

DRAGONLANCE: RELICS

(A Fan Fiction Story)

by Chris Androu

CHAPTER 1

“You’re such a coward, when will you learn to fight back!” Eva mocked Ander angrily.

Eva, a slender athletic human woman was darkened by years of outdoor labor under the hot sun. Although her lifespan barely surpassed twenty revolutions or so of Krynn around the sun, her tanned dry skin and fiery spirit gave off the impression of a more mature woman, a woman who exuded authority and was used to getting answers. The fire in her eyes was reflected in the torchlight inside the hut, and seemed to be in stark contrast to the dark night of the humid evening seen from the windows and open door that she had just entered in from a minute earlier. And right now, the target of Eva’s inner flame was laying prone in front of her, a similar-aged scrawny young human man named Ander. Although they had been friends since childhood, that friendship had been strained over recent years as they would go days or even weeks without seeing each other, forced by the Minotaurs to work in different sections of the slave camps in the local forest outside of a large Minotaur village named Tempest. When they did see each other, it was during short work breaks during the day, or for a few moments in the evenings after eating and before sleep took them, a tired, relentless sleep that can’t be defeated after such a physically demanding work day.

Now was one of those few moments, but Eva found herself looking forward to seeing Ander less and less each time—as their friendship was strained, at least from Eva’s perspective—by their differing personalities. Eva couldn’t stand to see Ander grow up to be such a push-over as was clearly evident in moments like this.

Eva helped Ander up off the floor as he sheepishly dusted off the dirt from his leggings.

“Here,” Eva said gruffly, returning the small bowl of food to Ander. “If you let them push you around and take your bowl today, they’ll just keep doing it. You need to stand up for yourself!” Eva said, loudly enough for the pair of young human male ruffians to hear.

Sitting in the corner of the human slave camp hut, the ruffians glared at her, but didn’t speak back, as they nursed bloody noses and welts from the stick Eva had beat them with, just before retrieving Ander’s food bowl that she saw them take from him.

“It’s bad enough that we have to work our fingers to the bone under the rule of the Bullies.” She paused momentarily, refusing to give Ander the satisfaction of a smile, despite the fact that she was proud of her pun-like term for the large race of Minotaur warriors. “But we shouldn’t have to extend that pandering to our fellow humans. When are you going to learn to stand up and fight back?”

Ander felt like the shame inside of him right now could light up the night sky, and form a third moon outside of tiny Lunitari and Solinari, that did not provide much light on their own. If overheard Minotaur gossip is to be believed, Minotaur elders speak of ancient times where the moons were much more prominent in the night sky, and would provide adequate lighting at night that almost rivaled a cloudy day in sunlight. But his shame was merely directed towards wanting to avoid Eva’s opinion of him diminishing; otherwise he felt strongly in his convictions and drew upon that well in his retort.

“The Minotaur’s feed us three solid meals a day, if I’m still hungry, I can just wait for breakfast in the morning before we work. Clearly these young men needed the food more than me, if they were so desperate to take it from me. It’s certainly not worth fighting over. And don’t confuse pacifism for cowardice, Eva!” Ander’s voice was cracking and wasn’t projecting the steady and firm argument that his mind had envisioned it, before speaking.

He would later rationalize that evening that he could have prepared a much better argument, had he been expecting to see her, but he hadn’t seen Eva in his section of the woodlands for weeks. The

Minotaurs would often use groups of humans in one section of the forest to chop down the massive Vallenwood trees that only seemed able to grow in this section of the world, and then start to trim and craft the wood into workable sections that were then transported by the Minotaurs to the coasts, presumably to be made into the boats that continued to replenish the largest navy in the history of Krynn. Vallenwood trees were massive trees that grew incredibly fast and could supposedly grow big enough to hold up houses if allowed to do so. Unfortunately, that would have to remain a myth as the Minotaurs forced the human slaves to chop them down well before they were fully grown in one section, while in another section of the forest, the human slaves would be growing and cultivating the next batch of baby Vallenwood trees, only to repeat the process seemingly without end.

The slaves would be switched from one section to another as needed when certain slaves became injured, infirm, or died. Other times, the Minotaurs would simply want to mix up the slaves so that they could procreate – after all, future Minotaur generations will require slaves as well. At that point, the pregnant human mothers were taken away to another place to grow and raise their children until they were old enough to serve the Minotaurs as well.

Ander feared that the Minotaurs were growing impatient with Eva being in the same camp as Ander. She clearly, and quite forcefully fought away any advances that other human males would make towards her, yet the Minotaurs likely felt this Ander whelp was unwilling or unable to mate with Eva, and had been moving Eva around to other camps likely as a result. Eva was strong, healthy and a hard worker, so they likely weren't in a hurry to see her mated, but the human population was dwindling and the Minotaurs had to think about the future. While they once numbered in the hundreds of thousands in this part of Krynn, the human population had dwindled to less than a thousand or so. Most died during the Minotaur occupation of Krynn several hundred years earlier, known as the Lost Wars; so the stories go. Still more die each year in the labor camps – the Minotaurs still seem surprised how fragile most of the humans are, despite years of experience as their masters.

Eva's harsh voice brought Ander's thoughts back to the present.

"Even if you are a pacifist, there are any number of valid reasons to compel a man to fight."

"I challenge you Eva to come up with one reason for fighting that I can agree to," Ander said, happy to return to these types of philosophical discussions that they had seemingly been having with each other since they were able to talk.

"How about self-preservation for starters?" Eva said cockily, thinking she might as well try to win the argument right away.

"Why? The Minotaurs will protect us if any humans attack us in camp, and there hasn't been a sighting of another race in these parts in years. They're probably all extinct, unless you count the gully dwarves, and they're hardly a threat."

Ander smiled at the thought of the smelly, yet happy diminutive race that, like cockroaches, always seemed to find ways to survive between the cracks of society. The Minotaurs had tried to eliminate them, but no matter how many they killed, there would always be sightings of them, often at night scrounging on the refuse left by the Minotaurs and humans alike, and scurrying away before being found.

Ander saw one a few nights earlier, the first he had seen in months. It had snuck off into a nearby cave that seemed too small to hide him the next day when the sun rose up and Ander had looked in that direction. He could have gotten a reward of extra food portions from the Minotaurs by signaling to them about the gully, but he valued all of life's creatures and didn't want any harm to come to it.

With only Minotaurs and humans, day after day, it was comforting to see another creature, truth be told. The only other humanoid creature he had ever seen was an ogre when he was a young boy. The creature was hard to forget as it had yellowish skin with grey eyes, and was even taller than the other Minotaurs. The creature was an emissary, Ander later heard, come to visit from the other lands where the remaining ogres had been banished to years earlier, after having broken their truce with the

Minotaurs. It was an act they surely regretted as Minotaur retribution was fierce and their numbers and skill in large scale warfare was unmatched, so the Minotaur stories say. Whatever that emissary was asking, more like pleading for, as Ander now recalled, the answer must have been no, as he remembers the ogre's head placed in a large bag ready for transport.

You don't forget that sort of thing as a boy.

"How about fighting in order to hunt for food?" Eva was used to Ander's poor attention span and tried to rope him back into the conversation at hand.

Ander happily re-joined the banter, "Again, why? The Minotaurs provide us with three square meals a day, even if we could somehow scale those huge staked fences, why would we risk death just to acquire what is likely to be a single meal before we were caught?"

"What about fighting for honor?" Eva quickly came back with.

This argument, Ander was expecting.

"Eva, I know how much you love the tales about the Solamnic Knights we heard that Minotaur named Steer talk about when we were young, about how much respect the Minos had for them, and that the Knights fought to the last man without wavering or surrendering. But where are they now? Don't you think they made the wrong choice if they're all gone and I'm still here? I choose life. It's the best choice in any situation," Ander answered smugly.

Eva had no retort and was growing frustrated. She tried a different approach.

"How about fighting in order to protect a loved one?"

"Sure, but why would a loved one be in trouble if they are under the protection of the Minotaurs? Who would they be in trouble from, the elves? I heard that Minotaur guard Gonhorn tell another Bully...Damn you got me saying that now!" Ander laughed quickly, and even Eva had to smirk for a second at Ander's use of her slang. "I heard Gonhorn tell another Min-o-taur," Ander said slowly to avoid using that contagious Bully term again. "Last week that he hadn't heard of an elf sighting in

generations on land. Whatever few elves are left are likely to be refugees of what he called the Dirminesti and Dargonesti sea elves. Or maybe it was Darmonesti and Dirgonesti? I can't remember. But he said these Minotaur ships that the trees help build, have been going out on diving expeditions to try to find the last of them, as well as travel back and forth to Taladas. I bet after they get rid of those nuisance elves, they won't need us to cut as many trees down and we can relax most of the day. Maybe they'll even free us and let us live in their villages at that point."

