

The logo for 'Pathfinder Tales' is rendered in a stylized, gothic font with red and white colors and decorative flourishes. It is set against a background of a large, dark, industrial-looking structure with glowing orange lights.

PATHFINDER TALES™

The central illustration depicts a dwarf character in a dark, industrial setting. The dwarf is wearing a helmet with large, curved horns and is shouting while holding a large hammer. He is surrounded by bright orange sparks and flames. In the background, a large, dark, mechanical structure with glowing orange lights is visible.

FORGE OF ASHES

JOSH VOGT

Akina smiled even as she smelled the unappetizing stench of her own cooked flesh. Then the creature advancing on her blocked the monk's ongoing fight. She strained again to force her stubborn limbs into motion. Right as her would-be-killer stepped in for the strike, an object slammed into the top of its head, crushing half its face and driving it to the ground.

Akina's maulaxe clanged down beside her. A clatter of armor pieces fell after it, with her ram's helm as the last to land.

Izthuri's call rang out. "Found it."

Akina grabbed the maulaxe handle and pulled herself up. "Lady, whatever you are, I like your timing."

Ignoring the rest of the armor for the moment, she slapped the helm over her head and hefted the maulaxe in trembling arms. Screaming wordless defiance, she ran for the nearest of Nullick's warriors. One flung crystal wedges at her as it backed away. Two wedges shattered as she ran past, spraying her with slivers. The third clipped her arm and spun away. She threw her maulaxe ahead, and it struck one of the little monsters aside. As the crystal-

flinger drew another shard, she drove it to the floor and clamped a hand on its wrist. It struggled with wiry strength, but she flexed its arm until it gasped and dropped the crystal. She grabbed the wedge and crunched it through the waiting neck.

Nullick laughed."Such a good game. But you've only found one set of gear and I've summoned more to play on my side. Shall we try for a second round?"

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Forge of Ashes

Josh Vogt



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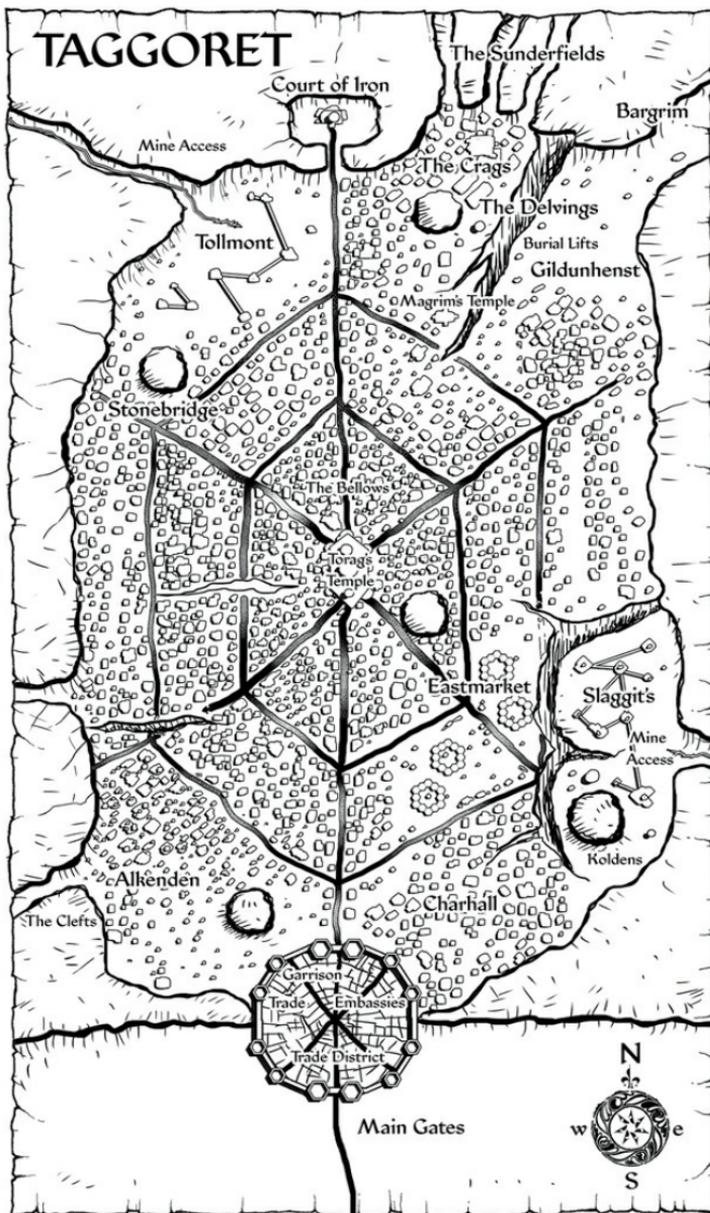
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To Robert and Beth Vogt, who gave me a lifelong love of stories, and who have never stopped believing that my own tales are worth telling.

TAGGORET



Chapter One

Homecoming

Akina hefted her maulaxe and pointed to the iron gates visible just down the mountain road. "I swear, if you don't say something by the time we get there, I'm pounding you into the ground—head-first—and leaving you to rot."

Ondorum's soft smile, barely visible in the shadow of his hood, tightened her irritation into a prickling knot of anger. He looked down at her and then over at the dwarven city of Taggoret—at least, its surface level. He spread his hands and shrugged. She'd put up with his ridiculous vow of silence long enough to understand that this gesture simply meant, *Really?*

Huffing, Akina strapped the maulaxe to her back and plodded onward, iron-and-leather armor creaking. "Stop calling my bluffs. And next time you want to sell our horses and toss all the coin to a few beggars, you damned well ask me first. Think I wanted to walk all this way? And stop dragging me into your penance. Not your fault

they died. How many times do I have to tell you?"

Ondorum kept his gaze forward, but his gait grew heavier. Akina sighed. Fool of a monk. His ridiculous commitment to "attaining perfection" had manifested in stubbornness before, but this took it to unbelievable heights.

