Chapter One

Unto the Breach

As the cart he was sitting in started its descent down the well-traveled road, leaving the forest behind them, Rurik Balderk was of two minds about his situation.

*Literally*.

On one hand, he was Isaac, a pretty normal teenager of, he’d like to believe, above average looks and intelligence. He’d grown up in a pretty quiet New England town, and his hobbies were playing videogames, joking around with his friends, and watching movies.

On the other hand he was in the *body* of Rurik Balderk, Dwarven Samurai in a land of high fantasy, on a quest from his Daimyo to make his mark and bring glory to his name, and his lord’s by proxy.

The problem was that, while there was none of Isaac’s body left behind after the merge, the same couldn’t said of the dwarf’s *mind*.

*Oi! Pay attention ya useless, lazy human!*

And it wouldn’t stop *talking* to him.

*Of course I’m gonna be talkin’ to ya, ya pile of mud given half a mind! A samurai needs to-*

*Shut the hell up!* he snapped at the voice in his head, putting enough ‘force’ into the thought to make the dwarf do *just that*. There was no question that he was the dominant one here, *he* was the one that always won these confrontations, though if he wasn’t careful he *could* lose control. He really wasn’t sure how the others handled it, dealing with the constant reminder that their bodies *weren’t theirs*.

‘Rurik’ stopped even trying to pretend to read his book and took a long look around.

The Gnomish Wizard. Fonkin Fulkur. stood at the front of the open cart, and was staring intently down at the bottom of the hill, at the structure by the water. Fonkin, who insisted he be called- *who wanted to be called* Badger, Isaac self-corrected, trying to keep Rurik’s speech patterns out of his thoughts.

Just like Isaac, ‘Badger’s’ body had been taken over by the spirit of Isaac’s father, Jack. Now clocking in at an ‘impressive’ three foot seven inches tall, he was the runt of the group, but his spells were damn useful. Considering Isaac’s father worked with computers for a living, wizardry seemed a good fit.

*Bah, trust a Human to focus on height,* The dwarf in the back of his mind criticized.

Isaac had determined that complaints made up sixty percent of Rurik’s statements, by volume.

*And I be right! That bein’ said, ya be too soft on him just ‘cause he got possessed by yer old man. The scrawny fella’s barely able to hold himself up, and has ta hide behind his finger wagglin’ instead of fightin’ like a* ***real*** *warrior!*

*That ‘finger wagglin’ took you down, when you tried to* ***kill*** *him!* Isaac threw back. *Yeah, what he said wasn’t* ***nice*** *but it wasn’t* ***wrong*** *either? ‘Sides, I thought you were supposed to be* ***tough?*** *How tough are you when you lose it just ‘cause someone points out you being a* ***dumbass?***

The samurai’s presence angrily retreated, unable to come up with a non-violent response which he’d be unable to act on while he lacked a body, leaving Isaac to his thoughts.

That had been… a *bad* moment, when Isaac hadn’t kept the separation between himself and his ‘character’ firm, the teen’s own… *issues* with his father aligning with the Samurai’s pride in such a way that, that it’d been *bad*.

He wasn’t sure how his dad handled *Badger’s* voice in his head, but he was doing much better than *Isaac* was.

It might’ve had to do with the fact that while Isaac was only fifteen, while Rurik was *fifty five*, though that was equivalent to twenty two in Dwarf years. In turn, Jack was in his late forties, while Badger was sixty seven, or *twenty* in Gnome development.

If that was true though, that didn’t explain his cousin.

Grace, who was a grade above him in high school, had been dropped into the body of a *hundred and sixteen year-old* Elf without a problem, as far as Isaac could tell. ‘Fayne’, said Elf, who was currently driving the cart and staring in the same direction as Dad was, had chosen Scout as her class, specializing in fast movement, stealth, attacking from unexpected angles, and disabling traps, making her the ‘Rogue’ of the group to his ‘Warrior’.

Isaac hadn’t been that close to her before all this, to be honest, as she always seemed to have more in common with his older brother, so he didn’t *know* her well enough to say that she wasn’t having any issues, but if she did, they weren’t obvious. She’d seemed to have *no* problem in this place, not hesitating to throw herself into action when needed, though she’d also almost gotten herself *killed* when she got in over her head.

Whether that was something Grace would do, or Fayne’s MO, leaking through the girl’s actions, Isaac wasn’t sure.

He didn’t hold it against her, though, seeing as he’d done the *exact same thing*. He waited for some snarky comment from his other half, but the dwarf stayed silent. *Nothing to say?*

*Well, since ya be askin’,* the voice sneered, *of course the stupid tree hugger-*

*That was* ***rhetorical***, Isaac interrupted, focusing on the last member of the party, sitting in the front right corner, next to the gnome, easily able to see over the front of the cart with her greater height, staring at the same thing everyone else was. His mother, Maggie, had taken over the seventeen year old body of the Aasimar, Aria Mozart. The girl’s diluted angelic ancestry gave her gifts above the normal human, and she had followed her natural inclinations by becoming a Cleric who followed Solus, god of the sun, healing, and general ‘goodness’, whatever *that* meant.

