

Halftime Heroes – PROLOGUE

"We should be reaching the ridgeway soon," Karnas proclaimed. "Once we do, it shouldn't be far before we –". He held out a hand to signal the rest of the party to stop. "Everyone quiet." Sara stopped dead in her tracks. She strained to hear what Karnas heard. Though she couldn't, she trusted him inherently from the years they spent journeying together. They all did. She could sense the tension in the air, the anxiety winding up within her like a spring. Sara tried looking in the direction of Karnas' gaze, as if that would amplify the sound. The only noises she could hear was the pounding of her heart in her chest.

Sara was a seer. With enough concentration she could see into the chaos of the multiverse and pluck out all the rhythms of the next few moments. They were often misshapen and ambiguous, but with years of practice she had learned to lean on it like any other sense. It never helped to assuage her fears. Years of journeying, countless adventures, countless epic fights, yet still, it was the brief moments before action that scared her the most. Once the tension of what came next broke, it was easy. To see the monster was to give it form, identity, physicality. It had limits. She could handle that. The great evils of the world were insignificant compared to these brief moment of otherworldly clarity. It could last a fraction of a second, but in her mind it would stretch out for

an eternity. All the ways that the next moment could go horribly wrong flashed before her, each iteration of it more gruesome and unfortunate than the last, overlapping, intertwining. It came to her in malformed shapes, scents, tactile sensations. That was the thing people didn't understand about seers. They assumed she could see into the future. It was all in the gut. She knew this was not the end. She could just feel it.

She broke from her reverie and looked toward Karnas. Her far-sense faded. He was waiting for her signal. She gave a very subtle shake of the head. Karnas nodded once and returned his focus to listening for whatever it was he was listening for. They waited for a while longer. She could hear the slow, steady breaths of Brandt behind her, centering himself. Sasha brought up the rear guard, her brow furrowed, her hand gripping ever tighter around the hilt of her sword. Each with their own ritual to perform. The four of them were pins and needles. There was a distant echo of thunder. The area this deep in the shardlands was prone to sudden storm surges. She strained to keep herself focused, at the ready.

Very faintly she began to hear what she could only describe as the snapping and whipping of heavy cloth in the wind. *That's odd* she thought to herself. The shardlands were completely uninhabitable and rarely traveled. It would be a far stretch to believe that anyone else would be up here. The longer they waited to clearer the noise became. It was unmistakable now. It sounded like a banner flapping, yet it somehow carried with it an overwhelming sense of wrongness. She couldn't tell whether it was the growing storm in the distance or her nerves, but the air felt electric. The sound grew louder as the wind picked up. Brandt muttered the beginnings of an incantation beneath his breath as the stones around his neck began to glow faintly. Nothing serious, just *prepared*. More

rituals. Somehow the billowing noise continued to grow, as if in movement. *Maybe a flag had torn free from someone's caravan in the storm up ahead.* She knew it was a lie. Her brain was trying desperately to make sense of the wrongness. Anything to give the fear shape.

The noise persisted but stopped growing in intensity. Then it shrank. Karnas peered from around the edge of where they were hiding. He turned back to look at the party. He made a series of gestures, the first of which was his right hand raised with the palm outstretched signifying *safe*. He then raised a single finger to indicate *one*. They gathered in closer to Karnas.

"What is it?" whispered Brandt. Sasha unsheathed her sword by a fraction of an inch, her leather glove creaking as her grip tightened.

"I don't know. It looks like a man in a hooded cloak. But the fabric moves in the wrong direction, as if of its own volition."

"Of its own volition how?" asked Sara.

"Not as if it walked. More like it was gliding. It just looks *wrong*."

"Are they armed?" Sasha asked.

"Not that I could see. They seem to be unaware of our presence. They're headed in the direction that we intend to travel. One way or another we need to confront them."

The statement hung in the air begging for input from others. Should they approach this unknown person? Should they assume the worst and attack in case there were others it could signal? Any option seemed like a risk to Sara.

