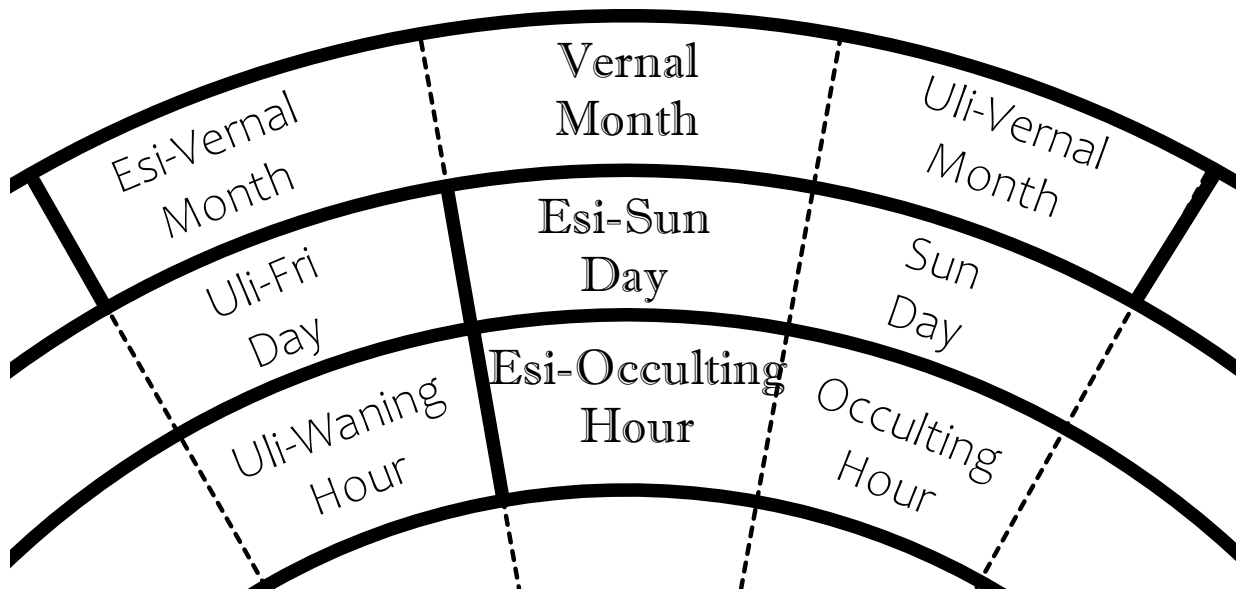


Chapter 1: An Unlocked Door

Nineteen Years Later

YEAR 647



O LENTHRA, Olen for short, extended his hand and pulled open the Guard Room door squinting through the bright, humming, Lectric light that was inside.

He was late again.

The smell struck him next: a mixture of sweat, stale food, and of course, Gruel Mead. The four Endemic Guards, sitting around an old, thickset, and stained rectangular table, were in the middle of playing Brickets with Cards and Dice. Credits, half-empty glasses of foamy Mead, and unfinished food were also strewn all over the table.

The bulky Endemic were in their Guard clothes, yet, with many shirt buckles undone and boot laces untied, they wore their uniforms loosely. With the Master away for at least a few more Days, there was no need to dress formally.

The Guards all looked and smelled drunk. Whatever musing they were doing or saying before the door was opened stopped, and all four of them were now staring at Olen. The disappointment of being interrupted from their Brickets game was clear on all their facial expressions.

dQuan Di Tandall, Chief of this lot, an ugly, weathered Endemic with a large scar on his cheek that did not improve his looks, swatted the shoulder of one of his lesser Subjects, causing that Guard to spill a little of his own Mead.

“Sturn! Whazz this Sap doin’ outta bed? I thought you shut them boys up! They’s not s’posed be out on the’own! Ever!” Tandall’s damaged tongue always made his speech slurry on top of the usual drunken, Endemic guttural accent.

