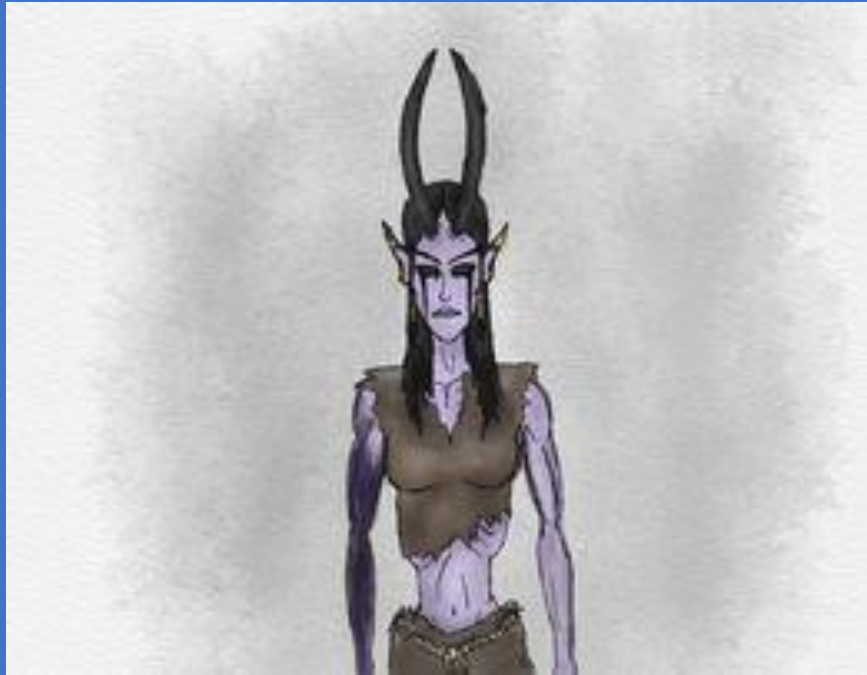


The Eruption Sagas



Episode 01: Ashareena's Mercy

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ABOVE

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BEFORE

Countless ages ago, only a few centuries after the Sphere's formation, came the Shattering. Some strange reaction happened deep within the core of the Sphere.

In a terrible instant, an explosion tumbled the layers of rocks and minerals, sending them skyward in narrow veins of vertical ore and crystals compressed with concealed energy.

Over the millennia, crystals of differing vibrations, when too close, melted into volcanic torrent of magma. The spires and veins of rock weathered. Some collapsed back into the Sphere's core, leaving massive pits and gaping chasms. Quakes from the melting crystals and collapsing spires further altered the terrain.

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Massive titans thrived among the misty spires of rock, in some places knocking over öbls and pounding debris into layers of pulverized rock, fledgling soil.

Eons passed between the constant movement of the three moons.

Other creatures survived among the forests of stone öbls and gargantuan legs of the titans, which they named beomids.

These tiny creatures hid in the ruins, fighting each other, every group in competition with their barbarous neighbors.

And then came the Ü'toor'i and the destruction of the third moon. They came from the stars, from a sphere so far away as to not even be a speck in the sky. Their vessel, almost as large as a moon itself, fell to the Sphere, destroyed.

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The coming of the Ü'toor'i changed everything. They taught the more intelligent creatures to work together.

Thus, enemies for thousands of years became allies: the clever awaralu, the hard-working nöms, the sturdy dohgra, and the wise öj were joined by the waakri who flew among the öbls, the colorful sprigs, and the mer, who swam in the depths.

They came together and formed a new city: Alosia. Every group chose their own leader, the Appointed, who met as a council. The things they learned from the Ü'toor'i led to an age of learning, peace, and wonder.

They developed weapons with the powerful crystals that drove away the titans, giving the Alosians their own land of quiet and plenty.

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But while the Ü'toor'i labored for thousands of years repairing their crashed craft and the Alosians thrived in their beautiful city, something dark awakened Below.

Deep beneath the surface, in the hollow heart of the shattered Sphere, a new alliance arose, intent on conquering the surface world and enjoying its spoils.

The first attack surprised the Alosians, but they quickly used their might to force the invaders back into the depths. The hordes erupting from the fissures gave the attack its name: the Eruption.

And it was known as this until the second attack came.

It was in the Second Eruption that Alosia fell to the monstrous creature known as Maladanik.

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His hordes slowly smothered all resistance in the fallen city. However, during this period, many of the survivors began anew elsewhere.

The remnants of the Grand Elegation, pushed out of the city, regrouped, vowing to retake all of Alosia and renaming themselves The Order of the Reclaimers.

The Builders and Sages fled across the sea to the isolated island of Kindiril.

And the rest of the city's survivors rebuilt on a massive cluster of spires and öbls off the coast, calling themselves the Legacy.

Even more shocking, the Third Eruption did not happen near Alosia, but far to the south, across the Straits of Jhurdu. The forces of Below spewed out of a series of massive canyons and pits known as the Cracks.

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Now the Reclaimers had a foe to the south, weakening their position even more.

Years passed. The stalemate ground on.

And then a little over 70 years before the Fourth Eruption led to the fall of Agharta, in the deep deserts.

At the current time, the forces of Below have footholds in the ruins of Alosia, controlling the desert kingdom of Agharta, and the jungles surrounding the Cracks.

Fear grows each year of the Fifth Eruption all know is coming..

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CHAPTER ONE: THE PRISON

Every time Ashareena thought of jumping from her prison and ending her suffering, she would see a ghost. Now, as she stood on the ledge, she couldn't help but keep turning about, looking for the spirit.

The isolation, fear, and hunger had driven her to the brink of madness. Had she really been seeing a ghost¹? Or was her battered mind playing tricks²?

¹ Why would she imagine a ghostly öj? It had to be her guilt causing visions, guilt of getting herself in such a plight because of mercy to an öj...

² Ashareena had heard tales from other commanders, tales of isolated madness, minds wrecked by torture. Was she mad?

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Her loneliness resulted from being trapped on a platform at the top of an öbl, a rock spire, jutting from the ruins of Alosia³, so high up sometimes she would be lost in mists and clouds⁴. The view was magnificent, often almost hypnotizing her with its rugged, lofty beauty. The world of Above mesmerized, sometimes making her forget her problems, her prison.

³ How many towers and spires in Alosia? 10,000? 50,000? She could see hundreds of platforms and the tips of spires, even though the majority of the city was hidden from her eyes by the great central pillars rising like a mountain, blocking all views to the south.

⁴ The pillars clustered like a forest to the northeast. The area was almost a series of open-air caverns they were so deep and labyrinthine. If she could escape, that would be where she would go, to hide.

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The platform was ingeniously built: the ceiling was the original top of the spire. The Alosians had carved away a space, leaving huge pillars in the four corners and a circle of eight. They stood around a central firepit where the flame never died. Ashareena had been unable to discover how it worked: it did not burn any wood.

The platform did not have a door. Originally, it had been connected to a larger crag of rock by a bridge⁵. Maladanik's forces had destroyed it during the conquest, so now it was a about a

⁵ A tasty awaralu with a wing-cape could have glided away to another spire or tower.

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bowshot away⁶. A rough, wooden bridge with a simple pulley was taut, vertical against the rock on the crag, too far away.

In spite of herself, Ashareena gazed about in wonder, feeling small, fleetingly insignificant.

Towering öbls would snag the clouds, capture the rain; some were in perpetual mists like an aura. Sky vines grew in those places, their huge leaves storing moisture and keeping those beneath them in an eerie, endless twilight.

⁶ Once arrows and spears rained down on the platform late one night from the other tower, but she had been safe behind a pillar, near the firepit.

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The tallest spires rose above the clouds. The tops of those mountainous öbls were arid like tablelands, frigid deserts, bright by day, the moons and stars seeming so close you could touch them.

Her fear was the fear of Maladanik.

Maladanik the Tyrant was punishing her because she had shown mercy⁷ on her last mission. He did not tolerate that quality in his commanders⁸.

⁷ Her encounter with the handsome öj reminded her of the sea. The Legacy was in the Western Ocean. Her encounter on the rocky shore was imprinted deep in her mind: the wind, the crashing waves, the smell of salt, the lure of freedom...

⁸ She was the one the nublins foolishly called the Antlered Queen, though her two curving horns looked nothing like antlers.

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If given reprieve, she would not make the same mistake again.

Her hunger came from having only sporadic meals for the past 144 days⁹. After all the food that had been left for her on the platform was gone, she had been forced to eat the occasional bird, along with any insect she could catch.

She had even been forced to eat the mold that had grown in the indentions of the frieze¹⁰. That did not taste as foul as the monstrous cockroaches¹¹.

⁹ She had not been fed since displeasing the Tyrant. Those endless days had been the hungriest she had ever experienced. Her skin felt tight on the bones in her face. She knew the Tyrant enjoyed her privation and suffering.

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Something about her nature, something primal and powerful, allowed her to live so long on such little food and keep her strength: either a curse or some wicked blood in her veins from the creatures Below¹².

¹⁰ Peeling the mold from the frieze had uncovered a fascinating series of images carved into the stone, images that told of Alosia's rise, its magnificence. To see evidence of the city's fall, all she had to do was look around at the ruins surrounding her.

¹¹ Cockroaches almost as large as her fist swarmed about the ruined city. Before her imprisonment, she would merely crush them. Now her mouth watered at the sight of the foul insects.

¹² She didn't want to think about curses: her entire life felt cursed. What had she done to deserve such a fate?

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The setting sun would soon drench her in darkness and cold. The winds so high never truly stopped blowing, chilling her and piercing the rags she wore. That morning a sandstorm had blasted the spires, wearing on her battered nerves¹³.

She stared at the horizon in despair. The sheer cliffs beneath her feet dropped into thin, wispy clouds. Her prison was high among Alosia's ruined towers. Swarms of bats wheeled darkly among the massive spires.

¹³ Ashareena had curled in a ball near the ever-flame, in the center of the prison-platform.

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A giant shell-bat flew far on the northern horizon. Ashareena stood in rigid fear until the titanic beast disappeared from view¹⁴.

The wind whipped her hair, whistling among the cracks in the stones. "I cannot take this anymore," she told the sky.

No one answered.

¹⁴ Seeing such titans always made her feel smaller than an ant. Something that large should not be soaring among the clouds.

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The tall pillars of rock were all about, some rising above, some sitting far below, while others dotted the horizon. Sometimes she felt like she was in a forest of stone pillars and crags and chimneys floating in the sky¹⁵.

On some inaccessible pillars grew new vegetation after the fires from the city's conquest: scraggly trees and tough, thin pines burst out of cracks and seams into new groves and forests.

¹⁵ How many times had she wondered how the spires and öbls had been formed? What forces had caused such towering pillars of rock? What lay in the deepest depths of the collapsed öbls, dark pits of hidden murder?

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A small herd of hammer-horns grazed on a single sky-vine growing on a pillar in the distance, near broken crystal towers¹⁶.

Maladanik's foolish troops, however, had destroyed the towers. Now mostly barren desert and rock lay where before fields of fertile crops had fed the city¹⁷.

Ashareena now knew the city had not deserved its fate. Despite all of Maladanik's lies, she had learned much during her imprisonment.

¹⁶ She had heard that before the fall of the city, the landscape had been lush. The Alosians had used towers of special crystals to protect from the huge beasts and the beomid titans.

