

Prologue

Dorchester Homestead, Union of the Badlands, 748 a.d.f.

FEW THINGS MANAGED to cause Conrad of House Vindofalen to break out in waves of intense shivering and chattering teeth.

A night spent wandering a stretch of the western deserts was one of them.

For all his rugged physique, developed over a lifetime of strenuous activity and harsh conditioning, the howling wind tore through every fibre of his being. Even Dorian, the well-fed grey wolfhound at his side, offered the occasional whimper. A companion of many years over countless difficult journeys, it was rare for the old mongrel to display such overt signs of discomfort. The situation must have become truly dire indeed.

Conrad scratched behind the old hound's ears to offer some small measure of an apology, to which the stout bounty hunter was rewarded with a short but determined growl. Heads bowed against the shrieking winds pouring across the tall dunes, the two travellers struggled up the nearest ridge in need of a brief respite.

After huddling beneath a small outcrop the lost wanderer unstrapped his satchel and felt around for the pewter flask. It contained the meagre remains of what

had been an ample supply of water upon leaving the way station two days prior, but both he and the hound desperately needed to wash the grit from their eyes and throats.

Cursing the lack of visibility, resulting from a combination of the new moon in the sky and incessant maelstrom, Conrad threw his pack to the ground in frustration as he withdrew the small container. Dorian's large, chestnut eyes reflected the glint of the metallic surface in anticipation of relief, only for both their hopes to be crushed as sand poured from the canister.

'Kurugh and all his twisted bastards,' the shaking form muttered. 'Of all the damned places to settle down, those two incompetents had to settle with the badlands. Tarm had the right of it, but that stays between us, eh boy?'

Dorian looked up with a blank expression, tongue lolling between yellowed teeth. With a sigh of resignation, Conrad unravelled the stained brown blanket of coarse wool from atop his travelling kit. The damned horse had run off after getting spooked with the rest of his provisions.

'That's what you get for hiring a cheap mount, in the first place' Conrad muttered to himself through ground teeth.

Without a further word, the man and hound curled up with parched mouths to try and wait out the sandstorm.

'You have got be kidding.'

Shaking off the last grains of sand from the night's

torment, Conrad watched the mutt racing towards outstretched arms no more than a hundred steps below their small encampment.

‘I see you up there, Vindofalen,’ a raucous voice called out. ‘Are you going to roll about in the sand a while longer, or would you rather join us for the morning meal?’

‘Maps, stay right there,’ he tried to call out in reply, but it exited his throat as a dry rattle. ‘I don’t know whether I want to kiss you or put you six feet under.’

Unsure if the short woman had heard the remark, and secretly hoping it had been lost on the now-gentle winds, Conrad carefully made his way down from the mound towards the small homestead. Dorian was greedily lapping up clean water from a small copper bowl on the porch by the time Maps sauntered over to greet the dishevelled nobleman.

‘Conrad of House Vindofalen, Scion of Ripuaria, Champion of the Divided Steppe and Slayer of Chimera,’ the bespectacled face gave a low bow. ‘Welcome to our home.’

‘Ok, enough with all that, Maps,’ Conrad rolled his eyes. ‘You know I’ve no time for such nonsense. I’ve spent the last night with a mouthful of wolf fur, dreamin’ of whisky and ice cold Anastan rivers. Please, tell me you have—’

‘No on both accounts,’ Margot interrupted. ‘Hal is too drained. I reckon he won’t be fit to transmute any more water for a few hours, let alone whisky.’

Margot of Almsville went by a number of nicknames, largely dependent on who was doing the talking, but

Maps and *Maggie* tended to be the two most common these days.

Over the seventy-odd years since they had first met the red hair had lost none of its sheen, nor had any of her squat features set beneath wide-rimmed bifocals shown any signs of age. In fact, he knew through Hal that although Margot appeared to be a young woman in her mid-thirties, she had recently celebrated her one hundred and twentieth birthday.

The truth of her enhanced lifespan never seemed to bother Hal, but then he was nearly three centuries old himself so that made a strange sort of sense. Conrad, who was himself gifted to some extent in the Inner Path, nonetheless felt slightly awestruck when confronted with such potent sorcery.

How in all the hells had they controlled the power needed for that type of spellcraft?

Suddenly, his focus was brought back to the moment by a quick, playful slap to the face, as freckles and shoulder-length curls filled his view.

‘Conny, you still in there?’

Margot placed an ice cold bottle into his left hand.

‘Sorry Maggie,’ he quickly came to attention. ‘I was just mulling over the fact you haven’t aged a damned day, while here I am looking like an old codger.’

His remark was met with an impish grin.