The other two Guards, dBeron Di Thurgess and dBeron Di Marak, two brothers that did *not* look at all like each other, turned their attention towards the Guard Tandall had just admonished. Marak was the shortest of the Guards with a thicker neck and chest. Thurgess was the tallest and had abnormally long arms. It was hard to outrun those arms.

dVen Di Sturn, the newest Guard, and the one the others picked on to do the most menial of labours, did not question his error and rolled his eyes as he ungraciously got up from the table, shrieking his chair across the hard, stained wooden floor. Sturn had to steady himself with the table as he moved to go around the mess of Guards, garbage, and other chairs.

“The Punit was not finished scrubbin’ th’Lav last I saw of ‘im,” Sturn mumbled. “I jus’ forgot about it, is all. Took yo’ time, didn’ ya, Olen? That’s f’weepin’ sure.” Sturn staggered towards Olen who was still standing by the open door.

Even though Olen was now almost nineteen Namedays old, Sturn towered over his small stature by a good Span. Sturn’s smell was as expected for a drunken and unbathed Behemoth who must have sweated the Day away in the heat of the Master’s Rikkur Mine.

Olen knew better than to speak or show emotion, so he allowed Sturn to grab him by the shoulder and push him out the door and into the middle of the Guards’ hall.

As they left, Olenthra heard Tandall's snarling drivel from inside the room: "B'quick wit'it, Sturn! I'm 'bout to rout yo'winnins!" In response, Sturn only growled and shut the Guard Room door behind him.

The Guards' hall was on the second level of this Wing of the Master's Keep. At Night, only two or three Guards were on duty.

They were supposed to be guarding the Keep, or at least watching over it from who knows what. Olen, however, suspected that their actual job was to keep a watch over Olen and to make sure he did not leave the Keep. Ever. They never left Olen alone. For anything. Even while scrubbing the Lavs.

With no Master around, the Guards must have been letting even some of those rules relax a little.

For as long as Olen could remember, Workers from the Town of Bryson down the Road or other Endemic from their Village of hRathstin would come during the Day to work in the Mine which was up the Mountainside behind the Keep, or they would come to work at the Smelter inside.

The Workers would all go Home by Night. Even the Master's Servants, Kitcheners, and Stablers all lived elsewhere now. Tonight, as with most Nights, the Keep was empty, damp, and dark.

Made long ago, this Keep could hold off the siege of an Army, but now it just housed the Smelter for the Mine. Even the Master spent less time here than abroad.

The main Guard Room was at the front of this hall near a thick wooden door with a viewing window on it that lead outside to the Battlements on top of the Front Gate. Further down the hall, in the opposite direction, were other personal rooms and storage areas for the Guards, including a small Kitchen Room and an Armoury.

On this side of the hall, across from the Guard Room and their personal Lav, was the stairwell that led up and down to the other levels. The Servants' level, the top level, was one floor up.

Sturn brashly pushed Olen into and up the stairs and past the closed door that led to the lower levels. No Lectric lights were open in the stairwell, nor were there any upstairs. Sturn almost tripped on his own boot buckles as they went up into the darkness.

On the third level, there was a thin window that was directly above the wooden door below. With the shutters open, this window looked out over the Battlements above the Front Gate one floor down. From his current angle, Olen could only see a few bright Stars outside as they walked past the window and the upper Lav.

This top level housed the Servants' Quarters. At one time, long ago, there were many who stayed here at Night to work during the Day. Now there were only two tenants, himself included. Sturn pushed Olen down the hall and towards his own Bed Chamber. Olen could hear Sturn fumbling with his key ring in the dark.

They walked past Sahindra's old room on the left that was right beside Olen's. Olen knew that Sahindra's door would be locked and had been locked for over seven Years since that terrible Day when they took her away. No matter how many times Olen tried to avoid it, and think of something else, Olen always had those horrible memories flood back into his Mind whenever he passed that room.

Soon, Olen was in front of his own door, and Sturn held it open for him. "Come on! Get y'rear in there! Y'lazy Squit!"

