

Adam Oliner

21W.755

12/5/02

Final Story

### Death in the Kingdom of Lunaria

In the kingdom of Lunaria, the grand wizard Rothmiridor was all-powerful. At his command, the sun rose and set. From the grassy precipice of a cliff, he oversaw the battle being waged below. The goblin armies had appeared outside the towering walls surrounding Lunaria while the stars were still sparkling brilliantly in the night sky. Rothmiridor had been planning the battle for nearly a week, but only that morning did he notify the warriors of Lunaria that the invasion force had arrived under cover of darkness. They were slaves, he had warned, of the dark elven queen, Ha'Gaart. Even then, as Rothmiridor stood on the edge, overlooking the valley, he could see Massahni Ha'Gaart in her fortress, high atop the treacherous Mt. Ferehaat. She was gazing down through the twilight haze with her lifeless grey eyes.

Far below, in the midst of a fierce confrontation among species, the legendary barbarian Wolfraine pointed the Blade of Carpasius toward the goblin hordes. On his command, a hundred warriors thundered past Wolfraine as he sat atop his stallion. He let loose a rumbling war cry and his troops yelled in support. In the pale light of dawn, Wolfraine's eyes looked black and dead, but his jade sword shone with the same brilliance as ever. He looked back at another group of men assembled behind him, each armed with an assortment of rare weapons. There were barbarians, lesser wizards,

paladins, several elves, and a few sorceresses: all Lunarians, all enemies of the dark elf Ha'Gaart and the goblins that threatened their kingdom. Their faces were patient and calm. Wolfraine aimed the Blade of Carpasius at the sky once again, and the warriors unsheathed their blades, lifted their wands, and adjusted their helms. He gave his horse a kick and it took off at a run as he let the sword's tapered point trace an arc from the sky to the enemy. The warriors sprinted into formation behind their leader as the distance between them and growling goblins grew ever smaller.

The elven princess approached Rothmiridor silently from behind. She was covered, as always, in a cloak of fine blue velvet. A hood shrouded her face in shadow.

"Hello, Solenya," Rothmiridor said without turning.

Solenya moved to stand beside the wizard, her soft cloak moistened by the dew on the grass. "Good evening, my lord," she said. Her voice was fragile as she shivered softly in the cold. The cries of dying goblins drifted up from the valley.

Rothmiridor carried a massive, gnarled staff, topped with an ancient gem. It marked him as the ruler of the kingdom, a position of godlike power. He shifted the heavy staff to his other hand to have a better view of Solenya. She kept her face perpetually hidden from the people of Lunaria. But Rothmiridor knew that she must be quite beautiful. He sighed heavily and whispered, "I must go."

In the basement of his mother's house, at 471 Dulworth Street, Milton Skapinski took another sip from his 2-liter bottle of soda and leaned back in his chair. The light from Milton's computer monitor illuminated his unshaven face. The fluorescent orange crumbs of cheese puffs formed scattered constellations on his black t-shirt.

“Milton! Dinner!” his mother called from atop the staircase. Her voice was piercing, and Milton cringed at the sound of it. Ever since he had failed out of the local community college, his mother had been pestering him relentlessly to move out. The economy was bad, he had insisted, and he would move out as soon as he could find a job, or a girl.

Milton turned off his computer game and stood up, wiping the crumbs onto the floor. A sliver of pale stomach peeked out from the bottom of his shirt. He stretched and scratched his pudgy cheeks. The basement was dark, so Milton turned on the lights to let his eyes adjust before going upstairs. She would yell at him again, he knew.

Since he was a boy, Milton had possessed a talent for using computers. He would tinker with the family’s old desktop, opening it up and disassembling it down to its component parts. He was always able to put it back together, of course. He had also shown a proficiency for writing. His teachers often discovered him in the school’s computer lab, entrenched in spinning some fantastic tale. The prose flowed freely from his fingertips. It was an escape from the taunts of his peers, the cruel words that mocked his appearance and intelligence.

