

Excerpt from the High Loremaster's Journal

LET US CONSIDER what we know of the Desolation. A thousand years ago, it wiped most of civilization from existence. Turned to ash. Lamentably, our sources are secondhand. Religious texts, interpretations, translations. We must, as scholars, approach our “facts” with skepticism. It is no coincidence that the powers to survive this event are those responsible for its record, and those who police such authenticity to this very day. Can one imagine the implications should even a single thread prove erroneous? We rebuilt this civilization upon the principle of infallibility. Of order.

Woe to the faith, then, that Dula’Thalier was unearthed within the confines of Ilvica. The dukes will see to its exploitation. And after? What happens to ancient artifacts of power when bestowed on those that value themselves above all others? I fear our grasp of control is more tenuous than we care to admit. Perhaps, then, we could use a little chaos.

Chapter 1

The Breakers

RURIK CURSED as the head of his sledge split down the middle. A solid sheet of rock clattered to his feet from the impact and added to the pile of debris that shaped around decrepit boots; worn leathers coated in black dust. He raised the tool and squinted at the construction, the thin twilight that lit his world a poor illumination. Fantastic. Four candle marks and he found himself at the mercy of a wall. Its obsidian sheen taunted him, a clear, pristine reflection mirrored by the accursed material. In it he glimpsed a sour countenance.

He looked like death.

Rurik lilted back and eyed his companions: a dozen miners clad in black that lost themselves in the persistent beat of metal on stone.

“Sunlord take me,” he muttered and brushed his calloused fingers over the band that kept his unruly mop of hair in check. It was cold, drenched in sweat from half a day’s labor. He shivered and attempted to wipe the sensation off his bare chest, a mistake that only served to worsen the grime that coated his skin. Rurik sniffed. His eye twitched and he twisted his heel into the ground with a stone scrape. Time for a break.

He separated himself from the line and stalked a short distance off. Behind him, a murmur grew in his absence, whispers of gossip and the

occasional laugh beneath the din and disarray of an unyielding symphony of hammers.

“Ya givin’ up?” a bald man asked as Rurik approached, his face more beard than skin, scalp wrinkled with age. He sat beside a pile of misshapen hafts, discarded metal implements that Rurik tossed his own sledge into with an unceremonious clatter.

“Tired of getting my ass kicked by a wall.” Rurik balked at his own voice; a hoarse tenor weighted with fatigue.

“Aye, ya’d be an expert on tha’ by now.”

“Oh hah, jackass.” Rurik matched a smirk with his own and grabbed a nearby bucket. He dumped the contents over his head: warm, still water that washed that dirt and dust from his hair and face. “We can’t all be important enough to sit out the hard part.”

“Oi!” the older man, Rust, spat. He grabbed Rurik’s discarded sledge and set it on his lap, a flicker of pale green energy emitting from his fingers as he traced the fracture. With his gesture, the wound sealed itself and erased any trace of its existence, though the head seemed smaller now, diminished. “Maybe if any’a ya were as useful as me ya wouldn’t need be so jealous.”

Rurik shook his head with a snort. He scanned the circular courtyard, its surface the same obsidian sheen of the offending wall, and frowned at the series of empty buckets.

“Where’s the rest of the water?”

“Eh?” Rust quirked a thick, bushy brow. “Ya used the last fer yer bath just now.”

“Shit.”

“Aye.”

“I’ll ah–yeah. I’ll get more. Make sure these idiots stay focused.”

The solid-sole beat of Rurik’s shuffle accompanied him out into the urban corridor where sheer, black structures lay on the flanks, separated from the sunken road by lipped walkways. A series of metal wire posts lined those sidewalks, each bearing a crystalline sphere at their zenith, all alight with a soft shimmer stolen from what served as a sky in this forsaken place.

Runes danced upon that sky, an intricate web of arcane patterns that pulsed upon a cavernous ceiling of rock. It formed a dome-like half sphere that carved itself from the crust of the world in perfect uniformity. At the center, a single tower ascended to the cavern's height as a shadow upon the horizon. One that soared above a city silhouetted in darkness.

