

Calamity

v.1.3.1, Journeys #1

The fires in the candles lit up. So did the flames of the fireplace. They always did that when Hu'orhun was agitated. *Furious* might be a better word, judging by the roars coming from the hearth. In fact, the heat was getting a little too much, even for a Dwarf, so Tu'wehan took a step away from the blazes. He looked at his wife with apprehensive hazel eyes.

'You are NOT leaving!' Hu'orhun almost shouted, trying to get some of her fiery red hair, those strands that always eluded her braid, under control. She was standing by their dinner table made of solid, dark granite. The matching granite chair, she was sitting on moments earlier, had been toppled over when she jumped to her feet in anger. Hu'orhun let out an irritated groan as she gave up on the flaming red locks, turning her attention back to Tu'wehan. 'By the Slumbering Giants, who put this stupid idea into your head?' Hu'orhun asked. The question was followed by a stare so intense it seemed as if she was trying to light her husband on fire that very second.

Tu'wehan looked at the black leather jerkin in his hands. He was wearing his brown one already on top of a dark green linen shirt, ready to leave as soon as he was done packing. His grey, woollen travel cloak was hanging by the door.

'The Chapters and their entourage are leaving Zhi'Na Qien to spread the Teachings of the Five Pillars to more lands and they are in dire need of craftsmen. So, I figured I would lend them my skills as an Iron Artisan,' Tu'wehan explained as he placed the black jerkin in his travel chest.

'And what? Because they asked you nicely, you're just gonna uproot your whole life and leave me behind?' Hu'orhun asked as she took a sudden step forward. In her current state she didn't notice that she almost tripped in her black silken qun skirt, embroidered with beautiful, red and ember roses. 'When were you planning on telling me about this?'

'No, it's just that-'

'Just what?' Hu'orhun interjected with a sharp voice.

'Huhu,' Tu'wehan pleaded, 'you have to calm down.' He tried to speak in his calmest voice as the sweat started to form on his forehead.

'Don't "Huhu" me!' Hu'orhun protested, never breaking her stare. Tu'wehan could feel her eyes like ruby red daggers that bore into his soul. He wasn't sure which was worse; that or the blazing heat.

'No, I-' Tu'wehan paused for a moment to make sure that he chose the right words. 'I didn't just mean me, I meant the both of us. I want you to go with me so we can continue working together as we always have... and being together! I mostly want you to travel with me so we never have to be apart. It's true, I've already made preparations for you to join as well!'

Hu'orhun replaced her stare with a look of angry confusion.

'How long have you known that these Humans were leaving?'

For a second or two, Tu'wehan just looked at his wife. Then he answered with a nervousness clinging to his voice.

'For a couple of weeks...'

'FOR A COUPLE OF WEEKS?!' A burst came from every source of fire in the Monarchweaver household as Hu'orhun shouted the words back at her husband. 'And for all this time, it didn't occur to you to talk to me about this?'

'It did and I tried, several times, but-'

'But *what*?'

'I just...' Tu'wehan sent her another pleading look. 'I just couldn't.'

Hu'orhun wasn't quite sure what to do with that information

'Why couldn't you tell me?' she asked as the heat in the room dissipated a bit.

'I was afraid of-' Tu'wehan needed to find a little more courage before finishing the sentence. He knew how it sounded even if it was true. 'Afraid of how you would react.'

He didn't look at her but kept packing his wide sleeved zhiduo robes as he finished.

Hu'orhun tried to digest that answer.

'And you thought *this* was the way to do it?' she finally muttered.

'No, I...'

Tu'wehan had nothing.

The pair stood in silence looking at each other. The daggers had dulled, however, as Tu'wehan noticed the beginning of tears forming in the narrow corners of Hu'orhun's eyes.

Tu'wehan was the first to break off as he went up the small steps to their bedroom for more clothes to pack.

'Think of all the good we could do if we travelled together,' Tu'wehan said loudly from the other room. He didn't wait for a response before continuing. Somehow he found it easier to speak with his wife not in sight. 'We could maybe even teach the Humans some proper blacksmithing, you and I. You should see some of their flimsy tools and what-not.'

Tu'wehan chuckled a bit behind his small but full chestnut beard as he re-entered the large dining room. A chuckle that quickly faded as he saw Hu'orhun standing in the exact same spot, not having moved a muscle. And she was still staring directly at him.

'...but, most importantly,' he added in a sincere tone, 'we belong together, you and I. At the forge and in life.'

'Do we now?' Hu'orhun countered. 'And this is how you express to me that we belong together by suddenly leaving, never having said anything to me?'