Before his death, Mr. Skapinski worked for an insurance company, doing a job he hated. Mr. Skapinski came home every night and told Mrs. Skapinski that he hated his job, that he wouldn’t wish it on his worst enemy, and that he planned to quit the next day. He grew fat and lethargic. Milton watched as his father sank ever further into depression. Entire evenings were spent in front of the television, with Mr. Skapinski pointing out possible professions for Milton. “But in the end,” he always qualified his suggestions,

“you need to do something you enjoy.” Mr. Skapinski suffered a massive coronary when he was only 47. His heart simply gave up.

For his 24<sup>th</sup> birthday, Milton’s mother bought him a brand-new computer. It was genuinely top-of-the-line, and Milton was impressed. “I knew it was something you’d enjoy,” she smiled at him. But every evening, when Milton emerged from his dark den in the basement, Mrs. Skapinski felt a small lump form in her throat. Milton looked more like his father each day.

Milton paused at the bottom of the stairs. His mother stood at the top, looking down on him, backlit by the yellow glow from the kitchen. Her eyes seemed grey. “Milton, hurry up,” she whined, “Your food is getting cold.”

“Coming mother,” he responded quietly. He hated that name: Milton. He had hated it since he was a child. He wanted his mother to call him by his other name, the name used by most of his friends. The name that commanded respect and awe. In a land very different from Dulworth Street, Milton was known as: Rothmiridor, grand wizard and supreme ruler of Lunaria.

High stone walls, punctuated by towers, enclosed Lunaria in their protective embrace. The kingdom within those walls was built on a slight incline, sloping upward from the forest beyond the walls at the bottom. The tiny houses rose in progression toward blacksmiths and armories, culminating at the base of the castle itself: Celestala Keep. Tucked in among quaint village shops was the Inn, whose windows cast yellow shafts onto the dusty cobblestone.

The Innkeeper balanced the pints of frothing lager on a thin wooden tray as he weaved his way among the noisy patrons of the Singing Cow Inn, Lunaria's social center. The foam crawled down the side of the thick glasses as the Innkeeper set the tray down at Rothmiridor's table. Solenya smiled gently from beneath the shadow of her hood. The Innkeeper slapped Wolfraine heartily on the back.

"Congratulations on yer victory yesterday!" The Innkeeper slid Wolfraine his drink. "A stunning show, by all accounts."

Wolfraine swept the black hair away from his eyes. It hung down to his shoulders, unkempt and thick. He laughed heartily at the compliment, raising the glass with one hand while resting the other on the hilt of his sword. He took a long swig. "News travels fast in this place, no?"

"Speed of light," the Innkeeper laughed while Rothmiridor smiled and shook his head in mock disapproval. Wolfraine was joking, of course. He had spent the better part of the evening standing on a sturdy wooden chair in the middle of the common room, backlit by the deep glow of the fireplace, recounting his triumph over the goblin hordes. But now his energy was spent and he was recuperating quietly with his two closest friends.

"Won't you join us?" Solenya gestured for the Innkeeper to take a seat.

"Thank you kindly for the invitation, m'lady. Ma shift's almost over. I shall join you in jus' a few minutes." The Innkeeper snatched up the empty tray and scurried off into the din of the crowd.

A paladin entered the Singing Cow, dressed almost entirely in worn, brown leather. He carried a cracked iron sword in one hand, and a few coins of gold in the other.

The crowd identified him at once as a beginner. He walked quickly over to the table where Solenya sat with her two male companions. Solenya turned away as he leaned into her line of sight and said, “Age/Sex/Location?”

Suddenly, Milton was back in his dark basement, inhaling the stagnant air. The transition had jarred him, and he felt nauseous. The newbie had torn him from his fantasy world. Milton cleared his throat and began typing furiously.

Rothmiridor gripped his staff tightly, turning his knuckles a white that matched his long beard. He grabbed the paladin by the collar and whispered angrily into his ear. “You know better than to speak like that in my kingdom. You signed an agreement before I granted you entrance to Lunaria. Do not aggravate me, or I will revoke your citizenship.” The paladin did not respond, but sat down at a table behind Wolfraine.