Eva's short temper had reached its boiling point at that remark. She had planned to break this news to Ander more gently in the coming days, but she couldn't help herself anymore.

"Ander, you have to be the most naïve creature on the face of this Gods-forsaken world! The Bullies will never let us go! Our only chance is the arena and I've decided to enter this year. Goodbye Ander, enjoy your life, such as it is. I don't think we'll ever see each other again."

CHAPTER 2

Eva's words ripped through Ander's heart like a hundred daggers. He kept repeating her words over and over again in his mind. He had tried in vain to convince Eva to rethink this madness, but she coldly rebuffed any further attempts at conversation, and he eventually was grabbed by Gonhorn's strong arms and easily thrown into the opposite corner of the hut and told in no uncertain terms to stay quiet during sleep hours.

Not the arena, he thought to himself in horror.

Once a year, up to twenty human slave volunteers were allowed to compete in an arena in a fight to the death contest for freedom known as Sargas's Circus. If more than twenty applied, the Minotaurs would arbitrarily pick the twenty they thought would put up the best fight and the remaining ones would have to volunteer again next year. Only one survivor gains freedom, while the remaining humans were free only to shuffle off their mortal coils and be dumped into a mass grave that the Minotaurs dubbed, "Losers Lot". Arenas were set up yearly in sections all over Ansalon and thrilled

the Minotaur audiences who cheered on their favorite combatants like they would a small pet rat, invested in the moment's battle then easily ignored as the human bodies were discarded into the mass graves afterwards. To the Minos grudging credit, they were honorable in allowing the one victor their lifelong freedom. Humans and Minotaurs both can see those rare individuals in the villages living out their lives as a part of Minotaur society. While they were considered proper citizens, they were sub-class citizens, never fully accepted as equals by their neighbor Minotaurs, nor allowed in positions of high esteem or authority. It seemed to Ander to be a lonely existence, not much better than the life that he is in, and certainly not worth the terrible odds and risk it took to achieve it.

In recent years, the arena struggled to get a full twenty combatants, with only the strongest and most confident men and women willing to take the chance, and that typically entailed fourteen or fifteen in their territory at most. *What is she thinking?* Ander thought to himself, in worried terror, as he saw Eva being escorted the next morning by Minotaur guards out of his camp. Right before the gate behind her closed, she turned quickly to look at him, and Ander searched her eyes feverishly back and forth to glean her feelings in that moment. There were feelings for him in those clear blue eyes of hers, that he could tell, but also a fierce determination and something else perhaps? Disappointment towards him? Anger? He couldn't tell, and a moment later she was gone.

He had lived long enough to know where they were taking her. All volunteers were taken to a training area where they were given intensive training for two weeks before the annual arena event was to take place. *The Minotaurs wanted the humans to survive long enough to put on a good show,* thought Ander bitterly.

As the days dragged on towards Sargas's Circus, Ander couldn't sleep or eat. He was filled with regret. *Why hadn't he tried to mate with Eva? Why did he let fear get in the way of progressing their relationship, which was otherwise so comfortable to him? Why did he have to argue with her so much,*

had he pushed her into this terrible decision? Prior to this, even when he hadn't gotten to see Eva all day, the possibility alone that he might see or talk to her the next day brought fulfillment to his life.

Now there was nothing.

No hope.

Even if she was the lucky one to survive, he would never be able to spend time with her again. The survivors of the arena battle lived where they pleased, typically in nearby Minotaur villages where they were acknowledged at least as that year's victor, but they weren't allowed to visit the slave camps. While he may see her at some point in the future somewhere in the distance while being transported between Minotaur towns, he knew he would never be able to speak to her again, and there was an even stronger likelihood that she would be killed during the battle. After all, there were a lot of labor camps that comprised this territory, Eva and Ander likely hadn't even seen half of the combatants that she would be facing.

The day before Sargas's Circus was to take place, Ander, who had been irritable and combative with his fellow slaves all week, pushed back a middle-aged man who had tried to take his half-eaten bowl of food away from him.

"You want it so bad? Take it!" Ander growled at him and threw the bowl towards a group of three young men huddled in a corner, turning away in disgust as all four wrestled on the ground for the remainder of the food left in the bowl, seemingly oblivious that their actions had spilled its contents over already, onto the ground.

Ander walked angrily towards the Minotaur guard Gonhorn standing by the gate. Gonhorn snorted derisively.

"Since when do you approach me, boy?"

The Minotaur's sheer size and intimidating gaze quickly erased any anger Ander had been propelled by previously. Minotaurs were large monstrous creatures covered in hardened fur and

seemingly made out of pure muscle. They often towered over seven feet tall with bovine features and horns of up to two feet long. And Gonhorn was the biggest and most nightmarish one Ander had ever seen.

Ander's voice cracked as he asked him, "Sir, I was merely wondering if you had heard what the final tally of contestants are participating in tomorrow's battle, sir?"

In his head, he was hoping to hear less than ten to improve Eva's odds, but he'd settle for anything less than last year's fourteen to give her a fighting chance.

"A full twenty!" Gonhorn replied, with an evil glee as he watched Ander's heart sink to the ground, "and your girl Eva is the only woman who volunteered this year. I'll bet they'll make quick work of her so they can move on to the real threats."

Ander glared at him in anger but he knew Gonhorn spoke the truth. Sargas's Circus is treated like a holiday and the results of prior battles are talked about in vivid detail the next day among the Minotaur guards for all the camp to hear about. It's the biggest event of the year, as far as the human camp is concerned as well. A large pig roast is served to the humans the night before and they celebrate the survivor throughout the year as if they were royalty. Ander knew from past descriptions that all the combatants enter the arena at one time and often the weakest target is killed first so that the combatants can focus on the larger threats without worrying about being stabbed in the back by an otherwise weaker opponent. He hoped that Eva would stay as far away to the edges of combat as she could, and hope that the others fought each other first. The one chance that she had is that the fighters never seemed to ally with each other, maybe they would all kill each other first before even getting to Eva? The combatants get separated during the training and were unlikely to trust each other not to get their throat slit from behind if they turned their back for a moment. There is after all, only one possible survivor.

The hours dragged like years that last day into the early evening. Ander looked up to the sky, a cold unfeeling black sky with dim distant silver and red moons, and even dimmer stars set behind the one bright constellation in the sky each night, that of the Minotaur God, Sargas. Rumors in camp from his childhood said he was called Sargonnas by humans in ages gone by, though given the state of the world, he clearly couldn't care less about any race other than his beloved Minos.

Ander watched without emotion as the large annual pig roast was brought in by Gonhorn and another Minotaur guard Voros, and placed on a large table for the humans to scrap over, even though there was more than enough of the beast for each human in camp to dine on for an entire week. The pig roast this year seemed particularly undercooked, but it wouldn't have mattered to Ander what was on that table, his thoughts were in the arena. With Eva.

Gonhorn suddenly shifted his gaze to Ander.

"Seems your girl's odds have improved by one." He laughed deeply for a moment, his powerful chest muscles rising and falling quickly. "One of the contestants broke his back during the training, and there's no time to train a replacement. Take heart little man, now all she needs to do is kill eighteen of your kind's best warriors." He laughed again.

Not to be outdone, Voros added, "That's not the only thing that human broke!" Joining in the sadistic laughter.

"What does that mean?" Ander asked, with sad realization hitting him before the answer even took place.

"Well, he couldn't fight, and he couldn't work, what good was he? Seems like he had the distinction of setting a new record for the earliest human to ever die in Sargas's Circus!"

The laughter continued as Ander's appetite, at least what was left of it, disappeared.

Ander stared dimly at the oversized pig roast on the table, currently being ripped apart piece by piece by his fellow humans in the slave camp. He didn't know their names, he never bothered to learn

them. They never showed him a shred of kindness despite Ander having seemingly been given the same life sentence that they were. Eva was the only one that mattered to him, and now she was all alone. Alone like he was, but needing somehow to be the unlikely survivor in a battle of nineteen combatants. Nineteen! Suddenly, a desperate plan hit him like a fallen tree limb and he knew what he had to do. Or at least, what he had to *try* to do. Grabbing a large section of pig loin and stuffing it under his tunic to hide it, he strode purposefully to the two Minotaur guards, who eyed him curiously, not expecting to hear from this insignificant creature again this evening.