He strode beside her, his hood and voluminous sleeves hiding most of his features, but dusky gray skin peeked out from time to time, streaked with emerald-hued veins. His deep brown robe, stained by weeks of travel, added to the illusion of his having been dug up from the earth. With his stocky frame, he had the size and sculpt of a man chiseled from stone—fitting for an oread, she figured, with an earth elemental for an ancestor. However, he moved more like a mountain river than a boulder.

Compared to him, Akina clomped along like a miniature avalanche, kicking up enough dust to blind an eagle. As Taggoret's gates neared, she straightened her helm. Shaped in the likeness of a ram's head, complete with horns curling back around the sides, it was one of the few mementos she'd kept from their years with Durgan's band,

exchanging blood for gold.

Realizing she was fiddling with the strap, she dropped her hands and made fists. Since when did she let nerves get to her? Why should returning home make her feel more on edge than facing down a pack of rabid wargs?

Ahead, several caravans and a stream of lone travelers worked their way in and out of the main gates. The towering iron and stone had been worked by hammer and hand, filling the mountain pass from wall to wall with images of dwarves bent over the anvil or over fallen foes. Faces of the city's leaders stared out with graven eyes, features embellished with precious metals. All around them rose the peaks of the Five Kings Mountains, a mix of harsh scree- and scrag-spotted wilderness along the upper slopes, with verdant fields and forests in the valleys below. The peak of Mount Langley reared above Taggoret itself, one enormous bluff carved so the likeness of King Taggrick watched over Kingtower Pass.

Akina sucked in a deep breath, savoring an earthy scent she'd thought she'd forgotten these past ten years. Snatches of dwarven language filled the air as they neared the gates.

With brisk efficiency, the guards inspected everyone, hammers and shields readied. Their helms and breastplates bore the symbol of the Five Kings Mountains, a noble peak adorned with a five-tined crown. Two guards blocked their path.

"Name and business?"

Akina stepped forward, chin lifted. "Akina Fairingot. Business is personal. Taggoret's my home."

The other dwarf tilted his head. "Fairingot? The one who went off to the Goblinblood Wars?"

Surprise jolted through her at being recognized after so many years, especially since there'd been at least a hundred volunteers from Taggoret in her cohort alone. She studied the guard's features, but didn't think they'd ever met. "So?"

"Huh. Many thought you dead. Some will be glad to hear it isn't so."

She furrowed her brow. Many? Some? Before she could ask, the guard waved for the next group of travelers to come up.

"Pass on and welcome home."

The other guard thumbed at Ondorum."What about him?"

When Ondorum just bowed, Akina sighed."His name's Ondorum. He's"—*a crack-brained fool!*—"taken a vow of silence."

The dwarf peered up at the oread."What for?"

Akina leaned in and spoke in a stage whisper."He was cursed by a mad wizard. Now his voice makes warriors weep and children hide and dogs howl. So we figured it'd be best if he just kept his trap shut."

Ondorum drew his hood back, revealing a sweep of gray hair a shade darker than his skin, and ridges of alexandrite crystal shards instead of eyebrows. Malachite-green eyes gazed out beneath these, thoroughly unamused.

Akina contained her chuckle. She'd been working on rounding out his sense of humor ever since they met. Whatever monastery he'd been raised in, the monks there had certainly striven to grind any mirth into dust, replacing it with the nobler pillar of grave contemplation. Not that they'd needed to do much. With earth magic fused to their bloodline, oreads not only resembled stone, but also often

shared its sense of humor. Hard to make a mountain laugh, after all. Ondorum readily admitted to his failings there, though he'd become more nomadic than most of his kind, partly due to Akina's influence—as well as the events that spurred him to leave the monastery in the first place.

The guards shook their heads in sorrow.

"Pity to hear," said one. "Might be the temple could help."

As they passed through the gates, Ondorum pointed back, frowning.

She smirked. "If you don't want me to lie, tell the truth yourself, hm?"

She ignored him and took in the sights of home. Taggoret's surface had been built on a gentle slope until it butted up against a cliff. The central road ended in another set of gates that led to the main subsurface dwellings. Little of this topside portion held her interest, except for faint nostalgia. Most of the buildings and shops were part of the trade district, shipping out the city's famous iron.

Dwarves bustled about, carting crates and wagonloads of armor, mining gear, or refined ore. Guards patrolled the

thoroughfares, keen eyes scanning the visitors to the many inns and taverns. A handful of humans and gnomes mingled, and even one elf glided through the crowds, several bodyguards keeping in step. The stone buildings blended into the mountain while engravings and murals adorned almost every wall and rocky surface—results of the dwarven drive to transform the raw hills into eternal works of art.

Akina glanced at Ondorum, wishing he'd tell her what he thought of the place. Pure delight shone in his eyes, and his broad smile elicited one of her own, easing some of the tension simmering in her bones.

As they passed one frieze, his smile slipped and he pointed. There stood a carving of a female dwarf clad in golden armor, poised before a fleeing army.

Akina's marrow chilled. The image looked like her. It didn't just depict her build or broad features, but also the streak of platinum that shot through her otherwise dirty blonde hair. An inlaid strip of white marble created the effect.

She edged over to study the piece. Ondorum joined her,

brow raised in question.

"Must be my mother's work." She brushed gloved fingertips over the smooth stone. "Looks like she's doing good business; it's an honor to mark the city itself." Was this a way for Jannasten to remember a daughter gone off to war? Akina tamped down a swell of guilt.

Ondorum stroked the image of her face, then turned and did the same to her cheek.

Flushing, Akina jerked her head away. "Come on."

They passed through the inner gates, exchanging sun and sky for cool tunnels blazing with torchlight. The passages had been decorated with reliefs, so walking down them felt like crossing through dwarven history. One detailed their emergence on the surface millennia before. Another showed the founding of the Sky Citadels.

