

Stolen Hearts

Written by Travis Olson

Braedon's hands were shaking now. 10 years gone from the Rangers, the same 10 years living within the walls with the Nobles and Clergy, he had thought it would go away but his hands still shook. The stickiness of the spilt blood zigzagged with the tremors. He clenched his hands to fists to cease the shakes and looked to the opened cloth sitting on his counter. It looked like a miniscule pebble from where he knelt, but its size hid the tremendousness of grief its existence bore.

The sadness reignited his focus to the two dead bodies. The overturned shelves and shattered vials showcased the struggle that had took place throughout his apothecary shop. The pungent smells of ill-mixed potions were beginning to reach him as he grabbed the raggedy cape of the bodyguard and used it to drag him out of his establishment. He dropped the body and returned for the broker.

Screams erupted from the street as he picked up the broker. This was an unfathomable situation this close to the castle for any passersby to comprehend. This level of undesirable behavior was something that only happened outside the gates in the village. Braedon dropped the broker beside the bodyguard and then scanned the street, the citizens were keeping their distance.

He knelt to investigate the men in the sunlight. The broker had been freshly shaven, there were healed nicks from inexperience. His tunic was too big for him as well. This man had changed his appearance to travel within the gates. He looked to the bodyguard who didn't have to sacrifice grooming for the exposure.

Braedon had discovered that both men had identical bracelets, crudely twisted steel with the engraving of a triangle separated by a line above a crescent moon, when the City Guard had turned down his street. Braedon hoped Cora was leading them today.

“Braedon?” Cora called out. Her expression was genuine confusion as she advanced with her hand on the hilt of her sword. “Are you armed?”

“No... they were...” Braedon realized he had gone instinctual and now found it strange to have explain to another. “Their weapons are inside.”

Cora put her hand up to the Five soldiers with her to stop their advancement. She walked to Braedon but was looking inside at the mess. “Anybody else inside?”

“No.”

“Alright...” Cora knelt beside Braedon feigning to look at the bodies. Her voice turned to a whisper. “...What is all this?”

“I killed these men.” His hand began to tremor.

Cora waited for more that did not come. “Did you have a reason?”

“I’d have to show you... it’s in there...”

“Okay.” Cora stood up first. “Let’s take a look.”

Braedon rose and looked to the Soldiers, still watching at the ready. He turned and stepped into his shop with Cora two steps behind. His boots crunched clay and glass as he walked to his counter. Though Cora’s head didn’t move, her eyes saw the intensity of the scuffle that had occurred. She made special note of the dagger on the floor and the axe in the ceiling.

He stopped at the counter and stepped aside to let Cora see the display. She saw it. “What is that?”

Braedon sighed, he knew that once he gave the instruction, she would be forever changed. “Reach for it.”

Cora looked to Braedon for motive but then knew she didn’t have to. “Just reach for it?”

“Yeah.”

Cora removed her leather glove and wiped her fingers on her opposite sleeve. She extended her hand near the open cloth. A faint vibration was felt first, no wind dispersed with it, just a tingle against her skin. As she advanced, a spark ignited to her finger from the teardrop shaped object.

The shop disappeared and Cora found herself naked. Her location was a void, consumed in darkness but she could see herself. A serrated blade approached her and pierced her chest, it made an incision with complete ease that opened up her rib cage. A harsh croaking voice spoke a beautiful word as two fingers entered her chest and pulled out her beating heart. She could see herself in the darkness but she wasn’t herself, she now knew what was on Braedon’s counter.

She had the entire experience in the time the spark had touched her and disappeared. “Faery?” Cora pulled her hand away as she looked to Braedon. “Is that a Faery heart?”

Braedon nodded, Cora was still coming to terms as he had had to. “The man had come in with what I assumed was his bodyguard. He talked to me as if I knew what was coming, when I asked him to clarify... he showed me the heart...” Braedon looked at his shop. “I had a negative reaction to the experience.”

“No shit.” Cora simplified as she was coming out of it fully. She was stalling with small talk, she looked to the axe in the ceiling. “Guess, you don’t lose those Ranger skills.”

“Well the first guy wasn’t expecting it and the other guy got his axe stuck taking it from behind his cape...” Braedon now realized he was doing it too.

“Captain?” A youthful soldier stood in the doorway and summoned her. Cora walked to him as he retreated out the door and pointed to a red-haired soldier. “Diggs says these guys are bandits.”

“Diggs?” Cora waited as Diggs shuffled forward.

“I was just telling Kinny, well, that I’ve drunk with them before, ma’am, in the village. They’re alright, usually just lift things from the loggers... Maybe some highway’in... They’re not that bad.” Diggs’ eyes tried to stay in contact with his captain’s, but they began to avoid as he made his case.

“Where in the village?”

Kinny was getting reinforcements as Cora and Diggs stood in the stables across from the Welcome Inn. Braedon and the three reluctant soldiers were waiting for instructions while holding the stablemaster hostage in the hayloft. The soldiers were giving Braedon contemptuous looks as he pretended to study his new axe. He didn’t blame them. Their lives were now dedicated to whatever outcome waited in the Inn across the street and they didn’t truly know why, but the apothecary did.

No longer enjoying his muggings, Braedon left the soldiers and walked to Diggs and Cora. Cora’s frown of the situation didn’t help as she looked to his arrival. “Kinny’s taking too long.” She explained.

“We don’t know what’s in there.” Diggs added.

“Want me to go look?” Braedon surprisingly offered.

“Not your kind of place, Herby.” Diggs looked him over.

Cora looked Diggs over. “You can go with him.”

“Great...” Diggs began taking his armor off, he looked to Braedon. “...Leave the axe.”

As they crossed the street, Diggs’ anxiety began to show. “It’s not a bad place unless you bring bad into it... I don’t know why you killed their guys but you don’t start anything if we find more of them... Got it?”

“Got it.” Braedon repeated.

Diggs got to the swivel door and stopped suddenly. “Shit, you have any trade?” Braedon held up his coin purse. “...Maybe this will all work out. Come on.”

Diggs pushed the door open, the strong odor of fermentation hit Braedon’s sophisticated snout and he gagged. Diggs grabbed him by the shoulder and pulled him inside. Braedon was half dragged to a table and pushed down to the bench seats. He watched Diggs walk to the barkeep and begin a discussion.

Braedon looked the long interior of the Inn. From the outside, it looked like a shack with a ramshackle fence and a barn in the distance. The deception is that the fence hides the walls that connect to the barn, you could fill a hundred souls easy in here. There was a gathering toward the barn section that Braedon couldn’t count the occupants but those that were near the kitchen were few and filthy.

