Breaking the Bonds of Destiny

On Writing the Fantasy Novella *Illusions of Grandeur*

M.A. Essay for English

Ólafur Páll Einarsson

Kt.: 160683-4499

Supervisor: Anna Heiða Pálsdóttir

May 2018
Abstract
The following MA thesis is a creative writing project which is a combination of a fantasy novella of approximately 26,000 words and an expository essay detailing the writing process as a whole of approximately 5,500 words.

The novella is set in a fantasy world where the backstory is that a small group of villages band together and cross a great sea to find a new place to live, and a better future for them and their children. Shortly after they arrive, they encounter a villainous sorcerer, who gives them an ultimatum: pay a terrible price and they would be protected, or refuse and be destroyed. The novella begins years later, when the few villages that remain are barely surviving. In one such village lives Jax, a young man of sixteen, who has been irrevocably marked by the foul deal his ancestors made. All his life he has let others make decisions for him, as if he has no say in his life or his future. However, when the sorcerer returns to exact his price, Jax must decide whether to make peace with his destiny, or struggle against it and become his own man in the process.

In the expository portion I delve into the writing process; what tools and methods I used in writing the story. I detail the difficulties I faced in getting started and the process of building this fantasy world. I also look at the setting and the themes that are explored in the story. One chapter is centered around how I created the characters in the story. I go deeper into their personalities, their fears and desires, along with what I used for inspiration in creating them. Lastly there is a chapter on the editing process; what changes and fixes I made, both from the natural process of writing the story and from seeing what worked and what didn’t, along with changes I made because of notes I received from my supervisor. I hope that this will give the reader a deeper understanding of the story along with a glimpse into my creative writing process.
Table of Contents

**Novella: Illusions of Grandeur** .......................................................... 2

**Exposition: On Writing Illusions of Grandeur** ................................................ 65

1. Introduction ........................................................................................................... 65
2. Getting started and building the world .............................................................. 66
3. Setting and theme .................................................................................................. 68
4. Character creation ................................................................................................. 71
5. Changes, edits, and fixes ..................................................................................... 74
6. Conclusion .............................................................................................................. 75

**Works Cited** ..................................................................................................... 77
Illusions of Grandeur

by Ólafur Páll Einarsson
The sky above Bryn Nevin was a brilliant fusion of deep azure and pearly white, clouds frolicking like unsheared sheep across the horizon. Birds of infinite colors flitted this way and that, diving and climbing, feathers ruffling in the wind. Sometimes they would dive until they were almost all the way to the ground, never quite getting close enough to brighten the village with their presence. It was as if some unseen force kept them away. The moths and the butterflies, unable to reach such heights, spent most of their time in the outskirts of the village, among the farms, some abandoned, most poorly-tended, and all desolate. The farmers did as little work as possible, and especially none during midday. Once in a while an adventurous butterfly would make its way further into the village, fluttering down the winding and too-narrow lanes, where the sun rarely made an appearance. The villagers would tell you otherwise, but the houses all seemed to be at a bit of a slant. They seemed wrong in some way, though you could never quite put your finger on it. At the very center of the village was the square, which in its day was often used as a meeting place for the village elders, and was always bustling with life. Today, there were few people there, their gazes cast only downwards as they went about their way, always with a bit of a shuffle, as if they needed to be somewhere else at that point, darting quickly into dark recesses, closing heavy doors behind them with a soft thud.

One such doorway, however, was open. This was one of the few remaining merchants still trying to ply their trade within the village. Even with the open door, the interior of the grocer’s shop was dark, with dust hanging in the air like a veil, illuminated by the rare beam of light that escaped through the shuttered windows. Shelves meant for food and wares were mostly bare, containing some pieces of fruit that managed to be both under- and overripe at the same time, along with dried meat, but from what animal was not known.

A solitary figure, a boy they called Jax wandered along the aisles, not really looking for anything in particular. It was just a way of clearing his mind. In the dim light his dark hair had some streaks of gray as it fell halfway to his shoulders, and it matched his pale skin well. He was tall for a boy of sixteen years, although he often slouched, as if to not stand out in a crowd. His mind was far off in the distance at that moment, and absent-mindedly he let his fingers brush over the few items that were available for purchase. Looking up from his reverie, he saw that his hand had settled on an apple. The apple looked half-presentable, with only a few dark spots of overripeness dotting its features. He closed his fingers over it, picking it up and feeling its weight in his hand, all the while trying to take his mind back to a
happier place, a happier time. These happy memories were not many, but he clung on to them with all he had.

From the corner of his eye Jax noticed a shape moving past the open door, and he turned his head to see Landon, a boy about his age, walk past. While that wasn’t in itself an odd occurrence, the look on Landon’s face showed that something was bothering him. His hair was tangled and unkempt, his clothes stained and ruffled. He looked like he hadn’t slept in quite some time.

“Landon?” Jax called after him while he moved closer towards the open door.

Landon froze, his head snapping towards the doorway. The look on Landon’s face was enough to stop Jax dead in his tracks. Landon’s eyes were open abnormally wide, veins visible even from this distance. His mouth opened slowly, uttering only a single word very slowly. “Jax?” He hurriedly shut his mouth, and kept walking past the shop, moving out of Jax’s vision quickly.

Jax started moving again, quickening his pace, and he had almost reached the door when he felt a strong hand grip his shoulder firmly.

“Where do you think you’re going with that fruit, boy? Were you going to pay for that?” a gruff female voice thundered behind him.

Jax felt himself being yanked about to face the large, corpulent form of the grocer’s wife, Tilda, her visage twisted in anger. As soon as she realized who she had stopped, however, her features comically changed to register shock.

“Jax! I didn’t know it was you!” The grip loosened on his shoulder, the hand now trying ineffectively to smooth his crumpled shirt. “Of course you can have the apple to take with you. Please accept my apologies, and know that we’re all so proud of what you’re doing for us here in the village. Give my regards to your lovely father and mother as well.”

“Yeah, sure,” Jax replied, suddenly uncomfortable, backing up towards the door while keeping the large woman squarely in his sights. He turned around, reaching the door quickly, turning the corner onto the narrow street. Looking back, he saw the entirety of the frame of the door taken up by Tilda, an odd smile plastered on her lips while she waved in his direction, her huge arms jiggling at the effort. He wasn’t sure, but he thought he saw tears forming in the corner of her eyes.

Disgusted, he looked away, down at the fruit he still held in his hand. He wanted to throw it as far as he could, as the object was obtained in a fashion he wasn’t comfortable with. He held on to it, though, as he knew that not everyone had enough to eat, not as much as Tilda at least, and he slipped the fruit into one of his pockets. He turned left at the next
intersection, setting his sights on a small house in the distance. As he moved down the narrow path between run-down houses that always seemed to need more work, he sighed, slowing his pace, for he would surely need his energy in the days ahead.
Day drawing to a close did little to improve the atmosphere of the village. With the light dwindling, the shadows from the buildings were cast at strange and unnatural angles, seemingly daring the people to cross their path. Something was different on this night in the village. Not all the houses were dimly lit and quiet on this night, as most nights. On the north side of the village square stood a large house, at least compared to the houses around it. Standing on two floors, this was the house of the mayor and his wife, and every single window spewed forth bright lights and chatter, as all the villagers was there that night.

There must have been upwards of one hundred people in the main hall of the house, all standing around, with goblets in hand, taking sips and gulps of a dark, red liquid. Most spoke in hushed tones, eyes darting about, waiting for the main event to begin. A rather large, heavyset man stood in the center of the room, wearing a broad smile, speaking loudly and happily to those around him. His balding head was sweating, glistening in the candlelight and along with his clammy, fidgeting fingers, gave away his nervousness. Suddenly, he raised his arms and the crowd reluctantly grew silent.

“Good villagers! Friends!” he cried out. “I welcome you all to my home on this, most important of nights! I hope you are enjoying the food and drinks my wife has prepared. I know I am,” he continued with a large grin and a playful pat on his large midsection. His wife, a small, homely woman standing by his side turned a shade of red rarely seen in the drab village.

“Now, if I may be a bit serious. Many years ago, our forefathers came to this place in search of a better life, and on these bountiful shores, they found it! They founded this village, our lovely Bryn Nevin, and we owe them great thanks!” The rotund mayor now lowered his voice, no longer bellowing, and looked over the crowd with a pleading gaze. “We have a good life here, do we not?”

The crowd didn’t seem convinced, with most of them avoiding the mayor’s eyes, taking furtive sips of the wine.

“Yes, of course we do!” The mayor boomed out, his expression brightened, completely oblivious to the muted reception his question received. “I know these past few years have been a bit trying, but there is always a new day on the horizon. The sun shall rise again and so shall we!”

“Get on with it!” a voice shouted from the crowd, with an almost imperceptible addition of “blowhard” at the end.
“Who said that?” boomed the mayor, eyes searching the crowd agitatedly before softening. He continued in a milder tone. “Yes, yes of course, the matter at hand, of course, you are right.”

“Our forefathers, in their great wisdom, made a deal with the high and mighty ruler of this land, that we should always receive protection if we required, and would be assured that Bryn Nevin would continue to flourish for ages to come. It is a high price, but we must pay it if we want to continue living. Exactly one month ago, we held the lottery to determine the eleven families who must make the ultimate sacrifice.”

As he said this last part, an audible sigh made its way around the room, as if the crowd had begun to deflate. Most who were in attendance lowered their gaze, eyes brimming with tears, some more from guilt than from sadness. Wine-stained fingers lifted goblets, many not lowering them until they were completely empty.

“The time is here again, my friends, to pay this price. Tomorrow, the forces of Zevander will come, and we must say goodbye to some of our young folk. I want to say to the eleven families, that I know what you are feeling. I share your pain. As is custom, the first-born son of the mayor becomes the twelfth, the twelfth boy to be taken, to fulfill our debt to Zevander. So now we raise our cups, and give a fond farewell to these brave young men. We say goodbye to our dear Jax,” the mayor concluded, slightly misty-eyed, scanning the room for something, and not finding it. Getting agitated, he continued. “Jax? Jax my boy? Where is that damned boy? Never mind. We shall say our farewells tomorrow morning. We hope that those selected may find happiness out there somewhere, in the service of Zevander, and that they will do our village proud.”

Raising his goblet and his voice, the mayor continued. “For now, we salute their courage, and the courage of countless young men before them, and we drink! To Bryn Nevin, and the future!”

The crowd, eager to distance themselves from the harsh reality of the evening’s topic, raised their goblets as well, and gave a muted shout “To Bryn Nevin!”
Jax looked on from his hiding spot under the stairs, shaking his head and cursing every single one in the crowd for being cowards and hypocrites. Their tears were short-lived, now that they had drink in hand. All their problems were forgotten.

He had known all his life that he would be one of those selected to be taken. The other kids had had relatively normal childhoods, had developed friendships and were mostly able to live their lives care-free. Not Jax, he had always been careful not to make any friends, not to get too attached to anything. There was no point, as he was born doomed.

The crowd was getting rowdier and their smiles and wide-eyed gazes grew more grotesque. It felt like a feast, and he was the sacrificial lamb. The honey-glazed pig with an apple in its mouth, while onlookers salivated with knife and fork in hand. He couldn’t stand it any longer and crawled out from his hiding spot, being careful to not be seen by anyone in attendance, especially his parents. He was sure his father would give a rousing speech about how Jax was the embodiment of bravery and responsibility and how he was single-handedly saving the village. It was all crap, and he had to be gone from there. Sticking to the shadows, he followed walls until he got to the side entrance, gingerly opening the door and escaping into the crisp air of the night.

Jax made his way stealthily away from the square, in the direction of a small, haggard-looking house on the outskirts of the village. Like many of the other houses in the village, this house had windows that had been shuttered with thick wood, and the garden, if you could call it that, hadn’t been tended to in probably a decade, as it was teeming with weeds and bugs. While most of the villagers tried to keep up pretenses that everything was going well, the tenant of this place didn’t seem to care.

Looking around to see if anyone was watching him, Jax crouched down by the basement window, the only one not covered, using a nearby twig to unfasten the lock, as he had done so many times before. With a creak, the latch gave, and the window opened, allowing him access into the inky darkness within. Crawling backwards through the window, Jax dropped to the floor below, staying on his haunches until his eyes got used to the dark. The window, left slightly ajar behind him, let in a handful of silvery moonbeams, which made his eyes adjust quicker.

All of a sudden, a hairy, disheveled creature came out of the shadows of the opposite corner, half crawling and half running towards him, making screeches and guttural noises. “Aaaaeeee, aaaaaiii, aaaaooo! Death comes to those that intrude into my lair!” the creature wailed. “Unless, of course, the intruder has some sweeties?”
“Damn the heavens, Sam, you frightened me half to death! Of course I have something for you,” Jax said with a laugh, standing up and holding out the apple.

The wild figure stood up, smoothed its hair, at least as much as possible, revealing a grizzled, yet kind face, and gave Jax a lopsided smile as he took the fruit and bit into it heartily. With juice running down his disheveled beard, he went around the room, lighting various candles that were scattered about. As the soft candlelight grew, Jax looked around fondly at the place he had spent much of his childhood. Lining the walls were shelves filled with old tomes, bottles, and all sorts of contraptions covered in a thick layer of dust. Numerous tables of many different sizes dotted the room, some used for experiments, some for dinner, although they were mostly used for both.

Jax looked in the corner which held an unruly stack of burlap sacks, a place where he had spent countless hours reading books, listening to Sam’s stories, and generally escaping from the outside world, from his life in the village. His eyes started filling with tears at the thought that this was the last time he’d ever be down here. Shaking his head and drying his eyes with his sleeve, he turned to face the eccentric little man.

“Wait, did you lay an ambush for me? How did you know I’d be coming?” Jax asked.

“Of course you were coming, dear boy. I know what importance this night has for you, and how hard it must be,” Sam said while looking at Jax quizzically. After straightening his spectacles and regaining some composure, he continued. “How are you doing, Jax?”

Jax wasn’t sure how to answer. He had known Sam his entire life. The eccentric old man was the official historian of the village, even though Jax wouldn’t use that term. Sam liked to say that he simply knew many stories, and liked to tell them. The problem was, these days people didn’t want to hear them, so his services weren’t in high demand. This had had a negative effect on the old man’s mental well-being in recent years, knowing that his stories would die with him.

“I hate them. I hate them all. My father made this grand speech where he made me out to be some sort of hero, like I’ve made some sort of brave sacrifice. I haven’t! I didn’t get a say in this at all. I was born with a black cloud hanging over me, and it’s finally starting to rain,” Jax said with downcast eyes brimming with tears. “If I had my way, I would run away and never come back. The village be damned, along with everyone in it.”

Sam got up slowly, shuffled over to Jax and put his hand on his shoulder. “Do you know the story about your uncle, Jax my boy?”

“Of course I know, I was named after him. He was taken when he was sixteen, same as me.”
“Not that uncle, your other uncle. Your father had two brothers,” Sam said softly.

“Two brothers? No, you’re wrong. My family would have told me about that. You’ve finally gone off the deep end, haven’t you?” Jax replied.

“Calm down boy, and I’ll tell you the story. Your father had two brothers, Jaxinder, whom you know about, and Willem. Willem was the oldest, and like you, was chosen to be taken after his sixteenth birthday. He was always a quiet sort, and didn’t want to make any friends or form any attachments. What was the point, since his life would be effectively over at a young age? You’re quite like him, actually, except that you’re stronger than he is, stronger in spirit. He was a jumpy sort. It didn’t take more than a loud noise to make him run for cover.”

Sam paced around the room as he continued his story. “In the days and nights leading up to the Taking, he grew even more morose and nervous, if that was possible. Then, when that fateful day arrived, he was nowhere to be found. He couldn’t handle the pressure and fled, leaving his family to deal with the fallout. Since Willem was the chosen one, the raiders were one short, and that wouldn’t do. Instead, they took Jaxinder, the middle brother. To this day I still remember his screams as the raiders dragged him away. He cursed everyone in attendance, especially his family.”

Jax stared at Sam, eyes wide open, not quite believing what he was hearing. He had grown up on hearing the stories of his brave and noble uncle Jaxinder, how he so selflessly and stoically took on the burden of being chosen, and how lucky Jax was to follow in his footsteps.

“They lied to me. They lied to me my entire life. My uncle was no hero, he was just a victim in all of this. Wrong place at the wrong time, made to suffer because his brother was a coward. Like I’m being made to suffer because they’re all spineless.” Jax paced around the dimly lit room, growing angrier with each step.

Sam walked over to Jax, and put his hand on his shoulder. He said nothing, but then again, he didn’t have to. They stayed like this for a few moments until Sam reluctantly withdrew his hand and shuffled over to a shelf filled to bursting with vials and bottles of all shapes and sizes, containing ingredients of a hundred different colors.

“I can’t come with you tomorrow. That’s a journey you’ll have to undertake on your own. However, I may have something that you need, something that will help you along the way,” Sam said as he let his hand brush across the bottles, looking for one in particular. Suddenly, his hand darted in between two large brown bottles and produced a tiny stoppered vial, so coated with dust that there was no way to see what was inside. Sam rubbed the vial
on his cloak, and held it up high, so a beam of light from the window showed that it was filled with a bright purple liquid.

“Here, drink this,” Sam said quickly as he pulled the cork from the bottle and thrust it at Jax.