Yet after they left the main tunnel, Ondorum pointed out several more carvings that looked eerily similar to Akina. The art often placed her in scenes of battle, fending off everything from orcs to hill giants. They passed a row of wall niches, and a small statue of Akina stood in one like a city guardian. Her appearance accompanied many other

works, but care had been taken to subtly set her apart, especially with her distinctive hair.

With each image of herself she saw, Akina's unease grew. Why had her mother toiled to add her to the bedrock of their people? She didn't deserve any such honor. She didn't deserve to be treated like a revered ancestor, especially not after she'd surrendered that heritage to seek a violent fortune in the world beyond.

Her pace quickened. She locked her eyes forward, refusing to give the art any further regard until she burst out of the tunnel's end. She paused to slow her breath as Ondorum caught up. The tunnel exited onto a ledge with switchback stairs leading down several flights to the main level. Their perch provided a perfect vantage to see across the cavern. Stone columns jutted up to the rocky ceiling far above, and the non-load-bearing pillars had been carved out to provide dwellings for thousands of dwarves. Everburning lamps and torches cast most areas in a golden glow, blazing from doors and windows as well as from posts set at intervals along the roads. Worked every hour of the day, hundreds of forges lit swaths of the

cavern.

Several deep rifts cut through the cavern floor, with massive bridges set across them allowing for steady streams of foot traffic. Further dwellings and workshops had been dug directly into the sides of the cavern, connected by stone ramps and stairs. More tunnels bored deeper within the mountain, connecting to other city districts. The smell of hot iron filled the air, underlain by the nose-ckinkling stink of scorched beards. Bellows and laughter echoed through the cavern, punctuated by the metallic music of hammer on anvil.

Akina pondered her next move as she soaked in the familiar sensations. Find her mother and get it over with? No. She wanted a clearer head first. Wouldn't do to make her first homecoming act a demand for explanations—especially since she owed the bigger one for her extended absence.

She fixed on the central temple to Torag, where the smithing fires forever roared in honor of the dwarven god. Her brother, Brakisten, had just begun serving there as a cleric when she'd left. Akina assumed his position had

since changed, but they'd no doubt have his name and current station noted in a duty roster.

She led Ondorum down into the city proper and had to reorient herself only twice before they reached the front court of the smithing temple. Here, dwarves worshiped the Father of Creation by fashioning magnificent works of art, powerful tools, and equipment for war. Unlike many clerics Akina had encountered during her travels, ones who kept their robes clean and hands unsullied by labor, Torag's faithful milled through the temple in dirty aprons, faces stained with soot. Their roaring chants rang out as loud as the clang of their tongs and pounding of their hammers on the consecrated anvils. The whole temple thudded with a fiery heartbeat.

Akina paused within the main chamber to let the sense of the place engulf her, memories sparking in her mind, stories and legends and history she'd given little thought to ever since leaving home. All dwarves of the Five Kings Mountains grew up with abundant reminders of their heritage. Even outside the temples, countless statues, murals, and anvil-shaped altars celebrated their maker and

god, Torag, whose forge hammer had birthed their race within the Darklands and who'd given them a simple prophecy:

When the ground shakes beneath your feet, you must leave the caverns of the world behind and journey upward at all costs.

For even though dwarves still toiled beneath the earth, in ages past they'd existed far deeper, and knew nothing of the surface. When earthquakes wracked the world, her people had embarked on the grand Quest for Sky, traveling for three centuries and braving monstrous dangers to finally answer Torag's call.

Though not all of them had done so. Akina frowned, but her reverie was interrupted by a sweat-stained cleric who escorted them to a side room where they could hold a conversation. A grin split his black beard as he focused on Ondorum, giving an excited bob of his head.

"A son of the earth! We're blessed to have you with us. Have you come to ply your strength in Torag's honor?"

Ondorum bowed with a rueful smile. At the dwarf's quizzical look, Akina explained the monk's vow of silence

and then presented her own inquiry.

"I'm looking for my brother, Brakisten Fairingot. He served here awhile back."

The cleric's beard sagged.

Akina removed her helm and clutched it against her side."What's wrong?"

"You must be Akina." The cleric drummed fingers on the hammer strapped to his belt."We're blessed to have you back with us, but your brother has fallen out of favor." At her scowl, he raised calloused palms."It isn't my place to speak his deeds, but I can direct you to him. Please, tell him he's not beyond redemption. But he must be willing to go through the fire of renewal if he wishes to work beside us once more."

Akina stepped closer. The cleric gripped his hammer but didn't draw it.

"Where is he?" she growled.

Chapter Two

Brother's Keeper

Akina rammed a shoulder against the tavern's front door and tromped inside. A single lamp flicked shadows across the simple bar and the tender who gawked at her from behind it. Rough-carved tables and chairs littered the area, and it took her a second to scan the assembled riffraff. Her brother wasn't present.

Ondorum waited by the doorway as she marched over to the barkeep.

"Brakisten Fairingot," she said. "He here?"

The dwarf scowled through a bristly beard. "If you're looking to collect, you'll have to wait a few. Snuffstone's boys already have him out back, and I doubt he'll have much left to pay with by the time they're through with him."

Akina chucked her chin at the back door set off to one side. "That way?"

"You want to poke around in Snuffstone business, go out the front and 'round the side. But they don't like being interrupted."

"Right. They'll have to get used to disappointment." Ignoring the bartender's bark of warning, she clambered over the counter and strode through the back storeroom. Another door deposited her into the broad alley behind the tavern, filled with rubble and scrap.

Three dwarves already occupied the space, and Akina barely recognized Brakisten as one of them. He stood with an arm locked behind his back, held by one of what she assumed to be the Snuffstone brothers.

Brakisten wore a tattered robe stained yellow and green down the front. His black beard and hair had grown wild, hiding most of his eyes and cheeks. He breathed heavily, and his eyelids drooped.

A Snuffstone brother tangled a fist in Brakisten's beard and growled threats until the other nodded Akina's way. He spun, scowling.