‘I was just saying we could do you one better,’ Margot replied while pointing down at the glass vessel. ‘Since when do you call me *Maggie*, anyway? You really must be out of sorts if you’re starting to sound like Hal.’

Conrad shook his head as he held up the

frost-covered bottle of *Las Lágrimas*, the best beer to be found anywhere west of Culversten. He hadn't even meant to call her that, it just came out.

'Thanks,' he unscrewed the cap and drained half the bottle in one long pull. 'I wish I'd known your place was another few steps in this direction last night. We couldn't see so much as an arm's length.'

Margot nodded and her face set into a grimace.

'Worst one we've seen since moving here.'

'I take it Hal and the boys are fine,' he said. 'It would take more than a storm to put that mentor of yours in his grave.'

'Yeah, they're all fine,' Margot replied through a yawn. 'Couple of cracked window frames and he'll need to rebuild the pigpen out back, but nothing we can't handle. At least the hoglins had the good sense to hide under the rubble and stay put.'

A loud chortle came from behind the small wooden hovel and caused both their gazes to turn in its direction.

'More sense than me, at any rate. I tried to repel the winds and ended up on my backside.'

Henry Dorchester, known by many other names due to having spent decades living as a fugitive, strode over and polished off his own bottle before placing it on a nearby ramshackle fence. To friends and his foster mother Lorotte, the man had always simply been known as *Hal*, although he often went by *Chester* when dealing with the seedier elements of society.

Given their common ties as bounty hunters, and the fact they had cooperated on quite a few good scores

since first meeting at the tavern in Esperanza years ago, Conrad knew all too well how important it was to keep a low profile.

Unfortunately for Hal, that was easier said than done. With glowing violet eyes, a shock of unruly black hair and a lanky figure covered in various scars, the man stood out in any crowd. The fact he was missing his left ear and had a bronze replacement fitted in its place certainly didn't help either. Add to that the warlock's tendency to wear gaudy and outlandish attire, and the effect was complete.

Thankfully, unless Hal was undernourished or utterly exhausted, keeping up a glamour was one of his greatest natural talents. He could take on any living form that came to mind, all while manipulating his surroundings, that aspect of spell-work the mages used to call the *Outer Path*, without even so much as breaking a sweat.

‘You’re thinking about just how wonderful I am, for all my... physical quirks.’

‘Nice try, jackass,’ Conrad chuckled. ‘We all know telepathy is one of the few schools where you can’t best me.’

They spent the next few minutes greeting one another and discussing the previous night’s weather before turning to follow Dorian’s wagging tail into the homestead. Conrad noticed the look Margot gave him behind Hal’s shoulder, and he returned a very slight nod in response.

Their friend had tried to mask the pain in his right arm during all the arm clasps and back pats, but the stoic mask hadn’t reached up to his trembling eyes.

With concern over his friend's lingering injury, Conrad followed his friends to take a seat near the pantry.

'So there's no sign of it healing or closing up?'

Hal shook his head. Margot clasped her hands upon the small granite table with a deepening frown. Most of the house was constructed from good cedar and oak, which was a great expense given the lack of lumber in the badlands, but several metal and stone-based items furnished its interior as was the local custom.

'I wager all this fine woodwork is part of the gift from Tarm and her folk,' mused Conrad, as one of his large, caterpillar-like eyebrows lifted in a wry expression.

'Tarmeena should have been here last week,' Hal returned. 'Maggie went out scouting yesterday before the storm hit, but there weren't any tracks. *Merilithi* don't easily sneak past undetected in the middle of the badlands.'

'She's not half bad using those legs of hers these days,' Margot cut in. 'Last I saw her after the battle you'd have been hard pressed to recognise Tarm as a mermaid at all.' The squat woman shifted the glasses on her nose and squinted. 'Although to be fair, the fact she was dripping from head-to-toe in entrails and wearing a cracked bronze helm didn't help either.'

Conrad nodded. After taking a deep draught of cold water from the copper cup offered by his hosts, and then proceeding to chew over a morsel of salted pork with relish, he yawned and returned to the topic of his friend's ongoing injury.

'Surely between the two of you it shouldn't be too

hard to get sorted?’

Hal barked a quick, guttural sound of amusement.

‘I’m good, but I’m not *that* good. I reckon if Lorotte or Valderic were here they would have my arm fixed properly. There’s something rotten about the cut, and it ain’t natural.’

Mention of Hal’s foster mother Lorotte, once leader of the Shaman Council up north in the wilds, gave Conrad a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. As for Valderic, well... there was no reason to spoil the mood of their reunion with talk of him. At least not for the time being.

There would be plenty of time later.