*I’ll tell you what’s good, Laddie,* The dwarf chimed in. *That lassie’s behind! I’d love to grab that an’-*

*One, she’s my mother,* Isaac snapped. *Two, she’s married to Badger. Three,* ***she’s my mother!***

He shivered at the thought, catching the attention of the woman in question. “Are you okay, Rurik?” Aria asked in dulcet tones, completely *unlike* how his mother’s voice sounded, but weirdly identical in intonation.

“I be fine, Lass,” he replied, Rurik’s speech patterns warping his own. He could repress them, but it was *always* an effort, and he only had so much of that to spare. “Go back to lookin’ at the city,” he directed. She gave him a measuring glance before smiling and turning back to the conversation she was having with Fayne & Badger.

He hadn’t liked his older brother’s choice to have them use their character’s names instead of their own, in that first dungeon, but it *had* helped them all absorb their character’s skills more easily, allowing Isaac to handle a sword with the skill that Rurik had spent *years* honing.

*Bah, you call that skill! If me sensei be seein’ how ya be swingin’ that fine piece of dwarven craftsmanship, worryin’ about me’d be the* ***least*** *of your worries!* the Dwarf in his head sneered.

*Katanas aren’t ‘Dwarven craftsmanship’*, he reposted.

*That one be made by Dwarves, thus it be Dwarven craftsmanship. It don’t matter the type, it be better for bein’ made by a Dwarf!*

Isaac was *also* getting used to the constant *racism*, which he *wasn’t* sure was a good thing. Leaning over the side of the cart, he looked down at what everyone else had been gawking over for the past ten minutes: the city of Firebreach.

The metropolis was where his brother, if he could free himself, wherever he’d been taken, would meet them.

It was also, to put it bluntly, *freaking enormous.*

Isaac had to agree with his father as, using Rurik’s knowledge as a base, the Dwarf eyeballed it at eight miles across, and close enough to perfectly circular to not matter. According to Maggie, that put it as being bigger than *Paris*, and from what Dad had pointed out about it, it seemed new, no more than a few decades old.

*How could you make a city that size, that fast?* Isaac wondered. There didn’t seem to be any partially constructed buildings from their view high above it, coming down a hill that was more like a small *mountain*, the edge hundreds of feet above the distant city, and neither could he spot anything that indicated ongoing construction.

*If it be Dwarves, we could be doin’ it, if we be properly motivated. You surface dwellers probably cheated, usin’ magic to make it instead of by hand, lackin’ any* ***real*** *craftsmanship!* Rurik observed.

Half the reason Isaac listened to his ‘shorter half’ was for bits of information like *that*. Whatever had dragged them here had given them the knowledge of the world they found themselves in, but it was spotty. If they knew to ask the questions, they might get the answers, but knowing *what* to ask was the problem. “Could it be made with magic?” he asked the others. “The city, I be meanin’.” he clarified as they all shot him confused looks, not expecting Isaac, the *baby*, to be asking questions, just because he rarely did back home, when he could look things up on his phone and not have to deal with, well, *this kind of reaction*.

Badger’s eyes went distant, probably talking to his *own* tag-along, before he was back with them and smiling. “That *would* do it. With the proper spells, modified a bit, you could build walls in minutes instead of hours or days. Doing it all with magic would be *incredibly* expensive, but if used intelligently, it would speed up construction thirtyfold, at least!”

*Like I be sayin’. Cheatin’.*

“Is that how they made the walls?” Fayne asked, peering towards the city. At the others’ looks, she elucidated, “They look too big. I thought it was closer than it was, that’s why I called you guys to take a look.”

Isaac peered down at the city himself, and it *did* look odd. The outer walls, which not only surrounded the city, but curved inward, separated out two circular walled in area at the front and the back, like a filled in, fat, circular letter I, cast a slight shadow over the buildings within. As they continued down the long, sloping hill, making their way closer to the sea-side depression the city resided in, it was getting harder to see what was just inside the gate, the stone rim of the fortifications cutting off the line of sight.

“They be big. *Really* big,” Isaac said. “They must be...” he trailed off, trying to figure out *how* big.

*Seventy feet, ya product of a dimwitted ape and an ugly elf.*

“Seventy feet tall,” Isaac repeated aloud. *Didn’t you say all elves were ugly?,* he asked Rurik.

*Aye. Now consider how beastly yer mum had to ‘ave been to be called that!*

*She’s right there!,* the teen pointed out, not wanting to get drawn into *another* argument with the surly Samurai.

*That be the body she be possessin’. I’m sure she’s a right hag herself*, the dwarf sneered.

Isaac bit back his response, doing the one thing that always served to enrage the dwarf he was sharing a body with into shutting up.

*He ignored him.*

“So, this be where we be meeting Shino?” the Dwarf asked aloud. “How’re we supposed ta find the big lug down there in all o’ that mess?”