Rurik's green stare lingered too long on that tower. It whispered in the back of his mind. *Try me*, it said, *I am what you seek*.

It was the song that broke his reverie. A haunting dirge spun from a lithe tone. Feminine, it filled the still air of the street, its melody punctuated by the occasional cough or groan. The source, a woman in white robes, her hands and face wrapped in layered bandages, massaged the shoulders of a black clad miner in the last moments of his life. Rurik maneuvered his way through a motley collection of men and women in similar states, some absent the occasional limb while others nursed wounds and rested against one another. They offered nods and grunts of acknowledgement at his passing.

"Six," the woman said as Rurik halted beside her. The accent was thick, attacking vowels with extra emphasis, as if she feared stumbling over their pronunciation. She glanced up, one blue eyed speckled with golden flakes peering out from behind the mess of bandages. "Now, it is. The rest survives. To complaint, but—they live." She swept her hand over the dull glare of the dead man's eyes, closing them for good.

"Six? That's better than I hoped. You sunsingers are worth a hundred surgeons." Rurik took a knee and hoisted the corpse up and over his shoulder. "Could've used you months ago."

"I am no longer a servant of the church," she said.

The two of them rose together. Rurik stood two heads above the woman, her slight frame a stark contrast to the thick, muscular build he cultivated from a one year-too many of beating rocks with hammers.

"And?"

"I." She paused. "I no longer hold such titles."

"Titles tend to stick," Rurik said. "With or without your permission."

With the sunsinger on his heels, Rurik carried the body to a cart laden with its fellows. Two men in long leather coats stood guard nearby; a quiet, ignoble resting place presided over by a pair of malcontents. One stood at attention and brought his fist to his chest, a halberd clanking against the paved street. The other spat.

“At ease, Hal. Save it.” Rurik exchanged the corpse for a cask that sloshed in his grip.

“Sorry, Lord.”

“See?” Rurik glimpsed the sunsinger who blinked at the sudden attention. “Titles, can’t shed the damn things if you try.”

“Soldier boy’s stuck at Ilduan.” The spitting man snickered. Rurik pegged his accent for a lowborn local.

“Better than being stuck with you, Slackjaw.” Rurik quipped as the guard spat again. “Charming, soldier. As you were. Come on, Leylia, grab a barrel. The others need you more than the dead.”

The trek back seemed longer than his initial approach. They reached the oval-shaped building of the excavation, its massive structure large enough to fill an entire block on its own. It stood separate from the city rows, roads widening to encompass its presence. Paths from every direction fed into its grandiose center where a gilded staircase ascended to a sealed archway, its summit crested by murals and statues of armored warriors in lifelike renders. The figures bore heraldry that matched Leylia’s robes: golden sunbursts. A church, maybe? Or a theater. Whatever its use, the builders bragged of riches, and Rurik heard the call of treasure within.

Jovial chatter replaced the relative silence of the line since his departure, a chorus that overcame the ringing assaults as the miners beat fractures into blackened glass.

“It ain’t speed that wins.” A short, lean woman lectured the men beside her. She picked at her leather gloves and gripped her sledge, lifted it up over her shoulder and brought it down with a resounding force. A small crack split from the impact. “Form! See? Form and precision, can’t beat it.”

“Su-hure,” a nasal-pitched voice quipped in response. Its source, a bronze skinned man, leaned out of formation, his black mop of curly hair bouncing along with his tilted head. “Tell this to Feral. Her strength is of legends. This beats your form, yes?”

A guttural grunt shadowed the sentiment. In the center of the line, a woman stood above the rest. Her arms bristled with thick muscles revealed by a sleeveless tunic too small for her towering form. Elegant dreadlocks fell to her knees; they scurried behind her with each strike, her sledge bigger than the rest by a full length.

“Shut it!” Rust bellowed. He glared at the others, his eyes narrow. “Stop yappin with Sweets, your highness, unless ya like missin’ an arm or two.”

“That’s what we’ve got you for, Rust! Can’t have you miss out on all the fun, sittin’ all safe and whatnot.” The short woman snorted and set her sledge against the ground. She leaned against the haft and turned, dark curls bobbing with her movement. She opened her mouth to continue the taunt, only to choke as Rurik set both water casks down opposite the metal pile.

