

JOURNEY TO THE HELLFIRE STEPPE

By Konrad Cajgler

Somewhere between insanity and logic, where the energies of elementals and gods converged, somewhere between the weird and mundane, there lied a prison unlike any other; a desert wasteland which none escaped from, many have tried. Only the Warden, making his rounds every aeon or so, will open the portal and descend the golden stairs into the Hellfire Steppe...

‘...So, the legend goes.’ Daelothwen, a pale-green skinned woman—a rose dryad—said.

The pair of roses on her head flowed in the dry wind like buns of hair, glistening in the arid sunlight; with great struggle she conjured flakes of ice upon her head to stop the plants from wilting.

‘Shouldn’t have wasted all your ice before.’ Fringe smirked. His blond curls flowed chaotically in the wind.

‘I don’t know how you can stand it here in that coat.’ she changed the topic, sprinkling her face and neck with more tiny bits of ice. The ice flakes turned into water; the water ran down her dark low-cut dress made out of leaves.

Arkadiusz Fringe swatted the sweat from his forehead, ‘why would there be a “Warden” coming down, opening up a gateway out of a magical prison?’ he paused, then spoke again, ‘it just doesn’t make any sense.’

But she did not reply.

‘I’m not leaving!’ Screamed the old man, Dio, from within his clay jar home.

The jar laid to its side, it was large enough to fit a man or two and there were strands of hay sticking out from the inside.

‘You can rot here forever if you want.’ Daelothwen wailed at both Dio and Fringe.

The woman, the wizard and the old man were upon the rocky shelf, a stone slab somewhere in the middle of the desert wastes a couple of feet above the sand with great dunes surrounding them in all directions. Those that stood upon the shelf towered over everything within miles and miles of mere human sight. And Dio’s jar was right in the middle of that maelstrom of chaotic nothingness.

‘I’m not going!’ the old man crawled deeper into his clay jar.

The dryad walked off the stone slab, delving into the hot, almost steaming sand. Upon seeing her bare feet touch that rough, coarse sand, Fringe knew it would irritate him if he walked in his shoes and socks. It already had back when he first followed Dio to this stone slab, this stone shelf back when he first landed—unfairly sentenced—into this prison world. His options were simple; He could take off his shoes and walk barefoot across the desert, like the woman just did, and expend his mystic energies on keeping his feet cool with some elemancy, conjuring specks of ice in the same way she kept her flowers from wilting; Or, he considered keeping his shoes on, instead using the abundant light to form a barrier around his shoes, using photomancy, that would prevent any dust or sand from coming in... In the end both ways would drain him, and if he ran out of energy to keep up whatever spell he used, then there wasn’t much point in wasting it all to begin with.

No, Fringe would suffer the hot sand crawling in between any hole or crevice of his shoes and not bother protecting his feet. And as he descended from the great stone slab down into the sands, he regretted his decision. With each step his heels dug in, his toes clenched as he raised each leg one after another to climb out of the yellow horrid dust. His shoes were heavier with every step.

And yet somehow, he caught up to Daelothwen. Her strange name echoed in the back of his mind, as if he heard it somewhere before. Seeing the back of that pale-green woman, her wilting dress shuffling as she strode across the desert, arms waving back and forth as if she also had issues with her feet digging into the sand.

But the two pressed on. In the hot, arid sunlight.

‘Maybe we should’ve waited until nightfall?’ Fringe suggested, struggling to keep his breath steady.

‘No.’ was all that she uttered.

Then he remembered the first night he spent here—last night, all those weird noises and movement in the distant reaches of the desert. In the darkness.

King Mouse and the giant worms...

‘Do they only come out during the night?’ he asked.

It was all he could do to somehow sway the tide of nervous silence that he knew would otherwise build up.

‘Not the only ones. But the ones everyone else is afraid of.’ she said, puffing air.

They had come quite far by then; Fringe couldn’t even see the stone shelf anymore. Instead he saw the writhing shuddering frail skin-and-bones of Dio. Not closing in on them at all, the old man followed them nevertheless.

