

PACT OF THE KEEPS:  
**BLACKWING KEEP:**  
DARK WIZARDS DEMISE

FIRST BOOK IN THE  
“PACT OF THE KEEPS” SERIES

AUTHORS: BK STAPLES & THEO MOON

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# DEDICATION

Special thanks to my Gamer buddies. We have spent years perfecting characters in several games together. I hope I have captured the essence of their personalities and presented our gamer family with fun and dignity. So, as you read, know that each character has a real personality behind them.

Also, in memory of our young friend, Skitty. She was a tenacious gamer and a crazy Halfling Rogue. Unfortunately, we lost her to cancer way too young and miss her dearly.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

RD Shull (Gavin Brokinhorn) assisted in the editing.

Brian Lee (Shamash) was also a tremendous help with early editing and constant re-reading and ideas. Also, our systems and communications coordinator.

Each person behind the characters gave me the backstory or history. We then incorporated it into the story and tried to capture each personality.

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# INTRODUCTION

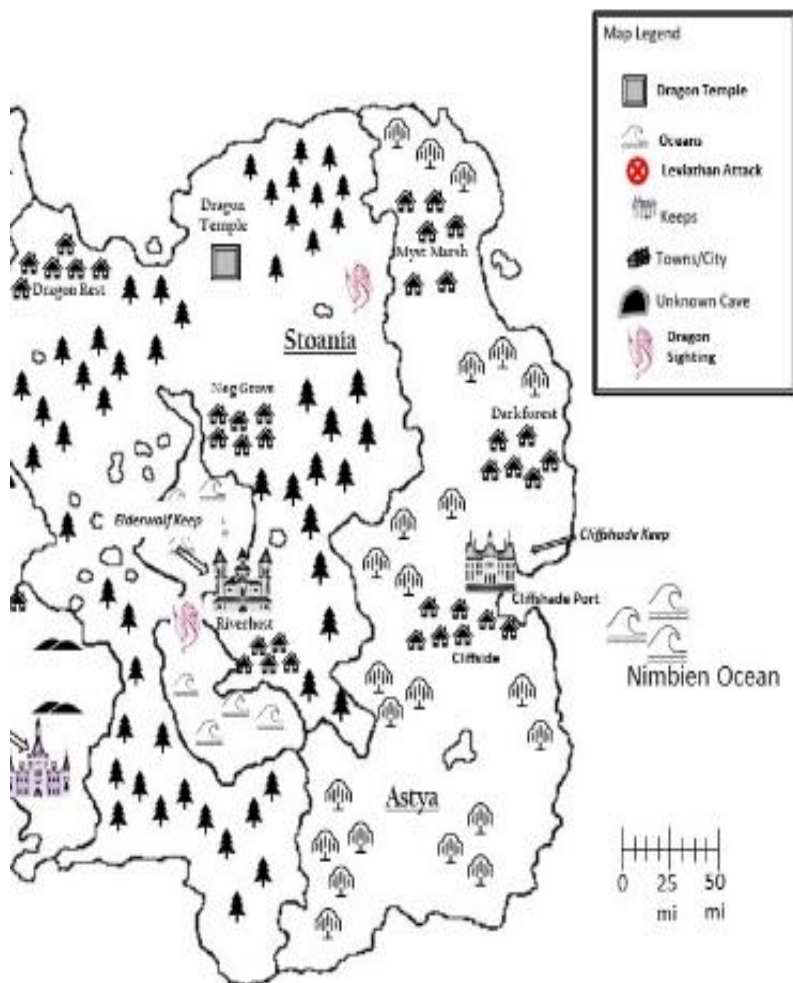
A story about an eclectic family of friends' survival. Their trials and tribulations. Their fight to rid the continent of Alahora of a recent rash of dangerous enemies and monsters. They are a variety of races and beliefs, with their family histories are equally exciting and, in some cases, unimaginable to most.

We start at the middle of their lives, but it does begin just before they embark on their most dangerous adventure yet. Follow them along as they find themselves and their importance to Alahora.

Alahora has seven known Keeps with Ruling Families. Six major cities and a few minor cities spread over the land, with various villages dotting the countryside. There are treaties among them to benefit trade and travel; however, there are times that relations between the Ruling Families do get strained.



**Alahora**





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# PROLOGUE

Lightning streaks across the dark sky, only giving a brief glimpse of the giant iron gates embedded in the cliffside. The ocean presses upon them, trying to find its way through the doors. There is a low hum that I can hear deep inside the cave. Something or someone lurks behind. Deeper in the darkness beyond the wood and iron lies an evil.

Finding a small opening, I crawl into the dark. The stench is awful, like rotting fish and manure. Nevertheless, I press on until I can see a faint glow ahead. It opens to a great cavern with a dock and stone buildings along the shore of an inlet ocean. On a platform by the dock is a great winch holding a sizable oblong shape. It appears to be a vessel or cocoon of some sort. Several goblins in dark red robes walk up to the winch as my eyes adjust to the light. I can't hear what they are saying, but they are pointing at the dangling cocoon. I can see an outline of a figure inside the cocoon. Out of the shadows steps a shorter figure in a black cloak. He seems to be directing the goblins.

