

A Request of Halcourn Hall

Halcourn Hall was carved into a mountain face over thirteen generations ago. At the time, it was not just a staple, but the pinnacle of dwarven architecture. In the end, Stone Masters mixed three different kinds of stone into the grand hall's façade: the naturally occurring granite in the mountain, iron to make the bones of the building, and polished marble for the decorations and other adornments. Four, great marble pillars twisted up from the hall's entrance, as if the building was the only thing holding up the mountain itself. Beyond those pillars, Halcourn Hall stretched on for miles in all directions, levels upon levels stretching down into the heart of the mountain where dwarves toiled away in the mines in search of gold, jewels, and more elusive minerals. In the upper levels, the dwarves conducted business in small offices that looked out over the mines, the sound of steel against stone reduced to a soft tinkling by the time it reached the ears of Armi Halcourn.

"It's a matter of feasibility," Armi said, stroking Nert, the fat lizard nestled in the crook of his arm. "A request for the much Dragon Ore is not possible!"

Armi had typical dwarven features: a square head with a long, braided black beard and black hair that dropped down past his shoulders. His body was as square as the rest of him, with broad shoulders that made it look like he had very little neck. While only four feet tall, Armi weighed as much as any human twice his size and had the strength of six. When his beard had grown in, Armi went to work in the mines as his father had. Armi grew to understand every aspect of the mining process before he dared to make a deal. The elf opposite him was not as acquainted with the way mining worked.

"Money is no object," the elf said. He was thinner than any creature Armi had seen before, but he still sat somewhat stooped in the dwarven-made chair. His frame was elegant and lithe with hands that had rarely seen dirt--let alone a hard day's work. His face was smooth as polished marble and his eyes were the color of emeralds. "We require the Dragon Ore as soon as possible."

"But four tons?" Armi scoffed, jostling Nert as he shook his head. "Even if you paid me enough to fill this whole hall with gold, finding a deposit that big isn't possible. If we had a year, we might be able to scrounge together a pound for a lucky buyer, but four tons?"

"I was told Halcourn Hall contained all the great riches of the world..."

"Riches like the world had never seen," Armi corrected, "but I'm no alchemist. I can't pull Dragon Ore out of thin air."

"This mine has been dug out for years," the elf said. "Surely, there are parts of the mountain yet unexplored that could yield results."

"Too risky," Armi shook his head. "Dig too far down and we'll have another Grenord Hall on our hands. Four thousand dwarves died that day and an entire hall was filled with molten rock. Nothing much there these days besides half-boiled pools of dwarven slag."

"They weren't Halcourn Hall."

"If you're trying to appeal to my vanity, it won't work. A good approach, but I care more about keeping my mine than the reputation. And what do you need all this Dragon Ore for anyways?"

"Construction."

"Of what?" Armi asked. "I can crap out four tons of iron before breakfast tomorrow if you're looking to build something, but making a house out of Dragon Ore is an exercise in excess."

"We're not building a house, Master Halcourn," the elf said, a little uncomfortable. Armi didn't like it. He'd seen uneasy humans every day, but elves weren't known for breaking their carefully maintained masks.

"Whatever you're building," Armi said, "it's not a vanity project... you're building it because you're scared."

"Of failure, yes," the elf said. "If I can be frank with you, Master Halcourn? We are building a house of sorts, but not for any living being. My masters, you see, have a much more dangerous inhabitant in mind. They want to trap a Vragen."

Armi felt his blood go cold and even Nert tensed a little, the tiny claws gripping the dwarf's forearm.

"For what...mad purpose?" Armi demanded, his voice wavering a little. "I know some of you elves try to test your immortality, but a Dread Beast? Are you trying to open the most lethal menagerie imaginable?"

"A Vragen is deadly, there's no question about that," the elf agreed, "but our end goal of containment has a purpose. Vragen produces naturally what men and kingdoms have died trying to get a sample of. Vragen's blood has potent alchemical properties used in antidotes, poisons, and elixirs of every kind. Three drops of Vragen's blood are worth your entire mountain tenfold. And my superiors wish to get it straight from the source."

"Oh, I'm sure it'll be agreeable to that!" Armi said. "You're better off trying to trap a god!"

"That would require less Dragon Ore," the elf said. "We've done our arithmetic on the matter...careful considerations have been made and every precaution will be taken. A cage of Dragon Ore--purified to such a degree--would be enough to hold the creature."

"And when you run out of blood?" Armi asked.

"There are...other things that Vragen produce. Namely, other Vragen."

"You're out of your mind," Armi said, "and our business is through."

"Whatever happened to the industriousness of dwarves? Your passion for a challenge?"

"You mean our greed?" Armi said. "Dwarves are as greedy as elves are wise, especially when it comes to something as foolish as this! Now, if you'd be kind enough to show yourself out? I have more business to tend to."

"Don't be a fool," the elf said, trying to maintain an air of friendliness, "think of what this would do for Halcourn Hall. Beyond the payment, the reputation your contribution would give you is...unfathomable."

"And I wouldn't trade for every drop of dwarf blood in my domain," Armi shook his head. "Get out..."

The elf nodded slowly, stood, and exited. As soon as he left, Armi felt the icy grip on his heart relax. The fool was gone and already fading from his memory. The temptation had been there for a moment but was quickly snuffed out by Armi's self-preservation. He stood and walked over to the window, cradling the lizard in his arms. His heart was beating slower now as the sounds of hard-working dwarves laboring below sang out a soothing melody. It was late in the day, though Armi could hardly remember the morning. In fact, it felt like he'd skipped lunch. That didn't feel right. He thought long and hard about the events of the morning. He'd gone down to the mines to talk with the foreman, reviewed the current bookkeeping over a mug of hot tea, and then come up to talk with...someone.

A knock on the door made him jump, startling him out of his musings. An elf came in, smooth-faced with hard emerald eyes. He looked familiar, but Armi was certain they had never met before.

"Good day, Master Halcourn," the elf said, bowing a little. "I have something of a challenge for your operation here if you're interested."

"Halcourn Hall never shies away from a challenge," Armi smiled. "Tell me what you need and we'll do whatever we can to help."

"Well, my masters and I find ourselves in need of a great deal of Dragon Ore..."