They had come to some rocks in the desert. Not great big rocks like Dio’s stone shelf, but they were massive enough that one could stand or sit upon them. First the dryad picked a rock for herself and climbed it. Then Fringe, exhausted, tried and failed to climb the one he picked. After falling into the sand and causing quite a puff of dust to rise up, he jumped and ran up the rock’s hot dry surface to the top.

‘That’s enough!’ Fringe screamed, calling for Daelothwen’s attention.

She, standing on her rock, turned and looked at him as he swung his arms up into the air. From his eyes there was a white-blue colour spilling out a little bit into a shape of lightning. His hands grasped for air as he had spoken the language of ancient tongues—interpreted by the lexicologists in the middle of their wizardly lives; rich enough in wisdom to transcribe old tablets but still uncorrupted by the wild magics enough that they could carry on their studies and share the fruit of their labour with others.

The area around them dimmed as dull black clouds were thrust into being overhead, suffocating everything beneath them. Once Fringe collapsed from sheer exhaustion onto the rock he had stood upon, the suffocating sensation was swept away by a rapid burst of cool air.

And then it rained.

Dio caught up with them just in time to get drenched, looked at Fringe, then at the green dryad woman.

‘What now?’ he smiled, a childish, innocent smile that almost crept from ear to ear.

The old man looked at the horizon of yellow light that shone between the land and the dark clouds.

‘Well, now I sleep.’ Fringe sighed.

‘What about the worms?’

‘Thank you for that.’ Daelothwen stretched out her body to catch as much of the water as possible.

But when her leafy dress dropped to the ground, Fringe covered his eyes at first, then looked away, noticing Dio staring unashamedly at the pale green almost-flesh of the woman—that though looked as soft as skin of any fair beauty, it was still bark of a tree-person—but of course Fringe didn’t look at her. He had more class than that. However, it was not enough to stop him from peaking.

She almost skipped up and down after a while of standing in the rain. The old man, as if seeing a loving muse for the first time in years, raised his hands and made his way towards her. If only Fringe didn't put his hand on his shoulder in that moment of near triumph, Dio was so close he would have touched her, maybe at long last feeling complete as a man, as a being.

Once she noticed what the pair of ogling men they turned into, she dispatched three shards of ice, formed out of the rain pouring down, and had the shards, those spikes, fly right into them, piercing their bodies.

At least that's what Fringe expected to happen, and it was not for the lack of the desert rose's want that they didn't die right there and then. If Dio hadn't thrown himself at the young wizard, shoving both of them out of the way, Daelothwen might have cheered.

By then, the two men got up from the wet sand, the woman had put her leafy dress back on. Her red, glowing eyes pierced the very soul that Fringe forgot he had, in a way that no ice spikes could. It made him feel cold inside—was it another spell?

'Feeling better now?' Fringe offered a hand to help Daelothwen jump off the rock.

She refused, hit the ground on her feet. Then her eyes were focused on the horizon.

'It will be night soon.' she said, then turning towards them, 'I never should've let you follow me. The worms will find us now.' and she stormed off, just as the storm clouds above them dispersed and the rain ceased.

'Hold on!' Fringe went after her.

But his legs were too tired, he fell on his knees, one of the rocks was the only thing preventing him from falling face first into the froth of wet sand, he managed to lean on it. She was still walking away when he turned his attention towards the rock. The rough texture of it, the sleek layer of water seeping into every inch of its very surface, every crevasse.

'I have an idea!' he screamed again.

When Fringe had finished explaining his idea to both Dio and Daelothwen, the cloudless sky had turned from blue to orange, then to pink. The sun was setting. Shadows came. Darkness was swallowing all.

‘It sounds...’ Dio started, stroking his bald forehead, ‘unbelievable. Like nothing I ever heard possible!’

And there was a terrible rumbling in the distance, the vibrations from under the ground came and went in sporadic episodes. The sensation given by the sands was odd, as if each speck shivered individually. It had been an earthquake, or at least an echo of one.

Fringe looked at the dryad, ‘Well I’m out of juice.’

‘Are you thirsty?’ Dio asked.

Both the young wizard and the woman ignored him.