¹⁷ Now shell-bats roosted in the highest towers. One broke a tower late one night, causing the slender pillar to collapse with a thunderous roar, waking her.

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On the inside of the shrine, carved in a band just beneath the ceiling, the story of Alosia¹⁸ had been hidden by fungus and mold. She had maintained her strength by hanging from the frieze with one hand and scraping mold with the other¹⁹.

Then she had spent much time studying and deciphering the tale²⁰.

¹⁸ Creatures with nothing in common coming together with single purpose, working together to combat the beomids, to build a true civilization, not wretched lives lived in isolated terror of the titans.

¹⁹ The mossy mold tasted foul but it alleviated her hunger; and the more she deciphered of the fallen city's tale, the more she wanted to learn.

²⁰ Knowing such things about Alosia, about the Tyrant, might get her killed.

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The isolation was driving her mad²¹. She howled in frustration and rage. The echoes of her despair rolled among the towers and spires and öbls. A subtle movement caught her eye.

Xanfang²²!

Before she could focus, the impling was gone, either through some arcane craft or spell or its catlike speed.

The thought that her only companion had fled emptied what little resolve remained in her heart. Though she had suffered much

²¹ She longed to speak to another creature. Once, a haunting voice had sung a malodious tune of despair and pain. Another time screams had wafted up like an agonized mist.

²² Her familiar, the impling Xanfang, was bound to her, to aid in her duties as a commander of Maladanik's Horns.

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on the platform-prison, this was the most alone she had felt.

Anguish burst forth, almost screaming from her lips.

"Xanfang! Come back!"

Nothing happened, except the constant sting of the bitter, northwestern wind²³.

Ashareena's emotions were an imploding whirlwind of pained madness. Her litany of grievances burst forth like some cursed song, twelve wrongs that haunted her.

²³ If the wind did not stop blowing, she feared she would soon go insane. How could it ever shriek among the spires and öbls?

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"Xanfang, I hunger!" she cried out.

"They starve me²⁴. I won't die, but I do not feel alive."

She stared at the misty column where she thought she had glimpsed the impling.

"One night I was attacked with a rain of arrows²⁵."

²⁴ If only Xanfang would bring her a morsel to eat, perhaps to talk briefly...

²⁵ Late one evening, right before the dawn-runner's appearance, the platform had been assailed by volleys of nublin arrows from all sides. The first ones had caught her by surprise. Quick reflexes had allowed her to dodge the wooden arrows as they broke upon the stone. She had hidden in the center of the platform, near the shrine, until the attack ended. Fifteen volleys of arrows had left a shattered mess of wood and feathers.

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"Another evening, while I slept an ohgra attacked me with a pike, I am sure sent to kill me on Maladanik's orders²⁶."

Her words echoed among the misty towers and öbls. She kept scanning for Xanfang, without success.

"I freeze up here²⁷. I long for a warm wind, to sweat!"

"When it is not cold, it rains²⁸."

²⁶ How many times had she longed for the pike that had rolled off the platform? She had forced herself to gorge on the raw, foul flesh of the ohgra, as much as she could stand. She had sharpened one of the leg bones, which she had hidden by the ever-flame. Other small bones she used to tie up her hair.

²⁷ The ever-fire in the shrine was the only thing that had kept her alive on the coldest of nights. That high in the city's towers the mists were cold, a damp that clung to her skin, never truly warming her.

²⁸ The rains came whenever it was above freezing. The öbls and columns of rock reached toward the clouds, the stars, in defiance of the ground below. Half the time she lived in a misty, gray-white world of damp sadness.

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It felt good to share her troubles. Her voice rose. "Each night I am tormented by scream and howls and threats, trying to scare me, to drive me mad²⁹."

Her confidence grew with her anger. "Once a mighty shell-bat almost killed me³⁰!" As she spoke, she pointed to the southwest, toward a trail of destroyed pillars and towers jutting up and out like broken teeth.

²⁹ The taunts and threats would come and go throughout the night, ebbing and flowing like some tide of hate. Whenever she would fall too deeply asleep, they would resume with a fury, waking her in a fright.

³⁰ This was true. Forty nights before a monstrous shell-bat flew amongst the towers and öbls, destroying everything it touched. Its wings had pulverized two towers, its huge, turtle-like shell shattering rock, crystal, and stone, its tail smashing a flying bridge linking two towers. She had never seen a creature so titanic: she had felt like an ant.

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"I have seen the flying shells, the strange lights in the sky³¹! Though I do not know their purpose³²."

Movement by a tower nearby caught her attention. Her sharp eyes discerned a tiny figure hovering under a stone windowsill.

Xanfang!

The sight of her familiar affected her deeply, though she did not let on,

³¹ The strange lights had silently hovered over her prison twice. The first time she had thought she was imagining it, but the second time she was certain. The rainbow-hued, bobbing lights had mesmerized her, floating only a few lengths from where she stood on the ledge.

³² As she had stared at the shifting lights, a thought had come to her, almost as if placed by an outside force, telling her to be strong, that she had great purpose. Though after the lights had disappeared, Ashareena had doubted that it had even happened, so dreamlike were the events.

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continuing with the airing of her twelve burdens.

“A herd of hammer-horns roamed the öbls one day searching for food, grazing on sky-vines³³. I feared they would leap to my öbl, shattering it.”

“The worst part of the loneliness is your absence, which feels like a betrayal! You were supposed to be bound to me!”

Xanfang floated out of the shadows beneath the distant window. His tiny wings were a dark, hovering blur.

³³ She had watched the huge herd had devoured the leaves of several sky-vines. One tower, weakened by roots and vines, had collapsed. Most of the hammer-horns had jumped to other perches but a few had fallen screaming into the mists.

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Though its features were grotesque,
Xanfang was her impling³⁴.

Her familiar stared at her,
expressionless, before, flying out of
sight.

Ashareena couldn't take anymore. She
took a deep breath and stepped forward, to
fling herself from the precipice.

³⁴ Her only friend... She had never been able to trust the other
Horns, as Maladanik called his commanders. If the impling wasn't her
friend, then she had never had one, which made her even sadder.

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Out of the corner of her eye, a pale, glowing shape glided along the edge of her prison. As with her previous sightings³⁵, the ghostly figure washed away her suicidal thoughts blew away like a cloud, replacing them with awe and wonder³⁶. Even though it came toward her as if with purpose, she did not feel terror, malice³⁷.

³⁵ Ashareena had heard ghostly tales and stories growing up in the ruined and conquered city. Commanders she respected had sworn they had witnessed the restless shades of slain Alosians on many occasions. She had not truly believed the tales until seeing the spirit with her own eyes.

³⁶ After seeing the figure, she would have strange nightmares of the woman, a mournful öj, not because of terror but because of unstated loss, unspeakable longings.

³⁷ She knew, in her heart, that if the ghost was real, it meant her no harm.

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In fact, she felt the opposite, a serenity³⁸ she had not felt since her imprisonment. A warmth filled her³⁹, a warmth she had not felt since being locked so high in the clouds.

She blinked. Looked again.

The shade disappeared between the shrine's pillars⁴⁰.

³⁸ The peaceful feeling made no sense. All who had seen the tormented spirits of the city's slain agreed they terror they felt, the cold, the desire to flee.

³⁹ She almost felt enveloped like how she envisioned a warm bath to feel, a cozy sensation that made her feel safe.

⁴⁰ Her prison had once been a shrine, perhaps a temple to some unknown Alosian god, or perhaps simply a place for reflection.

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She followed the spirit away from the ledge. Its features were delicate, graceful: an öj⁴¹!

The ghostly öj moved like a breeze, passing into the interior. The shadows were cooler beneath the roof. The spirit stopped by the interior sanctum⁴².

Ashareena stopped, entranced. The öj flickered like a winded flame, pale and translucent, the wall of the pillar visible through her⁴³.

⁴¹ Though she had battled öj on many occasions, doing so always filled her with a strange longing, almost a sickness, that she had to bury deep within to avoid Maladanik's wrathful hunger.

⁴² eastern edge of the westernmost of the pillars encircling the central fire

⁴³ Ashareena could see the ever-flame burned brightly in its bowl in the center of the shrine. The flickering of both the ghostly form and the flames dancing behind almost made her dizzy.

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The ghost soundlessly mouthed words without meaning. Eyes, anguished. Spectral clothes ripped and torn⁴⁴. Ashareena's gaze locked with the tormented eyes. Felt a profound and instant connection⁴⁵. Silently bound as the winds blew fiercer, whipping the blaze in the ever-flame.

⁴⁴ The dress had been formal, layers of lace, now shredded and ethereally bloody, beads sewn into lost patterns, barely seeming to hang onto her ghostly form, one shoe lost to eternity.

⁴⁵ The shade of the öj wanted to tell her something, something important, but whether the ghost could not summon forth sound or some entity or force kept her from sharing her secret, Ashareena could not discern.

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Ashareena stepped forward.

The shade disappeared⁴⁶.

She noticed something missed in all of her time on the platform. At the base of the pillar where the ghost had stood: scratches, faint bloodstains, the barely-discernable shape of a figure⁴⁷.

⁴⁶ When the shade of öj faded, the warm glow Ashareena had been experiencing sank like the last rays of the day's sunlight.

⁴⁷ Prone, bloody writhings, alone and in pain, that is what she felt from the faded marks.

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She knelt over the spot, touching it.
Without knowing why, emotion welled up⁴⁸
from some hidden source.

Ashareena had been beaten, tormented;
she was a battle-hardened commander serving
a harsh lord.

She was not supposed to have feelings.

And yet she collapsed to the floor,
sliding back to sit in the discolored spot.
Overwhelmed, she shut her eyes and drifted.

⁴⁸ No, it was not like a well. The strength of the emotions she felt was like the eruption of a geyser. She did not have to draw forth the feelings like water from a bucket: they burst upon her from hidden places buried deep within.

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CHAPTER TWO: THE SOUL-DRINKER

The light from the small moon woke her⁴⁹, as it sank from view, parallel on the horizon from where she lay on the floor of the shrine. Outside, night passed toward dawn. The tiny second moon⁵⁰ raced low across the sky in an endless marathon.

⁴⁹ She was unsettled: her dreams had been odd, compelling, leaving her only with glimpses of half-seen images and feelings of sadness, and another strange one, that was comforting in a way she had never felt before. She dreamed of the öj. These had been replaced by images of tunnels, and spires, and caves .

⁵⁰ The Runner passed overhead six times a day, three journeys during the sun's steady march across the sky, and three at night, providing a way to measure time.

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Most nights were cold so high in the tower. Though it was high summer, Alosia was far enough north that the chill never truly left her bones once the sun set.

The drawbridge in the other tower began to descend with a loud clanking of chains.

Ashareena cast off her half-sleep:
what approached?

Was it the dreaded summons? She rolled to her feet, retrieved the sharpened bone, which she grasped with both hands, like a sword⁵¹.

⁵¹ The bridge was coming down—if she only had her sword! Or, even better, her barb, almost as long as a spear, with a sharp tip and jagged hook, to catch and rip. But if she had her barb, she would have leapt from the platform, hoping to use the barb to snag an obl. At least it would be a chance...

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The shadowed shape of the Soul-Drinker strode silently across the bridge, tiny yet terrifying. His withered body, clad in black hood and robes, had once been a nöm.