While the three hunters sat in quiet discussion about less severe matters, such as the intended colour scheme for the fresh cedar walls, Dorian walked over to Hal’s side and nudge a wet muzzle into the man’s arm. Then, the wolfhound repeated the gesture several more times before beginning to bark an odd cadence and pattern of growls.

‘Forgive me, my young friend,’ Hal said. ‘It completely slipped my mind as the lads are out back trying to keep the hoglins from running off.’

The warlock gave a sudden flick of his wrist and inscribed a strange symbol in the air using his fingers. After returning the hand to his side with a noticeable amount of pain, the ward remained shimmering in a light blue hue before their eyes. It reminded Conrad of a twisted mouth, but one with coils of rope protruding from the sides.

The pup seemed to relax and lay down in

contentment upon the floor.

Hal knuckled the large shock of grey fur on the beast's head.

'Well, that should sort out the pain. That will teach you to chew on sharp branches, eh?'

Dorian raised his head with an overt display of indignation and pride.

Margot laughed aloud and tossed one of the pork chops into the air, which Dorian caught deftly in his maw with ease. After making sure the slab of meat was firmly secured between his canines, Dorian declared he was going to go help keep the pigs in their place.

An enormous, scarred wolfhound carrying a chunk of swine flesh blocking off the exit from the ruined pigsty should certainly do the trick, Conrad mused to himself.

The rest of the afternoon passed in amicable conversation around the table.

Despite sporadic interruptions from Dorian wanting fed, most of the discussion centred upon whether they should go search for Tarm or give her more time to arrive. Tarmeena af Tarmosti, for all her glamour and subtle arts of seduction, was well-known to have a prickly constitution and to become offended easily. However, in truth she was mischievous and had a deep sense of humour which she often hid from those outside her immediate circle.

Still, Conrad had always been fond of the ageless *Merilitha*, although he could admit to a pang of envy for Hal having become her beau. It wasn't that Conrad of

House Vindofalen lacked the resources for dalliances with the high and mighty, but few lordlings' daughters had made any sort of first impression in the way Tarm had years earlier.

Anyone who knew her was well aware she eschewed the typical customs of her people and hostility to humankind, instead preferring to spend time on land by means of two long, slender enchanted legs.

That in itself took some serious magical prowess, but where Tarm really shone was in the art of glamour. Few were better at altering a person's perception of things. Indeed, the first time they had met had clearly demonstrated just how adept she truly was.

Conrad, having been taken prisoner alongside Hal by a band of brigands near the coast, watched as Tarm drew them in with her coral harp and irresistible voice. She looked every bit the typical *syrene* you might hear some old, drunk fisherman bellow on about at one of the many taverns lining the coast of the Eastern Reaches.

Unfortunately for the bandits, for all Tarm's shimmering jewels crafted from shells, or her long, flowing locks of emerald-coloured hair and matching tail, once they dropped anchor it was too late.

It took all of five minutes for the suddenly wailing dirge to cause the men to rip one another to bloody ribbons at her behest. Afterwards, the mermaid had even had the good grace to lead them ashore in one of the small longboats.

Conrad couldn't stop the large ear-to-ear grin from splitting his face. When he thought back to their first

meeting, the look on Hal's face had been priceless: the man's heart had been utterly stolen hook, line and sinker.

Tarmeena had claimed she could see into a person's essence and that was the only reason she had let them both live. However, when Hal had lifted his manacles in her direction with a raised eyebrow, she had burst out in a throaty laugh and winked.

A kidney bean suddenly thudded into Conrad's head.

'Stop thinking about my bride-to-be like that,' Hal mocked with humour in his voice. 'I know that look, Conny. Besides, whatever happened with that girl Caroline? Where was she from again, Malata?'

Conrad grunted. 'Just never worked out, same as usual.'

At this Margot sputtered out a mouthful of water and tore into the conversation.

'Poor Conny... nobleman from a rich family? Check. Renowned bounty hunter with rugged good looks? Check. Famed slayer of monster-kind and saviour of countless settlements? Check. Humility and a good sense of humour, despite all his fame? Check. You poor, unlucky and hopeless so—'

Conrad lifted his hands in a gesture of mock surrender.

'Ok, I admit it Maps, you win,' he replied with false modesty. 'I have my moments.'

'It's a good thing I couldn't care less about men, eh?' Margot was quick to fire back. 'Well, nor women for that matter. Give me a good stylus and roll of paper, thank you very much.'

Before Conrad could respond, Hal stood up to get the fire started in the small stone hearth in the centre of the room. After using an incantation to conjure a small globe of glowing flames and making sure it was safely resting in the ash pit, he then sat down on one of the many soft furs lining the floors nearby.

‘So, do we give her until tomorrow morning, or should we head out tonight? You know what Tarmeena can be like about these things.’