"Well, we're close to where the supposed anomaly was last seen. Could that be it? I doubt another soul would be so foolish as to traverse this ridgeway knowing full well the dangers it imposed."

Karnas fixated his gaze on some far off point. He was working through the scenarios in his head, looking for the least dangerous angle. Sara was too. She could sense the daggers. The paths that could lead them along any one of them. For all the help her far-sight could be, Karnas was the one she trusted to walk the correct path.

"What do you think Sara?" He asked. She focused on those daggers. She struggled to concentrate. The clouds roiled above her, much like her frustration within. No matter what it seemed like this encounter would escalate to something worse.

"It's tough to say. I agree it all feels *wrong*. But this far out into the Shardlands is unsafe for anyone traveling alone. We should approach them with caution, but not with hostility. They may need our help."

Sasha drew her blade in response.

"I say we follow them and scout the area to make sure they're *actually* alone" said Brandt. He was right. It could be a trap. There could be more. The knives continued to dance in the pit of her stomach.

"Very well. Let's keep our distance for now until we can be sure they're alone. If we can avoid confrontation we should. Besides, it's beginning to get late and that storm is going to be overhead within the next couple of hours."

They continued on behind the hooded figure towards the ridgeway. The figure didn't seem to pay them any mind. Not once did it look back. It just continued forward, instilling in Sara the same sense of *wrongness* the entire way. She wished she could see their path more clearly, but in moments like this, it was hard to concentrate enough to glean any significance. She had to remain present in case something happened.

They rounded a corner through a narrow passage through the rock, created by centuries of wear by windstorms. When they

emerged through the other side, the figure was nowhere in sight.

"Where the hell did they go?"

The knot in her stomach rose like bile into her throat. She tried again to see if she could glean some significance, sense something that could guide them. Nothing came to her. It worried her more. She felt a wetness hit her cheek. The storm clouds had caught up to them.

"They are probably seeking refuge, something we should be doing as well. If we hadn't lost them now, we'd have lost them in the storm any how."

Karnas sighed.

"I suppose you're right, Brandt. Let's see what we can find nearby and set up camp."

They searched around for a short while. Sasha pointed to a small grouping of rocks just off to their right.

"I think I see a small cave over there," Sasha, "could provide a decently defensible point as well."

The party broke camp within the confines of their temporary shelter. "Who do you think would be out here? The Shardlands are treacherous enough as is. With all the disappearances that have occurred out here lately it's even worse." Brandt took a seat next to their tiny fire.

"Maybe it's another knight, looking for glory" exclaimed Sara. "We can't be the only ones out here on the hunt."

"True enough, but the Shardlands are a big place. You can spend years traversing the various passes and never see anyone."

"No wonder people have been going missing." Sara replied.

"Maybe it's one of those missing people," Brandt said.

"Maybe it's one of those things that caused those people to go missing in the first place" Replied Sasha.

"It did give me a rather bad feeling, whatever it was," said Sara.

"We can't know either way, so let's just try and rest and not worry too much. We're getting close to our target destination, so we'll have our answers soon, one way or another."

"Fair enough. You all get some sleep and I'll take first watch. Whatever it is won't be going anywhere with this storm," Sasha proclaimed. The rain had since picked up quite significantly and Sara was grateful for their puny fire and uncomfortable, albeit dry, sleeping arrangements.

"What I wouldn't give for a goose down pillow right now," said Brandt with equal parts petulance and sarcasm. He always had a way of making light of every situation. "Hell I'd settle for a single feather at this point."

She exhaled a low chuckle to herself and laid her pack down to rest against it. She would be sore in the morning. They all would. They had been travelling for months now, and as much as she loved playing the hero, Sara would be all too glad to be back home.

She looked toward Karnas. He smiled and shrugged in his *it's no inn but it'll do* way. She pushed down the knots still churning in her gut long enough to smile back. She hoped she could manage at least a couple hours of sleep. It came to her with some difficulty but it came all the same.