Now he was something else.

He called himself *The Soul-Drinker*⁵², neither alive nor dead. He had been a great lore master in old Alosia⁵³, but something had happened to him during the city's fall.

⁵² Eager to steal the life-forces of whatever unfortunate creature crossed his path. Once a lore-master, he had been transformed into something else...something cursed...during the fall of the city. A sea of sinister powers had been raging then.

⁵³ Maladanik liked the fact that the nom knew more of the city's secrets than any other creature and the fact the demon-lord could abuse the servant endlessly without fear of killing it.

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"It is time. Our terrible and awesome ruler, Maladanik, has finally summoned you."

She nodded.

The Soul-Drinker smiled in the faint light⁵⁴. No fangs marked his features⁵⁵. Even she had small fangs⁵⁶. No, what was most remarkable about the Soul-Drinker was the blue, glowing brooch embedded at the base of his throat⁵⁷.

⁵⁴ Soon the sun would creep over the horizon in its blinding might, but most of the illumination came from the ever-flame in the center of the shrine.

⁵⁵ He drank the soul straight from victims' mouths. Ashareena had seen him consume a victim...it had looked as if he had sucked a smoky or ethereal substance from the captured öj. Murzod had left just enough of the unfortunate creature's soul to create a new slave to serve him. She did not want to share that poor öj's fate.

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"No witty remarks? Has he finally broken the famed Antlered Queen⁵⁸?" The Soul-Drinker laughed, finding joy in her pain. "Kneel," he whispered cruelly⁵⁹.

⁵⁶ Another gift from her unknown parentage, along with the two, long, curving horns growing from her forehead, just below her hairline.

⁵⁷ Even looking at the strange crystal gem made her eyes blurry and her head ache.

⁵⁸ Nublins had foolishly begun calling her the Antlered Queen after her first victories. Her tactics had smashed the well-trained units of the Order, saving countless nublin lives, earning their trust and loyalty.

⁵⁹ The Soul-Drinker never spoke loudly: he didn't have to raise his voice to get anyone in Alosia to follow his command, except Maladanik, and some said the Tyrant feared the Soul-Drinker.

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She refused, shook her head. Her centuries-old hatred for him boiled, burst⁶⁰. "No!" Saying the words exhilarated her⁶¹.

The Soul-Drinker smiled. Blue, sparking power blasted from the tips of lean gray fingers into the center of her chest. She dropped to her knees⁶² in convulsing, agonizing, defeated hunger.

⁶⁰ The Soul-Drinker had been very cruel to all of the misshapen children born in among the ruins. He had trained them, in strategy, in giving and receiving pain. She feared and hated him, having watched him consume many of her companions.

⁶¹ Perhaps all of her impotent rage and hatred for the Tyrant welled up like a geyser, reacting to the closest object of vengeance...

⁶² The sharpened shard of bone rolled out of sight. Ashareena could not look away from the Soul-Drinker's eyes. The makeshift weapon could have been in the shadows at the base one of the pillars or it might have rolled off the öbl, falling into the mists far below.

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A terrible whisper: "That look will get you eaten." A callous smile: "Not that I care. But *he* despises the weak. Your spirit is all that has kept you alive so long. You make him laugh."

Ashareena stared, dumbfounded⁶³.

In the past, before her last mistake, she had wondered if the Tyrant even knew who she was, despite her victories and despite his praise after the Third Assault.

Was the Tyrant toying with her?

Or was it more dangerous he held her in his thoughts at all?

⁶³ Never had she imagined Maladanik having anything but hatred and scorn for her.

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"Don't look so startled! 'Antlered Queen?'" he mocked. "Antlered Fool! You have much to learn if you are to keep your bones out of the pit, your flesh from his bloated belly!"

His scornful words enraged her⁶⁴. Fool!

The Soul-Drinker nodded approvingly⁶⁵.

"Yes, more like it. Perhaps a chance for you yet!" A laugh like splintered ice...

⁶⁴ Despite the endless hunger, fear, and cold, the ember of her spirit rekindled at the taunting words. She had been trained to be a warrior, a commander, one of Maladanik's Horns.

⁶⁵ The Soul-Drinker must have seen something in her gaze, for he almost smiled, at least barely showing his ancient yellow teeth, stained like buried bones.

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The Soul-Drinker stepped back, stared at her prostration. His gaze lurked from the tips of her horns to where the stone of the floor dug into her knees.

"While he does respect strength, he wanted you to suffer. He likes to see others in pain."

Even with her kneeling, she towered over him. The Soul-Drinker stared up at her face, as if studying an old scroll.

"This will not do!" A command: "Bend lower⁶⁶!"

⁶⁶No matter how much she attempted to reject the command, the Soul-Drinker's words forced her into action. She felt violated and hated the monster more than ever.

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The Soul-Drinker slapped her so hard her hair was knocked out of place—the ohgra bones she had used to style it flew to the floor and bounced off a pillar. “No! You must look like you have suffered more!” He rained blows of ice upon her face and body⁶⁷. She endured, knowing Maladanik the Tyrant would do much worse.

⁶⁷ His dead hands beat a staccato rhythm on her flesh.

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The beating was soon over, leaving her pained and more disheveled. She ached⁶⁸ Yes, how she ached⁶⁹... Her hair was no longer neat: the long strands tangled in all directions or clotted black near the scalp.

"And my clothes?" She wiped her lip on her forearm as he turned away.

"Rip them if you like." The Soul-Drinker laughed. "I do not know what he has in store for you—I merely wanted to hurt you once more before he kills you!"

Never had she hated the Soul-Drinker more, and she had hated the undead tormenter her entire life.

⁶⁸ Her emaciated face bruised. Her pale lips cracked and bloody.

BELOW

ABOVE

"Ah, what spirit. How I would love to drink your soul!" Laughing, he slapped her once more, putting another mark on her left cheek.

When he did, she could not refrain from glaring at him, locking eyes.

⁶⁹From the lightning...and from his chill, cursed touch

BELOW

ABOVE

She always tried to avoid eye contact⁷⁰. Ashareena feared finding out if she was weak, too. She had no weapons, nothing to defend herself⁷¹. Sword, barb, and armor had been stripped from her before they had dragged her to the tower platform.

The Soul-Drinker's malicious, upthrust grin split his white and leathery unchanged face. Evil flames serving as eyes danced.

⁷⁰ Rumors whispered he could control the weak.

⁷¹ She hated being without her weapons. She had been trained to fight since she was young. Her sword was Alosian, perfect for her large size but obviously forged for a dohgra. But her barb was her favorite weapon. If she had that, she would have tried to split the soul-drinker in half.

BELOW

ABOVE

The twisted orbs burned brighter. "You have seen her!"

A depth of cold coated Ashareena's empty stomach. "She⁷²?"

"Don't play games. The shade of the öj!"

⁷² Ashareena did not want to admit she had seen the shade of the öj. Mercy to such a creature was the cause of her imprisonment in the first place.

BELOW

ABOVE

Ashareena tried to change the subject.

“I have studied the carvings here. They fill me with questions about their meanings.”

Something about the question affected the Soul-Drinker⁷³. “Ah, the history of Alosia⁷⁴.” The ancient nöm’s face was a storm of emotion, but his eyes burned low, as if in protest.

⁷³ He seemed confused, losing his focus, forgetting his question of the öj.

⁷⁴ The name of the city sounded confusing when he said it a mixture of uncontrolled love and hate, guilt and malice. Her skin crept into knots at the sound...

BELOW

ABOVE

"You never taught me the histories," she uttered before thinking better of it⁷⁵.

"My apologies."

The nöm's voice changed, softened in a way she had never heard before. "I never taught you the histories because...because he doesn't want those things discussed. To hear *his*⁷⁶ boasts, there was nothing here before he came."

⁷⁵ She feared her thoughtless words would earn her another beating...

⁷⁶ Hearing the Soul-Drinker mock the Tyrant twisted her shrunken stomach with a bile of dread for them both.

BELOW

ABOVE

The Soul-Drinker's eyes appeared to twinkle like distant cold stars. "And you never asked."

The Soul-Drinker laughed harshly⁷⁷.

"This is a time when secrets are revealed. He would not want me to speak of this. In fact, he has forbidden me, threatening to eat me many times if I did. But he fears I would be a difficult meal to digest. And he is a coward."

⁷⁷A wicked sound that contradicted the calm look on his face...

BELOW

ABOVE

She gasped, shocked⁷⁸. "He is your master."

"I serve Lord Neferus and the Lords and Ladies Below, not your father."

The meaning of his words pierced her fear. "Father!"

"He is not your master, or your creator, as I heard him once claim. He creates nothing but bones and chaos. Maladanik is a constant liar. He brags of much he cannot do. The only thing more powerful than his lies is his cowardice!"

⁷⁸ Terrified, afraid they would both be executed for such words...

BELOW

ABOVE

Ashareena stood, entranced by his words, sickened by their implications, but before she could speak, the Soul-Drinker began to convulse.

He struggled, battling something within⁷⁹, before mastering himself again.

"Why did you tell me this?" she whispered.

"So, the shock would not weaken you, doom you, when he tells you himself."

⁷⁹ His face writhed, contorted, expressions melting like wax and reforming. His eyes dimmed then blazed in spastic flashings.

BELOW

ABOVE

She was confused⁸⁰. "Why do you care?
You are the Soul-Drinker."

"Though I am now bound to serve the
great and powerful Lord Neferus, part of me
is still the simple nöm from the eastern
Fahjir, the lore-master of Alosia. Once I
was kindly Murzod, gentle, loyal to the
Faithful Peoples."

⁸⁰ The cursed little monster had haunted every night of her
childhood, a terror lurking among the young Horns, always watching,
mocking, taunting with a painful, soulless death.

BELOW

ABOVE

The words awakened the dark spirit within. Spasms contorted Murzod⁸¹ as he battled against the powers enslaving him. His face twisted in pain, mimicking the agony of his victims.

Murzod slowly mastered the bond⁸²: the flames again faded in his sockets, revealing the ancient, tormented eyes of the nöm. "The struggle...it tires me..."

⁸¹ Never before had she considered the cursed nöm felt anything but hate and malice; seeing such painful visages uneased her even further. She wanted to die.

⁸² The wicked blue glow of the brooch faded but did not die.

BELOW

ABOVE

Murzod stood silently, gathering his strength before resuming, "I have taught you for many years. And though this dooms me," he said pointing toward a small brooch⁸³ embedded in his skin at the base of his throat, "Part of me remembers, watching your development. Knowing your potential. Remembering your mother..."

⁸³ A hateful hue of blue blazed and faded when mentioned in a whispered voice. Could it hear them malign the Tyrant?

BELOW

ABOVE

"You need to be prepared," Murzod added. "He has never acknowledged you as his own. But he has tormented you. Caused you pain. But now that he needs you, his flattery and promises will know no bounds. You will be 'Daughter' and 'Beloved' when you can help, 'Fool', 'Weakling,' and worse the rest of the time."

"What must I do⁸⁴?"

⁸⁴ How would she be able to think of such subtleties when in his terrible presence?

BELOW

ABOVE

"When he tells you what I have revealed, do not show fear. Do not show shock. Do not be repulsed. Flatter. Shower with praise and affection. Lie." His face frowned but his fiery eyes blazed. "If not, then he will devour you on the spot."

