

# Alysha

3 Chapter Sample

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# Chapter 1

“Start with her.” The head slaver pointed at Jocelyn Brandywine.

The slaver’s name was Sev. Alysha remembered him now. He was the man who had come to Waterhall, her home village, some days earlier, seeking refuge. He had claimed at the time that he had been attacked on the road and had lost his wagon, horse, goods, and all his money. He just needed somewhere to stay for the night and recover. The residents of Waterhall had welcomed him in with open arms. What a terrible thing to happen, to strip a man of his livelihood, they had said. Stay as long as you need, Meri Appleseed, the settlement’s elected leader, had offered. Sev had gratefully accepted Waterhall’s charity and had pressed on a couple of days later. But not after snooping around and seeing what was available to loot, Alysha now realised.

Sev wasn’t a tall man. He was shorter than average height and seemed to be forever needing to look up at other people. His hair was short and black, with a not inconsiderable amount of grey to be found throughout. His short, neatly clipped beard was suffering much of the same about the tips.

The man to whom Sev had spoken scowled and looked Jocelyn up and down. “The old woman first?” he asked, with a look of disdain. “Are you mad?”

Alysha had heard him referred to as Jake on the way up here, as she and the others had sat in the cage upon the wagon, wondering what fate lay in store for them. Jake was slightly taller than Alysha and seemed to have a permanent scowl on his face. His eyes, too, were quite unkind, his brow locked into a furrow. Or that might just have been how it looked due to his blonde bowl haircut.

Sev gestured behind him, to where two other men were crouched down, examining the ground there. “She’s skinny enough to fit down the hole,” he said, waving a finger up and down Jocelyn.

“And fragile enough that she’ll break every bone in her body when she slips off the rope and hits the bottom,” Jake said. “Even from three feet up. Gods knows what you were thinking when

you picked her.”

The men began to argue for a time, the two others who had been examining the hole coming back over to voice their opinions. One was a very large man, who seemingly went by the nickname of Bull. It was a fitting name, Alysha thought. The man was thick about the arms, legs, and torso. He sported quite a large belly, perhaps the result of drinking too much. He was bald, with the occasional healing cut to be found on his scalp. He must have earned those from shaving his own head.

The name of the fourth man escaped Alysha – Ferth, she thought she had heard the others refer to him as. He hadn’t said much recently. Out of the four, he was the oldest. Late fifties, early sixties, if Alysha had to guess. He had a shock of spiky white hair about his head. It did not appear to be thinning very fast and he retained much of it. He didn’t seem to smile too much and had a quite severe look on his face a lot of the time, more so than Jake. A life of crime seemed etched into his wrinkled skin. The type of man that would sell his own mother if he thought the price was good enough.

The slavers pointed at the collection of unwilling captives and back to the hole as they argued, their voices steadily rising as their tempers began to flare.

Alysha met the eyes of her fellow residents. Including herself, the slavers had brought five of them to the top of Sommer’s Hill. None were doing a good job of masking their fear at being here, all casting glances in the direction of the nearby trees, as well as the cage upon the wagon that had been used to transport them up here.

Alysha’s attention strayed down the hill, to the land beyond. In the fading light, she could just about make out Waterhall. Or what was left of it, at any rate. A column of smoke drifted up from the village. Of the settlement itself, tiny pinpricks of red and yellow, the embers of the flames that had consumed many of the houses and other buildings, could be seen. Far brighter earlier on, they would have been doused now by those who had been left behind – the very young, the very old, and the infirm, whom the slavers had deemed to be without value (with the exception of Jocelyn, of

course). Alysha thought it a good thing that the air was still tonight. A heavy wind would have fanned the flames and made things much worse, reducing the entire village to ash. At least if she were to somehow escape and make her way back home, there might be something worth salvaging. Something upon which to rebuild ...

“Hey, hey, hey!” Sev shouted. “You’d best not be thinking of running.” The slavers stopped arguing then, turning their attention back to the group of captives.

“If they even think of it, we’ll run them down and gut them where they stand,” Jake said.

“Why do they keep looking at the woods like that?” Bull wanted to know.

“There are huglers up here,” Hue, a boy a good few years younger than Alysha, said. He looked again at the line of trees.

Alysha agreed. She swore that she had seen movement there earlier, a glimpse of white, skeletal hands between the many tree trunks. They had withdrawn swiftly, the things waiting, biding their time.

Jake hooted with laughter. “Monsters? You’re telling me you’re scared of *monsters*?”

“Tell you what,” Sev said to his captives, “you do anything but stand where you are and you’ll find yourself with something much worse and very real to be scared of.” He gestured to his three accomplices as he spoke.

“They’re real,” Hue pressed, eyes darting to the treeline. “They live in the woods and come out at night, when it’s dark. They don’t like the daylight.” He looked up into the night sky. “Not so fond of the moons, either.”

“No such damn thing,” Sev said. “Just stupid stories made up to scare children into not playing far from home and to come in when it gets dark. Now,” he said to Jake, “get the old woman.”

“She’ll fall and die,” Jake said.

“She’s the test subject.”

“It will be a waste of good rope.”

