



THE VOICES WITHIN



THE LILAC AND THE STONE

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STORY

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Among all the great craggy, unfeeling boulders of our people, Dagrán was always my flower.

For all the good it ever did him. Or me.

Few can imagine what it costs a gentle soul to grow up a dwarf. It may even be worse than to come into this world saddled with the soul of a daughter instead of a son. That one singular roll of the bones determined much of my life before my fist first found my mother's braid. My body robbed me blind with its first breath: it was a girl's, and therefore not what my father wanted.

I am Moira Thaurissan, daughter of Magni Bronzebeard and his bride Eimear, princess of Ironforge, widow to the Dark Iron Emperor, mother to his heir Dagrán II, and I have been angry since I was old enough to walk the path set before me. Sometimes, I think my anger will outlive me. That they will close up the earth over my body, and long after I am forgotten, some brutal, black hardened jewel left from my rot will work its way up out of the moss, hissing and spitting and still scalding hot. Maybe they will use it to warm a village somewhere. An eternity of cozy hearths and ready stews fueled by this bitter fury I carried but could never fully satisfy. I like the idea of that.

For a long time, I wore my anger on my chest, glinting like one of the gems on that shield they can't stop squabbling over. As if it could shield me, as if it could shield anyone. But in time I learned that anger shown is anger wasted. It only puts others on guard, makes them fearful or defiant, pushes them to dig into defensive positions, fuels rumors of madness and whispers of revolt, and blunts its own edge as even fear fades with overuse. So I learned to make that shield gem inside myself, pushing the rage deep down into the caverns of my heart, compressing it into a crusted geode of pain, all so that my husband's people might like me a bit better. All my mistakes have come from that horrid boiling crushed place inside me. Sometimes . . . I wonder who I might have been without it.

I do not worry that my son will make those mistakes. I worry that he will never get the chance to make them. Because for all that, there *is* power in righteous fury, and poor Dagraan does not have even that to protect him. In this great vast universe, that boy has never looked on anything with hate or disgust or fear or rage, only curiosity and longing to understand. He has no fury to keep him safe. He has only me. But all these great officials who gather here to bicker over old jewelry will not suffer me to stand between him and their punishing world forever.

And we welcomed them, despite the ugly expectations they wished to shackle to my son. We welcomed them to Quench-vessel Hall, my late husband's favorite retreat, a vast house built into the great caverns that make a whistling war flute of the subterranean plains that stretch out from Shadowforge City. We welcomed them, and they looked at my child like he was a particularly unimpressive carpet.

Quenchvessel Hall is a pretty place, though too enormous to ever be called a home. Dagraan and I both have paced out the rough rock clerestories and walkways, the polished black marble arcades over molten underground rivers connecting one vast wing to another, the silver-silled lancet windows and balconies woolly with firebloom. One could walk for hours, staring out into acre after acre of luminous stalactites and glittering stone, hours upon hours, and never leave the house.

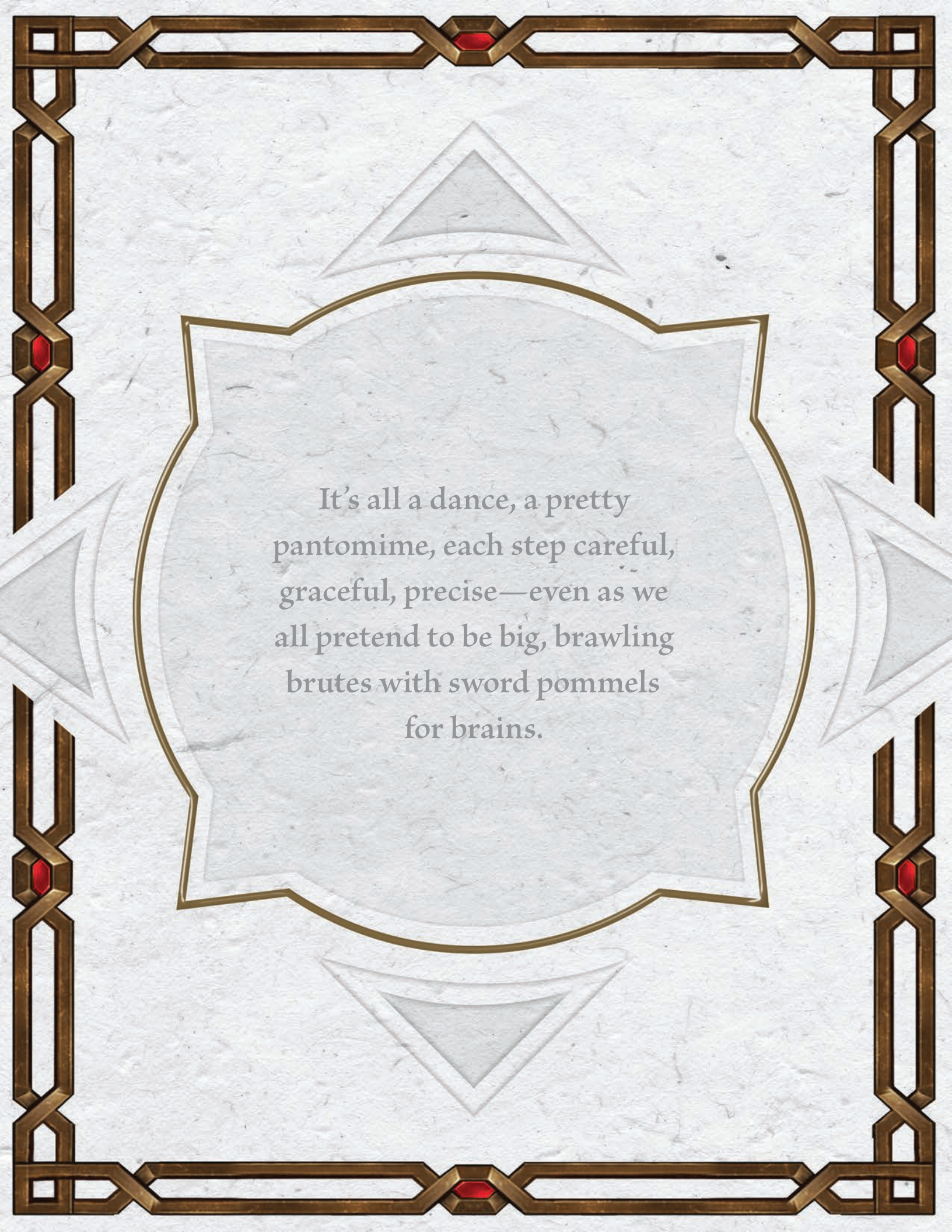
I have always walked to clear my head. To have a moment of quiet without these stomping bellowers demanding to be satisfied every second—and there is never a second

in the life of a queen-regent without stomping, unsatisfied bellowers. Sometimes, I think I see my son running ahead of me as he used to do, small and sweet and careless, laughing as I have not heard in many years. Then it is gone, vanished around a blue-agate column into the shadows of my mind, and all that remains is regret—and the problem.

I have gone to several meetings now concerning the great shield discovered by explorers in the Badlands. I have examined the bloody thing closely—and it *was* bloody, splattered with the stuff, blackened and cracked and centuries dry. The battle side was quartered by a cross of three delicately braided metals: iron, bronze, and gold, dividing the massive surface into four images, faded by time and bludgeoned by experience. An ornate and delicate silver crown barnacled in black pearls and jewels of purple and green against a black field, with a great war hammer thrust through its circlet whose pommel was a simple knuckle of plain, rough-hewn granite. An eagle and lion rampant addorsed on a field of white, and below them a branch bearing both orange blossoms and oranges in the mouth of a helpless lamb. A great iron goblet studded with chunks of onyx and amber and filled with blood pricked out in ruby dust. And last, a tower of blackrock, its masonry cracked through the middle, engulfed in flames of topaz and garnet that spilled up and out into the other quarters, threatening them all. And all around these designs, a border of that same braided metal, but with a fourth ribbon of silver on which is engraved runes so ancient not even the most learned scholars dare claim the capacity to read them, or even swear to it that they represent words at all.

I have listened to the evidence and the arguments, both practical and born of passion. I have closely examined the artifact. And I have come to the definitive conclusion that I do not care about that slab of metal and time-chewed leather. It is nothing and means nothing. Artisans with too much time on their hands trying to impress some long-dead king who wouldn't know rampant from passant but I'm certain truly excelled at separating brains from skulls. It's a very finely made and rather expensive reason to fight, nothing more.

Oh, is it for the Bronzebeards because the method of braiding such metals so finely together is a secret of their smiths alone? Is it for the Dark Irons because the rubies and opals and onyxes were cut and finished in their style? Or is it for the Wildhammers



It's all a dance, a pretty
pantomime, each step careful,
graceful, precise—even as we
all pretend to be big, brawling
brutes with sword pommels
for brains.

because the eagle and the lion together make the gryphon? Do let us consult the heads of all the great families. Perhaps we could have a war about it.

And so on and so forth for the whole long history of dwarven-kind's struggle to stop being piles of rock and start being people. We certainly will get around to finishing the process. Any day now.

