

## *The Splendid Sorcerer of Sarthas Isle*

Morning always arrived late at the home of Asterion Snowmane. His handsome estate sprawled across the southwestern slope of Mount Sarthas, overlooking the hamlet that was The Bullring. The village filled the bowl-shaped hollow that lay in the saddle between the mountain and the smaller Vista Hill to the west.

Nestled in the arms of the mountain's base, Asterion's villa never received the morning sun before 10 am, which suited the minotaur sorcerer just fine. He loved few things more than sleeping in, wrapped up in his silk sheets on his massive bed that dwarfed even his robust frame. What sunlight that made it past the curtains that gently swayed in the island breeze had bounced off those heights of Vista Hill that managed to rise above the shadows.

But soon, the sun rose high enough to finally spill over the ridge and flood the valley with morning light. Only then did Asterion

begin stir from his slumber, and even that took some time. The minotaur awoke to find his cream-colored mane strewn across his muzzle. Taming it was a future task. He brushed it from his eyes and cast aside his bedsheets. The climate stayed pleasant both around the year and around the clock, meaning Asterion frequently slept au naturel.

The tan-furred minotaur looked to where his dressing robe hung upon its usual hook. He pointed at it, spoke a syllable dipped in minor power and the garment flew to his hand. Asterion donned his robe before stepping out on the balcony.

He looked down onto the village of The Bullring with pride. What began as a collection of ramshackle huts years ago had turned into a true community. Now brick houses wrapped in white plaster stood here and houses constructed of whitewashed wood stood there.

They reflected the growth of Asterion's own home. The minotaur retired to this island after a modest but lucrative career as an adventurer, righting wrongs and vanquishing beasts across the dozens of islands that dotted the Karina Sea. As a sorcerer, he had been able to magically access the otherwise impregnable interior of Sarthas Isle, whose coast consisted almost entirely of sheer cliffs and treacherous shoals.

Once he set hoof upon the flanks of Mount Sarthas, he conjured a small cabin to serve as his new abode. Word quickly spread that the sorcerer whose name and deeds were known across the sea now lived there, and that brought small groups of admirers and hopeful proteges. Less experienced mages looking to study at the hooves of an accomplished sorcerer arrived first and then used their power to construct a safe harbor for those who came after. Once reliable anchorage appeared, more came and helped turn a

small homestead into a comparatively small but vibrant village. The citizens named it The Bullring in honor of the minotaur who made it possible.

The minotaur gazed at what he made possible for several minutes, watching the citizens as they went about their morning business. Some looked up and waved at him. He waved back. Though the entire island was his domain, the village kept its own council, yet deferred to Asterion for the final say. He was still a sorcerer after all and the mightiest magic user on the island. Seeing as residents tended to be the kind of person he himself approved of, and that was a low bar to clear, he had yet to deploy his power of refusal. His “teleport an irksome repeat offender to the mainland” power had been brought to bear more than once, however.

He turned and went back inside to see to his morning ablutions. Breakfast, actually lunch at this point, followed with all

manner of fruits and vegetables alongside baked fish. Trying to maintain maximum self-sufficiency saw The Bullring grow its own produce in enchanted greenhouses and gardens alongside harvesting the bounty of the sea with the occasional exotic fruits gathered from the mountain's misty heights.

His meal delivered itself, borne from the storeroom and kitchen by the ambient sorcery that suffused his home. Cooking, cleaning, laundry, repairs, and more, were all performed by the potent dweomer the sorcerer laid down when he first established his refuge. Asterion's enchantment even claimed responsibility for growing the lavish manor from a simple cabin.

Finished with lunch, Asterion left the dining nook as his plate flung itself off the table and into the sink. The sorcerer strode up to his tower to begin his next favorite hobby, correspondence.

Asterion's study sat in the top room of what he referred to as his tower, though it was in reality the only true second story room of his home. The estate followed the slope of the mountain upward in several terraces and his study modestly loomed above the highest point of the property. The view from that elevation served as Asterion's favorite aspect of the chamber. From his huge and comfortable armchair he could sit at his desk and look down over his whole sprawling house and the village beyond. Vista Hill bifurcated his view of the sea to either side. Yet that was no issue. If Asterion wished to enjoy the panorama unobstructed, he had but to transport himself by incantation to any locale on the island.

In his study sat the hub of Asterion's vast web of pen-pals, the autoscroll. A ream of tightly wound parchment hung suspended under an ensorcelled quill. A person anywhere on the planet who knew the special code to this assembly could dictate a letter into

their own autoscroll and the device here would create a copy of the speech when complete.

Shelves lined one of the curves of the study's walls, each with a cubby sporting a name above it. Every named nook had at least one scroll rolled up and stored inside, a treasured message from a distant friend.

As it happened, Asterion's autoscroll had generated three letters since his last visit. They sat atop his desk, lightly curled from where they had rolled off the spool.

Asterion opened the curtains and shutters to let in the light before settling into his chair. He waved his hand and a mug flew out of a service hatch concealed in the wall and onto his desk. The sorcerer picked it up and sipped it, nodding happily. The house knew exactly how he took his coffee.

The minotaur settled his pince-nez onto his muzzle, unfurled the nearest scroll, and began to read.

The letter was from Opha Quartzbeard, dwarven technomancer from the land of Summer Haven that lay across the sea far to the north and west. She worked in the hydroponic gardens that kept that nation of mages fed. Asterion consulted with her years ago regarding ways to grow as much produce as possible in the smallest acreage. Her instructions had been instrumental in establishing The Bullring's agricultural capacity.

