoke billowed upward from the torch. "We can speak normally, now," he said turning back to the man carrying the boy. Then looking at the boy, he asked, "What is the matter with him?"

"He has gone through the Door," the Aspen answered. "If he is to regain consciousness, I must take him to my people, the Elid."

"The Elid?" Jegger asked. Looking at the boy, he noticed a white spot on his
forehead. He reached over to uncover the mark, but Aspen pulled away. Jegger looked at the man again. "What is your name?" he asked suspiciously.

"Aspen."

"A feminine name for a man?" Jegger moved to quickly for Aspen as he pulled the hood back. Short hair. Then in an accusing tone, he asked, "Are you a man or woman?"

"What does it matter?" she said looking down. "I am a woman but must masquerade as a man to stay alive. I have heard stories about your people, and I feared."

Jegger looked at her and the boy for a long time then threw up his hands in disgust. "I do not want to be encumbered by a woman!" he exclaimed futilely. Turning back to Aspen who was still looking down, he said, "You must stay here for a little while. Then, we can go to your people. If I do not return in one hour, take this torch and follow this corridor--do not turn left or right. It will take you outside." When he finished, he looked at them again and threw up his hands in disgust.

* * * * *

"Gernalda! My good friend!" the Old Man exclaimed with open arms as the large woman entered the room. The two doors closed behind her and she stood suspiciously watching each of the Old Man's actions. "I am so glad you are here."

"Enough of the honey-talk! What do you want?!" She glared at him. She had difficulty that anyone like the Old Man would be friendly for mere friendship--there had to be a hidden agenda.

Seeing that there was going to be no room for comradery, the Old Man dropped the facade and his hands and looked straightly at his opponent-comrade. "You know? It's strange your here..." He tried a different tack.
"Get to the point!"

"I need some military support," he said bluntly. When a grin appeared on Gernalda's chubby face, the Old Man raised his hands and explained persuadingly, "I understand that you are lacking sufficient funds to feed and care for all of your troops. And as you probably know, the Meckellin have foolishly invaded our land." He laughed hollowly, and noticing that she did not agree with the humor, he changed the laugh into a cough and continued. "I propose that I accept part of your army--temporarily--so that they all could be well provided for," he finished with a toothy smile.

"Your information is not correct," she stoutly replied. "I do have enough for my troops. In fact, I have enough to supply your army as well." After pausing for a minute to let an icy stare bore a hole directly through his forehead, she opened her arms and looked around the room at various items like they were so affordable. "But, if you need to have some of my troops for your encounter with those Meckellin, perhaps we should discuss terms," she spoke casually then stopped emphatically and looked at him. "My terms."

The Old Man stiffened. "If you want more money after I get the proof of lineage, I have very little to spare. The amount we agreed on empties the very resources we have left," he complained.

"Oh, you poor dear!" She exclaimed sympathetically and smiled while his face contorted angrily and flushed. She walked over to a chair and rested her hands on the back. "But, since I hold little regard for the Meckellin, lending a few troops would certainly ensure that I get paid," she smiled and looked at him.

A flood of emotions swept his countenance. Going from anger to confusion to surprise, he finally decided to settle on gratitude and walked over to the woman to thank
her. Seeing his approach, she threw up her hand and he stopped. "Don't get me wrong, Old Man!" she warned pointing. "I just want to see the Meckellin," she said opening her hand expressively. And pausing for a second to choose the right word, she continued, "humbled!"

"Oh, yes! Of course!" He nodded.

"Then, let us discuss the arrangements," Gernalda sat down and signalling for the Old Man to take his seat. The Old Man scowled at the woman but decided to oblige.

*   *   *   *   *

The opening was well concealed by the trees that had grown up along the edge of the forest. It almost appeared like someone intentionally placed the cover so that no one would discover that the path ever existed. Even the path that used to lead up to the forest no longer existed. Gil and the Hermit pulled themselves into the opening with some effort and scrapes and finally managed to get through the trees. As soon as they passed a couple trees, they found themselves on a well-worn, wide path that led directly ahead. The path was covered with debis of fallen limbs and dead brush. Even though it was midday, seeing was difficult. So, Huja got two large sticks and wrapped them with dirty cloth from his pack. After pouring some oil on them and lighting them, they both had torches that lit the way down the long dark tunnel of branches and trunks.