Jax was puzzled, but knowing better than to argue with the old man, he lifted it to his mouth and swallowed with one big gulp. The liquid was viscous, tasting slightly of elderflower and rotten mushrooms, and tingled all the way down. For a moment, nothing happened. Then Jax noticed the candles getting brighter all around him and his head felt so light he feared it might float away. As the light grew, he fearfully looked one last time at Sam, who only gave him a wry smile as he faded into white.
The First Dream

Clouds of shimmering smoke churn and swirl before parting to show a very small boy, whimpering inside a makeshift enclosure in the corner of a small room, a low gate made of enmeshed metal keeping him in. Given the small nature of the enclosure, the boy stands slightly hunched over on wobbly legs, unused to the exertion. He is wearing a soiled cloth around his waist, and his dark hair is matted and dirty. His skin, even in warm glow of the candlelight, is deathly pale. The boy’s eyes are fixed on a pair of hooded figures standing in the doorway of the room, speaking in hushed voices.

“You know this is the right thing to do. They will be here soon, and we have no time to make other accommodations for the boy,” the taller of the robed figures says, glancing nervously into the room. “He’s their problem now.”

The smaller figure hesitates, and gives a long, sorrowful look back at the boy. In the low light of the room, the only thing the boy sees is a hint of curly blonde hair from behind the hood. After the long look, the smaller figure nods, and sharply turns away. Both figures then depart with barely a whisper in their wake.

* * *

The boy now sits upon the floor, bawling loudly as the dying candlelight glows from the corner. The room has grown cold and the boy shivers, his hands desperately trying to warm his goosebump-covered skin. In the distance, many loud voices can be heard, growing closer. Soon, one voice stands out from the rest.

“Search every house! Don’t let them escape. We’ll soon educate them on their wickedness,” a harsh voice commands.

The boy hears many boots thumping throughout his village, making their way in and out of houses, up and down stairs.

With each passing moment the voices grow louder, and clearer. His shivering increases, fearful of these intruders, and he crawls towards his makeshift bed in the corner of the enclosure. Pulling the blankets up around his ears, he stays completely still, barely daring to breathe in fear of being discovered.

“They’re gone! The houses are empty. Get their wicked tools and books. Get their blasphemous scrolls and their vile potions. Burn everything!” the voice barks again, even angrier this time.

These strange people, not finding anything in the houses, grow more irritable with each passing moment. They yell at one another, each one blaming the other for their failure. The shouting escalates until suddenly they grow hushed in unison. The boots step softer, and
whispers can barely be heard in the air, before the boy’s blankets are rudely torn from him, exposing him completely. As soon as the boy dares to open his eyes, he looks up to see a large man standing over him scowling.

“What have we here?” the man asks mockingly. “Well, I guess we did manage to find something, after all.”

The boy doesn’t utter a sound as he is carried away from the only home he has ever known, the buildings around him in flames, his kin nowhere to be seen.
Jax returned to consciousness slowly, his eyelids heavy with sleep and crust. As he opened his eyes, he still saw the soft light from the candles, but repeated blinking showed him that there was a lone beam of bright light coming from the window. It was daytime! How long had he been asleep? What had Sam given him? The dream had seemed so real to him. What did it mean? Who were those people?

Jax stood up from the pile of sacks that had been his bed for the night, and scanned the room for Sam, who was nowhere to be seen. As he stretched his tired and aching limbs, he could hear the shrill call of a bird from a ways off. What an odd sound; it sounded almost like a scream. He walked to the window, opening it and letting in the sun; he breathed deeply of the fresh morning air. The scream came again, and again. That was no bird, and it was coming from the center of the village.

Squeezing out of the tight window and onto the street outside, Jax hurriedly stood without brushing the dirt off his knees. The screams continued, and he raced in the direction of the sound through the crooked and winding lanes of the village until he finally entered the square. At the north side of the square, outside of a house not far from his own, a woman stood, hands on her head, violently pulling at her hair, screaming and sobbing while a crowd grew around her. Jax recognized her as Lucia, a woman close to his mother's age. He didn’t know her very well, but he knew that she was the mother of Landon, the boy he had seen the day before, and one of the other eleven to be taken.

“What’s going on?” Jax asked one of the women at the edge of the crowd.

“It’s terrible! Poor Lucia, she was set to lose her Landon today, but not like this. He couldn’t handle the pressure, took his own life he did,” the woman replied with a downcast look and a heavy sigh.

“What’s the meaning of this?” A voice Jax recognized bellowed out, and he turned to see his father striding towards the crowd, red-faced and sweaty already. When his father saw Lucia, his demeanor shifted from anger to sorrow. “Oh my. Oh no. This is not good at all. There is no time!”

As if on cue, a sound was heard in the distance. Sharp, and clear, every single head in the square turned to face it with eyes wide. It was the deep, unmistakable sound of drums. The raiders were coming. There was no more time.
The drums rolled on, getting louder with each passing moment, as more villagers arrived at the square. Soon enough, the entire village was in attendance, and everyone waited with nervous anticipation. They whispered to each other, not wanting to break the collective mood, until the whispers couldn’t be heard anymore, and they had to get louder. They still didn’t say much, as they knew that the outside evil was back.

Just as the noise of the drums was becoming unbearable, the first of the raiders came into view. Two giant lizards led the cavalcade, heads held higher than the tallest of the villagers, shuffling on four legs with a tail like the trunk of a tree dragging behind them. Every few steps they would snake out their long tongues, as if testing the air for weakness.

Behind the lizards came a score of men on horseback, all dressed in black, with their heads and faces covered with a dark fabric. Across their hips they bore curved swords, always keeping one hand close to the hilt. Behind this procession came a pair of giants, comparable in stature to the village windmill, which was already the height of four men. They were dressed in ragged loincloths, each holding a drum the size of a large farm animal in front of them, as they beat them mercilessly with implements which resembled bones, only they must have been from some creature far larger than any that Jax had ever seen. Their bare feet were marching in time with the beats, giving the illusion that it was their feet that was making the tolling beats.

The villagers nervously backed away, and Jax noticed that his father was sweating profusely. The mayor’s eyes were open to an unnatural degree and he had a look of pure terror on his face. He had retreated as far as the square would allow, but kept going, pressing and squeezing to get but a few inches further away from the black procession.

The lizards parted, one turning right while the other turned left, setting up flanking positions on either side of the villagers. The riders and the giants did the same, splitting into two groups. As the way cleared, Jax saw what they had been blocking. More lizards, each one harnessed to a cage on wheels, straining to pull them up into the square. Each cage consisted of a sturdy, wooden base with thick iron bars affixed to it, rising to a thick, wooden ceiling. The cages had doors with heavy locks on one end, the end facing backwards, and they gave off an aura of being absolutely impenetrable. Some of the cages were already full, containing numerous youths, perhaps from other villages that Jax had never visited. One cage, however, was empty. His cage.

With the entire black horde in the square, the giants ceased their drumming with three final beats, each one louder than the last, then nothing but silence. Jax noticed that most of
the people around him in the crowd seemed transfixed by the strange sight in front of them, and no one made a sound. After a few moments of stunned silence, he felt someone begin to push themselves through the crowd: it was his father.

“Well, welcome,” the mayor stammered as he made his way to the front of the crowd, towards the middle of the square. “Welcome to Bryn Nevin. Would you like…”

One of the riders in black snapped his clenched fist straight up, and the mayor fell silent immediately. The man in black dismounted and untied a thick, burlap bag that had been affixed to his saddle. With slow, determined steps, he walked towards the middle of the square, while untying the knots that held the bag shut. Stopping a few feet from the mayor, he got down on one knee, and upended the contents of the bag on the ground, before retreating hastily towards his horse.

On the ground in front of the crowd was a small pile of dark fabric, a robe of some sort. Just as the mayor was preparing to raise some sort of questions, the sky began to darken. Black, ominous clouds appeared overhead to blot out the sun, and a peal of thunder shook the houses. Cries arose from the crowd, with people restarting their pushing and shoving to try and get out of the way of this evil group.

“Look,” Tilda, the grocer’s wife exclaimed with wonder, her eyes wide open and a doughy finger pointed straight at the bundle of robes on the ground. “It’s moving!”

Jax, suddenly more curious than afraid, shifted his gaze towards the robes. Tilda was right, it seemed that the robes were moving: they were rising. Slowly, inch by inch, the robes were being filled, as if some invisible force was blowing air into them, stretching them upwards until they stood before the crowd, hood up, just without a body to fill them.

Suddenly, with an almighty thunderclap, the mightiest yet, a bolt of lightning came down into the square and hit the top of the robe’s hood. Jax cried out in surprise, turning away from the dazzling light. When his vision slowly started coming back, he looked back upon the square and saw that the robes were now filled by a man, with a dark beard and bushy eyebrows, and a wicked-looking smile on his lips.

“Zevander!” the mayor cried out.

The dark man chuckled, looked around the crowd, and with his arms out wide, he sneered a response. “Miss me, boys and girls?”
After the initial shock of Zevander’s appearance, the crowd came alive with people commenting to their neighbor how exciting this all was, and that the village hadn’t had anything truly remarkable happen in ages.

“But, it can’t be. You, you haven’t aged a day!” Jax’s father called out with a puzzled expression on his face.

“Silence!” Zevander roared and the crowd fell silent. “Now, on to the matter of our business. As you know, in my benevolence, I have kept your little village safe for many a year, and all I ask in return is that you give me a helping hand, once in a while. That time has come, and I gracingly ask you noble folk for your help. I have come for the chosen!”

This time, no one in the crowd uttered a word, and no one dared to move a muscle. Jax let out a heavy sigh. He knew that it was time. Summoning all that remained of his courage, he gently nudged the woman in front of him in the crowd. She looked back, gasped, and parted the way. Others noticed, and soon a path had been cleared. He strode deliberately forward, stopping only after he had reached his father’s side. He didn’t look over, he knew what he would see on his father’s face.

One by one, the other chosen came forward and joined him. Some he knew. Gyles, a large boy with fair hair and complexion, shoulders broad and muscled from years at his family’s mill. Artis, who was small for his age, but was well-known around the village for his ability to brighten everyone’s mood. Others, he didn’t know personally, but he had seen them around the village. They kept stepping forward, until there were eleven young men standing, their backs straight, trying to give off the appearance of bravery. The last to appear was Erek, who had been Landon’s best friend. Striding forward, his eyes never left Zevander’s, glistening with unbridled hatred.

Zevander walked back and forth past the boys, humming an odd, disjointed tune to himself. He came to a sudden, jerking halt.

“One, two, three, four, there definitely should be more! Five, six, seven, eight, somebody’s running late! Nine, ten, eleven, twelve. Wait, where’s the twelfth?”

“You see, there’s been an accident,” Jax’s father began. “Landon, the twelfth boy, you see, he was taken ill. He unfortunately did not make it.”

“My dear mayor, I seem to recall having this conversation before. No matter, I will have the next in line,” Zevander said with an unconcerned wave of his hand.

“Well, yes, but that’s the thing. You see, Landon did not have any brothers to take his place, only a sister,” the mayor said.
Zevander didn’t seem to give this much of a thought and said, “Yes yes, sister. I’m sure she’ll do just nicely.”

A single solitary wail came from the back of the crowd. It was Lucia, Landon’s mother. “No! You can’t take her!” She positioned herself in front of her daughter.

“But, that just isn’t done! Only boys have been chosen, no girls have ever been taken. You can’t do this!” the mayor said in increasing agitation.

“Do you question my authority here?” Zevander boomed out, accompanied by a peal of thunder from the heavens. As he shouted, he strode towards the mayor, all the while growing in stature and increasing the volume of his voice, until he towered over even the giants in attendance. “What gives you the notion that you have any say in this matter at all? I have not protected this insignificant little backwater so that you lot can grow a spine, let alone a brain!”

Even the giants looked terrified at Zevander’s ferocity, dropping their drums and desperately trying to cover their eyes as well as their ears with their hands, failing at both. The effect on the crowd was almost as severe, with people trying to get away, bolting for any exit they could find from the square. The black riders had dismounted and they were now physically stopping the people from getting away, sometimes roughly.

“Silence!” boomed from the fifty-foot tall Zevander. “Bring out the girl.”

Two of the black riders pushed their way roughly into the crowd, heading towards Lucia and the girl trembling at her side. Linara, the daughter, was everything Jax was not. Fair of hair and of personality, she had been quite possibly the bubbliest, happiest person he knew. She always tried to look for the positive in any situation, and even when her older brother Landon had been selected in the lottery, she spent most days trying to cheer him up, bringing him flowers and telling him stories of how he was going on an adventure. The siblings had always been close, as they were born less than a year apart, but in the end, it hadn’t mattered. Now, she glumly kept her eyes focused on the ground, trying to appear as small as possible, so that perhaps the world wouldn’t notice her.

One of the riders grabbed Linara’s arm roughly, but her mother threw herself at him, using fists and feet and even teeth to try and dislodge him. The other rider quickly drew his sword and plunged it deep into Lucia’s chest. She stopped her barrage, looked at her daughter with an expression of confusion painted on her face, and collapsed into her arms. For a moment, mother and daughter held each other, but it was cut short as as the riders tore Linara away, her mother dropping to the ground weakly. They dragged Linara to the front of the
crowd as she kicked and screamed, trying to get away, and threw her to her knees in front of Zevander, who had shrunk to his normal size.

“Quite the bother. I’m sorry about that, my dear, but people need to know their place in this world. I am at the top, and you are at the bottom. That’s just the way it is,” Zevander said calmly as he eyed Linara’s sobbing form on the ground in front of him. “I’m sure it will work out in the end, we’ll find a good use for you. I’m sure in time we’ll become the best of friends.”

“Now take them to me,” Zevander said while licking his lips, and with another flash of lightning, he was gone. The only thing left of him were the robes, now empty, lying in the middle of the square.
The twelve youths of Bryn Nevin had been loaded into the last empty cage, not giving much of a fight as they were driven away from the only home they had ever known. Linara, not her usual self, cowered in the corner, head down, sobbing quietly. Artis had gone over to her and tried to console her, but she had angrily pushed him away. Jax felt sorry for her, and he wished he could do something for her. Even though they hadn’t been friends, or even friendly, he didn’t like seeing her in this kind of pain. He hadn’t really had any friends, except old Sam, and he was back at the village. After Artis’ rebuffal, the other youths decided to leave the grieving girl alone.

Jax saw that the youths in the other cages looked just as miserable as he did, and any attempts made to try and talk to them were met with stony silence. Some of them even actively tried to dissuade them from talking to them, putting their fingers to their lips, before pointing them up at the sky with a distrustful eye. It seemed Zevander was all-seeing, all-knowing, and everyone was terrified of him.

The group stopped like clockwork, twice a day. Once at midday, while the big lizards rested in the shade during the hottest part of the day, and then again in the evening, as there was little light to navigate with here in this wilderness. Provisions were scarce, and Jax felt his stomach rumble with hunger most parts of the day except perhaps just after they had taken their meager meals of stale, hard bread and water. Linara, at first, refused all food and water, but the riders would not take no for an answer, and she was soon forced to eat. This didn’t do much to improve her mood, although it did shift it slightly from sullenness to anger, especially as she was getting increasingly longer looks from the riders in black. This just seemed to anger her more.

On the outskirts of the village, the going was easy, with wide-open meadows on each side, and an easily-discernable path to follow. Jax could see that they were headed towards a great mountain off in the distance and he wondered if that was their final destination, or whether they would need to cross over it, a task that looked seemingly impossible.

A few days later, the group entered the wastelands, a place Jax had heard his parents speak of in hushed voices after he was supposed to be in bed. According to his parents, it was a barren, desolate place where no crops would grow, and roving bands of wild animals took care of anyone or anything that wandered into the region by mistake. The black riders were certainly on their guard, looking to the skies and to the horizon, and instructing the giants to cease their drumming. They definitely didn’t want any extra attention.
Linara had partially come out of her stupor and was angrily scolding the other boys for not putting up more of a fight when they were being taken.

“What’s wrong with you? I thought boys were supposed to be brave! I guess you’re not men just yet,” she said as the boys looked away in shame.

“Give them a break. What were they supposed to do? Charge Zevander, or the riders? You saw how that worked out for your mother.” Jax muttered this last bit under his breath.

“What did you say?” Linara was furious. “My mother was braver than all you lot put together, and when I get back to Bryn Nevin, I’m going to honor her memory for the rest of my days.”

“What do you mean, get back to Bryn Nevin? This is a one-way trip. What do you think we’re being taken for? A holiday? Zevander has something planned for us, and we’re not getting out of it alive,” Jax said soberly, looking at each of the members of the group as he spoke. The boys looked down as he met their gaze, but Linara was unfazed.

“What is wrong with you, Jax? You’ve always been a bit of an outsider, but you’re one of us, whether you like it or not, and we’re going to stick together and get out of this, together,” Linara said.

“You do that. I’ve accepted my fate since I was a young boy, and now that we’re on our way to our doom, it’s time you accepted it too,” Jax replied.

“No talking!” One of the black riders passing by kicked at their cage, causing a loud clang that reverberated all the way through the canyon they were in. Another rider joined him, and they laughed together at the cowering youths.

“Zevander is going to pay us handsomely for this lot. Look at that one in the corner,” one rider said, pointing at Gyles. “He must be the size of three of the others. I wonder what Zevander is going to do with the girl?”

“Whatever it is, it won’t be good,” the other rider replied, giving Linara one last lingering look, as they set off towards their horses. “Maybe we can have some fun with her on the way. These kids think they have it bad now. Wait until they get to Zevander, then they’ll know the meaning of misery. He might even kill all of them as retaliation for angering him.”