But darkness had come. The shivering sands quaked more.

Something was getting closer and closer. All three of them jumped on the massive rocks. Fringe couldn’t see much, but he heard Dio being kicked off and hitting the ground.

‘Get off me you fool.’ Daelothwen screamed.

The old man scurried to find another rock—there was a sound of his feet dragging in the shifting sands. The earth shook. This time there was a continuous hum as if something were burrowing beneath them.

‘Come on!’ Fringe lifted his hand out, out into the nothingness of utter darkness.

Something latched onto it.

It was Dio! Fringe pulled the old man towards him, and he managed to climb to the top of the rock. Nothing could be seen in the darkness. In that complete, terrible darkness that made the shadows and monsters of the mind play up with any sound; a whistle of wind, or howling? The earthquake, or the worms breaking through the surface to devour them? And in

all that noise, in all those images conjured by a tired, weary mind, Fringe heard the echoes of a high pitched “ho-ho” cackling.

King Mouse.

Fringe’s hand was loath to break away from Dio’s. The young wizard’s entire being gripped to the cold surface of the rock.

That night there would be no rest for any of them.

Quakes did not cease until the coming of dawn. The yellow bright rays heralded by the brightening blue hues of the sky. The velvet clouds darted furiously about it, above their heads. The beauty of it was lost on Fringe, who though could not see the black bags beneath his eyes, still felt their sensitive malice with the touch of wind. When Daelothwen opened her eyes—and for a moment he feared she wouldn’t—she told him of how horrid his face looked.

‘And all those lines.’ she added with a devilish smile.

Then Fringe noticed that she had teeth and tongue, and besides her skin-tone, the roses on her head and that leafy dress (now half torn and half wilted) she looked quite human.

‘And that hair?!’ her smile vanished.

Fringe panicked, grabbed his curls, combed the hairline with his fingers. His face relaxed, relieved that the full set was still there.

‘It’s orange.’ Dio whispered.

‘No.’ Fringe felt his face, his dry wrinkled face.

Daelothwen laughed, ‘you’re ginger!’

‘Curses! Damnation! Kurwa!’ Fringe cursed as he searched the inside pockets of his coat.

When at last he found a vial with an orange liquid inside, he hurried to drink the liquid. After throwing the empty glass away, Daelothwen and Dio stared at him with wide eyes. It was as if they had been expecting something grand or whimsical to happen.

‘What was that?’ the rose dryad asked.

‘Nothing.’ Fringe said, getting up and jumping off of the rock.

He then swatted the dust off his coat with his hands and looked at the both of them, then at the rocks around them.

‘My plan.’ he started.

Dio interrupted, ‘are you feeling well enough to begin?’

‘He’s had enough rest.’ Daelothwen crossed her arms.

Fringe cleared his throat, ‘I had no sleep last night.’

‘Neither did I.’ Daelothwen rolled her eyes, held up her hand, pointed her palm at Dio.

Almost instantly, Dio froze up in a block of ice up to his neck.

‘Not again!’ he cried, ‘Gods damn you witch!’

‘I’m glad you’re back to your full form.’ The ginger wizard waved his hands, ‘but humans need a little more than rainfall to replenish their energy and...’

There was silence for a while. The rose-dryad looked around at the yellow sands, then up at the blue sky around where they came from, then faced the direction they were heading towards.

‘I am not waiting almost a whole day to thaw out again!’ Dio screamed in agony.

‘Neither am I.’ Daelothwen snapped, ‘I’m going further on my own.’ she turned away from them.

‘You only slow me down. Both of you.’ she added under her breath, though loudly enough that Fringe could hear.

‘There was a reason you’ve stumbled into us in the first place, wasn’t there?’ the young wizard spoke with a clear, assured voice.

She stopped, turned around to face him and the old man.

‘Do you know how long I walked? How many of those nights with the worms and that blasted laughter burrowing into my mind, echoing and echoing...?’

She gripped the roses on her head, ‘years of isolation. Not talking to a single soul takes its toll on you. On your psyche.’

‘Are we not alone in this place?’ Dio asked, looking at Fringe like a lost puppy looking up at a passer-by, ‘I must admit, until I met you two, I thought I was alone.’