"It will getting dark soon," the Hermit said as he plodded along. "We want to get to the center of the forest before that time."

Gil made a quick effort to get in step with the Hermit and looked at him inquisitively. "I thought you said that Hittylee was safe!"

"Well," he said looking at him, "what I said was true. Hittylee is safe, but the
forests surrounding the kingdom by the mountain have dangers. It is not safe for us to stay for very long."

Just then, Gil stopped. "I'm not going into there! You lied to me! Why should I trust you?"

Without even looking back, the Hermit said flatly, "You have to. Now come on!" He continued walking not looking back.

Gil watched Huja's for a little while. The Hermit's torch cast his shadow longer and longer as Huja walked. The light also cast strong shadows on the Hermit's pack. For a minute, it looked like Huja had only the arm that carried the torch. The bright light from the torch glowed spherically around the Hermit as he got smaller and smaller. Soon fear of being along in such a place overcame Gil, and he ran up to the Hermit's torch arm.

"Don't worry, boy. We'll be alright," the Hermit reassured.

They walked for a ways down the seemingly endless path. Gil nervously looked about as his hackles rose and fell with each new sound he heard from the woods around them. Huja did not seem to notice the boy's nervousness but just kept walking down the dark road. Although the road had not been used for many decades, it was dead and lifeless from the shadowing trees above the travelers. Rocks and dips that surely would have shattered a good wheel, they walked around and paid little notice. Huja stopped suddenly and the boy with him.

"Get out your knife," the Hermit whispered as he felt the gaze of the uncertain boy. "We have some company."

Gil reached to the hilt of the long dagger stuck in his belt and held it uncomfortably. Looking about, he saw nothing, but the sounds of the forest had not changed from their
insidious laughter. He stood still next to the Hermit and waited nervously for any cue to run. He did not have to wait long. Just beyond the reaches of the torch light, he saw some movement. Peering carefully to see what it might be, Gil stepped forward instinctively.

"Gil! Get back!" Huja snapped hoarsely. The boy jumped back and peered fearfully into the silhouetted gloom his knife bravely poised. The movement soon became a figure; the figure became a man. It walked closer and closer. At first, Gil relaxed to see that it was not a gruesome monster he had imagined. But, some was wrong. The being was walking too stiffly--too mechanical--to be normal. Suddenly, the creature caught fire and disintegrated before their eyes. "That was the first test. We can expect many more soon," Huja said glumly, "Let's keep going."

Gil looked at the smoldering stump and Huja incredulously. The Hermit started walking leaving Gil to catch up behind him. Still perplexed, Gil eyed cautiously the rank lump in the middle of the road. Looking something like what a cow had done, the odor was far less pleasant. The boy jogged to catch up with Huja as he glanced questioningly at the distancing lump.

"What was that?" Gil asked finally.

"Oh, something dead."

"Sure, it's dead now, but what was it before it burned up?"

"It was dead before I destroyed it."

That struck Gil. A creature that walks and is dead? How can something walk and be dead? Then the other fact caught his attention. "You destroyed it! How?!!" Gil thought back to the incident and could not remember any movement from the Hermit.
His questions were left unanswered as he tried to figure out what had happened. He looked at his shoes and at the road beyond them. Lost in thought, he didn't notice the drooping dead limb.

"Gil! Look out!" Huja barked as the boy walked into the limb hitting him in the head. Dropping his torch, Gil landed flat on his back. Stunned, he sat up and rubbed his forehead. He felt something sticky and looked at his hand. Dark blood stained the fingers as he felt it drip from the wound on his forehead. Hurt and frightened he sat there and began to cry.