The riders laughed uproariously at this, while the youths sighed miserably, and some even started crying. Jax was unfazed, however. He had known this day would come his entire life, and he had prepared mentally for it.

Looking around, Jax saw that his parents had been right on one count. Nothing would grow here. The vegetation that sparsely populated this land was dry, bordering on desiccated,
and had probably not bloomed in years. The sand below the cage was dry and powdery, blowing this way and that with the smallest of gusts. It also had a red tint to it, similar to the deep red of the walls of the canyon. The sun above was blistering, as it was soon after midday. The lizards had found a small cave in one of the canyon walls, and were snoring peacefully.

That night, as Jax had his head bowed, trying to get some sleep, he heard a noise at the other end of the cage. He looked up and saw Gyles on his feet, attempting to tinker with the lock.

“What are you doing?” Jax hissed at him. “You’re going to get us in even more trouble!”

A few of the boys lifted their heads to see what was going on.

“What does it look like I’m doing? I’m trying to get us some food. We’re all starving here. They’re punishing us for what happened back in Bryn Nevin,” Gyles whispered back at him. He didn’t seem to be having much luck with the lock, so he set off examining the bars next to it. Pushing and pulling, twisting each one, he found one that was loose, and he gave the others a joyous grin as he quietly pulled the bar out of its hole. “Come on, let’s go!”

Gyles began squeezing his large frame through the new opening, with Jax right behind trying to hold him back.

“Get back in here,” Jax whispered harshly as he tugged on Gyles’ arm, trying to keep him in the cage. “You’re just going to make this worse.”

Gyles easily kept going, and managed to squeeze the rest of the way out of the cage, dragging Jax along behind him.

“Are you going to help me or not?” Gyles asked.

“You’re right, we’re all hungry,” Jax answered, giving it some thought. “I’m already out of the cage, might as well come along. You’d probably mess it up without me. Fine, lead the way.”

Gyles dropped to a crouch, as to not be easily seen by the riders, and Jax followed suit. The two boys crept stealthily towards where the riders were camped single-file, taking care not to step on any of the dried, rotting bushes that dotted the landscape.

The riders were camped around a large bonfire, and a juicy, succulent pig was roasting over it, giving off such an aroma that the boys’ mouths watered. After days of nothing but scraps, it was hard for Jax not to go rushing towards the sight of actual food, but Gyles put his hand up, warning him. The two boys froze. One of the riders, in a sleep-addled state, muttered some loud curses, snorted, then turned over and went back to sleep.
Gyles continued, and saw that part of the pig had been cut off, and was on a plate near the biggest of the riders. Gyles, looking back at Jax, pointed this out, and Jax nodded silently. They crawled towards the plate and each helped themselves to a bite. It was the best thing Jax had ever eaten. It took a conscious effort not to finish the entire thing right then and there, along with a reproachful look from Gyles as Jax reached out his hand to take another bite.

“We’re taking this food back to the others. I know you’re hungry, but think of someone else for a change,” Gyles said.

Jax was glad for the darkness of night, as his faced reddened with shame. He wasn’t accustomed to having to think of others.

Together, the two boys half-dragged and pulled the plate back to the cage. They hoisted it through the hole made by the missing bar, and followed themselves. After replacing the bar, they happily shared the rest of the food with the others. Even Linara had some, and the mood in the cage was lifted considerably. Some of the boys even slapped Jax on the back, congratulating him. He didn’t quite know how to process this new information, but it did feel good. He joined in on some conversation, getting to know these kids who he had shared a village with his entire life. With food in their bellies, they soon fell asleep.

* * *

The next morning, the youths had a rude awakening.

“What is this?” a rider standing beside the cage loudly asked. Jax looked down, and with a sinking feeling saw that they had fallen asleep with the dinner plate in the middle of the cage. Jax even had grease halfway across his cheek, which he was quick to wipe off with the sleeve of his shirt. The rider reached into the cage, grabbed the plate, then ran off with it held in one hand above his head, looking for a superior.

The other youths were stirring, looking around with bewildered expressions on their faces. Jax looked over at Gyles, who appeared strangely calm, with a hint of a smile on his lips.

The rider returned, this time with four others, among them the large rider that the boys took the plate of food from. He did not look pleased.

“Who did this? Who stole food?” the large rider asked in a commanding tone.

The inhabitants of the cage looked at one another, eyes wide, nervously hoping that they were still asleep and this was all a dream. Jax knew that they weren’t going to get out of this one so easily, and made to stand, but with a speed defying his size, Gyles quickly got up, pushing Jax back in the process.
“It was me, I did it. I needed more food! Look at me, do you think some small scraps of bread would sustain me? I ate the whole damn thing myself!” Gyles said.

Jax looked up at Gyles, and gave him a look that said “What are you doing?” Gyles shook his head and continued to taunt the riders.

“You guys are all a bit on the heavy side. I was doing you a favor. Didn’t your mothers tell you that if you ate too much pig you would turn into one yourselves?” Gyles said mockingly.

“Open the cage!” the large rider shouted at the others, and they scrambled to obey.

The cage opened, the riders grabbed Gyles and hauled him out of the cage, holding both of his arms and the big rider gave orders to take Gyles to one of the canyon walls, and hold him, front facing the wall.

“This is what happens when you break the rules. Zevander says we can’t kill you, but that doesn’t mean we can’t make you hurt,” the rider boomed.

He walked over to his horse, and drew a long, black whip out of one of the saddlebags, and strode back with long, deliberate steps. He gave the whip a flick of his wrist, and it unfurled to an impressive length. Raising his arm, poised to strike, he held that pose.

Jax looked away as the whip cracked, his eyes brimming with tears.

Crack. Crack. Crack.
A few days passed without further incident. Artis saw to Gyles’ wounds, lightly dabbing at the angry red welts across his back with a sleeve he tore off his shirt. Gyles had a fever, his face covered with sweat and his entire body shivering, even though they were still in the heat of the wastelands. They had stopped for midday, the heat so oppressive that it was hard to think, let alone move.

In the distance, a howl rolled across the wasteland like a tumbleweed, and the riders looked up from their stupor as one. They stayed seated, but the howl was soon joined by a second, then a third, then many more howls, and they jumped to their feet, barking orders at each other. Linara, who had been watching the riders, nudged the others, who reluctantly awoke from their dozing.

“Guys, something’s going on,” she whispered.

The riders, with swords out, advanced uneasily to the outskirts of their makeshift camp, careful not to make any unnecessary noise. The giants, still half-asleep, looked on dully. One of the riders, the one with the whip, sensing something, raised his hand, and the riders, along with Linara and the boys, froze, not even breathing. The entire camp was deathly still.

All of a sudden, an animal burst from behind a nearby dune, and raced towards the large rider. Jax couldn’t quite get a clear look, but its fur was somewhere between the canyon walls and the desert floor in color, in places short, and in other places shaggy. It ran on four legs, and had horns on either side of its head, curved and the size of large daggers. Before the rider could raise any defense, the beast leapt through the air, pinning the unfortunate man to the ground, followed by more of the beasts emerging from nearby dunes.

The camp exploded into chaos, with the giants shouting and running first one way, then another, but not really getting anywhere. The lizards, while large in form, were small at heart, and cowered in their caves, trying not to be noticed by these intruders. The riders, not having time to get to their horses and mount an offensive, formed a disciplined line to defend against the creatures, while two of them detached to assist their fallen companion.

The beasts, sensing that the line of riders was perhaps too formidable of a threat to face head on, decided to go around, and set their sights on the cages. Jax saw one beast leap and collide with a cage head-on, using its long paws to try and reach one of the youths inside. The riders, shouting orders at each other, made their way to the cage, and with their swords, managed to drive the creature away. The other creatures decided to use this opportunity and
circled around, going for the horses. The riders spotted this ruse, and moved their formation accordingly.

One of the creatures held back, however. As its brothers and sisters were occupied with the horses and the riders, it set its sight on the cage that Jax and the others were in. It hunched its shoulders, slinking around the other side of the cage, not to be seen by the riders, then pawed at the ground while eyeing the youths hungrily. Licking its lips, it pawed one final time, then charged, launching itself at the cage. It hit the cage at an awkward angle, and with the momentum of the lunge and the force of the impact, the cage was lifted up off the ground before slamming down on its side with a deafening crash.

The youths inside screamed, some had been caught unaware, and were thrown roughly against the sides of the spinning cage, hitting their heads violently on the bars and getting knocked unconscious. Others, like Jax, managed to brace themselves, only getting the wind knocked out of their lungs. Standing up with effort, he looked at the carnage around him. Those youths that could still move were groaning and fighting to get to their feet. Jax and two others quickly dragged the unconscious forms away from the bars, towards the bottom of the cage, which was now the side. The beast, trying desperately to get at the youths, was snarling and lunging one of its clawed paws as far into the cage as it could reach. It couldn’t quite reach them, so it backed up and tried again, and then again.

Erek was also up, eyes filled with fury, and fists clenched, he was yelling at the top of his lungs at the beast. “Go away! Get the hell out of here! Don’t make me hurt you!”

Artis rushed to Gyles’ side, but breathed easier when he saw that Gyles hadn’t been injured further. Linara, also recovering quickly, was up on her feet and examining her surroundings. The youths were crestfallen when they noticed the loose bar, which they had used in their escape for the food, was now up against the ground, so they couldn’t use that route again.

“Jax, look! The creature knocked the door open,” she said excitedly.

Jax looked over at the door of their cage, and saw that it was indeed open, although just a crack. The creature, seeing it couldn’t force its way into the cage, had apparently lost interest, and wandered off in the direction of the horses. It looked back at the youths, giving off an angry-sounding snort, before continuing on its way.

“We can get out of here! Come on guys, let’s go,” Linara said.

Linara rushed to the cage door, pulling on it with all her might, but it wasn’t enough. The door just wouldn’t budge. She looked over at Jax with an expectant glance at the door.
Jax came over to help, and using both hands and all of his might, he gave a mighty tug and the door swung slowly open.

“We’ve got to get out of here,” Linara said.

“Gyles isn’t going anywhere in his condition,” Artis said worriedly. Most of the others were still unconscious, so there were few that were in any condition to escape.

“Jax, Erek, come on! We can get help and come back for the others,” Linara said with a slightly frenzied look in her eyes.

Linara made her way out of the now-opened door of the cage, careful not to make any noise; she wanted the riders’ complete attention on the creatures, who were realizing that they had perhaps bitten off a bit more than they could chew, and were considering retreat. Erek followed her hesitantly, looking back at Artis and Gyles, and then picked up two planks of wood that had broken off the cage. He hefted one with his right hand, swinging it this way and that, apparently approving at the weight and balance. He gave Jax a grim smile and offered him one of the planks.

Linara looked back at Jax, imploring him to come with them. With a remorseful glance back at Artis and the prone form of Gyles, Jax made his way towards the exit, stopping at Artis’ side. Putting his hand on Artis’ shoulder, and looking down at Gyles, he said, “We’ll get help. I owe him that much.” Artis, with wide, hopeful eyes, nodded back at him, then refocused his attention on Gyles. As Jax exited the cage, he took the plank Erek held out to him.

The riders seemed to be still locked in battle with the creatures, and their entire attention was on them. Jax, Linara and Erek sprinted much of the way to the edge of the camp, giving the cage, their newfound temporary home, a long glance.

“We’ll come back for them! I promise we will,” Linara said breathlessly. The boys agreed.

They made their way to a small hill, hoping to get a better view of their surroundings before proceeding. Halfway up, they heard a growl behind them. One of the creatures had been tracking them, and now stood menacingly behind them, pawing at the ground with deliberate strokes.

“It was waiting for us to get out, it knew it couldn’t get us in the cage, so it waited until we were out. Clever,” Jax said, as he lifted his weapon and took a defensive position.

Erek put his hand on Jax’s shoulder, and with a fierce look at the creature, said, “I’ll take care of this one, you two go ahead. I’ll catch up with you later.”
Jax thought of arguing further with Erek, but decided against it. Even though he knew Erek had never faced battle before, something about the fury in his eyes let Jax know that he couldn’t change his mind, even if he tried.

“How go!” Erek urged, motioning urgently with his arm away further up the hill.

Jax took Linara’s hand, and together they ran up the hill, using their hands to claw at the dirt when the climb got too steep. They looked back to see Erek waving his makeshift weapon fiercely, and shouting taunts and foul words at the creature, which didn’t seem to understand, and kept up its threatening stance. It continued pawing at the ground, with its head getting lower with each passing moment. As it tensed its muscles to pounce, it paused, ears flattening, sensing something.

With frightening precision, the group of raiders came up from behind the beast and divided it from its prey. While two of the riders attacked from the front, three others attacked from the rear, and quickly overpowered and killed the creature. They then turned on Erek, whom they subdued easily, kicking and screaming, and carried him away. Jax, upon seeing the riders attack the beast, grabbed Linara and dove behind a large boulder that straddled the hill.

“We have to do something! We have to help him,” Linara said, eyes pleading.

“We can’t. Their only hope is for us to find help somehow,” Jax replied, backing away from Linara.

“From whom? We’re all alone in this world. Our village didn’t want us, we don’t know anyone else. Who’s going to want to help us?” Linara asked, turning away while tears formed in her eyes.

Jax didn’t know how to answer her; they were out of options. He paced the hilltop, trying to think of some way out of their current predicament. He thought of Sam, the smartest man that he knew. He would know what to do. Jax just wasn’t smart enough to figure it out. He stomped his feet, then dropped to his knees and hit the earth with his fists.

“I don’t know, I’m sorry Linara, I just don’t…” Jax said, as he felt the ground beneath him shudder, and then give way. He heard Linara call out his name as he fell, then the whole world turned black.
The Second Dream

The clouds swirl again, and part to show a young boy, older than the one in his previous dream. He is clothed in a loose white shirt and brown trousers, both stained and ill-fitting. His dark hair is unkempt, long, and blows in the wind. His stance gives off an air of insecurity, his eyes downcast and his shoulders hunched. Surrounding him is a crowd of other children, all taller than him.

“Lumpy, Lumpy, Lumpy!” the children chant in unison.

The boy continues his downward stare, trying to bore a hole into the earth for him to disappear into. The other children tease him mercilessly over the fact that he’s shorter than they are. His hump doesn’t make matters any better.

A girl steps forward, eyes shining with a glint of wickedness. Her long, blonde hair cascades down towards her shoulders, partially restrained by a light blue bow tied upon her head.

“Lumpy, Lumpy, Lumpy! Nobody wants you here. We don’t want you, the town doesn’t want you. Your kin didn’t even want you. They left you like a piece of trash,” the girl says.

The boy’s eyes begin to tear up, and he uses a sleeve in an attempt to stop the inevitable flood. When the girl reaches out and pushes him brutally to the ground, he does not lift a hand to defend himself. Laying on the ground, one elbow scraped and bloody, and the tears now flowing freely, he sees the teacher, standing by the entrance to the school, holding back laughter. Right in that moment, the boy’s eyes narrow, giving off an almost murderous glow, as he mutters something under his breath so that the children can’t hear him.

“You may be right. I know I’m not wanted here. I was left behind, not even my kin wanted me. I know I’m different, but being different from you lot is a good thing. It’s something I can use to my advantage. No matter what, no matter the price or how long it takes, I will get my revenge,” the boy mutters as the corners of his mouth curl into an evil grin.
Jax awoke to familiar smells. For a moment he thought he was back in Sam’s basement, surrounded by shelves of strange objects and colorful bottles, but things were not the same here. Like the last time he had awoken in Sam’s basement, it was after a strange dream, so vivid that he felt like he had been there with the children. Who was the boy from his dream? Was he the same boy that had been abandoned? As an outsider, he felt empathy towards the boy: he knew how it felt to not belong.

He wondered whether his dreams were trying to tell him something as he rubbed his eyes to get rid of the last vestiges of the night, and as he blinked, a soft blue hue illuminated Linara standing over him, hands clasped, smile reaching from ear to ear.

“Oh thank the heavens, you’re alive! I was so worried when you disappeared and I tried calling after you but you didn’t answer and then I came after you and you were lying down here in this dark cave and I called out for help and Sela came and, oh, this is Sela, she came to help and she’s a dwarf and I found dwarves, Jax! She’s been oh so nice and we’ve been talking and did you know that dwarves can see the future? Or, at least, they can see the things others most desire in life and she gave me this strange drink and I saw stars and clouds for a bit and she’s alive, Jax! My mother’s alive! I saw her in her own bed with bandages wrapped around her where that awful rider stabbed her,” Linara said, all without stopping for breath as she rushed towards him and gave him a hug. She withdrew quickly with a concerned expression as Jax whimpered in pain.

“Give him some space, dearie,” a woman’s voice said from the corner.

Jax looked over and saw a small, robed figure standing in the corner, hunched over a stone bowl, using a mortar and pestle to grind away at something while humming softly. It had its back slightly turned towards Jax, so he couldn’t make out many details, other than the fact that it was very short, and also that it seemed to have gigantic ears, stretching at least three times further than his own. The figure turned around to look at him, and Jax saw that it was a woman, only much shorter than any woman he had ever seen. She was obviously advanced in age, and had long, curly hair, mostly grey but with streaks of the original blonde, that reached halfway to her bare feet. She looked at Jax and smiled reassuringly towards him.