Tu'wehan knew she was right but dodged the question.

'You have to come with me, Huhu!' he exclaimed, probably a bit louder than intended. 'You know how great we are in the smithy together. When you are handling the fire and I'm at the anvil, I feel like we can make anything together! Things that could compare to what the First Dwarves made in the stories!'

'Don't be ridiculous,' Hu'orhun scoffed as she dismissed her spouse's claim.

'You know it, I know you do,' Tu'wehan continued. 'When you truly feel the flames, and the metal starts singing to me, I swear it's as close to magic as you can get!'

Tu'wehan had stopped packing and instead walked towards Hu'orhun.

'And you also know that I'm not the only one to think so. Or do you question the will of our Green Empress?'

No, Hu'orhun did not question the Empress of Zhi'Na Qien. Nor had she forgotten about her relieving Hu'orhun from Initiate at the Chamber of the Heart. The Empress had done so after Hu'orhun and Tu'wehan, as young teens, had snuck into the smithy of the Shieldshaper family. Against the wall next to the forge, they found a crate of rare materials and used them to procure the most wonderful sceptre that the Empress had ever seen.

'Your dad was so angry when he first found out what we had done,' Hu'orhun said with a small smile as her slightly crooked teeth began to show.

'And he had never been so proud as when he saw the Empress' reaction to the results of our little stunt.'

'I think it also helped that she replaced all of the materials so he could finish the ceremonial shield she had ordered.'

Tu'wehan gave another chuckle. He was standing right in front of Hu'orhun now.

'Sometimes I wonder if it was just because he didn't take a loss and not so much that the Green Empress graced us with her kindness.'

They both looked at each other smiling, although Hu'orhun's eyes were still wet.

'But that's why the Humans need us, Huhu,' Tu'wehan said as he laid his rough hands on her, for a Dwarf, narrow shoulders. 'Please, come with me. I feel like we have to help them because we have so much to offer.'

Tu'wehan had always been such a helpful and caring person, Hu'orhun thought to herself. It was actually one of the biggest reasons that she loved him so much. He was always right there with a helping hand, no matter the problem. But this was too much, even for him.

Before she could say anything, however, Tu'wehan spoke again.

'And isn't this what you always wanted?'

'I-'

All perplexed by the sudden question, Hu'orhun couldn't manage to get any other words out.

'You know, back when we used to skip my classes and your Initiate duties in the Chamber of the Heart. When we explored every nook and cranny of Zhi'Na Qien pretending to be explorers of the humid jungles to the south or finding ancient artefacts of the First Dwarves in the frozen wastes of the north?'

Hu'orhun did remember. In fact, those times, when the two of them managed to sneak away, were probably her happiest memories from her time as Chamber Initiate.

'Remember that time,' Tu'wehan continued, 'when we laid on the roof of one of the western guard towers looking out over the rice fields and watching the suns set on the vast lands beneath the Giant?'

Again, of course Hu'orhun remembered. She clearly remembered sitting on those faded green roof tiles that stuck out from the side of the Giant, feeling the last rays of the suns as they disappeared under the horizon. And she also clearly remembered the feeling of warmth when looking at Tu'wehan, lying down next to her with his eyes closed.

'I do remember,' she said, smiling a little brighter. 'Keeper Ji'ayuhan gave me a whack with the Everburning staff and made me clean up in the Medicine Chambers for twenty-one days after I came back but it was all worth it.'

'My Heart Keeper made me recite dusty old history books in front of my entire class,' Tu'wehan said, meeting her smile. 'And my mother made me promise never to see you again after that.'

He shrugged as they both laughed.

'I also remember that you, on that roof, made me swear that we would someday travel to the other Slumbering Giants that are out there.' Tu'wehan grabbed Hu'orhun's hands and squeezed them ever so slightly. 'And I remember you making me this brooch out of twigs, leaves, and some sap so I wouldn't forget that promise.'

Hu'orhun reached out for the brooch adorning Tu'wehan's chest just above his heart.

'You've always worn it ever since,' she stated and felt her eyes welling up again. 'It was so long ago, I'm surprised it's still intact.'

'I will never let it break,' he told her, 'but I have had to mend it a lot. It's not made of the sturdiest of materials.'

Tu'wehan's smile turned cheeky as he looked at Hu'orhun, awaiting her response. This time it was her turn to let out a chuckle.

'You even wore it on top of your fancy brown zhiduo when we wed.'

'I did.'

'That time it was you who made the promise, and not me forcing you to swear,' Hu'orhun recalled.

'I did that too. It was important for me to let you know that I meant it.'