“Hey! What is this!” Diggs called out to Braedon holding the folded cloth in his hands. Braedon realized that Diggs had grabbed his coin purse to buy the first round, Braedon was going to use it to instigate the first round. Diggs dropped it to the counter and began to hunt further in the empty coin purse. The barkeep unfolded it and looked toward the barn, he raised his hands to get their attention and then pointed at Diggs before backing away.

Diggs was distracted and didn’t see the signal, Braedon watched as five men got up from their table and began advancing toward the bar. Diggs reached for the cloth and got shocked, he

stumbled back from the bar as the men arrived. Braedon had pulled his new dagger from his boot and palmed it to hide under his forearm, he slouched forward to get a better footing for when Diggs came to.

“It’s Diggs.” A man shouted to the back of the Inn.

Another man peered to the cloth on the bar, then to Diggs. “How’d you get that?”

Diggs held up his hands struggling with the reality, a third man recognized the symptom. “Look it’m, it’s his first ride.”

“A coin, he cries.”

“I’ll take that action.”

Braedon’s cheeks flushed and his ears pounded as his blood was racing. To him, these men were so far gone that watching the destruction of purity could be accompanied with a game of chance. Braedon rose up and the fist blindsided him. His knees wobbled trying to keep him standing but he fell into a table that screeched as it slid a few feet from his collision. He could acknowledge that he was on the ground and should stand up however Braedon’s legs and arms seem to be only working at half speed.

A howl filled the Inn as Diggs’ reaction became known. “He’s a screamer.” Joked the man who’d struck Braedon.

“Shut him up! He may have friends outside.” The barkeep shouted as he left the bar and headed for the entrance. As he got to the swivel door, it opened and collided with his face. The force was enough to crumple the barkeep but also created the briefest of moment to let the men inside know there were people coming.

Diggs and Braedon were discarded as non-threats. All the men inside were hardened, whether by training or life, as they took in their environment and pulled their weapons

accordingly. Braedon watched as the men toward the barn readied arrows in bows while the men by the kitchen pulled long daggers and short swords. Braedon, and the men inside, knew the soldiers outside would be coming in with armor and long swords or polearms, the odds were not going to be in their favor.

“no.” Braedon mourned as he saw it was worse than that. Kinny hadn’t arrived yet, Cora and her three soldiers entered with swords drawn.

Their foursome spread out to block the door as soon as they entered. They postured to let their eyes adjust and take in the situation. The five men were ready but didn’t advance, they didn’t have to with the archers behind them. It seemed to be a standoff, then Braedon saw that a Sixth man had arrived to the kitchen area. He wore leather armor within a grey cape, his hood was down and he had a kind face with long hair tied back.

The tension of the standoff was palpable as Cora called out. “By order of the King, drop your arms!”

“No.” The Sixth man replied waving his hand before him. A forceful gust of wind emitted from a jeweled ring he wore and knocked the foursome back and to the ground. The five men charged at this moment and pounced upon the City Guard. They didn’t have a chance fighting from their butt save Cora who had rolled with the gust to be on her hands and knees.

Though her sword had dropped with the roll, she locked up with her assailant and forced him to begin to back up. Unfortunately, it was away from the scuffle and into line of sight with the archers that she was unaware of. Braedon watched as one arrow pierced her outstretched arm and the other connect with her throat. Gagging while gasping for air, she held her throat as she collapsed to the ground.

“We’re done here.” The Sixth Man spoke looking to the men as they were wiping their opponent’s blood from their blades back to their opponent’s clothing. As the Sixth Man turned to head back to the barn, the swivel doors burst from the hinges. Kinny and a dozen City Guard had arrived.

Chaos ensued as the odds had shifted. The Sixth Man took to running instead of using his power as the City Guard dispatched of the five men who’d been so confident a moment before. Braedon crawled across the floor as the City Guard looked to the barn area, they hesitated their advancement as the archers were accurate in their ability. Braedon got to Cora and turned her over, she was already gone.

His head was pounding from the hit and his senses were adding to the pressure. Recklessly, he got up and simply walked to the broken front door and exited while arrows flew and murderous orders were shouted. The sound having been muffled and the fresh air gave him the minimalist of relief but it was enough clarity to give him his next purpose. He began walking down the dirt road toward the city wall.

“OI!”

Braedon turned back and saw Diggs stomping toward him. He returned to walking toward his destination. “Stop!” Came the next shout. Braedon stopped and turned back just as Diggs had come into grabbing range, which he did. Braedon was surprised that Diggs could lift him enough to be intimidating. “Where you going!”

“Get my horse and my gear. They’re going to escape into the forest...” Braedon answered politely. “...I need to kill them all.”

Diggs was slightly taken aback and lowered Braedon. “Can I come?”

“Yeah.” Braedon could take or leave Diggs’ help but he knew that Diggs was touched as he and Cora had been. He played a hunch. “Did you get it back?”

Diggs nodded as he held out the coin purse.

“Come on then.”

Diggs was unimpressed as they reached Braedon’s Stable. The stable was connected to the city wall with a staircase that accessed the city gate. The proximity to the city gate gave it protection by the City Guard. Braedon walked to the horse’s head that snorted disappointment from its window. “Sorry Ez, a lot has happened today.” Braedon patted the horse and put his head to it. Diggs sighed annoyed.

“We need to go.”

“He needs to eat first.”

“We don’t have time...”

“They are going to get as far as they’re going to get, regardless of when we start...”

Braedon needed the time to rest his injury as well. “...We need to talk anyway.”

“About what!”

“Let’s do this inside.” Braedon said as he pointed to the stable door. Diggs walked to the door and opened it, he stormed inside as Braedon followed. By the time Braedon entered, Diggs’ anxiousness had turned to awe. “That’s what we need to talk about.”

Diggs stared at the Elven Sword displayed on the wall; the bins of herbs and mushrooms beside it and drying foliage hanging above made for a comical sight. Braedon wandered to the hay bale beside the stable and proceeded to put it in the stall. He patted his horse again and stepped away to let it eat.

“You fought in it?” Diggs asked as his curiosity grew from visual to investigative.

“Yeah. I was with the Rangers out of Klaf-in-Coop back at Sea Cliff.” Braedon looked at the display now as well.

“My Dad fell at Sea Cliff.” Diggs added his association.

“I’m sorry.” Braedon saw a lot of his friends at Sea Cliff fall. “What was his name?”

“I don’t know.” Diggs added nonchalantly. “What happened?”

“At Sea Cliff?”

Diggs nodded.

“Uh, well, the Elves that aligned with the Usurper, uh, when we stopped the infantry. They launched a last stand, they used their magic in the castle and shook the foundation. The castle collapsed and fell to the sea...”

“Where were you?”