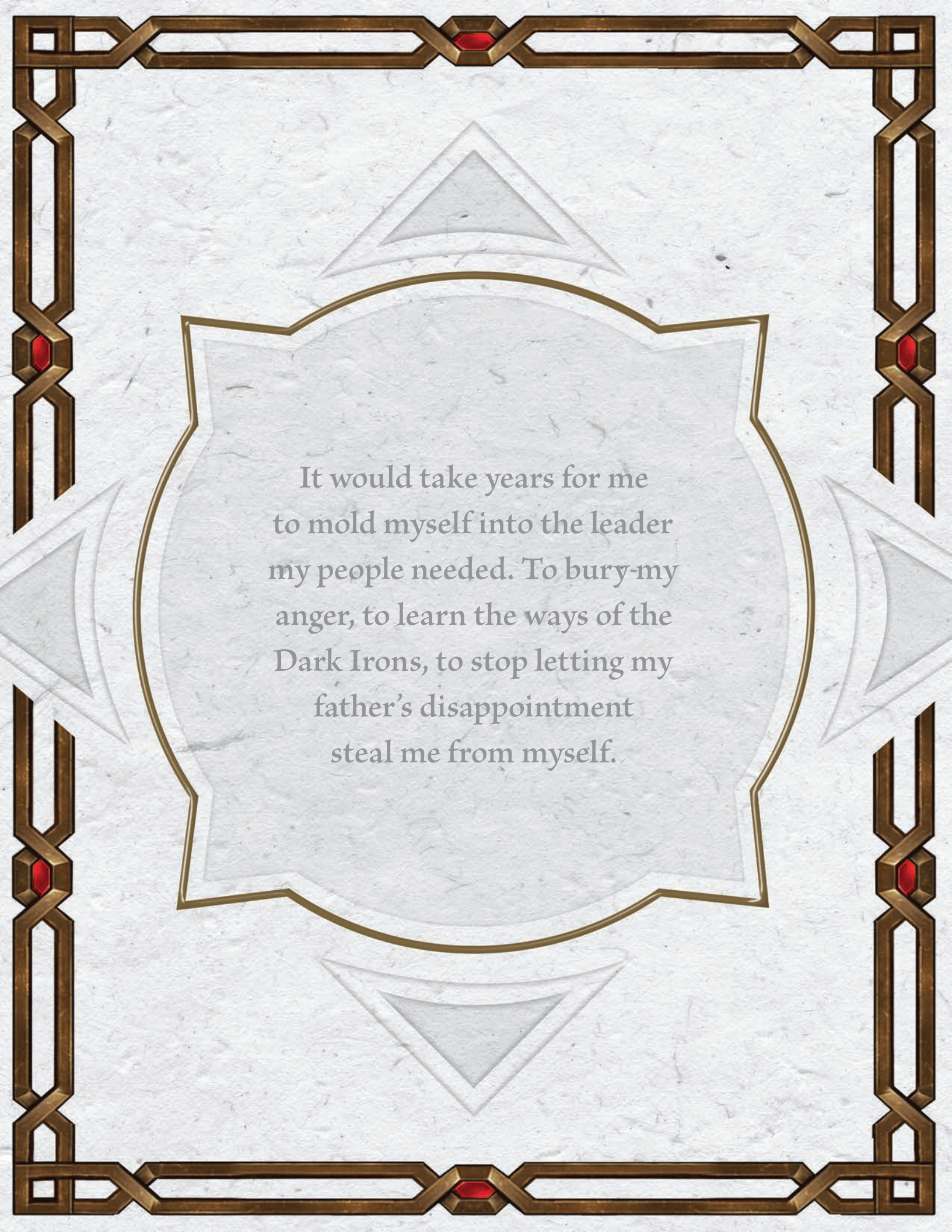
But not today.

Today they argued, then quarreled, then thundered about, puffing up their deltoids like birds in mating season, then various mothers were insulted, and the standard past crimes dredged up, then lunch.

But lunch is never just lunch, oh no. Statecraft is tablecraft, on both sides of the board. I suspected this lot starved themselves for a month before they arrived so that their vigor and appetite would cost the Shadowforge vaults as dearly as possible. It's all a dance, a pretty pantomime, each step careful, graceful, precise—even as we all pretend to be big, brawling brutes with sword pommels for brains. Even as we all know it's going to end up in a museum or a monastery where everyone can look at it but few will ever take the time. It's absolutely *exhausting*.

And I am so much better at it than they are. How could I not be? Not one of these walking belches ever learned to bake their own bread or bothered to scrub their own tables after they slopped ale all over it—and mind you don't spoil the grain with your fat fingers, Grunthin Windwhip, you gryphon's arse flea. Oh, has Thurn Berylbane, the great bat-fart of Ironforge, let the oven get too hot and spoiled the morning loaves? How many times shall the cook beat him?

No times whatsoever. They were born for better things, weren't they? They are so terribly good at pounding on tables with their fists and bellowing demands, while I do the quieter work. It's beneath them to know a favorite meal can make a man more agreeable to a cause, or a luxurious bedroom set with the same flowers his mother once loved can soften his resolve, or sour ale that does not agree with his stomach can turn his temper against everyone equally, or how a silly little sticky latch on a stable might release his ram to mate with one of our ewes and remind him quite vividly of the value of



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alliances, or how guest gifts given with enough care can put him in debt without his ever even knowing he has agreed upon terms. These proud strutters think the dance of state begins at their arrival. They cannot imagine the music began weeks before, nor fathom the advantage of owning the dancing floor.

Did I try to teach my son these things? Of course I did. It took so long to understand them myself. I resisted all that for years upon years. I didn't *want* to know it. My mother's world. My mother's ideas. My mother's skills and subtleties when I wanted only to become my father: body, soul, mind, and throne. Not only to become as he was, but for him to see it in me, see it for himself—and not because my dying mother told him to look. If I learned to bake the braided bread and spin the thinnest metal into linen thread to make it shine and memorize the leverageable childhood pains of every politically significant man in Khaz Modan, I would still be nothing to him.

Magni Bronzebeard would never turn his face to his daughter and see a son.

So many mistakes because I wanted only to be like him. To solve every problem by making it bleed. So much pain because other solutions didn't make me feel like my father's heir. So much ale spilled on so many tables, and for what? It would take years for me to mold myself into the leader my people needed. To bury my anger, to learn the ways of the Dark Irons, to stop letting my father's disappointment steal me from myself. I had made mistakes in the doing of it, but it was I who saw my husband's vision realized, who helped free the Dark Irons from the thumb of Ragnaros. And it was I who allied them to the other clans, who led them into the broader Alliance. And it was only then that my father saw me for what I was and not whom he thought I should be.

And I would never let this be the model for rearing my own son.

Unlike the nobles braying about our table, my boy has baked his own meat pies of boar and bear, spun his own wool, stitched his own tunics, washed the stones of Quenchvessel Hall until they shone and he bled. The trouble has never been that he does not know how to play the game—it's that he refuses to play it at all. He will hole up with his books, pretend not to know these things. He will not behave like a dwarf, only like Dagra, and a flower among slabs of rock must appear to be stone or be crushed.

The high steward Angrid Coldfeast prepared and set out the meal alone. The clan representatives ignored her as she entered. Who was she to them? Just an old woman. Might as well be a piece of broken furniture fit only to rest a mug of beer on, stooping and scuffling on the flagstones, her back cameled with age, eyes distant and glazed, arthritic hands quivering on the lip of a great golden platter stamped with the gryphon sigils of Wildhammer, piled high with sugared morels and spiced haggis, blood sausages smothered in boiling bramblebear butter sauce imported from Kul Tiras. Grunthin was such a greedy, plump little cakesnatch when he was a boy. I never once wanted to hear his mother complain about how he stained his leathers with drips and glops of bramblebear butter sauce, but I am glad of her whining now.

After settling Grunthin and Falstad Wildhammer, poor old doddering Angrid steadied herself as she slid a bronze platter stamped with the seals of Ironforge. The huge plate was crammed to the edge with icefin fillets, honey-spiced lichen, tender boar stuffed with winter figs. Thurn Berylbane licked his chops. Whenever he was ill, his old nurse made him honey-spiced lichen to suck on. It made him feel drowsy and agreeable, cared for and unthreatened. But Thurn had not come alone; none of the clans send only one mouth to argue with. The Bronzebeard representative, my uncle Muradin, reached eagerly for a fistful of arctic char from Dun Morogh, his favorite, preserved out of season.

And then there is my plate: blackened iron, bearing bitter greens, crayfish hearts still in their shells, and a round of red spiced braided bread seeded through with dried fruit, onions, bits of hard cheese, and morsels of bacon, as big as my head and twice as pretty.

I know all this because I planned it. I learned long ago that I detest surprises, though there was one I welcomed gladly: Angrid. Angrid is older than magma. When the emperor and I first came here, young and in love and determined to fill every one of these rooms with a child or at the least exhaust ourselves trying, Angrid was already stark white of braid. As far as I know, she sprang whole from the foundation stones of this place when the first hammer struck the first slab. When we met, she was mistress of the kitchens, a bare spinster branch of a minor family's scrub brush. Now she is the singular gem set in Quenchvessel Hall's stark prongs. Nothing passes here that she does

not know. But few who pass here know her, and that is how we two have devised it since I became a widow and she became my spymaster.

Angrid's hand was perfectly steady as she poured hot vinegar into a stone bowl to dredge my crayfish through—because her hand is always perfectly steady, unless I tell her it ought not to be. I make apologies for her infirmity and her hearing trouble when she possesses neither. The great clan leaders do not care. They do not even see her. She is nothing to them.

We devised our finger language when I was a young bride expecting to visit here often—of course, I never got the chance to be an old bride. We became so quick and subtle at it that we would finish our conversation before anyone else thought to ask why I so incessantly played with my signet rings or touched the prongs of my forks or soundlessly tapped my knuckles with my thumb.

Where is my boy? my fingers asked.

Where else? *In the library,* hers answered.

Still? What is he doing? asked the raise of one eyebrow and a sharp dip of my chin toward the north wing of the house.

Nothing useful. No one ever sired an heir on a book, that's all I know, said the subtle movements of her fingernails on the edge of the plate, then tugging her wispy, snowy mole-spattered muttonchops I have come to love so dearly.

Summon him. He ought to be here.

