

The background of the cover is a lush, green forest scene. In the center, a stone archway made of grey and brown blocks leads into a dark, shadowed tunnel. The archway is flanked by tall, thin trees with dense foliage. In the foreground, a set of stone steps leads up towards the archway, surrounded by tall, vibrant green grass. The overall lighting is bright and natural, suggesting a sunny day in a forest.

Dungeon Rune

*The Ruby
Squirrels*
Book 1

H. M. Wolff

The Ruby Squirrels



Copyright © Polar Bear RPG 2024

9781445795522

Imprint: Lulu.com

Dungeon Rune is a Fantasy Roleplaying Game System designed and published by Polar Bear RPG Limited. This story and its content are written by H. M. Wolff and © Copyright: 2024 polarbearrpg.com

The Ruby Squirrels

Book 1

<i>Prologue</i>	9
<i>Chapter 1</i>	15
<i>Chapter 2</i>	27
<i>Chapter 3</i>	43
<i>Chapter 4</i>	57
<i>Chapter 5</i>	73
<i>Chapter 6</i>	91
<i>Epilogue</i>	109

Prologue

“Hey! Get back here you vermin!” Sabrione ran as fast as her legs could carry her across the packed market square. She clutched the loaf of bread tightly. Ahead of her she spotted her brother. He was waiting near the street corner just as they had agreed.

She dodged a hand that half-heartedly tried to grab her and wove through the mid-morning crowd to her brother. He must have seen her. He had ducked down a little and was getting ready to run!

She managed to reach him unscathed.

He ran with her.

By now three distinct voices could be heard, calling out about thieves and for the town guard.

“Just like we planned.”, Sabrione said between hurried breaths. “Got it?”

Her brother’s eyes were wide but he gulped and nodded. “Yes.”

“You’re fast. You can do it!” She tried to smile encouragingly as she held out the loaf for him to take.

He grabbed it and bolted left into a narrow alley. Sabrione hoped he would remember not to go straight home.

She slowed down a little and tried to listen for the tell-tale sound of the heavy boots the town guards wore. The usual market noise was muffled here, but she couldn’t hear anything that sounded like someone running behind her.

It was probably safe enough to glance back. It looked like no one was chasing her. Good. She stopped running and walked, trying to catch her breath somewhat and looking for a hiding place.

There was old Mr Tarrenspire's outhouse. Sabrione frowned, but it was the only place where she knew she could easily climb up on the roofs. She held her breath as she pulled herself up, just like she had done as a child.

Once she had been dared to sit in the outhouse and count to a hundred. The stench had almost made her faint and she quickly lost that dare as she stumbled back out.

Sabrione jumped from old Mr Tarrenspire's roof across the gap to his neighbour and carefully made her way to The Ghosthouse, a dilapidated shed near the edge of town.

It was empty today. Young children came there sometimes, drawn by the sinister tales their older siblings or others had told them.

As far as Sabrione knew it wasn't actually haunted, but she still felt chills running down her spine as she dropped through the remains of the roof onto the ground.

She quickly removed her cap and un-braided her hair, before taking off her extra tunic.

As brown gave way to green she mentally applauded herself for her own foresight. But where to hide her disguise now ... ?

She looked around. This place was most likely safe enough to stash everything for a while, but her father was probably going to miss this tunic, seeing as she had borrowed it without asking. And that would lead to questions.

Questions she would rather not deal with and her parents could also use something less to worry about.

She sighed. “Don’t ghosts need haunting supplies?”

The Ghosthouse didn’t answer her back.

Sabrione rolled the cap into the tunic and fashioned them both into a bundle of cloth.

After all, no one was going to look too closely at what was obviously a blanket being carried by a young woman.

Surely.

Chapter 1

The Letter

“Ho there, are you Sabrione Ragnory? You look like the description I got.”

Sabrione looked up from her grindstone.

“Depends on who’s asking. What do you need from her?”

The young man standing in front of her looked sheepish as he reached into his bag and produced a letter.

“The man in the tavern told me to go find a woman with long red hair who looks like she could easily beat me in an arm-wrestling match and who is named Sabrione Ragnory.” Sabrione smiled at that. “Alright kiddo, you found me.” She held out her hand for the letter. The man then also produced a small leather pouch from his bag.

“The man in the tavern said this is also for you.”, he said as he handed both the letter and the pouch to her. “You, erm, have a good day. Ma’am.”

Sabrione inspected the letter carefully after the messenger had left.

The envelope had a very good feel, it was probably made of some expensive material. Someone who had some financial means must have sent this, she mused. Or perhaps someone who wanted to portray themselves as such.

“TO THE RUBY SQUIRRELS” was embossed in silver on the front of the envelope, while the back was sealed with a purple wax seal. Sabrione squinted while she tried to make out the symbols on the seal. They looked like ... a stag head framed by a circle of rope, with a fish at the very top. She did not recognize this particular coat of arms.

Putting the letter down gently on a tree stump in front of her, she turned around and called towards the direction of the small cottage she was sitting a bit away from.

“Ky, can you get out here please? There’s a letter I want you to look at.”

Not long after, an elven woman emerged from the cottage. Sabrione noticed her auburn hair was still unbrushed and she was clutching a cup with some faint red steam coming from it. Her morning robe looked dishevelled and in danger of sliding off her narrow shoulders. “Morning, Sab”, she yawned, “what is all this about a letter?”

She began making her way over to the tree stump.

“Some kid dropped it off. It’s addressed to our group, but I don’t recognize the seal.” Kylantha had stepped up to her and took a slow sip from her beverage. “It feels far too early for such mysteries.”

“Anything before noon is too early for you, sleepyhead”, Sabrione teased playfully, “can you see if it’s magical?”

“Give me a moment to fully wake up.” Kylantha sat down cross-legged on the grass next to the stump and finished her drink unhurried. Once that was done she put down her empty cup gently, yawned again and waved her hand in an intricate circular motion over the letter while quietly saying something Sabrione didn’t understand.

A small cloud of pink smoke enveloped the letter, before dissipating into the air around them. “Not magical, as far as I can tell.”

“Thanks Ky.” Sabrione picked up the letter and held it up to the late morning sun. The light didn’t fully penetrate the material, but it seemed to contain nothing nefarious.

“Come on then, let’s go inside.” Sabrione held her hand out towards Kylantha, who grasped it and let her help her up.

They had walked halfway to the cottage, when Kylantha suddenly turned around and hurried back.

“My cup! I almost forgot it!”

Sabrione continued without her.

The cottage she entered was rather rustic and it could probably benefit from a nice deep scrubbing. To her left stood a massive wooden table, its light brown boards stained and cracked in places. Sitting at said table was Brazzneark, a goblin man and the last member of The Ruby Squirrels.

He looked up from his reading as she entered and a smile spread across his face.

“Good morning Sab! Did you bring that mysterious letter with you?”

Sabrione grinned. “Sure did.” She carefully placed the letter on the table in front of Brazzneark.

“Do you want to do the honours?”

Brazzneark shrugged and gave the letter a quick once-over.

“I don’t recognize that seal and I am assuming you don’t either, do you?”, he said.

She shook her head. “Maybe Ky will, once she finds her cup outside.”

“I am surprised you got her out of bed at all!” He laughed. “And coherent, too!”

“You and me both.”

Sabrione walked to the right of the cottage into the little kitchen and began rummaging through their pantry.

“Bazz, do you want anything to eat before opening mysterious letters of great mystery on such an early morning? I know I do.”