The wind was howling, kicking up rocks and dust, rain battering against her face. In the distance shone a bright light, like a lighthouse cutting through fog. She was climbing towards it, desperate to find its source. She struggled to move her feet, one in front of the other. No matter how hard she pressed they seemed to move at a lethargic pace. She knew that whatever was at the source of that light was important. The closer she got the

more furiously the storm beat against her. She could hear voices calling out in the distance. They were shouting her name, but they sounded too far away to ever reach. She braced herself against the onslaught, pushing forward, determined to know what lie in wait at the source of the light. She had to know. There was something there she needed to see.

The closer she got, the more the uncanny whipping of cloth began to creep into her awareness. In her periphery she could sense eyes watching her from beneath hooded faces, imperceptible to her. There was a wrongness growing. She urged onward, towards the peak of this great and terrible climb. The light began to take shape. There were now three distinct points of light where there was once one. They hung like three motes in the clouds, rippling behind the sheets of rain that continued to threaten her very existence. She strained to see them, growing ever more aware of the gaze of the hooded figures. There were hundreds of them. Hundreds of figures of faceless malice. She gritted her teeth, pressed onward as the lights began to take form. The rain had shifted to sleet, ripping and tearing at her flesh. She was so cold, yet she burned with each new cut. The bloody taste of iron filled her mouth. She felt her focus waver. Each step felt like moving the mountain itself. She knew she had to make it. It meant life or death. She wanted to scream, to cry, to collapse.

She looked back, thought to herself how easy it would be to turn around and retreat back to safety. Some part of her knew it was a dream. That part struggled to take hold over the raw animalistic panic in her heart telling her to flee. Somehow it did, because she knew that if she didn't she would surely die. She was past the point of no return. She turned back to face the lights, the torrent of ice and rain abated. They stood now in crisp focus. Three swords of light hovered in the air in front of her, corruscating and brilliant as a mid-day sun. They were blinding to look at, eclipsing everything else around her. She

reached out. She needed this weapon. The pain and weariness grew more intense. She was bloodied all over. She could hear a ringing in her ears like someone had struck a tuning fork. Some unseen force emanating from the swords pushed back against her, daring to plunge her into oblivion. Her heart beat in her chest like a wardrum stretched too tight. It overwhelmed all her senses. She could feel her reality unraveling, daring to unmake her at any moment.

She was mere inches away now, her world a bleak contrast of black on white. Just a little more and she could rest. Just one more inch. She just needed to hold on a little more. Her body screamed. The swords screamed in response and her entire body vibrated with a violence she had never known. The muscles in her shoulders struggled to keep the bones in her arms in their sockets. She was beyond the limits of what a human body could take. She was going to go insane. Her heart was going to burst. She was --

In silence. The storm had stopped. The wind completely gone. Her vision swam with the afterimage of the swords hung in the air before her. There was a low hum in the air. Or in her body. Or in both. But the swords were gone. The wounds she had sustained had disappeared. She stood in a clearing in the path. She had reached the summit. A crescent moon hung in the sky, blood red like the sickle of death himself. Silhouetted in the distance, against the glow of the red moon and the star-strewn sky stood a massive tower, built into the mountainside. No, not built... shaped. As if the mountains were mere mounds of clay. A chill began to creep from the base of her spine all the way into her brain. The low hum persisted, adopting a renewed sense of malevolence. Again she heard the unnatural billowing of cloth. She looked around and could not spot the source.

She returned her gaze towards tower and was met by the face of the hooded figure. She screamed.