The cursed nöm's words were true⁸⁵.

Ashareena bowed her head, in thanks and acknowledgment. "I will heed your word. My thanks to you, Murzod."

⁸⁵ The Tyrant would devour anyone at the slightest provocation. His hunger and lust were insatiable.

BELOW

ABOVE

Something about hearing the name come from her lips angered the Soul-Drinker lurking inside the nöm. She could see him now in the emerging dawn⁸⁶, and regretted it.

"Follow me!" he snarled. His face raged⁸⁷, seeming unaware of the conversation⁸⁸.

Without a word, she rose. The Soul Drinker waved his hands and the drawbridge in the other tower lowered again⁸⁹.

⁸⁶ And the light from the reawakened brooch in the hollow of his throat...

⁸⁷ His face changed, twisting back into its normal smirk, its possessed grimace.

⁸⁸ She knew the instant Murzod left her and the dark spirit of possession returned. Whenever Murzod had grown in strength, the brooch embedded in his throat would again spark, overwhelming the remnants of the old lore-master.

BELOW

ABOVE

CHAPTER THREE: THE RUINS OF ALOSIA

Ashareena followed him down the winding stairs⁹⁰ carved into öbl. For a long time, they descended the spire in silence. The air warmed, growing humid, thicker; the morning grew around them.

The entire time Ashareena studied the city⁹¹ unfolding below and around her. Though there were few lights near her

⁸⁹ The chains clanged so loudly, echoing among the misty öbls that Ashareena was sure the whole city was aware of her release.

⁹⁰ She was out of the tower! Out of her prison! She had wanted to be free for so long that now the air was becoming heavier, warmer with each step, she feared meeting the tyrant. Meeting her father.

⁹¹ Though she had lived in the ruins the entirety of her long, miserable life, this was the first time she had truly observed what had been Alosia. Having studied its history carved into the rock of her prison had given her a new appreciation of its past, its accomplishments.

BELOW

ABOVE

prison, fires and torches dotted the distant skyline of the central spires.

Ramps and stairs were carved around the exteriors, cut into the rock, so there was always a ceiling over them, almost like a tunnel with one side open on a cliff-face. Wherever runes or letters from the city had been, now hammer-smashed ruins.

She could hear water running in some of the still-working pipes. In other places, runoff condensed from the mists and clouds flowed in channels⁹² on the edge of the stairs.

⁹² After her seclusion, her knowledge of the Alosians, she looked at the city differently: now in the once-clean water channels, trash and slime.

BELOW

ABOVE

They passed bridges leading to other spires and towers⁹³ and catwalks leading to platforms and buildings that looked like they were floating in the mists, with their rocky foundations hidden in the clouds.

The huge columns of rock were honeycombed with empty dwellings. In the past, the other commanders had whispered that in 300 years they had not eliminated all the resistance hiding in the ruins⁹⁴.

⁹³ Once burnt and bent pillar held a still-glittering sword, buried to the hilt in the half-melted marble remains.

⁹⁴ The official resistance had lasted for 42 years. Ashareena had barely completed her battle training when the last holdouts had been cornered and destroyed.

BELOW

ABOVE

Isolated killings⁹⁵ of guards and patrols still occurred at times.

Finally, the stairs ended.

They exited the tower, and she breathed in deeply but immediately coughed out the stink of the destroyed city⁹⁶. The air smelled much worse below the clouds, filled with the stench of death, waste, and neglect. Two ohgra guards with pikes joined them without a word, trailing behind her, breathing foul hot air on her neck.

⁹⁵ Either a few rebels still had a hidden redoubt in the city or some powerful individual waging a lone crusade had some lair hidden in some unchecked öbl or in a cavern deep beneath the ruins.

⁹⁶ ...moldering corpses, rot, slime, offal, dung, and pools of toxins and poisons. Maladanik had made the city in a charnel house on a grand scale

BELOW

ABOVE

The hulking creatures⁹⁷ were even taller than Ashareena. A ridge of horned spikes ran from the top of their heads down their spines and tails.

Ashareena followed the Soul-Drinker east⁹⁸ along ruined broadways and broken boulevards⁹⁹ surrounded by towers and öbls¹⁰⁰ almost like walking in a forest of stone.

⁹⁷ Ashareena hated ohgra: they stank. They leered and muttered at her, always foul and mocking. The very sight of their apelike, yet reptilian faces made her long for her sword, her barb. She had been forced to work with them in the past: in the Third Assault, she had commanded a force of nublins with loathsome ohgra on both of her flanks.

⁹⁸ The day was too bright for her eyes: she had to keep looking down and blinking before glancing back at the spectacle of the city.

⁹⁹ At one dizzying clouded intersection, the broken remains of a red carriage rested, crashed against a stone railing overlooking the mists.

¹⁰⁰ One mighty öbl was now just a broken stump, destroyed in some terrible explosion during the city's fall; another öbl's top was flat, but the plateau was covered in ruined buildings, shattered and crumbled.

BELOW

ABOVE

The illusion did not last, though: the beautiful marbles were stained with soot, blood, and slime¹⁰¹.

They passed through the burned roots of a giant Star Tree that was as huge as a cavern¹⁰². She had seen the dead husk many times, as it covered the main route to the eastern gates, but this time she felt melancholy¹⁰³ at its loss.

¹⁰¹ Once the city had been beautiful, but three hundred years of Maladanik's rule had ruined Alosia. Now it was a frightful mess

¹⁰² The Star-Trees were the largest living things Above. She had seen many of them over the decades: some rose into the clouds like öbls.

¹⁰³ But never before had she felt the subtle and strange tugging in her chest, a sudden sadness that the tree's beauty was burned away

BELOW

ABOVE

In the shadows beneath the roots, she felt like they were being watched. In one spot, she walked through a frigid spot and shivered. Ghosts¹⁰⁴ abounded in the haunted city.

¹⁰⁴ How many restless spirits roamed those halls and bridges?

BELOW

ABOVE

Beyond the tree was a long, narrow bridge that looked like it was held up by clouds. Stone blocks were missing in places, whistling misty holes and chasms.

Halfway across, strange lights rose out of the mists, blinking in a nauseating rainbow pattern. Then the lights were gone, replaced by a gust so strong she had to grab the stone railing to steady herself¹⁰⁵.

¹⁰⁵ The tiny Soul-Drinker was unmoved in the wind, appearing sturdier and more unchanging than the stone itself.

BELOW

ABOVE

The bridge ended on the top of a massive öbl covered in tall, dry, whispering grasses and sharp thorn bushes. Stunted trees grew in places, while dead vines rattled in the wind. Halfway across the öbl, they passed ancient corpses, waxy and fungal, looking almost like the day they died three centuries before. In one spot, rocks had been piled into a small pyramid or cairn. Stupid nublins¹⁰⁶!

Two more ohgra guards joined the group.

¹⁰⁶ Nublins were fools, superstitious and gullible. They built shrines to the Tyrant, the Lords and Ladies Below, anything they feared.

BELOW

ABOVE

Deep among the grasses¹⁰⁷, they passed the broken remains of a crashed airship¹⁰⁸. As they neared the far side of the grassed öbl, crude statues of Maladanik began to appear. Piles of stones, and other nublin shrines ringed a huge skeleton¹⁰⁹ poking from the waving leaves and flowers.

¹⁰⁷ In the center of the overgrown öbl.

¹⁰⁸ All she could discern were shattered beams and timbers buried beneath a shredded rubbery bladder that seemed impervious to the weather.

¹⁰⁹ From the position of the bones, the creature might have once guarded the bridge, serving Alosia...or, more likely, the fallen remains of some rampaging monster from Below.

BELOW

ABOVE

Soon they passed the avenue leading to the Great Moat¹¹⁰ where the Second Assault had begun so long ago. A huge and gaping chasm descended into a network of tunnels that burrowed deep, to where the Lords and Ladies lurked below in the darkness¹¹¹. Ohgra guards¹¹² with huge pikes stood near the edge of the abyss.

¹¹⁰ The Great Moat ringed three sides of ruined Alosia: to the north, east, and west. To the south, crystals and öbls rose into a mountainous wall, separating the city from rivers and channels flowing westward to the sea. She had been told that was the route many of the city's inhabitants had used to escape.

¹¹¹ Maladanik used the chasm when he sent emissaries Below on diplomatic missions. He would often send gold, food, and slaves deep to their evil realm far beneath the surface. It was whispered he kept the crystals and mage-silver himself.

¹¹² Ashareena could not recall ever seeing so many guards by the Great Moat; it was as if Maladanik was guarding from Below, not from the hated Order.

BELOW

ABOVE

The Soul-Drinker took a new route into the heart of the city. They were avoiding the central spires. Though the way was longer, it was faster if on foot.

Below...

The word reminded her of the monstrous hordes waiting in the depths. Ashareena did not think Maladanik truly loyal to the Lords and Ladies Below¹¹³ as they called themselves. She had no proof but believed it to be true¹¹⁴.

¹¹³ She believed he sent gifts to keep their suspicions low, so he could continue to rule Alosia with little interference.

¹¹⁴ She had often wondered about his decisions, puzzling and pondering their implications. When she was younger, Ashareena had figured she was simply ignorant of some key details. But as the centuries had passed, she had watched the tyrant waste numerous opportunities

BELOW

ABOVE

She had even been Below, once, long ago, before the Fourth Assault. Ashareena had been awed by the massive numbers of troops¹¹⁵, humbled by the gigantic caverns¹¹⁶.

She stared into the fading abyss of the moat as they passed deeper into the city. Ashareena feared their might Below turning against Maladanik because of his arrogance and incompetence.

when the Order was weak or in retreat. His orders always seemed capricious, almost whimsical in their lack of thought. But she was merely a lowly Horn.

¹¹⁵ Over the years she had become convinced that Maladanik's forces did not succeed because he constantly gave them foolish orders, wasting huge numbers of lives to avenge slights and regain lost ground of no strategic value.

¹¹⁶ like empty mountains

BELOW

ABOVE

He *had* served the Shadow Council faithfully in the beginning, leading their armies to victory in the Second Assault. When those Below had invaded for a third time¹¹⁷, he had assisted. Maladanik had marched his forces east to engage the Order¹¹⁸. His horde had helped secure a victory, but he had been injured in the process by a wizard's spell.

¹¹⁷ His army had kept the Order busy while the Third Eruption cracked open in pits in the rifts splitting the steamy jungles south of Jhurdu. His monstrous army had kept the warriors trapped in the Midlands and unable to send help.

¹¹⁸ that arisen to protect the other surface-dwellers

BELOW

ABOVE

The wound still troubled him¹¹⁹ and he had not left his throne room since. Yes, Maladanik had helped the Lords Below yet again during the Fourth Assault. But he had remained in Alosia during that campaign, sending Ashareena to lead the horde of ten-thousands in his absence.

¹¹⁹ He always wore a long scarlet cape and was prone to pulling it over the wound self-consciously.

BELOW

ABOVE

Not far from the Great Moat, they entered a shadowed canyon snaking between the towers and spires¹²⁰. Here, a bridge led south, into the heart of the city. On the bridge, the three-horned symbol of Maladanik was painted in dried, black blood.