I swiftly move closer, dodging flickers of light and hiding behind a fish barrel. I can hear them now. One of the goblins to the figure in black, "Master Evad, is it time?"

In response, "YES! You trolic, go the storeroom and get my ingredients. Don't lick them this time either. I want the second one to be perfect."

The goblin scurries off to a small building close to me. I have to crouch behind the barrel quickly as not to be discovered. I slowly peek around the barrel and see the figure in black raise a staff in the air. A purple glow begins to radiate from it, directly in front of the short figure that the goblin called Master Evad is a vat with a bubbling liquid.

The goblin that likes to lick things comes back with an arm full of items and drops them into the vat. From this distance, they appear to be dragon parts. Then, raising his hands and staff higher into the air, Evad starts chanting in a language that's long been dead for a good reason. It's Ungar, the tongue of the demonic gods. I don't understand it, but I recognize it when I hear it. The coldest chill I have ever felt runs entirely up and down my spine.

The staff gets brighter and brighter. Evad plunges it into the bubbling liquid, and the vat shatters. The concoction spills into the waters in front of him. Evad

yells "now" to the goblin closest to the winch. The little goblin releases the lever, and the dangling cocoon drops into the water below it.

The liquid that was in the vat is glowing purple as it slides into the water. It seeks out the cocoon and envelops it. The water around it starts churning furiously. My heart is beating a hundred times faster than usual. I have no words for what I'm seeing.

Evad steps to the waters' edge and begins chanting again. The purple light is forming around the cocoon-type object, and it's growing outwards. I can see the beginning formation of several tentacles. They stretch outwards towards the dock. They get bigger and bigger until they crush the wooden pier under their weight. Then the beginnings of a head begin to form. Some creature is developing before my eyes. It's starting to resemble a Leviathan.

Suddenly a tentacle darts through the air and grabs a goblin next to the winch. He screams as he's crushed and made limp. The grotesque tentacle pulls back and disappears into the churning water. Fear swells in my chest, "Am I safe here behind this barrel?" I'm not going to stay to find out.

I quickly turn to make my way to the opening that I entered through, but I see only black. I think, huh, that's funny, when did the torches go out. Then I

realize that it is a black cloak that is in my face. I slowly look up and see the deformed face of Evad. A flash of purple light strikes my eyes, and the world starts to go dark. I hear Evad whisper, "You'll power the next Leviathan."



Meanwhile, the High Duke Edmond Blackwing is gravely ill at Blackwing Keep. Whatever the affliction is, the cure is just out of the grasp of his healers. They are frantically reading, searching, and trying everything to save his life.

Taking the family crest and handing it to his trusted friend and Cleric, Shamash, "Give this to her, help her to take my place. I know we have raised her well; she can do this."

"That's all well and good Sir. I will do as you ask. You know she has spent all this time away to learn more about life and fighting. This last trip is for her magic, but I sense it is also her means of hiding from the truth. She doesn't think she is ready and feels you will want to retire."

"I don't think I am being given a chance to retire. My healers are good, but I fear some things just aren't



meant to be. She will whinge, moan and deny her natural gifts, but she will step up to the task." Sir Edmond drifts off to sleep again.

Shamash thinks to himself, may the Gods give me a few months to ease her into her new role before anything significant happens.

As Shamash heads to his quarters, the master healer meets him in the hall. "Good evening, Jacci. Any news?"

"My old friend, I fear I have dire news. This seems to be a rare poison with all we have tried and researched. I would need a drop of it to find an antidote. We have searched his room, personal effects, stuff in the food pantry, even my medical supplies. I am at a loss, and it pains me that I cannot just mix up or conjure up a cure to help him."

"Hmmm... Jacci, this means someone in the Keep poisoned him. Are you sure before I go searching for a murderer in his own home?"

"As sure as I can be unless some miracle happens in the next 24 hours. I would give anything to be wrong."

## **CHAPTER 1**

# **LIFE-CHANGING NEWS**

"Akita Blackwing, Ak-i-ta Bl-ack-wing," the messenger calls from the Hungry Boar Tavern and Inn door. A scruffy halfling looks like he has been running a 20-mile marathon fast to deliver his message. He is shorter than most halflings, with messy red hair, brilliant green eyes. His light brown shirt is rumpled under his rust-colored vest, with brown pants and knee-high boots. He uses his gloves to knock the dust off his shirt and pants as he looks around the room. With the sun at his back, it's a bit difficult to see faces in the tavern. Nevertheless, he sees that the bar is pretty packed for an early afternoon as his vision adjusts.

Akita looks up, eyeing the little guy, and recognizes him as Judas, her uncles' usual messenger, and loyal friend. However, she sees an outline due to

the sun behind him until he steps further into the room. Curious, she calls over, thinking it's early for her uncle to send his monthly communication that usually begs her to come home or update the single men in the area. As Judas walks up, she notices he is visibly upset. He is holding his hat and gloves in his hands that are shaking, and if she didn't know better, it looks like he's been crying.