‘Scared she’ll rip off your grapes with her bare hands?’

Hal grimaced. ‘You know it, Maggie.’

Margot tossed a bean at him, but it was swiftly caught and thrown into the fireball.

‘I was dead on my feet this morning,’ Conrad said in response to his friend’s earlier question. ‘But, with a day’s rest and a belly full I’m up for a night ride if anyone else cares to tag along.’

Hal crooked an ear for a moment before replying. ‘Storm sounds like it’s long gone and blown itself out, why not? If we do happen to come across Tarm I’ll shoulder the blame for not trusting her path-finding skills.’

‘Right,’ Margot said as she got to her feet. ‘I’ll scribble a quick note that she’s to make herself at home in case we miss her.’

‘My apprentice does all the real work around here,’ Hal drawled as he began preparing his gear for a patrol around the vicinity. ‘I’m just here to look pretty.’

Conrad nodded in amusement.

‘Did I ever tell you about our first hunt and the mess

we got ourselves into afterwards? Well, the first *real* one anyway, not counting anything so simple as coywolves or bears.'

'Oh, this should be good,' he replied. 'You can tell me as we're getting saddled up. I take it you have a spare ride?'

Margot interrupted them with the sound of crumpling paper.

'You know what,' she said. 'You two go out for a quick look around the boundaries, I may as well stay put and keep the fire going for her. Take my remount, Conny. She's light on her feet and not one of your huge warhorses, but you should manage. Might even breed her with Rufus someday, if he's still up to it.'

The gruff hunter nodded, the shame at having lost his hired colt during the storm slightly assuaged. After leaving Margot to her comfort by the fireplace alongside a snoring Dorian, the men wrapped up in their ponchos and went out into the evening air. Hal's old horse Rufus was hitched up, although the post itself was slightly damaged and bent from the prior night's madness.

'I'm guessing she didn't want to overhear you telling me the story, then?'

Hal didn't look up from his saddlebags as he replied.

'Oh, quite the opposite. I made an absolute mess of the job and she never tires of hearing it.'

Caught off guard by the unusual confession of weakness from a fellow hunter, Conrad checked the stirrups of the brown steed and listened intently as Hal began his tale.

Chapter 1

Old Barset Coal Mines, Union of the Badlands, 674 a.d.f.

THE CLOYING TASTE of heavy dust and stagnant water filled my throat.

I quickly readjusted the black linen bandana covering my face in the hope of reducing the awful assault to my senses. At first it seemed to do the trick, but after a few minutes another layer of putrid odours penetrated my mask.

After years spent roaming the deserts comprising most of the Union's landmass, in the western half of what had come to be known as the 'Frontiers' following centuries of exploration, I was familiar with the various scents encountered when delving into abandoned quarries. In all honesty, this was probably my tenth such contract in as many years.

However, there was an extra layer of rot and decay overpowering the more mundane tang of rusted iron or unused kerosene. The hairs on my neck had shot upright upon reaching the entrance to the excavation site. Brutal deaths can happen in any number of ways, but the smell left behind is unmistakable.

Beasts of all shapes and sizes tended to make their

homes in such places, and bands of outlaws often settled in once such horrors had been purged. This is hardly surprising, given how useful a deep complex of tunnels can be for prey hoping to flee their pursuers.

Unfortunately, caves also make the perfect lairs for predators.

Enormous, pallid grey ones striding atop sharp claws, with greasy strings of black hair and rows of teeth the size of pocket knives, for example.

Well, the bounty office in Esperanza wasn't offering good coin without the usual high chance of dismemberment or having my face chewed off. At least Melphas, the imp in charge of issuing hunts, had given me enough detail for a bit of preparation ahead of time. My belt was laden with a number of different brews and concoctions, while the satchel slung over my right shoulder was filled with various cured meats and dried foods which could enhance my natural talents in a pinch.

I always tended to make a few too many strips of pork jerky, but then it was my preferred nibble when it came to boosting the effects for anything to do with the Outer Path, a term the mages used for anything requiring a user to draw power from their surrounding environment. Moisture for spells of water-work, heat for those of a more infernal nature, you get the idea.

Yeah, I know. The name is pretty self-explanatory and on-the-nose, what can I say? Blame the Hall of the Sage for that one. Valderic was not the most creative of people, for all his skill honed over seven centuries of study. In any case, I was well-provisioned with draughts

to bolster my illusory abilities such as concealment or glamour, and foodstuffs to magnify my more aggressive spells should they be needed.

When they would be needed.