Sara bolted awake. She was still in the cave. The storm had subsided into a soft pattering and the fire had burned down to the embers. Brandt snored softly beside her. Sasha was curled up with her cloak under her head, facing toward the fire. Karnas was looking intently towards her from the mouth of the cave. She wiped her eyes with the back of her arm and let out a yawn. Her body ached. There was a thin coating of clammy sweat coating her entire body. She let out a groan and propped herself up. The afterimage of her dreams hung in her mind, already beginning to slip away. She focused on them intently. There was some significance to it, she was sure. The contents of dreams like that were always of grave portent. A gathering storm. Three blazing swords suspended in the air as bright as the sun. A blood red crescent moon atop a tall, unnatural tower of stone. A man of cloth. The details were beginning to blur, but she could retain their impression at least vaguely.

Karnas came over to her. He brushed the matt of hair caked to her forehead away and handed her his handkerchief.

"You were sobbing. Are you alright? Was it another premonition?" He asked.

"I'm fine, just another nightmare. I'll survive. But yes, I believe I experienced another vision. I think I know where our cloaked figure has gone."

Karnas leaned in closer, his eyes hard and focused on her. She welcomed the intimacy. It helped to steady her mind.

"What did you see?"

Sara sat up further and braced herself against the back of the cave wall. She took a deep breath and wrapped her cloak around her. The sweat on her body had begun to dry into a cold, clammy discomfort. She licked her lips and swallowed against the dryness in her throat. Karnas handed her his canister of water which she readily accepted.

"It's not all entirely clear. There was a storm. Three burning swords hung in the sky. A blood red moon and a tower. And the man we saw earlier. I think... He had the same *wrongness* about him."

Karnas nodded solemnly. She took his silence as implicit encouragement to continue. She took a long pull from the water canister.

"The tower I saw. It was somewhere here in the shardlands. I couldn't make out the location from what I saw, but we must be close. Whatever it is that has brought us here is surely at the heart of that tower."

"I understand" said Karnas. His gaze softened. "That's wonderful. You've done great Sara." He placed his hand gently on her arm, both as a sign of consolation and gratitude. She felt herself relax. Karnas always knew how to comfort her. That's what made him the great leader that he was. She gave him a weak smile and sighed. She closed her eyes and rested her head back against the wall. The imprint of the swords still burned there behind her eyes.

"I don't know what to make of the rest. I can't tell if the swords are a sign of victory or a warning."

"I suppose we'll find out one way or another soon, won't we?". Karnas tightened his grip ever so slightly and released her. "You should try and get a little more sleep, gather your strength. It's nearly dawn." Their eyes met and he let the look linger for a little moment. She was tempted to say more but the words she was looking for escaped her. Karnas smiled, gave another curt nod and turned to assume his post by the entrance. She wanted to protest, to stay near him a little longer. She felt like there was something more she needed to say to him. Something more she needed from him. Her tiredness returned with a vengeance and won out against her sleep-deprived desires. She

laid her cloak out again and return to her horizontal position. Sleep came almost immediately. The dreams did not return.

In the early hours of pre-dawn Karnas came and roused her. Sasha was already oiling her sword. Brandt had rekindled the fire from the previous night and was cooking a small pot of oats for them to break their fast. A faint hint of cinnamon danced in the air and her stomach audibly grumbled for closer investigation.

"Morning Sara. Hope you slept well" said Brandt. Sara grimaced and stifled a yawn.

"As well as one can, sleeping on a cave floor."

"I slept like a baby. I honestly can't believe it." he smirked and handed Sara a small wooden bowl and spoon, still steaming with the fresh oats.

Sasha chimed in. "I'm not shocked at all. You'd sleep through an earthquake without so much as tossing. It's at least a small mercy your snoring didn't keep us up as well!"

Brandt let out a deep, soulful laugh.

"What can I say, it's just another one of my many gifts." He handed Sasha another bowl and spoon.

"Speaking of, come get some of this before it gets cold. I used a little extra cinnamon and honey to warm us up after that storm. A little sweet to cut through the bitter."

Sasha took it with a wry smile and returned to her whetstones. Sara chuckled softly to herself. It was almost enough to forget about the visions she had seen in her dreams. She could sense it though. The unease bubbling beneath an otherwise pleasant morning. She stifled the thought and turned her attention back to Brandt.