‘There are thousands. Over the eons, possibly millions of sorcerers, warlocks,’ Fringe looked at Daelothwen, ‘witches.’ and he sighed.

After a brief breath, he continued, ‘I only heard things of this place from sources that are less than reputable.’

Then Daelothwen let go of the flowers on her head, ‘what good does that do when everyone were either placed thousands of miles apart from each other or had gone completely crazy?’ and there was something resembling a droplet, a tear falling down her cheek.

‘You’re slowing me down. I have to get out of here.’ she said, walking away from them.

Fringe caught up to her.

‘Hey!’ he grabbed her arm, ‘how do you know which way to go? If you’ve never seen another soul here for years? How did you hear about this “Warden” legend anyhow?’

‘I didn’t hear it.’ she started, then shrugged Fringe off.

‘I’ve read it. Gravestone upon gravestone of wizard scribblings, mages long gone from this or any world.’

And Fringe’s eyes widened, ‘But I thought we could live forever. You know, it being pact and parcel of magic and all that—’

‘You mean part and parcel?’ she shook her head, ‘the gravestones were for their last words of sanity. Before they succumbed to their true age.’

She walked on.

Fringe and Dio followed.

‘Leave me alone.’ she said not even looking at them.

She just kept walking forward.

‘How long have you been on your own before meeting us? Whatever happens, it’s best we stick together.’

‘I liked the ginger man’s idea before, the one with—’ Dio was interrupted by Daelothwen suddenly swerving around as if her feet were sliding on ice.

There was fury in her scarlet upon scarlet eyes, pain of loss and longing for something. Fringe could tell at least that much. The irises of her eyes were focused on Dio, yet shivered intensely, as if keeping all that focus took all the energy she had.

But she said nothing.

‘As far as I know,’ Fringe started, ‘the worms don’t come out during the daylight. We’re save here. Using my idea, we can travel throughout the nights and rest in the day.’

‘That makes sense, plant-woman!’ Dio added.

‘This way we’ll get there faster. But I need your help.’ the ginger wizard said.

‘I told you I don’t do stone. Or earth. Or this blasted dirt!’ and she kicked at the sand around her, a cloud of dust puffed into being around her as she did.

‘I don’t need you for your elemental power.’ Fringe crossed his arms, ‘you’re a witch, right? Surely you must know a spell that could prove useful in this situation.’

Closing her eyes, she sighed, then opened them again.

‘Yeah. I might know. With your idea, we’d need to breathe somehow. Otherwise we’d need to make stops every time we run out of air. I guess.’

‘Good.’ in hearing Daelothwen’s voice and shortly after hearing his own, Fringe collapsed down.

The tiredness must've gotten to him.

At first there was nothing but an empty void devoid of any thought. He spent no expense on thinking, instead he let himself loose in a river of feeling. Swept by emotions: fear to happiness, anger to sadness, anticipation to shock surprise, joy to disgust. Over and over. From one to the other he ceased to be himself, only a thing conscious enough to be aware of the immediate, to suffer the now as entropy peeled away at his existence.

'I don't think he'll eat that.' he heard a faint feminine voice.

Something other dragged his consciousness out of the river and into the recognition of the self. He opened his eyes. The light of the setting sun blinded him. He closed them.

'Hold on, he's waking up.' he heard a man's voice.

And he recognised it, it was Dio's.

He opened his eyes again, he saw Dio hold up in the bowl of his hands a spaghetti weave of tiny long worms.

'Neath one of the rocks.' the old man pushed the worms closer to Fringe's face.

The young wizard threw himself away from the live food. Dio shrugged and chowed down on the food he had presented.

Fringe looked around, the distant sand dunes gleamed in golden hues with the setting sun, he saw the specks of sand fly off their tips in the coming wind. He saw the nearby rocks set about the sands. Those rocks that had saved their lives the night before were as if looking down on him now. He sat up, saw Daelothwen, her red eyes focused on him.

'Have I wasted my time on you? Eat.' then she threw a stern glance at Dio, 'he says it's human food. Didn't know bird and man ate the same prey.'