The room did its part in putting Jax at ease. As the familiar smell indicated, the walls were lined with shelves very similar to Sam’s basement, and Jax’s heart felt heavy at how much he missed the crazy old man. What made this room different was that instead of candles, clusters of crystals dotted the walls and ceiling of the room. Similar in hue to the sky
on a summer day, they radiated soft light and lit the entire chamber. It made for an odd sight, but not a displeasing one, and Jax felt wholly at ease in this alien place.

“Just mixing up something to cure you of those aches and pains, I tell you so. You had yourself a mighty tumble, you did! Lucky for you that your missus found us and brought you to us,” Sela said in a strange accent.

“She’s not, she’s just my friend,” Jax said with reddening cheeks as he glanced over at Linara, who seemed to be much more interested in looking at all the strange and different things that were on the shelves around the room.

“A very good friend at that, as she rightly saved your life, I tell you so. I don’t know many who would follow someone into a dark pit,” Sela said with a wink, turning back to her work.

“Your mother’s alive? Are you sure?” Jax asked as he turned towards Linara.

“Yes, of course. I saw her, as I see you now, although a bit cloudier. She was laid up in bed, as you are, and I could see her chest lift and fall with her breathing. She’s hurt, but she’s alive,” Linara said.

“And you saw this after Sela gave you some sort of drink?” Jax asked, slightly incredulously.

Sela, finishing her grinding, added a drop from a green vial, then two pinches of a powder from a high shelf, and topped it off by digging a finger into one of her enormous ears and depositing whatever she found into the bowl with a plop. Giving the bowl a shake and a whirl, she nodded contently and brought it over to Jax. “Now, drink. This mixing is good for broken ribs and the sort, it is.”

Jax, eyeing the green, goopy mixture with equal parts disgust and horror, looked around, and saw Sela and Linara smiling broadly, excitedly waiting for him. He gave a deep sigh, and upended the contents of the bowl into his mouth. Strangely, it didn’t taste bad, although it had the texture of something you’d find beneath moldy floorboards after heavy rains. The mixture tingled as it made its way through his body, and his aches lessened almost immediately.

Sela, taking the now-empty bowl from Jax’s hands, brushing his fingers with hers as she took it, nodded happily and answered Jax’s question. “The drink I gave your friend over there is one us dwarves have known about and used for generations, so we have. It shows you your life’s greatest desire, at least, it usually does. Doesn’t always work quite how it’s supposed to, I tell you so.”
Looking quizzically at Jax, Sela continued. “Would you like me to mix the drink for you, boy?”

“Oh, do it, Jax! I’m sure it’ll brighten your mood,” Linara said.

Jax, with angry tears forming in his eyes, struggled to turn on his side, away from the expectant glances of the two women. “No. I already know what my life’s greatest desire is. I’ve known it all my life. I was born into a lonely life without choice, cast in the role of the village’s savior, even before I’d taken my first breath. Nobody cared about me, not really, they only cared about what I could do for them. What I’ve wanted, what I’ve always desired, is the freedom to choose for myself, for my life to be my own.”

Linara flinched, as if Jax’s words had physically struck her. Sela saw this, and went over to the girl, putting a hand on her back, for she could not quite reach her shoulders, and led her carefully out of the room. “Why don’t you give us a moment, dearie? Jax and I need to have a little talk, so we do.”

“All, all right Sela. If you think that’s right,” Linara said as she departed.

Sela came back into the room, closing the door softly behind her. She came over to the bed, sat down beside Jax, and rested her hand on his arm. “Your friend told me your story while you were still sleeping. To be sure, it’s a hard life you’ve had, so ye have. There’s one thing you’re wrong about, though. Your greatest desire isn’t to be free.”

Jax, intrigued, rolled over to face the wise old dwarf. Sela continued, “No, what you want, what you have always wanted, even though you didn’t know it, was to have meaning in this world. You wanted your decisions, when you finally made them for yourself, to matter. You desperately want to know that your life has a purpose. And considering that your friends are in danger, carted off to a bad fate, the next decision you make will surely matter, so it will.”

“But we have no chance. Zevander’s forces are great, and we’re only two kids,” Jax said as he dried the tears from his eyes. An idea came to him. “You can help us! With your wisdom and your potions, we might be able to save our friends.”

Now it was Sela’s turn to look away. She took a few moments before responding.

“No, I’m sorry Jax. We fled to these caves generations ago. The people living on the surface, the ones tall as trees, as you two are, they became jealous of our power, the power that we get from the crystals, and wanted it for themselves. When we refused to share our knowledge with them, as it is surely dangerous in the wrong hands, they threatened to attack us. We took all our belongings and departed in the night, leaving most everything behind,
including a few very precious things, and came down into these caves. We’ve been here ever since, so we have,” Sela said with sorrow in her voice.

“What are the crystals?” Jax asked.

“They are Eleneth, our god. Or, they’re manifestations of his power here in the physical world, so we say. In dwarven legend, at the beginning of time, Eleneth and his brothers Galador and Alaras were arguing over how best to create this world. Alaras, stubborn as a rock, created the plains and the mountains and all things immobile. Galador, who was ever-changing his mind about all things, created the oceans and the seas, which come and go with the tides. Eleneth, who was always looking up at the stars, felt sorry for any creature who couldn’t marvel in their glory, so he gathered up a handful and thrust them deep into the earth. These crystals contain those stars, so they do. They contain mighty power, so it is important that only those who are responsible be able to wield their power. This is part of the reason that only dwarven females are allowed to be priests. Dwarven males are much too emotional and rash, much better for them to release all that pent-up rage and anger doing muscly things, that’s so.”

“With that kind of power, I’m sure we could defeat Zevander and free our friends,” Jax said.

“I’m sorry boy, it’s going to have to be my final answer. We can’t go with you, but there are other ways we can help,” Sela said, walking over to a small wooden chest that stood against a wall in the corner.

Linara, who had obviously been eavesdropping, now burst into the room. “But we have to rescue them, Jax! When Zevander realizes that he’s missing some of the chosen, life is going to get very tough for our friends. Imagine Gyles’ wounds on each and every one of them.”

Jax looked over at Sela, then looked back at Linara resolutely and sat up in the bed. “I agree with you. Gyles saved my life when he took the blame for the food, and I owe it to him to at least try. Sela told me that they’re not going to help us, so we’re going to have to go it alone.”

Sela, crouching down and opening the small chest, reached inside and pulled out two items. The first, a small necklace holding a small pendant, she held up to Linara, meaning to put it on her, and after harrumphing loudly, Linara took the hint and bowed down so the dwarf could put the necklace around her neck. With the necklace fastened, Linara took the pendant in her hand, studying it. It had a depiction of a crystal on it, and it seemed to give a pulsing hum all on its own. She then slipped the necklace under her shirt.
“This will protect the wearer from all sorts of danger, especially from the aboveground people with ill-intent, it will,” Sela said.

The second item she pulled out of the chest was a small dagger, seemingly made of the same crystals that dotted the walls, even giving off the same blue light. She held it out for Jax, who gratefully took it.

“This item is one of our people’s most sacred treasures. We constructed it long ago, carefully harvesting one of the holy crystals of our Lord Eleneth from the wall. Linara was right, we dwarves can sometimes see the future, at least a version of it. If someone has evil in their heart, we can detect it. Years ago, we noticed it in one of our own, and we knew that we had to construct this dagger, for someday in the future it would be needed,” Sela said.

Sela wished them good luck, adding specifically to Jax, “If you ever find yourself in trouble such as you’ve never seen before, if hope has deserted you, call out to Eleneth, and help will surely be at hand. Now, here is Groth, he will show you the way out of the caves, past the wastelands.”

A large dwarf, exceedingly hairy, with long, curly hair and a bushy beard entered. He was clad only in a pair of leather trousers, leaving his upper body bare, showcasing bulging muscles all over his short frame. He grunted at Jax and Linara and walked off down one of the tunnels leading away. The two kids quickly said their farewells to Sela, and rushed after the gruff little man. Jax had mixed thoughts about leaving the dwarven realm, but he knew they needed to hurry if they were going to rescue their friends. It was a long road ahead, but they were on their way.
Jax and Linara easily made their way back up to the surface with the assistance of Groth, who hadn’t said a word, leading the way by means of pointing motions and an odd grunt here or there. After an hour or two of easy walking through the blue-lit caves, they ended up in a large, high-walled cavern. Multiple exits lined the perimeter of the room, some headed upwards, some downwards. Groth walked to the middle of the cavern and stopped suddenly, pointing towards one of the tunnels that headed downwards, and with a gravelly tone, uttered a single word. “Up.”

They thanked Groth, Linara even trying to give the little man a hug, which he deftly maneuvered his way out of, and started off down the tunnel. After a short downwards walk, the tunnel angled sharply upwards, and they soon spotted a small, blinding light coming from up ahead. The light grew as they neared it, and after acclimating their eyes to the increased brightness, they found themselves above ground, in a small patch of foothills on the edge of those barren, red wastelands. The sand, which was so deeply red in the wastelands, was here a rather muted brown color, and the beginnings of vegetation were all around them. A few trees dotted the land, with quite a few more in the distance; a forest it seemed. From this high vantage point, they also saw a small trail snaking its way out of the wastelands, heading off in the direction of the great mountain, which dominated the horizon.

Jax and Linara made their way down the hillside towards the trail, soon finding telltale signs that told them the riders had passed this way. It was easy to follow the tracks the cages made in the brownish sand, and they walked alongside them until they were out of sight of the wastelands, which was a relief to Jax. He never wanted to see that barren, evil place again.

As they headed away from the wastelands, the trees around them grew in number as well as in size. Soon, they were following the trail through a dense forest containing trees so thick and so high that they couldn’t see the sky anymore, and the light grew dimmer and the air cooler.

“May I ask you something?” Linara asked after they had been walking in silence through the forest for a while.

“Yes, of course,” Jax replied.

“Sela offered you the elixir. Why didn’t you take it?” Linara asked delicately.

Jax didn’t respond for a while, giving his thoughts time to form into a coherent manner. He didn’t have much practice with baring his heart and speaking about his emotions, but the past few days with Linara made it a bit easier to open up to her.
“You know that the mayor’s eldest son is the only one who is automatically one of the chosen,” Jax said, and Linara nodded. “How do you think it feels to be born, knowing that your life is never your own? That it will end when you are sixteen, taken away, never to return.”

Linara was silent, contemplating Jax’s words. They continued on in silence for a while longer. The day had given way to evening, and the forest had grown even darker. They followed the path, taking them between the trunks of large trees and even larger boulders. The canopy above was so dense that he couldn’t tell where one tree ended and another began, and from a certain perspective, they almost seemed connected with some sort of web, glistening in the silvery light of the newly-risen moon.

Jax continued, “I know that your pain is greater than mine. Your brother was a good person, and he didn’t deserve what happened to him. I noticed you two over the years, how happy you were, how full of life and optimism. I also noticed him change when he was chosen. It was as if a hole had opened up in his heart, and all the good things that made up who he was drained away. Now, imagine that same hole, but imagine having it all your life. Envision that pain, but stretch it over an entire lifetime. No matter how much you try and fill up your heart, it empties again, slowly but surely. I have lived with that pain for years. It hasn’t let me breathe. I haven’t experienced friendship, or love. What would’ve been the point? It would’ve eventually come to an end.”

Jax, after having finished his confession, felt utterly exhausted. Not an exhaustion of the body, but of the spirit. He had never bared his heart like this before, and the depths of his despair surprised even him. Linara hadn’t said anything for a while, so he looked over to her, and saw her eyes full of tears.

“You’re right. I don’t really have any idea how that must have felt, living with that your entire life. We never talked while we were in Bryn Nevin, you were always on the outside, never took part in any of our games. You never gave anyone a chance to get to know you. Whenever we would think of inviting you, you were either absent, or might as well have been. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you smile. I thought of you as the unhappiest boy I had ever known. Now I know why,” Linara said softly, choosing her words carefully. She stopped, and turning to him, she took his hand in hers, and looked into his eyes. “I’m glad you told me, Jax.”

Jax, not knowing what to say, merely smiled at her as they stood there in silence, letting their tears fall freely. They stayed like that, unmoving in the soft moonlight, oblivious to everything except each other. If they had been more alert, they might have noticed the
movement of a dozen green forms, camouflaged in the canopy above them. They were the size of small farm animals, with fangs as large as small daggers, dripping with a noxious, sticky substance, descending slowly from the webs they had interlaced with the leaves of the trees. As they grew closer to the youths, they rubbed their forelegs together in anticipation, making a soft, high-pitched humming noise.

“Jax! Watch out!” Linara shouted, finally seeing clearly, as she gave Jax a hard shove moments before one of the spiders landed in the exact spot Jax had been standing.

Jax, jarred violently out of his own thoughts, looked around him and saw the danger they were in. The spiders, whole groups of them, were descending from the trees, and barring the path ahead. He took out the crystal dagger Sela had given him, and slashed it towards a nearby spider, which didn’t seem too bothered by Jax’s attack.

Jax and Linara came together, standing back to back. Jax holding out his dagger, Linara waving a branch she had found on the path before her. They saw in the dim light that the spiders now counted in the dozens, their fangs glistening with either saliva or venom, hungrily looking at the two youths. One spider, hungrier than the rest, tensed and jumped towards Jax, who swung at it with the dagger, barely nicking it on the leg, but enough to divert its course slightly. It crashed into Jax’s shoulder, knocking him out of the way and continued on towards Linara, who also fell to the ground, the spider on top of her.

Linara crawled backwards with swift, jerking motions, the spider following. This sudden movement caused the necklace Sela had given her to spill out from under her shirt, and suddenly a bright beam of light cut through the dim light and hit the attacking spider full-on, knocking it halfway across the path where it lay on its back, scorched and sizzling where the beam of light had hit it.

“Jax, the necklace Sela gave me!” Linara shouted, holding it in her hand as she guided the bright light around her at the other spiders. With her other hand she reached towards Jax, who clasped it in his own and held on tight.

The other spiders fearfully backed up, seeing what the beam had done to their fallen comrade. They didn’t retreat very far, but enough to allow Jax and Linara to stand up and regain their wits. Linara, holding the necklace, swung it in the direction of any spider that was brave enough to venture too close while guiding Jax along the path until they could see that the foliage was thinning, and the spiders remained further and further behind. Seeing this, they could relax, but they kept her hands firmly gripped together long after the spiders were gone.
Jax and Linara were relieved to reach the edge of the forest, the sun just having risen, showering the land in its warmth. Their shivers soon ceased, and they found themselves in rougher, hillier terrain. Going up and down these hills at the base of the great mountain was hard work, and the youths were soon tired. They had to take breaks often, which didn’t sit well with Jax. He felt like the riders, and their friends, were getting too far ahead, escaping from their grasp. He saw that Linara was also bothered, as the two hadn’t spoken much in the days prior. What lay ahead loomed large in their minds, and when the time came, they weren’t sure that they would be up to the task.

Late in the afternoon, both of them sweaty and tired, Jax close to calling another stop to rest, they crested a hill. This hill, like the last dozen or more behind it, didn’t look like anything special. But as they reached the top, Jax’s eyes widened, and he grabbed Linara and dragged her with him to a crouch. The other side of the hill sloped downwards into an enormous basin, ending in a cave entrance high enough for even the giants to easily go into. Wooden tracks came out of the cave and snaked their way across the basin towards a large structure. On the tracks, wooden carts were being pushed by ragged-looking people, two to a cart, with the black riders armed with whips to make sure the workers didn’t slow down.

With a gasp, Jax realized that the carts were full of the blue crystals that Sela and her people held in such high regard. In the corner of the basin were the hated cages that Jax and his friends had been transported in, now empty. They had reached their destination.

The two youths barely remembered to breathe as they kept looking over the bustling camp. The lizards, now resting after a long journey, were being fed all manner of plants and vegetation by the giants, who appeared to be enjoying themselves immensely, as if the lizards were their pets. A few of the horses were being led by riders towards another large building on the outskirts of the basin, presumably a stable, after which the riders made their way to a lavish tent, with rows of smaller tents behind it. Jax could hear the festivities going on inside the main tent, the riders had completed their assignment, and were now celebrating.

“Look, Zevander!” Linara whispered towards Jax, pulling his sleeve and pointing in the direction of the grandest, most ornate tent of them all.

True enough, the sorcerer himself stood in front of a tent of such splendor that Jax had never seen. It was blue, similar in color to the crystals being carted through the camp, with gold trim along its sides, and looked to be even larger than Jax’s house back in Bryn Nevin. Next to this tent was another, similar tent, except smaller and not as grand. Zevander seemed to be having a heated argument with a large man dressed in black. This man, similarly
dressed to the riders, had a large mask on, which was shaped like a skull of some wild animal, with large horns on top spiraling towards the sky and a row of teeth sharper than any dagger. Long, grey hair, almost white, came out from the back of the mask. He had his arms clasped behind him, unaffected by Zevander’s tirade. He bowed, then walked off towards the riders’ tent.

“I’m sure Zevander just heard about his missing kids. He looks furious. We have to do something, otherwise our friends, or even our families could be in real trouble. We should wait until nightfall, though. If we tried to do anything now, we’d be spotted immediately,” Jax whispered back to Linara.

* * *

During the hours they waited, Jax had formulated a plan. After night fell, a large crowd of tired, shuffling workers had made their way out of the mine, and towards a large, dilapidated building on the other side of the camp from the riders’ tents. They were herded by the riders, who eagerly cracked their whips and laughed when the workers flinched, or fell. The riders then went to their tents, with only a few patrolling the area. The giants had grown tired of their game with the lizards, and had fallen asleep, some holding a lizard as a child would hold a doll.