"Off with you," he said. "This don't concern you."

She reached back and gripped her maulaxe. "That's my brother you're working over. You've business with him, you've got it with me."

"This lout's your kin?" His grin exposed a silver

tooth."Never figured anyone would admit to being related to this sippy soul. Don't you know what he's done?"

"Let me guess: he owes you money, hm?" Akina hid her dismay behind the nonchalance, pained to see Brakisten in drunken disarray. How had he fallen in with these ruffians?

The Snuffstone brothers shared a look. The one holding Brakisten let go and whacked him across the back of the head as he dropped. Brakisten curled up on the ground, shivering and whimpering.

Akina bared her teeth."I might expect surface folk treat him this way. But not his own kind in his own home."

The first Snuffstone prodded Brakisten with a boot."You wouldn't claim him as kin if you knew. He got kicked out of the temple years back for stealing from the coffers. Then he started raving about Droskar and how we're all doomed to burn in the Ashen Forge. He's nothing but a mad traitor."

At her snarl, they put hands to the blades at their belts.

"Don't you dare accuse him—"

"It's true," Brakisten whispered."I've stolen from Torag

himself. Droskar will take our souls. I've seen it..."

She stared in horror. Mentioning the Dark Smith, much less proclaiming doom in his name, equated to blasphemy for some dwarves. And her devout brother admitting to thievery? It had to be the ale addling his senses.

When the other Snuffstone reared for another kick, she stepped closer. "Touch him again and I'll break your knees and knuckles."

"Oh, the little lambie thinks she's a wolf." The lead dwarf blocked her path while his companion laid a blade across Brakisten's throat. "We're the ones with fangs, see?"

Akina trembled in rage. It'd be so simple to let it wash over her and leave these two as quivering piles of pulp. If the fury claimed her, though, she might hurt Brakisten before she regained her wits.

The dagger-wielding dwarf nicked Brakisten's neck. "Brak. Brak! Lookie here. This little lambie claims she's your sister."

Brakisten dribbled drool over his beard. "Sh-shut it, you lying bastard. Just leave me alone. Lemme sleep."

The dwarf chuckled. "That's rich, it is. Calling *me* a

liar."

One of Brakisten's eyelids peeled upward, revealing a bloodshot eye. He stared at Akina, then closed his eye again.

"Go away. You're a ghost. Everyone's a ghost now. All darkness and ghosts."

Grinning, the lead Snuffstone crossed his arms."Seeing as you're so protective of this poor soul, how's about we strike a bargain?"

She curled fingers into fists."How much does he owe?"

He scratched the tip of his nose."With interest and whatnot, I'd wager right around a hundred gold."

Akina sputtered."What kind of crook are you?"

"Aw, c'mon, little lambie." He rapped knuckles on her ram-shaped helm."Can't you see he's had a hard time? Why not make it easier for all of us? Do your sisterly duty, pay his debts, and we won't have to chisel it out of his hide."

She hauled her maulaxe free. The Snuffstones drew their blades, but she just held out her weapon.

"This is worth at least a few hundred. Here. Take a look."

One stepped in, eyes narrowed but head cocked in curiosity.

She dropped the maulaxe headfirst onto his foot with a thud. Even as his howl rose, she dove at the second dwarf. A wild dagger slash clanked off her breastplate. She grabbed his beard and yanked his forehead down against the curve of the ram's horns. Eyes rolling, he staggered and crashed to the ground.

The first dwarf roared as he turned and charged—straight into her cheek-cracking punch. He dropped alongside his brother. Akina heaved breaths as she stood over them, wanting to pummel them into scrap. Her vision fuzzed around the edges, and her nostrils flared, scenting sweat and blood and smoke.

Then Ondorum shifted into view at the alley's end, worry etching his features. While Akina's fury didn't vanish, it ebbed at the thought of him watching her beat the two dwarves senseless. So she tended to her brother and let the violent cravings become a background buzz.

She grabbed Brakisten's stained robe. He grunted and tried to bat her away, but she gripped his chin and forced

him to look at her.

"Brakisten. Stand up. We're going."

Groaning, he slumped. Then he clawed upright, using her armor as handholds until he stared blearily at her face. She chuffed at his rank breath and tried to ignore the embers that simmered in her gut. At last, the disorientation cleared from his eyes and he took her into a hug.

"Akina! My big sister. You're alive! Let's go inside and buy a round to celebrate."

She grabbed an arm to guide him out of the alley."Let's get you home. Where's mother?"

Brakisten choked a laugh."Mother's dead, Kina. Been dead years now."

Akina froze."You're drunk. She can't be dead; I've seen her work across the city. Some of it's recent."

He staggered free and leaned against a wall."That's not her work. It's Gromir's."

Her fingers twitched."Whose?"

He dropped to his knees, buried his face in his hands, and wept. Aghast, she stared at this wreck of a dwarf while a mocking voice whispered in the back of her mind.

Welcome home, Akina.

Chapter Three

Graven Images

As Akina hauled Brakisten back up, Ondorum came over and took his other arm. She nodded in silent thanks, not trusting herself to speak.

They maneuvered him out into the street. It saddened her to discover that almost everyone they passed recognized Brakisten in this state; a few even knew her, though they treated her with an odd reticence, as if unsure whether to congratulate her homecoming or not. Perhaps her return reminded them of the many warriors Taggoret lost during the Goblinblood Wars.

Muttered requests got her directions to where he lived. When they arrived, her face flaming with shame, she kicked the door wide and they stumbled into a stone hovel. Two rough-hewn rooms contained little more than a rickety bed in the back, with a dry washbasin and small dresser in the front. Ratty clothes and boots lay piled in one corner. Not so much as the tiniest anvil altar to be seen.

She dropped Brakisten onto the bed. He snored, and she resisted the temptation to shake him awake. He'd be useless like this. However, she knew where to get more answers.

Grimacing, she turned to Ondorum. "Not how I expected things to go."

He frowned in sympathy and tapped his temple.