*To my fellow sorcerer and gardening enthusiast,*

*It is my estimation that you should feel envious that you did not accept my offer for a seat at the Black Moon Festival last night. You missed a singularly spectacular performance, the kind as to not be repeated anytime soon.*

*Most of the performances staged throughout the day were passable. Yet the final included these two bards, one minotaur and one bugbear, whose earlier performance left me rather underwhelmed. Yet it was clear they were holding back their true skill for the evening's spectacle.*

*The written word can scarce communicate the full grandeur of what I witnessed; there was music, mayhem, and magic. They made it appear First Apprentice Borusu wanted to free the Sorcerer of old from his icy sphere by stealing the king's sorcery.*

Asterion paused as he recalled Summer Haven's sorcerer king. In his opinion based on the one time they had met when his company visited the realm, Kyvyk Dweomerhorn was little more than a dabbler whose only remarkable trait laid in surrounding himself with far more competent mages. He was a sorcerer, sure, but not one of enough power to command his own kingdom.

Besides, he hardly seemed monarch material while being herded around by that overbearing Borusu fellow. Inwardly, Asterion doubted Kyvyk had enough sorcery worth stealing, yet he supposed they pretended he did for their theater. He read on.

*They actually broke the ice sphere! And made it seem like a dragon escaped. They even claimed the dragon, named Isynde, had been the Sorcerer's partner in founding Summer Haven all those years ago! Can you believe such a wild tale?*

Asterion's eyes narrowed. Isynde? he thought to himself. The name sounded familiar. He recalled a mighty dragon by that name who mysteriously disappeared centuries ago. It sounded to him like whoever scripted this show was well-versed in the dim and dusty lore from history's shadows.

*They had a giant bird who fought the dragon and then the bards conjured ghosts and revealed Isynde was a dragon mummy.*

*Whole plot felt kind of all over the place but the music was good and whoever was in charge of the illusions deserves a raise.*

*Of course, I had to roll my eyes at the massive ego trip at the end where they had Kyvyk save the life of the minotaur bard. That part made my stomach turn. The bard was caught by an exploding sword and looked like something out of a slaughterhouse mishap before Kyvyk fixed everything.*

*Maybe next time when I tell you that we're having a special event you'll come?*

*Yours in sorcery,*

*Opha*

Asterion set down his mug, mulling over his reply.

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Miles away from Asterion's comfortable study, Krug Goldtusk was experiencing acute discomfort. The mountain of orc muscle

leaned over the railing he held in a death grip as much as he tried to hold his breakfast down by sheer willpower.

His mission demanded speed and he stood aboard the good ship *Happy Hippocampus* as she sped towards Sarthas Isle, her sheets full of the magewind conjured by the windcaller who was also her captain. Captain Norgal Rainshadow laughed as she spun the wheel, the hobgoblin clearly amused by the orc landlubber's distress.

The ship crested a wave and rode into the trough, soaking the orc's golden hair and beard with spray and foam. He prayed aloud to the Lightwurm for deliverance from that briny torment while inwardly cursing the master of Sarthas Isle. Lord Asterion's island may not have been in the middle of nowhere, it actually sat close to shipping lanes and near to bigger isles with full towns and cities, but

the minotaur cloaked it in a ward that blocked teleportation by any save those to whom he gave special tokens of passage.

Krug arrived by spell thanks to an order warden on the neighboring isle of Klathmos. There he booked passage to Sarthas on Rainshadow's skiff. Hers wasn't the largest vessel in the port but she was the one who was ready to serve as a ferry on such short notice.

The hobgoblin whooped again as her boat jumped from one crest to another. Krug held on to the rail for dear life and forced himself to endure the experience. He clenched his eyes tight, which also kept the sunlight dancing on the waves from dazzling his sight, which was better suited to nighttime than full daylight without shade or cloud.

Soon, but all too long for the orc's liking, the *Hippocampus* glided into the safe harbor of the Anchorage. Captain Rainshadow

steered her vessel to the dock and, quick and graceful as a panther, tied the boat to the pier. Krug forced himself into enough composure to collect his backpack and disembark with as much dignity as the still-queasy orc could muster.

“Enjoy your visit,” the captain purred as she gazed a little too long at Krug’s pecs, standing out thanks to his soaked tunic that clung to his muscles. “You know, if the island mages aren’t to your liking then maybe you can see me at yonder dockside inn and we can discuss your return voyage.” She leaned in close. “I like a man who doesn’t have sea legs. Means I can leave him behind in port,” she winked and laughed before stalking off.

Krug stared, jaw slack. He couldn’t tell if the captain was actually flirting with him or just ribbing him. He’d explained himself, that he was a member of the Knights of Inexorable Justice, a paladin, and that his order sent him on a quest to seek Asterion’s

aid. Captain Rainshadow immediately asked if he was under the sway of vows of chastity.

When he said that he was on assignment and couldn't be distracted, the hobgoblin replied, "That's not a 'no'."

Once the terra felt more firma under him, Krug trudged away from the docks, seeking the winding road carved into the cliff face that climbed from the harbor up to the island's interior. The sun beating down on him quickly dried his clothes but he felt salt settling into intimate places. Krug let out a prayer of thanks upon reaching the welcome shade underneath the broad leafed trees.

Once under the canopy the paladin began to understand why anyone would choose to live there. Multiple colorful birds of varying sizes flitted about and an azure butterfly as big as his head fluttered by. The road to The Bullring stood out, demarcated by wooden posts every 10 yards with glowing lanterns atop each.