The Innkeeper finally appeared from within the bustling whirlwind of elves, sorceresses, and men. He sat triumphantly down at the empty seat next to Wolfraine. “These days just keep getting longer and longer,” he declared, winking at Rothmiridor.

“Business looks to be good, though,” Wolfraine’s voice was deep and grainy.

The Innkeeper shook his head, “Hardly. There’s been some counterfeit money flowing into Lunaria recently. People coming in with piles of gold and me with no choice but to accept it. Big problem, I know, but here’s the catch: everything is costing even more. Have you tried to buy some decent chain mail lately? I’d have to sell ma Inn!”

Rothmiridor frowned, “I am doing what I can, Innkeeper.”

“I don’t blame ye,” he smiled, “I jus’ wish there was somethin’ I could do.”

“The elves are at your service, if you should require it,” Solenya bowed her head slightly. As an elven princess, she had authority over a small army of elven archers. The

elves were wise and skilled in many arts. They delighted in the pleasures of life, and worried little about daily affairs. The elves, after all, were immortal. Solenya and her people rarely interfered with the affairs of men, desiring that men afford the elves the same courtesy. But in matters that concerned the welfare of Lunaria, the warriors at Solenya's command were among the fiercest in battle.

"'Tis little you can do either, I'm afraid," the Innkeeper bowed in return, "But thank ye. This job is tough, and only rewardin' at times. But ma guild needs the money."

The paladin stood from his chair, "Haha! This guy has a job he hates... in a computer game!"

Rothmiridor stood so quickly that his chair skidded backward on its hind legs, fleeing in anticipation of the wizard's wrath. Wolfraine and the Innkeeper glanced at each other only a moment before clearing the path between Rothmiridor and the lone paladin. Solenya took several cautious steps away from the impending tempest. The wizard spread his arms, letting the sleeves of his immaculate white robe hang down and give the illusion of immensity. The crowd noticed what was happening and retreated to a safe distance, leaving a crescent of space containing the wizard and the paladin.

"You were warned!" boomed Rothmiridor's suddenly deep voice. He swung the gemmed end of his staff toward the paladin and it erupted in a beam of blinding white light. The glow engulfed the paladin and dissolved him into nothingness. Rothmiridor ceased his attack. The light subsided and the windows of the Inn rattled with lingering energy.

The Innkeeper was the first to break the tension, joking to Wolfraine, “I should charge these folks for a show as well, eh?” Wolfraine was silent. “Hey, Wolfraine, ya there?”

“I don’t think he’s left Lunaria since before yesterday’s battle,” Rothmiridor noted, “He may have fallen asleep.” This happened sometimes, Milton knew. People’s phones rang, their computers crashed, their connections ‘went dead.’ Once Wolfraine was idle for a few minutes, Milton would disconnect him. Such was his job as Lunaria’s game master.

The headline caught his attention as he scanned the news the following morning: “Korean Man Dies After 86 Hours of Gaming”

Milton clicked the article link and began reading. “The body of Suh-Jun Park was found this morning, slumped over a keyboard in a cyber-café in downtown In-Chon, Korea. Employees told police that he had been playing for nearly 86 hours, eating and drinking nothing but coffee and donuts. Police indicate that Suh-Jun had no next of kin. ‘He spent a lot of time in here,’ one employee said, ‘I don’t get the impression that anyone is going to miss him.’” Milton was struck by the familiarity of the name, but shrugged it off.