“I’m going to sneak down there and try and find where our friends are being held. Then, I’m going to free them and come back,” Jax said confidently.

“Wait, that’s your plan? You’re going to march in there, through all the guards and giants and past Zevander, and just free our friends?”

Jax’s confidence wavered. “Well, yes. That’s the gist of it.”

“If that’s the gist, what’s the rest? Now, listen. We need more information. We can see that our friends are being used as workers in the mine, with those black-clothed bastards as supervisors. We have no idea if the building where the workers are being housed is locked, or if it has traps on the outside. We don’t know if Zevander is watching them day and night, he could be! That big man with the scary mask, he seems to be second in command here, under Zevander. We definitely don’t want to let him spot us,” Linara said.

“So what do you suggest?” Jax asked.

“What I suggest is that we go and check out the house where our friends are being kept, try to get in, and talk to one of our friends, to see what’s going on. Then, we try to get them out, if possible,” Linara said proudly.

“That was my plan!” Jax protested.
“Well, your plan had me sitting up here, twiddling my thumbs and doing nothing. That is entirely unacceptable,” Linara said.

“Fine, let’s go,” Jax said.

Together, they made their way around the basin until they were at the closest point to the workers’ building. Carefully, they slid down, making sure to keep out of sight of the patrolling guards. They arrived at the building to find it unlocked, and slipped inside. The room was large, and completely filled with beds, three up and five of those to a row, and probably a dozen rows, meaning enough room for hundreds of workers. In each bed there lay a dirty and ragged form, still breathing hard from the day’s labor. Some had long hair and beards, and had obviously been at the camp for years. These men were wide-eyed, staring at the ceiling, and had a hopeless air about them. Others, the newest arrivals, while dirty, were markedly more miserable. They hadn’t had years to get used to the horrible life that was now theirs.

Linara poked Jax in the ribs, and pointed towards the corner of the room, where he saw a group of youths that he recognized. They hurriedly made their way to them.

“Linara! Jax!” Artis exclaimed as he saw them. “I’m so happy to see you again.”

Artis hugged them both, and then made way for the others to greet the newcomers. First in line was a large form, with a smile as wide as his broad shoulders.

“Gyles! You’ve recovered!” Jax exclaimed.

“Of course I have, I wouldn’t let a little thing such as a whipping keep me down,” Gyles said with a grin. “Where have you two been? It got pretty bad after you left, the riders were furious when they discovered that they were missing some of the chosen.”

“We’ll tell you later, but for now, we’re here to rescue you,” Linara said. “Now, get your stuff, hurry up, let’s go.”

Gyles’ smile faded, and he sat down on one of the beds. The others glumly followed his example.

“We can’t go,” Gyles said as he lifted one of his pant legs to show a small, crystal anklet. “Every morning this thing wakes us up with a jolt, and if we’re not on our way down into the mines on time, it gives us another, worse jolt. We’ve heard stories from the others who were already here that some of them tried escape over the years. They said to imagine the morning jolts, except a hundred times worse. As soon as they tried to climb the hill surrounding the camp, the pain got worse and worse until they had to turn around, much to the enjoyment of the riders.”

“What can we do?” Linara asked glumly, her plan not going as she had hoped.
“We’ve heard rumors that the anklets can be deactivated, and that that big fella with
the horns has the controls for them,” Artis said. “You two don’t have anklets, so you can
come and go as you please, maybe you can make your way to his tent tonight while he’s
sleeping, and steal the controls.”

Linara perked up: a new plan was forming in her mind. They stayed with their friends
for a few hours more, learning more about the camp and its inhabitants. When their friends
had arrived at the camp, the riders had taken them out of the cages, and Zevander had given
one of his speeches, telling them that this was their new life, and they should give up any
hope of escape. The riders had then fastened an anklet to the leg of each boy, with Zevander
cackling maniacally in the background. He told them that they were part of a greater plan,
that they would be going down into the mine, which goes deep beneath the great mountain,
and would be bringing back valuable blue crystals. These crystals are then broken down and
taken to another building in the camp. They didn’t know what happened to them in there, as
the workers weren’t allowed anywhere near that building.

Their friends told them that the conditions weren’t really bad, as long as you did your
work and kept your mouth shut. They got three meals a day, and a good night’s rest. The
worst part, however, was knowing that they would never get to leave, never get to go back to
their families, and this feeling of despair and hopelessness was toxic. It eventually killed your
spirit, and the veteran workers sometimes refused to get up, even though they knew that they
wouldn’t survive the resulting jolts. They just didn’t care anymore.
Jax and Linara waited until they were sure that most of the guards would be asleep. Reassuring their friends that they would come back for them after they got the controls, they made their way towards the foreman’s tent, sticking to the shadows, where the crystals’ blue light didn’t reach. Opening the flap of the tent, they slipped inside and saw that it was bathed in the crystals’ soft light, and was much larger than it appeared from the outside. They were in a hallway, with openings both on the left and right, and another room at the far end.

Taking care to step as lightly as possible, Jax and Linara made their way down the hallway, stopping to peer in the two side rooms. One was filled with various chests and boxes, overflowing with gold and jewelry and treasures. The other was covered in a wide variety of weapons, shields and armor. Jax picked up one of the swords, hefting it and slashing at the air with mock ferocity, before sighing and putting the weapon back.

“Boys,” Linara whispered as she shook her head.

They found nothing else of note in these side rooms, and they made their way to the room at the end of the hall. In the middle of the room was a large desk, piled high with maps and letters, with two chairs in front, and a large, black chair behind. To the right were boxes filled with the hated anklets that the workers wore, and to the left was a small, plain looking bed, which was empty.

“I have a bad feeling about this. Where is he? He was supposed to be asleep,” Linara whispered to Jax.

“I’ve been expecting you,” said a booming voice behind them. “So thoughtful of you to deliver yourselves to me.”

Jax whirled about and found himself face to face with the masked man, now much more terrifying up close. The man snapped his fingers, and a pair of riders that they hadn’t noticed before now came out from the shadow-filled corners of the room and restrained Jax and Linara. The two youths were then dragged on their feet towards the large desk, and made to sit roughly on the chairs. The masked man leisurely made his way behind the desk and sat down.

“It would have been such a bother to have to hunt you and bring you back here,” the masked man said. “Now we can get you two to work, just as planned. Bring over the anklets.”

The riders retrieved a couple anklets from the box in the corner, and brought them over. Bending down, he affixed one of the anklets to Linara, as she looked over at Jax with
tears forming in her eyes. Jax reached over and took her hand, squeezing it firmly, and they shared a long, lingering look. The other rider then attached an anklet to Jax.

“Good, good. We’ll get you to work in the morning. The boy in the mines, and the girl, well, I’m sure we can find something for her to do,” the masked man said with a chuckle.

Jax, filled with rage, grabbed the crystal dagger he was hiding in his shirt, held it high and lunged over the table at the masked man with a throaty yell.

“Jax, no!” Linara called after him.

The masked man easily parried Jax’s strike, disarming him in an instant, but then he merely stood there, with a stunned expression in his eyes, the dagger hanging limply from his hand.

“Jax?” the masked man asked. “Your name is Jax?”

Jax was about to answer when the guards straightened all of a sudden, and gave a hasty salute towards the entrance to the room. With his robes swirling around him, Zevander entered and strode up to the masked man, slapping him heartily on the back.

“Well done, commander! You’ve apprehended our missing chosen, I see. Delightful,” Zevander crooned in the masked man’s ear.

Seeing the crystal dagger the commander was still holding, Zevander reached over and took it from him. Holding it up to his eyes, he inspected the weapon, cooing softly.

“It’s a pretty thing, isn’t it? It’ll make a lovely addition to my treasure room.” Zevander chuckled as he stuck the dagger in a fold of his robes.

Turning to Jax and Linara, Zevander continued. “Welcome, welcome. You must have gotten lost on the way, very unfortunate, you must have been so scared! But now we’re all back together again, a happy family, reunited at last. Yes, yes, I see that the commander has equipped you with our lovely jewelry. Good! Now, we’ll get you straight to work, to earn your lodging here at our Crystal Camp.”

Motioning to the guards, Zevander ordered them to take Jax away.

“Bring the girl to my tent, I’m going to want to have a chat with her, I’m sure we’ll become quite close,” Zevander sneered.

Jax struggled against his captors, trying to reach Linara. One of the guards holding him pulled back and Jax felt a sharp knock on the side of his head, then everything faded to black.
The Third Dream

For one last time the clouds swirl, concealing and then revealing a hunched figure of a man. The man is standing in front of a table covered with drawings and schematics and piled high with mechanical parts and gears, his fingers tracing lines on parchment, brow furrowed with concentration. He looks up from his reading and picks up a small iron piece, circular and notched on both ends, and approaches a large construct behind him. This construct is taller than him by at least double, with tubes and levers all over its front, along with a large, square opening. Reaching his hand inside the construct, he carefully inserts the piece, and jiggles it to make sure it is in straight.

Stepping away, he looks upon his creation with wide-eyed fervor. He reaches out, holding his breath as he does, and pulls a large lever that is positioned at the middle of the construct. Nothing happens for a while, and he sighs in frustration. Pacing back to the table, he looks over the parchments, shuffling papers back and forth, looking for what went wrong. All of a sudden, behind him he hears a soft whirring noise. Scarcely allowing himself to breathe, he turns around, eyes wide as saucers, and he looks upon the construct, now working on its own. The whirring grows even louder and settles into a steady rhythm of mechanical noises.

The man reaches into a box on the ground by the construct, and pulls out a blue crystal. Looking at it with fury in his eyes, he turns it this way and that, regarding it from every angle.

“This is where it starts,” he says with hatred burning in his eyes.

He thrusts the crystal into the opening of the machine, and waits eagerly for something to happen. It soon makes happy, crunching noises, and a soft, blue beam of light illuminates the man. He looks down at his hands, holds them out, and wills power into them. Soon, they begin to transform, one into a monstrous claw, the other into the trunk of a tree, sprouting leafy branches at its end. The man regards these new appendages with a wicked smile on his face, he wills power into them again, and they turn back into his own, gnarled hands.

Looking down at them, now back to the hands he knows so well, he lets out a laugh of unbridled rapture. He raises his arms high in the air, hands clenched into fists. Slowly, his form starts to change. His hump, previously forcing his posture to be always slightly askew, recedes, and with that his back straightens and his shoulders grow more relaxed. His legs grow and soon he towers over the table that he had had made specifically for his short frame.
His robes grow with him, and soon enough, his transformation complete, he stands confidently in front of his creation with a devilish grin plastered on his changed features.

“My time has come! All those that have done me wrong, you shall be sorry, I shall visit those wrongs back upon you thousand fold!” he shouts as the clouds swirl back in to obscure the vision.
Jax awoke slowly from the dream, the clouds still swirling in his mind. He didn’t know how much time had passed, but hearing the distant sounds of pickaxes and shovels working further down the tunnel brought him fully out of his stupor. For a moment he didn’t remember where he was, or why he was there, but it gradually came back to him.

Jax dimly remembered being dragged from Zevander’s tent by his arms by the guards. Several times during this journey he blacked out, only to partly regain consciousness soon after. He noticed that the guards were dragging him in the direction of the mine, and then into it. The workers in the mine barely looked up as the guards passed with Jax, not wanting to draw attention to themselves. The guards turned into a small, dark alcove where mining implements and other tools were kept, and threw him roughly into the corner with a harsh laugh.

Tears filled his eyes at the thought of Linara in the hands of Zevander, and his new friends in captivity here under the earth. He felt so small and powerless, completely insignificant in this large world. He thought back on his life, on the fact that he had never been free to live it as he had wanted, and here he was, literally a slave, unable to make any choices at all. Sela had given him hope that he had the power to shape his own destiny. He could have gone his own way, left the workers to their own fates. That was something the old Jax might have done, but he had changed. He knew that having the power to make your own decisions came with the responsibility to make the right ones. He would do anything to stop Zevander, to save his friends, but he had failed. This, and the added weight of the crystal anklet around his foot brought down his mood even further. He couldn’t have stopped the tears slipping down his nose and landing on the cave floor if he wanted to. He didn’t know what to do, so he clasped his hands and tried asking a higher power.

“This might sound stupid, but here it goes. I’m not sure if you can hear me, or if you’re real, but my name is Jax, and I’m here surrounded by your creations, these beautiful crystals that are now being used for a foul purpose. These crystals, your gift to this world, are being harvested and used to fuel Zevander’s deranged lust for power. I tried to stop him, but I wasn’t strong enough. Now Linara is in his grasp, and the rest of my friends and I are slaves, forced to work in his mines. We can’t go against him, he’s too powerful. Help me, Eleneth. What should I do? Please, give me a sign,” Jax pleaded, hands clasped.

Maybe it was just a trick of the light, but it seemed to Jax that the crystals glowed a bit brighter for a short while, before returning to their usual dim glow. The usual distant din
of mining abated for a few moments, and Jax could swear that he heard enraged cries coming from far off in the distance.

Was this a sign? What was it trying to tell him? Jax didn’t know, so he just lay there for a while, thinking upon his plight. The dreams came back to him, they were obviously trying to tell him something, but what? Was the main figure in all three dreams the same person? Especially in the last dream, he felt that something was awfully familiar about the figure, but he couldn’t quite put his finger on it. He had to get to Linara, she would know what it all meant.

“Psst, Jax,” he heard a muffled voice say from across the tunnel. Startled, he looked over and saw the large form of Gyles. “Jax! I’m so glad that you’re all right. I hadn’t heard from you the entire night, so when we got taken back to work, I feared the worst. When the riders dragged you in here unconscious, I realized that your plan must have failed.”

“They got Linara, Zevander took her,” Jax said bitterly, turning away so that Gyles couldn’t see his tears.

Gyles walked over to Jax slowly and put his hand reassuringly on Jax’s shoulder.

“I’m sure she’ll be fine, Jax,” Gyles said softly. “She’s a strong girl. If Zevander wanted to kill her, she’d probably be dead already. Better her being there than here in the mines.”

Artis and Erek stuck their heads around the corner to see what was going on, and came in to join them.

“Those bastards. I just need to get my hands on a weapon and I’ll show them that they messed with the wrong person,” Erek said while hefting his pickaxe without realizing. Looking down at it, his features grew glum, and his shoulders sagged.

“What are we going to do?” Jax asked. “Do any of you know a way of getting these damn anklets off? If we can’t get them off, there’s no way we can get away.”

Looking at one another, the boys didn’t say a word. Jax’s heart sank; seeing the resigned and defeated looks on his friends’ faces confirmed his fears, that they didn’t know of a way to escape.

“Back to work!” a sharp voice suddenly barked out from the entrance to the alcove.

Jax turned his head to see a black rider, armed with a whip coming around the bend. When he saw the boys standing there motionless, he uncoiled the whip and cracked it towards Gyles, who flinched, but didn’t make any indication that he would be going back to his work. Jax stood up and joined his friends, and they all stared at the rider, pure rage evident on their
faces. Jax knew that he would rather go down in a fight than waste away to nothing over the course of years of back-breaking work and degradation at the hands of these bastards.

“All right, you asked for it,” the rider said as he cracked the whip again at Gyles, this time hitting the large boy’s shoulder and tearing open his shirt. The wound started bleeding immediately, but Gyles never made a sound, and his expression never changed. The rider raised his whip again to strike, when a loud voice sounded.

“You will stand down,” an authoritative voice sounded from behind the rider.

The rider, whirling around swiftly, quickly stiffened and straightened his back to a comical degree.

“Yes, yes sir,” the rider stammered in reply.

Striding up towards them was the masked commander, eyes glinting in anger from behind the mask. Stopping beside the rider, he reached over and yanked the whip out of the man’s hand, giving him a cold stare as he did.

“Now leave us,” the masked man said.

“Yes sir,” the rider quickly stammered again and rushed away.

The tall form of the commander walked slowly up to the group of boys, eyes still ablaze behind his mask, looking at each of the boys in turn, before settling on Jax. Jax tensed, and readied himself to fight.

“Your name is Jax?” the commander asked searchingly.

“Yes, what’s it to you?” Jax answered angrily, remaining tense.

“We never got to finish our conversation in the tent. I, I once knew a Jax. How did you come upon that name?” the commander asked.

“I was named after my uncle, Jaxinder, who was taken instead of his older brother when Zevander came to our village. I’m sure my father thought it was a way of honoring the sacrifice of his brother, but he never had a choice to make in the matter, like me,” Jax said.

The masked man stood in silence for a moment, contemplating what Jax had said, then reached up to his mask and took it off slowly. Behind the mask was the handsome face of a man, still relatively young, but scarred by many hard years. It was a face that was strangely familiar to Jax.

“Yes, Jaxinder, that was my name long ago, before I came to this evil place,” Jaxinder said. “I suppose that I am your uncle, young Jax.”

Jax was dumbfounded, unable to speak. Could this be? He had grown up hearing stories about his uncle all his life, the brave Jaxinder who had been so brave and selfless.
Even after hearing Sam tell him the real facts of the matter, he had a hard time believing that this man before him, who was the second in command behind Zevander, could be his uncle.

“How, how is this possible?” Jax asked after a long moment of silence. The other boys looked at each other, stunned.