Without waiting, Sturn grabbed Olen by the shoulder and, with considerable ease, tossed him into his own room and slammed the door.

Olen fell to the floor and got up on an elbow in the dark. He could hear the other Endemic Guards that were downstairs bark muffled commands up to Sturn. Sturn barked back in his own language, full of grunts and nasal snorts. It translated into something about getting them all another barrel of Mead. The Endemic here only used their own language around him when they were angry, or very drunk.

The keys rumbled in Olen's lock and Olen heard Sturn drop them onto the floor behind the door. Sturn bellowed an Endemic curse and picked them up again. The barking from downstairs was louder now: one of the other Guards must have been in the stairwell. Sturn yelled back with a slurred remark and sauntered off towards his fellows.

Still on the floor, and on his elbow, Olen listened for the footfalls of Sturn and whoever else was in the stairwell descend back to the Guard level below. The noises then became more muffled as they entered the Guard Room and closed their door.

As Olen listened, he stared in astonishment as his own door slowly creaked open a crack, letting in a tiny fragment of Starlight.

For the first time since he could remember, Olen's Bed Chamber door had been left unlocked.

STATICUS heard one of the Guards bring Olen to his room as he lay on his bed, his hand still smarting from the welt Tandall had given him earlier that Day.

To Stat, it sounded like Olen had gotten off easy, even though he was late again with his chores. Had the situation been reversed, Staticus was sure that the Guards would have had him screaming on his way to his Bed Chamber with fresh new bruises.

Such was the way it was around here.

It wasn't Olen's fault. The Master had a special thing for the kid and had him treated kinder. Olen was just over a Year younger than Staticus and had been a captive here in this Keep all his life. Stat, however, had been a Prisoner in this decrepit Keep for only three Years. For whatever reason, Olen often sidestepped the uglier chores and punishments.

Besides, Olen wasn't Half-Stock, like Staticus was.

Being half-Endemic was a gift from Staticus' Endemic father. Stat's height and girth were larger than most normal People, a fact that caused his feet to hang off the end of his bed. He was also, nevertheless, thinner and much less muscular than most Endemic, even after the Years of cruel slavery he had endured in this Keep.

The Endemic Guards did not take Stat's Half-Stockiness kindly. They all thought of Staticus as an Abomination and would rough him up whenever they had the chance.

Olen was a good friend. No. A great friend. Olen would often defend Staticus by taking the blame for things Stat had done, knowing that the Guards would be easier with their reprimands on him.

Olen and Stat would work together, help each other, and sometimes even try to escape together. Regrettably, opportunities to escape rarely came, even with Stat's often brilliant ideas. Olen and Stat were both here against their will, and they shared a bond.

Staticus knew the Master wanted their presence under his watchful gaze kept a secret. Fortunately, Stat also knew that the Master wanted them both to stay alive in here. Broken and bruised, maybe, but alive. Stat rubbed his sore hand again.

The sounds outside diminished, and things went quiet again, save for the monotonous sound of the Stream below the Keep.

Stat's room was at the far end of the hall, a move made long ago to prevent him and Olen from communicating with each other, and so there was not much noise from the Guard Room downstairs. With luck, Staticus would be asleep before one of the Guards would come up and check on him—

A soft knock came from Staticus' wooden door.

Stat froze. The Guards would not knock. They would just unlock the door and barge in, often yanking Staticus out of bed by his enormous feet.

Stat listened, and the knock came again, accompanied by a whisper that he could not make out. Stat sat up and waited. The knock came again and with it, the whisper. Staticus looked at the door. On it, there was a small, barred window to allow the Guards to peer in and see him in bed.

Even in the dark, Stat saw a shadow there.

It was much shorter than a Guard.

Staticus whirled his feet out of bed and approached the door. The whispers became discernible: "Stat... Staticus... come here..." It was Olen's voice. He was still out of bed. It must be almost the Occulting Hour by now!

Staticus approached his door, bending down a bit to see into the hall. It was dark, but the open hall windows allowed for a little of the Starlight in. Olen's face was wide eyed and silhouetted.