“Thank you, but I already ate. I’ll wait.”

Sabrione smiled into the cupboard as a warmth slowly spread inside her chest. She was glad to have met both Brazzneark and

Kylantha all these years ago and that fate had not pulled them apart.

As she prepared herself a light breakfast, Kylantha entered the cottage.

“Found my cup!” She announced happily. “I am feeling like more tea.”

Kylantha made her way to the window next to the kitchen and propped it open before she took out her bag of tea leaves from the mostly scent proof container in the pantry.

Sabrione quickly finished up and sat down at the table, observing Kylantha’s tea making routine from a distance while sating her hunger.

Brazzneck cleared his throat. “Ky, do you recognize the seal of this letter?”

“I cannot say I do, Brazz. I had hoped you would.”

“I don’t. May the spirits guide me.”

With that Brazzneark carefully opened the letter and read aloud.

Dear Ruby Squirrels,

tales from your exploits have finally reached me and I really would hate to be late to the party of supporting some of the finest talents out there. I am in need of your services as experienced retrievers of old and valuable things. They are hidden deep in the ruins of Selvenora, a place I very much doubt you are familiar with yet. Dashing explorers such as yourselves may have heard of Marough, which is very much not in ruins and quite near. My task is simple. Explore Selvenora and bring back any magical artefacts of means. I am convinced Ivasaar Vagwyn will be a good judge.

Once you return to Marough go into The Unusual Spiders Tavern and ask for “Kai the Lucky”. Kai will hand over your appropriate reward.

Consider the Pennies an advance for your travels, should you choose to accept my task. Otherwise I will consider it an investment into both our budding partnership as well as supporting upcoming adventurers.

Only The Kindest Regards,

F. H.

“Bazz, please hand me the letter.” Kylantha sounded a little worried as she asked. She read the letter again and seemed to dwell on a specific passage.

“This person ...” She said quietly. “They know us. Or perhaps they only know me. They used my correct title, in the Elven Language no less.”

Sabrione cocked her head to her left side. “Is that kind of information very difficult to find out, Ky?”

“I am not sure. I had never thought about it. It is not a secret, especially not in learned circles,

but also not something to be mentioned over a shared beverage either.”

“Whoever F. H. is, sounds like they did their research.”, Bazzneark chimed in. “Your title doesn’t sound impossible to find out. There’s probably records and all sorts.”

Kylantha nodded slowly. “That is a very likely explanation, yes.”

“It looks like F. H. is serious about this task, given the amount of work they put into researching this. Our names are probably easy enough to find out, but that title, now that shows real effort.” Sabrione thought for a moment. “They surely know how to get me interested.”

“Not just you.” Bazzneark grinned and opened the leather pouch, revealing it to be filled with glittering Silver Pennies. “Shall we do some counting?”

Chapter 2

The Journey

“Hm, have either of you heard of this place before?” Sabrione asked while giving the letter another quick read.

Bazzneark and Kylantha disagreed.

“We will have to inquire around town.” Kylantha offered. “Maybe someone has been there before and can tell us which route to take.”

“There was no time frame mentioned in the letter, but we should probably not waste any either way. How about you two go to each of the inns and I head to the market to get some supplies?”

“Good idea Bazz, but maybe Ky should get properly dressed first.”

Kylantha mumbled something under her breath that sounded suspiciously like “Someone has to look the part ...” and started to make her way to her clothing chests.

Sabrione responded by ruffling through her hair while she walked past her.

She then left the cottage herself, joining Bazzneark on the short walk into town.

“It’s times like these I wonder if we should move to somewhere bigger than this.” Bazzneark said as they walked past the first little town houses.

“I’m not sure. I like how quiet Epring is. And the larger the town, the bigger the problems tend to be.”

“I guess.”

“Also, we just bought the cottage last year! Settling into a place takes time.”

Bazzneark raised an eyebrow at that remark. “You are not telling me anything new here, Sab.

And sure, for day-to-day life Epring may offer all we need. But we don't really have a lot of that now, do we?"

"I hear your point." Sabrione raised her hands in a defensive gesture. "But the cottage was cheap!"

Their conversation was interrupted by one of their neighbours greeting them as they walked past. Sabrione decided to stop for a quick chat while Bazzneark continued. She picked up her pace once she had fulfilled her social obligations.

Ky would most likely prefer the higher-class inn and go there first, she thought to herself. This would be just like the old days.

Sabrione grinned as she pushed the door of The Honey River open and her nostrils were assaulted by a very familiar concoction: stale smoke, spilled alcohol, sweat and the faintly present vomit undertones that no tavern ever seemed able to rid itself off.

She quickly surveyed the dimly lit room. That pile looked like last night's patron, as well as the two in the corner to her left.

"If you want something to eat, come back around noon."

She looked for the source of the voice and found it in an exhausted looking younger goblin woman standing behind the counter.

Sabrione flashed her a dazzling smile. As she approached the counter, she made sure to sway her hips a little more than usual, it never hurt to be extra friendly with innkeepers. She kept a close eye on her facial expressions. To her dismay the goblin looked mostly tired.

"I'm actually looking for information. And maybe an ale."

She winked.

"Have you ever heard of a place called Marough?"

"Can't say I have, Ma'am. That'll be two Pennies for the ale."

Sabrione produced five coins from her money pouch and slid them over the counter. "One is for your help and the other two to get yourself an ale as well. I don't like to drink alone."

The goblin looked at the coins for a moment, before quickly pocketing them.

"Frankly I prefer something a little stronger this early on." She said as she bent down behind the counter and then set a cloudy bottle on the darkened wood, as well as two small cups. With practiced ease she poured a golden liquid into each cup.

Sabrione set her ale down. "The house special?"

"I see it's not your first time here, Ma'am." She put one cup in front of Sabrione and then lifted her own. "To the spirits of our ancestors."

"And may we not join them all too soon." Sabrione replied, lifting her own cup and drinking quickly.

The goblin raised an eyebrow and smiled a little before emptying her cup. "I see you are well travelled. Sadly I have never heard of that particular place. Narrow, was it?"

"Ma-rough, actually. That aside, do you happen to have any patrons that are not local and may have heard of it?"

"I'm sorry, but no. We only had local patrons last night."

Sabrione sighed. "Thank you for your help in any case. And if you do happen to overhear something, know that Sabrione of The Ruby Squirrels is interested."

She finished her ale. "You can find us in the cottage on the outskirts of town."

The goblin nodded. "I will."

Sabrione left The Honey River in a slightly dissatisfied but not discouraged mood and decided to head back to the cottage.

Information could be hard to come by. Perhaps the others had had better luck.

She was searching through her personal chest as she heard the door open and she looked back quickly, almost on instinct.

Bazzneark entered the cottage, carrying a noticeably full cloth sack over his back. He heaved it on the table with mild difficulty.

"So, I couldn't quite get everything." He said as he started unpacking. "Just some provisions and some more rope."

"You can never have enough rope."

"True, but you can also never have enough healing supplies. And those were what I couldn't find, our Surgeon's Bag is looking rather sad."

"We can probably stop along the way."

"We will have to." Bazzneark said as he started to wrap the rations individually.

"How's your axe looking, Bazz? I can sharpen it before I pack up my tools."

"It could probably use it. Thanks Sab."

Sabrione made an agreeing noise as she continued to search for her favourite quarrel quiver.

