

Prologue – Of Ash and Dust



The rain had begun to ease, its rhythmic drumming on the tin roof softening into a muted patter. Each raindrop struck the rusting metal with a hollow resonance, like faint drumbeats in the quiet of the night, before sliding down the incline and forming neat rivulets that trickled over the edge. Below, a row of perfect little puddles stretched along the muddy ground, their surfaces rippling gently with each new droplet's arrival.

The structure was barely a roof—more a lean-to hastily attached to a stone wall, leaving one side entirely open to the street. It wasn't much, but it provided enough shelter from the rain to make it one of Klagg's favoured spots. He had stood under this particular roof countless times, its vantage point offering a clear view of the narrow street. It was rarely patrolled by other constables, a forgotten artery in the city's sprawling network of cobblestones and brick.

This neglect gave it a certain charm. In these quiet shadows, it wasn't uncommon to see the types who avoided the main thoroughfares—the kinds of people Klagg was supposed to watch. Smugglers.

Pickpockets. Occasionally someone worse. From this spot, he could observe without drawing attention to himself, a silent sentinel beneath the shelter of the tin roof.

Klagg wasn't a fan of getting wet. Most dwarfs weren't. Water in caves was different—gentle, deliberate, a trickle here and there that served a purpose. It provided a cool drink on a long shift or a place to wash the grime from a miner's beard. But this? This was far too much water, a deluge that seeped into clothes and clung to skin, cold and relentless.

He sometimes thought about home, about Blackstone, one of the proud cities of the Dwarven Dominion, with its great halls carved deep into the heart of the mountains. The memories were there, unbidden and insistent, but Klagg had made his choice. He'd left Blackstone behind for a reason and had no plans to return. Some things were best buried, like an unwanted vein of ore sealed beneath a wall of stone.

He sighed, leaning against the damp stone wall as the rain drummed on the tin roof above. His eyes followed the streaks of water running through cracks where the roof didn't quite meet the wall. It didn't bother him much—he was still dry enough, and that was what mattered. Moving closer to the edge, he tilted his head to catch a glimpse of the sky. The clouds were softening now, the darkness lifting ever so slightly. The rain had passed its worst, leaving behind kinder shades of grey. It wasn't night yet, not quite, but the day was ebbing.

Stepping back into the drier shadows of the lean-to, his gaze caught his reflection in a rain-streaked window. His uniform stood out sharply against the muted surroundings—a stiff blue coat with golden embroidery on the collar. On his shoulders, the epaulettes glistened faintly in the fading light, marking him as a sergeant of the Ellessian Guard Constabulary. He adjusted the fabric absently, ensuring everything sat just so.

Over his breast pocket, the symbol of the Constabulary was stitched in fine gold thread: a set of elegant scales, each arm bearing a word in Old Ellessian Script—Truth and Integrity. Symbols of justice. Traditions carried forward even now, long after the Constabulary had been absorbed into the broader ranks of the Ellessian Guard. Soldiers might keep the kingdom's peace, but it was the Constabulary that knew the streets, the alleys, the pulse of the city. It was men like Klagg who upheld the law, even when the scales seemed to tip more often than they balanced.

Klagg adjusted his hat with a faint grumble. A stubborn lock of dark brown hair refused to stay in place beneath the brim, and the hat—standard issue for the Constabulary—never quite fit dwarven heads the way it did human or elvish ones. With a firm push, he forced the errant strand back under the fabric and turned away from his reflection in the window.

The rain had nearly stopped now, its deafening rhythm on the tin roof giving way to occasional, sporadic taps as water spilled lazily from the edges. The quiet allowed other sensations to creep in. The rich smell of damp earth mixed with tantalizing hints of food wafting from nearby kitchens—a stew perhaps, or fresh bread. The aromas

reminded him sharply of how long it had been since his last meal. His stomach growled, a low, insistent protest.

He sighed. There was no avoiding it—he'd have to leave the comfort of the lean-to eventually. The thought was less daunting knowing he'd be meeting his partner, Corporal Relan, soon. The elf would likely be finishing his patrol through the busier streets, where his height and sharp eyes gave him a natural advantage. Relan's ability to see over the heads of a crowd had often been the subject of Klagg's good-natured ribbing—an advantage Klagg couldn't share, given that most humans and pretty much every elf easily topped him in height.

The two made an efficient team, one that had been forged back when Klagg was still a corporal himself. His promotion to sergeant a year ago hadn't changed their dynamic; they'd simply refined their approach. Relan would sweep the more crowded thoroughfares while Klagg covered the quieter, shadowed alleys and twisting gullies. It was a system that had proven its worth time and again.

More than a few criminals had learned the hard way that the two constables were in sync. The sight of Relan, his stern figure cutting through the crowd, often sent the more skittish lawbreakers scampering into side streets, seeking escape in the city's labyrinthine back alleys. That was where Klagg would be waiting, his broad silhouette a sudden and unwelcome surprise. Many a crook had convinced themselves they'd evaded justice, only to find themselves pinned between Relan's sharp gaze and Klagg's unyielding presence.

It was teamwork at its finest, and though Klagg would never admit it aloud, he'd come to appreciate Relan's company. The elf's sharp wit and unshakable confidence were a steady counterbalance to Klagg's

more methodical approach, and together they had earned the grudging respect of the streets they patrolled.

The rain had softened to a gentle drizzle, a fine mist that curled and danced in the breeze, clinging to his skin and settling on his uniform. It was time to move. Klagg had lingered long enough under the shelter of the tin roof, convincing himself he was watching for suspicious characters when, in truth, he'd simply been avoiding the weather. But duty called, and with an hour left on his shift, he wasn't about to risk a reprimand from the higher-ups.

Stepping out from under the roof, he felt the drizzle immediately seep into the air around him, cool and faintly irritating. His boots splashed through shallow puddles as he began his familiar trudge down the cobblestoned street. The buildings around him loomed tall and close, their faces a patchwork of old and new. Most had started as sturdy stone homes, simple and unassuming, but the city's growing population had demanded expansion. Some had added upper stories of stone, seamlessly blending with the original structures, while others bore uneven wooden extensions that jutted out awkwardly, their crude construction betraying the hurried growth of the district.

Many of the roofs remained thatched, a fading remnant of older times, though the shift toward clay tiles was evident. The tiles gleamed slickly in the faint light of the drizzle, their brighter hues standing in contrast to the weathered brickwork and mortar. The street itself bore the wear of countless footsteps, cartwheels, and hooves, its cobblestones uneven and darkened with years of grime.

Klagg's pace was unhurried as he made his way toward the end of the street, where it met the broader thoroughfare. He could already see the

movement of horse-drawn carriages passing through the mouth of the alleyway, their wheels clattering over the stones. A smile tugged at his lips as a memory surfaced—a moment from years ago when he'd stopped and searched a merchant's wagon at this very spot.

The merchant had been a tall, older man, his white hair tucked beneath a straw hat secured by a strap under his chin. His impressive mustaches hung well below his lips, giving him a distinctive Bjornish air.

“A good merchant ain't gonna let no rain stop his trade, good constable,” the man had said with a twinkle in his eye, securing the waterproof cover over his wares as Klagg completed his inspection. “I once knew a fellow who took the coast road to Darnik during the season of storms. Right in the middle of the largest storm ever recorded, too.” The merchant's hands worked deftly, tying a strap to the side of his wagon to stop the cover from flapping in the wind. “Lost his wagon and two of his horses, but still managed to turn a profit by selling bottles of rainwater to fledgling alchemists. Damn whoreson was a dab hand at cards, too, lemme tell ya.”

That had been five, maybe six years ago. Klagg's grin widened as he recalled it, a small, cherished memory of a simpler time. It had been the first wagon search he'd ever led as a constable, and the experience had been more fortunate than most. The boots he wore now had come from that very merchant—a well-crafted pair that had served him faithfully through countless patrols. He'd taken care of them over the years, replacing the soles when they wore thin and treating the leather with water-repellent oils to keep the warmth in and the rain out.