I shook my head, trying to clear my mind of the many potential abominations which might be waiting in ambush farther into the underground passage. After a few steps the darkness overwhelmed my vision, and I clasped the large, rusted mine cart to my left for support. Uncovering my mouth, I tried to ignore the rancid smell and gulped down a small vial of an amber-coloured liquid. Within seconds my sight burst into a vibrant clarity, as though the entire damp corridor was lit with torches. Taking a moment to blink and make sure the measure of Black sight Brew had been enough, I managed to chew on a morsel of pork over the rancid smell emanating from deeper in the mine.

You never know when a spur of the moment firestorm might be needed, so I managed to keep it down despite the aroma of death and decay making me want to void my insides.

Taking a deep breath to steady my nerves, I released my grip on the coal hauler and took in my surroundings. Melphas had been right in his risk assessment: the walls were covered in patches of dried blood and deep gashes about three hands' length in size. I moved closer to inspect the damage, and upon examining the ragged marks knew exactly what manner of monster had made its lair within.

I made a mental note to try and get Melphas to reimburse my expenses alongside the bounty fee when I

got back to town. A hundred silver pesetas was nowhere near enough. Well, at least I knew what to expect. I just hoped my apprentice Margot, who I'd taken to calling Maggie despite her youthful insistence on going by 'Maps', would be of sufficient courage to stand her ground should I fall to the monstrosity ahead.

After checking both the bronze pistolas at my hips and the rifled longarm hanging across my back were properly loaded, I raised my bandana and proceeded to sneak towards the nearest bend in the mine shaft, taking extra care not to trip on the lattice of rails under my feet.

The mines outside of Old Barset hadn't been in use for over a decade, but they had once been a major contributor to the region's supply of coal for use in furnaces during the cold desert evenings. As a result, a large web of connecting burrows stretched out underground for miles. While many resulted in dead-ends or collapsed rubble, I had been able to navigate the trenches by following the trail of destruction and growing whiff of decomposition.

Finally, after what must have been several hours, I peered carefully around the bend of a small tunnel opening into a large cavern. Kneeling behind an old wooden crate I held my breath and scanned the dig site for any sign of movement. Pickaxes were scattered against the far walls opposite me, and broken lanterns were strewn across the ground or upon barrels. Large wooden beams had been erected with scaffolds to support the miners' work, and piles of discarded stone

lay in heaps next to the structure.

Still, there was no sign of life.

I didn't want to abuse my potions and end up on death's door for a week, but a small beaker of cactus extract was clutched in my right hand in case I needed a quick spell of concealment. Better safe than sorry, as the saying goes.

After several long minutes of silence, I let out a sigh in equal parts relief and frustration. It was at that moment a glimmer of light reflected off some object in the corner of the room, which would have been invisible if not for my augmented vision.

Moving swiftly and silently to another point of cover, this time behind an upturned steam carriage of some kind, I noticed a smaller opening which I had not been able to see from my previous position. It had been largely hidden behind the scaffolding and mound of rocks on the left-hand side of the chamber. Creeping to the side wall of the cavern, I kept a low profile and moved in the direction of the crevice. Gently uncorking the small glass bottle, I downed its contents in one quick swallow.

'Athal imet kasado,' I whispered.

Nothing happened. At least, not from my own perspective. Thankfully, I knew to any onlooker it would appear as though I had vanished into thin air. Feeling slightly more secure in my concealment, I turned into the smaller pit.

The creature's lair was a chaotic mixture of half-eaten corpses, human and non-human alike, with pools of thick fluid collecting between the five-odd

stacks of victims' remains. A nearby stalagmite showed signs of having been worn down through continual scratching, likely the result of the fiend sharpening its nails. The upper torso of a cave bear was propped up against the wall behind the makeshift scratching post. Even so, amidst all the signs of carnage there was nothing but the sound of dropping water or the occasional creaking of the mine's wooden supports.

'The brute must be out hunting,' I thought to myself.

I waited for about half an hour perched in the narrow crack before turning to leave. At least I had found its hideout, but I wanted to regroup with Margot to come up with a plan of action.

Suddenly, all thoughts of returning to camp were dashed, as a rumbling growl came from above.

Looking up towards the high ceiling, I took in the expanding shape which moments before had been totally hidden by the pitch black.

'So much for Black sight Brew,' I thought to myself in annoyance.

As the monster stretched out from its previous state of hibernation it dropped effortlessly to the ground below, landing upon two lean, grey and spindly legs. Resembling something between a malnourished man and a coyote, the beasts were reported to grow to over twelve feet in height.

This one was possibly close to that, and a crown of narrow antlers rested upon its head. Dark spittle dripped from the thing's jawline, and razor-sharp teeth protruded in jagged rows within the gaping maw. Its arms and long claws were perfectly suited to slicing

through flesh, and the sickly grey skin only added to my sense of dread as I darted back behind cover.