After she had almost finished packing, she picked up Bazznearks axe and headed outside, once again sitting down in front of the grindstone. The axe wasn't in horrible shape, but it was definitely beginning to dull. Sabrione started sharpening.

She had noticed recently how the repetitiveness of this task gave her thoughts a welcome break. For a while all she could and should focus on was how the metal interacted with the stone, how it felt and if there were

any dull parts remaining. It was freeing not to have to think about life's hardships for a while.

She saw a figure approach on the edge of her vision but decided to enjoy the sensation of only sharpening an axe for just a little while longer.

A hand placed itself on her shoulder and gave it a little squeeze. "I take it that you have almost finished packing up?" Kylantha said gently.

"Yes." Sabrione held up the axe, inspecting the edge. "Bazz got us some food and rope, but no healing supplies. Did you find out anything?"

"I have what you might consider a lead and some more fortunate news."

"Oh? We better go inside then." She carefully placed the axe on its side and followed Kylantha.

"I happened to converse with a cloth merchant in The Wanderer and while they had not heard of Marough themselves, they suggested

we try our luck in one of the coach inns in Okhuridge. And as I was about to leave I was approached by one of the serving staff, who recommended his cousin's farm should we be in need of swift steeds. A somewhat brazen selling tactic, but I do have to applaud its effectiveness."

"That's a cheeky one." Remarked Bazzneark.

"We may as well see what they have for sale, I don't know any reputable horse breeders here yet." Sabrione said and stretched a little, sharpening the axe had taken its toll. "We shouldn't waste any time, it's already noon and Okuhridge is about two days away."

They picked up three decent enough looking horses from the farm Kylantha had been recommended and Sabrione managed to haggle the price down to 90 Pennies per animal. She also made a deal with a boy who looked fairly trustworthy to keep an eye on their cottage. They had stored everything away

and thrown out any perishables, but Sabrione simply slept easier if she knew someone was coming to check on it, even just once a week.

The path to Okhuridge was well established, if perhaps a little boring. Sabrione used the time to get acquainted with her horse as well as getting used to wearing her armour again. She hadn't donned it in about a month, while they were settling into their cottage there was simply no need to wear it. As they arrived in Okhuridge after an uneventful two days she felt as if she had never taken the armour off in the first place.

"Looks like one of the coach inns is coming up ahead." Bazzneark, who had taken the lead for the last leg of the journey, pointed to a two-story building, with what looked to be two stables and several barns clustered around it. "Last one there has to buy dinner!"

Kylantha spurred her horse from a gentle trot into a full gallop and dashed past Sabrione.

"You are merely proposing this because you are already ahead!"

"Cheater!" Sabrione teased as she urged her own horse to keep up.

Kylantha arrived first, her horse had overtaken Bazzneark's with ease. Sadly, he was still too far ahead and Sabrione arrived last. She paid for their meal once they had found a table in a slightly darker corner, this had all been in good fun.

Once they had eaten Sabrione looked around. Most of the other tables in the room were occupied, but like sat with like. She spotted some day labourers eagerly eating their meal, a group of fairly wealthy looking travellers conversing over their drinks, two groups of not so wealthy looking ones playing cards and some coachmen sitting by the counter, eating in tired silence.

She grabbed her empty tankard. "I'll ask around about Marough, why don't you two keep the table occupied?"

"Gladly." Said Bazzneark while Kylantha merely nodded.

Sabrione figured either the groups of travellers or the coachmen might have the information she was looking for. She bought another ale and asked the coachmen at the counter. None of them had heard of it. She let them be and decided to try her luck with the group of wealthy travellers.

She slowly approached their table, gauging their mood and waiting for an opportune moment to join the conversation.

One of them seemed to take note of her, a striking elven man in very well-fitting clothes. "Why don't you join us for our dice game? We are one player short."

Sabrione smiled, hoping she wasn't blushing too noticeably. "Gladly, friend. What are you playing?"

"Swords and Shields." He said. "Are you familiar with it?" He smiled encouragingly at her.

"I'm afraid I'm not, why don't you explain it to me?"

As he explained the rules Sabrione had a hard time listening, she was distracted by how the light of the candle flame shimmered in his eyes and hair and how his strong, but elegant hands turned the dice to show her the different point combinations.

Naturally she lost the first few rounds of the game and some Pennies with them. As the evening progressed and more games were played, she did eventually discover that the elven man who had invited her to the table had not only heard of Marough, but actually been there himself some years ago.

"The village itself is just that, a village." He mused while slowly nursing his fourth goblet of wine. "But the ruins of Selvenora are rather interesting."

He looked her up and down quickly. "You seem the kind of person interested in delving for forgotten treasure."

"You got me there." Sabrione chuckled.

"Well, let me give you some advice." He put his hand on her lower arm and looked her straight in the eye. "Those ruins are dangerous, take caution as you explore them."

Chapter 3

The Descent

"Hail travellers!"

Sabrione waved to the goblin man who had greeted them, grateful to see an unfamiliar face after almost a full week's worth of travel.

"Did you get through the mud okay?" He shouted.

"Yes, thank you!" Sabrione answered, leading her horse towards him. "Is this Marough?"

"It is indeed. You'll no doubt want to find a place for the night, the tavern is just down the road."

Sabrione thanked him and they continued into the village.

"Huh, it really is called The Unusual Spiders Tavern." Sabrione said as she had read the sign

of the only house with two stories. "I'll see if they can house us for the night."

They could and while Kylantha took care of the horses and Bazzneark carried their luggage into their room, Sabrione decided to treat all three of them to a hot bath before dinner.

"I think I'm going to call it an early night tonight." Sabrione yawned after they had finished their meal and were now lazily drinking their beverages of choice.

Bazzneark smirked. "Unsatisfying hunting grounds, eh?"

She stuck her tongue out at him which caused both Bazzneark and Kylantha to burst out laughing.

"Actually, I'm just tired."

"I am assured in my reasoning that this the sole cause for you to retire at this hour." Kylantha winked at her.

Sabrione felt rather refreshed when she woke up the next morning. To her satisfaction she noticed the others were still asleep. She had no idea when they had come to bed last night and she was not going to wake them now.

Maybe after breakfast.

She headed downstairs and found breakfast was merely a bowl of plain porridge.

"Your companions said you want to go to the ruins, is that true?" The innkeeper asked her after he had served her.

Sabrione nodded. "Yes. We were hoping to get some information before we set out."

"We don't go there. Three generations ago some... people... came to our village and set up in the ruins. We haven't seen any of them since, but strange things have happened ever since then and some nights horrible noises plague us."

He leaned towards Sabrione conspiratorially and continued in a much lower tone. "Ever since the demon worshippers have been in the ruins, if you leave a piece of raw meat out on a new moon, it turns rotten and foul, even putrid the next day."

"Sounds like we should be careful."

"You shouldn't be going there at all; some things are better left alone."

"Your warning has been noted, thank you." Sabrione said evenly. "Do you happen to know any farmers who can take care of our horses while we are gone?"

"You'll want to try the Redwoods."

It took them until noon to reach the ruins. What remained of the old road had been damaged by the passing of time and was slowly being reclaimed by nature. Kylantha remarked

how the architecture and age pointed to Selvenora being a city build by Virion Elves.

"Virion can loosely be translated to Shard Guardian." She said while inspecting what was probably once a flowerpot. "They liked to experiment with crystals of any and all sizes, shapes and forms."

She stood up and stretched. "I only remember a little about them, it was not my focus of study. I do recall how they liked to dwell above ground as much as below. We should be wary of the ground giving way beneath our feet, especially if it is still soaked with water from the recent rain."