As he trudged onward, the rhythmic tapping of his boots on the cobblestones mixed with the distant sounds of the city—carriage wheels, muffled voices, and the faint clang of metal from a smithy. The memory of the merchant lingered, a quiet reminder that even in the routine of duty, small moments could bring unexpected treasures.

The steady trickle of water spilling from rooftops faded beneath the growing symphony of the city. The rattle of cartwheels and the sharp clapping of hooves on cobblestones rose in volume, accompanied by the hum of voices—a steady murmur of traders haggling, passersby conversing, and children laughing in the distance. The city was alive, a constant rhythm of movement and sound.

The Outer Circle stretched before Klagg, a wide thoroughfare that looped around the Old Town like a protective ring. Beyond it lay the Inner Circle, a maze of streets spiralling inward toward the city's heart—a tall hill crowned by the castle of Ellessar, its imposing spires visible from nearly every corner of the city. Surrounding everything was a towering wall, fifty feet high, with sturdy watchtowers standing sentinel every mile. Together, these layers formed a fortress of civilization, a testament to the kingdom's enduring strength.

Ellessar was the largest city in the known world, eclipsing even the famed dwarven city of Greyhill, whose sprawling underground streets extended for miles. Though some claimed Ellessar was larger than Zvenya, the elven capital, few would dare argue it was more beautiful. Zvenya, with its crystalline towers and ethereal glow, was a masterpiece of elven artistry, while Ellessar was a city of pragmatism—a patchwork of cultures, trades, and histories stitched together over centuries.

Stepping into the Outer Circle, Klagg leaned casually against a stone wall, letting his gaze sweep over the bustling street. This was a city of diversity, far removed from the insular elegance of Zvenya. Here, humans, dwarves, and elves moved together, their distinct features and styles blending into a lively mosaic.

He preferred it this way, this unassuming anonymity amidst the crowd. Most of the city's inhabitants paid him little mind, going about their business with only the briefest of glances in his direction. Klagg appreciated the lack of attention—he hated the way people changed the moment they noticed a Constable. It was as if they all harboured secrets, their shoulders tightening, their movements growing deliberate, almost cautious.

It was absurd, really. Did they think he could read minds? Everyone knew that such abilities were a rarity, a skill reserved for only the most gifted and dangerous mages. Certainly not a dwarf. His people were famed for their skill with hammer and forge, for their craftsmanship and ingenuity, not for dabbling in the mystic arts. Dwarves, he thought wryly, were more likely to enchant a blade than delve into the minds of its wielder.

The thought amused him as he watched the flow of humanity pass by. Merchants hauled carts laden with goods, their wares covered in damp cloths to shield them from the lingering drizzle. A pair of dwarven blacksmiths marched by, their beards braided neatly, their hands stained with soot even at this early hour. Across the street, a group of elven scholars walked in quiet conversation, their pale faces framed by hoods against the rain.

Klagg leaned a little deeper into the wall, letting the sounds and sights of Ellessar wash over him. Here, at least, he could blend into the city's rhythm, a silent observer of its ceaseless motion.

As Klagg let his eyes drift over the crowd, a familiar figure caught his attention. A tall elf, unmistakable even in the throng, wove his way down the street. Relan, wearing the same uniform as Klagg but tailored for his lankier frame, looked utterly drenched. His soaked coat clung to his slim figure, water dripping from its hem with every step. Long strands of blond hair were plastered to his face, yet despite his bedraggled state, Relan wore a grin of pure confidence. He looked, Klagg thought with a wry smile, like a drowned rat who had decided to own it.

Their eyes met across the street. Relan raised a hand in greeting before sidestepping a merchant's wagon, narrowly avoiding the muddy spray of the wheels as the driver shouted indignantly. Relan gave an exaggerated bow of apology before continuing toward Klagg, his grin never faltering.

“Sergeant Short!” Relan called, snapping a mock salute so theatrical it bordered on farcical. He bowed deeply, his soaking wet hair flinging droplets of water. “Seen any of the usual old rascals yet?”

Klagg crossed his arms, a smirk tugging at his lips. “Not yet,” he replied, nodding toward the alley he'd emerged from. “Just investigating a noise back there.”

Relan straightened, placing a hand over his heart with mock solemnity. “You can trust me, Sergeant. I won't tell a soul about your

special hiding spot. Of course, if every constable started using that lean-to every time it rained, we'd never get anything done."

"Crime would run rampant," Relan added, his voice adopting a faux-serious tone, "and society as we know it would crumble."

"You're being a little dramatic, Relan," Klagg said, rolling his eyes, though the corner of his mouth twitched in amusement.

"Nah," Relan shot back, shaking his head with conviction. "I am but a humble scholar. Mark my words, society would crumble. It would be like a crumbling cake... because it would be *scone*."

Relan's grin widened as he delivered the punchline, clearly pleased with himself. He waited, watching Klagg expectantly.

Klagg sighed heavily and turned to walk away. "I'm not dignifying that with a response," he muttered, though the faintest grin betrayed him.

"Oh, come on!" Relan exclaimed in mock exasperation, quickening his pace to catch up. "Get it? *Scone!* Like the word *gone!*"

"It's pronounced *scone*, as in *stone*," Klagg corrected, though the grin he was trying to suppress finally broke free. He shook his head, muttering, "Damn fool elf."

Relan laughed triumphantly, falling into step beside him. "There's that smile! See, I knew you appreciated my razor-sharp wit."

“Razor-sharp, is it? More like blunted steel,” Klagg said dryly, though his tone carried no malice. If anything, Relan’s relentless cheer had a way of cutting through the rain and the weight of the day, making it easier to press on.

Together, they walked, Relan’s voice a steady stream of playful chatter, and Klagg found himself grateful, as always, for the elf’s company. Relan always had a knack for lightening Klagg’s mood. It was one of the things Klagg appreciated most about his partner. Raised in a human household, Relan was nothing like the elves Klagg had encountered before—stoic, reserved, and far too serious for their own good. Relan had an easy laugh, a sharp wit, and a knack for making even the dourest dwarf crack a smile. In polite elvish society, such open displays of humour were considered improper, almost scandalous. Elves were a peculiar people, Klagg thought, always so concerned with appearances. Relan, thankfully, was an exception.

As they walked down the thoroughfare, Relan’s soaked boots left faint wet prints on the worn cobblestones, and water dripped steadily from his sodden coat. Despite his usual humour, he seemed thoughtful, his gaze flitting between the passersby.

“So, what do you make of the night, Sarge?” Relan asked finally, his voice casual but probing.

Klagg sniffed, pulling a neatly folded handkerchief from his pocket to wipe his nose. “I’m not sure,” he admitted. “Nothing obviously out of place, but something feels... off.” He folded the handkerchief back and tucked it away. “Has there been any development on the case of that missing Rathmore girl? Did the Captain mention anything before you left the station?”

Relan's grin faltered, replaced by a sombre expression. He hesitated, his eyes darkening slightly. "No," he said at last, his voice tinged with sadness. "Barnes hasn't said anything. It's been almost a year now. Her parents are sick with worry, and... well, the worst thing is, the main theory hasn't changed."

"Slavers," Klagg muttered, his jaw tightening.

Relan nodded grimly. "Yeah. Children are easier to train as slaves, aren't they? They don't fight back as much, and it's easier to... break them." His voice cracked slightly on the last words, and he cleared his throat quickly, trying to mask it.

Klagg felt a weight settle in his chest. The idea of slavers operating in Ellessar, preying on families, was bad enough. The thought of a child being torn from her home and sold like property was the kind of cruelty he couldn't stomach. He glanced at Relan, whose usual cheer had been replaced by quiet intensity. The elf had a daughter of his own, Kyna, and Klagg knew this case hit far too close to home. Relan's light-hearted demeanour might fool most people, but Klagg could see the fire burning beneath it—the determination to find the girl, no matter what it took.