The wendigo ceased its rumbling growl and sniffed the air.

I didn't even dare to so much as breathe.

'Just wait,' I told myself. 'You know how this goes, keep it together.'

Sure enough, after several minutes the terror began to rip apart one of the bodies on the floor. It was uncommon for such aberrations to come back empty-handed, but not unknown. Indeed, this was precisely why *wiindigooag*; as my foster mother often called them, often stank of putrefaction: they were never above eating carrion or spoiled meat from past hunts when needed.

Taking extra care not to make any of my equipment clatter, I drew the rifle from my back and aimed it at the wendigo's forehead. For all their monstrous strength and agility, they were not immune to a bullet to the brain.

I knew the shot had to make its mark, or else I'd be in a world of trouble and likely to join the corpse pile less than fifty feet away. One of the major downsides to concealment magic is the requirement to move discreetly at all times; any loud or boisterous motions immediately negate its effects. I had to be ready to react, in case my shot went wide.

Following a few deep breaths to steady my nerves, I held it in and aimed for the spot immediately between its dark, black eyes. As I pulled the trigger there was an explosion of noise and smoke, but I wasted no time in

closing the distance. Tossing my rifle aside and bounding out from cover through the gun-smoke, I intoned a ward of corporeal protection and drew my two sidearms.

There was no need. The still form of the wendigo lay upon its back, a stream of viscous, dark red blood oozing from its forehead.

I let out a long sigh as my body shuddered in relief. The body wasn't going anywhere, I could go back to get Margot and show her which parts of the wendigo were worth keeping as either trophies or for sale on the market.

The teeth in particular would fetch a fine price, and its antlers were known to have medicinal properties when ground into a paste. I knew a guy who paid well for livers and their offal as well, although he could be hard to track down.

Feeling exhausted from the constant nervous energy and slightly nauseous from the mixed potions, I removed a flask of water from my bag and gulped greedily. Within seconds I started to feel better and more clear-headed.

I've always found it amusing that for all the complex magical potions and dishes we have discovered over the centuries through trial and error, the cure to their overuse is almost always water. Nothing fancy, no special concoction. Just clean, untainted and pure water. With a grin curling at the sides of my mouth, I turned to retrace my steps back to our small camp next to the quarry.



As I began to follow the trail of chalk I had etched into the left wall of the winding shafts during my descent into the gloom, my spirits began to lift. The bounty itself and possible bonus from Melphas would keep Margot and myself fed and sheltered for months, with some extra pesetas for a bit of fun at the tavern now and then.

My apprentice would be able to buy those rolls of high quality paper and bottles of expensive ink she had been desperate to afford, along with the latest map of the Frontiers issued by one of the universities along the coast in recent years. For myself, I needed some new clothes for the change of seasons, and I wanted to get a new saddle kit for my mount Rufus.

My head was spinning with the possible uses for the cash reward, when a stomach-churning shriek bellowed from the tunnels behind me. My skin turned ice cold as my mind was bombarded by an outside force.

‘You dare? You... DARE?’

I doubled over with my hands on my knees, overcome by the sheer malignancy and weight of magic pounding into my head.

‘I walked these lands since before the gateways were even built. Your trespass was still a lifetime of the world away, and you would try to hunt ME?’

The wendigo’s white hot rage was palpable.

‘You... you should be dead,’ I replied in what sounded like a feeble tone inside my thoughts.

‘Oh come now, child of Lorotte, surely that young

witch has taught you better than this?’

The mention of the shaman responsible for my upbringing brought me up short. Young witch? She was nearly eight hundred years old. That’s when I knew I was in way over my head as it clicked.

Of course.

This wasn’t just any corpse-feeding wendigo, which was rare enough to begin with. No, this was a *strigatic* variant of the monster. Only three had ever been recorded since the Old Worlders started to settle and colonise the Frontiers following the discovery of the gates between realms nearly seven centuries ago. Worse still, only one of the hunts had been successful, with the remains of the monster supposedly on display somewhere in Culversten.

Unfortunately for me, according to the various bestiaries I had studied the only clear difference in appearances was that a ‘strigatic wendigo’ had blood red nails and a patch of moss-green hair above its tailbone.

Given it had been elbow-deep in gore and facing my direction, I wasn’t exactly in any position to notice such things. Despite the trivial physical variation from its wendigo cousin, in terms of raw power this nightmare was on an entirely different level.

‘You used to be a shaman,’ I said as a statement rather than a question.

There was no response for a several minutes, while I scrambled in desperation along the subterranean passage in hope of escape. The undead obscenity which had once been a man in another life was gaining on me. It was the only explanation I could think of for the

creature having survived a clean shot through the skull, and I had said as much to try and distract it in a bid for time.