The two of them got back to simply standing there. Tu'wehan was looking at his wife's fair, round face, while Hu'orhun was fiddling with his brooch. The anger and desperation had left the room, if even for a moment. Hu'orhun was the first to break the silence.

'I'll never forget the pain of waiting for you to turn twenty so we could get married,' she said, still looking at the brooch.

'Me neither. And I'll never forget the pain that came next and was so very different either.'

Tu'wehan pulled up the left sleeve of his green linen shirt revealing a strip of scorched skin across the wrist. Hu'orhun likewise pulled up the wide sleeve of her new green ru showing the matching mark on her right wrist.

'I don't know what I expected,' Tu'wehan said as he rubbed his scorched mark, 'I mean, they did pour molten lava over our joined arms, even if it was just for a couple of seconds.'

'I didn't care,' Hu'orhun returned. 'They could have lowered me into the fiery heart itself if it meant that I could finally call you my own!'

Hu'orhun caressed Tu'wehan's cheek and his always neatly combed beard.

'And if nothing else,' Tu'wehan added, 'the look on our families' faces when her highness entered the Heart Chamber, wielding our sceptre, to name us Monarchweavers was incredible to say the least!'

'I still think that your parents were a little disappointed that we wouldn't continue the line of Shieldshapers by name.'

'If they did, they hid it well. I just remember both of them shining almost as much as your father and mother, and they seemed happy to simply be at the Chamber of the Heart that day.'

'Well, you know how big it was for mom and dad,' Hu'orhun added, 'being a Ricetiller rarely grants you any privileges so seeing her Green Grace up close was quite something! It's still my mom's favourite story to tell.'

'I know, and I always let her share it when we visit.'

Tu'wehan continued his smile but Hu'orhun's demeanour suddenly changed.

'But you're not gonna visit them anymore are you?'

The silence fell upon the couple once more. This time it was Tu'wehan to break it, though his smile had faded too.

'I swore to you that I would take you to see the world,' he said in a heartfelt tone of voice, 'that I would take you to see the mists of Wu'Na Qien, the frozen peaks of Xai'Na Qien, the restless sleep of Hu'Na Qien, or any of the other Slumbering Giants! This is me trying to finally keep my promise, or at least the start of it.'

Tu'wehan had gone back to packing as he started listing the different Giants sleeping across the world. He had found several belts, both for everyday work, and some formal ones decorated with beautiful jade, to take with him.

'Come with me, Huhu, so we can explore where no Dwarf ever has, just like we dreamed of doing!'

'I...' Hu'orhun had trouble finding the words again, '...don't know what you're expecting of me.'

Part of her wanted to say "yes" to Tu'wehan's proposal, to travel by the side of her spouse, help the Humans, and see where it would take them. A bigger part of her, however, reminded her of what had happened so long ago when she was still living among the rice fields with her family.

'I- You-, ' she stammered. 'N-not like this, it's too similar,' was all Hu'orhun finally managed to say.

'Too similar to what?' Tu'wehan replied having found a bunch of woollen pants to pack, mostly of grey and black, but also different shades of green and brown.

'You know...' Hu'orhun didn't want to think about it, much less say it out loud. She took a deep breath before finishing the sentence. 'About the time when *they* came!'

The memory of desperately looking over her shoulders, as three elder Heart Keepers led her from her family, was a wound that had never truly healed.

Of course Tu'wehan knew what she was talking about, and he felt rather terrible for asking that question.

'Huhu, it's not gonna be like that time,' he promised her, 'I'm not taking you anywhere against your wi-'

'But you're not giving me a choice!' Hu'orhun interrupted before Tu'wehan could finish what he wanted to say. 'You're merely coming here and suddenly springing this huge thing on me and expecting me to follow? For all the Slumbering Giants out there, what did you think I would say?'

'I didn't-'

'No, you didn't think that far!' She once again didn't let her husband finish, as the fires of the room burned brighter. 'You're giving me an impossible choice and that is taking away control, and you know what that does to me and how much-'

Hu'orhun could feel her body tensing. Suddenly it got harder to speak the words she wanted. She tried to take a deep breath as a means to go on.

'You can't do this!' she finally managed to say. 'You have already made a choice and then you put it on me to decide if we-'

Not now, Hu'orhun thought, *not now of all times*.

'I- I can't...' Hu'orhun started to stutter again. 'Y-y-you can't... I-'

A thousand thoughts raced through her head as Hu'orhun's body started to shut down. The thoughts drowned out anything she was trying to say, resulting in her just standing there in the middle of the room with a slightly open mouth, looking at nothing. Not even her husband. Tu'wehan had not moved either but was staring at her with great concern.