Klagg sighed heavily, the weight of the conversation settling over him like the rain-soaked air. He knew better than most how much this topic stirred something deep within Relan. The elf, so jovial and lighthearted in almost every situation, transformed when crimes against children came into play. It was a quiet intensity, one that simmered just beneath the surface, visible only to those who truly

knew him. And for those who saw it, it was unsettling—Relan’s usual restraint replaced by a raw determination that bordered on dangerous.

Klagg chose his next words carefully, not wanting to stoke that fire further. “I can’t see it being slavers, lad,” he said.

Relan’s sharp gaze turned toward him, studying his face. “You think?”

“No,” Klagg replied, shaking his head. “I think there’s something more to it than that. Remember her parents? Both magic users, and not just any magic users. Her mother was high up in the Council of Mages, and her father was a Battlemage. There aren’t many in the world who can even touch magic, let alone wield it like they could. My theory? Someone wants the girl for what she *might* become. If she inherits even a fraction of their power...” He paused, his voice lowering. “Imagine it, Relan. A personal assassin with the strength of a god.”

Relan raised an eyebrow, his expression sceptical. “Sounds far-fetched to me, Sarge,” he said, gesturing for them to keep moving. “I think some sick bastards put in an order for a child, and their order got filled.”

Klagg felt a heavy knot settle in his stomach. He’d worked cases like that before—cases that lingered in his mind long after the arrests were made. He could still see the hollow faces; hear the quiet sobs of parents whose children never came home. The memories were wounds that never quite healed. Steering the conversation away from the bleak subject, he adjusted his belt and said, “It could be. Either way, we’ll find her. We’ve got extra patrols, every wagon is being searched, and

those scum that deal in lives? We've got eyes on them. Slavery is a thing of the past in the Kingdom of Ellessar.”

Relan's steps slowed, his face growing sombre. “It's only been forty years since King Nimagard abolished slavery, Sarge. There are still people alive today who bear its scars—on their bodies and in their minds.”

Klagg nodded, the truth of those words sinking in. He'd seen it firsthand during his years with the Constabulary. The ex-slaves he'd met were haunted people, their eyes hollow and distant. They flinched at raised hands, even ones meant to wave in greeting, and they often moved through the city as if lost, unable to believe they were truly free.

Many didn't know how to rebuild their lives. Some, unable to bear the weight of their memories, had ended their pain by throwing themselves from the cliffs a few miles outside the city. Others became part of the invisible masses of Ellessar's homeless, surviving in shadows and back alleys.

The luckier ones found work as paid servants in the homes of the wealthy. It wasn't much—small wages and smaller quarters—but it was enough to give them safety and the smallest semblance of a life. Even so, Klagg had seen the resignation in their eyes, the way they clung to their meagre comforts as though they were fragile treasures.

The thought settled heavily on him, and he glanced at Relan. “You're right,” he said quietly. “We're not so far removed from it all, are we?”

Relan gave a faint nod but didn't reply, his gaze fixed ahead. The streets stretched before them, bustling with life, but the shadow of the past hung over them both, unspoken yet undeniably present.

Klagg sighed, his breath a heavy cloud in the cool night air. "You're right, of course. We still have our issues. The humans, anyway." He paused, running a hand through his damp hair. "And I guess we dwarves aren't perfect either. That's why I left the Dominion." He managed a faint smile as he glanced at Relan. "But at least we're not as tall as you are. I bet we spend a fortune less on clothing. You must need twice as much material, being all long-limbed and elfy."

"True," Relan conceded with an exaggerated nod, his sharp grin already hinting at mischief. "But it evens out because you dwarves are so *wide!*" He threw his arms out dramatically, mimicking the curve of a large belly, and began waddling down the street like a caricature of a stout dwarf. His laughter rang out, unbothered by the curious glances of passersby.

They passed a child playing in the dirt near the edge of the road, her clothes dusty and patched. She looked up, caught sight of Relan's antics, and broke into a fit of giggles. Encouraged, the elf leaned into the performance, swaying more dramatically and nodding toward Klagg with mock solemnity. The child doubled over in laughter; her mirth infectious.

"We're not all fat!" Klagg barked, his tone laced with mock indignation. He puffed out his chest and pointed at the child. "Some of us are pure muscle!"

The child only laughed harder, and Klagg turned his glare on Relan. “That’s racism, I tell you!”

“Relax, Sarge!” Relan said between chuckles, raising his hands in surrender. “I’m joking, I’m joking!”

Still laughing, Relan slowed his pace, allowing Klagg to catch up. The mirth lingered in the elf’s eyes, but the laughter faded as they resumed their patrol. The playful exchange, brief as it was, had cut through the heaviness that had been weighing on them all night.

Klagg’s expression softened, and his voice lowered as they walked side by side. “We’ll find the Rathmore girl, lad,” he said firmly. “If anyone can find her, it’s us. We’ll bring her back to her family. Then we’ll go home to ours.”

The pair continued down the main road. Shadows stretched longer with each passing minute, and the bustling city began to shift its rhythm, the hum of evening trade giving way to the livelier clamour of the night. Lanterns flickered to life along the road, their warm glow illuminating the cobblestones in patches of light.

Eventually, they came to a small junction where five roads converged. From here, a traveller could continue along the Outer Circle, the city’s perimeter road, which offered a two-hour walk around Ellessar’s outer districts. Another path led out of the city entirely, snaking toward the Eastern Gate, its route lined with warehouses and the occasional guard outpost. The remaining roads turned inward: one leading toward the heart of the city and the towering spires of the Inner Circle, the other descending into a less desirable quarter known as the Middens.

The Middens had a reputation—none of it good. It was the beating heart of Ellessar’s seedier side, a tangle of narrow streets crowded with shabby taverns, ramshackle alehouses, and the occasional gambling den. For Klagg, it was familiar territory. Too familiar.

The two stopped at the junction, watching as people moved purposefully through the streets. Some headed home, their arms laden with goods from the market, while others made their way toward the dimly lit establishments that promised warmth and liquor. It would only be a couple of hours, Klagg knew, before the usual drunkards began stumbling their way into trouble, earning themselves a night in the holding cells.

Klagg had the advantage, as a sergeant, of choosing his own patrol route, and he rarely picked the Middens unless it was absolutely necessary. He had spent more than enough time there in his earlier years, making more arrests in that area than anywhere else in the city. Those experiences had left a mark—not the proud kind, either.

He could recall countless nights spent dodging bottles hurled by unruly patrons or weathering a drunken tirade from someone who had lost their coin purse to the wrong hand. He’d been spat on, shouted at, and on one memorable occasion, drenched with an entire tankard of ale by a furious barkeep. The *pièce de résistance*, however, was the time a drunken elf had vomited on his boots. It had taken days to get the stench out of the leather.

Klagg glanced toward the road leading into the Middens and felt the familiar knot of unease in his stomach. The place had its dangers, but more than that, it had a way of wearing down even the most seasoned

constable. If tonight's route took them through those grimy streets, he was certain of one thing: it wouldn't be a pleasant shift.

He glanced at Relan, who was watching the crowd with his usual relaxed demeanour, hands resting lightly on his hips. "Feeling adventurous tonight?" Klagg asked dryly, nodding toward the Middens.

Relan's grin widened. "Only if you're ready to dodge another tankard of ale. Or would you prefer to wait for the vomit?"

Klagg groaned, shaking his head. "Don't remind me."

"Wanna go to the Middens?" Relan asked with a mischievous grin. "I hear Old Ghinza's still hanging around. You know, that dwarf who swears blind that the city walls were built by a race of talking moles with magical chisels?"

Klagg groaned, rolling his eyes. "I'd rather boil my head in a cauldron of scalding hot stew than go patrolling in the Middens! I thought tha—"

The street shook violently beneath their feet as a deafening explosion tore through the night. A massive fireball erupted into the sky, lighting up the junction in an instant. The sound was followed by the unmistakable chorus of panic—screams rang out, and people scrambled desperately for cover.

Relan turned to Klagg; his grin replaced by sharp focus. "Looks like we don't have much of a choice now, Sarge!" he shouted before taking off at a sprint toward the chaos.

