

1

Her Meddling Bears Fruit

When: Unknown at this time

Where: The Earth is not as it once was

The first thing was what the boy saw, as he struggled to open his eyes as though his body had forgotten how. Though only half open he saw two long shadows upon the ceiling of stone and dirt that was above him. The shadows flickered and danced, as though lit by a torch that had been set down in front of them. The second thing was what the boy felt, which was a rough stone, poking up into his back in a most uncomfortable way. The slab he had laid down upon hadn't been meant for his comfort, just something to keep him off the floor during his long sleep. He tried to shift, to move even the slightest inch, but his body would not respond. Then what the boy felt was panic, but through his haze he remembered what his father had told him. That more than a few weeks might pass, and that he might be quite weak when finally woken up again. This calmed him a bit. The third thing was what the boy heard. Two voices, strange, low, and somehow unfamiliar to his understanding.

But that's impossible, the boy thought, trying to calm himself and get past his fear. *How can I not understand people talking?*

The boy did not realize that other languages might exist. The very idea, had he been asked, beyond his imagining. But slowly, as he concentrated and his ears began to recall their task, he began to understand.

"I don't know, do I?" asked the first voice, sounding somewhat upset. "I'm no expert in these sorts of things, am I?" The voice was deep and came from somewhere near the boy's feet. "We removed the funny pieces of paper that were on him and they burned up, what more can we do?"

Another voice, also male but more like gravel being rubbed together answered him. "Not an expert? You always claim to be."

"I do not. You're the one with his nose in a book all the time. You should know more than I."

“Not all the time.”

“A good portion of it!”

“Name a time in the last week I’ve even been near a book.”

“You can’t use the time we’ve been exploring these bloody tunnels as your example. There’s no book within ten kilometers of here!”

“An exaggeration, as usual.”

“Ah, so you do have a book in your pack!”

“I don’t. How many times do I have to say it?”

“Then let me see the inside of it.”

“No!”

This arguing was not improving the boy’s mood or outlook, as neither of these voices were the ones he expected to hear. A male voice, certainly, that of his father. He should have been saved, and been the one to come and get him once it was safe. His mother, and here the boy tried to avoid a sigh and even greater despair, had no doubt been lost and he would therefore never hear that voice again. But these two, they seemed to be more interested in their argument than in his welfare, meaning neither his father, nor his father’s friends who had also been chosen, had come to find him. And they had mentioned the wards that had been keeping him asleep and alive without food, how could they not know such a simple thing? He knew wards, granted only a few, but it should have been obvious. Suddenly the boy brightened. The fact that there were voices, and that he was now awake, meant that at least some people had survived the Allfather’s wrath and had, at last, come to get him. He struggled to raise his head.

“I think he’s awake!” exclaimed one of them.

“Easy lad,” said the other. “Don’t rush yourself.”

His vision was blurry, and the shapes were backlit against the fire he vaguely saw flickering behind them, but as they came to his side his eyes widened.

He had been rescued by monsters.

The figure nearer to him was the taller of the two, but only slightly. His skin seemed almost misshapen, protruding out at odd angles and almost looking as if a pile of rocks had grown a face and decided to walk around and look for a bite to eat. The other was shorter, and the boy might have mistaken him for someone his own age, had he not had

a beard that reached to his stomach. His limbs were oddly short, and the boy wondered what could have created such freakish looking beings. Both were dirty, wore rough clothes badly in need of a cleaning, and in the flickering firelight shadows obscured their faces as they advanced. The boy tried to move, tried to scramble away, but could only manage a horrified expression and a slightly high pitched whine from his throat.

The boy realized his throat was very dry, and wondered just how long he had been asleep for. The figures made no sudden moves, but that made them no less terrifying in his eyes. Both must have picked up on his reaction as they stopped advancing.

“Easy lad,” said the bearded one. “We’re not here to hurt you. Goodness, but he’s a scrawny one, isn’t he?”

“Oh sure, insult him right to his face. Great way to earn his trust.”

“He won’t understand dwarvish, he’s a human!”

The boy dimly realized that the bearded one’s words *had* sounded different a second ago, but he had bigger problems. The two were staring at him. Wondering if he was good to eat, perhaps? Who could tell with such beings?

“Stay away,” he tried to say, but couldn’t manage more than a weak rasp.

“It’s water you’ll be wanting,” said the bearded one. “Here, pass this up to him, Everest.”