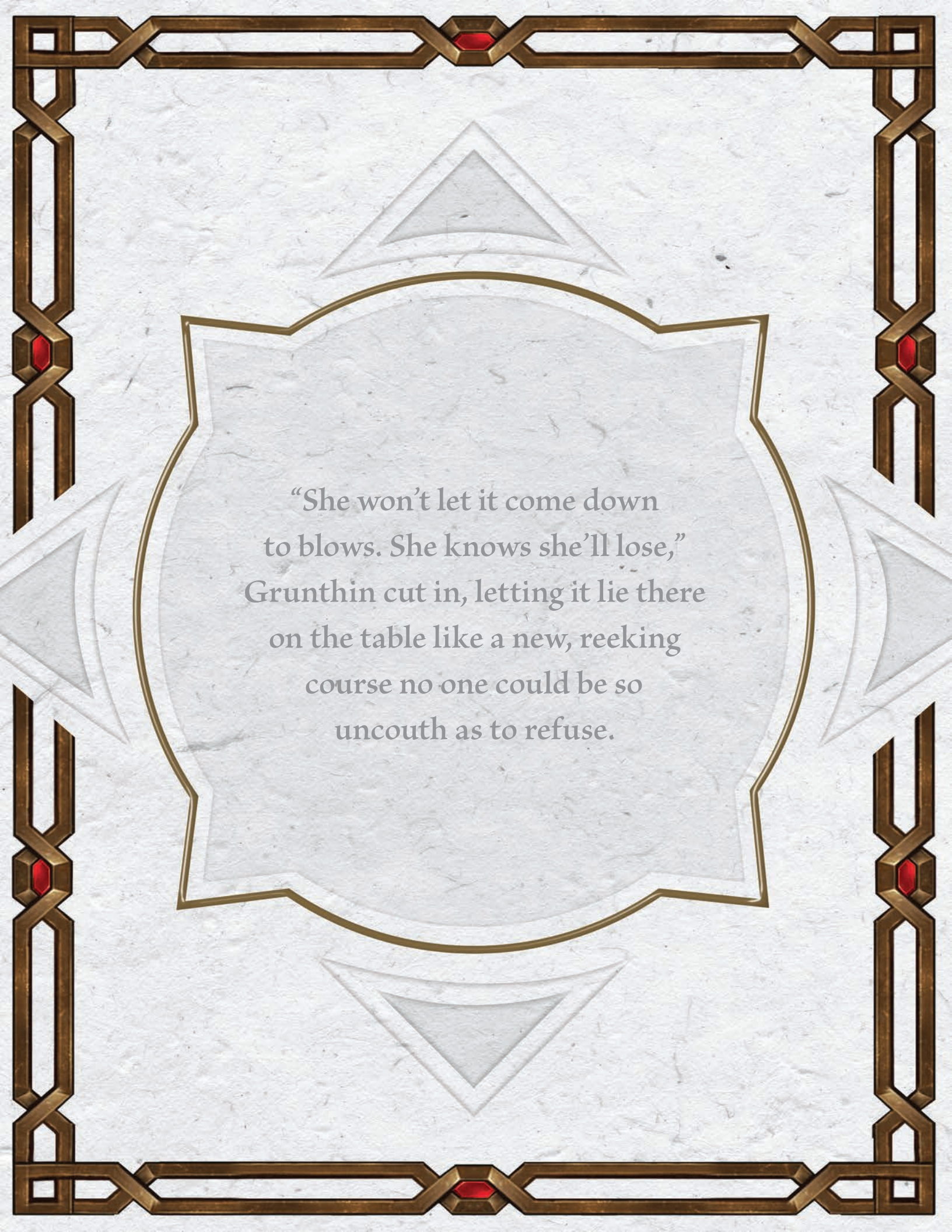
He will not come, my queen. You know that.

Stubborn like his father. And mine.

And you.

I tossed a heart shell onto the floor and sighed. “Brothers, I am nearly ready to call for my mace to break this bauble in four pieces. We can each take one home, pitch the last into the sea, and go back to our usual business, which is still warm and waiting for us.”

“No one who thinks that would satisfy Ironforge ought to call me brother,” Thurn Berylbane snarled. “The shield belongs to us. How can you deny it, a child of the

The page features a complex gold border with interlocking geometric patterns and small red gemstones at the corners. A large, ornate gold frame in the center contains the text. The background is a light, textured paper with faint, embossed triangular shapes pointing towards the center.

“She won’t let it come down
to blows. She knows she’ll lose,”
Grunthin cut in, letting it lie there
on the table like a new, reeking
course no one could be so
uncouth as to refuse.

Bronzebeards yourself? Are your loyalties truly so bent to the Dark Iron, when your son reflects the lineage of both houses?”

“Subtle as a cudgel, this one. My first loyalty is, as ever, to our people.”

Grunthin snorted around a butter-greased mouthful. “Oh, just let us fight it out, Moira. It’s what we’re going to do anyway, in the end. I don’t know why you’re putting it off. This will all be over as soon as I am allowed to make my points *clearly* and *efficiently*.” Windwhip held up one massive hand and then the other, by way of illustration. “Arguments without fists are like sentences without punctuation. You might manage it, but why make so much more work for yourself and everyone else? Easier to just do it right the first time.”

Falstad looked about to interject but was cut off by Thurn.

“Oh, I heartily agree,” the Bronzebeard second slurred over gulps of ale. “Since the start of this council, it’s been too long since we’ve all had it out, either amongst ourselves or with some third party. Give us a fight and more bottles of whatever this stuuuuuff is. More of this. Is there more of this?”

My own uncle looked me in the eye, his beard wet with food I paid for. He cleared his throat as if he meant to say something truly meaningful.

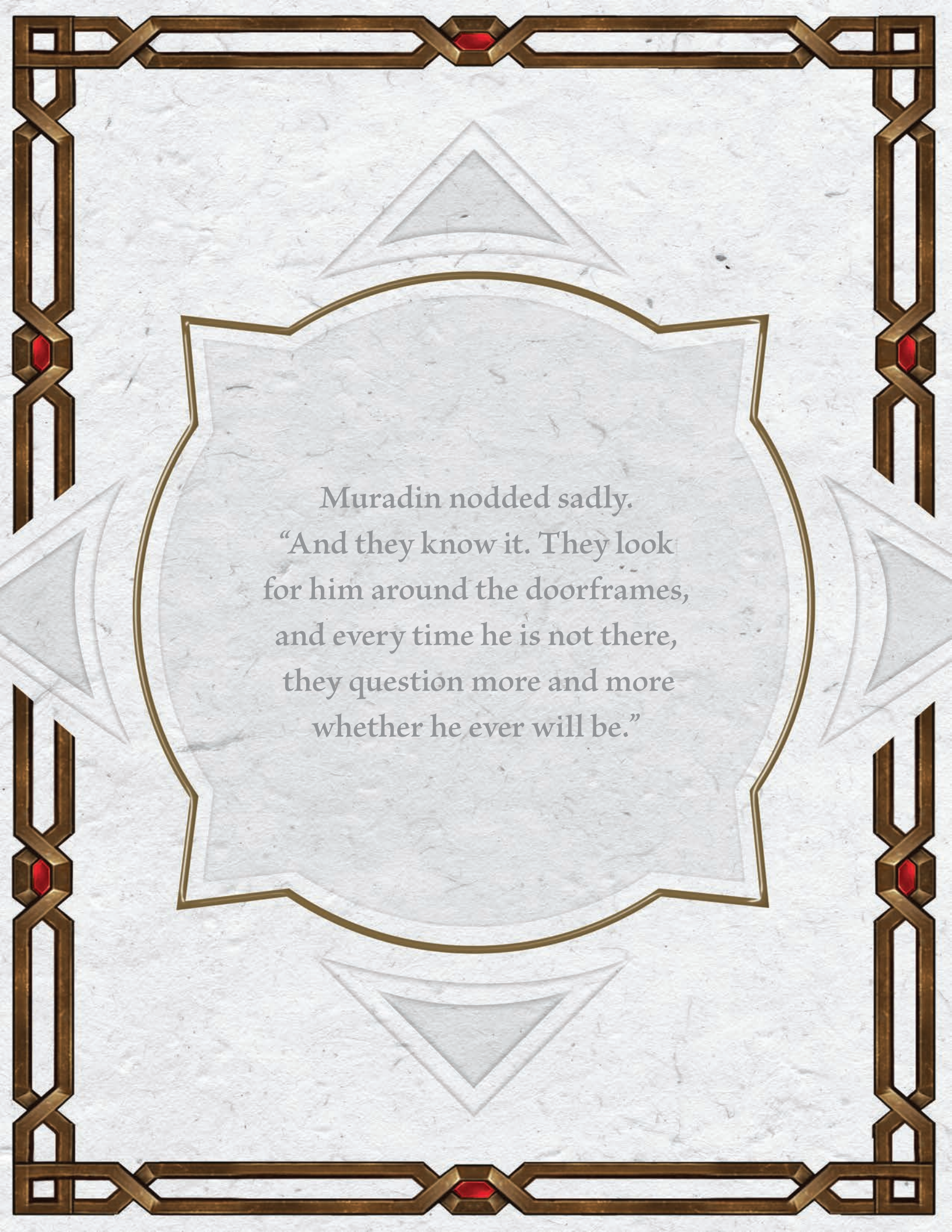
“She won’t let it come down to blows. She knows she’ll lose,” Grunthin cut in, letting it lie there on the table like a new, reeking course no one could be so uncouth as to refuse.

He was waiting for a laugh, a grin, but I indulged him only with a sigh. I know what I am. I know my way in this world. All the careful foods and flowers and codes and whispers will work, but with a dwarf, you will always have to use punctuation too.

As fast as my father ever taught me, I snatched the iron crab prong from its bowl, flipped my grip on the handle, and shoved it hard into the Wildhammer idiot’s knee below the table. He screamed in pain.

“Come on, Grunthin,” my uncle said. “You set yourself up for that one. I think we all know better by now, hmm?”

I twisted the prong into Grunthin’s joint. His eyes bulged. I leaned in close, with the eyes of all those men and their seconds and even the creatures on the shield boring into

The page features a complex, ornate border made of interlocking gold lines with small red gemstones at the corners. In the center, a large, irregular gold frame contains the text. The background is a light, textured paper. There are also faint, embossed decorative elements in the corners of the page, including triangles and larger shapes.

Muradin nodded sadly.
“And they know it. They look
for him around the doorframes,
and every time he is not there,
they question more and more
whether he ever will be.”

me, waiting to see which way it would go before choosing a side, the cowards.

