

The Cauldron of the Cronos

A Realms of Highfall story

Written by

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The cold wind blew by the Wizard's face, and the comfort that the cool air brought his grizzled face was refreshing. He travels alone stopping from time to time in every town he passes through to restock on supplies or look for odd jobs here and there. He has been practicing and studying magic for decades now, immensely knowledgeable he is a formidable magic user capable of spells in multiple schools with his destruction magic being fiercely dangerous. The Wizard stops and grasps his long dirty white beard thinking to himself "How long has it been since my last hot meal?" he has been eating rations of bread for a week now. That is how long it has been since he was in a town, nowadays he rarely learns the names of these towns that dot the countryside he visits so many. He thinks aloud "Yes a hot meal sounds wonderful now" the thought of warm food in his belly on these cool nights just fills him with excitement. The Wizard has been walking through Wenneford forest a densely wooded area on the northern edge of the kingdom for that week since he last ate a hot meal in the town whose name has been lost to him. Wenneford forest is massive and once beyond its boundaries to the north lies a town, that is where he will stop and purchase sustenance and a bed at the inn. The Wizard raises his staff, and the crystal globe fastened to its top begins to emit a bluish hue of a glow. The Wizard uses his knowledge of magic to have the staff tell him how much longer before the edge of the forest, it is a mere hour of a walk. Relieved that the distance is not that great he lowers the staff the glow dissipating, he lifts his dark blue hat to wipe his brow, puts his hat back on, takes a deep breath, and resumes his walk through Wenneford forest.

The town's edge became visible and the Wizard began to fill with excitement, just the thought of warm food and cold ale, no more bread and spring water at least until his return to the trails. He begins the walk into town, as he reaches the outskirts he sees the sign "Fritania, Province of Wolfden, Kingdom of Colkirk" with a small smile he enters in search of the inn. The Wizard makes his way up the road with town folk giving him a long stare, it has been ages since they have seen a wizard come through town. Fritania is far away from the academy of magic to the South and rarely does a wizard venture out this way. However our Wizard is not on official business, he travels alone practicing his magic for those that need it and could afford him. He has become disillusioned with the politics at the academy and the constant meddling of the royal family. The Wizard left and headed North after decades of living at the academy, not knowing what he would find it mattered not to him. Living by his own rules and helping those he deemed worthy not the academy is all that matters to him now. At last, he spots the Inn, he walks up to the small staircase just off the main road leading to the entrance, a sign on the side of the entrance reads "Welcome weary travelers to The Gifted Obsidian enter, feast and join us for the night" the Wizard enters through the doorway a relieved smile on his face.

The crowd was somewhat big, a good mix of local shopkeepers, farmers, and some guards of the local garrison of the royal army. The crowd was boisterous, it was late in the evening, and the sun was but mere minutes from setting. The guards were off their shift relaxing, shopkeepers fresh from closing for the night, and farmers finished with their chores for the day. The Wizard calmly walks in and removes his hat placing it on a coat rack next to a mannequin wearing brown leather armor emblazoned with what the Wizard assumed is the local Jarl's sigil. He began walking to the back of the Gifted Obsidian where the bar is located. The Innkeeper behind the bar was an older man very worn and tired looking but also warm and inviting. The Wizard walking through the crowd catches the eyes of several townsfolk and the boisterous crowd noise begins to soften as the people notice a wizard is among them, a rare sight in Fritania. The stares never bothered the Wizard, he was used to it and understood that wizards are not a common sight here this far North. He smiled at everyone who caught his gaze, hoping that reassured the people that nothing strange was going on. The townsfolk still curious about the Wizard began to go back to their feasting once he smiled. The Wizard arrives at the bar and speaks to the old Innkeeper.

"I would like a meal and a bed please, if you have the space," The Wizard said

"We've got roast pork, potatoes, and beans. That sound good?" The Innkeeper asked

"Sounds delicious, much better than the bread I've been eating this past week," The Wizard said

"Aye, we've ale as well or I can fetch you some wine. Be a bit more if so" The Innkeeper said

"No sir, ale is great. How much for the meal and a bed?" The Wizard asked

"All together twenty gold, you're in luck I have one room left upstairs," The Innkeeper said

"Much obliged sir, might I inquire as to work that might have use of a magic user?" The Wizard asked

"I can't say if a magic user is needed but if ye come from the academy the Jarl may have use for your detective skills," The Innkeeper said

"I left the academy but was once a member, is there something that requires a detective?" The Wizard asked

"Children gone missing without a trace, several families have reported to the Jarl and the Garrison commander, but neither can make heads or tails of it, that's about all any of us know. Officially we townsfolk are not to know the inner workings it's just idle gossip, but we find it strange that no one can solve these missing cases" The innkeeper said

"I could be of some help for the right price of course, how do I gain an audience with the Jarl?" The Wizard asked

"Just so happens the Jarl is my brother. I will tell you what, eat, rest and use the bath and come morning I will take you to him. I just please ask; nay I beg you, help these families. I grow tired of seeing the sorrow in these parent's eyes" The Innkeeper said

"No need to beg, I believe I can be of assistance. Thank you for your hospitality, sir" The Wizard said

The Wizard ate his meal, the roast pork was delicious and salted to perfection. The potatoes were buttery and moist loaded with savory spices, and the beans soupy and salty a great mix on his tastebuds. The ale was cold and just barely bitter, it was a wheat ale brewed with a heap of snowberries native to the province of Wolfden to give it sweetness. The Wizard sat back in his chair his staff lay across his lap at the table beside the bar thinking to himself. He wondered why the garrison or the court of the Jarl are having a hard time with these missing children cases. Although the wizards of the academy are trained in this kind of detective work it was seldom needed because the local garrisons mostly could solve these on their own. He would rest on this for the night, for if he is truly needed then the Jarl will explain everything come morning. The Wizard returned his plate to the Innkeeper and made his way to his room to bathe and sleep for the night, he would need his mind sharp to be of assistance.