Jaxinder continued. “I have not thought of myself as Jaxinder in a long time. He was a foolish boy, naive to think that this life held any fairness or beauty for him. No, his fate was pain and ruin. When I was taken instead of Willem, I thought that my life was over. I felt such hatred towards him for running away, for my family for allowing this to happen, for the entire village for their cowardice. I didn’t think I would manage to survive, I didn’t really care. After coming to the camp, I tried to escape multiple times, sometimes with the thought to get back to Bryn Nevin and burn it down, and sometimes without any thought at all. I quickly gave up and saw that there was no way out, so I decided to take my fate into my own hands, and I showed Zevander that I had certain talents that he could use.”

“You joined in with Zevander because you were angry at your family? Because you thought life was unfair?” Jax asked angrily.

“I’m a survivor, I tried as hard as I could to find a way out, but there wasn’t one. So I found another way, a different way to get back at the village,” Jaxinder said, eyes full of sadness. “My hatred faded years ago, but by then it was too late, I had already thrown in my lot with Zevander. Even if I managed to get away, I didn’t deserve any sort of salvation. There was no coming back for me.”

Jax stayed silent for some time, thinking this over. His first thought was anger at his uncle, for giving in to his bitterness, to his despair, for being weak. But Jax had to admit that he didn’t know whether he would make the same choice himself, had he been in his uncle’s shoes. Jax had spent half his life resenting the world he grew up in, the village, his parents. He had rejected every opportunity of happiness that came his way. Linara, who he was now so fond of, had been so close all his life. He could have made different decisions, made friends, been happy instead of giving up and allowing his fate to control him. He knew that if he could change, and he certainly had changed in the past few weeks, his uncle could too.

“No. Like you, I was so angry at the world that I refused to allow even a speck of happiness into my life. I felt that life, or fate, or whatever you call it, had dealt me a bad hand, and there was nothing I could do to change that. I was wrong, and so were you. There is always time. You can still make things right. Even if you fail, even if Zevander wins, if you do what you know is right, you defy fate. You tell it that no matter what it chooses to do to
you, you won’t take it lying down. You can be the person that you know that you are deep inside,” Jax pleaded.

Jaxinder looked touched at Jax’s sincerity. His eyes that had shown no emotion other than anger or hatred in so many years grew soft, and a single tear fell down his cheek. He smiled grimly, and put his hand on Jax’s shoulder.

“I’ve kept my heart shielded for many years. It was easy to reconcile myself with the fact that these boys and these men that I’ve been watching over were from other villages, unknown to me. But when I recognized you, that all fell away. I tried making more excuses, but they seemed so hollow. I recognized them for the lies that they were, the lies that I had been telling myself for years. You’re right. I can’t just sit by anymore and make excuses to myself,” Jaxinder had a vaguely content look on his face as he looked down at his nephew, and after a moment, he reached down resolutely and using a key he drew from his pocket he undid Jax’s anklet, and it fell away. He did the same to the other boys’ anklets.

“What’s next, nephew?” Jaxinder asked.

“Linara is being held by Zevander, and I have to rescue her. Perhaps you can draw him away, keep him busy for a while? If you give Gyles the anklet key, he can free the other workers, and then we all can attack the riders and make good our escape,” Jax said.

Jaxinder nodded. “It is a good plan, and even if it doesn’t go our way, at least we tried. I am glad that I met you, nephew. You shall be my salvation in the end. Wait a while to leave the mine, give me time to get Zevander away. Help the workers, set them free. Most of them would normally be too weak to be much help in battle, but given the prospect of freedom, that glimmer of hope can make warriors out of the weakest of us,” Jaxinder said as he handed Gyles the anklet key. Putting back on his mask, he looked at Jax, gave him a short nod, and strode towards the entrance to the mine.

Jax and the others went over their plan in hushed tones. He looked at them each in turn, and they gave him a resolute smile back. They had each other, they had a plan, and for the first time in a long while, they had hope.
Jax made his way to the mine entrance and carefully looked out. Everything looked normal, looked calm. Jax breathed a sigh of relief, as nobody had sounded the alarm. In the distance, he could see his uncle leave Zevander’s tent, with the sorcerer following closely behind, heading towards the riders’ tents. Zevander looked annoyed at this distraction, wildly gesticulating with his hands, and they were quickly out of sight.

Jax used this distraction and ran towards Zevander’s tent, making sure no one had noticed him before he slipped inside. This tent put the other tents to shame, as it opened on a magnificent garden, lined with colorful flowers. In the center of this entrance room was a large fountain, adorned with stone carvings of many exotic animals, each one spurting cold jets of water from its mouth. The circular room was lined with luxurious rose bushes, adorned with the largest roses he had ever seen in his life. On the other side of the fountain a grandiose set of stairs, covered in luxurious red carpet, rose up to the upper floors of the tent, something that should have been impossible, since the tent had only one floor from the outside.

Jax didn’t have time to marvel at this incredible view and he rushed up the stairs. At the top there was a long hallway, so long that it seemed endless, with a multitude of doors on each side. Jax rushed down the hallway, trying doors almost at random. Some opened upon empty lounge areas, one was a kitchen staffed by woodland creatures wearing colorful aprons. One door housed a library that had shelves so high he couldn’t even see the top. Jax found multiple treasure rooms, where he spent some time looking for his dagger, before realizing that it was an impossible task. It would take years to search through all the gold and jewels for one solitary dagger.

After what seemed like hours of trying door after door, he finally reached the end of the hallway, where he found a set of doors larger and more ornate than the rest. It took all of Jax’s strength to push open the door, and it swung open with a loud creak. Inside he heard soft murmurs, and upon entering saw Linara holding a tray with an ornate teapot and several cups and saucers. She had been dressed up in an unusual array of clothing. A short, ill-fitting blouse, loose on the sleeves but with a revealing neckline, and a greyish skirt that stopped short above her knees. An ornate, blue bow was tied into her hair, keeping it up and away from her face. Jax tried hard not to notice the revealed skin, and blushed furiously. Linara noticed him enter and gave him a smile that was both pleasant and cold.

“Oh, more guests of my master. I’m so glad you could come and join us,” she said. “Make yourself comfortable, and I will pour you a cup of tea.”
Turning back around, she busied herself with the drinks as Jax went over to her and put his hand on her shoulder. She didn’t seem to notice the touch at all. This all seemed very odd to him. He carefully turned her around so that she was facing him, and using a hand under her chin, tilted her face upwards and looked into her eyes.

“Linara, it’s me, Jax. Don’t you remember?” Jax asked.

Linara blinked, first once, then twice, then turned to resume pouring the tea.

“My master would be cross with me if I tarried with the drinks,” Linara said with monotonous precision.

“What has Zevander done to you?” Jax asked, struggling to come up with some way of freeing Linara from this strange trance. Something in the back of his mind nagged at him. There was something very familiar about the way Linara was dressed, the clothing, but especially the bow. He had seen it somewhere before. The dream! He remembered seeing it in the hair of the girl that was bullying the boy. Jax reached out his hand, and with one deft pull, the ribbon fell away, and Linara’s hair came free.

Linara stopped what she was doing immediately, frozen with teapot in one hand and cup in the other, then both fell to the floor and shattered into countless pieces. She turned around slowly, her eyes meeting Jax’s, rapidly filling with tears.

“Jax! Oh Jax I’m so glad that you’re here,” Linara cried out and she eagerly threw her arms around him and kissed him energetically.

Jax felt his face redden, but he was so happy that Linara was back that he didn’t pay it any mind, and returned her embrace enthusiastically. They held each other like that for many moments, neither wanting to let go, but they had to. There were more important matters to attend to.

“That damn Zevander. After he had me brought here, he kept telling me that I would be working for him, doing anything he asked of me. I refused, naturally, but after he tied that damn ribbon in my hair, it was like I had no control over my body anymore. I was awake, and could see everything that was going on, but I couldn’t move my hands or my feet, and when I could hear my voice call Zevander master and that I would do everything he desired, I knew that I had lost,” Linara told Jax, tears running freely down her cheeks.

“Don’t say that, you’re still standing, and we still have a chance. With you helping us, I know that we have chance,” Jax said with a genuine smile.

He quickly filled her in on what had happened, with Linara gasping when he told her of his uncle. Jax then told her of the dreams he had been having.
“These dreams, I know they’re trying to tell me something, I just don’t know what it is! I’m not smart enough,” Jax said, eyes downcast.

“You’re plenty smart, Jax, but sometimes you can be a moron,” Linara told him with a wink. “Why didn’t you tell me about these dreams earlier? Sam’s elixir is obviously giving you the key to defeating Zevander, in that it is telling you his story. He grew up an orphan, being teased mercilessly by everyone while the adults looked on and did nothing. This fueled his anger, until he figured out a way to get back at them by building this construct you saw in your last dream. I think the construct is the key, it’s what is giving Zevander his power. We need to destroy it. Now tell me everything you remember about it.”

Jax elaborately described the machine, its surroundings, which were dark and looked to be underground. He remembered that on one of the walls above the machine there was a peculiar symbol, a set of circles, interlocking with curved lines arching away from the circles on either end, something he had forgotten about when he initially described his dreams to Linara. After he had finished, Linara stood there, brow furrowed, deep in thought, before conceding.

“I don’t know. It’s probably in the mine, but it could be anywhere down there, and there are probably miles upon miles of tunnels, dead-ends and pitfalls that we would have to look through to find it,” Linara said with a disappointed sigh.

“Maybe my uncle knows about it. He’s been here for twenty years, and has had free rein to go where he pleased since he became Zevander’s second in command. We should ask him,” Jax said excitedly.

On their way out, Jax spotted the crystal dagger Sela had given him on Zevander’s desk, and grabbed it as they left. Linara also picked up a small sword that she found in one of the treasure rooms, and the two made their way out of the tent.
Outside, they saw that Gyles had successfully freed the workers and they were pouring out of the mine, pickaxes and shovels held high, and rushing towards the riders who had kept them locked up for so long. Initially, with the element of surprise on their side, they managed to overpower some of the riders, taking their swords and continuing the assault. The workers were no soldiers, though, and with military precision, the rest of the riders gathered into formations and initiated a swift counterattack. The main force of the riders came at the workers from the front, with two other groups held in reserve, working their way around the workers’ flanks.

It seemed that the fight was all but over in the riders’ favor, when Jax heard a loud, guttural battle cry coming from the entrance to the mine. Startled, he looked over and saw a group of dwarves emerge from the mine, with Groth in the lead, carrying a gigantic two-sided battle hammer raised high above his head, as he sprinted towards the fray. Legs pumping furiously as he ran towards the riders, he leapt high in the air before bringing his hammer down on the nearest rider, taking out two of them with a single blow. One of the riders, lying haphazardly on top of his companion, murmured something unintelligible and tried to raise his head. Groth, showing no mercy, raised one of his large fists and punched the rider on the side of his head, knocking him out as well, before turning his attention to the next enemy. Many more dwarves followed behind him, armed similarly, and all screaming battle cries and raring for a fight. The battle had turned in their favor.

From behind Zevander’s tent, Sela appeared wordlessly, and Linara raced over to her and embraced her fondly.

“How, how did you get here? How did you know we were in trouble? I thought you weren’t going to help us,” Linara stammered.

“These caves are larger than you think, so they are,” Sela said with a wink towards Jax. “Eleneth heard your prayers, and relayed them to me, through the crystals.”

“You were listening in on me!” Jax said.

“Perhaps,” said Sela with a coy smile on her face. “I suspected that something was going on here at this camp, and when I heard you say that Zevander was harvesting the crystals, Lord Eleneth’s crystals, I knew that we could not idly sit by any longer. We made our way through the caves into the mine, and we saw first-hand what Zevander was doing, that we did. We saw all those broken crystals, ripped from the wall without a thought. It broke my heart, it did, but it made the males angrier than I’ve ever seen them. Plus, they haven’t had a good fight in ages, and they’re only happy to crush some skulls, they are.”
Jax told Sela what had happened since they parted, and about the dreams he had been having since he drank Sam’s elixir, the mention of which made her give a quick smile. He also mentioned his uncle, who he saw running over towards them. Jaxinder had several cuts on his arms and on his side, and was limping slightly. Quickly undoing his mask, Jaxinder stood before them, panting heavily and trying to catch his breath. Zevander had now joined the fight, growing to mountainous size, barking orders at the riders in black. Soon, he had grown enough in size to be easily larger than the giants, who cowered in the corner of the camp, each holding a lizard and furiously sucking on one of their thumbs.

“I’m sorry, Jax. I kept Zevander distracted as long as I could, but when the fighting started, he suspected that I had betrayed him. I held him off for a short time, but he’s much too strong,” Jaxinder said after he had regained his breath. “What’s the plan?”

Jax told his uncle of the dreams he had been having, and about the metal construct, which they were now sure was the key to everything, and the symbol on the wall above it.

Jaxinder’s eyes grew wide at the mention of the symbol, and said nothing for a while, deep in thought. “Yes, I think I know of the tunnel that you speak. It is deep in the mine, hidden in an offshoot tunnel, and is strictly off limits, even for the riders. It is a dangerous place. We regularly hear terrifying roars emanating from there, and the few brave souls that have gone to investigate never returned.”

“That must be it!” Jax exclaimed. “We must go there and destroy the machine, whatever the cost. Will you take us there, uncle?”

“Yes, even though that place scares the piss out of me, we will go, if that is what we must do,” Jaxinder said gravely.

Sela had kept silent up to this point. “You have friends in all sorts of unlikely places, Jax. We will try and buy you as much time as we can, while you three go for this evil contraption of Zevander’s. Now go!”

The battle in the camp had turned heavily against them, and even with the help of the dwarves, they saw that their side was losing. He saw multiple dwarves climbing up Zevander’s legs, furiously biting at him and hitting at him with their mighty hammers, none of which seemed to have much of an effect, as Zevander just laughed and brushed them off like insects.

Sela ran off towards the battle to help out, and Jax, his uncle, and Linara, now alone next to Zevander’s tent, looked at one another, steeling themselves for what lay ahead, and headed towards the entrance to the mine. With the tumult going on in the camp, they slipped inside with no one noticing.
The party of three made their way deeper into the mine, keeping a brisk pace since they didn’t know how long their friends and the dwarves could hold out against Zevander. Jaxinder led them confidently through the maze of tunnels that made up the mining complex. After quite a bit of time had passed, they found themselves in a part of the mine that had not seen much use, as abandoned tools and carts lay littered around the tunnels collecting cobwebs. It had grown dark since there were almost no crystals on the walls to light the way. Here they slowed down at the insistence of Jaxinder, as he told them that they were getting close, and needed to be ready.

Coming around a bend, the scenery changed dramatically. The rough-hewn walls of the rest of the mine, and even the ground, had been smoothed here. The tunnel opened up into a long hallway, lit with the light of torches on both sides, since the crystals were now completely absent. Jax noticed the strange symbol from his dream, carved into both sides of the hall, serving as a warning to any that would come this way. They could see a bright, blue pulsing coming from the end of the hallway.

The air had grown colder; their breath misting before them as they made their way down the hall, following the blue light. Entering the next room, Jax was momentarily floored by what he saw. The room was gigantic, completely smooth like the hallway before it, and the ceiling was so high they could barely see it. What took Jax’s breath away were the contents of the room. Piles upon piles of the crystals dominated the room, some taller than the giants outside. The crystals were giving off a weak, sickly light, but there were so many of them that it was almost blinding, and with each pulse, Jax had to shield his eyes. As they ventured further into the room, the light grew brighter, as if begging Jax for help.

Carefully stepping around the crystals which littered the floor in between the larger piles, the group, with Jaxinder in the lead with sword drawn, made their way carefully towards the other end of the room. Every once in a while a crystal from one of the piles would shift, making them jump.

They kept going, until Linara gasped and gripped Jax’s arm. “Oh, dear goodness.”

He looked over at her, and saw that her eyes were fixed on a pile in the corner that gave off no light. Stepping closer, he saw that the pile was not made up of crystals, but of bones. He recognized some of the bones as human, while some were similar, but smaller, which he hoped were dwarven. He didn’t even want to think about the the alternative. Some of the bones were much larger, and these Jax couldn’t identify.
His uncle, stopping to see what had alarmed them, put his finger to his lips, ordering them to be quiet. Another crystal shifted in a pile next to them, and Jax looked over and noticed a small hole had formed in the pile next to him. A slight movement caught his eye, and he ventured closer to the pile, trying to see in this dim light. Bending over and peering into the hole, he saw what looked like an eye. That was impossible, since this eye was so big that the creature attached to it would have to be absolutely massive. Jax blinked, trying to see better, when the enormous eye blinked back at him.

Panic immediately seized Jax, and he turned to shout a warning towards his uncle and Linara, but the creature never gave him a chance. Leaping out from its hiding place in the crystal pile, it swiped at where Jax had stood a moment before with a colossal paw, barely grazing him but still hitting with enough force to knock him halfway across the room. Jaxinder and Linara turned at the commotion, and their eyes grew wide with fear.

What was standing before them was similar to the cats some of the families in Bryn Nevin had kept as pets, except about a hundred times the size. Standing about twice the height of a man, it was mostly black, which in this soft light looked blue, but it also had white streaks, and its huge paws were mostly white, ending in claws similar in size to the curved swords of the riders. Swishing its tail to and fro, the guardian looked at the three of them quizzically, before opening its impressive mouth, lined with razor-sharp teeth, and giving out an earth-rending roar that made Jax cover his ears.