“Windwhipped whelp,” I hissed. “Did I lose against the Frostmane, while you huddled in your keep, fearing me more than the trolls who threatened our lands?”

Grunthin would not beg with his mouth. His eyes said it, *clearly* and *efficiently* enough for all to see.

“Go clean yourself up, boy,” Muradin said, and you never saw a room empty itself faster—except for my uncle, grinning fatly and smugly across the table.

“Thank you for the assistance, uncle,” I said, not without amusement.

“Always happy to clear a bit of room for my niece to maneuver,” Muradin acknowledged, inclining his woolly head. “I do hope you’re right and these lumps can be soothed by Mummy’s soup and Daddy’s favorite tune on the lute. But I fear you may not be able to leverage this weight so deftly. They’re egging you on, looking to test *Dagran* with all this. They want to see what he’ll do, the kind of heir he’ll be. They won’t go or settle this until he gives them that show.” He speared a crab with his own dagger, one with no fancy sigils or jewels, just a hard, sharp, cruel triangle of metal accustomed to use.

“I did all this for my son.” I felt my face burn red. “As heir to both thrones, he has the power to steer this council. But, Uncle . . . Uncle, if proving himself to the council, to the powerful families, is only a matter of brute force, you know he’ll never be able to pull it off. I am trying to make another way, a way for *him*. Titans know he’s not even here to *pretend* he’s ready for their sake.”

Muradin nodded sadly. “And they know it. They look for him around the doorframes, and every time he is not there, they question more and more whether he ever will be.” The old dwarf put his hand on my arm. “I know your father . . . did not do right by you. He broke his promise to Eimear, to look out for you. Keeping someone safe does not mean you deny them the tools they need to make their way after you’re gone. But . . . it is not much wiser to protect *Dagran* so fiercely that he doesn’t believe he needs armor at all—or that he will ever walk in that armor alone.”

Muradin slapped his knees with his broad hands and stood, adjusting his belt around his belly. The old Bronzebeard warrior glanced at the bloody fork on the floor. “They’ll

want to reconvene in the morning. Bring him. He's of age. It's beyond time. He's a sweet enough boy, Moira. But he can't rule over dwarves if you won't even let him try to be one."



There is no natural light in Quenchvessel Hall, except in one place. The manor, the grounds, the stables, the armory, even the walls and rivers all sprawl, clatter, rise, and tumble deep underground. The stoas and corridors and buttressed colonnades glow a faint red from the hot magma far below, illuminating somewhat every wall and arch, broken by occasional orange flames in faceted lanterns where the shadows grow too deep. Outsiders always found it dreary and oppressive—my people find it safe. Reassuring. Correct.

But there is one place. One place where a new husband, young enough to rip out a strip of the night sky for his wife's shawl if only she wanted it, ordered the craggy stone ceiling breached all the way to the surface, then had it thatched and engineered with clear thick crystal to let in the sun and nothing else. And that single shivering shaft of daylight falls in the portrait hall, on a painting that should not be there, for it shows no Dark Iron ancestor or hero who earned their honor here. It is only a painting of my father, holding my mother's hand gently and looking at her with a private, naked fondness that no paint should ever be able to capture.

There is no path to the great library from the meeting vaults without passing through the portrait hall. It pained me to look on it now, after all that had come to pass. My parents, illuminated by my husband's love because I missed my home, never guessing how short a time I would be wed, and why.

Magni Bronzebeard. My father, who could not let me be or use me well. He held my mother as she died, ripped apart by ice trolls. He stared into the ruin of her guts and swore to be my true father, to be there for me always. And beside those nice words, his only action was to teach me to hit everything in my way as hard as I could.

That is not how my father was taught. I suppose he thought it was, because he enjoyed the hitting parts most, so he remembered them best. But from the moment he drew breath,

everyone from the nurses in their veils to the soldiers below in the courtyard believed him to be competently violent and strong. His education was to temper that natural steel with judiciousness, magnanimity, fairness, and the occasional necessary mercy.

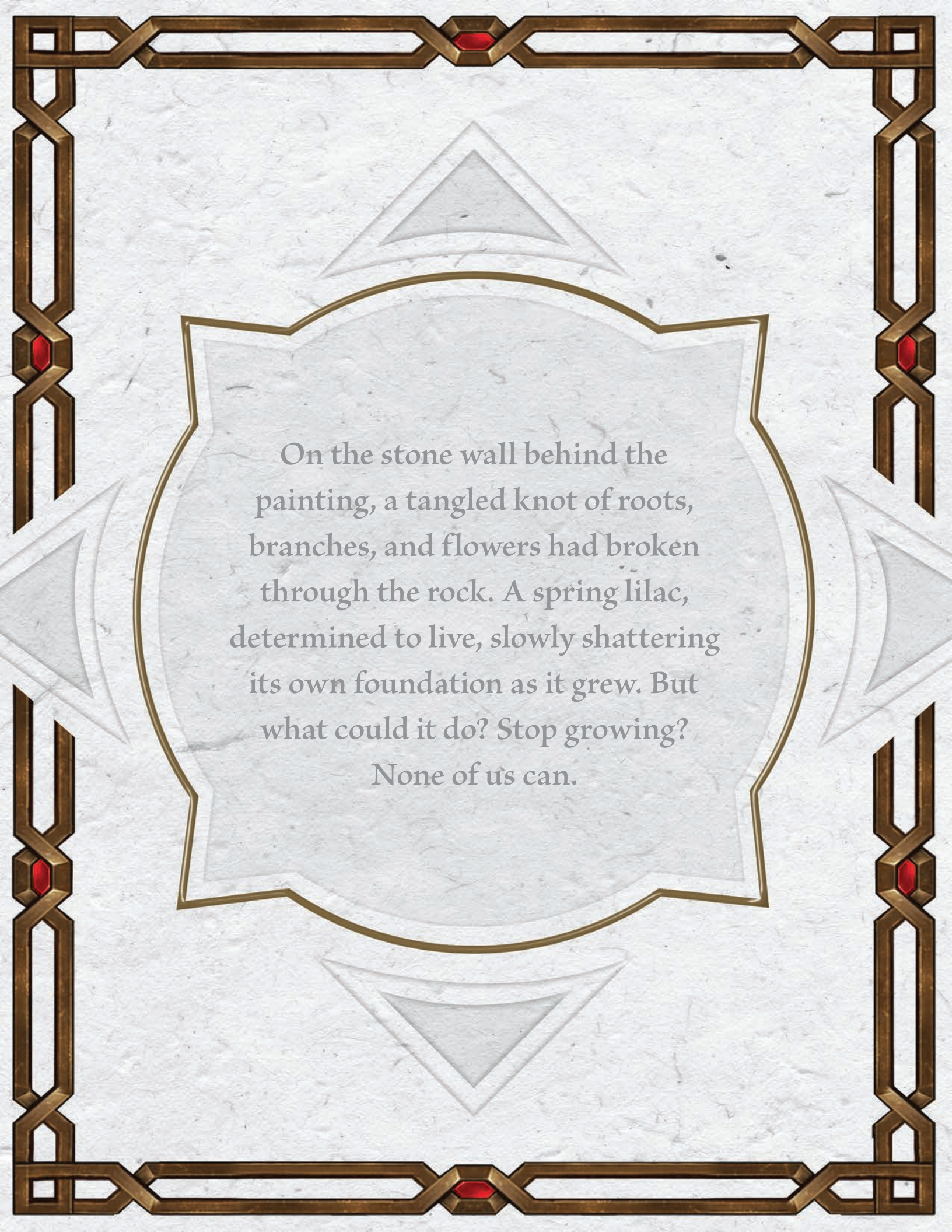
With my first breath, my father knew me to be inferior. Weaker, softer, sweeter scented, unserious, ignorable, small. Given a girl to raise to a throne, he deemed her education must be to cut that natural linen into the harshest battle tunic imaginable, because only at her strongest did she stand the slightest chance. I was given no philosophy of rule, no lessons from a foreign mage on the niceties of justice, never taught to hold back if ever I struck a blow to spare the weak or the innocent—a prince who does not use all his strength is still fearsome, even wise and merciful. A princess is merely that: a princess. If she does not swing with every crumb of might, she may never get to swing a second time.

But perhaps that is not fair. Magni thought those things. Magni arranged my world so. But there are daughters thought not so, and sons as well. Perhaps because my father loomed so colossally in my view I could not see that my pain was only his made flesh, and not every eye in the world was cast against me because I could not be a son. I tried to do better with Dagra, I did try, but I became lost somewhere in it. In the reflections of pain. And in trying to protect him as I was not, I protected myself and left him bare.

Perhaps, when I finally saved myself from this frozen prison of a promise half-kept, when I shone so bright and swung so hard in the depths of a dungeon that the emperor himself raised me up and treated me as his future, loved me enough to let the sun into his stronghold only for me—when I became a queen in my own right, won in the battle of love, which is no less a war than any open plain churned with bodies, that man in the painting took it from me. My own father. He could not bear to let me own my birthright, but neither would he allow me another.

And then my nurse in her veil put this tiny, wrinkled boy into my arms and said: *Make him a king, make him a man, make him a warrior before whom everyone who could not see you for your father's shadow will tremble.*

What was I to do with him? What good could I be to this strange mirror of my Dagra? Another Dagra, but not another. Nothing like his father or his mother, born quiet and

The page features a complex gold border with a repeating geometric pattern and small red gemstones at the corners. A large, ornate gold frame in the center contains the text. The background is a light, textured paper with faint, embossed triangular shapes at the top and bottom.

On the stone wall behind the painting, a tangled knot of roots, branches, and flowers had broken through the rock. A spring lilac, determined to live, slowly shattering its own foundation as it grew. But what could it do? Stop growing? None of us can.

gentle and loving as I was not, as no man I ever knew even wanted to be; born so happy and kind that Toothgnasher himself would let him kiss his nose, to whom violence would have to be taught, because he drew only wisdom from my breast.

Oh, my son, my son, what will you be with a mother like me?