The Wizard awoke feeling refreshed, his beard and long hair while clean still had a grayish hue to its color. His robes and hat were cleaned as he had washed them the night before, after bathing, he felt amazing for the first time in at least a week since his last stay at an Inn. The Wizard dressed and proceeded to make his way down the stairs, the common area of the Inn was empty and quiet a stark contrast to the previous night. The Innkeeper was sweeping the floor and noticed the Wizard coming down the staircase.

"Good morning, I take it your stay was pleasant?" The Innkeeper asked

"Yes, quite pleasant, I have never felt better and full as well from dinner last night," The Wizard said

"That warms my heart, it is so good to know my customers are finally happy," The Innkeeper said

"Finally happy? Has there been issues before with customers?" The Wizard asked

"Oh..uh..no I just meant happy in general that's all. Are you ready to see the Jarl, I can take you to him?" The Innkeeper asked nervously

"Yes, I should be on my way if I am to assist in this investigation," The Wizard said cautiously

"Then yes please, come with me," The Innkeeper said

The Wizard and the Innkeeper left the Gifted Obsidian and made their way up the main road leading towards the town keep. While on the walk the Wizard was watching his surroundings taking careful notice to see if anything was rather suspicious. Nothing was out of the ordinary, people frolicking about in the early morning doing their chores. People sweeping their porches, children playing, farmers tending to their livestock, and every time they would walk by the Innkeeper was greeted with a very enthusiastic hello by all the towns folk. In all, it was a rather common town, nothing he had not seen before in his travels. But something was off, he was a very seasoned magic user after all, and his intuition was telling him something was not right,

but even he with his great magical abilities could not pinpoint what that was. He kept thinking of the missing children, most times a missing child was bandits looking for ransom, or a father running off with the child without telling the mother. These were surely reasons that wizards were never used for this kind of case, the local courts and garrisons most of the time solved these cases before a wizard could even be contacted, but this felt different. The Wizard and Innkeeper were now at the town keep, the Innkeeper led the Wizard through the door and into the main hall of the keep, and the Jarl sit upon a simple wooden throne with only a scarlet blanket covering the chair. The Jarl looked upon the Wizard and the Innkeeper with cautious surprise, even the two guards on each side of him glanced with surprise. There was one more guard at the feet of the riser holding the Jarl's throne, though he was clearly a higher-ranking soldier, his leather armor was adorned in fur and was more ornate than the two guards at the Jarl's side. This guard showed a little more concern on his face which caught the Wizard's attention. The Jarl quickly rose to his feet as the Wizard and the Innkeeper reached the riser.

"What brings you here brother?" The Jarl asked looking suspiciously at the Innkeeper

"This wizard, he stayed at my Inn last night. I believe he might be of use to find the children Simon" The Innkeeper said

"I will decide who helps with this investigation Roderick, not you!" The Jarl exclaimed

"Careful Simon, I am only trying to help. You shouldn't yell at me like that brother" The Innkeeper said

The Wizard noticed that the Innkeeper's tone shifted with that statement. No longer was he calm, bubbly, and happy, he was stern, cold and his demeanor was rather callous. There was some obvious sibling rivalry here the Wizard thought to himself. The Jarl was a younger man maybe in his mid-thirties, while the Innkeeper was older, maybe in his fifties.

"Go back to your precious inn Roderick, I will have a chat with this wizard, and do not come back here unless I call for you," The Jarl said

The Innkeeper looked to the Wizard and he shifted back to his bubbly personality from before, a smile adorning his face.

"Pay no mind to that little spat, talk to Simon and I will see you should you need another meal. Safe travels sir" The Innkeeper said to the Wizard

With that, the Innkeeper bowed and let himself out of the keep leaving the Wizard alone in the presence of the Jarl and his court.

"I apologize for that wizard, but you see my brother has a way about him that just angers me," The Jarl said

"I can understand, familial relationships almost always have rivalries," The Wizard said

"So let us start over on behalf of the people of Fritania I welcome you to our town. I am Jarl Simon Derric and this gentleman standing next to you in uniform is the Captain of the Garrison Balian Jocet" Simon said

"Captain Jocet to you wizard," Balian said

"A pleasure to make your acquaintance, may I be of assistance Jarl?" The Wizard asked

"Ahh straight to the point, I like that," Simon said

"Do you think a wizard is necessary my lord?" Balian asked the Jarl

"Perhaps Balian, we are running out of leads he may be our only hope," Simon said

"There is a matter of payment, while I can help you, I do not work for free" The Wizard said

"Done. Captain Jocet, give our wizard here two hundred gold now and after the cases are solved, he gets another two hundred" Simon said

"I accept, now please inform me of what we are dealing with," The Wizard said

The Jarl Simon Derric sat back on his throne and began to explain to the Wizard what had been happening in Fritania.

For years Fritania had very little turmoil, maybe an occasional outlaw gang causing trouble from time to time, or an escaped prisoner from the capital city trying to make their way undetected. Nothing that Captain Jocet and the garrison could not handle, but never anything as nefarious as this. Children some as young as four years old, missing, just vanished, but all with a common thread. They were all outside of their house playing at dusk before being noticed missing. At first, it was thought to be just a child running away but all were from loving homes. Then thinking it was just one isolated incident it happened again the next night, a child just gone, vanished. Before long a week had passed and six children in total had gone missing, the Jarl and the garrison were unable to gather clues or find the missing children. The only clue that was found was footprints near where the children were last seen, then drag marks leading to the West, as if the child were being dragged and their feet leaving a trail in the dirt. To the West was Wenneford forest as Fritania was surrounded by the forest on all sides except to the North where it was open fields leading to the very large Lake Sorsha, the freshwater supply for Fritania. It was here that the Jarl began to explain why they never found the children in their investigations.

