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### The Shard of Carnor

Carba slunk down the narrow steps, farther and farther through the dark passage. Finally, he saw the end of the stairs, leading off into a large room. Reaching down to his leather deerskin belt, he unsheathed a long curved dagger and continued cautiously as the corridor opened up to the larger area. The room was fairly dark, although it was partially illuminated by the eerie green torches that lined the walls. A door lay at the end of the room, carved out of the stone, with an old inscription on it. Carba gently brushed the dust off of the door and attempted to make out the words that had been fashioned into the wall. As the dust settled, Carba read the inscription quietly, which was in the ancient language of the Palani, an extinct race that had once ruled the entire world of Carnor. “Here lies the domain of Blazic, Lord of the Darkness.” Carba pushed the door, causing it to rotate to the left. He walked through the entrance, his dark brown eyes shifting from left to right, taking in every detail of the new world in which he was entering. All around him was a wasteland, scorched and desolate, as if it had been burned for several years without a drop of water or glimpse of sunlight. Ahead lay a dark gate that guarded some unseen destination that lay beyond its grasp. Carba glanced back at the mountain passage that had led him to this place. Turning towards the gate, he started forwards into the barren wilderness.

A path led down the road towards the dark land, although it was barely visible among the dry sand that lay on the ground. Withered trees were scattered about the land, with other dry shrubs to keep them company among the scorched wilderness. As he surveyed the gate, Carba could faintly make out the small forms of men up on the ramparts of the gate. They all wore the black leather armor of the dark lord, with black shields that had a black orb on them. The orb symbolized Blazic's power, and it was the sign that all of Carnor had come to fear. Suddenly, the path before Carba disappeared, giving way to a large dark shadow that resembled a man. The dark newcomer drew up to its full height, causing its form to change from a man to something out of a nightmare. Its glowing red eyes stood out against what was otherwise a completely black shadow. A sword materialized into the phantom's hand, and it rasped out its message in an eerie voice.

“What is your business in the domain of Blazic, man? Tell me swiftly! The dark lord does not welcome visitors.”

Carba's sword left his sheath in a metallic whisper. “My business is my own, shadow! You do not command me, and neither does Blazic. I come here to do business with the dark lord, in which I will be justly rewarded for my work!”

The shadow paused and then vanished with a scream, going to some location inside the dark fortress. Another dark form rose up from the round, fire flashing around it as it materialized into the dusty valley. The new shadow looked similar to the last, except larger, and a flaming mark stood out on its chest, glowing with every breath it took.

“You say that you have business with the dark lord? Speak then, man! I command the black orb in the absence of Blazic!”

Carba paused, contemplating his options. Then, with a practiced twist, he returned his blade to its home, slowly reaching his hand into a pouch on his belt. The shadow looked on, its expression unchanging as it watched the man that stood before him. Carba slowly withdrew his hand, keeping the object inside invisible from the dark creature. His mouth slowly contorted into an evil smile that spread across his face. As he opened his hand, the shadow gaped in surprise at the object in Carba's hand.

"Perhaps you are right, man. The dark lord will be very pleased to do business with you. What is your name?"

"I am called Carba." Carba's face returned to its expressionless state. The shadow gestured towards the ground, causing flames to rise up around the two figures in the landscape, whispering as the two were taken away. "Carba, what is it you want most?"

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The sun rose slowly, cresting above the trees of Moundun, and illuminating the mountains that dwarfed the valley. The river of Central Moundun twisted around the small towns of the area's inhabitants, glittering as the bright rays of sunlight bounced off of the water in a woven pattern around the small structures. Trees were abundant in the peaceful valley, growing in small groves around the settlements of the Moundain people. Central Moundun was, of course, the center of Moundun, and it was here that the Moundain people depended. The typical wooden structures of Moundun that were in this part of the community were a bit more impressive than the normal huts of the Moundain. The central building of Central Moundun was about three times larger than a house, and it boasted a balcony on each side and a stairway that led up into the second level of the

structure. The small ruling system of the Moundain was headed by the elders that dwelled in the huts surrounding the central structure. Although this large building had no real name, all of the Moundain referred to it as the “judging house.” Once every month, the score of elders would meet at the judging house to settle all of the various disputes and help with the needs of their people. The few days in which the judging house was functioning, the tall Moundain people would line up at the door, waiting for their turn to present their problem to the elders.