'Not the cuisine I am used to, or one that I prefer. Or one that I am willing to digest.'

But when Fringe's stomach growled in a high pitch, he rubbed his belly and looked at Dio, still eating his protein clew.

‘Eew’ was all he said when Dio showed him where he found the small worms.

Under a rock nearby. With worms in his hand, Fringe closed his eyes. He had to think of something else, anything else. A BLT sandwich, a banana waffle with chocolate chips, his favourite crunchy salt and vinegar crisps, cheese and bacon burger. Anything.

After the dinner, his stomach ceased making noise. Fed, (as well as the circumstances permitted) and rested, (as well as the bane of nightmares allowed) Fringe got up on his feet and started preparing for the spell.

Night was coming, and they’d move out tonight—with great speed, he hoped.

First, they pushed all of the rocks closer together, rolling them into one spot. This made it easier for his next step. He held up his arms and within his mind chanted appreciative thoughts of studying advanced geomancy. What he’d do after getting out of this hell hole, is go into his library and clear all the dust from the tomes on the topic.

The rocks slapped together, cracking and quaking into one another forming a single great boulder. Fringe opened his eyes to see his new creation. A smile helplessly appeared on his face. Daelothwen noticed, her scowling gaze penetrated him but did not affect his mental stability. He felt good. Closed his eyes and moved his hands closer to each other. He shaped his hands as if he were holding a ball, moved his fingers around. As he did the boulder’s ragged and sharp edges smothered through the air as it swivelled around and about in place. Then his fingers drew together as if gripping something, they loosened and stiffened as if he were stroking or scratching something dramatically with them. But otherwise it looked like he was trying to touch, hold and scratch nothing but air.

Dio opened his mouth, but the woman threw her hand up at his face, silencing him.

The boulder became a smooth round ball, then it bulked up all around, larger and larger until Fringe clapped his hands.

‘Ok. It’s hollow. I’ll make us an entry,’ Fringe said, then turning towards Daelothwen, ‘will you be able to do something about the air once we’re inside and close it up?’

She nodded.

* * *

They travelled during the night. Fringe had made a stone platform inside the hollow boulder; thus, they could stand inside while the geomancy propelled them forwards with great haste. While he expended his energies keeping up the speed, Daelothwen expended hers in keeping up a spell of underwater breathing (or such a spell with applications in out of water environments, with a few tweaks). But they were still travelling blind.

Driving, or rolling would be a more apt of a word for it, during the cold and dark nights in the general direction that the rose-dryad pointed at before they got into the boulder meant they could cover dozens and dozens of miles at once. They’d know when daybreak rolled in because they felt the heat inside the rock build up to unbearable levels. They rested during the day, and Dio would hunt the wastes for food; those tiny worms seemed to have been sprawling from everywhere the closer they got to the “Hellfire Steppe”.

They spent days sleeping, and when they did not sleep, they begrudgingly devoured the offerings of the desert (all begrudgingly except Dio, he said he got used to it). And in the space between sleeping and eating, they found time to talk. About each other, about their pasts, about anything really.

Arkadiusz Fringe used to count the days he had spent in Tartarus, but when other things occupied his mind—more important in the moment; memorable events in Dio’s life, how Daelothwen ended up in the human dimension when she was a sapling and got bullied by a pack of raving twelve-year olds—he stopped counting. Maybe he was there months, maybe a year had passed. The only hint for his aging were the cringed faces Dio and Daelothwen pulled when they looked at him. He felt the wrinkles on his face, too many to

count. And his hair grew so long that he could see its orange strands if he pulled them down. He was out of potions and his energies were needed elsewhere rather than to keep up the façade of eternal youth.

After many days and nights, Fringe joined Dio in the hunt for the tiny worms.

When the old man picked up a rock, underneath which hundreds of them slithered, he fell to the ground. There was nothing Fringe could do, by then the old man was a mere lying skeleton. A death in the prison of eternal torment was an odd thing indeed—It was not thought possible, but then again, the line between memory of truth and gossip of legend had blurred with time so much that nothing really made sense anymore.