She knows it's a five-day ride to Salthall from Blackwing Keep if you stop for the night, but he seems as if he hasn't slept in days. Judas is not just any messenger either. He's the fastest halfling on the continent. Halflings are naturally fast, but Judas gives new meaning to fast. It seems his gear and enchanted items enhance his natural talent. The trip from her uncle's Keep in Prayla to the town of Salthall is five days, and Judas can make it in half the time.

As he makes his way to her through the crowded room, he gets pushed by one farmer doubling over in laughter into a big burly ugly half-orc, who looks three sheets to the wind in his ale. The tall half-orc is wearing all black with a black mask that only has slits for the eyes, nose, and mouth. His fangs give away his race. If you are looking at him, you might see the definition of his muscles within the black jerkin and vest. Judas apologizes with a slight nod to the man but keeps moving as the half-orc stands. He turns on the

halfling calling him everything but an adult halfling. Judas tries to ignore him, but the belligerent drunk has set his eyes and anger on Judas.

As he finally gets to Akita, she quickly steps between the two, protecting her friend and employee of her uncle. She realizes the half-orc is speaking Dwarven instead of Common or Orcish. Puzzled, she speaks in orcish, "Don't take another step. This is a friendly establishment, and I will not allow you to attack Judas." The half-orc stops and looks her up and down, like a man sizing up a pest. Akita now knows, he does speak Orchish and Dwarven, interesting.

Akita is tall for a Demonan female. Her darker toned red skin with a brighter metallic copper sheen makes her physique imposing to some, but it's her powers as a Warlock that people need to beware of. She has gotten in the habit of hiding her abilities to keep the criminal element from goading her into fights. Her horns wrap from her forehead around to just past her slightly pointed ears with a gradual sweeping upturn, with dark brunette hair falling past the middle of her back. Golden fire eyes that her father used to say heated his heart. She has wyvern-type wings, and a long Demonan that tail tapers to a thin point like a half arrow swishes in agitation. Judas, a rogue, dressed like a commoner to deliver his message, Akita is dressed like a rogue with flair. Two-

toned gold-colored thigh-high boots, a lighter gold tunic with a V-neck, and a two-tone gold light overcoat with a high collar and flared arms and belted. Her overall look makes her look regal.

The half-orc stops dead in his tracks with a confused expression. Replying in common, "The little idgit should watch where he's walking and stay away from me." He stands there staring down at Judas. People around him have gotten quiet and slowly back away as they observe the stand-off.

It is impossible to read the facial expressions of the big bully with his black mask and the dim afternoon light in the tavern to see if he will persist in intimidating Judas or walk away. Akita knows that the half-orc is mean and bad-tempered, not drunk. "Let me buy you a drink, and let's call it done. Is that a deal?" she replies in dwarven to show him she has understood every word he said, no matter what language.

The bully half-orc sizes her up again, believes she is not much of a threat to him, but he has decided he cannot be bothered with this any further. "Add a bowl of the house stew, and I will walk away." He is trying to decide if this is the Warlock, he has heard so much about in his travels. If rumors are true, she is a Noble, a charitable person who helps everyone who asks and should not be taken lightly or mistaken as

weak. He has heard that a female Demonan is a formidable foe in the magic arts and with a blade. He decides to keep his eyes and ears open.

Akita looks at the tavern maid, "Get this gentleman an ale and stew, please." The tavern maid nods and hurries off to the kitchen, dropping her apron she had been twisting in her hands nervously, as she expected a fight.

The bully corrects Akita, "I am Ghod and not a Gentleman, never insult me again." as he stalks off to find a seat away from the crowd.

The Hungry Boar Tavern and Inn is one of the high-end Inns. It is considered an upper-middle-class neighborhood and tends to have a more refined clientele. If a person wishes to be richer and rub elbows with the upper-class when they come "slumming it", spend their time in this tavern. There is a large fireplace with a performance stage off to the side. Hanging above the fireplace is one of the most enormous boars head that anyone has ever seen. A long bar can sit 20 customers at the back. A stairway that leads up to the rooms for rent. Above the bar hangs two more boars' heads with utilitarian banners showing the coat of arms for Prayla, Stonia, and Oscain, turning to either side.

The tavern owner, Elgin, has a flat on the third floor for him and his wife, Lucille. The guest rooms are reasonably priced, and the beds are decent even if they aren't the best and the linens are always clean. The tables are clean, the ale is good, and the food is delicious due to Elgins' wife's' cooking. In the evenings, they even move tables away to allow for dancing.

Akita sits back down at her table, waiting for Judas to finish talking to one of the halfling barmaids; he is well acquainted and thinking about the encounter, amazed at the audacity of the bully to call himself Ghod and be so arrogant. She's going to have to check up on this guy, with his dark clothes and covered face. Also, noting that no one else in the room even bothered to step in, but then again, her reputation of being a formidable Warlock, a high-level mage in the area, might have kept them back. Those that are nosey know she is staying in town to train with Void Roasten, one of the best Warlocks in the land. Void is a Dragonkin Warlock who keeps retiring, saying he's done, but the right words and reasons can pull him back for a reasonable amount of gold. When someone successfully gets his time, it is always for a good amount of gold, which he says restocks his coffers, where he has overspent on some luxury.