“Gonhorn, I want to enter Sargas’s Circus. I want to fight!”

CHAPTER 3

Gonhorn looked Ander up and down and snorted.

“You’re a good worker, you never give us any trouble, you’re fast for your species, strong enough, and it will take me a few days to find a suitable replacement in the other camps. Why don’t you just go back in your corner and I’ll pretend I didn’t hear you say anything.”

Voros looked at Gonhorn in shocked disbelief. The Minotaurs valued honor above all things, to even suggest that he might deny this time-honored tradition of allowing humans to fight for their freedom, was sacrilegious. Voros thought, *perhaps I may need to challenge Gonhorn in battle at some point myself, to remind him of our customs?*

Ander’s nerves were causing his body to tremble, but he stared back at the Minotaur, who was twice his size, and stood his ground. Gonhorn, seeing Voros’s expression out of the corner of his eye, realized that he was duty bound to accept this late volunteer.

“Fine, if you’re in such a hurry to join your friend in an early death, let’s not keep you waiting.”

The Minotaur opened the gate and shoved Ander gruffly in the back towards the exit. Gonhorn took Ander to the training area outside of the arena. There was a long stone hallway under a large ceiling that depicted artwork of glorious battles from Minotaur past. Ander passed by multiple thick

wooden doors that offered no access to the interior of those rooms, but through which he could hear the ringing of metal on metal as the combatants were getting in their last training sessions, like anxious students cramming to study before tomorrow's final exam. A VERY final exam.

He could hear Minotaur trainers barking commands at the human participants, with advice like, "Keep your balance, you have two legs for a reason!" And. "You're still reaching too far with your sword, your entire flank is open, fool!"

Ander knew from past stories that the Minotaur trainers took pride in seeing which of their trainees survived Sargas's Circus, they would brag about it for the entire year until the following year's event.

Try as he might, he couldn't tell which door belonged to the training area where Eva was. He needed to speak to her – this was a critical part to his desperate plan that he had derived for them both to survive. The oversized pig the Minos had provided to the slaves was not well cooked, he suspected the large loin section that he had taken and concealed under his tunic was filled with blood, blood that he hoped would be carefully spilled by Eva to convince the guards and crowd that he had been killed. As long as he could help Eva be the victor, she could walk out a free human, while he could escape after he was left for dead.

He knew the odds of his plan succeeding were stacked against him, but he felt that he couldn't live with himself if he didn't try. Truth be told, just the act of making this attempt was empowering to him.

Ander thought himself clever by phrasing his next question to his Minotaur captor, "Gonhorn, can I please talk to Eva one last time before we meet each other in glorious battle tomorrow?"

Ander thought wrong, as the answer to the question came swiftly in the form of a powerful slap across his cheek that drew blood and started throbbing loudly.

"Boy, don't you ever address me again like we are equals. No matter what happens tomorrow, we will never be equals! You are the weed pushing through the crack in the floorboards hoping to gain

sunlight, and I am the boot that blocks the sun and crushes your soul!” Ander cowered, thankful that the Minotaur honor code prevented Gonhorn from crushing his bones right then and there.

Approaching the door to his training room, Gonhorn gave instructions to the Minotaur trainer and looked down at Ander again who was now having trepidations after Gonhorn’s threatening words and looked away from his gaze.

Gonhorn leaned down anyway to make sure the human absorbed every utterance, “The next time you see this face, boy, it will be as the life fades from your eyes and I am carrying you to your grave.”

Ander’s body shivered with chills at this proclamation but said no words.

The next few hours were like a blur to Ander. A young Minotaur trainer named Mithos was initially cursing at having to train this young human in mere hours when the other human combatants had been given two weeks to train for the arena battle. Still, he at least had a miniscule chance to be the trainer of the sole victor now, after having lost his previous chance when that human broke his back and was put down. Humans are so fragile, after all. Mithos eyed the row of armor and weapons that were leaning against the wall and apprised his new trainee.

“You’re younger than most of the other combatants, I think there’s only two around your age. You seem quick and lean, but not as strong as most of them. Heavy armor would be a waste. Your only chance is to stay light and utilize stick-and-move tactics.”

He handed Ander a set of leather armor about his size and a short sword.

Ander turned his back to Mithos as he suited up, careful to conceal the pig loin and position it near his stomach where the loose-fitting leather armor would be able to hide it within folds and leather straps. Mithos proceeded to cram in as much knowledge about combat tactics as he could, impressed by Ander’s natural athleticism and aptitude to learn quickly. When the training time had expired and an exhausted sleep finally overtook Ander, he thought to himself as night took him, *I wonder if tomorrow will be my last day alive?*

After a morning and afternoon of last-minute instructions and food given to him in his training room, the combatants were all blindfolded and marched, weapons in hand into the unknown. Ander could feel the ground beneath his feet changing over from stone to dirt and through the blindfold he could sense the beating rays of sunlight upon him. Although it was late Autumn, the sun felt warm and provided him with a brief feeling of rejuvenation from the aching muscles of hours of combat training. Even in a cold, cruel world, there are moments of respite where the very presence of sunlight can provide inspiration for what is about to come. That moment was fleeting however, as the sunlight seemed to be swallowed up by shadowy figures, likely from a raucous Minotaur crowd standing on their feet as the noise of cheering was deafening.

Ander felt Mithos' arms hold him in place, he had clearly come to the starting position of whatever was about to take place next. The crowd noise had barely diminished in the past few minutes, these Minotaur's were obviously thirsty for the bloodbath to begin. Ander could barely hear an announcer shouting out the name of each trainer standing next to their charge, clearly the humans names themselves were insignificant. Ander tried to gauge the distance between the various combatants and himself based on the sounds of the corresponding Mino trainers who shouted back an acknowledgement when called out by the announcer. Fifteen feet maybe? Not nearly far enough in Ander's mind.

He hoped that when the blindfold was removed that Eva would be near him so he could whisper to her his plan about the concealed pig loin.

A deep horn blasted and the crowd noise somehow climbed to an even greater crescendo.

The blindfolds began to be removed. Blinding light came flooding through Ander's eyelids and he quickly blinked back tears to try to locate Eva. Damn! She was on the opposite end of what was a semi-circle of combatants, evenly spaced, all facing the middle of Sargas's Circus and his ultimate fate.

The arena was covered in sun baked dirt with uneven sections of higher areas, low ground, and dispersed with broken marble columns and well tread ground. Clearly the architects wanted to add an element of uneven footing to complicate things even further for the participants.

Ander watched one combatant, a middle-aged tall warrior quickly take advantage of his nearest competitor and extend his weapon, a long spear into his opponent's shoulder, penetrating it easily and ripping off a chunk of skin. The younger man was shocked, clearly still gaining his bearings and began to panic, realizing that his life was in imminent danger. The young man ran towards the line of trainers who were all leaving the one exit of the arena, a sturdy metal gate with small metal spikes encircling the metal bars in the gate like a serpent coiling up towards the heads of its victims. As the gate was closing, the young man tried to push through, begging the Minotaur trainers to let him out. The man's own trainer kicked him backwards forcefully in the chest causing the man to fall onto his back, knocking the wind out of him. The trainer spat on the ground in disgust, having spent two weeks training this coward for battle, only to watch him panic at the first sign of trouble. The Mino trainer took satisfaction when he saw a burly human clad in chain mail, swing his mace down crushing the young man's head instantly like a melon. The crowd roared its approval. The gate fully closed with the trainers on the other side, rooting on the remaining contestants in a bloodthirsty exuberance that shook Ander to his core.

He saw two men near Eva approaching her from opposite sides, hoping to make quick work of this year's only female contestant. That spurred Ander into action. There were a few skirmishes going on, but everyone so far had stayed near their starting position, leery of moving too far and making themselves more of a target. That meant the middle of the arena was completely empty and with Eva on the other side, Ander made a beeline straight in her direction. Most of the combatants appeared to have heavy weapons and armor, ranging from scale mail all the way up to plate mail. That was advantageous for Ander as he quickly outran them in his light leather armor. Eva was clad in tight

fitting chain mail, a gold helmet, long sword, and shield. She didn't seem to notice Ander racing in the middle of the arena towards her as she moved to intercept the first attacker's two-handed sword which was slicing down towards her in a circular motion. She brought her shield up and the metal clang and reverberations nearly knocked the shield off of her arm. The opposite attacker grinned as he gripped a sharpened halberd and prepared to decapitate this foolish girl's head like a veteran executioner. His eyes widened in shock as the tip of a sword protruded from his neck as he looked down. Swords weren't supposed to come through his neck. *What was happening? How did it get there?* Those were the questions that quickly seemed to run through this human warrior's mind moments before he pitched forward and fell, dead before he hit the ground.