Strigatics in the wild weren't particularly rare. In fact, any form of vampire or necrophage tended to prolong their existences by drawing the life forces from their prey in one way or another. However, this particular case only happened when someone of incredible magical strength and strong bonds with the land had engaged in acts of cannibalism prior to their death, and even then the blood curse almost always resulted in the creation of your run-of-the-mill, average wendigo.

Still, given most of my knowledge of such matters came from either cracked leather-bound tomes in the recesses of musty libraries, or from stories overheard during my youth living up north in the Shaman Wilds, I had taken a chance to see how it responded.

‘Mmmmm...’ came a deep, guttural rumbling in my head. ‘That’s a title I haven’t heard in many lifetimes. Clever little huntsman. I can taste your fear, which shows me you have sense. But, I can also see and smell all of the flesh you have killed over your meagre two centuries.’

The gurgling in my head paused for a moment before continuing at a more rapid and excited pace.

‘I can respect a fellow hunter of the wilds. If we had met when I was but a man of the council, we might have camped together and boasted to one another about our prowess with the bow and hexcraft.’

‘Hexcraft, is it?’ I sent back. ‘That hasn’t been a

common term for the magical paths for nearly a thousand years. You really must be an old fossil after all. What's your name?"

My pursuer knew better than to rise to the bait. Names aren't in themselves magical nor of any real importance to spells or curses, despite what some might think at the Hall of the Sage, but I do find them useful for unsettling opponents and forcing them out of their comfort zones. This old fogey was too smart for that.

'It wasn't difficult to absorb the bullet, although I confess it staggered me for a few minutes as I weaved the pain away. You really should learn about your prey's weaknesses before heading out. The problem for you, Hal Dorchester, is that it fucking HURT.'

At that I heard the shaking of the wooden arches grow in frequency as the monster picked up its pace. If I had to guess, it would be on me within two minutes, and I was nowhere near skilled enough to take on this type of foe.

Look, I know I can be a bit of an arrogant ass at times. Margot never ceases to let me know when I'm being a peacock out in public. But, I'm also a pragmatist and like my head firmly attached to the end of my neck. This botched hunt was not the time for false bravado.

I felt a sharp, painful stabbing sensation in the back of my skull as the once-living being severed our telepathic connection. There would be no further need for words, as the corridors began to shake and rattle violently, with dust and debris beginning to fall around me. I could barely make out the chalk dashes to my right as I hurried along, clutching the bandana to my face to

try and avoid inhaling deep gulps of grit.

A light at the end of the tunnel. I was either dead without having felt a thing, or I really was almost to the open quarry yard. I would likely still end up in a corpse pile along with my apprentice, but maybe there the two of us would have a fighting chance out in the open.

‘I’m sorry, Maggie,’ I gasped to the empty air between painful breaths. ‘I should just turn and let it have me rather than drag you into this, but you know what I’m like. We’re going to fight this fucker with everything we’ve got.’

With the seed of a plan beginning to grow, I squinted and forced my burning thighs to run ever faster towards the blinding radiance ahead.

After what felt like an eternity I burst into the massive open space of the outer quarry and collapsed to my knees. Taking in shuddering lungfuls of sweet, clean air, I quickly rose to one foot and used my fingers to etch a glyph of resistance in the air. When the monster soon emerged under the night sky, I hoped the ward would be strong enough to slow its movements.

On the occasions I had found the skill used against me, it had felt like trying to walk through something between a swamp bog and a tar pit. There was no real way to gauge what this ungodly stalker was capable of enduring, but I tried to have faith in my own craft.

‘Henry!’

I looked up to see a rusty-blonde mop of hair and a pair of large bifocal lenses bounding in my direction. Margot looked ready for a fight, with a belt of various

throwing daggers at her waist and a thick cedar staff in one hand. Over her coarse brown trousers and matching leather coat hung a heavy rucksack, no doubt filled with stamina-enhancing meals and potions to match my own.

Strung through Margot's hair were strands of dandelions and numerous other bright flowers, interlocked by the thin shroud used to signify a 'Mistress of the Land' which most just referred to as a Wild Witch. The look was completed by a matching kerchief to my own draped across her mouth.

I smiled to myself. This had been intended as an exercise in harvesting parts from a successful hunt, but instead we were both about to meet our grisly ends. At least she would go down looking the part of a bounty hunter.

Margot's eyes suddenly went wide beneath her glasses.

I knew what to expect, but I turned to look behind me anyway.

The enormous figure of the strigatic wendigo was perched in the entrance to the mine, face set in a mask of pure malevolence. I knew at once it could tell there was a magical barrier erected, and the beast was weighing its options on how best to negate the trap. At least my plan had bought us a few moments to catch our breaths, and Margot arrived at my side to help me up.