“I was part of the guard protecting the King. We were returning from the field when we felt it...” Braedon had more to tell but there was work to do. “Anyway, I thought you should know that I’m not just some “Herby”, I’ve been in the mix before.”

“Yeah, I figured that out when you killed those two guys this morning, and when Cora was nervous about apprehending you.” Diggs simplified it.

“She was nervous?” Braedon was saddened.

“Told us...” Diggs noticed Braedon’s change. “She just told us, she didn’t want to go, in case...” Braedon nodded so that Diggs didn’t have to finish. Diggs felt awkward and returned his gaze to the display. “How’d you get it?”

Braedon looked up. “What’s that?”

“How’d you get the sword?”

“The old law. You get to keep what you kill.” Braedon did not boast.

“You beat an elf!” Diggs was surprised.

“Elf isn’t more than a man...” Braedon looked to the sword. “...Especially one that makes alliances with aristocrats. Once they skulk to our level, they’ve lost all their intrigue.”

“Still though?” Diggs was trying to give him credit.

Braedon waved his hands to say “enough”. “Let’s move on.” Braedon walked to his saddle that hung over a rack. “You got any sway with the Rangers?”

“I mean, I hang more outside the city walls than most guards... I could approach them and not get laughed out the room.” Diggs fidgeted.

“Alright, we’ll go plan B.” Braedon walked to another rack and pulled a dusty blanket off a very worn saddle. “It’s not going to be comfortable, but then again, you won’t be on a horse...”

Diggs raised a finger to interrupt but Braedon moved on purposefully ignoring the gesture.

“...What arms do you prefer?”

“I’m good with a lot, what do you have?” Diggs looked about.

Braedon knelt beside the worn saddle and pulled up another blanket revealing a large chest. “Take your pick, mostly stuff from people that tried highway’in me.”

Diggs walked to the chest and began taking small axes and daggers out, to get to the maces and short swords. He looked to Braedon who was searching his bins and packing camp equipment into a saddle bag. “How is there any crime in the forest?”

“I wonder that, too.” Braedon remained stoic as he grabbed his flint.

“What about armor?” Diggs had laid his selection on the blanket and was rolling it up.

“We don’t use armor in the woods.” Braedon closed his bag. “Too heavy and it slows you down in the bush.”

Diggs sighed irritated. “But it stops blades and cushions...”

“...How about, I don’t have any armor here.” Braedon interrupted. “Get hurt out there, don’t plan on making it back to the city healer. You still want to go?”

“Yeah, I’m going. I just think armor is a good thing...” Diggs finalized. He glanced about and then shrugged. “What am I riding?”

Braedon took a priming breath. “About that...”

Git, the mule, was not accustomed to having a rider but succumbed to the task after two carrots. Diggs was not happy to be riding the mule but didn’t like the idea of carrying his ramshackle gear through the brush paths Braedon was taking them through to get to the forest. The landscape had been ripped through and scattered rotted stumps showed where the new Castle’s foundation had begun from.

Braedon’s head was still throbbing, he’d been chewing numb-root since they left and it was having little effect. Ez’s footfalls weren’t helping and the swaying from the tied line to Git was encouraging nausea to help. He began to doubt, he knew the task ahead was something he’d done countless times in the past but he was older and probably softer from the city. “I need to stop.”

Diggs watched as Braedon got off his horse, he walked about ten feet ahead of it and stopped. Several minutes past and Diggs came to the conclusion that not moving on a mule was worse than riding. He leaned forward. “I’m getting off, don’t be a dick when I try to get back on.”

Diggs stepped down and could feel a rawness between his thighs as he walked up to Braedon. He stopped and stood next to him. The two looked to the distance and saw the forest looming peacefully in the midday sun. “You okay?”

Braedon lurched forward and began to vomit, Diggs stepped back hastily and let him finish. Diggs watched as Braedon knelt before his retch and stuck his finger in it, he began swirling it about. “What are you doing!”

Braedon looked to Diggs in all seriousness. “It wasn’t numb-root...” He spit the taste from his mouth and then stood. “We can go now.” Braedon walked back to Ez and got up, Diggs followed behind but was now wary of his companion. He’d seen Guards act funny after an injury and had been wondering since he watched Braedon walk through arrows to leave the Inn.

The next two hours were without incident. They’d entered the forest and still traveled along a small path used by foragers. Diggs assumed this was Braedon’s usual trail. He’d been watching him sway with the horse’s stride and occasionally glance back to him. Diggs would offer a friendly wave but not get one in return.

Once the remaining sunlight turned orange through the canopy, they came to a stop near a stream. There was a cleared-out area where a camp had been previous. “We’ll stop here.” Braedon spoke as the horse stopped and he dismounted with ease. Diggs felt more confident seeing Braedon’s agility, less so when Git sidestepped as he dismounted and fell hard on his shoulder. Braedon seemed to ignore this as he pulled a folded blanket with iron rings sewn in and proceeded to fasten them into metal spikes in two trees.

“Been here before?”

“Built it.” Braedon said stepping back from the new ceiling. Diggs began picking up kindling. “No fire. The smoke carries in here.”

“We’re hoping they make one?”

“Nah, they would have went deep. City Guard would have gotten the Rangers to pursue...” Braedon began scanning the area. “Old Ranger Rule, there’s always someone in the forest, plan for them or avoid them.”

“And we’re avoiding?” Diggs halfhearted his own scan.

“I call it planning.” Braedon looked to Diggs. “...But yeah, my head is still ringing. I’m going to go find some numb-root.” Diggs watched him walk to the edge of the clearing and then stop. “Give me the purse.”

Diggs had tied the coin purse to a string and wore it under his tunic like a necklace. “Yeah, sure.” Diggs hesitated before taking it off. He’d experienced the closest thing to magic he figured he ever would and had gotten attached to the keepsake. Diggs handed it over to Braedon, he felt reassured as he watched how Braedon held it as though it could get hurt.

“Stay here.” Braedon ordered before he left the camp.

It was that order that kept replaying in Diggs’ thoughts. Nothing was suspicious until he said those words. He was a city boy and had no desire for traipsing around bushes and bugs. He didn’t need to be told to stay in the one place that was relatively comfortable and had all his stuff. “So what do you want to do?” Diggs finally asked himself aloud.

Ez snorted as Diggs walked to the edge of the camp as though to reiterate the order, Diggs made a rude gesture toward the horse and then realized he’d done it. He hoped that no one was there to see their battle of wits. Diggs wandered from the camp, he could tell he was on the trail because the ground was smooth. For what seemed like an eternity of slowly stepping in the dark, he heard it. City or Forest, the sound of metal sliding out of leather is unmistakable.