Milton recalled, suddenly, the first time he spent an entire day in Lunaria. Wolfraine had sent him, Milton, an email. It was a gross violation of Lunarian regulations, but Wolfraine was a new player and seemed genuinely interested in being a part of their community. Wolfraine had confessed to being unfamiliar with the ways of the land, and lacking the resources to participate the way he wanted to. His character had

neither the strength nor the weaponry to be a major player. What Wolfraine wanted was a chance to prove himself as a warrior. Milton was charmed by the man's enthusiasm, and agreed to help. He immersed himself in the memory:

After days of planning, Milton created a fearsome dragon, named him Gornyzath, and allowed him to briefly terrorize the kingdom. The enormous red lizard swooped down and bathed Lunaria in fire. Milton then sent Gor to a cave hidden deep in the forest. Rothmiridor called a town meeting. "Our kingdom is in grave danger," he announced solemnly to the assembly. "Gor will not stop until he has destroyed us all. But, I say again, you must never underestimate a dragon. Gor is not a mindless engine of destruction, but a clever strategist and powerful magician."

The search for the cave lasted 29 hours. They found it in a small burnt-out clearing. Every animal that inhabited the woods for miles around had fled in terror. When the thick-scaled creature was finally cornered in his lair, one hero after another attempted to confront him and fell. Swords shattered on Gor's skin, arrows incinerated, and armor crumpled in the grip of his massive claws. Sorceresses and wizards summoned elementals and launched spell after spell, all without effect.

"Foolish maggots!" boomed Gornyzath, brimstone spraying from his toothy maw. "You hope to defeat me in combat? Haha! I will grind you to dust!"

Rothmiridor looked on, as some of the kingdom's most revered warriors were cooked or shredded by the hulking dragon. All this time, however, Wolfraine was studying in Lunaria's library. He read every word of dragon lore in every tome he could find. He taught himself about their magic, their treasures, and their arrogance. He studied

dragons until he breathed them like fire. When all hope seemed lost, Wolfraine stepped forward amidst the smoke and blood and proposed an idea.

“The elves, of course, are at your service,” Solenya told Wolfraine, “but, with all due respect, what can you possibly hope to do against a dragon?” She gestured to his rusted helm, bent mace, and moth-eaten cloth armor.

Wolfraine took a deep breath. “A long time ago, Gor slew a great king named Carpasius. He was the ruler of an ancient kingdom that once stood where Lunaria is now. He came to kill the dragon and save his people. Gor reduced the king, and the ancient kingdom, to ashes. Carpasius carried a legendary jade sword that I believe is still hidden with the dragon’s treasure stash. I intend to recover that sword, and use it to pierce the soft scales that cover Gor’s heart.”

“Sir, I suspect you have not thought this through,” Solenya held back a laugh. “How do you intend to get into his stash of treasures? Gor guards that with his life.”

“He will take me there himself.”

“Unlikely. But, given that, he would still never allow you to get close enough to his chest for you to use the sword,” Solenya turned to several elves, who stood nearby, for confirmation of this. They nodded.

“No, he would not. But he might let you get that close. Or, at least, someone who he takes to be you.”

Solenya cut short a gasp as she began to realize what Wolfraine intended to do. The elves, among their many abilities as magical creatures, can cast illusions. So, at Wolfraine’s suggestion, Solenya made the barbarian look exactly like the elven princess. Solenya admired her handiwork, accurate down to the stitching on her cloak.

“I would certainly be convinced,” Solenya admitted, “but dragons are clever and can see through cheap magic, including mine.”

“I have considered that, my lady. Do not fear for me. I am not afraid to die.”

And so, disguised as a beautiful princess, Wolfraine entered Gor’s lair and announced his presence.

“Mighty Gor!” he cried. His voice came out dulcet and soft. “At last I have found you. Word of your greatness has reached me even in my distant homeland. Your wisdom and strength are said to rival that of the gods.”

Gornyzath rose from where he lay, following the gentle voice to where Wolfraine stood in the shadows. Gor’s claws shook the ground with each step, sending loose rocks tumbling down the sloped cave walls. His great neck craned down to ground level and stared into the face of the lovely elf. “How brave of you to come so far,” Gor said suspiciously. “Have you come to be eaten?”

“If it pleases you,” Wolfraine bowed deeply. The hot air from Gor’s nostrils buffeted the velvet cloak and stung his eyes. “But I had hoped merely to bask in your glory that I might return home to tell tales of your magnificence.”