"You can never have enough spice. No way I could stand for us to eat like some small time wayfarer, even if we are stuck in this rather inhospitable place. Some small comfort can go a

long way, wouldn't you say Sara?" He smiled a full smile and winked at her. She smiled back

"Of course."

"I hope your sleep was at least somewhat restful. Karnas mentioned you may have had some trouble."

Sara smiled nervously and stared into her bowl. As if on cue Karnas entered the cave. He removed his cloak and sat down next to Brent, opposite the fire from Sara. He'd likely been out scouting. Brandt handed him a bowl and he accepted. Karnas produced his canteen from his side, filled another small pot with water and placed it into the embers of the firepit. Sara gave him a quick smile and greeting.

"I had a vision last night. I'm still not sure what it all means, it's still all rather jumbled in my head. But I think there is a tower somewhere in these mountains. Whatever is there is at the root of all these disappearances."

Brandt furrowed his brow and nodded his head slowly in understanding. Karnas shifted his pot of water next to him and placed a few herbs from his satchel in it.

"You were right. I think I've spotted the tower you speak of. It's fairly close, maybe a day or less of travel from here. There's a causeway that runs up the hills towards it. It's not the most welcoming of paths, but there's no mistaking it. Whatever is there did not occur naturally."

Brandt exclaimed, "Good. I look forward to getting to the bottom of this. The sooner we do that, the sooner we can return and claim our reward. And sleep in a proper bed."

"Could be a trap." stated Sasha. The quiet that followed signaled that they all knew that was a distinct possibility.

"We'll prepare for that. We've overcome a great many feats. Sara's premonition seems to indicate that we need to be there. If it is something more sinister than a couple lost travelers, then it is our duty to intercede."

"Didn't say it like a bad thing. I'm itching for a fight. This has been the most boring errand we've been on in a while. I might even enjoy the challenge of stacked odds." Sasha said with only the slightest hint of acrimony in her voice. Karnas pursed his lips.

"If we're all in agreement..." he let the words hang, inviting opposition. He looked directly at Sara. She gave an uncertain nod. "then we'll leave within the hour."

They walked for the remainder of the day. Sara felt muddled, like the fog of the prior evening still hung over her. She tried to stay alert and part of the conversation, but there was a gnawing at the back of her brain. Her mind kept drifting back to the symbols she dreamt. Three swords. The inverted red crescent moon. The figure of cloth and shadow. She felt distracted. She couldn't quite place why. The others carried on their usual light banter, filling the time recounting tales of their travels. An over-enthusiastic fan they encountered in some backwater village who seemed all too eager to do whatever they could to win favor with them. Plans for the feast they'd have when this journey was through. Brandt recounted with ebullience the time they thought they'd seen a centaur, only to later find out it was a man feeding his horse while standing on a nearby rock. That always gave them a good laugh. Sara chimed in from time to time, but for the most part she remained retreated into her thoughts. The gnawing continued. Something was amiss, but she could not suss out why. Karnas would occasionally look back to her and she would return in kind with a weak smile. She did her best to make it at least seem reassuring, even though he probably saw right through her.

By midday the spire in the rock face began to take shape in the distance. It looked unnaturally smooth with almost no openings, and was flanked by a secondary set of towers

connected by a walkway. It was eerie to look at, even from this vantage. There was no way it could have been shaped by human hands. The group grew quiet for a moment as they took in the sight. The ethereal symbolism of Sara's dream had abruptly taken on a very real slant. They would find out soon the significance of that symbolism. It did nothing to quell the pounding in Sara's chest, or the incessant gnawing in her brain.

As they walked, Karnas slowed his pace to match hers. He deliberately tried not looking her way so as to not seem overly concerned, but Sara knew. She waited for him to speak. He gave a pointed look to Brandt and spoke in a low tone so as to not be heard. Brandt and Sasha began very loudly and deliberately discussing anything but the structure ahead of them.