Halfway across the bridge, a light shower soaked her. They hurried, entering a huge building covering the whole top of the öbl. Broken furniture lay everywhere. The Soul-Drinker kept them moving, past a terrace piled high with skulls and bones¹²¹.

¹²⁰ A crystal spire--dominating the center of the city's skyline, tan streaks blending and bubbling in red patterns inside--sparked at the sky, occasionally sending fingers of lightning searching the clouds.

BELOW

ABOVE

More rough statues and painted symbols marked the exit. Outside four ohgra stood waiting by another nublin shrine¹²². They silently followed as the Soul-Drinker led her up a long ramp toward another level, high in the mists.

¹²¹ More skulls lined the tops of stone railings and scattered atop the remaining walls of roofless structures.

¹²² The shrine was another small pyramid of rocks; however, this one nurtured a broken green crystal, once a powerful source of energy but now useless. Stupid nublins!

BELOW

ABOVE

Vines clung to the edge of the ramp, an unexpected splash of color and fragrant scents so rare in the ruins. Dirty water trickled among sickly ferns, down trash-filled channels.

They entered a narrow, low tunnel¹²³ filled with more broken things: smashed furniture, shattered glass, splintered boxes. Holes and cracks from a hammer dotted and lined the floors and walls.

¹²³ They passed into single file, and the ohgra all had to crouch, grumbling all the time.

BELOW

ABOVE

A faint beam pierced the gloom, finding clever holes between stones haphazardly mortared into place. The dim light revealed strange looking molds and growths¹²⁴. The air grew dank and stinking. Ashareena was thankful when they again stepped outside into the sun onto a terrace lined with smashed statues.

¹²⁴ The fungi grew in varied colors, striking in their boldness, more beauty among the ruins.

BELOW

ABOVE

The Soul Drinker led her up a wide staircase. After they entered, she walked carefully down a hallway with vaulted ceilings¹²⁵, a step behind the cursed nöm. Some doors were open, others locked. The muffled sound of hammers, moans, and screams came from different rooms. Some walls were defaced, covered in crude drawings and curses in the nublin tongue.

¹²⁵ She liked the passageway better than the last: because the ceilings were tall and the hallways wide, the stinking ohgra spread out a bit, giving her more room, more air.

BELOW

ABOVE

A broken, horizontal öbl served as a bridge to a cluster of the mesas rising at different heights¹²⁶. The tallest spire in the cluster was a massive, sparking crystal with a rod of mage-silver rising from its tip¹²⁷.

¹²⁶ The cluster of spires sparked with crystal energy, which was shadowed by a mass of dark, rainless clouds hanging over the spot.

¹²⁷ Red, angry lightning from the crystal spire would arc into the clouds, only to receive a reply of more white lightning from above, a call and response of uncontrolled powers.

BELOW

ABOVE

Another bridge led to a honeycombed öbl that looked like it had once been home to thousands of apartments. The hallway leading through the apartments was better lit from holes in some of the walls and numerous broken windows. In places, the dirt was thin enough that she could spy the tiles beneath¹²⁸. All locks were broken, along with some of the doors themselves in pieces¹²⁹.

¹²⁸ In some places lay pitfalls and mounds of shattered glass, rusty metal, soggy carpets of shredded, soaked papers and ruined, rotten rugs.

¹²⁹ All the apartments had been ransacked, either during the mad looting during the city's fall or later during the hunt for rebels.

BELOW

ABOVE

Murzod led her past a hallway clean and empty of all creatures, looking as pristine as the day of the conquest. Twenty huge, armored ohgra warriors with pikes guarded the entrance to the hallway. Stoic, they glared at her but averted their red eyes from the tiny Soul-Drinker¹³⁰.

¹³⁰ They made no movement or sound to acknowledge the distant screams of a tortured ohgra.

BELOW

ABOVE

Bright lights glowed from runes and strange marks on odd doors at the guarded hallway's end¹³¹. Giant roots or limbs of a tree¹³² crossed and twined like a knot around the closed door. She could hear sizzles and crackles, as if the gate were alive.

¹³¹ It was rumored to be the door to the Vaults. For three hundred years her father had not been able to open it. All of the treasures and inventions of Alosia were said to be locked safely behind the glowing wards. Some thought the vaults were filled with weapons, spells, and riches.

¹³² The city was so massive another Star Tree could be above her, hidden in the cluster of main spires and she would have never known it.

BELOW

ABOVE

The Vaults¹³³!

Maladanik wanted to open the Vaults more than anything. He constantly mused on what treasures, what powerful weapons and devices, were locked away. Some nublins whispered that he had gone mad¹³⁴.

Foolish nublins...

¹³³ She had heard that Maladanik's inability to open the Vaults had been one of the causes of his odd behaviors. No one knew for sure what was locked behind the impenetrable walls, though all were certain that its treasures would only be topped by the weapons and lore hidden inside. In a way, the Vaults had become a symbol, a dream, that if opened, would lead to the conquest of all Above with new might and power, reinvigorating the Tyrant's forces.

¹³⁴ Rumors told that over the centuries having such wealth and power so close yet beyond his grasp had affected his wits. However, all who whispered such things soon added their bones to the pit ringing his throne

BELOW

ABOVE

The hallways grew filthier as they left the entrance to the Vault. Tapestries clung to some walls, tattered, ripped, stained. Graffiti fouled most surfaces.

The hallway exiting the Vault had been the sight of a terrible battle. Dark smears coated floors and walls pocked with holes¹³⁵. Another of the three-horned symbols was painted on the steps to another span. On the bottom step, another clay figurine stared to the south, toward his throne room.

¹³⁵ Stone burns from crystal weapons.

BELOW

ABOVE

When she looked down, shock struck her dumb: the Soul-Drinker was gone¹³⁶. She was alone with the hated ohgra.

More creatures lived in this part of the ruined city. The bridge led to a series of flattened öbls, all connected by bridges. Four more huge ohgra awaited them, joining the group as they passed. Three large forts made of rough logs¹³⁷. More ohgra from the legions stopped what they were doing to watch the strange group. Some hissed and grunted at her.

¹³⁶ Never before would she have missed the presence of the Soul-Drinker. Somehow, in such a brief time, she had come to almost rely on him for protection. The ohgra hated her. Her danger was great.

¹³⁷ They looked to Ashareena like crude castles in the air.

BELOW

ABOVE

Some ohgra reached for spears in barrels or swords on racks. She wished again for the Soul-Drinker's return. They had to pass a terrifying beomid¹³⁸ on a powered chain before stepping onto another series of bridges.

¹³⁸ She was not sure what it was: it was not a hammer-horn, nor a thresk. Those were the only beomids could recognize. This was a huge barking beast, three Alosian lengths tall, covered in spikes, scales, and horns.

BELOW

ABOVE

The bridges came together onto a cluster of spires forming a huge structure. In old Alosia, this had been a major center of activity: beyond it lay the former Chamber of the Appointed, but now it was the Tyrant's home. The closer to his lair, the more ostentation the decorations and the larger the crowds¹³⁹.

¹³⁹ Spectators were now hanging from balconies, yelling and jeering and drinking wine: some threw bottles at her. Clouds of purple, tan, and amber smoke drifted from the intoxicated mercenaries and outlaws, the madness of lotus blossoms, purple leaf, and sand poppies...

BELOW

ABOVE

But a malign spirit increased as well. Snakes twined about some of the stone columns as if they were trees. Bats clung to the ceiling. The sense of dread grew as they drew close to the throne room.

The bridges and streets grew so crowded the ohgras had to push their way through with the hafts of their pikes and forks. On the tops of some öbls above and below their spire were entire villages and tent cities teeming with nublins¹⁴⁰.

¹⁴⁰ Ropes and nets were strung everywhere—up, down, sideways, slanting—making the area look almost like a giant spider's web. Nublins raced about on the lines, nimble as monkeys.

BELOW

ABOVE

They were surrounded by swarms of nublins¹⁴¹. Nublin women wove vines into ropes. Some held babies up for her to see. Huge, pregnant nublins¹⁴² barely able to move waved. Some roasted slabs of meat over sparking fires, while others stirred basins of green liquid.

As word of her coming spread, the crowds cheered and waved scarlet banners. Some danced around shrines holding dead and shattered crystals.

¹⁴¹ The crowd was mostly women and children. The males were off in their war bands and legions. There were few elderly either because of their harsh, short lives.

¹⁴² Nublin women would elongate when pregnant, filling with hundreds or thousands of eggs each, until they were no longer able to move.

BELOW

ABOVE

A huge ohgra wearing a necklace of thumbs joined her entourage. He suddenly roared a terrible howl, and the nublins fell silent, glowering and slinking away.

They left the crowds of nublins behind. Instead, she was surrounded by boglins¹⁴³. They were all blinking in the light and cursing her. They began wiping filth off their bodies and flinging it at her. She retched at the stench, furious at the humiliation¹⁴⁴.

¹⁴³ Boglins were filthy creatures that lived at the bottom of the pits where öbls had collapsed. They believed whatever they were told, and their curses were all of the lies told about her before she had been imprisoned.

¹⁴⁴ She swore if she ever had the chance, she would make the boglins pay dearly for their insults.

BELOW

ABOVE

Drums and a rhythmic stamping of feet and clapping greeted them as they drew closer to the Throne room¹⁴⁵. A large nöm carriage sat on one bridge, a trophy seized in battle.

¹⁴⁵ The drums were nothing compared to the wailing dirge-like sound of a primitive staff-flute. The warbling note grabbed her bones with potential threats.

BELOW

ABOVE

A stinking corridor led to her left. The walls dripped with moisture. The passage had once led to the High Chapel of the Sky Father. Maladanik had found other uses for it, though.

His slaves there had labored until a titanic cauldron hung over a pit of flame. The cauldron had aided the Tyrant with developing several powerful devices¹⁴⁶, cooking and boiling essences and enchantments she didn't understand. And sometimes Maladanik¹⁴⁷ soaked in a boiling bath of oil to soothe his ancient bones.

¹⁴⁶ In it he had forged his wicked sword enchanted with curses and the remains of his enemies' weapons. Each of the Appointed had been stripped of their powerful blades and wands. Before devouring them, he

BELOW

ABOVE

The entrance hall to his chambers lay ahead of them. More ohgra guards moved aside pikes like saplings as she and her ohgra escorts approached.

The doors opened...and the air grew warmer, fouler, a reek she could almost see¹⁴⁸. And strange music¹⁴⁹ wafted on the stink, an off-key, arrhythmic, cacophony.

The guards glowered: one pushed her forward with a pike haft. The time for her meeting with the Tyrant had arrived.

had saved their skulls. The skulls had been used to create his Skull Scepter, using the cauldron in the last stages of its creation.

¹⁴⁷ It was whispered that for the past forty years Maladanik had only left his throne room for boiling oil baths. Some said fear and cowardice, others said his unhealed wounds.

¹⁴⁸ She wished again for the Soul-Drinker, despite her best judgment.

¹⁴⁹ Flutes, drums, howling-staffs, horns, wails.

BELOW

ABOVE

CHAPTER FOUR: THE TEST

Shoved, Ashareena stumbled, caught her hand on a pillar, blinked¹⁵⁰. She crossed the threshold.