Gor lifted his head proudly, and smiled at the thought of his legend reaching distant lands. He quickly studied the maiden and, blinded by conceit, was convinced that she would make a lovely addition to his treasures. He snatched Wolfraine up in his claws and carried him to a chamber filled from wall to wall with gold. “You will wait here,” Gor’s voice echoed down the tunnels of the cave, “while I dispatch these interlopers.” Gor returned to the entrance of his cave.

Solenya waited long enough for Wolfraine to find the jade sword, the Blade of Carpasius. Then, accompanied by two of her fellow elves, dressed to look like common thieves, she let loose a piercing scream.

“Help! Kidnappers!” Solenya cried, as her companions pretended to force her into the woods.

Gor roared furiously, leveling nearby trees with the shockwave. He took flight and began to pursue his stolen treasure. Solenya’s comrades left her and ran in different directions, as Solenya hid herself. Gor selected one of the fleeing thieves and gave chase. Meanwhile, still disguised by the illusion, Wolfraine emerged from the treasure room, and waited by the cave’s mouth. Hidden under his cloak, cold against his skin, was the jade sword. Gor, realizing that his treasure was more important to him than revenge, abandoned his pursuit and returned to the cave.

“My lord, there was nothing I could do.” Wolfraine pretended to shake in fear. “You have saved my life!”

“How they got into my treasure room, I do not know,” Gor mused, his forked tongue whipping against his razor teeth. “But I will keep you close until I figure it out.” Gor snatched up Wolfraine like a rag doll and pressed him against his chest. Gor eyed the wood’s edge cautiously as he held his coveted treasure in a tight embrace.

Wolfraine drew the Blade of Carpasius from underneath the soft leather. With all his might he thrust the point into Gor’s chest. The sword’s aim was true, and it pierced through the scales and muscle and blood, directly into the heart of the beast. With a choked roar, Gor impulsively dropped Wolfraine, the illusion shattered. The barbarian scurried for cover as the towering dragon toppled lifelessly to the ground.

Gor's impact drove up a cloud of dust. As the fighting forces of Lunaria gathered around the cave to see what had become of the frail barbarian, they could see only a brown tempest of dirt. Even before it had cleared enough for them to witness Wolfraine's triumph over Gornyzath, the barbarian emerged from the cloud, scratched and dirty, but carrying the Blade of Carpasius, dripping a trail of blood.

With this legendary weapon, and a victory of epic proportions, Wolfraine secured his fame and his livelihood. His story became required reading. Rothmiridor declared it a day of celebration.

Realizing suddenly what had sparked the memory, Milton quickly searched for the old email, and opened it. He scrolled to the bottom of Wolfraine's letter and read the name: Suh-Jun Park. Wolfraine had died, Milton realized, not in the glory of battle as he had been forged, but alone and unremarkably. Struck by nausea, Milton entered Lunaria in search of Solenya.

Rothmiridor found Solenya sitting on the edge of the massive fountain that marked the center of the town. Around her stood a number of people listening to her rendition of the previous day's battle. She was an excellent speaker. Her audience barely moved as she recounted the appearance of the goblins, as they stood battle-ready in the first moments of dawn. The crowd shifted only occasionally, trying to catch a glimpse of the princess's face under her velvet hood.

"I am sorry," Rothmiridor interrupted, "but I must steal her from you."

The crowd responded with sounds of disappointment. "We want to hear the story!" one shouted. "Come back later, we're busy," joked another. "Look out, he might

zap you like he did that paladin!” heckled another. Rothmiridor struck the base of his staff against the ground and sparks leapt from the gem and showered the ground. The startled crowd laughed and scurried away.

“Solenya,” Rothmiridor bowed slightly, once they had been left alone.

She stood and wiped the dirt from her cloak, “What is it, my lord?”

“Wolfraine is dead.”

“How? Was there a battle this morning? What killed him?”

Rothmiridor leaned down and whispered in her soft ear. It felt cold against his cheek. “Not the avatar: the man.”

