

Overlord

Introduction

A long time ago, when there was still magic in the world, there lived a wizard.

At the edge of civilization, the wizard spent his days high in a tower overlooking the Valley of the Mages. His tower was not a mighty stone obelisk with sharp angles and perfectly smooth walls, shining in the morning sun. Rather, it was a rudimentary, cylindrical spire with rough, uneven walls made up of stones gathered from the valley below and mortared together. It was rather dark, and it was neither large nor luxurious; but it fulfilled the wizard's needs, providing him with privacy and a place where he could concentrate on his studies.

Covered with scrolls and ancient texts, rows of tall bookshelves dominated the study. Against the wall sat a sturdy wooden table, also strewn with scrolls and books, where the wizard conducted his studies. Near the table was a small fireplace, for the tower was cold and damp in the winter. And double wooden doors opened to a balcony overlooking the valley below. When propped open, these doors and a small window above the table provided light for the wizard's studies. In this cramped and cluttered environment, amid the smell of old parchment, the wizard spent long hours, day after day, poring over ancient scripts and rummaging through arcane texts, perfecting his command of the art of magic.

Because of these long hours of study over many years, the wizard's knowledge was vast and his mastery of the magical arts was such that it was heralded throughout the land in rumor and legend. But his devotion to his studies was not merely for personal gain. The wizard was not like most men, who devote their lives to accumulating wealth and power. While lesser men spend their lives obsessed with their own prosperity and well being, giving little thought to the good of others, this wizard was different. He answered to a higher calling, striving to increase his knowledge and power not for selfish ends, but to protect his people. For this wizard had vision and understanding of things to come. Although we begin our story in a period of prosperity and peace, the wizard knew of dark times ahead; evils that would demand all his strength to overcome.

Hunched over his books and immersed in his studies, with his long white beard and perceptive gaze, one may have assumed the wizard to be old and infirm. But this was not the case. He had been studying the ways of magic for several centuries and, as is common among wizards, over the years he had developed an affinity with the universe such that the flow of magic through him had preserved his health, preventing the passage of time from deteriorating his body. To be sure, the wizard was neither weak nor frail. Rather, he had the strength and endurance of a young man in the prime of life.

And, while the wizard's appearance may have led one to doubt the fortitude of his body, so too with his mind. The long hours he spent alone in his tower had led him to develop

the peculiar habit of occasionally talking to himself. He would not carry on a conversation, taking part in both sides of the dialogue. Rather, from time to time, when deep in thought or faced with some intriguing mystery, he would utter his thoughts aloud. This seemed strange to those who did not have the privilege to know him well, and few had such privilege, for the wizard chose his friends with care. But this wizard was neither eccentric nor senile. On the contrary, this wizard was very wise.

This wizard was Alathor and, as we look back on his quest to protect his people, we shall see just how wise a wizard he was.

Far enough from civilization that he had few visitors, yet close enough that he could reach the neighboring villages in a matter of days, Alathor's humble abode sat on the edge of the Kingdom of Havenrealm, a small but thriving state on the rich, fertile plains to the west of the Fortitude Mountains.

Many generations before, the first settlers from across the Sea of Sythillian had arrived to find the region wild and uninhabited. They came fleeing from the war-torn lands to the north in search of a more peaceful existence and a land where they could forge a better future. With time and the sweat on their brow, the settlers tamed the land and founded the kingdom, building a fortified castle at Havenrealm City and establishing Anchorport on the coast. Soon thereafter, as more settlers arrived from the north, small farming villages formed along the banks of the Slowdrift River and throughout the area.

And, as news of this new kingdom reached the lands to the north, Alathor saw that this was good. Frustrated with the warring factions that ignored his pleas for peace and schemed instead to draw him into the conflict, the wizard followed the settlers across the sea. He built his tower in the Valley of the Mages and took this new kingdom under his protectorate, as had been customary according to the code of the Wizard Council before its demise.

As Havenrealm City grew, guilds developed for various professions, such as the Tanners' Guild and the Blacksmiths' Guild, each one with the purpose of preserving the knowledge of their profession and perfecting its practice. Eventually, the crafts and goods produced in Havenrealm City were renowned far and wide for their high quality. And merchants would travel from distant lands to trade or purchase goods. Furthermore, the fertile soil and the solid work ethic of the people made the surrounding farming villages very productive. They produced enough food for the region with a surplus for trade. As a result, the economy thrived and trade routes developed with kingdoms far and wide. There was trade with the feudal kingdoms to the north, with the dwarves in their mountain kingdom to the southwest, with the nomads through the Bazaar on the edge of the desert, and with a variety of peoples to the east across the wild.

At first, trade was difficult, for the lands to the south remained untamed. Merchants and trade caravans would fall victim to bandits, marauding orcs, or any number of evils that lurk beyond the edge of civilization. But the people of Havenrealm overcame the obstacles that stood before them. Merchants organized trade caravans to bolster their

numbers and they hired mercenaries to protect them on their journeys. Soon, trade flourished and the people of Havenrealm grew in prosperity.

With the passing years, the kingdom gained control of the lands to the south. An important trade route, the Great Trade Road, developed between the Bazaar in the west and the distant kingdoms of the east, facilitating commerce between Havenrealm and the rest of the subcontinent. Soon, an outpost was build close to the Great Forest to protect trade along this route. And, with time, this small castle on the edge of the kingdom grew into a great metropolis, the mighty City of Farfield.

By the era before our story begins, the lands between Havenrealm City and Farfield had been under the kingdom's control for many years. Villages had formed in much of the area, soldiers patrolled the roads, and travelers crossed the region without worry for their safety. Alathor had seen the kingdom through countless conflicts. He had guided its leaders through a wide variety of crises. And he had developed a profound love for this peaceful land and its kind, hard-working people. The Kingdom of Havenrealm enjoyed a period of peace and prosperity far greater than that dreamed of by its founders.