She sees the first barmaid deliver the ale and stew to this "Ghod" person, who seems to grunt at her, and Akita waves her over to the table. She knows Lily is a great informant who keeps her mouth shut, with her eyes and ears open for a few coppers or maybe a gold piece depending on the information. "Lily, thank you for taking care of big and grumpy over there." as she hands Lily the coppers for the food and drink.

"Not a problem, my lady. Anything to keep him as happy as he can be. He's a crafter who floats from town-to-town custom-making items a person like yourself can't just find at the local armory or blacksmith. Rumor has it he is also a mercenary for hire if the price is right, although that is not widely known. Would you like me to see if I can find out more, although he never talks to anyone, so eavesdropping is a difficult thing at best." states Lily, much to Akita's surprise.

"Umm, yes. Find me this evening and let me know what you find out, and yes, there will be some coppers in it for you." Lily smiles and strolls away to her next customer.

Akita turns back to Judas, who now has ale and stew. He silently hands her a letter, but it does not have the family seal. She looks back at Judas, who waves his hand for her to open it but doesn't seem to be able to speak to her yet. It is not like him; he is



usually one of the most talkative people she knows. He tends to talk anyones ear off who will listen, whether it's about dragons, troll patrols, fishing in a particular stream or river, or gossip he hears on his travels for her uncle.

As she opens the letter, she quickly looks for the signature first. It is signed by Shamash, her Uncles Cleric, which sends a chill down her spine. She quickly starts reading the letter.

*Dearest Akita,*

*Your presence is desperately needed at home. You may want to bring some muscle with you as fast as possible. With a heavy heart, I am informing you of your uncles passing, the High Duke of Blackwing Keep, Edmond Blackwing.*

*As you know, I have been his Cleric for many years and considered him a true friend. By the time you get this letter, it will have been six days since we found him in his eternal sleep. Because of timing and decency, please know that he has been prepared and buried next to his wife, your aunt, and we can have a prayer ceremony if you so choose once you return. You are now High Duchess of Prayla.*

*The urgency stems from his passing. As you are his and the Blackwing families only heir to the Keep and all its lands, as well as the last member of the ruling family, you need to show our people that the country is stable and in good hands.*

*I look forward to your return to the Prayla - Blackwing Keep. I have taken over management of the affairs until your return to maintain appearances that Edmonds matters were in order and prepared for this day, even though, as we both know, they are a bit lacking.*

*Sincerely and with great Sorrow,*

*Your Cleric,  
Shamash*

Akita bows her head and folds the letter. Even holding in tears, she is visibly shaken to her core. She is now alone in the world, the last survivor of her family, but she must keep control for the moment. Then, when she is away from town, she can grieve. She sits there for a time, just looking down, before wiping a few tears and gaining her composure.

Looking at Judas, she now understands the look on his face and the sadness in his eyes. She holds the letter out, but he shakes his head. "Shamash and I discussed what to put in the letter. I do not want to dwell on it now." Judas goes back to eating his stew and takes a swig of ale. "We do need to head back as soon as we can. Do you have, shall we say, friends of power/muscle/magic to join us at the Keep for a while? Shamash is worried about the home guard/military, and I am worried that evil beast, the Dragon, will somehow find out what has happened and attack the towns and keep."

She looks over her shoulder at the people who occupy the tavern. No one stands out except the half-orc, and she really must know more about him before approaching him. Several others come to mind, but getting word to them in time to get back to the Keep or on the way back home could prove a challenge. Grace O'Malley is a day's ride if she is in residence, but does she want to bargain with the local rogue of

the coast, Queen of Pirates. As for Rogue, last Akita knew, he was in Astya in Dark Forest, which is about three weeks' travel away from Salthall.

Rogue and Grace are two of the continent's toughest, sneakiest, and deadliest scoundrel rogues. She keeps thinking of all her friends or loyal acquaintances who could or would meet her at Blackwing Keep; two more names pop into her head. Ishvet Bluescale is a Greatsword Warrior who earned her friendship and respect in a chance encounter against some mountain trolls. Jessa Redmane is a Fighter with a chip on her shoulder but still an excellent person to have at your back, as she is a bit ruthless.

Why do these people have to be so far away? Ishvet was last in Emberfrost and Jessa in Neg Grove. Emberfrost is at least a two-week ride north of Blackwing Keep and Astya at least a month's ride from the Keep. She knows that even if the distances are great, most have ways of travel that will cut the time to days once they get a message. At least Greenbean is right here in town if she isn't out of town for one reason or another, a mighty half-orc Greatsword Warrior who is quiet, calm, cool, and calculating, therefore deadlier than most.

"Judas, go get a bath and some rest. Then, meet me here for dinner. In the meantime, I will find

Greenbean and see about getting messages out to some other allies. After that, I might need you to go find Grace." Akita grimaces.

Judas nods, "Shamash suggests against getting Grace involved. Depending on the mission, she always wants more than she deserves or more than her fair share. He also does not appreciate the way individuals end up indentured to her when she does you a favor." With that said, Akita nods and heads for the door.