They continued on the remains of the old road until a small settlement came into view. Sabrione noticed how there were few buildings, she counted about just over two dozen. She motioned the others to stay back while she scouted ahead.

It all seemed empty. The dwellings were made from rock and what had probably been wood once. As she entered one of the smaller buildings something crunched and shattered under her boot.

She froze and looked around, slowly breathing through her mouth. But nothing jumped out at her. A little more relaxed she inspected the ground. She had stepped on some incredibly thin crystal. The shards were clear and tinged slightly purple. She carefully picked one up and made her way back to the others.

"It seems abandoned. And look at this, I found it in one of the houses."

Bazzneark inspected the shard and held it up against the midday sun before cursing and dropping it. "Yeouch, you piece of..." He shook his hand. "Darn thing cut me!"

Kylantha picked it up from the ground, it had survived the impact in one piece. "Fascinating. I do believe this was a window at some point.

Notice how it is entirely transparent and devoid of any imperfections? This shows some very advanced craftsmanship!"

"I can think of one imperfection." Bazzneark hissed. He had moved over to their luggage and was currently using the Surgeon's Bag to clean and wrap the cut on his hand. "Thank the spirits we bought some healing supplies back in Okhuridge."

All of the buildings had a basement with stone steps leading into it. A lot of them had flooded, most likely due to the rain. Sabrione waded through the waters in the basement of one of the bigger buildings, only to find an exit out of the basement blocked by a pile of rubble and debris.

"Ky, did the Virion Elves have tunnels?" She turned around to look at Kylantha.

"That would certainly seem to be the case."

They finally found something interesting in the last building, which also happened to be the biggest. It reminded Sabrione of a place of worship, a temple perhaps, as they entered and she stepped into a large, square room. Unlike the other places they had been to it was both dry and surprisingly clean, except for a thin layer of dust. The centre was dominated by a sizeable metal brazier, Sabrione reckoned she could have probably used it to take a bath in, with a circle of stone benches around it. Towards the back she spotted an archway with an, upon closer inspection, incredibly detailed and fine crystal mosaic inlaid into the stone and stairs leading down into darkness.

"What incredible craftsmanship!" marvelled Kylantha and traced one of the patterns with her hand. "It is astounding how this has stood the test of time, even as sheltered as it is."

"As if it was protected by something... " Bazzneark looked around a little nervously. "Great, erm, Virion Spirits! We are just passing

through! We mean no disrespect!" He bowed quickly facing the brazier.

"I don't think there are any presences left here, Bazz." Said Sabrione, but she also scanned her surroundings again.

Just in case.

The room remained quiet.

Sabrione tied the rope they brought first to herself, then to Bazzneark and last to Kylantha.

"Usual strategy, Sab?"

Sabrione nodded and helped Bazzneark into his armour.

Kylantha raised her staff, holding it in both hands. She closed her eyes and Sabrione saw bright, blue light emanating from her back, shining through her clothing. Like two snakes it travelled over her shoulders, down her arms and finally the magical ink markings on her hands lit up, before transferring a bit to her

staff. She opened her eyes again, now holding her staff like a mundane torch.

"Let us proceed."

Sabrione walked carefully as she made her way down the stairs. She could hear her companions behind her, not quite as quiet as she was. Still, their presence comforted her. She knew she could count on both of them.

The stairs went on for quite some time before finally leading to a long, perfectly straight corridor. Sabrione could hear Kylantha making a noise of interest behind her. The walls were unnaturally smooth and she could not see any signs of tool usage on them. They were also undecorated, just flat dark grey rock.

The corridor made her feel uneasy.

Still, they pressed on. They passed several perfectly square rooms, each with seven hewn stone coffins in them. Most were still sealed, with carvings accentuated with crystals

depicting figures engaged in battle. One of the lids was ajar and as Sabrione carefully looked in she saw dust and cloth wrappings that crumbled as she touched them with a quarrel. She motioned for the others to continue.

The corridor took a sharp turn to the right. Sabrione peeked around the corner. There was something a little further down. She waited for a few breaths, but it didn't move. Her crossbow at the ready she stepped around the corner and approached the thing. It looked like a statue.

As Kylantha's light illuminated the corridor fully Sabrione stopped dead in her tracks. What she had seen was not a statue. Instead she looked at a grotesque and violent display of mummified bodies. There were two, one larger and one smaller, intertwined and covered in arrows in the centre, framed by skeletal remains. Sabrione counted nine skulls, each pierced with a long and sharp rock surrounding the bodies.

Something was jaggedly scratched into the rock above, still stained brown.

"GLORY TO KORRETHOD"

She gulped. It was safe to assume they had found the demon worshippers.

Chapter 4

The Search

"Hey, watch it!" Hissed Bazzneark.

Sabrione offered him an apologetic smile and quietly mouthed "I'm sorry."

They had walked further. The unnaturally straight walls and rooms had made Sabrione feel more on edge and seeing the arranged remains hadn't really helped. She had been so preoccupied with looking around a corner she hadn't heard Bazzneark come up behind her and promptly hit him with her crossbow as she turned back around.

She put up a hand and motioned for the other two to wait. She closed her eyes and focused on her breathing.

Inhale, two, three, four, five, six. Hold, two, three, four. Exhale, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight. Hold, two three, four.

She had forgotten the name and face of the Healer who had taught this to her. It had been a long time ago. But it still worked. She repeated the exercise three times and found herself calming down.

She opened her eyes again, swiftly looked around the corner ahead and pressed on.

After what felt like ages of them quietly walking through perfectly straight corridors, exploring perfectly square rooms with imperfectly square coffins in them, Sabrione noticed a crack in the wall, framing the entire corridor. It looked like a severe cut-off between the inconceivably straight, unnatural smoothness and a rougher, perhaps hewn rock.

As she stepped over the crack she felt a sense of relief. Looking back, Bazzneark and Kylantha seemed a little more relaxed as well.

"Wonder why it's stopped so suddenly."
Mumbled Bazzneark.

"I imagine the Virion decided their corridor was of sufficient length." Kylantha mused.

"Maybe. We shouldn't let our guard drop."
Sabrione signalled the others to be quiet.

They followed what could now better be described as a cave tunnel rather than a corridor for a while. Every dozen or so steps there was a marking on the floor or on the wall, proclaiming "GLORY TO KORRETHOD", "KORRETHOD WILL PREVAIL", "HAIL KORRETHOD" or simply "KORRETHOD" over and over.

Suddenly the tunnel gave way to Sabrione's right, into a small chamber. She motioned for Kylantha to shine her staff into it.

The first thing she noticed were brown stains everywhere, it looked like they had seeped into the rock. In the middle of the chamber stood

a heavy wooden table, half fallen apart. The walls were covered in hooks and little cubbies, some containing knives of all sorts, stained bowls and rusty nails. The dark colour of the wood and a quick sniff confirmed Sabrione's fears.

"A lot of blood was spilled here." She said quietly. The scent of blood lingered surprisingly long in her nose as she motioned to the tools on the wall. "I think these were used for either torture or sacrifice. Or perhaps both."

"Don't think these folks were the type to have a lovely cup of tea at that table."

Sabrione acknowledge Bazzneark's remark with a weak chuckle.

They searched the chamber and Bazzneark found a small vial in one of the lower cubbies. It contained a crimson, shimmery liquid. He carefully held it wrapped in a piece of cloth while Kylantha cast the same spell she had used for the letter back at their cottage in Epring.