Ander had acted on pure adrenaline and fear. He was only mildly aware that he stabbed the human through the neck above the armor and below the helmet, just as he had been trained by Mithos, the night before. He stepped on the man's body quickly and pulled his short sword out. He wasn't even thinking about his actions at this point, it would have shocked him to his very being if he had. Ander had never even harmed a rabbit in his life, and he had just killed a man in cold blood from behind. He was oblivious to everything at this moment, the body he stepped on, the crowd noise, he didn't even bother to look behind him to see if he was vulnerable, his only focus was to get to Eva.

He was only a few feet away from Eva now who had her back to him, as she desperately blocked powerful swing after swing from her aggressive attacker's two-handed sword, the clanging of metal-on-metal shield being swallowed up in the cheers of the boisterous Minotaur crowd. Gods, there had to be thousands of them in the stands that began ten feet above the wall that surrounded the arena in a perfect circle, and extended up many rows and sections in this vast open stadium. Yet the sound of their overzealous cheers made it seem like the Minotaurs were right on top of the competitors, urging them on to glorious victory.

Eva had been able to fend off the larger bearded man who was swinging at her, with her shield and longsword up till this point, but the man was clearly wearing her down as her shield was raised back up a bit lower each time he swung. The bearded man saw Ander running up to Eva and relaxed with a perverse grin for a moment, expecting him to finish his opponent from behind. Instead, this newcomer bypassed an easy kill and without breaking stride lunged straight towards the bearded man's midsection. At the last moment, the man adjusted his sword to block Ander's killing blow, bringing the point of both swords to the ground. Too late, the man realized his mistake as Eva jumped at that momentary lowering of his defenses to strike, swing her sword in a fierce arc meant to cleave the man's head clean off. Her sword bit deep into the man's neck but she did not have the strength needed to slice through completely and the sword stuck, halfway through the neck and collarbone, his life blood pouring out of him as he staggered backwards and fell to the ground.

Ander took this moment to grab Eva by the shoulders and face her to him. Her breath was coming in shallow gasps, out of a racing adrenaline more than any injury as she appeared to be completely unharmed up till now. She stared him as one would a ghost, not believing that her childhood friend, someone she had often hoped to be more than just a friend, could somehow be standing in front of her at this moment.

His voice snapped her out of her disbelief, "Eva! I am here. I have a plan that will get us both out of here alive!"

Eva's eyes looked up past Ander in fear, and he knew that she must be looking at the other competitors. Ander spun around quickly to take stock of the situation.

The fighting must have been quick and fierce. These were not the gladiators of legend that the Minotaurs sometimes spoke of, that supposedly battled for long periods of time for sport back in the days of Istar, before the cataclysm. Those were supposedly trained warriors that were putting on a

prolonged show for the crowd as they wouldn't fight to the death. The Minotaurs had ridiculed that aspect in their stories, using it as an example of the human weakness. No, these were desperate men who had abandoned their limited training to attack like ferocious dogs, afraid to engage in a prolonged battle for fear of being attacked from behind by another combatant. And the results were evident to Ander as he surveyed the arena and saw there were only four men left standing, all of which were quickly approaching Ander and Eva walking sideways, keeping all others in eyesight at the same time.

“Eva, grab your sword, I'll cover you.”

Ander stood protectively in front of Eva, who quickly heeded his advice and moved to retrieve her sword.

A tall scraggly man with chain mail armor and two curved swords, one in each hand, started to make his move towards Ander. Ander swung his sword back and forth to keep him at a distance, which worked for a few moments, but Ander feared the other combatants could be approaching him or Eva – still he dared not take his eyes off this closest threat for fear that any distraction would cost him, and more importantly Eva, their lives. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a glint of metal gleam in late afternoon sunlight. Fortunately, it wasn't aimed at him as a thrown dagger from another man flew, end over end, and struck the tall man square in his thigh. The man dropped to one knee screaming in pain. The Minotaurs cheered loudly.

Eva darted towards the downed man, fast as a bored Kender, as the saying goes about a race of creatures not seen on Krynn in generations who were by now possibly extinct. Eva pushed past Ander, who could only marvel at her speed and athleticism as she ran towards the man and sliced him halfway through the front part of his face, ear to ear, without even slowing down. The man pitched face forward into the ground. Eva didn't bother to provide a killing blow to put him out of his considerable misery as she moved back to Ander and stood back-to-back with him ready to face the next attacker.

Two of the other men had engaged each other in sword-to-sword combat, both decked in plate mail armor and invoking stories of the old Knights of Solamnia when they still walked the planet. The last combatant held a dagger in hand with two more in his belt strap. He clearly had been the one to throw the dagger that had hit the tall man in his thigh. This man had the look of a thief, with an eye patch over one eye and a thin beard over a thinly muscled body. He looked to be only a bit older than Eva and Ander, but had the cruel vestige of a much older man who was enjoying this Sargas's Circus far more than he should have been. He eyed them both quickly, assessing neither Eva nor Ander as much of a threat individually, but both of them fighting together confused him.

Why doesn't one of them take the opportunity to kill the other while they weren't expecting it? He thought.

He took the dagger in his hand and threw it at Eva. Ander pushed Eva away as the dagger sailed harmlessly between them, Eva having already been moving out of the way in time but appreciating the gesture with the quickest of nods towards Ander in gratitude. The man grabbed his two remaining daggers in both hands and considered his next move. Just then a loud cheer came from the Minotaur crowd and Ander stole a glance in the direction of the two, plate mail armored combatants. One of them had managed to wrestle the other to the ground and knock his helmet loose. He had just plunged his sword down through the prone man's head in a killing blow, but at that same moment the prone man had managed to position his sword arm to point the sword upwards from the ground at an angle. That sword went through into the other man's chest from the armpits, when the momentum of his downward plunge carried him into the pointed sword and both men died, taking no pleasure in having prevented their opponent from winning their freedom.

Now there were only the three of them left. The man grinned at Eva and Ander, knowing the biggest threats were now gone. He charged them quickly but not recklessly, backing away when Eva's longsword swung in a long circle, causing the man to dart back and forth, careful to stay just out of

distance of its reach. He circled them, looking for a weakness where one might bump into the other as Eva and Ander tried to stay close together. The man suddenly kicked his feet forward intentionally causing dust and rocks into the air, straight into Eva's eyes. The man pounced at this opportunity, jumping towards her intending to plunge his dagger into her chest. Ander reacted out of instinct, ignoring the lethal weapon he held in his hand with his short sword, and diving forward meeting the man's forward momentum with his own; knocking both men to the ground in a swirl of dirt and pebbles. Due to the collision, Ander felt the pork loin jostle out of position under his leather armor, slipping up higher along his chest instead of near the bottom of his stomach where it had been. Ander reached to grab the man's wrists before he could stab him with the daggers. Ander's arm grazed past one of the blades, drawing blood, but Ander ignored the pain and gripped hard to the man's wrists, which was a difficult moving target as they rolled over on the ground. Ander ended up underneath the man who started to push the dagger in his right hand down closer to Ander's chest despite Ander's tight grasp on the man's wrist, momentum and gravity now working against him. Just as suddenly, Ander felt the wrist go slack as the man's eyes glazed with death, Ander knew that the man had become the final victim of Eva's longsword and this year's Sargas's Circus.

Ander rolled the dead man off of him to the side, and for the first time appreciated the Minotaur cheers as he felt those cheers were almost reflected within his own body, so exalted did he feel in this moment. They had actually won! Still prone, he extended his hand to Eva to pull him up and smiled. She stared at him, a blank look upon her face. Confused and his body aching with the dull pain of draining adrenaline, he extended his arm further towards her.

"The least you can do is help up your hero," he began to say with a crooked grin, that grin quickly turning to shock as Eva plunged her sword into his chest.

Blood spurted up everywhere. His face was covered by the warm fluid, and he lost his sight. His vision fading, he started to think that she had accidentally stabbed him too deep, that wasn't part of the

plan, what was she doing? *Wait, I never got to tell her about the plan...* Ander's eyes closed and the world disappeared to darkness and loud cheers.