She shook her head. "No. It didn't take me that time. That was necessary."

His expression remained dubious.

"I could've done worse and you know it. I'm fighting the rage better now. It doesn't control me as much."

He tilted his head.

"At least, I think so." She stared at her hands. "Hope so. Sometimes it seems life is nothing but fighting. Fighting the rage. Fighting myself. Fighting idiots who can't see how badly outmatched they are. I thought coming home would give me a rest." She puffed her cheeks. "Apparently not. At least those fools will think twice before threatening Brakisten again."

At his deeper frown, she pounded a fist against the

nearest wall."Don't tell me I can't be angry for my brother! Nobody died. Besides, if you'd really been worried, you would've stepped in. I know you were just around the corner." She headed for the door."Right. My mother's old workshop shouldn't be far. I need to go figure a few things out. Make sure Brakisten doesn't wander off to get cockeyed again, hm?"

Ondorum looked over at her brother and mimed lifting a bowl to his lips.

"I'll find a meal, sure. Lucky I saved a few coins before you gave the rest away."

He reached out, offering a parting embrace, but she pretended not to see as she strode out. Once the door latched behind her, she squared her shoulders, swallowed hard, and set off to discover her family's fate.

As she dredged up old memories, remembering which roads connected where, she fought against the sense of being a ghost, as Brakisten had accused. While the city remained similar in many ways, most of the faces had changed. She avoided those she recognized, though plenty of people pointed her way, even with her helm in place. A

handful of other architectural pieces featured her, from archways to cornices to door knockers. With each one spotted, the urge rose to smash the ornamentations to shards. She'd never earned that honor. Maybe she never should've returned.

She rounded a corner onto the street that ended at her mother's workshop. Her heart bumped up at the sign hanging over the door. *Janna's Handworks*. Light burned in the front windows and from the workshop in back. She fought to keep her pace steady. Her mother lived. Brakisten had been rambling nonsense after all.

She entered, and a greeting died on her lips. An unknown dwarf stood at the counter, dressed in a simple violet robe, her reddish hair pulled back into a ponytail. She smiled at Akina and spoke in a husky voice.

"Can I help you?"

Akina locked eyes with her. "Who're you?"

The other dwarf frowned. "I'm Selvia, the shop assistant. You've business with the master?" She waved at the curtained entrance to the back rooms.

"Master? This is my mother's shop. Jannasten Fairingot.

Where is she?"

Selvia's eyes widened."You're... oh my, you're her. I should've realized." She bowed her head."I'm... I'm so sorry for your loss."

Akina came up to the counter."What're you talking about? Where's my mother?"

"Selvia? We have a customer?"

The curtain parted. For a long moment, the newcomer joined in a three-way stare-down. Wiry for a dwarf, and with a sparse, golden beard, he wore trim work leathers over which he'd donned a cerulean robe. A bandolier peeked out from under his robe, strapping throwing axes across his chest. A tuft of darker yellow hair peeked out from beneath his tunic at the base of his neck.

A memory flashed by of Akina's fingers tangled in that particular patch. She shoved the image away, not needing the distraction. Ancient history.

He twitched a hand."Selvia, please see to the latest invoices on your desk."

Selvia curtsied and slipped past him. He rounded the counter, hands raised as if framing her in his mind.

"It's you. It's really you." He clapped once in delight. "You've returned!"

Akina pressed fingertips to her forehead. "Gromir. Dust and drudgery, what're you doing in my mother's shop?"

"Well, I—that is, I run it now, in the wake of..." His face fell. "No word ever reached you, did it? I sent letters all around, but we had no idea where you might be. Or if you were even still alive to receive them."

"What word?"

"Your mother. Her... her death."

Akina's shoulders slumped.

Gromir wavered, looking torn between wanting to embrace her and respecting the years between them now. She remembered how he'd held her once before at a time like this, after she'd learned of her father's frozen body being pulled from the avalanche debris. How she'd used him to wear her out until she was too exhausted to feel grief anymore.

She firmed up, refusing to show weakness this time. "Brakisten told the truth, then."

"You've seen him? I wish you'd have come here first; I

could've prepared you."

"Prepared me? For finding my brother's been kicked out of his temple for theft and is now a blithering drunk?"

Gromir cleared his throat."That, unfortunately, summarizes it rather well." He raised arms and stepped forward."I'm sorry, Akina."

She backed up, and her maulaxe bumped against the door."What're you doing?"

He hesitated."Welcoming a dearly missed and beloved friend home?" When she continued staring, he lowered his arms."My apologies. I thought..."

She adjusted her maulaxe straps. He'd always been a bit clingy during their time together. Apparently that hadn't changed.

"I'd welcome some straight answers," she said."What happened to my mother? What happened to Brakisten? Why are you running her business and sticking my likeness all over the city?"

He perked up."You've seen them, then? Do you like what I've done?"

"Like it? Gromir, what in Hell were you thinking?"

What's going on?"

He clasped hands behind himself. "You've been gone a long time, Akina."

"Right. Tell me the one thing I do know."

"Hear me out, please." He bowed his head. "After you left for war, once my guard post expired, I returned here to continue my studies. I never had your prowess in battle, and hoped I might find success in the magical arts. However, it proved an expensive effort. Jannasten supported my studies by hiring me, and we kept the business quite profitable. I eventually became her apprentice on top of my other pursuits." He moved back behind the counter and gazed up at various stone and metal panels decorated with icons and runes.

"When most of the surviving volunteers returned after the war—minus yourself—we feared the worst. No one had any idea what had happened to you."

"I joined up with a few mercenaries. Seems I'm pretty good at that sort of work."

Gromir twitched. "Ah. That's quite... enterprising of you." He coughed. "But after five years passed, we were

certain you were a battlefield casualty. I convinced your mother to let me honor your sacrifice in our work—a way to also uphold your ancestors' dignity as Brakisten's crimes became known."

"So he really stole from Torag's temple? And started prophesying about Droskar?"