It's late afternoon, and the streets are full of people going about their business. The buildings in this section of town are many shades of adobe, and each has a colorful cloth awning of all different colors. There is a store in the city specializing in awnings for any building and tents for any occasion. It is a nice added touch to spruce up the town and add color. The poorer sections of town tend to have wood structures with wood awnings, but even they paint the buildings and colorful awnings to keep the city in its entirety looking nice. Of course, it helps to be a city of art and teaching; hence, Akita is studying with Void Roasten in the Warlock Arts. So, she heads to Greenbeans home and personal training center for the occasional Greatsword Warrior.

As Akita walks through town, past the shops and street vendors, she remembers the first time she met

Greenbean. First, she thought her name was so unusual, named after a vegetable, but of course, it wasn't what it seemed with her friend. Greenbean was a mountain dwarf who got into a battle with a Wizard, who changed her to Half-Orc with his last act of defiance. In her travels, she found some strange green beans that kept her so energized in her experimentation that it made the Stonebritches Dwarf Clan crazy, so they nicknamed her after the young unroasted virgin coffee bean.

As she started to run out of the beans, she struck out to find more, which led to meeting a Cleric named Fab Ulous and their Wizard encounter that changed her from dwarf to half-orc. Second, she is one of the most graceful Sword Smith to swing a great sword. When Greenbean is in a fight, you worry that she couldn't do enough damage, but she can slash anyone or any monster in half when that sword hits. That is also a testament to how well she cares for her blade and its sharpness.

The first time they met, their paths happened to meet at the foot of the Voskaola Mountains. Akita was camping out in an old cave for the night when she heard the angry yell from what she knew was a mountain troll, followed by a somewhat feminine yell full of rage. Cautiously, sneaking out to see what was happening, Akita witnessed Greenbean single-

handedly take out two full-grown mountain trolls. One lost both of its arms with two spins. While that one was in shock, staring at its arms or lack thereof, and raging, she turned and brought her sword down through the others skull-splitting it like a banana for some desert, and then immediately turned around beheading the first one. After which, Akita made her presence known, and the two struck up a conversation and shared a fire for the night.

Greenbean owns the Magic Bean Inn three blocks to the north and two blocks west of the Hungry Boar Tavern and Inn. She has living quarters on the third floor like most innkeepers. Because of the "Magic Beans," the place is always hopping with dancing, music, loud conversations; it's too much for Akita to handle daily. As Akita walks in, she sees the standard clientele, people with the shakes, fidgety, or constantly moving. People talking to themselves or over others, they are "in a conversation with."

A couple, people are in corners of the room slumped against walls, crashed out, drooling all over themselves, snoring. Akita knows just one drink of the special magic bean drink, and those slumbering will wake up and be just as outrageous as the rest. Looking around, she finds the barkeep, who is also wiggling out from the magic bean concoction. Akita walks up and asks for Greenbean.

"What happened? Is something wrong? Was the service bad? Why do you need to talk to Greenbean? OH! Akita! I am sorry, she is out back practicing." the barkeep spits out in one significant breathless sentence. Then, shaking her head, she walks past the barkeep out through the kitchen, going by cook and two helpers, all having too much to drink. We need to put a warning sign over the door about "Magic Bean" drinks; it's worse than someone drunk on ale.

"Hey, Greenbean, you might want to cut your help back on the beverages." Akita chuckles. "Your Greenbean Bartender is a bit paranoid in there."

"Well, heck, if I did that, I would have to pay them more. Right now, they come to work for the drinks, for the most part (giggles). How are you, my friend? I suppose you are staying at that other Inn, (giggles)." Greenbean winks as she stops her practice rotations with her great sword.

"I could be better. I just received the disturbing and sad news. My Uncle Edmond Blackwing has passed away." her voice starting to shake before she got control again. "The last blood family I had in this world. Shamash, the Blackwing Keep cleric, has sent word that I need to return immediately and bring some muscle to show the people strength. I believe that is because I have been away so long, but one cannot be sure, and Shamash is not an alarmist. So, I have come



to seek your support and ask you to travel with me to Blackwing Keep. Possibly stay a bit until I can establish that the rule of law has not changed. I am sending word to Rogue, Jessa, Darkwing, Ishvet, and depending on the situation, Grace."

Studying Akita, Greenbean sees her need for a friend with a calm, logical demeanor, especially given the list of acquaintances she just mentioned. But, unfortunately, it's a deadly bunch of friends, and not even Akita knows what she will need. "Don't you have some, umm, less, shall we say combative friends? Not that I mind, but wow, no one on your list is a diplomat, except maybe me, when I want to be."

"Greeny, when you meet people in dangerous situations like the way you and I met, they tend to be deadly friends. Shamash has advised against Grace unless it is necessary. Rogue will have to have the rules and mission set for him, so he doesn't go off and do something insane, thinking he's helping, although most of the time, his impulsiveness does work out. There is just more to clean up after the fact. With that said, that is why I came to find you first. I hope you can get a hold of Fab Ulous and have him meet us there or go with us. Also, do you know anything about a half-orc in town named Ghod? He's an arrogant bully from what I saw of him earlier."