"Lake Sorsha would be the end North, we've searched the banks all around and nothing. Not so much as a breadcrumb" Jarl Simon said

"And to the West? In the forest?" The Wizard asked

"We dare not venture into the woods in that direction" Captain Jocet interjected

Jarl Simon Derric glanced at Captain Jocet with a stern gaze as if to say to him not to speak further. The veteran Captain unfazed turned his attention to the Jarl as The Wizard watched noting the body language and anxiousness of both men.

"If he is to assist then he must know EVERYTHING about our community, including the places we dare not venture" Captain Jocet said

"We agreed never to mention them, that was part of the deal. If we send him to them we risk breaking the truce we have enjoyed for years now" Jarl Simon said

"We need to face the facts that THEY may be responsible for these vanishings and him being a powerful magic user he has nothing to fear from them. As garrison Commander I am taking executive action, these families rely on us and we have produced NOTHING!" Captain Jocet said

The Jarl facing the fact that Captain Jocet was right lowered his head and reluctantly began to tell the Wizard what lay to the West in Wenneford Forest. Captain Jocet was correct, The Wizard has no ties to Fritania and had nothing to fear being a magic user himself and a powerful one at that.

"To the West in Wenneford Forest lies Serpent's Grotto, a place of great dark magic and home to the Crones" Jarl Simon said

"Crones? That is just a title like a wizard or a cleric, I have dealt with crones before they just delve more into dark magic than witches. If this is all you fear I can gladly speak on your behalf, I do not fear dark magic as some do" The Wizard said

"These crones are particularly nasty Wizard. They are old, ancient even, ugly, and twisted by dark magic. They keep their faces covered as to gaze upon them would cause pure shock and freeze you in place while they devour you" Captain Jocet said

"While old and ugly yes, prolonged use of dark magic can have that effect. However I have found that most crones when keeping to themselves rarely harm anyone, and the legend of gazing on their face may just be that a legend for a hex that powerful requires a high price" The Wizard said

"I am glad you are not frightened Wizard because we will dare not take the chance to go directly to them," Jarl Simon said

"Years ago the crones terrorized our farmers, destroying crops and stealing livestock. They attacked many citizens and even cursed several of them. A party was gathered and they ventured into Serpent's Grotto, they bargained with the crones, and a truce was made. We would leave them alone in their home and they would not bother our town. It has been peaceful ever since, until now" Captain Jocet explained

The Wizard noted to himself that this story must at least be a generation old by now as the details are not quite fleshed out. Either way, he would help as he was being graciously compensated.

"If you think these crones are a part of the vanishings, I will speak with them. Perhaps I can even bargain for their cooperation" The Wizard said

"I hope you are right, and I wish you, well Wizard. Should you need anything just ask, we beg for your help. These families have suffered enough" Jarl Simon said

"Best of luck to you Wizard, the garrison has your back. If you need some troops to accompany you I can send for them" Captain Jocet said

"That won't be necessary Captain, if I am alone I will have greater success. Now I must be on my way" The Wizard said

The Wizard raised his staff in the traditional academy salute and began to exit the keep to begin his newest quest. The Wizard would venture to Serpent's Grotto and speak with the crones and would work from there. The answers he knew had to be out there somewhere and he would not rest until he found them. Though he would never admit it, he longed for the children's safety and their return to their families, this case had touched him in the heart where he thought he had no feelings. Just the thought of the fear in those children sent a rush of emotion in him, he had to find them, if not for the parents for himself. He would not rest until they were found.

Upon exiting the keep The Wizard began his walk to the western edge of Weneford forest, with every step he would glance at the people, their homes, the shops, and farms, it was a normal town for lack of a better word. The Wizard's staff though every time it touched the ground he could feel the vibrations, something was different. His magical abilities allowed him to feel the vibrations in his staff, every place had vibrations and if you were magical you could sense them. Most vibrations were similar but the ones in the ground of Fritania were different, they had magical properties. Though he could not pinpoint what it was there was something magical in Fritania, a curse maybe, a spell, a hex, something was wrong.

The Wizard reached the edge of town looking upon the entrance to the forest, two trees that grew next to each other with their top branches connecting in a simulated arched doorway as if beckoning travelers to venture in. The Wizard cast a protection spell on himself waving his hands in the correct motion according to the old scrolls, a light blue glow emanating from his fingertips. He gripped his staff tightly and entered the forest. Though it was midday when he left the forest was so dense it darkened the sky to almost black. The further he walked from the arched trees at the entrance the harder it was for him to see. The Wizard stopped, remembering his spells he motioned his free hand in the way of the light spell, he raised his staff, and the crystal affixed to the top shone bright with white light. The path was clear again and he returned to the trail. All along the way, The Wizard felt a presence as if he were being followed, careful not to give notice that he sensed the presence The Wizard stopped to adjust his belt and pouch. He slammed his staff into the soft soil so it would stand on its own and began to readjust his belt, after readjusting he placed his free hand in the pouch connected to this belt and began searching the inside. At this point, he heard the growling and rushing footsteps coming toward him, from out of the darkness a hideous creature leaped toward the Wizard from behind. The Wizard turned around just before the creature reached his backside,

and removed his hand from the pouch where he had been motioning his fingers in secret, the motion was for a firebolt spell. His hand glowed orange like a burning ember and a firebolt flew from his hand connecting with the creature. The creature shrieked in agony falling to the ground and melting away, once the firebolt dissipated all that lay where the creature once had been, was a pile of black ash. The creature which the Wizard detected with his staff was a familiar, a creature created by a magic user for protection, usually from a deceased animal's carcass. He knew he must be close to Serpent's Grotto.