The cold sun filtered down through the crystal and lay like a hand against my mother's painted cheek. I watched the light move for a long while. Too long. So many years since I could bear to look up as I passed through the door to the library that inevitably held my son, no matter the hour. So many years since I could stand to look at the family that never was.

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And there beyond the grand door and the paintings and the lanterns was Dagraan like a seed in its husk. Where Angrid said he would be; where no one ever needed anyone to say he'd always be. In the great library of Quenchvessel Hall, surrounded by books open to chapters and verses and illuminations on a thousand different subjects, reading, as was his preference, nine or so at once, jumping each to each like a butterfly sampling flowers. Dagraan Thaurissan II, beautiful and gentle and quick, hair a fright, fingers covered in ink stains, several seasons from being a man grown, eyes alight with interest and whatever peculiar excitement he took from those pages as from no other source.

On the southern wall, Dagraan had hung a length of parchment bearing a detailed, carefully shaded drawing of that damned shield in all its confounding mystery. Half of it was painted in brilliant colors, the precise colors of the real thing. Half was still stark charcoal lines. It really was quite an extraordinary likeness, even the dried blood and dents were perfectly duplicated.

"Did you draw that?" I asked my child.

"What?" Dagraan asked, startled as if out of a dream. He groped for a pair of spectacles, a thing I had hardly seen a handful of dwarves come near in all my days, though only the

gods know how many of them are half-blind and full-proud enough to need them badly but never admit it. The boy shoved them onto the bridge of his nose under his wild explosion of white hair, long ago fallen loose from its braid. “Oh, that. Of course. Who else?”

“It’s very good.”

“If you say so. It’s not really important.”

“How not? All these men have swaggered here strapped with enough weapons to pass for porcupines over the thing. It’s what I’ve come to talk to you about.”

“Well, of course it is important, but it isn’t *at all*, the shield is just . . . leather and metal. It’s nothing dreaming of being something. The drawing of the shield has as much meaning as the shield itself. Both can be true. Do you see?”

When it came to Dagra, I rarely saw.

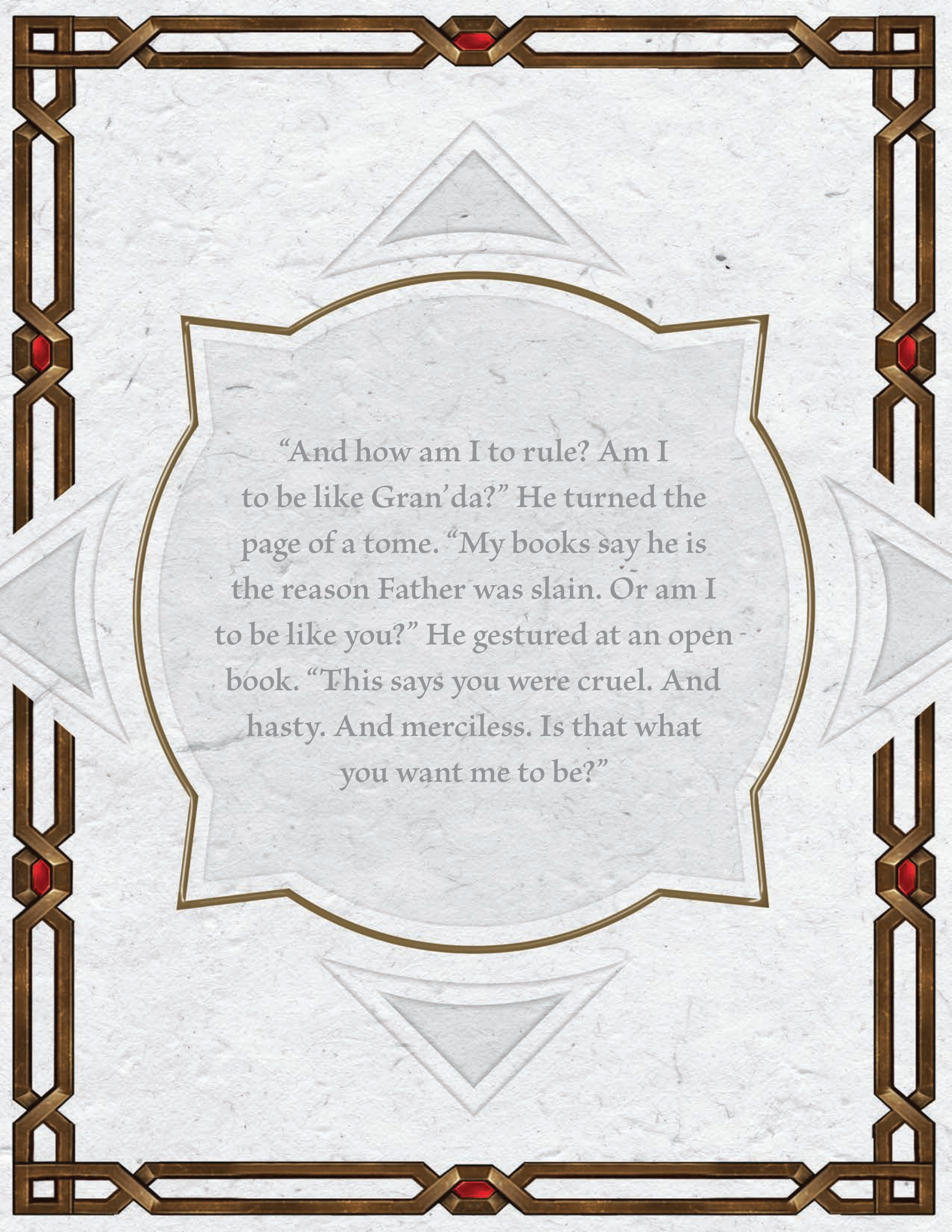
“How long has it been since you’ve eaten?”

The heir to two clans hitched up his trousers like a babe not yet grown into them. So thin, so frantic with energy. He waved me off. “I can eat anytime. But I’m so close to figuring it out. It’s the words. It’s the words I can’t get hold of.” Dagra flitted from book to book to book, some as wide as my own arms outstretched. “There really isn’t a language in Azeroth I don’t have a toehold on. Some of the *very* dead ones I might only grasp the basics, but once you know one, the others sort of open up, like a puzzle box. There are only so many ways to put words and symbols together. But I can’t nail down a thing about the inscription. The runes don’t play well in any tongue I’ve even heard whispers of. So I thought I might be able to track down that tower. Maybe it’s not just a pretty design, but a real fortress that existed somewhere, in some era. Then I thought I might be able to find the artisan who made it. Match the style to those huge heraldic books I used to love—do you remember?”

Of course I remembered. Children always think they are the only ones who remember their childhoods.

“But to do that, I had to understand the style well enough to recognize it elsewhere, and I never cared much for art. So I taught myself to sketch and paint.”

“You taught yourself to do that?”

The page features a complex gold border with interlocking geometric patterns and small red gemstones at the corners. A large, ornate gold frame in the center contains the text. The background is a light, textured paper with faint, embossed triangular motifs.

“And how am I to rule? Am I to be like Gran’da?” He turned the page of a tome. “My books say he is the reason Father was slain. Or am I to be like you?” He gestured at an open book. “This says you were cruel. And hasty. And merciless. Is that what you want me to be?”

The boy shrugged. "It wasn't that hard. And anyway, it didn't help, so I moved on to something else. There's something about the goblet that bothers me . . ." He scrambled over to yet another huge tome, half forgetting I was there.

"Dagran, I have to talk to you."

"Hmm?"

"Dagran, it's time."

"Hrm. Time. Yes. You know, you're in this one, Mother."

I didn't ask. Nothing in a history book concerning me would be kind. "Dagran. Please. It's *time*. Your time."

He stood up suddenly. All the blood ran out of his dear little face. "Oh," he mumbled. "Oh."

"Muradin won't continue the negotiations without you. They've been counting minutes for you to come of age so they could be rid of me at last."

"I'd rather it keep being you forever," he said quietly and with such defeat in his voice.

"No one gets what they want," I snapped. "Only the scraps from fate's table. Now, you've got to decide, and I cannot do it for you. The easy way or the hard way. Continue as one of three squabbling clans in the council or seize the throne of both your bloodlines and break it. But if you take the latter, you may pay for it in blood."

Dagran frowned. He never showed anger on his face. Most thought he had none of it in him, but I knew. His frown is another man's shriek.

"And how am I to rule? Am I to be like Gran'da?" He turned the page of a tome. "My books say he is the reason Father was slain. Or am I to be like you?" He gestured at an open book. "This says you were cruel. And hasty. And merciless. Is that what you want me to be?"

How should I not be angry?

"Oh, my love. Books . . . they're such unfaithful things. Once you write something down, it's just exactly the same as if it really happened, even if it's not how the day itself went at all. I don't need to read that to know what it thinks of me. They'll tell you I was proud and unyielding, that I ruled with an iron fist. I ask you: What other sort of fist was

I meant to use in Khaz Modan? Better yet: What did I do that no king has done before and been called great for it?”

He did not answer. He could not. There was no answer to that. Neither of us spoke for a long while.

“And anyway, I was young. Youth is foolishness, whether great or small.”

“I am young too,” Dagraan said quietly.

“As for your grandfather,” I continued quickly, “I hated him. For years it’s all I thought of, but . . .”

Oh, did I really mean to say it? I did not want to, but you’ll do so much for your only child. So much. Even tell the truth.

“But he did the right thing. From his point of view.”

Dagraan, who never knew his father, snapped his spectacled face toward mine. And there was a flash of fire there after all.

“I don’t believe that, and I don’t think Gran’da does either.”

Tears poured down my face. I did not feel them.

“This may be bitter soil to plant, my son. But it is spring, and you must, or there will be no harvest. The time for learning is over. The time for action has come, and I am so sorry it has. Please believe that if I could take this burden for you, I would. I would have long ago.” I sighed and took a last glance at the half-finished painting, so skilled, so wasted. “Look up, when you leave this hall. Above the door. You will see your last lesson. There are flowers that grow on naked stone and thrive. Then report to the meeting hall to address the council, two hours after dawn.”