"Are you sure this is a place we should be heading? We can turn back now, or even scout the area a while longer."

Sara furrowed her brow. "No. One way or another we will have to go there, of that at least I am certain, though I still cannot say why. I've not been quite myself today. I feel as though my head is filled with cotton. My thoughts are thick. But there is certainty in our path. We must go to that tower."

Karnas was quiet for a long moment.

"What are you not telling me?" he asked. "You've been transfixed by whatever is your dreamt last night. What was different about these particular visions?"

"I don't know," she replied. She honestly didn't. "That's what's different. As clear as they are, their meaning remains opaque to me. All I know is that if - when we go there - it will all become clear."

Karnas grunted. It was uncommon for them to walk into the unknown like this. Sara usually had more in the way of her far-sense.

"Very well. If we must plunge head first into darkness so be it. We'll be prepared. We've gotten through worse, right?"

Sara felt oddly maudlin.

"Karnas, I... if I've steered us wrong... If this turns out to be a trap -"

"Then we'll get through it," he said with reaffirmed determination. "Of that, you have my word."

Sara responded with her own grunt of affirmation and nodded. Her shoulders relaxed. She didn't realize she'd been holding so much tension. Karnas lingered a moment longer as if to say something, then walked ahead to join with Sasha and Brandt. She gave a mirthless laugh to herself, shook her head and sped up to rejoin them as well.

It was near dusk now. They were near the base of the tower and still there was no movement anywhere. The sun hung like an orb of molten amber on the horizon, still barely peeking over the mountain range. They huddled in a small group.

"We're still not exactly sure what we'll find in here, so be on full alert. It could be nothing, but in case it isn't..." He let the silence imply his meaning.

"We'll deal with whatever it is, one way or another," Sasha.

"I'm sure it's nothing we can't handle. Let's not waste any more light." Brandt gave them all a cheerful smile and began his descent towards the base of the tower.

They arrived to find two large doors with simple geometric shapes embossed upon them. For all intents and purposes the place seemed well kept, yet abandoned. It was quiet. Almost serene if not for the growing knot in Sara's stomach. She could not sense any imminent danger and gave the go ahead for them to proceed. Sasha and Karnas drew their swords. Brandt lit a torch. Sasha approached the doors and pressed against them

lightly. Despite their apparent weight, they moved with relative ease. The doors shut behind them as they entered.

"Well then. This is a rather warm welcome isn't it," joked Brandt. Sasha gave a snort of derision without taking her focus off the hall ahead of them. The inside chamber was fairly plain. Smooth stone walls, straight and seamless, the last of the remaining light poured through the sparse loopholes that dotted them. They were otherwise unadorned: no tapestries, no friezes, no murals. Nothing to provide any indication of who the tower belonged to. A large, empty, shallow brazier stood in the center of the room. There were no doors other than the ones they entered through and a solitary stone staircase beginning at the far end of the chamber. The knot in Sara's stomach continued to grow.

"I guess we go up," stated Brandt. He lead the way with Sasha close behind, Karnas and Sara bringing up the rear. Sara readied her daggers. The pit of her stomach felt like a rock.

They climbed for a rather long time. From the outside it did not look like there should be as many flights as they climbed. The higher they went to darker it became, the flicker of Brandt's torch now the only source of light. Eventually they had reached the top. They had come to another smaller chamber with wide open windows. The view was breathtaking. Sara's sense of dread grew. Her mind was still foggy, and no far-senses were coming to her. The room was similar to the ground floor, except in the center of the room sat a wide stone table. No, not a table but a casket. This wasn't a stronghold, it was a mausoleum. The knot in her stomach redoubled and threatened to jump out of her throat, if it weren't for the fact that her throat was bone dry with fear. The gnawing in her brain returned with a renewed vengeance as well. Karnas approached the funerary box. There was what looked like the shape of a crescent moon carved on the lid.