Was this really happening?, Hu'orhun thought. *Why was this happening? Are we actually breaking up? But we can't break up, we promised to always be there for each other, to grow old and to realise our dreams together.*

The racing thoughts were almost unbearable.

What am I gonna do on my own? I don't know how to work the anvil, not very well at least. No, I'm best when handling the fire but I can't be an Iron Artisan with only controlling the flames. I have to go back to the Chamber of the Heart and trade in my freedom and my life to pick up where I left off all those years ago. No, I can't do that either. Not even if Zhi'Na Qien itself should awaken. I can't go back!

The fires and flames in the Monarchweaver household started spitting at random as Hu'orhun spiralled into her own mind. This was where Tu'wehan would usually come into action as he had done so many times before. Whenever Hu'orhun got lost in a problem that she couldn't see a way out of, her spouse would appear and calm her down by holding her close and singing some of her favourite Dwarven hymns of old. The deep, soothing voice of Tu'wehan, combined with his loving embrace, always got Hu'orhun's mind back from the depths to see things more clearly.

Don't worry, Huhu, I'm right here. Tu'wehan opened his mouth almost instinctively as he saw what was happening. But instead of a song, silence was the only thing that filled the room as Tu'wehan closed his lips again. *Does she even want my help? I don't think it's ever been this bad and I'm the cause of it all.*

It pained him to see his beloved wife standing in distress but one question kept Tu'wehan from acting; what if she hated him now?

In the middle of the room, a tear started rolling down Hu'orhun's cheek as she looked at her Tu'wehan, eyes begging for help but unable to ask for it.

Why isn't he doing anything? Why is he just standing there looking at me? Has he already made up his mind that he doesn't love me anymore? Is that also why he's so set on leaving and why this is all happening now? The thoughts in Hu'orhun's mind were still many but they seemed to be slowing down.

Tu'wehan still hadn't moved an inch and was looking with intense worry at his wife. He was still struggling, inside his own head, to figure out whether Hu'orhun would want his help or not.

He isn't going to help, is he? Hu'orhun starting thinking to herself. That sudden realisation was all it took for her to start gaining some control back of her own body. For starters, just enough to wipe the tears away.

When the fires stopped their aimless spitting, Tu'wehan silently began packing again. He didn't say anything to his spouse but he made a sigh of relief as he walked towards the walnut travel chest. While Tu'wehan still wanted Hu'orhun to join him on the journey, it was nice to know that she was able to claw herself back from spiralling without his help.

As Tu'wehan walked past the now somewhat calm hearth, he stopped to look at the decorative shield hanging above it. Maybe it was the changing flickers from some flames that got reflected in the shiny metals which caught his eye. Maybe it was something else. But now, Tu'wehan couldn't take his eyes off the object that had adorned their wall for years.

The beautiful heater shield was a gift from the Shieldshapers, made by Tu'wehan's father, when he and Hu'orhun had started their own blacksmith. The polished iron shield was topped with the head of a golden, four tinned hoe. Centre to the work, a silver loom was depicted from which threads combined in an ornate sceptre much like the one that the couple had made in their youth. All of it was intertwined by flames of gold. Across the bottom curvature, the shield was ornamented with an iron banner in which "Monarchweavers" stood ingrained with Dwarven seal script. Tu'wehan made a slight smile as he remembered the day his father gifted them the shield. It had been one of Tuwe'han's proudest moments.

'I want you to have our shield,' he said. 'That is, of course, if you decide to stay here?'

'Why?' Hu'orhun asked almost before Tu'wehan could finish talking.

'Why? It was a gift for the both of us and I figured you could-'

This time Hu'orhun did interrupt her husband before he was done.

'No, not the shield,' she said in the most indifferent tone. 'Why have you chosen now of all times to leave with the Humans?' Hu'orhun's expression had changed to more inquiring

than the helpless one she was trapped in a minute before. In the myriad of thoughts and questions, this one kept coming back. 'Why not wait until we are both ready? Then we could leave Zhi'Na Qien together like we always planned?'

A moment went by before Tu'wehan answered.

'You know why, I just told you,' he finally muttered. 'The Chapters and their entourage haven't got any skilled blacksmiths so I'll be lending them my aid. We will be, if you decide to come with me.'

'No, that's not the reason.' Hu'orhun sounded a bit more cold than she intended. 'I need you too so why aren't you determined to stay?'

'That's why I want you to-'

Once again, Hu'orhun didn't let Tu'wehan finish.