My son straightened his shoulders, just as he had when he was small and running through these halls on a ribbon of laughter and dreams. I knew that proud little spine. He meant to talk back to me.

“The time for learning is *never* over.”



I sent Angrid to prepare the morning meal and lay it out for the dignitaries to feast on before the council meeting began, hoping full stomachs might soften whatever was to come. She returned far too quickly.

Madam, her fingers said brusquely. *There is nothing for me. It is done.*

Impossible, I replied, already fastening my cloak around my shoulders and pulling on my boots.

But it was not. When I entered the greatroom, I saw a table already groaning, clusters of nobles already loosening their belts to let their bellies breathe. Grunthin Windwhip's knee was bandaged below the board, and he glared at me with one resentful eye. The table was perfect: each dish matched to each lord, each mug of ale carefully watered to fuzz tempers but not reason, and even the cutlery engraved with the seals of each dwarf's house and lineage. And Dagra Thaurissan II stood at the head, where he had been pushed all his life to stand—but he had set his table himself, relying on no servant to do his work.

His fingers flashed briefly against his belt, quick and nimble.

Mother, his fingers said. *Everything's going to be all right.*

I never taught him the signs Angrid and I devised so long ago. I never taught anyone. He had only watched, for all his life. And learned.

“Honored guests,” the child began, and by the time he finished, he would be a child no longer. “You are all fools.” The peace of hunger sated vanished in a roar of fury from all assembled. Half a dozen hands went for half a dozen hilts. “You *are* fools.” Dagra held up his hands. He did not bellow, he did not roar, he did not strike a blow to cow the rest. But they listened as they never had even when I did all those things. The bastards.

“You are fools, and it is exhausting. I know books are less entertainment than hitting each other because your precious feelings got hurt—”

“*Feelings?*” screeched Grunthin, a bloom of blood appearing on his bandage as his stitches popped free.

“I do apologize, would you prefer *honor*? There's little enough difference.”

“Watch your tongue, lad,” warned my uncle.

“I have, very well. It is tongues that have troubled me so. That”—he gestured at the inscription on the great ancient shield—“is no tongue recorded by any of the varied races of Azeroth. So why take the time to work it so finely into a shield?”

The gathered officials blinked in confusion.

Dagran smiled patiently. “A shield. What is a shield for?”

I confess I quite enjoyed watching these men who spat on me half my life squirm in their chairs like students who had shirked their lessons.

“Grm . . . protecting the guts?” one of the Bronzebeard seconds ventured bravely.

“Yes, and in that capacity, what tends to happen to shields?” Dagran led patiently.

“They get bashed in quite a fair bit,” Muradin answered, beginning to catch on.

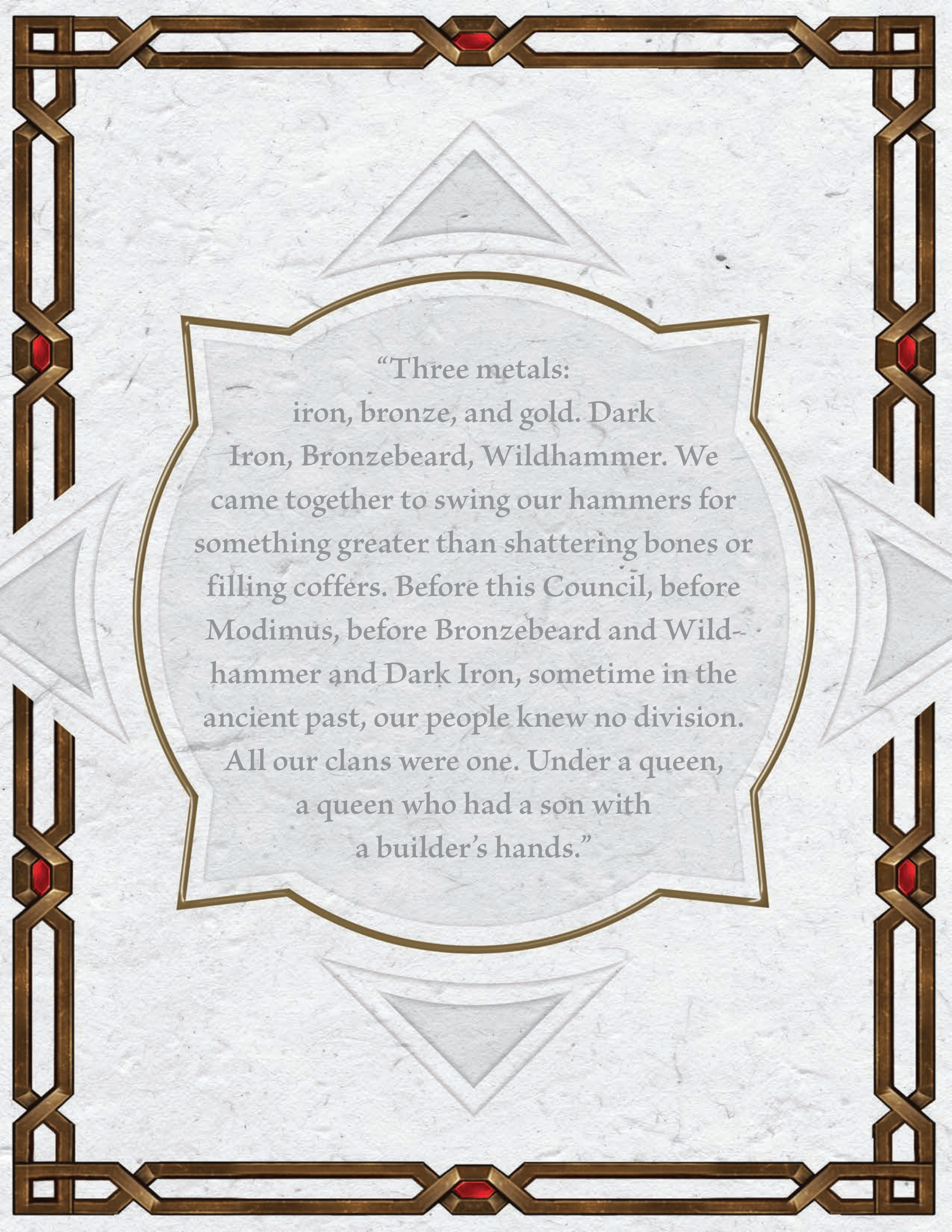
“Exactly. So why bother with all this fancy nonsense? Why take weeks upon weeks to paint and preserve and embed with jewels, to inscribe runes all the way round and cross the middle, to braid three metals together and filigree them like a lady’s bracelet? Just so someone can swing a mace into it and send all those pretty gems flying? I’ve seen your shields and mine; I’ve stretched leather and beaten iron to make them. We are practical people. We wouldn’t throw away the richness of our mines and the skill of our greatest minds on a shield. A sword, perhaps; parade armor, possibly; a crown, certainly. But a shield is not jewelry. It’s a tool. And this is *useless* as a tool.”

Doubtful murmurs circled the table. More piles of pies and roast joints and fillets went into nervous gullets.

“Look at it. Every jewel is intact. If this shield ever saw battle, there’d be but empty prongs left.”

“But it’s got blood on it. And it does bear marks of action,” Thurn Berylbane protested.

“Does it?” asked Dagran thoughtfully, as though that had not yet occurred to him. “Is that blood? Or is it paint? Or something even stranger? As for the little wounds on the metal here and there—” Dagran asked Grunthin for his stormhammer, Thurn for a war blade, me for my blade. He held each of them against the damage on the shield. None matched. Then the child who would be emperor pulled a small, delicate hammer and a pair of pincers from his own belt and laid them against the divots.



“Three metals:
iron, bronze, and gold. Dark
Iron, Bronzebeard, Wildhammer. We
came together to swing our hammers for
something greater than shattering bones or
filling coffers. Before this Council, before
Modimus, before Bronzebeard and Wild-
hammer and Dark Iron, sometime in the
ancient past, our people knew no division.
All our clans were one. Under a queen,
a queen who had a son with
a builder’s hands.”

“The Explorers’ League tries to be careful,” he chuckled ruefully. “These are the marks of excavation tools. As for the blood, I will come to it in a moment. I have spent weeks in the library researching these sigils and marks, the workmanship of each aspect, the runes themselves, everything. And the answer is: you are all fools.”

Don’t make them feel stupid, my fingers flashed in warning. *You won’t get to finish showing off.*

“This shield was never meant to be used in battle. It is a memorial. It is an apology. And it is a promise. Look again, Wildhammer: there is your gryphon, broken into parts that long to join, tragic, weeping, separate, unable to feast on the lamb alone, no matter how rich. Look again, Dark Iron, there is your fortress, burning beyond salvation. Look again, Bronzebeard, there is your goblet raised in the great halls of Ironforge, filled not with blood but with wine—and all alone, without your comrades to feast alongside you.”

Dagran raised his piercing eyes to me. “Look again, Mother. It is not only a crown in the upper quadrant. It is a queen’s crown. And thrust through it, a single hammer. Not a war hammer, just a hammer. A hammer to build, not to break. To raise up cities, not to raze them. This shield saw no battle, but was crafted with all this care to tell a story: a story about what happens to our people when we war one with the other. But we came together once. Three metals: iron, bronze, and gold. Dark Iron, Bronzebeard, Wildhammer. We came together to swing our hammers for something greater than shattering bones or filling coffers. Before this Council, before Modimus, before Bronzebeard and Wildhammer and Dark Iron, sometime in the ancient past, our people knew no division. All our clans were one. Under a queen, a queen who had a son with a builder’s hands.”

Thurn rolled his eyes. “How can you possibly know all that?”