Sev and Jake started to argue once more, Bull and the other man adding their opinions, though this time being ignored. It seemed to Alysha that while Sev was in charge, Jake was his right-hand man. They argued just as much as they agreed. From what she had gathered on the way up, Jake had applauded his leader's decision to hit Waterhall and take all the able-bodied prisoners to sell as slaves. He had been less enthusiastic about Sev's idea to take a detour up Sommer's Hill before taking the prisoners off to sell.

"She's scared half to death. She probably won't even be able to hold on to the rope."

"We'll tie it tight."

"And how's she supposed to get back up again?"

Alysha looked at Jocelyn. She wasn't as old and frail as the men were making her out to be. She was in her late seventies and quite capable of looking after herself. Still, Alysha doubted she would have the strength or stamina to handle the descent, never mind the return journey.

"Send the boy," Jake said. He meant Hue.

"His shoulders are too wide, you can see that," Bull said.

They weren't wrong. Hue might be skinny and a little small for his age, but he had wide shoulders. His parents always thought that was a sign he would end up growing quite big and stocky in the end.

"Feet first. We can hold his arms out so he slides in easier."

"And how does he get back out afterwards, genius?"

"I'll do it," Alysha said.

A silence descended. All eyes turned towards the young woman. Alysha kept her head held high as both the slavers and her fellow prisoners stared at her. All held a look of surprise on their faces. The way Alysha saw things, she was being practical – the arguing could go on all night and the noise was sure to attract the huglers lurking nearby. The moons might be full tonight, but she could see dense cloud rolling in, threatening to obscure them. That would grant the monsters the opportunity to leave the sanctuary of the trees and attack.

“Well, looks like we’ve got a volunteer,” Sev announced.

“Alysha, no!” Jocelyn said.

“It’s all right, Jocelyn,” Alysha said. “I’m not scared.”

“Good to hear,” Sev said.

“I don’t want to put her in, Sev,” Jake said. “Didn’t want to bring her up here in the first place. Look at her, she’s a pretty one. Got a nice face, one that will attract a number of buyers.”

“Nice skin, too. Good colour,” Bull added. “Buyers love that caramel look. That and pearl white are always in demand. We could get good money for her, Sev. Let’s put one of the others down first, in case something happens. We don’t want to damage that body of hers.”

Alysha’s hands tightened by her sides as the men discussed her like she was a piece of meat, being sold at auction. She kept her mouth shut, however. Now was not the time to get angry. It seemed that while Jake wasn’t keen on coming up here, neither did he want to miss out on any of the spoils that were to be had.

Sev pointed to the ground at his feet. “Listen, Jake, you didn’t have to come up here, but I’ll tell you this – what’s down there could be worth more than the value of her face. It’s worth the risk.”

Jake folded his arms. “If this ends with her becoming worth nothing, I want you to reimburse me my share of her worth. She’d make a good trophy wife.”

“Fine, fine,” Sev said. The head slaver strode over to the prisoner group, shoving them aside as he grabbed Alysha by the wrist and yanked her forward. The man must have been a good three inches shorter than Alysha herself, though far stronger than he appeared.

“Besides,” Sev said to the three others, “we put her down there, she comes up with the goods, we take those and sell her too. Even if she takes some damage, we’ll still gain more from the treasure.”

He led Alysha over to the hole. It made sense to her now why the slavers had chosen the most lean of Waterhall’s residents. The mouth of the hole appeared quite narrow and tight. None of the



slavers would fit down there, that was for sure. Looking at it now, Alysha wasn't altogether certain she would either. A child would fit with ease, but a child might not be able to handle themselves down there or follow instructions properly. They could become trapped or start to panic, and waste the slavers' time.

Sev gestured to Ferth, who was clutching the end of a great coil of thick rope, to come over. "All right," he said to Alysha, "this is what's going to happen – we're going to tie this rope around you and lower you down there."

"How far down is it?" Alysha asked. It wasn't as though Sommer's Hill was small, and if this hole led all the way to the base, they would need a healthy amount of rope.

Sev shrugged. "Two, maybe three hundred metres. We have more rope if we need it," he added, glancing back in the direction of the wagon.

"And what am I looking for down there? Treasure?"

"Yes, treasure." The head slaver rummaged through his clothes, extracting a coin from within and showing it to the young woman. "Gold, just like this. Legend has it that many years ago, a bunch of treasure hunters and explorers hid all their wealth down there. Mounds and mounds of it. Gold, silver, platinum, precious stones, jewellery, you name it. Enough to buy an entire kingdom."

"And what makes you so sure it's still there?" Alysha asked.

"That's what you're here to help us find out," Jake said.

Alysha had never heard of such a legend, despite living so close to the hill. She was familiar with a number of stories of adventure, but nothing quite like this. It sounded absurd that such a grand fortune could exist beneath their feet and go completely undiscovered for all this time, but Sev seemed quite convinced that it was here, and he was willing to stop at nothing to get it. She moved to take the coin from the man, for a better look, but he snatched it back.

"That is just one coin," Sev said. "Down there" – he pointed to the hole, almost salivating at the prospect – "is where we'll find the rest of it."

"Is this the only way in?" Alysha asked.

“The only other way is sealed,” Jake said. “Someone, or something, has blocked the north entrance with a great big boulder. From the inside,” he added with a grin, showing brilliant white teeth.

“Any idea what?” Alysha wanted to know.

“Probably one of your fabled monsters,” Bull said. He looked to the nearby trees, but saw nothing. He snorted.