Was this it? Had Fringe finally lost his mind? Was Dio even real to begin with?

The not-so-young-wizard broke down into a wild frenzy, a stroke of panic that forced Daelothwen to freeze him in a cube of ice until he calmed down.

Then, they found a rock and fashioned one side of it into a smooth surface using magics they forgot the words for. They buried the old-old man there. Deep, deep under the sands of Tartarus.

Fringe inscribed letters into the flat face of the rock. And the rock spelled out SILENCE. And when they turned away from the rock and turned back to gaze at it one last time, the letters spelled out DIO WAS HERE.

Thus, Fringe and Daelothwen travelled further across the desert, blazed through those wastes that were their prison every waking night. They travelled for a long time. Had it been Years? Decades? Perhaps a century passed since his *unjust* banishment. Was his punishment even meant to last that long? In all the time they travelled since, the rose-dryad did not age. Her pale almost-lime green body remained as he had met her, even as her dress had wilted and shrivelled into itself. That did not surprise him much though, after all she was of a race of tree-people.

In all of the time they had spent together, she never asked why he had been thrown here. Never hinted at pondering the reason, either. Because of this he never asked her why she herself had been banished to this world too. He felt it would be just a tad bit rude. Or maybe it ceased to matter.

Well, on the horizon there appeared a great stone wall that went up and up and up. It was so tall only the godlike Titans could use it as a step. If there was another one beyond it, even higher, it could not be seen even from a distance. They spent a day looking at it from hundreds of miles away, then every night they drove towards it. When they came close enough to see a crack in the wall, a gaping chasm cut between the stone, they knew they'd have to go in through there.

It wasn't long now, they cheered, they'd finally reach the legendary Hellfire Steppe. By daybreak they arrived at the mighty crack in the wall.

Why did they travel there? It was some important reason surely...

* * *

'What are you doing Arkadiusz?' the woman with two roses on her head screamed.

Fringe had turned away from the howling opening in the giant rock wall and took several steps back into the blighted desert.

'End of the line, why are we here anyway?' he shook his head feverishly.

'No!' she ran after him, grabbed him by the neck in a stranglehold and dragged him back towards the stone wall.

'I'm not losing you too. Not now!'

She dragged him into the cavern opening and into the shade.

'We're getting out of this prison! Now! Today!' her words echoed across the gaping chasm above them.

'Do you hear it?' she stopped.

Fringe ceased struggling and freed himself from her clutches.

‘Hear what?’

She looked at him, her eyes the same as when he met her, scarlet upon scarlet, the black irises in the middle, the alluring glow beckoning for him to draw closer, her pouty perky lips demanded his attention. But he was an old man now, there was no way he could satisfy a woman like that. Not conventionally at least.

‘You’re still a disgusting pervert.’ she snidely snickered.

‘Are you reading my mind or am I thinking out loud again?’ he laughed.

Though she broke eye-contact with him, a hint of a smile appeared on her face. Her eyes glistened in the light coming from the gap in the rock above them. At least what little light made it through all the way down to their level. Her smile faded when there was a loud thud, as if something heavy dropped into a sand pit, a sound coming from further into the cavern.

She turned to face the noise, coming further from within. This time he heard it too. They moved swiftly into the cavern, and after a few hours of near total darkness, the light shone through from the other end. It was as if the sun itself moved from the sky and shone their way across. When they made it through the wall, there was chit-chatter and shouting.

Thousands upon thousands of people: wizards, witches, warlocks, sorcerers and journalists swarmed a vast plain that stretched as far as the eye could see. On the other side of the plain there was a plateau high up, upon which tiny dots could be seen in swath of movement. Like ants. There were flashes of magic, colourful shapes spawned and conjured before waves of fire, ice or thunder swept across the plains. Fringe feared the fire, he didn’t remember why.

‘This is it!’ Daelothwen screamed through the barrage of spellcasting, voodoo cursing and just plain old cursing.

‘You f*cking right mate catch me outside!’ a man with short hair pushed past Fringe, almost tripping the old man up, and ran towards the plateau pointing at the light above it, above and in front of everything.