"Olen!" Stat whisper shouted. "What are you doing out of bed? Gnashes! How did you get out?"

Olen whispered back, "Sturn forgot to lock my door. They're all drunk downstairs. I figure they won't be checking up on us so soon, with the Master away."

Instinctively, Staticus tried his own door, but it would not budge. Even Olen tried on his side. After countless failed attempts with snatched Spoons, Knives, and other Tools, they knew that only the right key would

turn these Rauter locks. Those keys were always on a ring attached to one of the Guards; usually Sturn.

“What are you going to do?” Stat asked. “You gotta be careful!”

“I don’t know yet,” Olen answered. “This has never happened before. They don’t know I’m out. With luck, they won’t come up and check on me.”

“Is the door to downstairs open?”

“No, it was shut up as usual, but I’ll check it out if I can. Do you think the door to the outside is open? The one above the Gate? Weren’t you on the other side Today?”

True, Stat was on the other side of the Battlements. The Guards had him organizing one of the Storage Rooms over there to make room for something the Guards would not say.

The Master’s Keep was quite symmetrical in design. On the other side of the Front Gate, the rooms over there mirrored the same ones on this side of the Keep. At one time, there may have been two Guard Rooms and two Servants’ Quarters. Now, there was just emptiness across the Battlements over the Gate with just a few rooms used for storage.

Staticus answered, “I was over there, just moving things around a bit. Nothing out of the ordinary. I am sure they locked all those rooms up when we left. But maybe some unused rooms are still open. Hey, Olen... if you get the chance to run, you run, and don’t worry about me. Just go! Get as far away from here as you can.”

“I am not leaving you, Staticus!” Olen defiantly said. “I doubt I will find anything, but if I do, I will let you know. Keep your ear to the door. I will let you know when I get back.”

“Olen, I’m serious! This may be what you’ve been waiting for... a chance to get out and get away. Find some rope and climb down the front like we tried before. Maybe even find some help out there.”

“I will do what I can, so listen for me. There is probably nothing I can do. Anyway, what is the worst that could happen? If they catch me, they’ll just throw me in the Pit for a few Days. I can handle that. There is most likely nothing I can do out there, though, so I will be back soon.”

Staticus felt exhilarated. This may be the last time Staticus would see his friend. He did not know if he wished it or not. All he could say was, “Take care then, Olen.”

“Be right back,” Olen finished and then he whisked off down to the other end of the hall.

Staticus put his ear to the keyhole and listened.

O LENTHRA walked back to his door, his stomach full of unease as wandering around with no supervision was a rarity around here, and it just felt weird.

His door was closed but unlocked. It would need a key to lock and unlock it. Before moving on down the hall, Olen peered inside his barred door window and into his room.

It was darker inside, but his own window to the outside on the far side of the room let in enough Starlight to see that there was no one in his bed. What if his escapade outside went well and Olen was away when or if the Guards came upstairs to check up on them?

That happened most Nights, especially when the Master was here. Olen would lie in bed and see the dark shadows of the Guards peeking in; often barking some explicative when they saw movement. There was less chance of that Tonight, but still—Olen could not risk it. He opened his door and crept back into his room.

He had an idea.

Olen’s room was small and contained few personal possessions. Searches occurred often and anything not essential removed, especially any Metal objects he might have smuggled in.

There was nothing like that inside here Today. There was just a bed, a wardrobe, a plain empty desk with a chair, and the barred window with cracked shutters. This room was an extension to the larger room beside his—Sahindra’s room.

A different door separated the two adjoining rooms. This door had no lock but was and had been barricaded shut from the other side on that Day when Sahindra was taken. That door was another horrid symbol and reminder of those events that Olen wished he could forget.

Olen took his chair and moved it towards the window so he could have a better look outside. Opening the ruined shutters, Olen saw that the Occulting Night was cloudy, but the Stars that shone through were bright enough to see the silhouettes of most things.

