

JOURNEY TO CRYSTALMIST

As told by Rodin Rae Bellock, Captain

It was boiling hot in the Celebar desert. Every movement was hindered by the heat and the sand that seemed to pull them in with every step. Rodin Rae Bellock and Loquitor Braethen were marching across this sea of sand to find the Tapestry Room, the magical place that Areanna Moonshadow of the Fire Wolves created to provide mortals with an alternate route to Crystalmist. Rodin Rae was hoping that within those tapestries she might find a portal to bring her to her homeland of Sheldon.

The sun was ferocious in Celebar, ten times more glaring than the sunniest day at Sea. At least on the Sea there might be a breeze. Here, in the desert, one prayed for still air. Wind only meant the continued discomfort of a million needle-like pricks as the sand blew into your eyes and mouth. They both had been well warned of the dangers in Celebar. Rodin Rae could not imagine what it would be like to fight a sand tiger in such ferocious conditions as these, with each movement so laboriously slow.

"Loquitor, please remind me why I agreed to do this!" It seemed like they had been trudging across this desert for weeks. It had been two days. Two days of eating, drinking, sleeping, and dragging their feet in sand. Luckily for them both, they had no encounters with the desert's wildlife.

"Deckla. Just think of Deckla. When we find him we can make him pay for all this suffering."

Two days of Rodin Rae being sick every five steps. She had been fine of the Sea Sylph. Loquitor was afraid she had a bad case of sun poisoning; at night she shivered uncontrollably, even when the temperature never lowered below eighty degrees. But the strange thing was she was not even burned. And with all the time she spent under the sun on the deck of the Sea Sylph, this was the first time she seemed to be so affected. No, only Loquitor was so unfortunate as to have burned his ears as they sailed around the cape at the beginning of this quest. He had

spent the last two days trying to shield his ears' skin from more unwanted sunburn. He had also been trying to make sure Rodin Rae did not die of dehydration. She had managed to keep down her breakfast and her lunch so far. It was early afternoon.

"You know," Rodin Rae said, "I feel horrible enough to pick up your sword and kill Deckla myself."

"Very funny. I just hope we find him. Or else this journey is for nothing."

"Not true. Even if we don't find Deckla, there is always the possibility that there will be a tapestry of Sheldon at the portal room. Then I can go home." What a lovely concept. Somewhere without so much. . .sand.

"Are you sure you want to?"

Rodin Rae responded by throwing up her lunch. She took a drink of water from her flask as Loquitor scowled in disgust.

"Look on the bright side, Loqui. I think I've kept the sand tigers away."

Loquitor did not find her twisted sense humor amusing. He tore part of his sleeve, wet it with his precious supply of water, and rested in on Rodin Rae's head. She scoffed him away, mumbling that she felt ridiculous but otherwise fine. He shrugged at her, knowing how obstinate she could be.

"Loquitor! Look there!" She exclaimed suddenly, "Am I sun-affected or is that an out cropping or rocks?" Rodin Rae squinted off into the distance. Loquitor followed her gaze.

There, in the middle of the Celebar desert, was something that could have been anything. It looked like a bump in the sand, as natural as the dunes that surrounded them like rolling whitecaps on the ocean. Loquitor and Rodin Rae made their way to the hill, which, on further inspection, turned out to be several slabs of rock jutting up at the edge of the desert.

"Strange," said Loquitor, "this looks so odd, here in the middle of nowhere." They climbed up onto the stones, glad for a change of scenery and something hard on which to stand for a change.

"This must be the place Areanna spoke of, the way to the hall."

"But where is the entrance? This place looks so very...solid."

They found the tiny crawl space on the far side of the outcropping. Loquitor laughed when Rodin Rae suggested that might be the entrance. Areanna said it would be small, but this would require them to slide in on their bellies. Loquitor couldn't wait to see the vain Captain Rodin Rae Bellock slithering like an eel through the rocks. He wished that someone else were here to witness the event.

"What are you smiling about?"

"Nothing," said Loquitor, "after you."

"Age before beauty," she motioned him to go first.

"Ladies first."

She decided not to argue with him, and crawled inside. After much struggling (Loquitor bumped his head twice,) the two of them managed to squeeze through the space. It landed them inside a huge tunnel, lined with thousands of multicolored glow stones that looked like tiny, colorful stars. The effect was eerie, yet entrancing. Since the tunnel only led one way, they followed it.

