

The Astral Bear Inn shielded its patrons from the rumbling showers beyond its walls. The rains had settled in after a meteor storm and had drenched Quickriver Valley's lands for several days. Thick, gray clouds soaked the spring soils and softened the dirt into mucky pools.

A roaring fire at the establishment's center, fueled by valleybirch wood, illuminated the warm, cobble tavern.

Ferum Fallengrove sat with her mud-stained, leather boots on the ashen ghostoak, community table. Her strawberry hair trailed in two tightly weaved boxer braids behind her leaned-back chair. Leather belts, which held an assortment of small pouches of varying size and color, strapped her father's old, mammoth-hide armor to her muscular frame. Ferum's steel, forked sword rested in its scabbard. The weapon's covered, twin blades lightly scuffed the ground with each rock of its owner's seat.

Lendentamier Tylanus IV, Knight of the Masked Maiden, sat next to her, like a statue, with his arms crossed. Lendentamier's face was lost to history. A somber, gold mask of a man with symmetrical, silver, teardrop studs covered his face completely. He dwarfed every man in the Astral Bear. The central flame's gleam alchemized his knightly, silver chainmail into gold. The Masked Maiden's sigil, an oval vizard held by a spindly hand, was embossed on a plate in the center of his chest.

A young, female bard stood on the table. Patrons of all ages and backgrounds cluttered around the woman. Their mouths gaped and eyes sparkled.

“An army of dead basilisks lied behind them, on the blood-soaked cave’s ground,” the storyteller said. “Fallengrove and the Masked Knight sneaked through the subterranean labyrinth. The heroes stood at the edge of the room, and watched the Umbral Forest’s green dragon sleep on its riches.”

Ferum smiled.

“The paladin enchanted them with the Masked Maiden’s blessing,” the woman continued, “and the two waded through hills of silver, gold, platinum, and jewels. Not a coin clattered or clinked. Ferum nabbed the chalice, and then out the two slinked.”

The audience members clapped and drank. After a moment, the cheers died down.

“Is it true?” a toothless man shouted at Ferum. His blond, curly hair extended far past his shoulders.

“Of course, it’s true,” Ferum said proudly. She sat up and pulled a pouch from her belt. “It wouldn’t have been so easy without Lendentamier’s power. He’s the greatest magic-user in the valley. But who’s to say we couldn’t have taken the drake?”

Ferum carefully poured the bag’s powder into a black, square outline, muttered an incantation, and held her hands above the dark box.

A void crawled from the corners and consumed the area between the lines with a starry shadow. Ferum raised her hands. The box shot up into a foot-tall prism and unveiled a shining, jaded cup with ancient carvings engraved around the rim.

“That’s a king’s ransom,” a woman yelled from the crowd.

“Not a king of this world,” Ferum said.

“Will the dragon come after you?” the toothless man asked.

“Probably,” Ferum said, “but it won’t find what it’s looking for.”

Ferum slammed her hovering hands on the table. The dark box shrank, until it disappeared back into the table, along with the chalice. The spell’s void receded to the corners, until only the dust remained.

Ferum funneled the sooty material into the pouch and scooted from the table.

“Thanks for the tale,” Ferum said. She patted herself down and checked around the floor to make sure she hadn’t forgotten anything. “I think we’ll retire to our rooms for tonight, though.”

Lendentamier stood quietly from his seat, withdrew a silver-rimmed, golden coin from his nearly empty pouch, and placed it in the bard’s hand.

“Thank you, mysterious knight,” the bard said. She bowed elegantly. “I appreciate your patronage.”

Lendentamier nodded and followed Ferum.

Other attendants tossed copper and iron coins at the bard’s feet.

“I’m going to get one quick drink before we go, actually,” Ferum said to Lendentamier.

She marched to the bar, which was managed by a thin barmaid and a child. The woman had brown skin and hair and a swarm of black freckles on

her cheeks. The child looked very similar but was a boy with a small scar that ran from his left eye to his chin.

“What can I get for you, lass?” the woman asked. Ferum scanned the shelves. Barrels stamped with brewers’ guilds lined the wall. The kegs ranged from white ironwood and pink quartzwood, to deep black obsidianbranch.

“I’ll have some Mead of the Maddened King,” Ferum said. She pointed to a dark brown barrel with a broken crown branded on the keg’s face. Ferum popped an iron piece on the table.