The man was shortly pushed out of the way himself by some long-nosed witch and he forgot all about the light and punched her in the face. She retaliated by setting him on fire, to which he responded with agonizing screams.

There was a group of bald monks dressed in bright orange robes beating a helpless child with their sticks.

A rag-tag pair of long-bearded dwarves slapped each other with the carcass of a human-tall worm.

Fringe and Daelothwen held hands as they ran into the fray of madness. All of these people fighting amongst themselves shook Fringe to his core. The both of them ran as fast as they could for a whole day until the sun had reached the horizon of the plateau. Light touched light and the sun combined with whatever source of brightness there was before, causing erratic flashes across the black sky.

‘That’s it! The Warden! The sun is The Warden!’ Daelothwen screamed, almost falling to her knees.

Fringe didn’t let her.

They ran towards it, knowing that the plateau ahead of them will have to be climbed. They were so close.

‘We can make it!’ Fringe screamed, ‘We just have to not aggro anyone!’ he hoped the rose-dryad heard him.

‘It was all a ruse of the Alchemists!’ some dry crackly voice in the crowd of hundreds announced.

Fringe turned to face the noise.

‘Stop denying the Great Wiping of 3rd Era 8845 BBC!’ another one screamed.

‘Don’t you get it? it was a ploy to increase the stock prices of toilet paper!’ and just like that Fringe tuned out from the noise of the rabble.

Fringe and Daelothwen ran together towards the great plateau. Dodging out of the way of summoned stalactites of ice falling from the sky. When a series of meteors crumbled the earth that they ran on into a great crater, Fringe used all of his strength to float him and her up above, until they reached the other side. They fell just below the plateau. From here, Fringe saw the unfathomable battles raging above. There was the first plateau. Then there was a second one above that. And another one. And another. Near the top he saw movement. Large long ropes of shadow; the giant worms. He could almost hear the dreaded “ho-ho” cackling but was sure it was just his mind playing tricks.

Fringe turned towards Daelothwen.

‘I can teleport us up there!’ he said.

‘Teleport?! And two people at once? Why didn’t you tell us that earlier?’ her face contorted into a hurt scowl.

‘Take my hand!’ he screamed at her.

‘I’m already holding your hand!’

‘My other one!’ then he smiled, ‘that’s not my hand.’

And Fringe grabbed Daelothwen and snatched her into his arms. In their close embrace, he whispered into her ear:

‘I can’t do it through dimensions, only if I see the location I need to go to. Right now, the top of these plateaus, I can look up there and I can form some kind of connection to that place.’

There were thousands upon thousands of men and women, children and pets and monsters screaming and fighting all around them.

‘You could’ve done that before!’ she tried hitting him with her arms, but even for an old man he overpowered her.

‘What stopped you?!’

He looked her in the eyes, ‘it would have killed me. At least now somebody will make it through to the other side.’

She stopped struggling, the features of her face softened. ‘What?’

The air around them became colder, the dust and pebbles surrounding them shivered and darted about just above the ground, forming a patch of fog-like belts around them. The screams and wails of hundreds became just a faint echo.

Daelothwen tried breaking away from Fringe’s grasp. She cried and screamed and kicked and nearly tore herself away from him.

But he knew what he wanted to do, what he had to do. He lived a life constantly on the move, constantly chasing an escape. But it was her that made it all bearable, he realised. She still looked young and beautiful, and in her eyes, there was still a glimmer of something he had long lost; responsibility for one’s own destiny. When he strayed, she pulled him back on his path. When he faltered, she picked him up. She was worth his life—he lived it too long anyway.

She still struggled in his embrace when he closed his eyes, he disappeared.

Away from that place of endless suffering.

But he did not expect to open his eyes again.

He blinked. He appeared in a grey room in a circular centre surrounded by dim light. A stone altar in front of him almost surrounded him. Behind it were four human-sized figures wearing brown robes, their faces were covered by different expressions and colours. One wore a frowning red mask, another a crying blue, one green of utter indifference, and one with a yellow smiling mask cleared their throat and announced:

‘Congratulations! Your bail has been paid!’

THE END