Klagg didn't hesitate, his instincts kicking in as he followed his partner, his boots pounding the cobblestones as the acrid smell of smoke reached his nose. They jogged down the street, weaving through the panicked crowd surging in the opposite direction.

Klagg's heavy boots hammered against the cobblestones, his breath coming in laboured bursts as he struggled to keep up with Relan. The elf's longer legs and natural agility carried him ahead with ease, his figure disappearing into the smoke and chaos. The acrid smell of burning wood filled Klagg's nostrils, and the oppressive heat seemed to rise with every step.

The further they ran, the harder it became to breathe. Smoke swirled in thick clouds, curling around the street corners like a living thing. Each gulp of air stung, but Klagg pushed forward, his mind racing. *What in the Nine Halls could have caused such an explosion?* The thought gnawed at him as he rounded a corner, the flickering orange light ahead confirming his worst fears.

And there it was.

A building stood engulfed in flames, its stone foundation holding steady while the wooden upper floors burned like a funeral pyre. The fire consumed everything with a savage intensity, sending embers spiralling into the sky. On either side, neighbouring structures had also caught, their timber frames feeding the blaze as it spread hungrily across rooftops. The scene was chaos incarnate, bathed in the relentless glow of destruction.

Relan had already leapt into action. The elf stood at the centre of the street, issuing commands with the precision of someone who'd done this before. He directed nearby citizens to fetch water carts, his voice cutting through the roar of the inferno as he sent runners in all directions. A pair of constables in their bright blue uniforms flanked him, listening intently before hurrying off to assist with crowd control. Klagg watched the scene for a moment, a swell of pride pushing through his mounting dread.

Relan was capable—more than capable. For all his jokes and lighthearted banter, when it came down to it, he was a leader. Klagg had seen that quality early on and had made Relan his first recommendation for promotion when he became a sergeant. Watching him now, commanding both civilians and constables alike, there was no doubt the elf had earned his rank.

Klagg's attention shifted as he caught sight of a commotion near the edge of the crowd. A woman was screaming, her voice shrill and desperate, as two dwarves struggled to hold her back. Her dress was tattered, its once-elegant fabric now blackened with soot. Her hair hung in wild disarray, and her face was streaked with tears as she fought against her would-be rescuers, clawing at their hands to break free.

Klagg didn't need to ask what she was screaming about. A woman fighting that hard to plunge into a burning building could only mean one thing.

Children.

The thought hit him like a hammer blow, stealing the breath he'd been fighting so hard to catch. His fists clenched, and his jaw tightened as he surveyed the inferno.

Not today, he thought grimly, his feet already moving toward the blaze. *Not now*.

The roar of the flames grew louder as he approached, the searing heat licking at his face and arms even from a distance. Somewhere inside, he knew, there were lives still clinging to the faintest thread of hope. And if no one else would act, he would.

Klagg moved with grim determination, his mind racing as the heat of the flames pressed against him. He knew Relan well enough to anticipate what would come next. Even in chaos like this, a good partner always kept an eye on you—watching your back was second nature. Sure enough, a few moments later, Relan's head jerked up, scanning the scene until their eyes met through the haze of smoke and flickering light.

Klagg didn't hesitate. He pointed sharply toward the building, then to the screaming woman still struggling against the dwarves trying to restrain her. Relan's gaze followed the gesture, his expression darkening as realization dawned. When his eyes snapped back to Klagg, they were wide with alarm.

Relan shook his head frantically, mouthing the word: *"NO!"*

Klagg set his jaw and gave a single, deliberate nod in response. This was something he was going to do, no matter the risks. Damn the fire, damn the danger, and damn anyone who tried to stop him. There were

children inside—there *had* to be—and no amount of unease curling in his gut was going to change that.

How had this fire spread so fast? The question gnawed at him as he made his way toward the blaze, shielding his face with his gloved hand. This was no ordinary accident—fires this ferocious didn't just happen, especially not here, far from the city's tar and pitch stores. Someone, or something, had caused this.

The front of the building was an inferno, the doorway completely consumed by flames that danced and hissed like living creatures. There would be no way in from there. Klagg turned his head, scanning for another option, his eyes settling on the back of the building. The rear doors might offer a chance—slim, but better than nothing.

He turned back to Relan, who hadn't moved from his spot, his face painted with worry and frustration. Even through the chaos—the screams, the shouts, and the cracking of timber—Relan's expression spoke volumes.

Klagg, you're an idiot.

Klagg gestured sharply toward the back of the building, signalling his plan. Relan's shoulders slumped in defeat, and even from a distance, Klagg could see him let out a resigned sigh. They both knew how this would play out. As capable as Relan was, he also knew that once Klagg had made up his mind, there was no stopping him.

The flames roared louder, the heat nearly unbearable as Klagg pressed forward. *An idiot, maybe*, he thought, bracing himself for what came next. *But not one who would let children burn.*

Klagg reached into his pocket, his fingers brushing against the familiar coolness of the ring. It was an odd thing, made of silver and inlaid with a curious band of metal he had never been able to identify. He'd found it years ago, as a young dwarf wandering the streets of Jinstone in the Dwarven Dominion. It had been lying in a gutter, dull and tarnished, yet something about it had compelled him to pick it up. Since then, it had become something of a talisman, worn in moments when he needed an edge—or a bit of luck.

He turned the ring over in his hand as he moved around the building, studying the flickering flames that consumed its wooden frame. Walking into a burning building, he decided, was precisely the kind of situation that called for a little extra luck. He slipped the ring onto his finger, feeling the faint surge of confidence it always seemed to bring. The thought almost made him smile. *About to do something stupid*, he thought, *but I might as well feel good about it.*

The back of the building was more stone than wood, and that gave him some hope. Stone didn't burn, though it absorbed heat quickly, which could pose its own risks. Klagg glanced at his sturdy boots, reassuring himself that they'd handle the worst of it. Still, if the fire spread too far or the heat pushed the stone to its limit, the structure could collapse. He pushed the thought aside. If he was lucky—and he would be—he'd be out before then.

His mind turned to the problem of entry. Searching the place wouldn't be easy—not with the fire already raging—but it wasn't impossible. The heavy wooden door before him was likely his best option, though the searing heat radiating from it was a bad sign. He reached for the doorknob, then instinctively yanked his hand back before touching it.

The metal gleamed dangerously, heat rippling off its surface like a warning.

His eyes scanned the area for alternatives, landing on a rusted gutter that ran from the roof into a barrel just a few feet away. If he was lucky—and today, he needed every bit of it—there'd be water in that barrel. He strode toward it, yanking the makeshift lid off and peering inside. The water wasn't much, but it was enough. It might not save him, but it could buy him time—and sometimes, a little time was all that mattered.

He dunked his cloak into the barrel, swirling it to absorb as much water as it could hold. It wouldn't stop the flames, but it might shield him long enough to do what needed to be done. As he wrung the edges of the dripping fabric, his thoughts narrowed to a single point: *Get in, find anyone inside, and get out alive.*

It might not be much, Klagg thought grimly, but the soaked cloak could be enough to shield a child or two if he needed to carry them out. He hoped, fervently, that there wouldn't be any children to save—that the woman outside had been mistaken, that her panic was unfounded. But he'd seen that kind of desperate fight in someone before, and it rarely came without reason.

Klagg wasn't a religious man, not in the strict sense. Still, as he stood there, staring at the blazing building, he closed his eyes for a moment and muttered a silent prayer. To who or what, he didn't know. It wasn't about faith; it was about feeling like he'd done everything he could, like the weight of the moment wasn't entirely his to bear.

He moved back to the door, tentatively reaching out to feel the doorknob. The brass radiated heat, but not so much that he couldn't grasp it. Wrapping the edge of his wet cloak around his hand, he turned the knob and pushed the door open. A rush of hot air whooshed past him, making him stumble slightly. Of course—the fire was devouring the oxygen inside, and by opening the door, he'd only fed it. He took one last, deep breath of relatively clean air before stepping through and pulling the door shut behind him.

