PART I

1

"Good morning," Mike Curry's mother said. Mike rolled out of bed. His family had just moved into their new house a week ago. "Had a pleasant sleep?" his mother asked.

"Yes, mom." In fact, Mike had had a very fitful sleep. Although he had gone to bed early, he had lain in bed for two hours, contemplating what had happened over the past few weeks. It wasn't really a few weeks, though. In our time, it was only a second; but his adventure in the past, present, and future had seemed to last a very long time. He, Dave (his brother), Tony Hoffman and Katie Carter (two friends) had doomed the world and saved it again. Mike was still trying to sort it all out.

Presently Dave Curry walked into the room. "Hi, Mike!" He began his morning routine of making Mike's bed and cleaning up his room. After the adventure, Mike had bribed Dave into doing this with a few Kit Kat bars and a substantial amount of money. Mike hated making his bed.

They continued downstairs for breakfast. Cereal, as usual. Mike hated cereal. He guessed that it was his long adventure that had made him hate normal life. But after they had changed the present and had to move, Mike knew that Dave felt the same way.

Since it was a Saturday, there was no school. Anyway, it was June 13, and on Monday they would be out of school for the summer. Today they were going to tell their mom that they were going to the movies. Actually they were planning to sneak out and look for their old friends, Tony and Katie, whom they hadn't seen since that long adventure.

"Mom, can I go to the movies with Dave today?" Mike asked.

Mrs. Curry responded with a series of loud grumbles. She was sitting in their family room, reading the latest edition of

The Curry Courier. Currently, she was engrossed in the neighborhood news. "Look!" she said. "Two people broke into the new neighbors' house!"

"MOM!"

"Yeah, yeah! Go."

"YES!" Dave said. They ran out of the house before their mom could say another word. Not that she would want to say another word, with how busy she was.

Using a map that they had "borrowed" from their dad's car, they reached their destination, their old house, in under two and a half hours by riding their bikes. Dave said, "Look! There's a sign. 'Prudential Realty Company. Sold, but we have more.' Let's see if Tony's still here." They walked up to the Hoffmans' house. They knocked. Tony peeked out the window. He tried frantically to open the door, but it was jammed. He yanked it open a few minutes later.

"DAVE! MIKE!" he shouted. "Katie, come here!" Katie Carter walked out of Tony's game room and came to the door.

"THEY'RE HERE!" she screamed. After Tony and Katie finished jumping around the house, rejoicing wildly, they let Mike and Dave in.

"Hello, Tony," Dave said.

The four kids went inside to play NBA Hangtime. After a while they got bored and went outside to play baseball.

"Hey! We've done this before, haven't we?" said Dave.

"It is strange. We're all playing baseball. That's what started it all last time."

"Batter's up!" Tony threw a fastball toward the outside. Katie, who was batting, swung wildly, and the ball popped up into the pool. Because it was hot and the ball was in the pool, everybody decided to go swimming.

"Let's make a whirlpool!" Mike said. He promptly scrambled into a plastic boat and began paddling counterclockwise around the pool. Soon the whirlpool was strong enough that there was no hope of swimming against it.

"Awesome!" Tony said. The others agreed.

Suddenly there was an orange flash of light, and everybody vanished.

Dave, Mike, Katie, and Tony were standing in the middle of a dance square. Dancing and festivities were everywhere. A dark castle loomed in the background. Before anybody could speak, a man approached them. He said, "Why are you four standing here?" Pointing to Dave and Katie, he continued, "You two should know better than to bother with simple peasants. Off with you two!" He grabbed Tony and Mike by the arms and led them from the square.

Dave said to Katie, "Where are we? Are we--"

The man had returned and said, "Why are you two standing here? Dance! Have fun!" He then proceeded to show Dave and Katie how to dance to the music that was being played. After that very embarrassing event, the man left. Dave and Katie went to the edge of the square where there were traders trying to barter goods.

"Don't even say it. We must be back in the middle ages again. But how?" Katie commented.

Dave said, "It must be someone's fault. Maybe it--CHASTER!" Dave remembered Fred Chaster, the person who had caused so much trouble and almost destroyed the world on their last adventure.

"That's who it is!" Katie yelled, joyous at the realization.

"We must find him. He's probably here, too. And Mike and Tony."

"Yeah."

"Let's split up. I'll look for our buddy Fred, while you look for Mike and Tony. Meet here in an hour."

They split up, each going their separate ways.

Katie began by looking near the castle. She approached the gates. To her dismay, a guard was stationed there. She was about to sneak in when the guard stopped her and said, "What are you doing? Please, enter."

Katie was stunned. Then she remembered that in the middle ages, if you looked rich, you were considered a good person. Maybe the guard even thought that she was from a royal family. She realized that Mike and Tony were probably caught because they were not dressed properly, and therefore, they were not supposed to be at the festivities. She began looking for the dungeon. She spotted a door. When she opened it, she saw that

stairs led downward. Katie proceeded down the steps. She noticed a guard at the bottom. Oh, what a bother!

Outside Dave thought to himself, "If Chaster transported us here, he must be here, too." With this idea in mind, Dave began searching the carnival grounds. This was to no avail. He searched for over an hour but did not find any sign of Chaster. Dave finally gave up and began to look for Katie.

Katie had outsmarted the guard by posing as a maid who was bringing food to the prisoners. Originally she had thought that the dungeon was small. However, to her surprise, she was in the second wing and had already looked in over a hundred cells! Most of them were empty; but a few had prisoners, who, upon seeing her, began screaming and hollering to be let out. When Katie searched the third wing of the prison, she came upon Dave.

"How did you get in here? I thought you were going to look for Chaster!" she said.

"I did. He's not anywhere near this fair. I came looking for you. I thought that you were out there, too! I could have saved a half hour if I had known that you were here!"

"Sorry. Look, why don't you take the fourth wing. I'll continue here." Dave turned and went back down the hall.

Sure enough, Dave came to find Katie after ten minutes, screaming and yelling that he had found Tony and Mike.

Katie responded by screaming over Dave, "SHUT UP!" Her voice was quieter now. "Do you want everybody to know we're here? Well, where are they?"

"In the last cell of the fourth wing. They're chained and their cell is locked." Dave sighed desperately. "What should we do?"

"I don't know. When I tried to get into the castle, the guard let me in without hesitation. Maybe we can explain to the queen..."

"If we do that, she'll ask us where we're from! Don't you understand? That's what led to problems last time!"

"Well, let's at least look to see if the keys are in her room." They walked off toward the throne room.

When they arrived, they received a welcome that was less than friendly. After a brief argument with the guards, they realized that they would not be permitted into the throne room

and gave up. They went to the dining room and, seeing the food, ate when it was served. Soon the meal was over.

"Well, come on," the waiter said. He was holding out his hand as if expecting something. Then Dave realized--the money! He took a ten-dollar bill from his pocket.

"What's this?" the waiter roared. "Are you trying to cheat me?"

"Well, no sir, but--"

"Give me the money now!" the waiter said. He sounded angry. Dave dug around in his pockets, as if trying to show the waiter that he had the money. "Throw these two in jail!" he yelled, his voice reaching unbearable volume. Two guards came into the room. Before Dave and Katie could react, they were captured.

2

As Dave awoke, he realized that they had been knocked unconscious while they were being taken to their cell. He saw that he was in one of the standard cells near the end of one of the wings. He tried to walk up to the bars, but he met resistance. He could not move his hands or feet! Then he saw the problem. He was attached by shackles that were bolted into the wall on both sides of his arms and legs. He saw a keyhole in the middle and realized that he would need a key to open them. He pulled as hard as he could, but the strong metal held. The cell door is also locked, he thought. Not that he would be able to reach it, anyway.

As he regained his vision, he could see in the dim light that Katie was bolted to the wall in a similar fashion not more than five feet away. On the opposite wall of the cell were two figures--he couldn't quite make out who they were--MIKE AND TONY! They appeared unconscious.

"Mike? Tony? Are you awake?" When he said this, Mike and Tony began to stir.

"Huh?.....Dave? Is that you?"

"Yeah. It's Dave."

"And Katie." Dave noticed that she had awakened.

"Dave, this is a nice predicament you got us into," Mike groaned. "What are we going to do now?"

"Sit - STAND (he corrected himself) and wait for the food. If they come to feed us, after what we've done," Dave said.

"What did you do?" Tony asked.

Dave and Katie recounted all that had led them to their current situation, including how they had been arrested. They had little time to plan what to do, because as soon as they were finished speaking, a guard arrived with some food.

"Here, you criminals," he said. He opened the cell. "I don't know why I'm doing this! This is slave work!" He then proceeded to unshackle the hands and feet of each of the prisoners.

Dave rubbed his arms. They were aching from the loss of circulation. He noticed that Mike's and Tony's hands were blue. That must happen to people after they are shackled for a long time.

The guard said, "Here's your food. I'll be back in a few minutes to collect the dishes." He placed a bowl of something unknown in front of each of them. Then the guard left.

"Eeeeeeew! What's this?" Mike complained. Typical Mike, Dave thought.

Everybody (except Mike) ate what was in the bowls, amazed at how good it tasted. Mike was about to try some when the guard came back.

Dave realized that this was their chance to escape! He signaled to the others that they should jump the guard when Dave raised his foot.

The guard entered the cell, locking the door behind him. Dave was about to signal when he realized that his food bowl was in front of his foot. If it broke, it could alert the guard! He reached to move it. By this time, the guard had tied up Katie. The moment Dave gave the signal, chaos arose.

Dave jumped to his feet and grabbed the guard's keys. Mike screamed loudly and kicked him. Startled, the guard dropped the keys. He had just picked them up when Tony came to the rescue by stepping on the guard's arm, making him release the keys. In a last-ditch effort, the guard picked up the keys with his other hand and threw as hard as he could, just before Mike came up with a soup bowl and knocked the guard unconscious.

"Nice work, guys," Dave said.

Mike yelled, "Let's get out of here!"

Tony didn't say anything. He was slumped in a corner, his head on his arms.

"Tony, what's wrong?" Katie asked.

"Look. He threw the keys out of the cell. How are we going to get out of here now? It's all my fault!" Then he started sobbing.

"Stop crying!" Katie said. "I'm the one who's locked up, not you!"

When Tony realized this, he stopped crying and stood up. Then he said, "Well, what should we do now? There's a guard knocked out in this cell, the keys are outside, and Katie's locked up. Oh, not again!"

In response to Tony's moaning, the group came over and sat at Katie's feet to discuss what to do next.

"I just thought of something," Dave said. "What if another guard comes for this guard? I don't think we can take another fight. And this time, Katie's tied up. We have to think of what to do!"

Mike said, "Can we reach the keys?"

Tony got up and went to the cell door. "They're about ten feet away. There's no way we can reach them."

Dave said, "Here's something else we didn't think about. What if the guard awakens while we're still here?"

Katie had the answer to this one. "Just lock him up like me. Then when he gets up, we can force him into getting us out of here."

The group did so. It took a lot of effort to lift the guard into standing position, but after they had, they just pushed him back into the wall opposite Katie and locked the clamps. Then they returned to sit where they had been before, and waited.

About an hour later, the guard started to stir. First he tried to reach for his keys but then discovered that he had been confined.

Dave said, "You're up now. Finally! Now tell us how we can get out."

"I ain't telling you nothin'!"

"Well, we'll just sit here until you do." And so they did.

Five minutes later, the guard said, "OK. I'll tell you. Just take the keys from my pocket."

"You threw them out of the cell, remember?" Tony sarcastically replied.

"Oh. Well, in that case, I'll just stand here and not talk to you."

Five hours passed. There was no sign of life in the prison other than themselves. The guard continued to be nonresponsive, only saying that they would pay for this. Eventually Mike, Dave, and Tony fell asleep. Katie tried but was unable because of the uncomfortable position she was in. Finally Dave woke up. Because there was no longer any sunlight streaming through the open door at the end of the hall, Dave realized that it was nighttime. He woke the other two.

Katie said, "Had a nice sleep? You'll need it." Motioning with her head toward the guard, she said, "Our friend has awakened."

Mike said, "This is BORING! We MUST find a way out of here!"

Dave said, "I agree." Then he froze.

There were footsteps at the end of the hall.

The footsteps got louder and louder. Mike, Dave and Tony hid in a corner near Katie. Suddenly a shadow loomed over them.

It was a girl. She looked like a prisoner. Stopping at the cell, she whispered to Dave, "Come over here!" Dave obeyed. There was a long conversation between the girl and Dave, and then she left. Since his friends were tired, they all turned in without any questions to Dave.

The next morning was bright and cheerful. The rays of sunlight shining through the open hallway door lifted their spirits a little. Dave awoke last and was bombarded with questions.

"What did she say?"

"Did she tell you a way out?"

"Was she a prisoner, too?"....

"OK," said Dave, "I'll answer the last two first. "Yes, and yes. As to what she said, I'll repeat it to you." Dave yawned, because he was still very tired. "She said that behind every cell, there is a tunnel, dug out by the builders, so that they could work on the dungeon after the cell doors were in place. These tunnels were miles long and well traveled; but now, they are in disrepair. That's how she escaped. I suggest that we try to repeat that action. I'm tired...."

Just then, it hit Tony. "You're not tired. We must escape." Tony realized that he was getting dehydrated. So was Dave. The last liquid that they had received was yesterday's soup.

Mike said, "Come on, Tony. Help me dig."

"WAIT!" Katie screamed. "You're forgetting about me!"

Dave glanced at Katie. She was still tied to the wall. They could not leave without her. Dave sighed. Another problem.

"I have an idea!" Mike said. "Tony and I will go outside and steal the keys. Then, we'll release you.

"OK!" she said. "Start digging! I'm thirsty!"

Two hours later, Mike and Tony had still had no luck. They had tunneled three feet into the right side of the wall. It was slow going. The ground was hard, and they had no tools. Finally they gave up on that hole and began digging slightly left. Sure enough, by early afternoon, they had hit a tunnel.

Dave came in to check on Mike and Tony's progress. "How are you guys doing?"

Mike got up and turned around. He had dirt all over his face. "How does it look to you?"

Dave apologized, "I'm sorry. Here. You take a break. I'll dig for a while." Dave quickly found out how hard it was, but he kept at it. Soon there was a hole big enough for a person to crawl through.

"Okay, Mike," Dave said. "That looks big enough. It's time to go."

"I hope this works," Mike said as he climbed into the tunnel. Dave said goodbye as Tony crawled in, still complaining about being thirsty. Dave sat down to wait.

"Look! Up ahead!" Mike exclaimed. There was a pinpoint of daylight ahead.

"YES!" Tony screamed. He didn't care who heard him. They had finally escaped, after crawling for over an hour. The light kept growing bigger and bigger, until they finally emerged. They were shocked at what they saw.

"Water!" Mike said, speechless. It was a large river. They had come all this way just to be stopped. Mike shrank down, depressed.

"What's so bad about that?" Tony said. He dipped his finger in the water. It tasted all right. "Drink!"

They did so. They drank and drank and drank. Mike wondered if they would get sick from this water. He said nothing. They drank until they almost vomited, which reminded them of their hunger.

They sat down just inside the tunnel, to get out of the bright sunlight to which they were unaccustomed, and to think.

Tony spoke first. "Well, we'll have to turn back. At least Dave can get a drink. But what about Katie....."

Mike was firm. "We're not giving up! We crawled for an hour and sat in that dungeon for two days without food or water! We are going on!"

"Do you mean we should SWIM? Come on, we'll never make it!"

"We'll never make it if we sit in that dungeon and starve!"

"Well. . ."

"Come on," Mike said, grabbing Tony's arm. "Let's go."

Mike jumped into the water and was shocked by how cold it was. Tony came next and would almost have given up, if it weren't for Mike pulling him across. Soon it was too deep for either of them to stand, so they began to swim. That was when they noticed the strong current.

"HELP ME!" Tony screamed. He was drifting downstream, away from Mike.

"TONY!" Mike screamed. He couldn't do a thing about Tony. He was too busy trying to reach the shore on the other side before he was captured by the current. Finally he reached the other side. Mike looked for Tony, but he was out of sight.

Mike approached the side door to the kitchen. It had been left open, presumably to let out some of the heat from cooking. He was able to slip in easily, as the cook was not there. He found some clay bowls to the side and stole some of the soup that was cooking. He went outside and ate. It was the best food he had tasted in his life. When he was finished, he slipped back into the kitchen unnoticed.

Suddenly he heard voices. Someone was coming! Mike frantically looked around. The kitchen was big, maybe twenty feet across. He spotted a cabinet on one side of the room. He jumped into it and closed the door. Just in time! The cook had returned and was stirring the soup. Of course, from poor Mike's vantage point, he could do nothing except stay put. And stay put he did, for what he guessed was over an hour. His legs became quite cramped.

When Mike finally opened the cabinet door a crack, he noticed that the cook had left. The soup was missing from the stove. When he emerged from the cabinet, he noticed another door to the kitchen. Upon opening it, he was greeted by loud, cheery voices and the bang of utensils. Just what he needed! A dinner. Time to think.

He decided to just open the door and walk through the dining room, trying not to be noticed. His plan went off without a hitch. He found the locked door to the dungeon without any interruptions and then realized that he had no keys. Where would he find them?

"If they don't come back soon, I'm going to go crazy!" Katie said to Dave. She was very tired of being chained to a wall for two days straight. Tired of her sore, purple-blue arms,

tired of being dirty, tired of being fed by Dave (very embarrassing, even though she would have starved otherwise), tired of being bored, and just tired altogether.

"Oh, come ON!" Dave managed to creak out of his parched throat. Of course, he was unaware that there was water just a fifteen-minute crawl away.

"Dave, what do you think will happen back home if we die here? Last time, time was frozen while we were gone. What if we die?"

Of course, this was a question that Dave was unable to answer. Before he could say anything, though, Katie cried out.

"Look!" she said. She was motioning toward her right forearm. There was a wide cut. Blood was dripping down.

Dave was startled. "What should I do?"

"Just do SOMETHING."

Dave realized, even in his thirsty stupor, that he had to do something or Katie would bleed to death. He quickly pulled off his shirt and ran to Katie. He pulled her arm up as far as he could and tied his shirt around the cut. He was about to say something when he heard footsteps at the end of the hall.

"MIKE!" Dave and Katie screamed at the same time. Mike held the keys in his hand. He also looked as if he had gone through a lot to get them. There were several bruises on his right shoulder, and his shirt was torn in half.

Dave ran up to the front of the cell. "Where's Tony? Did you get the keys for Katie?" he asked.

"Yes. It's a long story. I'll tell you later. Right now, let's get out of here!" Mike then opened the cell door.

"Hurry!" Katie said. Mike unlocked her legs. He was careful not to hit the cut as he undid her arms. Katie fell forward onto Mike, causing Mike to careen backward onto the hard floor.

"I...can't get up!" Katie said. She was so weak from being tied up.

"Well, you have to!" Mike exclaimed. "How are we going to get out of here?"

"I'll try," she said.

It took a lot of effort to get into the tunnel. Actually Dave posed the most difficulty, because he was so dehydrated. It took a half hour to get to the tunnel entrance.

"WATER!" Dave screamed. He drank. Mike was able to help Katie get to the edge of the river without falling in.

"Well, what do we do now?" Katie asked.

"Swim," Mike said.

"I can't swim!"

"Well, what else should we do?"

"Go back through the cell door!"

Mike had never thought of that. Then he remembered. "There are two guards at the entrance to the dungeon. I stole the keys from one of them. And from what I saw," Mike showed Katie his bruised shoulder, "we'll never get past them."

"Well, then we'll have to swim," Dave said. Mike and Katie looked at him. He had been busy drinking but had still heard them, even though they had forgotten he was there. "How will we get Katie across?"

"We'll have to carry her," Mike suggested. After I crossed before, I noticed a shallow part about fifty feet upstream. We can walk across there."

"I don't know. It sounds risky and--" Katie cut in.

"Don't worry. We'll get you across and to a place where you can rest," Dave responded.

"Let's go," Mike said.

The two brothers managed to pull Katie near the water, and then picked her up, carrying a leg or an arm. They shivered from the cold.

Halfway across, Mike stumbled but regained his balance. "WHOA!" he said.

"What's going on?" Katie asked. She shifted position, a fatal mistake.

"OH NO!" Dave screamed.

"AAAAAAAH!" Mike screamed.

Mike slipped, dropping Katie into the shivering cold water. She gasped. Dave lost his balance, and that was all it took.

"I can't swim!" Katie said, desperately. Mike and Dave could not swim, either, because the water was getting too cold.

"HELP ME!" Mike yelled at the top of his lungs.

The current grew stronger and the group lost their balance. They were swept swiftly downstream. And so began their great adventure.

3

Katie awoke near a campfire. She did not know where she was or how she got there. Was she dead? Soon her vision cleared, and she saw Dave lying a few feet away. Then she saw Mike--and Tony! She must not be dead, because it was very unlikely that all of them had died.

Dave, Mike, and Tony began to stir. Katie noticed that her arms did not hurt anymore. Then she realized that a monster was standing over her. She screamed and tried to move away, but the monster grabbed her and said, "Sssssssh! Do you want *THEM* to hear you?"

"Who are you? What do you want?" Katie squeaked.

"We're here to help you," the seven-foot tall monster replied nonchalantly. He had a long beard and a very oval face. To put it plainly, he was fat, too. And hairy.

"Katie! You're all right!" Tony began to run toward her. Then he noticed the monster standing behind her.

"Don't be afraid. We're on your side," the monster said to calm Tony.

Just when Tony and Katie had become comfortable with the monsters, Dave and Mike awoke, and it took quite a lot of explaining to convince them that the monsters were not enemies.

"Now, let me explain to you. This must be very hard on you. We're trolls. We live in the forest outside the castle and help the prisoners. We feel that the justice system in the castle is unfair."

"Tell me about it!" said Tony.

"Don't interrupt. We know that the guards are after you. So we will make you a proposition. The castle has gone too far, punishing innocent people like you. We are planning to raid the castle of Harrogen tomorrow night, and we will take care of your pursuers. I suggest that you get as far away from here as you can. But . . . on your way, there is another troll stronghold with supplies and men in it. I want you to get them and bring them here."

"Wait! Why should we--" Tony began.

"I told you, don't interrupt! I'll give you five minutes to talk it over with your friends. But if you say no, the guards will probably recapture you, and well, then--." He drew a finger across his neck and made an unsettling noise. "Five minutes."

The group walked away from the trolls. There were three there now. Dave assumed that the others had arrived while the big troll was talking to them.

"This is outrageous! Why did they capture us and then say--" Tony began again.

"Calm down, Tony," Mike said. "You're not helping us any."

Dave said, "Trolls! Trolls do not exist! Where are we? I have a feeling that we are not in the middle ages as I once thought."

"I don't know," Katie said, "but what should we do about them? We have to get back home!"

Mike whispered, "Maybe if we help them, something will come up that will allow us to get home."

"Right. Also, do you want to sit here and get your heads chopped off? Do you have anything better to do?" Katie added.

"But, what if--" Tony began for a third time.

"Look, Tony," said Katie. "The matter's settled. If you want to stay here and get killed, then be my guest."

"OK, then we all agree?" Dave asked. Everyone was silent.

As if the troll sensed a decision, he returned at that moment and asked, "Well, have you made up your minds?"

"Yes. We are going with you," Dave said firmly.

"I think you have made a mistake. *I* am not going. *You* are," the troll replied.

"But--" Tony began.

"Do you have a problem?" The troll turned to Tony. "STOP INTERRUPTING!!!!" he bellowed.

"Yes," Tony squeaked. He shrank away from the troll.

The troll pulled a map from his gigantic pocket. "Here's what you should do. . . ."

An hour later, the group was on their way into the great forest that surrounded Harrogen Castle.

"OW!" said Tony, catching his foot on a tree root protruding from the ground.

"Here, I'll help you," said Dave. He offered Tony his hand.

"I must be the person with the most bruises in the world!" Tony complained.

"Second most," said Katie, showing Tony her arm. Then she was shocked. The cut was gone! "Uh oh!" she gasped.

"What's wrong?" questioned Mike.

"The cut..."

"What cut?"

"It's gone!"

"She's right!" Dave exclaimed. "I saw it when we were in the jail."

"Something's wrong here," said Mike. "First the trolls, then this, and there was no Harrogen castle! So where are we?"

"This must be Chaster's fault! That stupid, lousy pig--" Tony cut in.

Mike said, "It has to be. How else would we wind up back in the middle ages?"

"Maybe there's a way to get back. Maybe a time gate . . ." Katie commented.

"But this can't be REAL. Trolls, missing cuts . . . how can this happen? I don't think that we are on Earth at all!"

Everybody gasped and stopped walking.

"I never thought of THAT," Mike said.

"Maybe . . . maybe you're right," Tony said, "but that leaves us with a greater problem. We don't own an interplanetary spaceship anymore. And we might not even be in our time. We could be millions of years in the past . . . or even the future!"

"Look, guys," Katie said, "let's stop talking and concentrate on getting the trolls' job done."

Presently they reached a stream with a wooden bridge over it. Everybody stopped and sat down to eat some of the provisions that the trolls had given them.

"Yuck!" Mike said, spitting out his bite of food. "This is awful!"

"Maybe the water's clean, at least, hopefully," Dave said. But when he tasted some of the water, he spit it out just as Mike had.

"Well, I guess we better be going. At least we can try to find some clean water," Katie suggested.

Everybody got up and began to cross the bridge. When

they were halfway across, Mike screamed. “Look!” Skulking figures were untying the ropes that held the bridge on both sides.

“NO!” Dave yelled.

At that moment, the bridge gave way and began to float down the river toward the edge of a waterfall.

“Hurry! Jump off!” Mike said. The waterfall loomed closer. Dave and Katie jumped off and swam as far away from the floating bridge as possible. Of course, with the swift current, it was impossible to get out of the water.

“NO! We’ll all die!” shrieked Tony.

“JUMP OFF!” Katie screamed.

Mike jumped off, trying to pull Tony with him, but it was to no avail. Tony stayed on the bridge, and Dave and Katie screamed as the bridge plunged into the depths below. They didn’t have much time before they too were swept over the edge of the waterfall.

Dave hit the water hard. Once he had cleared the pounding surf of the waterfall, he looked around. The waterfall was about fifty feet high! He frantically looked for Mike and Katie. They were farther downstream, clinging to the battered remains of the bridge. They got out of the water and pulled the bridge with them. Dave wondered why would they do that? Then he remembered that Tony hadn’t jumped off!

As soon as Dave reached the shore, he asked, “Where’s Tony?”

“Right here. He’s injured,” Katie responded.

Dave went over to Tony. There was a large cut on his right arm. It was bleeding. Dave had never seen so much blood in his life!

Mike went off to see if he could find some leaves to stop the bleeding. Dave and Katie were left alone with Tony.

“Well, expecting that he lives,” Katie said angrily, “what should we do with him?”

Dave said, “We should just leave him here! He’s only trouble. Why didn’t he jump off the . . ..”

Just then, a small green figure clad in green garments appeared out of the underbrush. “May I be of assistance?” it said.

“Who are you?” Dave and Katie said in unison.

“Christopher the Imp, at your service.”

Dave and Katie began to back away from the figure. He appeared not to be frightened, and he stood where he was.

"What do you want?" Katie said, frightened. She and Dave huddled near some bushes.

"To help you. What else do you think?" it said.

Dave and Katie had a quick conference. Needless to say, there was a lot of arguing; but they decided to allow the imp to help them.

"Okay," Dave said. "What do you think you can do?"

"Watch." Slowly, the Imp waved his short, skinny arms in strange motions. To everybody's amazement, Tony began to rise slowly from the ground! Christopher continued to wave his arms until Tony was at eye level. Then he stopped, but Tony didn't fall. The Imp dropped to the ground, exhausted.

"WOW!" Dave exclaimed. Katie sat back in silent wonder.

"Do you believe me now?" the Imp said.

Just then, Mike came back, and several events happened at once. Mike screamed and dropped the pile of leaves that he was carrying. He looked frantically back and forth at the Imp and Tony and then ran off toward the river. Dave screamed and began to yell at Mike to come back. In his hurry, he ran into Katie, who was also trying to reach Mike. They fell. Then everything stopped. Mike was in the air, jumping over a fallen tree. Tony was floating, and Dave and Katie were sprawled on the ground on top of each other.

Unnoticed in the commotion, Christopher had been waving his arms in the same strange sort of motions. After he was done, he collapsed to the ground and could not get up for a long while. Then he walked in front of Mike and waited a few more minutes.

All of a sudden, everything began again. This time, when Mike tried to get away, he ran into Christopher. Strangely Christopher did not fall. It was as if Mike had run into a brick wall.

Mike sat up, stunned. "How . . . " he said. He inched away from Christopher and backed into Dave and Katie! There was a loud commotion, and finally Dave, Katie and Mike stood up. Dave hastily explained that the Imp was on their side. He also recounted all the other events that had happened while Mike was gone.

"Well, now? Are you coming with us?" Dave said.

"Yes. I will assist you."

"Good. I need your help to find out where the

trolls . . .."

"Trolls?" Christopher said. "We must not go to the trolls."

"Why not? Those people from the castle will find us and kill us if we don't notify the trolls!"

"NO!" Christopher screamed loudly. "We must not go to the trolls. THEY will kill you."

"But they seemed better than the people," Katie said.

"The people . . . yes," the Imp muttered, "they are chasing you, right. I mean, they are probably on your tail."

Dave, Katie and Mike looked at each other but turned quickly back toward Christopher. "Well, then, what should we do?" said Mike.

"A few miles from here is a town called Oman. We can take your friend there and care for him. Then we can figure out what to do next."

And so the companions began their journey to Oman. It was hard going in the forest, and they had to constantly get Christopher to cut down low underbrush or guide Tony through the dense trees. It was starting to get dark when the party reached the edge of the forest. A wide plain stretched before them. They could see faint lights in the distance.

"That's Oman. We'll get there tomorrow morning." Just then, Dave noticed how hungry he was. "I'm starving!" he complained.

"Yes. Me too." Mike said.

"Don't worry," Christopher said. "There's a small stream. I know how to fish." No sooner had he said this then he was off to the stream. When he returned, he had two large fish. It was dark now. The companions ate and then decided to go to bed.

The next morning dawned bright and early. Everyone was still tired when Christopher woke them at our equivalent of 5:00 a.m.. They ate the remaining fish--there had been too much to eat last night--and started off. By 8 o'clock, they could see the village before them. Presently, they entered the main gates.

"I know the man who runs the inn here. He will help us." So, the companions proceeded to the inn. The manager of the inn was very friendly and decided to take care of Tony for the time being. He also gave the party a free room.

Once settled, Mike began, "What should we do now? You said you had a plan."

"Oh, yes," said Christopher. "We must find our way to . . . "

"Wait a minute," said Katie. "Why should we go where you tell us? You are friendly, but we have our own things to do."

"Yeah," Mike said. Everyone agreed.

Then Christopher the Imp began. "Well, I think you deserve an explanation. This will take some time. Are you sure you want to hear?"

"Yes. Tell us," Dave said.

"Okay. Somewhere in the north, evil deeds are at work. I have noticed that there are many more people getting lost in the forest. Many complain, just like you, that they were pushed into the river. Many don't survive. I watched this for over five years. Then I decided to find out what was going on. I started to go north, and I found hundreds of trolls in a camp a little north of this town. Standing behind a large rock, I heard them say things about strange happenings in a country called Antike. Something about the evil Yavin, who is trying to take over the world. The trolls also mentioned that many of the other strange creatures, such as calks . . .."

"What in the world are calks?" Dave interrupted.

"I was getting to that. Calks are like birds, but they are huge and have large bills. They can fly at enormous speeds and can pick up something as large as a horse if they must. Anyway, these creatures are joining Yavin in his quest to control the world. Already the northern countries have been overwhelmed. One traveler escaped from a prison in the Dark Castle and told me of this."

"What does all of this have to do with us?" Katie asked.

"Watch." The Imp pulled a large sword from his belt. It shone clear in the sun from the window, almost as if it were transparent. The group stood in awe. Then Christopher put his sword away and continued. "This sword, which goes by the name of Falchion, is our only hope of defeating Yavin and freeing the world."

"But why can't anyone else do this job?" Mike asked.

"Why don't you find out?" said Christopher. He took the sword from its sheath and held it out to Mike. "Take it," he said. As soon as Mike touched the shining sword, its aura stopped and it looked like a regular sword. But as soon as he gave it back, it was shining as brightly as ever.

Christopher continued. "The Falchion can only be used

by one who has a strong desire to wield it. It takes many years to build up that confidence. We don't have the time to find the right person. He could be on the other side of the world. Even as we speak, the Enemy is laying siege over the northern part of the continent. The Falchion is the only weapon that can destroy Yavin and free the world. There was another weapon, a knife, years ago, but it fell into the hands of Yavin. So . . .."

"Wait. Why do we need to be concerned with this? *You* have the sword. Why don't *you* go and defeat Yavin yourself?" asked Dave. "We have to be concerned about getting home . . .." Dave put a hand over his mouth.

"He has a house far down south and is homesick," Katie said, covering the mistake. "We were on our way there.

"I thought you were going to the trolls," Christopher said.

"Well, that was only a stop on the way," Mike said.

"There's no need to hide it," Christopher said. "I know what you are thinking. I wanted to get home at first, too. But eventually, you will learn to live here."

"You don't understand."

"Yes, I do," Christopher said. "I used to live just like you. You see, I am from the same place from which you came. The future."

"What!" Mike said.

"I'd better explain. I am actually from the year 1920. When I arrived here, I appeared next to a castle and was imprisoned like you. In the dungeon, I met a strange woman named Danube. She was a sorcerer, and she taught me many spells. One day she and I were digging, and we found the Falchion. We stayed in prison for many years, and eventually she died. I grew old, but I didn't feel any older than that day we found the sword. That was when I learned of the sword's power. It makes the user immortal as long as he or she keeps the sword. I managed to escape from prison. It was then that I learned that my Imp form would not grow old, and I could cast more powerful spells. To my knowledge, 150 years have passed."

"150 years!" Mike exclaimed. The others were too astonished to speak.

"Wait," Dave said. "Why do you need our help?"

Christopher said, "There is a legend in this time that says that three boys and one girl will overcome all evil. Look at this." He pulled out a small transparent stone from his pocket and

handed it to Katie.

"What is this?" she asked. As she spoke, the stone began to glow. It cast a pure white light around Katie, and then . . . she disappeared!

Everybody stood in awe. Then finally Dave spoke. "What is that?"

"It's the Hadar stone. It's more powerful than it looks, but nobody has ever been able to use its true power. It's also helpful for concealment." The stone shone blindingly bright.

Katie put the stone in her invisible pocket, and she became visible once again. "I don't like the part about *three* boys and one girl. What about you?"

Suddenly there was an urgent knock at the door.

Dave unlocked it. A maid came in. She looked sad. "I'm sorry," she said, "but your friend didn't make it."

4

"WHAT?!" Dave screamed.

"Your friend . . . He's dead," the maid said.

"DEAD?!" Katie screamed.

"I'm sorry. There was nothing to be done. There was too much bleeding."

"Why didn't he jump off the stupid bridge?" Mike said quietly, and then started to cry.

THREE DAYS LATER...

"It looks like he will remain in the middle ages now," Mike said. He was walking away from Tony's gravestone.

"If we are in the middle ages," Dave said.

"Maybe when . . . IF we get back, we'll see his tombstone somewhere," Katie said.

The three walked somberly away from the graveyard and headed for the inn, not knowing what better to do. When they arrived at their room, Christopher was sitting in a chair, deep in thought.

"Paid your final respects?" Christopher said.

The three nodded.

"Good," Christopher continued, "because I know now what we must do. We must defeat Yavin and bring peace to the world."

"Us?" Mike asked.

"It may get us home. I don't know how, but it may. Besides," Christopher looked up at Mike, "do you have anything better to do? I don't feel like spending my life here. Something would be . . . missing."

Everybody was quiet for a minute. Then Katie spoke.

"I agree," she said sadly.

Mike and Dave nodded their heads.

"Then it's settled. We'll leave tomorrow morning. Cheer up. You still have the rest of the day ahead. Go and look around. But first, let me tell you my plans."

Everybody sat down at a large wooden table in the center of the room. Christopher searched in his pocket and found what he wanted: a map. It looked exactly as below:

"Where'd you get this from?" Mike asked. "I thought you were from the same time we were."

"I am," said Christopher, "and I got this map from the prisoner that I told you about earlier. He managed to steal it during his escape."

"So what do we do?" Dave questioned.

Pointing to the map, Christopher said, "We are here." He was pointing to the lower-left corner, at the town of Oman. "These red lines are roads. I don't think they will be of much use. Yavin already has his servants out to find us and the sword. We must stay off the road as much as possible. This means that we must go through the Calhoun foothills until we near Jasper. Then we can get back on the road. Jasper is a major trading post and a crossroads. We can stop there for rest and news of the Enemy. It will probably take about . . . seven or eight days to get there."

"Seven or eight days!" Katie exclaimed.

"This will be hard," Dave commented.

"We'll pack lots of supplies, and even winter furs, because the journey is likely to take a few months!"

"I wonder what my Mom's saying now?" Mike worried.

"Nothing. Remember how we came back last time at the same instant we left?" Dave said.

"Oh. Yeah. Right."

"Well, anyway," Christopher continued, "we can stop at Jasper and figure out what to do next. Now," he turned to Katie, "that stone is yours. Use it wisely. Anything you touch except the ground and air will disappear, too. Try it."

Katie took the stone out of her pocket and rubbed it in her hands. It started to glow. Then Katie disappeared. A moment later, there was a cry of "Aaaah!" as Dave disappeared. Soon after, there was a loud crash, and Mike, too, disappeared.

Christopher chuckled as all three of them reappeared. Katie was grabbing Mike's and Dave's arms on both sides of her. Everybody returned to their seats.

"Well, now that you've had some fun, let's take the rest of the day to rest and prepare," Christopher said.

Christopher woke the party before daybreak. They had gone to bed early and were not tired. Presently, they ate a large

breakfast, for they would not eat the same for some days. Final preparations were made. Christopher gave Dave a gold coin, and he bought two horses to carry their packs. When he returned, everyone left the room and started on their journey.

As they passed through the town toward the north, Mike admired the sights, wondering if he would ever come back to his home alive. They passed through the town gates to the road and turned eastward. By about 7:30, they were in the foothills. They continued eastward. Around noontime, everyone was hungry, so they stopped on top of an unusually tall hill and ate.

"Nice day, isn't it?" Dave commented.

"Yes. It is. Not too hot. But it's only June." Christopher answered.

"Hey!" Mike interrupted. "What's that?" There were two men standing still on the road toward the west. They looked around as if searching for something.

"That doesn't look good," Katie said.

Suddenly the two men looked directly at them. Then they galloped off to the east.

"I think we've been spotted by the Enemy," Dave said.

"I think you're right," said Mike.

Christopher interrupted. "Let's get out of here before they return."

For the rest of the afternoon, they traveled farther back from the road. Everybody was anxious, and that anxiety grew as it began to get dark. As soon as the sun had set, they found a grove of trees. They ate a quick supper; and, after a lot of complaining, Mike decided to take watch until midnight. Little did he know how dangerous that watch would be.

Mike was bored. It was an hour before midnight, and nothing had happened. He didn't know why he had to sit watch so long. He looked down at Christopher, Katie, and Dave. He could be asleep right now, too.

Unnoticed by Mike, just a few feet away, five dark, shadowy figures were creeping about the underbrush around the grove in which the party slept. They eventually stopped moving and simply observed. Soon, they saw the person on watch nod his head and that was their cue. The five shadowy figures jumped the party.

Mike awoke with a start. Someone was grabbing his arms! He squirmed and screamed but to no avail. The large figure put a hand over his mouth and carried him away.

The figures quietly stormed the party, waking and capturing them each, one by one. Then they took their supplies and were gone.

Mike was resting on the shoulder of a huge troll. He had been carried for over an hour now, and the troll's thick, burly legs didn't show any sign of stopping. When he could, Mike looked around, and he found Dave and Christopher on other trolls' shoulders. There was no sign of Katie. The trolls continued to walk for another hour and came to a clearing, this one larger than the one in which the party had camped.

The trolls set them down roughly and went off to the other side of the clearing. One troll stood guard while the others fetched some rope. Dave, Mike, and Christopher the Imp were bound tightly. Then the guard left to join the other trolls near a large campfire.

The trolls began to perform a strange ritual around the campfire, dancing, singing in unintelligible language, and jumping up and down. After about half an hour, they stopped and sat down on the ground. The largest one (Mike presumed he was the leader) began to talk.

"Well, another band of traitors. Miglik warned them to follow his orders. Now they will pay!" The large troll gave a deep laugh, and the others followed.

"What should we do with them?" one of the smaller ones asked.

"Roast 'em alive. They'll make meat enough to feed us for many a day," another said.

"No!" one shouted. "Let us keep them as our slaves!" There was more than one affectionate groan.

"Better yet!" another yelled. "Torture them!" There was a chorus of loud cheers.

While the trolls argued over what to do with their captives, Dave, Mike, and Christopher were secretly planning their escape.

"Now. What did the trolls ask you to do?" Christopher said.

Mike told him the story about how he had escaped from Harrogen castle and how the trolls had offered him a deal, up to the point when they met Christopher.

"You should never make a deal with trolls," Christopher said. "They are the scum of the planet."

Just then, Dave heard a voice in his ear. “Dave. Roll over.”

“Mike!” Dave whispered. “Did you hear something?”

“No. What?” Mike replied.

Just then, an invisible hand gripped Dave’s arm and rolled him over. “What are you?”

“Who do you think?” the voice said. “It’s Katie.”

“How?” Dave said in wonder. Then he remembered - the stone!

“Wait!” Katie said. When she gripped both of Dave’s arms, he disappeared! She dragged him out of the clearing and then came back for the others. But as she was pulling Mike away, the worst happened.

“Hey!” the troll leader roared. “Where are the prisoners?”

“Yeah. Jakir was supposed to take care of them!” a smaller one answered.

“You told me to come over here . . ..”

“ENOUGH!” the leader roared. “FIND THEM!”

All of the trolls began to search the clearing. As one was examining near the edge, he met a solid, invisible wall. “Over here!” he yelled. The other trolls came running to his side.

That was just enough time. Katie had finished untying Christopher’s bonds. They ran to where Dave and Mike were waiting. By this time, the trolls were hot on their heels, so Katie took off the stone and put it in her pocket so it would be easier to run.

“It’s the prisoners!” one troll screamed. “GET THEM! Kill them if you have to!”

The pursuit was slow, but the trolls had the advantage of their strong bodies to push the underbrush out of the way, and eventually the party's lead was narrowed to less then ten feet.

"Do something!" Mike hollered.

As he ran, Christopher began to wave his arms again. Suddenly, a large tree that they had just passed exploded in a brilliant flash, as if struck by lightning. Sparks flew. There were several horrific screams, and two of the trolls fell over with a loud thud, burning alive. The other three took little notice of this and kept up their pursuit of the party. Although they had fallen behind because of the exploding tree, the distance was closing fast.

"Cool!" Mike exclaimed. "But there are other trolls chasing us, too."

"I'm . . . too . . . exhausted," Christopher gasped.

"Hurry!" Dave said. Suddenly, the party reached a dense area of the forest. "It's too dark! I can't see!" he yelled.

Katie took the Hadar stone out of her pocket. She concentrated on the stone, and it shined a pure white light. This made the going much easier and may have saved the party from imminent defeat. But the trolls didn't give up. They were still gaining.

Then the worst thing that could possibly happen did. Dave tripped over a tree root. He was sprawled on the ground, entangled in the tree root. The trolls would overtake them in seconds.

"CHRISTOPHER! DO SOMETHING!" Dave screamed. The trolls were only a few feet away now.

Katie wished with all her heart and some more that the trolls would stop chasing them. Then something strange happened. The stone began to shine. Suddenly, there was a flash so bright that it was seen as far as the town of Oman, over ten miles away. The trolls stopped, frozen in their pursuit.

"Hurry!" Christopher said. "They are momentarily stunned. RUN!"

Everybody helped untangle the root from Dave's foot. Christopher led them for over a mile. By the time they stopped, everybody was out of breath, especially Mike, who had not slept that night.

"Nice job, Christopher!" Dave said.

"That wasn't my doing," Christopher said.

"What? Then what happened?" Mike asked.

"I just wished that the trolls would stop chasing us," Katie said slowly, "and the stone glowed brighter, and then . . . they stopped."

"Wow!" Dave said. Everybody else was speechless.

After a moment, Christopher said, "I didn't know the stone was that powerful. I just thought it could make the user invisible. We better not mention this stone to anybody. It will benefit us greatly, after what has just happened." Everyone was silent.

"Now," Christopher continued, "let's talk about more pressing matters, shall we? What of our supplies? And our horses? We cannot journey to Jasper without them. There is little or nothing to hunt in these hills."

"What should we do?" Dave asked.

"Well, we have two choices--go back to Oman, where we could be lucky--that's if there are no trolls there--or continue on and hope we find food."

Everybody was silent, debating their choice.

"I think we should vote," Katie said. "I vouch for going on."

"Me, too," Dave agreed.

"Well, at least we can survive for a while without food, but if we get caught by trolls again . . . " Mike said.

"Well, well," Christopher said. "It looks as if my vote doesn't count, so let's get farther away from the trolls before we rest. But hurry--it is already getting light." He was right.
The eastern sky was turning grey.

The party hurried toward the growing dawn. After the sun rose, they found a clearing with a stream nearby. They lay down to sleep. A watch was assigned, and soon everybody was sound asleep.

5

Christopher the Imp was the first up, around midday. He bathed in the creek and returned to find Dave and Katie awake, trying to rouse Mike. Everybody got a drink of water, and then they were off.

Everybody was hungry, so they searched for food as best they could but to no avail. The party began to despair. They stopped at a small stream| around midafternoon to drink, and pressed on as best they could. It began to cloud up, giving the party relief from the heat but not from their growling stomachs. Just before dusk, they sat down to rest on the top of a hill.

The view was spectacular. Christopher said that, on a clear day, you could see as far as the town of Oman, which was over twenty miles away now. The clouds were thickening, and Christopher warned that it might rain soon.

"I'm so hungry, I'm gonna starve!" Dave complained.

"Shut up, Dave! You don't hear me complaining. The human body can survive up to five days without food," Mike said.

"Hey, hey! Calm down. The lack of food is getting to all of us," said Christopher.

"Look!" Mike said, pointing to the southwest. "Smoke!"

"Where?" Christopher said. Mike pointed it out to him. A big puff of smoke was rising out of the distance. Because of the cloudy weather and the oncoming sunset, its source could not be seen. "This is ill news. That is toward Oman. Most likely the trolls burned the town down."

"Why would they do that?" Dave asked.

"Because they think we're there," Christopher said, "or just because they wanted to. Trolls are evil. They follow only Yavin or their own minds."

"Let's stop talking and get some food," Dave commented nonchalantly.

Everybody got up and started again on their long trek east. Around dusk, they reached a stream. They settled down to sleep, being too weak to walk anymore, when it started to rain.

"Oh, no!" Dave complained. "We're not gonna make it. We'll all die tonight."

"Wait!" said Christopher. "Rain is the best time to fish, because the fish are stirred up. Let me try to catch one. Help me with that tree." He pointed toward a sapling that stood right next to the riverbank. With a little help from Dave, they tore several branches off the sapling and bound them together to make a fishing pole.

"What should we use for bait?" Dave asked.

In response to this question, Christopher began to dig a hole in the ground. After about a minute, he found what he was looking for–a big, fat worm. He attached the worm to the end of the makeshift fishing pole. Because he had no line, he held it horizontally, so that the end of the pole with the worm was submerged.

Five minutes later, after not catching anything, Christopher said, "The water's not deep enough here. We must go farther downstream." It was decided that Mike and Katie would stay at their current location, so that the whole party would not have to go too close to the road, where the trolls could see them.

Dave and Christopher ventured about a mile downstream when they came upon a deep area of the stream, where the pouring rain and the dusk made it impossible to see the bottom.

Thirty minutes later, the rod began to jiggle in Christopher's hands. He lifted the pole out of the water and found a small fish foreign to Dave nibbling at the worm. He quickly pulled it ashore until it stopped moving and packed up to get ready to return to Mike and Katie.

It was dark by the time they returned. Dave and Christopher had traveled for over an hour. Mike and Katie were starving, but they also had some news.

"There was a large bird overhead," Katie said. "It looked as if it were searching for something. We ducked down under the trees just in time before it flew overhead."

"That was a calk," said Christopher. "It was probably heading toward Oman, which we must now presume to be destroyed. But we cannot rule out the possibility that it was looking for us."

"Enough," Mike said. "Where's dinner?"

Everybody looked in dismay at the small fish that Christopher produced from his pocket. "At least it's something,"

he said.

"How do we cook it?" Dave asked.

Christopher replied, "We don't. Even if it weren't raining, we could not build a fire because of the calk that you just spotted. We'll have to eat it raw."

Christopher cut the fish into four equal pieces, and everybody tried to force down their meager portions of the horrible tasting fish. When they were finished, Christopher said, "Let us sleep, for we must be off before daylight. It is dangerous to stay in one place too long with all of these evil creatures searching for us."

Everybody except Mike lay down and fell asleep immediately. He wasn't that tired, even though he had slept less than a few hours that morning. Anyway, he was too hungry to sleep.

Mike observed the quiet in the hills. It is too quiet, he thought. Once or twice, he saw another calk flying to the south, along what he presumed to be the road.

It was still dark when Dave awoke, but he could feel the morning in the air. The rain had stopped, but it was still oppressively humid. He found Mike sitting on a tree stump a few feet away.

"I couldn't sleep," said Mike.

"Me neither. I woke up a few hours ago and couldn't fall back to sleep."

"It's the fear of being chased," Mike commented.

"That, too. But I can't sleep because my stomach pains me greatly." He made a gurgling noise and rubbed his stomach. Mike and Dave laughed.

"Hey! What's going on, you guys?" Katie yelled. She had awoken to the sound of Mike's and Dave's voices. Presently, she stood up and walked over to where Mike and Dave were sitting. Christopher remained sound asleep.

"Why did we decide to go along with him?" Dave whispered. "There must be some other way to get back home."

"I don't think so. Look what happened in Oman, where we would be if we had not met Christopher," Katie commented.

"I think this is for the better," Mike said. "But I wish it weren't so dangerous . . . " His voice trailed off.

Just then, Christopher awoke and went off to the river to wash. By the time he returned, the first grey light of the impending dawn was in the east. The party decided not to try to

fish in the stream, because it was unlikely that they would find anything. Also, there was the threat of the pursuing trolls, who could reappear at any minute.

As they walked off to the east, they broke out of the small forest through which they had passed. Hills stretched before them to the horizon. The sun rose, casting a golden light. From their vantage point, the road was just to the south, less than a mile, although they could not see whether there was any activity on it.

For the rest of the day, the party pressed on. Their hunger grew. The sky cleared and, at dusk, there wasn't a cloud in the sky. The scene hadn't changed all day--up and down hills, with no end in sight. Around sunset, they stopped on the side of a hill for protection during the night.

As they were settling down to sleep, a large animal stood just outside the camp.

"That could be the food we need," Christopher whispered to his companions. "Be quiet." He crept closer to the animal, which was unknown to either Mike, Dave, or Katie. Suddenly, he leapt. The animal gave a terrifying shriek and began to run. Christopher pursued and eventually caught up to it. By this time, he was so far off in the distance that Mike, Dave, and Katie couldn't see what happened next. Christopher later told them that he jumped the animal and hit it on the head with a branch he ripped off from one of the sparse trees.|

Christopher motioned to Dave, and he came and helped drag the animal back to camp. It was as big as a horse! By the time they returned, they were exhausted.

"YES!" Mike shouted excitedly and rejoiced as best he could with his remaining strength. Katie followed suit.

"Wait!" Christopher said. "It's not dead yet. It could still run away. We must build a fire while it is still unconscious."

"With what wood? There isn't a tree for miles!" Mike said, sarcastically.

"Not true," Christopher replied. "Look." He led Mike around the hill, about a hundred feet, and showed Mike the tree from which he had ripped the branch. For the next ten minutes, everybody helped drag branches back to their camp. Soon they had a roaring fire going. |(Did C. ever kill the animal/)Everybody ate heartily, although the meat was very tough and tasteless. When they finished eating, they went to sleep.

The next three days of the journey were inconsequential.

The same scenery scrolled by, and Dave devised a way to carry the leftover meat with some branches. There was plenty to eat and plenty to drink.

On the sixth day, everybody began to get anxious as they approached the town of Jasper. The hills were getting less severe now, but a thick forest loomed closer as it approached mid-morning.

Everybody agreed that the only way to transverse the forest was to use the road, no matter the dangers of trolls and Yavin's servants. So they made their way south, as well as east, and met the road shortly before entering the trees. Around midday, they stopped in a small grove to eat. There still wasn't a cloud in the sky, which meant no water for several miles, and the food supply was now running thin.

"We should reach Jasper around this time tomorrow," said Christopher. "That is fortunate, for tomorrow is midsummer's eve."

"I thought that was celebrated only in legends," Mike said.

"This feels just like a legend to me," Katie said.

"Anyway," Christopher interrupted, taking a bite of the meat, "there are festivities and parties, and that will be a chance to catch up on some news."

"What should we do from there?" Dave asked.

"I don't know," said Christopher, "but it might be advisable to learn the news first. For all we know, the trolls could have destroyed the town by now."

"Let's hope not," Mike said, lost in thought.

By mid-afternoon, they exited the forest and left the road. As they cleared a hill in front of them, a view for miles opened up. All they could see were hills to the west, from where they had come, and wide plains to the east. They continued their trek until they came to a strange marking on the ground that consisted of several concentric circles with a dragon emblem in the middle. There was strange writing on the perimeter of the outermost circle that none of the party could understand.

"This could be the doing of the trolls," Mike said, worried. "I don't think so," Christopher said. "From what I've seen from trolls terrorizing innocent villagers, I don't think they would go to such lengths as to construct this. But . . . " A look of fear came over Christopher's face.

"But what?" Katie asked.

"This could be the mark of Yavin himself."

Everybody gasped. "What should we do?" Dave asked.

"Yavin wants us dead, no doubt," Mike said quietly. "I hope he doesn't get his way."

"Stop worrying," Christopher said. "This mark is old. You can tell that by the smeared edges. If we arrived here even an hour from now, rain could have washed it away or it would have been too dark to see."

"When was it made?" Katie asked. "It hasn't rained for five days now."

"I'm not sure. There's no way to tell. But one thing is for sure. Yavin himself did not make this mark. One of his servants did."

"That's good to know." Mike sighed with relief.

"Either way, I think we should get outta here. I wouldn't want anybody to return and find us here," Dave said.

"I agree. Let's go a little farther before dark." Christopher answered.

They continued for another hour. They cleared the hills, and were walking in the middle of a plain. They came to a stream, and crossed it, after a lot of complaining from Mike, who didn't want to wet his clothes, and Dave, who was afraid of what was in it. On the other side of the stream, they rested for the day.

The next day, Christopher suggested that they turn closer to the road, so that they would meet the Northern Branch, which led toward Yavin's kingdom. Just as Christopher predicted, everybody was relieved to see the faint outlines of a large town in the distance around late morning. Five minutes before noon, they could see the town clearly.

"Yes! We're finally here!" Mike yelled, and began to run the final half-mile or so.

"Wait," said Dave. "What's that?" Mike stopped.

Everybody looked closer to find that two shadowy figures in the distance were having a sword fight. Indeed, the whole town was alive with moving, fighting figures.

"Hide yourselves!" Christopher said. Everybody dropped to the ground for the cover of the tall grass.

"What happened?" Katie asked, too frightened by the tone of Christopher's voice to get up and peek.

"It looks like a battle," he said.

"A battle?" Dave yelled in surprise. "Between who?"

"To find out, we must get closer. Follow me, and don't get up." Christopher began to crawl fast. Eventually, he crouched, and ran about half the distance to the town. It was hard going, but about fifteen minutes later, they were only two hundred feet from the town.

"Look. It's that same symbol!" Katie exclaimed. She was right. The same emblem they had seen the day before was on the helmet of a knight, who was now in the middle of a battle with another one. The party watched from their hiding spot for a while, and watched the knight with the strange emblem kill the other; and then go looking for another.

"If they are Yavin's servants, they're losing!" whispered Dave. "We had better do something."

"Katie!" Christopher whispered. "Put on the stone, and go investigate."

No sooner had he said this than Katie disappeared. She returned three or four minutes later with horrible news. "They are Yavin's servants," she gasped. "I overheard one of the unadorned ones say, 'Down with Yavin.' And it looks like they're losing."

"Well, there's nothing we can do," said Mike, and started edging away from the battle.

"Oh yes there is!" Christopher exclaimed. "We join the battle."

"What?!" Mike screamed. "Are you out of your mind?"

"No. I'm not. With this sword," Christopher replied, pointing to the Falchion at his side, "and the stone, we can defeat quite a few soldiers. Besides, if Yavin's soldiers win, we might as well be dead."

Although Mike protested ("You're crazy! You're gonna kill yourselves!"), they ran toward the battle field. The noise of the battle grew louder as they approached. When they reached the gates, they noticed that the battle had moved into the village square.

Christopher screamed a battle cry and ran in to join the fray. Several enemy soldiers were scared and fled out of his way. He swung the Falchion this way and that, downing two in less than a minute. Dave and Katie watched the battle from the gates. It still seemed, though, that the enemies were winning.

"We have to do something!" Dave said.

"What?" Mike, who had now crawled up to the gates, said. "Go inside and get killed?"

"Shut up, Mike!" Dave said.

"Why? I haven't said anything?" Mike replied angrily.

Suddenly, there was a loud BANG and lightning leapt out of the cloudless sky, striking an enemy soldier on the head. He fell at Christopher's feet. Christopher had quite a collection of soldiers at his feet, now. Mike counted five. The enemy still greatly outnumbered the village defense, and Christopher was pushed into a corner by several soldiers.

"He's gonna die!" Mike screamed in terror. "I told you so!"

Just then, Katie concentrated on the sword as hard as she could. She didn't know why she did this when she looked back at their adventure years later. Suddenly, the Falchion which Christopher was swinging around began to glow brighter, and brighter, until the enemy soldiers that surrounded him ran in terror. When the light reached its peak, Christopher held the sword high and the enemy soldiers cowered at the light, and ran screaming out the gates.

"WOW!" Mike said. "The true power of the sword!"

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Christopher lowered his sword. Everybody was speechless. After about a minute, Christopher returned to his companions at the gate, who were now rejoicing wildly. They were joined by the rest of the soldiers, who jumped and cheered. Christopher ran into town to join the party.

After the initial victory was over, there was much work to do. But with the help of the doctors, the wounded were healed, and with the help of Christopher, the dead were buried. Among the dead were fourteen of their finest soldiers. The enemy bodies were uncounted.

By the time thus was done, it was already getting dark. The [mayor] decided that the festival should go on, to celebrate their victory. Presently, Christopher was standing near the large bonfire in the middle of the square. Dave, Mike, and Katie were on the other side with a few of the townsfolk.

"Okay. Now we have some time to think," Mike said. "Why are we doing this? We could be killed. That battle proves it."

"I know. Christopher doesn't seem like somebody from our time. There's something different about him." Dave added.

"Yeah," Katie agreed. "Like that time he killed that animal. People in our time aren't skilled hunters. And how did he know so much about the sword? He couldn't have learned that much from that prisoner. And where is this prisoner? He never told us where."

"And there's this issue about how-" Mike began, but was interrupted by a loud bang on the other side of the square. A knight called out that the feast was ready. The three friends ran to the table, because they were extremely hungry, but were dismayed at what they found.

"What IS this?" Mike said in dismay.

"That would be stewed hare," said one of the knights that overheard his conversation.

"Eeeeew!" Mike whispered, "They ate rabbits?!"

Nobody paid much attention to that comment, because they were busy trying to find something that was more "normal" to their liking. In the end, all they found was a little bit of corn, which they ate out of a glazed clay bowl. They returned to the other side of the square to continue their conversation.

"So, Mike. Go on," Katie urged.

"Well, there's this issue about how Christopher got possession of the sword. Obviously, a sword so powerful with Yavin looking for it wasn't just lying around. He must have had some doing to get it. And I think that this Deneb that he got the sword from is not who she looks."

"This all adds up to...." NONSENSE!" Katie exclaimed. "Sorcerers, magical swords, trolls, and...." Katie glanced toward Christopher, who was now talking to one of the villagers. "Imps!"

"And then...," Dave continued, "How will defeating Yavin help us get home? I thought that these things didn't exist! Maybe this is just some kind of dream, and we will....wake up."

"I doubt it's some kind of dream. It's too long, and too real." Katie replied.

"Do you mean that we could be in a coma, and our dreams are somehow linked?" Dave asked.

"I doubt it. Tony died, remember? That would have severed the link," Mike continued, "and also, it's very unlikely. Let's stop talking about this and look for something else to do."

So, the group transversed the square to talk to a few people. When they arrived, one of them said:

"So. You folk look different. Where are you from?"

Katie replied, "We're traders from Harrogen."

"Harrogen, eh?" the man said. "There are some pretty queer things going on down there now."

"Queer?" Mike asked. "Like what?"

"Well, I heard that there were these people that escaped from prison. Completely fooled the guards. Found one of 'em dead, starved, in their cell."

"Oh," Mike pretended. "Where'd you learn this from?"

"There's this girl, came through here two days ago. She told us all about goings on down there. She said that Oman was completely destroyed!"

"How?" Katie asked.

"Nobody knows. It wasn't those dratted trolls, no. Someone found five of 'em dead in the woods before a fire, and

there weren't any more within miles. It was probably one of the servants of the Shadow Land."

"Shadow Land? You mean Yavin?" Mike shouted, puzzled.

"Ssssssssh!" the man whispered. "Those words shouldn't be overheard at a gathering like this! Who knows who could be listening? Trolls, Calks, or even....." The man cringed. "One of the three elements. That girl said that they were abroad."

"What are they?" Mike asked in surprise.

"Fire, Earth, and Ice. Three very powerful wizards from the ancient times. Not long ago, Yavin bribed them to work for him. Now, they are his immortal servants."

"So you mean that Yavin is unbeatable?" Mike cried in dismay. "Why did we do this, then?" he whispered.

"I did not say unbeatable," the man said. There are two ways to destroy them."

"How?" Mike asked.

"The first way is to get Yavin to do the job himself, which is impossible because he would kill you before you even got out a word. But there is another way. They can kill each other."

Everybody gasped and then tried to look as if they were involved in a normal conversation at the festival.

"Fire can melt ice, ice can freeze earth, and earth can douse flames. If they were on our side, Yavin would lose much of his power."

The man paused. "Boy, are you nosey!" he said. "Why do you want to know all of this. Don't you all know this already? I mean, any Harrogen citizen should know."

Mike stuttered, "Well, we were....traveling. We'd better go. It's pretty late." Without another word, Mike, Dave, and Katie marched across the courtyard.

By then, it was getting dark, and the group decided to stay at Jasper for the night. Christopher stayed awake while the others went to bed. The festival continued past midnight.

Next morning, Dave, Mike, and Katie were virtually the first people up in the town. It wasn't until an hour before noon that the town began to stir. Christopher awoke with the rest and went outside to join the group.

"From what I heard," he said as he approached, "we are in danger here. We should leave at once."

Dave, Mike, and Katie exchanged glances.

"What's wrong?" Christopher asked. "Did I say something?"

"Oh, nothing," Mike replied.

"OK, then we'll leave in an hour."

Everybody decided to go along with Christopher for the time being. They packed their bags and were having a pleasant conversation near the gates when Christopher returned.

"It's time to go," he said.

"Where are we going?" Mike asked.

"There is a road north of this town that should lead us toward Yavin's castle. There are little towns along the road, as far as I can tell."

Without anymore conversation, the group set out northward along the road. Everyone figured that the road was safe because Yavin's servants had lost at the battle yesterday.

The day was uneventful. As the party was traveling over level ground, they covered more than twenty miles until Dave finally collapsed to the ground, exhausted. Since the group had come to a narrow valley on the east side of the road, they settled down for the night in its shelter.

Sometime during the night, Mike was awakened by a sound like the galloping of hooves on the road. As he watched, a shadowy figure stopped, dismounted, and looked around as if searching for something.

It was several minutes later when the figure finally began to move away. Mike sat up, glad that the mysterious figure was gone. In doing so, he accidentally kicked a branch out into the center of the road! Mike held his breath. The figure turned around and picked up the stick. Looking around, Mike saw that it was the girl that had rescued them from the cell back in Harrogen!

The girl then slowly left, leaving Mike with a sense of curiosity and fear. Nobody else in the party had even batted an eyelash during the strange incident.

The next morning was hot and humid. There was an eerie stillness in the air. Everybody awoke as if nothing had happened. Christopher cooked some meat that they had traded in Jasper for a few of their unnecessary items. It was their first real meal in the wilderness. Then the party continued northward.

The oppressive heat grew until it was almost unbearable

around midday. That was when Mike spotted the girl again in the distance behind them. The sky seemed to be clouding up, and a deep fog was moving in toward them from behind. Mike said nothing about what he saw.

Around midafternoon, the sky became noticeably darker and it started to rain. The party was in the middle of an open field when the thunder started.

It was like nothing they had heard before, and the lightning that accompanied it was unbelievable. “This can't be natural!” Katie screamed over the noise.

Just then, Mike saw the girl - a shadow against the fog - racing across the plain toward them. Nobody else seemed to take notice of this. As she loomed closer, Mike saw that she was much bigger than when he had first seen her. In fact, she was morphing in front of his very eyes! Now she looked like a giant, although not completely human.

The rest of the group still did not notice her, although she was standing in front of their very eyes. Suddenly, she thrust a stick into the ground. Lightning leapt from the sky and struck the stick, causing a deafening noise. Katie screamed. Christopher jumped. Dave ran. Chaos erupted when everybody tried to gather their supplies and run for shelter.

Suddenly, the storm ended. The air fell dead. The stick was incinerated no less than ten yards away. Then the giant woman began to change. Mike could not describe it, but after it was done, she looked less...transparent. Dave, Katie, and Christopher now saw her and shrank away in fear.

“You did very well...for a novice,” she said in a calm voice. “Who are you?” Dave asked, frightened. “What do you want?”

In response to this question, the giant began to change again, this time back to her girl form.

“That girl?!” Dave exclaimed shakily, puzzled.

“Exactly,” she said. “But things may not always be as they seem.” Suddenly, the girl picked up another of the sparse sticks and thrust it into the ground. Everybody began to run. But there was only a low rumble of thunder.

“Come back here!” she yelled sternly. She picked up yet another stick and threw it at the earth. A loud rumble followed, and the ground began to shake--an earthquake! Everybody ran back, and the earthquake subsided. The girl seemed unaffected by the earthquake, contrary to the fear and wonder that Mike,

Dave, Katie, and Christopher were experiencing.

"I am Chapin, elemental of Earth," the girl said.

"What?!" Dave exclaimed, surprised.

"I control all nature at the tip of my fingers. I am one of the three elements."

"What do you want from us?" Katie asked.

"I believe you know....., Kahman," she said, looking at Christopher.

"What?!" Christopher exclaimed in disbelief. "It can't be!"

As everybody watched, Chapin morphed into yet another form. This time, she looked like...a witch.

"Deneb?" Dave asked.

"Precisely," Chapin responded.

"I must help," Christopher said. Suddenly, there was a flash, and Christopher turned into another giant, this one looking like a giant ice sculpture.

"Now," Chapin said, "I think we have some business to attend to.

There was a flash of light, and they both disappeared.

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"What was that?" Dave asked.

"I don't know," answered Katie, "but our suspicions were right. Christopher wasn't who he seemed."

"But that leaves us with lots of questions. And there aren't any answers!" Mike continued.

