

*Chapter 3: The Cave*

The sweaty-browed, stubby man approached the rough, grey stone upon which sat a tall and very pale man.

“What is it, wrench?” the tall man said, in response to the short man’s heavy footfalls on the stone floor of the cave. It wasn’t a very nice cave, either; it was relatively small, but upon close inspection revealed passageways to other caves in the mountain that the cave was part of. The mountain, in fact, was a volcano. Two torches, one at each end of the cave, flickered uncertainly. It was as if they were attempting to suppress their flames until they knew of a certainty that light was what was wanted from them.

The cave was low-ceilinged; the tall man, had he been standing, would have had to stoop to avoid hitting his head. The tall man, very obviously in charge, had his back to the short, pale man.

“I asked why you bothered me, you wastrel!” he suddenly snapped. The short man stammered for a moment, then began to explain.

“The d-delegation from the Turrellian Council has been sighted, my lord. Master Wekkyn sent me to, er, n-notify you.”

“You tell Wekkyn,” the tall man said slowly, though in increasing volume, “that though he may be my brother, that his standing” – he abruptly slammed his fist to the rock he sat upon, which cracked; then, he finished in quiet but sinister voice: “can easily change.”

“O’ course, m-m-master,” the short man agreed, scuttling out of the room as fast as he could. The tall man, looking down at the cracked rock he sat upon, cursed quietly and ran his middle and little fingers along the crack, which sealed over.

“Quatremaine!” a jovial voice called. A tall man with a fair complexion and sandy brown hair strode into the room, ducking as he entered.

“Wekkyn,” the tall man on the rock, presumably Quatremaine, spat.

“Oh, dear brother,” Wekkyn said – at least, presumably he was Wekkyn – “you will one day see eye to eye with me..”

“No, I won’t, you wrench,” Quatremaine said, with even more venom than his previous statement. “And you should have been relieved of command long ago!”

“Father did not remove me from my post for a good reason, brother,” Wekkyn said, in an aggravatingly cool and unconcerned tone; but something had changed in his face from his previous words to Quatremaïne – it seemed as if hate and rage were boiling in his very eyes.

“Father is *dead!*” Quatremaïne yelled, and both torches went out suddenly. The one called Wekkyn actually started back a step; fear was etched in his brows, though it was hard to see through his mop of sandy hair.

“Father knew that it was for the best, our joint...” Wekkyn began, pausing momentarily and then finishing, “ruling. Partnership, you could say.”

“I want you out of my sight,” Quatremaïne said, with a sense of finality about his words. “Now!”

Wekkyn coolly and slowly retreated from Quatremaïne, each with his eyes fixed on his brother.

“Presenting the Turrellian Council’s Ambassador, Sir Bryant Collson of the dissolved royal court of Turrellia,” a nasal-voiced, short and stocky man said, entering the cave. Quatremaïne stared daggers at the man, who held his head high. He then performed a sweeping bow and moved aside, allowing a bald and fat man to enter the cave. Quatremaïne inclined his head ever so slightly and the torches relit themselves, faltering now and again and casting an ominous sort of feel about the cave.

“Is there a problem?” asked the fat man – Collson.

“Nothing,” Quatremaïne said coldly.

“Think nothing of it, then,” Collson said, his double chin jiggling slightly. “The Turrellian Council received your dispatch very recently and immediately sent me to discuss your... terms.”

Quatremaïne raised an eyebrow. He had, in actuality, sent the dispatch to the Council five weeks previously. Due to the fact that Turrellia’s capital, Xelouv, was four days’ travel from the cave complex, Quatremaïne could easily tell that the Council had debated for, he would guess, several weeks. In addition to that, Collson would not have traveled lightly; men like him rarely did. He fixed Collson with an icy stare.

“You call yourself ‘Sir,’” he said, with venom in his voice, “yet it seems you have never been worthy of knighthood.”

The stocky man reached for the short sword at his side and began to make a hand motion, but Collson stopped him.

“Let it be, Jurgen,” he said, aggravation evident in his voice. He sighed, then said, “I shall inform the Council, then, that you are uncooperative and we cannot reach an agreement—”

The words had barely left his lips when spiraling spikes of rock erupted from the floor, encircling him and closing fast. Jurgen, the stocky man, leapt up and drew his sword, which glinted in the torchlight. He began to hack at the stone tendrils but to no avail.

A humanoid figure, short and stocky like Jurgen, entered the room. It had scaly skin, and flames licking the scales up and down. It carried a battleax, the metal black as midnight. He was followed by three more like him, one carrying a battleax as the first one had, but the other two armed with pikes of the same metal.

At the same time, three men burst into the cave, armed with swords and girded about with glinting armour. They stopped when they saw the advancing, flaming creatures. One faltered back a step and whispered, “Fire–Kin,” in a breathless and afraid voice.

“Stand and fight, brethren!” Jurgen yelled, raising his short sword and charging the foremost Fire–Kin, for that was what the creatures were, and thrusting the sword at the flaming creature. It glanced off the scales of the Fire–Kin’s belly, and Jurgen, who was invested in the move, fell off–balance. The Fire–Kin batted him aside with the flat of the ax, and Jurgen hit the stone floor of the cave with a resounding crack. The three armoured soldiers advanced warily towards the four monsters, alternating sword thrusts towards the Fire–Kin. The one in the center took heed to carefully parry the blows of the immensely strong creatures.

Quatremaine snapped his fingers and the four creatures surged forward, letting out primal screams of delight as the three men gave ground. One of the Fire-Kin leapt forward onto the center soldier's belly, clawing and ripping with rage unequalled by any known creature. The metal armour was ripped to shreds; but the soldier on the left, seizing an opportunity, sliced with all his strength and the creature's neck as it intently disemboweled the soldiers' comrade, and the creature's head fell with a thud to the floor. The third soldier, in a courageous move, advanced into the horde of Fire-Kin attacking them, and fell almost instantly from the overeager beasts' thirst for blood. The smell of charred flesh assaulted the remaining soldier's nostrils, and he turned and ran. Quatremaine clicked his tongue three times, and the three Fire-Kin looked expectantly at him.

"Leave one to spread the word, my minions," he said quietly. Then he snapped his fingers, dismissing them. Two grabbed the body of their fallen comrade and dragged it out of the room, tearing chunks of flesh from it and devouring them, apparently with no regard for the fact that they had fought alongside it minutes before.

Quatremaine raised his hand, palm held flat, and slammed it down. The solid rock encasing the ambassador sunk into the ground, leaving no indication that the ambassador had been there at all.

He sighed slightly, glaring at the bodies of the fallen men; and suddenly, as if realizing something, he whipped around and fixed the wall with a fiery stare.