The figure took a bag from the other and uncorked it. “You’ll feel better after you’ve had something to drink.” He held the bag out and lifted the boy’s head. His eyes widened but he didn’t yet have the strength to pull away, and had to accept the bag that was lifted to his lips.

He almost thought that they meant to poison him in some way, and resolved not to drink, but then realized this was a rather silly thing to do. If they wanted him dead, why had they woken him up? They might have been misshapen, not humans like himself and clearly not any angel he had ever seen or heard about, but perhaps he should gauge their intentions before refusing this badly needed aid. He swallowed some water, the creature only allowing him sips at a time, and did begin to feel better.

“Thank you,” he managed when the bag was lowered, and a blanket of some kind was placed under his head so he could at least look at his rescuers a bit more easily.

“You take your time, lad,” said the bearded one. “We’ll introduce ourselves first. Only fair, and all that, no? This nasty piece of work is Everest, a gnomad as you can clearly see. A face only a mother could love, but his heart is somewhat in the right place nearly most of the time.” He pinched the other’s cheek with a smile.

“And this,” said Everest throwing his arm around the other, “is Whitebottom Clearwater Talltree the fifth, and a surlier dwarf you’d be hard pressed to find anywhere.”

“Don’t confuse the lad, I introduced you properly didn’t I?”

“You did get my name right! My apologies. Friend, this doesn’t seem the time for our usual games, does it? This is Axhandle McGee, shortest giant in these parts.”

“Would you quit that!?” He shoved the gnomad’s arm away from him. “I’m Don. Don Fortress, at your service. And I am a dwarf, he was right about that.”

“I wouldn’t lie about that part,” said Everest with a conspiratorial wink. “He’s as dwarfy a dwarf that ever dwarfed.”

“Dwarf? Fortress?” managed the boy.

“Please, call me Don,” said the dwarf, stroking his beard with his right hand.

“Oh, leave that alone, you’ll go blind.” He turned back to the boy. “Are you feeling a little better? Want some more water?”

The boy nodded and took several more sips, then nodded and the bag was taken away.

“I’m Lysanias,” he announced. “Did my father send you?”

The two looked at each other, then back at Lysanias. “No one sent us, lad, unless you count that funny little beastkin girl.”

“Don’t suppose you know her? Shorter than us, fox tail and ears? Funny clothes, too, come to think of it.”

Lysanias shook his head. He didn’t know any monsters like that. Didn’t sound like any angel he had heard of either. A person that was part animal? How could such a thing even exist?

“Paid us to map out these tunnels for her, and gave us a pretty big sack of silver to do it too,” added Everest.

“Uh, don’t tell him that,” Don shushed him. *Yes, that does sound different. Why is that?*

“What? You think he’s going to rob us or something? Besides, we’re not lugging it through these tunnels, it’s back at home. What’s he going to do about it?”

“True. Anyway, we stumbled across you because I was sure there was some gold in this direction, or at least something valuable. Turned out to be your sword I was smelling.”

“Sword?”

“Yeah, the on fire one?” Don stepped aside and pointed to the foot of the room, and Lysanias raised his head a bit more to look over his-

“What’s happened to me?” he shouted, looking his body over. His clothes didn’t fit anymore, they were far too small for him. And as he raised his hands to his eyes he further cried “And my hands. What’s happened to my hands?”

“They look perfectly ordinary to me,” Everest assured him. “Though we did wonder why you were wearing such tiny clothes.”

“Your beard though, that’s really something,” remarked Don, stroking his own again.

“Beard?” Lysanias’ hands flew to his face and he sat up, propping himself up with his left hand. There was a beard there, and his hair was long, far longer than it had been before. “What’s happened to me?” he wailed, panic rising in his voice again.

“Now take it easy,” Don uselessly suggested. “Tell us what you expected to see, and we can tell you what we see.”

Lysanias had to admit they had a point. With no mirror these two were his only means of discovering what had happened, what had gone so terribly wrong after he had been sealed away.

“I should be smaller,” he tried to tell them. “My hands are so big now!”

“How old are you, lad?”

“Fourteen.”

“Fourteen?” they both cried. “Are you sure?” asked Everest.

“Of course he is,” Don admonished him. “Who doesn’t know how old they are?”

“You, after a few pints too many.”

“I didn’t quite recall the way home, not how- never mind that! Lad, how long have you been down here for? That beard didn’t grow in a day or even a year.”