Greenbean smiles slyly, "Well, there is that, the way we tend to meet people is a bit disturbing to the normal person. As for Ghod, he has a reputation for being a mean bastard, but he's a master crafter extraordinaire. I have also heard he is a mercenary for hire that has not missed a target, but that's the word on the underground. He was orphaned and raised by dwarves."

"So, my friend, would you suggest talking to Ghod about changing cities for a while? He can sell his wares there, and then we can utilize him if needed, although I have no idea why Shamash says it's so urgent." Akita spins, hearing someone at the door behind her.

Judas, who was supposed to be resting, suddenly appeared in the doorway. "Akita, I thought you would like to know some valuable information, so I came to find you. I was sitting in the Hungry Boar Tavern and Inn when I overheard that Grace requires help. A giant Leviathan lurks outside the Port, attacking anyone in the bay, keeping her from setting sail. She is one mad Pirate. So, I thought this might work to our advantage."

Akita and Greenbean looked at each other and smiled, "Leviathan Deal!"

"So, let's meet at the Hungry Boar Tavern and Inn to leave at dawn. In the meantime, I will go to The Messenger to have all the special messages sent we need." Then, turning to look at Judas, "Would you please go get some rest? And that's not a request; it's a command." Akita giggles as she heads back to the door of the Inn.

Greenbean follows Akita and Judas, "I will be there and see if I can get a message to Fabby. As for Ghod, yeah, I would talk to him. Some of our crew might need special weapons for the Leviathan or Dragons or both."

Akita hadn't noticed that the sun had dropped so far on the horizon. It's probably two hours before dark, so she starts at a brisk walk back towards the Hungry Boar Tavern and Inn but heading a block past and over one. The Mystical Messenger Dispatch Office is a small building with an awning that looks like clouds floating in the middle of the block.

Walking in the Mystical Messenger office is an experience in itself. The room has many iridescent light bobbles shaped like teardrops hanging all over the room at different heights. There is a table in the corner with regular messengers sitting at it, playing card games. Behind the counter is a fountain of magically flowing water that changes colors, supporting a Seeking Shard.

You can hear birds ruffling feathers and other animals roaming around in the back. The proprietors of the Mystical Messenger office are a Halfling Cleric named Dutch and his partner; a sylph named Snappy. They have a variety of ways to get messages across the land. Several services require magic, and otherwise, the guys playing cards do local runs.

"Snappy, Snappy... our favorite Warlock just walked in. She must have an important message to send." Dutch shouts to the back room with a massive smile on his face. "Nice to see you, Akita, but it isn't time for your monthly message home, so to what do we owe this great honor?"

"Well, I would like to say it was a social call or that I was sending a message to my uncle, but I found out today that my uncle passed. So, I must return to the Blackwing Keep and show that I am enforcing the rule of law. Since I need some assistance, I have quite a few messages I need to be sent all over the land." Grabbing a few pieces of paper, Akita starts making a list of people and places. "I will leave it to you to decide how to send the message, but Darkwing Keep will require the Seeking Shard.

The message is simple:

***Akita Blackwing urgently requests your presence and assistance at Blackwing Keep as fast as you can travel.***

***Regards,***

***High Duchess of Prayla, Akita Blackwing.***

Send to Rogue of Darkforest, Ishvet Bluescale Greatsword Warrior currently in Emberfrost, Jessa Redmane Fighter of Neg Grove, Skrymir Darkwing Wizard of Darkwing Keep. And then,”

***Shamash,***

***I am on my way with assistance from all over the land. I trust you to do what is needed.***

***Signed Akita.***

Dutch stared at Akita in shock, finding it hard to find words to say. Snappy glided out from behind the counter to hug Akita and convey sympathy without a word in her unique way. A calming touch of magic slowly covered Akita in peacefulness. "Dutch, these messages are on the house. It is the least we can do for our friend, lovely Akita, in her time of need. She has been good to us when times are slow."

With his hands on his hips and a stubborn but smiling face, "Oh, yes, yes, and don't you even argue with us as you usually do, Lady Akita."

Shaking her head, "You realize I am the High Duchess of Blackwing now and should pay my way; however, I will graciously accept your gift. I thank you, my friends. With that said, in this last message, I should pay for and pay hazard duty. I need a specific message taken to Grace O'Malley. As we all know, that has to be hand-delivered with care."

Noticing out of the corner of her eye, the messengers pointed at each other, knowing one would be picked like it or not. "For this last message, I will throw in a gold coin to the messenger that delivers it." Akita chuckles as they, now, all stumble and fight to get to the counter first. Dutch eyes the messengers, marveling at what people will do to make a little more coin. Because a trip to the Aquara Keep is easy, delivering the message can be troublesome. "Yes, agreed, and we will seal the message with our wax seal and put it in a special case, so she can send a return message that we will immediately send to the Blackwing Keep."

"Thank you, Dutch and Snappy. Your efforts are greatly appreciated. I think you will have to open an office in Prayla because I will miss your services."