Watching the small pink cloud envelop the vial reminded Sabrione of sunshine and a quiet morning. Those felt incredibly distant to her now.

"It is of magic origin!" Kylantha said, a note of pride colouring her voice. "I shall store it for now."

As she lazily watched Kylantha handle her bag something caught her attention.

Kylantha's hand.

It looked... different, just for a moment. Sabrione could have sworn she saw scales and claws flashing into view. But now her hand looked very normal, as it always looked.

"Ky, could you give me your hand?"

Kylantha looked at her questioningly but held out her hand nonetheless.

She found nothing out of the ordinary. All of Kylantha's ink markings were still in their usual

place, she hadn't grown any extra fingers either. And no claws. Or scales.

"I thought I saw something." She said as she released her hand.

Kylantha looked at her own hand. "I sense nothing out of the ordinary."

Sabrione sighed in mild relief. "I thought you had claws there for a moment."

"Claws? Sab, are you doing alright?"

She turned around to face Bazzneark as he spoke and leapt back instinctively while her hand moved to her crossbow. For a blink of an eye it looked as if Bazzneark had grown a spiky, crimson tail, swaying lazily behind him.

"Sab?" He looked worried.

"I... " She couldn't find the correct words. She felt the urge to keep this observation hidden. Something was going on with the two of them. She knew what she had seen, even if it was gone now.

She wasn't going insane.

"I guess I'm a bit on edge." She smiled and laughed a little. "You just startled me. I hadn't heard you."

"If you say so."

"Say so I do indeed." She took her hand off her crossbow and gestured to the outside of the room. "How about we take a little break, have something to eat and celebrate finding our first treasure?"

"I wholeheartedly agree. I, for one, am famished."

They made their way out of the chamber and a little further down the corridor before having a meal. Sabrione tried to fill the silence with some meaningless small talk.

Every now and then her friends looked like they had demonic features, though they disappeared as fast as they emerged. They didn't behave any differently than usual though,

Bazzneark seemed to be a little worried about her while Kylantha made sure she kept hydrated.

It felt forced and faked. Sabrione put on a cheery, nonchalant exterior, chatting away and while she was quite sure they weren't paying attention, made sure her crossbow was loaded and she had easy access to her quarrels. Her small dagger, while usually not a weapon she relied on, was still in its sheath on her left boot. The stiff weight felt made her feel a little safer, but she knew a weapon was only as good as its wielder.

After they had finished their meal Sabrione took the lead once again, as not to rise suspicion. She would have preferred to see her companions in front of her, but she trusted she would sense them sneak up on her.

They walked deeper into the cave. Every now and then Sabrione could hear an unusual swooshing behind her, as if scaly skin slithered

over smooth rock. She did not dare to turn around but took notice how the frequency increased until the swooshing was constant.

"See this chamber on the left?" She looked back over her shoulder and gulped, but quickly replaced it with a smile. Bazzneark's tail had returned and grown in size, its end flicking slowly like a cat tail would. Kylantha looked off, those were definitely claws grabbing her staff now and her eyes were a lot darker than before. "How about you search in here while I scout ahead? I don't want to be down here forever."

They nodded and the knot in her stomach eased a little as she watched them disappear from her view. She quickly turned and continued, lighting a torch to be able to see.

She found two more chambers which she quickly surveyed for any danger or potential artifacts. They were as abandoned as the rest of this place, but the second chamber seemed

to have served as a library. A quick glance revealed shelves and crates, in surprisingly good condition, filled with scrolls and books of various sizes.

She continued until she stepped into a very big cave, the light of her torch did not reach the ceiling nor the walls. Her gaze was immediately drawn to a very big, hewn stone in the centre. It was brown, stained in the same way the first chamber they had found had been. She noticed some grooves, forming a hexagonal shape on top of the stone and running down the sides, joining into a sizeable channel that continued into the darkness beyond.

This seemed like a good space to wait for the others.

And subdue them, if she had to.

She was beginning to worry they were beyond saving. She would try to of course; these had once been her best friends and she owed them that at the very least. But something whispered

in her gut that they were too far gone, Korrethod had taken over their bodies and soon would move on to their minds. She would have to be quick, before the demon had ensnared them completely.

She did not think to question when exactly she had become an expert on demonic possession.

Sabrione positioned herself on the opposite side of the big centre stone, facing the entrance and waited. She felt her throat swell and pressure moving up through her chest. She bit down on her fist to suppress any loud sobs while tears flowed freely down her face. The possibility of losing Bazz and Ky terrified her. She did not want to do this.

But she had to.

"Hey Sab!"

She quickly wiped the tear streaks away and returned Bazzneark's wave. His arm was now crimson and scaley as well.

"Find anything good?" She asked, hoping her voice didn't waver too much.

"Indeed so! I have discovered two additional artifacts of significant worth and we have come across a journal that may be related to a family in Marough!"

Sabrione gulped. While Kylantha had excitedly recounted their findings they had both come closer. Bazzneark was now fully covered in crimson scales, his eyes emitting a dull orange glow. The tail had not disappeared and he had also grown horns. Meanwhile Kylantha's mouth opened up to her ears and was filled with a row of very sharp looking teeth. Her eyes were two dark voids and her skin was beginning to flake off. She left little bits of herself on the ground as she walked, revealing raw, red muscle and tendons underneath.

In one fluid motion, the speed and grace of it surprising her, Sabrione shot a quarrel into Kylantha's right arm, which held her staff, and

reloaded her crossbow faster than she ever had before.

"HAVE YOU LOST YOUR MIND?!" Screamed Kylantha.

She fired another quarrel at Bazzneark's left knee who had begun to run towards her.

"Sab, please stop!" He begged, struggling to keep his balance.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry." Tears filled her eyes again, blurring her vision. "Don't you see what you've turned into?"

"We didn't..." Bazzneark looked back at Kylantha who was picking her staff back up. "Sab, please stop this. We are still the same." He held out his hand towards her, as if that gesture could stop her from shooting.

"He will turn you soon!" She cried. "Don't you realize? Don't you see?" She shot another quarrel at Bazzneark who yelled out in pain.

"SABRIONE RAGNORY, FREEZE!" Kylantha shouted and pointed her staff to her. A small bead of blue energy emerged from the tip and whizzed through the air.

Time slowed. She frantically tried to dodge Kylantha's spell while trying to reload as well. As she leapt to the side the bead adjusted its course and hit her in the chest. Her entire body stiffened, her crossbow began its descent from her hands towards the ground and her vision was taken over by ice crystals. She couldn't move her eyes anymore. Her breathing, already slow, stopped.

She impacted the ground.

And everything went dark around her.

Chapter 5

The Ascent

"Haaaaaah... I'm just not sure if we can trust her again."

Bazzneark's voice floated through the thick haze of Sabrione's mind.

The first thing she realized was that she was conscious. She could not see anything and there was also a pressure on her left side.

She tried to blink. It didn't feel like a blindfold was covering her eyes, but she couldn't quite open them. How strange.

She then attempted move her left hand. It did move, her fingers too. She could even make a fist. But her wrists were tied. Tied quite well, she realized. Whoever did this clearly knew how to make a good knot.

Now then...

She took a slow breath in and moved her right foot only to discover it was also immobilised.

"I assume whatever demon lay dormant here has now awoken and was influencing Sabrione. It may still be doing so. We must take every precaution."

Wait, that was Kylantha's voice.