“Diggs?” Braedon’s voice seemed to come from all around.

“Yeah.” Diggs replied closing his eyes to listen harder.

“What are you doing out here?” Braedon’s voice came from above now.

Diggs looked up. “I got restless.”

“What are you looking at?” Braedon asked standing in front of Diggs, looking up with him.

“You were gone for...” Diggs began. “You alright?”

“Yeah, didn’t need the numb-root after all.” Braedon said lifting the coin purse. “I think this has healing properties.”

“What does?” Diggs couldn’t see anything in the dark.

“The heart.” Braedon said lowering the purse. “Let’s go back to camp.”

Diggs began walking.

“Wrong way, Diggs.”

Diggs stopped and altered his direction to follow Braedon’s foot falls.

“Still wrong... Here, take my hand?”

Ez snorted hello to Braedon, which sounded like disdain toward Diggs, as the two entered the camp. Diggs sat under the blanket as Braedon seemed to wander about the campsite’s boundary. He dropped several sticks to the ground and organized them for a burn.

“Thought you said no fire?” Diggs questioned as he could sense what was happening.

“Learned a couple things while I was out there.” Braedon began clicking his flint and dropping sparks onto the dry moss he had placed in the center. “I haven’t tried this yet, but I think the science is sound...”

A smoldering began to erupt from the moss and then it turned into a flame. The flame left the ground and rose to Braedon's outstretched hand. It danced in his palm until it burned itself out. "What!" Diggs exclaimed, his mind was still catching up to his volume. Braedon placed some more moss down and lit but this time just to start the campfire. "How did you do that?"

"Before we left the stable, I thought I had grabbed some numb-root. My vision was blurry and getting worse, so when I retched on the ride here..." Braedon looked away from Diggs and into the fire. "I've seen soldiers take a stumble and die two days later. I've seen the signs in them and then started seeing them in me... I went out walking, genuinely, looking for the root but also wondering if I should take us back, since, you are really not going to survive alone in here."

"I might." Diggs tried for confidence but fell a hair short.

Braedon paused to decide if he should correct him but chose to move on. "...I started getting dizzy and fell to my knees, I remember clutching the purse and asking to whatever might be listening in the ether to help me. I felt a tingle in my hand and then it seemed to course through my entire body until, I felt completely fine... and refreshed, like summertime, lying in the sun after a swim."

"I don't swim."

"Well it's a really good feeling." Braedon confirmed. "The tingle started from the purse, made me think, why would someone want a faery heart?"

"Cause it still has magic." Diggs was with him now.

"That's what I thought... So, I tried something else."

"What?"

"Walking on water."

“What!”

“Didn’t work though. I was at the stream, I held the purse tight and thought about walking on the water, like believing I could do it. Instead, I stepped to the water and the water moved away from my foot. I touched the dirt of the stream and didn’t get wet.” Braedon revealed a trout. “Not walking on water but a good way to fish.”

“Can I try?” Diggs’ excitement was palpable.

“There’s more.” Braedon let the question linger as he pulled out his dagger. He began prepping the fish. “...The Man at the Inn, with the ring, he sent out that heavy wind.”

“You think there’s a faery heart in his ring?” Diggs’ excitement waned. “But how do you...? Why bring it to you?”

Braedon put his finger into the fish and pulled the guts out. He could tell Diggs was close to the answer from the silence. “If you had a faery heart and knew what it could do. You wouldn’t bring it to an apothecary. You’d bring it to an...”

“Alchemist.” Diggs finished the thought. “And if you’re some backwoods bandit, walking through the city for the first time, you might get confused...” Diggs trailed off knowing everything but, “Wait. How does a bandit who gets confused between an Herby and a Gold-Faker get a faery heart in the first place? You have to know magic, right?”

Braedon had cut the fish in half and laid the pieces on the fire. “I figure the Man with the ring will tell us.”

He wouldn’t. Two hours into their ride, they encountered Kinny and a dozen Rangers. The Man with the ring’s corpse was strewn over the load horse.

“Where were you!” Kinny asked Diggs harshly.

“I was protecting the Herby.” Diggs added his own tone to ward off the accusation.

“Cause you were late!”

Braedon was inspecting the corpse of the Man who no longer had the ring, as it was in his palm. He gave nods to the Rangers as they respected those who came before, none saw his craftiness. “The man use magic?” He asked the nearest Ranger.

“Yeah. Guy swung up his hand and fire rose from the ground. Did it too late though, we were already committed to the charge... We rode them down.” The young Ranger’s eyes wandered from Braedon’s, sometimes the win was too fresh.

“You did good, son. Man killed my friend, much obliged.” Braedon stepped away but stopped. “How far to their camp?”

“Not much left there.” Kinny was taking a break from Diggs.

“Just answer the man.” Diggs kept the pressure regardless.

“Just head...” Kinny faltered as he realized it wasn’t like giving City directions.

The young Ranger spoke up. “You know the fork before Old Bridge?”

“Yeah.” Braedon knew it.

“Just East of that.”

Braedon was curious. “Like they were heading to Sea Cliff?”

“Yeah.”

“You want some protection?” An older Ranger rode closer. “It’ll be close to dusk when you get there.”

“No...” Braedon paused for effect. “We were geared up for a stalk-and-chop anyway. You guys can get replenished, if you want to come back afterward. I’ll take the Sitter to see Sea Cliff since we’re halfway. You don’t find us there, I knew the risks.”

“You gonna make him a Leaf Pie?” The older Ranger winked at Diggs while the rest chuckled.

“If he’s good... Safe ride, guys.” Braedon smiled warmly. The Rangers began trotting off as Kinny stayed.

“Can I go to Sea Cliff?” Kinny was earnest in his request.

“You bleeding?” Braedon ignored Diggs’ facial appeal to say no, for he had already found his loophole.

Kinny looked to his ripped pants and red stained leg. “I think it stopped.”

“Deeper we get, more worrisome the predators...” Again, pausing for effect. “Not this time, but I swear, for killing the men that killed Cora, I will take you.” Braedon sealed it with a salute. Kinny gave a crestfallen nod before saluting back and riding forward.

Diggs waited until they were alone. “What’s a Leaf Pie?”

“Old Ranger delicacy.”

“Stalk-and-chop?”

“Sneak up on your enemy while they sleep and...” Braedon finished the sentence by dragging his finger across his throat.

“You Rangers are grim...” Diggs looked to Braedon’s hand. “Got something?”

Braedon flashed, then tossed the ring to Diggs. “You can hold this one... try not to use it accidentally.”

Diggs stared at the gem, he could just see the translucent heart within it. “Why are we staying out here?”