"It was unwise for you to come here," said an unfamiliar voice from behind her. They turned to see the hooded figure they'd been following the day prior before them. Even with Brandt's light directly on him, Sara couldn't see his face in the darkness of his hood. He was wrapped entirely in cloth that rippled at odd angles, as if in complete disregard to the wind. *"This place is hallowed ground and you have defiled it with your presence. You do not deserve to step foot in this place. For that you shall die."*

Karnas approached him. "We did not know good ser. We're merely trying to find some missing people. We meant no ill will."

"Those people are of bones and dust now. You shall join them soon."

Sasha raised her sword and widened her stance. Karnas put out his hand to signal her to stand down without looking away from the figure. Sasha remained firmly planted as the stones that surrounded them.

"There is no need for more violence. We have you outnumbered. We will leave and no blood need be shed."

"My life holds no meaning in this plane." the figure hissed.

"Be that as it may, we can speak of what justice should be served for those fallen when your leader arrives."

"I answer to no one by my queen. Your words hold no weight here. But fret not. She will be here soon enough."

Brandt took a tentative step forward. The whole room was a hair's breadth away from carnage. The figure turned to face him.

"Are you so eager for the sweet release of death? I can grant you that before she arrives. You are but nothing to her."

Brandt growled low and bared his teeth in a cruel smile. "I'd like to see you try."

The image of the burning swords flashed into her mind. She felt a shearing stab of pain rip through her gut. She knew in that instant that Brandt was in grave danger. The cloaked figure moved with incredible speed. Somewhere in the span of a single breath he had brandish a thin dark blade. Before she could call out to warn Brandt the cloaked figure was on him. The blade made contact and dug deep into Brandt's side. Sasha screamed and lunged at the figure. The figure jumped away with an eerie grace, leaving Brandt stumbling back. Karnas rushed to aid Sasha. Sara grabbed Brandt and eased him down to the ground. He was bleeding fairly heavily from his left side. She took her dagger and cut his tunic away. She grabbed a clean bandage from her bag, soaked it in a brew of herbs and alcohol and placed it over the wound. Brandt grunted.

"Hold this in place so that I can wrap this and get pressure on it."

His eyes swam as he nodded. He clumsily grabbed at the bandage and held it in place. She took his tunic and ripped it into rough strips. Brandt sucked in a shallow breath and grimaced as she pulled the strips tightly around his torso and tied them. It wasn't enough, but it would slow the bleeding down long enough to buy her time to treat the wound properly later. He tried to stand and stumbled back to one knee.

"Conserve your strength old friend. We'll -" the hairs on the back of her neck stood up. She ducked just in time to avoid the cloaked figures' dark blade swung within less than an inch of her neck. Karnas took another swing at the figure to draw its attention. In one fluid motion she turned and swung her blade for the back of the figures' knee. It made contact, but something was off. Where there should have been soft flesh and sinew, there was nothing. The cloth ripped to reveal only a darkness. The figure didn't even so much as flinch. Sasha, Karnas and Sara traded blows with the figure. He danced around

each with an unnatural fluidity. Each of his blows came very close to connecting. Sara struggled to suck in air and hold her ground. The figure was gaining on her. She'd never seen anyone move so quickly. It was almost majestic. She staggered and again the vision of the three swords burned in her brain. Karnas let out a painful cry as the dark blade made contact with the gap between his gauntlet and vambrace. His hand went limp and he dropped his sword. He just barely managed to raise his shield in time to block the next onslaught of swings from the figure. The room stank of sweat and blood and fury in her nose. The figure kicked Karnas square in the chest and he stumbled back and fell. Sasha made another desperate swing but the figure parried it easily. He turned his attention to Sasha, giving Sara time to run over to Karnas.

"Don't worry about me, I'll be fine. Go help Sasha!"

"Your arm, it's disabled. You're defenseless!"