She tried to move her body and soon realized the pressure she had been feeling on her left side was the ground.

She tried to speak, but a cough came out first.

"Look who's awake." Said Bazzneark, sounding hesitant.

"I can't see." She moved her head around, but there was darkness all around her.

Suddenly she felt a big, warm and calloused hand on her upper arm.

"Try again, Sab."

She opened her eyes and looked straight into Bazzneark's face. He looked sad.

"You're normal again!" She couldn't stop the tears forming in her eyes as a tidal wave of relief flooded through her body. Her friend was back! He was fine! He was not a demon anymore!

Or was he? Perhaps Korrethod was just hiding. Demons were tricky.

Her smile dropped in an instant and she tried to move away, only to lose against her bindings.

"Sabrione." Kylantha's face came into view over her. She looked like her old self again, albeit a little worse for wear. "I will try to drive the demon out of you."

"What? I don't have a demon in me! I'm completely myself! It's you two who are possessed! And now he's trying to get me, too!"

"Who's trying to get you, Sab?" Bazzneark said softly.

Sabrione laughed mockingly. "As if you don't know!"

"Hold her. She will most likely attempt to struggle." Kylantha sighed and took her face into her hands, looking directly into Sabrione's eyes. "If you are still present, somewhere... please accept my apology for what I am about to commence."

"What are you..."

Sabrione could not finish her sentence. She only saw Kylantha holding her staff, once again pointing it at her chest and saying something quietly. An ink marking at her throat lit up in a sickly, vibrant green and the light travelled over her shoulder down her arm and to her staff. A slimy glob of a sticky, green substance dripped on Sabrione and immediately disappeared.

There was something in her that wanted out. She felt hot and her surroundings began to sway and spin. Her head seemingly split in two and she cried out in pain. Everything in her wanted to curl up into a small ball in a dark and cool corner, away from this. But Bazzneark held her tight and she couldn't move.

"Are you Sabrione Ragnory?" Kylantha asked.

"Yes, please stop this! Please... no more!"

"What did you see?"

Sabrione heaved, but nothing came out. Her guts were on fire, roaring against the torment. Tears ran down her face and she had never felt sick in her life.

"You... were... possessed." She dry-heaved again and coughed, whimpering. "Korrethod..." Sharp flames shot through her guts, as if they were being sliced from the inside. "You... turned."

Another wave of pain enveloped her and she cried until her voice gave out.

A smooth, somewhat cool hand turned her head slightly and that proved to be too much. Sabrione gagged through her cries as a blazing mass of agony made its way from her innards upwards.

"Forward." Kylantha said quickly and she was bent over.

She heaved until her throat and mouth were filled with a slimy, blazing inferno. She could only part her teeth and let it leave her.

Something dropped to the ground with a thud and suddenly she was no longer held. Sabrione fell to her side and through tears saw a writhing mound of black and purple begin to move away from her. An axe blade came down on it so hard the rocky ground sparked. The axe came down again and again and again while the mass also burst into flames.

She wasn't sure how much time had passed but eventually she heard a scream so otherworldly it sounded like the universe was being turned inside out. The mass had turned into dust.

A pair of fine, but dirty leather boots walked into her field of view and she was being picked up and held again. Kylantha's face appeared in front of hers.

"Are you Sabrione Ragnory?"

"Yes! Please..." She retched. "Help me." She was beginning to feel hazy. Her blood rushed in her ears and her vision darkened. She welcomed her dulling senses with open arms, since the agony was also lessened.

There was pressure on her nose, she noticed. As she tried to breathe in through her mouth, she unexpectedly swallowed something cold and bitter. She coughed.

Slowly her vision began to clear up. As the haze lifted she saw Bazzneark and Kylantha bending over her. She could hear a loud crack followed by the sound of several small stones hitting the ground.

"We've gotta go!" She struggled to get the words out. "This place is going to collapse."

Bazzneark looked in the direction of the sound and cursed loudly.

"Ky, you grab the goods, I'll get Sab. NOW MOVE!"

He grabbed her and threw her over his shoulder before breaking into a full-on sprint. The force of being pressed against Bazzneark's armour drove the air from Sabrione's lungs. Her face was dangerously close to the ground and as she lifted it, she saw Kylantha behind them, running and clutching her staff tightly, their only source of light.

A crashing sound filled her ears, as loud as thunder. She couldn't see far into the darkness, but a gust of wind impacted her face. Kylantha stumbled but managed to catch herself just in time.

Bazzneark had not been quite so fortunate. He and Sabrione impacted the ground with a loud clang and while he seemed to have landed face first, Sabrione hit the back of her head on the ground and saw stars on the ceiling. She sat up slowly, that was going to leave a bruise for sure.

Kylantha extended her hand to her. "Can you run?"

"I'll try." She said through gritted teeth, while letting her help her up.

Bazzneark was dusting himself off, before turning to both of them, a worried look on his face. "I can carry you again, if I have to. Now come on."

Sabrione tried to keep pace with them, but she quickly found she was not yet capable of reaching her usual running speed, let alone sprint. The others slowed down for her but still they made progress. Soon they passed the crack between the more natural looking rock cave and the unnaturally perfect Virion corridor.

"Slow... down..." Panted Sabrione out of breath. "This... reinforced..." She came to a full stop and took several deep breaths, trying to recuperate.

"We should not linger here still. I am wary of structures as old as these. Oh, and Sab?" Kylantha approached her and hugged her, holding on as if she was about to drown. "I am so, so sorry. I never want to do this to you again." She whispered.

Sabrione noticed her shoulder was getting a little wetter than usual while she tried to find any words of comfort. She couldn't settle on

anything, so she kept quiet and simply returned the embrace, swaying lightly.

Suddenly she heard yet another loud crack directly above them. She looked up. The ceiling was covered in fractures as far as she could see either way and one of the pieces above them looked dangerously close to being severed and about to fall.

She pushed Kylantha away from her and yelled for both of them to move.

Crack.

Sabrione felt a burst of energy surge through her as her feet pounded into the ground and propelled her forward, away from the falling ceiling.

"You complete and utter fools!"

The booming voice made her freeze in her movements. She turned her head around slowly, her body felt as if submerged in a sticky,

tar-like substance and every breath was much too long.

Her vision was obscured by dust, but it eventually settled to reveal a creature twice her size and width. Glowing red eyes forced their way into her mind and she gasped audibly. It had horns, wings and a spiky tail too, appearing eerily similar to Bazzneark when she had had Korrethod inside of her.

"Oh yes, silly little mortal. Look upon your demise and despair!" The creature laughed maniacally, throwing its head back. "Did you really think you could sneak into my temple, loot it and simply abscond?"

"Of course not, you piece of filth!" growled Sabrione. Its words had filled her with anger so violent it had overtaken her initial fear. Her body moved at its normal speed again and she readied her crossbow, taking aim at one of the glowing eyes. "Your followers are dead and your name will be forgotten!" She released the

quarrel and moved to the side, pressing herself against the wall to make room for her friends.

A silvery dart of magic flew past her and impacted the demon at the same time as her quarrel. It released a scream as if the universe was being turned inside out and held one clawed hand against its left eye.

Bazzneark barrelled down the corridor and brought his axe down on the demon's knee in a mighty overhead swing, causing it to stumble. He swung the axe around and connected a second time, forcing the demon to kneel.

It looked at her and opened its mouth in a wide, toothy grin. "You. You will be the reason my name will not be forgotten."