“How’s he going to know that?” Everest shot back. “He’s been asleep the whole time.”

Don stared at him, but conceded the point. “Fair enough. Lad, what year do you think it is?”

“Year? Let me think... Probably 1642 I guess?”

The two got a very shocked look on their faces and stepped away from the boy. They had a hushed conversation and Lysanias took this opportunity to look himself, and the sword they had pointed out, over. He was thin, very thin actually, like the wards that should have kept him healthy and whole had failed, or their power had been diminished for some reason. His arms and legs both were weak and longer than they should have been, and he wondered idly how tall he was now. Certainly taller than either of these two! The sword, that he recognized. It belonged to his father’s friend, the one that usually made weapons for the village to try and defend it against those awful nephilim. But what was it doing here, and why did it seem to be on fire? He had never seen it do that.

Don pushed Everest forward, who looked resigned to doing something unpleasant. “You’ll find out sooner or later,” he started. “So I guess it’s best we just tell you. As we figure it, this is roughly the year 2102.”

The two let that sink in a moment.

“I’ve been in this cave for almost four hundred years?” he gaped. “What happened to my father? Why didn’t he come get me like he promised? Was the flood that bad? Did Atlantis not survive it?”

Now the two just looked puzzled. “What flood?” Everest finally asked.

“*The* flood! You can’t have missed it,” Lysanias seethed. “The one the Allfather was going to use to wipe out humanity? That one? We didn’t have long to prepare, a couple of years those that could see into the future said. But it should have been finished.”

Again the two had a hushed conversation, but Lysanias was growing impatient. He swung his legs over the side of the platform he had been laying on and gingerly put a foot down. It seemed to hold his weight so he tried the other, still holding on to the side of the platform. The two now were doing some funny little ritual where they both threw their hands out, and Don got a pained look and came over to him. He had to look up and up to look him in the face, it seemed Lysanias was a bit taller than he was after all.

“Should you be moving around like that?” he asked.

“Just tell me what’s happened. Obviously the flood didn’t kill everything, so what happened? Why did it take so long for me to get rescued? Is my father dead after all?” He felt a pang of sadness as he said this, but it was always a possibility. There was no real way to hide the

construction of the floating city of Atlantis from *the Allfather Himself*, after all. There was every possibility it was simply smashed to pieces by divine might as the storm raged. If the Allfather wanted his creation dead to the last man, he was sure more than a bit of rain would be involved in the effort.

“You might want to keep sitting down,” Don suggested. “But it’s up to you, of course. Lad, I think there are a few things, unpleasant things, you’re going to have to hear.”

“It can’t be that much worse, can it? Are there no humans left, or something? Am I the last?”

“No, there’s people left. All sorts, and all over the place.” But still, Don hesitated.

“Okay?”

“It’s just, you talk about a flood, and it wiping humans out. Are you sure you don’t mean a moon?”

“Moon? That was no moon. No, it was rain, as far as our future seers could tell at least forty straight days of it. He was really angry with us, for some reason.” Lysanias shook his head, remembering. “A few angels came to warn us, near the end, but by then it would have been far too late. Why? What happened to the moon?”

“One, one thing at a time, lad. If you’re sure.” Lysanias nodded his head. “Okay. The thing is...”

“Go on, tell him,” prompted Everest.

“The thing is, there was only one flood your flood could possibly be, and those records are really only fragments at this time.”

“We only know because I happen to like reading old books, and searching out really old stories of the world before the fall,” explained Everest. “And you can’t get more before the fall, or an older story, than that one.”

“Know what? What old story?” Lysanias’ legs couldn’t hold him up anymore and he lowered himself to the platform again, at least able to sit upright.

“Let’s divide things into ages, that might be easier!” suggested Don. He looked around and found a few stones littering the ground. “Right, here’s your age, which I guess is what started everything.” He put a stone down. “Then, I guess after about fifteen hundred years or so the Allfather wiped you all out. But then he made some different people, and they carried on in your place. This would be the second age.” He put another stone down.

“People like you guys?”

“Ah, no, we came later,” he hedged. “We’ll get to that. That age lasted a good while, but eventually it ended too, when a man chosen by the Allfather was killed. That started a pretty dark time, as we understand it.” He put a third stone down. “But things got better, and great cities were built, and many wonders were constructed by people with their understanding of science.” Lysanias looked at him funny, he didn’t know that word. But Don went on. “Then the chaos moon showed up in the sky, and magic came back to the earth.” He put down a fourth stone. “This is where we are today.” He pointed to the far end of it.