As her eyes adjusted, she hurried forward. Now that she was actually here, she was afraid to look toward the throne. Her instincts or training forced her to quickly looking around: ohgra guards¹⁵¹, a large group in the center, filth on the

¹⁵⁰ The room was dim, half-shadowed, a mix of a few fires in the far corners and a few weak beams of sunlight breaking through a hole in the roof.

¹⁵¹ Ugly, menacing guards stood every length around the edge of the circular room (except for near the throne), wearing scarlet and carrying pikes and forks.

BELOW

ABOVE

floor¹⁵², displays on all the walls¹⁵³,
sycophants¹⁵⁴...and Maladanik.

She held in her fear, locking her eyes
on the large group, staring fearfully:
Horns¹⁵⁵ and a motley assortment of scum,

¹⁵² The floors were foul: broken pottery and glass shards lay everywhere, a testament to the violence and madness in the room; metal scrolls, stomped, bent, crushed; dirt and other refuse; and running over the edge of the pit near the throne, Maladanik's encrusted filth, hardened into rivulets.

¹⁵³ Arms of the defeated, skeletons of members of the Order nailed to the marble, paintings of pain and torment during Alosia's fall, and a crude map adorned every wall in ostentatious displays.

¹⁵⁴ Actually, it was not just sycophants near the Tyrant's throne: powerful guards close to their master such as the Desiccator and the Ü'Merz; a construct or sentient armor that stood next to the great seat; Maladanik's evil bat that would sometimes sit on his shoulders like a monstrous parrot; sad, scantily clad women of the harem, a horned creature that wrote everything down on a huge scroll. The musicians were near the throne, in the shadows of the bones near the east wall.

¹⁵⁵ She had not seen some of her fellow commanders for a year or more. A few glanced at her. None said anything.

BELOW

ABOVE

mercenaries, and others attracted to the Tyrant's power¹⁵⁶.

The door slammed shut loudly behind her, causing all to look her way as she neared them.

She stood with several of the creatures known as Horns. She had fought and trained with them. They were all horned¹⁵⁷, misshapen creatures born from the fall of Alosia. Some held commands, leading their own troops, as Ashareena had done in the

¹⁵⁶ A rough, half-shaved dohgra and a scarred waakri held a chain holding a mournful, bald, and bleeding dohgra. A dark wizard glowered but did not touch the Piercer. A tattooed merc whispered to a figure cloaked in leather and wearing an enormous wide-brimmed hat.

¹⁵⁷ The horns protruding from their heads came in a variety of shapes, styles: long, curved horns of slender bone similar to her own; short, conical horns barely poking past brows; thick piles of antlers and spikes; ridges of sharps spikes running from head to spine.

BELOW

ABOVE

past. Other Horns worked in the city for Maladanik on unknown tasks.

Ashareena was surprised to see the other commanders. They had not all been in the same room since just before the Fourth Assault. She had been raised with many of them, the outcasts and mutants born from the countless rapes during the city's fall.

All the commanders in this group had some type of horns¹⁵⁸, except for two. The ones called the Ant and Mög the Living Rock were said to be experiments, either from

¹⁵⁸ Zor was half-dohgra, shaggy in patches on his legs, shoulders, and back, with two rows of three small horns running from forehead through his long, greasy, black hair toward his neck. Bajzin was part nöm, but instead of being tiny, he was huge, with thick horns like an ox poking out the side of his head; poor Quag had horns sticking out in every part of his skull like a porcupine.

BELOW

ABOVE

Murzod or, more astonishingly, Lord Neferus himself, leading the Council deep Below.

Being with the others made her uncomfortable, so she looked around the circular room of empty pools and platforms¹⁵⁹. All of the bridges leading to the eastern side had been smashed except one in front of the throne, which was illuminated by a single beam of sunlight¹⁶⁰.

At the end of the hall, lounged Maladanik the Tyrant. As soon as her eyes

¹⁵⁹ oval pools connected to each other, interwoven with circular platforms with pillars and bridges linking the platforms to the largest platform in the middle. This is where the crowd gathered. The pools were no longer filled with water but filth: bones, trash. The bones were stacked up, rising almost like dikes the closer they got to the throne.

¹⁶⁰ The hole in the ceiling was where Maladanik had smashed a pillar, causing part of the roof to collapse.

BELOW

ABOVE

reached his huge, clawed feet, she averted her eyes, staring down¹⁶¹. Time passed slowly, only counted by the melancholy music and the pounding of her heart.

A hated, familiar voice broke her concentration, stopped the music: "Look at me! Absorb my beauty." The horned monster laughed. The nervous commanders trembled.

The Tyrant snapped his fingers and the music resumed. She breathed deeply and raised her head: he was both hideous and awesome, majestic and foolish¹⁶².

¹⁶¹ at feet, filth on the floor, nothing

¹⁶² He was three times her height, thick and massive, with his stomach hanging over a belt of gold and jewels. More jewels strung among his horns, at once terrible and comic.

BELOW

ABOVE

Maladanik surveyed them, looked at each carefully. Some held his gaze for a long moment, while other only glanced¹⁶³ before again looking at the floor, the ceiling, the throne, anywhere but Maladanik's searching eyes.

"You are all my children!" Maladanik pointed¹⁶⁴ at Mog, Ant, and the mercenaries. "Except you poor, hornless bastards. You were not lucky enough to spring from my talents!"

¹⁶³ Some took such brief glimpses they were the opposite of a blink.

¹⁶⁴ His every gesture was exaggerated, his acknowledgment of his children was accompanied by a sweeping clawed arm flourish, causing the rings on his scaled fingers to sparkle in the dim light.

BELOW

ABOVE

Some gasped. Others said nothing¹⁶⁵.

The Fool muttered, "No!"

"It is time to see who has the strength and skill, the power and the will. To aid glorious me in my magnificent plans. Who is worthy to serve me?"

As the Tyrant spoke, the Soul-Drinker walked toward the throne, having entered through a side door¹⁶⁶. The Soul-Drinker stopped at the base of the stairs, holding a smooth orb of polished red crystal.

¹⁶⁵ Ashareena silently thanked Murzod for the warning. She forced a smile so large at the Tyrant's revelation that her back fangs were exposed.

¹⁶⁶ At the sight of the Soul-Drinker, the musicians began to play a mournful dirge, almost as a salute.

BELOW

ABOVE

Maladanik's voice boomed. "Zor."

"Yes, my lord."

Patches of hair grew among scales and horns, though dohgra features were evident.

"Take this." The Soul-Drinker held out the orb. "Draw forth its flame."

Zor looked confused. "How?"

Maladanik growled¹⁶⁷. The drums grew louder. A single flute seemed to hang in the air.

¹⁶⁷ Ashareena could hear her heart pounding so silent was the room at the Tyrant's growl.

BELOW

ABOVE

Zor took the orb. It sat dead in his scaly paw. He grimaced, ground his teeth. Nothing happened. The drums stopped.

"He has not the power, my lord," Murzod said. He took the orb from the now-terrified Zor.

Zor threw himself on his face¹⁶⁸. "My apologies, great lord Maladanik! I serve you well!"

Maladanik nodded. Drums pounded from the shadows. "Rise. Though you cannot use the orb, you may still serve my magnificence. Leave us. Go to your legion. You are commanded to destroy the hammer-horns outside the city."

BELOW

ABOVE

The Tyrant raised a scaly fist. The drums stopped. He spoke one word, "Sable."

The horned, black-furred dohgra raised his spear in salute, walked forward to renewed drums and flutes, and took the orb.

He could not pull a flame either.

Sable groveled in the silent room for many long heartbeats. He was praised for his enormous strength¹⁶⁹ and long horns and rewarded with a command: to harass the

¹⁶⁸ She did not know if it was pride or foolishness, but she was certain she would rather be killed and eaten rather than beg like Zor. It was as he had forgotten all of the warrior code they had been taught when faced with actual death. She did not want to grovel. It was better to be a memory. The one was called The Antlered Queen.

¹⁶⁹ Upon hearing praise for Sable's strength, a massive Horn named Beak puffed out his chest and clicked his beak smugly.

BELOW

ABOVE

Order among the eastern spires, near the Stalks on the flat plain.

The drums thundered in response. The Soul-Drinker raised a hand and the room grew instantly quiet.

"My lord," the Soul-Drinker said. "Size is not the most important skill with such things¹⁷⁰. We need to focus on finding one who can wield crystal strength."

Maladanik pretended he didn't hear and turned with a flourish of his cape.

"Tusk!"

¹⁷⁰ Beak looked both furious and terrified.

BELOW

ABOVE

A sheepish looking dohgra with an unfortunate horn curving out of his mouth shuffled forward.

When Tusk failed to raise a flame, Maladanik smiled. "Drinker! You deserve a treat!"

Tusk wailed as the Soul-Drinker turned, smiled, and drank¹⁷¹.

The room was absolutely still.

The Tyrant broke the silence. "Fool!"

The drums began yet again.

¹⁷¹ The Soul-Drinker held Tusk in a hypnotic gaze. The cursed nöm leapt on Tusk's chest, grabbing the long horn. The Soul-Drinker opened its mouth, and a ghostly substance poured from Tusk's silent scream.

BELOW

ABOVE

Ashareena perked up. The Fool looked similar to her, obviously possessing some öj blood.

"No," the Fool said quietly, defiantly.

"Take it," the Soul-Drinker commanded from where he stood on Tusk's empty husk.

Against his will, the Fool reached out and took the orb. Without effort, he drew bright, blood-red light from the crystal. A wind blew through the room, disturbing the large tapestry near the throne¹⁷².

¹⁷² Behind the tapestry were the shattered remains of what was once a platform for an airship, one of the wing-bladders; now it was a dangerous platform of unsteady rocks and pits dropping into the clouds below.

BELOW

ABOVE

The Fool gasped as he pushed the precious orb back¹⁷³ at the Soul-Drinker. "I will not serve your vile will," he said, staring directly at Maladanik.

Maladanik jumped forward, catching the Fool in one great fist. The Tyrant squeezed and shook his small offspring before throwing him hard to the floor.

At his feet, the bruised and bloodied öj lay helpless, disturbing Ashareena¹⁷⁴.

¹⁷³ The light fading as the crystal left his touch.

¹⁷⁴ She did not like the sight. Whenever she felt numb to torture and death, an even greater evil would instruct her once again she was not completely dead inside.

BELOW

ABOVE

She had bad thoughts¹⁷⁵, tried to clear her mind¹⁷⁶.

He stepped forward.

His bulk crushed the life from the tortured öj.

Then Maladanik tossed the corpse into the air with his clawed foot: and caught the body in his slavering jaws, chomping and swallowing loudly. He coughed and spat bones and offal at a nearby pile.

¹⁷⁵ Don't think of the dead republic! Not here! Not so close! Have I learned too much?

¹⁷⁶ The Tyrant had been angered when she had shown pity to a handsome male öj. Öj always reminded her of her mixed lineage, the mother she had never known. She did not need to think about her mother's people, not this close to Maladanik. Too much risk in his reading her thoughts. She cleared her mind, tried to meet his piercing gaze.

BELOW

ABOVE

The Tyrant scowled, drank a barrel of water, and spat into the pit of bones and offal. "Next," he said, his anger still visible on his blood-spattered face.

"Worm!" The Soul-Drinker called out.

Worm whimpered¹⁷⁷.

Maladanik snarled, still foul from the Fool's words. His tail lashed out. Its split and grasping end grabbed the Worm.