A viper clad in brilliant blue scales slithered out of the undergrowth and onto the path. Krug froze, suddenly wishing he was wearing armor. But the serpent regarded him for only a moment before vanishing back into the foliage. Krug moved a little more quickly after that and found his brow dripping with sweat by the time he strode under the wooden arch welcoming him to The Bullring.

The orc looked around and located the inn and tavern, an inviting-looking edifice of white plaster walls and cheery red tiles on its roof. The building occupied only one story, but it was wide. Krug entered, stepping into the cool and welcoming gloom inside. A few lamps glowed from the tables and bartop. A human man stood behind the bar, idly cleaning glassware with a towel.

He took measure of Krug's stature. "If it's construction work you're looking for, I recommend sailing on. Folks around here spellbuild everything."

"What? Oh, no, I'm not," Krug stammered. "I mean. I'm here on behalf of the Order of Inexorable Justice to seek an audience with Lord Asterion to request his aid on a matter most dire."

The man kept doing battle with the stain on the mug. "You want to see Lord Asterion then go see him. Can't miss his place. Big house on the mountainside? Go outside and look up. You can't miss it."

"The lord of the island will just listen to anyone who knocks on his front door?" asked the orc, eyes wide. "But he won't even allow strangers to teleport to his island."

The man shrugged. “Guess the old bull figures if you took the trouble to get here the hard way then you must have a good reason.”

“Oh, yes, uh, thank you for you aid,” said Krug, straightening his posture and trying to look like he knew what he was doing. He spun on his heel and stepped back out into the sunlight.

Looking at it from below made Asterion’s estate into an intimidating sight. Each building seemed to loom over him despite rarely exceeding one level in height. Krug put his pack down long enough to rummage around in its depths for the message he’d been tasked with conveying to the sorcerer. He pulled out the scroll, still sealed with a wad of wax sporting the signet of his chapter head.

The orc shouldered his bag, took the missive in one massive fist, and marched up the road leading to the hillside estate.

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Asterion had just finished dictating his response to his third letter and was reading it to ensure it recorded correctly when the door bell rang, the peal echoing throughout the house. The sorcerer looked up, satisfied in his reply and signaled the autoscroll to send it.

He waved his hand in the gesture that told the household enchantment to open up a channel for communication. "Can I help you?" he asked of his caller.

The voice that answered was deep and gravelly, striking Asterion as probably orchish or ogrish in origin. The pronounced enunciation around the tusks was a giveaway. "Um, yes, hi, your Lordship. I mean, greetings and salutations esteemed Sorcerer."

"A visitor," Asterion thought to himself. They always tried to infuse their words with grandeur, gravitas, and a surplus of flattery. It amused the minotaur that people thought him a lord when he

considered himself more of a homeowner with long term house guests.

The orc kept up with a string of honorifics and titles, praising the sorcerer for his wisdom and skill.

“Child, please. I am a sorcerer and my ego is inflated enough as it is. Just tell me what it is you’re here for.” Asterion waved his hand to conjure a misty image of the man at his door. The spell showed an orc built like an ox. He looked like he could plow a field if given the opportunity judging by his neck muscles. His crown of hair and beard were gold, a color not usually seen among orcs. The orc looked more than a little embarrassed at Asterion’s gentle chiding.

“Please, sir, I’m here on behalf of the Order of Inexorable Justice on a matter of life and death.”

Asterion had heard some dramatic requests over his career but this orc’s tone and bearing suggested he meant his words.

The orc went on. "I have a message here from the head of my chapter. It's meant for your eyes only."

The sorcerer thought for a moment. "I will hear you out. Enter. I will meet you in the reception courtyard."

He waved his hand both to end the conversation and to let the estate enchantment know to follow his instructions. Asterion rose to his hooves and set out for the meeting spot.

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"Reception courtyard?" asked Krug. "Where is that?" but no reply came. At least, not a vocal one. Instead, the doors swung inward, opening onto a welcoming foyer of white plaster walls under a skylight. Several doors led off in various directions but only one of those sets opened. A faint breeze began to blow towards the newly opened portal.

Uneasy about the whole affair, Krug crept into the estate.

As soon as he was inside the front doors closed behind him. They didn't close with the expected resounding and final boom but their soft click was somehow more unsettling. The orc advanced slowly, sure that something was going to spring out from behind a doorway or curtain. The soft breeze took him through a few corridors, some lined with windows, other open-air, that overlooked gardens bursting with all manner of exotic flora. Judging by the stairs he figured he had ascended three terrace levels.

Soon, the wind had brought the orc to a set of double doors with frosted glass windows embedded in them. These doors also opened by themselves and revealed a beautiful courtyard in the center of the manor. A pavilion sat in the middle of the yard, surrounded by flower beds. Many ropes ran from the house walls to the tent, each one holding up at least a dozen lanterns. None were lit this early.

Two large chairs separated by a low table sat in the pavilion. In the chair on the right sat Lord Asterion. To Krug's eyes the sorcerer was a minotaur of a certain age. His mane and beard looked sun bleached yet his muscles still stood out under the blue and silver robe he wore. The minotaur was looking at what appeared to be a pink and white flower on his hand. Krug approached and the flower revealed itself to be a mantis as it took wing and buzzed away.

"Welcome" said the sorcerer. "Please, have a seat. You look thirsty. Can I get you anything?"

"Uh, just water please," replied the orc as he moved to sit down. He put little stock in anything beyond the necessities. But he stumbled for a second as his paladin sense tingled.

Asterion made a gesture and a pitcher of ice water flew from behind his chair along with two glasses. He filled one and handed it

to the orc who accepted and took a grateful swallow. “Now,” said the minotaur, “what is this missive you carry?”