CHAPTER 4

Ander's mind drifted far away for an eternity. *Was it hours? Days?* His dreams of black nothingness were slowly interrupted by a crushing weight on his back and a pain in his chest. *This wasn't right, was death supposed to be this cruel that the pain in my chest be eternal?* He thought to himself.

He tried opening his eyes, but a sticky substance made it difficult. He went to wipe his eyes but his arm was pinned down, as was his whole body by something heavy on top of him. He went to turn over but a sharp pain in his chest was so intense, he nearly vomited and had to gasp for air, which caused him even more pain. He was trapped, the panic was rising up so much that he began to hyperventilate and tried furiously to calm his mind and take stock of the situation. He eventually won that battle and started to slow down his racing heart. He had been stabbed in the chest – yes, but it wasn't too deep as it didn't penetrate past the pork loin too far – that's the reason he's still alive. He must have passed out from the shock, the loss of blood, maybe even his heart gave out in that moment. Whatever happened, it must have seemed like he was dead to everyone else, but what is the weight above him and the rampant smell of blood and decay? The realization hit him so hard that he wished in that moment that he was already dead. *Losers Lot!* He thought to himself in self-pity. What was the point of surviving only to be buried alive in this pit to die of suffocation or starvation, or worse.

No! He refused to give in and die this way.

Although he didn't have much of a reason to continue living on in that moment, something inside of him spurred him on. He needed to keep going. He found that if he could position his head slightly, he could see a crack in the bodies that were on top of him, so he could see upwards. It was nighttime and he could see stars in the sky within the tiny section he was able to peer through.

It was very quiet, so he suspected it was past midnight as there would otherwise be sounds of people eating or the Minotaur guards making their rounds in the nearby camps. He slowly started to maneuver his body around to lay on his stomach and try to leverage what he now realized were bodies beneath him to push up with his back. The pain was excruciating, and he passed out again, waking a few minutes later. He tried again, moving slowly to twist his body into position where he could use his knees and back to push up what turned out to be two dead bodies up and off of him and he rose up on his knees breathing in the air with painful but relieved gasps. Life affirming breaths of air. His momentary victory quickly ended when he realized that the pit entrance was twelve feet above him and there were no rocks or purchase areas along the walls to climb up with. He swore to himself in frustration and started to examine the bodies near him, looking for something he could use like a rope, though a rope without a grappling hook or something to gain purchase at the top of the pit seemed doomed to fail as well.

He searched for what seemed like hours. There was a seemingly endless supply of bodies, each more gruesome than the next. Twice he retched, causing the pain in his chest to throb and burn. As he crawled over the bodies examining them, he found little beyond the armor they wore. Expensive metal armor like plate mail, scale mail or chain mail seemed to have been stripped from the bodies, and kept for future arena contests, no doubt. But inexpensive armor like leather or damaged armor seemed to have been left on the bodies, apparently not worth the effort to the Minotaurs who likely have amassed thousands of human sized sets of armor during their conquest of Krynn. Ander removed what was left of the pork loin from beneath his own leather armor and fought down the smell to eat it right then and there amongst the horror and nightmare that surrounded him. He didn't know the last time he ate as he wasn't sure how long he had been buried alive here in Loser's Lot.

How could Eva do that to me? She didn't even say anything to me. What's the point of going on now? He thought.

Having taken off the leather armor, he stared down at the sword wound in his chest. The cut was mildly deep but the wound had mostly closed, with the slit in his chest opening up small drips of fresh blood only when he moved at anything more than a snail's pace.

Why go on? He thought. Answering his own question in his mind, *because it's not right that I die here slowly and alone. What Eva did is not right. It's not right that the Minotaur's get to keep doing this to us!* His anger gave him purpose and strength. Through incredible pain and exhaustion, he slowly dragged one of the lighter bodies to the wall of the pit, and then grabbed another and stacked him on top of the last one. Slowly, after what felt like an eternity, he had stacked mutilated corpses on top of each other. When the stack got too high, he would start a smaller stack and then a smaller one, until they resembled macabre steps of broken bodies and broken dreams. Then, just before the dawn, Ander seemingly crawled out of the Abyss and walked away a free man.

Ander had less than an hour before the guards would start the daily process of waking the human slaves and organizing them into groups to head back to the forests to begin their unending cycle of deforestation. He knew of only one place he could go and hobbled towards a nearby cave where he had seen a gully dwarf scurry into weeks before. He was counting on a gully dwarf to know more about that cave's potential for survivability than his own information of the region outside of the slave camps. The irony of relying on a gully dwarves' knowledge was not lost on him.

It began to rain just then, further irritating Ander as each raindrop that hit his chest, just added to his incredible pain as he'd re-opened the wound during his efforts in creating his stairs of human bodies. He clutched a shirt he had taken off one of the bodies to his chest, trying to keep pressure on the wound as blood flowed at a slow but steady pace down from his chest and onto the ground. He stopped to kneel down in the grass just outside the cave and thirstily drank water from a puddle that was being created by the steady supply of thick rain drops. He pushed on into the cave and walked

towards the back which was completely obscured from the pre-dawn light that was otherwise peeking its way through the horizon.

Feeling around with his hands, hoping for an opening, he did notice the slightest of drafts coming from the edge of a small boulder that was propped up against the wall. He never would have detected it in the light, unless he was right on top of it as he was now. *It must be true what they say about blind people's senses being heightened.* He thought to himself. Sitting near the side of the boulder with his back braced against an outcropping next to it, he placed his feet on the boulder and pushed, slowly rolling the boulder slightly and exposing a tunnel of cold air and impenetrable darkness. He moved in and did his best to roll the boulder back into position, though he couldn't be certain if he had done it perfectly, being in the dark and now pulling on the boulder from the inside of the tunnel. Ander then began to walk, and crawl at times, through what felt like the very heart of Krynn itself.

Without light, without sound, and with only his own thoughts to keep Ander company, he traveled through the maddening darkness for what seemed like years, but may have only been days, there simply was no way of knowing without any frame of reference. He couldn't travel fast as he was likely to pitch over into some unseen chasm, plus his wound prevented him from moving too quickly.

When he was tired, he slept. When he awoke, he kept going, not knowing how long he had been asleep. His only consolation was that the gully dwarf had gone this way – surely there was a destination point? Unless there was a fork in the tunnel somewhere and he had taken the wrong path? The tunnel was large enough for several people to walk through it in many sections, it's possible there were multiple paths? Perhaps he had already missed his chance for salvation? *No, I can't think like that. There is always hope. I choose life.* He repeated that mantra to himself, more so than any other reason, it was just to hear his own voice. The sound of it reassured him that he was in fact still alive, as the endless dark void would have been enough to convince him otherwise. Just then, he saw

something different than mere darkness, and anything different was good. Are his eyes failing him, or is that a faint red glow up ahead?

Moving forward, he could sense that the ceiling was much higher here. Having been in the caves for Gods know how long, he had learned to sense the relative size of the area he was in by the echo of his movements off of the walls, and the feeling of an abundance of cooler air compared to when in a confined space. The glow was coming through a double steel door that had been half opened, revealing the soft faint light. The glow gave off just enough light to see that the tunnel went right up to these double doors and continued in two paths left and right in front of the doors. The path to the right started to go uphill but was completely blocked by rubble and large rocks. The path to the left sloped downwards and the tunnel continued on, with no indication of what was further beyond. But Ander wasn't about to go any further without investigating this desperately welcomed bit of light. The glow reminded Ander of when he had seen a firefly bug as a child. He was mesmerized by it, but then he remembered fighting back tears after Eva had stepped on it while laughing playfully. He had sadly watched the glow at night flicker and then fade to nothingness. But this glow wasn't fading, it was beckoning him to move forward towards it.

As Ander entered the room and approached the soft glow, he sensed movement and felt the air shift to his right. Too tired and hurt to move, he waited for the welcomed respite of death that seemed sure to follow. And he might not have to wait long as cold steel poked against the skin of his neck.

“Who are you? What are you doing down here?” a deep voice spoke broken common, from a foot or two below Ander's height.

Ander realized the blade had been extended upwards to reach his neck, and the voice had a thick accent he couldn't place. Was it a gully dwarf? He had never spoken directly to one but had been told they spoke in broken short phrases. This voice was deeper and seemed more confident, however.

“I'm Ander, I'm human and I've been wandering these caves after I escaped from the Minotaurs.”

“Who travels the great tunnels without food, or water, or weapons?” the voice asked.