He jerked poor Worm aloft. The Tyrant caught him with both hands.

Maladanik flexed.

Drums pounded.

¹⁷⁷ Ashareena knew Worm was doomed. He had never taken to his command, to killing. He was too kind, too compassionate to survive in Maladanik's Alosia. She hoped it would be swift, painless.

BELOW

ABOVE

Worm screamed.

The poor creature ripped in half.

Maladanik devoured both halves, chewing loudly, swallowing, then spitting out bones and horn¹⁷⁸ and drinking¹⁷⁹.

"Though none are as wise as you, my lord, perhaps Bajzin could continue to build wonderful devices for your greatness? He is quite useful!"

Maladanik eyed the odd, horned nöm. "Fine," he said gruffly. "Go build me something magnificent. Something that suits my greatness!"

¹⁷⁸ He spat into the rotting pile in the pit in front of him.

¹⁷⁹ Terrified ohgra servants waited in the shadows near the throne with barrels of fresh water for the Tyrant.

BELOW

ABOVE

Bajzin nodded, bowed, left. She could barely concentrate as more Horns were called, some receiving new commands, others being devoured, none succeeded in the test of the flame¹⁸⁰.

The Soul-Drinker turned to the Tyrant. "Now, great and wise Maladanik, the last of the Horns to attempt the test: Ashareena, the Antlered Queen!"

¹⁸⁰ Terror, horror pulled at her, distracting, almost making her forget Murzod's warnings. She tried to clear her mind, to think of nothing, of clouds, of dark pits in the shadows of öbls, anything but thoughts that might get her eaten.

BELOW

ABOVE

CHAPTER FIVE: MALADANIK THE TYRANT

She looked at the ground near the Soul-Drinker, moving quickly and taking the crystal¹⁸¹, ignoring the implied peril of the drums.

She had used a crystal long ago¹⁸² and expected it to be heavy yet smooth, light yet slightly vibrating until it felt rough in her palm.

Without hesitation, she cleared her mind, drawing on her anger and frustration, the shadows fled before the harsh, blood-

¹⁸¹ His face was a storm of changing emotions as he handed it to her.

¹⁸² All the Horns had been taught the rudimentary skill with the weakest purple ones. The red crystals were the strongest. She had never been this close to one before.

BELOW

ABOVE

red pulse she drew. The room exploded in gasps, shouts, drums, and horns.

She did not look as she handed the crystal back to the Soul-Drinker.

"Approach, slave!" Maladanik's voice stayed cruel but grew hauntingly quiet¹⁸³, but the entire room was calm as a grave¹⁸⁴.

Ashareena walked head down, careful to try to shield her thoughts, except anger and defiance¹⁸⁵.

¹⁸³ He did not speak too loudly, letting his near-whisper carry constant threats. If he raised his voice, death was almost inevitable.

¹⁸⁴ The drums' absence made the walk even worse. Did they know something she didn't?

¹⁸⁵ She had taken Murzod's words to heart, for good or ill. A risk but one she felt necessary.

BELOW

ABOVE

When she could see the pit of bones, she stopped, knelt, and closed her eyes¹⁸⁶.

"Master, how may I serve?"

He laughed unexpectedly and taunted, "I mean, daughter!" The drums began again, very subdued. A flute joined them hauntingly.

"Rise."

She stood, lifted her chin, took a breath, and opened her eyes¹⁸⁷ and spoke

¹⁸⁶ His throne was still several lengths from her. She did not want to get any closer.

¹⁸⁷ Closer to the throne, she could see a huge pile of dirty carpets, furs, and blankets for a bed; a basin of orange goo with a large spoon sticking out; the hole in the ceiling where he had rage-smashed a pillar now covered by a pile of logs, limbs, leaves, which let in tiny beams of dim sunlight; a device in the shadows by throne, a box of mage-silver covered in crystal dials and levers; a few foxen huddled in small wooden cages as snacks for the Tyrant.

BELOW

ABOVE

before her courage left her. "Father, I am overjoyed to hear I come from your greatness¹⁸⁸!"

Maladanik had sat again upon his hulking throne¹⁸⁹. Thrice her height, a nightmare of crimson scaled flesh. Three long horns rose from his forehead, straight and sharp unlike her curved ones. Ridges of smaller horns ran down both sides of his snout and down his face curving down from above his brows, ringed like a mane of bone. Intricate golden loops threaded with gems wound around his skull and horns.

¹⁸⁸ The Soul-Drinker was nowhere to be seen. Why had he left? Was it because of his warning to her? She tried not to think of it.

¹⁸⁹ Of steel, stone, and fire flickering in small tubes at the top

BELOW

ABOVE

An ugly patch of white, dead-looking skin covered his left side, over his ribs and down his left leg¹⁹⁰.

His split, snaky tail whipped lazily as he lounged on his throne, shifting his dirty, scarlet cape.

Bones competed with treasure and dung in heaps about him. Flies swarmed black in the humid air.

"I need you to perform a task ...it is of...greatest importance!" His now-louder voice echoed through the chamber, deep and sinister.

¹⁹⁰ —where the wizard had injured him so long ago.

BELOW

ABOVE

The monster cleared his throat, spat again, drained another fresh barrel.

"Yes, Master¹⁹¹."

"Call me *Father*¹⁹²." Another barrel drained in an attempt to quench his endless, cursed thirst. "I need you to find a key."

"A key, father? I will find it for you¹⁹³."

"But it is not just any key," he hissed. His tongue darted between his bloody fangs, around his snout. "I need to

¹⁹¹ Her face was a stone statue as his stinking breath wafted over, a stench as bad as any she had ever encountered. She tried to force a smile.

¹⁹² Cheers and drums! Too many sounds, smells, thoughts...

¹⁹³ She relaxed into her role, trying to believe her words.

BELOW

ABOVE

open the Vaults. I cannot wait any longer. Powers locked away in there might grant me lordship over all of Above¹⁹⁴. It must be done."

"Yes, Father."

"I believe this key to be hidden somewhere in the Triple Peaks valley. My spies tell me that is where the Wind Clan scum fled after this city fell to my greatness."

¹⁹⁴ As the Tyrant spoke of the hidden powers of the Vault, he unconsciously rubbed his pale wound with a single claw in a habitual motion.

BELOW

ABOVE

"I have heard of this place,
master...father...to the east of the alliance
of Öj¹⁹⁵?"

"Yes...it is a high valley...it towers
above the rest of the Endless Forest...and is
said to lie between two peaks...and a crater,
high in the clouds."

The demon-king paused. "But there is
more. The Lords and Ladies Below are
divided. Some clamor for a Fifth Assault.
They want slaves, food, treasure, to carve
more kingdoms on the surface¹⁹⁶."

¹⁹⁵ A confederacy of öj clans worked together in the western Fahjir to defend the rest of the forest from Maladanik. She dreaded saying the word but forced it out in a rush.

¹⁹⁶ It was obvious he did not want any of the other lords and ladies to take kingdoms Above and compete with Maladanik. His snout bared bloody fangs.

BELOW

ABOVE

He spat, growled.

"Others wish to continue on the slow conquest Above. I cannot oppose them all, when they are united. I do not wish for them to take *any*...fast or slow. Above is mine!"

He grinned with murder. "Come closer."
The harem murmured in the shadows.

Ashareena shivered but did as commanded¹⁹⁷, walking across the single bridge to the throne¹⁹⁸. A strange chill

¹⁹⁷ Walking into the odor that almost hung like a cloud...

¹⁹⁸ Ignoring the shifting carpet of flies, bones, and rotted flesh beneath her...

BELOW

ABOVE

radiated from Maladanik¹⁹⁹ in addition to his terrible smell.

She stopped at the base of the throne. Something about the mage-silver device²⁰⁰ next to the throne tried to pull her gaze, but she forced herself to look at the Tyrant.

He whispered. "If I can unlock the Vaults' powers...I can drive the öj far away. If...when I consolidate my realm...I will keep the hordes trapped forever Below...and I can rule Above unopposed." He cocked his head,

¹⁹⁹ She thought he was born in the pits Below but had learned magic and lore from Lord Neferus. Was it power? Was it sickness? She denied her repulsion, again smiling.

²⁰⁰ A cube of mage-silver, crystal levers, calling to her, calling...

BELOW

ABOVE

shifting his horns²⁰¹ and watching her carefully.

“And someday, perhaps, it might all be yours.”

Her eyes grew larger as she realized his plan's audacity²⁰².

“You must be very careful. The Lords and Ladies Below suspect me...I would if I were them.” He smiled, again showing stained fangs.

²⁰¹ The motion in and out of the light caused his gems and jewelry to sparkle and fade.

²⁰² He was thinking of opposing Below while trying to finish off the realms Above at the same time: something he had been unable to do for three hundred years. How could he defeat them all? Maladanik would definitely need more power, lore, and weapons.

BELOW

ABOVE

"I cannot arouse their suspicions any more...not until I have the key. I had to admit to Lord Neferus that I was planning a raid to the east...so now they are sending someone to accompany you...the drak'n, Syrilla. She is said to be very ambitious and scheming. I told them you are scouting for raids or a possible Fifth Assault. I need you to gain this key without her suspecting."

Maladanik glared. "And you must accomplish all of this without rousing the Order²⁰³. I do not want more of their wrath.

²⁰³ How she would love to sink her barb into members of the Order!
How many times had she faced them in combat?

BELOW

ABOVE

That much activity would surely anger those Below even more."

Maladanik smiled again²⁰⁴; she paralyzed her face into a smile to match his evil grin.

"You will lead a thousand nublins. At a glance, a raid for slaves and food and information to aid the upcoming Assault. We do that every so often. The peoples of the forest will think nothing more." He leaned closer, spreading his chill deeper in her bones. "Keep Syrilla occupied. But get me the key to the Vault. Don't let her know

²⁰⁴ Her stomach almost emptied as she saw bits of the Fool's flesh lodged in the Tyrant's teeth.

BELOW

ABOVE

your true purpose. You are raiding and scouting...not searching for the key."

"Yes, Master."

"My daughter..." Maladanik stopped. "One more thing...this...the reason for the test..."

He opened a monstrous palm. His scepter of seven crystal-covered skulls appeared, glimmering and sparkling²⁰⁵.

"This will aid you...remember...this turns former foes to friends!" His fangs flashed red in the firelight. "Use it well." He handed her the scepter, which was like a staff to Ashareena.

²⁰⁵ The scepter contained all seven types of crystals! That was why Maladanik used the red crystal!

BELOW

ABOVE

The Skull Scepter felt like squirming ice in her hands²⁰⁶.

The skulls were covered with melted crystals and studded with gems. Each skull was one of the races of Old Alosia. She ran her finger along the scepter-staff's edge.

The tiny sprig skull of violet crystals and gems was the smallest²⁰⁷... this skull sat lowest on the scepter's slender mage-silver rod binding them together.

Next was an awaralu²⁰⁸ skull ridged with purple gems²⁰⁹.

²⁰⁶ Its power was unmistakable...with such a weapon, she could do many things!

²⁰⁷ Covered in chalcedony, amethyst, night-wing, and sapphire...

²⁰⁸ The furry awaralu lived in the tops of tallest trees.

²⁰⁹ Fluorite, lavender diamonds, and stones from distant Kindiril...