“Here.” Krug handed over the scroll. Asterion cracked the seal with his thumbnail and unrolled it, eyes scanning the page behind his glasses. He reached the end and looked up at Krug, his brows furrowed.

“Your order head has been blighted,” said Asterion plainly.

“Yes,” said Krug, keeping his emotions reined in. He wished to say that Knight Commander Marzyn was like his father and his current malady felt like a shard of ice in the orc’s chest but he had to remain composed. He was a paladin and the Order had a reputation to uphold.

“You can assist, right?” the orc asked after a beat.

Asterion reread parts of the page. "Sounds like Karum's Bane. It's a combination of a poison and a hex. Truly nasty brew meant to get around the resistances you holy warrior types usually sport."

Krug tried to focus on the sorcerer's words yet the vague impression that warned him when evil lurked nearby, well, it didn't exactly tingle like usual. But it told him that something was amiss.

"Did you hear what I just said?" asked Asterion.

"Ugh, something about hexes?"

The sorcerer gave him a look. "That was a minute ago."

"Oh, I apologize. The voyage over... I don't have sea legs. Or a sea stomach," he offered by way of excuse.

"I see," said Asterion with the tone of one who did not entirely buy the excuse. But he went on. "Like I was saying, I can assist with an elixir potent enough to shatter the hex and restore vitality, But it won't be ready until tomorrow."

Krug's jaw dropped. "You can brew an elixir that quickly?!"

The sorcerer gave a slight seated bow. "I am good at what I do and this island hold many secrets."

Krug's senses flared up at that statement.

Asterion went on. "The cloud forest produces many rare plants not found anywhere else. And the mages I share the island with have made great strides in medical alchemy."

The paladin tried to hide that he was detecting half-truths among the minotaur's words. He felt he succeeded as Asterion betrayed no notice.

"I just wish you had arrived yesterday, before the night of a Black Moon," Asterion went on. "A celestial event like that infuses the materials with extra power. Enough that I could have made it within a few hours. No matter, you need a potion and I will assist."

Despite his paladin's training telling him the minotaur was more than he seemed, he didn't carry the exact stench of evil, and Krug felt as if the ice was removed from his chest. He would have the cure to Marzyn's affliction in a day.

"I will need make preparations for the creation process," said the sorcerer, rising from his seat. "You may stay in the guest wing tonight. Feel free to explore The Bullring and the island as you see fit. But stay away from the summit. It grows unsafe after dark."

"Oh, yes, thank you, sir. Really," said Krug. "I don't how we can repay you."

"Your order can owe me a favor," Asterion said after a moment's consideration.

The sorcerer took his leave and the guiding breeze guided Krug to a room that most people would consider humble but the paladin considered palatial when contrasted against his cell at the order

stronghold. It even had its own bathroom attached and the paladin took advantage of the tub to wash away the salt from the sea and his own sweat.

He was about to sink into the warm water when his holy senses went haywire.

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Asterion excused himself from the young orc and went to his sorcerous sanctum, a glass-domed chamber with each pane darkened as to let in only the barest hint of the afternoon sun. Models of the moon, sun, and planets floated in the air overhead while the inside of the windows bore markings representing constellations.

Closing the door behind himself and locking it, Asterion walked into the center of his private planetarium and loosened his robe enough to free his left arm. Around his left wrist the fur sported a

series of dark lines that looked like a bracelet. The fur round his left bicep was banded with a star mark on the outside.

Asterion drew a deep breath and, with his right hand, tapped the star mark on his left arm. The banded patterns began to glow with a soft flickering blue radiance. “I require your assistance,” he said aloud to the empty room around him. The temperature dropped and the shadows deepened. The air grew heavy as *something* pressed down onto the fabric of the room’s reality.

The sorcerer could feel the presence’s anticipation. It waited for his explanation. “I need an elixir that can break an eighth tier hex and repair the damage it has done to the mortal body.”

The entity... to call it thinking would be assigning mortal attributes to something that had no idea what mortality was. It didn’t think. It did. And what it did was impress its terms into the minotaur’s personal reality. Asterion knew what it wanted without

words or images. “Yes, my friend. I will meet you tonight at the summit.”

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Krug nearly slipped right on his tusked face as the wet orc struggled to get out of the tub. His paladin’s awareness detected a presence so potent that he nearly inhaled bathwater. Again, he couldn’t call what slammed into his spirit like a landslide evil. It didn’t have that stink. But it was... strange. Krug hated not being able to put his finger on it. He was a paladin, nuance was for those less secure in their moral clarity.

Yet he had misgivings. No one had ever accused Asterion of foul play, dark deeds, or ill intentions. And he was the only lifeline Marzyn had right now, and time was running out. Still, Krug wondered what cost was truly involved here.

The orc finished bathing and then went back to his pack. Yes, it was enchanted, but the spells that expanded its interior space were so commonplace as to be trivial. He could trust that magic while Asterion promised a miracle that not even the order priests could manifest.

He reached into his bag's depths and produced his plate armor, his sword, and his shield. He laid them out on the bed his host had provided. Then he dressed himself in another tunic and breeches.

Skulking about did not become a paladin so Krug wandered around what parts of the estate permitted his presence. He found himself allowed to go back to the reception courtyard. Under the pretense of enjoying the flowers he maneuvered himself to the pavilion and found what he sought, a few of Asterion's mane furs in the back of his chair. Krug gathered them and, conspicuous in how inconspicuous he tried to move, went back to his room.