An Old Friend's Riddle

The wizard was in his study copying a spell from a tattered scroll to his thick spell book. With great care, he drew each rune and glyph in black ink. When finished, he rolled up the scroll and placed it on a shelf at the back of his study, leaving the book open on the table so the ink would dry without the slightest smudge or smear. Over the years, the book had grown so thick and heavy that the mage struggled to lift it. Bound by an old leather cover, it contained every spell and incantation that the wizard had encountered during his many long years of study, and many that he had created himself. Some were easy to memorize and the wizard could cast them at will, but others were very elaborate and he had to read them from the book or a scroll to invoke their power. Some were mighty incantations to conjure fire or control the weather while others were mere trifles, allowing the mage to light the candles with a wave of his hand or pull a rabbit out of his hat.

It was early afternoon on a warm spring day and Alathor decided to take a break from his studies for lunch. Leaving his spell book on the table, he stepped out onto the balcony to get a breath of fresh air and take in the impressive view of the Valley of the Mages for a moment. Below, the grassy fields descended from the foot of the mountain and stretched across the valley to the gray mountains that lined the southern horizon. Bathed in the afternoon sun, the tall grass bowed and swayed in erratic, unpredictable patterns as a soft breeze found its way down the valley. And against the green background, the wizard saw a lone figure dressed in a dark red robe and wizard's hat making his way toward Alathor's tower.

"Melchor," exclaimed the wizard to himself, returning to his study and starting down the stairs. "My friend, Melchor. What a fine day it is indeed."

The quiet isolation of Alathor's tower was necessary for his studies, but the mage truly enjoyed the company of his few, select friends when they came to visit. And chief among them was Melchor. There was no one else with whom the mage had so much in common, and no one else with whom he could talk about what most interested him, the art of magic and its many mysteries.

Alathor and Melchor had met ages before, not long after beginning their studies. As the only apprentices on the Wizard Council, and feeling that they did not yet fit in with the powerful wizards around them, they had spent much time together. They discovered that they shared many of the same interests. They found that their studies were easier when they took time to discuss their lessons and share their learnings with one another. As youngsters do, they found their fair share of mischief, turning Alathor's master's cat into a toad or making a rain cloud follow one of the senior members of the council wherever he went. And, between their studies and their juvenile pranks, they developed a lifelong friendship.

Alathor reached the tower entrance and stepped outside. A rough stone wall with a wooden gate enclosed a small courtyard where the wizard kept any goods he did not wish to store indoors; firewood and chickens or other small farm animals. Wading his way through the assorted supplies, he opened the gate and waited for his friend, who was now following the path from side to side up the foot of the mountain. He had a

pack on his back and he carried an elegant staff made of polished oak with runes and intricate figures carved in it.

"Welcome, my friend," yelled the wizard when his guest grew closer.

"Hello, old friend," answered Melchor. "It has been many weeks since I have paid you a visit."

Although Melchor's tower was only a half-day's travel across the valley, it was common for several months to pass without the wizards seeing each other, both immersed in their studies and tending to their own affairs. From time to time, they would travel together to Havenrealm City when the king requested their presence and advice. And occasionally a group of adventurers would request the mages' assistance on an expedition. But mostly, each wizard went about his own business and seldom sought out the other.

"It is good to see you," began Alathor as his friend reached the gate. "I was not expecting to see you for several weeks. What brings you about this afternoon?"

"Questions. Questions and worries," answered Melchor. "I bring news from the south, and I know not what to make of it."

"Please, come in and tell me what is worrying you," said Alathor, holding the gate open and stepping to the side to allow his friend to pass. They crossed the courtyard and stepped inside, following the entryway to the kitchen where a small fire warmed a kettle and a pot of stew next to a wooden table and chair. Alathor pulled a second chair to the table and invited his guest to have a seat.

"You must be hungry. Let me get you some food," he said as he placed a loaf of freshly baked bread on the table and prepared two large bowls of stew.

Although the wizard dedicated little time to his kitchen, he had many years of practice. And most everything he prepared merited taking a short break from his studies to enjoy. And while the two savored their stew, Melchor explained the reason for his worries.

"As you will recall, I traveled to Farfield and was there for several weeks to meet with the local Merchants' Guild," began the wizard...

Melchor had finished his business in Farfield and was preparing for the return journey to the north. Since Havenrealm had grown so large and the wizards were only two, their visits to the edges of the kingdom were few and far between. So, whenever they traveled to the outlying regions they would meet with the local leaders to learn what problems plagued the area. They would offer their advice or support, or at least return to the north with a better understanding of the issues affecting the region so the king could take the needs of the rest of the kingdom into consideration.

As such, Melchor had arranged to meet with the steward of the city. And, as he entered the meeting hall, he was expecting the steward to request his advice regarding a long list of problems. Two years before, when he had visited Farfield, not even a week had

gone by without news of orcs attacking travelers or raiding farming villages. A wide variety of problems had kept Melchor busy; however, this time his short stay had been uneventful.

Standing behind his chair at the head of the table, the steward invited Melchor to take a seat in the first chair to his left. Then, instead of sitting at his usual position, he took a step to the right and sat across from Melchor, leaving the chair at the head of the table empty. This was a common custom in Havenrealm. As a sign of respect and because a wizard answers only to the king, one with greater authority would often take a lesser position when in the company of a wizard, showing he regarded the wizard at least as an equal, if not as his superior.

"Good afternoon, my esteemed council. I am honored by your visit and I am eager to share with you a riddle," he greeted the mage.

"A riddle?" replied the steward's guest, intrigued.

"Perhaps with your wisdom you can answer the question that perplexes me," continued the steward. "As you know, the Great Forest is teeming with pillaging orc tribes. Until recently, we were fighting with them on a daily basis. So frequent were their raids, I had to station soldiers in each of the nearby villages and I assigned armed guards to escort travelers to our city. However, a little over a month ago, the attacks stopped and my soldiers who patrol the region have hardly seen an orc since."