From this vantage point, Olen could see the entire Inner Courtyard of the Keep. It was quiet and still. As far as Olen could tell, there was no one lingering around outside from working during Day.

All the lights were closed opposite the Courtyard where the Inner Keep, the Master's Quarters, and the Smelter were located. Olen could also tell that everything over there was shut down by the smell. The yellowy Rikkur that was mined and then processed in the Smelter smelled like rotten eggs.

Today was Esi-Sun Day, the end of the Vernal Month. No one would come in to work Tomorrow, on the Sun Day, the first Day of the Uli-Vernal Month; especially with the Master gone.

Most of the Keep was primarily one level above ground, and it surrounded this central Courtyard. Only this side of the Keep, where Olen and Stat lived above the Front Gate, was three levels high. As a result, Olen had the highest view outside in this direction.

No one was out and about. Good. Olen might find himself out there if he was lucky Tonight. The Courtyard was blooming into its Vernal beauty. There were many Gardens, trimmed bushes, and statues in the Courtyard. Olen would often watch the Gardeners at work while stuck in his room. Contact with them was forbidden.

A wide Path led from the Front Gate, off unseen to Olen's left, up to the main double doors of the Inner Keep's main entrance. A large, ugly central statue lay on Olen's side of the Courtyard to the right of that Path. This statue did not look like much, just a sculpture of several large metallic rings connected by thick Rauter chains. Olen had asked no one what it meant.

The Mountain that was mined here loomed ominously in the dark behind the Keep. A Stream from that Mountain ran down and under the Keep. That Stream, Olen knew, generated the Power needed to open the Lectric lights, Heater Coils, and various other Lectric equipment in the

Smelter. Olen could still hear the hum of that Generator in the quiet of the Night. It stayed open even with no one working in the Smelter.

Peeling his eyes from the view, Olen got down, replaced his chair, and rummaged in his wardrobe, bringing out all his extra clothes. They were just work clothes and undergarments in various stages of ruin. There was little time to do the cleaning and mending of his own dirty stuff.

Olen stuffed them all under the blanket on his bed and tried to mold them into a Human form, with its back facing the door. Leaving his small pillow sticking out at the top, Olen went back out into the hall to have a look from the barred door window.

Sure enough, in the dark, it looked like a headless Human laying near his pillow.

That would not do. Back in he went.

Olen had never slept with his head covered. Would the Guards know that? Probably. Frantic, Olen looked around for something round like a head and thought of the bedpan under his bed. It was empty and clean, thank the Heavens. Olen at least cleaned that thing out each Morning.

The bedpan was round and dark, so Olen propped it on his pillow, so it only poked up a bit on the other side. Then Olen went back into the hall to check. Not bad. The bedpan kind of mimicked Olen's dark, short-haired head. It was hard to tell if it was not a sleeping Human in the darkness. Endemic had worse Night vision than his own. It would have to do.

Leaving the door to his room closed, Olen turned toward the stairs. He knew Stat was straining to hear from his own room down the hall. Things were too quiet downstairs; and that worried him.

As Olen walked past Sahindra's room, he hesitated, and then without wanting to, reached out to try the door. It was locked. Always was, but rarely did Olen get a chance to try it without someone looking over his shoulder.

He moved on past the Lav on the left towards the stairwell on the right. Ahead was the window that looked out over the Front Gate and the Battlements on top.

Olenfroze and backed up. Outside, Olen saw Sturn coming out of the Keep through a door on the opposite side of this Wing with a large

keg of Gruel Mead on his shoulder. An outside walkway on top of the Front Gate connected this Wing from the one opposite where the Storage Rooms were. The wall of the roofless walkway facing the Road had openings that would allow Crossbowers to aim at oncoming trouble down below in front of the Gates.

Olen crept further in to peek out the window again. Sturn was not looking up, thank the Heavens, and could not with that keg on his shoulder. The Guard was already lumbering—staggering really—halfway across the Battlements towards the door on this side of the Keep directly under this window.

When Sturn was out of view down below, Olen looked out the window again. From this closer vantage point, the Road to Town curled past the Stables. It was dark and appeared empty. No People or Animals.