It seemed more inquisitive than threatening to Ander, though it didn't matter. Ander was tired, too tired to fight back as he answered the voice.

“I have no need for weapons, I am a pacifist by nature. As for food and water, I have great need for that, yes. But I understand it is far easier for you to kill me here now, than share what must be precious resources down here in the belly of the world. I no longer care, do what you must.”

What seemed like an unending silence to Ander began, then the dagger withdrew from his neck.

“You must be the most depressing bard in the history of Krynn. No wonder they sent you away.”

A water skin was pressed into Ander's hand. He stared down, not understanding.

“My name's Garwed. That is called, 'W-A-T-E-R,' you drink it with your mouth. Boy, they don't teach you much up there in the sky world, huh?”

The dwarf named Garwed chuckled loudly at his own joke then plopped down on a stone chair that appeared to have been chiseled quite skillfully out of the nearby stone walls.

Still confused, Ander gratefully drank the water skin's entire contents, then caught a pouch filled with mushrooms and grain that Garwed had thrown to him. The sudden movement caused a mask of pain to cross over Ander's face and he slumped to his knees, the wound in his chest re-opening again for what seemed like the hundredth time.

“Aye, you seem to have sprung a leak there, matey,” Garwed said playfully, coming in for a closer look. “You don't happen to be one of them Minotaur Sea pirates are ye?”

Ander, still feeling that this was very likely to be the hallucinations of a dying man, studied the dwarf, the first non-gully dwarf he had ever seen. Garwed looked a bit like a human, but was shorter, around four feet high and stout and broad. He had unkempt black hair and a thick beard that had been tied at three different spots, giving it a thinner, craggily appearance. Ander couldn't tell Garwed's age but he certainly acted with the levity and irreverence of youth.

“What’ya say we get you stitched up so you can tell me another uplifting poem of yours?” Garwed continued to chuckle to himself as he shifted through his pouches to find a satchel filled with cloths, needles, string and some sort of balms and ointments. “Not to worry, I’ve practiced on many an imaginary friend down here, and they almost always survive.”

Ander never met a creature like this, how can he be filled with such mirth in a world that only knows sadness and cruelty?

Garwed proceeded to stitch up Ander’s wound and applied ointments intended to keep the wound from turning, ‘a shade of purple uglier than a purple worm,’ whatever that meant. Ander ate from the pouch of grain and mushrooms, with Garwed occasionally picking one out here and there for himself. For the first time, in a very, very long time, Ander began to relax and enjoy the company of another.

Garwed for his part, seemed equally as happy to engage in conversation. He explained to Ander that he was from a clan of dwarves called the Daergar. Most of the dwarven clans had allied with the surface dwellers in a failed attempt to defend Ansalon from the Minotaurs during the Lost Wars. The Minotaurs had come from their Ansalon capital of Sargasanti, formerly Silvanost, which long ago had been the capital of the Silvanesti elves, but was occupied by the Minotaurs as a foothold to a larger invasion force. The Minotaur army was reinforced with endless waves of Minotaurs from a faraway land known as Taladas – it seemed they had been breeding and training for countless generations for world conquest. After the War of the Lance and subsequent conflicts on Ansalon, the Minos knew the continent was weakened and the time had finally come to declare war on the world of Krynn. The Knights of Solamnia and the remaining allied forces of dragons, mages, and the various races, including most of the dwarven armies, fought hard for many years, generations in fact, but eventually had been pushed to the brink, surrounded by the Minotaur fleets on the island of Sancrist for their last stand.

Garwed spoke in hallowed tones, a far cry from the initial impression he had given, “Legend has it, the Knights secretly deployed the remaining elves and dwarves onto some ships that were magically hidden by the few remaining wizards. That allowed them to evade the Minotaur blockade to make it all the way to Southern Ergoth. The Knights drew the Minotaur army into Mt Nevermind with the Minos assuming that the elves and dwarves were there as well, for what was to become the Minotaurs’ final victory for the glory of Sargonnas. There, with the help of the gnomes, the Knights made the ultimate sacrifice, activating a gnomish invention of last resort that erupted with the force of another cataclysm, taking out a large portion of the Minotaur fleet and utterly destroying Sancrist Isle, leaving only what is now known as the Nevermind Islands. That blow to the Minotaur fleet bought time for the remaining dwarves to travel back and delve underground where they withdrew further and deeper from the world than ever before. The remaining elves were supposedly given refuge undersea by the sea elves who supposedly have large underground cities that the Minotaurs have been trying to get at for years, and the remaining refugees of the other races scattered to the four corners of the world, and haven’t been heard of en masse, ever since. Of course, our knowledge of the surface dwellers is somewhat limited these days, but it seems that the world’s last chance to defeat the Minos died with the heroic Knights that fateful day on Sancrist Isle.”

Ander took in this terrible knowledge, secretly chastising himself for having spoken so flippantly of the Knights mere weeks ago, now knowing what they did to try to save the world. There was a long silence that followed, which was comforting to Ander, knowing that Garwed was capable of deeper emotions than just lighthearted jokes.

Ander finally broke the silence, “What about you, Garwed? If the remaining dwarves are now much deeper below the surface, what are you doing here?”

Garwed, happily answered, grateful to have changed topics from the current fate of the world.

“There is a thriving economy down deep in the dwarven cities, but everything there is well, stale. The metalwork is all utilitarian in nature as there is the ongoing fear that the Minotaurs will eventually succeed in their quest to rid the surface world of the elves and will turn their attention down below. There is great demand and nostalgia for relics from the past ages. ‘They don’t make things like they used to,’ as my uncle says. So, my friends and I started a business years ago where we would make our way much closer to the surface than anyone has traveled in generations and find relics that we take back down below and sell them for a nice profit. But we hit the mother lode when we started excavating this area. This was apparently some kind of sacred tomb in the area that we’re sitting in right now. We found more magical and rare items in this one area than exist in all of the dwarven cities combined.” Garwed continued, with barely contained enthusiasm. “There were sections of white marble that must have been of dwarven construction, there were black obsidian plaques on top of those, but it was difficult to make out the names. We found a bier made of obsidian and an urn that contained a single black lily that had somehow survived the generations, and just all kinds of relics like you wouldn’t believe.”

“Just where exactly in this tomb did you find these relics?” Ander asked.

The word ‘tomb’ causing queasiness in his stomach as his thoughts returned to how he himself had searched through the dead bodies in Loser’s Lot.

“Oh, don’t go being all judgmental on me now,” Garwed said teasingly to Ander, sensing his discomfort. “The people who owned these relics died hundreds of years ago with no kin to mind us taking them, and believe you me, the deceased would be happy to know that someone other than the Minotaurs are using them these days.”

“I see,” Ander said, not entirely satisfied but still feeling too grateful by Garwed’s kind actions towards him to really judge him in any sort of negative light. “Where are your friends now?” Ander asked, looking around as if they were going to pop out of the room at any moment.

“They left over a month ago, with our carts filled with ornate armor, marble, obsidian, magic artifacts, you name it. I imagine my crew is among the wealthiest in all the dwarven realms by now,” Garwed said.

“I thought magic had left the world ages ago,” Ander asked.

“That’s just bull-talk, the Minotaurs lied to you,” Garwed answered quickly, expecting that disbelieving question. “Magic still exists, it’s just trapped inside old objects or known only to a few rare individuals.”

“Did you find any weapons?” Ander asked, more out of curiosity than any real desire to take up arms again.

“There was one fine blade that my friend, one of those rare special types that I mentioned, said something about how he thought it might have belonged to an ancient elf king or something. But most of the weapons are too old and damaged to be useful, like that rusty one over there that’s lying next to that tomb that says Steel Br- something, the rest is too damaged to read. I left it alone because it looks like it will break the second it comes into contact with a straw dummy, let alone an enemy.” Garwed chuckled again, and Ander was coming to enjoy the sound of it. “More so than weapons though, we found things like antique disks with weird writing on them, some sort of magical spoon that we haven’t figured out what it does yet, and these cool medallions like the one I’m wearing now.”

Garwed reached into his tunic to pull out a silver medallion he was wearing around his neck that was shaped like an hourglass with two intertwining circles that gave Ander the feeling of infinity. They had a soft but faded glow to them as if the light inside them was being obscured by some thick veil, or the source of the light was far out of reach. Not nearly as bright as the object that had originally drawn Ander into this room, which was also muted, but far less so.