“There was an “expectant” behavior, with the guys that came to my shop... I want to see their camp, cause I don’t think this is over.” Braedon walked to Ez and took his reins. The two began walking away.

Diggs followed suit and grabbed Git’s reins but there was no movement. “Come on, man.” He looked Git in the eye and then held the ring up. “Start moving.”

Git seemed to raise his head to be within eyesight of Diggs but then was taller, Diggs realized Git was levitating. Diggs panicked. “Drop! Get down!” Git slowly lowered to the ground beside him. Diggs began petting Git’s ratted mane immediately, he leaned in and whispered an apology.

“You good?” Braedon had turned and was looking back to Diggs.

“We’re good!” Diggs’ volume startled Git to start moving. Things seemed normal so Braedon turned and began leading again. Diggs’ chest felt tired from how hard his heart had been beating. He placed the ring in his pocket with no desire to use it again.

With the pressure of the hunt over, Braedon took the main traveler’s road. Diggs walked with Git as their pace was relatively the same and the terrain wasn’t difficult. The birds chirped loud in the trees as if they were sentries heralding the intruders on the path. A gentle breeze caressed their silhouettes though the tops of the trees made it seem like a hurricane. Diggs had never spent any time in the forest and never understood the lifestyle of the Rangers, the concert of nature was helping to convert him.

Braedon knew the danger wasn’t over, the clatter of the birds let him know there was much unrest. He would periodically check back on Diggs, who seemed to be a very happy tourist. Braedon knew the day was getting away from them and this deep in the forest, even on the road, they might have a rough night protecting the livestock.

“How much further, boss?” Diggs called out noticing the shadows of the trees had grown longer and in a different direction.

“Not so loud, huh?” Braedon dismounted and waited for Diggs to walk up. “We’re close, you can smell it.” Diggs lifted his nose and realized there was a hint of burning in the air. “Put your head down or close your mouth, all birds are jesters.”

Diggs lowered his head but with annoyance, not caution. “How do we proceed?”

“You stay with the animals, while I go have a look.” Braedon pulled his unstrung bow from the saddle. He collected only two arrows from his quiver. “Don’t follow this time, the animals need protecting.”

Diggs watched as Braedon stepped over his bow and bent it to place the string. “If you get into trouble?”

Braedon stared deadpan. “Come and save me.” He gave one tug on the line, satisfied, he took to a sprint off the road and into the denseness of the trees.

Diggs stared at the trees as Braedon seemingly disappeared before his eyes. A moment passed. It dawned on him that the birds had stopped chirping. The wind had died without warning. Though they were no longer walking, the twigs and road still made their whispering sounds. Diggs had felt this feeling before, when Cora told him to go across the street, it was a feeling coming from his stomach. He found himself beside Git, arm in the wrapped blanket, hand on hilt, waiting.

Waiting.

Ez’s lowered head raised and looked off trail, her chewing stopped, then began. Git stared aimlessly, knowing whatever fate was coming for him, was coming for him. Diggs cocked

his head for better hearing, but the breeze picked up and the leaves began to clatter like waves negating his efforts. He felt something was coming.

A distant whistle sounded, Ez slowly began to amble toward it. “Ez?” Diggs called through gritted teeth. “Ez stop!” Ez continue her slow pace. “Ez!” Diggs whispered harshly to no avail. “Damn.” Diggs gave a tug to Git to follow and, miraculously, he did. Short sword outward and dagger with reins, Diggs followed Ez’s lead. They stayed on the road a short distance and then veered off a freshly trampled trail.

Braedon stood with his arms crossed as they came into view. “Ever hear the old saying, ‘You can follow a horse to slaughter...’” Braedon looked up in thought. “Wait, maybe it’s ‘water’...”

“Was I supposed to follow the horse?” Diggs asked with mild irritation, he was beginning to realize there was specific quirks with Rangers.

“Yes.” Braedon released. “I thought I’d figure out the saying before you got here... Maybe it was ‘don’t drink water from a horse’?”

Diggs looked away from Braedon’s grin to the remains of the campsite. The ground was scorched in a peculiar cylindrical pattern. The bushes and greenery were properly flattened from the hoof work of the Ranger’s steeds. Shredded cloth and plundered saddlebags scattered the ground. “Where’s the bodies?”

Braedon’s smirk tucked away. “Twenty yards in...” Braedon looked to the ground. “Rangers are required to send messages to those that... follow.”

Diggs was morbidly curious to see what would affect Braedon so but also worried what morbidity he would actually see. He made no motion which satisfied Braedon.

“We’re losing the light, help me gather some wood.”

Diggs was elated. “We get a fire tonight?”

The fire was small in Diggs’ eyes and too big in Braedon’s, but the two sat before it in wanderer’s comfort. Ez and Git were unburdened and tied to a tree. Braedon fashioned a small roof of hay through piled up dead branches. As the two would eat, the starry sky would reveal itself. Diggs didn’t understand the effort. “How did you get to be in the city?”

“...Got lucky.” Braedon’s eyes tranced to the fire. “Saved the King’s life.”

Diggs waited for more. When it didn’t come, he tried to put it together. “That how you got the elven sword?”

There was a hesitation before the response. “Yeah... well, it helped get the ball rolling.” Braedon rose up and walked to the small pile of wood they’d collected. He searched for a particular size and brought the branch to the fire. He rested one end in fire and the other on the ground beside his hand.

“You okay?” Diggs asked wondering if he’d overstepped.

“Yeah, yeah... Forgot how a fire got people talking.” Braedon looked to Diggs warmly. “Got me realizing how much of a hermit I’ve become since moving into the city.” Braedon lifted the stick to see if it had caught yet. “You ever seen a faery?”

“Nah. I wasn’t even sure they existed until yesterday.”

“Yeah, that fits. They don’t really like the city, or the folk inside it...”

“Why is that?” Diggs changed his seating arrangement for the knot in his lower back.

“I mean, I don’t know for sure. I assume its for the way we change nature to suit our needs... And sorry for that, cause I like drinking from a cup made of whatever.” Braedon lamented.

“Damn right, sleeping in a bricked room.” Diggs attempted to join.

Braedon nodded as the moment passed, his eyes back to the fire. “How I met Cora, ya know... She was there, must have been Ten years aged, she was a squire for...” Braedon’s eyes darted around as he remembered. “...Yeah, he died that day... The army had won the field and we were at the encampment when the call came out.”

“What call?” Diggs felt like he was listening to a riddle.

“Sorry. There was an assassin, he got to the King but was fended off before he could complete his task... This was the Elf. He was good, I lost some friends to him... why I joined the chase actually. Yeah, I remember it being a strange sight. There was a few Knights in full armor running with a us Rangers and then one small squire in braids keeping up as we disappeared into the forest after him.”