The heat hit him like a wave, and the air was thick with smoke and the acrid scent of burning materials. It felt as if he'd stepped into another world, one ruled entirely by fire. The corridor he found himself in was narrow, with walls of stone that absorbed the heat but didn't burn. The ceiling, however, was wooden, and flames were already licking their way across its surface, leaving blackened trails behind.

Klagg moved quickly, pushing through another door into what must have once been a grand lobby. The remnants of its former elegance were still visible beneath the destruction—the intricate moulding on the walls, the wainscoting now charred and curling from the heat. It was clear the building had undergone renovations; makeshift walls divided the space into smaller rooms, but now those walls were little more than tinder.

Wooden beams sagged from the ceiling, some already ablaze, their flames throwing shadows across the room. Patches of plaster crumbled and fell, and the paint on the walls bubbled and peeled away in grotesque patterns. A large painting caught his eye, its oils melting under the heat. The once-noble features of the man depicted were now twisted and deformed, the dripping pigments giving him a monstrous, almost demonic visage.

It wasn't exactly comforting. But then, nothing about being inside a burning building was.

Klagg forced himself to focus. He had to move fast. He'd seen buildings like this before, consumed by fire in a matter of minutes. Usually, it was an accident—an unattended cookpot, a toppled candle. In those cases, the fire spread slowly, smouldering until it found fuel to ignite. But this wasn't like that. This fire hadn't crept through the building. It had exploded into existence, tearing through wood and stone with ferocity.

That left only two possibilities. Either someone had been manufacturing illegal explosives here—volatile and unstable—or magic had been involved. And if it was magic, he thought grimly, this wasn't just an accident. Someone had meant for this to happen.

Klagg moved through the smoke-filled lobby, his thoughts unbidden drifting to magic. Though he couldn't feel it, let alone draw upon it, he'd studied enough to recognize its potential presence. As a constable, he'd seen his fair share of magical mishaps, and the memory of those cases lingered in his mind.

One book in particular stood out: *The Principles of Magic* by Alemi Kachenkski. Despite the author's tendency to ramble and take circuitous detours in their explanations, the text offered a surprisingly solid foundation in magical theory. Klagg remembered one section vividly—it described how latent magical abilities often manifested explosively in young children. Such incidents were usually the first indication of a person's magical aptitude. For many, this discovery led to visits from relatives or local mages, who stepped in to teach them

control. In more severe cases, the child would be sent to Magebridge, where the Council of Wizards would perform a Union Bond, a ritual designed to ensure they could learn magic in safety.

The possibility lingered in the back of his mind as he searched the burning building. Could this fire have been the result of an uncontrolled magical outburst? He hoped not. Magic was unpredictable, a force he had little patience for. If it turned out to be illegal explosives, that would at least be a situation he could grasp—something he could address with the blunt practicality that dwarves excelled at. But magic? That was a different beast entirely.

Dwarves weren't known for their affinity with magic. It wasn't impossible, but it was rare, and Klagg had always been grateful he didn't have to deal with it personally. He'd seen enough mages lose control to know it wasn't a power he envied. He didn't worry about accidentally blowing himself up during a stressful moment, nor did he have to contend with setting himself on fire for forgetting to protect against his own spell. Klagg preferred his life grounded, his skills forged through discipline and training—not by playing with powers he couldn't fully understand.

Pushing the thoughts aside, Klagg focused on the task at hand. He moved systematically from room to room, testing each doorknob before cautiously entering. Most of the rooms were empty, their furniture reduced to smouldering rubble or entirely consumed by flames.

In one room, though, he found a frantic little figure—a cat, its fur singed and its claws scrabbling at a closed window. The creature let out a desperate wowl, its wide eyes fixed on the outside world just

beyond the glass. Klagg didn't hesitate. He smashed the window with the hilt of his sword, clearing the shards with his gloved hand before stepping back. The cat bolted without a second thought, leaping through the opening and vanishing into the smoky night.

Klagg watched it go for a moment, a small flicker of satisfaction cutting through the chaos. "No need for you to go out like this," he muttered, turning back to continue his search. The inferno roared around him, and he pushed forward. There was no time to waste.

Klagg pushed onward, ascending the staircase to the next level of the building. Each step felt heavier, his lungs burning as the smoke thickened around him. He could feel the heat intensify, radiating off the walls and making every breath a struggle. His head swam, and his vision blurred at the edges. *A few more minutes*, he thought grimly. *That's all I've got before the smoke takes me.*

At the top of the stairs, he moved toward a door at the far end of the landing. His gloved hand reached for the doorknob, but he pulled back sharply, hissing in frustration. The metal was blisteringly hot—too hot to touch. He knew enough to realise what would happen if he opened it. The influx of oxygen would fan the flames, and the resulting backdraft would suck the remaining air from the corridor, suffocating him in moments.

Klagg cursed under his breath, his options narrowing. He had to cut his losses. Turning away, he made for the stairs, his boots pounding on the scorched wood as he ran. Just as he reached the landing, he nearly collided with Relan, who appeared out of the smoke, his tall frame illuminated by the flickering glow of the flames.

Relan was gesturing wildly, motioning for Klagg to follow him back down. The roar of the fire was deafening now, and Klagg could barely make out the elf's voice over the chaos. He thought he caught the words "Firewatch" and "water carts," and a faint wave of relief flickered in his mind. At least reinforcements were on their way.

Without wasting another moment, Klagg followed Relan down the stairs. The two moved quickly, dodging falling debris as the building groaned ominously above them. A thunderous crash from somewhere overhead sent a shower of embers cascading down the stairwell. Klagg's heart raced as the realization sank in: the building was moments away from collapse.

When they reached the ground floor, the air was marginally clearer, though the heat remained stifling. Klagg glanced at the walls as they passed—what little paint remained had curled and blackened, flakes of it drifting lazily on the rising thermals. The once-grand lobby was now a hellscape of charred beams and smouldering rubble.

Relan's urgency was written all over his face, and Klagg didn't need to be told twice. They had to get out. Now.

Klagg moved ahead of Relan, reaching for the door that led outside. Before his hand could close around the doorknob, the door suddenly swung open with a loud, jarring crash. For a split second, he thought the heat had weakened the hinges, causing the door to collapse under its own weight.

But then he saw it—something moving through the smoke.

It was fast. Too fast. His instincts screamed at him to react, but his body froze, his mind struggling to comprehend what he was seeing. The flickering light of the flames cast distorted shadows, making the figure appear larger, more monstrous. Whatever it was, it was coming straight at him.

Klagg tumbled backward, his breath leaving him in a painful rush as his head struck the ground with a sickening crack. Pain radiated from the back of his skull, his vision swimming in a blur of firelight and smoke. He'd been so focused on the fire, so unprepared for anything else, that the attack had come from nowhere.

Dazed, he glanced upward to see who—or what—had struck him. A figure loomed above, wreathed entirely in shifting, living shadow. At first, Klagg thought it might be a trick of the firelight, but no—the darkness clung to the figure like a second skin, obscuring any human features. All he could discern was the shape of a man, silhouetted in blackness that seemed to devour the light around it.

The figure raised a hand, and Klagg's breath caught. The shadows writhed and stretched, coalescing into tendrils that snaked down the man's outstretched arm. They slithered toward him, their movements deliberate and menacing, like a predator toying with its prey.

Klagg froze, his body paralyzed by a mix of fear and pain. The blackness crept closer, curling and undulating like deadly serpents. His head throbbed, his vision blurred further, and for the first time in years, Klagg felt utterly helpless.

A gust of wind and a flash of movement broke through his panic. Relan vaulted over him, his Zvenyan Scimitar gleaming as he brought

it down in a powerful, two-handed swing. The shadowed man jerked back, his tendrils retreating as he narrowly avoided the blade's edge. Relan pressed forward, his strikes precise and unrelenting, forcing the figure to retreat through the doorway.

Klagg shook his head, trying to clear the fog. He couldn't let Relan face this thing alone—not in the middle of a burning building. Gritting his teeth, he braced against the pain and began to push himself to his feet. The acrid smoke clawed at his throat, and his legs wobbled beneath him, but he forced his body to cooperate.