The Wizard wondered to himself why the area the crones decided to call home was named Serpent's Grotto but that answer became clear. He came upon what looked like the head of a snake, its mouth open ready to strike but it was tree branches that had grown into that shape. The Wizard walked through the mouth and saw a bright light, the trees above the grotto were open enough for sunlight to come through and feed the plants. There was a flowing pond in the grotto and flowers, plants, and even a small garden. It was serene, beautiful, and peaceful. It was very hard to think that someone evil lived here, The Wizard knew that what people don't understand they accuse of being evil and the persons living here may not be evil after all. The Wizard noticed the cottage and heard rustling about inside, the front door opened, and out walked two female figures in long black hooded robes with masks covering their faces. The masks were of generic expressionless female faces and were made of steel. Though he sensed nothing to fear he still was cautious, he placed his staff on the ground and raised his hands above his head showing he meant no harm.

The first crone, the figure in front glanced at the Wizard studying his movements. She stepped forward and motioned the crone behind her to stay where she was. She came within just a few feet of the Wizard and began to speak.

"Why are you here Wizard? Do you wish to harm us?" The Crone asked

"I mean you no harm I just come for help. Maybe some information if you would be so willing to share" The Wizard said

"Pfft...you're like all the rest, you want us dead, don't you?" The Crone asked

"No I swear, children are missing from Fritania and I was just curious....." The Wizard was interrupted before he could finish

"You think WE took those children?" The Crone asked angrily

"No not at all, we are all children of magic and I thought we could combine our efforts and find these children. That is why I wanted this audience with you" The Wizard explained

The Wizard could see the Crone's eyes through her mask and she was not trusting what he was saying, the motions of her eyes gave it away.

"You truly want our help and to find these children? Prove it" The Crone said

The Wizard motioned to his pouch affixed to his belt as if to ask if it were alright to reach for it. The Crone nodded permitting him. The Wizard reached into his pouch and pulled out a ruby

with a protection rune carved into it. The Wizard offered it to the Crone as she looked at it confused.

“Why would you give this to me?” The Crone asked

“The ruby is synonymous with a blood covenant, a promise. The rune carved into it is a protection rune as I am sure you know, I have enchanted the rune it will protect you. It is my gift to you and my proof I mean well.” The Wizard said

The Crone was shocked, this indeed meant the Wizard was truthful and honorable. She even felt a rush of emotion for the first time in a long time, she felt this could be the start of a friendship.

“You are honorable Wizard, anyone that would enchant a rune for us is welcome in our home. Please come in and allow us to serve you some refreshments.” The Crone said

The Crone motioned to the Wizard to retrieve his staff from the ground and follow her. The second Crone by the door to the house walked inside. The Wizard was not sure why the people of Fritania thought these two were evil, they just seemed protective of their home which is understandable. The Wizard followed the first Crone into the house, she reached her hand out for his hat and staff, and feeling no ill will toward him The Wizard handed the Crone his staff and hat. The Crone hung his hat on a coat rack beside the door and placed his staff on an empty weapon’s rack directly beside the coat rack. The Crones both removed their robes and masks and the Wizard was shocked, what stood before him were not two ugly, monstrous women whose years of dark magic use had taken their beauty, but two amazingly beautiful women. Not young but not old either, the first crone had long dark brown chestnut hair, and the second crone had long bright red hair. Both were just absolutely stunning, they could not be users of dark magic, or if they used it, they must not use it often. Dark magic use takes a major toll on the body and prolonged use can make you grotesque, however, minor usage will not have such a taxing effect on the user. The Wizard concluded they must just be witches not crones. The First Crone motioned the Wizard to sit at the kitchen table, she sat with him as the second crone also came to the table with three tankards and a pitcher of ale. The second Crone poured the Wizard some ale from the pitcher and slid the tankard to him, the Wizard noticed the second Crone had a slight grin as she slid him the tankard of ale.

“So, children are missing you say?” The First Crone asked

“Yes, the Jarl has asked if I could help investigate. The court and the garrison both are having difficulty finding any of the children. I thought that being magic kin we could help one another” The Wizard said

“The thing is Wizard, the Fritanians have a problem with us. Despite us living alone and keeping to our agreement we constantly get unwanted visitors, some want to see the “horrible crones”, and others come asking us to curse another family or put a spell on their crops to grow. So, forgive me when I say I care not for missing Fritanian children” The First Crone said sarcastically

"Drink your ale Wizard, it is delicious, a homebrew I personally made," The Second Crone said with emphasis on personally

The Wizard noticed the emphasis and curiously glanced at the second Crone. She made no notice of his gaze. The Wizard also noticed neither Crone has drunk from their tankard yet.

"Please ma'am, you drink first," The Wizard said directing his glance at the Second Crone

The Second Crone slowly raised her tankard to her lips and took a small swig. Something didn't sit right with the Wizard, a feeling he was getting as if his magical instinct was warning him and its vibrations were coming from his tankard. Trying to pay no mind the Wizard tried to return to the subject at hand.

"Is there something I could do to earn your favor? To maybe help me in finding these children? Perhaps an herb you need, or a gemstone perhaps?" The Wizard asked

"You don't listen very well, do you?" The First Crone asked rhetorically

The first Crone began to look agitated and threw her tankard across the room. The Wizard now knew what his magical instincts were telling him, his tankard of ale was poison, a weak magic poison. That would explain the second Crone's sinister behavior toward his drinking. Had he drunk the ale he would have been poisoned and unable to defend himself with magic. The first Crone motioned her hands in a spell and the Wizard glowed a crimson red and was raised off the ground. Despite not drinking the poison the Crone was powerful and he may be in for a fight.