The carvings in the stone were like nothing Rodin Rae had ever seen. There were scenes from every walk of life, from battles to what looked like families at supper tables. And the walls seemed to resonate with a life of their own, as if the elves in the carved scenes were humming as they marched off to war, and to dinner. Everything here spoke to the senses of Elven magic; something Rodin Rae was getting very used to in these FALO lands.

The tunnel opened up to a huge cavern. Rodin Rae and Loquitor stood like two children, wide eyed. Never in all their lives had either of them seen such a beautiful and magical place. They were on the far side of a cavern, which was illuminated like the tunnel with tiny glow stones. Whereas the tunnel stones had only lined the path, the stones here were placed in intricate patterns and knotworks all over the cavern walls. The magic effect was augmented by an amazing waterfall that cascaded down to an underground spring, reflecting a myriad of colors; some of that Rodin Rae swore she had never even known existed in the spectrum. "What

now?" Asked Loquitor, when he again found his voice. They need not have asked. Two fierce, elven guards approached them. "I hope they got Arena's missive, or we're going to be in a lot of trouble," Rodin Rae mumbled under her breath. Loquitor ignored her.

After formalities were exchange and it became apparent that the guards had been expecting them, Rodin Rae and Loquitor were led to a hall where they were refreshed and given time to collect themselves. It was miraculously cool inside these caverns but more importantly, the tunnels were completely free of sand, and for that alone they were both grateful.

"This place is full of old magic," said Loquitor.

"It reminds me of something, a place at home in Sheldon."

"What place?"

"It was called The Academy. Only a select few were taught there. Inside the Academy was a Library, filled with books about everything you can possibly conceive and somethings you probably cannot. Something about the wall carvings here remind me of the patterns in the Library."

"Did you study there?" Loquitor remembered that Rodin Rae had been well schooled as a member of her Guild in Sheldon.

"No. Lenardo did. But I visited it once, before it was burned down."

Loquitor sipped his drink. Rodin Rae didn't often speak about her homeland, or the trials she endured there. He knew a little about Lenardo, or Len, as she often called him. Lenardo was the main reason Rodin Rae wanted to return home. He had been her mentor. When she spoke of honor and trust, vows and duty, she spoke with the words Lenardo had taught her.

"You know," said Rodin Rae, half-smiling in memory, "it was Lenardo that first told me there was a way between worlds. He was denounced for trying to prove there were lands beyond Sheldon's Endless Sea. And for his theory that two Guilds in Sheldon were really different races. He believed that was why there was so much turmoil between them."

"Is that why he was locked in the tower?"

Rodin Rae scoffed at Loquitor, as if he should know better. "No. He was locked in the

tower for the political rebellion he instigated."

"He sounds like a very...um, eccentric personality."

Rodin Rae came back from her memories and swirled her drink around in her mouth before swallowing.

"Loquitor, Lenardo was crazy."

Loquitor nodded. He had guessed that a long time ago. Apparently her mentor had a lot of wild ideas about things, most of which landed him in a lot of trouble with the Government of Sheldon. Loquitor knew that Rodin Rae hoped to rescue Lenardo before he died in that tower, it was the reason she was here to look at the Tapestries. The Tapestries showed other worlds, allies to the FALO lands. If, by some chance, there was one of her homeland, Rodin Rae could then travel back and forth with no problem. If there were not a Tapestry to Sheldon, she would be forced to find Deckla and make him reveal to her how he had managed to pull her across to the FALO lands. This put her directly at odds with Loquitor's own plan of killing Deckla. She might need Deckla to reveal the portal; Loquitor wanted Deckla dead.

When they had rested, they were brought through a maze of halls and tunnels to the Tapestry room. There, two other warriors stood guard at the door, which was carved out of the darkest jet. One of the guards opened the massive door for them, and Rodin Rae noticed briefly that he had amber eyes. She wondered if that was a trait of Areanna's people. A torch was lit they entered.

Inside, dazzling with their own vibrancy, were the Portal Tapestries. Each shimmered with an eerie glow of Elven magic. The threads themselves seemed to glow with what Rodin Rae could only describe as 'life.' Colors sparkled and radiated light upward to reveal an intricate coffered ceiling leafed with gold.