Bracing himself to run in case Sturn, or someone else, came up, Olen went to the top of the stairs on his right and waited. Down below, Olen heard the door to the Battlements open and the sound of a grunting Sturn clamouring into the Guard Hall downstairs.

The Guard Room door opened, and Olen could make out the merriment the other Guards were making with the arrival of Sturn and his new keg of Mead. The Guard Room door closed, muffling the cheering.

Olen crept down the stairs and peered around the corner into the Guard Hall. On his right was the door to the Battlements that Sturn had just walked in from. Olen did not think he heard Sturn lock it up when he came in: maybe another lucky break.

Beside him was the door to the stairs that descended to the ground floor. Checking, Olen found it locked, so there was no way to go down any further.

Across the hall was the Lav Olen had just cleaned. Peeking further down the hall, Olen saw the Llectric lights peeping from under the closed Guard Room door. Too many doors—too many locks!

Olen thought he could sneak past the Guard Room towards the Armoury or Kitchen Room where he was sure he could find a Weapon, a Tool, or maybe even some rope. Olen, however, did not want to get caught on *that* side of the door just yet. He would be trapped like a Dunhare if

any of them were to come out now and go that way. Even with a Weapon, Olen would not try.

Looking at the door to the Battlements, Olen knew that there was only one place to go, and so he hoped that there was nothing more the Guards needed from the other side of the Keep.

After waiting a Breath to see if he could hear approaching footsteps from behind the Guard Room door, Olen crept out and tried the door latch to the outside. It clicked open with an audible *clack!*

Tacitly opening the door, Olen scooted through, keeping low. The Night was still cool a Month from Vernal Equinox and Olen could see the vapours of his breath. Fortunately, there was no breeze in between the walls on both sides of this open walkway, so the temperature was bearable without a coat.

Olen stayed low so that he would not be seen by anyone through the small window on the door behind him. Also, the wall facing the Road on the left had those gaps for the Crossbowers, and Olen did not want to be seen from the outside either.

On Olen's right, the heavy gears, chains, and mechanisms of the Gate were visible. The heavy Rauter Front Gate was closed at this time of Night but, Tomorrow Morning, one of the Guards would manipulate the pulleys to open it again.

True, Olen and Stat considered jumping over this Battlement wall and down to the ground, but the ground floor was much, much higher than the other floors up here. A jump or fall would break a leg for sure. Now, if Olen had some rope, he might risk it. It was an idea Olen and Stat had tried before, but they could not get out here before the Guards found and confiscated their makeshift cord.

Maybe there was some rope on the other side of the Keep in the Storage Rooms. Very tempting, but Olen would not leave Stat behind. The Guards would butcher Stat when they found out Olen went missing. At the very least, they would make him do all of Olen's chores and work around the Keep and the Mine.

No, there must be another way for the two of them to escape together. If there was, then Olen would find it.

Staying low, Olen crept along the Battlements and towards the opposite door. Oddly, the ground up here was littered with small stones and rocks.

He did not want to linger long, for Olen knew that the farther out he got, the more visible he would be to someone looking through the door window behind him. Olen had the upper hand, however, for he would see the light of the Guard Room as its door opened to give him warning. There was nothing yet.

Upon reaching the other side of the walkway, the curiosity inside Olen got the best of him and, for some inexplicable reason, Olen stood up to peek through one gap in the wall so he could see the front of the Keep and on down the Road—to freedom.

Besides, from up here, Olen could look around better and maybe, just maybe, *she* would be there.

The Keep sat atop a small Bluff, with a River beside it far to Olen's left. The smaller Stream that ran the Lectrics flowed out from under the Keep below Stat's room to join the River. Sewage, from the Lavs, went into this Stream. Olen knew the Stream was heavily grated where it connected with the underside of the building.

The Road wound with the River, down the Bluff, and towards the Town, which was not visible from here because of the Forest and bushes on both sides and the curve of the Path. Men and Endemic would come up the Road to work in the Mine most Days. Some came on Curelomback and placed their Animals in the Stables off on the right.