"That is odd," replied Melchor after pondering the steward's words for a moment.

"One might think such a turn of events would be cause for celebration. Yet I fear it is not, for I wonder what has happened. Perhaps some greater evil has driven them from the woods to take their place," the steward said.

"Yes, where the servants of evil are concerned, one cannot take such a blessing at face value," agreed Melchor.

"Orcs are vile, despicable creatures. They may be like men in size and form, but they are twisted and evil," the mage went on. "Spawned of the black arts of sorcery in dark, dank dungeons, they have no concept of family or love, only hatred; for their hearts know only evil. Orcs have no art or literature; they are incapable of creating things of beauty. They do, however, have a sinister talent for anything related to cruelty and pain; forging weapons, creating poisons, and devising fiendish means of torture."

"Yes, I have visited the hamlets they have attacked, and I have seen what they do to their prey. They are vicious and cruel. They are like animals," Melchor's host affirmed, repulsed at the memory of villagers slaughtered by orcs.

"Do not underestimate your foes," Melchor warned. "It is easy to assume orcs to be ignorant, irrational animals, but they are not. Their evil nature makes their way of thinking very different from our own, but they are not ignorant. Not only are they intelligent, they are shrewd and cunning."

"Indeed," replied the steward, recalling a patrol that a band of orcs had ambushed. This was an undertaking that clearly had required a great deal of planning and forethought. "To underestimate these beasts would be a dangerous error."

"Returning to your question, I am afraid I cannot explain this abrupt change you mentioned. I will have to share this mystery with some associates when I return to the north. Perhaps Alathor or Erothain of the Paladin Order will have greater insight than I can provide."

"That is fine. I merely wished to see if you had any knowledge regarding what may have caused this sudden change. There must be an explanation," answered Melchor's host.

The steward and the wizard discussed several other topics of lesser importance that afternoon before bidding each other farewell; however, the steward's puzzle stuck in Melchor's mind. The beasts and evil things that lurked in the shadows had plagued the communities of the region for years. It was their nature to do so and the mage had no idea what could have changed this. They could not have suddenly disappeared. This puzzle troubled him and he pondered it late into the night, speculating about what may be afoot.

The following day, Melchor departed late in the morning, beginning the long return journey to the north. The weather was good for traveling; there was a soft breeze, and the sun was shining as the mage followed the Great Trade Road toward the Passage of Grayspires. In the evening he set up camp on the side of the road and prepared a light dinner of dried meat and bread he had packed for the journey. Since the region between the Passage of Grayspires and the Valley of the Mages was safe and well populated, with small villages and towns scattered across the Heartland, he had decided to travel light and purchase provisions along the way. Having packed food for only a few days, his pack was light on his back and he tired less as he crossed the plains.

On the evening of the second day, he crossed through the Passage of Grayspires and, after pushing onward until nightfall, he camped under the eaves of the Fortitude Mountains. It rained sporadically the following morning and, having eaten dried meat and bread for two days, the wizard decided to stop at the next village. There he would purchase provisions for the next few days and treat himself to a warm meal. Shortly before noon he reached a quaint farming village just off the Great Trade Road. From the road, an inn was visible on the town's edge. A wooden building that stood taller than the other structures, it invited travelers to its door with a large wooden sign with the words *The Hearth* carved in it and painted with the welcoming tones of autumn leaves.

There was one other customer having lunch in the inn, a merchant returning to the Heartland after spending several weeks in Farfield.

"Come, fellow journeyman," the merchant said, waving at Melchor when he entered the inn. "Let me share my table with you. The food is excellent, but it could be better with someone to talk to."

Melchor introduced himself, thanked the man, and took a seat across the table from him. The owner of the inn, eager to serve his new guest, was at the wizard's side ready to take his order as soon as he had taken a seat.

"May I suggest the chicken dumplings," he proposed. "With soup and bread, for our fine guest."

"Yes, please. And a cup of tea," replied Melchor.

As they enjoyed their food, Melchor and the merchant spoke about the weather and other topics of little importance. Soon, the merchant realized that he was speaking to a wise man with much knowledge of the ways of the world. He leaned forward toward the wizard and spoke in a hushed voice, although there was nobody nearby to hear their conversation.

"So, tell me what you think. Is it safe to continue the journey to the west?" he asked.

"Well, of course. I cannot see why the road would not be safe," the mage responded, perplexed by the man's inquiry.

"Then you did not see them," the merchant replied. "Yesterday, I was on the Great Trade Road not far east of here. I had set camp along the road and was about to start a campfire when I saw them. There were dozens of elves coming over the hill toward me from the east. I had never seen one of those wicked, treacherous creatures before, and I fled north away from the road before they got close. I found this town soon afterward and I have been here since."

"There were so many of them; I dare not think what mischief they are up to. Nor do I dare continue west for fear that they may wait and ambush me," he continued.

Melchor had known many elves and none of them were wicked nor treacherous; however, he understood the man's fear. There was little contact between men and elves, and much of what each race believed about the other was based on rumor, hearsay, and superstition. As far as the number of elves that the merchant had seen, elves seldom travel far outside their forest realms, but when they do, they travel in small groups. The wizard concluded that the man was exaggerating and reasoned that for someone who had never seen an elf, a group of a dozen elves would be an amazing site.

"I am sure they will not wait and ambush you. I have known a good many elves in my time and they are not interested in harming us. If you would feel safer, accompany me on the road north. My path takes me across the Heartland, and the leagues will pass more quickly with someone to talk to," proposed the wizard. The man graciously accepted, stating that he had never traveled in the company of a wizard before, and soon the two left The Hearth to continue their journey.