'What the fuck is that?'

I grunted at the question. 'Long story, explain later.' Margot's eyes narrowed. 'What do we do?'

'Well, the mine sounds about ready to collapse at any

moment, I figured I might help it along. Listen kid, this day's work is a major fuck up, and that's on me for not doing my research. The best we can hope for is to stop this son of a bitch from enjoying any more future hunts of its own.'

'But the bounty and the mar—'

'I know, it's real shitty,' I panted. 'We'll make do and find some other work, we've always managed so far, right?'

Margot didn't move for a long second, then simply nodded.

'Ok then, I have a pretty good guess what's on your mind, boss.'

I grinned over at her, with a huge chunk of jerky in my mouth.

'You fire off a windstream and let me finish gathering myself' I said. 'It will likely resist the effects, but if you can keep it in place I'll take care of the rest.'

Margot didn't even hesitate, bless her. She ran to within about fifty paces of the undead horror, closed her eyes and began an incantation. The once-shaman shrieked an ear-piercing roar and tried to lunge in her direction, but my warding of resistance held firm. Instead, its large feet struggled against the rock and dirt.

'NOW!' I shouted.

Margot opened her eyes, put her arms parallel in front of her and screamed.

An invisible wave of energy poured out of my apprentice and witch-in-training. The entire area immediately in front of Margot burst into chaos, with mine carts and tools flying towards the shaft's entryway.

It was as though a powerful sandstorm had arisen out of nothing, but the strigatic was no pushover. Raising its arms to shield against any oncoming debris, the monster intoned its own spell and began to slowly press forward against both my ward and Margot's destructive talents.

But see, here's the thing: I was no lightweight either.

Even those seventy-odd years ago, my true natural gifts were already abundantly clear to me. I had become proficient in both inner and outer paths of magic, a point which largely explained the Hall of the Sage constantly hunting me as a 'Pathbreaker' and enemy to their creed, but there was one type of sorcery in which I was truly second-to-none.

Henry Dorchester, known as 'Hal' to his friends, a name full of infamy and scandal. But more importantly...

A masterful geomancer.

My eyes blazed with violet light as I slammed my fist into the dirt. Instantly, the entire quarry complex began to erupt, as colossal boulders the size of cabins rained down upon the entrance of the mine. I knelt in grim determination, my focus entirely upon the terrain beneath. I felt rather than saw the hilltop collapse in upon itself, but I felt the foul presence of the fiend disappear, snuffed out like a candle which has burned for too long.

Looking up, I took in the consequences of my actions.

Margot stood facing the former mine taking deep breaths, no doubt recovering from her own substantial use of the Outer Path. We stood in a small circle of flat

sand, perhaps eighty paces across. Everything else in our vicinity had been turned upside down or churned into jagged, uneven shapes.

‘You,’ Margot panted. ‘You think we pulled it off?’

‘Yep,’ I replied. ‘Undead doesn’t mean invincible. The most reliable ways to slay such scum are to either take off their heads or render them into a bloody pulp. We’re good, besides what was one of the first things we worked on together?’

Margot pursed her lips as she came over to stand at my side. After a minute stood in amicable silence, the gears must have clicked into place and she responded.

‘Right, give me a sec.’

My apprentice closed her eyes and I could see her eyes fluttering underneath the dark lids resulting from a lack of sleep.

‘Yeah, there’s nothing,’ she agreed. ‘Well, there’s us and I think there might be a pretty good-sized lizard scattering about somewhere nearby.’

Sure enough, as if on command a large desert reptile scurried out from behind a pile of broken sandstone.

We both grinned.

‘So this is what a real hunt looks like, huh?’

I chuckled. ‘Nah, this is worse than most. I could count the times I’ve come away with no parts nor trophies on one hand. Even if I were to shift the mess, there’s nothing but a mush of flesh and bone left under all that.’

We both turned to leave and head back to our small, makeshift camp nearby.

‘Well, I guess it’s not a total loss,’ Margot said

between steps.

‘How do you reckon that?’

‘It’s not every day a fine lady such as myself gets to shout at a *widjigò*.’

I turned with a smile. ‘Oh, you’ve been reading some of my books behind my back, I see. Good, although you’re not entirely correct.’

This brought a confused expression to Margot’s features.

‘How do you mean?’

I sighed and uncorked a flask of dark amber liquid. Once the comfortable heat reached my chest I passed it over to my friend.

‘Stop calling them that, it makes you sound like one of Valderic’s stuffy mages. *Wendigo* will do well-enough, thank you. I think it’s about time I taught you about strigatism.’

A blank stare was my pupil’s only response.

Like I said Conrad, it’s a long story.