"What do we do now?" Katie asked.

Everyone was silent for a few moments.

"We must continue the quest," said Dave.

"What?!" Mike screamed. "Are you out of your mind?"

"No. Look." Dave pointed to the ground a few feet away. A glittering object laid there. As the threesome approached, they saw it was the sword - the Falchion! There were also several documents scattered about the area. Upon closer inspection, they proved to be the maps by which Christopher had guided them through the first part of their journey.

"I'm not picking it up!" Mike said, pointing at the sword and backing away. "Remember last time?" Dave remembered last time when Mike was shocked by the great handle of the sword as Christopher demonstrated its power.

"I will, then," Dave said. Mike and Katie gasped. "I think that I'll be able to, now that Christopher went....off."

As Mike and Katie braced themselves for Dave's demise, Dave leant down to pick up the sword. Suddenly, he grasped the handle. The Falchion began to glow. The Hadar stone in Katie's hands began to shine brightly. Suddenly, there was a bright flash, and Dave was able to pick up the sword with little resistance.

Mike and Katie were stunned. Dave said, "Come on! I'm fine!"

It had been two hours since the frightful incident, and there was still no sign of Christopher. Everyone had decided to continue northward until they came to a place they could rest. Unfortunately, they saw nothing, and had to camp out under the stars for yet another night.

In the morning, they came to a small town that was called Haber. It was very small; in fact, so small that there wasn't much to do but to grab something to eat. They left about noon and continued northward. It got dark, and the group was beginning to despair. There was little food, and hardly any water. (The citizens of Haber did not want to give some of their precious food away, either.)

They were making camp when they felt a sudden stillness in the air. “It's too quiet. Something's wrong,” Katie said.

“If you don't want to be killed, put your hands up!” a voice said out of the darkness. Out of a narrow valley to their right came ten enormous trolls.

“Oh no!” Dave moaned. “Not again!”

“What do you want?” Katie croaked.

“Where is your Imp friend?” one of the trolls demanded harshly.

“Why?” Mike asked.

“That doesn't matter,” the troll sneered. “Tell us where he is. Or else.”

“Or else what?” Mike asked. “You'll kill us? You'll never find out that way!”

“No,” the troll said. “Better yet. Haglik, get them!” Another troll grabbed Katie and Dave's necks with each of his hands. “I'll have them killed if you don't cooperate.”

“Okay,” Mike said, deciding it was better to cooperate than have Dave and Katie dead. “What do you want?”

“Where is the Imp? And we'll take that sword while we're at it!” The leader pointed to the Falchion, which was lying on the ground next to - the stone! It shone brightly in the moonlight. Mike suddenly had a crazy idea that even he doubted would work.

Mike continued to talk, buying some time, as he edged closer to the stone.

“I don't know where Christopher is. He disappeared,” he said.

The leader of the trolls pondered this for a moment and then said in a harsh voice, “He's lying!” The other troll gripped tighter on Dave and Katie's necks. A look of desperation filled their faces.

“Look. I'm telling you the truth. Why don't you just take the sword and leave us alone,” Mike said as he continued to move toward the stone? It was only about three feet away now.

"Okay," the leader said, and then hesitated. "I'll take the sword . . . and kill you all!" He made a low-pitched laugh and then advanced toward the sword.

At that time, several things happened. Mike reached the stone and picked it up. Nothing happened! The lead troll got to the sword and leant to pick it up. Suddenly, there was a bright flash. The leader troll fell over backwards, dead. At this, Dave punched the troll, who was holding him captive, in the stomach, making him fall over and release his grip on Katie. Katie ran to the Hadar stone while Dave ran for the sword.

In the middle of all the commotion, the other eight trolls began to run to attack the three. Then, the Hadar stone shone brightly in Katie's hand, and the three disappeared.

"What's going on?" one of the trolls roared.

"FIND THEM!" another yelled. The trolls began to search the area. While this was happening, Dave, Mike, and Katie were frantically trying to avoid the burly bodies of the searching trolls. Finally, a hole opened up in front of them, and they ran. But it was too late.

Two trolls had been hiding in the bushes throughout the commotion, and they now jumped out, effectively ending all hopes of escape for the group. Three more trolls closed in behind them and captured them for good.

The trolls bound them hand and foot and tied their hands to each others' so they couldn't escape alone. Katie realized that this was the perfect opportunity to use the Hadar stone to escape. But how would she reach into her pocket? As she pondered this, the trolls continued to talk about their capture.

"So, those fools killed the boss! And five others near Oman! They will pay when Miglik sees them!" one of the trolls said. (This and all the following troll dialogues during this incident were spoken in Jaklik, the language of the trolls, but they are translated here for ease of understanding.)

The rest of the trolls roared. Although the group on the side struggled to escape, they could not and decided that it would be easier to get some sleep and be prepared for whatever happened next.

As the three drifted off, the trolls stayed up late into the night to ponder the fate of the victims. Eventually they, too, succumbed to slumber, dreaming sweet thoughts of their rewards for their captives.

Awaking in the middle of the night, the trolls decided to

move before dawn came. They unloaded the supplies from their horse and put the group on the horse to move on. The party had no idea of where they were going or how they would escape.

The trolls continued toward what seemed north for the rest of the night. When the first rays of dawn were opening in the eastern sky, they found a spot under a few trees where the trolls, who were very sensitive to light, could rest for the day. They left Dave, Mike, and Katie in the middle of a clearing. As the sun grew hotter on this late June day, they wondered if they would be able to survive in the scorching sun. Somehow they managed; but by sunset, they were terribly thirsty and impatient from lying in one position all day. Hunger was the least of their problems.

That night, the trolls continued in the same direction, keeping two or three guards on the group at all times and never untying their bonds. By daybreak, Dave estimated that they must have traveled well over 20 miles.

This pattern continued for another three days. On the third day, it was approaching dawn when they came to what looked like a small river. A little to their west was a small fort that looked as if trolls had constructed it. The trolls continued toward it. When they reached the door, the troll who was now acting as the leader made some strange clicking noises and was admitted by another troll who was almost twice his size.

“So, are these the prisoners that I've heard so much about?” the door troll asked.

“Caught 'em outside Jasper. Wouldn't tell us where their friend is. We were gonna kill 'em until I got word from the boss,” the other answered.

“The boss is on his way now. He should be here in a few days. Come inside. We'll take care of the prisoners until he arrives.”

The door troll stepped aside and allowed the other trolls to enter, the last one leading the horse that Dave, Mike, and Katie were riding.

While the other trolls went off to a dining hall to the right, the door troll lead the group to their left down a flight of stairs. They transversed a long a passage cut out of stone, then followed the troll down two more flights of stairs to a dismal, cold, and dank dungeon. He led the horse to the last cell and opened the door. He threw the prisoners in and slammed the door, then went back the way he had come, leaving Dave, Mike, and Katie in the cell.

Two days passed, and still nobody returned to check on them. None of the group had been able to loosen their bonds. Now they were almost dehydrated. Dave guessed that they had been forgotten and were going to be left to starve. Suddenly they heard a noise above them. It was the guard! He opened the door to their cell and, sitting them on top of the horse again, led them back upstairs to the dining hall.

"Ah!" one troll at the far side of the room said. "I see you've brought the prisoners. Give them water!"

They were unbound. Dave, Mike, and Katie felt a surge of new energy after drinking the water. It still wasn't enough but was able to give them enough strength to sit up. They were each given a piece of strange meat, which tasted awful but helped to ease their hunger.

Next, they were taken off the horse and placed on a long bench. Then the troll dressed in what appeared to be royal garments began to speak.

"Tell us where your friends are," he commanded.

"Well, last time-" Mike began.

"We'll never tell!" Dave said firmly. "We'd rather die!"

"That won't do at all," the troll said. "Then we'll never find out! But I'll be happy to offer you a handsome reward..."

A guard coming from what Dave presumed to be the entrance to the kitchen rolled a wooden cart filled with all kinds of food toward the party.

"Do you think we'll fall for that?" Dave said angrily. "I said we would rather die than tell you what happened."

"Well, then," the troll said. "You will. Bring out my sword!"

Katie wished that the troll leader would be dead. Suddenly there was a bright flash. The leader tripped in the bright light and fell on his sword! He uttered a gasp, then fell over, wounded. Several other trolls rushed to his side.

While this was going on, a dark shadow loomed over the doorway. A giant was standing there! There was a loud scream from one of the trolls, and all grew quiet.

"LET THEM GO!" the giant commanded. The trolls looked back and forth between their fallen master and the giant.

Suddenly there was a loud rumble and the ground began to shake. "I said: LET THEM GO!" the giant roared.

The trolls began to back away from the giant, bringing their captives with them. Suddenly, the giant leapt forward and killed the troll who was pulling Mike, Dave, and Katie's bench with him. The rest of the trolls gave no protest and relinquished their captives.

The giant took Mike, Dave, and Katie out of the troll fort and walked for about a mile. He sat down and began to shrink. As everybody watched in amazement, the giant morphed into the girl whom they had met on the plains a week ago.

The girl proceeded to untie them. Katie said, "Who are you?"

"As if you do not know," the girl responded and finished untying Dave.

"Why are you doing this?" Katie asked.

"Like all creatures of this planet (except trolls and Yavin's servants), we hate Yavin."

"We?" Mike asked.

As they watched, they saw Christopher the Imp, their long-lost companion, in the distance, walking toward them, in normal form. When he arrived, greetings were exchanged, and everybody sat down to talk.

"We have failed," Christopher said despondently.

"What do you mean?" Dave asked. "And why did you leave us in the middle of that field? We were almost killed!"

"First," Christopher said, "let's eat." He pulled out a bag with weird-looking vegetables and fruits in it. He distributed them throughout the group. When everyone was finished, Christopher began to speak.

"I think it's time I told you the truth," Christopher said. "I am from your time. I was in my backyard playing football when I got dizzy and passed out. I awoke in Yavin's castle, and, not knowing who he really was or what his intentions were, I told him where I was from. He decided to let me go, thinking that I would never be a problem to him."

"When I arrived at Harrogen, I learned of you and your

friends. I also was told who Yavin actually was. At this, I began to suspect that he was the cause of your plight, but I said nothing to anyone because I would get thrown in jail, too."

"When Chapin met me in the middle of that field, I did not know who she was either, but I felt an uncontrollable urge to follow her. Then she turned me into a giant and ordered me to follow. It turns out that I have been transformed into the elemental of ice."

"The other Elemental of ice was destroyed in a rebellion against Yavin," Chapin said. "He gave me his powers. I also began to look for the lost elemental of fire, who had not been seen for a long while."

"While I was gone," Christopher said, "Chapin told me that you would be fine and taught me all the powers that I needed. She also searched during the night for the other elemental but failed. Then, when we were walking through a northern town in troll form, we heard of your capture and came to rescue you--just in time."

"Wow!" Katie exclaimed in awe. "But what about Christopher's story about Deneb the Witch and the sword?"

"That story was true," Chapin responded, "but I was Deneb and gave the sword to Christopher in order to keep it safe. He is not the rightful sword-bearer. One of you is."

Dave, Mike, and Katie gasped. "Which one?" Mike asked.

"You have already found out."

Dave looked up in surprise. "Why?" he said.

"I don't know. Yavin might have had something to do with it."

"Why would Yavin make a sword that could be the only weapon that could defeat him?" Mike asked.

"It was probably intended for his purposes," Dave said.

"Exactly the same as my theory," Christopher said. "Someone stole the sword from Yavin and then lost it."

"Enough speculation for today," Chapin responded. "We must be moving on before nightfall. There's still a long way until we reach the road."

The group set off, and there was no more conversation until it was beginning to get dark. The journey was difficult and slow because the ground was hilly.

At nightfall, nothing of consequence occurred, and the group went to sleep to prepare for the long journey ahead.

Everyone fell asleep quickly and was well rested when the early sunrise came.

The next day, the group traveled over flat plains and had no trouble. Christopher said that the next day they would reach the road and resume their previous trek. Everybody was tired after the day's journey and went to sleep before sunset, which was after 9:00 because they were going north.

The following day, they caught sight of the road around noon, and the group stopped on the side for a rest.

"Do you know where we are?" Dave asked.

"I know that we're on the road. But where on the road we are, I have no clue," Christopher said.

"More problems," Mike complained. "I'm starting to wonder if we'll ever complete this journey!"

"Let's just eat and stop worrying about what might happen in the future," Chapin said firmly. After this statement, there was no more conversation. The party traveled north along the road for the rest of the day and all of the next, seeing no towns and having no idea of their location.

They came to a river. Christopher pointed out that this could be an important landmark and began to look at his map. Meanwhile, the rest of the group sat down on the bank of the river to eat the last of the food that Chapin had stolen from a nearby troll fort. Then Christopher spoke.

"We are farther north than I thought," he said. "This river is the Maltese River. There is only one point where the road that we are on crosses the river."

"And what?" Katie asked.

Christopher showed the group the map. "That means that we are much closer than we expected. But this is also troubling."

"Why?" Dave asked.

"This is much farther south than any troll stronghold that I've seen. That must mean that Yavin's power is growing. And - he might be setting up these forts farther south to deter us."

"But...do these trolls all have to answer to Yavin?" Dave asked. "The trolls we met in Harrogen seemed as if they wanted nothing to do with him."

"It's possible," Chapin said. "But there are only a few groups of such Yavin-enemy trolls. But that far south, where Yavin's power is weak, it could be true."

"But what does this all matter?" Mike asked. "All trolls

hate humans, so why do we care if they're on Yavin's side or not?"

"Because," Christopher said, "they might all hate us somewhat, but the ones that aren't on Yavin's side hate him and his trolls more. There is a possibility that, if enough trolls become enemies of Yavin, there could be a rebellion, weakening much of his troll power."

"You mean, recruit trolls to help defeat Yavin? They would kill us for an easy meal!" Mike said.

"You're right, Mike," Chapin responded. "But if the trolls were left alone, it might happen."

"But it's unlikely,' Christopher said. "Have any of you ever given a thought as to what we are going to do when we reach Yavin's castle? Five lowly humans don't stand a chance."

"One with the sword might," Katie said, uncertainly.

"Yes, the sword is powerful. But it can only kill one foe at a time. It is said that there are thousands of Yavin's servants in that castle. What if they all charged at us at once? Then we would be killed, the sword and stone would be lost, and the world would be under Yavin's control. We need to gather an army and storm Yavin's castle. Even if we lose, maybe one of us could sneak into the castle and destroy Yavin. If Yavin perishes, then all the creatures under his control would be set free."

"Where would we be able to gather an army?" Dave asked. "Every town we've been to, people have been terrified of Yavin. It would be impossible to gather an army with the strength needed to take down Yavin."

"Maybe we can figure out a way at the next town," Christopher said. "This map says that there is a town called Jasper about two days' journey from here. We can stop there, rest, and discuss how to take on Yavin."

Everybody agreed and continued on for the rest of the day. That night there were no further problems, because they had found a stream with plenty of fish to satisfy their appetites. It began to rain that night, to the disappointment of everybody. The trek continued for the next three days, but there was still no sign of the town. The group began to despair.

Finally, late on the fourth day after their discovery of the river, they saw a town in the distance. Everybody began to run toward it. As they cleared the final trees near the city gate, they stopped short. The town had been destroyed.

8

Smoke drifted from a building that was smoldering as if it had just been set on fire. Pieces of wood and other debris lay in the streets. The entire town was deserted.

"Something bad must have happened here!" Mike said, as he brushed aside the branches and walked forward.

"Another troll raid?" Katie asked.

"Possibly. Let's look around," Chapin said, continuing toward what used to be the town square.

At this point, they split up and went to examine the ruins to see if they could find any clues about what had happened. A few minutes later, Mike came running out of one of the buildings that was still standing near the town square.

"Quick!" he screamed. "Look!"

Everybody came running toward him. They entered the house and looked around while Mike pointed to the wall, which had a peculiar burn mark in it.

"It is....Yavin?" Dave asked, in awe.

"Fortunately it doesn't look like it," Christopher responded. "This mark is different than the one we saw in that field back near Jasper. I wonder, then, who could have put it here, and why."

Suddenly they heard a sound from the back of the cottage. Dave rushed toward the sound. There was an old, frail-looking man who was badly injured lying on the ground underneath what looked like the remains of the chimney.

"Get him help!" Dave screamed.

Christopher ran to Dave and, seeing the man, motioned for the rest of the group to come. Together they managed to pull him out of the ruined cottage and into the town square.

"He has been burned," Christopher said.

"What should we do?" Mike asked, panic-stricken.

Dave felt for his pulse but found none. "He's dead," he said.

"Hurry, Christopher! The magic might still work with two of the elements!" Chapin cried.

"What are you talking about?" Dave asked as Christopher and Chapin approached the dead man.

"The elements have the power to restore life, if the victim has only been dead for a short time," Chapin said hurriedly.

"What?" Mike asked, surprised. Katie stood in awe several feet away from the scene.

"I'll explain later," Chapin said. Then she and Christopher stood on opposite sides of the body and began to chant words that neither Dave, Mike, nor Katie could understand. They continued for several minutes.

Suddenly, the chanting stopped when the man began to cough. Everybody rushed to his side to help him up. Mike ran back to the ruined cottage and managed to find a feather pillow that was still intact. He gave it to Christopher who placed it under the man's head.

The man slowly regained consciousness and began to mutter strange words that were beyond their understanding. This continued for another hour, which seemed to pass endlessly. During that time, after a quick debate, it was decided that it would be best to stay the night. Preparations were made to stay in one of the few remaining houses in the town. Chapin went to a nearby stream that they had passed, and managed to catch a few fish, which they quickly roasted over a fire.

"I think I'm finally beginning to get used to eating in the wild," Mike said.

"Yuck!" Dave said. He spit out a piece of fish. "I still enjoy home cooking!" Katie and Mike laughed. Chapin and Christopher were across the square attending to the injured man.

"Well, now that this town's destroyed, what should we do? We have nowhere to get supplies. There's nobody to help us fight Yavin." Katie said.

"But maybe this man will give us some information about what to do next. He was probably injured by Yavin's servants when they trashed the town." Dave said.

"I wonder if those trolls had anything to do with Yavin?" Mike said. "They probably captured us to get the sword, or the stone."

The three were silent for a while as they watched Christopher and Chapin eating next to the man, consoling him and attending to his wounds. After they finished eating, they motioned to Mike, Dave, and Katie to come toward them.

"Go and bring this man some water from the river," Christopher said, and Dave ran off toward the outskirts of the town.

While he was gone, the rest of the group talked amongst themselves for a few moments. Suddenly, Dave came running back with a look of panic on his face.

"Trolls!" he gasped. "They're everywhere!"

"What?!" Christopher exclaimed. "Where? How many?"

"At least twenty. They're about a mile away on the top of the big hill near the road. And-" Dave paused. "They're headed toward us!" This last message came as a shock to everyone.

"Quick," Chapin said, hurriedly. "Everyone inside the big house!" She pointed to the only remaining house near the town square that had not burnt down. Everybody ran toward it.

The moment they got inside, they began to hear murmurs in the distance along with the noise of marching feet. Everybody held their breath.

The noises became louder and louder. Eventually they could hear voices. Suddenly they all stopped. One voice stood out from them all. A troll was banging on the door. "I think it's in here!" it said.

The troll continued pounding on the door for a while and then called to his "friends" to come and help him.

Inside the house, Mike began to panic. "We're gonna be captured and all DIE!" he screamed frantically.

"No we won't!" Dave said. "They'll never be able to get the door open!" He leant back against the wall. To his surprise, a panel of the wall behind him fell out and revealed a small space between the inner wall and the outer wall!

"Quick," Christopher said. "Everybody, in here!" Christopher hurried into the small opening, followed by Mike, Chapin, Katie, and then Dave, who closed the opening to the passage not a moment too soon. They were sure to pull the still unconscious man into the passageway with them before they shut the door.

Two trolls, at that very moment, had brought a large log to the house and had begun to attempt to batter down the door. After the fifth loud BANG!, the door splintered, allowing the trolls access to the inside of the house.

The party was sure to be very quiet while the trolls

ransacked the house, as if they were searching for something. ‘Get the Boss!” one of them yelled after several minutes.

From what everybody could tell between the walls of their hiding place, the boss was huge, by the way he commanded his trolls. He was so heavy that there was a low rumble in the ground when he walked into what remained of the house.

“What do you want?” the boss sneered.

“It’s not here,” one of the lower trolls responded.

The boss searched around the house for another minute, and presumably upon not finding what he was looking for, he began to roar, “What does Katan think he’s doin’, sending us here for two hundred or so miles, and we find NOTHING!”

“That’s right. I’ve done enough under his orders! I say we forget Katan and go on our own!”

“YEAH!” a few of the other trolls screamed in unison in response. All of the trolls marched out of the building with heavy feet singing and cheering. The house was eerily quiet when Mike whispered, “Do you think they’re gone?”

Christopher whispered in response, “Maybe, but let’s wait a few minutes to be sure.” The group waited five minutes before doing anything else.

“Dave,” Mike said, “It’s been five minutes. Open the door and let’s get outta here!” Dave crawled over to the opening and pushed as hard as he could. It wouldn’t budge. “It’s stuck!” he said, exhausted.

“Push harder!” Mike said, beginning to panic again. Dave pushed himself to the limit and was able to open the panel wide enough to see that there was an obstruction blocking it.

“Looks like one of the trolls threw a couch in front of the panel,” Dave commented nonchalantly.

“OK,” Katie said. “That’s great. But now what do we do?”

“Dave, feel around to see if there’s another passage,” Chapin said calmly. Dave did so. After about a minute, he exclaimed, “There’s no back wall!”

“What do you mean?” Christopher asked.

“The wall...where it was in the house...it’s not here! There are stairs instead!”

Everybody began to talk at once in light of their discovery. “QUIET!” Christopher yelled over the racket. “Everybody follow Dave. Be sure to keep up.”

Dave began, slowly, down the passage, which at this

point was only wide enough for one abreast and still not tall enough to stand. When Dave reached the stairs, he discovered that the ceiling was high enough to stand, and the others followed, slowly, down the stairs. By grabbing onto the shoulder of the person in front of each of them, they were able to not be separated or fall down the stairs. The stairs went down about twenty feet. When the ground leveled, the passage widened.

"WOW!" Katie said in awe. The ceiling seemed to have a light source, similar to an incandescent bulb, except that this one was blue and seemed to have no source. These lights were about every twenty feet along the ceiling of the passageway, giving off enough light to allow the party to see the outline of the walls clearly.

Soon the passage curved left. It continued for a few hundred feet until it curved right a little, and then maintained a straight course. Everybody's feet were aching when they spotted a red light in the distance that stood out from the unusual blue lights that lined the passageway.

Dave, being premature in his assumption that this light might signal the entranceway of the tunnel, ran forward as fast as he could. Everybody screamed and yelled and then ran to catch up with him.

Dave stopped short of the red light. When the rest of the group arrived, they saw that they were standing before a great room with a very high ceiling that extended well over the twenty feet that they had thought they were below ground, suggesting that they had traveled downward during their trek.

"What is this?" Dave asked, motioning toward the red light.

"This is very weird," Mike said. "If somebody dug out all these tunnels and built that secret passage in the house, whatever this is must be very valuable."

"I don't know what this is," Christopher said. "I've never seen it before!"

Chapin walked up to the table. "Look!" she said. "There's some writing on the side!"

Everybody else came to look. Indeed, there were some unintelligible symbols on the side.

"Could be the language of the trolls," Christopher muttered. "Or it could be..."

"What?" Dave asked.

"The language of the ancient wizards that was used

many millennia ago. It dropped out of existence shortly after Yavin appeared, gaining power for the first time and destroying the wizards. The common people revolted and overthrew him, but he has regained his power now and is stronger than ever."

"How are we going to find out what this means?" Mike asked.

"Maybe," Dave commented, "the man we found unconscious would know."

"Good guess," Katie cheered. "But he's all the way back upstairs. I wouldn't want to go back through that passageway alone to get him; and if we all go, we could be caught by the trolls."

"We should have two people go and get him," Chapin suggested. "The rest of us can stay here and investigate this further."

"I'll go," Mike volunteered.

"I'll follow. If he's still unconscious, you'll need help trying to wake him. I might try some of my 'elemental powers'," Christopher said.

They left and headed back the way they had come.

Meanwhile, Dave, Katie, and Chapin continued to search the chamber for other clues to the meaning of the script on the side of the table and what the bright red light exactly was.

Dave had searched fruitlessly on the walls for something that might help them when, suddenly as he pushed on the wall near him, a door hidden in the stone fell back into what looked like another tunnel, this one continuing back farther than Dave could see.

"Everybody," Dave yelled in excitement. "Come here! I've found something!"

Katie and Chapin walked briskly toward Dave's location. Upon seeing what Dave had discovered, Katie asked, "Where do you think it goes?"

"Should we go back and find out?" Dave questioned.

Chapin thought a moment, and then said quietly, "We could go, but then what if Christopher comes back with Mike and the man? He won't know where we are."

"Let's just take a quick look," Katie pleaded. "If we have to walk down the passage for more then ten minutes, we'll turn back." Dave and Chapin agreed and began to follow Katie down the passage. This one was narrower than the one they had come from, so they had to travel single file. The same eerie,

sourceless lights illuminated the passage.

They traveled down the passage for what seemed a long time, but everybody knew that it was only a few minutes since they had left the chamber with the strange light.

Suddenly, it seemed as if the weird blue lights were brighter ahead. Dave ran forward as fast as he could, hoping that they had discovered something new. He stopped short in wonder when he got there.

There was a large hole in the ceiling - and the river was running over it! There was no apparent support for the water. The three looked at the area for several minutes but were not able to find how it was held up. "Must be magic," Dave said in wonder.

Katie and Chapin arrived, too, and stopped dead in their tracks. It was another chamber - this one smaller, and the ceiling lower, only about eight feet above them. Another weird light, yellow in color, stood on a stone table similar to, but smaller than, the one in the last chamber. It was situated against the back wall of the chamber and displayed more unintelligible writing on the side.

"What do you think this is, Chapin?" Katie asked.

Chapin walked up to the table. "This is strange. This looks strangely like... the Hadar Stone!"

"You're right," Dave said. "It does remind me of it. Except this one's yellow."

"Come on," Katie impatiently suggested. "We walked for fifteen minutes, at least, so Christopher and Mike are probably waiting for us back there."

Chapin decided to take the strange yellow stone in case it might prove valuable in the future. Then they left the chamber, hurrying as fast as they could from the strange cavern. It seemed to take not as long to come back to the other chamber than it did to get there.

When they reached the rock wall, it was still open, so they passed through. Christopher and Mike hadn't returned yet, so the three examined the stones and sat back against the wall to wait.

Five minutes later, they heard a shout from down the entrance tunnel. It was Mike! A minute later, they - and the old man - were in view. Greetings were exchanged, and the man began to tell the rest of the party what had happened with Christopher and Mike.

"First," he began, "Let me tell you that my name is Henry. I was knocked unconscious while the first wave of trolls were searching the town for something. I assume that they attempted to kill me after that so that I wouldn't tell anyone about the incident."

"Trolls were searching for us, too!" Mike exclaimed. "That's why we brought you behind the secret passage! They would've probably killed you if they had found you. Maybe they were even looking for you!"

"But why would they be looking for me?" Henry asked in surprise. "I have nothing to offer them. I know the ancient wizards' language, but Yavin and many other people know it as well."

"Maybe they want to kill you," Katie said quietly. Everybody turned around and then looked hard and long at Henry.

"Why?" Henry asked quietly.

"Oh!" Katie cut in before another word could be said. "We forgot to show you what we just found!" Chapin took the strange yellow stone out of her pocket and showed it to the rest of the group. Everybody was startled.

"Do you know what it is?" Christopher asked Katie.

"No. We thought that Henry would be able to help us."

"I certainly can't help you there," Henry said. "I've never seen or heard of a stone like this. There was another one, the Hadar stone, but that one was red..."

"Here it is," Katie said, handing the stone to Henry, who examined the two stones closely.

"You must be pretty important if you have the Hadar stone," Henry commented. "How did you get it?"

Katie and Christopher recounted at length the various events that had led them to their present location. Mike, Chapin, and Dave jumped up when Christopher asked Henry, "Can you decipher this?" He pointed to the writing on the side of the table.

"I think so...," Henry responded, concentrating hard. "I'll need a few minutes. I haven't read this language in some years."

Those few minutes seemed to pass endlessly. Henry examined the writing engraved in the side of the table, while everyone else paced the room restlessly. They had guessed that it was the middle of the night now, and they had been down in the tunnel system for a long time.

Suddenly Henry cried out, “I know what it says!”

“What?” Christopher asked in anticipation. “Is it good news or bad?”

“It says,” Henry said, “*The one who bears the shining ball is the chosen one.*”

“What could that mean?” Katie asked. “Does it mean the Hadar stone?”

“It might,” Henry replied. “But which one?”

“Pardon?” Christopher asked.

“There are two stones - the red one and the yellow one. Which one does it mean?”

“This is VERY weird,” Katie said. “And this still doesn’t tell us what ‘the shining ball’ means.”

“I think I might have an idea,” Christopher said. “In my search for a way to defeat Yavin, before I was transformed into the elemental of ice, I heard of the three elementals, two of which had been destroyed the year before in a rebellion against Yavin. The third, Chapin, had been injured. If she were killed, the power of the elementals would vanish. Fortunately she survived. But I also heard that the fire elemental, before he rebelled, built a shrine in a secret location in case they were all killed. This location was hidden and protected from all of Yavin’s servants by some secret magic. This might be it.”

“Wait, here’s another inscription,” Henry said, pointing to the wall. “It reads, ‘*Thou whose heart is pierced by Yavin’s power shall not awaken ere a quarter century’s turn.*”

“Things are getting more mysterious by the minute,” Christopher commented.

“So what does the Hadar stone have to do with this shrine?” Katie asked hesitantly.

“Maybe the person with the Hadar stone has the power to become one of the lost elementals. But then what is this yellow stone? It probably has something to do with this, too.”

“Katie, I think you should take the power. You have been chosen. If the three elementals combine their power, we could overthrow Yavin.”

“Me?” Katie asked. “I don’t belong in this world.”

“But if we defeat Yavin, maybe we’ll get some answers. It’s at least worth a try.”

“OK,” Katie responded, very hesitantly. “What should I do?”

“I don’t know,” Christopher said. “Try holding the

Hadar stone in the light."

Katie took a deep breath, then reached in her pocket for the stone. As she tried to remove it from her pocket, it accidentally brushed against her leg and she dropped it. It rolled a few feet away and bounced into the yellow stone that Chapin had carefully set on the ground away from the table with the strange yellow light.

As Katie bent down to pick up the stone, a low rumble shook the cavern.

"What was that?" Mike asked.

Everybody froze. Suddenly there was another rumble, this one louder, and it shook the ground slightly.

"An earthquake?" Christopher asked.

There was another loud rumble, and pieces of debris began to fall from the ceiling of the chamber in which they were.

"Let's get out of here!" Christopher screamed over all the commotion. Everybody began to run for the entrance to the chamber.

At that moment, several things happened at once. There was a deafening BANG from down the corridor, and the chamber shook as if rocked by an earthquake. Rocks flew. The eerie blue lights lining the chamber went out.

"Katie, take out the Hadar stone!" Dave yelled over the deafening noise.

Katie did so, and it provided enough light to see that the chamber was collapsing around them. They began to run as fast as they could to get out of the chamber. After a few minutes, they became aware of a low rumble that was steadily increasing in volume and causing the tunnel to collapse about them.

Everyone ran faster. A minute later, Mike turned around and was stunned at what he saw.

He froze.

Everyone else turned around to see a solid wall of water racing toward them.

"RUN!!!" Mike screamed hysterically. A support they had just run past collapsed against the pounding water, sending wood and rocks into the relentlessly surging surf that was growing ever closer behind them.

This made everybody double their efforts. "Katie, do something!" Christopher screamed. Katie wished very hard that the water would stop, just as before. Nothing happened, and the water continued toward them. It was only a few feet away now.

"Look!" Christopher exclaimed, panting for breath. "The exit!" A dim light, presumably from the moon, was lighting the stairwell ahead of the party.

At that moment, the water overcame them.

9

"GET DOWN!" Chapin yelled before she managed to grab onto the bottom of the stairs.

The water surged around them, gushing up the stairs. The railing above them splintered and was snatched away by the enormous force of the water. Chapin was able to hold on for only a second or two before she and the rest of the party were swept upward with enormous speed.

The water was at the top of the stairs after another second. It shot out of the stairwell, into the secret passage, and out, utterly destroying the only house left in the ruined village.

Debris flew, bodies flew, some up to a height of twenty feet. Just as quickly as it had surfaced, the water, its pressure released, sank back to the level of a few feet below the top of what remained of the stairwell.

There was no activity for several minutes. Bodies lay scattered about the area surrounding the shack. Debris littered the landscape, some strewn as far as one hundred feet away. The water frothed and churned below the stairwell, as if trying to claw its way back up to torture its victims.

Ten minutes later, Dave stirred. He bolted upright, thinking that water was chasing him. When he saw that he was mistaken, he lay down for a moment to recover, and then stood up to the best of his ability. There was a large cut on his shoulder and putting any weight on it caused him immense pain. He decided to just wait for everyone else to get up, because it would be a big task to walk any distance.

Soon, Christopher, uninjured on the other side of the square, rose and approached Dave.

"Is it over?" Christopher asked, slowly. "What's wrong, Dave?"

Dave showed Christopher the cut on his arm. "Oh," Christopher said. "I'll see if I can find something for it."

Next Mike and Chapin awoke at the same time, both uninjured. After checking their surroundings, they went to see Dave. Katie awoke a minute later, stuck in a bush at the outskirts of the square. "HELP!" she screamed. Mike and

Chapin came running over. Katie was clutching her leg. Blood oozed out of the fresh wound. Mike, too squeamish to look, went back to help Dave while Chapin attended to Katie.

Christopher returned a moment later with some strange looking leaves. They were red, although it was the middle of summer. He was about to offer the leaves to Dave when he saw Katie lying injured on the far side of the square. Apologizing to Dave, he went to help Katie instead.

When Dave managed to limp over to where Katie was, Christopher was saying, "..might be broken. There's no way to tell for sure. If it doesn't stop hurting by tomorrow, we should put a cast on it."

Wrapping the leaves on Katie's leg, Christopher told Mike where he had found them and that he should get more for Dave. Mike returned a few minutes later, toting a few leaves. Christopher tended to Dave's shoulder as best he could. Then everybody went to the nearby woods for protection in case the trolls returned.

Chapin found a tree that had been knocked over (presumably during a storm) and used it to start a fire. They were careful not to put too much wood on it, lest the trolls see the bright blaze from far away. Everybody sat down and Christopher started a conversation by saying,

"That was a frightening experience!"

"You can say that!" Katie exclaimed. "I thought for a moment there I was going to die! And what about the strange light and the fire elemental?"

"That leaves us with another question," Chapin said. "What do we do about the fire elemental now that the shrine's destroyed?"

"WAIT!" Dave exclaimed. "What happened to Henry?"

Everybody was silent, as if they were unsure of what to say next.

"He must have been killed in the flood," Katie said quietly. There was silence for a few minutes. Then Mike said, "Let's worry about this tomorrow. I'm tired."

Dawn was beginning to break, so without another word, they decided to go to sleep. They slept most of the day and didn't wake until late afternoon.

Although everybody was still tired from the unusual events of the night before, they knew that they should press on as soon as possible. They also decided that it would be better to travel at night so that the trolls or any other watchful eyes would

not spot them.

After Chapin caught a few measly fish from the nearby stream, the group quickly ate their meager meal. She remarked that the water level was considerably lower. They were still hungry when they set off around sunset. Calculating the distance with the use of his map, Christopher concluded that it would take a few days to reach the Dark Forest, a dangerous place that would mark the end to the easy part of their journey.

Leaving the ruined town behind, the harried troop traveled northward. The road was degrading in places. Maintenance was not even a thought, mostly because it was rare that anybody needed to venture beyond the village of Truce for any reason.

The road became worse and worse as the night wore on, and there was no relief from the murky darkness. Fortunately, after midnight, the road leveled, although it was still damaged in places.

They traveled only seven or eight miles that first day, because of the road condition and the hilly terrain. The second day, they made better time, doubling the distance they had traveled the day before. The third day was slow going, because the road was mostly overgrown in spots, and the same occurred on the fourth and fifth days. By the sixth day, when they sat down for a midnight "lunch" of dead rabbit ("EEEEEEW!" Mike screamed, but still ate it), they could see the outline of the forest to their east.

It was decided at that moment that it would be best to not go into the forest until daybreak. Once Christopher had made it clear that there were many people who had not returned from the forest, they went to sleep and did not awaken until the afternoon. By then it was too late to begin their journey, so they rested until the next morning, when everybody, full of apprehension, set out toward the Dark Forest.

"It's getting cloudy again," Mike commented, to take everybody's mind off their impending journey.

"Hey!" Dave said. "It's the fourth of July!"

"What's so special about the fourth of July?" Chapin asked.

"It has to do with where we come from," Katie said to Chapin. "You'd never understand."

"Oh," Chapin said.

By that time, the sun had risen enough for it to be safe for the party to enter the Dark Forest. Christopher led the party

as they crossed the threshold that marked the division between the forest and the plains. A great feeling of despair took hold of them, with the exception of Katie, who kept skipping ahead of the party. The sky was getting cloudy although they were too far into the forest that they couldn't see it anymore.

It was dark and dismal while they trekked through the forest. They continued until midday when it seemed as if there were a great dread in the air. Katie seemed unaffected by this. It wasn't until they stopped from sheer exhaustion that Dave asked, "Don't you feel it, Katie?"

"Feel what?" she asked.

"This....feeling of despair...It's not natural."

"I feel it, too," Chapin said.

"I don't feel anything wrong," Katie replied. She looked down and saw something shining brightly in her pocket. The Hadar Stone!

"Maybe the stone has something to do with this," Katie said. She pulled it out of her pocket. It was shining very brightly, brighter than they had ever seen it before.

Christopher let out a minute gasp. "This might be some kind of magic of the forest, probably under Yavin's control. Whatever it is, it seems that the Hadar Stone and its bearer are unaffected by it."

"Katie," Dave asked, "can you transfer some of the power to us without having to pass the stone among us?"

"Maybe," she replied. She took a step back from the party. "Let me concentrate." Katie seemed in a daze. The light of the Hadar Stone grew brighter. It seemed to envelop the party. Everyone's spirits lifted, as if a huge weight had been taken off their shoulders.

"Wow!" Mike exclaimed. "That thing's powerful!"

"What happened?" Chapin asked. She didn't feel any better. If anything, she felt worse.

Suddenly, Katie had an idea. “Do you still have the strange red stone that we found underground a few nights ago?”

“Yes,” Chapin exclaimed. “Maybe that’s what’s causing it.” She put the stone on the ground. The feeling of dread left her for a second. When she picked up the stone again, it returned, as strong as ever.

“Well,” Christopher said, “we can’t just leave the stone here. It might be a very important part of defeating Yavin.”

“Then what should we do?” Chapin asked.

“I suggest,” Dave began, “that each of us hold it for only a short while, say about an hour. That way, we won’t fall under the strange stone’s spell.”

Everybody thought that that was a good idea, so Dave volunteered to hold the stone for the first hour. That hour passed uneventfully, but the stone seemed to get heavier and heavier in his pocket as the hour wore on. Finally, the hour passed, and he gave the stone to Katie, who was to hold the stone for the next hour.

Near the end of her assigned hour, Katie was so tired from holding the stone that she thought that she would faint. She persisted, however, knowing that she would be rid of the dreadful stone in little under an hour. The same dreary scenery of seemingly endless trees rolled past them throughout the day, and each person held the stone twice.

By the end of the day, everyone was dead tired. They settled down for the night in a small clearing to the left of the rapidly diminishing trail. They placed the stone in the middle of the ring that the five bodies made as they slept.

Mike awoke in the middle of the night with a start. There were low, eerie chanting noises coming from somewhere in the woods. He quickly crawled over to Dave. “Dave!” he whispered.

“What...” Dave mumbled and sat up sharply when he heard the chanting coming from an unknown source. “What is that?” he asked.

By now, everybody in the clearing was awakened by the commotion that Dave had caused when he awoke.

“Do you know what that noise is, Christopher?” Dave asked quietly, as if to not let his words reach any ears that might be listening to them at that moment.

“No,” Christopher responded. The chanting continued, the same few eerie notes over and over again, the same volume,

the same length, unchanging.

"It seems to be coming from the entire forest," Mike commented. He listened closely but could not pinpoint the exact source of the sound.

"This might have something to do with Yavin or his servants. After all, this forest was transformed into an evil place by them," Christopher added.

It was nearing early morning, so the sky was beginning to brighten in the east. Suddenly the chanting stopped as the first rays of light erupted over the horizon above the trees.

"Is it my imagination," Mike asked, "or did the strange chanting just stop?"

"No, it's not your imagination," Dave said. "The chanting probably stopped because the sun just came up."

"If it stopped because of that," Katie commented, "it's probably one of Yavin's doings."

"Well, it's stopped for now," Christopher said, "so let's not worry about it. I'm not tired anymore. Are any of you?"

Nobody responded, so Christopher assumed that that meant no, and said, "We'd better be moving on. It would be best to get out of the forest as soon as we can."

The rest of the day was uneventful, and everybody again took turns carrying the strange red stone. By the end of the day, everyone welcomed a spot to the right of the trail that actually had some open air above it for a thirty-foot radius.

In the middle of the night, the party was awoken again by the same strange chanting that they had heard the night before. Christopher told everyone to ignore it, but nonetheless, nobody slept much that night.

The next day, it seemed to get darker and drearier as they traveled further into the forest. Everybody grew weary as the great weight of the stone seemed to increase ten fold.

Around noon (although in the midst of the forest it was too dark to tell), they came upon a stream that had black, shiny water in it.

"This seems suspicious," Christopher said.

"What should we do?" Katie asked as they drew closer to the water.

"I don't think that we should touch it, let alone drink it," Christopher said.

"Then how are we going to get across?" Dave asked.

"Maybe up a little further the stream gets narrower,"

Mike offered.

| "That sounds like a good idea," Chapin responded. The stream traveled toward what seemed to be south, so they turned the opposite direction and began to travel upstream.

This took them off the trail, a resource whose value they realized only after it was gone. It was slow going because they had to constantly stop to make it over a log or a bush, or to go around a protruding tree.

| It had been at least two hours when they realized that it was useless to continue upstream because they would be into the wastes of the north before they found where the stream originated.

"Let's cross," Dave said during a break they had taken for a few moments when they came to a small grove of trees.

"I don't know," Christopher said. "It might be dangerous. We don't know what effect the strange water might have on us."

"I'd rather take the risk than stay here in this dreary place," Mike complained, rather effectively.

"I agree. Let's take our chances," Katie said impatiently.

"OK," Christopher responded hesitantly. "But one of us should go alone first, so that the rest of us will be unaffected if he or she gets hurt."

"I volunteer," Mike said, stepping off of the rock that he had been trying to balance himself on for the last few minutes.

"Just stick your hand in first," Christopher warned.

Mike edged closer to the stream. He was about to put his hand in the water when he noticed a pinpoint of light behind him. The Hadar stone was shining brightly in Katie's hands.

"What could this mean?" Mike turned around and asked Christopher, who was walking around the stone and examining it closely.

"Evil is probably lurking nearby. The stone is reacting to it. Maybe in the stream," Christopher responded.

"Should we still try to cross?" Katie asked.

"I think Katie should go first, because she has the Hadar Stone. It might have some protective property that will keep her from harm in the water," Chapin said.

"I hope so," Katie said uneasily as she walked toward the strange lake. When she arrived at the edge, she hesitated for a moment, and then continued onward.

Nothing appeared to happen when she touched the water,

and she waded across the weak current with no problem. When she reached the other side, everyone was shocked. She wasn't even wet!

"OK, now what about us?" Chapin asked. "The last time we tried to carry the stone, we got shocked."

"Someone should put their hand in the water to see that it's not going to hurt us," Christopher said, and everyone turned toward Mike.

"OK, OK, I'm going," Mike complained and started to move toward the lake. As he was reaching down, he noticed yet another bright flash of light - this time not from the Hadar Stone across the lake, but from behind him, in Dave's pocket.

"OK," Mike said. "Now what's that light?"

Dave took the strange red stone out of his pocket to examine it. It was also shining brightly, this time red instead of the bright yellow glare of the Hadar Stone. "There's something special about this stone," he observed.

"Maybe this stone can help us, too," Chapin suggested.

"It's worth a try," Dave said, handing the stone to Mike. Immediately Mike felt the weight of the stone on him. He took a slow step forward into the water.

"OOOOOOOOOOOUCH!" Mike screamed, drawing his foot back in one quick motion.

"What happened?" Chapin cried fearfully as she rushed, along with the rest of the party, toward Mike, who was clutching his leg as if it were on fire.

Christopher pulled up Mike's pantleg and took a look at the wound. It appeared to be a burn that had been caused by the strange water on his foot. "This is bad," Christopher said, "but not life-threatening." Katie looked on from across the stream.

As Dave was trying to help carry Mike away from the water's edge, his foot accidentally hit a rock and he fell backward, into the strange lake.

"Oh no!" Christopher screamed, practically dropping Mike and rushing to Dave.

Strangely, there was no cry from Dave, and he didn't scream. Instead, as Christopher came toward him, he said, "What happened? Why aren't I burning?"

"This is getting stranger by the minute," Katie said from across the river. She paced back and forth, trying to think of an explanation for this turn of events.

"Maybe the stone Mike was carrying had something to

do with his burns," Dave commented.

"It's worth a guess," Chapin said. "Wait a minute. Give me the stone." Christopher took the stone from Mike's half-burned pocket and handed it to Chapin, who proceeded to slowly lower the stone closer to the river. At first, it showed no change, but after she was within a foot of the water, the stone began to shine, first dimly, then bright enough to light the undersides of the trees around them a reddish color. When the stone was a few inches above the water, Chapin stood up again.

"I think we have our answer now," she said to everybody.

"OK, so we can cross safely, but how do we get the strange stone across?" Mike said, grabbing his leg as another wave of pain swept through him.

"We can throw it," Dave suggested.

"Too risky," Chapin responded. "What if we miss or don't throw the stone far enough? Then it gets washed away, and with it, one of our hopes of defeating Yavin."

"That may be our only choice," Dave sighed.

"Can you think of any alternatives?" Mike said. He attempted to stand up, but failed and fell down on his good leg. Christopher went over to help him up. There was no response to Mike's question.

"Who has the best aim?" Christopher asked. Nobody made any action for the next minute.

"I'll try," Mike said. He had pitched for years in his old house before he moved as a result of their last adventure.

"Help him up," Christopher said. Chapin went over and helped Mike stand up so that his back was up against a tree and supported enough to stand.

"Here goes," Mike said and did the best windup he could. The stone soared through the air as if shot out of a rocket. It reached its peak at about the middle of the river. Suspense hung over the group as the stone made its downward flight toward the opposite shore. Just in time, Katie reached out over the water and caught the stone, saving it from falling into the river about a foot from shore.

"Yes!" Mike said. "Good catch!"

Everybody did a quick victory celebration and then attempted to cross the river. The sun was just now beginning to set, casting eerie shadows around the area.

Dave went first. Chapin and Christopher followed

behind, carrying Mike. The current was swift but did not deter the party from crossing the river safely. Deciding that it was getting too dark to continue, they retired for the night.

Around the middle of the night, Christopher was awoken by the same strange voices that they had heard for the past two nights. Since there wasn't really anything that they could do about it, he just fell back to sleep as he normally would if awakened at his house or an inn.

"What's that?" Mike asked immediately upon awakening in the morning. The noises, like the night before, were drawing to a close as the sun rose. Suddenly the sky became noticeably lighter, presumably from the sun now rising from the east, and the chanting ceased as suddenly as Mike had noticed it.

Inside the forest, everything was still. It looked as if it were going to be a hot day, about 85 degrees, which was almost a record for being that far north. Everybody was up a few minutes later. The party's food supply was beginning to run low again, so they set out as quickly as possible to get out of the forest in as short a time as they could.

Nothing of consequence happened that day, and they settled down for their third weary night in the forest. Christopher was telling a rather lame joke about one of his travels.

Dave said, interrupting Christopher, "I'm tired. Let's go to bed now."

"I agree," Katie said. She yawned.

"Okay," said Christopher. "I think I'll lie down, too."

Everybody lay down and quickly fell asleep. They slept soundly until the middle of the night when the strange chanting began for yet another time.

"That chanting's driving me crazy!" Mike said loudly when he was awakened by the noise.

"Let's find out where it's coming from," Dave suggested.

"Maybe it's some secret power of the forest," Mike said fearfully.

"Whatever it is, it seems to be coming from all around us, but it's stronger from that way," Chapin said. She pointed toward the north. Trees there were thick, but now she realized that they were camping at the junction between the main road and what remained of a small path that traveled north. Trees grew around it thickly, and it was pitch dark, not even allowing

the light of the moon to shine into the tunnel. (In places, they could see the tops of the trees bathed in moonlight.)

"Should we go that way?" she asked, pointing toward the partially hidden path.

Everybody hesitated for a moment. "It would be bad if we all went and left our supplies here to the mercy of the forest creatures," Christopher said. "I think it would be best if two of us stayed here to guard the supplies. Then we can meet back here at dawn."

"That sounds good," Dave said. "Who wants to go?" Everybody was hesitant to volunteer. Dave finally said, "OK, I'll go." Katie volunteered next and Chapin followed. Everybody said their goodbyes and the three were on their way.

The first part of the journey was slow going, because the path was worn out in places. As the continued on, it got easier and easier, as the path widened and the trees seemed to lessen. About halfway there, they noticed that the strange stone, which Chapin had been carrying, was now glowing bright red, as if there were some presence nearby.

"This is very strange," Katie remarked for the fifth time.

"I agree," Chapin also responded methodically. It was getting to be a habit that occurred every ten minutes.

After stopping for a break halfway, they finally reached the end of the trail. In front of them stood an enormous stone building that stood higher even than the trees. The trees seemed to not grow within twenty feet of the building. It was a little after midnight, so even though it should be pitch black, the building was illuminated by an unknown source.

"What is this?" Katie asked, puzzled. She walked closer, into the sourceless light. The building was so big that, if they had tried to walk around it, it would have taken them at least five minutes. The trees seemed to close in around the far half of the building, and that side seemed darker than even the forest itself. The bright light stood out in great contrast to the evil, dark feeling that was felt when looking toward the far end.

Chapin followed Katie, followed by Dave. They approached the building from the trail. It led into the doorway, which was about twenty feet high. The wooden doors had rotted away in spots. It also appeared that the building was deteriorating from years of abandonment. As they approached, the red stone began to shine even more brightly. They crawled through a small opening in the right door.

The place reeked of rotting wood and stagnant air that might not have been breathed for centuries. Dave's first reaction as he entered the great room was: "It stinks!". There was light inside, also coming from an unknown source. The chamber they were in was huge, about twenty feet high and rectangular, stretching to their sides a few hundred feet and, in front of them, farther than the eye could see. The ceiling was ornate, domed, rising ever so slightly as far as they could see.

"This is enormous," Dave exclaimed. Then his tone of voice turned serious, and he muttered, "Wonder what this could have been used for..."

"Let's see if there's anything else here," Chapin said. She began walking forward and then stopped.

"The chanting..," she said. "It's stopped."

"It has!" Katie exclaimed. Everybody pondered this for a moment and then began to walk forward. About two or three minutes later, they seemed to be nearing the center of the building. Eventually they came to the point where the dome came to its peak directly above them.

"Look ahead!" Dave whispered. "It seems to get darker!" He was right. About fifty feet in front of them, the light became dimmer and dimmer until they encountered complete blackness at the end of their vision. Dave's whisper echoed throughout the hall as if ghosts were warning them about some danger that lay ahead.

"Should we go on?" Katie asked Chapin hesitantly. She thought about this for a moment.

"Do you have the stone?" Chapin asked Katie.

"Yes," Katie said, holding out the strange red stone that shone brightly.

"No. Not that stone," Chapin responded. "The Hadar Stone."

"Oh, I have that one, too," Katie replied. She pulled out the yellow stone, which was also shining brightly. The yellow stone seemed to penetrate the darkness for more than a few feet ahead of them, a quality that the red stone did not possess.

"Let's go on," Katie said. Chapin nodded, and they continued on, the Hadar stone illuminating the chamber immediately in front of them.

As they approached the darkness of the chamber in front of them, the Hadar stone, for just a moment, seemed to flicker, but then returned to its regular intensity.

"I have a bad feeling about this..," Dave said uneasily as they progressed into the darkness. A feeling of apprehension engulfed them as they approached the rear wall.

It was completely dark at that end. Suddenly, they saw a statue through the dim light that the Hadar stone gave out. The other stone also gave off light, but it didn't seem to penetrate the darkness as did the Hadar Stone.

The statue was of a strange creature that looked like a troll, except gigantic in size and fatter in width. The gruesome thing was grasping a torch, holding it high above its head. The statue was almost as high as the dome, now sloping toward the back wall.

"This is weird," Katie commented apprehensively.

"Something bad's gonna happen. There's something evil here!" Dave said.

"Let's get out of here!" Chapin screamed. Everybody began to run back the way they had come. Suddenly, there was an eerie cackle.

"What is that?" Dave asked, his fear now approaching hysteria. They ran as fast as they could across the vast chamber. They had traversed a quarter of the room when they stopped.

It was still pitch black in front of them. Suddenly, there was a loud bang. The Hadar Stone flickered and went out.

Dave screamed. Katie jumped. They felt for each other's hands and ran as fast as they could. The strange cackle was heard again.

"What's going on?" Dave screamed. "What is this?" Suddenly, they stopped short. A bright light exploded in front of them. They realized that it was the doors, now fully restored, along with the rest of the chamber, as if it had been built yesterday.

The strange chanting began again, increasing in volume all around them. They were at the heart of the chamber, the heart of the forest, the heart of the chanting, the heart of evil. The chanting became deafening. The lights went out, leaving the party in pitch darkness. The red stone in front of them shone the brightest they had seen since they had acquired it.

They ran as far as they could, and collapsed in exhaustion, unable to reach the entrance. There was a great presence in the chamber, as the red stone began to shine so bright that nobody dared look at it. The chanting rose to an incredible volume. Suddenly, it became clearer, and the frightening truth of

what was being chanted became apparent.

"Come, Yavin, Come!"

10

Christopher and Mike were having an uneventful night. They took turns guarding their supplies, while the other slept soundly. It got boring after a while, and Mike regretted his decision to remain with Christopher. He thought of Mike, Chapin, and Katie, who were probably now exhausted from walking toward whatever they were looking for. Maybe they had found it, and maybe they hadn't. But whatever happened, Mike was sure it was more exciting than what he was doing.

It was a little after midnight now, and the forest was quiet. Too quiet. Then he realized - the chanting had stopped! Mike rushed to Christopher to wake him up. The first words out of his mouth were "What happened? Why has the chanting stopped? Are they back?"

"No, not yet," Mike replied. "But the chanting stopped and I thought that it might be a good idea to wake you up."

They were silent for a while, each having nothing more to say. The night dragged on, while the chanting was silent. Finally Christopher said, "Let's go and check what happened to them."

"Yeah," Mike replied. "Let's go." They picked up their heavy supply bags and moved them so that they rested under a bush to the side of the trail, unseen by eyes that might be watching.

Then they turned north, and followed the trail that Katie, Chapin, and Dave had gone down a few hours before. They had reached the clearing that the group had sat in to rest a few hours before, and noticed the fresh footprints.

"They've been here!" Christopher exclaimed.

"Hurry! Something bad might be happening!" Mike shouted, and not a second later started off toward the direction the footprints led. Christopher followed. They made good time for a few minutes, but as they continued, the trail became sloppier. Suddenly they stopped as the strange chanting began again.

"This is strange!" Mike said, a feeling of danger welling

up inside him. He doubled on his efforts in running as fast as he could. Christopher ran faster than him, and was well ahead of him when the chanting began to get louder and clearer.

About two hundred yards from the location of the strange ruins (although Mike and Christopher did not know they were that close at the time), they stopped, panting, listening hopelessly as the chanting reached a deafening volume. They covered their ears as they approached the ruins.

Christopher came to the clearing with the front half of the building showing. He stopped in fright at the immense size of the fortress. Holes protruded from the sides, ready for an arrow to penetrate the darkness. Big wooden doors stood in front of them. The tower, now restored in its majesty, towered above them against the moonlight, creating a shadow that led to the doors in front of their feet.

"Oh my....," Christopher gasped. White, ghostly images hung out of the windows, as if slain in battle. At that moment, Mike caught up to him and saw the fort in front of him. The chanting became clearer at that precise moment so that they could hear the evil message behind it.

"Come, Yavin, Come!"

"What should we do?" Mike shouted over the noise, frightened. Christopher hesitated for a moment, afraid to make a decision either way.

"COME, YAVIN, COME!" The chanting grew above the threshold of pain, and Christopher and Mike covered their ears to block out the noise. The forest all around them seemed to grow darker by the minute.

"We have to go save them!" Christopher yelled at the top of his lungs, unable to make himself clear above the roaring voices. Mike was not able to hear him, but could make out his lips and nodded. Holding their ears to keep them from becoming deaf, they rushed toward the massive doors.

Suddenly, before them, the chanting ceased abruptly. There was silence. A bright light pierced the darkness. Christopher and Mike shrunk away from the light as a reddish-white figure appeared on the apex of the tower.

They watched in horror as it performed strange methodical motions, and the forest grew darker around them, and the silence seemed to increase, if that was even possible. Suddenly, as if he had been cut off by some unknown force, the figure suddenly disappeared in the middle of his motions.

A wail went up, in the same tone as the chanting. It

slowly quieted down, and then ceased altogether. The white spirits vanished, and the forest became alive with evil sounds, like the squawk of calks and the roars of trolls and animals that Yavin had possessed with his evil powers. The structure in front of them returned to its decayed state.

"Should we go in?" Mike asked, awaiting Christopher's answer, still obviously shaken by his experience a few minutes ago. Christopher replied, "We have to find the others!" and began to lead Mike to the strong doors. He noticed that there was a large hole in the rightmost door, large enough to get past the towering, strong entrance.

It was dark inside, but a bright red light shone brightly in the middle of the room. From the dim light, he could make out a figure to the back of the chamber - no, there were three!

"Chapin, Katie, Dave!" Christopher shouted. "Is that you?"

"Hurry!" Chapin responded. "I think Katie's hurt!"

Christopher ran as fast as he could, but due to the immense size of the ruins, he was not able to make it faster than two minutes, with Mike even farther behind. When he reached the group, he found them in shambles, the clothes on their backs reduced to rags and full of bruises. Katie still clutched the red stone as she lay on the ground, clutching her left leg with her other hand.

"Let's get her out of here," Christopher said.

"Yeah," Mike added. "What if that happens again? By the way, what happened to you?"

"It's a very long story," Dave said. "We'll tell it all later."

They ran as fast as they could to get out of the strange stone structure. There was no further excitement, and they passed through the doors safely. Christopher suggested that they walk farther away from the building before recanting their stories to each other.

They walked for about an hour, to the clearing that both parties had rested in on their way to the source of the chanting. The first words out of their mouths when they stopped was by Dave, who said loudly, "What in the world was that?"

"Wait," Christopher said when everybody began talking at once. "First let's find out what happened to each other." Mike retold what had happened to Christopher and him and of the agonizing wait for them. When he finished, Christopher inquired, "Now what happened to you?"

Chapin began with their encounter with the strange statue, the dark building, and the events that had occurred before they had realized the voices' terrible message.

"What happened after that?" Christopher asked.

"Suddenly there was a loud bang," Chapin began, "and the chamber fell into pitch blackness. Then there was a white flash of light and everything was over a few minutes later. As soon as we were able to recover, you came in and found us."

"We saw a figure on the top of the building," Mike said. "It seemed to be chanting something and making strange motions. I wonder if that could have been..." Mike stopped talking at the thought of the horrible name.

"I don't know," Dave replied. "But whoever it was, it was evil!"

"That's for sure!" Chapin agreed grimly.

Nobody was sure of what to say next. They decided to press on back to the junction between the roads, for their safety and so that they could get some rest in a peaceful location.

It was near dawn. The chanting hadn't been heard since after the incident with Yavin (or whoever it was whom they had seen on top of the building). Scared and puzzled, they reached the spot, settled down and were asleep in a few minutes.

The next day was uneventful, and, because of their exhausting encounter the night before, the party slept soundly until sunset. It was dusk when Christopher awoke first and proceeded to awaken the others. Everybody was refreshed, having had almost twelve hours' rest.

It was decided that they would continue their journey throughout that night because the chanting had stopped and so had all of the other weird nightly sounds. However, it seemed just a little darker that night than the night before and the nights before that when they had rested in the forest.

They came to a halt near the end of the night, as the area was beginning to get lighter with the arrival of the new dawn in the east, the direction that they were going. They still couldn't see anything of the sky, which they had last seen four days ago. This day was darker than the day before, and the darkness was

even more apparent when they went to settle down for the day. It became so dark that it was getting hard for the party to see in the forest.

That night was even worse. It was almost pitch black, and even the light of the Hadar Stone was unable to penetrate the darkness surrounding them. Eventually they had to stop and rest. When they awoke, there was ample light to continue, but not enough to lift the feeling of doom that engulfed them.

"Could the cessation of the chanting have something to do with this?" Chapin asked Christopher.

"It would be plausible," he said, "and likely. But why did the forest become darker? Maybe it's some evil caused by Yavin or some related threat."

"What should we do?" Dave asked.

"Maybe we should stop," Katie said. "At least for a while, until we see what's going to happen."

"If we do that," Chapin responded, "we might not be alive in a day or two to witness it. I suggest we get out of the forest as soon as possible."

"Agreed," Christopher said, ceasing the cry of Katie. He continued, "Let's pick up the pace in order to get out of here as fast as we can."

"How far do you think we have to go?" Dave asked Christopher after they began walking at a faster rate.

"I don't know...." he paused. It might be good if we had somebody climb the trees to see how far we have to go."

"That's a good idea," Mike agreed. "Who wants to volunteer?"

Nobody offered at first, but then Katie said, "Last time I almost got everybody killed in the tunnel, so it's only fair that I go."

"Everybody help her to get onto that low branch," said Christopher as he pointed toward a tall tree that stood a few feet away to their south. Everybody grabbed Katie's ankles and hoisted her above the branch until she was able to grab on. It took what seemed like a long time for her to climb to the top of the tree. They lost sight of her halfway up because of the darkness. A minute later, they heard a cry.

"What is it?" Christopher yelled, his voice resonating deeply throughout the silent forest.

"I can't see anything from this point!" they heard a reply. "Let me take a minute to turn around." Leaves rustled above,

and then they heard, “There! It looks a long way off, but I think that it’s the edge of the forest.”

“How far?” Christopher hollered.

“I don’t know,” was the reply. “At the edge of the horizon. There seems to be a hill. It’s bright over there.”

“Can you see anything else?” Chapin asked Katie.

“Yeah,” she replied. “It’s bright up here, but there seems to be a sort of mist below that blocks the sunlight. You’d have to be up here to notice it.”

“Come back down now,” Christopher yelled. “We must be heading on so we can get farther before the sun sets.”

Katie scurried back down the tree, and a minute later they were traveling down the road. Near midafternoon, the road dwindled to a beaten path that, from their observations, showed little signs of travel.

The same dreary scenery passed them in the murky afternoon. No sun reached them now, not even from openings in the treetops as they had seen when they had first entered the forest.

At the end of the day they were exhausted, both from their brisk pace and the darkness that seemed to seep the energy out of their pores. They went to bed in a grove of trees to the south of the path, which was now little more than a foot wide. Several times the day before Christopher had had to stop in order to clear a bush from the path or direct the party around a tree that was in the way.

That night they again heard no chanting. The morning of the Eleventh of July dawned bright and early to the outside world, but inside the forest they could see no further than the distance from their eyes to their shoes. Walking just a few feet was beginning to become troublesome, because of the darkness and the condition of the path, which was deteriorating so rapidly that by noon it was almost nonexistent.

Around that time, Katie muttered, “Probably because many people have given up or ... died before they could cross the forest.”

With that grim thought in mind, they continued on for the rest of the day, making progress, but not as much as the day before. Their plight continued for the next two days, with the path almost gone and the darkness affecting their weary bones.

The third day saw a major change to them. Mike was the first to notice it when he awoke before everyone else early in

the morning.

"It feels warmer today," he muttered to himself. "And not as damp. Maybe we'll finally get out of this dreadful forest today."

"What's up?" Katie said as she rose from her sleep on the other side of the clearing. Dave awoke next, followed by Christopher. Mike repeated his phrase to the party so that everyone could hear. Then they set off toward the east. The path began to get wider again. Christopher said that that was a good sign, because if people came into the forest on the path, they couldn't be that far away from the edge. The murky darkness was getting to them all when, around midafternoon, they noticed a change - the path had returned to a normal road with markers around the edges.

The next night in the forest turned out to be their last. About an hour after they set off, Katie cried out excitedly. The rising sun peeked through the end of the forest in the east, casting a yellowish glow about the path.

They ran as fast as they could toward the opening, about a mile distant. The view was wonderful after being in the dark, dreary forest for over ten days. The sky was clear, and they could see for miles in either direction. A tall hill stood in front of them.

"Let's climb that hill and we'll decide what to do next," Christopher said upon emerging from the forest. They set out to do just that. It only took them about two hours to climb the hill, short by what they had been accustomed to for the last two weeks. When they reached the top of the hill, everybody gasped.

Around them stood barren wasteland. The forest stretched out to their west as far as they could see. To the north, there was dirt where it was so dry during the summer that nothing grew. To the far south, there was grassland, but it, too, seemed to be dying from lack of rain. And to their east, more of the same, except that there seemed to be a town in the distance. Although it was difficult to tell for sure, it seemed to be rather large.

"A town!" Mike remarked, excited about seeing someone else other than themselves.

"Should we head that way?" Katie asked Chapin and Christopher.

"That might be a good idea," Dave agreed.

"If we did, we could catch up on the latest news of Yavin

and see if they would want to mount a resistance," Chapin added.

Christopher agreed, so they sat down to eat lunch and, after that, continued on. They didn't reach the town that day, or the next, but they liked traveling through the open air instead of the dreary, dark forest. The third day was hot, but dry, signaling that rain probably wouldn't come for the next few days. That day, they arrived at the grasslands, a comforting distance away from the forest.

On the fourth day, they reached the town. It was large, at least as big as Harrogen. Thick, long walls surrounded the city, and spikes protruded above the walls and gates. There were two lookout towers to either side of the main gate. When they were in range of the guards' eyesight, they were greeted with, "Who goes there?"

"Travelers!" Christopher replied. "We need food and supplies!"

"How do I know you're not spies for Yavin?" the guard responded.

"We're not!"

"Prove it!"

Christopher thought about this for a moment, and then Chapin picked up a stick and thrust it into the ground. An earthquake ensued, shaking the towers and striking fear into the guards.

"It's...it's...." The guards were speechless. "The Elementals have returned!" they finally managed to scream. Shouts rose up inside the city, and the gates began to open. People crowded near the gates to get a glimpse of the two Elementals.

"This is unexpected," Christopher said, almost nonchalantly. Dave, Mike, and Katie stared in wonder as the crowd parted, and Chapin and Christopher led the way into the town. The heavy gates closed slowly behind them. When they were about a hundred feet away from the gates, an elderly man approached them.

"Welcome to the village of Kahah. I am honored to meet the saviors of the world. I am the village elder, |Scott."

"Nice to meet you," Christopher said, bowing. Then he said, "Can we have some food and water? We have just traveled through the dark forest, and dreadful events have occurred."

"Certainly! We shall bring the finest!" Henry said.