In all the chaos Karnas managed a mirthless smirk.

"Tis but a flesh wound. Go, help Sasha."

She nodded and resumed the fight. It was quickly becoming a blur. The cloaked figure didn't seem to tire. They had to be smarter. Sara began watching for her opening. As the figure went to attack Sasha she would dart in and slice another slit in the figure. If he could seem annoyed he would. They were slowly gaining ground. Or so she thought. In one motion the figure struck Sasha and Sara, leaving them both reeling. She stumbled and fell. The figure loomed over her, his blade raised to strike the killing blow. She tensed and raised her arms in a futile attempt to block. A sword suddenly emerged from the figure's midsection. Sasha screamed as she ripped the sword in a wide arc, tearing the figure nearly in half. He staggered as he reached for his side. He laughed and cocked his head toward Sasha.

"Quite the fire in you. It will be a terrible shame to have to extinguish it. You would have made a perfect soldier in Her army."

Sasha paused. "Army?"

The figure lunged once more with a cold viciousness. Sara only briefly saw the flame of Brandt's fireball from her periphery as it made contact with the figure. He let out a blood curdling scream as his entire body became engulfed in the flames. He went up like dry tinder and in an instant was nothing more than a pile of ash on the ground. It was over. Sara rushed to Brandt's side as he let out a ragged breath.

"That was a close one, wasn't it?" Brandt let out a wheezy laugh and coughed. He turned and spat a mouthful of blood onto the ground. Karnas came over cradling his limp arm and sat on the floor next to Brandt.

"Like I said. Nothing we can't handle, ain't that right Karnas." He chuckled and slapped Karnas on the back. Sasha came over and stood next to Sara.

"I've never seen anything like that. The man had no form. He was just... a void..." She trailed off, lost in her own thoughts.

Sara finished dressing Karnas' wound and handed Brandt her water and some numbroot for the pain. He accepted both gladly. They sat in silence, gathering their breath.

"Now what?" Asked Brandt.

NOW YOU DIE. A voice boomed through the room and Sara's very being. From behind them appeared another figure, wrapped in all manner of cloth. It hovered in the air and wore a crown of jagged metal. Sara felt all the color drain from her face. *This was the cloaked figure in my dream* she thought. Not a man, but a woman. A queen. The one the other other figure spoke of. Her mind suddenly went blank except for the blinding sense of

terror. She tried desperately to move but found herself frozen.
This is what I saw.

YOU SHALL ALL WITHER LIKE THE WRETCHED INSECTS YOU ARE.

Sasha turned. "We'll see about that." In one instant she was lunging toward the Ragged Queen, and the next she was flying towards one of the windows. The swords flashed again in Sara's mind and it burned like a red hot iron pressed to her skin. Just like that Sasha was gone. Brandt struggled to stand and tried to conjure his fire.

YOU PATHETIC MORTALS AND YOUR FLAMES. I AM EVER-BURNING. I AM UNDYING. YOU. ARE. NOTHING.

Sara felt Brandt's death deep in her bones before he did, the burning sword plunged through her chest. She collapsed and let out a wet sob. Karnas screamed something she couldn't hear. He was yelling at the Ragged Queen. Demanding. Pleading. Pure vitriol spewed from his mouth.

"You'll pay for this! You'll pay for what you did to -"
Another sword impaled her heart, leaving Sara doubled over and frozen as the light in Karnas' eyes went out. She was weeping. It all became clear. The last swords hung, burning in her mind's eye. She tried to reach out and grab it. She yearned for death.

YOUR LEGEND ENDS HERE. YOU ARE BUT DUST, FORGOTTEN IN THE WIND.

Sara looked up upon the endless void of evil that towered over her. Moonlight glinted off the Ragged Queen's crown and for a second it seemed almost beautiful. One final moment of clarity before oblivion. Her dream had been an omen. She should have seen it coming. *I'll see you in the nether my friends.* Death took her in one decisive, definitive sweep.