The note to Grace O'Malley:

*Miss O'Malley,*

*I have heard you must stay in Port due to a Leviathan that has taken up residence in your harbor. I have a proposition for you. My formidable force will help you eliminate the Leviathan if you agree to come to Blackwing Keep for an indeterminate amount of time and assist with a unique project. Once the project is complete, we will amass at your harbor to take out the beast. We will call it an even trade. Please send a return message with my messenger, and head to Blackwing Keep if you agree to the proposal.*

*Regards,*

*High Duchess of Blackwing Keep,  
Akita Blackwing.*

Akita hands all the messages to Dutch and Snappy, confident that they will be delivered and that responses will be forwarded to her. She gives the selected messenger two gold coins instead of one slyly with a wink.

Snappy informs Akita that she will be using the Seeking Shard to deliver Skrymir Darkwing and Shamash messages. Messenger Thunderhawk's to

Ishvet Bluescale, Jessa Redmane, and Rogue messages. The icy mountain and swamplands require a Seeking Shard message because the land can be too dangerous for the average messenger to travel; it can be faster.

The only drawback is that someone must monitor their Seeking Shard when the message is sent. The Thunderhawk's are trained fighters, fly higher, faster, and longer than other domesticated birds; therefore, delivery success is more guaranteed versus a smaller bird that could be killed on the way to the delivery, no matter how short or long the trip. Thunderhawk's usually are tamed and trained by Storm Giants for messages and fighting. Snappy's four were rescued and raised by her for the same purpose. Each has a unique name, Sunmantle, Deathclaw, Lonewing, and Icetalon.

Saying her goodbyes, Akita heads back to the Hungry Boar Tavern and Inn to speak to Lily about the Half-Orc, Ghod, and see if she should talk to him.

The sun has almost set when she walks into the Inn. Judas is at a table by the bar, and the Half-Orc is currently nowhere around. Akita joins Judas at his table. He looks rested and in better spirits; she decides to try not to mention her uncle specifically so that both can maintain their composure. "I have just been to Dutch and Snappy at the Mystical Messenger



office. They are currently sending messages to my VIF's (Very Important Fighter). The message asks them to meet us at Blackwing Keep as soon as possible. Some will take a few weeks, and others will be there shortly after we get there. Also, Greenbean is meeting us in the morning and sending word to Fab Ulous to come to the Blackwing Keep. What news do you have, Judas?"

Judas starts to answer, but as always, the Waitress, Lily, walks up to get their order. "My Lady, may I get you some stew or a steak dinner before you set off on your travels? Oh, and I have news of the Half-Orc, Ghod."

"Ya know, a good steak dinner sounds good and one for Judas too. Two ales will do us just fine too. Then, when you bring the dinners, you can tell us about "Ghod." Akita looks back to Judas, awaiting his answer.

Looking around the room, making sure no one was too close to hear, "Well, the General of Blackwing's forces is fighting with his Lieutenant over what should be done now, both believing you are too young and inexperienced to take charge. So, in his loud, blustery way, Shamash defended you and sent me to get you as fast as I could. Also, the Leviathan that is bothering Grace O'Malley has a mate, friend, or family member hanging out just off the coast of

Prayla. It keeps the fishermen of Stagbreak ashore, and we see it at night from the Keep windows that look out over the Blackwing Bay.

The fishermen can't fish from shore for fear of being attacked there. We hope it does not awaken Annut, but then again, maybe Annut would kill it and feed, therefore leaving the land alone for a while. With the Officers fighting and the death of your uncle, may the gods bless him; Shamash and I knew we needed you with strong allies to show strength and your ability to command." Judas wipes away a tear. "Shamash also sent messages to his sister cleric Ixenvorlux and his twin friends, Vicar Blackbrew, another cleric, and his brother Mandrake a formidable Wizard. He stated that he thinks Mandrake, with some help, could freeze the waters around the Leviathan if you can believe that one."

Akita notices Lily on her way back to the table with the ales and meals. She signaled Judas to wait as Lily set down their plates and ale, which was most definitely unnecessary but a habit. "So, My Lady, there wasn't much more to learn about big and burly, but word has it he is a man or Half-Orc, who trades fairly, keeps his word, and completes everything he starts, no matter what it takes. He does drive a hard bargain and is an opportunist. I am sure he would benefit those in need of his goods or his Greatsword

Warrior abilities. Oh, but the juiciest part, sorry My Lady, but you need to know, is he has been admiring, shall we say, your friend Greenbean and her skills as a Greatsword Warrior. I believe the fact she is a half-orc, too, doesn't hurt anything either." Lily giggles and then goes serious again.

Pulling a gold coin from her purse that is tied at her waist, Akita knows the fact that "Ghod" has been admiring Greenbean might be all it takes to make a deal with him and get him to go to Prayla for a month or so. "That is interesting and excellent information, Lily, and I appreciate your help. Have you seen grumpy today? Or do you know if he will be back for dinner this evening? Unfortunately, I don't have time to hunt him down." Akita hands Lily the money for the meals and the gold coin for herself.

Lily bows and smiles, looking at the door that just swung open. "Here comes grumpy now. I will get his order, and shall I tell him you want to speak to him?"