'Your whole family is here too, don't they need you? And what about your sacred duty?'

'What sacred duty?' Tu'wehan responded, avoiding the original questions.

'Don't pull that!' Hu'orhun countered half mockingly, half annoyed by her husband's gall to ask that question. 'You know damn well that it's the sacred duty of the Dwarves of Zhi'Na Qien to make sure the Giant never wakes from its slumber!'

'But wouldn't we have broken "our sacred duty" anyway when we would have left eventually?'

Tu'wehan had found a bunch of leather aprons to pack and was once again on his way to his travel chest.

'Well, I- It would have been the two of us and...' Hu'orhun struggled to come up with an argument. Instead her ruby eyes turned to pleading.

Tu'wehan didn't let her suffer for long, though.

'Do you actually believe what they preach at the Chamber of the Heart?' he asked, stopping the packing of the leather aprons that he usually donned by the forge. 'Have you actually ever seen proof that the Giants are alive? And that it should be our duty to keep them in their slumber?'

'I-' This time Hu'orhun also had trouble finding the words but it was more because the question took her by surprise than anything else. She had never thought to hear her husband challenge their faith.

'What do you mean?' she eventually said. 'We've both been coming to the Chamber of the Heart since we were born. We've seen all the rituals first hand that the Heart Keepers perform to prevent The Awakening from happening. We've both been taught the tales from the time of the First Dwarves up until now. Do you think all of that was for fun?'

'Well...' Now it was Tu'wehan's turn to interject. 'Just because the Heart Keepers do their rituals and teach their history of how the First Dwarves battled the mighty Giants rising from the earth doesn't mean it's proof that it's all true. It's just rituals and stories.'

Hu'orhun almost fell down in shock because of what she had just heard her husband say.

'But what proof do you need?' she asked almost aggressively. This was the first time she had heard Tu'wehan express these feelings and she found herself having some difficulty with how to respond.

Hu'orhun left her spot, where she had been standing almost ever since Tu'wehan had started packing, and walked with purpose past him over to the hearth. She rolled up her broad sleeve and stuck her right hand into the fire as if trying to grab it. When she took it back out, Hu'orhun's hand was covered in flames but the skin still looked untouched.

'Can't you *feel* the fires around you?' Hu'orhun asked as she looked at Tu'wehan, concentrating on the rising flames enveloping her hand. The other fires in the room followed suit.

'Careful, Huhu, your sleeve...' Tu'wehan said, pointing at her new silken ru. Hu'orhun had been so focused on removing the right sleeve from the flames that she didn't realise the left one had actually caught on fire. It wasn't much, and she put it out with a quick swing of the arm leaving only a small hole with burned edges. At least now the jacket matched most of her other garments.

'Whatever. I'm asking you a question.'

'No one can feel the flames like you, Huhu.'

'Well, if not the fires,' she said as she closed her hand to put the fire out, 'don't you always say that the metal *sings* to you when we work the smithy? *That* is the essence of what they preach at the Heart Chamber, to listen to the elements around us!'

The heat had definitely come back as Hu'orhun made her argument. Small pearls of sweat started to form again on Tu'wehan's forehead as he thought about what to say next.

'I like what the Chapters teach about the Five Pillars,' he suddenly let out. 'I mean... I like the idea they have about helping the less fortunate and each other. You know, to help create a peaceful and prosperous life for everyone involved.'

'Well, I- I don't- What?' Hu'orhun was both a little baffled by Tu'wehan's change of subject and his knowledge of the Humans' religion. 'How do you know what those Chapters preach?'

'"Chapters",' Tu'wehan corrected.

'Whatever... you haven't seen them preach more than those couple of times we passed those Chapitans on the Chamber Terrace, have you?' Hu'orhun had a bad feeling about that question but she also felt a strong urge to ask it.

'They're called "*Chapters*,"' Tu'wehan corrected once again but he wasn't quite sure why.

'Just answer the question.'

Tu'wehan took a deep breath before saying anything.

'I have been...' He looked his wife deep in her eyes before continuing. 'I've been more engaged with the Chapters, and their company, than you probably know,' he finally admitted.

Hu'orhun was quite unsure how to react to this new information yet she still found herself asking another question.

'When have you been more engaged with them?'

'Lately I've been timing my deliveries and my trips to the Miners around when the Chapters have been giving their teachings,' Tu'wehan answered. 'Their Dwarven aren't particularly great but it's been getting better and I've listened to them a fair amount. I've even been helping them here and there with problems, like fixing wheels on their carts or carrying things. You know how Humans aren't the strongest bunch,' Tu'wehan ended, forcing a smile.