Back inside, he took up his blade in one hand and one strand of Asterion's fur between the finger and thumb of his other hand, and laid it onto the blade. The metal gave off a soft blue glow and Krug got an impression of Asterion's current, albeit approximate, location. He felt that the sorcerer was still within the bounds of the estate.

So Krug passed the rest of the afternoon wandering around the estate, gawking at the finery and the gardens. When his sword's tracking enchantment wore off he refreshed it with another of the sorcerer's hairs. With his host occupied elsewhere, Krug found the dining room empty when he was summoned for dinner. He enjoyed the meal alone, devouring the seafood stew the unseen attendants provided him.

Once dinner was done, Krug realized the sword's magic had elapsed again. He fed one more strand to the blade, expecting once more to feel Asterion nearby.

He was not.

Instead, Krug's blade told him the sorcerer now stood some distance away and had changed elevation. The orc remembered what the sorcerer had said about the summit 'not being safe.'

"What are you hiding up there, old man?" the orc wondered as he returned to his room. Feeling the situation called for maximum preparation, he donned his armor and strapped his shield to his back. His sword he placed in its scabbard and belted it to his side.

Krug stepped outside and found that evening had fallen. He turned to look at the peak of Mount Sarthas, now clad in a halo of clouds. The paladin couldn't tell if any roads or trails wound their

way up to the crown so he decided to bulldoze a line straight up the slope.

Several hours later Krug finally emerged out of the trees and onto the bare craggy surface of the mountaintop. His breath came heavy and ragged, sweat matted his hair, causing leaves to cling to his face. Vines had wrapped themselves around his limbs and a thick layer of mud caked his boots.

His ascent up the slope had been neither quick nor easy. Only the enchantment upon his blade kept it from being stained by the foliage he'd sliced his way through. At the very least he had tried to not to step on or bushwhack through anything that looked rare or important.

Now, standing at the peak in the cool night air under the vast vault of stars overhead, Krug surveyed the area. The summit rose to a conical point and a ring of stones supported by pillars sat atop it.

Right in front of him the orc could see a passage carved into the mountainside.

Krug dropped to a knee to collect himself. He spared a look backwards and lost his breath all over again as he saw the western half of the island spread out beneath him. Lights flickered both in the windows of the Bullring far below and upon vessels plying the waves. The dark waters glittered as they reflected the stars above. Only the barest suggestion of the crescent moon hung overhead.

The paladin's reverie broke only when he heard a terrible wail reverberate out from the stone passage. Krug snapped back to his senses and shrugged his shield from his back. Equipped for battle he roared and charged into the passage. The cave held some twists and turns, eating the momentum of his headlong rush but he pressed forward until the tunnel opened into a wide chamber.

Krug's charge and war-cry both petered out upon seeing what the chamber held.

The paladin could hardly believe what he stumbled upon. It seemed to him that the night sky had inverted itself and now existed as a ball of starry darkness floating in the air in the middle of the chamber. A thin tether protruded from the orb up through the hole in the ceiling. Numerous flailing tendrils extended out from other parts of the orb and several of them held Asterion in their pliable embrace.

The sorcerer was naked, his robe tossed or torn and cast aside. A tentacle curled around his torso, holing him aloft. Another had inserted itself into his ass, thrusting in and out in rapid succession. Asterion was lost to anything but his rapturous agony. His moans of pleasure were the horrible wail Krug had heard, distorted and amplified by the strange acoustics of the stone hollow.

Wrapped in the entity's embrace, Asterion arched his back and cried out long and loud as his erect member fired rope after rope of hot thick seed. It splattered on the floor alongside earlier payloads.

Only just then did Krug see the arm and wrist tattoos on the sorcerer's fur. They shone with an eerie radiance, the same glow as the stars on the strange void creature.

His orgasm finally stopped wracking Asterion's body and he went limp. The orb thing seemed to shudder before going still. It bore no head or anything approaching discernible anatomy, but Krug got the impression it was aware of him. The paladin held as still as he could.

The sorcerer recovered his wits enough to become aware of the orc's presence. "Wha...? No! Get out!" he yelled at the paladin and tried to wave him off.

Krug interpreted this as a warning of danger and his training took over. He yelled anew and charged at the entity, sword held high. He made it three strides before coming to a sudden halt, tentacles of inky blackness sprouted from the floor around him and held his arms and legs fast. The orc looked up and saw Asterion held his arm out towards Krug, the way he held and moved his hand it was apparent he was commanding the binding tendrils.

“Don’t attack it,” the sorcerer said between heaving breaths.

“Drop your sword.”

Indecision tore at Krug. Every sense he had told him what he saw was not normal. The pressure the entity exerted simply by existing in the chamber pounded against his eardrums.

“Please trust me,” the sorcerer said as the tentacle slowly lowered him to the floor. “Your commander’s life depends on this.”

Krug, upon being reminded why he was even there, slammed his eyes shut and let his sword fall to the stone beside him. The tentacles restraining him retracted back into the ground. The paladin fell to his hands and knees. He opened them when he heard Asterion's hooves clacking on the rocks. Krug looked up and saw the sorcerer walk over to a shelf carved into the cave wall. Numerous glass bottles and vials sat upon it. He grabbed one of the bottles and returned to the dais below the star-thing.

Asterion held up the glass. The void-entity rippled. The air around it shimmered. Between one heartbeat and the next the sorcerer's bottle went from being empty to being full of a silver liquid with golden flakes.

"Thank you," the sorcerer said with bowed head.

The star-thing indicated towards the prone paladin.

“Forgive his intrusion. His concern for his friend’s life drove him to unwise decisions.”