Get up, damn it, he told himself, steadying one hand against the wall. His head pounded with every heartbeat, but he managed to stay upright. Through the thick smoke, he caught sight of Relan just beyond the door, locked in combat with the shadowed man.

The figure moved with an unnatural speed and grace, evading each of Relan's strikes. Then Klagg noticed something he hadn't seen before—a weapon. The shadowed man now held a blade, its edges jagged and dark as if forged from the very shadows that surrounded him. Klagg's mind raced. The man hadn't been carrying anything when he'd kicked him—so where had the weapon come from?

Relan didn't seem fazed, his scimitar a blur of motion as he pressed his attack. But Klagg could see it—the shadowed man wasn't just defending. He was biding his time, waiting for an opening.

Klagg's grip on the wall tightened, his body still shaky but his resolve firm. He couldn't let Relan fight alone. Not against this. Summoning what strength he had left, he took a step forward, his eyes locked on

the shadowed figure. Whatever this thing was, it wasn't leaving the building unchallenged.

Klagg's fingers fumbled at his belt, his hands clumsy from the pounding in his skull and the acrid smoke filling the air. With a grunt of effort, he freed his sword—a weapon of sturdy dwarven make. It wasn't as elegant as the curved blades of the elves or as intricate as the enchanted steel some humans carried, but it was reliable, forged with purpose and meant for the rough, unrelenting realities of combat. Coughing violently, he took a few tentative steps forward, his balance wavering as the heat and smoke conspired to throw him off-kilter. He didn't feel steady, but he gripped the hilt tightly. He could still fight.

Ahead of him, the shadowed man was locked in a deadly dance with Relan. Their blades clashed with an almost musical precision, flashes of steel slicing through the haze. Every strike Relan made was met with a perfectly timed parry, the two moving like duellists in a grim ballet. The smoke parted with each swing of their swords, the firelight illuminating the strange, rippling shadows that clung to their opponent.

Klagg could see it clearly now—this wasn't just some rogue fighter. Whoever the shadowed man was, he was skilled, trained. Dangerous. Each movement spoke of discipline, of someone who knew how to kill and wasn't afraid to do it. But why was he here? Could he be the one responsible for the explosion that had set the building ablaze? The pieces didn't quite fit, but there would be time to figure that out later—once they had him subdued.

Whatever illusion the man was using to mask himself was working flawlessly. Klagg could see no details, no breaks in the swirling

darkness that surrounded him. It was as if the shadows themselves were alive, guarding their master's identity as fiercely as he wielded his blade.

Klagg narrowed his eyes, watching the fight carefully, and chose his moment. With a burst of effort, he barrelled into the room, his boots hitting the charred floorboards with a thunderous crash. Timing it perfectly, he brought his sword up to intercept a blow meant for Relan. Their blades met with a resounding clang, and the shadowed man recoiled, stepping back into a crouch.

Klagg took his place beside Relan, his chest heaving as he steadied himself. The shadowed man froze, his body low and coiled like a predator ready to strike. He held his blade high, angled above his head in a position that spoke of readiness and precision. For the first time, Klagg noticed the faint sound of the man's breathing, heavy and laboured. At least he was alive—and mortal.

Relan, panting heavily, levelled his scimitar toward the crouched figure. "By the power vested in me by King Nimagard and the Ellessian Guard Constabulary," he declared, his voice firm despite his exhaustion, "you're under arrest."

For a moment, the room was still save for the roaring flames and the groaning timbers above. Then came a crash from somewhere overhead, and the entire building shuddered violently, sending a cascade of embers and debris raining down around them. The walls trembled as the fire consumed them, the structure nearing its breaking point. They were running out of time.

The shadowed man remained crouched, motionless, but his presence filled the space like a coiled spring. Finally, he spoke, his voice cutting through the chaos like a blade.

“Under arrest?” he said, the words dripping with disdain. His accent was hard to place, with the lilting cadence of Skerran speech but an edge that suggested Bjornish influence. His voice trembled slightly, not with fear but with tightly controlled rage. “I don’t have time to be arrested. I have work to do. You see, we don’t take kindly to betrayal.”

The last word hung in the air, sharp and deliberate. Klagg felt a chill run through him, colder even than the fire was hot. Whoever this man was, he wasn’t just another criminal or thug. There was something calculated about him, something that hinted at a much larger game being played. And they had just stepped into the middle of it.

Relan stepped forward, his scimitar steady and levelled at the shadowed man. “Drop the illusion,” he demanded, his voice calm but unyielding. “And we’ll talk.”

The shadowed man tilted his head slightly, his dark form flickering in the firelight. For a moment, Klagg thought he might refuse, but then, to his surprise, the shadowed figure let the sword fall from his hand. It clattered against the floor, the sound sharp and jarring against the roar of the flames.

Klagg exhaled a breath he hadn’t realised he was holding, relief washing over him. Across from him, Relan’s shoulders relaxed ever so slightly, his own tension easing as he lowered his scimitar.

And then it happened.

Time seemed to slow as the shadowed man's hand flicked upward. The empty hand now held a crossbow, its darkened form appearing as if summoned from the void itself. The weapon was already loaded, the bolt gleaming cruelly in the firelight. Klagg's eyes widened in horror as the shadowed finger tightened on the trigger.

"RELAN!" Klagg's scream tore from his throat, but his body refused to move. He was rooted in place, frozen by a terror he couldn't shake. He could only watch as the bolt flew through the air, slicing through the haze of smoke before burying itself in Relan's stomach with a sickening thud.

Relan staggered backward, a look of shock and pain crossing his face as he clutched at the bolt protruding from his abdomen. Before he could even begin to recover, the shadowed man raised his other hand. Tendrils of purple energy crackled and surged, coalescing into a jagged bolt of lightning that leapt from his palm. It struck Relan square in the chest, the force of it throwing the elf to the ground.

Relan's body hit the floor hard, folding into a position that no living being should ever settle into. He lay there motionless, the light in his eyes dimming as the fire roared around them.

"You bastard!" Klagg roared, his voice raw with a mix of fury and anguish. The room swayed around him, his fear and rage intertwining into a volatile storm in his chest. "I'll kill you! You hear me?"

But even as he yelled, he realised he was unarmed. His hand flailed for his sword, only to find empty air. His eyes darted downward, and

there it was—on the ground, just out of reach. When had he dropped it? He couldn't remember, but the question gnawed at him as his enemy stepped forward.

The shadowed man's laugh was short and bitter, devoid of any humour. "That's exactly what Gammett said," he drawled, his voice dripping with venom. "Right before he got his little whore to blow up this building."

Klagg instinctively stepped back, the sheer calmness in the man's tone more chilling than the fire raging around them. The shadowed man took a deliberate step forward, the shadows surrounding him rippling like water.

"The explosion killed my associates," he continued, his voice flat, almost conversational. "It was an inconvenience. Those men have been in my employ for a year now. I actually liked them." He shrugged, as if their deaths were little more than a footnote in his story. "Still, they knew the risks."

The man's composure was horrifying. How could someone talk about murder—about death—with such detached indifference? Klagg's breath came in short, ragged bursts as the room seemed to close in around him. He wanted to move, to act, but his body wouldn't listen. All he could do was stare at the monster before him, his mind racing with fear, anger, and an overwhelming sense of helplessness.

Another thunderous crash jolted Klagg back to reality, the sound accompanied by a shower of sparks and falling debris. The building was coming down, and fast. He had to move, had to act, but more than

anything, he had to get Relan out. If the Battlemages arrived in time, they could use their Restorative Magic—they could still save him.

But for now, he had to stall. His dry throat scratched out the words, “Why do this?”

The shadowed man tilted his head, his gaze drifting lazily to the elf at his feet. He nudged Relan’s limp form with his boot, an act so casual that it made Klagg’s blood boil. “Because I am doing what must be done to save the world,” the man replied, his tone almost bored.