Jaxinder, sword raised, moved in front of Jax and Linara to meet the guardian, advancing slowly. Swinging his curved sword this way and that, showing off his considerable talent with the weapon, he finished the flurry with a lunge at the guardian’s exposed neck. With a minor sidestep at the last moment, the guardian dodged the attack, and swatted Jaxinder aside like a toy. Jax saw his uncle fly through the air, landing with a heavy thud high up on the far wall, before crumpling to the floor inelegantly and lying still. The guardian looked at Jax and Linara, gave them another inquisitive look, before opening its maw again widely, this time to yawn.

Linara, raising her own small sword, shouted out to the beast. “You think you’re so tough? You think we won’t defeat you? I’m here to tell you that we will!” Her voice cracked at this last taunt, reducing its effectiveness considerably.

The massive guardian peered at Linara, jaws open slightly, giving off a sound that sounded almost like a chuckle. It then lowered its head and sniffed at the ground for a moment before tensing its muscles. It remained in this position for a short time, before leaping through the air at Linara, using its forepaws to push her to the floor when it reached
her. Linara fell backwards heavily, landing with a thump, the air being knocked from her lungs. She raised her head weakly to look at the towering beast above her, powerless to raise any defense against it.

“No! Linara!” Jax shouted from where he still lay on the floor.

Things had happened so fast that he hadn’t had time to react, but now that he saw Linara was in danger, he sprang up from the floor and sprinted towards where she lay. He had almost reached her when, with a bored flick of a paw, the beast knocked him away, and he landed in a nearby pile of crystals, momentarily stunned. He saw the beast lower his head to Linara, sniffing her from head to toe, before giving off another ear-splitting roar.

Jax didn’t know what to do. This beast seemed invincible. His uncle, who was an experienced warrior, hadn’t stood a chance. How was he supposed to stand against such an enemy? He only knew that he would rather die trying to save Linara than let her be eaten by this beast.

Jax raised himself unsteadily from the crystal pile, hefted the small, crystal dagger that Sela had given him, and with a running start, he jumped onto the back of the beast, and with both hands raised high, brought the dagger down into the beast’s back. The guardian snapped its head up high, giving an almighty bellow as Jax plunged the dagger in. It started to shiver, convulsing so forcefully that Jax was thrown from its back, landing a short distance away from Linara. He crawled over to her, and they put their arms around each other as they watched the terrible guardian convulse.

Along with shaking, the beast seemed to be shrinking. Jax couldn’t believe what he was seeing, but it was definitely getting smaller. Soon, it was man-sized, then half that, then smaller yet. Another few moments passed, and Jax and Linara looked at each other, bewildered, as before them, the mighty beast had become a regular, household cat, which looked up at them with inquisitive eyes, and meowed softly. Linara picked it up, holding it in her arms and stroking its fur, and the little feline purred contentedly, while playfully swatting at strands of her hair which dangled close to its face.

“What happened?” Jaxinder asked, having woken up and limped over to them.

“We’ll tell you later,” Linara said with a smile.

The threesome continued further into the room, and at its end, they found the construct. The crystals which lay scattered around it were pulsing rapidly, but dimly, as if sickened by the proximity to this evil contraption. The construct itself gave off a low hum, the opening on its front emitting sounds similar to grumbles, aching for more crystals to devour.
Jaxinder looked over at Jax, unsheathed his sword, and flipping it around, offered it to Jax. This was his journey, this was his plan and he had to finish it. He took the large, curved sword from his uncle, and giving Linara a comforting smile, plunged the sword deep into the bowel of the awful machine. Loud, jarring noises arose from the metal box and smoke began pouring out of it. Its hum grew louder, its grumbles as well, but less rhythmic, more like the ragged last breaths of a dying animal, before giving out one final, long grumble, and falling silent. Zevander’s machine was no more.
The threesome made their way out of the mines into the bright light of the world above, but even before they had reached the entrance, they knew that the battle outside had ended. Gone were the harsh sounds of steel upon steel, gone were the shouts of rage-induced anger, the anguished moans of pain. Replacing those were triumphant cries of victory, as when they exited the mine, they saw the riders relinquishing their swords, dropping them to the ground and surrendering to the combined forces of the workers and the dwarves. Jax and Linara joined their friends near the front of the battle, with Jaxinder trailing close behind. Jax saw Gyles, who gave a great cry of triumph as he spotted Jax, and the two boys embraced warmly. Artis and Erek, bloodied, but not seriously injured, joined in the celebration, hugging Linara and clapping Jax heartily on the shoulder.

“The fight seemed to go out of the riders when Zevander’s magic stopped working,” Gyles told Jax, with a hand around his shoulder, pointing around at the changes in the camp. The changes were certainly severe. It seemed that more than just Zevander’s might was an illusion. The massive giants, who had avoided the battle altogether, had changed back into their original form, a sort of docile, hairless ape, not nearly as large as they had appeared previously. The giant lizards they had been holding had reverted back into donkeys, who seemed completely oblivious to all that was going on around them, and were just enjoying the attention from the apes, that still held on to them for dear life. The lavish tents, especially Zevander’s massive tent, had turned into decrepit shacks, held together with little more than a nail or two in the right place. The entire camp, which had seemed so formidable at first glance, was now as majestic as a beggar’s threadbare cloak.

With the power of the construct wearing off, Zevander’s was the last illusion to fade. He had reverted back to human size, but his change continued past that.. His legs shrunk, a hunch grew on his shoulder, giving his posture a sense of crooked wrongness. His voice changed mid-sentence from one of authority to a nasal whine. Jax immediately recognized the small boy from his dreams, the one the children had so cruelly called Lumpy, now grown into adulthood. The pity Jax had felt for him when he first saw him in his dreams was gone, the kinship Jax had experienced with him as two outsiders long forgotten. Zevander had had a hard life, but instead of using hardship to build character, he had used all his energy into making sure others would go through the pain and misfortune that he went through.

“Get them! Kill them! I am your master, this is what I pay you for. Like herding a gaggle of geese, damn mercenaries,” Zevander said, wildly gesticulating towards Jax and his friends.
The riders, looking at one another, unsure of what to do, until a distant voice was heard, coming from the direction of the riders’ tents. Jax looked over with alarm and saw one of the mercenaries, running back as fast as he could, hands held high, something small tumbling from his grasp with each step.

“Our gold! Our gold is gone, replaced with this,” a rider shouted, holding a fistful of dull, grey rocks above his head, slowing down when he reached the group of riders, eagerly stretching out his hands to show them that they had been duped.

It appeared that Zevander had been paying his mercenaries with illusory riches. The chests full of gold and jewels and glittering trinkets had all been a fantasy, concocted by the sorcerer to purchase the services of the black riders. He then used them to harass the villages of the land into giving him their children to work as miners, to get him more crystals, which gave him the power he needed to craft more illusions. It was a clever scheme, one that had worked well for many years.

The riders were growing louder, outraged over this betrayal, with some picking up the swords they had just dropped in surrender, turning them towards their former master. As a group, they slowly swarmed towards the unfortunate sorcerer, the rage behind their eyes barely contained. Jax was conflicted over whether to stop them. Probably not a single worker in the camp would lift a finger to save Zevander, after the years of misery and torment he had made them endure, but it still felt wrong. Zevander should pay for his crimes, but this type of mob justice seemed far too emotional, with people being swept up in a tidal wave of hatred. Jax took a step forward, and was about to say something when a loud, unyielding voice rang out from behind him that stopped the riders cold.

“You! This is all because of you!” Jax turned around to see Sela standing there, a look of pure fury on her face, hand raised, finger pointing straight towards the changed form of Zevander. “I knew we should have taken care of you years ago, we should have.”

“But, but m–,” Zevander stammered in surprise, looking up at Sela, who silenced him with a look.

“Sela? What do you mean?” Jax asked.

“This sorry excuse for a dwarf was born into our village shortly before we were forced from our lands. I saw the evil in his heart, the wrongs he wanted to inflict upon the world, and there were many among us that wanted to end his life then and there, me included,” Sela said, still staring at Zevander with unmasked fury.

“You were going to kill him for something he hadn’t even done yet?” Linara asked, horrified.
“We can see what people desire most, a certain vision of their future. He was a bad apple. But there were others that felt that course of action too drastic, and pleaded mercy for the boy. When we ran from our homes, we left him behind, to be someone else’s problem, so he was,” Sela said with a slight tremor of sorrow. “That is my life’s greatest regret. I look around me and see the horrible deeds he has committed, the pain he was wrought to countless families across the land. If I had been stronger, it would have been avoided, yes it would have.”

The riders, now unsure what to do, looked at each other before continuing their menacing advance towards Zevander, who gave a shriek of alarm and shielded his face with his hands.

“No. You will not harm him. He was our problem to begin with, and we will see to the solution, so we will,” Sela said.

She gave orders to the male dwarves to tie Zevander up, and as a group they lead him back towards the mine. It was a fitting destination, to end his evil journey where it had began. Groth, looking over at Jax and Linara, gave them a nod and a grunt, and even a hint of a smile, before marching on with the others.

“You have shown us that not all surface-dwellers are weak, not all would run from danger. Perhaps one day I will lead my people back to the surface. We shall see, we will,” Sela said to Jax, giving him a warm embrace, then Linara.

“I see that some of what we saw came true,” she said to Linara with a knowing wink, which made Linara blush deeply. Sela then continued with her kinfolk into the mine, where they quickly disappeared into the darkness.

Jaxinder, having kept quiet all this time, now turned to the riders, who still looked at him with a sense of awe. “You men have been in the service of an evil man. You knew this, yet you did nothing to stop him. It was all done for payment, that you have no evil in your hearts, some will say. Now is your opportunity to prove that. Will you seek out the next tyrant to offer you riches to perform despicable acts, or will you use your swords for good?”

The riders, looking at each other, grumbled loudly, but were quickly silenced by the threatening looks they were getting from the freed workers.

Jaxinder continued. “It is your choice. But know this, the good people here have been merciful. The next time you fall, those standing above you might not be so kind.”

One after another, the riders took off the black fabric from their heads, revealing many different faces. Some were young, some were older, most had scars, but all of them looked tired. Not the tiredness of lack of sleep, or from heavy labor, but the tiredness one
experiences from a life lived poorly. Looking at each other, they hung their heads, and as one they dropped their swords again. Some stayed behind to tend to the wounds of the workers, which they had no doubt caused. Some, too ashamed to face those that they had done injustice to, slunk off into the distance without even a glance back.

Jax came up to his uncle and hugged him fondly. They had only known each other a short time, but they had been through more than most.

“What will you do?” Jax asked.

“I must set things right, as well.” Jaxinder said, eyes heavy. “I knew all these years what I was doing was wrong, but I did nothing. I will go back to Bryn Nevin. I will kneel before the village, before my brother, tell my tale, and ask for forgiveness. If they give it, I will spend the rest of my days earning it.”

“It is a good answer. The villagers are a good sort. I know they will find mercy in their hearts,” Jax replied.

“What about you? Where will you go?” Jaxinder asked, giving Jax a knowing glance. At that moment, Linara, who had been busy seeing to some of the wounded, came over with Gyles, Artis and Erek.

“It’s set. The workers are going back to their villages, and we’re ready to go back to Bryn Nevin. I’m so excited to see my mother again,” Linara said, barely containing her delight.

Jaxinder, giving Jax a last glance, went over to the workers, who were preparing to make the long journey back home. Jax fidgeted, rubbing his arm nervously, not wanting to make eye contact.

“You’re not coming, are you?” Linara asked, a pained look on her face.

“I’m sorry,” Jax replied, this time finding her eyes with his. “I will come back to Bryn Nevin, just not right now. Now that I can make my own decisions, I need to decide who I am. I need to decide what I want. I can write my own future.”

“I think I understand. I don’t like it, but I understand. Just know that when you’re ready, there’s always going to be a place for you in Bryn Nevin. There are going to be people that miss you, people that love you,” Linara said, before gripping him tightly, and giving him a tender kiss on the cheek. She looked into his eyes with warmth, “Just come back to us.”

Jax told the boys his decision. They had a harder time understanding it than Linara. In the end, they accepted it, they just didn’t like it. He hugged each of them in turn, these new friends that he had made on the journey, before retrieving one of the donkeys and loading it up with provisions for the journey ahead. He got into the saddle and set off, looking back
towards the camp. He saw Linara, the boys and his uncle, each waving towards him, wishing him luck on his travels. Every fiber of his being was telling him to turn around and join them, but he couldn’t. He would come back when it was time. It wasn’t time yet.
On Writing *Illusions of Grandeur*

by Ólafur Páll Einarsson
1. Introduction

I must admit, when I started my studies in English at the University of Iceland, I did not think that a decade later I would be finishing my Master’s thesis by writing a fantasy novella as a creative writing project, but here we are. I have always been interested in literature, especially fantasy, and have read voraciously since I was old enough to follow words on a page. Reading extensively does not directly translate into skill as a writer, but it sure does not hurt. As Stephen King said, “if you want to be a writer, you must do two things above all others: read a lot and write a lot” (139). At least I had one of the requirements fulfilled.

In the Master’s program, I took all the creative writing courses I could find, which, to be honest, were not that many. I tried my hand at some short stories, which were all terrible, and some other writing exercises, equally dreadful, which did not help my self esteem. Over time, however, something happened. The writing started improving, along with my mood. Writing is a craft, and although I would never make a great carpenter, with enough practice, I could probably be a passable one. The same goes for writing.

Over the next few years I wrote more, reading quite a few books on the topic along the way. Stephen King’s On Writing, Anne Lamott’s Bird by Bird are popular books that were both a great help, mostly with getting into the right mindset, along with some good tips and tricks. Sol Stein’s On Writing and How to Grow a Novel were incredible for the technical side of the writing process. Once I got into the actual meat of writing the story, Christopher Vogler’s The Writer’s Journey proved to be probably the best resource for me, and I highly recommend it.

Choosing the realm of fantasy for my novella was not a difficult decision. I grew up on reading fantasy novels in the late 80s and early 90s, mostly ones put out by TSR, such as the Dragonlance, Ravenloft, and Forgotten Realms books. It was not always great writing (they were churning out multiple books per month), but for me, they were incredible. Other favorites were David Eddings’ Belgariad series, as well as Lloyd Alexander’s Prydain Chronicles. Since then, I have devoured countless other fantasy titles, so that is the realm I know most about, and I have heard the mantra “write what you know” enough to put some stock in it.

I wanted to start off this expository essay detailing my past, for one’s past can tell you much about their present. If I had grown up on a steady stream of Donald Duck comics like many of my schoolmates, I am not sure I would be writing this essay, and it definitely would not be one set in a world of sorcerers and magic.
2. Getting started and building the world

Now that I have established the reasons for choosing a fantasy setting, there were a few things that I had in mind before I started. I wanted the story to be accessible to people of all ages. I wanted to write it for myself as an eight year old, just starting out in fantasy literature, as well as myself now. “Language does not always have to wear a tie and lace-up shoes” (King 128). A good story is a good story.

Next came the world building. I wrote a few pages on the backstory of the world, how the village of Bryn Nevin came to exist. The villagers had crossed a vast ocean, trying to get away from the wars and strife of their homeland. They were not alone, there were many other villages that joined them on the journey. They reached a bountiful new land, and things were looking up when Zevander appeared and demanded a high bounty from them. Many of the villages refused, and set off again in their boats, but Bryn Nevin, and some other villages stayed and took the deal.

This was all detailed in the prologue I wrote (but later took out) which is something that all my favorite fantasy novels from my youth had. Prologues are not as popular in 2018 as they were in the 1980s, as I found out. Usually these prologues are short, oftentimes giving a short synopsis on events that lead up to the story, sometimes introducing the villain in disguise doing something villainous. Sometimes, the prologue includes some kind of divine foreshadowing, as in the case of Weis and Hickman’s *Dragons of Autumn Twilight*, where a mysterious old man comes to the Inn of the Last Home, and tells the barmaid Tika that big things are coming. I think it is an interesting and fun way to start a story, but I seem to be in the minority these days. Orson Scott Card says that “they imagine that their poor reader won’t be able to understand what’s going on if they don’t begin with a prologue showing the ‘world situation.’” Alas, these prologues always fail. Because we aren’t emotionally involved with any characters, because we don’t yet care, the prologues are meaningless” (83). I can understand the reasoning for it, and I think the story as a whole improved by taking out the prologue, but I still like them, mostly because of the nostalgic factor. There is no accounting for taste, it would seem.

Another knock against prologues is the immersion that the reader feels when they learn about things at the same time the protagonist does. You will need some more expository dialogue here and there, but not loading the story with backstory and facts up front is a good move. It is what Jeff Vandermeer calls “Worldview versus storyview” (216). Worldview is what you as the writer know about the world and everything in it, and storyview is what the
characters know. If you do not have a prologue, your readers will share the storyview with
the characters.

After detailing the backstory of the world, I made an outline for the story. There are
many conflicting views on whether it is helpful for writers to do an outline or not, but for me,
it was extremely helpful. When I tried to write with no pre-defined structure, I floundered and
could not seem to get anything going. It was not until I sat down and planned out the story in
its entirety and wrote one or two paragraphs about each chapter/scene, that I started to make
some headway. As Terry Brooks states, “it gives you a working blueprint to which you can
refer later” (83), which is exactly how it felt for me. The outline would change as I continued
to write. I realized that things that made sense when I wrote the outline did not make sense
when I wrote out the chapters, then it was easy to make a change or two and continue on my
way.