"Get up!" Huja leaned over and took the blood-splattered hand and lifted him to his feet. Taking a cloth which looked rather dirty, he wiped off the blood and inspected the wound. Noticeably satisfied, he tore a small piece of the cloth and placed it on the bleeding cut and held it there for a couple seconds. Letting go the cloth stuck to the boy's forehead. "Leave that on there for a while," Huja instructed when he looked at the tear-streaked face. "We'll be just fine--just keep your eyes open." The look of pain changed to fear in the boy's eye. Seeing it, Huja asked, "What is the matter?"

"The branch moved!"

"This old, dead branch?" Huja asked humorously. Just then, the branch wrapped itself around the man hand and began to creep up his arm. The Hermit scowled and winced slightly. "Dor-jem!" He commanded. The climbing limb on his arm flashed brightly dissolving the parasitic branch. A small light remained and traveled up the limb dissolving it. The tree shuddered noticeably as the light ate its way through the trunk. Creaking loudly, the trunk shook and glowed red. The glow abated leaving a black-ash trunk with drooping dead limbs.

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"How did you do that?" Gil asked with a little awe.

Ignoring the question, Huja looked at his arm and noticed blood oozing from two cuts. "Those damn trees!" he cursed. "Well, I guess I better doctor myself too," he said rather disgusted. In a couple minutes he had to bandages on his forearm just like the one on Gil's head.

"Huja?" the boy got the Hermit's attention, "How did you do that? And what was that thing?"

The Hermit looked at him carefully and considered. "Boy, let's go." He started walking again down the path. Then he stopped and looked back at the boy who was still standing there. The Hermit shook his head and rested his hands on his hips. "If I tell you, will you stop arguing with me?" Gil jogged up and they began walking together. There was a long silence before Huja explained.

"I didn't tell you all of the story, because you really didn't need to know. Mostly, I traveled with my brother exploring countries and lands. I also was stranded for many years with a strange people called the Elid. They know a lot about magic. And they taught me a little about it. Finally, my dear brother decided to take me back. He went back to Elidret Mountain and to rescue me. But, I did not want to leave. He could not get me to leave, so he bound me and took me away. Finally, he could not get me to teach him the ways of magic, so he banished me. Because, I was too far from Elidret Mountain to go back, I could not go back. That is where you found me near those caves."

They walked for a while in silence, while Gil absorbed the new facts about his traveling companion. "What was that tree back there?" he asked looking at the Hermit.

Huja had no time to answer the question as a shadowy figure stepped out from the
woods. Gil looked in the direction of the Hermit's gaze and tried to focus in on the black thing. It was close enough that he should have been able to see any features, but he saw none. In fact, there was no distinguishing feature about him. Something in the corner of Gil's eye moved. He turned and saw a leopard cautiously step into view and turned to face him. He looked around and saw two wispy figures move out behind them. The sight of the figures froze Gil in his tracks. His hackles rose and he wanted to scream, but no sound would come. He quickly turned his head away to look at the ground.

Calming himself down, Gil managed, "Huja, there are three more around us." His heart was racing but did not feel any stronger. His hands were clammy but was not hot—he felt cold. He watched the leopard slink its way closer and closer to him. With the knife still poised in his hand, the boy determined not to let this beast get too close. Reaching down, he picked up a rock and threw it at the large cat. The leopard hissed and growled as the rock struck its flank. It stopped and clawed at the air growling angrily.

Huja reached into a small pouch and threw glittery dust at the approaching black shadow. As the dust touched it, the shadow shattered into fading fragments which blew away by some invisible wind. He turned to the vaporous ghosts behind them and tossed two marbles at them. When the marbles touched them, they screamed inhumanly while they were sucked in.

Still concentrating on the large cat in front of him, Gil reached down again for another rock. The leopard's eyes watched the boy hatefully and twitched its muscles getting ready to pounce. Gil's fingers searched blindly for a projectile but found none. He began to panic while he clumsily searched with the dagger still in his hand. He glanced down briefly and found a rock just out of reach. Noticing some movement before
him, he looked up just as the large cat jump at him.

"Gil! Gil!" The Hermit exclaimed as he pulled the cat from the boy. The cat twitched it paws convulsively while it rolled over on its side exposing the dagger in its chest. The boy shook his head and sneezed. He had animal blood and fur on his chest and face. After checking to make sure the boy was alright and cleaning him up a little, Huja looked at the leopard.