"Today is the 19th of July, isn't it? We'll have a huge celebration at nightfall to honor the |day of birth of one of the saving Elementals."

"I almost forgot!" Christopher said. "I was so worried about trying to survive that I forgot what day it is! Thank you for your kindness."

"One more thing, great Elemental of ice," |Scott continued. "I need to talk to you and your companions in private, preferably now, maybe while you eat. There is much to discuss." Christopher agreed and allowed |Scott to lead the way toward the chief's home, an ornate building constructed of glimmering stones. It was large, and stood in the middle of the northernmost wall of the city. When they were inside, |Scott closed the door. He instructed his servants to bring some food. When they did so, they were told to leave, with a severe warning that |Scott and the travelers not be disturbed. After all was silent, |Scott began. "I think it would be a good time to discuss what to do about Yavin."

Everybody was silent and attentive. "This town has been through hard times. It's been years since we were able to travel outside the walls safely, and trolls are always causing trouble. We now have to grow our crops inside, in a smaller area. And the growing season is so short this far north that there might be famine this winter. We need to act now to prevent Yavin from gaining too much power."

"What do you propose we do?" Chapin asked.

"We need to figure out a way to revive the other Elemental. Even if we couldn't do that, we could still provide a small army for your assistance."

"The Elemental can't be revived now," Christopher said, going on to tell him the adventures that they had been through so far. It was two hours later when they had finished.

"How small of an army are you talking about?" Christopher asked.

"Maybe....a few hundred men."

"That's substantial. But they could not do anything about Yavin," Mike said.

"He's right, even with his youth," Scott responded. "We can't just send a horde of soldiers toward Yavin's castle. We don't know how many trolls and strange creatures there are in there. It could be a suicide mission."

"Yes," Christopher agreed, "but maybe not. We do have

two of the Elementals on our side."

"Two," Henry said. "But not all three. You can't use many of your powers without the third, am I correct?"

"Yes," Chapin responded. "So we must go and find the third."

"That won't be easy," Christopher said. "The shrine was destroyed."

"Maybe," Chapin said. "But I just thought of another way."

"You mean--" Christopher stopped.

"Yes," Chapin continued. "The towers of Guldah."

"What are those?" Mike asked.

"Towers," Scott butted in. "There is a legend that they have powers that will be unleashed for the purpose of defeating Yavin when there is greatest need."

"But they're up north, near Yavin's fortress," Christopher said.

"I know," Scott said. "That's why I'll have my soldiers escort you there and keep you safe. It's the only hope for the world, and this town."

Christopher, Chapin, and the rest of the party talked over the decision among themselves for a moment. They then turned to Scott and said, "OK, we'll go."

"Great," Scott said. "Rest here for a few days while I prepare our army, and then we'll leave together.

That was the end of the discussion, and it was late afternoon when they finally left the house. That night, a party was held in honor of Christopher's birthday, and they remained in the town five more days. On the morning of the fifth, it was announced that they would be leaving early the next day.

The sixth day dawned bright and early. Even though the days were getting shorter, it was still about 5:00 when the sun rose, because they were so far north. The party awoke in the middle of the night, with the rest of the town, to gather their supplies.

There was a big commotion in the square when the first rays of light broke out over the east. A trumpet sounded, and everybody grew quiet.

"We go forth in the name of the Elementals!" Scott shouted from upon his horse near the front of the crowd. He was adorned in robes that held the symbols of the town. There was a loud cheer.

With a signal from his hand, the leader of the knights, a middle-aged, tall man wearing different colors, lead them out of the square.

Eventually the square emptied, with the knights leading the way. Christopher and Chapin rode on a horse near the front of the pack, and Dave, Mike and Katie followed close behind, each on a separate horse that rode near the front of the pack. After the town had cleared, the enormous gates were closed.

They set off toward the northeast. The first day, since they were traveling over the barren plains, they made good time and were able to travel a great distance.

However, after that, the ground became rugged with the approach of the mountains that surrounded the towers and Yavin's fortress. The second day was one of the hottest they had seen since they were further south back in June when Katie, Mike, and Dave had arrived in this strange world. Due to the extreme heat, they and the five hundred or so knights stopped for a rest around noon. Each person present took something to eat of their backpack and sat down on the ground. They had been prepared with fifteen full days of food each, with about twice that if it came to rationing. They expected to be at the castle in ten days of so and would cross a small pine forest where there was sure to be at least a little food. "So," Christopher said to the lead knight during the break. "Have you ever gone against Yavin before?"

"No, this will be the first," he replied. "Everybody was too afraid to go against him earlier."

"What is your party going to do once we get to the towers and revive the Fire Elemental?"

"I don't know," was the reply. "We were told by Scott to do whatever the circumstances required."

Katie, Mike, and Dave approached from an area to the left of where they were. "What are you guys talking about?" Dave said as he walked toward them.

"Nothing," Chapin responded. "Scott and his soldiers might stay with us all the way to Yavin."

"We can get home faster that way," Mike said.

"Don't count on it," Christopher said. "Yavin always has another trick ready to pull on us."

Katie put her hands in her pockets, not knowing that the Hadar Stone was still in there. As a result, there was a bright flash, and she disappeared.

"What was that?" the leader said.

Christopher explained to all of the knights about the Hadar Stone and the sword which Dave held at his side. After that was over, they continued on toward the east, unaware of what was to happen to them in just a few days.

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"Ow!" Mike awoke with a start. Something was pushing against his back, creating pain in his spine. As he turned his head, he realized that it was a rock that he had wedged himself against during the night. It was now the fifth day since they had left the town to travel to the towers. There was faint light in the east, signaling that it was morning. The days were getting shorter now, the first he had really noticed since they began their travels. It was probably now about five in the morning, and Mike felt rested. It was almost August. Mike was glad that, in only a few months, this dreadful heat that they were experiencing would go away.

There were a few knights walking around on the other side of the camp, talking among themselves. Mike overheard their conversation, something about past episodes dealing with Yavin in their village. Mike decided not to go over, because he was tired of hearing about all this death and destruction. Instead, he went the other way for a few feet, but all he could see was wasteland on all four sides. If it had started to rain, they would have no protection. Mike shivered in the chilly morning air.

He didn't know how long he sat on the rock near the edge of the camp, but a while later, as the sun was just rising over the horizon, the lead knight came up to him. "Worried?" he asked, surprising Mike. Mike turned around.

"No, not really," he replied. "Just passing time."

"All this time," the knight replied, "I forgot to tell you my name. It's Sean." Sean looked around and then said, "I think it's time to go now. Do you want to wake everybody up?" Sean produced a primitive trumpet from his belt.

Mike, being an expert trumpet player in his school band, blew as hard as he could. The sound must have been heard for miles around, because everyone was up and about in less than a minute. Knights began to pack away their furs and supplies, and many went to a nearby stream to refill their water bottles. Ten minutes later, after everyone was seated on their horses, Sean

told Mike to blow the trumpet again, and they were off. Dave, Mike, Katie, Chapin, Christopher, and Sean rode out in front, and the rest of the knights followed behind.

The day was uneventful. The trees were beginning to get even sparser, and at times there was not a living thing in sight. Despite the bleak surroundings, the knights behind them were lighthearted. Mike guessed that they were used to seeing such dreariness.

At the end of the day, the forest was in sight. Sean said that they would be camping there for a few days beginning tomorrow. There would be ample food and water. Everyone needed rest.

"Where do we go after that?" Dave asked as the day was coming to an end.

"To the east, to the towers," Sean responded.

"Have you ever been there before?" Katie asked Sean.

"No, but I've heard that, ever since the Fire Elemental was destroyed a few years ago, evil things have happened there."

"What do we need to do?"

"I'm not sure," Sean replied. "I guess that there'll be an inscription there or we'll just have to try things out. But enough speculation for now." "HALT!" he cried.

The rest of the knights came to a stop and Sean said, "We'll camp here for the night. It looks like a warm one, so conserve your water until tomorrow." There were several murmurs of yes, and then everyone dismounted and began to unpack. The party followed suit.

When they were settled, Christopher asked Chapin, "What are we going to do when we get there? Sean expects us to know what to do."

"Don't worry," Chapin answered. "Although I've never been there before, I have some idea of what to do. Go to sleep. We won't fail."

"OK, I just hope you're right," Christopher responded. "If not, the whole world may be at risk."

With that grim perspective, Christopher, Chapin, and the rest of the camp went to sleep. One knight was set to watch for trolls, calks, or whatever Yavin might have decided to throw at them.

Near the middle of the night, as the guard was being changed, there was a loud squawk, followed by a whooshing sound. A large bird swooped over them, making eerie noises and darting about precariously. It stayed over the camp for a while, jostling everyone out of a sound sleep.

"What's that?" Mike yelled to Christopher over all the racket. Having just been rudely awaken, Christopher appeared surprised for a moment, and then replied, "Calks."

"What?" Mike yelled. "I can only see one."

"There's more," Christopher screamed. "They don't travel alone! They're probably trying to find us on Yavin's orders!"

"What should we do?!" Mike shrieked.

"They've already spotted us," Christopher retorted. "They know where we are, so we should hide. They might be ordered to attack us!"

Christopher ran up to Sean as fast as he could. "We need to get out of here now! If we can reach the pine forest by daybreak, we should be safe!"

"EVERYBODY!" Sean bellowed over the loud squawks. "We have to MOVE NOW!"

There was mass chaos as all the knights who had been sleeping for the past few hours hurried to pack away their supplies and get mounted on their horses. But as Sean was just about to give the command to march, the squawking became fainter and fainter as the shadows retreated to the northeast.

"Are they gone?" Sean asked Christopher.

"Yes, but not for long," he replied. "They can be at Yavin's castle and back by tomorrow. And if we're stuck out in the middle of the fields in daylight, we're as good as dead."

"Let's go," Sean ordered. The group began to walk at the fast pace Sean set. Judging by the stars, it was a little past midnight. They did not want to put Katie at risk holding the Hadar Stone to light the path, as the calks would see them, so they walked in partial darkness for the first part of the night.

However, at about 3:00 in the morning, it became so dark that they were unable to see, so Katie took out the Hadar Stone and, by holding it, once again made it light the way with a piercing brightness. Chapin commented that, if the calks were to come their way, they would be defenseless. However, they would have some hope if they extinguished the light quickly.

The forest in the distance seemed to encompass the

entire horizon by the time it was dawn. Sean estimated that it would be another hour until they reached it, leaving them exposed to the daylight for about a half hour after the sun rose. Katie put away the Hadar Stone and they redoubled their efforts to get to the forest as fast as possible.

It was broad daylight and they were only a few feet away from the forest when they saw dark shadows looming overhead. "Calks!" Dave gasped.

"Quick!" Sean said. "If they see us, we're dead!" The group pressed themselves to the limit to get to the forest as fast as they could. They could hear the squawks in the distance.

"Oh, my...." Mike gasped in astonishment as he ran. "There must be thousands!"

"They can't attack us in the forest!" Chapin panted. "RUN!"

As they neared the edge of the forest, several calks broke away from the main flock to attack them.

"AAAAAAAAAAH!" one of the knights uttered. He fell in front of Mike. Afterward, even Mike could not describe the fierceness of the calks' attack on the helpless knight. Finally, they reached the forest, but not without the loss of two knights, whose mangled bodies were left lying in the middle of the field. The calks closed in, threatening to attack anyone who might be stupid enough to leave the forest.

However, nobody took that chance, and the two bodies were devoured within minutes. The group moved further into the forest, where there was a stream, and they collected some water. The small forest, from what they could tell, was only a few miles across.

"So what do we do now?" Katie asked everyone as the sun climbed in the sky in the east. They had settled down halfway into the forest and broke camp. Knights ran about, searching for food.

"We wait for the calks to go away," Christopher replied.

"The calks won't give up easily," Chapin said. "They're pretty intelligent birds. If Yavin told them to kill us, they'll stay around the forest until they can get in or we starve."

"Then that means we have to do something," Dave responded.

"We can take our chances," Mike said. "Leave during the night. Even if the calks could see us, we could be far away from here before they could attack."

while. "Calks, because they're part of Yavin's force, have excellent night vision. And if they did spot us, we'd be far from cover. We'd all be killed before we'd be a mile away."

"Have any other ideas?" Christopher asked.

A knight to whom they had spoken before approached them and said, "I do, sir."

"What?" Christopher asked. "And you don't have to call me 'sir'."

"You two are the Elementals, correct?"

"Yes," Chapin responded, "but what does this have to do with our current predicament?"

"Well, we could cast some sort of spell around the area. Then we could escape protected by it or perhaps not even be seen at all."

"Would that be possible?" Katie asked.

"It might, but it would be extremely difficult without the Elemental of Fire. Darn! We need to revive him!"

"Then the idea wouldn't work?"

"Not completely," Chapin said. "We could use our power to help destroy some of the calks but not all of them. Do you knights have your equipment with you?"

"Yes, only the finest."

"Let's wait for a few days," Dave suggested. "We could see what the calks are going to do, while we rest and plan our attack. Maybe we'd have better success then."

"That sounds like a good idea," Christopher agreed. "What about you?" he said, glancing at the rest of the party.

Everyone else nodded their heads, glad for a temporary reprieve of the troubles that they had to face.

"Then we'll start planning tomorrow," Christopher ordered. "Take the day and night off, and go get some food and sleep."

Mike, Dave and Katie headed for the stream, which wasn't that far from the camp. There was cool, fresh water in it, presumably direct from the mountains. They drank as much as they could. A sign was posted that all bathing take place downstream, away from the fresh water source. From then on, for the rest of the day, they were required to travel further north to get some water.

They ate a breakfast of rations from Kahah and then decided that a few hours of rest would be helpful. When they awoke in the late afternoon, there were several animals, skinned

and cleaned, ready to be cooked for dinner. However, since there wasn't nearly enough there for |500 people, it was decided that they would take turns eating the meat until they were out of the forest.

They met Sean several times during that day, directing the hunting effort in the forest. With his help, by the next morning, they had more food than the night before. After everybody rested again for the night (with the exception of a few guards), they called an assembly with everyone at midmorning. The calks kept everybody on edge through the night.

Finally it was about 9:00, and all the knights, even the ones who were hunting, came to the assembly to hear of what they would do about the calks. Almost as a signal, a calk squawked as the meeting was about to begin.

"Friends," Sean began, "we have been called together here today to decide what to do about the calks that have surrounded this forest, trapping us in this place."

"In order to escape," Christopher continued, "we must do battle." There were several murmurs throughout the crowd in response to this statement.

"Yesterday," Christopher said, "Sean and I took the time to draw up a battle plan to destroy the calks." He pulled a large piece of bark from behind the tall stump he was standing on, and held it in front of him.

The explanation of the battle lasted throughout the morning. Christopher did most of the talking, although he stopped every once in a while as Sean explained a part of the map to the soldiers.

The battle was set for the fifth of August, only four days away. That would give them enough time to prepare and rest, but not too much as to deplete their supplies, Christopher said.

The next few days were uneventful, except for the occasional conversation of squawking that the calks made. But eventually, the morning of the battle came. Since it was to happen at high noon because of the tendency of the calks to fight better at night, there was still time for final preparations in the morning.

Logs were hollowed to act as stretchers. Swords were sharpened and arrows were made out of twigs with stone attached to them. Although the knights already had shields and helmets, makeshift helmets were made out of wood to protect Dave, Mike, Katie, Christopher, and Chapin.

When the sun was at about an hour before noon, Sean ordered all the knights to take their positions. Most of the knights would defend the corners of the forest, while some would remain behind to assist Chapin, Dave, Mike, Katie, and Christopher, and tend to the wounded.

The calks seemed to have stopped their squawking now, since it was almost noon, and most of Yavin's creatures hated the daylight. Christopher climbed a tree in the middle of the forest with the rest of their group to help by casting their spells. Finally, everything was ready.

Katie unveiled the Hadar Stone in the air above the forest, making a piercing light, even in broad daylight. That was to be the signal to begin the attack. She could see many calks hovering on the tops of the trees around her.

There was a cry, and an arrow flew from the north, striking a calk dead. At this, all the other calks awakened, and began to squawk wildly.

Chaos broke loose. Arrows flew. Knights climbed the trees to try to defend their proponents with their swords. Katie used the Hadar Stone to ground one calk, shaking the tree to her right with a loud boom. The body stopped moving on the top of three.

After the initial attack, the calks, realizing what the knights were trying to do, fell back to the perimeter of the forest, concentrating their attack on the westernmost group.

"We need help here!" Christopher shouted. Katie held up the bright red stone, which was to signal distress, and pointed toward the west. Chapin transformed herself into the earth elemental at that moment, attacking the numerous birds above her.

There was a loud cry to their left, and reinforcements arrived at the west. Several knights fell from the treetops as the calks unleashed their full fury. Katie, Christopher, and Chapin continued to crush and freeze their enemies from the center of the forest.

"It looks like they're winning now!" Christopher said, pointing to a large influx of calks from the north. They all went to the west, while some broke away to attack the other groups.

"We need to do something quick!" Chapin screamed above the noise of battle. She and Christopher, casting a combined spell, managed to down ten calks at once around them. But this made them lose energy, and the calks shifted their attack

toward them.

"They're coming!" Mike screamed. A large black one swooped down, crashing into the tree, sending Christopher flying down to the forest floor below. But even though friendly forces were falling, the calks were falling as well, and the remaining ones were not much of a threat to Chapin with her magic.

Finally the rest of the calks retreated to the north. Chapin, Dave, Mike, and Katie climbed out of the trees down to the forest floor. When they reached the ground, knights came running from different directions with damage reports.

Many people helped heal the injured. The dead were brought to the center of the forest, and buried in a mass grave. When they counted, there were 50 dead knights and 104 injured. A high price to pay, Mike thought to himself. Calks littered the battlefield, but were left where they laid. Christopher was tended to, and a knight said that he would live.

It took the rest of that day and all of the next to repair the damage the calk attack had caused. A small memorial service was held in honor of the dead knights at the end of the second day. Then Christopher and the rest of the original party sat down to discuss what they would do next.

"Now what should we do?" Dave began.

"We have to continue toward Yavin," Chapin responded.

"Yes," Dave said. "But how? The calks will most likely be back with reinforcements, and then we'll have no cover like this time."

"Well," Katie added, "we can't stay here. We'll starve or be attacked, or something."

"She's right," Christopher replied. "Trolls and calks and who knows what else are probably heading toward this forest right now."

"Then we have to leave as soon as possible. I'll tell Sean to be ready by tomorrow morning."

The night was still, and there wasn't a trace of anything living in sight. Everybody slept well that night, knowing that the calks were finally gone, but afraid of what laid ahead. The knights were up early in the morning, as to get a head start on going to the towers.

They left the forest at dawn, traveling to the East. There were no further signs of calks through that day, or the next. The same scenery of barren wasteland was all around them. By the end of the fifth day, they were nearing their goal, the towers.

The mountains that surrounded Yavin's great fortress loomed to their left as they traveled eastward.

Finally, the next day, they reached the towers. A storm was blowing in, from what they could tell, and as the towers grew larger in the distance, the sky clouded over, blocking out the sun.

"Looks like it's going to rain!" Sean shouted to Christopher. "What should we do?"

"Continue on," he replied. "We should get there before the rain hits."

So they continued on, ignoring the thunder in the distance. It was a cool day, since it didn't get too hot up that far north, but nonetheless, a thunderstorm was brewing. Unfortunately, it began to rain before they reached the towers.

"Ride faster!" said Sean. "We must get there before the storm gets bad!"

At that moment, the storm intensified. The wind began to drive the rain in sheets at the party. Then Katie had an idea. She took out the Hadar Stone and wished hard that they would be protected. Suddenly, there was a blue flash, and it stopped raining. A blue dome seemed to be above them, protecting them from the rain and wind.

"Amazing!" one of the knights gasped as he looked up. Everybody hesitated for a moment, unsure if the dome would travel with them, but upon seeing that it did, only picked up the pace. Katie strained as hard as she could while riding on her horse near the back of the pack to try to keep the dome holding.

Christopher joined her, directing his magical powers to help her hold the protective dome intact. With the dome in place, they marched across the barren wasteland toward the three towers. Outside the dome, the wind roared, the rain poured, and it was very dark, but inside, it was like a sunny day.

However, Katie was unable to hold the dome for more than five minutes, and it collapsed a few minutes later, with the rain and wind finally penetrating the weakening dome. It fell apart altogether, and the full fury of the storm was felt by the party.

"Hurry!" Sean cried over the roaring noise. "Only a little more to go!"

They doubled their pace and reached the closest tower. "What do we do now?" Dave asked Sean, who was approaching the tower behind him in the roaring storm.

"There must be a door!" he replied as loudly as he could. "Or else how are we going to get to the top? We can take shelter inside for now."

"Everybody," Sean yelled. "Search for an entrance!"

The knights spread out around the massive tower, searching for the entrance. "There isn't any!" shouted Christopher above the wind after several minutes.

"Wait!" Katie yelled from the back of the knights. They parted to allow her through. "Let me try this!" She held the Hadar Stone high above her head. Then she moved her hand forward until the Hadar Stone rested on the great stone tower. Immediately, a door appeared in the side of the tower with the stone the center of the door. As a result, it was about a foot and a half above the ground.

"Everybody hurry in!" Christopher ordered and the knights, one by one, to enter the tower. They struggled over the high door as fast as they could to escape the pounding rain. A lightning bolt struck within yards of the tower, leaving a burn mark in the ground. It was so close that they didn't even hear the thunder.

It took over five minutes to get everybody inside the tower because of the sheer size of the four hundred and fifty knight army that was entering. Finally Christopher ran in, followed by Katie, who held the Hadar Stone up to the door again. Immediately, it vanished behind them, leaving no trace of the doorway that stood there a minute ago.

The inside of the tower was a large room, big enough to accommodate most of the knights who were inside. There was a staircase near the door, which spiraled upward around the tower as far as they could see. All of the knights were around the room, some talking amongst themselves, others lying down to catch some rest until the rain stopped.

"Where do you think the stairs go to?" Dave asked Christopher.

"There's only one way to find out," he replied.

"Do you feel up to exploring?" Mike asked Dave.

"OK, let's go."

Mike, Dave and Christopher went toward the stairs while Katie and Chapin tended to a knight who had fallen and broken his arm in the confusion of rushing to the tower. There was no sign if it was raining or not outside because there were no windows in the tower. They walked up the stairs.

"Be careful, there's no railing," Christopher warned. "I'll go first."

This proved to be a problem for Dave, who was afraid of heights. When they were one rotation above the floor, everybody stopped to look down. The floor, lit by an invisible source, was about twenty feet below them. They continued upward, Mike almost falling off the staircase when he tripped on a stone that must have broken off the tower with age. However, they had made it safely to two turns and forty feet when the staircase stopped onto a platform that stretched across the tower for a third of the distance. There were three doors embedded in the wall, one in the middle of the balcony, and the others to the leftmost and rightmost ends. The staircase did not continue on, instead ending at the entrance to the balcony.

"What should we do now?" Mike asked.

"Let's try that one first," Dave suggested, pointing to the door closest to them. Christopher went first, and warned, "Stay back. There might be magic when I open the door."

Mike, Dave, and Christopher stepped behind the door as Christopher opened it. The knob turned as if it was just made yesterday, and opened into a dank and dusty room that looked like it hadn't been inhabited in ages. Cobwebs stretched from ceiling to floor. Strangely, there were no windows in this room either. An invisible source made this room just bright enough to see into.

"This is strange," Dave commented. "Let's try the other." He walked to the far door, and motioning for Christopher and Mike to stay where they were, attempted to turn the knob. "It's locked," he replied after a minute.

Mike went to the center door, and after applying the same procedure, opened the door to find a narrow staircase that wound upward in barely enough space and height for a man to climb it. Christopher had to duck as he entered the passageway first to lead the party up the staircase, which may have only been four feet in diameter and five feet between levels of stairs. At least there was no danger of falling a great distance here.

These stairs stretched on upward for a full five minutes. It was hard and everybody was exhausted by the time they reached the top. It was silent and still in there. Christopher wondered if that was because the rain had ceased or that there was some magic that surrounded the tower, keeping it in its present state for thousands of years.

After about 3 or 4 hundred steps, they came to another door. Christopher tried the knob, but it wouldn't budge. "It's locked!" he cried in despair. He kicked at the door from the narrow ledge, but all he succeeded in doing was almost falling to the level of stairs below.

"Maybe," Dave suggested, "we need the Hadar Stone to open this door like the entrance to the tower."

"That would make sense." Christopher sighed. "Let's start back down."

It took them another five minutes to go down the staircase, and a few more to get down the staircase around the big room at the bottom of the tower. Dave finally sighed of relief when he reached the bottom and didn't have to worry about falling from the stairs.

"We need the Hadar Stone to open the door, Katie," Dave said.

"I'll come, wait and let me get the stone."

She searched for a few minutes among growing unease from her colleagues. Finally, she sighed. "The stone," she cried. "I don't know what happened to it!"

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"Did you leave it outside?" Mike asked, panicked. He paced around the area, changing directions randomly, and almost falling over when he bumped into a wall. Meanwhile, everyone searched around frantically.

"Everybody, calm down!" Christopher yelled. "We're not going to get anywhere by panicking like this. Katie, when do you remember having it last?"

"I used it to open the door," she said. "That was the last time, no wait - I put it down on the ground when I helped Chapin treat the wounded."

"Where was that?" Christopher asked, staying calm in appearance and tone of voice.

"Over there," she replied, pointing toward the opposite direction of Christopher, to where a group of knights were lying down to rest before they continued.

"Look over there," ordered Christopher. The group hurried over to the location of the knights, and after they moved, searched the area to find nothing.

"I just thought of something!" Chapin said. "If we don't find the stone, we might not be able to leave this tower! Remember how Katie used the stone to open the door?"

"Then we must find the stone," Christopher replied. They continued to search around the whole room. Finally, Dave gave a shout, and everybody rushed toward him.

"What happened?" Christopher asked calmly. "Did you find the stone?"

"Yes!" Dave exclaimed. "But....look!" He pointed to what appeared to be the Hadar Stone, floating in the air near the wall! Just then, the others reached his position and gasped.

"Katie, try to touch it," Christopher said. She promptly went over to the stone, and picked it up with no problems. Then she put it down, and it dropped to the ground. No matter what she did, she could not duplicate the strange floating incident.

"Well," Mike commented. "At least we found the stone. Now, should we go upstairs and check out what's in the room?"

Just them, Sean approached them and, after inquiring what they were doing and learning that they were going upstairs, volunteered to stay downstairs to watch over the knights, should any more weird happenings occur.

Mike, Dave, Katie, and Christopher ascended the stairs and went up the narrow stairwell after they reached the terrace. After ten minutes, they were standing at the locked door at the top of the tower. Katie held out the Hadar Stone to the door, and at once it opened quickly, slamming against the wall on the other side of the door with a loud BANG!

They were looking into a room, tiny compared to the large room downstairs or even the second floor terrace. There was another door on the other side. The room was adorned with furniture and decorations that hung on the walls, which seemed if they should have decayed over the ages. There was a small window on the side of the tower that they had not noticed from the ground. Mike rushed into the room and over to the window, and fell back in amazement after looking out.

Everybody else approached the window cautiously, not knowing what had made Mike fall back. Soon they found out, though, after looking out the window and seeing that they were at an incredible height, so high that they could see the area for miles around them. The other two towers, which were too far away to see from the ground, were now visible to the north and east. After looking, they all fell back and stopped to think about what to do next.

"This looks like a door," Christopher commented, pointing to what appeared to be the door that many of them had seen when they entered the room.

"It's locked, like all the others," Chapin said when she tried the door.

"Maybe the Hadar Stone will open this one, too," Mike suggested, having recovered from his scare.

"OK, let's try it!" Katie exclaimed. "Everybody stand back!" The rest of the party stood to the left of the door in case anything would pop out as soon as it opened.

Nothing popped out, in fact, the door didn't even open! Everybody returned to their previous stances.

"OK, now how do we open this door?" Mike asked.

"Did you try the knob again?" Dave asked. Christopher

did, and replied promptly, “It’s locked.”

Katie put the stone down on the ground to think. When nobody came up with any ideas, she went to pick up the stone and try again, but then she noticed that the stone was floating! The stone hovered an inch or two above the ground, shining brightly.

“That’s what happened before!” Dave exclaimed. “Maybe it can open the door! Katie, see if you can get the stone to touch the door while it’s still floating.”

Katie got down on her hands and knees, and blew at the stone. Slowly but surely, the stone began to float toward the door, shining more brightly as it approached. Suddenly, there was a bright flash, and the door seemed to dematerialize to reveal more stairs leading upward, similar to the ones that they had just traversed coming up.

“Is it safe to go in?” Dave asked.

“Let’s find out,” Christopher said, and then bravely stepped through the doorway to find that the stairs were solid. Motioning to the others, he began to climb the stairwell.

These stairs were narrow, so they had to travel single file, Christopher leading, and Chapin bringing up the rear. The stairs wound up and up. Christopher commented every once and a while on how they should be at the top of the tower by now, because from the ground, it didn’t look as high as they were going.

They ascended the stairs for another fifteen minutes, stopping for several breaks due to exhaustion. But they finally reached the top of the staircase soon after, and found another door. This one was locked, also, but simply touching it with the Hadar Stone opened it to an amazing sight.

They were standing on the roof of the tower, but it seemed *transparent* beneath their feet! A few hundred feet below them, the faint outline of the tower pierced the clouds and came upward, almost as if gravity and the wind didn’t affect it.

“This is amazing!” Christopher exclaimed. Above them, the blue sky stretched in all four directions as far as they could see. From what they could tell, they had come at least half a mile up in the sky.

However, the edges of the tower were unprotected, like most of the other structures in the building, so everybody except Christopher huddled near the middle of the peak, should some strong wind gust come and blow them off. After he had

examined the summit, Christopher went back to the rest of the group.

"OK, there's nothing here," Chapin said. "So why did we come all the way up here?"

"That's a good question," Christopher commented. "Why would a tower be built so high, and so protective, if there's nothing to protect?"

"We're supposed to do something," Katie suggested. "I can feel it."

"Might have something to do with the Stone yet again," Mike said.

"Try doing something with the stone," Dave told Katie.

She concentrated really hard to make the stone light, even tried to make it float like before, but it was to no avail. Nothing happened.

"Should we go back down?" Katie asked.

"I guess. But it's hard to tell whether the storm's ended or not. We would just have to wait down there."

"OK, let's go back down and see what's going on," Christopher said, and started back to the door.

Suddenly, there was a loud bang, and everybody turned around. Katie was lying on the floor, as if some force had pushed her over. The rest of the group rushed toward her to find that the Hadar Stone was floating again, this time next to her, emitting what looked like lightning bolts from its side.

"LOOK!" Katie exclaimed, pointing to the floating stone. Everybody turned around and came back out of the doorway, transfixed on the stone.

Suddenly, the stone began to rise even higher until it was a full ten feet above the middle of the top of the tower. It stopped there for a while, and then suddenly there was a flash. The tower seemed to rise in the middle to reveal a pillar onto which the stone drifted. Suddenly, there was a flash, and a crystal that had emerged from the top of the pillar began shining brightly yellow. In a few minutes, the stone dropped to the ground, but the pillar continued to shine. Everybody was astonished.

"Well," Christopher said in a dreamlike sense, "I think we've got our answer of what to do once we got here."

Katie went to examine the stone. Finding it undamaged, she brought it back to Christopher to look at.

"It doesn't appear that the stone has changed in any

way," Christopher noticed. "But since we came to this tower, it was floating."

"That seems to me that that might signify that the tower is causing these events," Chapin commented.

"Well," Mike asked, breaking up the speculation and changing the tone of conversation to a businesslike manner. "What should we do now?"

"The same thing will probably happen in the other two towers," Dave said. "So we should go there and activate those stones to see what happens."

"That would be a good idea," Christopher said, "if it wasn't raining and getting dark." Suddenly everybody noticed that the clouds were still intact below them and that the sky was becoming noticeably darker, especially in the east.

"Let's go back down to the base of the tower and rest for the night," Chapin suggested. This was accepted by everybody, and they began their descent.

When they arrived at the base of the tower, they filled in Sean about the events that had happened when they had been at the top, and then sat down to rest for the night because it was still raining.

The next morning, inside the tower it seemed to be the same as before. Christopher, Katie, Chapin, Dave, Mike, and Sean were sitting in a corner, carrying on a casual conversation. Many of the rest of the knights were around the area, eating, talking, or practicing with mock battles against each other.

Around what they judged to be mid-morning, the group agreed to try to go outside and venture to the other towers. Everybody thought that the knights should remain in the tower that they were currently in until the danger outside the towers had passed.

Katie held the Hadar Stone up to the point on the wall where they had come in the tower, and a door promptly appeared. Stepping through it, they exited a cold and damp outside world. Being mid-August, and as far north as they were, it was already beginning to feel slightly colder than it had been the week before.

They set their sights on the tower that was to the south of the one that they had just exited, and began to trek toward it. It was, they judged, about five miles between the towers, so it took them well over an hour to reach the tower. By this time, the fog had burnt off, and the midday sun was beginning to shine

through the clouds.

They arrived at the tower a few minutes later than they had planned, on account of the lack of resources that everybody had at their disposal. Their chief problem was the lack of fresh water that they had available. However, they noticed that there was a lake in the middle of the towers, and promptly filled their water bottles. When they reached the southern tower, there was no entrance, like the one that they had come from.

Katie held the Hadar Stone up to the wall, but, strangely, there was no response.

"OK," she said. "What am I doing wrong?"

"Nothing," Christopher said. "It should be opening."

The stone continued to shine as brightly as ever, but the door did not appear.

"What happened to the red stone?" Katie asked.

"It's here," Chapin responded, handing the stone to Katie.

"Hold it up to the door," Katie ordered. Chapin did so, but there was still no response.

Dave approached the tower and held the Falchion up to the door, but nothing happened that time either. Try as they might for the next ten minutes, there was nothing that they could do to gain entry to the tower.

Depressed and anxious, they began the long trek back to the tower that they had come from. By the time that they arrived, it was past midafternoon and becoming dark, so they decided to camp out for another night in the tower.

The next day, there was a conference held between the party and the knights.

"We weren't able to enter the tower," Christopher said. The bad news seemed to echo around the tower, reverberating lower and lower until the voice finally disappeared. There was a murmur that went up through the knights, but quickly subsided.

"Is there anything we can do to help?" Sean asked.

"See what you have," Christopher responded. "It could be used to attempt to enter the tower."

With the four hundred and fifty knights watching, Christopher asked everybody to search their bags. The party went around, and found nothing of interest until they saw a young knight, separated from the others, in a far corner.

"Can I see what you have," Christopher asked.

"Sure," he replied. Christopher looked through his bag,

which was woven of grass intertwined with branches and old, worn cloth. Upon looking through, he discovered a ball, which looked quite like the Hadar Stone and the other stone, except this one was blue. It didn't shine but continued to stay dark. Christopher shouted to the other members of the party. Katie was the one to arrive first.

"It looks like the Hadar Stone," she was saying as the others approached. "But it's blue."

"Where did you get this?" Christopher asked the knight.

"It was my mother's. She died in a troll attack a few years back, and gave it to me. As far as I know, it's been passed down for generations in our family."

Chapin took the stone from Christopher to examine it more closely. The minute she touched it, it began to shine brightly, just like the Hadar Stone had when Katie had touched it.

"May we keep this?" Christopher asked the soldier.

"Yeah, sure. Just give it back to me when you're done with it, if you can."

After some quick reassurance, the group moved across the room to converse privately.

"I think I know what this is," Christopher said.

"What?"

"The Hadar Stone," said Christopher, "shone brightly the first time Katie touched it. At the time, I thought that there was only one stone. I was mistaken. This stone must be controlled by the earth elemental."

"If this is so," Dave said after some thought, "then why can Katie control the Hadar Stone?"

"There's only one explanation for that," Christopher said with great suspense. "Katie was meant to be the fire elemental."

There was a great shock at this, and everybody was silent for a moment. Then Mike said, "How? She's not even from this world!"

"That probably isn't for us to know," Christopher responded. "Neither is why she was brought here. But we must keep trying, and defeat Yavin."

At that point, there was a loud crash from across the room. There was a loud scream, and by the time that the group had turned around, a knight was standing up, screaming. His pantlegs had caught on fire and he was running around wildly to extinguish the blaze. Several knights near him moved away hurriedly to avoid injury.

"Hurry!" Christopher exclaimed, jumping over a bag in front of him and running across the floor. He quickly emptied the contents of a knapsack and smothered the fire on the knight's legs. By that time, the rest of the group had reached Christopher.

Sean hurried over along with a few others. The victim had a large burn on his leg, but with some bandages he would be fine. Christopher tore apart some old cloth and wrapped his leg in it, washing off the cut first with some water.

"What happened," Mike asked.

"All of a sudden," the man gasped, for he was in pain, "it just happened. There was no cause." These last four words struck a chill through everybody, but the man would say no more no matter how much they prompted him.

"This is weird," Katie said, uneasy.

"Tell me about it!" Dave exaggerated.

"Let's rest for the night now!" Christopher said loudly so that all of the knights and the group could hear. "We'll move out tomorrow!"

There was no further conversation within the group that night, as everybody parted immediately after Christopher's announcement. Christopher and Sean talked for a while on the other side of the tower, but soon succumbed to slumber like the rest of them.

The next day dawned bright, but not as early because they were so far north. There was a chill in the air as the party set out of the tower to see if the strange blue stone would open a door in one of the towers.

After they had reached a substantial distance from the tower, they could see a bright yellow light emanating from the top of the tower they had just left, the same color as the Hadar Stone.

They continued onward to the tower. When they reached it, Katie tried the blue stone on all the parts of the tower, but, again, there was no response.

"Let's try the other one," Mike said with a sigh.

It took them an hour to walk to the other tower from the one where they were. The going was rough, because even though the day started out cold, it became hot quickly.

When they reached the other tower, they tried the stone again and found that that tower opened in response to the stone. A door appeared in the side of the tower, and the group promptly went inside.

This tower was very similar to the last one, with a large ground floor with stairs protruding around the outer edges.

"Should we go up these stairs?" Katie asked Christopher.

"Let's go," Christopher said.

The group proceeded to climb the stairs. However, they were stopped by a frightening whisper from a voice they had never heard before.

"They're all gonna die!"

*- Everybody stopped dead. "What was that?" Mike asked, panic-stricken.

"Stop!"

"There it is again!" Katie exclaimed. The strange voice continued on; but seeing that there was no danger ahead, everybody decided to remain in the tower.

They climbed higher up the stairs. The voice continued as a whisper but nothing else happened. The balcony of this tower was much the same as the others. There were three doors in this one, too. The left one was locked, the right one opened into an empty room, and the middle one opened into stairs similar to the ones that they had found in the tower from which they had come. They ascended the stairs to find that they were exactly the same length as the ones that they had gone up before, and reached the top in about ten minutes. The door at the top of the stairs was locked.

"OK, how are we supposed to get in?"

"Try the stone," Christopher suggested.

Chapin took the suggestion, and a few minutes later they were in a room similar to the one that they had been in before. They opened the door on the far side with the water stone, and proceeded up the next set of stairs.

This was like the tower to which they had ascended before, so there were no surprises. When they got to the top, however, they were met by an astounding sight.

From their vantage point, they could see the other two towers clearly, even though they were miles away. One of the towers looked normal, but the other was radiating a bright yellow light.

"That must be the post that was energized by the Hadar Stone!" Katie exclaimed.

Chapin held the stone up to the center of the tower as they had done before but nothing happened.

"What's wrong?" Dave asked.

"I did the same thing that Katie did in the other tower," Chapin replied, "but it doesn't work here!"

There was an awkward silence, and several of the group members were forced to shield their eyes because of the combined blinding lights of the sun and the distant energy-charged tower.

Suddenly there was a loud crash, and the pedestal opened up. It rose to a height of about six feet, and then stopped, waiting for the stone.

Chapin rose up and touched the stone to it. Immediately there was a blinding flash that left the party seeing spots in their eyes for hours after.

The pedestal began pulsing with pale blue light until it was entirely engulfed. Christopher, who was standing too close, had to move back quickly. There was another flash, and suddenly the pedestal shot out a stream of light toward the other tower. The tower with the Hadar Stone did the same. They met in a violent eruption and merged into one white stream connecting the two towers. The colors dispersed evenly, creating a uniform stream.

When this was done, the tower began to shake. It took but a moment to convince Christopher that it was time for the group to get out.

They ran down the stairs as fast as they could. Halfway down, a strange event occurred.

"It stopped!" Katie exclaimed.

Indeed, the shaking had stopped. Everybody loosened up a bit, not having to worry about falling down the steps or losing their balance.

"Let's get out of here and then we can discuss what to do next," Christopher suggested. Everybody followed him out of the degrading tower.

They stepped out into the open air in mid-afternoon, and there was no further episode inside the tower as they had been leaving. Christopher suggested that everybody return to the tower where Sean and his knights were.

It only took them an hour to return to the first tower. When they arrived, they held the Hadar Stone up to the point on the wall where the door should have been, and it appeared. Walking inside, they were greeted with curious glances from the knights. Not much had changed since they had last been here, and many knights were now sleeping from pure boredom.

They spotted Sean on the other side of the tower and went toward him. He saw them coming and walked to the far corner of the tower, so that the knights or other unforeseen forces could not hear them.

"I saw what happened," he said when they were within earshot.

"You felt the shaking, too?" Katie asked.

"Yeah, and I thought the tower was going to fall to pieces. A lot of my men were scared, even those that acted bravely in the past."

"There are lights in two of the towers, too."

"I know. When the shaking started, I went up the stairs to see what was going on. Although it had stopped before I reached the top, I went up and looked out the window, and I saw the faint outlines of a bright light. I guess that that was the tower that you had 'energized'."

"Do you have any idea where we can find the third stone?"

"I don't know," Sean replied. "But you'd better hurry. My men have been sitting here for days. We're running out of food, and their morale is low. If we stay here much longer, they could desert us."

The conversation came to an end on that somber note. Sean walked back to a knight who had been patiently waiting with a question. The rest of the group remained where they were.

"We have been looking for the third stone this whole time," Christopher began. "But it's obvious where it is!"

"Where?" Dave gasped.

"We have it right here, of course! The strange red stone that nobody could hold!"

"I never thought of that," Katie commented. "We had it all this time?"

"But," Dave said, "there is a problem. Why can't anybody, even Christopher, hold that stone?"

There was a pause.

"I mean, if it is the stone for the remaining elemental, then Christopher should be able to hold it and open a door in the remaining tower."

"That's right," Katie said. "So this stone must represent something else."

"What?"

That question went unanswered. They did nothing more and went to bed that night, puzzled.

The next morning they set out from the tower with a plan to search the area in case the stone for the ice elemental was somewhere around the area. Most of the knights were invited out of the tower to help. Seeing a release from their boredom, the knights eagerly accepted.

They formed a long line of about 450 people, stretching from the two towers at the end of the field in which they stood. Each person was spaced about 30 feet apart in either direction.

Although it took twenty minutes to get all of the knights organized, the plan eventually went off without a hitch. After an hour of walking, they had come up with exactly...nothing. Exhausted, they returned to the tower, while Sean, Katie, Chapin, Dave, Mike, and Christopher remained at the far tower to discuss their poor fortune.

Standing below the unlit tower, they could see the two other towers in the distance, shining brightly in the late morning fog, connected by a stream of green light.

"This doesn't make sense," Christopher said. "If Chapin is the earth elemental and Katie is the future fire elemental, why are the stones blue and yellow? Why not brown and red or something?"

"We should be going back," said Christopher, looking around at the barren wasteland that stretched around them for miles on end. When they returned to the tower, they spent another sleepless night pondering the mysteries of the towers.

So it continued for another week. Every morning they tried a different way to find the stone, and every morning, they failed. They didn't even know if the stone were near the towers. It was mid-August now, and everybody knew that they had to get moving soon or they would freeze on the way to Yavin's fortress during the cold winter. Their time outdoors was beginning to be limited by the decreasing daylight hours. Their food was beginning to run short, and Sean estimated that they now were within one week of starvation even at the strictest ration levels. Although Sean had sent several knights to hunt for food, there were no animals in the vicinity, and no forests for miles around. Sean told the party that he had orders to bring his knights back to the city if they were running short of food, and that that time was rapidly approaching.

This day, they were moving the knights to the unlit tower

so that the group didn't have to travel back and forth every time they searched for answers.

Mike, Dave, and Katie were walking in the middle of the party when they were crossing the middle of the field.

"Wow!" Katie exclaimed. She had been doing some calculations on a soft piece of wood with a rock, attempting to figure out what day it was. "It's already August 14. We've been here for a day over two months!"

"The summer's almost over and there's still no way home," Dave replied sadly.

"I believe we'll find a way home," Katie said.

"If we do," Mike said, "we'll be old, sorry-people."

"Look on the bright side," Dave continued. "We won't have to go back to school in a month."

Everybody laughed, and then there was silence. Occasionally the murmur of two knights talking could be heard. The gloom that had set over the knights seemed to be contagious.

Suddenly Katie screamed. What had appeared to be normal dirt had given way to a hole. Mike reached down to save her but found that there were stairs in the hole.

"Stop!" Dave yelled.

The knights halted and Christopher, who had been riding at the front of the pack, turned around to see what was happening.

"I'm fine," Katie said and proceeded to climb out of the hole. When the group was able to inspect the hole, they were amazed at what they saw.

The hole was narrow, but deep. Stone stairs led down into the ground as far as they could see. The inside was pitch dark.

"What is this?" Chapin asked as she rode over on her horse to the scene of the commotion.

"I don't know," Christopher said. "What should we do?

"We can't just stand here while you explore," Sean commented. "What should we do?"

"It would be best to go back to one of the towers," Katie suggested.

"Fine. Let's go to the tower with the earth elemental so that everyone can enjoy a change of scenery, and Katie can come with us. Chapin, will you lead the group to the tower?"

Without another word, Chapin began to walk east toward the tower that they had not visited yet. The knights followed,

leaving the rest of the group alone to examine the hole.

"Katie, we need some light," Christopher said as they descended the stairs into the hole.

Katie took the Hadar Stone out of her pocket where she had kept it and concentrated until it began to shine brightly, illuminating a short distance in front of them. Although it wasn't enough to see the passage clearly, it was better than the pitch darkness that they had had a minute ago.

They followed the stairs until they were well under the ground. After a hundred feet or so, they stopped. Old tunnels stretched out in front of them in three directions, presumably toward the towers.

"Which way should we go?" Dave asked.

"Let's split up," Katie suggested.

"No," Christopher said. "We only have five people. We can't risk one of you going alone. Let's stick together."

"This still remains--" Mike said. "Which way do we go?"

"Let's go this way," Dave suggested, "toward the tower that we can't open. Maybe there's an underground entrance."

"That sounds good," Christopher replied, and they set off in a forward direction. The only light was that of Katie's stone. Even with its luminosity, the tunnel was still treacherous. In several places, they were forced to stop where the tunnel had degraded, or where there were mysterious artifacts that were lying on the ground.

Finally, after a while, they reached the end of the tunnel. Ahead was a similar clearing to the one that they had discovered in the destroyed town so long ago.

In the middle, there was a green ball, shining like the Hadar Stone. Indeed, when Katie brought the Hadar Stone up to it for closer inspection, it began to shine even more brightly, illuminating the whole chamber. It was no more than twenty feet across, the pedestal in the middle only three or four feet tall. This room was not as high as the other, too, being only about eight or ten feet to the peak of the ceiling.

"This might be the stone!" Dave exclaimed eagerly.

"Don't be so anxious," Christopher warned. "This stone might hurt us like the red one!"

"He's right," Mike said. "We should be careful."

"That makes sense," Katie said, "but how do we carry it out? Somebody has to touch or pick up the stone to see what

happens!"

"That should be Christopher, because this stone probably represents him," Mike said.

"Let's try," Christopher agreed. He slowly moved his hand toward the pedestal, as if he would be able to sense some evil inclination of the stone before he touched it. However, there was no warning. He suddenly thrust his hand forward and picked up the stone. It began to shine incredibly brightly, but Christopher seemed unaltered. The rest of the group looked at him in awe.

Christopher dropped the stone into his pocket calmly, as if nothing had happened. "I'm OK," he reassured Mike, Dave, and Katie.

"We've found the stone," Mike said. "Now let's get out of here."

"I agree," Dave suggested.

They backtracked out of the tunnel, no further cause for concern happening. When they had reached the surface, they set out toward the tower where the rest of the knights were located. It was afternoon by the time they reached the tower, and it was growing quite oppressive.

They spotted Chapin outside the tower, waiting for them. Because the walls were soundproof, there was no way of letting her know to let them in with the stone.

She made a door in the wall, and entered with the rest of the group. The knights were standing inside, bored, but waiting for news.

"I have an announcement," Sean said loudly to get attention after all were inside. "We have found the stone!"

A loud cheer rose throughout the tower. Knights jumped around, and Chapin looked at the party in surprise. When all of the partying had died down, Sean looked around the tower.

"Let us go outside and watch our heroes place the final stone in the remaining tower. We don't know what will happen to the towers after he does."

The obedient knights quickly gathered what little food and water they had and their few personal belongings. They headed for the door to the tower, and like before, it took them some time to exit the building. When they had, Chapin closed the door for the last time. Sean rode to the front of the knights, who had assembled in rows, and led them forward. They set off for the tower in good spirits, even though the day was growing

short.

By the time they had reached the final tower, it was almost twilight, but it was agreed that they hurry up and place the stone in the tower to avoid staying another night and using too many supplies. This one was almost identical to the other two, but there was one main difference: this one looked like it was falling apart, not like the "untouched for centuries" look that the other two towers had.

The stairs were wooden in this tower, and as a result many of the steps had rotted away with time. There was debris lying over the floor, and even some of the bricks that held the stone walls together looked brittle.

"Should we still try?" Katie asked Christopher after seeing the state of the tower.

"We have to," Christopher replied. "If we want to defeat Yavin and return home."

There was no argument, and the party began the grueling task of ascending the stairs. They were forced to remain on their hands and knees, inching up the stairs a few feet at a time. Christopher went first, and traveled far ahead of the party, so that if there was a problem with the stairs, he would be the first to know.

It took them quite a while to reach the upper balcony, which, like the rest of the tower, was identical to the one in the other tower, but was degrading rapidly. They had to step carefully to avoid holes in the floor, but they all made it safely to the narrow staircase. The staircase was not in as bad of shape as the other parts of the tower, and they had no problems climbing it to reach the upper floor. Once they had reached the "invisible" stairs, it was possible to continue up at normal speed without the threat of injuring themselves in some part that was degraded.

When they reached the top, they could see the other two towers, the one that Katie had activated with the Hadar Stone, shining bright yellow, and the one that Chapin had activated, shining bright blue. The beams of energy mixed, forming a bright green light that connected the two towers.

Christopher approached the center of the tower, holding the shining light aloft above his head. This time, the pedestal that was to be energized slipped out of the floor immediately.

"Here goes," Christopher said. "I hope that this works!" He touched the stone to the pedestal.

At first, it seemed like nothing was going to happen.

Then, the stone began to glow brightly, surrounding the pedestal in bright green light. Suddenly, there was a flash, and beams of shining light escaped from the other towers, and headed toward the pedestal. Christopher stepped back, along with the rest of the party.

The beams of light connected in mid-stream with the two that the tower that they were on had sent out. There was a loud crash, and all three towers were suddenly connected by blinding white light. Suddenly, there was a boom, and the towers began to shake. Slowly at first, they began to pick up momentum.

"Let's get out of here!" Dave screamed in terror. He rushed toward the stairs, which were groaning and creaking with the rest of the tower. Everybody followed as best they could without stepping through a hole in the already damaged stairs. When they were a few steps down, there was a loud bang. The door at the top of the tower vanished, and turned into a stone wall.

"That was close!" Mike exclaimed as he ran and screamed.

"Hurry! We don't want the next door to close on us," Katie said, ignoring the comments of the other two and concentrating on running as fast as she could.

The tower was shaking hard enough, by the time that they reached the bottom of the stairs, that the room that they were about to enter was in disarray. The floor was littered by falling stones from the ceiling and walls. A massive landscape of the outside that was somehow hanging on the wall had fallen down and been ripped into a million pieces.

Everybody ignored the state of the room, however, and concentrated on getting to the stairs as fast as possible. They sprinted across the room, and down the opposite stairwell. This one was falling apart with the tower, and boards here and there were loose and missing.

Suddenly, there was a scream. "HELP!" Dave exclaimed, but from where! A board had given way about halfway down and Dave had crashed down two turns of the stairwell, through the rotting wood, stopped by a metal pole that held up the staircase below.

The party rushed toward him. There was a large cut on his arm, and it seemed as if he was unconscious.

"He might have injuries inside!" Mike exclaimed over

the roar of the rumbling tower. "We can't risk moving him!"

"What are we going to do?" Katie said. "Let him stay here and die?"

"We have to get him down!" Christopher yelled, "and QUICK!" The tower around them was falling apart by the seams. Christopher and Chapin hoisted Dave onto their shoulders and carried him down as fast as they could. Even so, by the time that the remaining members of the party had made it down, the tower was shaking so heavily that it could fall apart at any minute.

At the bottom of the second set of stairs, they were met by a sight so incredible, that Chapin froze to look at it, almost causing Christopher to drop Dave down to the bottom of the tower. The entire stairwell that had gone down to the bottom of the tower had collapsed under the shaking tower.

"What are we going to do now?" Katie screamed in terror. "We're going to die up here!"

"Concentrate on the stone," Chapin replied. "Maybe we can figure out something!"

Katie thought as hard as she could of a way out of the tower, but she failed. Then she saw it: if only she could float down the empty space slowly. She pulled out the Hadar Stone, and wished as hard as she could that she was out of the tower. They stone began to glow, and before she knew it, she was floating several inches above the floor.

"Look!" Christopher said, pointing at Katie. Chapin and Mike looked over to see.

"Quick, grab on!" she said to Mike. She held out her hand. Christopher and Chapin wished that they, too, were also floating, and began to. The three, holding Mike and Dave, were able to float down safely to the bottom level of the tower.

At the bottom, Sean's knights were running about, scared that the tower would mean their doom. "Where were you?" Sean exclaimed over the noise. "Hurry, open the door!"

Christopher rushed over to the nearest wall and held the stone up to it. Immediately, an opening appeared in the wall, and the knights rushed toward it. Sean led Christopher, Chapin, Katie, and Mike out of the tower first, and ordered a group of knights to help carry Dave out.

The tower was falling apart in chunks now, the roar deafening and large stones falling from outside the tower as well. The knights who were exiting the tower had to move quickly to

avoid rubble that fell from the top of the tower.

Soon, there were several hundred knights standing outside the tower. They were in a cluster several hundred feet away from the tower, away from the range of the tower's falling debris.

Suddenly, without warning, there was an earth-shattering bang, and the tower began to collapse inward. The light from the top of the tower was still visible, even though the tower was crumbing under it. The knights at the door picked up their pace, colleagues shouting encouragement. The tower was half-gone now, a large section of it falling in the direction opposite the waiting knights, causing them to back up even further. They could see the other two towers in the distance crumbling like this one.

They watched in horror as the tower crumbled and the knights who were still in the tower scrambled out the doorway. Then the worst happened. A large chunk of the tower fell off in front of the door. One knight was crushed, and the doorway was completely blocked. Chapin turned away as she heard the screams coming from within as the last of the tower crashed downward, burying the remainder of the knights alive.

When all was silent, Sean said, "Is everybody alright?" Six knights came up, each with minor injuries, the severest was a mere broken arm. When they had been healed, they took a count of the live knights. There were 406. 52 had died in the tower. Sean suggested a moment of silence for those that had given their lives for their town.

After all this was done, a few knights took the bodies that they could find and burned them in a makeshift grave made of stones and dirt. Then the party rested. When the morning came, there was still a feeling of dread that hung over the party. However, many knights were also glad to be moving on. The white triangle, over the night, had remained, and had sent down a shaft of light into the middle of the clearing, above the trapdoor that they had accidentally fallen into the day before. They set off as best they could, among the rubble that had been thrown everywhere.

It was mid-morning when they reached the exact center of what remained of the towers where the light was shining. The trapdoor had vanished as if it had never existed.

"What should we do?" Chapin asked Christopher, puzzled.

Mike reached out to put his hand under the light, but he quickly removed it. There was a large burn on his palm that he had held under it. “Take care of him!” Chapin ordered, and Sean quickly came.

“Try the stone!” Dave suggested. Christopher, not knowing what else to do, rolled his stone into the light. Immediately, it changed color.

“Hey, look!” Katie exclaimed. She held the Hadar Stone under the light. It changed in color to orange. When she removed the stone, however, it did not change back.

“How were you able to hold your hand under the light?” Chapin asked.

“I don’t know, it didn’t hurt,” she replied.

Chapin put her stone under the light and it changed to a brownish tint.

“Katie,” Mike suggested, “try standing under the light.”

“Won’t she....die?” Dave asked.

“It didn’t hurt her before,” Christopher replied.

“OK,” she said, apprehensive. “Here goes.”

She put one foot under the light, and then the second foot. Suddenly, the light changed to a pinkish color. There was a bright flash. The knights gasped at the unbelievable sight, unable to take their eyes off what Katie.....was.

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Katie stepped out of the light. Immediately, there was a bright flash. The stones that were lying in the center of the light began to shine brighter, just for a second, and suddenly the white light was gone. It disappeared out of thin air. A split second after that, the three lights where the towers had once stood winked out once and for all. An eerie silence spread out over the field.

Everybody gasped, staring at Katie. Instead of her, there stood a ten foot tall monster, with glowing red hands.

"What happened?" she asked. Suddenly, without warning, a stream of flames shot out from her arms, into the crowd of knights that surrounded her. They dispersed, and watched in awe as the stream burnt the grass that was around them. As suddenly as it began, it stopped a few seconds later.

"Wait, I think..." Katie began, and suddenly there was a flash. In front of them now stood Katie, just as she had looked a minute ago, before she stepped into the light.

"What was that?" Dave asked, more curious than scared. Mike repeated the question when Katie didn't answer right away.

"She turned into the fire elemental," Christopher said with a look on his face that said that he was dead serious.

"The power..." Katie gasped, and then fell to the ground.

It was mid-afternoon. After careful examination, Christopher assessed that Katie would be alright, because she had just fainted, but would wake up soon. Mike continued to marvel at how, without the help of modern medicine, the people of this world were able to keep others healthy.

They had hoisted Katie on to a horse, and tied her down so that she wouldn't fall off. Dave rode on the front of the horse as an extra precaution.

They were traveling north, to a town that Sean had found by using a map he had. This town would be able to restock them, and prepare them for the long journey into Yavin's realm. However, they were low on supplies, and they had to survive for

at least three days with only one meager meal a day. Several times Sean had debated whether to give up and return, or to continue, but the closeness of the town compared to his home had made the decision for him.

Katie awoke around 4:00, while they were crossing a large field. The few deciduous trees were beginning to thin, leaving only sparse pines in between. They had covered a lot of ground that day due to the abiding weather and the flat terrain. It was suggested by Sean that they travel as far as they could by dusk, which now wasn't that far away.

When it had begun to get dark, the large group of knights stopped in a small grove of trees to rest for the night.

"What happened back there?" Dave asked Katie as soon as they had dismounted. Mike was present, the last rays of the sun disappearing behind him.

"I..I.. don't really know," she replied.

"Come on! You were transformed into some kind of creature," Dave exclaimed. "You must know!"

"I don't! It was as if I wasn't myself when I walked into the light. I can't remember anything about it. The next thing I remembered is when I woke up on the horse."

"Can you do it again?" Dave asked.

"No. It probably only happens when I'm in the light. Anyway, the light is gone and so are the towers, so I won't have to worry about that again."

"You might if we get to Yavin's tower," Christopher interrupted, walking towards them, just within earshot. When he had arrived, he said, "I think that you may be the lost fire elemental."

"That's not possible," Katie said. "I'm not even from this world!"

"Then maybe that's why you're here," Christopher said.

"What do you mean?" Katie said, uneasily.

"Well, you might have been brought here, by some reason, to save our world and return peace."

"I never thought of that," Dave said. "But now that I think of it, it makes sense."

Katie looked around. Christopher and Chapin were staring at her, like she belonged to their group. But that couldn't be, it was only a few months since she had even heard of this world. She shrugged at them and said, "I don't, I mean I guess." There was silence.

As suddenly as the awkward question had arisen,

Christopher said, “Well, I’d better be getting to bed. See you later.” Chapin nodded, and followed Christopher.

“What was that all about?” Dave demanded.

“How should I know?” Katie replied.

“Lately, Christopher and Chapin have been acting like they need us for something. Maybe it’s just this fire elemental stuff, but I kind of get the feeling that they’re *using us*.”

“We’d better watch out for signs that they are,” Mike said. “But anyway, we should go to sleep now and we’ll worry about it later.”

“Yeah, I’m tired,” Dave said. Quickly, they lied down and fell asleep without another word. The cold, hard ground was uncomfortable and they were awoken many times during the night.

When the morning finally came, it was dark and dreary yet again. It wasn’t raining, but by the time that everybody had gathered their belongings, it had begun to. Even though many of the knights had heavy blankets that sheltered then from the rain, all of them were soaked after an hour. When it was clear that they were going to make no progress that day, they stopped for a rest under a few sparse trees.

It was the same for the next few days, and they were terribly behind schedule and out of food by the time that they stood just a mile away from the gates of the town, they were exhausted, famished, and dehydrated. It took all of their effort to walk the final mile through the blazing sun. It was the hottest it had been in a while, and that was saying a lot for how far north they were, and it being near the end of August.

When they reached the gates of the town, two soldiers stood guard along with sentries in the tops of the towers.

“Halt, travelers!” one hollered. “What is your business here?”

“We need supplies!” Sean yelled back. “We are weary travelers, on our way to make a stand against Yavin!”

The guards paused for a minute, and without another word to the knights, looked at his fellow guard, and appeared to discuss something with him.

“Only fools would try to fight Yavin!” the guard yelled back.

“We aren’t fools!” Sean replied. “We have help and are just-” Suddenly, there was a loud explosion, and a spear hurtled toward the knights.

“Great!” Sean cursed. “These idiots are fighting against

people on their own side!"

"Return the attack!" Sean said to a group of knights in the front. "The rest of you, stay out of range!" The rest of the knights fell back from the hurtling spears and torches. Soon the grass in front of them was afire, threatening to envelop the party.

"Hurry, DO SOMETHING!" Dave yelled above the racket.

"Quick!" Christopher said. "Chapin, Katie, join my power!"

"What?" Katie screamed.

Christopher grabbed Katie and he and Chapin and her stood a few feet apart. Chapin began to chant some strange words in a quiet voice, almost unheard around them. Suddenly, a barrier formed around them, and the fire swept past, leaving them unharmed. The knights scrambled away on their horses as fast as they could go.

"Hold hands!" Christopher screamed. "NOW!"

Katie did so, and she felt a surge of energy. Chapin began to chant louder and louder, until her voice pierced the noise. Suddenly, all fell quiet. Even the knights at the town that had started the battle had stopped their attack. Suddenly, the barrier around the elementals disappeared, but they were unharmed. A drop of rain fell from the sky, and then two, and then a heavy deluge began. The knights watched as the fire winked out in the rain. As soon as the fire had been extinguished, the rain stopped, the sun came out, and everything returned to normal, except that there was silence. Christopher, Chapin, and Katie fell to the ground, exhausted.

"DO YOU BELIEVE US NOW?" Sean yelled loud enough for the guards to hear, breaking the intolerable silence.

"By all means," the guard replied. "Enter! We welcome you in the name of King Bahum!"

The rest of the group, which was now almost pressed back to the far woodlands by the fire, was reorganized by Sean and began to move forward. The burnt meadow crumpled beneath their feet. As they moved closer to the gates, they could see the town's knights bowing down to their presence.

When they had entered the town, the gates were sealed lest some other invading party try to take over, and every knight was hurriedly shown to a room. Since there weren't enough rooms in the town to accommodate them, everybody (except the elementals, of course) had to double up in a room.

Katie, Chapin, and Christopher were led to the King,

while Mike and Dave were shown to a room, the knights unheeding of their pleas to stay with their friends. When they entered the throne room, all of the guards bowed down to their presence.

"Ah!" said the king in a loud, booming voice. "The great elementals who have been created to save the world!" He cleared his throat, and the noise seemed to echo around the room.

"Welcome to our town," said the king, continuing on in a loud voice. "I am not permitted to say the name, lest the great curse fall upon us," he said quieter.

Returning to his previous voice, he said, "I am King Bahum, ancestor of the great Patrick, who brought our kingdom into existence."

"We are pleased to meet you, your majesty," said Chapin, who was now standing in front of the others.

"Why do you come here?" said the king. "I apologize for my guards' behavior. They were too quick to pass judgement on you. There's so many thieves and bandits and Yavin's scum around here any more that it's hard to tell who to trust."

"We ask for assistance," said Chapin. "We are in dire need of food and supplies. We would like to be well prepared before we journey on to Yavin's fortress."

"Very well," said the king, pointing to his guards. "Show these guests to the great hall. Seat them in the places of honor for tonight's meal. And gather as much food as you can find so that they can leave us prepared."

"Thank you," said Chapin, and then turned to follow the guards out of the room. Christopher followed immediately behind her, and then Katie brought up the rear.

They exited the throne room and walked down a flight of stairs, at the foot of which two guards were posted. They bowed as the party passed. They slowly made their way across the lower balcony and down a few more flights of steps. When they had gotten down to one flight above the town level, they abruptly made a turn and saw a door leading into the massive structure. The guard entered, and the others followed.

That level was a huge hall, which largely resembled a cafeteria. There was a massive opening leading into the kitchen on the far wall, and from what they could see, it was clear that a great feast was in preparation. Back in the kitchen, the party could see every once in a while a cook walk by the door, some food or a strange utensil in her hands.

"Take anything you want," the guard motioned. He pointed to a table near the kitchen where there were assorted vegetables and fruits. "Supper will take place at dusk." The guard bowed, and then exited the room.

"Let's get something to eat," Katie said. "But don't forget Dave and Mike. They're probably starving."

"Yeah, let's sneak out a fruit or something, Chapin agreed, finally beginning to get used to Katie, Dave, and Mike' strange language.

They walked over to the table. There were some fruits on the table that resembled apples, but were blue in color and softer. On the right, there wasn't a single familiar vegetable. Although it seemed strange at first, Katie found herself enjoying the fruit.

When they were done, they set out to find Dave and Mike. This was a hard task, because when the knights were shown to rooms, there was no order as their coming had been unexpected. Nobody had documented where anybody was. Therefore, it took over an hour to find Dave and Mike's room.

When they knocked, they expected to find just another knight's room, but were surprised when Dave and Mike jumped up from the bed.

"We've been looking for you guys," Dave said startled. "We didn't find you anywhere around the town, so we came back here just a minute ago. We were going to have to debate what to do next."

"We're here," Katie announced. "And we brought some food."

"Good," Dave said. "I was starting to feel the effects of our deprivation."

"There's going to be a big feast at dark," Christopher commented, almost nonchalantly.

"That's good."

"Let's get some rest before we go to eat," Chapin suggested.

"Good idea," Dave replied.

They woke up when it was pitch dark. At first, everybody was afraid that they had missed the feast, but then they heard bells ringing, which, as they had heard before, meant that it was time for a meal.

They rushed out of the door and made it to the hall just behind the last few stragglers. When they were inside, the doors were closed. It was hot inside, not only because the night was hot, but also because of the poor ventilation. Although there were several large skylights that had the ability to be closed in case of rain, the heat did not relent.

The feast was phenomenal. Large stone tables had been brought into the hall since they were last there. All of the knights were able to sit inside because of the immense size of the hall. There was a table, on the far side of the hall, near the kitchen, that was raised above the others on a dais. The five were led there, after a bit of arguing about Mike and Dave. Sean was seated at the high table, along with several distinguished knights, and the King, who sat on a velvet chair with a plate so large that three normal people could get their fill from it.