“Right,” Sev said. “Stop your yapping. We don’t have all night.” He stepped aside to allow Ferth to tie the rope around Alysha. He knotted it tight, forcing the air from her lungs and making it difficult for her to breathe. She resisted the urge to ask the man to loosen it a little – it might be uncomfortable, but at least it was secure.

“You see how this is done?” Ferth asked. “You put it around like this, loop it through here, then again through here, to create a knot. Another loop like this and a final knot here. Got it?”

“Got it,” Alysha said.

“Make sure you do. You’re not getting out if you can’t tie a knot secure enough to hold you. No skin off my nose if you don’t – I’ve got plenty of rope to spare.”

“Show her one more time,” Jake said. “I want to make sure she comes back out.” While Ferth was less bothered about Alysha making it out in one piece, Jake wanted to ensure she returned in pristine condition.

Ferth demonstrated the knots once more and Alysha again confirmed she understood how to tie the rope. Jake, too, was satisfied. With the rope fastened tightly around Alysha’s waist, Ferth looped the other end around the wagon, working it into a secure knot. A number of tugs was enough to satisfy him that it was safe, though Alysha was yet again convinced he did so more to ensure the safety of the rope itself, rather than the woman fastened to it.

“Maybe a giant put that boulder there,” Ferth commented, in a sarcastic tone, “to let him feast on the bones of the adventurers in peace.” He gave a nod to Sev that he was finished.

“To reiterate,” Sev said to Alysha. “We’re going to lower you down there and you’re going to

go looking around for whatever you can find. When you get to the bottom, give two tugs on the rope to let us know you're down. When you're ready to come back up, give three tugs. If we don't hear back from you in an hour, we'll send someone else down, understand?"

"Understood," Alysha said. She glanced to the other residents of Waterhall, seeing the looks of apprehension on their faces. Despite the concern, she knew they were happy it was her going down there rather than them. She couldn't blame them for thinking that way.

"It'll probably be dark down there," Alysha said. "I'll need some light."

Sev fetched an unlit torch, which he inserted into the rope around her waist. He next held up a small pouch, shaking some stones out into his palm. "Do you know how to use these?"

"Yes," Alysha said. "Those are firestriker stones. You bang them together to produce a spark and ignite a flame."

"It has to be done hard," Jake said. "So don't worry about them rubbing together and starting a fire while you're going down."

"We've got a lantern, but that will add too much bulk," Sev said, "and we can't exactly throw it down to you." He dropped the stones back into the pouch and secured it on the rope, alongside the torch. "Don't light that torch until you're at the bottom, no matter how dark it is. Otherwise you'll risk burning through the rope and dropping to your death. That everything?"

He glanced to the other three men, who gave him a nod.

"Right," Sev said to Alysha, pointing to the hole, "get in there."

## Chapter 2

The opening was much narrower than Alysha had been expecting. Even the slavers, who had no doubt made a few attempts themselves to get down in the past, seemed surprised that they needed to push and shove the young woman into the mouth.

Thankfully, Alysha found that after the initial few tight metres of the descent, the tunnel began to widen. Even so, she caught her boots and shoulders on the sides as she was fed down into the unknown, on occasion becoming wedged for a moment before she adjusted her arms and legs to better accommodate herself.

After a time, her feet no longer met the sides of the tunnel, finding instead open air. Despite it being almost pitch black, Alysha was well aware that she was now dangling quite some way above the floor of a great cavern. She held on tight to the rope as she continued to be lowered down. After a time, the rope went taut and a voice from above shouted to her.

“You all right there?” It was Sev.

“Yes,” she called back up.

No more words were exchanged. The rope became slack once again and she continued downward. She saw as she was lowered what appeared to be faint blue lights below her. More and more came into view as she approached the bottom, lining the uneven floor of the cavern and creeping up the adjoining walls. What they could be, insects, or maybe some kind of luminous plant life, she couldn't say. They were dotted all around, and while they were not providing as much light as a lantern or torch might, they were helping to mark the walls and floor. That would be useful with helping her to navigate, once she was down.

At last, her feet met solid ground. She breathed a sigh of relief; she had survived yet another part of this ordeal. She gave two hard tugs on the rope as it began to pool at her feet, the slavers still feeding it into the hole. If there was any word from above, she didn't hear it, but the rope at once stopped coming. She untied herself and then practised fastening the rope about herself once more,

for the ascent. There could well be a need for her to escape this place quickly and she didn't want to fumble with the rope if haste was of the essence. Happy that she was able to secure the rope efficiently for her journey back up to the surface, she next attended to the torch and the firestriker stones.

Three sharp strikes of the stones was all that was needed to produce a shard of sparks potent enough to ignite the torch. Alysha was glad that she was already experienced in using the stones. They could sometimes prove difficult to work with. Not today, however. The darkness around her fled as the torch flared into life and Alysha found herself standing in the middle of an expansive cave. It was far larger than she had originally pictured – a wide open space, the walls on all sides seeming to stretch all the way up to the top of Sommer's Hill. It was like the hill itself was hollow, the earth a shell around the cavern below.

She scooped up one of the blue glowing things at her feet, finding that it was nothing more than a luminous rock. What was causing it to glow this way, she couldn't be certain, though she was sure she had heard talk of such things before from merchants and travellers that had stopped by Waterhall.