In making this world, I wanted it to have it resemble the real world in most aspects,
albeit a more medieval, agrarian society. There had to be differences, of course, since it is a
fantasy story, but because it is so short, a novella, I did not have much room to explain all
sorts of new aspects of the world. In the beginning of the story, when Jax picks up the red
apple-like fruit in the grocer’s shop, I had originally come up with a new word for it, but
eventually just called it an apple, as I thought my first choice would just confuse the reader.
“If mugubasala means “bread” then say bread! Only use the made-up stuff when it is used
for a concept for which there is no English word” (Card 54).

There were two resources that helped me immeasurably in getting started. One was
the chapter on “Some Fundamentals for Emigrants from Nonfiction” in Sol Stein’s How to
Grow a Novel (162-171) that has lists of what to do before beginning to write, what to keep
in mind while writing, and also during revision and editing, and what to do if you get stuck.
The second resource was Terry Brooks’ rules of writing (113-133), which I will list below.

1. Write what you know.
2. Your characters must behave in a believable fashion.
3. A protagonist must be challenged by a conflict that requires resolution.
4. Movement equals growth; growth equals change; without change, nothing happens.
5. The strength of the protagonist is measured by the threat of the antagonist.
6. Show, don’t tell.
7. Avoid the grocery-list approach to describing characters.
8. Characters must always be in a story for a reason.
9. Names are important.
10. Don’t bore the reader.

3. Setting and theme
Farah Mendlesohn talks about different types of fantasy stories. There are portal-quest fantasies (1), where our hero goes through some sort of portal or over some sort of threshold, either literal or figurative, and goes on a quest. *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* is a famous example of this, as the children live in the real world, but go through a literal door (the wardrobe) and enter a fantasy world, where they must go on a quest to defeat the White Witch.

Another type of fantasy Mendlesohn talks about is the intrusion fantasy (114), where the fantastical element of the story intrudes on the real world, or a world which is not quite as fantastical as the one it came from. I tried to incorporate both these elements in the story. It starts off as an intrusion fantasy, as the village of Bryn Nevin is mostly ordinary. Zevander and the raiders intrude with strange beasts and powerful magic, disrupting the lives of the villagers. The story then turns into a portal-quest fantasy, as Jax is, albeit involuntarily, taken across a threshold, the edge of the village, the edge of all that he has ever known, into the wastelands. From there he and Linara escape and must go on a quest to save their friends and stop Zevander.

This type of hybrid story, one that incorporates both a portal-quest fantasy as well as an intrusion fantasy is probably most similar to Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Gandalf comes to the Shire, bringing fantasy and magic into the relatively normal home of the hobbits. It is from there that Frodo must then go on his quest to destroy the ring. I am, of course, hugely influenced by Tolkien’s story, and it shows in the similarities between the stories.

In creating the physical world of the story, I tried to make the landscapes mean something, to mirror Jax’s mood at that point in the narrative. The story begins on a “lazy flyover” over the village of Bryn Nevin, which is something I got inspiration for from Sol Stein. I wanted to show the beautiful blue sky, and the beautiful birds and butterflies that make it their playground. We then descend into the village, where things are not quite as perfect. Even though it is not a bad place, there is something amiss when you wander down the crooked lanes, lined with houses that are starting to fall into disrepair, surrounded by farms that sit untended. I wanted to start the story with the juxtaposition of these two things. It is the only home Jax has ever known, but it is also something of a holding cell; a temporary
stop on the eventual road towards his fate. The sky, which he can see every time he looks up, filled with beauty and life, is almost a cruel joke for him, as it is something he will never attain; it is always out of reach. That is partly why he looks down so much when he walks around.

After leaving the village, the raiders take the youths through the barren, red wasteland. This is Jax’s lowest point, and the desolation and hopelessness of the scenery mirrors that. There is no escape for him, either from the wasteland, or from his fate.

After the wasteland, Jax and Linara find themselves in the warm and friendly environment of the dwarven caves. There is something womb-like about the caves, with the soft light and the strong, female character in Sela. This is where Jax starts the process of becoming his own person, becoming reborn. This is the first moment where he has the ability to make a choice regarding his future.

After the caves comes the forest, which is also dark like the caves, but it is more claustrophobic, less friendly. The soft light of the crystals gives way to moonlight shining through the trees (and webs), and Jax must continue on his path of growth by opening himself up to someone new, to Linara. This is a big moment in the story, as we can see Jax as a character growing, and becoming the hero everyone wants him to be.

The finale of the story involves the mine camp, and Jax having to go back into the caves to defeat Zevander’s evil contraption. He finally lets go completely and embraces the new Jax when he leaps onto the back of the guardian, giving no thought for his own safety, but merely to protect someone else (Linara), something that would not have crossed his mind earlier in the story. When he emerges victorious into the sunlight above, his rebirth is complete, and he can enter into society anew, as the new Jax. As Vogler says, the hero must “die and be reborn” (155). In this case it is a figurative death, not a literal one.

I briefly want to go into Vogler calls the “Hero’s journey” (8), and how it fits so well to the story. I read Vogler after having written most of the story, and I could recognize each and every aspect he wrote about in his book as a part of my own story as well. He lists twelve aspects of the hero’s journey:

1. Ordinary world. This is the start of the book. We see the village of Bryn Nevin, and a normal day in the life of our protagonist, Jax.
2. Call to adventure. We learn from the mayor’s speech about Zevander and the chosen.
3. Refusal of the call (The Reluctant Hero). Jax does not want to go, but he has no choice. He flees the party to go to Sam’s: a safe haven.

4. Meeting with the mentor. Jax talks to Sam, gets more of the story, and gets help in the form of a mysterious elixir.

5. Crossing the first threshold. Jax and the other chosen are taken away.

6. Tests, allies, enemies. The other youths in the cage are potential allies for Jax. The riders are obviously enemies. Getting food with Gyles and the beasts attacking are tests.


9. Reward. They get out of the forest and they have bonded.

10. The road back. They get to the mine camp, but are captured and then must go back underground to defeat Zevander’s machine.

11. Resurrection. Jax heroically leaps onto the machine’s guardian and becomes the hero.

12. Return with the elixir. Jax has to decide whether to return to Bryn Nevin.

I also wanted to include Vogler’s archetypes (26). He talks about the hero, which for a large part of the book is not Jax. Gyles risks himself so that Jax does not get hurt. Linara helps Jax escape, along with Erek. It is not until later in the story that Jax becomes the hero. There is also the mentor, which is initially Sam, then Sela fills that role later in the story, as they both provide Jax with assistance and knowledge. Other archetypes, such as the threshold guardian, the herald, the shapeshifter, the shadow, the ally and the trickster are all more fluid, and multiple characters can perform the duties of different archetypes at different points in the story.

Another aspect I wanted to highlight is the fact that there are strong female characters in the story. Growing up on old-school fantasy novels, the women in those stories were often just as capable as the men, and oftentimes fought alongside them. I wanted Linara to be more than just an ally or a sidekick of Jax’s, but a hero in her own right. After being taken from her mother, who has been stabbed right in front of her, she still has the bravery and sense to help Jax escape from the cage in the wastelands. Even after finding out from Sela that her mother is still alive, she pushes Jax to continue, to be better, and to go after their friends.
Sela is another strong female character in the book. In the dwarven society, the males are deemed much too emotional and irrational to do anything other than manual labor, so it is the responsibility of the females to be leaders, and healers.

Lastly, I want to mention a couple of themes that are more subtle in the story: religion and ecocriticism. Zevander’s magic is derived from the power of the crystals, which the dwarves look upon as pieces of Eleneth, their god. Sela tells Jax the story of how Eleneth, who was always looking up at the stars, took some of them and inserted them deep into the earth, and they became the crystals. That is the reason for their glow; it is literally starlight. Zevander then uses the youths to mine the crystals and harvest their power for his own gain. The dwarves see this as a perversion of their faith, and essentially “darkening the world” by taking away the light. This is meant as a slight connection to today’s world where we, as humans, are constantly taking energy in the form of fossil fuel out of the ground, to use for our own power, and making the world worse in the process. I did not want to go heavily into this subject to avoid being didactic, but I did want to mention it briefly here in this exposition.

4. Character creation

In creating the characters in my story, I started with an exercise that I found in Sol Stein’s *How to Grow a Novel*, where he says to “write a character sketch of each of the main players that has much more detail than you are likely to use” (163). I took this to heart, and wrote 100-200 words on Jax, Linara, Zevander, Jaxinder, and Sela. Not just their physical appearance, but also their strengths and weaknesses, their desires, their fears. I tried to imagine them as real people in the real world; what they must have experienced in their lives to make them the people they are today. “Whatever your characters do or say will be born out of who they are, so you need to set out to get to know each one as well as possible” (Lamott 46).

I wanted to make each of them unique. Each of them needed their own personality, their own special character traits, something that made them real. They did not all have to be likeable, but I wanted the reader to care about all of them. They also needed to change, to grow, over the course of the story, especially Jax and Linara. I looked, for example, at Jax in the beginning of the story as a baseline for him, where he would go from there would be shaped by what happens to him in the story, and the decisions that he makes. Ann Lamott said something that I found very interesting, in that the writer should “find out what each
character cares most about in the world because then you will have discovered what’s at stake” (55).

Connections between characters was an interesting aspect of the story that I tried to cultivate. Jax is described as having streaks of grey in his dark hair at the beginning of the story. Later on, when they get to the mine camp, we see that the masked foreman has grey, almost silver hair. This I did to show that they might have something in common, which is revealed to be true, as the masked man turns out to be Jax’s uncle.

Another connection I tried to make was with Sam, the village historian, who obviously knows more about the village and its history than anyone else and is perhaps a bit more worldly. He also seems to know quite a bit about elixirs and potions, as the one he gives to Jax induces vivid dreams that help Jax out on his journey. The elixir that Linara gets from Sela seems to work in a similar fashion, so it is possible Sam has some connection to the dwarves.

Also, the dreams show Jax the character of Zevander during various times during his life. The scene in the first dream, where one of the hooded figures leave Zevander before fleeing their homes has hair that is described in a way not dissimilar to the hair of Sela, who Jax and Linara meet in the caves. This is also done to cast some shadow on the goodness of Sela, and the dwarves in particular. It is unclear what the connection between Sela and Zevander is, other than they are both dwarves, and Sela made the choice to abandon him, but they also seemed to be considering ending the life of a child merely because they saw that he has darkness in his thoughts. Sela might not be all that she appears to be, either.

Inspiration for the characters came from all sorts of places. As often happens, I put aspects of myself into Jax, especially from when I was his age. Jax is a loner, at times moody, often weird, but underneath it all he is not a bad kid. He opens up to those he cares about, such as Sam in the early story, and Linara later. He is emotional, but has always held it in. Linara came not from one, but from many different sources. Sam, the wise but half-crazy old man who knows more than he lets on, is loosely based on a good friend of mine. Sela, the strong, matronly spiritual leader of the dwarves, someone who nurses Jax back to health, is of course based on my mother. The character I most had fun with was the guardian of the machine, which is based on my cat, who can switch between curious playmate and ferocious predator at will, and I tried to instill that in the guardian.

It was necessary in my mind to have a strong antagonist. Gone are the days of mustache-twirling villains, who are more caricature than character. The hero cannot be faultless either, that would make for a short (and a boring) character arc. Terry Brooks’ fifth
rule of writing is “the strength of the protagonist is measured by the threat of the antagonist” (118), which I took to mean that you cannot have a strong and interesting hero without an equally strong and interesting villain. Zevander, as an antagonist, is slightly reminiscent of the over-the-top villains found in old movies, but with a bit more personality. I also added Jax’s dreams to give him a backstory, to make clear his motives in doing what he does. Everyone is the hero of their own story, even the antagonist.

The other characters, the smaller roles, although they might not be quite as interesting as the main characters, and they might not impact the story as much, still need to be their own people, fleshed out, and more importantly, have a reason for being in the story. Jeff Vandermeer says that a common flaw in writing is not paying enough attention to the secondary characters. “Just as your antagonist is a hero in their own mind, so, too, are your secondary characters, who, as in real life, have their own goals, emotions, allegiances, and friends” (192-195). I tried to make the boys, Gyles, Erek and Artis, unique, even though they do not factor heavily into the story and are often together. Gyles is the big, brawny boy who is confident and brave, and wants to protect those around him. Erek, having lost his best friend (or more) in Landon, is angry at the world: a ticking time bomb just waiting to go off. Artis, the sensitive and small boy who always has a smile for everyone stays behind to see to Gyles’ wounds, even at the expense of his own freedom.

Finally, I want to talk about names. They play a major part in the story, of course, when Jax’s uncle recognizes him from his name, as Jax was named after him, and he eventually helps Jax and his friends escape. The name of Sam is taken partly from Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*, the trusted friend who helps the main character more than he will ever know. In naming Linara, her brother Landon, her mother Lucia, I wanted to show how close they were as a family. Zevander I named partly because of the Zoltar machine in the movie *Big*, as they are both mysterious, robed strangers with powers unknown.

Not giving a character a name can be an important decision as well. I decided not to give Jax’s parents names. They are merely referred to as the mayor and his wife, or Jax’s father and mother. This was partly because of Jax’s state of mind at the beginning. He saw his parents as the reason for him being one of the chosen, as being the son of the mayor meant he was automatically considered one of the twelve. I do not know if not naming them was the right decision, but it was a conscious one.
5. Changes, edits, and fixes

There were a lot of changes from the initial outline. I already mentioned the prologue getting cut, but most of the other changes were much smaller. I moved scenes around, I changed names, I added a scene or two for dramatic effect, but the skeleton of the original outline stayed intact. At one point, late in the process of writing the story, I hit a roadblock; I did not like the last ten or so pages that I had written. I went through the text, identifying elements that were not working, and compiled a list that was longer than a page. The next day I went through the list, finding solutions, and then fixing them. It was an immensely gratifying experience, as just a day before I had contemplated giving up the whole endeavor.

A change I made early on was because of advice from my supervisor, who told me that Jax was not very likeable. He was moody, sullen, and she did not like him as a character, let alone as a protagonist. While this was hard to hear (my sixteen year old self was unlikeable, apparently), it was true. I still wanted him to retain his personality, which included a bit of grumpiness, I made him slightly more pleasant to be around at certain times during the story. Just by adding a slight smile at one point, and a kind word at another did wonders for his likeability (hopefully).

One change I made was in the scene early in the story when the mayor is addressing the crowd. I spent some time making the crowd drink too much wine, refill their cups, and drink some more. I wanted the party to devolve into a drunken, dancing mess before Jax leaves in disgust. The villagers are obviously psychologically traumatized by having to live under Zevander’s thumb, and the guilt of sacrificing the young men of the town on a regular basis will have taken a toll on them. I wanted the party to resemble some sort of bacchanalian feast, where the villagers are assuaging their survivor’s guilt by going completely crazy. I still do not think it was a bad idea, it just did not quite fit with the story tonally. Plus, it took up more room in the story than I was comfortable with.

One thing I changed after reading Vogler was that I moved Jax’s meeting with Sam from before the party to after. His “stages of the hero’s journey” (8) has “Meeting with the mentor” (meeting Sam) after “Refusal of the call” (the mayor’s speech about the chosen). As soon as I read it in Vogler, I knew I had to change it. It made much more sense for Jax to get assistance from Sam after the party. This was also around the time I got rid of the prologue, which contained much of the info about Zevander and the chosen, and moved it to the mayor’s speech.

Another aspect of the story that changed quite a bit from its earliest drafts were the dream sequences. In the first draft of the outline, there were no dream sequences, but they
quickly got added in after I started the actual writing of the story. I felt it was important that Sam give Jax some sort of help on his quest, and that it be magical or prophetic in nature. I struggled a bit with writing the dreams, as I did not know where to focus the point of view. Was Jax supposed to be present, but invisible, and able to walk around? Did I want to tell it in first person from Zevander’s point of view? That would probably be the most interesting, but then you would lose so much in seeing Zevander from the outside. I ended up somewhere in the middle, not having Jax be present, but merely see these as visions. Also, after good advice from my supervisor, I changed the dreams to present tense, and that made it flow better.

One last aspect that changed quite a bit from the initial outline was the relationship between Jax and Linara. They were always supposed to eventually bond over the hardships and pain they had gone through over the course of the story, but it felt wrong somehow. It felt like the bond had happened almost by magic, instead of through conversations and opening up to each other. To make the transition from strangers to close friends believable, I added more discussion between them, and had them be more equal in the role of hero in the story.

6. Conclusion
Given the length of the story (around 25,000 words), it meant that there were certain things I just could not do. Its scope could not be overly epic and I could not spend too much time on character development, which meant that I could not have very many characters. Still, I think I succeeded in what I set out to do, which was create a fantasy story that would be enjoyable regardless of the reader’s age. It has a strong and interesting protagonist, as well as a strong and interesting antagonist. It has compelling themes and Easter eggs for those who look a bit deeper, but that is not required.

It was one of the hardest things I have done in my life. I realized early in the process that I am just not creative in the mornings, so I developed a schedule of waking up late, reading fiction (mostly fantasy; I have read little else since I started on the story) for a few hours, then books on writing for a few more hours. Then, in the late afternoon or early evening, if I wanted to really get some serious writing in, I would crack open a beer, sip on it slowly, and write until dinner, and continue on after dinner. After much trial and error, this process led to some of the most creative writing sessions I have ever had in my life. Hopefully my liver forgives me.

I purposefully gave the story an open-ended conclusion. This was partly because those kinds of endings are much more interesting to me as a reader, but also to leave the door
open to revisit Jax, Linara and Sam sometime in the future, which is something I would very much like to do. I hope the reader agrees and will want to come back with me if I ever do return.
Works Cited