Rodin Rae was awestruck. Her very skin seemed to prickle with the surrounding magic. "What vivid colors!" she exclaimed, and walked over to the nearest Tapestry. She could not stop gazing the beautiful poppies in the weave. They were so...red. In the distance was a green marbled castle. She wondered how amazing it would be to visit that magical place.

"Look! Here's Crystalmist!" Loquitor pointed at the tapestry in front of him.

She could barely tear her eyes away from the blooming poppies to see what he was looking at.

When she did, she exclaimed in wonder. It was hard to believe that these woven strands were actual places, real, physical lands that they could simply step into.

Crystalmist looked all pearly and silver around the edges of the woven thread, as if the very moon had been woven into the pattern of the Tapestry. She wondered what it must be like to live there.

There were over twenty Tapestries in all, each with exquisitely woven threads that seemed to be the essence of the world to which they led. Rodin Rae marveled at the diversity of lands and the easy at which they could travel to them. Some of the Tapestries showed dense forests, others a specific places, and still others nothing but vast oceans. Rodin Rae and Loquitor looked carefully at each one, entranced by the colors and by the fact that the Tapestries seemed to change ever so slightly as the time passed. It was not an illusion.

"Lady Areanna told me this would be so," said Loquitor, "Time works slightly different in each world. We are seeing time pass in the weave of each World."

"Amazing! Would that I had a million life times to travel to them all!"

"Do any look like Sheldon?" Loquitor held his breath, if she said yes, then this would be good-bye. Once in her own world, who could tell if she would ever find her way back to the FALO lands?

"It's hard to tell," she said. "That one over there might be, but I'd need to see the night sky to be certain. I sailed all of Sheldon by the constellations."

They sat down in the middle of the room, carefully watching as night descended in some of the Tapestries. Each Tapestry seemed to stay illuminated by an internal light, as if the threads themselves were glowing. And in some worlds, it was not yet night, while in others night had already passed and it was dawn.

Rodin Rae looked for a long time into the sky of the land that she thought might

be Sheldon. Through the woven threads a myriad of stars freckled the purple night in patterns by the thousands. No recognizable shapes emerged. The ever familiar Satyr, Elven King, and archer, the main constellations of her homeland, were nowhere to be found.

"I don't think that's it, Loqui."

"Maybe they haven't risen yet."

"No, the Satyr and Elven King are always in the sky, no matter what time of year. And if the archer wasn't there then the fairy queen would be there to take her place."

"I'm sorry, Rodin Rae," Loquitor said and put his arm around her. He could see she was upset.

"It's Ok," she said, "I guess then I'll be coming with you to Crystallist to search for Deckla. I just hope that rumor we heard was true and he's there. Kittarina was right. You and I are going to have to work together to find him."

"I'll be honest with you, Rodin Rae, if we find him, and that will be hard enough, what do you think the chances are that he'll agree to help you? I mean, why should he? He won't do it just because you ask."

"He might," Rodin Rae said, feeling foolish the moment the words were out of her mouth.

Loquitor rolled his eyes, "Don't count on it. He can't be too happy that his plan for possessing you and assassinating me didn't quite work out."

"Maybe I could charm him."

Loquitor laughed. "Like you did that strange passenger on the Sea Sylph? The one who gave you the black widow bracelet in the first place?"

"Ok, so that didn't exactly work as planned!"

"It didn't work at all! And you tried to kill me!"

"Are you still holding that against me?"

"Look, I don't want to argue with you. But you must remember that this isn't Sheldon and the tricks you used there don't always work here. After all, there is a lot more magic here

then in your homeland, you said so yourself. You have to be careful. Do you want to get yourself killed?"

It was of course, a rhetorical question. Rodin Rae pouted. She was very good at looking miserable when Loquitor began one of his "you must be careful" speeches.

"Come on," Loquitor said, "Let's go to Crystalmyst and find Deckla. You are going to love Kiara's barony. It's exquisite." When that didn't cheer her up he added, "Maybe the Lady Areanna and the King will be in residence. I know how much you laugh when Starshadow plays 'Drunken Sailor' for you."

She cracked half a smile. "Speaking of that, I don't feel so queasy anymore.

"That's a relief! I'd hate for you to be bed ridden the entire time we were in Crystalmist."

"Let's go," she said. Loquitor held out his hand and she took it. They stepped as one through the Tapestry to Crystalmist.