“Oh, I know about magic!” Lysanias bragged. “I, uh, don’t really know any, there weren’t many angels that were willing to teach us that. I know it can do a lot of great stuff. But anyway, go on.”

“That’s all there is to tell. Four ages, destruction and rebirth every time.”

“So, wait, how long did each of these ‘ages’ last, anyway? It couldn’t have been long, it’s only been four hundred years!”

Don looked away, unable to continue.

“The calendar usually started over,” explained Everest. “We call this AF, for After Fall.”

“Wait, this moon of yours, it showed up two thousand years ago?”

“Again, records are spotty, but as near as-”

“No way. No way can I have been left down here for more than two thousand years.”

“It’s worse than that, lad,” Don said sadly. “This second age?” He tapped the middle stone. “It was probably at least two thousand years too. Maybe more. Maybe a lot more, the moon really did a number on records from that time. And the third lasted longer than that.”

Lysanias’ throat went dry again, and it had nothing to do with lack of water. He wasn’t sure what “did a number” meant, but he could guess. “It’s been over six thousand years since I was sealed away?”

The other two dropped their eyes, they couldn’t bear to look at the man who now was realizing that not only was his world gone, but the world that replaced it was gone, and the world that replaced that one... Was gone. Lysanias sat, stunned, thoughts both frozen in his head and racing at a furious pace. Atlantis must not have survived, or at least his father hadn’t. His friends, they were gone. His village was no more. He didn’t know how this world worked. Didn’t have any skills he could

contribute. Did the Allfather still want him dead? Not personally, he had never done anything really wrong, but he doubted the being that decided to wipe out what He had created would leave a job undone. Even in this, last, smallest, detail. Tears were now threatening to spill out of Lysanias' eyes as the weight of thousands of years, missed and missing years, threatened to crush him like a grape.

“What am I going to do?” he pitifully asked.

2

Coming to Terms

When: Some 8000 years + 15 or so minutes after the boy was sealed away
Where: A cave deep in the earth

Neither the dwarf nor the gnomad had any answer for the boy, and both were perhaps silently regretting ever having set foot in these stupid tunnels. Silver or not, was cruelly yanking this boy, now a man, out of his long sleep really a kindness? But at the same time was leaving him to sleep for all eternity any better? They looked upon the pitiful figure, lost and forlorn, sitting there on the stone slab that served as his bed these thousands of years. Tears silently ran down his cheeks as he mourned the loss of all he knew, and neither had words of comfort to offer him. What could they say? What levity could they provide a man who had passed the world by for so long?

None.

And so they did not try. Neither moved to comfort the man, this stranger out of time, for even that right was denied them. They had found the boy, broke the news to him, but they did not know him. They could not begin to imagine how he felt, waking up to news of this kind. To pretend they did, to offer him reassurance where none could truly be had? That would ring false to even the dullest of mind, and neither would treat him so. The only thing they could do was awkwardly stand and wait for him to compose himself.

But they couldn't ignore his question either, and finally the dwarf spoke up once again. "We won't abandon you, lad. If that's what you're thinking. There must be a place for you in this world, we just have to help you find it. Easy as that!"

Everest looked at the dwarf out of the corners of his eyes as if to indicate he was thinking perhaps his friend had lost his mind. "Sure," he agreed reluctantly. "I suppose it's the least we can do."

"And you're all about doing the least, aren't you Everest?" Don tried to joke.

"Maybe I just like to carefully consider things before acting."

“In the hopes that if you wait long enough, the problem will have sorted itself out.”

“Now that’s not true and you...” Both looked over at Lysanias, again perhaps realizing now was not the time for their little arguments. Everest cleared his throat. “Anyway, like Don said, we’ll have a long walk back to any kind of civilization so there’s plenty of time to discuss things. Our world, and what place we can find for you in it.”

“We aren’t heading back just yet though,” Don told him.

“We aren’t?”

“Of course not! Have the tunnels been mapped? I think not. I’m not going to let a job go unfinished.”

Everest pulled Don away again and Lysanias listened carefully. *Yes, the sound of their words does seem different*, he decided. *What a strange thing.*

“What are you talking about?” Everest quietly demanded to know.

“What do you mean, what am I talking about?”