Getting his wits about him, Gil sneezed again and looked at Huja as he inspected the corpse. "What's the matter?"

The old Hermit scowled at the beast and said, "A leopard does not belong here."

"What do you mean it doesn't belong here. Couldn't it have wondered in like we did?" Gil found the Hermit's comment rather ridiculous. What did it matter that the stupid animal was here.

"Look," Huja pointed at the corners the creatures had been at, "the other three monsters were undead--that is to say, they were once alive but were robbed of their life yet were not allowed to die. This," he pointed down at the leopard, "is alive."

"So?"

"Undead do not like the living very well. There must be something more about this creature," he concluded.

Not seeing the cause of the Hermit's morbid fascination, Gil shook his head and stepped over to withdraw his knife. Huja's hand flew up and and grabbed the boy's arm to restrain him. "What's the problem? I just want the knife back!"

"Look!" Huja indicated the feline corpse.

At first, Gil was about to object, but he decided not to and glanced at the cat. He
didn't really know what he was supposed to look at, but he watched anyway.

Imperceptibly, the paws began to change. Soon they shifted and changed more quickly until they became human arms. The legs and arms shifted from the legs as the hair defocused. The body moved and rolled over on its back--startling the travelers--showing the dagger's handle prominentely protruding from it chest. Finally, Gil looked at the face of the poor accursed man and cried in agony.

"Papa!"

* * * * *

Jegger stood and watched the two barter about how many troops were going to be "transferred" from the secret opening into the Old Man's room. It was rather boring to watch, but he dared not to disturb them. He had no problem hearing them--especially when they argued. Jegger let the thought that they fight like siblings curl a smile on his face.

"Not very professional, brother!" A voice came from behind him. Recognizing the voice, Jegger did not move. It was a voice from so long ago. "Many years ago, you bested me three times in the assassin's practice arena. But, that was then. I don't hold grudges; I seek revenge. You must have known that the Old Man suspected that you might not kill the boy, so he hired me to make sure you did it," the voice hissed. "And, that you did it right," he said with a sadistic tone. Then with almost a laugh, he said, "Well, brother, you did not do it nor did you do it right! We'll have to fix that."

Jegger turned slowly around and let the light from the secret door shine on the speaker's face. Ytoal! The cloak covered most of his scaly, red reptile skin, but the flashing green eyes shown brightly. He was leaning against the stone wall of the narrow
passage that led back into the recesses of the castle. There was quite a network of secret passages throughout the castle which were used for escape purposes or assassination. Only Jegger knew them all—at least he used to think so.

"You know, Brother Jegger, that you should never leave your back exposed. You have forgotten a lot of you training. That should make your death that much easier..." he said and sighed disappointedly, "and unchallenging." One of the Beltot's arms swung out silently and in a streak of black cloak. It met a shadow and dissolved. Surprised, the creature froze and peered suspiciously. Suddenly, the beltot arched his back, jerked and twitched uncontrollably, then gurgled blood letting it drip from his chin.

"Yes, Brother Ytoal," Jegger said over the reptile's shoulder, "most unprofessional. You should never waste time with silly cliches." Jegger let the body down carefully and quietly. Opening his case on his belt, he pulled out a long needle and inserted completely it into the staring corpse's neck. Then kneeling next to the body, he leaned over to the ear and whispered, "Tom-Ytoal, what have you done to the boy?"

Expression the same and eyes staring vacantly, the mouth whispered, "I have not found him yet."

"Are there other brothers here?"

"Yesss."

Jegger leaned back against the wall and looked down the hall pensively then looked the other way to the still-open secret door and frowned. He reached down and pulled out the needle, wiped it off, and stuck it back in the case.

* * * * *

"Well, now that has been settled," the Old Man said triumphantly, "I would like you
to meet my right-hand man for many operations. Jegger?" He leaned back confidently and waited for the assassin to appear. After a couple moments, Gernalda looked at him questioningly, and his face darkened. "Jegger, I know you're back there. Come on out!"

Nothing.