Once again, Hu'orhun merely stood there doing nothing, though this time in front of the fireplace. As she was staring at Tu'wehan in utter disbelief of what he was telling her, he continued.

'There's this one Chapter, called Petar, who I've learned quite a lot from. He's also the one that told me of their charge to spread the Teaching of the Five Pillars, and how they are in dire need of skilled blacksmiths like me. And like you, my sweet Huhu.'

The way Tu'wehan phrased that last sentence gave Hu'orhun a small sting in her stomach.

'And what *proof* do they have that these "Five Pillars" are real?' she asked rather snarkily. 'If *proof* is so important to you?'

'Chapiter Petar has healed some of my smaller wounds with his blessed water.'

'Is that all? The Heart Keepers heal wounds and injuries all the time! Why aren't The Slumbering Giants real all of a sudden?'

Tu'wehan had moved on to packing shoes but he stopped for a little while to think.

'It didn't hurt when Chapiter Petar healed me with his blessed water,' he said with his head looking down to the floor.

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'You know the searing of the wounds that happens when the Heart Keepers heal with their fire,' Tu'wehan reminded her. 'And they always leave a scar.'

'I never thought the pain was that bad,' Hu'orhun responded hesitantly. 'Besides, wounds scar when they heal naturally so what's the problem if it happens when the Heart Keepers heal with their fire? As long as a wound is treated and you can go along with your life just fine afterwards!'

'Well, the Chapiters' blessed water might have felt strange but it didn't really hurt and it didn't leave a scar. Not a noticeable one anyway and I quite like that.' Tu'wehan was still looking at the floor, and not at his wife, when talking. 'Besides, that's not the only reason...'

He barely whispered that last part to himself but Hu'orhun still heard him.

'What other reason is there?' she instantly asked. 'Or should I say "proof"?''

'There was the time when Chapiter Petar performed the Iron Burden in front of everyone,' Tu'wehan said with a slight shake in his voice. 'Remember that?'

'Somewhat...' Hu'orhun said, downplaying her memory of the event. But of course she did. In fact, it was so rare that it had been the only Iron Burden to happen so far in their lifetime.

'It happened right there on the Chamber Terrace. We both spectated as Chapiter Petar grabbed and held the glowing hot iron mace that the Heart Keepers presented to him. And you also saw how little strain his hands showed afterwards!'

'I'm sure it was some kind of trickery,' Hu'orhun dismissed.

'Petar told me how he and the other Chapiters soaked his hands in their blessed water before lifting the mace.'

'See? I told you so!' Hu'orhun countered, quite pleased with herself and her ability to call out the Human preachers. 'It was all just a trick!'

'But don't you see? Their blessed water was given to them directly by Angels, these divine, winged beings of Haven, and if it can protect that well against something so hot, then there has to be something to the Five Pillars and their teachings. Petar has even told me that he's seen some of these Angels once, taking a deadly ill believer to a better place. And if Haven is real that means the Five Pillars are real, which in turn would mean-'

Tu'wehan, who was now looking directly at Hu'orhun, suddenly paused before once again looking down at the stone floor of their home. His voice had also started to shake even worse just before he stopped talking.

'What would it mean?' Hu'orhun asked.

Tu'wehan didn't answer but instead kept eyeing the stone in the floor.

'What would it mean, Tu'wehan?' Hu'orhun asked a second time in a sharper tone. Unlike her husband, her gaze was fixed on the person she was talking to.

But Tu'wehan still didn't answer. He couldn't, because deep down he knew that if he spoke he would say something that he didn't want to say. Something he didn't want to admit. Something that he hadn't even admitted to himself.

‘Tell me now, Tu’wehan Monarchweaver, Iron Artisan of the Shieldshaper line, what would it mean if your precious Pillars were real?’ Not only was Hu’orhun’s voice as sharp as her ruby daggers could be but Tu’wehan could also feel the heat rising again at an alarming rate.

Tu’wehan raised his head and looked at Hu’orhun with begging eyes. But his begging was not met with any form of friendliness, and so Tu’wehan bursted out that which had been weighing him down for quite some time. That which he had been afraid to say out loud to anyone, much less himself. That which was the real reason he had decided to leave Zhi’Na Qien.

‘Because I don’t know how far I have to climb to reach Haven when I die!’

Hu’orhun, now more confused than ever, could hardly muster a word to question what Tu’wehan had just just said. But in the end, she didn’t have to.