It was on one of these such days, that Elner was woken up by the cries of all of his fellow citizens, rushing to be the first to see the elders, all the while knowing that someone would be there before them. Elner was a fine young man, for the Moundain people were little more than large men, and was renowned throughout Western Moundun for his skills with a bow and an arrow. Every day after finishing his work on his modest farm, Elner could be seen flexing his bowstring, sending shafts into any target that he could think of. He had made the bow as a child, and he carried the strong oak weapon with him on all of his ventures into the woods. In Western Moundun, Elner’s hut lay towards the far western fringe of the town. A strong wooden barricade surrounded the outer edges of each of the Moundain cities, and it was this structure that separated the forest from Elner’s home. Because the young Moundain man seldom ventured far into his community, he never had any arguments with his fellow Moundain, and Elner had made a habit of sneaking off into the forest during the judging day, where he could spend the day in peace. As Elner prepared a small sack full of necessities for his trek into the forest, he looked out of his small window in his after evening meal room. Against the crowds that horded their way towards central Moundain, a single figure could be seen

pushing against the crowd, slowly making progress towards Elnor's hut. The figure, which Elnor decided must be a man for his long cloak and tall hat, carried a walking staff with some object carved on the top of the wood. As the man pushed on into the crowds again, he was lost to view, and Elnor soon returned to his task.

Grabbing up his cloak and biting off the end of a loaf from his cupboard, the young Moundain strode out of his hut and started up the dirt path that led away from the chaos near Central Moundun. Elnor hummed a merry tune to himself as he continued towards the forest, noting to himself the quietness of the village now that the townsfolk had left. A large black bird suddenly launched itself out of a tree, circling once over Elnor, and then soaring off towards the forest. The bird was an unusual sight for Moundain, for it was an outsider of the land inside the mountains, and few birds ever happened across the mountains of darkness, or found their way through the great falling waters in the south. Elnor kept up a brisk pace until he reached the gate, where he paused, staring up into the eyes of the stone statue of Manalo, the great wizard. The wise stone eyes stared back calmly, as if the statue knew everything about the world, and the young man on the path was just another common traveler, who was passing through his gate. Walking slowly through the stone entrance, Elnor's world was opened up to him as the wide valley pointed him towards the forest.

Without glancing back, Elnor strode off to the forest entrance, which was a heavily trodden path that led into the woods. Because of his usual ventures into the trees, Elnor had made his own side path into the forest that was fairly free of obstacles, and had the benefit of not being used by any but him. Sliding under the shrub that hid his path, Elnor dropped down to the ditch that lay behind it. Continuing up the path, Elnor spotted

his first campground. He had used this area as both a campsite and a hunting spot depending on the situation. With practiced skill, the young man crept silently up to the small clearing, dodging from tree to tree. Drawing his bow and selecting a shaft, Elnor jumped out from his hiding spot, quickly surveying the unusual scene before him. A large pile of gold coins lay on the ground in the middle of the area, and about ten men sat around the money, counting it out and laughing among themselves. All of the men wore harsh expressions, even as they happily counted the gold, and a foreboding air hung around them, just as the fog stayed around after the midyear rains. Using his hunting skill that he had spent long hours developing, Elnor crept up a nearby tree, making sure to be well hidden so as not be caught by the men below. After reaching a relatively high point in the tree, Elnor stopped, and watched the scene below him with growing interest. One of the men, who was about two heads higher than the rest, stopped counting, surveying the sky above him. A flapping of wings and a loud squawking ensued from somewhere in the sky. Drawing his sword, he barked orders to the others, who complied hurriedly. "Get down! Douse the fire and hide the gold! Find cover before we are found." One of the men, who was scooping gold into a pouch in his belt, murmured nervously, "We never should have run. I knew we couldn't make it away from them. They will find us!"