Impatiently, the Old Man rose and stormed over to the dirty, black curtain and yanked it back. "What is the matter with you?!" the Old Man scolded. Gernalda shrieked as the Beltot fell to the floor on its face with a loud thud and splattered lumpy blood on the floor.

* * * * *

"Who's there?" Apsen demanded hoarsely as he heard the sound of footsteps approach him. He had waited there with the unconscious boy on his lap for about two hours in complete darkness waiting for Jegger to return. He was warned not to create any light, because someone might see it through cracks in the mortar. Feeling a little nervous from the last encounter, he waited patiently to cast another illusion so that the corridor appeared to end suddenly. Someone approached about an hour before. From the odor it was a Beltot. Most Beltot's were thieves or assassins, and Aspen was in not going to let anything like that near him! Yes, he had heard that they were very cruel. The Beltot was able to get close them but Aspen was not going to let that happen again--that was too close.

"Jegger of the Night," whispered the answer.

"Of the Night?! You're an assassin! Stay away!" Aspen warned feebly.

Jegger found the uncertainty in Apsen's voice rather humorous but fought the urge to play with it. "Do not fear!" he said reassuringly. "I union with you," he pledged.
"How can I trust you? You're an assassin!"

"You must; otherwise, you and the boy die," said flatly only about two feet away.

"Now, come! We have very little time before the Old Man discovers that I have killed his hired assassin."

"You killed! You really are an assassin! Oh, please do not hurt me or the boy!" He plead.

Jegger stood for a second in the darkness and considered carefully. He reached down and placed his hand on Aspen's chest. "You're a woman!" he declared. "Why have you led everyone to believe that you were a man? Didn't you know that women cannot be jailed?"

There was a long pause, before Apsen responded. "I feared that your people would treat me cruelly for being a woman--more cruelly than if I acted as a man. The Old Man knows that I am a woman and kidnapped me. I am a princess of the Elid. I feared that if my true identity were known among your people, I would face horrible torture."

Understanding came to Jegger as he understood the cultural differences. "Aspen, unlike the women of your land, women in Ponsale own land and are most respected. The Old Man must have thought that by kidnapping you he could gain some of you land. But, as you know, he can't get influence over the Elid that way."

"Then, why did he keep me?"

"I don't know. In any case, we need to leave very soon--before the Old Man discovers that I have deserted him. We are in grave danger. Can you travel?"

She looked in the direction of the unconscious boy. Carrying him for so long under the guise of being a man had severely weekened her. "I can if you take the boy," she said.
"We must get to Elidret Mountain if he is to survive."

That stopped Jegger. "How much time does he have?" All of his effort to save the boy will be for nothing if he dies from some stupid ailment. He stooped and felt boy's light pulse.

"He only has a day left," she said. "We are three days from Elidret Mountain if we go by foot."

Picking up the boy, Jegger thought about that. "What would suggest? Traveling by horse may kill the boy," he asked as he began walking down the passage. Aspen soon had to hold on to a small strap attached to Jegger's cloak to follow him as he moved from passage to passage. In cavern blackness, Jegger moved expertly and swiftly.

"There is another way," she said after another turn. "But, we will have to be in an open field in order for it to work." Trying to talk as she concentrated on following the leather strap in darkness was almost more than she could manage.

"I don't like being out in the open, but if you think that will help, how much time will you need?"

"No more than a half an hour," she gasped as a corner struck her shoulder. Still, she kept a tight grip on the strap.

"A half an hour!" Jegger growled. "Okay, I'll see what I can do." The thought of being out in the open for so long unnerved him. With the Old Man coming after him and the other assassins, it was not wise to delay anywhere.

"Where are you going in such a hurry, Brother?" a voice said ahead of them. Startled, Aspen gasped and Jegger slid clumsily on the dusty floor in front of her.

Jegger tuned his trained hearing and heard something behind them. "Aspen, look
"Well, now, what do we have here?" the second voice asked perversely. "A little girl for lonely boys!" He said as she grunted while trying to get out of his grasp.

"Brother, you have done very badly! You were supposed to kill the boy not kidnap him!" the one in front said parentally. "So, to do right you must turn the boy over to us, and you must apologize to the Old Man." The voice indicated no such expectation.