“Boss! You’re back. With the ah—the leper. Hi!” She waved, smiling, untouched by the momentary embarrassment. Rust sniffed. He stroked his grizzled beard and offered Rurik a curt nod.

“Oh no, don’t mind me, Princess,” Rurik snarked. “I love making Lanatir pay out death salaries.”

“Ah, yeah.” Princess shifted and scratched at her temple. “How many we lose?”

“Six.”

“Really? Only?”

“You can thank the leper.”

Leylia stood impassive beside Rurik, her hands folded in front of her waist. She emitted a strange, infectious aura of peace, one that drew more than a few uneasy stares from the crew.

Sweets chimed in, unconcerned with the reprimand. “Leper is no good. She needs a new name, yes? Melody is best choice, so says Shari, Sentinel of Wisdom.”

“Obvious. Stupid,” Feral grunted. Some of the others in the line laughed at the primal sting from her broken speech.

“You wound me, sweet one,” Sweets lamented.

Another bout of laughter echoed from the crew, followed by a tirade of insults. Rurik cracked a grin and folded his arms up under his chest, watching.

“Why do they give me a new name?” Leylia canted her chip up with a whisper. “Is my language offensive?”

“Nothing like that. It’s easier for breakers to not know each other.”

“Easier?”

“Easier to forget a nickname than the real thing.”

Leylia nodded, somber, though her next words fell flat on Rurik’s ears. Something shifted his attention to the breakers, the hair on the back of his standing on edge. Sweets and Princess bantered back and forth, eliciting the occasional chuckle as the others lost themselves in the rhythm of the line. Lift, swing, crash. Lower, repeat. There, in the center of the wall, Feral hit another fracture. A pebble fell from the impact.

She broke through.

Rurik’s eyes widened. He grabbed Leylia’s collar and hurled her at Rust who scrambled to catch her.

“Break!” Rurik screamed.

Time slowed.

The laughter died and the crew scattered. From the minuscule hole, a violent, red energy sprung to life. A series of jagged runes appeared as snaking arcane projections across the wall’s exterior. Men and women bolted. They clawed over one another and fought to the front of the exodus as the energy expanded behind them into a shimmering orb of unstable energy. It stabilized as a coherent half-sphere, holding its shape for a few blissful seconds before it retracted, disappearing into a silent void.

And then, nothing. The air itself died as all sound succumbed to a breathless vacuum.

Rurik leapt forward. He wrapped his arms around whoever he could and dragged them onto the ground, his body offered in place of theirs.

A geyser of flame erupted in a flash. It lapped at the crew's backs and engulfed half their number in a raging firestorm, their muffled cries lost to a chaotic ruckus. The shockwave sent others flying. Breakers leapt aside. Some landed with sickening snaps and others collided with chunks of debris, pieces of jagged glass impaling stone and flesh alike. The violent roar howled into the cavernous night, its harrowing cry a thunderous force that caught a section of runes from the ceiling. They burst at the disturbance, small pockets of frantic energy that tossed sparks of insult onto the scene, wafting fireflies of orange and blue that ashed as they fell.

Moans of agony rose in a wailing echo. Rurik opened his eyes to a haze of cinders mixed with a thick cloud of dust. Black soot stained his vision as he locked gazes with Princess, her green stare alight with fear. He rolled over and felt up the legs of his baggy pants to his crotch. Still there.

"You okay?" he asked.

"Yeah. I think." Princess felt herself up in a similar fashion. Her blouse held some frayed edges, but otherwise showed little wear. "Better than him." Rurik followed her gesture to where a black husk of a corpse lay with its arms and legs curled into itself. Wonderful.

"Sound off." Rurik rose to a knee and wiped the stinging soot from his eyes with a bare arm.

"Princess." She offered a thumbs up and coughed, sitting with her head between her legs. Feral stomped twice.

"Rust."

"Sweets," the nasal voice spoke into a hack.

"Jerk." Another voice, this one annoyed and haughty despite the situation.