“Because I can read the runes,” Dagran said simply. “The trouble of it was the trouble of us: thinking those sigils were all one language, one clan’s words, one clan’s ideas, one clan’s way of being. They are not: they are all three. Each rune is a chimera, a beast formed of the parts of other creatures. Three of them. The long slash of ancient Wildhammer script here.” His quick, clever fingers shaped the characters’ anatomies in the air like a painter. “The curt, blunt points of lost Dark Iron runes there; the bold

curve of dead Bronzebeard shorthand uniting them. Each letter follows this pattern. I would have seen that much more quickly if the chimera ended there—instead, not only is each letter made of three scripts, but each word is formed from pieces of our most ancient languages, and the sentence itself uses a patchwork syntax: Dark Iron verb conjugation, Wildhammer noun declension, Bronzebeard prepositions and syntactic typology . . .”

Dagran was losing them. He’d become distracted by his own joy of study and puzzles, by the delight of having solved an impossible riddle and the longing to share that, to show it off. My boy had delved far too deep in a mine that had no ore for these men.

Come back, Dagran, I thought desperately. It is not enough to remember who you are. You must remember who they are.

I opened my mouth to right the course of things, to do as I had always done, to guide and corral and make certain my child did not teeter too thoughtlessly on one of a million steep staircases down to a stone floor.

But I did not. I opened my mouth—and closed it again. I clenched my fingers tight. If he could not right his own course now, with these great men hanging on his words, he never would.

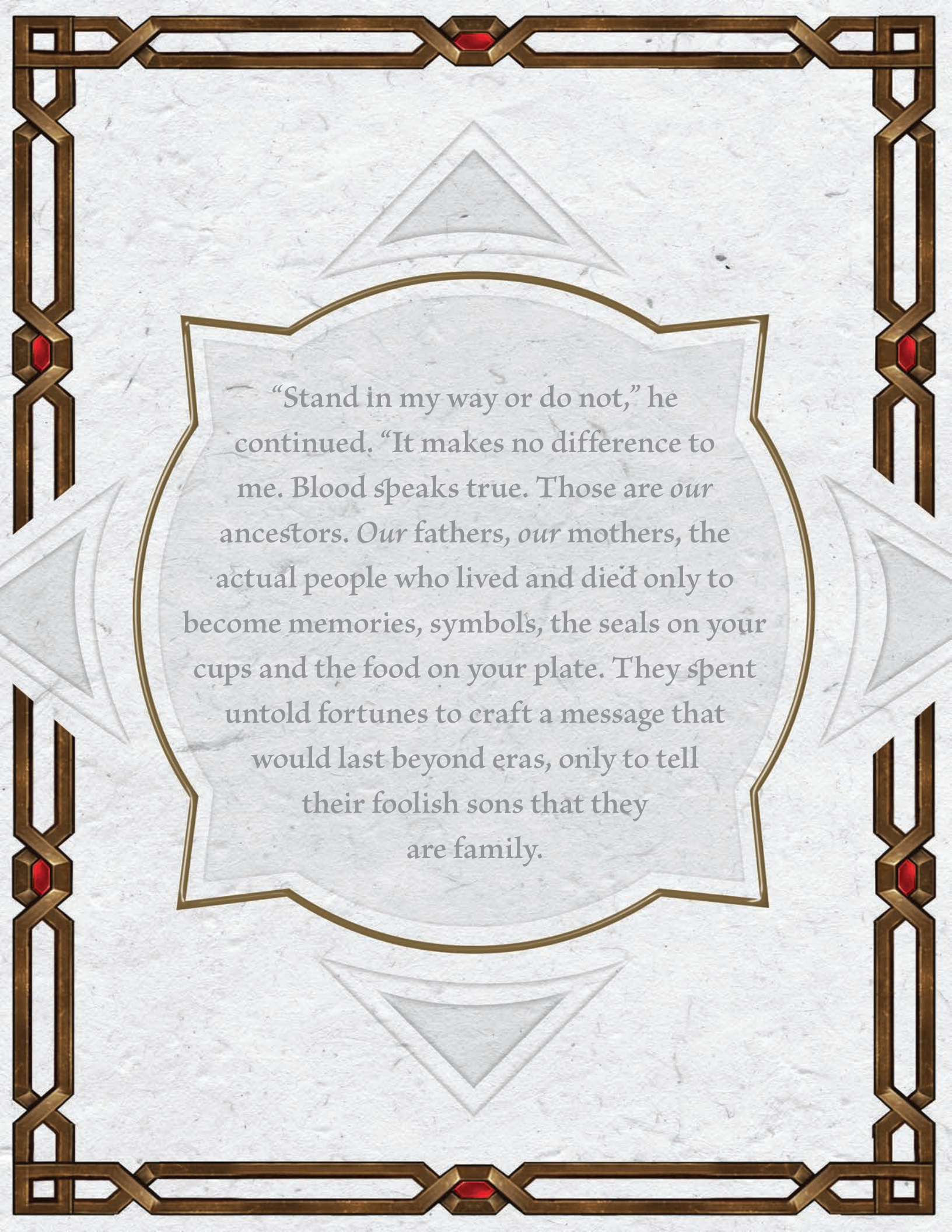
No battle wound has pained me as much as sitting still did then. Never one.

My child stopped. He closed his eyes, cleared his throat. And began again. “And if I am right, they are not just runes. They are a spell. A spell of restoration. If I speak the truth, it will show itself.”

Dagran Thaurissan II ran his finger across the inscription on the cross’s bar. “We are all fools,” he read. Then he ran his finger around the words that rimmed the images. “But fools no further. Fools no further. Fools no further.” Over and over again.

The blackened, cracked, dried, and peeling blood shimmered and ran like paint, and in a moment—less than a moment—the shield swam with bright dwarven blood, wet and fresh and hot.

“Will you be fools, then?” Dagran said in a voice I did not even know he possessed. He brought his fist down on the shield with such might it cracked beneath his strength. “Or

The page features a gold-colored border with a repeating geometric pattern of interlocking lines and small red gemstones at the corners. In the center, there is a large, light-colored, irregularly shaped frame containing text. The background of the page is a light, textured paper. The text is centered within the frame and reads:

“Stand in my way or do not,” he continued. “It makes no difference to me. Blood speaks true. Those are *our* ancestors. *Our* fathers, *our* mothers, the actual people who lived and died only to become memories, symbols, the seals on your cups and the food on your plate. They spent untold fortunes to craft a message that would last beyond eras, only to tell their foolish sons that they are family.

will you be brothers? If it is the latter, I welcome you. If it is the former, I have no time for your games when there is so much to build.”

“Stand in my way or do not,” he continued. “It makes no difference to me. Blood speaks true. Those are *our* ancestors. *Our* fathers, *our* mothers, the actual people who lived and died only to become memories, symbols, the seals on your cups and the food on your plate. They spent untold fortunes to craft a message that would last beyond eras, only to tell their foolish sons that they are family. If you wish to disrespect their honor, leave this hall and let it be your own affair. I will not. I will stay. I will work. I will build. With whoever is strong enough to hold a *real* hammer.”

Dagran tossed the excavation tools on the broken shield and strode out of the room.

Follow me and do not look behind you, his fingers urged.

I did, and in that moment truly thought I could not be more proud of the child I brought into this dark world.



“They will stay,” he said beyond the door. “Though I felt more certain in the planning.”

“I could not imagine you would do so well,” I said quietly. I touched his face, my own baby’s face, never to be so young again. “How did you finally solve the runes? You seemed so lost yesterday. You said it was impossible.”

Dagran Thaurissan II smiled softly at me. “This place is full of eyes and ears, and only some of them Angrid’s.”

“I don’t understand. It was all so perfect. You found the solution.”

Ah, there was the boy in him again. Practically wriggling with excitement to tell me how naughty he’d been. “I told you. The shield is nothing. The shield itself, I mean. I told the truth: that thing was never made to be used in battle. It could not have been. It is too fine, too dear—and all those soft metals and jewels make it brittle. Those ancient dwarves made it not to fight, but to speak. Mother, do you understand? To speak to us. Down through the centuries. They knew themselves. They knew each other. They knew,

when their fight was over, so their unity would be. They knew it would all happen again, inevitably, again and again. So they made this great object and sent it down the lines of their houses to their great-great-great-grandchildren like a message in a falcon's mouth—and their falcon was time." Dagrañ laughed dryly, ruefully. "I do get . . . carried away, don't I?"

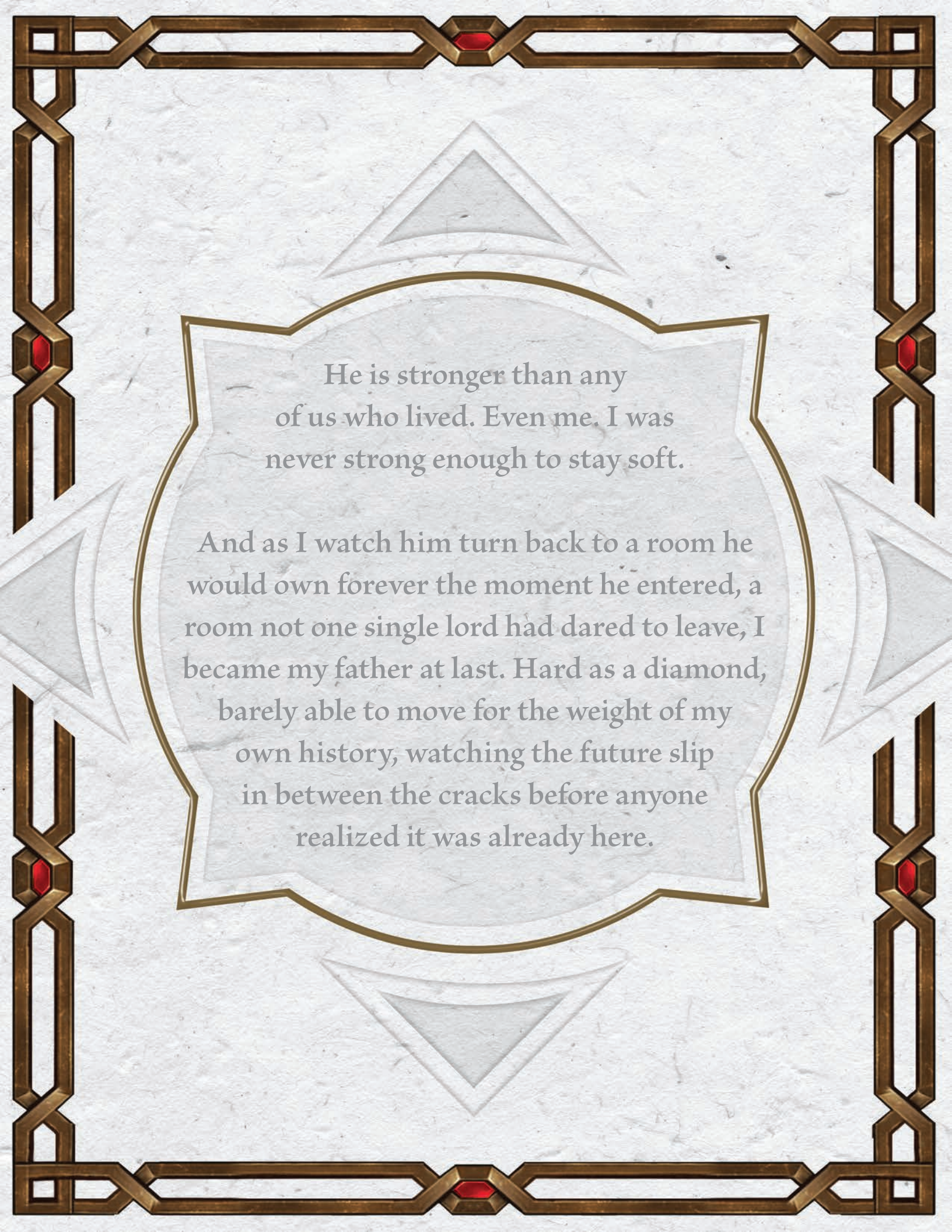
"Then why not make such a letter easy enough for anyone to read?" I asked. "It makes no sense."