"We had nothing to do with those children missing and we do NOT care either. We don't wish to help you, there is nothing you can offer us!" The First Crone angrily exclaimed

She raised the Wizard higher and made a quick sideways motion with her hand. The crimson glow hurled the Wizard against the wall of the house. He hit hard and fell, dizzy not only from the spell but the hard hit he took as well. He noticed the Second Crone's hands glowing the same crimson red, the glow formed an energy ball and she threw it at the Wizard. Quickly thinking he motioned his hands in an absorption spell and absorbed the crimson energy ball. It caused him great pain, it was dark magic and if he did not get rid of it soon it could take some of his life force. Thinking quickly The Wizard motioned his hands in a rebounding spell and launched the absorbed dark magic back at the Second Crone. The ball of dark magic energy hit her with twice the force it hit The Wizard with and she fell to the ground letting out a loud shriek as she fell.

"No!!" The First Crone screamed as she ran toward the Second Crone. Picking her up and cradling her in her arms she began to move her hands in a healing spell. The Wizard realized he too had a trick up his sleeve, the ruby with the protection rune on it. Yes, it was a protection rune but not protection for the Crones, it was protection for him. The Wizard suspected something like this might happen so he prepared the ruby with a hidden rune, so hidden that the Crones would only see the common protection rune. The Wizard's hands glowed an ice blue and he motioned them to activate the rune. The rune began to glow in the first Crone's pocket, she noticed and tried to grab the ruby but when her hand touched it she let out an awful scream. Pain from the light magic of the Wizard coursed through her, the rune now activated the blue glow surrounding both Crones in a bubble of energy. Both powerless to fight or use

their magic even for healing, this rune The Wizard learned from the Arch-Mage of The Academy who was ancient, several hundred years old, and a strong magic user. Not only did it render the Crones powerless it trapped them and began to waste away their beautiful visages. Their beauty was revealed to be a spell, their real appearances now visible. They were grotesque, covered in scabs, warts, scars, and lesions, both with long stringy dead gray hair. They easily could be confused for a necromancer's conjured familiar, this is the price they paid for using dark magic. They must have been using it for decades based on how grotesque their appearances now are. With no fear of the Crones, the Wizard stood stoic and confident and kept a strong gaze affixed to them both.

"Now that we have dispensed with the pleasantries, let's talk," The Wizard said sternly

"The sheer hubris of you!" The First Crone angrily snapped

"Not hubris, I've just dealt with creatures like yourself many times. Too foolish to check for hidden runes, your dark magic blinds you to your weakness. Your overconfidence" The Wizard snapped back

"I can leave you in this spell I have the ability, or you can help me. The choice is yours, but I see your friend there won't last very long" The Wizard said

"Fine!" The First Crone said angrily

"We were visited by someone from Fritania, no I do not know who he was wearing a mask and a hooded cape. But he was very interested in borrowing our cauldron" The First Crone said

"Your cauldron? For what purpose?" The Wizard asked

"When given a sacrifice a crone's cauldron will grant the caster anything they wish" The First Crone stated

"What kind of sacrifice?" The Wizard asked almost sure he knew the answer

"The bigger and more valuable the sacrifice the better the spell works. It can be an animal, an adult person or the most valuable of sacrifices, a child" The First Crone said

"Did you give it to him?" The Wizard asked very stern and angered

"We lost our cat, turns out this man kidnapped her. He threatened to kill our cat in front of us if we didn't give him the cauldron. I couldn't bear to watch our Mittens be murdered so yes we traded our cauldron for him" The First Crone explained

"What can you tell me of this man, anything identifiable, a clue, anything?" The Wizard asked angrily

"He wore the brown leather armor of the garrison and it was emblazoned with the sigil of the Jarl. The man also walked with a noted limp" The Crone said

"Why attack me?" The Wizard asked

"To be honest, we were bored and thought you might make a delicious meal. Wizards have a great flavor after all" The Crone cackled maniacally

"You two have caused enough pain," The Wizard said

Raising his hands his staff flew from the weapon's rack to his left open palm, the crystal on top of the staff glowed a dark midnight blue, brighter than the crones had ever seen. Bolts of energy emitted from the crystal penetrated the light blue bubble housing the Crones, the bolts striking both Crones. The Crones let out an awful howling shriek, it was deafening. The Wizard did not care, all he could think of was those poor children, he knew in his heart they were targeted by this mystery man to be used in the cauldron. He filled with rage and his anger poured more heavily into the energy bolts, the Crones screaming louder the more powerful the bolts got. The Wizard was now on the verge of crossing the threshold into dark magic. With a deep breath, The Wizard poured all his anger into one final burst of energy. The burst set off like a bomb and exploded, the bubble and the magic energy dissipated, and The Crones were gone. All that remained were two piles of red ashes, The Wizard ended the Crones for allowing their cauldron to be used by someone who meant harm.

The Wizard gathered his composure, he felt he did the right thing but was still shaken by having to take two lives. These crones were nefarious and preyed upon the people of Fritania he convinced himself. Whether he was right was a point of view, but there was no turning back now. His thoughts returned to the children, hoping beyond all hope that they were still alive somehow and just imprisoned. He had a lead now, a man in the armor of the Jarl with a limp. His first thought was Captain Jocet, but the Captain had no limp. Nevertheless, he gathered himself, reached for his hat and put it on, and began to leave Serpent's Grotto. His destination was back to the town of Fritania, for now, he was closer to solving this mystery and someone is going to pay for kidnapping the children.