Rurik waited. No one else joined the routine. He hoisted himself up, brushed his shoulders off and tousled his hair, the edges now frayed and burnt.

“Leylia? You with us?”

“She’s fine, Rik, just shocked.” Rust chuckled. “First breakin’, eh?”

“Get her up and working. When she’s ready, get the others moving, we’ll need them to haul. The rest of you grab your supplies and fall in on me. The Diviners will see the break.”

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The pale emanation of a glowlamp illuminated the structure’s interior; an immense foyer supported by a series of decorated columns. Rurik held the metal stick aloft, its lantern left to dangle from a short chain as its light flickered off crystal-mirror surfaces lining the walls. They reflected the glow in an intricate system of recycled energy.

He stepped onto a floor of smooth marble and inched inside, his head on a swivel, eyes wide, caught between a state of alert and awe. Though their inglorious entry marred the splendor of the endless gold and silver motifs, little of the debris made it inward, dedicated to the harm of his crew more so than risking further property damage.

A whistle echoed within the vast interior. Rurik glanced at Princess. She shrugged. The ragged group piled into the opening, Rurik in front, all armed with a sole lamp. From the rear, Feral sniffed and swatted at the air.

“Bad smell. Dark,” she snarled.

“Aye, sweet one, this place sleeps for a thousand solstices. Piqua knows.” Sweets smoothed out his black tunic, ill at ease.

“No,” Feral whispered. “Dark. Violent.”

Rurik held up a fist. The group halted. To the far sides of the hall two arches swept deeper into the building and flanked a raised landing of white stone. Before it stood a massive statue; a towering figure of obsidian, its arm raised in protest, a shield held off its side as if erected in defense.

“We need to split up,” Rurik said.

“Sayeth the dead men.” Jerk pinched the bridge of his hawkish nose and sighed through his nostrils.

“We’ve got too many wounded, Jerk, and no time. Feral, Princess, you take the left corridor.”

“What’s a corr-eh-dohr?” Princess asked.

“Hallway.”

“Yep.” She kicked at the tile.

“Sweets, Jerk, the right.” Rurik pointed at Jerk. “Don’t.” The dark-skinned man bit his tongue with his mouth open. “I’ll check out the landing.”

“Alone, boss?” Princess skipped backward. Her thick brow lifted, the edges singed from the explosion. She looked well otherwise, shoulders straight and somehow peppy, though Rurik’s gaze lingered on the gold-inked tattoos that spiraled down her forehead to her neck and disappeared into her blouse. “Boss?”

“Yes.” Rurik itched at the stubble on his chin and blushed. He extended a thumbs up. “Faster that way.”

Princess opened her mouth to speak, but paused at a grunt from her savage partner. A shrug followed, and she twirled away in a quiet scamper. Once the others grew scant, his shoulders slouched. A sharp inhale filled the empty hall as he pressed a palm to his forehead and bit back a scream.

“You’re fine, Rik,” he mumbled and adjusted the collar of his leather coat. “Easy now.” Another breath. Easy.

A cloud of dust wafted up from the first stair at his ascent. Dust was good, no runes or other arcane monstrosity. He mimed a silent prayer by holding his palm to his face, fingers spread apart before closing to a fist, though he doubted a sunburst would be of much use this deep below the surface.

Rurik topped the landing to find a set of stone doors that blocked his passage. Lines of diamonds were woven into the gilded surface with regal, robed figures engraved around them. A dull clink followed as he struck a gem with a steel dagger removed from his belt. No dice. He licked his lips and, enticed by the challenge of wealth, he placed the tip around the back of the diamond and tapped a fist to the pommel and it

popped off the door into his hand. Hah! One of these could feed his crew for a week. And all of them?

The ground shook. The landing rumbled and Rurik spun on a heel to find the statue's lifelike face canted in his direction. He stared. The statue stared. Neither moved. Rurik raised a hand and waved. Nothing. Okay. Rurik sheathed his dagger.

Forward, then. He grasped a hold of a golden handle—meant for far larger hands than his own—and peered over a shoulder. Nothing. Good. Rurik tugged to no result. He rolled his eyes and placed a hand under the other and pulled again. Nothing.