Now at the bottom of the cavern and away from her captors, Alysha's thoughts turned to escape. Sev had said that a large boulder was blocking the north entrance. Perhaps there was a way that she might be able to squeeze by and get to Permbridge Castle to raise the alarm, if no one had done so already. She hoped that Lord Cowdray would respond quickly to Waterhall's plight and send help to the village, as well as soldiers to track down the slavers and those they had taken.

"Don't worry," Alysha said to her kidnapped mother, father, brother, and sister, "help is coming."

Holding the torch aloft, she began to explore the cave, first seeking out the boulder-stuffed entrance. She had no idea what could have put it there. Ferth had suggested a giant had been responsible, but she didn't believe in such things. She was convinced there were no monsters to be found down here – no ghouls, ghosts, or banshees lurking in the darkness. Those were just fairy

tales from a long-forgotten time; folklore, fables, and legends that had been embellished over and over, to add drama. Though she admitted she had no explanation for who or what the huglers that inhabited the forests and woodlands in this part of the world really were. Some believed that they were nothing more than men, dressed up to frighten the naive into throwing down their money. Perhaps. Or maybe they were some animal that had learned to disguise itself in a fashion that would deter predators.

It didn't take long for Alysha to locate the north entrance of the cave, as well as the great stone that blocked it. To her dismay, she discovered that the boulder had plugged the exit very well indeed, just as Sev had said. There was no getting around it, no matter how she searched. It was packed so tight that she doubted even light could find a way past. She wasted no further time on it, and made her way back to the central area that she had been lowered into, keeping an eye out along the way for other means of escape.

She considered climbing the rope for a time. Perhaps if she could swing it, she might be able to locate some other tunnels in the walls that would lead out elsewhere. The idea was fraught with a variety of dangers, however, not least of all falling from the rope to her death. Or worse, breaking her legs or her back and being left here all alone in the dark to starve to death. The slavers might also interpret her swinging for something else and haul her back up. No, that way would never do. There were other unexplored passageways leading off the central cavern to try first.

Her eyes settled upon something on the ground as she walked, her heart momentarily leaping into her throat as she saw skeletal hands. These hands did not belong to huglers, however, but human remains. The body must have been here for quite some time to have decayed so much, rotting away right down to the bones. Ragged threads and patches of clothing not yet fully disintegrated still clung to the skeleton, though they gave no indication of who this person was, or why they had been down here. One of Sev's legendary explorers, perhaps, who had become trapped inside? She then spied a dagger embedded in the back of the skull. This fellow's attacker must have been in a hurry to have left without it.

Alysha removed the dagger, the weapon sliding free with ease. There was little doubt in her mind that the blade would be dull and rusted down by now. A thrust or a slash would fail to pierce even the thinnest of leather armour. It might still be good for something and could well puncture flesh with enough force. For now, it was her only weapon, and beggars couldn't be choosers.

She paused before moving on to continue exploring when she spotted a pouch beneath the skeleton. A coin purse. She lifted it, a smattering of coins leaking out from the worn skin and clattering onto the ground. Holding one up to her light, she recognised it as the same type Sev had shown her earlier. She discovered the coins were both gold and silver. Something told her they were far purer than those minted by the crown, where other elements had been added to the mix. The patterns on either side, too, were different from most others in circulation throughout Akidos.

Perhaps the slavers were right – maybe there was a huge treasure trove buried down here, waiting to be discovered. And maybe, just maybe, she could use it to bargain for her freedom, as well as that of her family's own and everyone else taken from Waterhall. She pocketed the three coins and forged on, making her way down another of the tunnels that branched off from the main area. Of all the tunnels leading away, this was by far the largest.

She walked only a short way down the tunnel before the light from her torch focused her attention on something up ahead. The tunnel opened up into another cavernous area, where she could see something sparkling. It looked like a great number of shiny red objects. This would be the treasure! Here was a great mound of diamonds, rubies, gems, and other precious stones, rising several metres up from the floor. There must have been thousands of them!

Alysha quickened her pace, eager to see them up close and discover what else lay within the cave. But as she drew nearer, she saw something odd. The mound was shifting, ever so slightly. She had at first thought the motion was caused by the flickering light from her torch as she trotted forward, but could now see the pile of diamonds and rubies was moving up and down with a steady, regular motion. Like it was breathing. Alysha slowed and crept the rest of the way forward. Up close, she discovered the jewels were not stones at all. They were scales, great red scales. Ones that

belonged to a creature that was very much alive.

Her eyes tracked over the body, seeing first one enormous foot, pure white claws settled on the ground. Further along, a great long tail was curled up on the ground. At the other end, the upper body was bristling with spines. They ran all the way up the creature's thick neck, too, leading to an enormous horned head. The creature's eyes were shut. It was asleep, for now.

Alysha decided she had seen all she needed to. There was no treasure to be found down here, just some giant creature, whose slumber she would rather not disturb. She began to back away, to quietly retreat from the cave and make her way back to the surface. She then backed into something solid that had not been there before, and turning around, she saw that the great tail had shifted and was now settled across the entrance of the tunnel, cutting off her exit.