When everyone was seated, several women came out carrying more fruits and vegetables. A large plate was placed on the high table where Chapin, Christopher, Mike, Dave, and Katie sat. Although the rest of the hall didn't receive as much as they did, there certainly wasn't a shortage of food.

After the vegetables and fruits were eaten, the servants brought out enormous slabs of meat. Although nobody could figure out exactly what kind of meat it was, it was delicious and was completely eaten. There was no dessert. The king was helped back to his room after the meal, but the other guests stayed in the hall to converse.

Dave and Mike were in the middle of a casual conversation about the ups and downs of being caught in a different time when there was a loud shout from outside the hall.

Suddenly, the big doors were thrown open and several guards rushed into the hall.

"What's wrong?" one of the other guards at the head table yelled.

"It's Yavin!" they said. "His servants are all over the town! We're trapped in here!"

Immediately, the knights stood up and began to draw their swords. The women in the kitchen dropped their servings and ran back into the kitchen. The guards at the door rushed toward the door to seal out the invaders. There was a bright flash of light outside and a house went up in smoke.

"They're torching the town!" one of the guards hollered with outrage. "Let's show them they can't defeat us!" He attempted to run outside, but two knights restrained him.

"We can't," one of them said. "They have over thousand men. We're badly outnumbered."

"EVERYBODY! SILENCE!" a voice roared. The chaos stopped. A few seconds later, the only noise was the great doors being sealed with a large metal bolt.

"Stop your panic, you undertrained imbeciles," said the king, now standing. Several of the distinguished guests moved away from him as he banged his massive fist on the table, making a glass shatter.

"There's nothing we can do by this senseless chaos," he said, now in a lower tone. "Gahdèn!" He pointed to one of the knights that had just finished closing the door. It was now silent in the hall, the great doors blocking the noise, and the roof holes closed. "How many of them are there?"

"At least a thousand!" he replied. "They brought some sort of battering ram that broke down the doors. Then they rushed into the town. All the women and children are still in their houses. When I sealed the doors, there were still trolls and evil humans flooding them."

"I see," said the king, more quietly. "It would not be advisable to fight in these conditions. Does anybody have a better idea?"

"How much food do we have here?" inquired one of the knights from Sean's army.

The king motioned to one of the women, standing in the doorway to the kitchen. "Three days' worth," she said. "On strict rations. The hunting party was supposed to gather fruits and animals today, but I guess they were caught in the battle."

"Are you suggesting that we wait them out?" Christopher asked.

"No. Three days is not enough provisions to wait out a more well-equipped army. We would not be in fighting shape, either, after a few days of rations. But it may be a good idea to wait for tonight, and to see what happens."

There was silence in the hall, his words echoing throughout. Some torches on the wall cast eerie shadows over the group.

"Let's wait until tomorrow. Trolls can't fight as well in the daytime anyway, so we'll have an advantage there," suggested Chapin. "But for tonight, we should have at least ten guards awake around the room guarding the entrance and the holes in the roof."

"Let's rest," the king said. No sooner than he had said that than all the knights begin to make room for themselves on the floor of the hall. It was cramped with all of them there, and some lied on the tables and chairs to make room.

During the night, all was silent. Some of the guards slept, even to a point where there were only three or four awake. But it didn't matter at the moment, they could be awakened if something were to happen. So far, it was quiet. There was not a sound outside. Several times, they had even dared to open the great door to look out, but there was not a troll in sight.

In the morning, when everyone awoke, the guards reported their findings to the king. Then they ate a small breakfast (to preserve rations if they were to stay here longer) and sat down for a brief meeting to discuss what to do.

This occurred at the end of breakfast. There was a loud bang from the king, and the guards yelled attention. The hall settled down to a dim murmur, and then to silence.

"Have there been any reports of activity through the night?" the king bellowed. All of the guards reported the same: there was not a sound.

"Then it may be safe to send a scout," the king continued. "We need to know if Yavin's followers are hiding out in the town, or have plundered it and left."

"That sounds like a good idea," Christopher said, "but who are you going to send for a scout?"

"Yes...it would have to be someone who is small, can run quickly, doesn't have full armor on... What about one of your companions?" He pointed towards Dave, Mike, and Katie.

"Mike, you're the smallest here," Christopher asked. "Would you be willing to be our spy?"

Mike hesitated for a moment. He wanted to be a help to them, but was afraid of Yavin. What if he was captured? The curious side of him won over, though, and he ended up answering yes.

Christopher and the king and Mike had a quiet talk. Mike was only to walk outside the hall and around the ledge, and then report his findings to the knights inside. If he spotted Yavin's servants, he was to alert the knights, who would decide what to do next. If he did not, a larger search party would set out to assess the damage and be sure that there were no lingering trolls.

After wishing him good luck, the king sent Mike to the door. The guards at the door opened it cautiously, in case something was to jump in. The entire hall watched as Mike went out the doors, through the small tunnel, and turned left onto the wide ledge that surrounded the hall.

Mike noticed nothing unusual outside at first. The town appeared normal below, and there was not a troll, calk, or other gruesome thing in sight. Suddenly, as he turned the corner, there was a loud noise. From nowhere five trolls appeared.

One growled maliciously. Mike turned around and began to run, but not before he noticed the smouldering ruins in the background. The trolls began pursuit. He rushed back to the main gate to the hall, but the doors were locked! He pounded as hard as he could, but they didn't open. Looking back, he saw the trolls only feet away. He pounded more and more, and finally heard the bolt becoming undone, but it was too late. The trolls were upon him.

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The door opened in a flash. The trolls jumped out, ready to battle the forces in the hall. Inside, it was equally chaotic: knights readied their armor, the king shouted out orders, and Christopher, Dave, Chapin, and Katie were prepared to use magic if necessary.

The knights surged toward the door, toward the trolls. The trolls were great in number, at least a hundred, and the battle began. The king's soldiers ran outside to protect the population in the hall. One swung his sword left and right, cutting down three of the trolls. Archers mounted the tables and attempted to aim at the trolls, who were now at the door.

Christopher rushed ahead of the screaming knights but found that the trolls were now around the perimeter of the hall. Other trolls rushed down from the castle high up on the top of the structure. The ground became soaked with the blood of the fallen soldiers. But it was clear that the king's soldiers were winning the battle.

The trolls were far outnumbered and began to fall. Christopher finally got outside and looked for Mike, but he was nowhere to be seen or heard. Near the bottom of the castle structure, the remainder of the trolls were in hasty retreat, running toward the town gates.

As the trolls fled, the king exited the hall to survey the scene. Many knights had fallen but twice as many trolls lay dead. The ground was stained red.

At that time, many things happened. The trolls were out of the gates, heading for their escape. Knights poured out of the hall to assess the damage. Chapin, Dave, and Katie also made it out of the gates but were dismayed with what they saw. Through the chaos, Mike was nowhere to be seen.

On the walkway to the left of the hall, the king ordered the knights to begin the cleanup. At once, many headed for the river to fetch water to wash away the remains of the battle. There were many weapons scattered about; and the king ordered his men to give them to Sean and his clan. In all, there were at least forty swords and a handful of bows without arrows.

Knights who had now taken off their armor carried the bodies of the dead trolls to a mass grave outside the city. Inside, maids tended to the knights who were injured.

Meanwhile, during this commotion, the four searched for Mike, but there was still no sign of him. Chapin suggested that they split up. They agreed that it would be a faster way to cover the terrain. Dave and Katie headed for the ground level, while Christopher climbed higher in case Mike was in the throne room or any of the other upper rooms. Chapin opted to search among the people in the hall and in the houses.

Thirty minutes later, they met back in the hall, which was now emptying out. Knights headed to their homes. The king had retreated to the throne room ten minutes before, confident that his knights would finish the cleanup by themselves. Chapin was the first to speak.

"Have you found him?"

"No," Dave replied. Katie nodded. "He's nowhere to be seen."

"I haven't found him either," Christopher said.

"Then the worst may be true: he has been captured by the trolls," Dave said.

"My thoughts exactly," said Katie. "But what should we do now that we have discovered that he has been captured?"

"Obviously, we can't leave him there," Chapin stated. "We'll have to organize a search party."

Below, traders entered the gates, which were now opened, and stopped for a second in surprise after being told by the waiting guards what had happened. They then continued around the great structure and to the marketplace, which had been ransacked.

"We can pose as a band of traders," Dave suggested.

"What?" Katie asked in astonishment.

"That would be a good idea," Christopher replied. "The trolls need supplies, just like humans do. Leading an army right in to the middle of Yavin's territory is just likely to get us all killed. But if we posed as a band of traders, we could infiltrate the camp, and maybe free Mike."

"What would we trade?"

"I don't know," Christopher apologized. "Does anybody have any idea?"

"I do." Sean stepped out from behind Dave, who was now standing perilously close to the edge of the structure. The flimsy wooden railing that was behind him would not protect

him if he lost his balance. Looking over the side of the railing, he could see several bodies, but from over thirty feet up, he couldn't see whether they were trolls or people. He stepped away from the edge. Sean continued talking.

"Let's trade the red stone." An involuntary gasp went up from Katie. Everybody thought about this unusual suggestion for a minute and then decided that this would be a good idea.

"That makes sense," Christopher said. "We don't even have to trade the stone. We can try to get Mike back first."

"Go on," Sean prompted.

"Well, if we have about five or six people, three can pose as the traders while the others stay as backup in case something goes wrong. When we go into the camp to initiate the trade, we make it clear that the trade takes place the next day. Then during the night, the others can try to rescue Mike from the camp. If they get caught, then we can try to trade for them, too. If not, we go away with Mike AND the stone."

"Sounds complicated," Dave said.

"It's complicated," Chapin said, "but I think it might have a chance of working."

"The only problem is that we need to get two more people," Dave worried.

"I guess I've been volunteered," Sean muttered partially under his breath. Chapin heard him and laughed. Dave and Christopher looked at her strangely and then got the point.

"Let's go to the king right now," Christopher suggested. He started up the stairs of the great structure. The ground fell away as he ascended to dizzying heights.

The first level, below the hall, contained the marketplace, some of which was inside and some outside. Below the structure, as Sean told him from experiences he had had at this town before, was supposed to be a great treasure vault, maybe even many floors deep. He knew that there was an entrance in the King's chambers that provided secret entrances to any of the lower rooms. The third floor of the structure housed the knights and royal servants. The fourth was built for the same purpose, and the fifth, smaller than all the other levels except the throne room, included housing for dignitaries from other countries or anybody who needed rest. This room had gone unneeded for many months now.

When they were at the top level, the guards recognized who they were immediately and granted them entry. The king was in the corner of the room, talking to one of the knights, who

was briefing him on the state of the recovery. It was noon by the time they were able to talk to the king.

After a few minutes of discussion, the king allowed them to take one of his best knights with them to the troll camp. They would leave the next morning. Before the party left the throne room, a spy was already on its way to search out the location of the troll camp.

Since it was only midafternoon, they decided to see what they could do to help restore order after the terrible battle that had ensued earlier. The knights had already buried the bodies of the deceased trolls; all that remained was to repair the damage that they had caused to the town. Some knights were bringing great buckets of water up to the second story in order to clean the blood which stained the ground. However, this turned out to be easy: they had finished in under a half hour.

Soon the builders came and began to make repairs to several houses on the ground that had been damaged. When it was clear that Dave, Christopher, Katie, Chapin, and Sean were not needed, they decided to see where they would stay the night since most of the town was destroyed. The king granted them rooms in the knights' quarters, and at once they proceeded to the third level.

The next day, the first of September, it rained for most of the day. It was a dreary, cold rain, which made everything seem chilled and eerie. Fortunately, inside the structure, there wasn't a sign of the rain, and throughout most of the day they stayed inside, there being no activity outdoors. The spy had not returned, but that was not unusual; they had not expected him to return for several days.

Even on the day after, it rained also, and this day it was colder than the one before. The spy did not return until the fourth day. By that time, it was finally sunny again, but the air was turning chilly with the approach of Autumn. The party had gathered in the King's chamber to trade information and to set off.

"This is Matt. You will be taking him with you," the king was saying. "You asked for some help."

"Nice to meet you," Matt said, and bowed down formally. After introductions had been exchanged, the king resumed his briefing."

"The spy that we sent yesterday did not return good news," he continued. "The troll camp is located about ten miles to the northwest, closer to Yavin's territory. There are at least

one hundred trolls there, maybe more; the spy was unable to ascertain the exact number. The camp is located in the middle of the plains, since there is no cover anywhere near there, save for a few trees, so sneaking up to infiltrate the camp will be impossible except at night."

"Do you have the red stone?" Christopher asked Katie, who had been carrying it for the day.

"Right here," she said, holding it up. It shone in an eerie intensity, its red light suggesting its evil nature.

"Because of this," Dave said, "We will have to modify our plans somewhat. We can no longer sneak up on the camp just by hiding because it is in the middle of a field.":

"We will have to rethink our plans on the way there," Matt interrupted Dave. "The spy also reported that the trolls were moving farther north, toward Yavin's fortress. But there is one peculiar point about their movements-"

"They're moving west," Katie said. "Yavin's castle is to the east."

"Why would they be moving to the west if they are trying to get back to the castle?" Chapin asked.

"Maybe they aren't trying to get back to the castle," the king said, all but forgotten during the speculation.

"Where, then, would they be going?"

There was no response. The silence was only interrupted by birds outside the castle singing in the morning light. The day was cool, but it seemed that it would be getting warmer. Matt turned to the group and said flatly, "I think we'd better be going."

"We will rethink our strategy on the way there," Chapin said. They paid their respects to the king, and then departed. As they descended the stairs, the bright morning sun shone just inches above the horizon behind them, as they sailed off into the west in what possibly could be their last mission.

Mike's head was hurting tremendously, so much that he thought that he would pass out again. It was hot again; Mike assumed that it was now daytime. It was hard to tell whether it was day or night except for the temperature, because he was blindfolded and bound to a tree. Even at night it was still warm; there was probably a fire built somewhere near where he was sitting. Someone had placed a small log underneath him now: he was sitting on the log with his hands bound behind the trunk of the tree. His legs were bound together, and somehow he was

held down so that he could not stand up.

Since he had nothing else better to do, Mike thought yet again of what he could have done to prevent his current predicament. He could just vaguely remember what had happened after he had left the gates of the city. He knew that the trolls had captured him and left quickly after, setting fire to houses while they walked, but after they had left the gates, everything became fuzzy.

He remembered being told to drink something, and he had refused, but they had forced him to drink it anyway. After that, they had bound him, but he didn't know why he hadn't fought back. Maybe he had, but throughout the rest of the entire day, he remembered throwing up while he was lying on top of a horse, fading in and out of consciousness. Then they had gotten here sometime during the night, he guessed, and tied him to the tree where he was now. He had stayed there throughout the whole day, being fed by the trolls, and falling asleep shortly after every meal, not waking up for hours later.

Mike was sore from how he was sitting. He tried to adjust his weight, but it was to no use, he could not even move. He had felt his legs getting numb long before, and now he knew the only way to remedy that was if he was untied, but there was no sign of that happening.

He wondered where Dave, Katie, Chapin, and Christopher were, and whether they were planning to rescue him. What he did not know was that the camp was being watched at this very moment by one of the king's spies, collecting information so that they could get him out.

The trolls now came over to give him a drink of water. He accepted it: he hadn't had anything to drink for the entire day. He soon felt himself becoming dreary, and he was soon asleep.

"Get down!" Dave whispered, and the rest of the group did so promptly, even though they were talking twice as loudly as Dave had. Dave pointed in the distance, straight into the setting sun.

Katie shielded her eyes from the large red ball which was almost touching the horizon. There were silhouettes in front of it now, just a few trees many miles distant, but there was smoke rising from the middle of them. Even with the barrenness around them, it was hard to pick out the camp from the sparse pines that were around the area. The grass was waist deep at this time of year, and Christopher had joked during the slow journey

that Mike couldn't have picked a worse time to be captured.

Crouching in the grass, Matt spoke. "The camp has been moved. It was more to the east last time, at least ten miles. They are going to the west."

"Yavin's peoples are becoming even more strange as we speak," Katie commented.

"Let's not worry about this for now," Christopher said. "After we rescue Mike successfully, we will try to ascertain the reasons for this."

"Let's carry on," Dave said.

It must be night again, Mike thought. If he was correct, it had been at least five days since he had been captured. This was the second time that he had been moved. He was now tied to a tree in a similar fashion that he was before. Since it was very cold now, he assumed that it was nighttime.

Suddenly, there was a loud shout from the far side of the camp. Several trolls growled. Mike wished that he had been able to see what was going on. Just as suddenly, the shouting ceased, but he could still clearly hear voices from there.

"Who are you?" one of the voices, this one coming from a troll, demanded.

"I am a trader who has traveled far and wide. We simply wish to offer you our goods. Perhaps we can strike some agreement," the other one said. This one was from a person that he didn't recognize either.

"We don't want no goods," the troll responded.

"Are you sure?" the human voice continued. "I have-" he was cut off by the troll, who responded gruffly,

"I already told you, we don't want none of your junk. Now be on your way before any trouble happens."

"I don't want any trouble," the other insisted. "But maybe you'd be interested in..." There was a gasp from the trolls, most of them closer to Mike than the trader. "This."

"Well," the troll said, appearing to rethink his position. "What you want for somethin' like this?"

"I could have gotten a good steed for this in any other town, maybe even a few bars of gold to add on. But instead, I'll settle for 15 bars of silver."

"What you tryin' to do, cheat us? This ain't worth half that much."

"Who's that over there?"

"Oh, that's just one 'a our captives from a previous

battle. Don't worry about 'im."

"Let's make a deal then. If you're not worried about him, I'll trade this stone for the boy."

"Well, da boss might not be happy. We was supposed to keep 'im and bring 'im back to da boss."

"Well, if that isn't good enough for you, I'll just leave and be on my way..."

"Wait," the troll shouted. Mike assumed that the other person was getting ready to leave. "You got yourself a deal."

"I'm glad to hear it. I need some time to talk to my cohorts. I'll be back in the morning to conduct the trade."

"Wait. What you tryin' to pull on us? You trying to cheat me? We trolls don't let nobody cheat us! We'll smash your skull in if we catch you cheating!"

"I understand. I just wanted to-"

Another voice was now heard, another troll: "Just come with us, and you won't be hurt."

"I'm just a plain old honest trader. I'm not trying to cheat you! I'll just leave and we can call the whole deal off."

"No, you're comin' with us," the new troll said. Several other trolls made angry grunts.

Suddenly, the troll shouted. "He's getting away. That fiend! CAPTURE HIM!" There was the sound of footsteps away from the camp, and then silence. Mike settled back down for another long night.

A few minutes later, the trolls returned. There was some muffled kicking and screaming. Mike assumed that it was the trader who the trolls had just captured. He would be having some company soon.

He could hear the sounds getting closer and closer, and then suddenly, there was a loud thump to his left. He assumed that it was the captive being bound to a tree. Soon, the trolls returned to their places. He heard crackling and it was beginning to get warmer now.

"Who are you?" Mike whispered to his left, where he assumed that the captured trader was.

"Quiet," he replied. "The trolls are listening. Wait until later tonight-"

"YOU!" One of the trolls screamed across the camp. "BE QUIET!"

Mike immediately became silent. Both of them knew that they would talk after the trolls were asleep. Then he turned his thoughts to Dave, Katie, Christopher, and Chapin, and wondered where they were...

The birds were chirping. It would not be long before they were gone, so Christopher savored their sounds in the morning light. The few deciduous trees that were able to survive in the barren land were crimson with light from the sun shining on their greenish-yellow leaves. Since Matt hadn't returned, he feared the worst, and had neglected to wake Dave for his shift at watch. Instead, he just sat and thought.

Finally, about a half hour after sunrise, he went over to the party and awakened them. Dave rolled over gently, and then his eyes snapped open and he shot up.

"What time? Did I?" he blurted out, looking at Christopher.

"Don't worry about it," he replied. "Matt hasn't returned."

"That is grave news," Chapin commented, her face sullen. Katie was not yet awake enough to comprehend what

this meant.

"We have to go and make a rescue attempt," Dave said.

"We should go back to the castle and get a small group to help us," suggested Chapin.

"That would take too much time," Katie said, now fully awake. "That is something we don't have. It would take three or four days to get back to the castle, another two to get troops assembled, assuming the king allows us some of his assistance, and four days to journey back. The camp may have moved by that time, and then we'll never find them."

"Then we have decided. Let's go there now. Get the stones ready. We may need to use them to free Mike," Christopher said.

Once everything was prepared (just a few minutes later), they set out for the camp. Since it was so early, the trolls were just getting ready to sleep (trolls sleep in the morning and need only about 4 hours of sleep, as was commonplace knowledge of the world). They decided to wait for about a half hour to ensure that the camp would be asleep.

After the time had passed, and the sun was high enough in the sky to see the plains ahead clearly, they continued. It wasn't far, but they hid and rested behind the sparse trees that lined the landscape.

Soon, they were there. There was a loud noise. At first, Christopher, Chapin, Katie, and Dave thought that they had been discovered by the trolls, but there was no activity, so they got up from their hiding place in some brush and continued onward.

Presently, they were outside the clearing. Dave peeked out from behind the trunk of the tree he was hiding behind. He could see the trolls fast asleep. Mike was on the left, tied to another tree, while Matt was to his left, bound and gagged. Then he noticed that there were two guards standing watch near the prisoners.

"We can't go in like this," Dave whispered. "There's guards right in front of them!"

"What should we do?" Katie asked impatiently. "The guards might see us if we stay here."

"Use the Hadar Stone," Christopher suggested.

"That was exactly what I was thinking," Katie said. "Watch." She pulled the stone out of her pocket and it began to glow. She quickly put it back before the guards saw the bright light.

Then, with care, she reached into her pocket and held the stone until she seemed to become translucent. Suddenly, in a flash, she disappeared.

"I'm going to try to rescue them," Katie's voice said. "Get ready to run in case we're spotted."

Without a word, she ran off. Faint footsteps fell in the chill morning air. Watching from his vantage point, Christopher could clearly see Katie untying Matt, who was closer. He was awake, and looked like he was trying to scream. Soon, however, he calmed down and returned to normal. When he was freed, he stood there, with the ropes over his hands and feet, with no sign of being able to free himself at any moment.

The guards, one of which was falling asleep and the other looking the other way, took no notice of this. Katie then went over to Mike when the guards turned around and looked at the footprints on the ground.

"Wake up," he said. The other troll stirred. "Somethin's goin' on here. Look at dem footprints!"

"Get the boss!" the other responded. They ran off to wake the trolls. Events started to happen quickly now. Katie, who was walking in the middle of Mike and Matt, could not risk being seen, so she ran back to Matt and hid behind the tree.

"Go! Now!" she whispered. Matt slowly sat up as if not to draw any attention, and stealthily moved out from in front of the tree. Katie, still invisible, followed him out of the grove of trees and shrubbery.

Looking back at Mike, she saw that he was still sleeping as if nothing had happened. They had to get Mike out of the camp as soon as possible. But it was too late. The trolls were already coming back. They settled behind the bushes to watch the drama unfold.

"Where did he go?" the boss demanded, approaching the spot where the cords ly on the ground where they had been left.

"I dunno, boss," one of the two said. "He was here before I left 'im to get you, and-"

"What? WHAT! You left him so that you could go get me if something suspicious was happening? There are TWO OF YOU! Get it through your head! One a' you should'a stayed here."

"But-"

"No buts. Strange things have been happenin' aroun' here lately. We got to get outta of this place. Maybe it's that

king's knights."

There was no response from the other trolls. The first continued talking. "Pack up the camp. We're leaving in fifteen minutes to report to Ka'tah.

"Yes, sir!" was the response, and they immediately dispersed to ready the group for departure. The trolls began to complain about being woken up.

Back behind the bushes, the five continued to watch. They had caught Matt up on the latest events while they had been watching the activities of the trolls. Now Dave spoke. "What should we do now?" he asked Christopher. "The trolls are moving out. We need to hurry."

"Hurry, indeed," Christopher replied, deep in thought. "But if we act now, the trolls will surely spot us and capture us as well." They were startled by a shout from the other side of the camp, but it turned out only to be a troll signaling that there was five minutes until they left.

"We'll just have to follow them," Matt said. "What other choice do we have?"

"If only we had backup from the castle," Christopher said.

"We're four days away from the castle," Matt said in a down-to-earth attitude. "If we go back, it'll be nine or ten days before we even get back here, and that's ten days behind the trolls as they move."

"Which direction do you think they will go?" Katie queried.

"It would be logical for them to go northeast, toward Yavin's fortress," Matt said. "But these trolls have been far from logical, moving northwest. If the trolls are going back somewhat to the east, it shouldn't be hard for two of us to take a detour to the castle to ready an army. But if they continue heading west, we have no choice."

The trolls were almost prepared now. Chapin talked with haste. "What if two of us go back to get reinforcements? One of us can't go, because he risks being captured very easily. An army on horses would be able to travel at least twice as fast as the trolls."

"Not possible," Matt reminded. "Most of our horses were slain by the trolls in their raid on the town. There might be ten or twenty left in the entire town, which would be no match for these trolls. Besides, by the time they get to the trolls,

wherever they are going, it might already be too late."

"Let's just follow them and see what happens," Dave suggested, and strangely, that was the end of the discussion. On the far side of the camp, there was a shout, and the trolls began moving.

"Well, here goes," Chapin said in words that would prove to be prophetic later. The trolls began walking westward, carrying Mike toward what possibly could be an early grave.

15

It was dark now. Through the whole day, the party had followed the trolls. Since they were taller, their longer legs seemed to carry them faster than the group, and they had fallen slightly behind. Chapin estimated that they were at least a mile behind the trolls. Although they could no longer see them, they knew that they were on the right trail because of the footprints and the tracks of the few horses that they had with them.

The next day was just as difficult. The party continued to trudge to the west. They fell even farther behind. As a result, Christopher recommended that they eat from their backpacks while they were walking, so as to make up lost time.

This proved to be almost impossible at the pace they were walking. So with meager snacks, they continued onward, conserving as many of their two-week rations as they could and trying to walk fast at the same time. Since it had been six days since they had left the castle, they were concerned about how much longer the trek would continue. If tomorrow wasn't the end of the chase, the long walk back would be hard unless they could find some better transportation.

Near sunset, they spotted the troll camp on the horizon. They had traveled at least thirty miles that day at the brisk pace they were walking. Since the camp was so close, however, one of them was forced to stay up in shifts to keep watch.

Fortunately, there was no activity during the night, and therefore no problems for the party. The trolls slept late as they usually did. That gave the party some well-needed rest, but it was short-lived. Before 10:00, the trolls were on the move again.

The trolls continued onward through the day at top speed, much faster than the day before. As a result, the party fell behind again even though they had caught up to the trolls the day before. That night, they were so tired that they did not even attempt to catch up. They were now past the limit that their supplies would last if they returned to the city, so they began a strict rationing that would stretch their supplies at least twice as long. Unfortunately, this had disastrous effects on them, and

they were no longer able to travel at full speed.

By the next day, they were almost a full day behind the trolls if they had continued on their path. Dave had suggested turning back, but the party decided against it, warning him that in the two and a half weeks that it would take them to get back here, Mike might already be dead. Dave became silent and trudged along with the rest of the party.

The night before had brought a terrible rainstorm. Luckily, the tracks that the trolls left behind in the muddy earth became more distinct, and before long, on the tenth day, they came upon a strange structure. It was built over the river, which Christopher surmised was the Hidden Forest River, the same one they had passed a while ago.

"The trolls might be in there," Dave suggested.

"They may," Christopher replied. "We need to think of what we'll do first if there are."

"What if there aren't?" Katie questioned wearily. "I don't know how long I can hold out on these rations."

"Now look," Christopher said, ignoring her comment, "if this is a troll stronghold, we need to sneak in. It would be much easier to get away undetected for a while than to trek for a week with the trolls right on our heels."

"Exactly," Matt, who had been quiet from the lack of energy lately, said. Everybody turned toward him, waiting for him to continue.

"If I may, I've had a few years of military strategy when I was in school."

"Go ahead," Christopher said. "You know better than I do." He stepped away so Matt could speak.

"See? The... thing is built over the river so that boats can go under it and dock. There must be a door there. All we have to do is somehow get under there and sneak in. They think that nobody can get under there when there's not a shipment coming."

"How do you propose we do that without a boat?" Katie said. "There's no way that we can get under. The structure is huge!"

"That would be a problem," Matt commented. "But why do we need an entire ship when we can just use a small raft?"

"He's right," Dave said in awe. "Look!" He pointed at the stream. Bobbing in it were small pieces of debris, from what looked like the remains of a town ruined by the trolls. Occasionally a piece of driftwood floated by. "We can collect

the wood and build a raft."

"When we get inside, we'll have to figure out where Mike is," Matt continued. "There is probably a dungeon under that thing. Let's hope he's there so we don't have to go searching the entire place."

"We'd better get started collecting wood," Christopher suggested. "It'll take a lot to build a raft. We'll run out of food and worse will probably happen to Mike if we tarry."

"Come on," Dave said, walking toward the river. Even the map that Christopher had did not show its source, though. Judging by the breadth of the river, they expected that it wound north for a while, shrinking and expanding with the seasons as the snow melted. Right now, since it hadn't rained in a while, the river was low. They spent the rest of the afternoon gathering logs. A chill was in the air, and the days were becoming short. The sparse deciduous trees were beginning to show a bit of color around them, and the night was cold enough that they were forced to use the blankets that were in their packs.

When the sun rose on September 15, an unnatural stillness permeated the camp. Dave was the first up, and hurried to the others to wake up. They felt it, but could not determine its source. Not an animal stirred, not a bird chirped. Although Mike suggested that the birds might simply already have migrated southward, his suspicion was proven wrong just a few minutes later when eerie reddish clouds began moving in.

"What's happening?" Katie panicked.

"Hurry! We need to finish the raft and get Mike out of here!" | Mike had never worked so hard before in his life. With all of them helping, they bound the wood together with some branches and pieces of cloth, and then hurried to the river. It took them at least a half-hour to drag the raft to the water's edge, and by then, the strange clouds had overtaken the party, obscuring the sky.

"Get the raft into the water," Christopher yelled as the wind began to blow. The group struggled as hard as they could, and finally managed to pull the heavy raft into the river. It took all their strength to hold it against the current, which was brisk at the point of the river where they were. Finally, they jumped on, and let go.

It didn't take them long to get under the troll complex, which was at least several hundred feet wide. As they were floating by, they saw a metal door with what looked like security devices on their right, coming up fast. A small ledge about two

feet higher from the water was their only way of reaching the door.

"What do we do?" Dave said, getting ready to jump.

"We have to try," Christopher said. "Hurry, before we pass!"

"How will we get back on the raft?" Katie asked as Mike made the leap, almost missing and falling into the water. He stumbled forward. Dave jumped next, and Christopher replied as he jumped, "We'll worry about that then!"

Fortunately, they all made it across the water in one piece, and not a moment too soon. The raft continued on its journey, and a few seconds later, smashed into the wall. The group watched as its remains floated downstream.

Meanwhile, outside the structure, unknown to the party, the strange clouds were slowly enveloping the sky. A dark figure walked into the building, knocking a special knock, and entered mysteriously when the door opened.

Under the structure, Christopher and Dave struggled with the door as Matt watched a few feet down on the narrow ledge. To their despair, they found the door locked. ("What do you expect?" Katie asked, angry at bruising her knee jumping off the raft.)

"Use the stones," Mike suggested.

"Good idea," Christopher replied, ashamed that he had not thought of that sooner. Katie held the Hadar Stone up in front of her, and the metal door blasted open, flying off the hinges and back into the wall with a loud BANG! Christopher and Katie quickly rushed back from the door and waited to see if anyone had heard. When it appeared that they had not, the five sneaked in quietly.

They were in what seemed to be a large storage room. All around them, huge wooden crates were piled up. To their right, another metal door was present. The room was made of metal, which to Dave seemed slightly out of place with their time. Katie didn't say anything, but she thought so too.

As they were walking toward the far door, a crack of thunder sounded, reminding the group of the impending storm outside. Everyone proceeded in total silence. This door was also locked, but Katie reminded Christopher of the strange clouds outside, and they agreed that they might signify an evil presence. Matt warned them not to use the stones, and they were forced to resort to old-fashioned means. Ripping the tops off of several crates, they formed a battering ram and crashed into the door. It

bent inward but didn't budge. It only took one more try until the door gave way. This time, it simply fell forward without much racket.

In front of them was a large hall. To their left was a stone stairwell leading upward. Wooden doors lined the sides of the hall. At the end of the hall was another door. Torches provided some dim light for the explorers. They stepped back into the cargo hold, where they were now sure there was nobody present, and debated what to do next.

"Which way should we go?" Matt asked Christopher. "Mike could be anywhere."

"If we go up, we might find what this whole structure is for," Chapin replied. "But they might be holding Mike in the dungeon, if there is one."

"The dungeon would most likely be below ground," Dave said, staring downward, his eyes temporarily fixed on the sacred sword.

"Here's an idea," Katie suggested. "Let's split up. It's very unlikely that they know we're here anyway, and maybe we'll find both things we're looking for."

"I think we should stay together," Chapin said. "It would be dangerous if we separated in this eerie place." Thunder with a pitch they had never heard before rumbled in the distance. It couldn't be natural, was the thought in everybody's minds. But everyone was silent.

"No," Dave said resolutely. "We have a better chance splitting up. We'll make less noise, and if one group gets caught, the other will be there to find them."

"I agree," Matt said. "Let's press on."

"OK," Chapin said hesitantly. "I'll go with Katie. Is that alright with you?" Katie and Dave nodded. Christopher and Matt made no comment.

"It's settled. We'll go forward through the hall. You guys go upstairs. We'll meet back here at noon."

Soon they departed to the routes that they had planned. Dave, Matt, and Christopher headed up the stairwell. After climbing one level, they realized that the stairwell went upward a few more floors. On the floor of the fortress that they were in, which still appeared to be below ground due to the lack of windows, there was another hallway, but there was no door on the end. Suddenly, a troll walked out from one of the side doors. Quickly, the three hid beneath the staircase. There was only inches to spare.

After a few tense moments, the troll went down the stairs below them. After waiting another minute to make sure that it did not return, Christopher, Dave, and Matt crawled out from under the stairs and ascended the staircase to the next floor.

The next floor had even more rooms, but they knew they were above ground because a window looked out on the plains at the far end of the hall. Continuing upward, they came to the top of the stairs. A long, bare hall that was poorly lit without windows stretched in front of them. This hall contained no doors, just a sole portrait of what looked like a troll on the far wall.

"If we continue through this hall, we won't have any cover," Matt whispered. "The trolls could capture us at any moment."

"We have to," Dave said. "Let's get to the bottom of this."

Christopher counted with his hand, and with the count of three the group dashed across the hall to the other side. When they were closer, they discovered that there actually was a door on that wall, hidden by the portrait.

Slipping in the door, Dave heard voices and motioned to the others to be quiet.

"What's wrong?" Christopher asked Dave, puzzled.

"Don't you hear the voices?" he replied. But listening again, he heard no voices. "Never mind. Let's go on."

With a shrug, Christopher led the party into the next room, which seemed to be a torture chamber. "Explains the long hall," Matt muttered. Inside the chamber were all sorts of devices, ranging from a guillotine on the far end of the room to an assortment of locks and chains close to them.

"Just be thankful that the trolls aren't using this on us,"

Christopher commented. There was nobody present in the room. "This is eerie," Christopher said, stopping.

"What?" Dave inquired.

"Where are the trolls? The only one we've seen so far is the one that ran downstairs past us." He stopped. There was total silence. Not a single drop of water was heard. Suddenly, there was a loud crash and Dave jumped. It was thunder from outside. Again, the pitch of the thunder was strangely warped.

"Keep moving," Matt said uneasily. Thunder continued to boom in the distance. Moving through the chamber, they noticed that everything seemed to be just in place. There wasn't a drop of blood (a comforting sign to Dave), a single tool out of place, or a single candle (of the few that there were in the room) that was unlit.

Hurrying, they passed through the far door just in time to hear it SLAM behind them.

Trying the doorknob, a grave look overcame Christopher that, without any verbal communication, seemed to say the same thing to both Matt and Dave: *the door was locked*. Thunder continued to rumble in the background.

The room they were now in seemed even stranger: there wasn't an object, save the door and stairs leading upward to the left, in the entire room! It measured at least thirty or forty feet from end to end.

Scurrying through that room, the party continued on their trek. It had now been at least an hour since they had entered the fortress. When they moved up the stairs, they saw an astounding sight: what looked like a church! There were several rows of pews on the sides, with a large, bare, stone altar in the front. Around it were candles, all red, along with a black cape draped behind the altar. The candles were not lit, so the only light came from the drab windows behind them. There was not a troll in sight.

"This is something I've never seen before," Christopher commented, astounded. "What could this be used for?"

"It looks like some sort of place for worship," Matt replied, looking around and inspecting the strange objects in the area.

"Worship of what?"

All three of them realized it at the same time and blurted out, "Yavin!"

"I just thought that the trolls were loyal to Yavin to fight

for him," Christopher said. "But this means they have some deeper drive for their actions."

"Is Yavin's power that great that the trolls, his servants, have to worship him?" Dave asked.

"It very well might be," Christopher replied, continuing his inspection.

A chill went down Dave's spine. "Let's get out of here and continue on," Matt suggested, and the other two were none too fast to follow. More stairs were accessible through a door in front of them, but upon closer inspection, they found it locked.

"Stones?" Dave asked.

"Too risky," Christopher replied. "Let's just ram it open. Look, the pews are pretty small and aren't nailed to the ground."

The three of them got behind one of the back pews, and, with a running start, slammed it into the wooden door, which crumpled on impact. Brushing themselves off, Christopher and Matt, with another push, slid the object back to where it was, in case any trolls should come by. Afterward, Dave pointed out the fact that the door was broken, and Christopher laughed rather sheepishly.

They ascended the staircase, and came to a halt. In front of them stretched a great hall. It was adorned with robes and decorations, each bearing the symbol that they had seen three months ago during their journey through the Calhorn foothills.

The group sprinted through the hall like before, but there was still not a troll to be found. At the far end was a window, which looked out on the plains far below, and yet another wooden door. Fortunately, this one was opened, and they walked in. Inside was a large bed, with a wooden cabinet containing robes bearing the seal in the hall. There was another door on the far end. A voice seemed to be emanating from it, and they followed, opening the door slowly.

They were amazed at what they saw. It was a large auditorium, with perhaps at least a thousand stone seats rounding a stage in the middle. Someone was speaking on stage while several hundred trolls listened from around. The door opened onto what appeared to be a balcony overlooking the events. They slipped quietly out onto the balcony and back behind some robes on the wall where they could not be seen. The speaker continued.

"Our Master has become angry with us," the troll was saying. "The elementals have been at large for too long. He

threatens to disband us and suspend our rewards!" An extremely low-pitched murmur echoed through the crowd.

When the trolls were quiet, he continued: "The raid on our friends to the east has failed miserably. There are even reports that their knights may have infiltrated this fortress!" The crowd let out another angry murmur, but it ceased quickly. Another boom of thunder sounded outside, almost as if on cue.

"We must not let this happen!" the troll roared. "If the elementals are allowed to reach the castle, we risk losing everything!" The trolls near the front roared with anger. "That is why we will not be defeated again!"

"What will we do?" one of the trolls roared.

"Tomorrow, we attack the town again, but this time we will bring three times the men and utterly destroy those humans once and for all! If we can take the town, the world is next!" More noise followed.

"We will leave at dawn," the troll continued, now with a more serious tone. "Get prepared. Our master has shipped us only the best supplies for dinner tonight. GET MOVING!" The back rows immediately began to file out of the auditorium through the lone door below them. Christopher, Dave, and Matt were careful to stay concealed in the decorations until most had gone past.

"The knights-" Mike whispered. "They're all going to be killed! There's no way we can withstand three times the attack they made last time!"

"We have to warn them," Dave said urgently.

"How?" Christopher suggested, almost sarcastically. "It would take us weeks to get back."

"Quiet," Mike suddenly shussed. "Listen!"

Surely enough, they heard voices. One was that of the speaker they had heard just a few minutes ago. It was coming from the room behind them where they had entered the balcony. They also heard a second voice that struck fear into their hearts.

"Has everything been prepared?" the voice asked in a low, eerie tone.

"Yes, my master," the speaker replied. "This time we will crush them and put an end to our resistance."

"You had better not fail this time," the voice warned sternly.

"Of...course, master. We will emerge victorious."

"What has become of the boy?"

"He's still being detained in the dungeon. What should I do with him?"

"He is a danger to us and our plans. Eliminate him."

"If I may, master, I think it is better that we keep him and torture him. He may hold valuable information for us."

"That is none of your concern. He is a threat."

"But master-"

"Wait. I may have uses for him after all. We can make a trade. One of the others for him. They won't want to see him suffer. But we must make them see that we mean what we say. Take him to the torture chamber until I arrive."

"Certainly, Master. And one more thing-"

"My time is limited!" the voice shrieked, taking an angry tone. "Hurry up!"

"We have been discovering shipping crates that have been destroyed. We suspect that Kaham and his cronies did it."

"Very well. Take them to the dungeon until I can question them personally. And that may be a VERY long time..." The voice laughed deeply.

"Yes, master. I'll go and take the boy to the torture chamber."

Christopher heard footsteps moving away. The voices ceased. They were about to reveal themselves and find Mike when they heard footsteps in the bedroom.

The voice was that of the 'master' that they had heard before. But this time, there was nobody around to hear him, even though he was talking.

"Yes," he laughed heartily. "I will destroy those idiots and finally receive my reward!" They then heard a strange tapping emanating from the chamber. Soon the voice continued.

"Oh, yes, master. I am on my way."

"Who's he talking to?" Dave whispered. "And who's he calling master?"

"Did you hear them? They just went to torture Mike! We have to do something!" Matt said excitedly from behind his tarp.

The voice continued. "Yes, sir. I am the great Yavin!" This sentence struck fear into their hearts. "Wait! I sense that they are already here!"

"Yavin's in that room?" Christopher whispered in fear. "Don't make a sound!"

Before anyone could reply, a loud trumpet call sounded

from below. There were thundering footsteps in the hall. Thunder sounded outside. Soon shouts broke out, but one stood above all the others. "Intruders have been spotted! Everyone search the fortress immediately!" The racket continued as trolls poured into the auditorium below.

"Let's get out of here!" Christopher yelled, no longer worried that he would be overheard. He ran toward the bedroom where Yavin had just been, but there was nobody in sight. They could feel the aura of his power retreating down below.

"They're going after Mike!" Dave said.

"Hurry! What should we do?" Christopher asked Matt in haste.

"We need to save them, but we can't risk being caught. Maybe they've already escaped. We can't go downstairs. Let's head up and get out of here!"

"We can't! What about them?" Christopher yelled.

"We have to save ourselves! If we're captured with them, the power of the elementals will vanish!"

"Fine!" Dave said. "Stop talking. Let's go!"

They hurried out the bedroom door and into the hall. Making sure there were no trolls around, they turned right and went into the floor of the auditorium. The trolls that had been there only a few seconds ago were now gone, searching at other places. They hurried up to the stage, where they were sure there would be more stairs.

They were right. The trumpets continued to flare as they ascended a wooden ladder up to a trap door above. They made it up the ladder just in time and closed the door. Looking around, they were stunned.

"We're on the roof!" Dave said. All around them stretched countryside for miles and miles. Not a thing moved. Thunder flashed from the strange red clouds. They turned around just in time to see a black, cloaked figure moving toward them. Trolls surged up the ladder. "Nobody move!" one of them shouted. Christopher realized in horror that they had been captured.

The hall in front of Chapin and Katie lead to a door on the far end. Fortunately for them, it opened without a hitch. Stretching ahead of them was another hall, this time with no doors on the sides. At the end, a stairwell led down into darkness.

Katie and Chapin, having no other choice, descended into the darkness. After a short debate about whether it would be safe to use the Hadar Stone inside the troll fort, Katie finally won out and they decided to light the stone. Katie held it in front of her to reveal a dank, musty room that seemed to have no purpose. There were two doors at the end. Continuing through the left one, they discovered that it dead-ended into another storeroom, this one not as large or as recently used as the room above them. They turned around and entered the right door.

The rooms seemed to stretch endlessly ahead of them. It seemed as if hours passed as they climbed down stairs and marched through corridors. When they had walked down at least three flights of stairs, they came to a heavy metal door that had no windows. It took all their might to try to open it. Giving up using their own strength, it was decided that it would be better to use the Hadar Stone to open the door.

Doing so, the door, like the one before, flew off the hinges and into the darkness with a loud bang echoing a second later. Katie and Chapin were not worried that the calamitous sound would be heard by any of the trolls above, since they were so far below ground and hadn't seen a troll since they had entered the complex.

The room they appeared to be in was the dungeon. There was no light save for that of a few torches that decorated the walls. They cast an eerie, flickering, dimness over the room. There were six cells in the area, on both sides of the central passage. Another metal door was on the other side from where they stood. Katie and Chapin entered cautiously, but soon it was apparent that there was nobody in sight.

Hoping earlier to find Mike here, Katie and Chapin were disappointed. After a thorough search, they turned their attention to the door in front of them. Like the last one, it wouldn't budge. Katie and Chapin took a seat on the ground and rested for a few minutes, deciding what to do next. Finally it was concluded that they would continue through the passage in front of them, using the Hadar Stone to gain entry.

Unfortunately, the plan didn't work as they had hoped. The Hadar Stone didn't seem powerful enough to force open the mass of metal, and Chapin found it necessary to assist with the water stone. A bright light shone down the path they had traveled, as the door flew back against its hinges. Inspecting the next room, which appeared to serve no better purpose than as an

extension of the dungeon, they saw a hunched figure in one of the cells.

"Who is it?" it whimpered. "Please, give me some food," it cried pathetically.

"Mike?" Katie yelled in joy.

"Katie? Is that you? Why are you here?" Mike asked, practically screaming.

"It's me, Chapin," Chapin chimed in.

"What have they done to you?" Katie asked, looking at Mike through the thick bars of the cell. His face was bruised, and his feet swollen. Mike's entire figure was severely emaciated.

"They haven't fed me in days," Mike replied, almost nonchalantly as he got up, trying to hide his pain. "I thought I would die here."

"Well," Chapin comforted, "we're here now."

"How do you suppose I could get out of here?" Mike asked, now seemingly rejuvenated by seeing his two colleagues.

"Let's try using the stones again," Katie suggested to Chapin as she held out the Hadar Stone. It was now shining dimly, unlike when they had entered the fort. Summoning her power, she tried as hard as she could to move the cell door, but failed.

"It looks as if the Stone doesn't have any energy left," she remarked. Chapin took her stone out of her clothing and tried the same thing. There was no effect, and an awkward moment of silence followed.

"We have to try to find a key or something," Chapin advised. After searching for ten minutes in both rooms of the jail cells, they were almost out of hope. Suddenly, there was a loud rumble and shouts erupted from a distant place.

"Intruders have been spotted! Search the fortress immediately!" came the harsh voice of a troll. Trumpets blared, and feet pounded to warn the rest of the fort.

"Uh oh! Do you think it's us? Or is it Dave and the others?" Chapin asked hurriedly.

"Hurry," Katie yelled. "We have to get out of here or hide!"

"Where?"

"Hurry! Go in the jail cell over there! Close the gate!"

Chapin and Katie rushed into the empty cell and closed the gate, taking care not to lock it by leaving it open slightly. In

the corner of the cell where they were located, the light was dim enough that they were sure not to be noticed by any passing trolls or other creatures. Soon after, they heard troll footfalls making loud noises above them.

Suddenly, there was a loud crack, and trolls came running into the dungeon. From where they were crouching, Katie and Chapin could see Mike and the trolls clearly in the bright light.

"Get the prisoner!" one of the trolls commanded.

"Right away, boss," the another replied submissively. Reaching into the pocket of his strange clothing, the troll produced a rather large, unusually-shaped key. Using it, he opened the door to Mike's cell.

"Get out here!" the troll ordered gruffly, and Mike responded slowly and weakly. He struggled to get up but fell. Katie and Chapin watched helplessly.

"Come on, prisoner!" one of the trolls hollered. "We ain't got all day! Intruders've been spotted!" He finally went over to pick Mike up.

"Take him to the torture chamber!" the other troll ordered and promptly left, leaving the first to take care of Mike. Although he was weak, Mike put up a good fight, screaming and kicking as the troll attempted to drag him from the cell. Finally picking Mike up, the troll rushed out.

Katie and Chapin came to the front of their cell and opened the door. The bars clanked together, but the trolls were nowhere in sight, though some faint yelling could still be heard far away. They hurried out of the cell and through the ruined entrances.

Rushing up the stairs, they could hear the shouting becoming fainter and fainter as the trolls made their way to the top of the fortress. After a few minutes of running as fast as they could, Katie and Chapin came to a stop at the location where the party had split up. Again, there was no sign of trolls in the area.

Just when they were beginning to catch their breath, Katie and Chapin heard yells and shouts coming from all around. A few trolls rushed down the stairs around them, taking no notice, and continued back down toward the dungeon. Safe for now, they dashed up the stairs.

When Katie and Chapin came to the room where Christopher, Dave, and Matt had been staring in wonder at the altar, they hesitated for a moment. A bench was in the side

doorway. The massive door, which looked indestructible, had a wide gash that had been made by the trolls to allow access. It was then that Katie realized the power that the trolls and the dark forces commanded.

Continuing on to the large auditorium, Katie and Chapin avoided trolls that were running around by hugging the walls and staying low. The place was swarming with trolls, and it looked as if something were going on inside.

"We have found the intruders!" a lone voice uttered from within. It appeared that the trolls had again settled down to listen to their leader's remarks.

"Who are these villains who would think they could beat us?" one angry voice asked, louder than the first.

"Here they are. See for yourself!" the first motioned. Looking in, Katie saw Dave, Christopher, and Matt emerge from the back of the large stone auditorium. Their hands and feet were shackled, and it took them a while just to walk the short distance from the edge of the stage to the troll's position. Other trolls with spears prodded them on from behind. When they reached the stone podium, they stopped while the crowd looked them over. Snickers broke out.

"Let's put an end to this!" Katie said, her voice almost reaching the point where it could be heard.

"No!" Chapin whispered sharply, holding the squirming Katie back. "They'll just capture us, too!"

Finally Katie settled down. The trolls continued. "These three thought that they could break in to destroy the entire fortress!"

"Destroy the fortress?" Katie whispered. "We're not trying to destroy the fortress!"

"They probably told them that so the trolls wouldn't find out they were related to Mike," Chapin replied, and motioned for Katie to look in.

"At this very minute, our forces are readying themselves to assault the town to the east and destroy it for good! And these three will be the first to die!" Applause broke out, and Katie and Chapin drew back.

"Forget about this," Chapin said. "There's no way we can rescue them now. Let's go look for Mike. They said he was going to be brought to the torture chamber."

"Where is that?" Katie asked.

Suddenly, a troll rushed out the doors of the auditorium,

slamming the heavy wooden portals back against the wall with a loud bang. Katie and Chapin were not noticed as it raced at top speed in the direction that they had come.

"Let's follow him," Chapin suggested. "He looks as if he's on an urgent mission!"

Katie took off toward the troll who was now turning down a corridor to their left, about a hundred feet from their current position. Chapin quickly followed. Their footsteps were practically silent compared to the troll's pounding feet. It rushed down a flight of steps in front of them, but the steps were so huge that Katie and Chapin had to jump down each one. By the time that they reached the bottom, the troll had vanished.

"Great," Katie sarcastically remarked. "The troll is gone and we're going to need a lot of help to get out of here." She was right. Looking back at the stairs, Chapin realized that it would take someone with superhuman strength to pull themselves up each of the fifteen or so stairs that they had just came down. Of course, a troll could mount the steps without a second thought because of their long legs.

"Let's keep going," Chapin said grudgingly and began to walk toward a door on the far side of the large hall they were now in. It had, fortunately, been left open by the troll, and they moved inward with the greatest of ease. Another, normal, stairway led downward. A large door dominated the opposite wall.

Deciding to go down the stairs, Katie and Chapin saw what they had most feared. It was the torture chamber, a dank, disgusting excuse for a room. A few trolls were there, with Mike in the center of the room, tied to a stone table. All sorts of vile-looking implements were around it, obviously for use on innocent victims.

Crouching near the top of the short stairwell that hugged the wall, the two anxiously surveyed what was happening. It appeared that the trolls were torturing Mike.

"Wait until our Master gets here!" one of the trolls roared. The others laughed.

"Master?" Chapin questioned Katie. Her voice took on a tone of panic. "They could mean...Yavin!"

"We have to get Mike out of here before he comes!" Katie replied. "We have to get Dave and the others, too!"

"Once we free Mike, all the trolls will be looking for us," Chapin pointed out.

"We'll have to take that chance, right?"

"Not necessarily." Chapin stopped as the trolls suddenly became quiet. When it was clear that they were just waiting, she continued in a lower tone. "Let's use the stones and cast a spell on them."

"Are you sure? It'll drain the stones' powers, and someone might be able to sense that we're here."

"Do you have any better ideas?" Chapin asked.

"Let's do it," Katie responded. On the count of three, they jumped from the fifth stair and landed hard.

"Freeze!" one of the trolls barked at them. Mike turned to look, but could not quite make out who they were. Suddenly, one of the trolls lunged for Katie, knocking the Hadar Stone out of her hand. It bounced off the back of the troll, incapacitating him. The other two trolls rushed at Chapin, but there was a blue flash and they stopped. One was suspended in mid-air while the other was in the process of grabbing, only a few inches from Chapin. Her blue stone slowly diminished in intensity.

"What happened?" Katie instinctively asked, although she already knew the answer. Chapin didn't bother to reply; instead, she moved toward the table where Mike was bound.

"Did they torture you?" she asked hurriedly unraveling Mike's bindings.

"No. They said they were waiting for their master to arrive or something."

"We have to get out of here!" Katie said desperately.

"How? Where's the key?" Mike asked.

"Oh no! We can't free him!" Katie said.

"I'm going to try the stone on the shackles," Chapin said. Mike squirmed, but he couldn't move an inch. Chapin held up the blue stone, but no light was emanating from it. Even when she concentrated as hard as she could, there was no effect.

"The stone will need to regain its power," she said. "Katie, try the Hadar Stone!"

"We may need it for later," she pointed out, but there were already rustling footsteps in a nearby corridor. Holding the stone up, Katie wished as hard as she could that Mike would be free, and the shackles burst off of him, flying up and hitting the ceiling with a loud bang. Mike got up and rushed with Katie and Chapin to the stairwell.

Not wanting to have to deal with the huge, troll-sized stairs to their right, the three elected to take the left path, down

the large, troll-size corridor. It dead-ended at a stairway, which they took upward. To their surprise, they emerged in the carpeted hallway overlooking the auditorium. Rushing to the same door they had been at before, Katie motioned Mike to be quiet and look in.

Dave, Christopher, and Matt were still in front of the crowd, although they were now covered with red stains. At first, Mike though that it was blood; however, upon further inspection, he realized that it was only the juice of some fruit with which the crowd had been taunting the three. The red juice was splattered around the entire left side of the stone stage, proving that they had been throwing the fruit at their captives. The lead troll was still speaking.

"We are placing our destiny in you, the army of Yavin!" the speaker said. There was a roar. Soon, the crowd grew quiet, and the speaker continued.

"Now, go and march forth, and bring Yavin's power so that all the world can see!" The trolls got up after some applause and went to ready themselves for battle. Just as the three were about to be discovered by exiting trolls, another troll walked on stage and approached the speaker.

"Halt!" he yelled at the top of his lungs. Those leaving turned to look toward the stage.

"There has apparently been another intrusion into our fortress!" he said. There were several angry snarls from the audience.

"I am ordering a complete search," the other said. "We will not leave until we find these idiots who think they can infiltrate us. We will give them what they deserve!"

The trolls began to pour out the doors. It wasn't long before Katie, Chapin, and Mike, who were far from any cover, were spotted hiding behind the doors. There was a shout, and though they tried desperately to get away, several strong trolls grabbed them, slung them over their backs, and walked back through the doors against the traffic of trolls that separated when they saw the captives.

"Here they are! They were listening to our every word!" the one who was carrying Katie said.

"They cannot be allowed to live after they have heard our plans," another suggested.

"Very well," the leader on the podium replied. "Do away with them in the torture chamber immediately. The rest of

you: prepare for battle!" There was a cheer, and the three were carried back toward the torture chamber from which Mike had just been rescued.

The trolls had not advanced five feet when, suddenly, there was a loud explosion that rocked the building. The trolls that were carrying them lost their balance while the rumbling continued for several seconds.

"What was that?" one troll asked.

"There aren't earthquakes here!" another screamed.

"Attention!" came a voice from far away, but it was close enough for all the occupants of the hall to hear clearly. "Rebel soldiers are attacking the fortress! Take defensive positions immediately!"

There were shouts of anger and surprise among the trolls, as they sprinted along the hallway to their various posts. A few seconds later, the hallway was vacant. Nobody had paid any attention to the former captives, who were now on the floor.

"Hurry!" Chapin said, regaining her senses first. "Let's see if the others are alright before the trolls return!" They ran back the way that the trolls had carried them. The auditorium was also deserted, except for Dave, Christopher, and Matt, who were in exactly the same place they were two minutes ago, dirty but alive.

After greetings were exchanged, another loud bang shook the fortress.

"What should we do?" Katie cried.

"Up the ladder, quick!" Christopher directed. He jumped high enough to reach the third rung and climbed upward. The others followed, but more slowly. When they reached the top of the fortress, they discovered that the lightning and thunder had stopped, but the clouds remained. There was another bang that made them fall over. Dave, the first to his feet, ran over to the edge of the roof to look below.

He was greeted by an astonishing sight. The soldiers that the six of them had thought to be two weeks away were surrounding the fortress. Several knights on horse back charged the drawbridge while they watched, but unfortunately were washed away. One troll leaped onto a knight only to be cut back. The battle raged around them.

Dave stepped back. A catapult built out of huge logs hurled a boulder at the side of the fortress. Stones crumpled, but it held. The entire fortress shook, throwing Katie and Chapin

down and leaving the rest of them shaky. Getting back to the edge, Dave looked over to see that the knights from the town were approaching rapidly. Several perched in the nearby sparse trees and shot arrows off into the blue. Swords clanked as trolls exited the fort via the drawbridge and entered the battle. Several trolls manned wooden cannons on perches just below them.

"What should we do now?" Mike asked Christopher and Matt, who were watching the battle.

"You're the expert, Matt," Christopher said. "You should know what to do."

"We obviously can't leave," Matt replied. "It might be possible--wait, that's it! If we get back the way we came--through the shipping area--we could leave undetected. We'd just have to get back down the fortress first."

"Not an easy task," Chapin estimated. "There are trolls *everywhere*! We'd be spotted before we even got back down into the fortress."

"Can we use the stones?" Katie asked with a tone of desperation.

"They're all drained," Chapin replied. "What about yours?" There was a big bang. Another rock had exploded, and a wall that had been built in front of the drawbridge to stop attackers fell, exposing the trolls on the lowered drawbridge to enemy fire. Quickly, they rushed inside, but not before several knights came hurrying after them. One troll raised the drawbridge to keep the remaining knights from entering.

"Ours are drained, too," Christopher replied. "We had to use their power when we were trying to open the doors on the way up."

"I noticed," Katie said, with ill-timed levity. "Can anybody think of any other ways to get out of here?" There was silence for a few seconds, and then Dave said, "What about the red stone? We haven't tried to use it yet."

"Too risky. It's evil, remember?" Christopher replied. "There must be some other way!" There was another crash.

"Whether we like it or not, we're going to have to run for it," Mike correctly predicted. The trolls and knights were deadlocked at the moment, neither side showing a clear lead. It was only a matter of time before the battle favored one side or the other, and if the trolls secured a clear advantage, it could spell trouble for them.

"We might as well run now before the wounded begin to

be brought in," Matt suggested. "There'll be less chance we'll be discovered, and if one troll sees us, it can't possibly capture us all."

"Let's go then," Chapin added. "Quickly, before anyone notices!"

Christopher took one last look over the side of the fortress. It appeared that the knights were attempting to construct a battering ram out of logs that were floating down the stream. There were, fortunately, no trolls in that area, though they poured out of the gates and now appeared to outnumber the knights. He rushed back from the edge and took off for the stairwell. The rest of the group followed, but not before being hindered by a boulder that again shook the fortress.

Picking themselves up, they rushed down the ladder as fast as they could. Christopher was the first to reach the bottom and see the bad news.

"Stop!" came a voice from across the auditorium. The place was swarming with at least a hundred trolls. They began to advance toward the party, who scrambled back up as fast as they could. Reaching the top, they rushed to the center of the fortress but were trapped.

"Freeze!" the troll said, pulling himself off the ladder and readying a knife. The others followed. Dave put his hand on the sword. There was silence as the other trolls reached the roof.

When all the trolls had removed themselves from the ladder, they parted, as if some great leader was coming forth. The battle raged on around them, and the sky seemed to take on the same menacing quality that they had seen the day before. Thunder began to rumble, and mysterious red clouds blanketed the area.

"So!" a voice said. It struck terror into the group's hearts. The trolls bowed down as a dark figure approached. Lightning lit up the sky and thunder continued to boom. "It appears that the time has come!"

"Yavin!" Chapin gasped.

"You have guessed correctly," the voice said. The shadow that was in front of them seemed to dissolve, and a huge, mean-looking man was in its place. "The time has come for you to meet your doom." A loud, deep laugh emanated from within Yavin's huge figure.

"Why?" Christopher managed to gasp.

"You imbeciles are the only threat to my achieving my righteous place at the right hand of Ba'tah."

"Ba'tah? Who are you talking about?" Mike asked, still stunned by Yavin's presence. The battle seemed to escalate around them.

"I have been seeking for years for the place I deserve, at the hand of Ba'tah, our absolute Master!"

"Master?" Katie exclaimed. "I had no idea..."

"Enough with all this talk!" Yavin exclaimed, his voice taking on an evil tone. "It has come the time for you all to perish!"

Yavin began to chant in low tones. Suddenly, Dave heard a whisper in his ear. "Use the sword!" Christopher murmured. "It's our only chance!"

Dave edged his hand closer to the sword as Yavin continued to chant words in a strange language. The storm above continued to intensify. He waited until the right moment, and then he made his move.

Dave lunged forward, closing the few feet between him and Yavin's back, plunging the sword in with a sickening crack.

There was a crash of lightning, and Dave drew back, frightened at what he had just done.

Suddenly, Yavin turned around, with the sword blade protruding from his stomach. He made a motion as if he was about to fall, and then a change occurred.

"You idiots think you can defeat ME with this weak sword!" he roared. In an instant, the man who had once been Yavin disappeared, and the shadow that they had sensed before stood in its place.

The chanting that they had heard before became even louder until it was deafening. "Run!" Christopher screamed above the noise. "Get away from here! Anywhere!"

Dave began to feel sleepy. "Ha ha ha!" Yavin cackled. "I won't have to be dealing with you for a long time!" Lightning flashed, and Yavin stopped his chant. "Remember the tablet: '*Thou whose heart is pierced by Yavin's power shall not awaken ere a quarter century's turn.'* Ha ha ha!"

It was too late to run. A bolt of lightning rushed down from the sky right in the middle of the party, throwing Dave and the others over the parapet. Above them, lightning continued to flash as thunder roared in the red clouds. The battle around them raged as if nothing had happened.

But all that didn't matter to them. They hit the water in the stream hard as Yavin's voice continued to sweep across the area. The last thing they remembered was the water surging around them. And then there was darkness.

END OF PART I

PART II

16

"What's the latest report?" came a voice that seemed to be very distant. Lights swirled, and everything was blurry.

Dave struggled to remember who or where he was. Why was he lying here? Where was he? As hard as he tried, Dave could remember nothing.

"There's no change in their positions," another voice replied. "Trolls are still out and about. Two more of our travelers were killed yesterday."

"Uhhh..." Dave managed to squeak, and suddenly, the room fell silent.

"Hurry!" one voice said. "Go get the others!"

"Are you alright?" the other asked urgently, getting closer. All Dave was able to do was groan. "What . . . ?" he managed to mumble.

"Everything's ok now," the voice said. Dave opened his eyes, but he was unable to make out what was going on because everything was blurry.

"What happened?" Dave gasped and lay back down after he struggled to get up. His vision was now beginning to clear, and he noticed no superficial injuries to himself. So why was he lying here?

Suddenly the door burst open and a woman entered. "Dave?" she asked. "Are you alright?"

"I think so. Why am I lying here?"

"It's a long story. What do you remember last?"

Dave searched his brain for any memories of why he could be where he was, and finally remembered. "I was falling, off of a tall building. And then I blacked out. The next thing I remember is being here."

"Things are worse than I thought," the woman attempted to whisper to the other man in the room, but Dave overheard and asked, "Why? What happened?"

"Dave," the woman said, "it might be hard to accept, but it's been twenty-five years since that incident."

"What?" Dave asked, uncomprehending.

"I'm Katie, your friend. I've grown up over those years, but look at you. You haven't aged a minute since you fell asleep."

An old man, standing proud and tall, pushed the door open and entered the room. Katie moved aside so he could see Dave.

"I'm Christopher. Do you remember me?"

"Yes, yes I do," Dave said in a tone of understanding, and then hesitated. Seeming to regain some lost energy, he sat up. "What made me stay out for twenty-five years?"

"It was Yavin's doing," said another voice. Another woman entered the room. Though her hair was grey and her appearance deteriorating, Dave could sense some power coming from her.

"I'm Chapin," she said. "You can see that the years have been hard on us." She motioned to a middle-aged man standing behind her.

"Hi, 'big' brother," he said.

"Mike!" Dave exclaimed in surprise.

"Let's allow you to recover for now. We'll tell you all that's happened tomorrow," Katie suggested. With a nod, they all filed out of the room. The light was growing dim and Dave took this opportunity to get some shut eye, though he had a hard time falling asleep.

Finally, near dawn, Dave awoke and, being unable to sleep, decided to get up and explore. Just as he was leaving the cabin, however, he met Katie, coming back in, looking as if she had been up all night. Dave then realized that she had because the group was looking out for him.

"Good morning," Katie said cheerfully, giving no hint in her voice of how tired she was.

Without any warning, the door suddenly slammed open, and somebody said with an urgent voice, "Hurry! There's another raid going on down the river!"

"Come with me," Katie said, motioning to the door. Dave obediently followed.

When they were outside the small cabin, Katie ran for a tower on the far side of what appeared to be a small village. Dave could make out no more than 20 houses. The lone tower stood out in the middle, with fences with sharp spikes surrounding the area. Inside the fences, but past the houses, were several fields that were currently overflowing with some

kind of strange vegetable.

Dave followed Katie to the tower. On the side was a wooden ladder, which went up at least thirty feet. Katie began climbing it as if she did it every day, but Dave became queasy just looking up.

"Come on," Katie commanded urgently. Finally, she came back down to help Dave get up the first few rungs of the ladder. She followed close behind, but Dave seemed to be recovering quickly from his infirmity.

As they rose above the town, what was happening became clear. To the south flowed a great river, at least a quarter mile across. In a village downstream, they could make out horses and knights scurrying around.

"Yep," Katie said, motioning. "It's definitely another raid."

"Why are they doing that?" Dave asked.

"A lot has happened in twenty-five years," Katie said. "Come. You have a lot to catch up on. There's nothing we can do about the trolls. They're almost a part of everyday life now." She started back down the ladder and Dave followed. When they reached the bottom, a few villagers had gathered, asking Katie what was going on. After replying to the best of her ability, she grabbed Dave and pulled him back into the cabin that they had been in before.