“I mean doing this supposed ‘job’ of course.”

“What about it? Just because we found the kid doesn’t mean we should go back.”

“Don’t you get it? Finding the kid *was* the job.”

“How do you figure that?”

Lysanias now politely coughed. “My name is Lysanias, and you might as well include me in your conversation, if that’s okay. I can understand you perfectly.”

They both jerked their heads to look over at him, then looked abashed. “You can understand us?” Don asked.

“Of course.”

“What about this?” he asked suspiciously.

“Yeah.”

“That’s odd.”

There was a moment of silence. “What is?” Lysanias asked.

Everest snapped his fingers. “You’ve got some kind of translation magic going, don’t you?”

“Some what?”

“You know, to understand different languages.”

“Different... Languages? What are you even talking about now? How can there be more than one way of talking to each other?”

They looked at him like he was growing horns, and Lysanias

somewhat resigned himself to both giving and receiving that sort of look many times a day for the foreseeable future. It seemed things had changed a lot more than he thought was possible. *But what if this is the least of the changes I'm about to hear? What if this, for them, was so obvious they didn't even consider a time when there was just one, what did they call it? Language? That there have been so many ways of communicating, and for so long, it's just normal for them? And how much more is 'normal' for them that's going to make me look like a fool?*

"Don't that beat all?" Don asked. "Well, if nothing else you can offer your services as a translator. Plenty of call for that, especially in the bigger cities. Magic being so costly, and all."

"Are you sure you weren't left with any translation magic? Or those paper things we took off you?" asked Everest.

"Wards? No, I don't think so." He looked himself over and checked inside his clothes. *Ugh, I'm going to need new clothes immediately. These are basically rags.* "Nope, nothing. Besides, like I said I didn't know there could be other ways of talking so why would I have been left with something to understand different ways?"

"Good point lad. So, no secrets then, eh? Anyway, as I was about to say. In addition to not leaving the job only partly done, we need to give Lysanias here time to adjust to the new world he finds himself in. I'm sure he's got a lot of questions, and everything we take for granted will be totally foreign to him."

"We need to give him time to regain his strength too," Everest mused, looking the man over. "He's going to need a little more than water to cover the distance we've gone since leaving home."

"That's the spirit!" Don roared, smacking Everest on the back. "Speaking of food, what have we got left from this morning?"

"Not much," Everest replied, heading away from the circle of light and to a nearby sack. "With your appetite," he added when he returned, holding a brown sack.

"It does vanish after a day, might as well not waste it."

"Like it's so tough to get more."

"Why go through the effort?"

Everest just shook his head and rummaged through the sack he brought over. He seemed to think about it, then just spilled the contents out on the slab next to Lysanias. "Help yourself, I guess."

Many of the things that tumbled out were quite strange looking to him, but Lysanias was quite hungry. Don brought out a knife and was

slicing up various things to make it easier for him, as he dropped the first thing he tried to pick up. He stared at his arms, so long now, wondering when he would be used to such gigantic fingers and hands. *Can't wait to try walking with my long legs either,* he thought sarcastically. *That's going to be a laugh and a half. For them.*

Lysanias found the food strange and rather bland, but sampled all of it. Both insisted he not eat too much, give his body time to get used to the idea again, and Lysanias figured they would know best. He stretched and yawned.

"I've slept for thousands of years," he said, still trying to get used to the idea. "You would think I wouldn't be tired."

"How *did* you manage that, lad?"

"Those wards you took off." They looked at him questioningly. "Those bits of paper," he clarified. "They're called wards. They contained supernatural power to keep me asleep and alive until I could be rescued. There must be some around the cave to keep the air fresh too." He gestured out into the darkness, and the others looked around, nodding.

"You ever heard of such a thing?" Don asked Everest.

He looked thoughtful, but shook his head. "No power like that, or this ward thing he mentioned. Not known anymore, maybe? Who knows what was lost in all the upheaval we've gone through."

"Great," Lysanias suggested sarcastically. *I should have listened to my mom and learned some more of them when I had the chance. Too late now, I guess.*

Don saw he was thinking about something sad again, and held out a hand. "How about trying a few steps?" he asked, hoping to take Lysanias' mind off it.

"You're not teaching him how to dance, the boy will be hard pressed to walk the length of this cave!"

"Not dance, you dunce! I mean taking a few steps- walking!"

"Oh. Why didn't you say?"

"I did say!"