Panic gripped her. She cast about for another way out, but saw none. It was then that the creature's great eyelids creaked open, two yellow eyes focusing on the intruder to its lair. Alysha tightened her grip on the dagger she still held, her only weapon, her one means of defence, as the creature raised its head off the ground. She knew what this thing was, having heard and read about them many times before as a child. This was a creature of great myth and legend, one of the grandest, mightiest, and most powerful beasts that had ever been spoken of.

This was a dragon.



## Chapter 3

*What are you doing here?*

The voice startled Alysha, and she hunted all around for the source, but could see no one other than the dragon in front of her.

“Hello?” she called, refusing to take her eyes off the great creature. Whoever was speaking had to be on the other side of that tail, back up the tunnel.

*Little one, what are you doing here?* the voice again asked.

“I’m in here!” Alysha cried. She hoped that whoever was speaking was backed by an army. It would take little else to see off a monster as big as this dragon.

*There’s no one there, little one, just you and me,* the voice repeated. *Why are you here?*

It was then that Alysha saw that the dragon was staring down at her, waiting. It finally dawned on her that it was the dragon who was speaking. How the creature was doing so, the young woman couldn’t say; the dragon’s mouth remained shut, its nostrils working as it breathed.

“How ... how are you doing that?” she asked.

*I’m speaking into your mind. It is how I talk.*

The voice was calm and relaxed, though it did little to placate Alysha’s fears. She pictured at any moment the creature’s head dropping down to devour her, opening its jaws to display row upon row of sharp, white teeth. The dragon did no such thing, however, and only continued to hold her in its gaze. Maybe it could sense her fear and was playing with her.

“You’re a dragon,” she said.

The dragon responded with a nod of its head.

“What are you doing here?”

*I asked you first.*

Alysha saw that she was holding the dagger out in defence. How absurd. Against the dragon, the already worthless blade would do absolutely nothing. She lowered it and steeled herself. The

only way she would get out of this would be by talking.

“It’s complicated,” she started.

*We have time*, the dragon said.

Alysha glanced back at the huge tail that continued to block her exit. True, she was hardly going anywhere. “I came looking for treasure,” she said. “I was sent down here by some men on the surface. They lowered me down through a hole at the top of the hill, to see what I could find and report back to them.”

*I didn’t think you looked like an explorer*, the dragon observed. *You’re not here of your own free will?*

“No,” Alysha said. “The men on the surface, the ones that put me down here, are slavers. They attacked my village this evening, taking all the men and women as prisoners. They burned down our houses and our stores, and left only the old people, the very young, and the less able behind.”

*The ones they knew they couldn’t sell or would have any use for*, the dragon said.

“Yes, exactly,” Alysha said. She couldn’t believe she was having this conversation with a dragon. Then again, if someone had told her that same morning how her day was to unfold, she wouldn’t have believed that either.

*The cruelty you humans are willing to inflict upon one another never ceases to amaze me*, the dragon said. *And these men have sent you here to find them treasure?*

“Yes,” Alysha said.

*There is no treasure down here, hasn’t been for years. You may find a few pieces of gold here and there, but the rest was plundered a long time ago.*

Alysha had suspected as much. Something told her the dragon wasn’t lying. If there was treasure to be had, she would have no doubt seen sign of it already. The dragon wasn’t guarding it either, it seemed. The place was truly empty.

*It is not safe for you here, little one. You should leave, immediately*, the dragon then said.

“How do I get out of here?” she asked.

*The same way you got in.*

The dragon’s voice remained kind, but firm. If she had intruded upon his nest or whatever this place was (a hideaway, perhaps?), he was being very civil and reasonable about it. She heard a noise behind her and saw the dragon lift aside his tail, granting her access to the tunnel once again. Her way out was now clear.

“There’s a boulder blocking the north entrance—” Alysha said, looking down the tunnel.

*And there it will remain,* the dragon said. *You should tell the men on the surface you found nothing down here. Nothing at all.* The dragon lowered its head to the ground. *Now go. It is dangerous for you to remain here.*

“It is dangerous for me to go back up there,” Alysha said. What could possibly be so dangerous down here, compared to a dragon, she wondered.

*You have no idea.*

Alysha gave a start, but the dragon said no more, fixing the young woman with its bright yellow eyes. Alysha counted her blessings and decided not to push her luck any further, retreating back up the tunnel without so much as a farewell to the great red creature.

Back in the central area, she stowed the dagger she still carried and set to tying the rope around herself, tight, just as she had been shown and practised earlier. She considered the torch and the firestriker stones. No, she would leave them down here. The torch had made traversing the opening of the hole more difficult and could well prove much more of a hindrance this time. Besides, a later opportunity might see her return down here. If so, it would be nice to know there was a source of light available.

She extinguished the torch and gave three sharp tugs on the rope. A short moment later, she was jerked off her feet, and her slow ascent to the surface began.

“Well? What was down there? What did you find? What did you see?”

Alysha was barely out of the ground before Sev was accosting her, eager for information and for her to report on all the wondrous treasures she had discovered below. She was all too aware that she was going to have to disappoint him there.

“Careful, Sev,” Ferth then said, “she’s got a knife.”

Sev’s eyes fell to the dagger at Alysha’s belt. Quick as a flash, the slaver had tugged it free and tossed it over to Jake.

“You didn’t have that when you went down,” Sev said to Alysha. “Where did you get it? What else did you find?”