Garwed continued talking about how each of his eight Companions and him had been lucky enough to find one of the medallions for each of them. However, Ander was distracted by the thought

of that red light as he gazed at the source of the initial glow in the room, a large weathered old book that had been propped up on top of a stone table. The pages of the book emanated a soft red glow that gave the room an eerie, yet somehow peaceful, presence.

“Ah, I see you’ve found the reason I’m still here,” Garwed spoke with pride as if he had written the book himself.

Yet even from across the room Ander could tell the book was ancient, it must have been written hundreds of years ago. As Ander approached the book, he recalled having seen glimpses of large reading tomes in Minotaur libraries or homes as they traveled between villages but had never seen one up close. The glow emanated from the binding of the ancient book that appeared to have been expertly bound with fine quality materials. Ander didn’t know what materials exactly comprised a book, and it had lines of words written in ink with such precision and consistency that Ander didn’t think was physically possible. The words on the page were gibberish to him of course, the Minotaurs had no reason to teach slaves how to read. Even if he could, some pages were torn, missing entire sections and even on most pages there was significant soot and water damage that obscured a large portion of the words. For a treasure hunter/grave robber, depending upon your point of view, this damaged book seemed like a far cry from the priceless jewel Garwed seemed to value it as.

Garwed approached the book alongside Ander.

“Allow me,” he told Ander, reluctant to let his new friend damage the pages.

Garwed carefully closed the book to show Ander the cover. Garwed seeing Ander’s blank stare, understood silently that he would need to read it to him.

“The book cover says, ‘Chronicles, A History of Krynn,’ and it starts to list a volume number but as you can see, that part has water damage and is illegible. It was written by someone named Astinus. We have some books back in the dwarven city, but nothing that is fiction like this, it’s mostly manuals on metalsmithing, agriculture, or stories about Reorx, the dwarven God who forged the planet. This

Astinus person has a vivid imagination and must have been a great bard because the storytelling in this book is more compelling than I could ever imagine.”

“Really?” Ander asked incredulous. “How can a make-believe story be worth spending so much time on?”

“Don’t underestimate the importance of escaping the sadness of the world in your mind sometimes. This book has been a source of inspiration, wonder, sadness, joy, you name it.” Garwed’s tone was gentle yet persuasive. “Besides, I haven’t *just* been reading it. I’ve been searching for other books or objects in the surrounding rubble and hoping to find some of the missing pages to this book.”

“How did this book even survive buried under rock and dirt for so long?” Ander pondered, staring at the book in newfound appreciation.

“It appears to have been protected from decay by a magic spell, but the spell must be fading or had limitations. I tried moving it once and an entire chapter crumbled to my great dismay, so I decided to leave it here where it was meant to be, I suppose.”

“What’s it about?” Ander asked casually.

Garwed replied, “Well, it’s a lot to sum up quickly, and keep in mind there’s a lot of missing sections, so I’m having to kind of piece it together, more and more each day. Apparently, there were some Companions that had to fight some queen on a different planet that had a gold moon. There was a wizard who seems very sick, and I always think died of illness, but then I find another reference to him later on, past some missing pages. There’s a shape-shifter called Tasslehoff, who can turn into a doorknob apparently, and they are led by Flint Fireforge, a powerful dwarf cleric who is fond of dwarven spirits and seems to go into a trance when encountering them. There’s also some character named Elistan, but he seems pretty boring.”

“You’re not exactly making this book sound that impressive.” Ander pointed out.

“No!” Garwed quickly rebutted “There’s so much great stuff in it. Dragons and miracles and Sturm’s sacrifice, war, and Gods, you name it, there are just so many words that are damaged. Look, it’s best to start at the beginning. Do you have the time?” Garwed asked playfully.

“Sure, why not. I need to figure out what a Sturm is,” replied Ander.

CHAPTER 5

Over the next few weeks, Garwed and Ander’s friendship grew strong. While Ander healed from his chest wound, Garwed taught him how to forage in the nearby tunnels for grub and fungi and talked about their life experiences, but their favorite pastime was reading sections of the Chronicles by Astinus together, and speculation on what the missing sections were about, disagreeing playfully about the pronunciation of certain characters like Skie the dragon, and often roleplaying their own stories in their minds to fill in the blanks. They had completely different life experiences up till now, yet they were able to bond over this book in a way that they both cherished.

On one such day, they were discussing some important details in the story.

“How did they not realize Eben was the spy?” Ander began, a huge grin on his face, now covered in a beard after weeks underground, that appeared to be a sad attempt at flattery, mimicking his dwarven friend.

“I know! His last name literally was, ‘Shatterstone,’ like a false metal. Leader Flint should have known right away!” Garwed joined in the laughter. “Or that Tanis Half-Elven fella that they seem to listen to more often in this section, he should have known too since he claimed to know it wasn’t Gilthanas.”

“Speaking of that,” Ander pondered, “Do you think elves and humans often made mixed babies?”

“Well, it is a made-up world,” Garwed answered, giving the question due consideration. “I suppose it’s possible that they could, but...,” he exclaimed, coming up with a thought mid-sentence, “I think Tanis was the only one, that’s why Half-Elven is his last name cause of how unique his birth was!”

Ander nodded silently for a moment, then looking at each other, they burst into laughter, like children who had yet to learn of life's difficulties. Sadly, like children, the truth often comes when they are not ready.

Suddenly both closed doors to the room burst open with such force that Ander and Garwed fell backwards off of their stone chairs. Lying prone momentarily, Ander turned quickly to see four powerful Minotaurs enter the room, each armed with large battle axes that were poised, ready to strike. Ander immediately recognized his old guards Gonhorn and Voros flanked by two others. It may have well been a thousand, formidable as they were. Ander's heart froze. Garwed was on his feet staring at them expressionless, Ander couldn't tell if he was scared or not. He should be. Ander cursed himself for not preparing for this, he could have set traps, he could have done a million things other than talking and laughing and preventing them from possibly hearing the Minos approach. It was too late now, this room had only one entrance. There was no escape.

Gonhorn strode into the room slowly with an arrogant sneer, he was in no rush for this to end quickly.

"I knew it was you, boy! Did you think we were stupid? That we thought the dead decided to come to life to form a staircase?"

Ander was frozen with fear, his throat so dry he couldn't have uttered a retort even if he could think of any.

Garwed's voice rose up in answer, "Well, it did take you a month to find him, so I wouldn't exactly call you smart either," he said mockingly.

Voros started to move towards Garwed but Gonhorn put his hand up, stopping him in his tracks.

"You insolent wretch!" Voros shouted at Garwed who stood his ground, much to Ander's amazement.

He's never encountered Minotaurs before, Ander realized. This isn't going to end well. Ander held back tears, fearing for his friend more than his own life in this moment.

"It's true we lost the human's tracks when they entered the cave," Gonhorn was admitting to Garwed. "We couldn't figure out how he had disappeared until we found a gully dwarf head in the cave a few days ago and followed him. If he was a friend of yours, you'd be proud to know that he didn't tell us where you were, and died keeping that info to himself. Of course, he was a gully dwarf so he might have just forgotten what he wasn't supposed to tell us."

Gonhorn and the Minotaurs laughed menacingly, a sharp contrast to the joyful sound of Garwed's laughter that Ander realized he would never hear again. Ander winced at the thought of the poor gully dwarf who likely would still be alive if not for Ander using his cave. It wasn't right.

Gonhorn continued monologuing, "You know dwarf, I didn't expect to find *you* here. I thought your kind were miles below here. You look like a Daergar if memory recalls from my school teachings. Aren't the Daergar supposed to be evil little creatures that murder even their own kind? Were you planning on fattening up this human for a nice feast?"

"The dwarves have changed, we're friends to all creatures now. All except the cow that had relations with your mother." Garwed stated unflinching.

This time Voros had to hold back Gonhorn, who's right hoof was sliding back and forth rapidly on the stone floor, indicating he was about to charge. Voros whispered in Gonhorn's ear, but still easily heard by all in the small echoing chamber.

"If there's one Daergar here, there must be others. He will tell us where they are and we will find them and show them all the wrath of Sargas!"

Ander knew his friend well, there was no coming back from that, and as Garwed grabbed a pipe from his belt and blew out a dart in seemingly slow motion, Ander knew it wouldn't be enough. The

dart hit Voros in the neck and stuck there, insignificant as a fly on the back of a great war horse. Voros laughed mockingly for a moment but then began to rock back and forth unsteady on his feet.

“Poison!” yelled Gonhorn and charged.