They stopped at the local market and Melchor purchased food for the next few days of the journey. The rain had subsided and the two resumed their voyage to the west. The journey was uneventful and they talked about a wide variety of topics as the road led them back toward the Heartland. Having never known a wizard before, the merchant was fascinated to hear of Melchor's journeys. Thus, for the most part, Melchor spoke

and his companion listened, occasionally asking a question or requesting the mage to elaborate on some topic, as they made their way down the Great Trade Road.

They continued for five days before crossing the Bounding River and starting up the North Road, the road that would take them across the Heartland. At night, they camped under the stars and during the day they talked at length about Melchor's life as a wizard as they made their way across the vast, green grasslands. After six days on the grassy plains of the Heartland, the travelers reached a path that would take the merchant a short distance west to his home town.

"Farewell," said Melchor. "And thank you for your company. Indeed the leagues have passed almost unnoticed."

"On the contrary, my fine wizard, it has been a pleasure. Thank you for your intriguing words along the way," replied the merchant as he started down the path toward his home.

The next day, as Melchor continued to the north across the Heartland, he saw a plume of dust rising from the roadway ahead on the next hill. It also advanced to the north and since the mage was traveling a little faster, it grew closer as the day passed. By late afternoon, he was within yelling distance and could see that the source of the dust plume was a heavily loaded horse-drawn cart carrying a small family and led by a middle aged man.

"Hello, fellow travelers," yelled the wizard.

"Hello," yelled the man as the cart came to a stop. "To where are you traveling?"

"To the Valley of the Mages," replied Melchor. There was a commotion on the cart as its occupants moved crates and bags from one side to the other while the wizard drew near.

"Come, my good wizard," yelled the man as Melchor grew closer. "We are returning to Argath, close to the Valley of the Mages. Please, join us and give your feet a rest."

Argath was a small village near the North Road where it veered east toward Anchorport. It was beyond the Valley of the Mages, so Melchor and the family would share the same path for many leagues, and the family was eager to have the wizard accompany them. The man introduced himself and, realizing that there was not enough room for Melchor on the cart, addressed his wife.

"Well, get down woman. Make room for the kind man. He must be tired," he instructed. With a nod, his wife stood and began climbing down from the cart.

"No, please sit," exclaimed Melchor, surprised that the man would have his wife walk so he could ride in the cart.

"Please, sir," answered the woman. "I would gladly walk that you should accompany us."

"I appreciate your generosity, but I would gladly accompany you if you would ride with your children," responded the wizard. "Please, be seated. I am not as old as I appear and I shall walk many leagues before my feet need a rest."

Resuming the journey north, Melchor walked beside the traveler ahead of the cart and, as they talked, he understood why the family was so eager for him to travel with them.

"We are returning from Farfield and, although we would prefer not to travel this road, we have no choice. We must return home in time to plant the fields," explained the man with a worried tone in his voice.

"Why would you not travel this road? It is very safe," exclaimed Melchor.

"Yes, that is what I believed," the traveler answered. "We have traveled this road every spring for many years with no problems. But two days ago we saw hundreds of elves following this same route north. And I wonder what mischief they are up to."

"Hundreds of elves?" repeated Melchor, now wondering if his assessment of the merchant's statements was mistaken.

"I counted eighty-three, but I missed many of them," yelled the younger of the man's sons from the front of the cart.

"You are the second traveler I have spoken with on the road from Farfield, and the second to mention having seen many elves along the way. I had assumed that it was an exaggeration when I heard of the number of elves to have traveled this road, but now I see that I was mistaken," began Melchor, his gaze drifting across the green plains to the north as he thought.

"I am sure the elves mean us no harm. They are not evil creatures," the wizard clarified. "Though, the elves seldom travel far from their forest abode and I wonder what caused them to venture so far from their home."

"Yes, I see," responded Alathor, caressing his beard as he considered his friend's account. "These are strange happenings."

"As requested by the steward, I will continue to Havenrealm City and inform the king of these events. In fact, I must go now so I might reach the valley entrance by dusk and start the last leg of my journey on the right foot," explained Melchor as he stood and retrieved his staff. "I merely wished to pay you a visit and mention this news so you would be aware."

"Yes, I am not prepared to travel on such short notice, but I believe I shall see you in Havenrealm City," stated Alathor as he accompanied his guest to the door.

"I thank you for the fine meal and your attentive ear," added Melchor, starting down the path to the valley below.

Alathor climbed the spiral stairway, passing the open door to his study and continuing until the stairs reached a wooden hatch in the ceiling. He climbed through the hatch to enter a circular room at the top of the tower, the Chamber of Farsight. Built of the same mortar and stone as the rest of the mage's abode, the walls were rough and irregular;

but the floor was one solid slab of stone, and was flat and even. A map of Havenrealm and the surrounding lands was carved in the floor and in the center, where the Valley of the Mages would otherwise have appeared, stood a stone pedestal with a glass sphere on it, a seeing stone.

The stone appeared to be full of smoke, but when the wizard approached and focused his mind on it the smoke cleared. Bright colors swirled in the interior of the seeing stone and then formed a crystal-clear image of the valley outside the tower. But then Alathor stepped away and the stone returned to its initial, dormant state.

"No," the mage muttered. "The south is vast and I know not where to look. The stone will not grant me the answers I seek, and its use will only drain my strength."

With that, he left the Chamber of Farsight and returned to his study, where he fetched a potion and several scrolls. He took them to his alcove, put them in a worn leather pack, and placed the bundle on his bed. A sturdy, wooden chest bound in iron sat at the base of the bed and, with a snap of the wizard's fingers, its lock clicked open. A few gold and silver coins slid out onto the floor when Alathor lifted the lid. Although the chest contained substantial wealth that the wizard had gathered during expeditions and adventures over the years, he gave little thought to its actual value. He took a handful of coins from the pile, put them in a leather pouch on his belt, and closed the chest. Then, retrieving his pack, he hurried downstairs.