Christopher, Mike, and Chapin had gathered there also. After closing the door so that prying eyes could not see, Katie began to speak.

"Where should I start?" she asked, not really expecting an answer. But Dave answered anyway. "What happened after I blacked out?"

"Oh yes," Katie continued. "We were knocked off the fortress and into the Hidden Forest River, and carried down the river into the forest. Fortunately, the strange water that flowed through the forest somehow kept us afloat; otherwise we would surely have drowned.

"When we woke up the next day, we weren't sure where we were, just somewhere in the middle of the dark forest. We couldn't wake you up at that time, so we decided to wait a while longer. However, things didn't go as we had planned. The dreariness of the forest got to us after a while and we decided to move on. We built a small cart out of scrap wood and supplies we found and pulled you over the level ground next to the stream.

"After two exhausting weeks, we reached the southern end of the forest and waited for news from the knights, but it never came. Now we know that all those men succumbed to Yavin's power at the fortress." She paused for a moment. Soon, she was able to continue.

"The Battle of the North, as it is now called, lasted many days, but in the end the trolls beat the knights and eventually ransacked the defenseless city. They then turned their attention on us and came at us from the north and west. We had no choice but to flee over the plains to the east, taking you with us.

"But the trolls eventually won out. Winter was coming on and they almost attacked us, but some brave warriors who happened to be traveling north toward the now-ruined town helped us to safety. We rode a raft down a river we discovered that wasn't on the map, and eventually came here, where we settled down."

"Where exactly is here?" Dave asked Katie.

"We're east of Seatown, off of Christopher's map," Mike replied.

"Then why have all of you grown up while I'm still young?"

"We don't know exactly why," Mike responded. "It's probably some secret spell. These past years have been hard on us. We gave up the idea of getting home. At first, since we were so far south, we didn't feel the effects of Yavin's victories to the north. But now there is nowhere you can go without fearing Yavin and his servants."

"Ba'tah. . .?" Dave asked questioningly.

"We don't know what Yavin meant," Chapin said.

"But we have recently received word of some very troubling events," Christopher said, and paused to see if Dave were listening.

"There has been an abnormal number of calks, trolls, and even normal men that serve Yavin coming out of the southern Blackstone mountains. We think that Yavin has some plans to begin an invasion to take over the world. We don't know why he's waited so long, but it might be because of this Ba'tah."

"What would he have to do with Yavin beginning to invade?" Dave inquired.

"He might be coming to Yavin's palace," Christopher almost whispered. "If he is able to join forces with Yavin, they could become invincible!"

"But!" he interrupted before Dave could react. "It would

take time to organize such an invasion. With the winter coming on in a few months, it's not likely to happen this year."

"When is it now?" Dave asked.

"September 15. The same day that the battle took place exactly 25 years ago."

"Guess this means we have to go on another adventure," Dave said, then paused. "Tell me something, Mike. Do you still really want to go home?"

"I haven't forgotten about going home, if that's what you mean," Mike replied. "But I am going on this mission for the good of all the people of *this* world, not so that we can get home."

"Enough talk," Katie said, cutting them short. Let Dave get some rest for a while. We'll leave in a few days. Let's start getting our things together."

After exchanging a few goodbyes, everybody left Dave in the hut by himself.

"It'll be hard leaving here," Chapin said to Mike and Katie. "Both of you have been here for at least half your life."

"Yeah, don't remind me," Katie said. "I've come to think of this place more as home than where I came from."

"We'll need to find somebody else to run the town while we're gone," Christopher said somberly. "The villagers have come to think of us as their leaders."

"I hope that Dave recovers," Mike said.

"Let's hope," Chapin replied. They now passed the tower and went on toward the farms near the outskirts of the small town. Though no more than 100 people now lived here, it offered safety from trolls and roaming calks. The party had come to think of it as home, growing very close to many of the villagers.

An elderly man was in the distance. The fields that he was working on overflowed with vegetables that were now familiar to them after having eaten them for twenty-five years.

"How are you doing today, Matt?" Katie asked as they approached.

"Want some?" Matt joked, holding up both his hands filled with the strange food.

"No thanks," Katie replied. "We need to talk."

"Oh," Matt said, seeing the grave look on her face. He put down the tools he was carrying and waited for the news that he almost already knew was bad.

"You're going away, aren't you?" he asked. "Dave must

have awoken."

"He has," Katie said. "And we are."

There was a pause. A breeze rustled through the trees which were beginning to show some color. Finally, Matt spoke. "I always knew that this day would come. And this morning, I had a strange feeling, with it being exactly 25 years to the day."

"We're going to leave sometime in the next few days," Christopher said.

"I'm too old and weak to go with you," Matt said. "I wish you luck."

"Don't say that," Katie said, trying to console the man. "We'll be back before you know it."

"I hope so," Matt said. "The knights of the army said that years ago, and they never came back. Think of all the lives that were shattered by that event," he continued in increasingly bitter tones. He soon calmed down. "If you don't win this battle, who knows what will happen to the world for future generations."

"It's already getting dark," Mike reminded them. Indeed, the sun was now red in the western sky and setting quickly. "There's still a few days left for us to stay here. We'll talk more tomorrow."

After exchanging goodbyes, the group of four set out to their separate huts in the village. As Mike walked home, the guard was just beginning to ascend to the watch tower, a sign that reminded them of the times in which they lived.

A loud noise awakened Dave. Suddenly, he started out of bed, feeling as if a snake were crawling over him. Looking in horror, he realized that it actually was a snake. It slithered over his right leg, moving up his body. He was afraid to call out to Mike, currently sleeping on the other side of the room, unaware that Dave could be dead in a matter of seconds.

Suddenly, there was an enormous crash. Before Dave could realize what had happened, he saw the snake lying next to him on the bed, chopped in half. Green slime oozed from its lifeless body. On the other side of the room in the dim light was Christopher.

"Another slaw," he muttered. "These things have been all over the area recently."

"Slaw?" Dave asked, still visibly shaken.

"That's what we call 'em. Katie thinks that they work for Yavin, gathering information surreptitiously and delivering it

to him. It probably had no intention of killing you."

"Then why did you scare me like that?" Dave asked.

"It was probably already too late. Slaws have some kind of telepathic abilities. The minute they see something, the rest of them know. Now they know that you're awake, and Yavin will know shortly. He obviously won't be too happy."

"What's going on?" Chapin yelled and burst into the room, slamming the door back into the wall with a loud bang. Katie followed a short distance behind her.

"It's another slaw," Christopher replied. By this time, Mike was awake and went over to Dave to examine it.

"Yes, another slaw," he said. "It's a red one, too."

"Red?" Dave asked, puzzled.

"The red ones have the ability to inject poison into their victims."

"Maybe it wasn't a reconnaissance mission," Katie said.

"I've never seen a slaw do any harm to anybody. And why Dave? They couldn't have known he was awake only a day after," Chapin added.

"Things are getting graver by the minute," Christopher added solemnly. "With the winter coming on, we'd better get moving soon so that we aren't held up."

"Let's make a point to leave the day after tomorrow," Chapin said.

"We have to," Mike added. "You're going to come with us, Dave, aren't you?"

"Of course I am!" Dave said. "I wouldn't want to leave my friends in all the danger you're going to face."

"Then it's settled. We'll leave in two days." With that, Christopher got up and proceeded to leave. Katie and Chapin followed. Mike continued to chat for a few minutes with Dave.

The next two days went by quickly for the adventurers. Dave took the opportunity to get to know some of the villagers. Christopher, Katie, and the others said many sad farewells during these days, as they had become the protectors of the village. The five inhabitants of the village who had been trained to fight were faced with the daunting task of keeping the village safe while the Elementals were gone. Many doubted that they would survive.

When the day came to leave, a cold rain was falling. Though weather conditions were bad, they decided to leave anyway because Yavin halted for nothing. Finally the time came. They left the village around noon and set off at a brisk pace. This time, they rode horses that the villagers had provided

them with.

From where they were, they decided to travel in the general direction of northwest, hoping that they would soon find a noticeable landmark that was on Christopher's map. However, as the day progressed, this seemed less and less likely anytime soon. Trudging through the mud, they tired quickly and stopped to rest shortly before sunset.

The seemingly endless plains dragged on before them for the next three days as they traveled in the direction of what they hoped would be Yavin's castle.

Finally, they stopped to rest in a small grove of sparse trees. The midday sun shone through the tops of the trees, casting weird shadows from the leaves which were beginning to change colors.

"Where *are* we going?" Mike asked.

"I think we're lost," Dave suggested and pulled a vegetable out of his supply bag to have for lunch. "We need a map. Isn't there anything that the powers of the Elementals could do about our predicament?"

"No," Christopher replied bluntly. "We know Yavin's castle is in this direction, and we set out, but now I don't think that this is such a great idea."

"So what can we do?"

"It might be possible to use the stones to levitate one of us in the air, but only for a short distance, and only for a short time, so it wouldn't be useful."

"Did anybody ever find out what happened to the red stone that we had?" Dave asked.

Chapin paused. "No. It was lost after we fell into the river. None of us knows what became of it."

"Quiet," Dave whispered. "Footsteps."

Indeed, footsteps were approaching from the north. When they got closer, it was apparent that the pounding of hooves was among them.

"Another army?" Mike asked.

"Can't be," Christopher retorted. "Even formidable armies don't travel out in the open for long, especially between towns." He paused and listened for a moment. "It might be trolls."

Looking between the few trees that surrounded them, Katie spotted the figures of horses coming toward them.

"I've never seen that mark before," Katie commented.

"They're not trolls," Mike confirmed, "but are they loyal to Yavin or the rebels?"

"We can't risk exposing ourselves to them," Chapin warned.

"Let's just stay here and wait for them to pass," Dave said. The pounding continued, but the knights, about a hundred of them, passed without incident. Finally, the rest of the group decided that it would be a good time to get going again, and they proceeded, forgetting about the strange army shortly after.

It wasn't long, however, before they heard the pounding of hooves again and yet more troops rushed southward. This time, there was no cover, and they weren't so lucky.

"Who goes there?" The leader yelled as he called his army to a halt.

"We're just travelers. We're not involved in your conflict," Christopher answered.

"We're not so sure," came the reply. The soldier dismounted and approached them. Christopher and Katie stood tall in the front while Dave, the youngest of the bunch, hid behind them.

"You!" he exclaimed, pointing to Dave. "What are you hiding?"

"I'm not hiding anything," Dave replied shakily. There was a pause, and the soldier continued.

"Search him!" he ordered some of his subordinates. They also dismounted and approached where the group was standing.

After surveying Dave for a few minutes, the leader gasped and looked at Christopher with an angry expression.

"Not hiding anything?" he replied angrily. He held up the sword that Dave was carrying.

"I can explain," he responded urgently.

"Explain what? You're working for the enemy!"

"We don't even know who the enemy is!" retorted Dave, trying his best to defend himself.

"Who is the enemy?" Christopher asked.

The leader paused, and then paced around, hollering. "This is an outrage," he cried. "It's just a trick so that they can destroy us with their hidden forces or something. But not this time. We're not being taken in by any tricks this time. Yavin is..." He trailed off, leaving dead silence, even in the midst of his knights.

"Is Yavin your enemy?" Christopher asked.

"Well, well, yes," the leader replied, him now being afraid that the tables had turned against him.

"Then we're actually on your side," Mike said.

"What?"

"We're going to defeat Yavin," Chapin added.

"Ha ha ha!" the leader replied. Laughs came from the knights in the background. The others who had been standing behind the leader gawked and cackled.

Christopher nodded his head at Katie and she returned the expression. Suddenly, he began to chant in low tones along with Katie and Chapin. Suddenly, clouds appeared above them, and a lightning bolt shot out of the sky and struck the leader. A blue pyramid formed around him. Just as suddenly, the clouds departed, but the leader remained trapped inside the mysterious object, unable to move much in any direction.

"Let me out, you fiends! Take them captive!" he screamed, furious at his predicament. Nobody listened to his orders, however, because all the knights were now hilarious, joking and laughing, paying no attention to what was being said.

"Do you believe us now?" Christopher asked calmly as the leader pounded at the walls of his prison.

"Yes! Of course! Let me out!" This was followed by more roars of laughter. Christopher raised his hand and the strange object vanished as suddenly as it had appeared.

The leader now stood up and brushed the dirt off of him that had splattered on him during the struggle. When he was finished, he turned to the knights, who were just settling down after the hysterical event.

"Where are you going?" Chapin asked as if nothing had happened.

When the leader was still hesitant to answer, Christopher raised his hand again. The leader of the knights, knowing very well what was going to happen, suddenly blurted out, "OK, we're going to Riverbend, a town about a week's travel from here to the east. An army is assembling there to combat Yavin."

"How many others are going to be there?" Christopher demanded.

"I don't know. There was a call to all the armies of the East to gather together at Riverbend. I don't know any more. Please, don't hurt me!"

"He doesn't know any more," Chapin said, nodding. Christopher lowered his hand, and the leader relaxed.

"This may be a great opportunity for us to learn Yavin's latest plans," Katie suggested.

"I agree. But we'll have to proceed with caution. If everybody knows about this meeting, there's sure to be spies and other servants of Yavin about," Christopher added.

"I'm sure that the people there will know who we are," Mike said.

"Good. Let's follow the army. We have nothing to lose, since we're lost anyway." The verdict was unanimous.

Soon, the pounding of hooves recommenced and this time the five were right behind them. But what they did not know was the trouble that would befall them in just a few days.

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The next day was the first day of autumn, and it felt like that to the adventurers. It was raining again, and the chill in the air didn't go away for the entire day. There was a thick fog that impeded their view of the plains ahead, and so the army had to proceed slowly so that there were no surprise attacks by Yavin or his followers.

The weather, however, cleared shortly after that, and it was uneventful traveling to Riverbend. When they reached the city four days later, they were in for a surprise. It appeared that the entire world was encamped there.

The city itself, as they could see from a hill about a mile away, was large. A tall wall with sentries on top guarded the city. Two large doors that were presumably closed at night for protection were open on the near side. People traveled in and out.

The entire area was littered with makeshift tents. Horses roamed about. There were several fires blazing to take the chill out of the evening air. The land immediately surrounding the city appeared to be partially divided into sectors of different armies, and many of the knights were wearing bright colors that were visible from high above. However, since all the armies were allied in planning to defeat Yavin, there were no stark divisions, and the colors mingled together at places.

Making their way down the hill, they entered the crowd of knights and it took at least a half hour to pass through them. The leader of the group they had just met a few short days ago had taken those under his command up ahead to the city while Dave, Katie, Christopher, Mike, and Chapin had stopped to look.

Finally, they reached the gates of Riverbend as darkness was setting in. A knight, presumably protecting the city, was standing guard, and motioned for them to pass. Inside the gates, there was an overpass on which a few more knights were stationed. Christopher approached them and inquired as to whom he should notify that they were here.

"The council will adjourn in five days," came the reply.

"Does the king know you personally?"

"No," Christopher replied. "But we may have information that is relevant to the action that will be decided upon."

"What town are you from?" the knight asked. He was holding a piece of parchment. However, the writing on it was illegible to Mike, Dave, and Katie. Christopher and Chapin looked as if they could understand it perfectly.

"We're not from any town," Christopher said. Katie looked at Christopher in surprise but didn't say anything.

"You must live in a town," the knight replied.

"We don't. We live off the land near Harrogen."

"Then why would you be coming here?"

"I already told you that we have some important information," Christopher reiterated, his voice rising.

"We'll let the king see about this," the knight replied, showing no signs of buckling under pressure. "He will escort you there," he said, pointing to a fellow knight. The knight had drawn his sword in case trouble began. He started leading them forward, through the center of the town, and toward the palace on the far side. Christopher wondered why such an enormous palace had been constructed when the rest of the common people virtually lived in shacks.

They entered through the huge main doors and proceeded through a long hall. It was dark inside. By now, it was almost completely black outside the palace, and the flickering of the candles that lined the sides of the hall cast an eerie glow on the travelers.

Soon they reached the throne room, which was also graciously adorned. The king sat in the middle, with what appeared to be the queen to his left and a knight that was decorated with badges and awards to his right. As the five of them entered with the knight escort, the king stood up from his chair and looked them over.

"This is King John," the knight said, motioning toward the throne. "Regard him with respect."

"What business do you have here?" the king asked in a menacing tone.

"We have come to attend the conference," Christopher replied, equally as determined.

"Then why have you been brought here?" John asked questioningly, expecting an answer from the knight even though he asked Christopher directly.

"They say they want to attend the conference, but they are from no town," the knight replied. "These are thieves or Yavin's servants that wish to undermine our power."

"It does seem a little suspicious," the king replied. "But hardly cause for concern. We'll just ask them the question that everybody that isn't loyal to Yavin should be able to answer." Christopher and Katie exchanged glances.

"You," he pointed to Dave. "Who is that man?" He motioned toward another knight on the other side of the room.

Christopher looked on, being unable to help. A look of horror came over Katie's face after she realized that Dave would be unable to answer the question.

"I know," Katie offered.

The king held out his hand, motioning to stop him. "Let the boy answer the question. It would be a shame if he couldn't."

"Well," Dave stuttered.

"Yes?" the king asked, expecting an answer.

There was an extremely awkward silence. Everybody waited for Dave to answer the question, and almost everybody in the room knew that he couldn't.

Finally, the knight to the right of them addressed the king. "Let the woman answer it. After all, he's only a boy and probably isn't worried about such things."

"Fine," the king agreed. "Answer the question."

"He's the leader of the rebel forces that are seeking to undermine Yavin's power," Katie said.

"What is his name?" the king asked.

"Nobody knows. He has never revealed it," Katie replied. The tension in the room suddenly vanished as the king smiled.

"You may leave now," he said. Mike turned around, and found that several well-armed knights had entered the throne room in case of trouble, and that the king was addressing them. They left, leaving the king, queen, and the knight on his right side alone with the party.

John looked the companions over. After a few minutes, he spoke. "I didn't expect you to be on our side. The way he hesitated...but never mind. What is the information you bring to

the conference?"

Chapin replied this time. "We can tell you where Yavin's troll camps are located. We also have been able to assess the most probable moves of the calks."

"Very well. It will add to our expertise," the queen said, speaking for the first time since they had entered.

"Then all is settled," the king said. "I will reserve a place of honor at the conference for all of you. We will assemble on the first of October in the main hall of the castle."

"Thank you," Mike replied in politeness and then followed the others out. No sooner had they exited the palace that Christopher burst out.

"You sure have a lot to learn," he said as they walked across the town. As they had left, a knight had said they would be accommodated in one of the town's guest houses, the only one that was currently open.

When they reached the house about ten minutes later, they entered to discover that it had not been used in some time. Dirt was everywhere. There was one bed on the upper floor, and the mattress was beginning to rot away in spots where bugs had gotten to it.

However, it had not been five minutes since they entered when a knight came with an small army of cleaners and builders. Before two hours had passed, even though it was pitch dark outside, the house was almost as good as new. Since it was well after midnight before they were left alone, the group decided to get some rest.

The next few days were relatively uneventful compared to their earlier adventures. The marketplace, which was where shopkeepers had built booths in the town square, was bustling with activity. At the end of the second day of their stay, the king graciously allowed them to ascend to the top of the palace's tower. Looking down, they could see that the area with armies encamped around had now extended to over a mile radius from the castle. In the distance, however, they spotted calks that were watching vigilantly, but did not dare get close lest the armies destroy them where they flew.

During the third day, Christopher made a trip to the marketplace to acquire some goods that would be useful in future journeys. He returned with several water bottles, some warm garments for the upcoming winter months, and some other trinkets to pass the time.

Finally, the first of October arrived. The group awoke early at around 5 AM, even before the sun rose. The conference was scheduled to start at noon, and last as long as it took to determine what to do.

During the morning hours, many of the leaders of the armies could be seen coming and going from outside the enormous doors. With a few exceptions, as was the case with Christopher, Katie, Mike, Dave, and Chapin, there was only to be one delegate from each army, which in most cases was its leader.

By an hour before noon, the delegates were pouring through the gates to take their seats at the conference. As the party made their way to the palace hall, they came upon a long line. A knight was asking each person (sometimes it wasn't a person) their name and affiliation. After this, they were admitted to take a seat in the hall. When the knight at the door spotted their group, they were let through without any trouble.

The hall was huge. There were at least fifty stone tables inside, and room for ten at each. On the far side from the entrance, there were two tables raised above the others on a dais. Doors to the kitchen were behind it and on the lower level.

The knight directed them to sit on the upper level with the honored guests. Already, before it was 11:30, most of the hall was full, and it was getting more crowded by the minute. The noise level was also increasing, even to the point where the king, who was now seated at the head table, had to call to lessen it. At noon, the hall was completely packed. A few stragglers who had arrived late came inside to join them. It was windy and cool outside, and the king ordered the doors closed to keep any of Yavin's servants out of the building. However, there was no way to be sure that there were no spies in the room already.

"The council will come to order," King John said, pounding his fist on the table. It rattled, and the few pieces of parchment, writing utensils, and assorted other gadgets that were on it shook.

"As you all know, the oppression of Yavin has been gathering for over thirty years now. This council has been called to put an end to his tyranny.

"Most of us just stood by, powerless to do anything by ourselves," the king continued. "And for a while, we were powerless. For many, Yavin seemed too far away to be of any concern of theirs, and as a result, your armies dwindled in

numbers.

"But now, we have that chance. We can give Yavin what he belongs, and be rid of our fear that has been ever-so-present over that time.

"We as of now have no idea what course of action we will take," the king added, now taking on a less dramatic tone. "Therefore, we have agreed that the best thing to do for now will be for each table to come up with as many ideas as possible. Cooperate with each other, and consult with other tables. If each of us can individually gain some ideas, then we will all be better off later when we choose the best one.

"My servants will serve you food. Good luck. We will discuss these happenings later today."

The room became noisy again. There was the ruffling of parchments and writing tools, and clamor of the wooden chairs as they scraped against the ground, and the footsteps of those who were unfortunate enough to arrive late attempting to find a seat.

The table where Christopher and the others were sitting was big enough to seat sixteen people. Their group sat on one side of the table, left of King John. To the right of him was the queen, who was again quiet, and the decorated knight they had seen before in the throne room. A person who looked like a miniature troll resided next to him, and three distinguished knights to his right. On the edges, Another creature that they had never seen the likes of before was seated, opposite from someone who appeared to be an astronomer. There were three empty seats on the other side of the table. More knights were seated, interspersed with the spaces on that side.

"Shall we begin?" John boomed, and quickly lowered his voice remembering that he wasn't addressing the entire room anymore.

"Why don't we start by hearing the information that our friends have to tell us?" the knight to the queen's right started.

"Pardon me," Mike said, curious. "I don't believe you have told us your name."

"Oh yes," came the reply. "I'm sorry. I am Jeff, the king's advisor in military affairs. Long ago, when I was still young, I participated in a battle against Yavin and his powers, and the king asked me to help him. It's been over twenty years now."

"I'm sorry for asking. I should have known-"

”There’s no problem,” Jeff replied.

“Now tell us more about what you know,” the king prodded.

Christopher took out the map that he had possessed for the past thirty years. To Dave, it seemed that it had not aged, because it was old enough before.

“Using this map,” Christopher began, holding the map out in front of him so that the entire table could see, “I was able to record where the troll positions were located the last time I was about, before Dave awoke.”

“Before Dave awoke?” one knight inquired.

“Uh oh,” Mike mumbled under his breath.

“Tell us,” the king ordered.

“Dave had some spell put on him by Yavin over twenty-five years ago,” Christopher recalled. “We took care of him all that time while we lived in a village....” He trailed off.

“So you’re not from the forest,” the queen said in a state of shock. King John and Jeff looked around in disbelief. After they had recovered, the king spoke:

“I thought that something was strange,” he revealed. “But I didn’t say anything because you had promised information. So I had a few guards watch your house for any suspicious activity. But there was none, and my worries disappeared, or so I thought.”

“Why did you deceive my husband like that?” the queen demanded in a strong tone.

“We had no intentions of any harm,” Christopher replied, trying to stay calm. “We just didn’t know if it would be wise to reveal where we truly lived.”

“And where would that be?” the king asked them.

“In a village a few days march from here.” There was silence for a split second as everybody tried to collect their thoughts at this revelation. The drone in the rest of the hall continued behind them, as if nobody had noticed what had just happened at their table.

“It doesn’t matter,” one of the strange creatures sitting at the side of the table commented. “Let’s continue and stop wasting time.”

“Very well,” the king agreed. “Continue. What were you saying about Dave?”

“It definitely wasn’t something natural,” Christopher reiterated. “He wouldn’t stay asleep for that long if it was a

natural occurrence. And besides, throughout that period, there were calks and slaws constantly checking on him. We found quite a few of the creatures crawling about."

"This is grave, indeed," the king commented. "What were you doing to get this curse cast upon yourselves?"

Christopher then explained what had happened to them during the summer of twenty-five years ago. It took over two hours by the time that he had explained the entire story in detail, and another half-hour for questioning by King John and the knights on the other side of the table, who seemed to be particularly interested in what had happened.

"A story that I would find unbelievable," John said after it was finished, "if it weren't for our living proof over here." He pointing to Dave.

It was now about three in the afternoon, and King John, upon learning this from one of his servants, called a ten minute recess for the entire hall. Many of the knights took the opportunity to go outside during the short reprieve, while some others, engrossed in their work, declined the chance, and continued to ponder.

When the break was over, King John called the room back to order, and addressed Chapin with his next question: "So, tell us about those maps you have."

"This," Christopher said after reaching into his traveling bag, "is a map I acquired a long time ago , and as I was trying to say before, I have marked the troll positions on it."

"Let me see that," Jeff asked politely, and Christopher passed the map over. In black, uneven marks, Christopher had drawn a symbol indicating the town of Riverbend approximately halfway between Gangton and Seatown on the road. There were three large red X's on the map: one just south of the compass rose that was located to the right of the map, one encampment south of the dark forest, and one at the location where they had almost met their doom twenty-five years ago.

"How large are these camps?" John asked after Jeff handed them the map.

"They have all been growing. There are at least twenty thousand at the far southern one. They may be planning an invasion."

"And the others?" Jeff asked.

"Still large, but it's been long enough that earlier estimates I made will have to suffice," Christopher replied.

"This is dire news," the queen said upon seeing the map. She handed it across the table for the others to see.

"I think our first order of business should be to dispatch these trolls," said one knight on the far side. "Then we can worry about attacking Yavin's fortress."

"I think that's a good idea," the king said, and then handed the map to another table with a few explanation. The knights at that table passed it amongst themselves while conversation continued.

"How will it be possible for us to combat an army that huge?" one asked.

"It isn't," the king said. "My forces have only one thousand men, another five hundred in reserve. Together, it may be possible. What are their armaments?"

"They were heavily equipped," Chapin replied. "Spears, swords, and the usual stuff, but they also had several large rams that could be used to attack. They built their camp on a hill, so it will be harder for us to attack them if we choose to."

"This sounds like bad odds," said one of the creatures sitting at the sides of the table. "It would take at least twice as many men if we even wanted to stand a chance in a battle like that. We'd lose many men in the process."

"Then a frontal assault on the camp is out of the question," Mike said.

"However," Jeff suggested, "it may be possible to lure them out somehow into attacking us. We can pick them off as they leave their camp."

"That is also possible," John said. "But if they got through, they would be able to use their weapons to destroy this town or one of the other towns along the coast."

"They wouldn't do that anyway," Dave said. Everybody fell silent as he spoke for the first time. "All the armies are camped outside. It would be an easy task for the trolls to sneak up at night and pick off a few guards each night. But they haven't. Why?"

"They must have some bigger plan," Katie suggested.

"Exactly. But what?"

"Look to the west," the king suggested. "Maybe to Jasper, or even Harrogen..."

"I was just wondering," Dave said. "But what side is Harrogen loyal to? When we were there, they threw us in jail and we almost died of starvation."

"That is a good question," Jeff agreed. "That would explain the lack of contact there has been over the past few months."

"I think that this is as good of a time as any to question Harrogen's loyalty," one knight said. "Since they refused to send a delegate to this conference and we haven't heard from them in over a year, we can't assume that they will provide us with help. They may even turn against us."

"I've heard that the king there has been voicing some strange ideas lately," another knight added. "The people don't know what to do, and, frankly, I think that Yavin has bribed him to join his side."

"So now," John said, "we're facing evil from all sides. Harrogen to the west, the troll camp to the east, and Yavin's castle to the north."

"It's getting late already," Jeff said. It was well past six o'clock, and the light was beginning to fade. "Let's get some rest and we'll continue tomorrow morning."

"Agreed," the king said, and then pounded his fist on the table. The nearer tables began to quiet themselves, and eventually the ones on the other side of the room fell silent. The king announced that the council will adjourn tomorrow an hour after sunrise, and the knights began to leave.

After bidding farewell to the king and the other guests at the table, Katie, Mike, Dave, Chapin, and Christopher headed for their assigned room.

The next day, the weather was bright and sunny. It was about half past seven when all the knights were again seen entering the town heading for the hall.

The party was greeted by knights and ambassadors from other lands as they entered the hall. It was more crowded than yesterday. As they took their place at the head table, the king began to pound for order. The hum in the hall died down until water could be heard dripping from a bucket in the kitchen behind them. Finally, King John spoke.

"You've had almost five hours to prepare your ideas. Let's hear some of them now. Who wants to start?"

At first, nobody stood up. Finally, one knight from a table near the entrance to the hall stood, and everybody turned to look at him.

"The knights of Amon have worked out a plan," he stated. The king motioned for him to continue.

"Using the map that Christopher gave us, we have determined that the troll camps in the north pose little threat to southern towns. It would take several days for the trolls to reach here, time which we could use to prepare our defenses.

"But if this does happen, we propose that watchmen be sent to survey the plains and the area near the Dark Forest in order to detect such an attack before it happens."

There was a murmur of agreement. Some knights looked up as if they wished that they had thought of the plan by themselves.

"That is a good idea," John said, and even managed to crack a smile. "Let's take a vote among nations, as proposed before the council began. All who approve of this plan, please raise your hand." Almost all of the hands in the room went up.

"All opposed?" There were scattered hands, amounting to no more than twenty knights.

"Then we will set up watchmen posts," the king said. "How many men do you see that we'll need?"

"A few hundred," the knight replied.

"Very well. I will appoint you in charge of gathering enough men to prevent such an attack."

The room began to grow noisy again, but the king held his hand up for silence.

Just as the room began to quiet down again, the doors burst open and a knight rushed in.

"Trolls!" he gasped. "Thousands of them! They're marching toward the city!"

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The room suddenly grew deafening, as trolls rose from their tables. There was a clink as they began to unsheathe their swords.

"Silence!" King John bellowed, and the hall began to get quiet again, but only after other knights attempted to get the situation under control for several minutes.

"Where are these trolls coming from?" the king asked so that all could hear.

"From the east, where the troll camps were. They said that there were ten thousand trolls, at least."

"Ten thousand..." the king mumbled. "How many men do we have around the city?"

"Only five thousand are armed, sir," the messenger replied. "There are twenty thousand from other nations attending the conference, but there simply isn't enough equipment."

"How long do we have?"

"Two or three hours at most before they reach the outskirts of the camps."

"Go sound the warning to protect the people!" the king replied immediately, quickly moving toward the door. "Get as many knights as you can inside the city, and close the gates!"

"Aye, sir!" the messenger replied, and rushed out of the room. King John, still standing, now looked over the assembly.

"It seems like we have more desperate matters to deal with now," he addressed them. "We have one hour to formulate a plan of defense. Give me your suggestions."

"Do we have any reserves of weapons?" one knight asked.

"Yes," the king replied. "There's a store in the castle basement. But only enough for a thousand men to use."

"Get those distributed immediately!" Jeff said. "Any defense is better than none."

One knight at the back who had been guarding the door rushed out of the room to the storage in the basement. It was

now possible to hear shouts and footsteps from outside the hall. Inside, the knights pondered over what could be done.

"I have an idea," Christopher said, and the room grew silent. "We could use the powers of the elementals to put up a force field against the invaders."

"What do you mean?" the king asked. "How would it be done?"

"If we use the powers of the three stones that we possess, we might be able to set up a barricade so that the trolls couldn't enter, even if it was only for a few hours."

"That would be enough time for us to determine a plan for arming the soldiers," Jeff said.

"Get started," the king commanded. "While they are gone, we'll think of a contingency plan in case this fails."

Katie, Christopher, and Chapin rushed out of the hall to get the barrier ready. Meanwhile, Mike was now with his now little brother, Dave.

"We need to secure reinforcements," the king suggested, continuing. "It's the only way we'll be able to survive without being armed. Especially since one troll has enough power for two men."

"We could ask for assistance from Harrogen," one knight from the back suggested. "They do have one of the most well-trained armies in the world."

"Would they be loyal to us," asked another knight, "or would they defect to the side of the trolls, heightening the odds against us?"

"We can't be sure," the first said. "But if we stand alone, we're sure to be defeated."

"Are there any other options?"

"My city of Jasper," another knight said, "has some of the finest forgeries in the world. We could produce more than enough weapons for your army."

"How long would this take?" asked Dave, who was sitting next to the King now, who had seemed to neglect this important fact.

"A few months, at best," came the reply. A sigh seemed to go down through the room.

"Come on," the king said. "In the entire world, there isn't enough force to overcome this band of trolls? There must be some solution somewhere."

"I have an idea," a voice came from the back of the room. The trolls turned to face him. When the rustling had

settled down, he spoke:

"I can ask my king, the king of Gangton, to send as many troops from his army as he can to here. They could be here within a day."

"I had never considered Gangton," Mike whispered to Dave, who was eagerly watching the proceedings.

"If I may speak," a highly-decorated knight who was seated at the table immediately in front of the king's said. "If we also asked Seatown, to our east, to send help, we could surround the trolls."

"Then," Jeff interrupted, "We could close in, trapping them around the castle, until we send our knights out of the gates of Riverbend to crush them while they're trapped."

"Excellent idea," the king agreed. "Let's take a vote. All in favor of this proposal, say 'I'." There was a chorus of "I"s, and there was almost no opposition.

"Then let the plan be carried out. Notify the kings of Gangton and Seatown to send as many reinforcements as they can. The council is now dismissed until the battle is won." With that, the king rose, and the rest of the congregation also began to leave, the two knights leaving more hurriedly than the others.

As Dave and Mike left the hall, it was complete chaos outside. Knights poured through the gates at breakneck speed. Citizens rushed out of their houses to make way for the incoming army. Weapons from the basement were distributed.

Suddenly, Dave was frightened by a blow from a bugle above them. A loud voice cried out, "By the order of King John, the gates shall be sealed in one hour to prevent the trolls' attack." This only served to increase the mounting panic. Mike spotted two knights leaving amidst the surge going the opposite direction. After walking for about a minute together outside the gate, they split, one going east, and the other traveling west. He assumed that they were the people assigned to gather help from their neighbors.

Dave and Mike made their way through the disorder to the castle, finally arriving a few minutes later. The doors were barricaded so that nobody would loot the palace in the chaos, but the guards admitted Dave and Mike without any trouble upon seeing them.

Inside, the king was in what had come to be termed the "strategy room", which was in the back of the castle, had only one entrance, and no windows. It was a perfect place for King John, Jeff, and other top advisors to compile their plans in secret,

as they soon found out.

When Mike and Dave knocked on the door, they were greeted by a loud, gruff, "Identify yourselves!" When they answered, the voice capitulated to his king's orders, which could also be heard loud and clear, and the door opened.

"Welcome," John said. "We're creating battle plans for tomorrow. How can I help you?"

"Aren't you going to do something about the chaos outside?" Mike asked. "Innocent people are going to get hurt if we don't do something to calm everyone." As he spoke, they heard a call go up from the same watchman outside that the gates would be sealed in forty minutes.

"You're right," the king said, talking quickly. "But I can't do anything about it right now. I need to create plans for the battle. Ask the guards outside to try to calm everyone down." He then abruptly shut the door, leaving Mike and Dave in the deserted throne room.

"What should we do now?" Mike asked, as they exited the throne room and made their way to the palace entrance.

"Let's go find the others. They're probably trying to set up the barrier that will protect us from Yavin's forces."

They made their way to the stairs outside the palace, and climbed them until they were on the roof, the highest point around the city. There, they found Christopher, Katie, and Chapin chanting in strange tones. When they approached quietly for fear of disturbing them, they made no indication that they were there.

Suddenly, after they had been watching for a few seconds, Christopher suddenly lifted his head, and Katie and Chapin stopped chanting. "OK, that's enough. I think we're ready," he said. Just then, they heard the trumpeter down below signal that there was a half hour left. Knights continued to pour into the gates, and the column stretched as far as the eye could see.

It was high noon by now, and, despite the fact that it was October, it was hot in the sun. Christopher, realizing that Mike was watching them confused, hurriedly assured him, "It wasn't you. We're ready to put up the barrier."

"You'd better get out of here," Chapin suggested. "When the barrier goes up, its source will be from the highest point, or right here. You'll get thrown off if you don't leave."

"Right," Dave said, and hurried down the stairs. When they had gotten down, the knight called the fifteen minute

warning, and the surge seemed to intensify. Mike wondered how all the knights would be able to get inside the barrier in time.

They made their way down to ground level just in time to witness the chaos that was still underway. As the knights rushed in, the ten minute call was sounded. Citizens of the town rushed away to their homes, while merchants that had been attempting to sell their goods hurriedly packed up their supplies.

"What should we do?" Dave asked as they stood against the outer wall of Riverbend, observing the happenings around them.

"There's nothing we can do," Mike said. "Just pray that everyone gets inside in time. The fate of the world could depend on it."

With that, they fell silent, and watched from where they were as the pandemonium continued. Finally, it was time. The knight called that there was one minute until the gates would be raised, and the surge seemed to intensify. But then, a miracle occurred: With only seconds to spare, the onslaught ended, and all the knights were now safely inside. They could now see dark clouds moving toward them, a sign of the evil that was approaching.

Finally, the knight gave the orders to raise the gates. It took almost two minutes to do so, a time during which everybody held their breath so that the trolls would not suddenly appear. Fortunately, they didn't. When the gates were finally sealed and locked, chanting erupted from above on the roof of the palace.

This continued for two minutes, after which Christopher, Katie, and Chapin began to move their arms in strange motions, while holding the balls, which were shining so brightly that it was impossible to look directly at them. Suddenly, a blue light began to emit from the center of the triangle that they had formed.

The light spread, first upward, and then outward toward the ends of the city, until it eventually reached the ground outside the city walls.

When the shield had been in place for over a minute, the three released their balls, leaving them floating where they were formerly held. Then they began to rotate in a circle, the blue light coming from the exact center of them. Soon, they were spinning so fast that nobody could tell them if they were single or one light.

As they backed away, Christopher picked up a bow that had been lying on the roof of the palace next to where they had been standing, and shot it directly upward as a test of the field's strength. About two hundred feet in the air, where the arrow made contact with the light, there was a flash, and it returned to earth at a perfect angle that would have impaled Christopher had he not moved out of range. When they were satisfied that the field would hold at least for the time being, they made their way to the stairs, and the townspeople and knights continued about in their mad rush. The entire city was now bathed in a bluish light, even though the sun was visible through the barrier above.

Mike and Dave, from where they were next to the outer walls, could see Christopher and Katie, followed closely behind by Chapin, collapse at the bottom of the stairs outside the palace doors, unnoticed. Strangely, the guards outside were nowhere to be found. Mike and Dave made their way over to them.

"That was something!" Dave exclaimed. "You should have seen the looks of wonder on the peoples' faces!"

"I'm exhausted," Christopher gasped as if he had been running for an hour before. "That's because of the barrier. But I should feel better in a few minutes after the stones' power takes over and reinforces the shield."

"By the way," Katie commented, "where's the guards that were here a minute ago? And where's King John during all of this?"

"I have no idea. They just disappeared. We went into their secret battle room a while ago and they told us to leave because they were drawing up plans," Mike repeated.

"That's strange. There's plenty of time and t here's no way anybody could betray their ideas to the trolls," Chapin said.

"Indeed," Dave agreed. "How long will the barrier hold?"

"We don't know," Katie responded. "It depends on the

power of the stones. Several hours at least."

"But it could last a few days if the stones have enough power," Christopher said. "This act will drain the stones' power for a few months after this, but they haven't been used for years because there wasn't any need."

"Let's go see what the king's doing for now," Chapin suggested.

The rest of them agreed. The chaos had somewhat settled down. The five opened the doors to the palace and went inside, but this area was also strangely vacant. There were only a few guards, and they seemed concentrated on other tasks than ensuring the security of the palace.

Therefore, they were able to sneak into the throne room unnoticed, and to the king's secret room. The door was locked, now hidden behind a tapestry that they had not seen before. They knocked, and there was no answer. After several minutes, it was decided that they would go somewhere to rest for a few hours. The entire fate of the city of Riverbend now rested on the two brave messengers who had traveled to Gangton and Seatown to ask for help.

The five slept the entire afternoon, save for wakening one time to check on the rotating stones. It was getting dark by the time they were up, but it was not getting any colder. Christopher explained that this was because the force field stopped everything from penetrating it. They had been awakened by shouts from watchmen, who were signaling that they had stopped the trolls on the far hill around the city, and would be at the barrier in under an hour.

Christopher, Katie, and Chapin rushed up to the top of the palace another time to check on the stones again. They were not rotating nearly as fast as they had been; in fact, they were only at half their speed. But the shield still held.

By the time it was dark outside, the trolls had completely surrounded the city, just outside the barrier. There were small flashes around the outskirts where some impatient trolls had decided to try to throw things at the field.

The stones continued to slow down. Christopher estimated that the barrier would fail before the end of the night. They could only hope that reinforcements would arrive in time.

Throughout the night, the atmosphere was tense. Every once in a while, there was a shout, and somebody came running across the square on an urgent errand. The king was still

nowhere to be seen, but Jeff had visited the five several times to see if they were OK and to bring them up to date on any plans that were being made.

By four o'clock that morning, there was no sign. The stones, Chapin warned, had less than two hours' strength in them. Outside the barrier, most of the trolls were now sleeping, with a few sentries patrolling the area, waiting for the barrier to fall. Inside, the knights who had been brought in to safety readied themselves for the battle ahead.

As the sun rose, the worst happened. Christopher, who had rushed to the top of the palace roof, watched in fear as the stones finally stopped, and with them, the blue light that was streaming out of their middle vanished. The barrier began to disperse, first in the middle, and then following down to the ends.

Finally, the barrier disappeared as the sun broke out over the horizon. There was no sign of reinforcements, and the trolls outside were called to awaken. As they prepared for the battle, the knights inside took up positions around the walls.

With a shout from who appeared to be the trolls' leader, the battle was underway. At least a hundred trolls began to scale the walls on all sides. Up above, some helpful citizens operated catapults to hurl rocks into the trolls to stop their ascent, while others used their weapons to stop the advance.

Christopher, Mike, Dave, Chapin, and Katie, meanwhile, were caught on the palace roof when the battle began, and had a bird's eye view of what was going on. At the point where they were, they could even see over the near wall, and could see that the city was in grave trouble.

"What should we do?" Dave asked. "There's no way that we'll be able to hold them off for long."

"We have an hour," Christopher said, "at most."

"Then," Katie suggested, "Let's find somewhere safe to get to before they break through."

"Where could that be?" Mike asked.

"The best place would be the king's secret room," Mike suggested.

"It's too well-guarded," Christopher replied. "There's no way we could get inside. Even if it's not occupied, we wouldn't even know how to open the door."

"What about one of the houses," Katie suggested. "There must be some secret rooms or something that we could

hide out in."

"That would take too long," Christopher again refused.

"The castle basement," Dave suddenly blurted out. "Why couldn't we hide in there?"

"Dave has a point," Christopher agreed. "If we went to the basement, we might be able to slip by unnoticed for a while, at least until things settle down outside. Then we could make our escape."

"Anybody have any better ideas?" Chapin asked. There was no response, and they began to make their way off the roof and into the palace.

When they were inside, they managed to find the door to the basement without much difficulty. Getting inside, however, was another task, as it was locked.

"Think, everybody," Christopher commanded. "Where would the key for this door be?"

"On the guards," Chapin suggested.

"They're not here," Mike said. "But if they're not here, there must be some central station where the keys are kept when the guards are off duty."

"There," Dave suggested. He pointed to a wooden door down at the end of the hallway from their current position. They all ran as fast as they could to reach it, but Christopher reached the location first.

"It's locked too," he said sullenly.

"If we can't open it that way," Mike said, "Then we'll have to do it the old fashioned way." He motioned for Christopher to follow, and moved a few feet from the door down the hallway. They then ran at breakneck speed across the few feet that separated them and the door, and crashed into it with a loud bang. It splintered, and shards of wood flied everywhere. The rest of the party covered their faces, but emerged unharmed.

Inside was a dark, dank room that contained exactly what they were looking for: keys. In fact, there were so many keys that Christopher wondered how, without any marking, the guards managed to keep them in order. Mike, however, pointed out that each had a different marking on it, and that settled the matter. They made their way back, keys in hand, to the cellar door. There were still no signs of trolls or guards anywhere around the area.

"There's at least a hundred keys here," Chapin said in disgust. "How are we going to try them all?"

"How else?" Dave said. "The old-fashioned way. Let's hope we're lucky."

Christopher slipped the first key into the lock and attempted to turn it. It didn't turn, so he dropped it on the ground. After a few, he handed half the keys to Dave so that they could alternate trying the lock and finish more quickly. Outside, after they had tried about thirty of the keys, there was a loud bang, and a crunch. Swords slashed, and shouting erupted.

Fortunately, the next key worked, and they hurried inside. Dropping the rest of the keys, Christopher retained the one that opened the door and pocketed it, being sure to lock the door behind them. As they traveled down the stairs, it became too dark to see. When they arrived at the ground, light shining from a tiny crack in the wall revealed an astonishing discovery.

"Weapons!" Katie gasped.

"There's enough swords here to supply the entire army!" Dave exclaimed.

Christopher reached down to pick up one of the swords that were neatly organized on shelves against the walls. It was sharp, and real. On the far wall, there were spears, and in between; enough armor for two thousand men. The room was massive, at least as large as the hall.

"What is all this doing here?" Katie asked. "I thought there wasn't enough equipment!"

"There wasn't," Christopher said, "or at least the knight said there wasn't."

"Is it possible that the knight didn't know?" Mike asked.

"Very unlikely," Christopher responded. "The whole time that the knight was talking, King John agreed with everything he said. In fact, he didn't protest a single word that was said during that discussion!"

"To think about it now, I think Christopher's right," Chapin responded.

"What's going on here?" Dave asked. "Why, then, would John want to conceal all these weapons that could be used to protect his kingdom?"

"Without these, his kingdom will most certainly be destroyed!" Katie exclaimed.

"By the way," Chapin suggested quietly, "Where is the king now?" Nobody answered.

"I don't know what's going on," Mike said in a confident tone, "But whatever the reason, there's no time to waste! We've

got to get these supplies to the knights!"

"Hurry!" Christopher shouted, and started up the stairs.

When he reached the top, however, he stopped suddenly and motioned for the rest of the group to be quiet. Outside, they could hear running footsteps, and two voices.

"What happened here?" one asked hurriedly.

"Probably damage from the catapult," the other replied. They stopped for a second to inspect the splintered door, and then continued on with loud footsteps.

"That was close," Dave whispered while Christopher pulled the key out of his pocket to open the door. For one tense moment, it stuck in the keyhole, and then finally turned. The door opened, and they rushed out.

Making their way down the hallway, they came to the palace doors. It was still strangely deserted. As they emerged outside, they were met with an astonishing sight.

Arrows were flying everywhere. Swords clanged. Trolls mounted the walls faster than the sentries could force them off. The group was forced to take cover inside the palace doors, helpless to get any further out without any protection.

Suddenly, there was a loud trumpet blast from the far end, near the wall. It was King John and his knights! Finally, Christopher thought. They would be saved.

As they watched, the knights ran across the square, and through houses with a large torch. One knight struck another one from a different, country, and he fell. All around, the knights were killing their own allies.

"What's going on?" Dave asked, dumbfounded.

"The knights...!" Christopher gasped. "They're not on our side! They're trying to kill us all!"

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"They've betrayed us!" Christopher screamed, horrified. King John, well behind the lines of his soldiers, watched as they slaughtered innocent people as they approached the gates.

"What are we going to do now?" Katie asked in terror. "We're all doomed! If they open the gates, all resistance to Yavin's power will be crushed!"

"We can't just go out there and stop them," Mike reminded her.

"We have to do something!" Dave yelled over the racket. "But what?"

"I guess you've seen what John was trying to do," a voice came from behind them.

They all turned around. Jeff, John's advisor, was standing just inside the doorway, with a helpless look on his face. "I tried to stop them," Jeff said. "But they attempted to lock me inside the secret room instead. I was able to get out, but not in time."

"Do you have any plans?" Dave asked him.

"Only one," Jeff said. "Let's get out of here. There's no way we can fight them off without reinforcements."

"What ever happened to those two knights who went to Gangton and Seatown?" asked Chapin.

"There's been no sign of them," Jeff replied sullenly, as they watched the death and destruction approach.

"Let's get up to the wall," Christopher suggested. "Maybe there's something we can do there."

"We need to get the weapons to the soldiers too if that's still possible," said Mike. "It might help a little."

"Good idea," Jeff seconded. "I'll go up to the wall with Mike and Katie, while you other three lead the knights downstairs. Is that OK?"

"Sounds alright. Let's meet back here in a half hour, assuming none of us get killed," Christopher suggested, leaving them to part on that grim thought.

Jeff lead the way, with Mike and Katie following close behind. They stuck toward the walls of the palace and the middle of the town, where there were few encounters with any knights. The fighting seemed to be concentrated on keeping enemies out instead of fighting them within.

When they reached the wall, spears flew and swords clanged as they climbed up a ladder to the terrace above. To their right, there was a loud thump, and a troll fell, covered in blood. Mike froze at the sight, finally realizing how much this battle meant. He shook it off as Katie shoved him from behind and yelled to keep moving.

When they reached the top, they were forced to duck under the stone wall that provided the knights at the top some protection. The doors to their left were, fortunately, still intact, but appeared to have been weakened by the constant attacks. Several trolls from below threw rocks in an attempt to knock the friendly knights off their perches in order to climb up.

"Sir Jeff!" one knight yelled as he spotted the three. "The trolls are continuing to advance. We can't hold them off much longer without weapons!"

"King John had been hiding them in the basement," Jeff said as a spear whizzed above their heads and sailed into the town, impaling itself in the roof of a house.

"Any chance we can get our hands on some of those so we have a chance to defend ourselves?"

"Go down to the basement now and take as many as you need. Be careful for the King's troops."

"Thanks, sir!"

When the knight began to climb down, Jeff braved the projectiles flying toward him and leaned over the edge to see the trolls swarming around the castle. They had arranged themselves in lines, the front line continuing to pound the castle while the others defended the front line and took care of their wounded.

"It's really bad," Jeff said to Mike when he ducked down for cover again. Suddenly, there was a loud bang, and the wall shook below them. Looking to their left, they could see that the trolls were using a sort of ram that they had seen before to attempt to break through the gates of the town. So far, their efforts had failed, but for how long that status remained was questionable.

"We need to do something about this now," Katie said.

"We can't just wait here while they destroy the town!"

"I agree. But there's nothing we can do," Jeff said solemnly. To their right, a knight fell, a spear protruding from his chest.

"Let's see if we can help make the doors hold until the others retrieve the weapons," Jeff said as he made his way to the left toward the gates. Mike led the way, followed by Jeff, and then Katie behind. They stayed low, protected by the stone rail that was on the outside. The inside edge of the wall, however, had no railing, and a fall from the height that they were at could have been deadly.

When they reached the doors, they discovered two knights, covered in blood, cranking the handles to the gates.

"What are you doing?" Jeff asked over the screams and noises of weapons being thrown.

"When they bring that ram back on us, if we can open the doors as it hits, it might lessen the impact," the knight said. "If we don't, the gates are gone anyway. Could you help us?"

"Sure," Jeff said, and motioned for Katie and Mike to move to the wheel for the other door. Looking throw the slits in the grate they were standing on, they could see the knights readying the ram for another run.

"Get ready," the knight said. The trolls moved the ram back further, and then began to push. They let go, and waited for the impact. "Now!" he screamed, and they all began turning the wheels as fast as they could to open the gates. As the ram approached, the gates parted, *and the ram sailed through*.

Not expecting this to happen, Katie watched in awe with the others as the ram continued on its path into a house, which splintered with the impact. It came to a stop no more than a hundred feet from the gate.

The trolls, also surprised, stopped, and looked to their leader for what to do next. Several, without waiting for orders, realized the opportunity to enter and dashed for the gates.

"Hurry!" Jeff said. They began to turn in the opposite direction. Even with all their effort, it seemed that they wouldn't make it in time. They put in an extra burst of energy, and the gates clanged shut as the trolls were no more than five feet away.

"Yes!" Mike rejoiced, jumping in the air, but quickly ducked as more objects flew their way.

"This will be a major setback for them," Jeff said. "But only until they can mass enough forces to scale the walls. They

have no idea how defenseless we are."

Suddenly, there was a trumpet blast, and an army of trolls began marching across the square, fully armed, led by Christopher, Chapin, and Dave. There were more than a thousand men, each one carrying one of the weapons that was in the basement. They continued to the nearest ladders and mounted the wall.

Seeing that they were not needed anymore and that they were in danger standing in the position that they were, Jeff led the other two down from the top of the wall. The trolls, however, even with the addition of more knights on the opposite side, showed no signs of weakening, and they now surrounded the entire town.

"Who is in command now?" one knight asked the party as they met in the center of the town. This question took them all by surprise. John's troops were now on the opposite end of the town, but the additional strength that had been added to the friendly forces was helping to hold them back on the opposite end so that they could not cause any more destruction.

"I guess Jeff is now," Christopher said. "You were a military advisor. You should take command."

"But, I'm not sure if I should."

"Who else has the capability that you do?" Mike asked him, and received no response.

"You are now the commander of the rebel army," Chapin said to Jeff in an official tone. "The fate of the world rests in your hands."

Jeff, finally accepting his new position, ran off to the wall to help organize the knights at the top.

"What do we do now?" Dave asked.

"The only thing we can do," Christopher responded, "is to watch and wait."

"Let's get on top of that house," Mike suggested, pointing toward a house a few feet away. "We can be at least a bit safer, and we can see everything that happens."

And so they sat on top of the house for hours afterward. It was a nice day, and if the battle around them was not raging on, they could have bathed in the warm sunlight as if they were on vacation. However, by the time it was getting dark, despite the efforts of the knights, it appeared that the trolls were gaining the upper hand. The gates were now beginning to crack, even without the assistance of the battering ram, which was now

crashed into a house only a few houses away.

Making their way up to the top of the wall, they discovered that conditions were worse than they had thought. At one point along the wall, the trolls had dug groves allowing themselves to climb up. Only a few knights protected Riverbend from invasion by thousands of trolls.

As they watched the destruction in dismay, a shout arose from a knight defending a few feet away. "Look!" he yelled. "We're saved!" He pointed toward the horizon, where a line of knights that stretched as far as they could see moved toward them. They held up a flag that was unknown to the group, but it wasn't Yavin's. The trolls, seeing the advance, began to mill around below, and looked to their commander.

"Hurry!" Jeff shouted from far away, but his voice carried for miles. "Attack!" A barrage of weapons flew downward off the wall, right into the ranks of trolls, who were now in a state of confusion. Looking behind them, the group noticed that the opposite direction also revealed a line of knights storming toward the town. The knights, trapped in the middle, began to move in between the lines, to the north.

"Open the gates!" Jeff commanded. "Let's annihilate them!" The knights above the gates worked furiously, and even as they opened knights rushed out after the trolls. As the trolls continued, the two groups to the east and west had formed one single circle, closing in on the trolls as they hurried to escape. From behind the trolls, the knights of Riverbend chased them, throwing spears and shooting arrows as quickly as they could.

Christopher had managed to secure horses for his four companions, and they rode together behind the lines as they approached the inevitable end of the trolls. Though the trolls knew that they would eventually be defeated, they continued to run, to survive as long as possible before their demises.

As they continued to pursue the trolls, however, the trolls suddenly stopped, causing the Riverbend army to halt behind them. They turned suddenly, prepared to make a stand. Jeff looked at the other armies in worry. They were still at least five or ten minutes away, and the trolls could possibly take out his knights before the others arrived. Although he saw this, Jeff ordered his men to make a stand.

"Ra' Kat!" one of the troll leaders screamed, and the trolls drew their weapons. Most of them were armed with huge sickles, which appeared sharp enough to slice through bone.

"Retreat!" Jeff screamed over the racket. "We don't stand a chance against them!"

"Come on," Mike said, half talking to himself. "Why can't our reinforcements come any faster?" Because they were now running away, the other knights could not catch up to them.

"Jeff," Christopher yelled to Jeff, who was riding next to him, "We can't just run back to the town. We can't let the trolls in, because they'd destroy the entire place!"

"You're right," Jeff yelled. "But we don't stand a chance here."

"Do we have any better chances in the town?" Christopher asked.

"No," Jeff said after some thought, if that was possible with all the noise around them.

"We'll make our stand here!" he ordered above the noise, and the horses drew to a stop. The converging armies in the distance continued their trek toward them.

"Attack!" Jeff ordered, and the air filled with clanging swords and flying weapons. Since the six of them were near the back of the ranks, the danger wasn't as high as near the front, but occasionally, they had to avoid a troll attack.

The ground became littered with bodies quickly. With their support only minutes away, it looked as if their entire force would go down before they could arrive. The fierce battle continued. It seemed as if they were losing quickly, but not fast enough. The allied armies swarmed in, overwhelming the few trolls that were still alive. It was a total victory within five minutes of their arrival, and not a troll was left standing.

Jeff led the way back to Riverbend. Crowds of people now lined the streets, first watching the battle and now rejoicing over the victorious returning knights.

After they had returned from the battlefield, the leaders of each of the armies assembled in King John's former palace to discuss future plans. Christopher was invited, along with the rest of the party and several dignified leaders. Knights were sent out to bury the dead outside the town and to restore the town to order.

After they had entered the palace and exchanged greetings, the twelve in the palace sat down to make plans. The king of Seatown, who identified himself as Benjamin, sat to their left, while the queen of Gangton, Marta | sat on their right at the long, rectangular table that was in the palace hall. The five of

them sat between, while Jeff and the other guests sat across.

Earlier, before the conference, Jeff had opened the former King's secret room and exposed the contents: pages and pages of intelligence from knights who had been spying on their supposed allies. Jeff, not knowing whether it would be put to good use or not, had saved it for a later time.

Presently, Jeff was speaking. "I don't think that that is such a good idea," he interrupted. "If we are to send an all-out assault on Yavin's castle right now, he would be prepared and crush us immediately."

"We must do so now, before the winter approaches. It is October 4th," said king Benjamin. "By the time that knights are sent to the castle, it will be at least two months. We must not delay!"

"Sir, I will not sacrifice my army on a foolish, hastily prepared attack on Yavin's castle," queen Marta said. "If you wish to ruin our chances of victory, you may continue. But I will not participate."

"I agree," Jeff said. "Most of my army is already in shambles, and we need time to recover."

"Well, then we're back to where we started," Benjamin stated indignantly, glaring across the table at Jeff.

"We could wait until spring to attack," Marta suggested. "That way, the conditions would be more favorable."

"It might be too long," Jeff disagreed. "Yavin could double or triple his power at this rate in a half-year. We need to attack soon, even if it means in the middle of winter."

"That's suicide," one of the guests said. "During the winters up north, the sun never rises. It's cold enough to freeze to death by just taking a nap."

"What if we attacked the troll stronghold that the trolls that just attacked us came from? Who knows how many trolls are still there?" Christopher asked politely, almost mockingly to Benjamin.

"By doing that," Katie said, "we would take out a major source of support for Yavin, and finish the attack in the middle of the winter."

"That is an excellent plan!" king Benjamin agreed.

"I agree," Jeff said.

"Well," Marta thought, almost as if she couldn't decide. "I'll go along with it."

"Finally, we have a plan we can all agree on!" Benjamin

shouted and slammed the table.

"Now there's the matter of specifics," Jeff continued. "We can't use our entire armies on this mission while Yavin quietly returns to our towns and takes them over."

"But we don't have enough men left to defend the towns if we want to mount a decent offensive," Benjamin pointed out.

"This presents a major problem," Marta pointed out uselessly.

"This has never been done before in my kingdom," Benjamin suggested, "But we could institute a draft."

There was silence. Then the queen stood up and shouted outright, "No!"

"I'm afraid I'll have to concur," Jeff agreed sullenly. "If we don't, everybody is going to die anyway or live miserable lives when we fail, so a few soldiers who perish in battle is better off, but still..." he fell silent.

"I will not have my people subjected to this," the lively queen yelled so that Dave thought the entire world would be able to hear.

"It's the only way," Christopher said, keeping his cool. "We have to put up a resistance."

"Well," the queen said, gasping for words, but she could find none. "I guess I'll have to go along." There was a sigh of relief that seemed to echo throughout the room.

"It's settled then. I think we can all agree that we should take a week to gather our resources," Jeff said, and the other two nodded their heads.

"Then, Benjamin," Jeff continued after they had agreed, "We should meet in Seatown on the eleventh of October to start our journey." After he replied, the leaders and their guests processed out, leaving Jeff and the five together in the room.

"That wasn't as easy as I thought," Jeff said. "But there's another matter I need to discuss with you."

"What?" Christopher asked.

"We just discovered the traitor John's body slaughtered among the trolls. This means that we must appoint a new king for Riverbend."

"You are the most worthy person," Katie pointed out to Jeff.

"Possibly," Jeff replied, thinking for a moment. "But I am a military man, and would rather lead my armies to victory instead of handling domestic matters."

"Who, then, are you going to appoint?" Christopher asked.

"I am going to appoint you," Jeff said. "If you would accept the honor."

Christopher sat in stunned silence. Nobody could think of a word to say after this happening.

"You would make a great king," Chapin suggested.

"But..." Christopher said. "I have people to take care of back home in the village."

"There won't be any need to take care of them after we defeat Yavin, which is when you would begin your duties," Jeff explained.

"After we defeat Yavin?" Christopher asked.

"Yes," Jeff replied. "I will appoint someone to care for the town until we return, when you will become king. I knew you wouldn't want to miss out on the action."

"If you put it that way," Christopher said slowly, "I guess I'll have to accept."

"Good choice," Mike said.

"Now, let the people see their new king," Jeff said, motioning toward the door. "They've been waiting for you."

"What?" Christopher asked in surprise, but stood up and walked toward the door. Through a crack in the door, he could see the crowd of people outside the palace.

A cheer rose up as he exited the palace.

The rest of the week was not uneventful. Between sleeping and eating, the group of five helped to do chores such as helping to restore order after the battle. A memorial service was held on the second day for all those that had died, and a large tombstone was built outside the town where the trolls had made their last stand. The battering ram, which had crashed into a house, was moved to the town square to stand as a monument to those who opposed them. It now stood as the second highest structure in the town, below the palace, of course.

All the people in the town were actively involved in the war now. Those that had been selected to become knights trained all day. The smiths of Riverbend made enough armor to clothe the entire army. Others helped sew heavy clothing for the knights as they were to trek in the cold winter.

Finally, when it was time to leave the town on the fifth day, everybody seemed prepared. After the usual goodbyes and formalities, they were able to be moving by 10:00 that morning. It would take two days, with one night in between, to make the short journey to Seatown.

That night, nothing much of consequence occurred, and they continued the journey the next day, arriving at Seatown at sunset, at the same time the army of Gangton was arriving. In addition, several thousand other knights had camped out around the area from neighboring kingdoms willing to contribute in the war effort.

Inside the town, the leaders of the three kingdoms, Christopher, Benjamin, and Marta, among other dignified persons, had their last full meal together for a long time in the hall of Seatown. They had packed enough food that could last two months on strict rationing; one if eaten normally. They had also brought along hunters if food was desperate.

Looking around the hall, the group could see that, while most of the people were joyful about the undertaking that was about to occur, others were sad that they might never see their husbands again after they went to war. Still others had a look of fear, wondering what Yavin would do to them if they lost this battle.

Fortunately, however, there was time to test their skills on the trolls at the camp first. This, though, would be no easy battle, either. They had estimated the day before that there were

some 25,000 trolls in the camp, all poised to take them out. The attack that had just occurred had proven that. Hopefully, the trolls' numbers had dwindled substantially enough so that they could attack and be successful.

It had been agreed that they would travel directly north and arrive at the troll camp within a week. After defeating the trolls, they would press on as quickly as possible, because any delay might cost them the world. They had to get as far as they could before the winter snows set in and would hamper their travel.

The next morning, it was finally time to go. When all the knights had gathered in the town square, the three leaders each gave a farewell speech.

"We will return home in victory," Christopher was saying. "Or we will not return home at all.

"All of the evils that Yavin has forced upon the world in the past twenty-five years will be vanquished with this march. By spring, we will return home proclaiming the good news.

"However," he continued, changing his tone, "we cannot fight alone. You, the people, must help. If you lose hope, we can never win. Therefore, we must put aside all the differences between our kingdoms, and stay together."

There was a murmur of understanding. Christopher simply said next, "We now proceed." He motioned to the knights in front to begin. The long ranks of knights filed out of the city walls, stretching miles long, numbering in the tens of thousands.

"I only hope we can survive," Christopher said glumly to Jeff as they left the gates. Only the cold, dark nights, the unknown, and Yavin's immense power lay before them.

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"Beautiful night," Dave commented, in spite of the chilly breeze blowing off the river to the west and the drizzle that never seemed to go away.

"Right," Mike said but not entirely sarcastically. Compared to some of the weather they had been experiencing before, tonight was a welcome break. The past six days had been cold and windy, much too cold for this time of year in that region. Yet, it was only a taste of what they would have to deal with when they arrived.

Presently, they were trekking through a forest, one of the few before the great plains that lay ahead. It would be fortunate that they would be traveling during the fall and winter, because in the summer, the heat would most likely be intense.

They stopped that night in a grove of trees. The edge of the forest was only a short distance away, and only shortly after that, the troll encampment. If they were to attack, it would have to be tomorrow, to give the trolls as little time as possible to get prepared.

As the knights around them were going through their possessions, |the five, along with Marta, Benjamin, and Jeff. It had been decided that they would leave excess items hidden in the forest, with a small guard in case thieves dropped by. The rest of the knights would march toward the stronghold and begin the battle late that day.

Surprise was going to be their only advantage. A spy had revealed before that the fortification stood on a hill, with guard towers around the entire structure and walls that stood many feet high. The trolls that were encamped within the base were alleged to be in numbers of over twenty thousand. While there were about two thousand more knights in the army than trolls, it would be a battle well-earned.

Several commanders of the army suggested that they send for reinforcements. It was decided that the best course of

action, however, would be to press on before the trolls also secured reinforcements.

As night finally fell and it was time to attack, it became obvious that the knights were becoming increasingly anxious and ready to move against the trolls. The delay was being caused by a group who had moved ahead to provide knowledge of defenses that were protecting the base.

Finally, the group returned with bad news. It appeared that the trolls had just brought in reinforcements of a thousand men. The good news was that if the trolls were caught unprepared, it might be possible to get into the fort with little trouble.

The orders were given by Jeff to move out immediately. It was only an hour to the fort from where they were located. In the plains, though, they were unprotected and vulnerable from all sides. They arrived within visual range of the fort about an hour and a half after leaving.

Hiding in the grass, the army out of range of the sight of the guards, they attempted to ascertain the strength of the fort's defenses. There were three guard towers on each wall. It was hard to believe that there were over 22,000 trolls inside, as the fortress looked as if it could barely support a castle, let alone a full-functioning military encampment.