Another inquiry hung in the air.

“I will handle it. You can count on me.”

Apparently satisfied, the orb flowed upward along its tether and returned to its home amid the darkness among the stars.

Asterion gathered up his robes and dressed himself as Krug struggled to get back onto his feet. His back was to the orc.

“I thought I told you the summit was unsafe,” growled the sorcerer.

“I... uh...” Krug stammered. “I sensed something about you and I had to-”

“Your damn paladin senses, I should have known,” Asterion snorted. “How callow are you that you can’t tell weird and evil apart?”

“Are you telling me that thing wasn’t evil?! I saw what it was doing to you!”

“What are they teaching paladins these days?” the sorcerer shrugged in exasperation. “You barge into my patron’s sanctum while we’re working on the cure to your commander’s curse and you accuse it of being evil. Why? Just because it’s an incomprehensible entity from outside our understanding of the universe?”

Krug blinked. “Uh, well, yes. Generally those things are pretty bad for us.”

Asterion rolled his eyes. “You say ‘generally’ yet you leave no room for exceptions. The Starry Void has saved more lives than I can count and you slander it. There’s the elixir you came for. Take it and I’ll send you back to your fortress.”

The orc eyed the potion warily.

“It’s safe,” said the minotaur. “Your commander won’t be the first person healed of an otherwise incurable affliction.”

“How can I trust you? I saw it just appear in the bottle. Where did it even come from?”

“The Starry Void comes from a place beyond the bounds of our cosmos. To it, our universe of matter and linear time is maddening. But all I had to do was ask it to bear the idea of a cure for Karum’s Bane into its home realm. There, ideas can be made into reality, assuming they’re small enough for our universe to not mind too much. But that also means there’s an expiration date so you’d better move fast.”

Krug realized he could take the strange elixir or leave with nothing. So he picked up the bottle.

“Now, picture your fortress in your mind,” Asterion commanded. “Where your friend is suffering. I’ll send you there.”

“Fine, I’m picturing it,” said the orc grumpily.

Asterion incanted a spell, walked over, and tapped Krug on his breastplate. The next thing the orc knew was he was standing in the great hall of the Order’s fortress. A few of the pages jumped in shock at a fully armored paladin appearing right in their midst this late into the evening.

“I have the cure for Commander Marzyn,” he declared. “I need to see him right away.”

The whole fortress came alive as word spread that Krug Goldtusk had returned from his quest. The only question that remained was if it was successful. More senior knights took Krug to Marzyn’s quarters and the guards at the door stepped aside to let him pass. Inside he found one of the Lightwyrms’ priests at Marzyn’s bedside.

Commander Telphor Marzyn may have been old, but until the curse struck him he had been hale. Now hard lines etched themselves across his face between his mane of snow-white hair and beard.

“Let’s see if this so-called ‘sorcerer’ can succeed where our Lord could not even prevail,” said the priest testily as he made room for Krug to kneel beside the bed.

The orc lifted the elixir to the old man’s lips and slowly dripped in into his mouth. Once the bottle was empty the man’s labored wheezing smoothed out and the lines seemed to return to being mere wrinkles. Marzyn opened his eyes for the first time in days.

“Kruggles?” he asked as his eyes focused on the orc. The paladin didn’t even blush at the man using the nickname he’d used when he was just an orphaned street urchin brought to the order.

“Commander?” Krug asked hopefully. “How do you feel?”

“I feel...” he said as he sat up. Everyone in attendance gasped and stepped back. “I feel good.”

A cheer erupted from one of the knights behind Krug. “Praise the Lightwyrms! Sir Goldtusk’s quest was successful!”

Krug barely noticed. He clasped Marzyn’s hand as tears welled up in his eyes.

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“You wish to return to Sarthas Isle?” Marzyn looked up from behind his desk.

A fortnight had passed since Krug returned and delivered Marzyn from the brink. Paladins, austere and severe as ever, had celebrated Krug’s grand accomplishment with a half day’s celebration. Krug returned to his duties within the fortress. He finally built up the courage to present his request to the commander.

“Yes, sir,” replied the orc. “I feel I left unresolved issues with the Lord Snowmane and I wish to repair the relationship. He can clearly be trusted to provide miracles when needed.”

At first Krug hoped to use the pack he left behind as a reason. But it appeared in the entry hall the afternoon of the day after his return. The orc had a small hope that there would possibly be a message of reconciliation from Asterion. But the bag contained only what he had brought with him.

Marzyn leaned on the desk and steeped his fingers. “You know, Krug. You conducted yourself well. I owe you my life after all.”

“I owe you mine and much more, sir,” the younger paladin replied. “You gave me a life here when I could have died on the streets.”

“My boy, I think you’ve proven yourself worthy of the trust to become a questing knight,” said the commander, unable to contain

his pride. “I will grant you the rank. You may perform the one last assignment of ensuring we have a good relationship with Sarthas Isle. Our warmages will see to the transport spell. And then you may go forward and dispense justice as you see fit, secure in the knowledge you’ll always have a home here.”

“Th-thank you, sir!” Krug held in his tears. “I’ve been looking forward to this for years.”

“I know, my boy. And I also know you’re going to do great things out there.”

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Asterion sat at his desk inside his study. A heavy rain fell outside and the breeze carried the scent of petrichor through the open window. His home was warded so nothing short of a hurricane could get so much as a drop past the windowsill.

The minotaur held his latest scroll in his hand and his eyes scanned the page. It was another letter from Opha Quartzbeard and the dwarf was filling him in on the latest developments from Summer Haven.