It was like a dream, except she was not sleeping. There was an odd sensation of falling that was not unpleasant and a burst of color. She heard voices, or perhaps it was the wind rushing up to meet her with the ground below. And then, she was standing in the arch of an inn. That was it. They had arrived as two travelers to the front of an inn in Starshadow's kingdom.

"I didn't think they HAD inns in Crystalmist."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know," she shrugged. "From the way everyone spoke of it I just figured it'd be this magical place where fairies conjured up everything and elves ran around in elaborate garb."

Loquitor laughed. Well it's kind of like that. But we have to sleep somewhere when we travel."

They entered the inn. It was dusk in Crystalmist. The inn held the color of the sky; an elusive shade of indigo that lingered on the floor, windows, and bar. Feeling much better, Rodin Rae was now ravenous, and she had the idea of ordering every dish that they served here. It was a bustling establishment and Loquitor commented that it reminded him of the place that he grew up in. He excused himself to go speak with the proprietor about getting two rooms for the night.

He and Rodin Rae needed to rest before the journey to Forsythia.

When the food came, Loquitor still was not back. He was probably still talking to the innkeeper, she thought, figuring he had gotten his name from 'loquacious.' It fit him. Rodin Rae couldn't wait for him. She began eating her stew and gulped down a glass of water. Suddenly the tavern room became silent and cold as a tomb. She looked up from her dinner into the scariest face she had ever seen.

She knew instantly that she was looking at a drough face to face. She dropped her glass and slid under the table just as a magical staff hit the chair in which she had been sitting. It burst into a million shades of gold, the split in two. The patrons in the tavern scattered like ashes in the wind.

"Come out brat, or I'll burn the table around you." Rodin Rae's heart was in her throat. She had never known fear like this, even when she had been hunted by the Assassin's Guild in Sheldon for her betrayal of them. This face, this dark elven creature, was the nemesis in all of her childhood nightmares come to life.

She crawled out from under the table just as the staff came down again, this time it took a second longer for the oak table to turn gold and crumple. It was just enough time for her to dodge to the to the center of the room.

She turned to face her attacker. She had only the small dagger in her belt with which she used to eat. She began to think that renouncing all weapons for killing had been a stupid vow.

"I could kill you if I want. I'm not bluffing," said the dark elf. She didn't respond. Where was Loquitor when she needed him?

"You know, you've caused me more trouble then you were worth to bring here. You were supposed to kill Loquitor Braethen for me."

So this was Deckla. He was a lot mousier then she had expected.

Her hand went instinctively to the blond streak in her hair that had shown up after she had been possessed by the Black Widow bracelet. "How dare you even try to posses me!" It was all she could think to yell at him.

"You didn't seem to mind too much when I was glamored as that wealthy passenger on your ship. I'd say you rather enjoyed it."

"You bastard!"

"You are a silly creature, but I admire your vanity. I can tell you honestly, that quickening of yours is none of my doing."

She dropped her hand to the small blade buckled to the belt at her side. Deckla laughed. "So, you would kill me with your eating knife?"

"I'd kill you with a spoon if I had one," she replied.

"You are spirited. And inventive. But I already knew that."

Rodin Rae ground her teeth.

"It's part of the reason I worked so hard to bring you here." He smiled, and the light glistened off tiny, animal-like teeth. "You should be grateful. I've been keeping my eye on you for a long time. If it weren't for my mage storm bringing your ship to the Westron Sea, your Assassin's Guild would have killed you by now. My clever intervention saved you from their wrath. As I see it, you owe me your life. It's time to pay up."

"I don't owe you anything. You failed at your attempts in using me to kill Loquitor. If you want him dead, you'll have to try again yourself."

"Don't worry, halfling, I will."

The term took her by surprise, what was that supposed to mean? She didn't have a chance to ask him. He grinned, and disappeared into a silver grey mist of smoke just as the Inn door opened and Loquitor walked in.

"Rodin Rae?" Loquitor had missed the entire scene. "I reserved us two rooms, did you order our meals? Hey," he said, looking around, "What happened here?"

She turned to him. "Oh this?" she said sarcastically, "Nothing. But I think it's safe to say that Deckla is definitely in Crystalmist."

"What makes you say that?" said Loquitor with a puzzled expression. Slowly the people in the inn began to return and clean up. Rodin Rae tossed the barkeeper a gold coin for the mess.

"Come on," she said, pulling Loquitor by the sleeve to another table, "I'll tell you over dinner."

Fini.