Solenya stepped back, startled by his touch as much as by the news. She was motionless for a minute.

Milton stuffed another cheese puff into his mouth, and found it hard to swallow with the lump that had formed in his throat. Watching the two of them standing there in the town square, he realized that Wolfraine’s absence was tangible. There was no swaggering machismo, no raspy sarcasm, and no booming laughter. There was just a moment of silence between two friends who had never really met.

Milton was overcome, as he often was, with the desire to learn Solenya’s true identity. He had come close to asking several times before, but always chose to preserve the fantasy. Was she an American? What did she look like? How old was she? Was she even a... she? Milton stood up and walked a slow lap around his basement as he felt himself begin to sweat. When he was nervous, his body sweated uncontrollably.

Solenya finally spoke. “Oh God.”

“He died alone,” Rothmiridor said, trying to direct the conversation, “No one knows who he really was.”

“What do you mean?” she crossed her arms, defensively.

“We never got to know the real person. We only got to see this manifestation of his lonely fantasy.” Milton detected a scowl beneath the shadows on Solenya’s face. He thought it might be best for him to stop talking.

“You surprise me,” she shook her head. “Wolfraine was not just that man’s avatar! We aren’t defined by what we look like or where we were born. We are our dreams, and our words, and our actions. That man was Wolfraine, and that is how he would want to be remembered.”

Milton was suddenly embarrassed, as Solenya turned and walked quickly away. He quietly apologized, “I’m sorry.” She didn’t hear him.

Rothmiridor designed a monument to the memory of his friend, Wolfraine. He placed the completed monument in the center of town, in place of the fountain. It was a massive metal statue of the barbarian, who had one foot propped upon the lifeless maw of a dragon. One hand was held in a tight fist at his side, the other gripped the Blade of Carpasius, pointing it triumphantly toward the sky. Rothmiridor inspected the statue, and smiled at his friend, captured in his life’s greatest moment. The grand wizard chiseled an inscription in the base:

Wolfraine the Dragon Slayer

Bearer of the Blade of Carpasius and Savior of Lunaria

Friend to many, hero to all

“Milton! Dinner!” the shrill voice carried down the stairs. Milton left Lunaria for the moment and headed upstairs. He had worked up an appetite, but as soon as he reached the kitchen he realized that his mother had no intention of letting him eat in peace. Milton knew the face she was wearing: confrontational.

“Hi, Mom,” Milton smiled sheepishly as he emerged from the darkness of the basement. “What’s for dinner?”

His mother exaggerated a labored sigh. “You should be surprised there’s anything for dinner.” She slammed the plate of mashed potatoes down in front of Milton’s seat as he sat down. “Your father’s life insurance isn’t a blank check, you know. I can’t afford to support you for the rest of your life. Our savings are slowly withering away, and you spend all day playing games.”

“Not this again! Please.” Milton started shoveling food into his mouth, hoping his mother would leave him alone.

“Don’t you brush me off. I know what goes on down there, you pretending to be some kind of king. You need to stop living in some fantasy and get outside.” She gestured brusquely to the window.

“Wizard, mom. I’m a wizard.” Milton felt foolish saying it. He could feel himself begin to sweat. “Look, I’ve been trying to get a job, there just aren’t any good ones right now.”

“And even if you got a job, so what? Are you going to spend the rest of your life playing games? You need to go places, meet girls.” Mrs. Skapinski had convinced herself, in a way that only a mother could, that her son was adorable. “They just need to get to know you.”

“You just don’t get it, do you?” Milton stood back up, with the kitchen table standing between him and his mother. “Look at me!” Milton grabbed the collar of his grey shirt, which was moist with sweat. “Girls take one look at me and don’t hear a single word that comes out of my mouth. They don’t want to have a conversation so they can find out who I am. They see this,” he grabbed a hunk of flab above his waist, “and think they already know me.” Milton swallowed hard and glared at his mother as though it was all her fault.

“Hiding in the basement isn’t going to help anything!”