Diggs didn’t interrupt as Braedon seemed to be reliving it.

“...The Knights got left behind, they were last seen taking their armor off cause they couldn’t get over a fallen log... You can’t track an Elf in the forest, they can see in the dark and they can walk in the trees. You go after an Elf, you need to hope he wants to hunt you as much as you want to hunt him... We got lucky...

He had rounded back for the Knights, they gave us the warning with their screams. It was me, Fender, and... Cowl, yeah, Cowl. We went back-to-back under some tall branches that we thought he couldn’t swoop down from, we were wrong. He got Cowl first, cause Cowl fell on Fender and that’s how he got ended right after. I only had time to spin around and see what was happening. I was done for in that moment, I got to see it...

An Elf with white reflective eyes, smiling, he was smiling. He had his arm extended back so that he could deliver that final swing...” Braedon smiled to himself, Diggs felt uneasy with

that grin. “His smile faded when he couldn’t start his swing, Cora had picked up a stick and pressed it against his sword. He turned back and saw her, gave her a stab in the shoulder... which gave me the time to give him a stab in the face...”

Braedon stared off into the fire for a second, realizing it, he lifted the stick from the fire to act as if he was checking it. There was a small flame attached to it. Diggs gave him a moment before asking. “How’d you save the King then?”

“Sorry, forgot that was the story we started... Cora took ill immediately, you could see the black in her veins...”

“Sword was poisoned?” Diggs answered-asked eagerly. He knew poison, his life in the city crossed paths with nature.

“Yeah, and it moved quick, especially in a young girl. I didn’t have any of my supplies since we’d run out on foot. I held the little squire in my arms, you know, telling her thank you and how brave she’d been...” The words choked Braedon but settled as he continued. “...I don’t know what drew them, but must have been a dozen faery had begun circling the dead Elf... One came by me and Cora to investigate, my first time seeing one eye-to-eye, and I remember we didn’t talk but I knew I needed Sponge Moss for the wound... And I swear, it nodded to me and flew off...”

“What’s sponge moss?” Diggs chanced the interruption.

“It grows on the rocks below Sea Cliff, it feeds off whatever gets splashed on it from the waves. Somewhere along the way, somebody discovered it helped to fight poison, and that was taught to me and that faery came back with it...” Braedon stopped as he remembered something else.

Diggs saw it. “What?”

“The other Faeries. They didn’t like the one for helping us. They swarmed after it, I remember the ruckus lit up the forest, you could see where they flew like paths of fire in the air. They chased it up and away from us, it was hell of a sight... Then we were alone, I dressed wound with the sponge moss and rested the poisoned blade on it. Carried her out of the forest and when we got back to the encampment, we were told the King had taken a turn...” Braedon didn’t feel the need to explain further. “My reward was to be free of the Rangers and be the King’s Apothecary... He’s never visited me since... the end.”

“You ever see the Faeries again?” Diggs wondered.

“Yeah, you get a glimpse now and then, but never face-to-face... I don’t know if it was cause of the Elf, or what?”

Diggs had another thought. “When you... Did you think it was the one who helped you? The heart?”

Braedon gave it an honest thought. “No. I worry that one didn’t make it passed that night in the forest.”

“Too bad...” Diggs said now shifting to lie down. “...Could have shown the others it was worth it.”

Braedon gave that an honest thought as Diggs’ breathing changed to announce that the dreaming had begun.

Diggs was concerned as he gave Braedon’s foot a slight nudge with his. He’d been awake long enough to take his morning constitution and saddle up Git. He felt he’d made enough noise to wake the Ranger but to no avail, a worrying had taken over the morning. Diggs tried again with his foot and startled himself with the result.

Braedon's eyes opened with alert, as he looked from his foot to Diggs and then around the area. "Damn..." He closed and opened his eyes excessively while working his shoulders about. "...Don't tell anybody you ever woke me up."

Diggs smiled. "What's our plan?"

"Let me wake up first..." Braedon complained as he stretched his arms next. Feeling Diggs' eyes on him, he decided to give him something. "We'll scout the area for anyone that was going to stalk-and-chop us, then we'll go from there."

Diggs' smile disappeared. "Wait? Did you think that could have happened?"

"It was a possibility."

"And you let us sleep?"

"Price you pay for sleeping in the forest." The wave of pertinent information cascaded against Diggs' mind as Braedon watched. He remembered getting this lesson as an initiate and enjoyed sharing it. "You ready?" Braedon chided as he stood up.

Diggs lingered behind as Braedon began his scouting of the area. He traveled in a circular fashion around the camp. At first, Fifty yards, then One Hundred. It was an unbearable amount of time that Diggs thought yielded nothing when Braedon finally turned to him. "Nobody was out here."

"What a waste of time!" Diggs' patience had turned to aggravation.

"Sorry." Braedon was sincere as he sensed the change in mood.

"What?"

"I should have said nobody was down here." Braedon pointed up at the tree branches overhead.

Diggs looked up and saw the small beings huddled together. "Are those?"

Braedon nodded though Diggs wasn't looking. "Yeah, they don't usually do that."

Diggs couldn't look away. "What are they doing?"

"Letting us see them."

Diggs now looked to Braedon, felt the crick that awe inspired. "What do you think?"

"I think they know we're here to help..." Braedon looked back up. "...but they don't trust us."

Braedon led the way as Diggs followed towing the reins of Git and Ez. The faeries, hesitantly, were advancing from tree to tree as guides until Braedon no longer needed their directions. Diggs noticed this as he still watched them. "Why aren't you taking their lead?"

"Cause they're taking us to Sea Cliff." Braedon replied to Diggs, to himself he spoke, "It always leads back to Sea Cliff."

The faeries stopped accompanying them as they reached the clearing that had once been the crossroads to Sea Cliff. Time and fire scarred the remains of the marketplace that used to serve as the welcoming visage to the outskirts of Sea Cliff castle.

"Did you ever see this when it was here?" Braedon asked looking to Diggs perplexed expression.

"No."

"It was tents and huts filled with game, fruit, and vegetables. You could find anything here." Braedon's nostalgia faded as Diggs' ignorance to it gave shape to his nodding toward the ruins of the castle, to the mission at hand. "...Yeah, okay."

Braedon watched the ground as the dirt road turned to implanted rock. The stonemason's worked years to smooth it for the royal carriages. So much history lost to the greed of one, Braedon thought as he looked away to Diggs walking onward. This Royal Road as it was

referred to, would soon trail off to the crater that used to be a castle. Braedon saw it once and never wished to see it again.

“You good?” Diggs called out.

Braedon didn’t realize he had stopped moving, he began to walk again. “Yeah.”