"Flint and oil for a campfire," he mumbled to himself, passing the kitchen and entering one of the storage rooms. "And a lantern. Or torches."

Removing the pack from his back, he filled it with an array of items that could be of use while traveling to the capital.

"This should do it," he concluded after several minutes as he lifted his pack to his shoulder to verify that it was not too heavy.

Alathor remembered the days when the Great Forest had been calm and peaceful, and he knew that the change it had undergone in recent years was not by chance. There was evil in the woods. From time to time he could feel its presence in the distance when he used the seeing stone. He knew not what it was, but on several occasions he had tried to find it, searching the forest from the Chamber of Farsight, but to no avail. Now, stirred by the questions left unanswered by Melchor's account, the wizard's curiosity grew and he laid awake late into the night. Staring at the ceiling of his alcove, he contemplated the words of his old friend and pondered what may have set these events into motion.

In the morning, the wizard organized his study. After verifying that the ink was dry, he closed his spell book and placed it on a shelf. He collected several scrolls he had removed from the bookshelves and returned them to their place before closing the balcony doors and the window's shutters.

Now that all was in order in his abode, Alathor returned to his alcove where he retrieved his broadsword, his staff, and a dark blue, wide-brimmed, pointy hat to match his blue

wizard's robe. Fastening the scabbard to his belt, he lifted the backpack and put it over his shoulder as he started down the stairway to the tower entrance. Then, stepping out into the sunshine and crossing the small courtyard, he put his hat on his head and departed for Havenrealm City.

It was mid-afternoon by the time the mage departed and it was a fine day for a journey, the sun was shining and the valley was green. However, despite the nice weather, the mage's mood was sullen. He followed a faint path toward the valley's entrance in silence, pondering the peculiar events in the south and wondering how they could be related. Shortly after dusk the wizard was outside the Valley of the Mages but, having traveled for only half of the day, he did not yet feel the need to rest and he continued some distance after dark. There was a long road ahead and he was eager to reach Havenrealm City as soon as possible. After putting a significant distance behind him, he camped alongside the path under the stars.

Unlike the region around Farfield, most of Havenrealm was free of any foul creatures that would pose a threat to travelers. Once in a seldom while, groups of bandits had moved into the area to prey on traveling merchants. But the authorities in Havenrealm City had always responded by increasing the number of patrols and sending soldiers to arrest the outlaws. As a result, travel was safe and the region did not have the problems that one may encounter in the south.

The next day, Alathor prepared a small breakfast early in the morning and set out shortly after dawn. As the mage made his way down the gentle incline toward the river valley, the sky was cloudy and it started to rain lightly in the late morning. The weather matched the wizard's mood as he advanced in silence, mulling over his worries.

"Maybe internal discord divided the elves of Eastvale," he muttered to himself. "The elders of Eastvale are younger and less experienced than those of Serenindale. Perhaps they lacked the wisdom to reach a consensus on some issue that divided the community. Perhaps a large segment of the community was not willing to live with some decision their elders had made and opted to return to Serenindale."

"Serenindale," he repeated after a brief pause. "That is where the answer lies."

The wizard would have to conserve his rations, for the journey to Serenindale was longer than planned and for most of the way there were no roads. It would be important to inform the king of the happenings in the south but Melchor would take care of that and any further discussion would be pure speculation. To avoid troubling the king with hearsay, Alathor would visit the Elf Realm and find out first hand what was afoot.

On the second day after leaving the Valley of the Mages, the path reached the North Road, the road that Melchor and the family from Argath had taken several days before. Where the road followed the river, there were a variety of small villages and farming communities along the way. Consequently, the road was well traveled and the wizard's spirits were raised as he met other travelers along the way, travelers who knew nothing of the troubles in the south and had a more optimistic outlook.

Through countless interactions with others during his long lifetime, Alathor had gained insight into the nature of man. He had reached the realization that each individual is

unique and, in some way, beautiful. Yet, he understood that all are the same in some fundamental ways. Everyone strives to avoid pain and suffering. Everyone seeks to achieve some end, whether that be some lofty goal or merely to support one's family for one more day. And, deep down inside, everyone wishes to love and be loved. And, having this sense of affinity with others, it always brightened the wizard's day to interact with the people of his beloved Havenrealm.

Passing one small town, the wizard gazed upon his surroundings. A handful of townspeople were buying goods in the village market when a fisherman arrived with the day's catch. In the field to the east, a farmer and his son were sowing seed on freshly plowed ground. And a pair of soldiers patrolling the road greeted the mage as they rode past.

Alathor smiled to himself as he watched the others go about their activities. In them, he saw individual threads in the intricate tapestry of society. As each of them carried out their daily duties, they contributed in their own small way to the betterment of all.

The road was wide and paved with cobblestones, polished smooth by many years of use. And often, when a low hill concealed the way ahead, the mage heard others approaching by the distinctive, repetitive sound of their boots on the cobblestones. For several hours, he continued north past the small villages and hamlets that lined the roadway. Finally, he came to a fork in the roadway, known as the Crossroads, where the road to Havenrealm City branched off to the west and crossed a sturdy stone bridge spanning the wide waters of the Slowdrift River. There, Alathor crossed the bridge and left the road to the capital, traveling instead to the southwest across the plains.

Traveling across the grassy meadows, this part of the journey was rather quiet and lonesome. From time to time, he saw a farm or hamlet in the distance but he met no other travelers. Yet, despite the solitude, Alathor's outlook remained bright. He was fond of the elfin people and eager to reach the Elf Realm. And while he walked he contemplated the reasons for this feeling of closeness.

Like the wizard, the elves valued knowledge and wisdom over wealth, power or other material possessions. And, being immortal, there were elves who had lived for many centuries and grown wise. These eldest of the elves commanded great respect. And it was these oldest, wisest members that elfin communities looked to for guidance and leadership. It had been quite some time since Alathor had visited this Council of Elders, but he recalled how impressed he had been at how the elders used their combined wisdom to promote the greater good of their people.