“Nothing,” Alysha said. She glanced towards the four other residents of Waterhall. They had been sitting in a circle when she had come back up. Now they were getting to their feet, just as keen to learn what Alysha had found in the cave below. She then noted how Jocelyn was eyeing the four slavers closely. Having been guarding their captives before, their full attentions had since shifted to Alysha.

“Nothing?” Sev spat. “What do you mean nothing?!”

“The place has been picked clean,” Alysha said. “Not a thing down there, just that dagger and some luminous blue stones.”

“Blue stones?” Bull asked. “Sure those weren’t gemstones?”

“Definitely not gemstones.”

“Rock lights,” Ferth said. “Poor quality, too, if they’re giving off blue.” The man began to grumble about what a waste of time this had been and how he had told Sev there would be nothing to find. Sev wasn’t having it.

“If there was nothing down there, where did you get that?” Sev asked, pointing at the dagger in Jake’s hand.

“It was lying there on the ground, where you lowered me,” Alysha said. “It had been stuck in

someone's head a long time ago. Whoever they were, they're nothing but a skeleton now." She went on to describe the tunnels and caverns, though omitted the detail of the slumbering dragon.

Sev only scowled as she spoke, continuing to appear dissatisfied. He looked at Jake, who was holding the dagger limply at his side. "Anything?"

"No," Jake said. "This is junk. Nothing of value in the hilt, either. Poor excuse for a dagger, all in all. I've handled sharper butter knives."

"And you found nothing more?" Sev demanded of Alysha. The man was sounding increasingly as though he didn't believe Alysha, or didn't want to. In his head, he must have imagined spending days hauling up enough gold and jewels to buy half of Akidos. Perhaps he thought Alysha planned to keep it all for herself.

"No," Alysha said, firmly. "Like I've told you – it's empty down there. If there was ever any treasure there at all, it's long gone."

Sev stared at Alysha for a time, his brows knitting together. "You're lying. What are you not telling me?" He lunged towards the girl, his hands all over her, searching every part of her body, working their way beneath her shirt and her trousers, batting and shoving Alysha's own hands away as she tried to hold back his wandering fingers.

"Ah ha!" he exclaimed, withdrawing the three coins that Alysha had found on the skeleton. He turned them over in his hand, examining the faces and the type. One gold, two silver. "I know for a fact that you didn't have these when you went down there. Tried to hide them from us, did you? See, lads? I was right!" Sev held the coins aloft for the others to see.

Alysha noticed that the clouds had thickened while she had been away. Already, they were choking off much of the moonlight from Mi, and threatening to do the same to Rune, its larger brother. The fading light made it more difficult for the other men to see what Sev was holding, and they moved in closer for a better look.

With their captors now distracted, the residents of Waterhall began looking around themselves for a means of escape. Alysha was certain that at any moment the group would be

sprinting back down Sommer's Hill, to freedom.

"Thought you were clever, did you, eh?" Sev rounded on Alysha as the other men inspected the coins. "Well, you're going back down there. And this time I'm going with you and you're going to lead me to the rest of the treasure. That fortune is mine, you hear me?! Mine!"

"You won't fit ..." Alysha started.

"I'll make myself fit, damn you! Even if we all have to dig with our bare bloody hands!"

Jocelyn, Hue, Sean, and Bart at last decided now was the time to make their escape and began to move away as quickly and quietly as they could. It did not go unnoticed.

"Sev! Sev, they're escaping!" Jake raised the alarm as he saw the group starting to creep away.

Sev spun around, his fury intensifying as he saw the four starting to run. He opened his mouth to speak, but the words didn't come. Alysha quickly discovered the reason why. A number of tall figures, dressed in ragged grey cloaks, were blocking the route back down Sommer's Hill, advancing slowly towards the now hemmed-in group. Long, white skeletal fingers poked out of sleeves. Moans emanated from beneath dark hoods that seemed to conceal all that lay within, save for the flash of bright green eyes that shone like emeralds.

Huglers. Alysha felt her blood run cold, her heart leaping into her throat. She had never seen them up close before, but one thing was immediately clear to her – these were no men in costumes. They were too tall, too thin, and their movement too unnatural. They seemed to be gliding forward rather than walking. The stories she had heard told of the things' nature were all true. It was plain that the monsters had been attracted to the coins that Sev was waving about, the lack of moonlight giving the huglers the opportunity to step out from the cover of the trees.

Jocelyn Brandywine was but a few metres away from the nearest one when she let out a scream of terror. The hugler shot forward, the front of its cloak flying open. Alysha caught a fleeting glimpse of what lay beneath – raw blood-covered organs, sinew, muscle, bone, and some sort of clear dripping substance that looked like saliva – before the cloak enveloped the old woman.

It wrapped itself around her completely, like a sack. The woman's further cries of terror were cut short, turning almost immediately into a strangled gurgle. Jocelyn could be seen thrashing about beneath the cloak, trying to free herself, though the hugler held her tight in its grasp.

Then the splattering started.

Red, yellow, and green ooze began to drip onto the ground where the hugler stood. It was eating Jocelyn alive! That clear substance Alysha had seen as the cloak had flown open had indeed been saliva. Alysha heard the old woman let out a number of choking sobs, her thrashing starting to subside as the ooze dripped down and the monster continued to consume its victim. The gore was already collecting into a pool at the hugler's feet, hot and steaming where it lay on the ground. The hugler gave what sounded like a sigh of pleasure as its feasting went on, and its companions began advancing quicker, their own appetites swelling.