‘It’s what I’ve learned from Petar,’ Tu’wehan continued, almost stumbling over his own words. ‘You have the Five Pillars, which is everything good in the world, representing Haven with Life, Peace, Feast, Prosperity, and Vigour, but they’re not just a representation of Haven because opposite them are the Broken Pillars, symbolising all that is wrong and immoral of the world, and when you die, or when the Day of Judgement comes, you have to climb your own Five Pillars in order to reach Haven and the Everlife, and the height of your Pillars are determined by how much you sinned in your life and strayed from the virtues of the five good Pillars, and you know that I’m not a very good climber, Huhu, so I have to make sure that I start living by the Teachings as soon as possible so that my Five Pillars are as low as they can get, just to be safe, and not fall to the eternal torment of one of the Broken ones!’

‘I...’ Overwhelmed by Tu’wehan’s explosion, Hu’orhun tried to find something to say as her spouse caught his breath.

‘You... actually really believe-’

Hu’orhun was interrupted mid sentence by a loud knocking.

They both stood in silence, looking at the heavy oaken door in the ornamented stone arch of their outer wall.

Tu’wehan turned towards Hu’orhun as another three knocks came from the door. However, this time it was his look to be met with a pair of begging, misty eyes, telling him not to open or say anything.

Closing his own eyes, Tu’wehan took a deep breath and turned to the still closed door.

‘Come in.’

Hu’orhun was the one to close her eyes now, resulting in a couple of tears running down her rounded cheeks, as she heard her husband invite whoever was on the other side of the door into their home.

The door opened with a heavy creak and in entered a tall, pale Human with long, slightly greasy, grey hair and full beard to follow. He had to bow quite a lot in order to fit through the oaken door made for Dwarven heights.

‘Havenum Vidae et!’ the Human exclaimed with big, joyous lapis eyes and widespread arms. No one answered immediately.

It took a little while for anyone to break the silence.

‘Vidaum ae Colloneus et,’ Tu’wehan finally said in return. ‘It means-’

He stopped himself as he again looked to Hu’orhun, her head shaking ever so slightly with pressed lips and wet, disappointed eyes.

The Human, quickly sensing the tension in the room, cleared his throat before also turning to Hu’orhun.

'My name... Petar. Chapter Petar, and I from Five Pillars Teachings... company... come.' The introduction from the Human was indeed in broken Dwarvish but was nonetheless understandable and followed by an extended hand, a traditional Human greeting. Their way of saying hello to each other was one of the few things that Hu'orhun knew about the outsiders.

'You Hu- Hu'or... hun?' Petar asked.

Hu'orhun didn't meet his greeting and only managed to scoff at the question while giving Petar the same look Tu'wehan had received.

'I... see...' There was a genuine sadness in Petar's voice as he retracted his arm and the greeting. 'I guess her... not with us coming?'

As broken as Petar's Dwarvish was, Hu'orhun couldn't help but be a little impressed by his abilities even in her current state. After all, the Humans had only arrived at Zhi'Na Qien three or four months ago.

'Ready you?' Petar asked Tu'wehan.

'I am, just about.' Kneeling down, Tu'wehan closed and secured the lid of the travel chest, thus confirming what he just said. He didn't look at Hu'orhun until he stood up. Tu'wehan's own eyes were teary as well.

Over by the fireplace, Tu'wehan's glance was met by still more watery eyes, pleading him not to ask what they both knew he was about to. The tears once again started to run down Hu'orhun's rounded features as she silently mouthed the words *please* and *don't*.

This was the moment that Tu'wehan had been most afraid of ever since he had decided to leave Zhi'Na Qien with the Chapters and their entourage. He was almost certain that he knew the answer to the unavoidable question coming up. Fighting to hold back his own tears, he forced a sombre smile.

'Are you coming... or not,' Tu'wehan's voice was trembling like never before, '...Huhu?'

Hu'orhun found that no words were able to slip through her lips. She could have known for years that this question would come and she would still not have been ready for it. How could she? This wasn't the way their life together was supposed to end. But when her love asked that fateful question, the words were written on their last page. As much as Hu'orhun loved the man in front of her, and as much as a part of her wanted to go with him, she simply could not.

'No,' she finally gained the composure to say, halting her tears for a moment. 'I can't follow you. Not like this.'

'I know,' Tu'wehan answered with a voice barely more than a whisper.

In an effort to hide a snivel and the tears that had started to flood down his square face, and into his ever so comely, dark brown beard, Tu'wehan quickly turned to his belongings ready for travel.

'Okay,' he said to Petar, who had been wordlessly waiting, and whose eyes had also started to water. 'Shall we?'