But there were also traits of the elves that bothered the wizard. Few were the elves who traveled beyond the woods. Though Alathor had urged them otherwise, the elves kept to themselves, isolated from the rest of the world in their forest realms. Consequently, most men had never met an elf and many believed them to be nothing more than fictitious creatures from legends and children's tales. Elves, on the other hand, knew of their human neighbors, but only the most outgoing and adventurous of them had had more than superficial contact with humans. Since the races of men and elves had such little interaction with one another, much of what each believed about the

other grew out of rumor, legend, and mutual fear; fear of the unknown, fear of that which differs from what one is familiar with.

But the wizard understood the elves' reluctance to interact with their neighbors. Being immortal, many elves had lived longer than any man could dream possible. And it was with good reason that the elves respected their elders for their knowledge and wisdom, having learned for many centuries the lessons taught by the hardships, successes and failures of life. On the other hand, from the point of view of the elves, the wisdom and insight that a man could gather in his short lifetime must seem inconsequential next to that of the immortal elves. For this reason, the elves often saw the actions of men as rash and impetuous. They especially disliked man's disregard for nature and his undying preoccupation with material goods.

The elves did, however, have great respect for the wizards. Although wizards were simply men who had devoted their lives to the study of magic, the elves held them in high regard for their dedication to the pursuit of knowledge.

Pondering the ways of the elves, the journey passed quickly and, at dusk on the fourth day after leaving the roadway, Alathor set camp at the edge of a forest. The men of Havenrealm believed this forest to be haunted and refused to cross its borders, but the wizard knew there was nothing to fear. This was the forest where the elves dwelled and, in the morning, he would enter the Elf Realm.

Alathor entered the forest in the morning and continued to the southwest, passing among the white trunks of the birch trees that dominated this region of the woods. On its northeastern edge, the forest was young, the trees were thin and their foliage was sparse. Rays of sunlight penetrated the canopy above, forming columns of light that shined down on the fallen leaves and underbrush lining the forest floor. As he made his way deeper into the woods, the mage admired the beauty of the sunlight among the white birch trunks and wondered how the men of Havenrealm could believe such a beautiful forest to be haunted.

Late in the afternoon the wizard reached the foot of the mountains and followed them to the south. Still awed by his woodland surroundings, he let the gentle slope of the terrain guide him along the base of the mountains until dusk. In the morning, the mage continued deeper into the woods and soon the slope veered to the west, leading him into a breach between the mountains to the north of the forest and those to the south. Close to noon, he reached the point where this gap was narrowest, a place known to the elves as the East Gate. Suddenly, a voice greeted him.

"Welcome, my friend," exclaimed the voice. It was not a far off voice yelling in the distance. Although the mage saw no one, he could hear the voice as if the speaker was standing next to him.

Mere steps from Alathor, an elf stepped forward from the vegetation. As is typical of his people, he was thinner and not as tall as a human. And his angular facial features were particularly elfish. Yet, were it not for his pointy ears, he could easily be mistaken for a young man. He had long, blond hair, bright green eyes, and a kind smile as he reached

forward to shake the wizard's hand. The elf wore a short sword on his belt and carried a long bow in his left hand. He was wearing a long, hooded cloak that was the reason the wizard had not seen him, for it was an elfin cloak and when its wearer stood motionless among the foliage he blended into his surroundings. This was Findilaan, a member of the Council of Elders and long-time friend of the mage. Although he appeared to be a young adult, Findilaan was one of the oldest and most knowledgeable elves in all Serenindale.

Findilaan's long bow, a masterpiece of elfin craftsmanship, was almost as tall as he was. The elf carried it always, and kept it well strung. He had a quiver of arrows tied to the bow in such a way that when he raised the bow in his left hand, the quiver passed over his hand to the left of the bow. This allowed him to place an arrow on the right and aim without the quiver obstructing his view. Retrieving an arrow from the quiver was more difficult than if he carried it on his back, but carrying the quiver on his bow allowed him to wrap himself in his cloak and disappear into his surroundings.

After greeting the mage, Findilaan untied the quiver from his bow, threw his cloak back to expose his shoulder, and tossed the quiver of arrows on his back.

"Come and meet my friend," yelled the elf to the surrounding woods, looking back over his shoulder. One by one, four more elves stepped out of the foliage some distance to the south and approached Alathor.

"What brings you to the Elf Realm during our watch?" asked Findilaan after introducing his four companions to the wizard.

"Your watch?" replied Alathor. "Since when do the elves keep guard on their realm?"

"For several weeks now," answered Findilaan. "As you well know, some on the Council believe the outside world to be full of danger. And when the elves of Eastvale came home, it was decided that vigilance was in order. There has been a team here since. We have kept watch for six days and tomorrow another team will relieve us."

"Then you have the answer to your question. I am here for the same reason you are," said Alathor. "I wish to know what has happened in Eastvale."

"I see," responded Findilaan as he gazed to the west. "I would tell you what I know, but I believe my friend Hilfendil is the one you should speak with. He is from Eastvale and has the whole story, while I only have bits and pieces of it."

"Lend our visitor your horse. I will take him to meet Hilfendil," he instructed, turning toward one of his companions. The elf agreed and, after wishing the wizard farewell, returned to his post with the rest the team. Findilaan led Alathor further into the forest. A short distance to the west of the East Gate was a small pasture, an opening in the trees where the elves had left their horses.

On horseback the friends advanced much more quickly than Alathor had on foot. The elves do not clear their path of vegetation or mark their way as men do. There was no road nor trail through the forest to Serenindale. But despite the lack of a road to follow, the horses trotted along with speed and agility. Almost without effort, they would pass

through the brush leaving no mark or sign of having been there. Findilaan guided his guest westward through the woods, sometimes veering to the north or south, sometimes circling around patches of thick vegetation, and sometimes weaving from side to side through the flora. If the mage had not traveled to Serenindale before, he may have thought Findilaan was wandering aimlessly through the woods, but such is travel in the Elf Realm.