Alysha heard Sev swear and saw the man casting about himself.

"My sword!" he demanded. "Where's my damn sword?!"

It, along with all the other weapons, Alysha saw, was back on the wagon, which the huglers were drawing ever nearer to. The head slaver made a run for it, apparently hoping to reach the wagon before the monsters cut him off, shouting at the other men to do likewise.

Sean was next to be grabbed by the huglers, evading the initial lunge before succumbing to a second that followed in rapid succession. Alysha saw the huglers drifting around Hue, surrounding him. He called out for help, for someone to please save him from the monsters. Finally, in sheer desperation or terror, he called out for his mother and father. A moment later, a skeleton hand, attached to an unnaturally long arm, shot out of a sleeve, grabbing Hue by the wrist and pulling him into the folds. Alysha wished there was something she could have done to help him. Now she only wished he died quickly.

Sev, Jake, Ferth, and Bull beat the odds of reaching the wagon before the huglers did. They snatched up their swords and prepared to face their enemies. Though some of the huglers were feasting on the settlers and now starting to battle over Bart, a good many others were still very

much on the lookout for their next meal. With moans and groans, they glided across the ground towards the now-armed slavers. The brandished steel didn't appear to bother them in the slightest.

Bull was the first to attack, doing so with far more aggression than his comrades. He leapt towards the group of monsters, cursing and promising them a swift death, swinging his sword upward at the nearest one's hood, intent on striking the head. The sword did not, however, find its mark, instead only ruffling the hood of the cloak, as though there was no head beneath it at all. How that could be, Alysha didn't know; there were eyes beneath those hoods, so surely there was a head? The fact did not deter Bull who thrust, slashed, and swiped again and again at various points of the hugler's body.

Despite a concerted effort, he met with no success, and like those before him, he was snatched at by a skeleton hand. At first, the slaver was able to resist the pull; he was a big man after all, larger than anyone else on the hill, thick with muscle and fat. But his struggles lasted only a short time before the hugler that held him lunged forward, cloak whipping open and swallowing him up. Like all those that had gone before, Bull could be seen beneath the folds, struggling to escape. He continued to curse and shout, even as the splattering of green and yellow mucus began. The shouts soon turned to screams of pain and sobs of terror as he was consumed.

Despite being quick to recognise that his sword swings were failing to hit their marks, no matter how well placed his thrusts were, Ferth fared little better. He learned from his comrade's mistakes and retreated back to the wagon. Here, a couple of torches burned. He plucked one from its holster and held his ground as the huglers moved in. With the sword having proven worthless, the man now swiped at the monsters with the torch, the flame roaring through the air with each swing. It gave the huglers pause, and the man's confidence grew as he created a circle around himself, into which the cloaked beings dared not enter. The slaver soon began to stab at the monsters with the torch, causing them to start gliding away.

"That's it, you bastards, fear the flames!" Ferth shouted at them. "Don't like fire, eh? You're just like every other animal, aren't you?"



One of the huglers wasn't retreating as fast as the others and so Ferth thrust the burning torch into it, pressing the fire right up against the cloak. To his horror, the flames did not catch. He tried again, but still the fire did nothing, not so much as even singeing the material. Ferth turned to look back at Sev and Jake, terror on his wrinkled face as he realised the huglers no longer had a reason to fear him. The next moment, the hugler he had attempted to burn came at him, moaning louder than before. Ferth's screech of horror was cut short as he was devoured far more aggressively than those that had fallen earlier.

Sev swore again. "What does it take to kill these things?" he wanted to know.

The huglers were closing ranks now, ensuring there was no way past them. Alysha couldn't count how many of the monsters there were. Well over two dozen, it seemed. She couldn't see Bart anymore. He was gone. He must have been quiet, or perhaps his screams had been masked by those of others. Of those that had come up Sommer's Hill, only Alysha, Sev, and Jake now remained.

"Told you coming up here was a stupid idea," Jake said to Sev. The man was grinding his teeth, anger and fear mixed in together. "We're going to die up here, all for nothing!"

The three continued to step back, though Alysha saw they were running out of room in which to retreat. This part of Sommer's Hill ended in a sheer cliff edge, one that they were fast approaching. She saw she had only three options – take her chances in the trees, where she was certain to be snatched by another of the monsters within seconds; leap over the side of the cliff, to an uncertain fate; or attempt to fight her way through the mob that had come up the hill.

Sev then seemed to realise something and rummaged through his clothing, extracting the three coins that Alysha had found down below. He tossed them in front of the huglers. The things' attentions were instantly drawn, the two men and the young woman forgotten for the moment. There were moans of intrigue from beneath the cloaks as three of the monsters made a grab for the coins, one snatching up two, while another pair jostled with one another for the privilege of having the third. Threatening gestures were made, until one became the victor. The coins were examined for a time, the emerald eyes brightening as they gazed upon the gold and silver. The things'

fascination with the coins lasted only a short while, however, the huglers then placing them beneath their cloaks and returning their attention to the three humans in front of them.

“Money! Get more money!” Sev shouted. “Throw it at them! We can get back down the hill while they’re chasing after it.”