The journey back to Fritania took but two hours, which should have only taken one hour but the Wizard would stop every once in a while and sit on a rock, log, or tree stump. He thought of those six children missing and tried to reach out with magic to feel their presence. Sadly without a personal item belonging to them, he would not be able to reach them, he was not quite that powerful at this point in his life. Only an arch-mage the highest ranking of all wizards might be powerful enough. The Wizard thought he could go to the academy and ask the Arch-Mage, but with him not in good standing and the fact it was a long journey to Fritania even in a carriage, it was not feasible. He was too close now and with a strong lead, it was just a matter of time before he found the culprit and possibly have a chance to save some if not all six of the children. He had to go straight to the Jarl, going to anyone else might alert the abductor. More thoughts played in his mind, wondering what would this man be using the cauldron for that would require such a big sacrifice. More questions grew further as he delved into this mystery. The Wizard returned to his journey to Fritania and never stopped again. The more he rested, the longer the children stayed abducted. The sun was still out but fading in the early evening as he came upon Fritania, walking the streets to the town keep many citizens stared in disbelief that he was back from the western woods. He passed by The Gifted Obsidian and Roderick Derric the Innkeeper and Jarl's brother was standing outside. Roderick looked questioningly at The Wizard, he smiled big and kept walking toward the keep. The Wizard arriving at the keep

knocked on the main hall door, a guardsman opened and motioned him inside, walking him to the throne of the Jarl where Simon Derric sat with only one other guardsman to his right.

"I trust there is news Wizard?" Jarl Simon asked

"Indeed. I have a lead from the Crones themselves" The Wizard said

"So, they were helpful?" Jarl Simon asked

"They were, but it took some "Convincing" to get them to agree to help," The Wizard said slyly

"They're dead then?" Jarl Simon asked

"Yes, but they did attack me first. I tried diplomacy but...." The Wizard explained before being interrupted

"No need to explain, I will not jail for that" Jarl Simon laughed

"They were a blight on this town, they caused a lot of grief for my brother and his Inn, along with continuing to try and lure people to their home" The Jarl explained

"They troubled Roderick?" The Wizard asked

"For a short time yes, he was having trouble at The Gifted Obsidian, food was terrible, lodging was terrible, and don't get me started on the entertainment. The worst bards in the kingdom" Jarl Simon laughed

"That was the Crones' doing?" The Wizard asked

"Oh, no not at all. They offered him a deal to reverse his fortunes, but he turned it down. I'm quite proud of my brother for that. He put a lot of work into his Inn without resorting to dealing with crones. Once he turned them down, they left him alone." Jarl Simon said

"I thought they never left Serpent's Grotto? That was the deal, wasn't it?" The Wizard asked

"Yes, but when have you known a crone to keep their word?" Jarl Simon asked rhetorically

The Jarl stood from his throne and reached for a bottle of mead that was sitting on the end table next to his throne. He walked toward the Wizard with a noticeable limp. The Wizard had not noticed the limp before because the Jarl never walked in their previous meeting, only stood up. A sinking feeling rose in the Wizard's stomach, this couldn't be what it looked like he hoped. The Jarl walked to another table next to the bottom of the staircase where his throne sat on the riser and grabbed two drinking glasses and filled them both with mead. The Jarl handed the Wizard a glass and raised his.

"To the death of those damned crones" Jarl Simon toasted

Both men touched glasses and took a drink. The mead was sweet and delicious but that thought the Wizard had was biting at him. Could the Jarl himself have the cauldron and be responsible for the children?

"I would like to continue my investigation, sadly this is not over," The Wizard said

"What else is there?" Jarl Simon asked

"The Crones had a cauldron, someone from Fritania has it and has been using it to their advantage. I believe they've used the missing children as sacrifices to bend the cauldron to their will" The Wizard said

"You're certain someone from Fritania has it?" The Jarl asked

"Quite certain, and I may have a lead to investigate and a place to search" The Wizard stated

"By all means do so, you have my blessing and the garrison at your disposal. My resources are yours" Jarl Simon said

"May I search the keep for clues?" The Wizard asked

"Of course, you have free reign, anywhere you need to go," Jarl Simon said

"Thank you, I will be on my way," The Wizard said

"Good, please help those children Wizard" Jarl Simon pleaded

The Wizard smiled and placed his glass on the end table and with heavy suspicion on his mind, he turned to the left hallway of the keep and began his investigation. The hallway was lined with suits of armor on display, all from past generations of the Jarl's family. Each suit was different than the last but all with one common thing: they all were brown and emblazoned with the family crest of the Jarl. The limp, The suits of armor, too much evidence pointing toward the Jarl himself being in possession of the cauldron and now the Wizard felt something he hadn't before. The further he walked down the hallway the magic in him vibrated at a high rate only getting higher with each passing step. He stopped to cast a clairvoyance spell motioning his hands in the proper form. Clairvoyance spells were not very powerful but could lead you in the right direction especially if your magic senses were vibrating. The clairvoyance spell guided him to a closet door at the end of the hallway, the magic in him now vibrating at a maddening pulse. The Wizard reached for the doorknob but it was locked, no worries as he thought to himself he can pick small locks like these. The Wizard used his lockpick and opened the door, what he saw next sent a rush of sadness through him. A small skeleton, what looked to be a child, the Wizard knelt down and touched the bones. Casting clairvoyance once more, it was powerful enough to identify the skeleton as an eight-year-old boy, a Fritania native.

The Wizard stood by the door and yelled for the garrison, specifically Captain Jocet. The Captain, The Jarl, and three extra soldiers all came running from the front end of the hallway and froze in shock when they came upon the closet with the child's skeleton in it. The Wizard with visible sadness and anger on his face looked the Jarl directly in the eyes and spoke to Captain Jocet.

"Captain, place Jarl Simon Derric under arrest for the kidnap and murder of this boy" The Wizard commanded

All five men looked shocked and froze in place, Jarl Simon visibly shaken spoke out

"I'm sorry, what?!" Jarl Simon shockingly asked

"I have mounting evidence that you Simon Derric are responsible for the death of this child but also the use of a dark magic item, a cauldron that once was used by the Crones" The Wizard stated

"I have nothing to do with this or the Crones' cauldron. Why would I send you out to investigate if I committed these acts? What of the other five missing children?" Jarl Simon asked

"I will get to them but for now I have enough evidence, You will be under arrest while I continue my investigation. Should I find the evidence you are innocent you will be released" The Wizard stated

"You have no authority here Wizard!" Jarl Simon exclaimed

"On the contrary, as a Wizard who was hired by you to complete this investigation, you have given me free rein. Under the King's law free reign when given allows me to remove a local official should I have mounting evidence of a crime against the crown" The Wizard explained

The Wizard cast a revision spell that played back everything from his conversation with the Crones up to this moment pointing out the evidence against Jarl Simon Derric.