"I wouldn't call it prophesying. More like disjointed rants."

"My brother never had visions before."

Gromir splayed his hands. "Your brother is sick in mind and soul. Drink dragged him down, but he hid it well until they caught him pilfering straight from the temple coffers to pay his debts. That in itself might not have been enough, but then he turned violent against anyone who wouldn't listen to his ravings. It almost broke your mother, but she threw herself into the work even more fervently. I joined her, but when she disappeared—"

"Disappeared?" Akina stepped closer. "You said she was dead before. Is she dead or just missing?"

Gromir sighed. "Will you please just let me tell you? Here's the full of it: You know your mother loved this shop

and her craft, but she loved seeking out new materials just as much—better-quality stone and ore to work with. Whenever she wasn't plying her trade here, she was out on some excursion or another. The last time, she told me she'd found a particularly valuable vein, but needed more proof to claim the strike. She swore me to silence, fearing competition. She knew the area well, so she said, and could navigate alone. Once she had the claim protected against jumpers, she'd take a proper team down. Despite my own worries, I'd seen her succeed numerous times. So she went. And never came back."

"Nobody went after her?" Akina's voice came out hoarse.

"Many people hunt down strikes and never return," he said. "Janna's bold—almost reckless—reputation was well known. Like mother, like daughter." He gave her a meaningful look. "People warned that she was risking the inevitable. That she should rely on survey teams; she never listened, of course. She always wanted to be the one out there, making the discoveries, seeing what lay beyond Taggoret, whether out across the peaks or in the depths."

Akina bowed her head. That certainly sounded like her mother. Forever caught between her craft and a restless urge. When Akina had signed up for battle training, Jannasten had celebrated, as it'd provide the perfect way for her daughter to see the world as well—so long as she came home. That'd been the unspoken stipulation. But things changed. Akina was her own dwarf. She'd made her own choices.

So why did she feel like she'd failed her mother's legacy?

"Once we realized she'd been away too long," Gromir said, "a few cries went up for search parties and the like, but most accepted it as a logical consequence. The world's a dangerous place. People die. We try to live on as best we can."

"How long ago?" Akina asked.

"Just over three years now. Time enough. I held out hope for awhile, but I knew she'd never abandon her work and home for so long."

Akina narrowed her eyes. Was that an accusation?

"Since then, I continued to do what I could to bolster

your family's name. I kept the business open, even though it meant diverting focus from my studies. I've also kept an eye on Brakisten, providing meals and a small abode he can rest in when he's sober enough to take advantage of it." He coughed. "Don't worry. The property's under my name, so he can't sell it for more drinking coin."

"Why, Gromir? Why go to all this effort?"

He spread his arms again, though this time as if displaying himself. "Isn't it obvious?"

"You're kidding. After all this time?"

"We loved each other once. Might we not do so again?"

Akina couldn't contain her snort. "We were infatuated over a decade ago. Big difference."

Gromir's face tightened. He exhaled through his nostrils. "Can I show you something? It'll only take a moment."

Scowling, she followed him into the back. Selvia glanced up from where she bent over a desk, ticking off figures with an inked quill. Gromir nodded for her to continue as he led Akina past the workshop filled with marble blocks and iron slabs. He showed her into a

darkened side room. Lifting a hand, he whispered a command, and a sphere of pale blue light flickered into being above their heads.

Statues, medallions, masks, and more crammed the shelves, all positioned to face the middle of the room. Akina spun a slow circle, gaping.

"What's this?"

Gromir kept his gaze down. "I suppose you could call it my private collection. Pieces I've crafted but can't bring myself to sell."

Akina picked up the nearest statue, feeling the polished stone. "They're all... me."

"They're a gift. A way to honor your memory and what I felt for you. Still feel."

She stared into the false eyes of her miniature and imagined Gromir at work, night after night, forming idols he then stashed. Convincing her mother to plant Akina's image around the city so he could see her wherever he walked. Practically building an altar in her image. This went far beyond his clingy nature. In fact, when she'd left for war, it had been something of a relief to learn he

planned to stay behind—a fresh start for them both. But apparently he'd never truly let go of their past. And what had she become in his mind since?

She swallowed her rising gorge and set the statue back down with a click. "This is a little... obsessive."

His expression blanked for a moment before his eyes flared. "Not obsession. Devotion! Something you obviously have no comprehension of." He froze for a moment, gaze darting all over. Then he sagged. "I shouldn't have said that. It's just been difficult, and this kept me focused on what really mattered."

"You should've moved on a long time ago. You should have a family by now. Younglings."

"I do have a family." He sniffed a laugh. "Not the traditional sort, no, but it's the one I've chosen."

So she'd left and, instead of shaping his own life, he'd supplanted hers. Who did he think he was? What gave him the right to claim her family as his own? What gave him the right to turn her into some sort of icon?

She hefted her maulaxe and pointed at the collection. "You chose to be stuck in the past."

"Akina..." He closed in, but she thrust a hand into his chest. He stumbled out the door and caught himself on the threshold. When he tried to reenter, she blocked his way with the maulaxe head. His eyes widened."What're you doing?"

She pondered the wisdom of her actions for half a heartbeat. After all, they had been friends and lovers once. Did he deserve to be punished for dreaming of an impossible future with her? She cast the misgivings aside. Wisdom had nothing to do with it. She needed this. If she'd killed those dwarves in the alley, the consequences could've been costly. Here, though, she at least had a safe target, an outlet to keep the fury from consuming her for a little longer.

"I'm freeing you from me." She spun and slammed the maulaxe down on a mask of her likeness, turning it to powder. She swept a shelf to the floor and proceeded to pound and crush it all into shards.

"Please, don't! No!"

He cried for her to stop with every smash of her maulaxe, wailing as if she struck him instead. Yet Akina

didn't cease until the last piece of the twisted hoard lay broken, her features obliterated. Fragments crackled under her boots as she lurched out of the room.