*Lord Snowmane,*

*Please disregard the inaccuracies in my last letter. I learned much of what truly transpired on the night of the Black Moon Festival. The 'performance' story was merely a cover for the tourists. That really was a dragon mummy that escaped the ice sphere. And Borusu really did try to steal King Kyvyk's sorcery for his own twisted scheme! The First Apprentice procured a vial of Aqua Magus for his plot!*

Asterion raised a brow. Not many alchemists could synthesize a dose of Aqua Magus. Sure, he could beg his patron for a sample but he would never do so for such base treachery. He read on.

*And that bard was well and truly grievously injured during the affair. I feel terrible for thinking it was merely an illusion. But Kyvyk actually undid the damage, saving the bard's life!*

*I must admit I've come to admire our king. Well, former king. The Aqua Magus severely damaged his sorcerous spark and he abdicated the throne. It's a shame that he finally proved himself worthy of the title only to lose it.*

*He doesn't seem too broken up over it. He's gone off traveling with those two musicians! Maybe they'll wander down your way sometime soon. Or you can see if you can meet them on the road. Word it they're headed out west to where the Sorcerer took the red-rock mountain for his own.*

*Oh! I discovered a new method to grow root vegetables in the air! I'll let you know what turnips!*

*-Opha*

Asterion sat back, amused by the dwarf's pun. "That fool ox had it in him after all," he said to himself. "Will wonders never cease?"

The doorbell rang out.

"Who is out in this weather?" wondered the sorcerer as he opened communication with his caller. "What business brings you out on a day like this?"

His eyes went wide as Krug Goldtusk's gruff voice replied.

"Please, Lord Snowmane. I want to... I need to--"

"I returned your effects the very next day, Krug," growled the minotaur. "If you don't have them then take it up with your fellow paladins."

"No, wait!" the orc shouted. "I came back to apologize and, and..."

“Oh, fine. Come on in. Can’t leave a fool of an orc on my doorstep in the rain. But take off your boots before you come in. There’s a bin for muddy shoes to the right. Meet me in the parlor and try not to drip on anything.”

Minutes later Asterion walked into his parlor to find Krug standing on the sole tiled part of the floor by the entryway looking for all the world like a wet, bedraggled, lost dog. The sorcerer snorted and snapped his fingers, bringing the orc and his effects to an acceptable level of dryness. With that, Krug strode across the carpet and threw himself at Asterion’s hooves.

“Please don’t tell me another one of your knightly companions went and got themselves hexed,” he grumbled. “I’ve been working in the garden and my back isn’t quite up for another round.”

“No, it’s not that,” the voice came from somewhere just above the carpet.

“Then what is it? Here for a tropical vacation? Are... are you crying.”

Krug looked up, tears streaming down his cheeks. “You saved the closest thing I have to a father in this world and I repaid your kindness by breaking your trust! I saw what you went through to save his life and I... I...” a sob choked off whatever he was about to say.

Asterion gazed down at the orc, expression softening as the picture became clearer. “That explains your excessive concern. Krug, no, Krug, please get up and have a seat.” He gestured to the pair of overstuffed armchairs. “I don’t care about your knightly humility, you’ve been trekking through the rain and need something hot. You’re having tea.” A kettle and two mugs jumped onto the nearby table.

The sorcerer led the paladin to his seat and poured him a steaming cup. Krug sipped it and let the warmth spread throughout his broad chest.

“Marzyn, he’s like your father?” asked the minotaur.

“Oh, yes,” Krug looked down at his bare feet. “He found me on the street when I was... I don’t even remember how old I was. Gave me a home, a family.”

“Your parents?”

“Don’t remember them,” the paladin replied. “But they tell me Marzyn found me after a... somebody accused an orc of a crime and the humans in the city... They were more interested in revenge than justice.”

“I see,” the minotaur said. “I think I understand more about your situation and I...” he paused. Asterion pushed his ego aside. “I

am sorry for being so short with you since that night. I'm not... I don't like people knowing about my..."

"Your patron and the fact that makes you a warlock?" the orc filled in.

Asterion closed his eyes and leaned back in the chair. "I prefer the term 'pactbound' but, yes. I, uh, years ago my progress with sorcery hit a plateau. I just couldn't advance any further at it. Then my company stumbled upon this island. It was uninhabited when we first arrived. 'Ill-fated' was what the locals on the other islands called it.

"I found the ruins in the peak and, one new moon night, met Starry Void. Some long vanished people called it into our world and left the door open. It didn't speak, what it wanted just appeared in my head. It tasted my sorcery and I received a new avenue of magic

from it. Since then I've weaved the two magics together so seamlessly nobody suspects I'm no mere sorcerer."

"And the... copulation?"

Asterion smiled. "It's not like most beings from outside. Starry Void... the closest thing I can describe it as is it's curious about us. When we 'copulate,'" he winked at Krug, "it feels the pleasure I get and that's intoxicating to it. It's how I repay Starry Void for providing elixirs that no mere mortal mage could create in our current age."

"But you whore yourself out for-"

"I whore myself out proudly!" snapped the sorcerer. "I don't mind trading my virtue if it alleviates the suffering of another. Gods know I have very little virtue as it is and what I do have isn't worth all that much."

Krug stood up. "Then I must offer up my own virtue to Starry Void to express my gratitude!" he shouted.

“Settle down there, crusader,” Asterion chided him. “First off, its touch would kill you. Seriously. Those tentacles dissolve solid matter. I can only handle it because of our pact.”

Krug thought a moment. “Then I must repay you!” he said and began to unbuckle his belt.

“Hold! Stop! Nope! None of that!” Asterion held up his hand.