"I'm sorry sir but he is correct, he has evidence and has now elected to remove you. By order of the crown by way of this Wizard you are hereby placed under arrest until the conclusion of this investigation" Captain Jocet explained

Captain Jocet motioned his soldiers and they took Jarl Simon Derric to the dungeon of the keep. The Captain called for more soldiers to take the skeleton and try to identify the child so his family could be informed. Though visibly shaken the Captain knew the Wizard's evidence was irrefutable and the Jarl was likely guilty. The Captain turned his attention back to The Wizard.

"Thank you for your help Wizard but we have the investigation from here. You are relieved of your duties" Captain Jocet said

"No, I have to finish. Those children can still be found" The Wizard pleaded

"And we will find them. Thanks to your evidence we have more leads and we will use them. You are done here in Fritania, you may go" Captain Jocet ordered

"What of the position of Jarl who will become Regent?" The Wizard asked

"Not your concern but it would go to the next of kin, the Jarl's brother, Roderick Derric" Captain Jocet explained

"Captain please, let me help. I can be of service to the town" The Wizard pleaded once more

"Here is the two hundred gold you are owed for your services, please leave. To be honest I've never liked magic users. Crones, witches, wizards, you all nothing but trouble. Now because of magic, those children are missing and one is dead. Leave willingly or I will force you out" Captain Jocet ordered

"As you wish Captain, just please find those children," The Wizard said sadly

"We will. pay no worry to that" Captain Jocet said

The Wizard made his way out of the keep still feeling a sense of defeat. He was so close, those children could still be somewhere in the keep along with the cauldron. The cauldron, that dangerous token of the Cronos' dark magic, needed to be destroyed. Deep in his heart, the Wizard hurt but in his mind logic told him he did the job and was dismissed. It was over, he had to continue his journey to the next town. Walking down the street out of the keep the citizens were all talking, word of the Jarl's arrest must have made it to the townsfolk. The Wizard faced icy stares as he made his way back to the Inn, he felt he should get a meal and say goodbye to Roderick the Innkeeper and inform him of the news he would be the new Jarl. The Wizard made it to The Gifted Obsidian and walked in.

It was rather quiet for the hour, whereas at any other time this Inn would be bustling but the gossip was too alluring for the masses. The Wizard hung his hat on the coat rack next to a bare mannequin and placed his staff next to his hat on a weapons hook on the coat rack. The Wizard noticed Roderick Derric the Innkeeper come from a door behind the bar. Roderick was alarmed by the sight of the Wizard and jumped, clearly not expecting him. The Wizard laughed and walked up to the bar and sat on a stool.

"I didn't mean to startle you, Roderick," The Wizard said

"Oh...that's quite alright. What are you doing here, shouldn't you be investigating?" Roderick asked nervously

"Well, that's why I am here. I have been relieved of my duties, and so has your brother" The Wizard explained

"Simon? Why would he be relieved?" Roderick asked

"My evidence so far has pointed toward your brother being the kidnapper. He has been arrested, looks like you will be Regent until Captain Jocet finishes the investigation" The Wizard explained

"Oh my, how could I not see it? My own brother, I am at a loss for words" Roderick said

"I am sorry Roderick. Could I trouble you for some food before I leave town?" The Wizard asked

"Oh yes let me get you a plate," Roderick said as he stepped to the cooking pot to pour the Wizard a bowl of stew

The Wizard felt a strange sensation as Roderick stepped away from the back door behind the bar. Vibration, like the one he felt when he found the little boy's skeleton in the keep, and it was coming from behind that door. He was feeling this without even a clairvoyance spell, Roderick stepped back in front of the door to hand the Wizard his bowl of stew, and the vibration was gone.

"Here you go my friend, eat up. If you wish to stay the night, I won't charge you" Roderick offered

"No, I couldn't impose, I will be on my way back to the road tonight, I just came to say goodbye," The Wizard said

"Well, I appreciate you coming to say goodbye," Roderick said

"What will happen now? With the investigation now that you are Regent?" The Wizard asked

"I suppose the first thing to do is find those children, then find the cauldron. No one needs that kind of power" Roderick said

The Wizard was shocked at what he heard; never once did he mention to Roderick about the cauldron. Another thing that the Wizard quickly noticed after looking back for a split second was the bare mannequin by the coat rack. The first time he visited there was a suit of brown leather armor with the Jarl's family crest emblazoned on the center of the chest. Something was not right and a deep fear filled his emotions as he looked back to Roderick Derric the Innkeeper and now Regent of Fritania.

"I did not know you knew of the cauldron" The Wizard stated

Roderick's eyes widened and quickly replied "The local gossips are telling it"

"No, they're not, Captain Jocet would keep a detail like that quiet," The Wizard said

"Well.....I....." Roderick stammered

Roderick quickly turned and ran for the back door behind the bar. The Wizard using his magic raised his hand for his staff and it flew into his palm. Running from the stool the Wizard followed Roderick through the door. A long staircase lead to the cellar of The Gifted Obsidian, cells on both sides of the cellar with one filled with four children. Two boys and two girls, a fifth child was chained to a chair sitting next to the cauldron of the crones. The cauldron was there sitting in the middle of the cellar, it was Roderick all along. The same feeling of rage started in the Wizard's emotions but began to build up to a boiling point. He frantically searched for Roderick but couldn't see him. One of the little girls in the cell yelled to the Wizard "He's using an invisibility spell!!" The Wizard raised his staff casting a mage light spell revealing Roderick's location and breaking his own invisibility spell. Roderick was standing right next to the cauldron. As big as the cellar was, there was no way out but up the staircase, the Wizard knew he had Roderick where he wanted him.