BELOW

ABOVE

A nöm skull covered in melted blue crystal was next²¹⁰.

Ashareena found the green öj skull²¹¹ to be the most fascinating²¹², but she was aware of the demon's gaze and kept her eyes on the strange yellow fish-like mer skull²¹³.

The skulls grew larger higher up the Scepter. The orange waakri skull of fire opals and topaz had a silver beak that stuck out farther than all the other skulls.

²¹⁰ Studded with aquamarine, sapphire, and moonstone...

²¹¹ Emerald, jade, and swamp amber...

²¹² Don't think about öj, *the öj*, mother, lost Alosia...just don't!

²¹³ Speckled with beryls, diamonds, and sapphires...

BELOW

ABOVE

The last skull was huge, dohgra, red with rubies and garnets.

“Do not betray me: if you are holding this, I can slay you from afar. I have powers beyond the Scepter.” He gestured²¹⁴.

“If you cross me, I will retrieve what is mine and make an example of you to be told for millennia.”

She bowed to Maladanik, turned away. She had a lot to think about and much to prepare before the raid.

“Succeed and you will be rewarded beyond your dreams—you may be helping to

²¹⁴ toward the device, toward a rack of weapons on the other side of the throne she had not noticed before, swords, an odd bow, crystal orbs.

BELOW

ABOVE

build your own realm. Fail and I will kill you slowly and terribly before those Below come for me. If you fail, we both die..."

"Yes, Lord Maladanik, my father."

Again, she shielded her thoughts²¹⁵.

"You look terrible." Maladanik smiled evilly. "You are starving...eat your fill...rest for a few days. Then take the underground routes to the east and meet up with your escort, a drak'n named Syrilla. If you do as I say, then your previous transgressions will be forgiven. And you might inherit all of this someday."

²¹⁵ Don't think! No! No! I am empty! A vessel of service without thought! Don't think!

BELOW

ABOVE

Maladanik gestured carelessly with his massive, clawed hands.

Ashareena stood straighter, gripping the strange weapon with both hands. "I will not fail you...father²¹⁶."

She bowed and turned away, unable to believe her good luck²¹⁷.

She would not let Maladanik down.

She hurried from the room²¹⁸ before looking at the scepter-staff.

As the sounds faded behind her, she gripped the scepter so hard rainbow sparks

²¹⁶ The word grew both easier and harder to say.

²¹⁷ Her fortunes had changed again.

²¹⁸ To the thunderous sounds of drums, horns, and cheers...

BELOW

ABOVE

burst forth²¹⁹. She grinned, relaxed, tried to focus.

Much needed to be done to prepare for her mission. She marched straight toward the prisons to feed. Her hunger fiercer, her anger hotter, she let it rage to become what she needed to survive.

Xanfang flew onto her shoulder, rubbing her hair²²⁰.

She grinned with glory!

Woe to any besides Maladanik who crossed her that morning!

She had been given a reprieve.

²¹⁹ Her joy was so great she ignored the surprised grunts of the ohgra in the hallway.

²²⁰ Her impling! A companion again! Touch energizing!

BELOW

ABOVE

The Antlered Queen would use it to serve well her master, her Lord, her father²²¹.

She would return with the Key to the Vaults.

²²¹ Father! Part of her had always known but hidden the horror of the thought...

BELOW

ABOVE

A PREVIEW OF EPISODE 02

In the next episode, we meet Syrilla, a young drak'n and servant of Lord Neferus. She is awakened deep Below and given a mission to aid the one known as the Antlered Queen on her mission to scout the Triple Peaks Valley, deep in the Fahjir. Her pride and ambition are matched only by her impulsiveness...

BELOW

ABOVE

Glossary

A

Above: the surface world; attacked by forces from Below.

Agharta: desert kingdom; home of the feline thompur; site of the Fourth Eruption.

Alosia: the capital city of the Grand Alliance of the Faithful People; the realm was destroyed during the Second Eruption and is now ruled by Maladanik.

Ant, the: one of the Horns of Maladanik.

Ashareena: The Antlered Queen.

Assault: named used Below for Eruptions.

Awaralu: one of the Faithful Peoples; small, furry intelligent tree-dwellers with long tails and big ears.

B

Bajzin: one of the Horns of Maladanik.

Beak: one of the Horns of Maladanik.

BELOW

ABOVE

Below: underground realm deep below the surface; home of the Lords and Ladies Below.

Beomid: the titanic beasts that roam the surface of Above; they avoid/fear crystals and their energies.

Boglins: semi-aquatic creatures who live in the bogs at the bottom of some pits; sometimes used as troops for Below.

Builders: See Society of Builders and Sages.

Burned One, the: enslaved, tormented öj forced to lead the First Eruption. See Murzod.

C

Crystals: powerful energy crystal formed during the Shattering; used to repel beomids.

D

Dohgra: one of the seven Faithful Peoples; large shaggy intelligent creatures living in tribes in the Fahjir.

Drak: small²²², carnivorous, reptilian creatures that serve Below;

²²²About half an Alosian length.

BELOW

ABOVE

Drak'n: shape-shifting creature from Below with characteristics of öj, drak, and shell-bats.

E

Endless Forest, the: Maladanik's name for the Fahjir. See the Fahjir.

Eruption: the name given by those Above to the four major invasions from deep Below.

Ever-flame: endless flame burning in the center of the shrine on the öbl.

Eye, the: the larger of the two moons;

F

Fahjir, the: the forest of the north; it stretched from sea to sea until the Second Eruption when much of it was destroyed in the far west; Triple Peaks lies in its center.

First Eruption: failed first Eruption that alerted the surface to the existence of those Below; led by the Burnt One.

Fool, the: one of the Horns of Conquest, serving Maladanik.

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Fourth Eruption: the most recent Eruption when Agharta fell to Arl Maxis; an attack from Alosia from the Antlered Queen drew away the Reclaimers' strength.

G

Grand Elegion, the: the doomed army of Alosia. During the Second Eruption, the Elegion made a fighting retreat east. The survivors of the retreat swore a vow, forming a new order. See Order of the Reclaimers, the.

H

Hammer-horn: elephant-sized creatures with massive hammer-like horns on the sides of their heads. Excellent climbers, using their claws, they graze on sky-vines, often destroying the öbls on which they grow.

Horn: a commander of Maladanik's legions.

Horns of Conquest, the: the name Maladanik gave his vast legions. Each is commanded by a leader known as a Horn.

I

Impling: tiny evil magical monsters from Below, often bound as pets or servants.

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J

Jaunt: an ancient Alosia unit of measurement; roughly one thousand lengths; roughly a mile.

K

Key, the: the key to the locked Vaults of Alosia, containing countless untouched lore, weapons, and treasures.

Kharsora: one of the Lords and Ladies Below; titan as large as an obl.

Kindiril: an island to the southwest, far across the seas. Home to the Society of Builders and Sages, who escaped the fall of Alosia.

L

Legacy, the: free city built high on an öbl rising from the sea; off the west coast of Ormarnth; home of the surviving government of Alosia, citizens, & scholars; friction with the Reclaimers over policy and strategy. Surviving alliance of Faithful Peoples.

Length: an ancient Alosian unit of measurement; roughly five feet.

Lords and Ladies Below: alliance of

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Lord Neferus: leader of the Lords and Ladies Below.

M

Mage-silver: magical silver found deep Below.

Maladanik: a monstrous creature from deep Below that led the Lords and Ladies' forces in the successful assault on Alosia. Proclaimed himself Tyrant of Above.

Mer: one of the seven Faithful Peoples; semi-aquatic humanoids. Two branches, salt-mer, who dwell in the deep oceans, and the sweet-mer, who dwell in rivers and lakes.

Mög: one of the Horns of Maladanik

Murzod: The Soul Drinker; a former nöm lore-master from ancient Alosia.

N

Nöm: one of the Faithful Peoples; short and slender people who live in burrows.

Nublin: ugly gray monsters from Below about the same size as nöms.

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O

Öbl: towering vein of rock or ore; some are block-like, others rise like pillars into the clouds.

Ohgra: large monsters from Below, related to dohgra; hairless with a sharp bony ridge running from their skull down their spines to the tips of their tails.

Öj: one of the seven Faithful Peoples; they are divided into 12 clans.

Order, the: See The Order of the Reclaimers. Name used by those from Below for the Order of the Reclaimers.

Order of the Reclaimers, the: the remnants of the Golden Elegation that kept the eastward retreat in the Second Eruption; founded a new order dedicated to cleansing the surface of monsters from Below; competes with the Legacy over policy and strategy.

P

Pit: deep chasms and abysses caused by collapsed öbls.

Q

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Quag: dohgra Horn whose head is covered in a mass of spiky horns.

R

Reclaimers: See the Order of the Reclaimers.

Runner, the: the smaller moon that orbits six times a day, which is used to tell time.

S

Sable: one of the Horns of Maladanik

Second Eruption: the eruption led by Maladanik beneath Alosia; resulted in the fall of lost Alosia and the splintering of realms.

Sages: See Society of Builders and Sages.

Shattering, the: early in the history of the Sphere, the core exploded, creating crystals and öbls.

Shell-bat: giant flying beomids.

Skull Scepter, the: powerful magical talisman made of the gem-studded skulls of the Faithful Peoples; created by

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ABOVE

Maladanik with the skulls of the Seven Appointed of Alosia.

Sky-vine: vines that grow on öbls; they can stretch for jaunts; covered in massive, shovel-shaped leaves.

Society of Builders and Sages: One of the groups of surviving Alosians, skilled builders, crafters, and scholars.

Soul-drinker: an undead that consumes some of the life force of its victims, controlling them; Murzod.

Sprig: smallest and most magical of the Faithful Peoples; they sometimes live in hollowed root-towers or witch-toads but mostly reside in plume trees.

Sphere, the: the planet.

T

Third Eruption: originated in the Cracks, tremendous rift valley splitting the jungles of Lesser Ormarnth; led by Hargul the Murderer, Togzheen, and Hyrrkiz the Hag.

Thresk: beomid; thirteen-tentacled, huge carnivore that hides among sky-vines.

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Triple Peaks Valley: high caldera in the center of the Fahjir; ancestral homeland of the Wind Clan.

Tusk: dohgra Horn with a single spiral tusk growing down from his snout.

Tyrant, the: see Maladanik.

U

Ü'toor'i: alien creatures that arrived millennia ago with the shattering of the third moon.

V

Vault, the: locked area in the ruined city of Alosia; rumored to contain great weapons, lore, and treasures.

Vine-wolf: hunters that live among the vines growing on öbls; pack creatures that climb and roam the vast network of sky-vines.

W

Waakri: one of the Faithful Peoples; large winged humanoids.

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Wind Clan: an ancient family of öj living in the Triple Peaks Valley region of the Fahjir Forest; former elite of Alosia.

Wing-Bladder: airship used by the order made from skin of beomid titans and powered by crystals; invented in ancient Alosia.

Wing-cape: useful garment worn by some awaralu on their arms and legs; when airborne, the cape fills with air, allowing them to glide.

Worm: one of the Horns of Conquest, serving Maladanik.

X

Xanfang: an impling, bound to Ashareena as her familiar.

Y

Ya'Daba: Reclaimer, mer lore-master who wounded Maladanik in the Third Eruption.

Z

Zor: one of the Horns of Conquest, serving Maladanik.

BELOW