It was pitch dark outside, and to their benefit the trolls had no shortage of lighting inside the fort. This would allow the knights to get closer without much interference.

The orders were finally given to move toward the fort. The first line carried bows and arrows, since other weapons would be useless until they were able to gain entry. Knights both on foot and on horseback followed.

Behind the lines, the strategists were planning the attack. The others had appointed Jeff as commander after seeing his skills played out in the battle of Riverbend.

"We need to eliminate the guards in the towers first," Jeff was explaining. "If we don't, our entire army will be slaughtered by a handful of trolls in the towers."

"How are we going to penetrate their defenses? It would be impossible to destroy the towers because other guards would just come up to take their place," Christopher reminded.

"That's where you three come in," Jeff suggested. "Using the Stones, it might be possible to destroy the ladders leading to the towers through magic. Then, the fort being

defenseless from the outside, they would be forced to either open the doors and come out fighting, or we can lay siege to them."

"Not having walkways on the top of the walls is a big weakness," Mike said, looking at the fort in the distance. The knights had been ordered to wait for the time being.

"I don't know if it will be possible to use the stones in this instance," Katie said.

"Why not?" Jeff asked.

"Well," she replied, "The stones' powers were badly drained a week ago in Riverbend. It might not be possible to use them again until they've recharged, which could take months."

"There must be some way to speed the process," Queen Marta suggested, glaring at Jeff because of this annoyance.

"I don't believe there is any way, your majesty," Chapin said quietly.

"Well, then," Jeff said, "we'll just have to deal with what we have. We are close enough now. According to the rules laid out in the Council of Seatown two years ago, all of the leaders of state present must agree in order to wage war. King Benjamin, do you agree?"

"Yes, I do," he replied exuberantly.

"I vote yes," Jeff said. "Queen Marta?"

"Well, all right," she said, sounding a bit flustered.

"Send a message to the front lines to attack immediately," Jeff said to a knight next to him who was protecting him during the journey.

"Yes, sir," he said and ran away at top speed. The leaders departed, each going to command their sections of the huge army that was now marching toward the fortress.

Less than ten seconds later, the clanking of swords and arrows was heard. A guard stationed above the gate sounded the alarm. A loud siren, probably powered by magic, began to chime. Suddenly the battlefield came alive; but at this point, it was clear that the allied knights had the upper hand. Though some of their men had fallen in front, others rushed up and the guards were soon overwhelmed before the rest of the trolls' army could mobilize.

"The stones," Jeff said. "Now!"

Christopher, Katie, and Chapin began to chant, holding the stones out in front of them. They were shining at only a fraction of the power that they had held before. Nevertheless, a cloud of brilliant colors began to spiral upward above the pulsating stones. For a brief moment, it looked as if the spell would work and the knights would be able to rush inside to victory. Suddenly, however, a dark cloud descended over the battlements, obscuring their view. The light from the stones stopped, and they oscillated wildly in the hands of their wielders.

The knights looked around wildly, but the trolls continued to fight despite the distraction, as if it weren't even there. Finally, the stones' light winked out. Nothing had changed. The spell had failed.

"What was that?" Christopher yelled among the noise of the battle.

"Some kind of spell that someone inside must have cast on us to prevent our tactics," Jeff said, riding up to them. "A knight near the front lines reports that he heard chanting inside before that happened.

"What do we do now? The stones have been completely drained," Katie pointed out.

There was a cry from near them. A knight fell, an arrow protruding from his leg. The four moved farther back. "We'll have to go to the contingency plan I devised earlier," Jeff said.

"And that is . . . ?" Mike asked hurriedly.

"We attempt to scale the walls. Some will die, but in the end we will be victorious." He rode off without waiting for them to say a word.

"We have nothing to do here, then," Christopher said. "Let's fall back and watch from over there so we don't get killed by a stray arrow."

As the three hurried back to join Mike and Dave, who had been behind the army helplessly watching the battle, the front lines surged toward the walls, while those behind them picked off the guards in the towers. The battle seemed to be progressing just as planned. Though some fell before they reached the walls, there were knights right behind them, waiting to serve.

The lack of defense along the top of the walls worked to their advantage. Because of this, the trolls could simply not place enough men there to adequately defend the fort. As a

result, the knights surged up and over the walls, and sword fights erupted in the towers.

As the battle raged, some managed to enter the fort, but, suddenly, nothing was happening. Though those who were able to penetrate the fort were expected to open the gates, there was no response from the inside. Suspecting a trap, Jeff ordered his men to fall back and see what happened next.

Though the trolls regained control of the guard towers, that was nothing compared to the disaster that was about to befall them. The gates began to open, and, before any of the knights could take advantage of this and enter, thousands of trolls emerged. What occurred next was nothing short of a complete massacre.

The huge trolls overwhelmed the knights and outnumbered them by over 2 to 1. The noise was deafening. From the back lines, Katie, Christopher, Dave, Mike, and Chapin could hear nothing, but saw the trolls advancing and the knights retreating toward them. Realizing that they were in grave danger if they didn't move immediately, they turned and ran as fast as they could.

The knights, even though they were more conditioned than they were, were wearing heavy armor that slowed them down. Some, near the back and away from immediate danger, realized that the armor wouldn't do any good against a troll twice their size, and shed it onto the battlefield.

Jumping over pieces of armor and occasional dead bodies, the five ran for their lives. After about ten minutes, they could run no longer, but the trolls didn't stop to wait. Pressing on as best they could, they continued. Christopher and Chapin, who were accomplished swords people but now over sixty, lagged behind after a while.

Finally, after about twenty minutes, the trolls appeared to have been called back by their leader. The five stumbled through the grass that was up to their shoulders until they collapsed from exhaustion. When they stopped, a few knights who had managed to escape the disaster helped them back to the camp from the night before.

When they reached the camp, they found no more than a hundred trolls, all that was left of their army. The guards, who were protecting the possessions of the knights and who had obviously not been expecting a total massacre were now

rummaging through them to bring what they could back to the families.

"Have they returned yet?" one knight on the far corner of the camp asked.

"Not yet," another replied.

"Who are they talking about?" Christopher asked the knight.

"The King and Queen, of course," he replied. "And Jeff."

Jeff had never bothered with formal titles, as all his knights plainly called him "Jeff". But that was inconsequential now that he was missing and that they had suffered such a vast defeat.

The five went to sleep and awoke sometime after dawn. It was a chilly day again, but then it was already near the end of October. The grass that had been almost shoulder high and green the night before was now drooping and yellowed. Frost lingered on the remaining leaves of the sparse trees. Now there was no cover whatsoever for their camp, but they would also be able to see anyone within miles in any direction.

The camp had grown overnight, and there were now about a hundred-fifty knights around. Many were injured and lay on the ground recovering. Some didn't make it. There appeared to be one knight, who was decorated as a division leader, who had been coordinating the escape effort.

Christopher approached him. "What are we going to do now?"

"I don't know," he replied. "I'm not in charge here. I don't know who is."

"We have to move quickly," Christopher said. "If the trolls find us, we'll all be killed."

"Are you appointing yourself leader? Jeff had said to me that you were capable if anything happened to him," the knight asked him bluntly.

"Not if anyone else has," Christopher replied smartly.

"Good." The knight smiled. "You can deal with this. I'm going to take a nap." No sooner had he said that then he was gone to the other end of the campground.

"Well," Mike said. "That was quick."

"As I see it," Christopher said, getting right down to business, "We have a few options." He paused.

When nobody said anything, he continued. “We can return to the cities and stay there. That might not be advisable since the trolls most likely have already set out to attack them since there aren’t enough knights there to hold them off. We can head north and continue our quest with the knights. Or, with some extreme luck, we might find a town along the way and add to our ranks.”

“Do you really think the towns have been destroyed?” Mike asked him.

“Well, if-“ Christopher stopped because a knight was rushing toward him.

“I heard you were in charge now,” he said as he skidded to a stop, panting. “There’s bad news. The trolls just sent a force of at least thirty thousand out toward Riverbend,” he said.

“Thanks,” Dave said solemnly, and the knight went away.

“There’s not enough power in the entire Harrogen army to hold away thirty thousand enraged trolls,” Chapin said quietly.

“Our decision has been made then,” Christopher said. “Our only choice is to continue our quest. Let’s see what the knights think.”

Christopher then went to speak to the knights. Many were lying on the ground, injured, attended to by others who had medical expertise, but they understood, just as the unhurt did, that their hometowns were gone.

They stayed there that night, and decided that it would be best to leave the day after that, so that the injured could recuperate. It was getting colder every day, it seemed, and the nights were cold enough that blankets were now required. The last leaves fluttered off the trees, and frost highlighted whatever was still alive in the landscape.

When it was finally time to go, there were several knights who were still unable to walk on their own. Two had died since returning to the camp, and they were left in a grave near the center of what used to be it. They then set off to the north and west, away from the troll stronghold, and finally turned due north.

They were only in possession of seven horses, as the rest had been killed or stolen during the battle. Since there were an equal number of injured men, it was necessary to allow them to ride the horses. The rest walked. It was easy walking through

the plains, but the distance they were required to travel left them tired each night.

Since the days were growing shorter, it was necessary to walk as far as possible during the day in order to move as fast as possible. The nights were clear and cold, and it was impossible to walk in the pitch darkness. There wasn't a town in sight.

By the fifth day, they were far enough away from the troll stronghold in order to slow down. If the trolls had gone to destroy the towns, they would not be pursuing them northward.

Fortunately, they and the knights had packed enough supplies to allow them to survive for months during the harsh winters. Unfortunately, the sheer volume of supplies required that they load extra packs onto the few horses they had.

The absence of towns continued. Now Mike knew why this area was denoted on Christopher's map as the "Great Plains." The knights, surprisingly, never questioned Christopher's newfound authority. Dave, who was younger than the others, tired quickly. There weren't any bands of rouges as they had had to deal with before, so this part of the journey was comparatively easy, even though it was colder than a month ago. The trek continued on for days...

The ground was hard now that it was beginning to freeze, Mike thought to himself as he shifted restlessly. Nobody else seemed to be having his problem, as they were all tired from the trek for days before.

The sun was beginning to rise in the East, and along with it, the month of November began. They now estimated that they were about three weeks' travel east of the Dark Forest, and approaching Yavin's stronghold fast. With luck, they could be there by December, depending on how soon the weather turned for the worse.

It was a crisp, clear morning. Deciding that he could sleep no longer, Mike got up and walked to the perimeter of where the knights were sleeping. He spotted Dave, Katie, and Chapin a few feet away, but Christopher was sleeping near the other knights, as he had other matters to attend to.

It had been so long since Mike had seen his home that he was now unsure of his motives for embarking on this quest. When he had tried the same twenty five years ago, he had attempted it to get home. Now, his home was in whatever world

he was in. Mike had thought many times whether, given the choice, he would return, and had come to no definite conclusion.

Walking around, leaves and dead plants crumbled under his feet on the frozen ground. The sun began to warm the air, and knights began to stir around. The watch that night had been a knight named Timothy, and he was beginning to nod off as the others woke up. The watches (there were three each night) were given the privileges of riding the horses the next day.

Timothy now awoke Christopher, since the sun was now high enough for them to continue. They were on the move by about eight O'CLOCK. This day seemed to be no different than the others. Each was harder than the last, it seemed.

Around noon, a knight suddenly shouted, "Look up!"

Christopher, in the front, looked to their right to find a dark speck in the sky unlike any he had seen before.

"What is it?" he asked in reply. "Is it a calk?"

"Everyone get down!" Chapin shouted, and the group hit the ground. However, the black spot did not appear to be getting any closer.

"All right," Christopher said. "Stand up."

"What do you think it is?" one knight asked suspiciously.

"It could be some sort of deception that Yavin is trying to fool us with," Katie replied.

"Is it safe to find out what it is?" Dave asked Christopher.

"There's only one way we can find out," Christopher replied. "Onward!"

The group turned to the east and trekked toward whatever was in the sky. Since it was only a few miles off of their track, it wouldn't waste much time. It could prove to be a valuable find, however, and that was something that Christopher did not want to miss.

As they grew closer, the outline grew more apparent until one knight suddenly shouted out, "It's a city in the sky!"

The rest of the group stopped and looked up. Indeed, the outline of buildings was apparent. From where they were standing, the city appeared by be rather large, even larger than Riverbend.

"What's holding it up?" Dave asked in awe. There was no visible support. From directly underneath, the city would

appear to be a slab of dirt high up in the sky. Above it, a dome of light shone over it.

"There must be some source of magic," Chapin suggested. "But why build a town in the sky when you can build it on the ground?"

"I don't know," Christopher said, "but there must be some way to find out."

"What are we supposed to do," Katie suggested sarcastically. "Climb all the way up there on a rope?"

"No, even better," Christopher retorted. "We'll use magic to fight against magic."

"Are you suggesting that we use to stones to somehow get us up there?"

Suddenly, the ground began to shake, slightly at first, and then growing more and more violent. Above the earthquake, the dome above the sky city seemed to flicker for a minute, and then return to its normal luminosity. The quake ceased.

Before anyone could talk, Christopher said, "We must find out what this is now."

"The stones are only half regenerated," Katie said. After all these years, the secret to the stones' regenerative properties had finally been realized by Mike, who suggested that the moon recharged the stones once every lunar cycle. It had only been two weeks since the encounter with the trolls.

"We'll have to deal with what we've got," Christopher said.

"Do you know of any spell that could transport us that far?" Chapin asked, looking up at the city, which was almost a thousand feet up.

"I believe so," he replied, chucking. "I may be old, but I remember a lot."

"Well then," Katie said, "do you think you could bother teaching it to us?" Christopher and the other two elementals discussed the spell amongst themselves for at least a half hour after that. When they were prepared, they held the stones up toward the sky and began chanting.

All of a sudden, it seemed as if they were moving. Beams of light came down from the sky from the city and brought them along the light until, before they knew it, they dematerialized in a narrow alleyway between large buildings.

The city was huge from what they could see, but very

organized. The entire place was laid out in a grid pattern, with narrow alleys between buildings. Every now and then, people passed into their view by walking down the main street. They were dressed differently than most people who lived on the ground. Some carried unknown objects at their sides, which looked like the three stones that the elementals possessed.

Behind them was the end of the city. There was no rail or wall, just a drop into emptiness a thousand feet below. Mike went to the edge to feel for any obstructions. Sure enough, he was met with resistance when he tried to place his hand over the edge. The partially invisible force field must protect the citizens from falling to their doom. The buildings around him were made of stone, but were huge, much larger than any other buildings he had seen in this world before. The noise was deafening compared to before.

When she looked behind her, Katie saw the entire army of knights standing there. "I thought only we were supposed to come," she stated indignantly. "We're going to get killed!"

"The spell is unpredictable," Christopher said.

They looked around. It was loud inside, quite different from the quiet there was on the plains. The dome above was barely visible, unlike the force field that had protected Riverbend.

Telling the knights to stay where they were and not make a sound, Christopher peeked around the corner of the buildings to a larger street. He was spotted immediately by a person wearing distinguishing clothes, and looked of some importance.

"Welcome to the sky city Almheinz," he said. "We've been waiting a long time for you."

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"Waiting for us?" Christopher asked. "I didn't even know about this city a day ago."

"You can practice magic, can you not?" the man asked.

"Yes," Christopher replied.

"Oh, but allow me to introduce myself. I am Edward, 5th member of the governing council."

"Governing council?" Katie asked, coming out from the shadows. Edward turned toward her and noticed the knights standing in the alleyway.

"Are you coming to invade our city?" he asked angrily, reaching into his pocket.

"No!" Christopher said. "This is all a misunderstanding! Put your weapons on the ground!" The knights obeyed.

Edward cautiously removed his hand from his pocket. It was obvious that something bulky was located inside, but he did not bring it out with him.

"Then why did you bring these knights with you?" he asked in a more subtle mood now, gesturing toward the group standing along the buildings.

"It was an accident. We were only planning to teleport ourselves here, to find out why a city was floating in the sky. It does look strange from the ground."

Edward mumbled something, and smiled.

"Excuse me?" Christopher asked politely.

"Beginner's luck," he replied with an abrupt mood change. "Many who suddenly appear here also find that they have produced unwanted effects."

"May I ask how this city is kept in the sky?" Chapin asked, moving out of the alley, which was now flooded in bright sunshine at the noon hour.

"Magic, of course," Edward replied. "But to disclose the spell would be treason, as our enemies could easily attack that way."

"I understand," Christopher said politely.

"Well," Edward said. "Come to the capitol building

tonight. We'll continue our discussion there. If you'll excuse me, I have some matters to attend to."

"Of course," Christopher said, and watched as Timothy ran off down the street. The knights, who had been standing behind them, watching the proceedings, now seemed to be less tense than before.

"What was that about?" Mike asked Christopher after the excitement had died down.

"They're obviously trying to hide something," he replied. "But what? Why would they build a city in the sky?"

"For defense, of course," Katie said matter-of-factly.

"I don't think so," Christopher replied. "If they had built the city this high up and used magic to defend themselves, then why can anyone who knows the spell get up here? Yavin could teleport an army of trolls here to destroy and loot everything."

"Perhaps the city was built before Yavin came to power," Dave suggested.

"Possible," Chapin said, "but not likely. This all seems too... new!" Looking around, they discovered that she was right. There wasn't a speck of dirt on the side of the buildings, which were several stories tall and made of materials that Christopher didn't even know existed a few days before.

"If not for defense," Christopher said carefully, "then why build this city?" Nobody answered, as they didn't have a clue as to why this would be.

"Well, let's return the knights to the surface," Chapin suggested in a low voice.

"I agree," Christopher said. Katie?"

Katie came toward them, knowing why she had been called. "Help us send the knights back," he said, and then turned to the knights. "Timothy will..."

"Where is Timothy?" Dave asked.

"He's not around here..," Christopher replied after looking behind them. The knights stood rigid as stones, as if they were afraid to move.

"Sir, he wasn't in the group before we came up here, I remember now," one of the knights said.

"That's bad news," Christopher said gravely. "Why would he desert us?"

"He might simply have been separated from the group," Katie said.

"That's unlikely," Christopher said. "We would have noticed that by now. There's some magic at work. Why hasn't anybody seen Timothy since this morning?"

The knights looked around, but nobody answered. Likewise, the five didn't answer either; Instead, directing their stares over the knights.

"Some sort of enchantment has made us forget about Timothy. But why, and who would cast such a spell?" Mike asked.

"Was it possible that Timothy could have been a spy?" Dave looked around. The wind, even with the force field, was picking up as if a storm was coming. Thick clouds rolled in over the horizon below.

"If he was a spy," Katie deducted, "then why would whoever he's spying for decide to whisk him away just before we came up here?"

"To avoid suspicion, perhaps," Christopher suggested. "Or because he already knew what he needed to know."

"What could he need to know? We're a rogue band of knights without a hometown. Yavin could wipe us out any time he wants. Timothy was looking for something more, I'm sure of it," Chapin said. "But what could that be?"

"Everyone check your possessions," Christopher yelled to the knights. The knights opened their bags and at once discovered the problem - their entire food supply had suddenly turned putrid for no apparent reason.

"These rations were just fine yesterday," one knight screamed from the back, pulling some rotten fruit out of a pouch and discarding it.

"The cause might not be a spy, but this town itself," Katie pointed out, eyeing the buildings around her suspiciously. "Has anyone noticed even a single source of food around here?"

There wasn't a tree in sight. There weren't even flowers on the windowsills. A single source of vegetation was not visible anywhere throughout the entire city!

"The residents have to go somewhere for food," Dave said.

"Of course," Christopher said. "Do they go down to the surface? I didn't see anything down there."

"Some magic is at work, and one of the side effects may be to spoil the food that is up here," Mike suggested.

"Then the entire town would have to go down to the surface for nourishment," Christopher said. "But that would be a vulnerability that could be easily exploited. Imagine - an army of trolls waiting down below for everyone to come to eat. And what about during this time of year, when there isn't any food to be found?"

"OK," Dave suggested. "Let's send the knights back to the surface and we'll continue."

"Good idea," Christopher said, "but look - the stones are completely drained again!"

"Well," Chapin said, looking up toward the sun, which was now in its midafternoon phase. "I think we had better start heading toward the Capitol building, wherever that is."

"Look up," Mike suggested in a bland voice. "It's not hard to find." A large steeple rose above the rest of the city to a height which Christopher had previously thought impossible.

"Well, let's get there then," he replied gruffly and started off. The rest of the knights followed, suppressing a chuckle.

Two hours later, through numerous delays, they were finally able to reach the building. It stood enormously tall in front of them. The building was a sparkling green color that was elevated above the rest of the city on its foundation. The front steps were several stories high by themselves.

They went up the stairs of the huge edifice just as the sun was beginning to blink out over the horizon. Inside, they could hear nothing. The doors to the place were so huge that it was impossible for a single man to open them. Chapin, Christopher, and Katie held the door while the others entered. The knights were instructed to stay outside.

Looking back down the stairs, the large battalion of knights had attracted quite a crowd. As they entered the building and the door slammed shut, they were in a large room. A single ray of light shone through a decorative fixture in the center of the room. The rest of the hall was lit by candles stationed around the edges of the chamber.

There was not a soul in sight. Three doors led off into separate adjoining rooms at the far end; otherwise, there was no exit in sight except the way they had come in.

Approaching the three doors, Christopher immediately shouted “Hello?”, but there was no response. The words echoed throughout the hall, and continued for longer than seemed natural. Behind the left door, a corridor slanted off, upward, around the edges of the building. The center door was locked. The right door led into a similar corridor, this one leading downward.

“What do we do now that nobody’s here?” Katie asked.

“We can’t just leave,” Mike said. “There’s something up, and we need to find out what it is.”

“Why would they abandon the entire building like this?” Chapin asked nobody in particular, talking half to herself.

“That’s what we need to figure out,” Dave said.

“Let’s split up,” Christopher suggested. “I’ll go with Dave up the left corridor, while Katie and Chapin go down the right.”

“What should I do?” Mike asked.

“Go outside and keep order with the trolls. If we don’t return in - Christopher looked up thoughtfully - two hours, get the knights and yourself out of here and continue the quest.”

“How will I do that without the stones?” he asked in reply.

“The same way we’d do it, because the stones are drained anyway,” Katie pointed out.

“You’ll figure something out if it’s necessary,” Christopher said. “Let’s go before something bad happens.”

Nodding to each other, the five split up into their appointed paths. Mike was halfway to the door when he turned around to ask how he was going to open the door, but the others had departed into the depths of the building.

He headed for the door as quickly as possible, remembering that the door was too heavy to open. He banged as hard as he could, but it didn’t budge. Suddenly, there was a loud noise from outside. The knights, watching the situation, had heard his plea and come to his aid.

The two knights that held the door open had a worried expression on their faces. Mike ventured outside, being careful to clear the doorway when the massive entrance swung shut.

“What’s the problem?” Mike asked the knights, but immediately realized what was wrong before they answered. The entire area outside was deserted. Except for the nervous

chattering of the knights, there wasn't a sound to be heard.

"What happened?" Mike asked one of the knights.

"I don't know," he said truthfully. "I was standing here looking around. I looked toward the capitol building, and when I turned back, everyone was gone!"

"Same here," a knight behind him added.

"Everyone felt the urge to look away at the same time," the knight said. "This is certainly some kind of trickery."

"Looking upward, Mike saw that dark clouds now partially obscured the night sky, so that only a few stars were visible here and there. The clouds themselves did not look unnatural, but they looked unusual within the current situation, as if they somehow fit in.

"I'm going to take a look around," Mike said, not knowing what better to do. He set off in a random direction, down an alleyway between tall buildings, which were equally barren. The lights, which were lit by an unknown source, that were in the streets, were still visible, as if nothing had happened. Candles continued to burn in the windows of the houses.

Mike continued down several more streets. In the dark, it was becoming hard to see the steeple of the capitol building, so he decided that he had seen enough. It was easy enough to navigate back by looking up.

As Mike was making his way back, there was suddenly a bright, blue flash. The blue light lit up the city, its origin being a dome that now covered the city. It looked similar to the force field that had held Riverbend while reinforcements had arrived. As suddenly as it appeared, however, it vanished two seconds later, leaving not a trace that it had existed.

Five minutes later, Mike was back with the congregation of the knights. They, too, had seen the flash, and hit Mike with a thousand questions that he had no answers to. He guessed that the others somehow understood, though...

Christopher and Dave started down the corridor. It sloped gently upward behind a wall until it finally opened up ten feet above the capitol floor. A flimsy railing guarded them from falling on their left, while the path hugged the wall, winding upward. They could see five tiers of the path above them. It was a long, hard climb to the top door, and it took at least fifteen minutes to walk up the constantly sloping path to finally reach

the top.

The railing stopped halfway up, leaving the two to fend for themselves throughout the perilous descent up.

Dave tried the door first, but it was locked. “All this way to be stopped for a locked door?” he complained in disgust.

“This door isn’t locked by ordinary means,” Christopher said, inspecting the lock, which had no keyhole and had a strange aura to it that was hard to pinpoint.

“It might be impossible to get it open then,” Dave said. “If it was locked by conventional methods, we could simply burst it down.”

“Wait,” Christopher said, holding up his hand. “Let me try something.” He took the water stone out of his pocket and held it up to the door. The door rumbled. Suddenly, the stone flew out of Christopher’s hand backward. He gasped as he stumbled toward open air. Dave reached out his hand and was able to save him just as he was about to fall to his death below. Below them, the stone continued to fall, and hit the ground with a ping. A blinding, blue flash came out that seemed even to penetrate the walls of the room. The door in front of Christopher and Dave blast off its hinges and flew back into the darkness of the room. The blue light turned back to darkness, and all was quiet.

“Are you OK?” Christopher asked Dave. The lights near the ground of the building had gone out after the flash, and, as a result, the large hall was in complete darkness.

“Yes,” Dave said. Neither moved, lest they make a mistake in the darkness. The path had many twists and turns, so it would be impossible to retreat back down in the pitch dark. Continuing on was their only choice.

Christopher felt for the doorway, which was to his right. To his left, the path ended into oblivion. The door frame appeared sturdy, so he grabbed onto the sides of the frame to steady himself while he inched closer. At one point, he made a mistake that could have proven fatal had he not been guarding against it: his foot slipped over the edge. He said for Dave to follow, who, in turn, carefully moved into the doorway. As soon as Christopher reached across the doorway, however, lights appeared inside, apparently activated by his entrance. Though it was still impossible to see throughout the hall, Dave and Christopher were able to enter the room, which was now brightly

lit.

The entire room was filled with controls of all kinds: including monitors that looked highly advanced for the time and knobs and switches that must have performed a thousand different functions.

"What is this?" Christopher asked Dave.

"It must be some kind of magic," Dave replied. "But why would there be a huge control room like this? Who would use it? What would it be for?"

"This may control the entire city," Christopher said thoughtfully. "Let's take a look around."

Christopher went over to the far corner of the room, where several television screens showed pictures of the square outside the capitol building. Through one of them, he was able to discern Mike, who was milling around the knights, who appeared nervous and uneasy, despite their hardening through numerous battles.

"Look at this," Dave said. Christopher came across the room and stood behind him. There was a large switch in front of him.

"Look," he said. "It reads 'Master On'. I wonder what this could be for?"

"I don't know if we should mess around with it," Christopher said.

"For all we know, this could restore the entire world back to normal," Dave said. "It's at least worth trying."

Christopher stepped back and thought for a moment. If they pressed the switch, it could put the rest of the knights and the people of the city in mortal danger. If they didn't, however, a huge opportunity could be lost.

"OK, step back and let's throw the switch," Christopher said in a loud voice. Dave stepped away from the console and back to the other side of the room. Christopher, with little ceremony, pushed the switch upward, and jumped backward.

At first, nothing happened. Soon after, a low pitched noise began inside the huge cabinet under the switch, like a motor coming to life. Dave hadn't heard that sound for what seemed like ages. Outside in the hall, there was a flicker of light, and the two rushed over to the doorway. The candles that had lit the place before had now been relighted, and the sourceless lights that Christopher had noticed when he entered the hall were

now beginning to become visible again. The noise inside the control room continued to rise in pitch as the lights increased in intensity.

Within thirty seconds, the entire room was now relit. The humming noise inside the control room reached a peak, and continued to sound as if machinery were grinding away inside. Christopher ventured back inside the room, and Dave followed.

The room was now making as much noise as a full-fledged battle against an army of trolls. Other switches were now lit by an inner source. The next panel had two more large switches on it. One was roughly labeled "flight controls", and the other "simulation".

"What do we do now?" Dave asked Christopher unsurely.

"What do you think this would do?" Christopher asked Dave, gesturing toward the switch that read "simulation".

"There's only one way to find out," Dave replied. Without further approval, he stepped toward the switch and threw it back. Again, nothing appeared to happen at first, but the same humming sound now began to emit from the innards of the machine, and another control panel to its right lit up, the word "Ready" flashing across the screen.

"ENTER COMMAND," a gruff voice said from somewhere in the room.

"Who is it?" Christopher yelled, looking around him. There was no response.

"What should we do?" Dave asked fearfully.

"Let's go down and find the other three "

"INPUT ACCEPTED," the voice interrupted him. "ENTER LOCATION."

"What did I just do?" Christopher asked.

"Let's go find the others," Dave said hurriedly, rushing toward the door. "They're probably in the basement-"

"ACCEPTED," said the mechanical voice suddenly. Everything was quiet.

"Out of here!" Christopher yelled. He ran out the door and began descending the ramps. He stopped suddenly and was horrified by what he saw in front of him.

Katie and Chapin were descending the passage by the time that Mike was leaving the compound. As a result, they too

did not hear Mike's stopping. They did, however, hear the resulting slam of the door, and Christopher's and Dave's footsteps ascending to the heights of the building.

In front of them was a long corridor, which stretched as far ahead as could be seen. Down both sides, lights similar to the sourceless ones in the central chamber were lit. The corridor sloped downward at a great angle, making it difficult to walk steadily downward without being forced to run. It was slow going, but easy because of the brightness of the surroundings.

They finally reached the bottom five minutes later. Ahead of them stood another corridor, this one sloping downward in a spiraling circle, in a similar fashion to the one above.

The sides of the paths did not have rails, making the descent perilous, to say the least. The path was sloped so steeply that it was hard to stay close to the wall. It took what seemed like hours to finally complete their great descent.

At the bottom was a single room with a door leading into another one. It was slightly ajar, and voices were audible through the crack. Chapin motioned for Katie to be quiet, and stole their way across the doorway without being noticed. They then settled down to listen to what was going on inside.

"Have our guests arrived yet?" a man said. His voice was tough and lacked any kind of emotion whatsoever. There was a rumble as he slid what sounded like a chair aside so he could stand up.

"No, sir," another replied. "If they had, Vahmah would have reported the disturbance to us already."

"What is taking them so long?" the first voice asked to nobody in particular. There was some noise as if he had stomped his foot down. Katie shifted position to get a better look at the room from the crack in the door.

The room was square and rather small, but the entire floor was glass, with nothing additional to stop them from falling to the ground far below if it should break. The other three walls were also constructed purely of glass, making it possible to perceive a complete view of the surface from inside.

"I have complete faith in Vahmah," said the second voice, louder than before.

"He could easily have been captured by the five of them if the were able to avert through the security outside the

building," the first said.

"If I may interrupt," a completely different voice said, "Let's get back to business. There-" he was cut off when all the lights in the entire viewing area suddenly were extinguished. From where Chapin and Katie were positioned, the only source of light was from the windows, which gave a slight amount of light because it was night.

"What the-" the first voice said in an agitated tone.

"I see our guests have arrived," the second said calmly.

"Where is your Vahmah?" the third asked angrily.

"He was upstairs, watching to see when they arrived," came the reply.

"Well, they have either arrived now, or there's something really weird going on upstairs," the first voice said at a deafening volume.

"Don't just stand there!" the third voice exclaimed. "You two - get up there and see what's going on!"

"Yes, sir!" the second voice said. Katie and Chapin flattened themselves against the wall. Two large men came out of the room. Though they had muscular builds, they were not trolls; however, they would be quite a struggle for Christopher to take on. They did not see Katie and Chapin in the pitch darkness.

"Let's get upstairs!" Katie whispered to Chapin while this racket was going on.

"The whole place must be alerted now," Chapin replied just as softly. "We can't run up corridors that are one person wide! Our only choice is to stay here." Having committed themselves, they slouched back against the wall.

"I knew that something like this was going to happen," the first voice continued to fume.

"If we hadn't been assigned with those imbeciles," the third voice said, "None of this would have ever happened!"

Without any prior warning, the lights suddenly returned. Inside the room, the two men stood out of their chairs.

"See," the third voice said. "Everything's under control."

"Everything's not under control!" the first voice continued to scream. "The entire army of knights can be loose in here! We'll be discovered and murdered!"

"They can't get in," the third voice continued in a calm

matter. “I made sure to lock the front entrances before coming down here. Nobody’s going in or out.”

“Good. Let’s set our backup plan into motion.” There was a click, and a humming noise began. The lights flickered for a moment, and there were several noises inside.

“Reporting!” came the monotonous voice of what sounded like a few trolls.

“I want those five eliminated!” the first voice roared. “I don’t care what it takes, but they will not leave here alive!”

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The air was filled with pounding footsteps as the five knights rushed out of the room and up the corridor. There was something unnatural about them; as all their movements seemed short and jerky. They did, however, possess the ability to run exceedingly fast- so fast that they were out of sight around the corner before Chapin and Katie were able to react. Apparently, they had not been noticed again.

Inside the room, the argument continued. "How is it possible that they've discovered us?" the first voice screamed, loud enough that his wail was heard all over the compound.

"They weren't supposed to be able to get up here," the second said. "I thought I had blocked out their magic."

"Well, you didn't, did you?" the first said sarcastically. A loud crash was heard as the first threw something against one of the glass walls of the room. It didn't break, but bounced off with a loud TWANG and returned to the floor.

"What should we do?" Katie asked Chapin in a panic. "They're going to discover that we're here soon enough, but we can't run back up the corridor, either."

"Are there any other exits around here?" Chapin asked. "Look around."

The long, sloped corridor was to their left, with the entrance to the glass room to their right. Behind them was a dark, unknown space that had not returned to brightness when the lights had gone back on. The entire area had a surreal aspect to it, as if it was somehow being controlled.

Since it was impossible to find out what was lurking in the darkness without actually venturing into it, Katie motioned to Chapin to follow her. The room was larger than they had imagined. It stretched back at least a hundred feet, where they came upon a door. From the distance, it didn't appear to be a door because it was etched into the wall somehow.

Vainly, they tried to open it, but failed. Pressing her ear up to the door, Katie could hear a humming noise coming from the inside. Distraught, they returned to the door of the glass room to watch the conversation inside. Currently, all was silent. Upon looking inside, Katie and Chapin were surprised to find that nobody was there. The room looked as if it had been vacated in a hurry while they were inspecting the strange door.

Deciding that it was safe to venture inside if it was only for a second, Katie went inside, motioning for Chapin to watch the corridor that led down to where she was standing. If anyone was to attempt to sneak up on them, they would have to make their presence known first by entering through the corridor.

Inside, the room was unmemorable. There were a few chairs and a table. The entire room was glass, the strength of which surprised Katie when she jumped up and down. It must be enchanted, she thought.

On the wall, however, there was a strange panel that looked as if it didn't belong where it was. The walls were stark white; yet the panel was some sort of metal that didn't quite fit in. She tried to open it; however, it was sealed. Maybe Dave and Christopher knew what was going on...

Five large men loomed in front of Christopher and Dave, who stood still, not wanting to agitate them.

"What have you done?" the foremost of the group stated in a cybernetic tone.

"We weren't trying to do anything," Dave said, pleading. The others moved toward them in a menacing fashion. Suddenly, just as one reached out to grab Christopher, the entire building seemed to lurch.

"What's going on?" Dave asked in surprise as he was thrown backward. The giant men in front of them didn't seem to flinch. Christopher, noticing that rocks were falling from the ceiling, ran into the room, dragging Dave behind with him. The rockslide continued, blocking off the entrance to the door. The building stopped shaking, but suddenly, it felt to Dave and Christopher like they were falling. The giants outside were clawing at the rocks, but it would take them hours if they hoped to get in. They were safe from the moment.

There was one window in the room, and Dave looked out of it to discover that the ground was getting larger - the

floating city was falling toward the earth! Inside the room, one of the mysterious machines began to beep - the frequency increasing every second. Another machine in the room emitted a loud tone. Outside in the city, Dave could see Mike, scrambling with the knights.

"We don't have long!" Dave screamed. "We're falling - what are we going to do?"

"Try pressing those buttons over there!" Christopher said. "Anything! We have to stop this before we all get killed!" The beeping was growing more intense. The faint outlines of groups of trees in the plains were now becoming apparent. Outside the door to the room, the men had apparently given up, noticing their impending doom.

Dave rushed over to the machines that lined the walls and began to frantically push everything he could, but to no avail. The earth loomed up out the window. After pressing all of the buttons, and still being unsuccessful, Dave looked around for a last-ditch effort. Christopher was pounding at the strange machines on the opposite end of the room.

Without any prior warning, the beeping ceased. A second later, Dave and Christopher were knocked to the floor as the city abruptly stopped its descent.

"What just happened?" Dave asked, relieved. "Did you do anything?"

"I don't know," Christopher replied. "I was pounding on that thing over there when it stopped." He stood up, and Dave wasn't far behind. Looking out the window, they were no more than a hundred feet above the ground now. A few more seconds and they would have all perished, Dave thought.

"I don't think it matters why it stopped," Dave said, second guessing himself. "It seems to be stopped for now, so let's get ourselves and the others off this island."

"There's only one problem with that," Christopher said grimly, pointing at the doorway, which was now caved in with rocks.

"Could we use the stones to get out?" Dave asked.

Christopher took the water stone out of the pocket of his traveling clothes, and held it up. "I don't think there's enough energy left in it," he said in a disappointed tone.

"You might as well try it," Dave said. "If it doesn't work, we don't have many options."

"If it didn't work, the stone would be drained anyway," Christopher said. "We probably should try to conserve the energy it has, but you're right - we don't have any other choice."

Christopher stepped closer to the rock pile, and held the stone up to the rocks. There was a loud crash, and the pile shifted. A few rocks that were formerly near the top crashed down with a loud noise. Then all was silent.

"Well, that didn't work," Dave said disappointedly.

"Wait!" Christopher exclaimed. "Look, there's a hold near the top!" Indeed, there was, but it was only a few feet wide and hardly that in height.

"Do you think we could fit through that?" Dave asked.

"I don't think so, but the best way to find out is to try it," he said. With a determined attitude, Christopher began to climb the pile.

The knights were in a panic. Mike had tried to calm them down, but had ceased his efforts when he began to doubt that the city would survive the tragedy. The ground under their feet continued to shake, and the falling sensation continued. Mike wondered what the cause could be, or what was going on. He and the knights had moved out of the shadow of the capitol building, but they were still surrounded by other buildings, and debris was continuing to rain on them from above.

When the shaking stopped several seconds later, Mike supposed that they were now safe, but he quickly realized his mistake. Though the episode had passed, flying objects continued to fall. After all was done, several knights had suffered serious injuries. Though they were not life-threatening, they required attention from the assistants that traveled along with the knights.

Throughout the entire time, all that Mike had been able to do was wait. There wasn't a sound in the entire city, as if all of its inhabitants had been involved in some catastrophic disaster. Perhaps it worse than the one they had just experienced. But then, why would all the structures still be intact? That raised even more questions for Mike. How was it possible that the buildings around him were so tall in this world?

Before he had time to ponder these questions, a knight from the group rushed up to Mike and told him, "Sir, I think you'd better come and look at this."

"Why? What's wrong?" Mike asked in alarm. The knight was speaking in very grave tones.

"You'll see very soon," he said. "Follow me."

Mike followed the knight down the road outside the capitol building. It led toward the edge of the island, where the familiar force field was in place. As they approached, it became apparent to Mike that something wasn't right. When he reached the edge of the island, he looked down in awe. They were only a hundred feet above the ground now.

"That's why it felt like we were falling," Mike said to the knight.

"Yes," he explained. "This city was falling from the sky."

"We're lucky we survived," Mike mumbled to himself, and then said out loud, "Why would the city fall that far and suddenly stop?"

"I have no idea," the knight said frankly. "Well, I'd better leave you alone." Without another word, the knight walked back toward the rest of the knights.

As Mike was looking out over the country, pondering why the city had fallen, there was a rumbling noise. The city was now rising up back in the sky almost as fast as it had fallen before. Mike hurried back to the camp to inform the knights.

After explaining all that had happened, he shouted quickly, "Hurry! We need to find the others and get out of here!" In the silent, deserted streets, his voice echoed all around him. The knights hurriedly gathered themselves up and rose. Mike led them toward the building.

"Help me get this door open," Mike ordered the knights. Three knights ran to the front and began to struggle with the heavy doors, but they wouldn't budge. Seeing they were unsuccessful, three other also rushed to help, but it was to no avail. The doors were somehow locked. Breaking in was out of the question, as the metal doors would most likely prove impenetrable.

"Does anyone have any suggestions?" Mike asked the knights, not being able to think clearly. The rising sensation continued, as if the city was being returned to the height that it had been at before.

"Look - there's an opening we can probably get in through over there," one knight suggested, pointing to the right

of the main entrance. A few bricks that held up the building had fallen out during the rapid descent, and now left a gaping hole in the wall. It had not been noticed before because a pillar blocked it from direct view from the street.

"Let's go!" Mike said, motioning for the knights to proceed. They moved inside, completely unprepared for the dangers that awaited them.

Katie and Chapin were still waiting outside the door of the room, trapped, when the island had begun to fall. Before that, the original two men had returned to the unusual room from where the giants had left.

"What's going on?"one of the men asked as the city began plummeting toward the ground.

"I'm sure it's just a minor malfunction," the other said with great aplomb. "I'm sure that everything's under control."

The first one was obviously extremely annoyed at this remark, but said nothing. After waiting for a few more seconds, he lost control. "You've been saying that for the past hour, but everything's not under control!" he screamed. "If nothing's done in a few minutes, we're all going to be killed!"

"There's always the emergency switch," the second replied, keeping his calm.

A tapping noise was heard, as if one of them was tapping his foot on the floor in a nervous fashion. The ground continued to get closer and closer in the windows. Katie and Chapin braced themselves for what seemed inevitable.

"That's far enough!" the first screamed. There was a tramping of feet, and then the falling stopped abruptly. Katie, who had been standing to the immediate right of the door frame, was thrown to the ground, exposed in full view to the two men inside.

"Hey!" the second screamed for the first time. "Who are you?"

"Run!" Chapin screamed, and began to rush for the corridor. Katie, realizing that they now had to take the chance of running into the giants, followed her into the long, sloped corridor.

"Stop!" one of the men screamed. "Who are you?" Katie didn't look back, but it was apparent that they were being chased - and the two were gaining of them too.

"They know our secret!" the other yelled. They were closing faster than Katie and Chapin could run. They approached the turn in the corridor that signified that they were halfway to their goal.

In the end, it was useless. The two men caught up to Katie and Chapin just as they were rounding the bend. The larger of the two, leading the pack, grabbed for Chapin and missed. Katie, following behind her, tripped and fell down, blocking the corridor. As the two men attempted to subdue Katie, Chapin sped away into the darkness.

As she approached the top, completely exhausted and out of breath, she noticed that large pieces of the building had fallen, blocking the path and the large entryway. Suddenly, however, she heard voices, and hid against the wall.

"They may be anywhere in here. Let's split up. Half of you go up, and the other half down. We'll meet back here, barring any unforseen difficulties." The voice approached Chapin's position.

"Mike!" she said, running out into the atrium. Mike was standing there with about seventy-five knights, moving toward where Chapin stood.

"Chapin!" Mike said. "What's wrong?"

"Katie! She's been captured!" Chapin said, out of breath. It would have been useless to attempt to hide against the wall, anyway, given how out of breath Chapin was.

"Where?" Mike asked.

"Down below. We were running away and I was able to escape, but she couldn't."

"How long is that corridor?"

"What you see is only half of it."

"We can compare notes about what's happened later. Everyone, go down in pairs. Run as fast as you can to get out of the corridor as quickly as possible, and we'll see what's down below. Try not to hurt anyone unless they attack you first."

The knights lined up in orderly rows. Christopher and Katie went to the end of the line to follow. Mike gave the order, and the knights started down at a breakneck pace. Their training had been so great so that they left space between the pairs without being told so they wouldn't trip over each other, in addition to placing the better armored knights in the front lines.

When they were nearing the exit at the bottom of the

corridor after the turn, a loud buzzing noise filled the air. Suddenly, there were a shout, “Don’t move!” It was one of the voices Katie and Chapin had heard before.

Chapin and Mike pushed through the knights that stood waiting in the corridor and around the entryway to the glass room. They were horrified by what they saw. Katie, bound to a chair, was in front of the two large men, one of whom was holding a sword in a menacing fashion.

“Nobody moves or she dies!” one said calmly, as he had before.

“Stop! Everyone!” Mike said, panicked. The knights stopped in their tracks and stood like statues at attention. “Nobody make a move!”

“What do you want?” Chapin asked in fear.

“The same thing you want,” came the reply. “Peace and prosperity.”

“Yavin is an evil creature. Nobody can ever enjoy peace under his rule,” Mike sneered.

“That is where you are sorely mistaken,” the men said together in an eerie tone. One moved up to the doorframe, while the other stayed in the middle of the glass room with the sword, guarding Katie. “Yavin will bring us all peace and liberation. You will be sorry that you ever opposed him.”

“You’re being tricked,” Chapin said, realizing that these two were under a sort of magic spell. “Yavin can’t make any of that happen. He will destroy you.”

“Perhaps,” the closer one said in a monotone voice. “But there are greater powers in the world.”

“What do you mean?” Mike said, puzzled.

“Enough!” the other said, moving forward a step. “We must not divulge our secrets.”

“What secrets?” Chapin asked, but backed off when one of the men raised his sword high over Katie’s head. Looking up, she slouched down as if she could hide, but didn’t say anything.

“Let’s heighten the odds a bit, shall we?” the calm man continued, keeping his cool. Moving out of the doorway, he made his way to the far wall of the room, where the strange panel that Katie had seen earlier was located. Taking a key out of his pocket, he held it up to the mysterious carvings, and the doors parted. Inside was a large lever with no markings on it.

The knights stood speechless, craning their necks in an

attempt to determine the purpose of the strange lever. Chapin and Mike, who were now at the head of the group, motioned for the knights to ready themselves while the men's backs were turned.

"Oh, I wouldn't try that if I were you," the calm man said from inside. "If I pull this lever, you'll all be rotting piles of mush in a matter of minutes. Nobody can survive a fall from this high."

"You're going to cause the island to fall?" Mike asked.

"Not if I don't have to. It would be a shame if all your friends were killed."

"You'd die too," Katie pointed out, venturing to speak for the first time since she had been captured.

"That's not the point," one of them said. "If we die, it will be a small sacrifice for Yavin's master plan."

Suddenly, from the back ranks, someone yelled, "Chapin!" It was Dave, who was rushing toward the glass room. Christopher was hot on his heels, but they both stopped abruptly when they saw the gravity of the situation.

"Stop where you are!" one of them commanded. "My, my, how we play these childish games!"

"Now, to the real purpose of this meeting since everyone's here," the calm man said, motioning to Dave and Christopher. "I have a feeling you know exactly what happened to the troll stronghold during the battle a week ago."

"What happened?" Christopher stumbled. "Um... of course, we know what happened," he stammered, his voice now rising in emotion. "But why would we want to tell you?"

"You would want to tell us because your lives will depend on whether I feel the urge to pull this lever in the next few minutes. Now talk or you will die!"

"If you kill us, you'll never receive the information," Christopher said bluntly. The two men looked at each other, as if they had not expected this contingency. Every knight in attendance was watching Mike intently. He looked at Christopher. The two men were still unprepared. Christopher nodded, and Mike dropped his hand.

At that instant, the knights surged into the room, swords drawn. When they had reached Katie, several knights quickly pulled the chair out of the room while the other surrounded the two men.

"Too late," the calm man said, still maintaining his composure. "That was a mistake." He pulled the lever. Five knights behind him quickly drew their swords and decapitated the man along with his partner. Their bodies fell to the floor with a loud thump.

"Yes!" Mike said, rushing into the room. His congratulations were premature. There was a loud grinding noise, and the ground began to rush up beneath them.

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Chaos ensued as the city began to fall. Knights ran around the room in circles, unsure as to what to do. Katie, who had had a close call, slumped back into the wall in defeat The noise was deafening. Behind all the screaming and yelling, a low pitch was heard as the island began to accelerate toward the ground.

"Everyone!" Christopher screamed above the racket in a hurry. "Quiet down! We can't do anything by panicking!"

"Is it possible to use the stones to escape?" Katie blurted out as soon as the commotion had dinned, keeping an eye out the bottom of the glass room at the approaching ground.

"Not here," Chapin said. "There's something in the capitol that's blocking our magic. We have to get outside."

"We have three minutes at best," Christopher estimated. "Go! Upstairs!" The knights, forgetting about any orderly fashion, swarmed the exit corridor and moved up as fast as it was possible to go under all the confusion. Katie and Mike followed behind as Christopher and Dave led the way. The city began to rumble as it descended through the clouds, making it hard for the group to find their way through the corridor.

Suddenly, without any warning, the lights in the entire building dimmed, and finally went out with a loud pop. The knights ahead let out a scream. Katie and Mike, who had no idea what was going on, ran headlong into a large pileup where one or two had stopped when the lights had ceased to function, thus causing the enormous mess they had on their hands now.

"Hurry!" Christopher screamed redundantly from up above, his voice growing fainter as the distance between him and the others increased. Evidently, he was unaware of what was occurring just a few feet behind him.

"Get up! Stop thinking and just run!" Katie screamed above the noise, unsure if anyone had heard her. The building was shaking so violently now that pieces of the ceiling and walls

were beginning to litter their escape route. The pile was dissipating rapidly, but it was doubtful that the group had more than two minutes left to travel the rest of the distance now. The last of the followers rounded the turn as a rockslide caved in behind them, sealing off the hallway. Had they been two seconds later, they would have not survived, Katie thought.

The perilous ascent (or descent, depending on your point of reference) continued. Christopher, Chapin, and Dave were so far ahead now that Katie wondered how she was going to assist them in casting the spell.

Finally, they reached the top and sprinted across the large entryway, avoiding falling debris. Across from them, one of the side walkways had fallen, in turn causing the walkways below it to also fall. As a result, a large pile of rubble stood blocking the window that Mike and the knights had been able to enter through. Fortunately, three knights held open the main door. A bright light was shining in from outside, which contrasted greatly with the almost pitch darkness within.

As Katie flew through the opening, she was shocked with what she saw. The city was much lower than she had thought. She grappled in her pocket for the stone, but found that it wasn't there!

"The stone! Where is it?" she screamed. Christopher and Chapin, already standing away from the building, ready to perform the teleportation ritual, looked at Katie with wide eyes.

"You lost the stone?" Chapin panicked.

"Where is it?" Dave asked, looking around. He sprinted back into the building, Mike hot on his heels. A few seconds later, they returned, saying, "It's in here! Come on!"

Katie, realizing that they would be unable to pick up the Hadar Stone, raced inside, retrieved the stone from the ground where it rested, and rushed back outside the building. Christopher and Chapin were waiting in the middle of the knights, ready to cast the spell.

"We have to get as far away from here as possible," Christopher said quickly. The ground was shaking so angrily that it was now impossible to stand. Entire buildings around them fell. One, down the street, sent debris into the air around them. Near the edges of the city, the ground was falling apart, pieces now falling separately from the large island. Papers and parchments that had been inside the buildings seemed to fly upward at an incredible speed, when in reality it was the

companions that were falling downward.

Christopher, motioning to Katie and Chapin, quickly aid, "you don't need to know the spell - I'll try to reconstruct it from my memory." He then began to chant, and the three joined hands. The ground was now only a few hundred feet away. The city was falling at a fever pitch. The ground was only seconds away now. Knights braced for the impact. Christopher finished his chanting as the city was less than a hundred feet from the ground. The outlines of the knights and the five grew thin, and then vanished.

The inevitable happened. The last moment seemed to last years. The city crashed into the ground at breakneck speed. There was a bright flash of light, and the roar that followed was larger than that emitted by a million bees. The ground shook miles away. A tidal wave of dirt flowed outward from the impact site, enveloping everything in its path. The chaos continued as smaller pieces of the island continued to impact the earth around the site of the large disaster.

After a few minutes, the calamity had ceased, and an unnatural quiet pervaded the air. A large crater had formed where the city had impacted the earth, almost a mile wide from rim to rim. A large pile of dirt raised the rim of the crater from the floor of the plains. Papers and other light objects continued to flutter down over the disaster area. In the east, the first rays of dawn were visible.

One landed directly on Christopher's head. He brushed it off with his arm. Katie, Chapin, Mike, Dave, and the knights were standing next to him, observing the destruction. They were only a few hundred feet away from the crater, much too close.

Katie picked up the paper and examined it. Indecipherable symbols filled the entire page. She placed it in her pocket. At least it would be good for fire material, she thought. Christopher was now walking ahead of them toward the gigantic crater. In front of him, a large piece of wood that had been projected into the air during the enormous explosion slammed into the ground at terminal velocity, spraying dust over him and his comrades.

Christopher stepped back from the explosion. He was uninjured. There was still quite a bit of debris left in the air.

"Maybe it's better we stand back for a minute," he said, half to himself. A few minutes later, when things had calmed down slightly, he began to move toward the edge of the crater.

The others, as well as many of the knights, followed suit. Looks were deceiving, because it took about three times as long to reach the crater's edge as they had expected. When the group had reached the edge, they looked in awe. An enormous crater stood before them. The area was still violent from the explosion, and dust continued to billow out from the center of the crater. Eventually, the immediate vicinity around them was so thick with dust that it was impossible for Christopher to see his arm in front of him.

"Let's move out," Christopher said, disgusted with the changing conditions and worried for their safety. The rim of the crater was less than ten feet away, but in which direction? It was impossible to tell the knights.

"Everyone stand where you are," Katie's voice was heard. The sound appeared to be coming from far away, but Christopher knew that Katie was standing right next to him.

"Listen to this rock," Mike said. "We can move away from the sound." There was a grunt coming from an unknown source that could very well have been right next to Christopher, and a loud crash from behind his back.

"Go away from that sound," Mike ordered everyone. It didn't take long for the coughing and choking knights to heed that command. They set out at full speed away from the disaster area. Christopher and the others followed not far behind. For the next few minutes, the knights did not appear to be a well-trained army, as they simply fled away from the dust and debris as fast as they could. A few times, a knight or two fell, causing a large pileup because it was impossible to see what was happening in front of them.

After ten minutes, the well-conditioned knights were almost a mile and a half away from the crater before they began to tire. Christopher and Chapin, being the oldest of the group, struggled to keep up.

When they were at least two miles from the crater, the conditions began to noticeably improve. The dust, which had made it almost impossible to see or breathe, dissipated rapidly. Christopher called to the knights to slow down now that they were out of danger. The knights continued. The going was going to be tough from now on, because the knights' horses had been annihilated in the explosion or run off. They would have to travel on foot from now on.

Through what remained of the dust, it was possible to

see that the sun was now peeking over the horizon to the east. It was agreed that the best course of action would be to keep moving for as long as possible to get away from the crater, because the dust could easily suffocate them, or worse yet, Yavin's forces would no doubt rush to the scene of the crash to investigate. Fortunately, by traditional methods of transportation that could take months, but Yavin had magic that was far more powerful and could shorten the journey considerably.

The landscape was now completely barren. The knights were moving into a forested area. Compared to their journey through the forest twenty-five years ago, it was much easier traveling through the forest without leaves on the trees. It was possible to see for miles. Christopher, using his keen eyesight, was able to spot a grove in the forest as far as a hundred feet away. It was there that they camped out around noon.

When they had settled down to rest, a fire was lit in the middle of the break in the trees with some timber that the knights managed to fell using what they could of their tools. Christopher, Katie, Mike, Chapin, and Dave settled down to discuss the recent events.

"That was too close," Katie said.

"I agree. From now on, we won't all go together," Christopher suggested. "It's only a disaster waiting to happen. This time, it was an accident, but we should try to prevent something like this from happening again."

"What exactly did you see up there?"Chapin asked Christopher. Christopher recounted everything that he and Dave had seen to the group, and Mike and Katie did the same.

"So that was why those strange lights kept going out," Katie said.

"Yes, whatever that switch was, it did something to the lights," Dave replied. "But the question remains... what *was* that room?"

"I've never seen anything like it in my entire life," Chapin said. "Is it possible that Yavin was able to construct all of that machinery? I thought that he used magic in his workings."

"Those machines were far too advanced to be created by any normal man. They were either powered by magic or came from somewhere... else."

"Where would they come from if not here?" Mike asked, puzzled.

"The only answer I can think of is that they originated from this power that is greater than Yavin that we continue to hear about," Christopher said.

"You're suggesting that he comes from elsewhere," Dave asked.

"I don't know. But what I do know is that we are beginning to run out of time. That floating island just showed us that. The snows will be coming any day now, and will only get worse as the season progresses and we move north. We need to make a decision on what to do," Christopher said.

"You're suggesting that we wait until the spring," Katie asked.

"I'm not suggesting anything," Christopher replied convincingly. "But we have reached the point where we must make plans for infiltrating Yavin's kingdom. At this rate, we'll be in sight of the Blackstone mountains in two weeks."

"Why not just go right through?" Dave suggested. "If we arrive during the dead of winter, nobody will suspect us. We can get in, do the job, and leave."

"Yavin has eyes and ears everywhere," Chapin replied seriously. "We would all be killed the instant he finds out."

"Then all we have to do is not be found out," Dave replied smartly.

"It's not that simple, though," Christopher replied. "If we are found, we won't stand a chance. We need to secure reinforcements to help us, as there's sure to be a huge battle."

"There's not a town for miles up here," Chapin said. "Where would we find these reinforcements?"

"That is the problem," Mike added. "We have to find reinforcements, but where?"

"I wonder," Dave said, "what happened to the troll stronghold that we attacked a few months.. I mean twenty-five years ago."

"Our allies were attacking when we last left," Christopher said. "Nobody has since heard otherwise, nor has any word trickled down over the years about what became of it."

"Yavin was there before," Mike put in. "It is possible that he is there now, and even if he isn't, there could be reinforcements for our group."

"We have no guarantee of either outcome," Katie said. "If we went, we could either find enough force to destroy Yavin, or get ourselves killed."

"It's too much of a risk to take," Christopher said.

"I agree," Chapin seconded.

"If we've decided that it would be best to avoid the troll stronghold, then where should we go?" Mike asked.

"The only route is East," Dave replied.

"Either that, or go for Yavin right now," Chapin suggested.

"This decision has to be agreed upon by all of us," Christopher said. "We'll go east. Does anyone disagree?" There wasn't a sound. The echo of Christopher's voice reverberated throughout the surrounding area in the clear air.

"We need to continue north like we have been for a while, and then we'll turn east along the mountains. It will be safer and we'll have somewhere to hide in case of an attack," Christopher planned.

"Let's get some rest before we start out again tomorrow," Chapin suggested, and they all lay down to sleep.

The party slept on and off throughout the night. Clouds were beginning to form, and a chill was in the air. Beneath them, leaves rustled as the party awoke at dawn to begin the next leg of their journey.

They set off to the north through the forest. The trees seemed to grow thicker as they moved farther inward. Christopher suggested that the knights and the party move eastward to see if it was possible to avoid the forest altogether.

A cold rain began to fall around noon, soaking the travelers to the bone. The trees stretched far to the horizon, despite Christopher's suggestion that traveling east would solve their problems.

A small, but quick river ran through the forest to the north, and someone suggested partway through the afternoon that they construct boats from the plentiful timber. At first, it was suggested that each group of knights build their own transportation, but the idea was frowned upon by Christopher, who insisted that it would be more efficient to build several larger rafts to float them downstream. From where the group was stationed now, it appeared that the stream ran to the northeast, which was the direction in which Christopher had originally planned to travel, anyway.

When it was beginning to get dark a few hours later, the boats were coming along nicely. Using their swords, the knights had managed to cut down smaller trees, a long and tedious

process that took several hours.

Around nightfall, the rain changed to a pelting sleet that forced the knights to take shelter, and covering the ground with ice. Since it would be impossible to build when it was too slippery to stand, the knights retired for another long November night. Chapin, unable to sleep, attempted to light a fire with what dry wood she could find, but was unsuccessful.

Midway through the night, the first few flakes of snow began to drift down through the trees. The chill that had been in the air before now turned to a fierce cold. It was all the knights could do to get some sleep. This is nothing compared to what it'll be like in a month, Christopher thought.

In the morning, the snow continued to fall until it was deep enough to reach up to the party's ankles. It was difficult to continue the work of making rafts when ice covered just about everything in sight, but the knights got it done somehow. It was decided that ten people would accompany each other on the rafts. The five travelers would lead the group, followed behind by the rest of their small army.

The rafts were finally cast away from the shoreline. Christopher quickly discovered that the most pressing problem was how to keep snow from accumulating on the rafts where the passengers were not seated. The river moved surprisingly quickly, faster than they could walk, but without the effort.

By the end of the day, the adventurers were at least thirty miles downstream from where they had started. The river still wound through thick woodland. The snow had stopped around noon, and the air was beginning to warm, signifying a temporary thaw.

During the night, Christopher observed the river and the large amount of debris that traveled along with its current. Large driftwood logs and pieces of unknown material were profuse in the faster waters in the middle, while smaller objects lazily floated by closer to the shoreline.

The source must be up the river, but from where?, Christopher asked himself. Yavin must be up to no good somewhere upstream. Would it be worth exploring what was going on up there, or continue on? Christopher thought as he fell asleep to the chilly breeze.

Christopher related his findings to his colleagues. The stream of trash continued, growing greater at certain times than others. At one point during the morning as they were readying

their supplies, the river was so full of unknown material that it would have been impossible to cast off.

"Let's see if we can capture one of these pieces to see what they are," Katie suggested. The others waded out as far as they could stand without being swept off their feet, and managed to pull in one of the pieces of strange material using a rope that Christopher had assisted them in fashioning using what they had with them. The knights helped them pull the piece of material onshore, which was actually much taller than Christopher had originally thought. The strange carton resembled some kind of a water-tight box. There was a strange aura emanating from the package.

"Don't touch it," Chapin warned. "This box is enchanted. This isn't just junk - there's probably something inside."

"How do you suggest that we get it open?" Dave asked Christopher.

"I guess I'll have to risk this," he said. "Stand back." The others took a few steps back, leaving a semicircle around Christopher and the box. The outer waves of the river lapped at the edges of the container. Christopher stood up, and then reached down to touch the apparently unopenable box. He screamed out in pain, and a lightning bolt struck straight up into the sky. Suddenly, a blue light surrounded Christopher for a moment. Then all was quiet.

"What was that?" Dave asked Christopher. "Are you all right?" Christopher moved a bit, emitting a grunt. "Yes, I think so," came the reply.

"Look!" Mike said, pointing to the container. The strange aura that had surrounded it was now gone, and a latch was clearly visible on the side.

"That trap must have been meant to kill anybody who attempted to open the box, but the stone protected me," Christopher theorized. "Now, the spell has worn off. Stand back. I'm going to try to open the box now."

Christopher stood up with a lot of effort and moved over to the box, struggling to maintain his balance. Eventually, his footsteps became firmer, and he was able to stand up straight. He touched the box, and nothing happened. He motioned for the others to come closer as he fumbled for the latch.

The latch gave way without any trouble, and Christopher opened the box in amazement.

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"What is it?" Katie asked as she struggled to see over the heads of the knights in front of her.

"Knives - an entire case of them!" Christopher gasped as he reviewed the contents of the case in front of him.

"The whole box is loaded with weapons!" Chapin said.

"This isn't just any trash floating down the river," Christopher pointed out. "Yavin is transporting supplies to his troops from somewhere upstream!"

"They must be preparing a major attack," Mike said in fear. "Forces must be gathering at some point along this river."

"I wonder where it leads to," Christopher said more calmly now.

"How would it benefit Yavin to construct weapons in the south, and they float them down river to the north?" Dave asked, puzzled. "Why not do it all in Yavin's territory? It would be harder to defend in the south."

"It would be harder to find for one thing," Chapin pointed out. "Or, they could be planning something secret away from where anybody would look. Notice that this river runs entirely through deep forest. It's an ideal location for such a scheme."

"Let's loot some of their boxes and see what else we can find," Christopher said. "It might be of use to us. I doubt that they'll notice a few missing pieces of equipment. Besides, it would take months for word to reach down the length of the river."

"Good idea," Mike said. "But we need a more effective way of capturing the equipment; otherwise, it would take days to find what we want, and we don't have that long."

"Maybe we could construct a net somehow to catch the equipment as it travels downstream," Katie suggested.

"What would we use?" one of the knights asked. "It wouldn't be very practical to use wood to make a net."

"We could use the wood to make poles to pull in the loot," Dave suggested. "A net in this case wouldn't be very practical."

"Something like a fishing pole might be adequate," Christopher added. "It would allow us to capture the crates without being swept away in the current."

"How many poles would we need?" Chapin asked. "We should be continuing on before the total onset of winter, and can't afford to waste time making poles to capture things from the river."

"Not too many, only about five if they were really strong. Two people could use one pole to retrieve things from the river, and others could unpack the boxes and distribute the contents," Christopher replied.

"It would only take a few hours to construct five poles," Chapin said. "Let's get working." Christopher didn't object, and the knights busied themselves in preparations. Indeed, the majority of the work was finished within two hours, and it was midafternoon when several knights were standing at the river bank to collect what was floating downstream.

At first, many cartons were lulling by on the placid waters of the river, but the supply dwindled as dusk approached. By the time that the group collectively decided to retire, it was a few hours into the night. It was very mild now, and the snow on the ground was turning to mush. They had managed to collect fifteen boxes, each containing 2 pieces of armor or two similar swords. The armor was nothing to get excited about, but the weapons were much better in quality than the ones the knights possessed. It seemed like it would take a lot of work to prepare the enormous amount of provisions that were floating down the river, and that only made Christopher uneasy about Yavin's future plans.

A few hours before dawn, the party awoke and began to "fish" for equipment yet again. When the short six-hour day dawned, Chapin judged that more poles were needed to get the job done without wasting too much time. The weather was unpredictable in late November where they were, and nobody wanted to take any chances.

By the end of the day, they had collected enough armor and weapons to outfit the one hundred forty-three knights that had joined the group of five on their journey. It was now exceedingly obvious that someone had camped where they were. Trees were missing in a small area and the immediate vicinity was littered with discarded equipment.

Before the sun rose the next day, Christopher ordered the knights to bury everything that was unneeded so the area wouldn't look suspicious from the river or to any of Yavin's associates traveling down it. The time-consuming task took several hours to complete and a lot of their energy for the day. It was decided that they would continue to travel down the river until the first sign of trouble, as it wouldn't make any sense to travel all the way up to wherever the weapons were produced. Most likely, the producers had no idea who they were making weapons for.

The details hammered out, the party set out back down the river on November 20. The first day of their journey was uneventful. The weather was almost summer like, very unusual for that late in the year. It didn't hold out, however. By the second day, a cold rain began to fall again, turning to snow. The river was widening, but the slow current kept the travelers from getting any farther than twenty or thirty miles a day.

This was slightly faster than they could walk, however, and much easier. In fact, the task was so easy that many of the knights became bored spending their entire day sleeping or looking around on the rafts. Fortunately, the knights were able to occupy themselves by practicing with their new weapons and armor when time or weather permitted. Five days later, the same boring forest rolled by, with almost no visible progress on their part.

The only sign that they were actually getting closer to Yavin's territory was that the weather was becoming progressively worse. It was rare that the temperature rose above freezing during the days now. Snow fell every three days on average, and began to accumulate on the shores of the river. The former forest that they had been traveling through was now a tangled mess of pine trees that, by the seventh day, were beginning to thin out.