They would need a lot of money for that, Alysha thought. She doubted very much that Sev and Jake had that much coin to hand. She realised then that there was a fourth option for escape – back into the cave below. She grabbed the rope that still lay on the ground and began to feed it back down the hole. She glanced at the two slavers, seeing them scrabbling to empty purses of their coins with which to distract the monsters. They threw the money with gusto to the sides of the creatures, causing them to part, a small thoroughfare emerging.

“Where’s the rest?” Sev demanded as he emptied his last purse.

“That’s all of it,” Jake said.

The huglers were mostly distracted. It might be possible to run between them, though it was doubtful both men would make it. Alysha concentrated on the rope. It was still anchored to the wagon, Ferth not having untied it after Alysha had come back up. She wished she had something heavy to attach to the other end so that she could simply throw it into the hole and then climb down the rope, safe in the knowledge it had reached the bottom. As it stood, *she* was the weight. If she didn’t feed enough of the rope in, she would find herself hurtling down tens of metres to the cave floor, where she would certainly die instantly on impact. Or worse, break her legs.

“It’s not enough!” Sev shouted. The men had run clean out of coins to throw. “It won’t keep them busy for long. Find more, we need more!”

“Oh, it’s enough,” Jake said. “All they need is something else to keep them occupied.”

Alysha heard Sev cry out and glanced up from feeding the rope down the hole to see Jake now running between the huglers that remained distracted by the coins in the grass. Some attempted to grab him, but their lunges were somewhat apathetic, the desire for the gold and silver much stronger. Soon enough, the coins had all been collected, and the huglers’ attentions were focused

once more on the two remaining humans.

Sev was staggering backwards, hands clutched to his front, the sword he had once held lying in the grass at his feet. He turned around and Alysha saw the dagger she had brought up from the cave was embedded in his stomach. Jake had stabbed him and made a run for it while he could, wounding Sev and leaving the other man here as fodder for the monsters.

Sev looked to Alysha as he staggered by, seeing her still working the rope down the hole. He didn't stop for even one moment. There was no chance of him squeezing into that gap. He might be smaller than Alysha, but he remained wider. He stumbled towards the edge of the hill, hovering by the sheer drop. He considered his options for a time.

"Enjoy your fortune," he said over his shoulder, and then toppled forward over the edge.

Alysha saw that she was the only one remaining up here. Everyone else was either dead or gone. The huglers were closing in, very soon to be within lunging distance. She hadn't fed in nearly as much rope as she wanted, perhaps not more than a third of what she thought she would need to make it to the bottom. A few metres of the rope had coiled on the cavern floor on her first descent. It told her the rope was longer than needed, though by how much, she didn't know.

She had no more time to feed in any more of the rope now, though, and would have to work with what she had. And so, with the groaning growing ever louder as the huglers drew near, Alysha crawled feet first into the hole, working herself into that tight spot as quickly as she could. She had buried herself up to her chest when a skeletal hand made a swipe at her, fingers brushing her scalp. She saw then that the yellowy-green ooze that dripped down was some kind of acid, burning the grass around where the creature stood. An acrid smell tingled her nostrils. Alysha wriggled frantically, sinking further into the hole. She could feel her legs and lower body were past the narrow mouth, but the slavers had earlier needed to push her to help her on her way. Now, she could only squirm her way past.

The hugler once again swiped at her, this time grabbing a fistful of her hair. She jerked her head to escape the thing's grasp, but to no avail. Dark shadows fell upon her as more of the huglers

gathered around the hole. More hands reached down to find purchase, to extract the prize and pull her free. Just as Alysha felt the end was near, gravity came to her assistance and she felt herself sinking rapidly down. She felt a painful tug on her scalp as hair was ripped free. Her ears were filled with the sound of her hair breaking, as well as the disappointed moans of the huglers that chased her down into the darkness.

With no one to brace the rope, Alysha's descent was rapid. It spared her little time to think and she only hoped as the luminous blue rocks covering the cavern floor rushed up towards her that the rope would become taut before she hit the ground at speed. About two-thirds of the way down, the rope was pulled tight, the sudden stop jerking her hard and making her scrabble to maintain a hold on it. She hadn't had time to tie a secure knot around herself, and was simply clinging to the rope with her hands and feet, thighs locked as tight as possible around its length. She hung in the air for a short time, before the rope became slack again and she resumed hurtling towards the cavern floor.

A few seconds later, the rope became taut again, then slack. Then taut, then slack. She realised what was happening as she continued her jerky descent – the huglers on the surface were interfering with the rope, either by grabbing hold of it or standing on it (she still wasn't sure if they actually had feet) as they hunted for a way to reach her. Just so long as they didn't decide to pull it back up. Or worse, cut it. As though reading her thoughts, the rope became rigid and then started to be hauled back upwards. She panicked. What to do? What the hell could she do?

She then saw to her relief, made clear by the bluish glow of the rock lights, that the end of the rope was starting to pool on the cavern floor. She need only slide down the rope to safety, a distance of some five or six metres. Alysha prepared to do so, when the rope once again became slack and she found herself in freefall.

Alysha never found out if the rope became taut again; the next stop came as a result of her hitting the cavern floor, toppling over backwards, and striking her head off the ground. What little light that existed down there was quickly lost as her vision went black.

\*

End of sample

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