Past the East Gate, the forest was older and much denser than where Alathor had camped the night before. To the east, the forest was young, the trees were not fully grown and the underbrush was sparse. But beyond the East Gate, the forest was much older and the trees were both tall and thick. Fed by countless brooks and streams that flowed from the surrounding mountains to Lake Mirrorwater, the woods were lush and green.

Among the greenery and the sounds of the woodlands, the ride through the elfin forest was pleasant and relaxing, allowing the wizard to forget his worries. Almost unnoticed, the afternoon turned into evening and at dusk the riders reached the edge of Lake Mirrorwater. The lake's surface shimmering in the fading light, the travelers followed its shore to the west until they reached a section of the forest dominated by mighty oaks, both taller and thicker than in other parts of the woods. And soon they could see torches high above, illuminating several of Serenindale's wooden platforms in the treetops. On the outer perimeter of the elfin community, there were smaller platforms at regular intervals closer to the ground. These were the guard posts, each one manned by two elves armed with long bows and charged with seeing that only friends of the Elf Realm passed.

As the riders approached the city's edge, they slowed their pace and Findilaan waved to the guards on the nearest platform. Recognizing the elf, the guards signaled back, indicating that the travelers were welcome to enter. They rode to the stables closest to the main stairway and left their horses with fresh grain and water before ascending to the platforms above.

The main stairway was a spiral staircase of wide wooden planks and an elegantly carved railing that rose as it circled repeatedly around the trunk of a giant oak tree. As they climbed, Alathor and Findilaan could hear music and the soft voices of elves singing above. It was late in the elfin city and the day's work had finished at dusk. Now, the city's inhabitants met with family and friends to relax before retiring for the night. The elfin songs in the distance reminded Alathor of his first visit to the Elf Realm ages before, and he recalled the impression that the elves had made on him with their light-hearted and cheerful outlook. So close to nature and among the elves with their music and song, it would be easy to forget about the problems of the world and become lost in the ways of these delightful people.

High above the ground, the travelers reached a large platform suspended among the mighty branches of the giant oak and made their way through Serenindale toward the Hall of the Elders. From this first deck they continued to climb ever higher as they passed from platform to platform on bridges of wood and rope. Each bridge rose at a

comfortable angle to higher platforms until the wizard and his friend found themselves among the highest boughs of the mightiest trees in the forest. There, they reached a circular platform overlooking the treetops that descended toward the lake's edge to the south. During the day, it offered a beautiful view of the lake and majestic mountains beyond; but now, well after sundown, only the stars' reflection on the lake's smooth surface could be seen. And on this highest tier of the elfin city stood the Hall of the Elders.

One might expect the meeting hall of Serenindale's wisest elves to be a luxurious chamber with a high ceiling and lavish finishings, but this is not how the elves build their halls. The Hall of the Elders was a simple, open structure with thick branches rising through openings in the floor to support the roof. From the thick boughs that supported the platform, smaller branches extended around its edges and reached up past the ceiling, making it blend in with the foliage and giving the impression of a natural canopy. In the area sheltered by the roof there were a dozen chairs arranged in a circle. Here, the twelve members of the Council of Elders held their meetings and discussed any issues affecting the community.

Waiting near the Hall of the Elders was a lone elf. His light brown hair shined in the moonlight as he looked to the south, observing the tranquil waters of Lake Mirrorwater and the imposing outline of the mountains beyond. Hearing Findilaan and Alathor approach as they started across the bridge from a lower platform, the elf turned and started toward them.

"The sparrows told me you were looking for me," the elf stated with a smile.

"Yes," answered Findilaan. "Let me introduce you to my friend, Alathor of the Wizard Council. He comes to the Elf Realm bearing questions; questions I thought you more fit than I to answer."

"My esteemed mage, tales of your deeds have carried your name to Eastvale and beyond. It is a pleasure to meet you at last. My name is Hilfendil," said the elf as Findilaan led them inside and lit a lamp to illuminate the hall. "Tell me, how may I be of assistance?"

"My friend Melchor told me he was in Farfield several weeks ago and on the way north he received word of many elves traveling in this direction from the east," began Alathor. He paused for a moment to think. The elves were a proud race and, whether some enemy had routed them or internal conflict had divided them, this may be a delicate topic for Hilfendil to discuss. "It is not for me to meddle in the affairs of the elves, but I know your people are fond of the settlement they created in the east and these events perplex me. After so many years on the edge of the Great Forest..."

"Yes", Hilfendil interjected softly, nodding his head. "Although you are uncomfortable with the question, I know what you mean to ask." The elf stopped and glanced at the floor for an instant. Then he turned and walked to the edge of the hall where the moon and the silhouette of the mountains reflected on the lake.

"The Great Forest has grown dark in recent years," the elf explained. "Perhaps we are to blame. We saw that evil was afoot several years ago. And we have watched it grow.

The orcs and goblins have multiplied. Whole tribes have come from afar to settle in the forest. But because they did not enter our corner of the woods, we did nothing."

He turned to face the others and, looking to Findilaan, he continued with a heavy heart.

"We believed we could build a community in the Great Forest. Those who became the elders of Eastvale were much younger and less knowledgeable than the members of the Council of Elders in Serenindale. We did not have the foresight to appreciate what was happening around us, or to understand the eventual consequences," he explained.

"We have always patrolled the area around Eastvale. For many years this was unnecessary. The birds and animals of the forest were our eyes and ears, and there was no threat to our people," he continued with a more optimistic tone. But then his voice sank again as he called to mind the events that followed.