The water beneath them was now beginning to get extremely cold. Christopher had said that they should continue their journey down river until the river began to freeze, which could be any day now. By the tenth day of their journey, they had traveled two hundred miles to the northeast and still could see no sign of where the weapons and armor was traveling to. Behind them, the supply had been thinning out as whoever was upriver was preparing for the freeze.

On the eleventh day, November 30, Christopher awoke that morning to the knights' yelling. The edges of the river were beginning to solidify into ice. Though it was still thin enough to be broken through by anyone walking on top of it, it would present a problem for the knights to land on the shore if it thickened. Christopher gave the signal to head for the northwest shore of the river. The other rafts followed suit, and knights stood up to stretch after the eleven-day journey down the river. After all the rafts had been pulled up onto the sandy shoreline, the five found each other and looked around. Dave gasped in awe and pointed to the northeast, in the direction of the river.

Out of the high clouds loomed the enormous Black Stone mountains. It was a sight that the five found hard to believe. They had traveled for three entire months through all kinds of difficulties, and had survived to see what they were now beholding. The knights looked up in awe, glued to the mountains that seemed to split the sky in two. They were almost completely white from snow and looked almost impossible to climb.

"Wow, that's amazing," Dave commented. He turned his view to the river, where ice lined the shorelines. The snow was almost six inches deep where he stood.

"I never thought we'd make it," Mike said.

"What do we do now? Keep going?" Katie asked Christopher and Chapin.

"We said we wanted to find out where these supplies were headed," Christopher said. "We can't stop now."

"Agreed. We must continue. But if we reach the mountains before we find what we're looking for, we will be forced to turn back," Chapin said in earnest.

"Then we are faced with another problem," Mike pointed out. "We have to find a way to trek through this snow, especially when it gets too deep to travel through on foot."

"We could make snowshoes," one of the knights ventured. "If we scrapped the rafts, which we have no use for anymore, we could use the remains to make skis or snowshoes to get us across the remaining miles to the mountains and beyond if necessary."

"I like that idea," Christopher replied. "It doesn't require any of our other precious materials, either."

"Well, then," Katie said. "Let's get started. Several of

the knights moved toward Christopher, who barked out orders left and right that the rafts had been torn up within a half hour. By noon, they had the ski/snowshoe combination that they were looking for. With the new footwear, the knights were able to walk easily across the tundra without falling through, as well as shed them quickly in case of an attack.

The party set out at noon toward the mountains. The huge black shapes grew larger as the day progressed. Three hours after noon, they were forced to stop as darkness fell. During those few hours, the group had made a considerable dent in their journey along the freezing river. The ice now thickened and began to encrust the entire body of water.

The next night was the coldest so far. The snow that covered the land was again beginning to thaw into mush, soaking the knights as they slept. The fire they had made with the remaining scraps of wood had melted the snow around the entire area, creating a sheet of ice that covered everything when it again grew cold the next morning before sunrise. The weak sun barely seemed to peak over the horizon now for the short five-hour days. The slush froze into ice this time, facilitating their journey.

It was possible for the knights to travel twice as fast on the ice as compared to the snow they had traveled on before. They had covered half the distance to the mountains during the first two short days, but it was impossible to tell in the rapidly changing weather.

Bitter winds blew over the plains as they neared the mountains on the fourth day. The river seemed to continue straight ahead even into the foothills. This was proven correct later that day as the travelers began to scale the foothills in front of the giant mountains.

On the fifth day since their departure from the river, the army of knights had almost reached the mountains when they came upon a small shack that had been built by the side of the now encrusted river. Further downstream from the shack, a large building loomed, constructed from enormous logs that stood several stories tall.

Christopher stopped short on the crest of a hill that overlooked the cabin. Down below, several trolls patrolled the area. They walked back and forth with large swords that were too huge for men to wield.

A large fire was visible between the two structures, and had melted the snow between them, exposing bare earth with a few patches of grass. The whole complex was highly guarded and seemed to be out of place for its desolate surroundings.

"Get down," Christopher whispered, and the knights in the front row immediately ducked to avoid being spotted.

"What could they possibly be trying to hide here?" Mike whispered to Christopher. "How many trolls are here?"

"There could be the five we've seen, or there could be thousands inside that building over there," Christopher replied. "There's no way to know for sure."

"Yes, there is," Dave said. "We should send in someone to survey the area. If all the knights went in, we would probably all be killed."

"You're the logical choice, Dave," Katie said from behind the group. "You're younger than all of us and could hide yourself better."

"Thanks for the compliment," Dave said half sarcastically and half flattered by her words.

"She's right," Chapin seconded. "The best course of action would be to send you inside to check things out."

"If I'm captured, they would know that we've survived this far," Dave said.

"They probably already know that," Christopher said. "Besides, we have to ascertain what's going on with these weapons shipments."

"If only it were that easy," Dave mumbled. Ignoring the comment, Christopher rose his head above the crest of the hill to oversee the action below. Troll guards patrolled regular paths around the complex. Since the area had been designed with stealth in mind, it was built in the middle of a valley surrounded by high hills.

"If you went around that hill there," Christopher said, pointing toward the snow-covered rise in the terrain to their left, "you could get in through that small valley. Then it's only a hundred feet to the building. It's up to you to find a way in. Don't try anything spectacular; just stay alive and find out what's going on inside."

"Ok," Dave said unenthused.

"Good luck," Mike told him. "We'll be right here if they get you."

"I hope so," Dave said, and departed. Christopher was able to watch his progress from his position until Dave reached the small valley where he would make his entrance into the camp.

It took Dave five minutes to circle around to the back end of the enormous log building.

As he approached the small valley between the hills, he spotted several troll guards near one of the corners of the building conversing with each other. It was impossible for Dave to get within fifty feet of them without being discovered. From his vantage point, it was impossible for Dave to overhear the conversations of the guards, but he was able to catch key phrases such as "Yavin", "troll", and "sword". He wasn't able to put these together because of the garbled manner in which they were said.

Dave waited several minutes before a troll who appeared to be in charge came out to disperse the group. They scattered in all directions, leaving nobody standing where everyone had once been.

Dave hurried through the narrow valley and emerged in the camp. Almost instinctively, he hurried to hide himself behind the protective walls of the giant building to spare himself from the eyes of watchful trolls. The trolls seemed to be everywhere except where he was. Dave inched his way along the concealed side of the building, vainly seeking an entrance.

Five minutes later, after having transversed the entire length of the huge structure, Dave was convinced that there was no way inside from the angle at which he stood. Peeking around the corner of the building, he spotted an entrance that stood seven feet tall to accommodate the huge trolls. There was nobody in the vicinity to stop him, so Dave rushed for the opening.

Immediately upon reaching the doorframe, he heard voices from the other side of the wall and stopped dead in his tracks. The noise was growing louder as if the participants in the conversation were nearing his location.

Dave panicked. He could not enter, as he would surely be spotted. He rushed back from where he came, but heard approaching footfalls coming in his direction. Cornered between the corner and the doorway, he had only seconds before he was discovered. He ran back to the doorway. Inside, he nervously

listened to the voices as the footfalls from behind the logs grew louder.

"I hope there's no problems here that you aren't tellin' me about," said one of the trolls in rough jargon. "I wouldn't want ta' have ta' inform Potak of any trouble here."

Dave's anxiety increased as the footfalls grew louder. They must be less than fifteen seconds away now.

"No, sir," the other troll said quite formally, which contrasted from the first. Dave thought he could hear his heart beating out of his chest.

Three or four seconds passed, with only the sounds of trolls talking in the distance and the approaching footsteps growing louder.

"Well then," the first troll said. "I see that everythin's in order here. I'll leave ya' to ya' work." There were footsteps for a few seconds, and Dave peeked inside, looking for an escape. There were several wooden crates stacked against one of the walls adjacent to the doorframe.

Hoping that he wouldn't be seen, he sprinted inside and hid himself behind the crates not a moment too soon. From his vantage point, Dave could see out the opened doorframe, and a particularly large troll, even by troll standards, rounded the corner the instant he looked up. He headed toward the door through which Dave had just come two seconds ago.

Once inside, the troll approached another who, to Dave's surprise, was lifting crates only a few feet away from the door. Fortunately, by sheer luck, he had been looking in the opposite direction when Dave had appeared. The troll who had been circling the building headed for this other one, who promptly turned and saluted.

"Sir!" he said, barking his words like a soldier, which Dave thought he probably was.

"I've received orders that this shipment is to be out first thin' tomorrow," the "officer" said.

"But that doesn't give us enough time," came the agitated reply.

"Get some of those lazy idiots in the fifth squadron o'er here," he roared in reply. Reducing his tone, he then mumbled, "What it takes to get someone to do some real work today!"

"Excuse me, sir?" his subordinate asked.

"Nothing of your concern," he replied. Half of the trolls

in the room were now looking his way. Dave remembered that only a few crates stood between them and his capture.

The smaller of the two trolls looked around at the spectators. From where he was positioned, Dave couldn't see many, but the trolls who were watching the spectacle unfold shook their heads in an unusual fashion. The knight turned back to face his superior. "I think it is some of my concern," he said. Several gasps were heard among the silenced room, but the majority of the trolls remained quiet like statues, showing no reaction to what was just said.

"Could you repeat what you just said?" the taller troll boomed, towering over the other who showed no cowardice.

"I said that it is part of my concern," he replied. "You were complaining about how we can't work as hard as we used to anymore."

"You have no right to question me," the officer boomed in a deafening tone.

Ignoring what was just said, the troll worker rose up to his full height and said blatantly, "Yes, I do. You and the other Bosses have been treating us like wild Veramus. We work twenty hours a day and are given meager rations as a reward. And you still expect more! We will not put up with this any more!"

"I will report this to Yavin himself!" the boss yelled, infuriated. "You will then see how good you have it."

"I don't know what you are talking about," the worker said forcefully.

The officer looked around at the other trolls in the enormous warehouse (which was what the building appeared to be), and screamed at the top of his lungs, "Everyone back to work! What are you looking at?"

A few, intimidated, turned back to their tasks. The large majority, however, continued to face the boss without fear.

"We will not," came a voice from the other end of the warehouse. A worker was standing there next to another set of crates.

"Yeah!" came scattered cries from throughout the facility, until the noise grew so loud that it was impossible to think. The leader was shouting as loud as he could, but his cries were completely unintelligible.

Pandemonium erupted throughout the building.

Hundreds of workers threw down their tools and began to shout, "Down with the bosses! Down with Yavin!" The officer, still glued to the spot from where he entered, turned and rushed out to a chorus of laughter.

"Let's go!" came a voice, and another cheer rose up. The trolls began to throw the crates down onto the floor, out from which spilled more than enough weapons to supply a large army. The trolls scooped them up by the handful and armed themselves. Dave, still unnoticed behind the unmovable stack of crates, racked his mind for an escape plan. He certainly didn't want to hang around a horde of armed, crazed trolls.

The trolls now rushed for the doorways. A few seconds later, the room was cleared, except for a few in the middle. Outside, the shouts and cries of battle were becoming more numerous as they amassed themselves.

The few trolls that had remained in the warehouse struck two of the weapons together. Sparks flew, and began to ignite one of the wooden crates. They rushed out as the logs above their heads began to catch on fire.

Dave rushed to the doors, now having depleted his options. Being captured would be better than being killed. After he was outside, nobody seemed to pay attention to him with the chaos that had ensued. Behind him, the log building was becoming a raging inferno, lighting the entire area with a surreal glow. Unable to retreat back the way he had come because of the increasing flames, Dave hid himself in an embankment that surrounded the camp to watch what happened next.

Christopher and the others who had remained with the knights were unaware of what was going on until they spotted the huge plume of smoke that was being emitted from the burning building. Several other small fires had erupted. Christopher poked his head above the hill on which they hid, and was met with an incredible sight.

The entire valley was afoot. On one side of the river, next to the raging flames, an army of trolls stood at arms. Across the frozen body of water, others had gathered. The first group outnumbered the second by almost three to one, Christopher estimated.

"It's really bad down there," he said. "I wonder where Dave is?"

"We have to try to save him," Katie panicked, looking at

the chaos down below. She rose and started over the hill.

"Wait!" Chapin commanded and rushed forward. Grabbing Katie by the shirt, she dragged her back over to their hiding place. "You're going to get us all killed!"

"Dave is down there going to get killed," she half screamed her reply for it to be heard over the din of battle below.

"Let's watch what happens," Christopher said. He peeked back over. The officers on one side of the river had crossed over and were being massacred by the hundreds of trolls on the other. Several buildings were burning down to the ground.

"It may be too late already," Katie sobbed behind him.

"We have a problem," Christopher said, raising his voice. The officers, far outnumbered, were now doing anything to get away from the maniacal trolls. They were now rushing at full speed over the hill where Christopher and the knights were hidden.

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"Everyone out of the way," Christopher screamed, storming into action. He rushed to the front of the line and began to race at full speed to the east. The large group of trolls, headed south, continued to pound on in that direction, spurred by the revolt behind them.

The roar of the ground echoed in the knights' ears as the trolls thundered past behind them as they barely retreated. Behind the stampede of crazed creatures, other trolls followed, brandishing powerful weapons that appeared to be able to slice the head off even the strongest troll. Several were killed in the initial skirmish, while the others continued the battle, moving farther and farther away from the troll installment.

During the chaos, nobody had seemed to notice Christopher and the knights, who were hardly concealed, attempting to vanish behind a hill that was more like a mound of dirt. Christopher, rising from his hiding place, mounted the small protrusion and moved forward with amazing speed in an attempt to surprise any trolls who might be waiting in ambush.

When he saw that the coast was clear, he motioned for the knights to proceed. A few trolls lingered in the small valley. As the group approached, they were astonished to find Dave, who they had presumed dead, standing in the middle of the valley, talking with trolls!

"Dave! You're alright!" Katie exclaimed as she approached where the group had gathered. The trolls enormous lungs sent puffs of smoke billowing into the air above them, creating the illusion that an enormous army was present, when, in fact, there were only seven bodies.

Dave, though he had just seen hundreds of trolls stampede around him in a frantic attempt to escape, seemed completely at ease with the surroundings. "Hi, Christopher! I've got a lot to tell you!" Christopher looked behind him, where the remains of the warehouse now stood smouldering in ruins. Ashes blew in the fierce, cold winds. It was now beginning to snow again.

The trolls who surrounded Dave looked at the army of knights in fear. Some of the knights had similar expressions on their faces. One troll began to taunt Christopher's knights.

"Hey, Hey!" Dave said, cutting in as one troll and a knight began to exchange remarks. "We're both on the same side!"

"Same side?" Christopher asked in puzzlement.

"Yes- these trolls were staging a rebellion. They hate Yavin and his leaders and want to overthrow them just as much as we do," Dave replied quickly.

One of the trolls muttered something that sounded like gibberish to Dave. He threw up his arms in confusion.

"He's talking in his native language," Chapin said. "I'll translate... He's saying that Yavin forces his group to work twenty hours a day just to stay alive." The troll continued to mumble on at an incredible pace, much faster than the humans were able to talk. The troll had to pause several times for Chapin to catch up in translating.

"Yavin forces his people to work in this barren wasteland far away from their tribes. He uses force to get his way, and kills those who oppose him." Chapin paused for a minute and glanced around with a troubled look in her eyes.

"They say that there is now someone else, more powerful than Yavin," she said quietly, but it was so silent around them that her words seemed to echo a thousand times off the mountains that surrounded the area.

There was not a sound for a minute except that of the lightly falling snow and the wind that howled around them. Finally, after what seemed like years, Christopher spoke up. "So, our enigmatic leader does exist after all." Another pause. "Ask him if he knows who this person is," he said to Chapin.

Chapin relayed this to the troll, and the troll responded with more gibberish. Finally, she told the group, "He says nobody knows his name. It's said that to speak his name would mean certain disaster not only to the person who said it but their family and friends as well."

"This is troublesome indeed," Mike said in a grave tone similar to that of Christopher's.

"See if anyone else knows about this person," Christopher told Chapin, who passed the message on to the rest of the trolls. One voice spoke up.

"He says that the new leader has the ability to travel through time."

"Wait-" Christopher said. "Ask the troll when this 'new leader' appeared."

Chapin came back a few minutes later with a startling answer. "He says only since the end of the summer."

The other four let out a murmur. "Since the end of the summer?" Christopher asked. "Are you sure?"

"That's what he says. There's no doubt about it," Chapin replied earnestly.

"Then we've already witnessed his time-traveling capabilities," Christopher said. "Twenty-five years ago, Yavin said there was someone more powerful than him. He couldn't have known that without some sort of communication between the present and the past."

"Yavin is dangerous enough to destroy the entire world," Dave said without a pause. "Who can be more powerful then he?"

"The only way we will find that out is if we're successful, or if we fail, in which case it won't matter," Christopher said.

"The trolls have agreed to help us," Dave said.

"Finally, some good news for a change," Mike said as he looked over the sizable guard of trolls standing by. There were at least a hundred of them of all ages and sizes.

Suddenly, from over the hill, there was a loud bang. Christopher shouted to one of the knights to scale the ridge to see what was going on on the other side.

Coming back panting, he reported incredulously, "You've got to come see for yourself!" Christopher ordered the knights to follow him up the hill, and the trolls also followed.

In the distance, there were several flashes just as the scene came into view. Trolls lined the horizon in two clearly divided lines that were obviously on opposing sides. From their vantage point, it was impossible for the knights and friendly trolls to determine who was on their side. It was clear, however, that the "army" closest in proximity to them was losing badly; the other side was using some type of magic that was devastating.

One of the trolls shouted out, and Chapin translated. "Our friends! They're being slaughtered!" At the sound of this,

the other trolls began to grow restless. A few began to rush toward the battlefield where the massacre was taking place.

"Stop where you are!" Christopher shouted to the trolls, who understood by the tone in his voice that something wasn't right. Chapin translated, and they burst out in a rage, looking back and forth at Christopher and the ongoing battle with a look of hatred in their eyes.

"You're only going to get yourselves killed, and possibly us as well," Christopher pleaded. Chapin must have added something to the translation, because the trolls obeyed reluctantly and returned to the group.

"Let's get out of here," Dave said in disgust. He motioned for Christopher to follow and waited for his approval. Christopher waved them on, but stayed behind, watching the battle progress. The trolls on their side were almost defeated now. All the world would remember of their battle would be a few holes in the ground from magic and a ransacked troll stronghold, both of which would be gone soon. Christopher realized the pointlessness of the quest on which he was about to embark. If they were killed, nobody would remember them. If they survived, they would be proclaimed heroes with the highest honors.

Christopher was awakened from his stream of though by Dave, who shouted to him from below to hurry. As he turned away from the massacre, Christopher was filled with a dread that he had never felt before, as if those who were lying on the battlefield were compelling him to not let their lives be forgotten.

Christopher hurried from the crest of the hill down to the river, where the trolls and knights were now gathered, planning their next move.

"What's wrong, Christopher?" Mike asked as Christopher slowly approached.

"It's nothing," Christopher replied. "What were you talking about?"

"Well," Mike responded, "We were trying to decide whether to continue right into Yavin's territory right now or not. Obviously you make the final decision, but now that we have reinforcements, it might be better to simply continue on."

"You do have a point," Christopher considered. "But even with three hundred of us, we're no chance against Yavin. He's much more powerful than we are, even if he has less

followers.

"Where would we go?" Dave asked bluntly, reinforcing Mike's point. "We'd have to backtrack all the way to Riverbend before we could find a decent-size town that will assist us in our efforts."

"Possibly not," Christopher replied. "We-" He was cut off by shouts approaching from the south, the direction in which the bloodbath they had just witness had taken place.

"We have to get away from here before they find us," Mike said.

"Agreed. Let's continue down the river until we're clear of them, and then we'll decide where to proceed." Nobody argued with this decision, and the knights cleared the area just as the troll bosses were rounding the crest of the hills behind them. Fortunately, the knights went unnoticed as they vanished behind a hill.

There were no signs of pursuit, so the knights continued down the river for a few hours until they decided to take a rest. By this time, it was almost sunset, so the choice was made to sleep for the night. During the day, they had gotten closer and closer to the mountains, until eventually a few minutes walk would begin the ascent to their northeast. Fortunately, the river had cut a path in the foothills over the eons. It was easy for the party to walk on the snow-covered frozen river, which was now solid enough to support their weight. By Christopher's calculations, the date was the first of December.

By the time they arrived at a suitable location to settle down for the night, the party was well our of reach of the out of control group of battling trolls. They decided in the morning to weigh their alternatives, and went to sleep with out much more talk. Two knights stood guard over the camp at all times of the night.

As the morning sun peeked above the horizon to the east, Christopher and Chapin rose before the rest of the knights and trolls to discuss their next move. After some debate, Mike and Dave finally awoke to join in their conversation. Katie got up just as the knights had begun to stir. The trolls, their rest cycles different from those of the humans present, normally slept until at least noon, and therefore, they were awakened as the others discussed their plans.

"Have you decided yet?" Katie asked as she approached

the four, who were in a heated debate.

"I'm trying to convince Christopher that we should go right to Yavin's fortress. We're only wasting time trying to find reinforcements, when nobody may be willing to help us," Chapin said to Katie in a persuasive voice.

"If we go that way," Christopher said in an uninterested voice, "we will surely be killed. At least we stand a chance to put up a fight by heading east."

"We don't even have a map," Mike said. "Traveling blindly into an unknown region inhabited by dangerous trolls and other things we can only begin to imagine is just plain idiotic. Winter is getting worse by the minute. If we don't get started on the journey "

"Calm down, Mike," Dave said, his temper flaring. "I agree it would be stupid to blaze right into Yavin's stronghold, but we should do so soon, before the winter sets in and Yavin's power strengthens."

"Yavin's power is already strong enough to kill us all," Christopher said pointedly. "We need some reinforcements. Right, Katie?"

Katie didn't know what to say. While she had originally wanted to charge into Yavin's fortress as soon as possible, it now seemed a foolhardy proposition at best.

"I agree with Christopher," Katie said, making up her mind. "It would be stupid to waste our lives in such a foolish exercise."

Mike and Dave stared at her with a look of bewilderment on their faces. "I thought you were on our side, Katie," Dave said, irritation in his voice.

"I just don't think we should do something as insane as this," Katie said.

"Now we're split two to two, with Mike half undecided," Chapin said. "So what step do we take next in this instance?"

"The option is clear -" Christopher said. "We must find reinforcements. The decision to proceed must be unanimous."

"We shouldn't proceed just because you don't want us to?" Dave replied angrily. "Why shouldn't we just go on because we can't make a decision?"

"We're talking about the safety of at least 300 lives here, possibly those of the entire world," Christopher replied. "We

can't just throw away our chances on a gamble. We have to be absolutely sure we want to continue."

"We aren't..." Dave said. "We aren't...absolutely...s..u..r..e....??" Dave was now feeling lightheaded. "What's happening?" he said, struggling to regain his lost balance.

"Somebody, help him!" Christopher yelled behind his shoulder as Dave collapsed to the ground.

"We can't...go..on...," he said, and then lost consciousness.

"Kevin!" shouted a voice that seemed to be a thousand miles away. Dave's head was throbbing. He couldn't seem to find enough energy to open his eyes.

"Kevin!" the voice shouted again. "Wake up!" Dave finally was able to open his eyes. The world emerged around him in a swirl of colors. Though he could not focus clearly, he was able to determine that he was lying on the ground in a small room with a low roof.

"Good, you're finally awake," the voice continued. "Get dressed! The ceremony is about to start!"

"Where... where am I?" Dave asked as he struggled to stand upright. He doubted that he had just been asleep, as the pain in his head was so severe that he was unable to say more than a few words at a time before having to rest.

"You're at home of course," the voice continued. Dave was now confident enough in his hearing and his vocal skills that he could determine the voice to be originating from a middle-aged woman.

"Come on, we've got to get to the ceremonies," she said. "I'll meet you outside in ten minutes." The woman exited the small shack through a door that was now clearly visible in Dave's improving eyesight. When his head stopped throbbing enough for Dave to rise out of his straw bed, he looked around.

Though his vision was still hazy, Dave was able to make out a small sack in the corner of the room where a set of garments was located. He had never seen any manner of clothing before that was in any way similar to the things that were now in front of him. Still puzzled at what was going on, Dave got dressed in a stupor.

After he was fully clothed, he took a look around him.

"Am I dreaming?" he thought as he explored his surroundings. As he was making his way across the few feet of the width of the small enclosure, he stumbled upon a sharp rock, which sent a piercing pain through his bare foot.

"Too real to be a dream," he concluded, hobbling around on his good foot. When the pain subsided, he pushed away the curtain to the entrance and exited the building.

It appeared that he was now standing at the outskirts of a small town that was cut out from the middle of a forest. Towering trees surrounded the entire area. The sky was overcast, but from the amount of light that was present, Dave could determine that it was either early morning or late evening.

"Kevin!" the same voice that Dave had heard before shouted. Dave turned toward the center of the small settlement, where the same woman who he had seen before stood. "Hurry up, we're late!"

"Who's Kevin?" Dave asked, becoming more confused. "Who are you? Where am I?"

"Stop joking around, Kevin," the woman scolded. "We're still in Terringrama, just as you were last night. You've lived here your whole life, too long to be playing games at an important time like this." The clouds in the sky were now beginning to thicken, and a cold wind was beginning to blow.

"But..." Dave protested.

"Hurry!" the woman commanded. Suddenly, there was a flash of light, and Dave lost consciousness.

"Dave! Are you awake?" Dave heard Mike shouting. Someone was shaking him so hard that it was beginning to hurt. "What's going on? Am I back?" he asked.

"Back?" Christopher replied, puzzled. "You've been here unconscious for the past half hour."

"Unconscious?" Dave asked. "But I was just in a town - Terringrama, I think I heard."

"You were probably dreaming," Chapin said.

"Dreaming? While I was unconscious?" Dave asked.

"It's possible. Anyway, the doctor over here can't figure out anything that's wrong with you," Christopher said. "All four of us have decided that it would be best to seek out reinforcements before we continue on to Yavin's fortress."

"Well, if you agree," Dave said, distracted. The fuzziness and the incessant throbbing in his head had now

vanished. Unlike where he had just been, where something had just not seemed right, everything appeared to be in order where he was now.

"We're going to leave in an hour," Christopher said. "Use the time to rest, Dave."

Dave acknowledged the comment but made no motion to lay down. He felt well-rested, as if nothing had happened to him except getting a good night's sleep.

For the next hour, Dave pondered over his predicament. After sixty minutes of trying to make sense of it, he realized that there was no clear answer. Though he tried to push it out of his mind, however, there was something about the experience that seemed to not want to be forgotten...

When the time arrived, the knights set out to the east on a journey that might or might not lead to their benefit. Christopher's map extended only a hundred miles to the east of their location. After they left the scope of the map, it might be impossible for them to keep their bearings. Christopher got out one of the rare pieces of parchment paper he had attained when the party was back in Riverbend, and began to extend his map from what he could see. In the clear winter air, the visible landscape stretched miles around them, allowing Christopher to add as much as possible to his map in case they were forced to return the way they came, should they not find an alternate entrance after searching elsewhere in the mountains.

The first day's journey was uneventful. The bleak, snow-covered mountains, now almost indistinguishable from the rest of the scene, continued to roll by to their north. The days were now so short that the sun barely rose above the horizon during the days. Christopher calculated that they had two days of light left before the month and a half period of darkness begun. Because of the increasing darkness, the party was forced to travel in the dangerous night, amidst whatever creatures Yavin decided to send their way.

After three days of trekking to their east, darkness overcame them. The knights and trolls had stopped at around midday that afternoon to watch the final setting of the sun. When the spectacle had ended and the night had befallen the travelers, they continued on, traveling for three more days in the pitch darkness. By this time, they were several hundred miles off Christopher's map. At times, the temperature dropped so

cold that the party was forced to take breaks to hole up in whatever cover they could find, which was sparse.

Shortly after this event, the small army spotted a lone shadow coming across the foothills they were trekking through in front of them. As the figure approached, it was difficult to be certain what type of creature it was; however, when it was close enough to see that the thing was human, Christopher halted and waited for the person's approach.

"Greetings!" it shouted out when it was close enough. It was not clear that the lone traveler was an older man, who seemed much too frail to be journeying out in the harsh elements.

"Hello," Christopher shouted in a friendly reply. "Isn't it late in the year to be traveling this far north?"

"I agree fully with you," the man replied. "Unfortunately, I'm fleeing from Yavin, who has invaded several towns in the direction you're going."

"This is bad news," Christopher half mumbled to himself. "Yavin has begun his invasion of the northern towns." Turning to the man, he asked, "What state are these towns in?"

"The ones I've come across are completely destroyed," the man replied. "But the last one, the one I just came from, was still expecting an invasion. It's all quiet around there."

"How far away is this town?" Christopher inquired.

"About a week's journey at a normal pace. I made the journey in a week and a half, and that's at my old age."

"Where are you headed?"

"I'm going west to a stopover at a town named Gager. After that, I'm getting as far away south from Yavin's influence as I can."

"Are you sure you can make it?"

"I've survived this far," the old but by no means disabled man replied. "I can manage."

"Very well," Christopher said. "Thank you for your help."

"By the way," the man asked as he turned away. "Who's side are you on?" A worried look came over his face after he surveyed the trolls who were standing off to the side, observing.

"We're trying to defeat Yavin by any means possible," Christopher said. Seeing the man's notice of the trolls, he added, "They rebelled against him because of maltreatment."

"Very well," the man said, not sure if Christopher was telling the truth and clearly regretting his decision to tell them anything, "Thank you for your assistance."

After the man had departed to their west, the companions set off in the opposite direction yet again, oping to cover more ground before they because too tired to walk.

By progressing steadily eastward over the next seven days, the group estimated they were less than a day away from the location of the town the old man had talked about. Little did they know the trouble they were getting themselves into.

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"Everybody down!" Christopher ordered. The clang of swords clashing echoed across the plain in front of them. Trolls swarmed ahead of them like ants on top of an anthill. The distance between the group of knights hidden on the ground and the furious battle in front of them was rapidly growing larger. It threatened to engulf the knights in its fury.

"Retreat," Christopher yelled as loudly as he could so that the knights could hear him. He didn't worry about the trolls and humans who were battling it out in front of him; if they didn't hear him now, they would discover their presence in a few seconds anyway.

The party had stumbled right into the middle of a war. Just a few minutes ago, a courier who had been delivering news to villages and towns spread out over the north had almost met with disaster when he had attempted to do the same thing that the knights were doing now. Unfortunately, when Christopher informed him of their true objective, he had lied, and they had fallen for it miserably. Now they were in the middle of a raging battle with their survival becoming more and more unlikely.

From scattered reports during their travels in the past week, Christopher was able to piece together that a resistance had set itself up in several villages clustered around the foot of the Blackhorse mountains. Yavin, who was irritated that a settlement of those not on his side was so close to his territory, had sent various life forms to seek out and eliminate all opposition to his rule. So far, they had not succeeded. Looking around, however, Christopher took note that the trolls outnumbered the men almost two to one, impossible odds to overcome, especially against powerful trolls, unless there was something of which he was unaware.

The knights scattered immediately when the order to retreat was delivered. Christopher was one of the first to realize the grave danger involved. He did not wish to drag his army into

a war. However, it might be their only way to actively resist Yavin's power and still live to tell about it. He made plans to visit the leaders of the resistance as soon as the battle was over, if they were still alive.

The trolls took little notice of the knights as they scampered away. The humans, who stood on the battlements of a stone wall that surrounded the village, did, however. Katie noticed several of these knights looking at the escaping army in wonder. One of them turned and rushed back down the ladder, as if to inform his superiors.

The battle raged on, with neither side showing any sign of their presence on the battlefield outside the fortified area. After the knights had retreated to a safe distance, they were able to watch the proceedings relatively safely. In a few minutes, it became clear from their vantage point that the humans were desperately in need of reinforcements. The battle was quickly turning into a bloodbath, and whoever could escape was attempting to scale the castle walls. Many times, these attempts to reach safety did not succeed, and the soldiers were cut down before they would meet their comrades again.

"We have to do something," Chapin pleaded to the others. "They're on our side, and they're being slaughtered!"

"There's nothing we can do," Christopher responded stubbornly. "We'd only succeed in getting ourselves killed."

"There must be a way," Dave added, pain evident in his voice.

"Look at the trolls," Christopher maintained. "They're all over. Even if they knew we were here, we would probably be dead in a matter of seconds, let alone having to enter into a battlefield."

"And if we don't help," Mike said, now joining the argument, "the members of the resistance and the innocent townspeople of the village will be killed!"

"Or they could emerge victorious, with no help from us, and our intervention would look foolish," Christopher said pointedly.

"We have to try," Mike said.

"Excuse me," came a voice from behind Christopher. One of the knights was tapping him on the shoulder. "Maybe you should come over here," he said.

Christopher did as the knight suggested. The knight led Christopher through the snow that was growing deeper every day. He climbed to the top of a small hill, from where they could see relatively far on a clear day. Unfortunately, another storm was brewing, and snow was just beginning to fall, obstructing their view. It was clear, however, what the knight had meant to show Christopher--a column of calks, trolls, and other creatures that the group had never seen before, marching toward the battle, cutting off their escape.

Christopher froze for a moment in amazement at the army, who appeared not to have spotted them in the worsening storm. Hurrying back over the crest of the small hill, he returned to the party. The trolls were now surrounding them on all sides; the only potential escape was to seek refuge inside the fortified town.

"We have to get out of here," Christopher said urgently to Katie and Chapin, who were standing around watching the battle in progress above them. The trolls had by now either annihilated or scared off all of the knights outside the village and were now attacking the outer walls. One after another, they began to scale the great walls. Above them, defenders threw boulders down, but for every troll that was knocked off the battlements, three others began the ascent.

"Trolls are behind us," Christopher explained hurriedly as he gathered his belongings. On all sides. Our only alternative is to seek shelter."

"See, I told you we should help them out!" Dave exclaimed, grinning at Christopher. "Let's go!"

The others, just as enthusiastic (with the exception of Chapin), followed in close proximity behind him. Christopher started to run as quickly as he could. As they rose up the hill toward the battlefield, the field below opened up before them. The troll army was much larger than they had imagined. The formerly white field was obscured by the march of trolls. It had now begun to snow. The snow was becoming more heavy, obscuring their view. Fortunately, it also obscured the views of the trolls up above, some of whom were obviously watching the hill below them for reinforcements.

"We need to reach the gates as quickly as possible," Christopher said. "We don't stand a chance out here."

"That might present a problem," Dave pointed out as

they ran at top speed up the hill.

"We'll have to find another way then," Christopher shouted above the combined noise of the stampeding knights, battle in front of them, and the wind howling. Snow pelted their clothing, making it almost impossible to continue in the direction in which they were traveling because the wind was blowing downhill into their faces.

"The trolls seem to have concentrated their attack on this section of the wall," Chapin pointed out, finally venturing a comment. "Perhaps if we traveled around to the other side of the town, we will be met with less resistance."

"You're right," Christopher agreed, holding up his hand to slow the knights behind him. "Let's move north and turn back east after we're clear of the battle."

"We have to hurry," Katie pointed out, motioning behind her, where the angry trolls were stampeding toward them.

"Move out," Christopher yelled to the knights after quickly explaining his plan. The knights and friendly trolls set off at a breakneck page, causing Christopher and the others to struggle to keep up. When Christopher and Chapin had caught up and settled into a relatively even pace, Chapin yelled to Christopher.

"Did you ever consider what the trolls' reactions will be to fighting some of their own kind?" she asked.

"Let's hope it doesn't come to that," Christopher replied.

"But if it does," Chapin pointed out, "the trolls may change sides quickly, leaving us all badly outnumbered."

"Or, as I would like to think," Christopher said, "the trolls on the other side will realize what they're doing and join *our* cause."

"There's not much chance of that happening," Chapin said grimly.

"We can hope for it," Christopher said, and with that they fell silent. They had traveled far enough so that they were now directly across from the northern wall of the town. Christopher gave the command to turn east, and the trolls did so immediately, without any questions.

The weather was approaching white-out conditions and seemed to worsen considerably as the party rounded the corner. It was now impossible to determine how far to their south the trolls that were attacking the town were or whether

reinforcements had arrived. It was quite possible that the reinforcements were only a few feet behind them. They would never know until it was too late, but at least they were traveling away from them as fast as they could.

The roar of the battle began to fade as the walls of the city blocked the noise from reaching them. From within the howling storm, it was impossible to determine from which direction any noise came; it was as if it were all around them.

There was a human cry that echoed throughout the area. Someone must have spotted the trolls' reinforcements, Christopher thought.

When they had traveled what Christopher estimated was half the length of the side wall of the town, the cries of battle grew loud again, and this time, he knew that the odds were not in their favor.

"We've got to go in now," he decided. "Toward the walls! We'll have to take our chances."

Abruptly, the obedient knights and trolls changed their course so that they were now headed toward the stone walls. After what seemed like years had passed, the grey forms of the walls loomed in front of them as they approached.

"What are we going to do now?" Christopher yelled above the hubbub. There was not a door or any opening in sight.

"All this way for nothing!" Chapin said, exasperated.

"We're going to be overwhelmed any minute," Mike warned as the noise of the battle grew louder. "Does anyone have ideas?"

"Can we climb?" one of the knights shouted, obviously too far back in the crowd to see through the snowstorm.

"The wall's perfectly smooth," Christopher yelled back.

"It almost doesn't look natural," Dave commented nonchalantly.'

"He's right," Mike said, moving toward the wall to feel it. There was hardly a hole for a pebble to fit into. There was an unnatural smoothness to it.

"There must be some kind of magic acting on it," Christopher deducted.

"Even if there is, there's no way to determine where it originates," Dave shouted as the noise grew louder. Cries of wounded soldiers filled the air.

"In fact, there is a way," Chapin said. "With the stones,

the three of us might be able to remove a magical field, given enough time."

"How much time is enough?" Dave asked, half afraid to discover the answer.

"A few minutes. We don't have any other options that I can see, so we'd better get started," Christopher said.

Before anybody could reply, he, Chapin, and Katie had moved to form a circle. Each was holding their magical stone. The stones, because they had been severely depleted several weeks earlier, were desperately low on energy. Christopher hoped that they would hold out in this situation. Unfortunately, he could not even guess at how long the stones would require to recharge.

They began to chant in voices that became louder and louder. At the same time, the volume of the battle sounds increased until it was impossible to determine how close the battle was to them. Around their current position, as Mike took notice while he waited anxiously for the three to finish their chanting, the snow was stained red from a skirmish that had occurred on this side of the castle.

Strangely, despite the presence of the huge army and the spell that was being cast, none of the warriors participating in the battle just a short distance away seemed to take notice of the knights and trolls. Mike wondered if the weather was causing this almost impossible occurrence.

Mike's thoughts were interrupted by a flash of light that lit up the wintry scene around them. Christopher and the others had stopped chanting, and the walls seemed to be transforming in front of their eyes.

At first, a few rocks shone through, but as they watched in awe, a ladder appeared just off in the direction of the battle. Another appeared in front of them and another to their left. The entire wall was lined with ladders and walkways. However, it only seemed that the spell had worked on the portion of the wall in their immediate vicinity; the area on the fringes of their visual perception seemed unaffected.

"They were so confident in their magical abilities, they made the wall scalable in case allies needed to gain entrance quickly," Christopher said.

"Hurry! Up the walls," Chapin said, and the knights didn't hesitate. The trolls, who were in front, began the climb

first.

As the first wave reached the top, it was evident that they were not the only people aware of their presence. Guards, wearing uniforms similar to the ones they had spotted before on the walls in front, brandished their swords and threatened to slash at the trolls.

"Stop!" Christopher shouted. For a split second, the defenders stopped in their attack, long enough for the humans to ascend high enough on the walls so that they were visible from above.

"What is this?" one of the guards shouted. "You must be some of Yavin's men!"

"We're not Yavin's men. These trolls hate Yavin!" Christopher tried to explain.

"I've never encountered a troll that hated Yavin," one of the guards said. "You're lying. Prepare to die!"

"Wait! If we were Yavin's servants, we could have killed you in seconds already. But since we aren't, we don't wish to do that. However, if you force us, three hundred to five is pretty good odds," Christopher pleaded.

"I see what you mean," one of the guards said after a brief hesitation. "Let them up, and signal the Master Guard that reinforcements have arrived."

"Thank you," Christopher said, not forgetting what had been done for them.

"The trolls have sent in reinforcements and are attacking a section of the front wall. We don't know how long we'll be able to hold them."

"Yes, I saw them on their approach," Christopher said. "There were at least a thousand of them, possibly more."

"That's not going to help our effort at all," the guard said to Christopher as the trolls and knights scrambled up the wall onto the small walkway that lined the top for defense.

"Fortunately, we have five thousand men on standby in case our condition worsens," the guard said.

"Five thousand?" Christopher said, astonished. "Where did you find all of this support?"

"This is the only friendly town for miles," the guard replied. "Everyone flocks here for protection and many wish to serve in our army."

"That's incredible," Christopher said. "Let's talk later.

Right now, however, we must be getting to our defense."

Chapin realized that she had been standing behind Christopher and the guard, listening to their conversation. The trolls and knights had gone on ahead, leaving her painfully obvious where she was standing. Apologizing, she headed off in the direction of the battle, and Christopher and the guard followed not far behind.

As they approached, the full extent of the calamity in front of them was finally revealed. There weren't just a thousand trolls as Christopher had estimated; at least two or three thousand were immediately attacking the front walls, while more seemed to be in waiting beyond.

Despite all their efforts, troll after troll fell as they attempted to scale the smooth walls. On top, guards threw rocks and heavy objects down as rapidly as they could to keep up with the onslaught.

"Get that hole in the field repaired," someone shouted to the guards. Looking over, Christopher saw that this person was protected with a different type of armor than the other guards. He was clearly their superior.

"Yes, sir!" three guards screamed, rushing past Christopher and Chapin, who had to back up against the rail behind them in order to avoid being run over. The three stopped a short distance away, at what appeared to be a door that Christopher and Chapin had not previously noticed. The wall jutted into the town slightly at this point; probably housing some kind of magic machine that protected the town by masking its walls.

No sooner had the three guards disappeared inside than there was a loud bang that shook the wall down to its foundation.

"What was that?" one of the guards who were in command shouted.

"They're hauling boulders at us, sir," one of the guards stated plainly to his commander.

There was another loud bang, and the wall shook beneath. When the shaking had stopped, everything was, fortunately, still intact, at least for the time being.

Christopher and Chapin continued moving forward to where the guard who appeared to be the commander was stationed. Katie, Mike, and Dave were right beside him, conversing. Christopher noticed that many of the trolls in their

army were now fighting alongside the knights against the evil trolls. As of yet, there hadn't been any talk about going back on their pledge to rise up against Yavin.

"You must be Christopher," the commander stated, remaining calm in the face of pressure. "I heard a lot about you and your knights before you arrived."

"Yes, word travels quickly, I'm afraid," Christopher replied. "If you could have found out so quickly in the middle of winter, the news could have easily reached Yavin's fortress by now."

"Perhaps it has," the commander said and motioned to the battle.

"Sir, the trolls are redirecting some of their attack to the north wall," a guard suddenly said, rushing toward his commander.

"Divert some of our reserves to help," he ordered. "Sound the alarm." Without waiting for another word, the guard rushed away to see that the orders were carried out.

After the guard had left them, Christopher spoke up once again. "What do you mean?" he asked the commander of the forces, afraid to be told the answer.

"I believe that these trolls expect to find you here," he said. "In fact, I would go so far as even to venture that they wish to eliminate their friends who are on your side."

"This happened less than a week ago!" Christopher exclaimed. "How is it possible that the news has reached Yavin's ears that quickly, especially with the weather the region's been experiencing recently?"

"Calks, perhaps, who stalked you while you slept," the commander suggested. "Or perhaps the trolls involved in the revolt reported back to Yavin after the incident."

"There's still the time issue," Christopher said. "Is it possible for calks to reach Yavin's fortress in that short amount of time?"

"Calks can travel faster than the fastest horse," the commander replied. "And they hardly ever tire. I would be surprised if Yavin was *not* aware of our presence."

"We should leave then," Mike said. "Our being here will only bring trouble to your town."

"No, that won't help," the commander replied. "The trolls attacked when you weren't here anyway, so what good

would leaving do if they weren't aware of you doing so anyway? We can't just go up to one of them and tell them you left, and they wouldn't believe us anyway."

"So, then what do you propose we do?" Christopher asked the commander.

"Help us defeat the trolls with your powers," he responded. "If we are victorious, we will assist you in your efforts."

"That's easier said than done," Christopher remarked, taking a minute to consider the suggestion. While he didn't want his army annihilated, the potential gains far outweighed the losses - as many as five thousand helping them to defeat Yavin. That would be a force to be reckoned with. After a minute while the battle raged around him, Christopher spoke up.

"I agree. Let's get started." Without waiting for the commander to reply, Christopher turned toward his knights, who were standing along the wall further down. He signaled to join the others. "Follow Sir.., I don't believe I know your name," Christopher said.

"Sir Tony," the commander said. Katie gasped when she recognized the name, but the sound went unheard as another loud crash shook the wall down to its roots. Mike peered over the wall, then the others followed. "They're trying to batter down the very stones we're standing on!" Christopher exclaimed.

"Squad four, relocate to the attack point!" Tony ordered, and a rush of knights surged past them to help reinforce the point where the trolls were attacking.

"Tony?" Katie asked.

"Yes?" Commander Tony answered.

"I thought - maybe this isn't true-" she was cut off suddenly the shouts of allies. They pointed to the horizon. A dark cloud loomed over the white landscape. Even in the whiteout conditions, it was clearly visible what was headed toward them.

"Calks!" Chapin exclaimed. "Thousands of them! They're headed straight for us!"

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"Everyone down!" Anthony shouted. The calks were approaching so rapidly that it was impossible for anyone to think of anything else than saving their own lives.

Outside the walls, a roar erupted that droned out all sound. The trolls were beginning to celebrate after seeing their reinforcements coming.

The calks swarmed over the city, enveloping it in a cloud of darkness. Strangely, however, they did not attack the soldiers protecting the city on the outer walls. Instead, they swarmed around a small building that seemed to have no importance to them, and then flew off to the East just as quickly. The cheers of the trolls quickly turned back to war cries. A few even seemed puzzled. The battle quickly resumed, but quite a few trolls fell during the stoppage when the defenders of the city had managed to fight back. Christopher and the others looked toward Anthony for answers, but he had the same expression on his face as the rest of them.

"What just happened?" Christopher inquired. "They calks could have killed us all. Why didn't they attack us?"

"Perhaps some spell you cast caused the calks to turn back," Anthony stated, a little too matter-of-factly.

"Spell?" Chapin inquired, as the calks disappeared over the horizon. "I don't recall casting any spells here."

"Maybe Yavin has other plans," Anthony suggested, but Christopher had doubts that he was telling the truth. He said nothing. The battle continued around them, almost in a deadlock from the numbers on both sides.

Chapin looked around, and saw that Dave was standing in the same position that he had been ten minutes ago, and had not moved the entire time.

"Dave?" she asked. "Are you alright?" There was no response. Christopher and the others turned toward her in alarm.

"Dave?" Christopher asked, a little louder.

Suddenly, without warning, Dave fell backwards onto the stone battlement. Mike, who was standing behind him, reached out with a cry and stopped him inches away from the stone.

"We must get him some help," Katie told Anthony.

"Yes, you should," Anthony replied. "Go down into the city, and the medical station is the first building on the right - it's only a minute from here."

"Thank you," Christopher said, and he moved off toward the stairway that led up to the battlements, carrying Dave over his shoulder. The stairs were steep, but Christopher somehow managed to descend into the city without any major difficulty.

As Christopher departed, Katie and the others turned their attention back to the battle. It was still a stalemate, with neither side able to gain a clear advantage. Just a few seconds later, a guard approached the group and requested that they assist in repairing equipment. As Katie and Mike followed the man, they were preoccupied by thoughts of what Dave's fate would be...

"Hurry up!" the woman shouted again. "I won't tell you again!" Dave was groggy. As he regained his senses, he realized that he was again standing in the square of that small town - Terringrama, he recalled hazily. He took a few unsure steps in a random direction. Apparently, they were in the correct one, because the woman turned and continued ahead, ceasing her pleas.

It seemed as if not a second had passed since his last encounter with the woman and the town. The sky was still covered in a sheet of grey, and a cold wind still chilled him to the bone. And the strange building still loomed ahead of him.

In his previous experience, Dave had not noticed how fancily everyone in the town was dressed. All of the men wore identical cloaks, dark blue with white stripes across the top and bottom. The woman also wore identical dresses with the same design as those the men were clothed in.

As Dave approached the large building in front of him, he realized that it was a place of worship. Not a church, but it looked similar - a large dome on the top of the structure, similar to a steeple but not exactly like one in that there was no adornment at the top of the rise. The roof of the enormous

structure slanted off to both sides but was exceedingly high, at least three times the height of a man. The place was so huge that it was the dominant feature in the town.

Ahead of him, Dave saw that the doors stood open, and others in the town were leading the way inside. The town was larger than Dave had originally thought from the number of people who now entered the edifice. As he followed the woman closer to the building, he began to develop a sense that something was wrong; though he could not quite pinpoint what.

The inside of the building was just as impressive as the outside. The walls were painted pure black, and contrasted with the ceiling, which was painted a bright red. Not standard colors for a church, Dave thought. Furthermore, there were no pews inside; the entire floor stood open with the exception of a small podium stationed in the middle of the expanse. Next to the podium were various candles and assorted religious articles not out of the ordinary for a town of this size.

What was next to them, however, was what caught Dave's glance. A large, elaborately decorated box was stationed at least ten feet above the floor. There was a small opening on the top of the object, which was slanted at an angle apparently to allow the spectators below to see. Situated inside were many strong metal shackles that were as decorated and elaborately designed as the rest of the box.

Many others had gathered around all sides of the podium, where a man who was adorned differently than the others stood, as if preparing to give a speech. The woman filed past the milling crowds and took a position near the back of the congregation, motioning for Dave to stand next to her.

There they stood for several minutes, during which time more of the townsfolk entered the room with them. The place was plenty large to hold everyone three times over, but it seemed like the entire town was present, because there wasn't a sound from outside. His suspicious were further confirmed when those who appeared to be the leaders took a head count of the people present.

Satisfied, one of them headed toward the large, heavy metal doors, and began to swing it shut. It clamored closed with a loud clang, and all of the outside light was blocked. It took three of the men to slam a heavy metal bar down over the doors. It was clear that no person could lift that bar without the help of

two others. Dave looked around, but nobody seemed to regard this as strange at all, though many of the people saw looked apprehensive.

The speaker stepped up to the podium and cleared his throat. "Unfortunately, the time has come again for us to perform the rituals that we have all come to hate. Yavin came to me in a dream last night, and requested yet another cleansing." The speaker's voice grew more depressing with every note.

"Another one?" one of the villagers piped up. "This is the second time in three months!"

"I can only obey..." he paused, and a look of disgust filled his voice. "Lord Yavin, not argue with him. Remember, he could have destroyed our town and everyone in it many years ago, but he has elected to preserve us.

"Being located at the foot of the Black Stone mountains does not come without its disadvantages," the speaker half-pleaded. "What is better? Death for all, or taking your chances amongst 1000 other townsfolk?" The room was deathly silent. Dave was still confused.

When the speaker realized that he would receive no more opposition, he continued on. "As you all know, Yavin decided to save our town during the wars many years ago, but required that at least one of the captured serve him. We have held out for many years, allowing the chosen to die rather than to waste their lives serving Yavin. We must not back down - we cannot give into his evil wishes!" The speaker had risen his voice considerably. He lowered it now, and continued on. Apprehension ran high in the audience.

"Therefore, the usual ceremony will commence. Chistan has the papers here - he will pick who is to be sacrificed. The chosen will then have one hour, as usual, to decide whether to reveal our secrets to Yavin, or to die instead.

"I sincerely wish each of you that your name will not be chosen." He looked around as if the death that was being proposed would be a horrible one. Dave now began to get nervous. Why was he present at this gathering? Was he in the lottery for Yavin's scheme? If his name was chosen, he realized fearfully that he would not be able to escape. Was it a dream? It was too real to be a dream. Dave hoped that it was.

"Let's get this over with as quickly as possible," the speaker behind the lead speaker said. He raised up a basket that

was filled with thousands of small scraps of paper. The leader reached down into the basket as Dave began to black out...

Dave sat up with a start. The noise of battle was all around him. He never thought that he could be so glad to be back in the middle of a war. Looking around, he noticed Christopher standing across the small tent where he was lying, tending to another casualty.

"Well, well," Christopher said genially. "It's good to see you back."

"Where was I?" Dave asked.

"You fainted on the battlements," Christopher reminded him. "The medic thinks it was because of stress."

"Fainted..?" Dave asked. "I was just..." He caught his tongue, not sure whether to reveal his experiences with anyone.

"You were where?" Christopher inquired. Dave cursed himself in his head for being so stupid. He now had to make a decision. If he told Christopher and the others, they could think he was going mad, or under the influence of some evil power, and leave him. If he didn't tell them, however, he had no way of knowing what would happen to him - the ceremony looked real to him.

"I was in a town. They were holding some sort of ceremony."

"What kind of ceremony?" Christopher asked.

"I don't know. They were trying to make up for something that Yavin promised them in the past."

"Do you remember the name of the town?" Christopher asked.

"Yes, I believe it was... Terringrama."

Christopher's eyes shot up from his work. Hastily, he wrapped the bandage around the man's arm that he was tending to. "You'll be just fine in a few days," he whispered quickly to him, and then moved toward Dave.

"You must tell me everything you know," Christopher said.

"Why?" Dave asked, half puzzled and half afraid. "What's wrong?"

"I can't determine that until I'm told everything that happened."

"Well," Dave began, "I was in a small town. Everyone

was going to a religious ceremony. There was a big building, when heavy doors with a metal bar to block it.."

"Slow down," Christopher said. "I can't understand a word you're saying!" Dave realized that he had been talking rather quickly.

"When I got inside," Dave continued, being careful to speak more slowly, "the entire town was there. They shut the doors, and there was a strange table that was raised above the floor that looked like a torturing device. There was someone who talked about a deal with Yavin or something like that, and he sounded like something bad was about to happen."

"That's because something bad *was* about to happen," Christopher stated plainly.

"How do you know?" Dave asked, puzzled.

"Terringrama..." Christopher said. "There was an old legend - about a town whose location had been lost in the mists of time. The inhabitants of the town were living peacefully until trolls and other creatures invaded, but they fought back bravely with magic and conventional weapons and forced them out of the town. The trolls suffered heavy losses, and no matter how hard they tried, they were unable to conquer the town. After a year of fighting over the same land, Yavin himself reportedly visited the trolls in hopes of encouraging them as if that might somehow win the battle.

"After the trolls suffered another defeat and their numbers were dwindling, Yavin cast a curse on the town. He wanted to be able to learn how the townsfolk had survived, but yet he did not want to let their deeds go unpunished. To this end, he cursed the town so that every time he demanded, another person would be chosen from the town.

"That person would be given an hour to defect to Yavin's forces and tell him the secret of the town's survival, or be killed by Yavin's power. Since it was only a story, nobody knows how long this has been going on, but supposedly there wasn't a single person out of the thousands who were murdered who would confess. According to legend, the process still continues today, wherever Terringrama is located."

"Some story," Dave said. "At least I hope it's just a story."

"We may have more to fear here than just a dream," Christopher replied gravely. "This has happened to you twice,

correct?"

"Yes." Dave knew what Christopher was getting at.

"There is a very small chance that you would have the exact same dream, leaving off at the exact same point, in the exact same setting, at the exact same time. My theory is that some force, perhaps Yavin himself, is bringing you to have these dreams. We can only guess at the purpose."

"What motive would anyone have to summon me to this place in my dreams?" Dave asked.

"That's hard to say," Christopher replied. "Yavin may be hoping to find out more about you. Or it could be as simple as that someone in the town is casting magical spells to ensure that the town's memory is never forgotten. In any case, I must inform the others as soon as possible. This does not bode well with our current strategy." Christopher turned and in several long strides went to the door.

"Wait," Dave said.

"Yes?" Christopher asked, turning.

"Is..." Dave said, a hint of uncertainty in his voice. "Am I in any danger from these dreams?"

Christopher stopped and looked at Dave. "I'd like to be able to tell you that they're only dreams, but we have no guarantee that they are. It is a possibility that you could be...affected in some way or another. That is why I must tell the others as soon as possible." He vanished from the tent before Dave could say anything else.

Affected? Dave thought. *What does that mean? He was obviously hiding something, but what?* The noise of battle that permeated through the thin canvas that surrounded him didn't make things any better. Standing up, Dave attempted to move toward the door to follow, but a sharp pain flowed through his arms. *Maybe I better ly back down,* he thought grimly. *These dreams are having an effect on me. What next?*

Up on the city wall, Christopher relayed the news to Katie, Chapin, and Mike, who were gathered together repairing armor and weapons that had been damaged in the battle. While most of the tasks were simple - mending a stitch in some body armor or forging the hilt back on a sword (that was saved for the experienced blacksmiths), some were beyond repair or too complicated for the novices to attempt. As a results, they were taking a break due to lack of work when Christopher entered.

"How is the battle progressing?" he asked.

"Not very well," the others replied. "At first, it seemed that the knights were going to be able to hold out, but their numbers are dwindling, and calks and trolls are multiplying by the minute."

"Is there any hope of reinforcements arriving in time?" Christopher asked.

"This is the only village for days, and the attack was a surprise that happened just yesterday. I think we can, unfortunately, rule out that possibility."

"Then we must find a way out of this town quickly, without ourselves being killed. Things will only get worse here, and our best course of action would be to flee as soon as possible," Christopher suggested. "I fear that something out of the ordinary is affecting Dave - possibly Yavin himself. There may be some sort of energy here that is affecting him, and I suspect that is why the calks withdrew."

"We have to talk to Anthony about this," Katie said.

"That would be foolish," Chapin chided. "We would be placing ourselves in unnecessary risk."

"No, it isn't a bad idea," Christopher said after a moment's thought, "but we must watch what we say very carefully. We wouldn't want to give away any important information, especially to a source I do not completely trust. Remember how he said he didn't know why the calks abandoned attacking us? The look on his face made it clear that he is obviously hiding something from us, or perhaps the entire town."

"There's no use speculating about it here," Katie said. "Let's go up top and talk with him."

"No, you should not accompany me," Christopher warned. "It will only attract suspicion if you volunteered to help with the war effort and you are skulking behind me eavesdropping. We must be more discreet. I'll go alone."

"Very well," Chapin agreed. "It is for the best."

"While I am gone," Christopher ordered, looking around him to be sure that nobody overheard their conversation, "Find a way that you can get out of here quickly, if need be. If the stones weren't depleted, we could possibly teleport ourselves a short distance, but that won't be possible. Still, in the case of an emergency, it will be helpful for us to get as far away from everyone as possible."

"Hey, you over there!" a man shouted from across the room. "Get back to work! You volunteered for this job, now do it!"

"Hopefully, we'll meet up soon," Christopher said, and then exited the building while the others returned to their tasks.

Once outside, the conditions had changed a great deal. Wounded were being brought in through secret passages all around the walls. Passing by one of them, Christopher saw that two guards guarded the inside entrance, with heavy metal gates that could be sealed off long before a troll could enter the structure due to the immense thickness of the wall.

Ascending the ladder, Christopher was met with an incredible sight. All around, the snow was stained red from the blood shed by the knights. Everywhere, bodies of the slain knights were piled up sometimes knee-deep around the outer walls. The remaining knights were outnumbered by the trolls almost two to one. The trolls were hardly being met with any resistance.

Sir Anthony was in the middle of a flurry of activity. Knights swarmed around him. Christopher was almost unnoticed as those who appeared to have a high rank moved in every direction around him.

After what seemed like quite a while, the knights eventually had told Anthony everything he had needed to know, or so it appeared by the fact that almost everyone left at once, leaving an opportunity for Christopher to talk to him. He took it. As he approached, warnings flared through his head.

"How is everything progressing?" Christopher asked.

"As if you could not tell," Anthony said with a hint of sarcasm in his voice. Christopher was taken aback. "My men are being slaughtered. If we do not find a way to hold back the trolls, we will be overwhelmed by nightfall."

"Well," Christopher said, mentally calculating what he would say next in his head. "At least the calks aren't attacking us anymore."

"Yes," Anthony said in a voice that was too calm for him to be telling the truth. "It is fortunate."

"May I ask what that building in the middle of the square is that the calks were attracted to?"

"It's just an ordinary building, as I told you before," Anthony replied in a rude manner. "Please, I must be attending

to business." He turned, and without looking back walked away, leaving Christopher stunned.

He spotted Dave mounting the stairs as he finally regained his senses.

"What happened?" Dave asked, sensing that something was wrong.

"I was just rudely informed that the building in the center of this city is of no importance."

"No importance?" Dave asked. "I think not. I took the liberty of investigating a little." When Christopher's face tightened, Dave added quickly, "I didn't go that close, and nobody saw me. But there were many knights guarding whatever it is. They're obviously hiding something."

"Well then," Christopher said, climbing down the ladder with a purpose in his step. "We'll just have to go inside and find out what's there."

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The roar of the battle was growing louder as Christopher and Dave made their way toward the unusual building in the center of town. The town was deserted, or, at least, it seemed to be. Most of the townspeople were hidden in their houses, away from the pandemonium that was taking place outside. Few seemed to realize the graveness of the situation. It would be less than an hour at the rate things were happening before the last knights were defeated and the trolls made entry into the town. Then what?

Dave blocked out the thought as they drew closer to the structure. Several armed guards stood watch outside the complex, which was surrounded by a tall wall. From what they could see, there was only one entrance, directly in front of them, and two guards stood on either side, swords ready.

"What could be so valuable that so many guards are needed to protect it in the middle of a battle that Anthony's forces are losing so badly?" Dave wondered aloud. Christopher nodded in agreement. With a motion from his hand that was not visible to the guards, both Christopher and Dave turned down a side street less than a block from the structure.

Around them, the wind made eerie noises as it blew between the buildings. The sun, which was now just above the horizon for its ten-minute day, cast strange shadows around them. When they were safely out of sight of the guards, Christopher spoke first.

"I don't think we should ask the others to join us," he suggested. "It would inevitably just draw attention to ourselves and create more problems than we already have."

"Agreed," Dave said, surprised that Christopher was asking him for his opinion. "How are we going to get inside?"

"We must distract the guards somehow," Christopher said. "Or else we must gain entry by climbing over that wall, but I wouldn't suggest it."

Dave peeked around a nearby corner. The wall was visible in the distance. Atop it were sharp spikes that would kill anyone instantly who attempted to scale the wall.

"I guess we'll have to go with our first idea," Dave replied.

"How will we go about that?" Dave asked, but as the words were emerging from his mouth, a large gust of wind erupted from the sky. It appeared to be concentrated in one area - around the medical building. The trees surrounding the structure groaned and swayed, and the snow on the ground made it impossible to see inside. From where they were, Dave and Christopher felt nothing. It was obvious what the effects of the sudden gust were: there was a sickening crash and a loud boom that shook the ground around the now splintered building. Enormous slabs of stone that had once been the foundation of the building flew out in all directions, but, once outside the wind, landed quickly.

People scrambled out of the way, running for their lives from the flying rocks. The two watched in horror as one of the stone slabs slammed into one of the passersby, killing him in seconds. Christopher and Dave turned away.

"Mike was in that building," Dave said, fear evident in his voice.

"He was when I last left him," Christopher said, uneasiness now creeping into his voice.

"We have to go back for him!" Dave shouted and began to run back toward the storm. He stopped at the end of the street, frozen in place, watching the storm which still raged. Though the building was now completely reduced to a pile of rubble, the fragments inside continued to whirl around due to some unseen force. Christopher grabbed Dave by the arm and pulled him back into the alley.

"You fool! You're only going to get yourself killed!" he exclaimed in anger.

"But Mike was inside there-"

|"We have to face the truth," Christopher stated. "Mike may have been inside the building when it was destroyed." He was interrupted by a gasp from Dave but continued on. "But if he were, there's nothing we can do about it now except get ourselves killed with him. And if he somehow escaped, he will be fine on his own."

"On his own...?" Dave asked. "You're not suggesting

that we still go inside, are you?"

"Of course I am," Christopher said. "In fact, that occurrence just gave us an opportunity. Look over there!" Christopher pointed toward the enclosed structure, which now stood unguarded. Looking down the street, Dave spotted the guards standing just outside of the range of flying debris, watching the destruction unfold.

"Hurry!" Christopher said. "Get inside before someone sees us!"

"But-" Dave started to reply, before he was pulled along as Christopher ran across the open street to an opposite, closer alleyway. When he saw that the coast was still clear, he sprinted off again inside the spiked wall, motioning for Dave to follow. Dave ran as fast as he could toward the gates, but a rock halted his progress about halfway through the trek. Falling over, he grabbed his knee in pain.

"Come on!" Christopher shouted just loud enough for only him to hear. "The guards will be back as soon as... that stops!"

"I can't get up!" Dave screamed. He pushed against the ground in an attempt to get some leverage, but shooting pains seared through his left leg.

Christopher shook his head but rushed over to Dave and bent to help him up. It took precious seconds in the open for Christopher to finally get into a walking stance and support Dave at the same time, and it took what seemed like ages to reach the inside of the wall.

When they were finally out of sight of the guards, Christopher motioned for Dave to make himself flat against the wall, while he did the same. After a few moments, when it was clear that the guards had not seen them, Christopher said, "They didn't see us... yet, so don't let your guard down. If they come back, we'll be discovered in seconds."

"There's something very wrong with my leg," Dave said, wincing and grabbing it just above his knee.

"Let me take a look. We need to keep moving." Christopher looked down at Dave's leg. The injury seemed more serious than at first glance - blood stained Dave's pant legs down to the ankles.

"It's nothing," Christopher said to reassure Dave, "but I'd better take a look just to be safe."

Pulling up Dave's pant leg, Christopher discovered a big

gash that ran almost the entire length of Dave's leg, widening near his kneecap. It appeared as if most of the bleeding had stopped; however, Dave's knee was somewhat out of position.

"You just bumped your knee," Christopher said. "Let me get this fixed up and we'd better move on."

"How are we going to move on?" Dave asked Christopher as Christopher tied a cloth to Dave's leg. When he tightened it, Dave winced again, but made no sound. "I can barely walk as it is," Dave said.

"Well," Christopher debated, "we can't go back outside - we'd surely be caught then, and there's a battle raging. If the calks are afraid of what's inside, maybe the trolls won't enter either should they invade the town."

"If calks are afraid to enter," Dave said grimly, "shouldn't we be afraid too?" Christopher gave no answer.

"OK, it should be fine now. I would suggest that you try to not use that leg for a while, but since you can't do that, just try to walk with the other leg as much as possible so that it doesn't start bleeding again."

Dave pulled the bloody pantleg down again and did his best to follow Christopher across the wide expanse that surrounded the structure. It now appeared to be some sort of place of worship. The building possessed a large domed ceiling, which somehow seemed transparent though it was made of neither glass nor any material with which Dave and Christopher were familiar. That part had been invisible from the outside. Christopher wondered aloud why a city would want to hide an architectural wonder such as this.

Dave was preoccupied by the growing pain in his leg, which intensified with each step. By the time that the two had finally reached safety in the shadow of the building, the pain was almost unbearable. Moving around the side of the round structure, Dave noted that there were many candles that seemed to be lit by an unseen source.

"There must be a door here somewhere," Dave whispered to Christopher. What little light the sun had provided was now dwindling fast, and it would not be much longer before the sun did not rise altogether. Christopher had explained that, for four weeks each year, Yavin's castle is shrouded in darkness, and this is when he is at his strongest.