Klagg’s fists clenched at the sight, rage bubbling up and threatening to drown out the pain and fear coursing through him. “Keep away from him!” he barked, though the effort left him coughing, his lungs protesting against the smoke.

The shadowed man chuckled, a sound as cold and empty as the void surrounding him. “Very well, Dwarf,” he said, raising a hand in Klagg’s direction. His voice took on a mocking edge as he added, “This isn’t personal, I assure you.” He paused deliberately, letting the moment stretch before sneering. “Actually, it is. I hate constables. And I especially hate dwarves.”

Klagg’s heart sank as he saw the man’s hand glow with a sickly purple light. The crackling energy coalesced into a jagged bolt of lightning, its edges rippling unnaturally. The shadows around the man seemed to writhe in anticipation as the bolt streaked toward Klagg.

But before it could connect, a loud popping sound rang out, followed by a pained scream. The bolt veered off course, smashing into the wall behind Klagg and sending a shower of sparks cascading over him.

The shadowed man staggered, clutching at his face with a strangled moan. For a brief moment, the swirling darkness surrounding him faltered, peeling away like smoke in the wind. Klagg's eyes widened as he caught a fleeting glimpse of the figure beneath the shadows—a pale, gaunt face with sunken, dark eyes and an unkempt beard. Blood streaked across his cheek, where something had struck him with enough force to break through his illusion magic.

Klagg blinked, his mind racing to make sense of the scene. His gaze darted to Relan, whose outstretched arm pointed weakly toward the wall. Klagg followed the direction of his hand and spotted small chunks missing from the stone—a fragment of debris must have ricocheted, striking their opponent in the face.

Relan had saved him.

And here he was, standing like a damned fool while his friend lay bleeding on the floor. Klagg could almost hear Relan's voice in his head, the teasing lilt cutting through the chaos: *That's your window, Hammer. Get him!*

The fire roared around them, the building groaning ominously. The fear that had paralyzed him moments ago burned away, replaced by a fierce determination. This was his chance—and he wasn't going to waste it.

Klagg snapped back to his senses as if waking from a nightmare. The sound of the flames roaring around him, the crackling of splintering wood, and the sharp sting of smoke in his throat brought him fully into the moment. His eyes locked onto his sword lying on the scorched

floor, and with a guttural growl, he dove for it. His fingers curled tightly around the hilt, the familiar weight grounding him in the chaos.

He surged to his feet, ignoring the throbbing pain in his chest and the haze clouding his mind. His gaze snapped to the shadowed man, who was clutching his bloodied face with one hand while the other began to rise. Purple energy crackled and swirled around his fingertips, jagged arcs of light forming in the air like malevolent snakes. Without the illusion to mask him completely, the man's unkempt nails and dirt-streaked skin were laid bare, the stark reality of his presence almost more disturbing than the shadows.

Klagg didn't hesitate. He charged forward, roaring as he swung his blade with all the force he could muster. The firelight gleamed off the dwarven steel, his strike aimed with precision. But the shadowed man was faster. With a sharp motion, he redirected the energy in his hand upward, unleashing a bolt of purple lightning that shot into the ceiling.

Time seemed to slow as the structure above them gave a deafening groan. The lightning ripped through the supports, sending wood, stone, and plaster cascading down like an avalanche. Klagg felt the world tilt as something heavy struck him in the back, slamming him to the floor with bone-crushing force. His sword clattered out of his hand, spinning away into the rubble.

The weight on his chest made breathing impossible, and the sharp crack of his left arm breaking sent waves of searing pain radiating through his body. He screamed—a raw, primal sound—as the agony surged up to his shoulder and left him gasping. His vision blurred with tears and smoke, and for a moment, he thought he might lose consciousness.

No! Not like this!

Klagg's howl of pain turned into a choked gasp as he struggled against the beam pinning him down, but it wouldn't budge. Every movement sent fresh pain lancing through his broken arm, and his strength was ebbing fast. He coughed violently, his lungs straining against the smoke-filled air, and felt the sting of ash on his tongue.

Above him, laughter rang out, cold and cutting. Klagg craned his neck, his muscles screaming in protest, to see the shadowed man standing amidst the wreckage. The illusion magic was slowly reforming, the black tendrils curling back around him like a cloak. But for a moment, Klagg caught a clear glimpse of his true face. Pale and gaunt, with dark eyes that burned with cruel intent. Blood streaked across his cheek, dripping to the floor in slow, deliberate drops, each one appearing starkly real as it escaped the shadowy shroud.

"It is a pity that I have not yet mastered the art of Necromancy," the shadowed man sneered, his voice dripping with disdain. He adjusted his grip on his bloodied face, his free hand trembling slightly as crimson droplets splattered to the ground, stark against the flickering glow of the fire. "I would have enjoyed using your elf friend as my puppet."

Klagg coughed, his body convulsing weakly as he tried to respond. The smoke clawed at his throat, his mouth dry and filled with ash. He spat onto the scorched floor, blackened saliva mixed with blood spraying weakly beside him. Pain wracked his body—his arm throbbed with every beat of his heart, his head pounded, and the heavy beam pinning him down made every breath a struggle.

“Why?” he croaked, his voice barely audible, raw from the smoke and exhaustion.

The shadowed man paused mid-step, turning his head slightly toward Klagg. His expression twisted into a sneer, the shadows flickering and reforming around his gaunt features. “I already told you, dwarven scum,” he snapped, his tone impatient and dismissive. “I am going to save the world.”

With that, he turned away, his movements measured and unhurried as though the inferno consuming the building was of no concern. Blood continued to drip from his wound, the droplets seeming to materialize out of the shadows before hitting the ground.

A thunderous crash echoed through the building, louder and closer than before. Klagg could feel the vibrations in the floor beneath him as another section of ceiling gave way, sending embers and debris cascading down. The shadowed man didn't so much as flinch. He walked with a deliberate calmness to where Relan lay, the elf's chest rising and falling irregularly, each breath laboured and shallow.

The pool of blood around Relan was growing, dark and viscous, seeping into the cracks of the scorched floor. Klagg's breath hitched as he watched, helpless, unable to do anything but witness what came next.

The shadowed man stopped beside Relan, looking down at the elf's broken body with an air of dispassionate curiosity. For a moment, it seemed as though he might leave him untouched, but then he lifted his boot and drove it into Relan's head with brutal force. The impact

snapped Relan's head back, his body convulsing violently before going completely limp.

"No..." The word escaped Klagg's lips as barely more than a whisper, tears filling his eyes and spilling down his soot-streaked face.

"Relan..."

The shadowed man nodded to himself as if satisfied with his work. Without a backward glance, he turned and strolled through the door, disappearing into the chaos beyond.

The heat and smoke pressed down on Klagg like a living thing, the air too thick to draw a proper breath. The building groaned and shuddered, the flames consuming it with relentless hunger. Another crash resounded, and Klagg's world began to spin, the edges of his vision darkening.

The pain, the smoke, the unbearable grief—it was all too much. He felt his consciousness slipping, his mind refusing to fully accept what had just happened to his friend. The last image burned into his memory was Relan lying motionless, surrounded by flames.

Klagg woke to a dull ache coursing through his body, every muscle protesting as consciousness returned. He blinked against the dim light of the small infirmary, his surroundings coming into focus through a haze of pain and exhaustion. The room was plain, the walls bare save for a few shelves lined with bottles of antiseptic and bandages. The sharp smell of disinfectant filled his nostrils, mingling with the faint, acrid scent of lingering smoke.

He tried to sit up, but the effort sent a bolt of pain shooting through his arm and head, forcing him back down with a groan. His bandaged arm throbbed, the memory of the collapse and the weight of the beam flooding back to him. He clenched his teeth, his breath coming in shallow gasps as the pain subsided enough for him to think.

The sound of approaching footsteps drew his attention. A figure emerged from the shadows near his bed—Captain Barnes, his stern face creased with a rare softness. The older man’s sharp blue eyes, so accustomed to commanding respect, now held a glint of concern.