Sabrione looked at him quizzically. The demon snapped its fingers and her left arm exploded into a cacophony of hurt which quickly flooded her entire body. Tears welled in her eyes and she looked at her arm.

Or rather what was left of it.

"You take from me. I take from you." the creature whispered in her head. She could barely make out the words over the pain and her blood rushing in her ears. She sunk to the ground, her crossbow falling with her.

Something behind her exploded in a flash of lightning and the demon screamed again, but it was muffled. She felt a cool, smooth hand on her back.

"Speak to me, Sab." Kylantha said and began gently caressing her damp skin in fluid strokes.

"I'm... He..." Sabrione choked on her words, her throat felt tight.

"He's gone." A warm hand touched her left shoulder. "I've applied some healing balm. Now, don't protest, but you are not walking out of here." Bazzneark lifted her up gently, holding her across his arms.

She leaned against his chest. His armour felt nice and cool. "Thank you." She whispered.

After Kylantha had gathered their belongings again they started walking. First out of the stone rubble and then further, past the gruesome statue, several of the perfectly square coffin rooms and around the sharp bend until they spotted stairs going up.

"I will take the lead. Bazz, do not follow me until I confirm it is safe."

With that Kylantha climbed the stairs and disappeared from Sabrione's view. She and Bazzneark waited in the darkness for a short while.

"It is safe. You can come up." She sounded relieved.

Bazzneark began climbing the stairs carefully, refusing to set Sabrione down. They walked through the arch and Sabrione could see the early stages of a sunset shining through the

entryway of the building, reflected by the metal brazier in the centre and bathing the room in subdued pinks and oranges.

Chapter 6

The Aftermath

"Hello daylight." Whispered Sabrione.

"Not a lot of it left." Said Bazzneark quietly.

"Hey Ky, I'd rather not spend the night here. Reckon we'd make it back to Marough?"

"I believe so. These forests appeared calm enough on our way here. We must be wary of the ground giving way beneath us, now even more so than before. I am unsure of how the collapse has influenced the surface."

Sabrione tapped Bazzneark's shoulder. "Put me down, Bazz. My legs are fine." She tried to quell his undoubtedly soon to follow protest with a pleading look. "We're not in as much of a hurry. And I'll have something other to focus on than the pain. Please."

He carefully lowered her onto one of the stone benches surrounding the brazier and sighed. "Don't expect me to let you leave our sight, though."

The walk through the forest was slow, a lot slower than their usual travel speed. Sabrione focused on putting one foot in front of the other foot, trying to divert her attention from the dull, pulsing ache on her left. It was, somewhat, working. Her thoughts kept drifting back to Korrethod's words and she begrudgingly had to agree with him. His name would never fully be forgotten, how could she? She was carrying a very prominent reminder.

"Sab?" Kylantha's voice cut into her inner monologue.

She looked up. "Yes?"

"Do you remember the name Redwood? We have come across a journal by a certain Tabitha Redwood and I cannot seem to recall where I've heard the name before."

"The farmers in Marough. The ones we left our horses with. They're named Redwood. But speaking of our latest acquisitions... " She paused, unsure how to continue. She had, after all, been a little preoccupied.

Luckily Kylantha filled the silence. "In addition to the blood vial and the journal, we have uncovered a dagger as well as a robe. They both possess magic however I was not able to ascertain which kind; given that we had other, more pressing matters at the time."

Sabrione focused on walking again.

Their arrival in Marough seemed to go unnoticed. The buildings were dark and quiet, but they were still let into the tavern. They declined any refreshments and headed directly into the room they had shared before.

Sabrione removed her armour and let it drop to the ground. She would clean it tomorrow. She quickly washed up once Kylantha had finished before her and distracted herself by

counting the floorboards while Bazzneark changed the bandage on her arm.

"It's not doing too bad." He said while putting the remaining bandages back into the Healers Kit. "I would like a proper healer to have a look at it though."

"Don't think we can find anyone here. This place is probably not big enough." Muttered Sabrione. She pulled the rough blanket over herself and lay on her back, staring blankly at the ceiling and trying to distract herself from the pain.

"We can inquire tomorrow." Kylantha yawned and extinguished her magical staff light with a short string of words. "For now, let us rest."

Sabrione closed her eyes and tried to get comfortable. She did not quite manage and suddenly winced in pain. It felt like her left hand was on fire. She tossed, trying to bury the pain in her bedding with her good side, her right side.

'Things will never be the same.' Whispered her thoughts. 'You will never regain what you've lost.'

I know, thought Sabrione. But what am I supposed to be doing here, exactly? Hm? Just... give up?

'You know Korrethod's legacy will live as long as you do, right? And don't pretend to have forgotten his name, you haven't.'

Sabrione curled up tighter. Her thoughts were right. Trying to forget his name was like trying not to think of a blue horse, one always thought of a blue horse.

She whimpered. She didn't know how to continue living her life. Certain things were out of the question with only one arm.

"Hey... " Her voice wavered and felt raspy. "I could..."

She stopped. Was she really going to ask for this? She was a grown woman after all.

She drew in a hitched breath.

"I could use a hug."

She heard rustling in the dark and was soon joined by two warm bodies. Kylantha positioned herself behind her, putting one arm over her midsection and pulling her closer while Bazzneark lay down in front of her, shielding her from the outside world.

The next morning sunlight lit up the room. Sabrione opened her eyes and felt very, very warm. She soon found the reason to be Kylantha. While both had not left her bed during the night, Bazzneark had turned away in his sleep, but Kylantha had merely pulled her closer and seemingly remained in her position the entire night.

Sabrione carefully removed herself from the tangle of bodies and sat at the edge of her bed. The fire in her left arm had faded considerably to a dull, thumping pain and it didn't feel like

parts were hurting she knew weren't there anymore.

She wearily eyed her armour, scattered on the ground and decided she wouldn't put it on today. Getting dressed in her normal clothing would be difficult enough. To their credit the others left her to it and respectfully waited outside. She joined them after she had finished and they made their way downstairs.

The Unusual Spiders Tavern was not very occupied at this hour as she approached the counter.

"Sleep well? My son told me you got in late last night." The innkeeper looked at her left tunic-sleeve, which was suspiciously empty and opened his mouth, as if he wanted to start inquiring.

"Greetings! We would like to receive three hot meals as well as two ales and some heated water." Kylantha had stepped up to the counter and positioned herself slightly in front

of Sabrione's left. "I would also like to inquire about a certain person we are due to meet. Are you familiar with Kai the Lucky?"

"Kai? Oh yes. Left a note about how to get in touch, hang on." The innkeeper searched something below the counter and soon produced a small slip of parchment.

"Hm, ah yes. If Kai sees my sign they should come by tonight." The innkeeper looked back at Kylantha. "I take it you're a part of The Ruby Squirrels?"

Sabrione nodded. "We sure are. We'll be back this afternoon, if you could let us know once Kai arrives."

They had their late breakfast in comparable silence and soon after set out to the Redwood Farm. She and Bazzneark stepped through the gate of the farm by themselves, Kylantha had broken off earlier to inspect their horses. They were soon approached by an older elven woman, waving.

"Salutations! My name is Wyborough Redwood. Are you back for your horses?"

"Salutations." Sabrione shook her hand. "We're here on other business, actually."

She handed the journal to over Wyborough, who took it hesitantly. "We've found this during our search." She said gently. "We thought we should return it."

She watched Wyborough flip through the pages, her eyes filling with tears.