I think these two have been together far too long without anyone else to talk to.

"Let's try it," Lysanias said, knowing he would have to try sooner or later.

They made a slow circuit of the cave, Lysanias holding on to the dwarf and trying not to trip over himself as they went into the darker

areas. Naturally there was a stone in the way he didn't see, and tumbled into the dwarf.

"Sorry, sorry!" he said, trying to extract himself. Something was poking him in the belly, and he froze.

"Yer stuck on my belt knife," said the dwarf dryly. "The hilt went straight through that thin material your shirt is made of."

Lysanias breathed a sigh of relief. It wasn't what he thought. Together they extracted themselves and Everest helped him back to the slab. He sat down heavily. "That's going to take some getting used to," he declared.

"Walking?" asked Don, brushing himself off.

"Being so tall."

"It's not so great, being tall," Don assured him, eyes narrowed.

"I don't think he meant in that way," Everest told him.

"How do you know?"

"Please you two, not now." He held his head. "I feel stronger, but it's going to take a while. Hope you're not in a hurry."

"We'll take all the time you need, lad."

"Thanks."

So the group rested. Every few minutes Lysanias would take a turn around the cave. First hanging on to the slab for support, then finally managing it without that crutch. He had too many questions bouncing around his head, and the others weren't sure where to start, so for most of this an uneasy silence had descended on the small group. Finally Lysanias decided to start somewhere.

"So what is a dwarf, and what did you call yourself, Everest? A gnomling?"

"A gnomad, actually. We're quite similar, I'd be happy to explain it." His voice took on a lecturing tone and he stood a little straighter. "A gnomad is a bipedal, mortal humanoid, descended from the union of a human and an earth elemental or gnome. Contrast this with the dwarf, which is a humanoid directly derived from demonic stock that migrated to the human world and became mortal over a period of hundreds of years. These now mortal creatures, when mating, birthed mortals closer to human than their demonic lineage would suggest was possible and we call those beings dwarves." He looked smug. "So while we're not related, long ago in history we came from the same source, that of the demonic earth elemental. Does that clear it up?"

Lysanias stared at him, trying to parse all this.

Don stared to, but for a different reason. "You've been reading again, haven't you?" he demanded to know. "Books. You know that no good ever came from a book!"

"What? No."

"A bipedal, mortal humanoid? Where did you even get words like that from?"

"It's what we are!"

"Yer a windbag, is what you are. Honestly, I didn't even understand that explanation, you think he would?"

"I was quite clear, and accurate. I'm sure he can infer any meaning for words he's not strictly familiar with..."

"You calling me stupid? You know what I think? I think you memorized that out of a book, hoping to sound smart! I'll wager you've got the book right in your pack. Been waiting for a chance to spout that, were you?"

"I read that ages ago, honestly!"

"Oh?" He stalked over to the mouth of the cave and brought a pack into the light. He shook it at his friend. "So I dump this out, and I'm not going to find a book?"

"No! Give that back!" Everest lunged for it.

"Oh no, we're having this out right now." Don pulled it away from him, or tried to.

"Please, don't fight," Lysanias tried to tell them, jumping down from the slab and hastily stepping over to them. He tried to force them apart but all he managed to do was stumble against them both, knocking them off balance. The pack went flying and tumbled open, and all three went down in a spray of limbs.

Lysanias heard a weird sound of both of them as he tried to stand, and realized they were laughing.

"What are we doing?" Don asked, rolling onto his back and looking up at the ceiling of the cave.

"Rolling around in the dirt like a couple of fools?" Everest asked back.

"Admit it, you were showing off!"

"What if I was?"

"Want to impress him, eh? Another fine beard comes along and now I've got competition, is that it?"

Wait, is the gnomad a girl? I didn't think he was...

“Not at all!” insisted Everest.

“Let’s not just lie here. Sorry about that, Lysanias,” apologized Don. “Let’s get this pack picked up then.” He got up and hauled Lysanias to his feet, then started picking up the stuff that had tumbled from the pack. “What’s this?” he asked, picking up a box that had come open. He held up a glass vial to the light, and rattled the box. There must have been more like it inside. The vial was full of a white crystal grain.

Everest sighed. “It was going to be your birthday present. Which is in another two weeks, if I have my dates right.”

“Wait, what? You thought that far ahead? We left a month ago!”

A month ago? How have they carried enough food and water?

“I figured the job might take some time. And you’re always complaining how bland the food is you make when we’re on the move.”