"But it makes every sense! What would you think if you found some bit of scrap metal that said, 'You are stupid'? You'd ignore it flat out and so would everyone else. No, this was the only way to make sure anyone would value it. If it was rich enough, and strange enough, indecipherable enough, then all the clans would have to come together to argue and fight over it, to claim it for their own. And together, perhaps, there might be enough of them that they would have all the pieces needed to comprehend the enormity of what our ancestors were trying to do. What they were trying to *say*. Which is the same thing you and Angrid say with your flowers, your music, your food: *remember who you are, because who you are is what we are*. That shield and that vase of blossoms are the same gesture by another hand. No, it had to be a puzzle. A puzzle so good that no one could comprehend it alone."

Dagrañ smiled to himself, and in that moment, he looked so much older, so terribly grown. "As are we all, I suppose. Oh, I can't imagine how long it took . . . to plan, to bargain, to spin out gold as fine as thread, hammer out jewels as thin as ice over a winter basin. To devise the gambit. It must have been . . . Mother, I think it must have been someone like me who did it. Who thought it into being and summoned the falcon to fly it into a world he would never know, the light of days on the other side of his own allotted span. Or hers."

I narrowed my eyes. I know my son. I do know him. "And you couldn't help adding your flourish to that lost soul's work, could you?"

Dagrañ glanced up at me through his lashes with a shine in his eye. "I may have helped a little with the blood spell. Linguistics are quite enough to excite me. I suspected my great uncle and his peers would need something more . . . obvious."

The page features a gold-colored border with a repeating geometric pattern of interlocking lines and small red gemstones at the corners. In the center, there is a large, light gray, irregularly shaped text box with a gold border. The text is centered within this box. The background is a light, textured surface, possibly parchment or paper, with faint, embossed triangular patterns in the corners.

He is stronger than any
of us who lived. Even me. I was
never strong enough to stay soft.

And as I watch him turn back to a room he
would own forever the moment he entered, a
room not one single lord had dared to leave, I
became my father at last. Hard as a diamond,
barely able to move for the weight of my
own history, watching the future slip
in between the cracks before anyone
realized it was already here.

I wanted to laugh and whisper and take apart every moment of this victory with him as we used to do when he was small and his only battles were with wooden dwarves and bathtub trolls. Tell him how I had done something not so different in my youth, show him my pride by showing him how alike we are. But I did not. I could not. I did not want to take from his deed by plastering it with my own, making his virtue mine, leaning over him like a shadow he could not escape to find a light he could own.

I can learn. I can.

“I . . . Mother, I knew this day would come, and I knew I would not be ready,” he went on. “I had to be better than them. I had to find my own game, because I could never win at theirs, any more than you could. And it will work now. It will. I know it. For a while, at least. It’s only ever for a while. Until the need for a falcon comes again.” He gripped my shoulders and pressed his forehead against mine. I thought my heart would burst open. “Say you’re proud. Say I am your son and you see me, you see in me what was taken from you.”

“I see you. My child. My son. I see you,” I whispered through my tears.

I was wrong about him. We all were, only they have yet to discover it. He was always my flower, my lilac growing in the most difficult way—but maybe we all are. Flowers beneath the stone. Maybe we all tangle inside. Maybe we scream and charge and stomp and frown because we know if the armor over our true hearts slips even once, this world will eat our petals whole. After all, the lilac is no less of the earth and earthen than we, no less than the petrified rock on which it must grow. But only Dagraan ever stood bare before horrors and told them all he was both at once and would rule them anyway.

He is stronger than any of us who lived. Even me. I was never strong enough to stay soft.

And as I watch him turn back to a room he would own forever the moment he entered, a room not one single lord had dared to leave, I became my father at last. Hard as a diamond, barely able to move for the weight of my own history, watching the future slip in between the cracks before anyone realized it was already here.

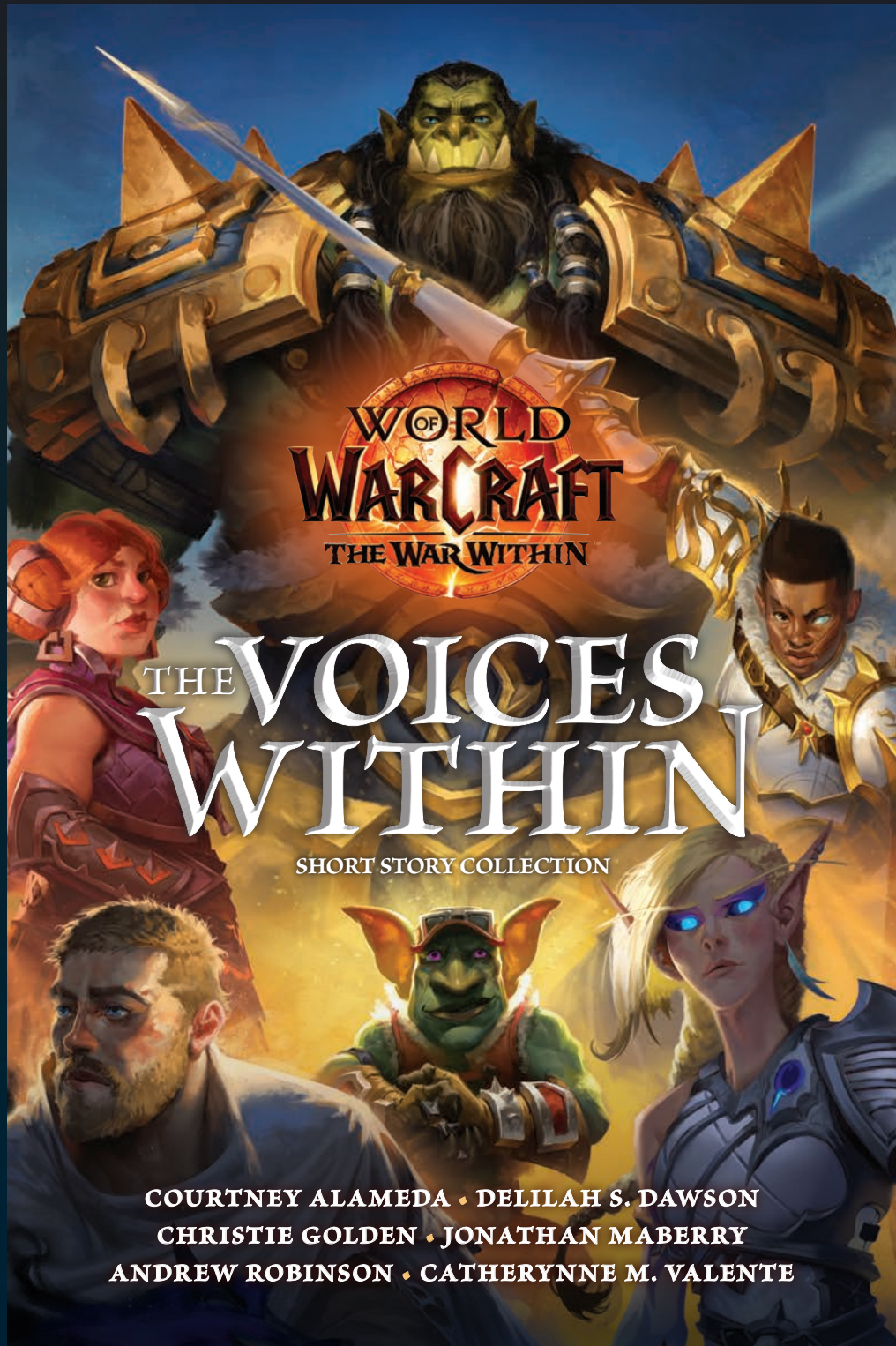


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CATHERYNNNE M. VALENTE is the *New York Times* bestselling author of over forty works of fiction and poetry, including *Space Opera*, *Palimpsest*, *Deathless*, *Radiance*, *Mass Effect: Annihilation*, and the crowdfunded phenomenon *The Girl Who Circumnavigated Fairyland in a Ship of Her Own Making*. She is the winner of the Nebula, Hugo, Otherwise, Sturgeon, Mythopoeic, Lambda, and Locus Awards, among others. She lives on an island off the coast of Maine with her son.

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