“I’m not hiding!” Milton yelled, then recomposed. “I meet new people every day, from all around the world. I know explorers, and fighters, and traders. I talk to girls and they talk to me. They are awestruck and inspired by me. I learn about their dreams and I share mine with them. I’m not hiding, I’m figuring out who I really am.”

She was unimpressed. “Well that’s nice. When do you expect to be done figuring that out? Well? Your little mission of self-discovery is costing me my retirement money.”

“You make it sound like I’m wasting my time.”

“You’re not?” She forced him to make eye contact. “And what, exactly, did you accomplish today?”

Milton met her gaze. “I honored the memory of a friend. A friend of mine died, mom.” He paused as much for effect as because he was choking on the words. Mrs. Skapinski froze, robbed of her momentum. “I built a monument for him, where everyone will see it and remember him.”

His mother was quiet for a while. “I’m sorry,” she said softly. “This game really means a lot to you?”

“It does.”

“And to the other players?”

“Same.” Milton nodded confidently.

“Then is there some way you could make money doing this?”

Milton looked down at his plate, the words of his father echoing in the back of his mind: do something you enjoy. “I’ll think about it,” Milton conceded. They finished dinner in silence.

When Milton made Lunaria a subscription-based service, he was surprised by how many people were willing to pay. Those who left tended to be casual players. And what membership loss Lunaria initially suffered was quickly balanced by an influx of players attracted by the new services Milton was able to offer. With a new computer, Milton was able to handle more players and more complicated battles. He hired players to police the kingdom, eject policy violators and help Rothmiridor invent new battles. The kingdom of Lunaria spawned smaller, sister kingdoms that grew into a thriving network of thousands of people. Rothmiridor ruled it all, and Milton grew wealthy.

But through all the changes, Wolfraine’s statue remained the center of the Lunarian universe. It was the first thing every player saw when they entered Lunaria. As the kingdom grew, so did his legend.

One day, Rothmiridor stood with Solenya, near the monument. They were sharing stories about Wolfraine.

“You know,” she caught herself, “That is, my lord, what you did for Wolfraine was really a beautiful thing.”

“You inspired it, my lady,” he said honestly.

“What I said...”

“That was a long time ago,” Rothmiridor interrupted her.

“You really did understand,” she smiled. “Thank you.”

Rothmiridor wanted desperately to take Solenya in his arms, to press his lips against hers, and to throw back her hood and get lost in her eyes. At the very least, he wished he could hold her hand. But the game had no mechanism for prolonged or intimate contact. Rothmiridor could only bow his head politely.

Then the grand wizard raised his staff and aimed it toward the noonday sun. With a subtle movement, he directed the sun to set. It sank quickly to the horizon and Lunaria was suddenly bathed in red light. Solenya thought of the dragon. The wizard made it set slowly, preserving this moment for Solenya: a celestial event, just for her.

The light made the cloak of the elven princess seem purple. They both noticed this and laughed. He thought it was the most perfect moment of his life.

A sorceress approached the pair. Rothmiridor recognized her wand as the cheapest one sold at Lunaria’s shop for magical artifacts, a short stick wrapped in twine and beads. She stopped in front of the monument, a few feet from them, and examined the inscription at the statue’s base. She traced her finger along the letters, pausing to admire the jade sword as it sparkled in the shafts of sunlight. The sorceress noticed Rothmiridor’s staff and addressed him, “Pardon me, your majesty, but can you tell me about Wolfraine?”

The wizard beamed, his white teeth scattering the waning light of the sunset. “I can,” he admitted, “but I suspect I cannot do him justice. Perhaps Solenya here would be willing to recount the tale.”

The sorceress turned to Solenya, “Well, my lady, would you mind?”

Solenya began leading the sorceress out of the square, to search for a place with better lighting. They left Rothmiridor by the statue, and he said a prayer for his friend. Just as the princess and the sorceress were about to leave the wizard’s earshot, he could hear Solenya’s voice:

“Do you have time for a story?”