“What’s that?” Diggs pointed to a hovel made of rocks just before the lip of the crater.

Braedon had spent his time looking at the ground, he was slightly embarrassed that Diggs had found what they were looking for, but not bitter. “Something that wasn’t there before.”

Braedon signaled Diggs to stop with his hand; with his face, to get ready. “Tie’em up”

Braedon pulled a belt with several sheathed daggers over his head and they dangled across his chest. He attached his short sword scabbard to his belt and chose his hand ax to be what he would enter with. Diggs eyed Braedon’s selection and copied it as best he could, he chose a mace instead of the ax. The two were silent in their preparation.

Braedon looked over Diggs equipment and their attachment and gave him an approving nod. “We go in expecting five of them, slow and silent is our descent, save fast and loud for our retreat...” Braedon began stating the rules.

“What if it’s empty?” Diggs offered.

Braedon wasn’t having it. “Didn’t you hear me, there’s five guys in there waiting for us.”

Diggs nodded his understanding. “You going to use the heart for a torch?”

“If they’re down there, we’ll use theirs.”

Diggs nodded again but reached into the saddle for the ring as Braedon turned to advance. He was a few steps behind when Braedon looked back at him, his eyes told him that he was with him to the end. Diggs remembered Cora giving him this look before she approached the apothecary shop.

There was no door to the hovel. It was an open door that led to a crude staircase, more fashioned by nature than man. Braedon went first, went silent as each step hovered before its planting. Diggs was forced to match the pace, which was good since his pumping blood told him to go faster. The darkness enveloped them as the stairs took them into the ground.

Braedon felt the ground level, his memory reminded him that this must be servant halls that ran beneath the length of the castle. It could have remained after the fall. He didn't have a working knowledge of where this one led but he assumed this one was for deliveries. Diggs blindly tapped Braedon to let him know he'd arrived.

Braedon moved in the direction the stairs were pointed, he thought the other direction would lead to the collapsed earth. Diggs listened for each hushed step Braedon took, before taking his own. The gravel steps felt so loud that the creeping seemed useless but there was no stirring from the corridor.

A faint creaking sound began to be audible the further they advanced. At first it was singular but the closer they got, it seemed to come from multiple sources and random like a wind chime. There was still no light as the creaking increased immensely and a new scuttling sound joined the chorus.

Braedon slowed his step when he heard Diggs' steps growing louder upon the gravel as they trembled more to match the knocking in his knees. He didn't blame him, his age and experience helped him hide his more. Braedon's outreached hand blindly reached a smoothed stone wall; beside it, splintered wood that he believed was a door. His trembling now took place in his gut.

Braedon turned and gently touched Diggs' arm, he followed it to get closer to his face and then his ear. "Door." He whispered, he tried his best to minimize the words he needed.

"Ready."

"Do it." Diggs was ready.

Braedon glided over the rough wood until he found where the latch should be, he realized it was only closed by a lock on the outside. This gave him pause, as the idea that this was the bandit's vault and not their hideout. He unlocked the door and let the rusted hinges slowly function, when the creak began did Braedon open it fully and lunge inside. It was the second step that clipped the pole and somersaulted him to the ground from the momentum.

A thunderous chorus of falling stands and cages collapsed around, and upon, Braedon. There was a second wave of clatter as he frenzied his way to his feet. Swinging wildly about in the dark, the shame rage overtook him as nothing came at him. "Dammit!"

"Clear?" came Diggs' voice from the dark.

Hesitant, Braedon answered. "Yeah, clear."

As the two men stood in the dark, listening for anything advancing upon them, a thought came to Diggs. "You must have been really good at those stalk-and-chops."

Braedon only exhaled at first then began laughing, Diggs joined in. As the joy faded, the mission returned and Braedon reached for a pouch at his side. "Turn around and watch out the door, I'm going to light the room."

Diggs stood in the doorway listening over the sound of Braedon flint-sparking. The sparks caught the cotton and Braedon scanned in the room with the hurried intention as the flame died out.

"What's in there?" Diggs said as he could see the light flicker out in his peripheral.

“...Eyes.” Braedon had backed up into Diggs, which startled both men. “Give me your mace.”

“Eyes? What do you mean eyes?” Diggs could feel his unease growing with each passing second he didn’t know what the eyes were attached to. “Like rats?”

Braedon pulled a small vial from his pouch and poured the contents over the maces’ head, he sparked his flint and it ignited instantly. Braedon held the makeshift torch into the room, Diggs’ curiosity overwhelmed his sentry duty and he looked into the room.

The wall was lined with shelves of cages, in front of the shelves were fancy standing bird cages, then farmer-built cages upon the floor. They were sturdy built as the pile up that Braedon caused hadn’t allowed any to open. Diggs could see the reflection of fire in over a hundred tiny eyes. Braedon advanced to illuminate the occupants.

Gaunt faces stared blankly into the fire, their wings seemed shriveled and were rolling up toward their backs. Their skin was grey, flaky. Braedon got next to a cage and peered at the chest “...They’re still alive.”

“What?”

“Without their hearts, they’re still alive...” Braedon handed the torch to Diggs unexpectedly, then dived into his pouch for the heart. He pulled out the cloth and unwrapped it presentation-like for the prisoners. Nothing stirred, all eyes stayed on the dancing flames.

“What were you expecting?” Diggs asked after a long moment.

“I don’t know.” Braedon’s eyes darted about the room. “Did you bring the ring?”

Diggs handed the torch back to pull out the ring. “Right here.”

“Use it.”

Diggs looked from the ring to the cages. “...Feels wrong in this place.”

“Might wake them up.” Braedon spoke, convinced this needed to happen.

Diggs pondered for a beat, for the right instruction in this place. “Open.”

Among the crash pile, a faery shook and rattled the cage. All the cages in the room opened at once. “Oh, I didn’t know you were going to do that.” Braedon said aloud to himself and unsure to Diggs.

The liquid was burning off and flickering light came from the mace as both men stared at the lone Faery emerging from the rattled cage. Diggs hurriedly and gently placed the ring on the ground before them. “Should we back up?”

“I don’t know.” Braedon answered, then backed up with Diggs following his lead.

The light dimmed rapidly. The men could only watch as the Faery walked to the ring and then sat down before it, the actions it made were unintelligible to them. It finally dawned on them that the light going down. “Got more juice?” Diggs convened on the present situation.

“No, I packed light.” Braedon answered.

“Pity.” Came a hoarse voice from the doorway.

Diggs turned to see but Braedon spun with action. The light extinguished with Braedon’s swing of it but not before it illuminated the rotted look of the elf in the doorway. There was an impact and an ensuing struggle, but Diggs couldn’t move. His instinct was to attack but he remembered what Braedon told him about an Elf in the dark.