"This is incredibly kind of you. We have not much in the way of riches but know that you and your horses are welcome to stay as long as you like, as our guests."

Sabrione put her hand on her shoulder and gave it a light squeeze. "I can only imagine how hard this is for you right now. We'll leave you be. If you like you can join us at the tavern tonight and we'll raise our tankards in Tabitha's honour together."

Wyborough dried her eyes with the back her hand. "I'll talk to my husband. Please understand if we choose to not come tonight. These are grave news and we will need time to process this. And to grieve."

Sabrione nodded. "Take all the time you need."

They picked Kylantha, who now smelled distinctly of horse, up on their way back into Marough and spent the afternoon resting. Sabrione decided to splurge on a hot bath, making sure her left arm did not get too wet. As she made her way back into the room, she walked in on Bazzneark snoring lightly in his bed and Kylantha having a cup of tea while idly reading a scroll.

"Not much to do but wait, huh?" Sabrione said and stifled a yawn. The hot water had relaxed her and her bed looked rather inviting right now.

"Most assuredly. I plan to continue my studies. I shall wake you if the need arises."

Sabrione was roused from her slumber by a knocking at their door. While she groggily tried to get her bearings, she heard footsteps walk across the room and the door being opened.

"Kai The Lucky has arrived and is waiting for you at the counter." said the voice of the innkeeper.

"I appreciate it. We shall join momentarily." Said Kylantha.

The door closed softly.

Kylantha woke Bazzneark and the three made their way downstairs.

Leaning against the counter was a person, about as tall as Kylantha. Their features were mostly hidden by a large-hooded cloak. Sabrione estimated they had an average build and the flash of dark green cloth and brown leather underneath the cloak made her think of a hunter. The person leaned forward and took a sip of their tankard with gloved hands.

Sabrione approached and addressed the figure directly. "Are you Kai The Lucky?"

The person nodded and put their tankard down. One hand disappeared into the cloak and soon produced a medallion with F. H.'s seal. The medallion was taken back as quick as it had appeared and Kai motioned to an unoccupied table in a corner.

They sat down and Sabrione begun the conversation a little uneasy since Kai had not uttered a single word.

"So, we have found the following." She motioned to Kylantha to produce the artifacts. "A vial of blood, a dagger and a robe. All imbued with magic, according to Ivasaar Vagwyn." Kylantha's title felt unusual on her tongue and she had probably butchered the pronunciation.

Kylantha placed the dagger on the table. "This weapon is magic however I am unfamiliar with the enchantments, I have not had the time for

a proper analysis. Given its construction and arrangement of the inlays I feel comfortable assuming it was used for ritual purposes, possible to channel power."

She then carefully lay a bundle of cloth and leather on the table. "These are some robes we uncovered near the main chamber. I would advise against unwrapping them unless you have ample cleaning supplies at hand, as they cover any surface or object they come into contact with in blood." Kylantha's voice dropped at that and continued much quieter. "Much like the dagger I presume these were used to channel and direct power during rituals. Unlike this." She set the vial down in front of her. "This contains desecrated power by itself, a corruption unlike I have ever seen."

"Alright then. How much are you going to give us for these?" Sabrione leaned forward. "We took a considerable risk getting these and I, for one, will forever bear the mark of this quest."

She moved the remains of her left arm, hoping the empty sleeve would be visible.

Kai did not appear to react to that. They leaned back and crossed their arms, seemingly waiting.

Sabrione looked into the dark part of the hood, where she assumed the face to be and bided her time. Nothing was gained by pressuring Kai, she sensed. Eventually, after a considerable silence, Kai reached into their cloak and placed three bags on the table with a distinct clinking sound. Sabrione motioned for Kylantha to push the artifacts further towards them, but not all the way just yet.

Bazzneark counted the coins quickly. "Looks like about several thousand per bag."

Kai reached out a hand and quickly took the bag back from Brazzneark's hand. Before he could protest Kai handed it back to him, this time upside down. The number Nine was embroidered onto the bottom of the bag. Bazzneark quickly turned over the other two

bags. "Two more nines. I'd say this is very agreeable."

Kylantha handed the artifacts over and they were swiftly taken into the cloak, presumably to disappear into some hidden pockets. Kai then rose and stood up from their chair.

Sabrione did the same, a little taken aback by the abruptness. She held her hand out for a handshake. "It's been a pleasure working with you."

Kai did not shake her hand, just gave a curt nod and placed a sealed letter on the table, before turning on their heels and leaving the tavern straight away.

"Definitely one of the stranger people I've had the pleasure of meeting." Sabrione said as she sat back down. "Let's see about this letter then."

She cleared her throat and read aloud.

Dear Ruby Squirrels,

If you are reading this that means at least one of you is still alive and your artifacts have passed my associate's judgement. So, congratulations are in order, please do pat yourself on the back!

You have completed the first step of a very lucrative partnership and I do hope you continue to dazzle me. I shall get in touch soon, as I am sure you must await my next letter with bated breath.

Only The Kindest Regards,

F. H.

Epilogue

Sabrione sat at the big table in The Ruby Squirrel's cottage in Epring and gazed dreamily into the remains of their hearth fire. She observed the embers gleaming and pulled the blanket closer around her.

It was late in the evening, snowflakes danced outside their cottage. Six months had passed since their delve into the ruins of Selvenora and not one day passed by where her left arm did not hurt. But the pain had lessened.

Bazzneark and Kylantha had not returned from their trip into the village yet but she was not sick with worry about them, if the snowfall picked up they may not arrive until the following day. She had everything she needed to have a comfortable evening in, even a day or two if need be.

Seeing the fire die down at an increased pace Sabrione begrudgingly got up. The blanket fell on the bench behind her and the remaining embers shone on her new arm. Kylantha had arranged contact with a very specialized, magical healer and they had paid quite dearly for it, almost all of their reward. Sabrione still felt a sting in her heart when she thought about it.

She was careful when she put a new log into the hearth. Her new arm was made out of wood and even though it was enchanted to perform basic motions, it was still wood at the end of the day. She shuddered when she remembered the magical attachment process, the pain had been almost on par with the time she lost it in the first place.

She sat back down and put the blanket around her shoulders, content to simply look into the hearth.

After quite some time, she had already added two more logs to the fire, the door flew open and a shivering Kylantha and Bazzneark entered. Snow melted immediately off their clothing and formed puddles around their heavy boots.

"Thank the spirits we made it back!" Bazzneark announced as he began to take off his outer layers. "Looks like we're in for a storm tonight."

"That bad?" Sabrione rose and walked over to their little kitchen, pulling a bottle with dark, almost black liquid, from one of the cabinets. She swiftly opened it, pouring the contents into a small kettle, which she then hung in their hearth to get warm.

"Yes, it seems rather grim out there." Kylantha hung her out coat next to the door and began to wriggle out of her additional robes. She then gave Sabrione a quick embrace. "I am very pleased to see you have neither frozen nor let the fire die."

Sabrione grinned. "I'm even heating up some mulled wine for you. That warrants no thanks?"

"Wine you say?" Bazzneark stepped up next to her. "I think that warrants extra hugs, it does." He gave her a tight squeeze.

Soon they each had a warm cup in their hands, sitting at their table. Kylantha had lit a candle. Sabrione watched her friends recall their latest trip into the village, but she was not fully listening.

Maybe it was the wine. She was too fascinated by their faces and gestures to pay much attention to what they actually said.

She felt warm and cosy.

And looked to her future with hope.