Putting his thoughts aside, Dave followed Christopher around to the back of the building, where they found a door

which appeared to be plated in gold. Ornate designs covered the entire surface, except for a small hole where a key could be placed.

"This is great," Christopher stated indignantly. "We get all the way inside, and we're stopped by a simple lock."

After he had stopped speaking, the noise of battle was again beginning to intensify. Torches and fires on top of the distant walls lit the city, which would have normally been invisible in the pitch darkness.

"Have any ideas?" Dave asked cautiously, not wanting to anger Christopher.

"We could force it open with magic," Christopher said, "but not without the help of Katie and Chapin. Even then, with the stones being depleted as they are, I don't know how much effect that would have."

"There doesn't even seem to be a doorknob," Dave said suddenly. Indeed, it was impossible to locate one on the heavy door. Even if they were unable to undo the lock, it might be impossible to force it open.

"It doesn't look like any keyhole I've ever seen, either," Christopher said. Instead of being shaped as a normal keyhole, the hole was oval in shape and appeared to have several grooves. The door was thick, as well, and the hole seemed to reach most of the way through it.

"It almost looks as if it could be opened with-"

|"A sword!" Christopher exclaimed. "I never thought of using a sword. Try using the Falchion, Dave."

"I can barely stand up as it is," Dave said. "How can I exert enough strength to even turn the key? What's the chances of this working, anyway?"

"Fine," Christopher said. "If you want to be stubborn, then I'll do it myself. He reached for Dave's sword, but Dave clamped his hand down on it.

"I'll do it," he said indignantly and straightened himself up from the slumped position he had been maintaining during the past few minutes.

Reaching his full height, Dave drew the sword from its sheath. He had had little occasion to use it over the past few months and had almost forgotten that the weapon was at his side, even though it weighed him down tremendously when he tried to run.

The sword seemed to sparkle and shine with a whitish glow. It was very faint, but Dave was sure that it hadn't been there before. *Maybe I'm going crazy because of this leg*, he thought. The unique shape of the sword seemed even more distinct from where he was standing.

"Here goes," Dave said and slammed the sword into the keyhole. There was a hissing sound, and Dave removed his hand from the sword's hilt in astonishment. The sword was glowing red hot, even though it was well below freezing outside.

"What...?" Dave asked Christopher, who appeared to be as astonished as he.

"I didn't even turn it..." Dave began to say but was interrupted as the door began to swing outward. The massive object threatened to crush Christopher and Dave as they scrambled out of the way.

The sword clattered to the ground, still superheated from whatever had just taken place. The snow around the scorching sword turned to steam, which promptly froze in the sub-zero temperatures around them.

"Amazing!" Dave exclaimed. Christopher was too busy looking around to see if anyone had heard the commotion they had made. When it was clear that nobody had been anywhere near to hear, he turned toward Dave.

"I've never heard of a device like this," Christopher said, as awestruck as Dave for a change. "You'd better wait for a few minutes to get your sword before we go inside - someone might steal it, and besides, it will give us away if anyone happens to come back here."

"Good idea," Dave said, and they spent the next few minutes in silence, waiting for the sword to cool enough so that Dave could reclaim it. The sounds of the battle were growing ever more frantic, and the number of figures on the city walls seemed to multiply every time the comrades looked over at them.

When the sword had finally cooled enough so that Dave was able to pick it up just long enough to replace it in its sheath,

Christopher led the way inside the temple. There was only one room, and from what they could tell, only one entrance. There were no windows save for the translucent top, which had a strange quality where Christopher and Dave were able to see clearly out, but anyone who attempted to peek inside would not see a thing.

The room they were in was perfectly circular, the walls adorned with great painted figures and more gold decorations. "Now I see why the guards are protecting this place," Dave said.

Upon further inspection, however, everything was covered in a thick layer of dust that seemed to suggest that the interior of the building had not been disturbed for quite some time. By the looks of things, at least ten years, Dave thought.

"If nobody's been here in a long time as it seems the case," Dave said audibly, "how would the guards know what was inside to protect? And why would they protect it if nobody could get inside?"

"All questions we cannot answer," Christopher replied mysteriously. "We are only wasting our time attempting to comprehend these things. Look at that!"

Christopher was pointing toward a large pedestal that was rising out of the ground as they watched. The entire building creaked and rattled as some mechanism lifted the heavy stone out of the floor. As they watched in amazement, layer after layer rose up, so that almost a third of the room was encompassed by the concentric steps that led up to the top of the pedestal. The top was adorned as ornately as the rest of the building and appeared to be made out of some type of crystal.

"I'm becoming more amazed by the minute," Dave said in a whisper, almost speechless. Christopher had ascended the steps to examine the top of the marvel of engineering.

"I think you had better come and see this, Dave," Christopher said in a voice that had a note of urgency.

As Dave walked up the multitude of steps, he noticed the eerie quiet that pervaded the atmosphere. No normal building could block out the sounds of the war that were present outside, but some property of the temple seemed to stop all noise. As a result, the only sounds were the shuffling of Dave's and Christopher's feet as they walked on the stone, and the hubbub that seeped through the open door.

The top of the pedestal was more complex than Dave

had thought when he had first noticed it rising from the ground. Whoever had cut the crystal that made up the top of the structure had obviously spent a long time on the exquisite design. *But why would someone do such a thing when nobody would ever see it in a place like this?* Dave thought.

"It looks like the keyhole out there," Dave said, puzzled. Christopher was looking around the room, taking in his surroundings.

"Yes, it does share a striking resemblance," Christopher said. But Dave wasn't listening; he was staring at the Falchion, which he had replaced at his side. It was glowing white again, and the white seemed to permeate even through the makeshift scabbard that Christopher had fashioned for him.

"Look!" Dave exclaimed but did not move to touch the sword for fear of what would happen to him. Christopher rushed around to the other side of the pedestal, where Dave was frozen in awe.

"Ahh!" Dave screamed and fell backward. The sword was now impossibly floating in midair. The force of the sword rising from its place had thrown Dave back down several steps onto his bad leg. Even though he grimaced in pain, he watched as the sword rose higher and higher, eventually reaching the domed ceiling. It hovered there for a few moments.

Christopher took his eyes off the levitating object and moved to help Dave, who was attempting without success to right himself. The fall had reopened the cut that had slit Dave's leg, as was obvious by the fresh blood seeping onto Dave's ruined garments. Both turned away from the injury, however, when a low rumbling began to sound.

"What is that?" Dave asked.

"It's glowing again... look!" Christopher pointed out. The Falchion had remained in its floating position for several minutes, but a low rumbling sound was now beginning to be emitted from it, and it was again moving back down.

"What is possessing it to do this..." Christopher began, but cut himself off when he looked at the crystal, which was beginning to glow with the sword. Both artifacts pulsed wildly, and the rumbling was beginning to increase. Soon it was loud enough for Christopher and Dave to hear clearly without straining.

"Maybe we should get out of here," Dave suggested, but

was again cut off by a loud crash. The door had slammed shut, sealing them in. The sounds of the outside world were now inaudible.

As the trapped party members watched in horror, the sword continued to approach the crystal. The rumbling intensified dramatically, droning out the two's thoughts. Eventually the noise became unbearable. *It must be able to be heard outside,* Dave thought as he covered his ears. *The guards will discover us*, he thought ironically.

The rumbling was beginning to shake the very building to its foundations. Dave and Christopher had backed up to the walls to get as far away from the sword as they could. Just when it seemed that the noise could get no louder, and the light could get no brighter, it came to an abrupt end as the sword lowered itself into the hole in the pedestal.

There was a moment of complete and utter silence as well as pitch darkness. All of a sudden, without warning, the dome's covering shattered, and the sword again began to resonate in its full glory. The light formed a pillar stretching far up into the sky and visible for miles, bathing the entire city as if it were noon.

The noise was unbearable. After a few moments, the walls around Dave and Christopher began to fall one by one, breaking into a million pieces that flew away from the pedestal. Wind began to blow that was unlike any they had ever seen, even the strange phenomenon they had witnessed earlier.

"Let's get out of here!" Dave screamed at the top of his lungs. Even though he knew that Christopher could not hear, Christopher shook his head affirmatively and ran as fast as he could over the rubble.

The surrounding wall outside the temple was untouched, and debris from the explosion had settled at the foot of the inside of the structure. Dave halted just before the entrance.

"We'll be executed for whatever we just did if we're found," Dave said, looking back. The rays of light that were permeating the sky were still as vibrant as they were earlier, but there was an air of waiting, as if something were going to happen.

"There's no time for that. At least we'll live for a few days more," Christopher said, and threw himself through the opening. Just after Dave followed, the light erupted into a storm

unlike any imaginable. Even through the now whiteout conditions, they could see clearly around them. There were no soldiers near, and people scrambled to get as far away from the building as possible.

The light appeared to branch out into thousands of individual rays, which headed toward the city walls. There were enormous bangs, and the cries of men and trolls outside the walls echoed throughout.

After a minute, the light vanished and the noise disintegrated, leaving almost no trace that anything had happened.

There was complete silence. People around the two stood in shock. The darkness of the night had returned, along with the weather conditions. Dave, who was half buried in the now foot of snow that was on the ground, was writhing in pain after the rough treatment of his damaged knee.

As Christopher tended to him for a second time, the world seemed to come back to life. Guards scrambled every which way, stunned at the occurrence. A cheer rose up. It was impossible to tell from where the sound had originated or why anyone would cheer.

"Will you be fine here for a few minutes?" Christopher asked Dave.

"I guess so," Dave said unsurely. "Go on and do what you need to. Don't forget about me, though."

"I won't, I promise," Christopher said, and then hurried off to investigate what had just happened.

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Emerging between the buildings, Christopher walked nonchalantly among the chaos that surrounded him. Guards who had been stunned were now rushing toward the scene. Christopher looked back and was astonished to find that the entire building had somehow blown apart and that the only remaining part of it was the high pedestal, which dwarfed the wall around it. The light was gone now, but it was clearly evident that something unusual had happened by the debris that was scattered about everywhere in the snow.

Christopher made his way toward the walls and the celebrations. The mood change was astounding. In one minute, Christopher had moved from the somber, curious mood of the destroyed area to the celebrating mood near the city walls, but he could still not guess what had happened. Scrambling up the slippery ladders to the city walls, Christopher was met with an incredible sight.

Scores of trolls lay dead surrounding the city, as if a catastrophe had happened. But, to his complete astonishment, there wasn't a single human soldier that had fallen. Somehow, the soldiers who had been killed earlier had been brought back from the dead! Christopher rushed forward, pushing past onlookers in his hurry to get to the front of the line.

Anthony was standing to one side, secluded from the others, in a state of utter shock. A soldier approached him to inform him of the casualty reports, but he didn't even look up. Christopher waited until he had recovered and then approached him.

"A great victory!" Christopher shouted and reached out to shake his hand. "You have done a fine job."

Anthony shook his head. "It was nothing we did. But it looks as if someone set off the Fortress's powers. Though I cannot be entirely ungrateful, I must say that it is one of the things we have guarded against during the last twenty-five years."

"Twenty-five years?" Christopher asked, trying to obtain information. "What happened twenty-five years ago?"

"Twenty-five years ago, there was a darkness that fell over the world for three entire days. During that time, everyone was fearful to even leave their houses. Suddenly a bright light came down from the sky and that Fortress was... just there all of a sudden.

"At first, we had no idea why it had been placed there or even what its intended purpose was. A few days later, however, a traveler came to visit our city. It appeared that he was in a disguise, but we had no authority to question him. Though he was a lowly peasant, he knew more than I did or ever will.

"He told us that the Fortress that had been placed there was to guard a great evil and remove the darkness from the world. This man told us that we must guard it against those who would attempt to release the evil. Then, just as mysteriously as he had appeared the day before, he departed after having said this."

"An unusual story, indeed," Christopher nodded in agreement. "Do you know who this fellow was?"

"Not really. Nobody in the town had ever seen him before, but since he was the only person that could explain what had happened, no matter how false his explanation might be, we were better safe than sorry. Oh yes, he also gave a name. Name was Fred Chaster..... I believe."

Christopher stumbled and the world swirled around him. *Fred Chaster? Katie gave me that name from one of her and Mike's and Dave's adventures. It's too much of a coincidence to be true. Is it?* He could still not think straight when Anthony tapped him on the shoulder and asked "Are you alright? You look as if you've seen a ghost."

"No, I'm fine. The events of the past few hours have shaken me up, that's all," Christopher said, trying to give the appearance that he had recovered quickly. "If the Fortress was so evil, then why did all of those men just somehow come back to life? Who would have had the power to enter the Fortress?"

"Chaster..... said that only one man was able to enter and that he must be kept away at all costs. He was the one who would be able to undo the lock and unleash the evil to destroy the world. But that seems untrue, now," he said, puzzled.

"Well, I think you've got enough to do right now without me bugging you," Christopher said, making an excuse to leave.

“If you’ll pardon me,” he said and quickly moved away before the tall man could respond.

|Making his way down the steps, Christopher’s most pressing thought was that he must, under any circumstances, protect Dave from the knights. If they accused Dave of any trouble in their ignorance, he or they would not be able to stand odds of six-thousand to five.

When he reached the area where Dave had been standing, the entire surroundings were illuminated by bright lanterns and soldiers combed the ruins. Dave was no where to be found, but Katie, Chapin, and Mike were standing right where Dave had been, looking in awe toward the destroyed structure.

Suddenly, the air grew quiet, and the soldiers looked toward an approaching figure. “Stop now!” one of them said, obviously uneasy about the exposed sword that now stood out above them.

The man, who looked young enough to be a boy, did not stop. On the contrary, he began to quicken his pace, pushing through the rows of guards, who seemed powerless to resist. They fell to the ground, frozen. Chapin and the others also seemed unable to do anything. Christopher attempted to walk forward but he was met with an invisible force. Frustrated, he watched in awe with all the others.

He was astonished to discover that the boy approaching the pedestal was Dave! He said not a word, and there was an air about him that seemed to suggest that he was not willingly carrying out the actions that he was now doing. Nevertheless, Dave became closer and closer to the podium.

The sword, the Falchion, began to shine as Dave reached out for it. As he grew closer and closer, the brightness of the light that illuminated him seemed to increase tenfold. Finally, Dave grasped the hilt of the sword and easily removed it from its position in the stone. The aura of light seemed to surround Dave.

Christopher blinked, and then everything was gone. Dave was standing on the ground with the sword in his hands, no longer surrounded by the light. The Fortress had simply vanished, leaving only the spiked fence around it. Even the debris caused by the explosion that had occurred earlier had vanished without a trace.

Dave suddenly looked up, and the restrictions that held everyone were suddenly gone. Several knights fell over after being released from their unbalanced positions. Christopher looked around to survey the area, finally able to move. Dave was moving across the square. Several knights reached out to stop him, but Dave held the sword out in front of him, shining, and they backed off. Finally he reached Christopher and sheathed the sword. The glow around him vanished.

"Incredible!" Dave said. "I wish I could remember what happened, but this sword seems to have magical powers that I didn't believe in before."

"It always had magical powers. I didn't tell you this, but I suspected this building to be the Shrine from the moment I heard about the huge number of guards around it and the man named Chaster."

"Chaster?!?" Dave shouted, loud enough for everyone to hear. "When did you find out about Chaster? This may be the most important information for our journey in months!"

"Not only did I find out that a man named Chaster had visited here before, but I also discovered that the Chaster that visited here was not like the one you described. Since Chaster is a pretty uncommon name to show up in an event of that importance, at that particular time, in this place, that must mean that this Chaster has altered his appearance in some way."

"I thought it was not possible, other than becoming unseen," Chapin offered, "for any magic-wielder to take on the shape of another being."

"It is, for people like you and me. But that is what makes Yavin so powerful. He can travel around the world without arousing an eye, and even if someone did discover who he was, he would crush them in an instant. This Chaster that was here was one of two things - one of Yavin's Lords, or..."

"Or?" Katie asked hesitantly after Christopher trailed off.

"Or Yavin himself." The thought sent shivers down Mike's spine, but he said nothing.

Meanwhile, as they talked, a large crowd was gathering around the square, looking at awe at Dave and the other travelers. Katie, who had been speaking, quieted down when she noticed the scrutiny that was being placed upon them. Unnoticed to her or the others, Anthony had joined the crowd,

coming to the forefront.

"It truly looks as if the Wielder has finally resurfaced. After all these years, it is truly remarkable to believe that I am seeing this in my lifetime. I know now that you are the Christopher I knew many years ago."

"You knew me?" Christopher asked slowly, a sign of recognition coming over his face.

"Mike and Katie, you have grown much since I last saw you at that troll raid twenty-five years ago. I long for the old days of pool parties and meeting together in each others' houses to play a game of Super Nintendo."

"Tony?" Katie asked, a smile coming across her face. The next moment was filled with wild jubilation. Katie and Tony embraced, everyone received pats on the back, and the crowd around them broke their silence.

"I thought you were dead," Mike managed to gasp in his astonishment. "These last twenty-five years have not been uneventful, but I have thought of you often as the time passed."

"The man you placed in the ground, I am told, was an innocent trader who was killed during our escape. I myself managed to lose the trolls in the confusion but fell into a ditch and didn't awake for two days. By that time, I was far behind you and tried to make up the lost time, but it was to no avail. So I followed you to the towers and lost you there. This city, believe it or not, is just two days' travel north of the towers. And I settled here because I did not know where else to turn. So I helped all these years to defend against trolls and every invasion. It is a good thing that you showed up just in time or I would have had my first real defeat," Tony said, cracking a smile.

|"The book of Arkana . . ." Christopher mumbled.

"Pardon me?" Katie asked Christopher.

"The book of Arkana - it predicted the events that have just happened. A man named Arkana wrote it hundreds of years ago after witnessing the ebb and flow of Yavin's power in the north. The book states that, after a long period of darkness, three 'outsiders' and one other will arrive to battle Yavin and put an end to the tyranny of his reign since the beginning of time, using the Falchion and the Hadar stones. The book, however, never states whether they will be successful or not," Christopher said on a somber note.

"Except Arkana did not predict the kind of help you

would receive in your quest," Tony said.

"Help? You are willing to come along with us?" Chapin asked.

"Indeed. Except I have decided that some... minor reinforcements, say my entire army of loyal followers united against Yavin, would aid us," Tony smiled.

"I can't say how much I can thank you for this," Christopher said. "But I'm not the only one who is in need of thanking you. The entire world will know you as a hero."

"I can only hope that that is true," Anthony said. "Even with this assistance, we may still be going against great odds if we were to attack now."

"I agree, but-" Christopher was cut off as a soldier came running up at top speed.

"I have an urgent message for you, Sir Anthony," the knight said, out of breath.

"Go on," Anthony said with a wave of his hand.

"A messenger from Talhan to the south just told me to relay the message that Yavin's forces are gathering around the mountains, about ten miles south of here. They are mounting what could be a catastrophic attack on the lands to the south."

"How many were involved in this attack?" Christopher asked. "Did King Jor tell you?"

"He said..." the man began, and then froze, as if he could not say the words that were about to be said. "He said that over 50,000 trolls had gathered, as well as calks and other creatures that number in the tens of thousands. They mean to conquer the world."

"With those numbers, it is not a far-off proposition," Christopher muttered, looking around. "We must do something about this."

"The King also said that we have less time than he previously thought - the evil ones mean to attack within weeks."

"Th..thank you," Christopher managed to stutter. The messenger walked away at a more leisurely pace now that his message had been delivered.

"This is a grave turn of events," Anthony said. "Even with the entire world united, which would never happen, we would never stand a chance against an army of that magnitude! Yavin will force a reign of terror and tyranny on the whole world!"

"Let's attack now," Chapin suggested.

"Pardon me?" Anthony said. "We don't have nearly enough men to withstand an attack of that magnitude."

"No," she said. "Let's go right to Yavin's castle now and finish this! No warning, no waiting, let's just put an end to it all!"

"She does have a point," Christopher said a moment after the suggestion was offered. "We do have over six thousand men here with which to charge the fortress, and Yavin can't have held that many supporters back if so many are on the offensive."

"If we were to attack now, Yavin would be caught completely by surprise. Since we can be assured that there were no dark survivors of this battle, he may believe that his followers are still involved in a stalemate here and send even more troops. By that time, we will have evacuated the town and been on our way."

"Before he receives news that the town is deserted, we will be at Yavin's throat," Mike said. "And more of his troops will be occupied here thinking that reinforcements are needed!"

"If we were to defeat Yavin himself, his armies in the south would surely fall without his controlling powers," Christopher pointed out.

"Sounds like we have a task on our hands," Anthony said. "I sent word to the next city, named Yahokl, about twenty-five miles to the east. I'll send back a message to have their reinforcements meet us at the foot of the Black Stone Mountains."

"It's hard to believe that we're really going to try to do this," Dave said.

"You must understand that we all are undertaking a grave risk. Even with six thousand soldiers, most of us will not return alive, whether we win the battle or not. But we will be fighting for the entire world, and our deaths will not be in vain," Christopher ended his mini-speech.

"We are all behind you," Dave assured him.

"Very well then," Christopher and Anthony said together. Anthony continued, "We will leave in the morning. We can't afford to waste any time at all."

Katie, Chapin, and Mike went back to rooms that had been provided for them by Anthony. Unlike other rulers, Anthony was not a king or queen, and he lived among the

people, partly because of his own choosing. He hadn't been elected or succeeded to the throne but had won so many victories that people began to think of him as the leader, and eventually that became true.

"This may be the last night we will sleep in a bed for the rest of our lives," Katie said grimly as she and the others arrived at the room.

"We will prevail in this battle," Chapin said. "Pessimism won't help us win any more quickly."

"You're starting to sound like Christopher," Katie mumbled.

"We have traveled all this way, and when the moment for which you have been waiting for twenty-five years arrives, will you sit on the side and watch the battle or will you try your hardest to help ensure the victory?"

"Well, if you put it that way-"

"It doesn't matter which way I put it," Chapin said in a low tone. "It's still important that everyone who accompanies us be entirely committed to the journey ahead."

"I understand," Katie responded. Mike had left for his room next door; he would share it with Dave if he ever stopped celebrating the victory.

Well into the morning the victory celebration continued. At first, Mike had assumed that when he was told "tomorrow morning", Anthony had meant right now, but upon listening to the joyous music that was just fading away as dawn came despite the near blizzard outside, he was more and more convinced that the celebration and the weather would keep them inside for most of the day.

There came a bang on the door. Mike plodded out of his bed, half asleep, to answer the courier who, he could see through a small hole in the door, was waiting outside in the snow to deliver a message to him. He pulled the locks off the door and pushed. It didn't budge. Looking through the peephole again, Mike noticed that over two feet of snow was barricading the door in front of him. The courier seemed unaware of this fact as he stood on the doorstep.

Mike shouted outside, and the courier realized that Mike was asking him to remove the snow from the doorstep. He did so grudgingly. When he delivered the letter, Mike gave him some extra gold to keep him satisfied.

The letter was written in a scraggly handwriting, which Mike recognized as Christopher's. It read simply:

There will be a strategy meeting today at high noon at Anthony's residence. Bring no one, and do not show this letter to anyone other than Chapin or Katie.

Following the instructions, Mike trudged through the waist deep snow to gather Katie and Chapin before proceeding across town to where Sir Anthony lived. It was a hard trek, to say the least, but there was still an atmosphere of exuberance and waiting in the air.

Arriving at the house, the three threw down their coats on a large wooden bench and looked about the surroundings. There were more rooms - the one they were currently in seemed to serve only as the entryway. A maid noticed them and, after Dave showed her the letter, she led them to the back of the house.

The room was nothing less than extravagant. Large tapestries lined two sides of the room. The third consisted of clear glass that let in enough natural light that candles were not necessary even at dusk and dawn. There was one door to the room, a heavy wooden door that appeared to be nearly soundproof so that nobody would be able to overhear negotiations inside.

In the middle of the room was a large square table, with elaborately ornate edgework and four decorated legs. The table was made of oak wood, it seemed, a precious commodity in the north. Perhaps Anthony's modesty was not entirely deserved.

He was seated at the far edge, with Christopher and Dave sitting adjacent to him and across from each other on the windowed side of the room. The table was large enough to hold at least sixteen people from end to end. Several soldiers who appeared to be high-ranking were seated further down the table from Dave and Christopher. Mike, Chapin, and Katie took the last three seats. Evidently, Anthony had known who and who not to invite.

Christopher and Anthony were talking, and the rest of the room was in complete silence except for occasional whispers among the soldiers. One of the soldiers whispered in response to Katie's question that it was mannerly to wait in silence until the

commander called them to order.

At the present, it seemed as if that wait would be quite a while. Mike pulled out a piece of parchment from his bag of belongings - it was one of the few that he had saved since he had obtained them before they had left in the fall.

Mike was engrossed in drawing a picture of the unusual scene. *It will be an interesting story to tell*, he figured. *It's not often that we go on a journey to crush the greatest evil in the world.* Suddenly, he realized that he no longer wished to return home as much as he had years before. He was debating what he would do if they were successful when there was a loud rap on the table.

"We will now begin," Sir Anthony said.

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The rumbling of chairs scraping against the hard stone floor echoed throughout the house as the participants filed out of the meeting room through its only door.

Katie was able to catch a little of the whispering that was taking place fervently behind her back. Phrases such as “crazy man” and “impossible” drifted toward her ears. At first she had been in agreement with the people who held those opinions, but after further thought, Katie realized that what Christopher was suggesting, though it may not be... conventional, might have a chance of working. Only time would tell, she thought.

Christopher pushed past the guards at the door who were talking excitedly with Anthony about battle strategies. “Brilliant!” he heard Anthony say as they passed, but they faded out of earshot before any more could be heard.

“Do you think this is going to work?” Mike asked, joining Katie as they exited the house into the waist-deep snow. Fortunately a small path that was barely one person wide had been cleared through the powder, making it possible for them to get back to their cabins. The night was as dark as ever, and the blizzard that had started earlier still raged, if not half as much in intensity.

“It’s a risk, no doubt,” Katie said, looking over her shoulder at Mike, who was following behind. “But I agree with Christopher on one thing - we must strike now if we are to have any success. More time only benefits the enemy and will get more people killed.”

“That’s what’s important now,” Mike said despondently. “Not trying to save people, but minimizing the number of people who get killed.” On that sour note, the two, followed by the others of the party, returned to their small houses.

The night was hard. Mike found that it was nearly impossible to sleep with the events of the day going through his head. What if the plan didn’t work? What if they never were

able to see home again? He finally fell into a fitful sleep just a few hours before what would have been morning. Up in the north, it was called the grey, referring to the time the morning would have been but did not come in the winter.

The snow continued to fall, and when Mike finally awoke, he found at least another six inches piled outside his door. This didn't appear to have stopped the knights from gathering, however. Many of them were standing out in the cold, putting on various pieces of armor and weapons. Servants brought out barrels full of swords from one nondescript building that appeared to be the town armory. Several men guarded the place tightly. Mike scolded himself for not noticing that before.

Whatever the building had been used for, it was now surrounded by knights in the middle of their preparations. Some of the knights wore snowshoes fashioned from some kind of wood that Mike had never seen before. The shoes were larger than any kind of footwear he had ever seen. However, it appeared that in this barren land there was not enough wood to go around to produce more of them; in fact, some of the knights wore plain boots that sank almost a foot down into the powdery snow. He wondered how those would survive the journey.

Of course, horses couldn't navigate through the harsh conditions, so the knights wore heavy, bulky backpacks stuffed with food and other provisions. The only saving grace that Mike thought of as he packed a similar bag was that he would not have to bring water with him, with all the snow around.

He saw Dave and Katie as they exited their houses across the street from his. He did not know where Christopher had acquired these houses or who would be willing to give away their house, but it seemed as if all the townsfolk were willing to accommodate them after the battle.

The knights continued their preparations. In under an hour, Christopher and Anthony were about, giving orders to everyone as if they were all old friends.

Before it was time to go, a large crowd of the townsfolk had gathered around Christopher, Anthony and the knights. All together, there were at least 6,500 knights, Anthony had told them, and the townsfolk also numbered in the thousands. All were expectant of Christopher giving a speech.

Mike had finally caught up to him and cornered him to ask what he intended for Dave, Katie and him to do while his grand scheme was unfolding.

"I haven't thought about that yet," he said frankly when asked.

"So you mean for us to just sit there and watch if you don't think about what we're supposed to do?" Mike asked, somewhat indignantly.

"Don't worry about it," Christopher replied. "I'll figure it out as we get closer. It will take almost a week to reach Yavin's fortress anyway, and that's under ideal weather conditions. But if you'll excuse me," he continued, motioning toward the people who were expecting him to speak.

"I don't know what you're expecting me to say," Christopher half muttered, "but whatever it is, I probably won't." Several heads close to him heard and laughed. Putting his head down for a minute to compose himself, he looked up and started.

"You should be looking at Sir Anthony over here for encouragement."

Several members of the crowd shouted things such as "You saved our town!"

"What are we thinking, sending just 6500 soldiers into Yavin's fortress, hoping to overcome all odds and win against him? We can only try our best."

"But our best might not be good enough. If we lose here, the entire world could fall under Yavin's grip and turn you all into slaves. But if we are victorious, you will never have to worry about trolls and calks ravaging the land, killing here and there, making it unsafe to even venture outside the walls.

"That's why I have a simple request for everyone. Never lose hope. Even when the situation seems bleak, we can always hope for things to get better. And that's what's inspired this journey. Many will die, have chosen to die, because they have a hope that Yavin will be destroyed and things will get better.

"Anyone who's been around for the past twenty-five years may have doubted that there was even hope. That's what Yavin and all his evil forces want you to think. As soon as you stop hoping for a change, there will never be a change.

"Therefore, no matter how bad things get, you must persevere. Don't submit to Yavin's forces, no matter how many trolls or calks or who knows what are around. Yavin is mounting

a huge attack aimed to destroy the world as I speak right now.

"Tens of thousands, no, hundreds of thousands of trolls have been assembled and ordered to stop at nothing. Think of all the innocent lives that could be lost. Even if we succeed, many lives will be lost. But that is nothing compared to what is happening right now. Children who aren't old enough to walk are being murdered in their sleep.

"On the morning of our victory, Katie, Dave, and myself will create a light bright enough to be seen all over the world with the power that will be released after the defeat of Yavin, bright enough for all the world to see in the years to come. When you see that light, you can find comfort in knowing that you, and humankind, never lost hope."

As Christopher made his way off the roof from where he had delivered his speech, the crowd was dead silent. There wasn't even a whisper.

Slowly, a cheer rose among the crowd, rising louder and louder, gaining intensity until the entire gathering erupted into a roar. The noise became deafening, with the beating on the sides of houses and other structures standing out among the pandemonium. Amid the standing ovation, Christopher and Anthony stood, shocked. Regaining his composure with the entire city behind him, Anthony suddenly ordered "March!"

The knights filed out of Northwall through its northern gate, two abreast in a column that stretched for miles. By the time Mike, Katie, and Chapin had left the town at the end of the line, the front was already snaking over the foothills of the mountains to the north and beyond. Christopher and Anthony, of course, headed the troops as they began their long march northward.

It was extremely difficult trekking through the incredibly deep snow, and difficult was an understatement. The column began to break apart despite Christopher's orders; the weather conditions were such that one man or another who became caught in the snow could hold up the line for quite a while.

Instead, all the knights were ordered to select a partner in case one of them encountered a problem or was suddenly attacked. In this way, everyone was assured of someone to come to their aid in the case of an emergency, and things moved much more swiftly after this decision.

After the first day, the knights had traveled little more

than a few miles, and those without snowshoes were at a severe disadvantage, struggling to catch up long after the rest of the column had departed. As they moved north, the sparse pine trees thinned to none at all.

When it was apparent that it would take weeks simply to reach the fortress at the rate at which they were going, Anthony called a halt, and all of the knights spent the next day searching for enough lumber to produce enough snow equipment for the army to move around in.

After this task had been accomplished, and another "day" wasted, the knights were able to move many times faster, but another problem arose - the increasingly difficult terrain.

As the mountains drew near on the fifth day, Christopher began looking for a pass between the highest peaks. Traveling high up into the mountains in the dead of winter would certainly lead to their imminent deaths, but Christopher largely ignored the problem in the eyes of the soldiers because he didn't make a big deal about it so as not to draw out any uneasiness.

By the seventh day, the party had reached the mountains and there was no break in the jagged peaks. A scout sent the day before had reported no troll installations or other enemy camps near the base of the mountains - either Yavin's support had deemed the weather conditions too harsh, or, as Christopher thought, they were planning an ambush somewhere else. Where, it was impossible to determine. Near the end of the seventh day, which happened to be December 14, Christopher took Dave, Mike, Chapin, Katie, and Anthony aside, along with some of Anthony's military leaders, to discuss the situation.

"It seems that we've come to a dead end," Christopher begun, looking grim.

"We don't have much choice but to continue on," Anthony pointed out. "If we start back now, we may not make it through the harsh conditions. The scouts report a blizzard to the south of here. These flurries we are receiving are only the fringes of the storm."

"Then we must go on. Traveling across the mountains here would be committing suicide, possibly for the world as well as us," Chapin continued, looking at Christopher.

"But if there are no passes, where will we go," Dave questioned, shifting his feet which were only an inch down in the chest-deep snow.

"I fear we will have to try something that has not been done in thousands of years," Chapin said.

Katie nodded. "While I was in Riverbend, I learned of this from a rumor. "The caves of Ghordan."

"It would also be suicide to brave the caves," Dave said quietly.

"Not necessarily. Rumors say that an ancient race used to live in the caves before they were taken over by Yavin's followers many years ago. They sealed the entrances to the caves with some sort of magic, which, with some investigation, I found would actually preserve the caverns and keep them from collapsing," Chapin stated. "If we could somehow disperse the spell, we might be able to make it through before the caves collapsed on us."

"That doesn't sound like pretty good odds," Christopher said simply. "If someone destroys a pillar holding up a roof, the roof falls. What is to say that this won't be the same?"

"There isn't anything to say that," Katie pointed out. "However, we have no other choice. If we don't move soon, we will be facing a hundred thousand men at Yavin's fortress once he recalls those who are gathering to attack the world. There will be no hope then. What hope can the six thousand of us have against those numbers?"

"It is no good either if the mountains fall on top of us," Christopher pointed out bluntly. "Our knights will never live to see that battle."

"Mike?" Dave asked.

"What?" Mike said, startled. "I'll have to agree with Chapin and Katie on this." Dave looked at Mike questioningly.

"I fear we have no other options," Anthony said. "I vote to rest outside so we can move through as quickly as possible."

"Vote?" Christopher asked. "When did this ever become a vote? It's your army. You dictate what your soldiers should do."

"Your judgement saved us once," Anthony replied. "Perhaps it will come through again."

"Where are the entrances to the caves?" Christopher asked.

"Well," Chapin said, avoiding the subject, "it is not documented anywhere except in one source where exactly the caves begin, and that source points to a mountain about ten miles

due east of here."

"That shall be our first attempt then," Christopher stated.

"Traveling those ten miles may take a little longer than expected," one of Anthony's guards said quietly, and then shut his mouth quickly as if he had done something wrong. Anthony looked at him and nodded.

"I learned of this a while ago, but thought it best to keep it secret from the troops so as not to cause any alarm. Besides, we weren't traveling in that direction at the time."

"What is it?" Chapin asked anxiously. When Anthony hesitated, Dave added, "Tell us!"

"Well, there is an... abnormally high drift to our east."

"What do you mean by 'abnormally high'?" Katie asked.

"At least one thousand feet." There were a few gasps heard around the room.

"That's impossible," Christopher said. "Even winds the force of a hurricane wouldn't create a drift that high."

"Then there's only one other way," Katie said. Though nobody said a word following that remark, everyone knew what she meant.

"How will we get around this . . . evil drift?" Chapin asked.

"Well, we could try to go over the drift, of course," Anthony said matter-of-factly, "but that would be impractical seeing that the drift resembles a huge cube of ice. We could attempt to tunnel through it as we will be doing when going under the mountains, but the scout reported that he couldn't crack off a chip even with his sword. Or we could take a two-week detour around the thing and hope to get there before the world ends."

"That doesn't leave us many choices," Mike said. "You're supposed to bring us *good* news," he mused.

"Then we must travel around the thing," Christopher said. "There's no other way."

"Very well," Anthony said. "Those are my thoughts exactly. Unless you three can accomplish anything with the stones."

"Unfortunately, the stones' power was depleted back when we were defending your army," Chapin said. The rest of the conversation turned to smaller matters.

That was the way things went for the rest of the

"evening". When the party set out on the next day, toward the giant obstruction, it was snowing again, piling another foot of powder beneath their feet.

The army arrived at the strange blockage about halfway through their trek for that day - a huge block of ice that was impossibly square and could not be chipped. The thing had a reddish sort of glow to it, suggesting that some energy source was needed to keep it in place.

"Whatever Yavin places in front of us," Christopher said, "he can't possibly know that we have decided to go through caves that have been forgotten for thousands of years. If he remembered them, why wouldn't huge hordes of trolls and calks be rushing at us through the caves right now?"

And so the journey continued for the next eleven days– traveling along the seemingly endless block of ice always stretching off to their left, passing two exact corners, and arriving at the same spot on the other side of the obstruction late on the eleventh day. It would only be one more day before they would enter the caves.

"Look!" Chapin shouted as they were settling down for sleep. Above them, a black shape like a bird reared, swooping down at them. But it was too cold for any bird to survive in these conditions.

"Calk!" Mike screamed, and a hundred soldiers had their bows ready in a heartbeat. Ready to loose their arrows, Christopher yelled "Stop! What will we do when several hundred arrows come back down at us?"

He signaled one lone archer to fire at the creature. The arrow swooped up into the air and missed the calk by inches. Before another archer could fire, it disappeared to the north.

"We had best be continuing," Christopher hurried, packing things up. "Calks can fly at incredible speeds when they have a message to deliver. Yavin will know about this within a day."

"We can make camp inside the caves, then," Katie suggested, and Anthony nodded.

"Tonight is Winter's Eve," Christopher reminded everyone. The piece of parchment that Katie had been using now read that it was December 20th. Even after all their time in the world, she had not been able to understand the meanings of a score of different calendar systems and had continued to use her

original calendar. “We must be careful. Legends say that strange creatures never seen at other times of the year appear on Winter’s night. Even though it’s not Winter’s night yet, we should be wary.”

The caves loomed in front of them near the end of the night. The knights were exhausted, and their leaders no less so. However, they had finally reached their goal: the caves of Ghordan. Approaching a rock that looked no different than any other, Christopher stopped.

“This is the entrance,” Christopher stated simply.

“Are you sure?” Mike asked.

“I feel the resonance,” Katie said. “There is magic at work here.”

“Very well,” Anthony said. “Do the stones have enough power to enter the caves?”

“They have had two weeks to charge,” Chapin replied. “Though they are only at half strength, the power will be sufficient to open the caves.”

“Proceed,” he said and stepped back, motioning for the knights to stay at least a hundred feet from the rock wall in front of them.

Chapin, Katie, and Christopher gathered together, standing in a line facing the rock wall, holding their respective stones in front of them. They began to glow brighter and brighter, red, green, and blue merging at the supposed entrance point to the caves in a ball of white light. There was a loud explosion, and snow sprayed up in front of the three, stopping inches from burying them. Mike supposed that they had done that on purpose; who knew what was possible with those stones?

The light vanished, and the dust raised by the falling snow fell to the ground. Christopher motioned for the knights to hurry toward him. He, as well as Chapin and Katie, rushed into the cave system ahead of the knights to check for unexpected surprises.

As the first knights marched through the door that was only wide enough to accommodate two abreast, Christopher continued to hurry them into the large cavern that was located beyond the entrance. Anthony, watching from the outside, was unable to see why they were in such a hurry.

Just as the thought left his mind, thousands of black shapes wheeled over the mountain, diving straight for them.

"Let's go, let's go!" Anthony screamed, but the knights needed no urging. Despite the rush of bodies toward the rock wall, they proceeded in an orderly fashion like the trained soldiers they were.

The calks hit just as the last quarter of the soldiers were entering into the caves. Covering his face with his hands, Anthony motioned for others to do the same and to hurry. The calks' attack was ruthless. As the knights poured into the caves, five times as many calks dove from the sky, some carrying some sort of white light that flew from their claws, creating huge explosions where it hit, both on the ground and on the rocks.

Snow flew everywhere, but the knights continued into the caves at a breakneck pace. Suddenly, the calk attack ceased.

Anthony stopped behind the knights racing inside toward safety. Looking up, his stomach fell in horror. Several hundred of the calks had somehow merged their smaller balls of energy into one enormous blast, aimed at the top of the mountain. There was a loud hiss, and chaos erupted.

Rocks and snow flew everywhere above him. The last of the knights were rushing into the caves, and Anthony scrambled to catch up with them. A roar began above him, and he did not need to look up to see that an enormous avalanche was descending upon him.

"Inside! Quickly!" he shouted to the last of the knights. They disappeared into the blackness of the caves.

In front of him, Anthony could see Christopher motioning for him to hurry. The knights wore worried expressions. The roar grew louder and louder, and Anthony ran at full speed toward the entrance.

The last thing he remembered was being just feet away from the caves and wondering why the knights had such dreadful looks on their faces.

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When the rumbling had finally subsided, Christopher looked around him at the soldiers gathered together in the small entrance. Chapin, standing next to him, checked the fallen bodies near the pile of snow that shut out all traces of the outside. It was a grim sight, but most of the knights that had been knocked over during the calamity possessed only minor injuries.

Suddenly Christopher remembered, and shouted "Anthony?" There wasn't a reply, and several groans came from behind him, where the knights were gathered. He realized that he, like them, was expecting the worst.

Suddenly there was a tiny sound, such as if something was rubbing against the ground, and Anthony pulled his head out of the snow, gasping for air. When the avalanche had descended upon them, most of the snow had fallen straight down, blocking off access to the cave. However, some had fallen inside the entranceway, just enough to hide a body below. During the entire time, all Anthony would have had to do was to poke his head up out of the snow.

"Is everyone alright?" he asked, looking around as if nothing had happened, and *they* were the ones in danger.

After the amazement over Tony's survival subsided, reality set in.

"Because the entrance here is closed off," Christopher said, "there better be another entrance on the other side of the mountains, or not even the stones will get us out in time."

"We'll worry about that when the time comes," Chapin said. "Let's get moving. Yavin obviously knows we're here by now, and we don't want to upset him."

Orders spread quickly throughout the crowd, and the knights began moving forward. After the first one hundred feet, the passage narrowed significantly, and the group was hard pressed to maintain even two abreast. The column began to stretch out. The passageway extended in front of the knights for miles, and by the time every last person had left the front

entranceway, it was a half hour later.

The trek through the dark caves was slow and uneventful. Without lanterns, it would have been impossible for anyone to see anything at all. As it was, it was nearly impossible anyway. The air grew warmer so that the knights became drenched.

As the hours in the long, narrow corridor passed, Christopher became increasingly aware of a dampness that hung in the air. Several of the knights commented on it, but not much more was said until Chapin, who was in the front of the army, said,

"Isn't that water dripping off that rock over there?"

"Halt!" Tony called, and the knights stopped in ripples traveling back into the depths of darkness. On the wall nearest Chapin, a tiny rivulet of liquid flowed out of a small crack in the rock. It was then that Christopher realized that the group had been traveling slightly uphill for the past few hours, as the water was trickling down the slope to a point where it eventually spread so thin it evaporated.

"Keep observing what's around you," Christopher warned. "There might be something important up ahead. We wouldn't want to be caught by surprise."

"March!" Tony shouted, and the knights continued on. Single file they continued down the long corridor, boots shuffling over the damp rock, water dripping slowly off the coats of the knights, the occasional shout echoing for minutes.

At the time Christopher was considering calling a halt for the night, Tony, who was in front of the six thousand or so included in the force behind them, the passageway suddenly opened up around him. Christopher stumbled as Tony stooped abruptly in front of him. Christopher stopped as well as he beheld what lay stretched before him.

On all sides, the walls shone with all the colors of the rainbow, illuminating the chamber with different hues of reds, oranges, blues, and more tones than Christopher could imagine. At the center of the chamber, the light converged on a large round circle inscribed into the ground with Characters unknown to either Christopher or Tony. Entrances to other caves and smaller rooms stood throughout the massive chamber, which was by far large enough to house the entire army alone. The room was so bright that not a single corner was left in the shadows. In contrast, the luminance that seemed to radiate from the walls

somehow simply *stopped* at the threshold. From where Christopher and Tony were standing, it was obvious what lay in front of them. Katie, however, standing immediately behind them, could see nothing.

"What's going on?" she asked impatiently, craning her neck to see above the heads of the taller men in front of her. After another minute, Christopher turned around and said unostentatiously, "Don't be surprised with what's ahead." Then he continued walking forward and branched off to the right. Katie, Chapin, Mike, Dave, and the rest of the knights who were waiting behind them gasped at the illusion as Christopher walked to the right and impossibly out of view.

The others followed, crying out in amazement or muttering beneath their breaths at the impossibility of such a place existing. The exclamations continued for quite some time as the knights filed into the chamber. Christopher stood in the exact center of the area, watching the arrivals.

"I must make an announcement," Christopher said to the knights closes to him. "Have everyone gather around here while I talk with Tony. Tony looked at Christopher questioningly, and the knights hesitated, wondering whether or not to carry out the order. "Go on!" Tony snapped when the knights didn't move, and they scurried out of the way, leaving the nearest people out of earshot.

"There is something significant about this place," Christopher said. "Look at this." He pulled out the water stone from his pocket and held it out in such a way that nobody else but Tony would see the pulsing blue light that was now being emitted by it.

"What does it mean?" Tony asked, keeping his voice down.

"You know as much as I do. But whatever it means, the stones are drained of power. Nothing can happen - yet."

"From these carvings, it looks as if this is some sort of magical device," Tony pointed out.

"Perhaps. What could its purpose be? Certainly Yavin has discovered it, unless this area is protected in some fashion. Possibly none of Yavin's servants have ventured near this area in the past. Whatever the reason for the device being deactivated, I don't believe we should experiment - this far under the mountains, it could explode or cause a cave in."

"Of course," Tony said.

With all the knights now watching Christopher and him, Tony turned around to address them in Christopher's stead. He knew what Christopher had been going to say. "Stay inside this large cavern. Nobody knows what's outside, and we can't afford to lose any of you when you get lost."

Many of the knights looked at him questioningly, for the obvious reason that what Tony had just said was common sense. "That's all," he said, and stepped down from the platform.

"Good handling," Christopher said. "If they knew I was biding time to get everyone away from the platform, there would be a line to see in a minute."

"Shall we get going?" Tony asked.

Christopher headed throughout the cavern on a futile search for the others, but found only Dave, who was sitting with his back to a wall eating some of the rations the knights had been issued before they left. Katie and Mike were nowhere to be found, and neither was Chapin.

Christopher was forced to come back to the cavern once because he and Tony had forgotten the cavern's strange illumination. He obtained a torch, and proceeded into the small passageway, which sloped further upward.

"What do you expect to find here?" Dave asked.

"I'm not sure," Christopher replied, to the point. "However, something I saw in the cavern was strange. I want to find out about it."

Holding the torches out in front of themselves, the group continued upward for an indefinite period of time. While it seemed to take just a short while, time was deceiving in these caves, as Christopher well knew.

The path eventually became so steep that it was impossible to climb without the help of small gaps that had appeared on the walls of the caverns at regularly spaced intervals. Christopher still made no comment, to Dave's amazement.

After what seemed to be days, the three were standing at an intersection where the current path they were on split into two smaller paths, one sloping upward, and the other downward. There was no adornment, and it could have seemed that these passageways were entirely natural.

"Which way should we proceed?" Christopher asked,

while Tony walked back and forth, peering down one corridor first, then the other. Nothing was visible in the pitch darkness.

"There seems to be an equal chance of finding something important either way," Tony said.

"Let's throw it to chance, then," Mike said. He pulled an old die out of his pocket and held it up to the light. "One, two, or three, we go upward. Four, five, or six, we go down. Agreed?"

"Makes no difference to me," Tony said.

Mike threw the lone die up high into the air. It ricocheted off the roof of the passageway, and clanked off the near side to Mike, then the far side, and then rolled along the floor. The worn, yellow cube bounced and rolled along the floor, making noises that sounded like they were in the middle of a battle. Then the die stopped, and there was silence.

"Six," Mike said.

"Downward we go," Christopher said. "It sure took a long time for that die to stop!"

Heading down the steep decline, Christopher undertook the task of taking in every detail of their surroundings. As difficult as it was with there being no source of light other than the torches, Christopher was able to make out strange carvings on the wall, similar to those he had observed in the large hall. Like the previous, these were also indecipherable.

The trek stretched onward. The meager supplies of water the three had brought along were almost halfway deleted, and the torches were nearing their halfway mark as well. The path continued a steep decline, first approaching the level that the large cavern was at, then the level of the surface adjacent to the mountain. Eventually, Christopher, Dave, and Tony had climbed so far downward that it was almost impossible that they were actually that far below the earth.

Christopher was leading the party, with Dave following close behind and Tony heading up the rear. Christopher was considering stopping and turning back, and the other two wouldn't have objected. Therefore, the last thing on their minds was the figure that stepped in front of them with a club and began swinging.

"Everyone down!" Christopher shouted, and no sooner had Tony and Dave ducked than a large metal club thudded into the cave wall above them, reverberating with a high-pitched tone

that cut through the darkness.

Christopher drew his sword in a heartbeat, and Dave and Tony weren't far behind. The unseen figure slashed at Christopher. A battle cry signaled that another assailant was coming from behind. Tony was ready. The figure swung his club far over his head, and Tony ran him through with his blade. Rushing forward on top of the corpse of the first, another figure came at Tony from behind. Christopher had acquired a fresh wound on his shoulder, and red liquid dripped onto the ground in an ever-widening pool. Dave, caught between the two, could see nothing except what the torches, which now lay on the ground, illuminated.

From Dave's vantage point, determining exactly how many were attacking the three of them was impossible. Shouts and screams echoed throughout the passageway on both sides, and Christopher and Anthony moved closer and farther, advancing and retreating. After what seemed like hours, there was one final scream, and silence ensued.

"They're gone," Christopher said.

"Clear on this side," Anthony said. "Quickly, David, where is the lamp?" Dave handed Anthony the lamp, which revealed the fact that Anthony no longer had a shirt. It lay on the ground a few feet from his legs in a slashed heap. Underneath, however, it appeared that Anthony was unhurt except for minor scrapes and bruises he had acquired when his shirt was cut into pieces.

Christopher, on the other hand, was not so lucky. A large gash on his shoulder seemed very serious, made worse by not having enough light to see all of his wounds clearly. Reaching for the tattered remains of his shirt, Anthony cut small strips and tied them around Christopher's arm to slow the bleeding.

"Who were they?" Dave asked after the initial excitement had died down.

"I have never seen the like," Christopher said, grunting as Anthony tied yet another piece of cloth on top of the bloodstained others underneath.

"Nor have I," Anthony stated after a while, and straightened from his medical duties. "Whatever they are, we must return to the cavern to warn the others. There may be more like our assailants down the path we chose to avoid."

As they turned to head back, Christopher caught a

glimpse of light out of the corner of his eye. "Halt!" he cried, walking in the opposite direction from which they had come.

"Where are you going?" Anthony and Dave said almost in unison.

"You'll bleed to death with that arm if we aren't able to return to the camp soon," Anthony added.

"Look at this!" Christopher exclaimed, stopping abruptly.

Following, Dave was unable to make out what Christopher saw at first. Suddenly, as the three had experienced up above, a scene opened up before his eyes. The large open space in front of them was larger than the one from which they had come, but that was not the only aspect of the new cavern that caught their eyes. Houses made of shining materials of impossible design filled their view from wall to wall.

"Impossible!" Anthony exclaimed, pushing past Dave into the chamber. There were enough houses for several thousand people, and entranceways to other passageways and caves suggested a larger number was possible.

It was then that all three noticed at the same time the strange figures that walked between the buildings. Seeming invisible at first, the eye did not register the figures as living beings unless Dave concentrated on them. Even then, it was common to lose track of one without warning.

However, it was hard to miss the gathering that was forming directly ahead of Christopher, who stood slightly in front of Dave and Anthony. Though many of the shapes flickered in and out of view, two remained solid while they made their ways through the crowd.

"It's them! Arm yourselves!" Christopher exclaimed, and struggled to draw his sword out of its scabbard with his uninjured arm. Anthony, recognizing the figures as the same type as their attackers, did not draw his sword, but reached for a knife he had recovered from one of the corpses.

At the sight of the weapons, the others drew back, but the two in the middle continued forward until they stood little more than ten feet away from the three. There were several hundred figures gathered now, flickering in and out of the eye in impossible ways. The two stopped and spoke.

"It has been a long time since we have entertained guests in our home," one of them said.

"Yes, it has been a while," the other said.

"Twenty-six years has passed already - it is hard to believe," the first said.

"Yes, but our efforts have failed. The world will know of us now."

"There must be something that can be done."

"There is nothing that can be done."

"We must tell them everything. It is the only way," the other said. They both seemed oblivious to Christopher, Dave, and Anthony standing in their presence. Christopher cleared his throat loudly, but the others ignored him as if they had not heard.

"The secret is forbidden to tell under the penalty of death," the first said loudly, and Dave became more confused. The argument continued for several minutes while the others looked on in wonder.

"Very well," one said eventually. "We will tell them. This may bring down our way of life, but I will do so at your command."

Turning toward Dave, Christopher, and Anthony, the other said in a forceful tone, oblivious to their standing in that place all along, "What we have allowed has not happened in twenty-six years, and what we are about to tell you goes against all customs in our land. However, it is past time that our secret be revealed."

Christopher, confused, said, "I am honored to keep your secret." The two frowned for some reason, if it could be called a frown.

"Welcome," they said in unison. "The people of Terringrama welcome you."

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"Terringrama!" Dave exclaimed. Christopher was speechless. Anthony, who obviously had no idea what was happening, looked toward Dave and Christopher expectantly. None of the figures moved a muscle, and their faces were stone.

"This..." Christopher stuttered and struggled to continue. "This is what remains of Terringrama, the city that vanished twenty-five years ago?"

The figures appeared to confer with each other, and silence reigned over the cavern. Finally, the first spoke.

"In a way, yes. We have much to explain. Please come with us."

Christopher immediately stepped in front of the other two and rushed forward to follow the others. Dave, who was feeling dizzy at the moment, followed closely behind, while Anthony took the rear.

As Dave walked with the strange figures toward the back of the cavern, he began to feel sick. Without warning, he suddenly collapsed, and Christopher and Anthony rushed toward him. The figures surrounded them, ever-watchful.

The leader pulled his hand from the box slowly, scraping the scrap of rough paper against the wooden side. The unreal silence made every sound in the room seem as loud as if the spectators were standing under a waterfall.

"I'm sorry..." the leader said, and everyone stopped. He held out the paper for everyone to see. The large printing, as far as Dave could see, clearly read the name "|". Somehow, Dave knew that the word written on the paper was his name, and he suddenly became fearful. All around, faces turned toward him, looking pitifully at him from a thousand directions.

Before he could back away, strong arms gripped him from behind. He struggled to get away, but a realization finally came to him: the guards had locked the doors so that the one who was chosen would be unable to escape.

As he struggled in the opposite direction, the guards

slowly pulled him toward the strange podium, which appeared to be controlled somehow by an invisible energy. It slowly lowered to the floor. The guards dragged Dave to the table. Giving one last valiant effort to escape, Dave stopped struggling as the guards restrained him with the metal clamps that extended from the table.

From his vantage point, Dave could see that the table was rising upward. It settled smoothly to a stop above the congregation gathered below. Though Dave could not see them, he knew that every eye was upon him.

The domed ceiling above Dave began to open slowly, exposing the sky above. Dark clouds swirled in the high reaches of the atmosphere, like those of a huge storm that would break at any minute.

From above, he heard a voice calling to him in his mind. "You have one hour. Confess the location of the artifact to me or you will die."

"I will never betray my neighbors," a thought came from Dave. Dave didn't think the thought, but he had a sensation as if he were just a passenger in his own body, watching the dream unfold before him.

"Just say where the stone is," the voice goaded him. "You will be given power beyond all comprehension. You will rule the world, and be the most powerful entity in existence, besides me of course."

"Never!" Dave thought or heard himself think.

"Let me show you what it will be like," the voice told him, and he convulsed. Images flashed through his mind–his long-lost family, his friends killed in the troll attacks, his old farmhouse restored to the way it used to be. Freedom to do whatever he chose without fear of retribution by a greater force. Immortality and no worries in the world, except obeying his master. Suddenly, he was back in his own body again, still shaking from the experience.

"Fifty-two have died on this table," the voice called. "I have searched for a year to find the one who will serve me. Don't pass up the opportunity."

"I don't know...," Dave thought, now uncertain of his resolve. "The villagers--they won't survive. I won't be the one to turn them over to your tortures!"

"Now you're worried about those *people* down there," the voice thought. "Those *people* were the ones who chose you

through their lottery. They were the ones who put you up here on this device, expecting you to hand your life over for their good. They expect you to let yourself be killed so that they, who were responsible for your death, can live on in their shielded village." "No! Everyone knew they might be the next one to be chosen! It was a game of luck!"

"Do you really think that? Have any of the elders been chosen for this *game*? Have you seen anyone with even a scrap of authority chosen to die here on the pedestal? They don't choose their victims by chance! They arranged the order long ago, so that they would live the longest. While they preached about how important it was that you not confess, the hypocrites were scheming to save their turns until the very last, hoping that they would survive at the expense of the rest of you!"

"I...."

"But they will die like the rest of you. Eventually, someone will break, and Terringrama will be liberated, and all its residents will know the rule of my law! All the blood that has poured from this table will be in vain once the secret is confessed!"

"The elders wouldn't do such a thing! They won't sacrifice us to the likes of you!"

"They would, and they are," said the voice. "Do you believe that they will die just like the rest of you? After everyone has perished, they will confess and gain the privileges that you were just promised!"

Dave didn't know what to say. The echo in his mind was becoming more panicked as he spoke. The dome above him began to grow brighter, as if it were a magic stone preparing to discharge its power.

"My, my!" the voice laughed sarcastically. "Look at the time! There's only a few minutes left! Looks like decision time! Die, and your death will be in vain. Or you can tell me where the shield artifact is and liberate your village to the rule of my law, which is fair above all else. You'd better decide quickly, though."

Dave looked down at the ground below him. Pitiful faces looked up at him and looked away when they saw his head over the side. Though he couldn't move far enough to see the rest of the village council, he could see the mayor, looking up at Dave, nearly expressionless. While faces around him were moved in pity, the mayor's face showed no emotion.

"See?" the voice said. "They want you to die up here, so that they can live for another week, and eventually reap the rewards that you were promised. Get your revenge on those uncaring thieves of lives! Just tell me where the artifact is located, and you'll never have to worry about anything again."

Dave's dream-self's heart was racing as the light of the dome above him became brilliantly bright. A low rumble began in the depths of the earth, shaking the building. What should he do? Betray his friends? Were they his friends? Confess the truth? Did he know the truth? What would happen to them? Would he receive those things that were promised him? Did he want to receive those things that were promised him? What–

"This is your last chance," the voice said in his head. "I hope you make the right decision."

Hesitating for an instant, Dave finally said, "Five miles east of the settlement. The artifact is buried in the cliff, about 100 feet above the ground, and four feet inside the rocks. There are several saplings planted over the site."

The rumbling stopped abruptly. The light in the dome and the murmurs of the spectators below ceased to exist. The silence was so great that Dave could hear their breathing. Shocked faces looked up at him. Suddenly, there was a jerk, and the pedestal began to rise up, toward the dome above him. Passing *through* the dome, Dave emerged into the open air, where a man clad in black holding a glowing stone was waiting.

The man looked toward Dave as soon as he emerged. Immediately, the clamps sprung free, and Dave stood up. It was just then that the strange glow that had penetrated the village vanished. There was a collective scream from inside the dome, and then the glow surrounded the dome as the man began to utter strange incantations.

"You have chosen right, my friend," the man said. "Don't worry about what's going on inside. We'll talk about your reward later, but first we must retrieve the Falchion."

Dave was feeling dizzy . . ..

Suddenly, Dave's head was clear, and he opened his eyes. Christopher stood above, looking at him with concern. The figures stood around. One snapped his fingers, and he turned into what appeared to be a normal man. They had been talking with Christopher when they suddenly noticed Dave's awakening. Turning toward Dave, they asked with anxious voices whether he had fallen ill.

"I'm fine," Dave said, feeling completely normal for the first time since he had fainted.

"That's good to hear, since you were out cold for well over an hour," Christopher said. "Was it another vision?"

Dave hesitated. With all the Terringrama townsfolk standing around him, saying anything about his vision might anger the people, which is not what was needed at the moment. Besides, something that had been said during the dream wasn't quite right...

"Let's accept their hospitality, Christopher," Dave said.

Before Christopher could protest, the townsfolk said, "Please follow us." They moved off into the distance of the cavern, toward what appeared to be a series of houses. Going inside one of the closest, two of the townsfolk, who appeared to be the leaders of the village, sat down on the couches inside the spacious livingroom.

"I am very interested in hearing your story," Dave said. "I had heard rumors of Terringrama but had never imagined that there was an entire civilization living underground here."

"Allow me to introduce myself - your friend Christopher and I talked earlier - I am Ipschan, the mayor of the 2nd City of Terringrama."

"The second city?" Dave asked. "Then the stories are true."

"Indeed," the other in the room began. "But first allow-"

Suddenly, there was a loud crash, and the ground began to rumble. Rising up in the blink of an eye, the mayor rushed out the door of his abode to witness the commotion that was occurring outside.

"Something is happening!" Christopher exclaimed, and jumped out of his seat to get a look. Outside, in the middle of the large open space, rocks dislodged from the ceiling and crashed to the ground.

"We must leave the cavern. Something is causing it to

weaken from above," Ipschan said.

"Yavin," Dave exclaimed. "His troops were chasing us in the snow, when we managed to find safety inside this passage. He may be casting a spell on us from above."

"If that is so, the time required to affect such a large mass of rock would be great, but not so great as to allow us to escape with ease. We have time, but we must hurry," Christopher said.

"Very well," the mayor said. "For the time being, I and as many of the townsfolk as possible will assist you. If we don't band together, neither group stands a chance when we reach the outside world."

"How many people?" Christopher asked.

"There are currently ten thousand and forty-seven residents, of which approximately six thousand will be able to assist in your defense."

"Six thousand?!" Christopher asked in a state of disbelief. "That number will almost double our forces!"

"Indeed," Ipschan said. "We have not traveled outside the caves in almost twenty-five years. We'll need your guidance."

Reaching into his pocket, the mayor produced a small whistle. Blowing three short bursts and one long one produced a cry throughout the village. Within minutes, the people were lining up in orderly rows around Dave, Christopher, and Ipschan.

"The rest will have to catch up," Ipschan said, looking toward the ceiling, from which dust was raining down upon the crowd that had gathered. "Lead the way."

Setting a moderate pace, Christopher led the vast crowd through the network of tunnels. At times, obstructions of dust and small debris littered the path, adding precious seconds to their journey. The dull rumbling beneath them continued to increase.

It was almost three hours later when the group finally reached the strangely illuminated cavern where the army had been positioned. Katie and Chapin, waiting by the door to the cavern, greeted them immediately.

"The lights in the room aren't going to hold. We'll need to hurry if we're to have any chance of escaping," Chapin said quickly. As if on cue, the room plunged into darkness but became bright again just a few seconds later.

"Yavin is casting a spell to bring the mountain down on top of us," Christopher explained. "The magic is interfering with whatever forces are at work right here. There's no time to explain. Get the soldiers ready to march and help the others behind me prepare as well."

Five minutes later, the twelve thousand men set out through the third path that led from the room. Having no idea where it led, Christopher walked in front. The group was helped by the wide girth of the tunnel, where, at times, five men could walk abreast in comfort, if it were possible to be comfortable with debris scattered everywhere and the thought of impending death. Eventually, the debris became such a problem that the army was forced to march first four in a row, then three, until eventually single-file was the only option. The tunnel began to slope upward and turn back toward the direction from which they had come.

"Are you sure that we chose the right path?" Dave asked Christopher as the two were walking behind one another up the steep incline.

"It's too late to go back now. We either chose the right one, or we die," Christopher said grimly. "If this path does lead to an exit, it will be on the side of the mountain facing away from Yavin's territory. It might allow us to hide ourselves from the assault of the calks or whatever attacked us before, as well as whoever is casting the spell."

Not an hour later, as the rumbling became deafening and the mountain seemed as if it were about to shake itself down into the center of the earth, a pinpoint of light shone in the distance. As Christopher reached the light, the noise stopped.

"They couldn't have stopped already," he muttered. "Yavin has to know that the mountain didn't collapse yet. Why then-"

"Hurry!" said Dave. "He knows that we would think that and let our guard down. He's planning an even greater assault!"

"Move!" Christopher yelled, and men began pouring from the opening. "Move!"

Tense moments passed as the soldiers filed out of the cave onto the cold, snow-covered slope. Chapin and Katie, who were at the very end of the long line, were on Dave's mind every second.

As soon as the stragglers, including Chapin and Katie, had cleared the cave, a bright flash of light lit the sky for miles around, and the ground jerked. Without warning, Dave was on his back in the snow. The ground had suddenly *shifted* down a few feet. He felt sharp rocks beneath him and offered a prayer of thanks that there was snow cover.

The knights, townsfolk, and five companions picked themselves up from the ground. Most of the knights had suffered only minor injuries. Their vantage point was above the treeline, so Dave had a full view of the terrain over which they had traveled prior to entering the caves. Below them, rocks, trees, boulders of snow, and other rubble from the avalanche and from the catastrophe that just occurred was piled up on the side of the mountain. It would be years before anything of consequence grew on this particular mountain again, but it would be more than a lifetime if Yavin had his way.

"From this point, everyone within ten miles can see us clearly in the day," Dave said to Chapin, who was climbing up the hill behind him. Tony stumbled on the slippery mountainside as he followed.

"He is right," Tony said, approaching the party. "However, if anyone wanted to find us, they would have already. We've been standing here for at least fifteen minutes, and the calks surely were ordered to search the mountain before the cave-in."

"The best course of action would be to camp just below the crest," Christopher added, joining the conversation. "If we hide there, we won't be visible from the fortress side and will have the opportunity to attack or retreat quickly if necessary."

"Very well," Tony said, looking down the mountainside at Ipschan, who was conferring with some of the townsfolk.

Ordering the others to follow, Tony began the long trek up the mountain. The going was rough, as the shakedown of the mountain had created loose gravel and even large boulders everywhere that threatened to crush those who made a wrong move. At one point, the path wound around the summit of the mountain, with less than three feet of loose dirt standing between the near-vertical rock wall and their doom.

On the way up the mountain, Dave met first with Ipschan, who promised to tell the rest of the story when they reached the top. He then exchanged a few words with Mike,

who was anxious about the days to come, and with Tony, with whom he had not really had a chance to compare notes during their twenty-five year separation.

As they approached the top of the mountain, Christopher warned everyone to stay at least a hundred feet below the summit and to make camp while he and Dave scouted the path ahead.

The last few feet seemed to be the hardest, but Dave knew that his imagination and the fatigue caused from the long walk had fooled his mind. He knew that what the party had first set out to conquer almost twenty-five years ago lay less than a mile away in the valley between the mountains. Anxiety welled up inside him as he imagined the fortress.

The sight that unfolded before Christopher and Dave was nothing as they had imagined. Below them, a thick fog obscured their vision, but the tall towers of a pitch black edifice rose through the fog. The silence was palpable. Nothing moved in the valley below them. It was almost as if Death itself seemed to reside in the depths of the fog below.