Moaning, Gromir slid to his knees, hands shaking as he stared at the ruined art. Selvia peeked down the hall, but ducked back out of sight at Akina's glare.

As she moved by, Gromir snagged the edge of her sleeve. "Wait. Where are you going?"

Akina pulled away and didn't look back. "To pray for my mother's soul."

Chapter Four

Contemplation of Stone

Ondorum watched the snoring dwarf for a little while after Akina left. He looked for any sign that Brakisten might wake, or even be sensible enough to work the door latch if he did. He studied Brakisten's twitches and briefly wondered what he might've been like before drink, deception, and grief took such a harsh toll. Little use, however, in questioning what might have been. Better to focus on what could be.

Ondorum searched the rooms for stashed alcohol, but the den lacked any hiding places he could discern. He guessed it'd be a while yet before Brakisten woke. Perhaps he could use the time to explore a bit on his own.

While he'd encountered other dwarves besides Akina, he'd never visited one of their kingdoms before. What glimpses he had so far proved fascinating. He'd been looking forward to meeting Akina's family—at least, the brother and mother. She'd told him how her father had died while she'd been in battle training, buried in an avalanche

during a Kingtower Pass patrol. In the years they'd traveled and fought together with the swords-for-hire, she'd occasionally spoken of her home and remaining kin. Her tone had initially been dismissive, but had grown increasingly wistful until her return had been inevitable. Her asking him to come along had been one of the great joys of his existence, but he possessed no certainty of how long it'd last.

Best to make the most of it, then.

Believing it safe to stroll for a bit, he bowed to Brakisten and prayed to Irori that the dwarf might have a soothed mind and soul when he woke. Then he stepped outside and took a moment to orient himself. Fortunately, he had an excellent sense of direction, a talent the mercenaries had often put to use when navigating unknown territory.

As he wound through the district, he admired the roads and bridges. The dwarves had fashioned well-situated thoroughfares, yet their constructions retained the sense of having sprung whole from the earth. Studying the dwarves themselves, he almost believed the legends that their

earliest ancestors had been formed of living stone with fire baked into their hearts. He sensed their joy and peace in knowing who they were and where they belonged—a peace he knew Akina no longer held. Even though she'd never said it outright, he reckoned she'd hoped to regain that centering of herself by coming home. Could she still, he wondered, despite the unfortunate beginnings?

An inconsistency nagged him as he wandered. Something about the city itself..

Ah! Of course. The light. He should've realized. Akina said her people worked all hours, taking shifts to ensure the forge fires never dimmed, the mining carts never rolled in empty, and the tunnels and buildings never stopped being strengthened or lengthened. While Ondorum knew dwarves could see in the dark just as well as he could, the artificial light displayed their handiwork in far greater glory.

He paused on the corner of a four-way intersection atop a rise. From here, he could see down one of the massive rifts dividing the city. Structures appeared to be built into the depths of the rift itself, with chain-and-pulley lifts

providing transportation up and down. Mining entrances? Homes?

He gazed upward and let himself feel the weight of the cavern. Not a claustrophobic press like many humans or elves complained of after spending time underground. To him, it offered a soothing weight, like a warm blanket beneath a frigid sky.

It seemed a city an oread might be right at home in. Oread culture was a loose thing, in itself. They had no central government. No real inclination to congregate with others of their kind. Most, like him, chose their own paths. He'd heard of other oreads finding homes among dwarven settlements, their inclinations toward stone helping them blend in well enough. He'd even heard of oreads and dwarves who'd married and had children, though he and Akina had never discussed such. Not that they'd been talking much lately.

Guilt cracked his concentration at that thought. He knew Akina detested his self-imposed vow, sometimes opining that he must've taken it just to provoke her. But did she realize how much it tormented him as well? Ever since

they'd first begun traveling together, he'd enjoyed the steady way they'd drawn ever closer. Now he'd distanced them in a way neither of them could bridge. In the pursuit of perfecting himself, did he now fail her?

Trying to restore a more contemplative focus, he shut his eyes and visualized his ki as a golden ball at the core of his being. Palms opened to the ground, he imagined lines of ki stretching out into the stone, connecting him with the essence of the city. A futile effort to gain a sense of the place, perhaps, since he'd only seen a fraction of Taggoret, but all lessons began somewhere.

As he attempted to meditate, a memory of screams teased his thoughts. Past mistakes and failures rose to taunt him, as they so often did. The golden ball of ki turned to granite. He fought to corral the riot of sudden emotion and steady his breathing, but everywhere he turned, regret threatened to overwhelm him. Akina. The monastery. The village. All of them hurt or lost despite his best efforts. The wrong words. The wrong actions. Yet he still struggled to know what he could've done or said differently in the circumstances.

Irori, please. I'm trying. Truly. I've ever believed yours is the hand that should guide my path, but it can be so difficult to know which way you're pointing. Is Akina's solace more important than my silence? Is my vow meant to be broken? Or is this a test to refine both of us?

He waited, listening for an answer, memories still haunted by screams. Then he opened his eyes, realizing some screams weren't in his mind. A faint roar sounded nearby, followed by a cry and crash. Someone in trouble?

He reached into his robe and drew out an iron rod no bigger than his thumb. He carried a small collection of such metal rods and chips to be employed when circumstances required. While he could fight decently enough with empty hands, he knew better than to overlook the advantage of an extended reach.

Calling on his elemental heritage, he let earthen power flow through him and infuse the metal, giving it the potential to be so much more than it appeared. The rod lengthened into a full quarterstaff. While it was a temporary transformation, and one he could only repeat

after a lengthy delay, it could help if he needed to intervene in a scene of violence.

So armed, Ondorum stepped out into the middle of the street, looking for the source of the disturbance. A dwarf walking by jumped aside, fists cocked. Then he gave a grating laugh.

"Flaming beards, boy. Thought you were a statue."