Garwed quickly put another blow-dart into the pipe and aimed it at the charging Minotaur, but the size and speed of this towering monstrosity that was almost upon him, caused Garwed’s hand to tremble just for a moment and the dart whistled high just past the ear of Gonhorn, who was upon Garwed now. Gonhorn swung his powerful battle axe in a deadly arc, slicing into the dwarf from the side of his midsection midway to the center of his stomach, like a tree being felled by a logger. It was a lethal blow. Ander had watched the whole time, paralyzed with fear. Garwed stared at his friend and somehow managed to smile at him and raise his fist in the air.

“For Flint!” he cried out weakly, blood gurgling from his mouth “Leader of the Companions!”

Garwed slumped to the ground, the smile still somehow on his face.

Gonhorn barked commands to the other two Minotaur guards, angry at the fact that this tiny creature had felled his second in command, as Voros’s body lay on the ground twitching in convulsions that Gonhorn recognized as fatal.

“Grab that human, we’re taking him to the surface to find out what he knows about the dwarves, and to make an example out of him for the rest of the slaves to see.”

Ander backpedaled clumsily from the two approaching Minotaur, not knowing what else to do. While neither was quite as large as Gonhorn, they each easily towered over Ander with rippling muscles that were taught, ready to strike. Ander’s hands fumbled behind his body hoping to grab something to throw at the Minotaurs, who were moments away from melee range anyway. His sweaty palms slid over rock, then obsidian, then finally over the rusty old sword that was ready to fall apart. Ander gripped the handle. He knew it would break, but overwhelming panic wiped his mind clean and he swung overhead in an arc from ceiling to the ground at the Minotaur closest to him. Too

late, the Minotaur saw the weapon in the human's hand, he had been about to grab a defenseless whelp a moment earlier. The sword held true, slicing completely through the Minotaur from head to toe as if it had sliced through water. The shocked Minotaur stared blinking for a moment before half of his body fell to one side, while the other half fell the other way, completely splitting the Minotaur apart.

The sword began to glow with a faint light, dust and debris suddenly vibrating itself off of the sword and falling to the ground in tiny pebbles. Before the other stunned Minotaur guard could react, Ander swung and sliced through fur, muscle, and bone like a scythe across weeds, cleaving the Minotaur with one swing. Gonhorn roared and charged Ander expecting him to drop the sword in fear. But Ander had used up all of his fear, it was now replaced with anger, white hot anger at the loss of his friend, the betrayal of Eva, even the loss of the innocent gully dwarf. It. Wasn't. Right! And this Minotaur was going to pay.

Ander swung the sword, now gleaming brightly and lighting up the small chamber, hoping to end this Minotaur just as quickly. But Gonhorn wasn't surprised as his hapless guards were and he raised his battle-axe to meet Ander's attack mid-swing. The two weapons collided and rang out with sparks flying off, further illuminating the room. Gonhorn twisted his body and swung fiercely at Ander's head, but Ander's parried it with the sword, saving himself from his ultimate fate, at least for the moment. Gonhorn swung again two, three, then four times, aiming at the hilt of this antique sword, bewildered that he could not break through it like a twig as he should have been able to do. Ander reposted and then started to take offensive swings of his own, striking at the Minotaur with the precision and experience of an expert swordsman. The battle raged on, longer than the entirety of Sargas' Circus with neither combatant able to break through.

One night of training couldn't have done this, Ander thought briefly. He felt like he was somehow being guided as to what to do with the sword and when. That sudden realization led to a momentary

loss of concentration which cost Ander, as Gonhorn took advantage by kicking downward with his powerful hoof into Ander's left knee, shattering it like a dropped vial onto stone. Ander crumbled down to his right knee; his left leg essentially useless to him. Ander looked around him desperately for something to put between him and the hulking Minotaur as a barrier to buy him time to figure out what to do next.

During their combat they had circled each other, and now Ander was positioned closest to the exit with his back towards the door that was only a few feet away, but may as well been a thousand feet away with Ander's broken knee. He was on the ground leaning on his good knee looking up at Gonhorn who was now standing between him and the Tomb of Heroes that lay behind him. Also behind Gonhorn was the Chronicles book that lay undisturbed on the stone table, the source of so much joy for him and his friend Garwed just earlier today. Joy and inspiration...

Gonhorn towered over Ander.

"Go ahead, beg for your life, boy. It won't save you but I'd like to hear it anyway."

Ander staggered onto one foot, using the glowing sword as a crutch to help him stand up. Then, just as he remembered reading about Sturm in the High Cle... Tower (Clerics he assumed, the High Clerics Tower, the word having been smudged), he raised the sword and gave the Knights salute to an enemy and prepared to fight on.

Gonhorn snorted in derision. "Foolish boy. You are no knight." Gonhorn stopped, seeing Ander's eyes stare in amazement at something happening behind him. "Nice try. I'm not turning around, fool."

Gonhorn started to move in for the kill, but then he looked deeper into Ander's eyes, and saw an eerie reflection of something in them, something that was moving behind Gonhorn. The large Minotaur quickly pivoted, ready to strike down whatever new threat presented itself to him. Standing mere feet away, no not standing...hovering... was the faint incorporeal outline of a young man in his mid-twenties. He had long, dark curly hair, the hint of a crooked smile with dark eyes and the proud

stance of a man who stood for honor. But unlike the Minotaurs who viewed honor as including the mantra of survival of the fittest, it was somehow evident that this man stood for protecting the weak. And right now he was staring. Not at Gonhorn the Minotaur suddenly realized, no – the ghost was staring past him at Ander’s sword.

Gonhorn spun back around, confused as to what this portended. He didn’t have to wait long.

Ander leaped forward off of one leg, propelling his body sword-first in two hands, directly into the Minotaur’s chest, all the way to the hilt. Gonhorn fell onto his back with Ander on top of him refusing to release the sword that was full embedded in the great Minotaur’s chest.

“The next time you see this face, boy, it will be as the life fades from your eyes and I am carrying you to your grave.” Ander mocked the minotaur with his own words as the shocked Mino stared at Ander in confusion, unaccepting of what just happened.

As predicted, the light then drained from Gonhorn’s eyes and his body went limp. Leaving the sword inside of the Minotaur, Ander looked up at the ghost, but it was gone. *Had he imagined it? No, the Minotaur saw it too. Unless the Minotaur was just looking at where Ander was looking?* He couldn’t be sure. He might never be sure.

Ander heard a gurgling sound in the corner. Garwed! He quickly hobbled over and knelt by his dying friend, ignoring the searing pain in his knee. Garwed whispered faintly to Ander who leaned in, struggling to hang onto every last word.

“My nightvision’s never seen a sword shine like that one. That certainly is a bright blade.” Then locking eyes with each other, though Garwed was clearly fighting hard to hang onto consciousness. He asked Ander, “You don’t think the stories could be real, do you?”

“Yes, my friend, I do. And when I find Astinus’ descendants, I will have them add a new chapter about Garwed, the hero of the blowgun.”

Ander smiled through tears that were flowing unabated now.

Garwed smiled back, squeezed Ander's hand and said, "Thank you for being my friend," and closed his eyes for the last time.

Ander cried for hours, he cried until there were no more tears left in his body. Then he struggled to get up and drag Garwed's body into an open sarcophagus next to the bier that he now knew belonged to the ghost he saw, the knight whose name was Steel Brightblade. He hadn't read about him in the Chronicles yet, maybe he was in one of the missing sections? But he already knew him to be a man of honor and Garwed deserved to lay near him. *The Chronicles, should I try to move it as Garwed had mistakenly done once and take it with me?* Ander thought. No, it deserved to stay here with Garwed, as a lasting testament to their friendship along with the joy, and the inspiration that this great book had brought them. Besides, he knew every word by heart, and always will, at least the words that weren't missing. If the stories in the book were true, would the made-up tales Garwed and he had created to fill in the blanks, ruin the authenticity of the book? *No*, Ander thought with a smile, it enhanced it and would always be a part of his memory.

Ander gathered up all of the belongings that he could carry, including the medallion that Garwed wore. He knew if he found Garwed's Companions and showed it to them and told them his story that they would believe him. And find them he must and many others as well, even if he had to travel to the depths of the Abyss itself to do so and raise an army.

Though he started hobbling through the pitch-black tunnels, Ander felt like his eyes had finally been opened after a lifetime in the dark. Eva was wrong, there was another reason to fight, and this one more powerful than any other. JUSTICE! For when you're living in a world where the scales of balance have been weighted down for this long, the only way to find solace is to climb back up and fight on...

THE END