“Easy, Sergeant,” Barnes said, his voice steady as he placed a firm but gentle hand on Klagg’s shoulder. “You’ve been through hell.”

Klagg’s mind raced, the events of the fire and the fight with the shadowed man crashing into his thoughts like waves. But one question rose above all else. “Relan...” he rasped, his voice cracking as the name left his lips. “What happened to Relan?”

Barnes’s expression darkened, the lines of his face deepening. He hesitated, his silence stretching just long enough to send a cold chill through Klagg. When he finally spoke, his tone was heavy with regret. “I’m sorry, Klagg. Relan didn’t make it. We did everything we could, but the injuries were too severe.”

The words hit Klagg like a hammer. He turned his head away, his throat tightening as a wave of grief washed over him. Tears welled up in his eyes, blurring the dim room as they spilled down his cheeks. “He was...” His voice broke, and he swallowed hard before continuing. “He was more than a partner. He was my friend.”

Barnes nodded solemnly, his hand remaining steady on Klagg's shoulder. "I know," he said softly. "Relan was one of the best. And we'll get the bastard who did this. I promise you that."

Klagg's hands clenched into fists, his nails digging into his palms as the sorrow mingled with a burning anger. His thoughts turned to the shadowed man, the cold cruelty in his voice, and the terrible power he had wielded. "It was no ordinary man," Klagg muttered, his voice low but charged with emotion. "There was something... something dark about him."

Barnes's expression hardened as Klagg recounted everything—the explosion, the illusion magic, the crackling purple lightning, and the man's venomous parting words. Klagg spoke through clenched teeth, reliving the terror and helplessness, his every word etched with pain.

When he finished, Barnes stood in silence for a moment, his face unreadable as he processed the account. Finally, he straightened, his tone resolute. "We'll need to investigate this further," he said, his voice firm with determination. "If this man is as dangerous as you say, we can't let him slip through our fingers."

Klagg nodded weakly, his body too drained to offer more than a faint acknowledgment. Barnes leaned closer, his voice softening. "But for now, you need to rest and recover. There will be time for justice, Klagg. You'll have your chance."

As the captain stepped away, Klagg's eyes drifted shut. The weight of exhaustion and grief pulled him into darkness once more, but Barnes's promise echoed faintly in his mind, a fragile tether to the resolve that

still burned deep within him. There would be justice—he would see to it, no matter the cost.

Days blurred into weeks, and though Klagg's body slowly mended, the wounds inside him remained raw and festering. The memory of that night haunted him relentlessly. The face of the shadowed man, wreathed in darkness and cruelty, replayed in his mind like a spectre. And then there was Relan—his laughter, his easy camaraderie, his final moments. It was a weight Klagg carried everywhere, heavy and suffocating.

He moved through his days mechanically, a shadow of his former self. Patrols, reports, and routine filled the hours, but his mind was consumed by a single thought: revenge. The shadowed man had to pay for what he had done—not just for Relan's death but for all the destruction and lives shattered in his wake.

One evening, as Klagg sat alone in his quarters, nursing a bottle of ale and staring blankly at the small desk cluttered with papers, a knock broke the silence. He hesitated for a moment, setting the bottle down, before rising and crossing the room. When he opened the door, his breath caught.

Standing in the hallway was Yiri, Relan's wife, her eyes red and swollen from crying. Her long, dark hair was dishevelled, and her face carried the deep lines of grief. Beside her, clutching her hand tightly, was Kyna, her young daughter. The girl's wide, innocent eyes looked up at Klagg, filled with a mixture of confusion and sadness that pierced straight through him.

Klagg's throat tightened, and he struggled to find words. "I'm so sorry," he said, his voice cracking under the weight of his guilt. "I should have done more. I should have—"

Yiri stepped forward, silencing him with a gentle hand on his cheek. Her touch was warm but firm, grounding him in the moment. "Don't blame yourself, Klagg," she said softly, her voice steady despite the tremble in her hands. "Relan knew the risks. He wouldn't want you to carry this burden alone."

Klagg's chest heaved as he fought to keep his emotions in check. The guilt clawed at him, refusing to let go, but Yiri's words carried a truth he couldn't ignore. Relan wouldn't have blamed him—not for trying, not for surviving.

He dropped to one knee, bringing himself to Kyna's level. The girl's small frame seemed even smaller as she clung to her mother's hand, her tear-streaked face looking at him with a vulnerability that shattered what remained of his composure.

"I promise you, Kyna," he said, his voice barely above a whisper. "I did everything I could to save your father. He was a hero—a brave, good man. And he loved you more than anything in this world."

Kyna nodded slowly, tears spilling over as her little body shook with quiet sobs. "I miss him," she said, her voice breaking as she clutched her mother's side.

Klagg's heart twisted, and without thinking, he opened his arms and pulled her close. She melted into his embrace, her small hands

clutching at his shirt as he held her tightly. “I miss him too,” he murmured, his own tears falling as he pressed his cheek against her hair.

For a moment, the three of them stood together in the doorway, united in their grief. Klagg felt the weight in his chest shift ever so slightly, the burden no lighter but somehow less suffocating. Relan was gone, but his memory lived on in Yiri, in Kyna, and in the promise Klagg silently made to himself: to see this through, to bring the shadowed man to justice—not just for Relan, but for all those he had hurt.

Yiri’s voice broke the silence. “Thank you, Klagg,” she said softly, her hand resting briefly on his shoulder before taking Kyna’s hand once more. “We’ll get through this. All of us.”

Once Klagg’s wounds had healed enough for him to move without constant pain, he threw himself into the streets, searching for answers with a grim determination that bordered on obsession. His steps were deliberate, his path meandering through Ellessar’s alleys, markets, and shadowed corners, each familiar street a backdrop for the ghosts of his memories. The shadowed man’s face lingered at the edge of his thoughts, a constant reminder of what he had lost—and what he had vowed to do.

His existence became a relentless pursuit, driven by a single purpose: to find the man who had taken Relan and bring him to justice. He questioned informants, scoured records, and followed rumours like a bloodhound on the scent, but no trail seemed to lead anywhere. Every lead was a dead end, every whisper just a shadow. As the weeks turned to months, frustration gnawed at him, and his resolve began to waver.

Klagg began carrying a small flask of whisky on his hunts, the burn of the alcohol offering a brief escape from the weight in his chest. At first, it was just a companion for the loneliest nights, a way to numb the sharp edges of his guilt. But slowly, almost imperceptibly, the flask became more than that. Each swig dulled the ache a little further, the warmth spreading through him like a fleeting balm against the cold grip of his memories.

The whisky, once a tool to ease the pain, became a refuge. It was easier to forget with the haze of drunkenness clouding his thoughts. Easier to bury the memories of Relan's smile, the crackling flames, and the venom in the shadowed man's voice beneath a veil of amber liquid. He told himself it was temporary, just a way to get through the hardest days.

Time passed, flowing like the relentless river that always seemed to mock him—unyielding, indifferent, and unstoppable. Days blurred into weeks, weeks into months, and each moment eroded the edges of who Klagg had once been. The foundation of the man he was—the steadfast constable, the loyal friend, the protector of Ellessar's streets—crumbled under the unrelenting weight of his despair.

The city around him moved forward, its rhythms unchanged by the grief that consumed him. People bustled through the markets, laughter spilled from tavern doors, and the city's guards marched their patrols with unwavering purpose. But Klagg drifted further from that life with every passing day. He no longer belonged to the city he had sworn to protect; the streets he had once patrolled now felt foreign, their echoes hollow and unfamiliar. His steps had lost their purpose, reduced to

aimless wandering through alleys that seemed to forget he had ever been there.

Ellessar's pulse beat steadily, a stark contrast to the shadows that engulfed Klagg. Slowly, inevitably, time continued its relentless march. Each day wore him down further, grinding away the man he used to be.

The river of time swept him deeper into its currents, eroding the last remnants of the constable who had once stood resolute against chaos and injustice. It left behind nothing but a shadow of the man he had been—a shell, hollowed and drifting, teetering on the edge of the void.

And the void called...