"No, Jemra! I want the girl!" the other voice objected.

Jegger heard some deliberate movement by Aspen. He used that as a cue while he heard Aspen say something in Elid. The man in front was ready as Jegger put Werren down and raced toward the man in front. Aspen's captor screamed as a bright flash of light engulfed his face. Blinded by the light, the man in front held up his hands defensively and turned away to run. There was a low grunt as Jegger buried his hand in the man's back. The body rebounded against the wall and fell, laying still.

The man who attacked Aspen lay fetal on the dusty floor with blood flowing from the back of his neck and a bright glow from his face directed at the wall. Shocked, Jegger looked at Aspen who was carefully wiping off a short, blood-stained dagger. "What are you looking at?" she demanded. "You certainly have killed before, and we Elid are not helpless."

Staring for a second, Jegger just shook his head, picked up the boy, and started down the hallway wondering what kind of traveling companion had he picked up this time.

* * * * *

"We have to help him!" Gil cried as he knelt by the unconscious, nude figure. Gil turned back and continued to weep over his father. Blood oozed slowly showing that the
wound was either not very severe or that the end was near. The old Hermit was not sure whether wanted to find out which.

"He may not be your father. The man is cursed!" Huja found himself saying. After saying it, he wished he had kept quiet.

Gil looked up tear-streaked and glowered at the old Hermit who stood there dumbly. "If you are not going to him, I will! Why don't you go to that stupid city that you desire so much?! Go on!"

At first the Hermit tempted to turn away and leave the damn boy or scold him, but he held his peace. Walking over to the body, he carefully moved Gil out of the way who offered no resistance. He knelt down and searched for a pulse. None. He sat back and shook his head.

"No! You've got to help him!" Gil cried hysterically, "Please!" Finally, the boy fell silent and turned away his face.

But the Hermit was not satisfied. He inspected the wound and found it not very severe. In fact, it was not in fatal region. Carefully palming the dagger's handle, he yanked the blade out of the wound and jumped backward. Nothing happened.

Seeing the movement in the corner of his teary eye, Gil looked over at the body fearfully. The body remained still, but the Hermit's attention was fully set on it.
The Meckellin armies are waiting just to pressure the Old Man.

The Old Man suspects nothing of the plan by his sister-in-law, Gernalda, to oust the Old Man from his greedy office by cooperating with the Meckellin. She sends some troops that will subversively convince the Old Man's armies to switch sides. She knows that the Old Man will eventually skip out on his kingdom to save his own skin once he has no support or defence. When that happens, the kingdom would be divided between the enemies.

Werren is the rightful heir to the Kingdom of Ponsale through his mother. This makes the union of kingdoms more smooth against the other kingdoms. Before Ponsale is divided by the enemy, Werren with the Elid return and disperse the enemy.

Where is Gil's father?

Father has a curse to return to the Hittylee forest every summer. Unable to help, Gil at least can understand now.

How do Elid fit in?

Adept in the workings of magic, they heal Werren of his sleep but find that there have been irreversible side effects. Therefore, Aspen is assigned to be with him for as long as he lives to teach him the ways of magic.

Aspen is really a female. (Check voice and references)

She is a princess of the Elid. Kidnapped by the Old Man supposing Aspen to be important land-owner. Only the Old Man knows that Aspen is female.

How will the Hittylee fit into the story?

The Hittylee is where Gil's father, Welforlum (Wel) is serving as a cursed creature. One hunting trip many years ago, Wel entered the forests and stole a
priceless treasure from one of the tombs. The spirits of the forest were offended
and cursed him to have to return every spring solstice to work as a guardian over
the treasure. Forever.

How does the white scar fit into the story?

The white scar is a curse on Werren that puts an endless slumber on the boy.
When the cursed was placed, knowledge of his father's blood line was not known
(he used to be an Elid). Therefore, the curse was altered slightly making Werren
very susceptible and sensitive to magic.

The Beltot was hired by Gernalda to assassinate or alienate Jegger so that the Old Man
will feel unprotected.