She wasn't there. No one was, and, as Olen had seen before, the Stables were dark and empty. The Master had taken all his personal Steeds with him.

Whenever he got a chance, Olen would often see teams of People coming and going along this Road as he cleaned or worked; always from a distance and from the hall window on the top floor. Olen was never allowed near the other Workers. Neither was Stat. There was always clean-up to do after they were gone, however. The window behind Olen had a clear view of the Stables, and *she* and the other Stablers would be there most Days, cleaning, preparing, and mucking the Animals.

Olen doubted that she even knew that he would often look for her through that window. He doubted she would even remember him from those Days, long ago, when they were just kids.

Also during the Day, Serfs, who did not work, would be outside hoping to take someone's place, or they would sit on the side of the Road to beg or glean for money or food. One old bearded man, a regular, was still there. He was sitting a fair way down the Road, but Olen could still make him out. The old man had a blanket that was wrapped around him.

Olen wondered if the old man would care if he threw the man a message or something. Probably not; the old man would not have the nerve to come this close to the Keep. The old Serf would most likely leave soon and come back in the Morn—

With a quick swing of his head, the old man suddenly shot a penetrating gaze directly at Olen as he stood there peeking.

Olen gulped down a breath and twisted out of the way. There was no way the old man saw him, as Olen was well under the cover of the wall and the darkness. The old man's glance shook Olen's nerves, so he tried the door to get back inside. This door, too, was unlocked and opened without a key, thank the Heavens. Olen entered the hall of the other half of the Keep, closing the door behind him.

It seemed darker in this hall, as there were no Lectric lights open under any of doors here. It took a moment for Olen's eyes to adjust to the little Starlight that came through the door window behind him. The doors along this hall all aligned exactly as those in the Wing the Guards lived in on the other side. Having been here a few times in the past, Olen was familiar with a few of them.

First, Olen tried the door on the right that led downstairs. It was locked. The stairs to the upper floor were here as well: dark and uninviting. On the left, the unused Lav was open, but all the other doors were closed. Pushing forward into the darkened hall, Olen traced his left hand along the wall for guidance.

The Guard Room door on this side of the Keep was also locked. That room would be the largest room on this floor. Olen wondered where Sturn had gotten his keg of Gruel Mead from. Or which room Stat said he had worked in.

Sturn did not bother locking the doors to the walkway, so why would he lock the door from the room from which he grabbed that keg? Continuing forward, Olen checked the doors as he passed them.

Nothing. All locked. He had to go upstairs.

The Master did not allow wanton drinking while he was here, so maybe the Guards would want to keep the extra kegs out of sight. Did the Master ever come over here? Anyway, Olen walked back down the other side of the hall towards the stairs. Up he went, feeling the wall along the way.

At the top, another window looked out over the Battlements and the River beyond. Olen could see his own hall window straight across the way. No movement anywhere. Good.

Olen turned around and checked the doors in this hall, finding one on the right that was unlocked right away. Eerily, its location mirrored Sahindra's room. In he went.

The open window in here was barred and illuminated this room accordingly by the Starlight. The room looked like Sahindra's room, but it was practically empty. Sure enough, there were two more kegs in a corner beside a door that would lead into a room like Olen's. Not feeling very lucky now, Olen crossed the room to the other door and went into what Olen knew would be a smaller adjoining room.

This room, surprisingly, was loaded with stuff.

A bed and a couple of desks, like his own, were used to hold numerous boxes and other unused items. Olen began rummaging in the dark and found that most of the boxes held clothes and other personal effects. Maybe these were old leftovers from previous Tenants and were all just piled up in here. Olen went through some of it in more detail.

One box of clothes he sifted through had what seemed like a large, metallic finger-ring that felt like it was engraved with some sort of Sigil. By the weight, it felt valuable, so Olen pocketed it.