Rurik shoved his boots into the floor and strained, his teeth clenched as his muscles bulged. He exhaled and set foot on the opposing door, stretched out his fingers and gripped the handle once again. Another heave. A vein bulged from his neck and his face grew pale.

“Voided door. Open!”

The landing rattled and Rurik groaned. The cumbersome hunk of obsidian statue moved of its own volition, its body facing him as it extended an arm. Something akin to a curse escaped his lips as he leapt aside, crashing to the solid floor with a skirting thud. Its motion passed over him and it grasped the handle, pulling once to a shutter and a cloud of dust. A second pull elicited a whining creek from rusted joints as the door popped open. Without further fanfare, the statue receded its hold and returned to its original poise, still and stiff.

Rurik watched, rapt with awe. He stumbled to his feet and brushed out the tail of his coat, bemused and bruised. Stone did not mix well with bones.

“Thanks?”

The statue did not respond.

Crisp air assailed him as he slipped through the threshold, ajar enough for at least three abreast. He wrinkled his nose and advanced, cautious, a nearby splashing encouraging curiosity. The same crystalline strip filled the expanse with ambient lighting and parted only for more grand architecture, an interior waterfall, one of clear

water that fell from a ledge into a pool raised from the ground, its edges surrounded by a lush garden.

Rurik's eyebrows lifted. He swung his lamp ahead and wandered marble-hewn paths amidst a host of creeping, wild foliage. Crystal glass adorned the ceiling where once blessed light poured in from a clear sky. Only rock lay above now. Rock and cursed runes. His shoulders tightened, his calm harshed by the reminder of his predicament.

The path brought him through figs and apples and plums that hung from short trees, with squash and tomatoes growing in carefully constructed sections of soil somehow intermingled with the floor. Red and purple roses sweetened the air, even, arranged with lilies and white blossoms that infused the hall with color. All this underground. And alive.

The realization darkened his countenance. Thousands of years of lost knowledge manifested in a simple garden. The depth of power contained here sent his thoughts spiraling. Greenhouses, he knew, but without caretakers? Never mind the autonomous statue. His stomach churned at the potential. All this wonder and they spent their time seeking tools and trinkets.

Rurik found himself at the back of the waterfall, where a large obsidian arch lay at the end of his trek, two passages obscured beyond. Etched with foreign script, it rendered complex symbols; layered and jagged lines that crossed one another in sharp patterns. More foul magic. Rurik fished out a silver coin from a belt pouch and tilted his head. He stood six, seven spans away. He backed up. One, two, four steps, then set his lamp on the ground.

What a terrible idea. Rurik inhaled and whipped the coin at the arch. Without delay he threw his hands over his head and dove into the fountain where a sudden wet chill forced the air from his lungs, eyes opening in shock. His entire body submerged into the pool, its depths without a visible end. He thanked his luck and tread below for a moment too long until his lungs begged for release. He broke the surface with a gasp and searched for the assumed devastation.

Or not.

No explosion. No debris or terrible ruins. His coin sat under the arch, unblemished.

Rurik grunted and climbed out from the pool, his shame dripping from his sopping clothes with a staccato pitter. He collected his lamp and sloped his way over to the archway, wet footprints in his wake. He dipped low and scooped up his coin, kissed the front, then examined the runes one last time. They held their own glow, one of a gentle make, the light akin to his lamp. No heat, no obvious demise.

Distracted by the wonder of the room, Rurik failed to notice the inky blackness within the arch. He shivered. Whether from the cold or stray magic, he didn't know. Curious, he dipped the end of his lamp into the darkness, wiggled it, then pulled it back to no effect. A veil, maybe an illusion? Everything here pointed to voidwork. Vile, terrible power from a realm beyond his own.

That matched the tales. Why he spent his days toiling in some cursed, eternal night. To recover what the Void stole. Though more than his sacred duty as a worshiper of the sun, Rurik's loyalty lay with his crew. If a diamond could feed his people for a week, then whatever lay ahead may be what paid the price of their freedom. His freedom.

“May the Sunlord guide me.”

Rurik disappeared into the darkness.