The Wizard motioned his hands and cast a binding spell, Roderick though inexperienced in magic tried casting a counterspell. It failed drastically and Roderick became bound with glowing red bands wrapped around his whole body. The Wizard filled with anger began tightening the bands constricting Roderick's breathing but doing it enough not to kill him. The Wizard with rage on his face began the interrogation.

"Why?" The Wizard asked

The kind old man's visage dissipated and upon his face was now a scornful scowl, he replied to The Wizard, not with remorse for what he had done but regret that he got caught.

"I am the eldest son of my father, the previous jarl. I should have been next in line, but I was always passed over. I was called too kind, weak, a pushover, so the heir apparent went to my younger brother" Roderick explained angrily

"Simon always got what he wanted while I was left to fend for myself. He got the throne when our father died along with the money that comes with being part of a noble house. I got nothing. I bought the local Inn and tried to make a good living but nothing I could do would work. I failed miserably, I lived in poverty and my brother refused to help, I was on the verge of doing away with myself. That's when the Crones came to me" Roderick explained

"Simon said you refused their offer" The Wizard interjected

"I did, to enter a deal with a crone would surely be a double cross and I was not about to lose anything to those creatures" Roderick explained

"I read up on magic and learned of the power of the cauldron of a crone, so I disguised myself as my brother. Even faking his limp but never revealing who I was. I threatened the Crones with their cat and give it to them in exchange for their cauldron" Roderick explained

"I hoped being disguised as my brother would throw anyone off, but the Crones revealed as I walked away with their cauldron, they knew who I was. They said my name, so I needed to find a way to get rid of them. That's when low and behold you came shortly after I sacrificed that boy in the cauldron" Roderick explained

The Wizard felt devastated, he thought back to his encounter with The Crones and how quickly he believed them that they did not know the identity of the thief. He was filled with regret, had his mind not been so full of rage he could have gotten the information out of them. There was no time for that he continued his interrogation.

"You kidnapped the children before you stole the cauldron?" The Wizard asked

"Indeed, I told you I read up on the cauldron beforehand. I wanted my preparations complete before I cast the spell" Roderick explained

"Why hide the body in the keep?" The Wizard asked

"My thought was no one would search there and if they did my brother would be the prime suspect. I guess it worked" Roderick explained laughing

"My spell was to bring good fortune to myself and my Inn, it worked because I prospered greatly. You came to town, and I thought that if I were to convince you to help investigate you would end those cursed Crones. It worked, a little too well. I never expected you to find me out" Roderick explained

"You should have known better," The Wizard said

"I never thought my brother would actually be arrested for the crimes and I be made Regent, I never meant for that. But that is my own stupidity, I guess. I am an inexperienced magic user and I made a few mistakes" Roderick said

"Mistakes are hardly your worries now," The Wizard said

"You going to kill me, Wizard?" Roderick asked sarcastically

"No, that will be for Captain Jocet and the Jarl to decide," The Wizard said

The Wizard placed another binding spell on Roderick but this time on his mouth to keep him from taunting the children or The Wizard himself. The Wizard released the boy from the chair and opened the cell with the other captive children, all the children embraced The Wizard a hug. The Wizard felt a rush of happiness and relief that these children were now safe and could be returned home. He still felt much regret over not being able to save the first boy but at least he saved the others. At this time the Wizard noticed the suit of armor that once adorned the mannequin lying in a dark corner, likely to keep it concealed from prying eyes. The Wizard used a communication spell to call Captain Jocet and inform him to release Jarl Simon. A short wait later the two men along with most of the garrison arrived at The Gifted Obsidian.

The Wizard explained everything and showed them using magic all of the conversation and confession of Roderick Derric. The Wizard released his binding spell as the garrison troops took Roderick into custody. The Jarl Simon Derric with visible disdain on his face confronted his brother.

"You are a sick, twisted man. You will never see the light of day for this, your days are done!" Jarl Simon yelled

Roderick just stared at his brother, with no remorse for any crime he had committed. The troops began to walk him out taking him to the dungeon.

"I would like to apologize Jarl," The Wizard said

"No need. Had I been in your shoes I would have done the same thing. It is not your fault my deceptive brother fooled you. He fooled all of us and we couldn't have done this without you" Jarl Simon said

"I should apologize to you Wizard" Captain Jocet said

"Unnecessary Captain. Had you not relieved me of my duties I would have never come here and likely would have never found any of this out" The Wizard said

"Let us agree, we are all sorry for everything done to one another and now we can be friends," Jarl Simon said

Both The Wizard and Captain Jocet nodded in agreement. All three men shook hands.

"Now that brings me to this damn cauldron. How do we get rid of it?" Jarl Simon asked

"Allow me," The Wizard said

The Wizard raised his staff in the air and began to cast a disintegration spell. The Wizard used all of his magical might and placed it in his spell. A bright white light shone in the cellar and a bolt of light magic shot from the crystal-adorned at the top of the staff. The bolt enveloped the black cauldron, and the green smoke emanating from the bowl which signified dark magic use

dissipated. The cauldron slowly disintegrated until nothing remained. The Wizard lowered his staff and smiled at the Jarl and the Captain.

The three men visited for a while afterward enjoying each other's company. The children were all returned safely to their parents and their homes. The boy that did not survive was given a funeral which the Wizard attended paying his respects. Roderick Derric would spend the rest of his life in the dungeon of Fritania's keep never seeing daylight. He went mad with all of the constant darkness; his use of dark magic ultimately became a source of torture for him. A local man took over The Gifted Obsidian and was prosperous. With both Roderick locked away and The Crones dead, Fritania knew nothing but peace the rest of its days. As for the Wizard, his adventures continued. But those are stories for another time.