Combs, boots, more clothes, some books that he could not read in this darkness, bedpans, and nothing else of much use were in the boxes he checked. If he had had time, maybe Olen could tie the clothes together to make a rope and escape. No. He had to keep looking!

The desks each held a drawer. Some had paper in them, with old markers and ink bottles. There was lettering on most of the papers. The lettering looked important, as paper was a luxury around here, but Olen, again, could not read them in this darkness.

In another desk drawer, behind more paper, Olen struck Durb and found a Rauter key. It was like the keys that the Guards used around the building on their key rings. Olen kept that; it might open another door.

Just as he pocketed it, Olen heard the *click* of the door in the opposite room. Olen froze, noticing that his door that led into the other room was also slightly ajar.

Olen stealthily went over and closed this door just as the hall door swung open and Sturn came bustling in with an empty keg.

Of course, how foolish! He must be returning the empty one. That was why all the doors were unlocked. Sturn was planning to come back!

With some muffled grunts, Olen heard Sturn drop the empty keg beside the others that were very near him on the other side of the door and then left just as quickly as he arrived, closing the door to the hall behind him.

Olen opened his door and slipped into the larger room with the kegs. With a realization of utter defeat, Olen heard Sturn lock the door from the hall. He was trapped! And only Stat knew he was over here!

A sudden image of dying in here with a bunch of Gruel Mead ran through Olen's head and caused the little hairs on his body to stand on end. This irritated the scar on Olen's right shoulder blade, that had no hair on it, with a cool sensation.

Olen ran to the door and heard Sturn lumber on down the stairs. The Endemic would lock all the doors on his way out! Hopelessly, Olen still tried the door. It wouldn't open. The only saving grace was the key he had just found.

Maybe, just maybe, could there be two keys for this room? Or maybe Sturn had a Master key? It was his only hope. Olen pulled the key out and tried it. The key slammed Home, and the door opened.

A wonderful feeling of relief washed over him, followed by another bout of panic that tickled Olen's scar. That key may not work so well on

the other doors Sturn would lock up as he went back to the Guard Room on the other side of the Keep.

Olen dashed to the stairs and descended. He did not know if Sturn had left this side of the Keep yet. At the bottom, Olen peered around. No one. Did Sturn leave?

Then, down the hall and away from the door, Olen heard something in one of the other rooms. Shuffling noises. Sturn hadn't gone back through to the other side yet. He was still here on this side!

Not wasting any time, for Olen knew that Sturn could come out at any Breath, Olen opened the door to the walkway and prayed that there would be no other Guards out there waiting for Sturn to return.

If Olen got caught, it would be a severe punishment no matter how much the Master discouraged it. At least he would not die locked in that room upstairs.

No time for ducking, Olen ran along the walkway and towards the opposite door. Out of the corner of his eye, Olen noticed that the old man was not in his spot any longer. Olen peeked into the Guard Hall through the small window on the door. No one was there. Good!

Just as Olen was opening the door to let himself in, he heard a soft clunk directly behind him. *Close* behind him. Olen twirled, fearing that he would have to face Sturn, but there was no one there.

A motion on the ground drew his attention. A small ball of twine was rolling to a stop by his feet. What? Olen picked it up, feeling the weight of a stone inside the twine. Someone had just thrown it up here from below.

There was no time to look. Opening the door, Olen sneaked into the Guard Hallway. Lights still crept from under the Guard Room door. Then, before anything worse could happen, Olen flew up the stairs towards his own floor.

Olen was so determined to get back to his room that he failed to hear Tandall, already upstairs, shouting something undiscernible.

Too late! Olen's momentum, as he ran, pushed him into the middle of the upstairs hall before he could stop himself.

There was Tandall, his dark silhouette enveloping the whole hall.

Luckily, Tandall's back was turned towards Olen, so he did not see him, but it was clear from the way the Guard held himself that the Endemic Chief was in a foul mood.

Unluckily, Tandall was heading straight towards Stat's room.

Deep in the Keep, the Master's great Water Clock chimed the Occulting Hour: the start of a new Day.

Sun Day.