Tu'wehan wiped his large, boxy nose on his green linen shirt sleeve, grabbed his toolbox with one hand and one of the leather straps of his travel chest with the other. As Petar grabbed a hold of the matching strap on the opposite side, they lifted the chest up and started making their way towards the door.

'Don't go...' Hu'orhun heard herself say.

Much to everyone's surprise, but mostly Petar who suddenly found himself holding the travel chest alone, Tu'wehan almost threw the items in his hands to the floor and ran to Hu'orhun on his stout, Dwarven legs. It resulted in large *thunks* and clanging of

blacksmithing tools as they flew out of the toolbox and scattered across the stone floor. But Tu'wehan could not care less.

When he reached his love, Tu'wehan seized her in a strong embrace. He couldn't stop sobbing as he held as tight as he ever had.

Feeling Tu'wehan's strong arms around her, as well as the dampness of his tears as he pressed his face and beard against her neck and collarbone, Hu'orhun closed her eyes and laid her own arms tightly around him in return.

The sobbing of Tu'wehan slowly turned to a deep, melodious humming and for a breath or two, Hu'orhun felt a touch of serenity.

The warmth of holding each other in their arms, together with the harmonic sounds of Tu'wehan's humming, almost made Hu'orhun feel as if everything was going to be alright after all. However, the peaceful respite soon turned to dread as Tu'wehan's humming turned to song. When she recognised the old Dwarven ballad of farewell, the weight of what was happening came rushing back. And so did the tears to Hu'orhun's now wide open eyes.

Tu'wehan gently pushed himself away, just a little. As he clutched Hu'orhun's hands in his own, his hazel eyes looked at her with a sadness she never knew they could, while continuing to sing.

*'And should our paths nay cross anew,
Before the Giants must awaken,
Learn that in my heart so weighted,
Your spirit's blaze was ne'er taken.'*

Tu'wehan's deep voice wasn't trembling anymore when he tenderly moved Hu'orhun's elusive locks of fiery, red hair away from her face and behind her beautiful ears. And as he finished the song, his floods had turned back into single tears.

Bowing his head, Tu'wehan broke the mournful gaze that he and Hu'orhun had locked each other in.

'I'm sorry,' was all he whispered.

As Hu'orhun stood speechless in front of her beloved, Tu'wehan got up on tiptoes to kiss a single droplet away from her cheek. He squeezed her hands one more time before turning around and walking back to his new companion.

Petar had gathered all of the blacksmithing tools and was struggling to give the toolbox back to Tu'wehan with both his hands.

Defeated, Hu'orhun watched them both pick up the travel chest once again and walk to the heavy oaken door.

'Laet Haven som viatioum ad,' Petar said as he turned to Hu'orhun and bowed as deep as he could, with one hand still holding the chest, before exiting the Monarchweaver household.

At first, Tu'wehan walked out the door without as much as peeking in Hu'orhun's direction. Hu'orhun only managed to let out a small whimper in response to that.

Not a moment after, though, two measured *thunks* and a bit of clanging could be heard from the cobbled streets outside the house.

'I forgot this,' Tu'wehan said as he re-entered the doorway with half his body and reached for the grey, woollen travel cloak on the wall. 'And I also forgot to say... goodbye, Huhu.'

Their eyes met a final time as Tu'wehan said goodbye. There was no water left in any of them, neither the ruby nor the hazel ones. Hu'orhun was slowly moving her head from side to side as their looks lingered.

'I am sorry,' Tu'wehan whispered once again. He took a last deep breath, and left Hu'orhun standing by the fireplace as he closed the door behind him.

Alone. Abandoned. Hu'orhun was looking at the doorway and couldn't actually believe that Tu'wehan had walked out the door, just like that. But she also couldn't deny the overwhelming emptiness that came creeping in.

Hu'orhun didn't know how long she had been standing there by the fireside, but she suddenly realised that she was holding something in her hands. Still folded in front of her chest, Tu'wehan must have handed her something just after they had embraced but before he left her.

Looking down, Hu'orhun opened her hands to see the brooch of twigs and leaves that she had made for her best friend on top of the guard tower so long ago. The brooch which Tu'wehan swore upon, promising to always be near her and that they would one day travel the world together. The brooch which never left the garments of her love.

Except not anymore. Now the brooch was resting in Hu'orhun's hands and not pinned to Tu'wehan's clothes. Now it was a broken promise, attached to nothing, and the more she looked at it, the more it seemed to be staring back at her.

Hu'orhun's heart skipped a beat and a couple of tears, from somewhere deep in her soul, found their way over her cheeks and onto the stone floor of the dim home. The fires in the candles had gone out. So had the flames of the fireplace.