“Wait, is this...” He dumped the box partially into his hand. The vials were similar, but inside some had small flakes of leaves, others a dark powder. “It is.”

“Happy birthday, Don. But you don’t get any until two more weeks.”

“Aw, that’s... Come here you big softy.” The two embraced, but pulled away, looking embarrassed at Lysanias standing there watching them. “Thank you.”

“Of course.”

“Er, what is it?” he asked.

“Spices, of course. You must have had them!” Don answered, holding the vial with the white crystals up again.

“Oh, my mom did all the cooking. Maybe?”

“HA! Things haven’t changed that much, you see?” Everest said.

“Maybe not. Well.” He put the vials back and closed the box up again. “Sorry about ruining the surprise. I’ll just-” He went to put it back.

“Oh no!” Everest stopped him. “You’re lugging it around now, DD. It doesn’t seem that heavy now, sure, but wait until it’s been a few hours.”

Don laughed. “That’s fair.” He went and put the box in his own pack. “So where were we?”

“You were trying to tell me what you are,” Lysanias reminded them.

“Maybe I better do it,” Don suggested. He grabbed some rocks

again. "He was right, long ago in history there were no dwarves or gnomads. Just demonic earth elementals." He set the stone down.

"What's demonic?"

The two stared. "You didn't have demons?"

Lysanias shook his head. "We had people, like us, and there were angels. If angels took a person against their will, a nephilim was born some time later. Stupid nephilim. Please tell me they're all dead. Oh, and animals, like bears and fish and stuff. But that's all. I don't know what you mean when you say 'demon.'"

"They're the opposite of angels," explained Everest. "You know how the Allfather created angels?"

"Yeah, sure. They first taught us a lot of stuff. Hardly ever saw one by the time I was born though."

"Some of them rebelled, and become demons."

"Rebelled?" Lysanias was aghast.

"I know, doesn't seem possible but they did it. They needed to place to exist because they weren't welcome back in heaven. And wicked souls needed a place to go when they died... You must have had a demon world..."

"A what? People in my time only died because of accident, or because a stupid nephilim killed them."

"Not because of old age?"

"What's that?" *There's that look again.*

"Anyway," Don went on, "those first corrupted angels became demons and took the souls that did not go to the heavenly realms and turned them into various other types of demon. One of those types was the elemental. There's all sorts of them."

"Air, water, fire, all the various elements," Everest agreed. "When the demon gates opened because of the chaos moon showing up, some came to live here. Those that did, and had kids with humans, those kids were like me. Gnomads." He set a rock down below the first one.

"But those that hung around for long enough lost their demonic taint, and some had kids with each other," Don took over. He put a rock next to the second one so it was now a triangle. He traced an imaginary line from the first two to the other two. "Those were the first dwarves."

"And then there's half dwarves, just to confuse the issue more," Everest put in. "That's a dwarf that had a child with a human. They're a bit taller, but still dwarfy."

"Some, like elves, don't like members of their race having kids

with humans,” Don added with a grimace. “But we don’t mind as much. Stupid elves.”

“Right.” *Well, I did ask. And it does explain why the gnomad looks like rock, I guess.* “But wait, humans like me die, right?” The other two nodded. “Their souls, whatever that is, goes to this demon world. They become an earth elemental. That earth elemental comes *back* to earth, and starts a new life. They fall in love, have kids, become mortal or whatever. What was the point? They’re right back where they started! What happens if they’re killed now? Did they get a new soul? Can they go to the heavenly realms now? Could they be sent back to the demon world no matter what? Could they become a different demon? Are they just... gone?”

“You’d have to ask a priest those sort of questions,” hedged Everest. “I guess it’s pretty complicated, at least with us. Most demons don’t have that happen... I don’t know why it did with us, actually. I should make a note to look into that.” He stared off into space, deep in thought.

“How many types of demons are there?”

“What? Oh, dozens. Maybe as many as fifty? I don’t know that anyone ever really counted. At least not lately.”

“That many? What other creatures have been created in the meantime?”

“Well, there’s elves, like I said,” Don replied. “There’s unicorns and trolls and orcs and remnants and fairies and those weird wanderer fellows.”

“Beastkin, like that girl we met,” Everest added. “And beastfolk, and just talking animals.”

“And that’s just a start,” Don assured him.

Lysanias closed his eyes. There was going to be so very much to learn.