"But as evil grew in the north, the region became unsafe. Those who wandered beyond the patrols' perimeter sometimes did not return. Goblins would sneak within the perimeter at night to steal. And on a few occasions orcs attacked our patrols. Eventually it was not even safe to travel to the Great Trade Road and the few merchants from Eastvale that had business in Farfield required an armed escort."

Downtrodden, the elf stopped again and watched the moonlight on the lake for a moment.

"Then, one frightful evening, the forest was in a panic. Birds and animals that had always kept us informed of the goings-on in the woods rushed to warn us of an approaching orc army. Three of the orc tribes that dwelled to the northwest of Eastvale were marching on our city. We were only four hundred elves, and we knew each of the three tribes had at least twice our number. To fight against such odds would have been folly and they would have slaughtered us. We had no choice but to take what we could carry and flee to the south. We marched at a relentless pace through the night and the following day without resting. Then, having seen no sign that the orcs were following us, we assumed that they would not pursue us so far from the forest, and we set camp. The next day, we made for the Great Trade Road and started the long voyage to Serenindale."

"These are dire proceedings indeed," muttered Alathor, stroking his long, white beard and looking into the distance with a worried gaze.

"Then it is as I feared. It has begun," added the wizard, as if talking to himself.

"It has begun?" repeated Findilaan. "Of what do you speak?"

Alathor thought for a moment before answering. This was a topic he had avoided for some time but, knowing it was time to bring it to light, he explained.

"The seeing stone has shown me dreadful images of war and battle. Violent and unsettling events. I have not spoken of these images before, but when I speak of the dark times that are ahead and urge our friends and allies to be prepared, it is because I believe these images to be visions of the future. The stone has shown me violent events in places where I know such things have not yet come to pass. I have seen an

endless sea of orcs marching across the Heartland, Havenrealm City under siege, peasants enslaved and forced to work in goblin mines. Appalling and disturbing images."

"The orc tribes of the forest are many. But we have not seen them as a menace to our communities. The beasts are but an annoyance; they pose a danger to travelers, they hamper trade, occasionally they threaten hamlets or farming communities. They force us to set up garrisons in the towns bordering the forest and to patrol the Great Trade Road. Any single tribe, even one of the larger tribes, is not a threat to the kingdom. But if they have joined forces, then this has troubling implications," the mage continued. He paced slowly across the platform.

"Troubling implications to be sure," he muttered, his bearded chin cupped in his hand and his gaze toward the floor as he thought. After a moment, he turned toward the others and continued.

"If the countless clans of the Great Forest joined forces they would muster an army far greater than man or elf could ever summon. But this is but one of my worries. The orc has little loyalty to anything other than itself and its tribe, and its loyalty to its tribe is questionable at best. For several tribes to work together would require a powerful and sinister force with the strength and will to unify them."

"Yes, we have known of an evil in the north of the forest, but none know what it is," concurred Hilfendil, nodding in agreement. "Some speculate that it is an evil warlock. Others suggest that it is a sorcerer, a master of black magic, or a witch. But none from Eastvale have ventured to investigate."

"I too have felt its presence," added Alathor. "I do not know who or what it is, but of late, it has been growing stronger and drawing lesser creatures of evil to itself. For what end I know not, but it is not to our benefit to wait and find out. If this enemy has grown so confident as to challenge the elves, then we must act. We must determine what this wicked force is and counter it before it becomes even more powerful and unites the beasts of the entire forest against us."

"I agree with you, Master Alathor," interjected Findilaan. "However, the Great Forest is a dangerous place and it will be a long journey to cross it from south to north. Then, once we reach the far side, how will we know where to look?"

"I can lead you to the place you seek," interrupted Hilfendil. "I have not been there myself and I know not what we shall find, but the animals of the woods avoid this place and have told me where it is."

"Thank you, Hilfendil," declared Alathor, bowing his head as a sign of his gratitude. "However, Findilaan is right. We are but a handful, and it will be a perilous journey."

"We pay little mind to the world beyond our forest, and this must change," declared Findilaan. "As a member of the Council of Elders, I will encourage my people to rethink their ways; however, change will take time, and for the moment my people are not ready to take cards in the events of the outside world. I cannot ask them to provide warriors for our quest. It is not our way. But I will ensure that we and whoever else will join us have sufficient provisions for the journey."

"You are correct," concurred Alathor. "We cannot ask the elves for aid; although it would be folly for us to embark on this endeavor alone. We will need support from Havenrealm. King Tharbold has unwavering faith in the Wizard Council and would gladly provide us with soldiers."

After pondering the situation for a moment, he put his thoughts into words.

"However, I do not wish to enter the forest with an army of foot soldiers. We shall have to cross the Great Forest without attracting attention. If we take a large force, word will travel like wildfire through the woods and every orc tribe in the area will move against us. We would never reach our goal," the mage went on.

He remained silent for a minute as he mulled over the circumstances.

"No," he said at last, shaking his head. "The team we are to form must be very strong, but must remain small. We must request aid from the Paladin Order. The paladins will agree that ours is the right course of action, and they will be more than willing to assist us. They have skilled warriors who train tirelessly and will fight against all odds to carry out the will of the Order. Tomorrow I depart for Arnonsul."

"There is a meeting of the Elders I must attend," Findilaan stated. "I would like to confer with the others about what we have seen tonight, and take this opportunity to help them see the error of our ways. I will also ask that Hilfendil stay behind to help me assure that we have sufficient provisions ready by the time you return. We will meet you on the eastern edge of the forest where the woods overlook the Ford of Union."

"So be it," declared Alathor. "I will be off in the morning. I will meet you with Melchor and a team of paladins above the ford, ready for the voyage to the east."

In the morning, the wizard departed for Arnonsul to explain his fears to the Paladin Order and request their support. But unknown to him, even as he left Serenindale, his journey was in vain. The situation in the south was much more dire than any had suspected. And events were already unfolding that would change Havenrealm for generations to come.