“But-”

“I’m flattered that you want to get with this,” he motioned at his body. “But it would be too weird. I mean, you were only born at the same time I was already winding down my adventuring career. Sorry, but you’re just going to have to live with being the recipient of a good turn.”

“But I’m a paladin,” Krug protested. “I deliver charity, I don’t receive it.”

Asterion smiled at the orc. "You have much to learn about the nuances of both the world and of virtue. It's not a balance sheet. You just do whatever strikes you as the right thing to do in the moment and hope it makes the world a better place."

"I've been promoted to questing knight," said Krug after a moment. "Maybe I can help here?"

"You're a paladin, Krug," said the minotaur. "You were trained to right wrongs. I can't deprive the world of that, especially when so many wrongs can actually be righted by a big orc with a sword."

Krug folded his hands in his lap and looked back down at the floor.

The door to the parlor opened.

In stepped another minotaur who looked strikingly like a much younger Asterion. His mane and beard were shorter and had more of a golden hue. His fur was a darker shade of brown. He was

muscular but without Asterion's heft. He also wore his glasses instead of keeping them on a chain about his neck.

"Father?" the newcomer called out.

"Ah, Asterius, welcome back," the sorcerer said as he got to his hooves and hugged the other minotaur.

"Oh, sorry, I didn't realize you had company over," said Asterius upon seeing Krug. "Apologies for the intrusion."

"Oh, no, No problem at all," said Krug as he rose to shake the minotaur's hand. "Sir Krug Goldtusk, Order of Inexorable Justice, at your family's service."

"Careful about offering that," the younger minotaur said with a grin. "Father might enlist you to work in the greenhouse too."

"Krug, this is Asterius Snowmane. My son," said Asterion.

"Your son?"

“His son,” said Asterius. “Sorry to be a wraith and leave right away but I just came back to borrow your silver shears from the sanctum. The wolfsbane needs to be cut with silver shears or the potion won’t come together properly. I’ll be back later.” And then we was off.

“You have a son?” asked the paladin once he and the sorcerer were alone again. “Is he...?” Krug wiggled his fingers in imitation of tentacles.

“No, he came into the world in the usual way.”

“But his name is so close to your own.”

Asterion chuckled. “His mother named him. She’s a wizard from the continent. Actually an important mage in Merrydale. Met her when my group and I were on one escapade or another. We had one crazy night together and... A year later she tracks me down to introduce me to our son.

“He’s a good kid, Asterius. Got his mother’s knack for wizardry and inherited my gift of sorcery. He’s combined them like I combined sorcery with my pact.”

“Does he know about your patron?”

“Nope,” said Asterion. “In fact, aside from my old adventuring buddies you’re the only other person I can think of who has discovered that I’m pactbound. Believe it or not, most people aren’t keen on charging through trackless jungle to get to the mountaintop at night. Mostly they hike the trail on the other side that I can block off if needed.”

“There was a trail!?”

“Oh yeah,” said Asterion as he sipped his tea. “Quite nicely maintained too. Lovely walk.”

An idea blossomed in the sorcerer’s head.

“You know, Asterius has been talking about following in my hoofsteps and traveling, possibly even bordering on adventuring. He’s been talking with two of my old companions who are still in the game. But that’s only because the one is an elf and the other is a druid who up and stopped aging. I think the business they usually get up to is a bit beyond what I think my boy can reasonably handle. But you, you just got your questing rank. You’d be starting out together.”

“Are you suggesting that I partner up with your son?” asked Krug.

“You’re bold, brave, courageous, honorable, maybe even to a fault. Admirable traits, I’d say. And Asterius is smart and charming. A little on the meek side. Your zeal and his brains could make a potent combination.”

“But wouldn’t it be weird?”

“Why would it be weird?” replied the sorcerer.

“Because he’s your son and I’ve seen your... I’ve seen all of you!”

“And just whose fault was that?” Asterion grinned. “I could remove that memory if you like.”

“What?! No!” the paladin protested. “I don’t like having my head messed with,” was what he said but, inwardly, he didn’t want to forget. Growing up in a knightly order of holy warriors meant he never got up to certain youthful indiscretions. And he’d be lying if he wasn’t more than a little disappointed that Asterion rebuffed his offer. It seemed he had encountered another one of those nuances the sorcerer so enjoyed talking about.

Still, Krug could see the wisdom of what Asterion was saying. His time to strike out on his own had come and the minotaur father and son had experience with the wider world.

“Maybe we could do with a more formal introduction,” said the orc. “Just as a start.”

Asterion beamed. “I’ll see about Asterius coming to dinner tonight.”

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Three days later Asterion leaned against the railing outside his bedroom. It was early, so early The Bullring still sat cloaked in shadow despite the blue sky overhead. His back and rear ached terribly but it was worth it. He’d gotten a rush order for another antidote to Karum’s Bane. A second appearance of the hex so soon concerned him. He thought that maybe he’d have to dust off his old gear, venture back out into the wider world himself, and see if the two incidents were connected. But that was a concern for later.

The sorcerer watched his son and Krug walk down the path through town and to the Anchorage beyond. Their first real meeting

had struck him as a success and the two seemed to hit it off. They made plans to start island hopping northward and make landfall on the continent. They would then visit Summer Haven to see how it was getting on now that the king had abdicated. Then they would make their way towards Merrydale, to see Asterius' mother.

Asterion watched until Asterius and Krug walked onto the jungle road and out of sight.

“He is a bit dense but I can think of worse potential sons-in-law,” Asterion said to himself as he took another sip of his coffee.