Ondorum pointed down the road and cupped a hand to his ear. The dwarf frowned, but then brightened. "Oh, that's the Scarred Knuckles. Best fighting hole in all the mountains. There's a tournament tonight. Was on my way, myself." He sidled up and nudged Ondorum. "My bet's on the Silver Skewer, but it'll be a good fight either way. For some of us, blood gleams brighter than gold, eh?"

Quarterstaff tapping along, Ondorum fell in step with the dwarf, who talked as they went. The dwarf didn't seem to notice the oread's failure to reply as he guided Ondorum to one building and ushered him inside. The noise quadrupled in force, and Ondorum tried to let the cacophony flow over and past him. At least two hundred dwarves crammed into multi-tiered seats surrounding four

sunken arenas. Each ring held a pair of fighters. The crowd loosed another roar as one combatant hit the ground and didn't move.

His dwarven escort cackled."Remember! All bets on the Silver Skewer."

Others called out names such as The Haunch and One-Nostril. Ondorum shifted through the crowd as the audience slapped and pounded one another in revelry, celebrating with what would've been bruising—or bone-breaking—force for many other races.

Ondorum's attention fixed on a cage set off in a corner. At first, it appeared to contain nothing but darkness; then the slightest movement suggested a figure huddled within. Ondorum got closer until he discerned the captive.

Clad in filthy rags, the person looked dwarven in shape and size. However, his skin was a dull gray, and what hair remained in his beard hung in white patches. He lay curled up beside a chamber pot, withered arms and legs weighed down by chains bolted to the stone wall. The wrinkles and heavy folds of his forehead and cheeks made him seem practically ancient.

Duergar. Ondorum had heard of the dwarves' fallen cousins but never seen one before. By the look of him, this one had been kept there as a spectacle for many years. The duergar stared out past the cage bars, dark eyes unblinking, face slack.

Ondorum frowned, uncomfortable with seeing any creature imprisoned. Akina had once entertained the mercenary band with tales of the outcast race. Once dwarves themselves, they'd rejected the call of Torag to seek the surface millennia ago. They'd remained below and, to survive in the treacherous Darklands, sworn themselves to Droskar, the Master of the Dark Furnace. Now the duergar continued to toil down in the Darklands, ruling their fell kingdom in cruelty and malice.

After a few minutes, he moved on, realizing he wasn't about to solve the ancient enmity between the two races with a little sympathy for a prisoner. He approached one of the nearer rings and looked easily over the heads of those crowding around it. The two fighters exchanged a barrage of hits and kicks before stumbling back from each other. The brief pause gave him a clear view of one bare-

knuckled combatant and her platinum-streaked hair.

Akina.

The crowd might as well have vanished as he focused on her in dismay. Her half-crazed eyes, the flex of her jaw, and the hunch of her shoulders told him she rode the edge of fury. Ondorum gripped his staff, uncertain. Even if he broke his vow to shout her name, his voice would be lost in the riot. She always thought she could control her rage, and so often proved herself wrong as she rode the swell up and over into temporary madness. The others here didn't know the danger, and would find out too late.

* * *

Akina howled in glee as her fist cracked across her opponent's cheek, sending him somersaulting. Every landed blow meant more coin added to the wagers on the bout. She didn't know her enemy's name. Didn't care. She bounded after and forced him up against a wall to pummel his belly while he beat at her skull. Might as well have been knocking stones against stones.

Here. She belonged here, dealing pain to any and all.

The longer her blood boiled, the more the world altered around her. Her nostrils flared as she picked out others by their sweat, by the auras of smoke clinging to them, by their reeking fear. The air itself felt like a rich current of magma through which she flowed as easily as thought, while those around her slogged and stumbled and burned.

With an incoherent battle cry, her opponent sprinted in. She took the hit and tangled fingers in his thick hair. Turning with his momentum, she drove him face-first into the wall. He rebounded, and she threw her weight into another slam. Then another. He went limp after the fourth, but she held him upright and cracked bone to stone, wanting to smash his skull through and beyond. Blood splattered her and the wall. He gargled in her grip as she reared back for a final thrust.

A hand grabbed her shoulder. She dropped her victim and spun, aiming a blow, but something slapped her fists aside and threw her off-balance. As she recovered, the newcomer scooped up the fallen dwarf and threw him out of the ring.

Akina shook bloodstained fists. "No! I was winning!"

Cheated on the brink of victory. For a moment she thought she recognized the new enemy, but then it didn't matter. Yet as she charged, he stood solid and took her strikes as they came. Open palms intercepted her fists; his arms didn't even as tremble at the hits. When she tried to grapple him to the floor, he stepped aside and let her sweep past.

"Stand still!"

Each missed attempt stoked the fires higher.

"Stand—" One moment to the next, the flames in her belly turned to a block of ice. The cold weight of it dragged her to her knees. She shook her head, hands planted, trying to rise. "No, I was winning..." Quivering limbs refused to support her.

As she collapsed, a pair of hands caught her. She blinked away the gray haze long enough to focus on Ondorum before a curtain of ashes enveloped her.

"Sorry," she said. "It's the only way I know how to pray."

About the Author

Josh Vogt is an author and full-time freelance writer whose work has been published in dozens of genre markets, with stories covering fantasy, science fiction, horror, humor, pulp, and any combination of the above. This is his debut novel.

Akina and Ondorum also appear in "The Price Paid," a prequel web fiction story available for free on **paizo.com**. Additional Pathfinder Tales shorts available on the website include "The Weeping Blade" and "Hunter's Folly." For other novels, look to his forthcoming urban fantasy series, *The Cleaners*, which commences with *Enter the Janitor* (2015) and *The Maids of Wrath* (2016).

As a copywriter, Josh works with a roster of international clients, crafting advertising and sales copy, content marketing campaigns, and more. He also writes for a wide variety of RPG developers and publishers such as Modiphius, Privateer Press, Gun Metal Games, and Raging Swan Press, producing game manuals, sourcebooks, campaigns, adventure modules, worldbuilding materials, and tie-in fiction.

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