Akita turns to look at the door, noticing that grumpy looks no different this evening than earlier when he was angry at Judas. This will be an interesting conversation. "Let us eat in peace, and I will pay for his meal but tell him after our dinner is complete. I will be ready to talk to him by then." Turning to cut her steak, she notices Judas is well into his. He must have been starving. Lily bows her head

a little and makes her way to her other customers. "Well, that is interesting, a bully that is a man of his word and has honor, who is a mercenary and craftsmen. Truly an odd individual." She states almost to herself, just out loud.

"Greenbean is going to find this bit of information comical; however, what I find hilarious is Ghod is a Half-Orc raised by dwarves, and Greenbean is a dwarf turned into a Half-Orc. Not in a million years would I have thought to find that interesting combination in the same land, let alone the same town."

When dinner finished, Lily brought over three fresh ales, and Akita nodded for her to ask Ghod to join them at their table. Akita positioned herself, so she could see his reaction without being obvious. Ghod seems to stare down Lily, who just continued to look at him innocently. He then looks directly at Akita and Judas, throws up his hands, and slowly stands up. She confirms he is headed to the table and gestures to the empty seat with the extra ale. Ghod can't help himself but stare down Judas, who just stares back. It would be comical if it weren't so childish.

"Ghod, I have a proposal for you. I have heard you are an excellent craftsman, who the town of Stagbreak and Prayla will have some use for shortly." Ghod grunts, showing extraordinarily little interest as

Akita continues. "With that said, little voices around town have also told me that you can be hired for other, shall we say, jobs and projects. I may need those services too. So, what would it take to convince you to pick up shop and head to Blackwing Keep? As I said, you could make money with your crafts and possibly from the Blackwing Keep. Greenbean, Judas, and I are leaving in the morning. You could travel with us."

Akita saw a slight change in emotion or attitude or something for a split-second, then back to his usual stoic eyes behind the mask. Ghod scratches his chin, looking from Akita to Judas. Grumbling, "What are you offering?"

"OK, we will give you a room at the Keep, which is about a three-hour ride from Prayla and a three-day ride from Stagbreak. I will send word ahead that a special crafter will be visiting but need to come to the Keep because you will have the use of the Keeps blacksmith workshops. The prices of goods are on you, remember if I find you cheating my people, we will have words. We are not sure about all the other issues I am going home to sort out, but one is a Leviathan near Prayla Harbor and another near Aquara Keep, home to Grace O'Malley. Eventually, we will have to kill both, but the one in Prayla first.

Based on the hazards, I will pay a fair wage as the project presents itself. In the meantime, a show of strength and ability. Is that worth your time? Room, Board, Workshops to craft your wares, and extras as they come?" she states in a tone of voice that says there is little to no wiggle room.

He sits staring at her for several minutes, takes a drink of his ale, and slams down his mug down, "So be it. More ale."

Judas waves Lily over, ordering three more ale. "Well, welcome to the family. Be ready to leave at dawn."

"That has yet to be determined, and I will leave when I leave. I have orders to complete here first. I know my way." big grumpy growls.

"As I stated, we are meeting here at dawn. Judas will go ahead of us to announce our arrival and let key people in town know that a specialized artisan will be at the Keep. Now, if you will excuse me, it has been a busy day and emotional day." Akita gets up, nods to the two men, and heads for the staircase.

She cannot wait to finally collapse in her bed, in her private little sanctuary. Climbing the stairs, she mentally checks all messages she sent. One more, she might contact herself once she knows more about the situation at home: King Wendu, Fighter, and self-

proclaimed King of Craonia. No one dares to stand up to him but asking him is not without perils. He must travel completely around the mountains of Voskaola to reach Prayla, just because going over the mountains would take much longer due to the ice, sheer cliffs, and deep ice chasms. Besides, he could not even leave without someone trying to take over the country. So, it will be a few more years before he fully cemented his position in his country.

Slipping into her room, locking the door behind her, she sits down for a long-awaited good cry. If only she had gone back to visit a month ago. She probably would have still been there when Uncle Edmond needed her most. Now she has no one. The Dragon killed her mother, father, sister, and three cousins, Annut - The Fast, when she was only 11 years old. Her aunt and uncle, who lost all their children in that brutal attack, raised her as their own.

The only reason it didn't kill her as well is that she wandered off through the bushes to the creek. She had thought she would hear them call her back to the wagons after their break to rest the horses, but instead, she scrambled under a bush, covering her ears with her hands, and silently cried while her family screamed in agony. The horses, wagons, and her family were torched in one swoop, just so the Dragon could have a snack of a horse.

She changed into her nightdress, packed all but her traveling clothes, then curled up in a ball on the bed and cried herself to sleep.

Dawn came fast. Akita must have been exhausted because she felt like she had just laid down. Changing and grabbing her backpack, she headed downstairs to meet up with Judas and Greenbean, but curious to see if Ghod would be there too.

Lucille brings out a bowl of creamed wheat with honey and a small mug of orange juice for Akita and Judas. "Lucille dear, Greenbean should be here anytime, thanks." Letting the inn keeper's wife know they will need another bowl and orange juice.