The fight was continuing down the corridor, but Diggs’ dark vision was gone from the torch. A helplessness came over him as the words left his lips “...I can’t see.”

The room illuminated in a soft light from the ground as the Faery held the ring in its arms, some blushing from the effort appeared on its cheeks. Diggs turned to the corridor and ran into its darkness, the Faery ran behind him and backlit it. Realizing the folly, Diggs knelt and felt

the light pitter-patter of feet running up his back leg and then up his back to his shoulder. Diggs and the Faery ran toward the fight.

Braedon had connected, he was certain the mace struck the Elf's shoulder. He dropped it so that he could tackle the Elf and get the fight into the narrows of the corridor. That was the extent of what his instincts had given him, now he had nothing but sheer will and the hope that Diggs was coming soon.

The Elf had no weapons, Braedon sussed out as he searched for them with his grappling. He had also discovered there was something wrong with this Elf's body, as he was squishy where he should have been hard; that his skin seemed to separate in a slippery fashion making him difficult to hold.

Braedon was thrown to the wall, it was unexpected since he felt he was in full clutch. The Elf didn't take the advantage of the attack but rather step back to view his opponent, Braedon raised his arms for the attack that never came. A light began to develop on the walls as a running silhouette advanced, the Elf turned to look at it. The new lighting gave Braedon the chance to view the Elf, he understood now.

The Elf looked down to Braedon before running away from Diggs' direction, Braedon rose and gave chase before Diggs arrived.

"Braedon!" Diggs' youth was not helping him to overcome the head start that the Elf and his partner had. He was desperate to catch up as he knew their only chance was to take this Elf together. He passed the stairway they'd arrived from, the unknown was now before them.

Braedon ran blindly in the dark for what felt an eternity, thinking he should wait for Diggs but not wanting to give up the advantage he felt he had. He dismissed that as he could see light from an opening ahead, it was now outlining the Elf's retreat. Braedon's heart sunk as he

realized what was really happening, the Elf changed his run from the ground to the walls. This was as far as the servant tunnel went, this is where the castle fell. Only reacting, Braedon dropped to his side and knees in an attempt stop his momentum with a slide; he pulled two daggers from his chest belt and dug them to the ground to no avail.

Braedon's slide turned to a roll and the graveled corridor floor only increased the speed that propelled him through the opening in the corridor. The sudden light blinded him completely and his flailing body could only tell him that he had no control of this flight. He never felt the ropes as he got entangled in them but he felt them grab hold and swing him to where his mass was going to take him and then bring him back with equal force against the cliff wall.

Diggs slowed his advance as his small companion began slap the side of his head desperately. Diggs looked to it but then forward as he didn't want to be distracted from his opponent. As he walked, he saw the slide marks and the two discarded daggers on the floor. Worry crept into his heart as Diggs wondered how the Elf could disarm and drag Braedon in such little time that was available for him to catch up.

Without warning, the Faery leapt from his shoulder still carrying the ring and ran to the opening of the corridor and simply jumped. "Bring back the cavalry." Diggs said truly feeling alone. He didn't blame the Faery for wanting to escape, he was feeling it too. As he got to the opening and his eyes adjusted to the streaming light coming in, he saw the ropes dangling from above the opening.

One rope seemed to strain and Diggs didn't want to see what it might be holding. Still, he advanced with several cautious glances behind him, he got to the edge and looked up instead of down. The gleeful expression of the Elf beamed down at him. Diggs hastily stepped back into the corridor and the Elf swung in instantly.

It held its arms outward from its side to show it had no weapons and to reveal the scabbed and necrotic flesh. His face had a pierced wound in the center of it, but you could still make out his features around it. It spoke in a language Diggs presumed to be elven but could tell the hisses from the wound weren't supposed to be a part of the message. Diggs knelt into his ready position with his short sword as his reply to the Elf's statement, he watched as puss dripped when the Elf smiled at the odds.

The Elf shrieked as Braedon emerged from behind and grabbed the Elf from behind. Diggs watched as Braedon lowered one hand, wearing the ring, and made an incision into the chest of the Elf. The hand went in empty but came out with the body of a Faery. The Elf dropped to the ground as Braedon let it go, he then knelt and gently placed the Faery on the ground.

Diggs stared at Braedon's mashed face with blood pooling down it. Braedon raised the hand with the ring and with his other hand he began to tug on it. "Braedon?"

Braedon smiled as he looked to Diggs and the ring gave some movement. "It's okay, kid." Braedon pulled the ring off and collapsed, his body fell backward through the opening.

Diggs lurched forward instinctively to grab him, but he knew he wouldn't get there. He dropped his sword and sat down, staring through the opening. The Faery climbed through the opening a moment later and walked to the ring to pick it up. It looked to Diggs and wandered to him instead. It touched his knee and Diggs looked to it, noticing a purplish hue in its skin returning.

It pointed to the Elf and then the ring; Diggs was perplexed by the two subjects but when he looked at the Faery, he understood through the Faery. That Braedon wouldn't have wanted to become what the Elf was. Diggs smiled to the Faery in appreciation for its words, he had a follow up as he realized they were communicating. "Sorry it took us so long. We didn't know."

“You know now though.” Was the sensation of the reply.

“Yeah.”

Alastar looked to the ceiling and wondered why it was so dark. The opening of the door usually meant that the servant was putting out the warmed water for his morning cleanse. He sat up on his elbows to and stared at the fog of breath he exhaled. Another strange occurrence since the shutters should have been closed.

The moonlight entered the window and illuminated the bed. He saw the Faery holding a ring at the end of his bed, watching him. A smirk crept from his confidence. “Hm, always wonder why you come, when you get it back.” His hand reached for his necklace but found it missing. His smirk ran from his unease.

“How much?” Diggs stepped into sight from beside the bed; his hand behind him, dressed in his guard wear.

“Thank the King, a guard... Wait, what?” Alastar saw another Faery holding his necklace on Diggs’ shoulder.

“How much is a stolen heart worth?” Diggs revealed Braedon’s Elven Sword.

Alastar was seeing it as a shake down. “So you know? How much do you want?”

Diggs looked to the ring Faery. “He’s not listening...”

Alastar looked perplexed as the ring Faery looked to Diggs and Diggs nodding in retort.

“Are you speaking to it?”

Diggs walked along the bed to Alastar’s side. “Yep.”

“And you can understand it?” Alastar’s perception of what was happening was changing.

“I can. Want to know what its wondering?”

Alastar's marveling of this revelation was not lost on Diggs as he nodded "yes" and said "Please."

"If you can live without your heart."

Diggs raised the sword and brought it down to the applause of wings.

-End