"Shut up! We will get no mercy from the dark lord's servants now! Our only hope is to fight, and somehow escape from their grasp." The man suddenly gasped, and then slumped to the ground, a dark figure emerging from behind the man's body. The form snarled at the remaining soldiers, its voice grating into the forest. "You fools! You thought that you could escape from us! Blazic's power reaches everywhere! There is no escape!" A red sword leapt into the dark one's hand, fire surrounding its dark blade. A

few moments later, the last of the dark men collapsed, and the black form returned its weapon from whence it came. Turning, the fiendish black form gazed up at Elnor, who drew an arrow and notched it to his bow. The shadow sneered at the young man, rasping out in the same toneless voice, "You thought yourself to be clever, boy. The servants of the dark lord see all, and one such as you does not escape our grasp. Why do you hunt these men? Speak!" Elnor swallowed nervously. "I was not hunting them. I was merely going out to hunt some animals to supply my family with for the season of the freezing waters. I usually come this way to hunt the deer that live near the mountains." The shadow remained silent, its dark form wavering with the slight breeze. Finally, the creature voiced its thoughts to Elnor, although its expression remained unchanged. "You will come with me. You may join my lord Blazic's armies' or you will die. If you succeed in the tasks appointed to you, I will see that you will be rewarded for your work."

Elnor kept his bow at the ready as he gestured towards the fallen men. "Work such as that? I will not become a murderer just to appease your lord." The shadow smiled evilly as the sword appeared once again in its grasp. "You are brave, man, but your courage cannot save you! Now you will embrace the darkness!" Elnor fired off a shaft towards the dark figure as it started towards him, its black form taking on that of a human. Dodging the first projectile, the evil one leaped agilely toward Elnor, its sword lopping off the branch inches from the young Moundain's face. Elnor fired twice more, the second arrow embedding in the form of his assailant, causing a hiss of pain to emerge from the dark man. The shaft vanished, and the angered man swung his sword again towards Elnor, metal clashing on metal as Elnor parried with his hunting knife.

Throwing down his bow, Elner leapt out of the tree, barely dodging another sword stroke as he landed. Grabbing one of the fallen men's swords, he confronted his adversary, taking a swipe at the shadowy man. The shadow parried and rendered Elner's sword arm numb by battering his sword aside with an inhuman blow. Seeing an opening, the shadow charged Elner, its red eyes glinting as it brought the sword forward in a finishing stroke. Suddenly, another sword appeared in the shadow's path. Drawing back from Elner, the dark man turned to its new threat, angered further by being delayed of finishing its quarry. The new man was as tall as one of the Moundain people, but his face resembled that of a man, and his snowy white beard confirmed that he was not a Moundain. The newcomer spoke, keeping his sword ready for battle with the dark man. "Leave the boy and go back to your master!"

The shadow showed the first sign of emotion as it backed away from Elner, as if unnerved by the new man's confidence. "What claim do you have on the boy? He is mine!"

The bearded man raised his staff slowly. "You know well who I am, dark one. The boy is mine to claim if I choose to do so. Leave us, or I will send you back to the dark lord myself!" Backing away, the shadow sneered at Elner. "Next time you will not be so lucky, boy! Shadow is growing, enough to snuff the candle of light that has been feebly resisting for all of this time. The dark lord will destroy everything, including this pitiful city that you live in!" The large man with the hat brought forth his staff, shouting. "Enough shadow! Begone to your master!" A searing white light appeared, causing the dark man to vanish and blinding Elner for a brief moment. The older man grimaced as the light disappeared. "Come, boy! We must move swiftly if we are to stop Blazic from

obtaining the other orbs of Palanti. I'm afraid that your town is lost. Moundain will soon be overcome by Blazic's forces! We must flee south into the realm of men!"

Elnor started moving quickly, matching the taller man's stride as they wove their way

back towards Western Moundain. "Who are you, and what is going on? Why was that, that thing trying to kill me."

For a moment, the tall man paused, then taking off his hat, he spoke gently. "My name? Perhaps you have heard it before. My name, is Manalo!"