The others winced at Isaac’s question, and it was Aria who shrugged, “He said he’ll find *us.*”

“If he can get away,” Grace added, meeting Aria’s glare. “He said *if* he escapes he’ll meet us here. If he can’t, we’ll need to go get him, but not until we’re level fifteen, like he said.”

“And we’re only level *five*,” Badger sighed. “And each level is taking twice as long to reach. Right now we could take on a troll, some bandits, or  small pack of grizzly bears. A small flock?”

“A sleuth of bears,” Isaac corrected, and the others shot him surprised looks.

He *hated* it when they did that.

He’d never done that well in school, but that was because it didn’t *matter*, and he didn’t talk that much to them before this, because everything he could talk about they didn’t care about or already knew, or, again, look up himself. He wasn’t *dumb*, though he sometimes had to push a bit *harder* to make his thoughts connect, Rurik not being as intelligent as he was-

 ***I’m*** *not dumb, ya tub o’ lard, you’re-*

*Rurik not being as intelligent*, Isaac repeated internally, his mental voice drowning out the Dwarf’s, *made it harder to think!*

“We took on a troll at level one!” Aria argued.

“It was waking up in a coffin, we had it surrounded, there were five of us, and Badger almost died,” Fayne rattled off.

“We killed those elementals!” the Cleric tried again.

“We took them one at a time, they were only *person* sized so they were what we at third level could handle, and even then the first one nearly drowned me while Rurik almost died fighting the second,” the Scout countered without heat.

Isaac knew his mother sometimes... *forgot* things to make her point, and while he, his father, and his brother were used to it, Grace hadn’t been. He was glad to see she was getting used to Maggie, though some traitorous part of him, wished *none* of them had to.

Not in *that* way, but maybe they’d be having an easier time of it if they were dealing with *Aria* instead.

“We fought a *dragon!*” the Aasimar insisted, getting angry. “In its own *lair!”*

“Who was a child pretending to be an adult with magic, it was only slightly stronger than we could handle even if we didn’t know it, we knew what type of dragon it was so we could prepare, and your *husband* almost died,” the Elf shot back, getting a bit annoyed herself. “That is *nothing* like charging into another plane of *existence*, fighting *unknown* enemies, in an *unknown* location, when the guy who *created* this damn world said it’s a bad idea!”

Aria turned away from Fayne, looking back to the city. “Well we should do *something.*”

Before his cousin could likely tell the Cleric what she *could* go do, Isaac’s father intervened. “We *are* doing something, Aria. Shinobot, *your son*, told us to go here, so we are. If he gets away from the things that took him from us, he’ll find us soon enough. He hasn’t lead us astray yet.”

The Aasimar huffed, but nodded, some of the tension going out of her, and Rurik sighed to himself. He’d thought they’d gotten better, and they *had*, but they still had a ways to go yet. His father was right though, his brother *hadn’t* lead them wrong yet, even if they were so stupid about it they’d nearly gotten themselves killed anyways.

*Repeatedly.*

His brother, Max, had wanted everyone to play one of those tabletop roleplaying games he’d liked, and they’d all been for giving Lairs & Liches a shot. Max’d been the ‘Lair Leader’, narrating the world and running all of the non-player characters: the townspeople, the monsters, and everything in between. He’d also made a character to go along with them to help the players out without bending the rule of the game *too* much, a magical robot ninja named Shinobot.

Isaac would be the first to admit it was a pretty stupid character, and Max had agreed, expecting him only to be with the group for the first for the first adventure as a set of training wheels. An Obi-wan, to the Luke, Leia, Han, and Chewie of the group.

The Dwarf hoped he was the Han, but he was *probably* the Wookie.

They’d all created their own characters, though everyone else had made themselves, *but Fantasy*, while Isaac was the only one who’d made a real ‘character’ to play. He’d *wanted* to make a Lawfully Evil Samurai, forced to go Lawfully Neutral by his mother, which, now that he was stuck listening to the jerk, he was grateful for.

Not that he’d ever tell *her* that, or else he’d *never* hear the end of it.

Regardless, they’d started the game, with characters that his brother said they could hopefully really *get into.*

In a way, in the *worst* way, Max had been right.

When they’d rolled those odd-looking dice he’d given them, they’d been pulled *into* the game, into their characters, *literally*, and Max had been pulled into Shinobot along with them. Max, *Shino*, had helped them survive that first adventure, that first day, but, while more and more things had started happening that Shino hadn’t planned for, *all* of things he has planned had happened.

He’d gotten them through everything, showed them how things worked and given them the best advice and warnings he could. However, Isaac wasn’t sure, *no one* was sure, if Max, a *different* Max, was also running the game. If the party had known *exactly* what was coming, Shino had argued, then ‘Other Max’, as the LL running the ‘adventure’, would’ve changed things to keep them *interesting*. In the end, he’d given them what seemed like general advice, for both of their adventures, but it was advice that had always been *exactly* correct.

He’d warned them to get their foot in the door, and when they *hadn’t* they’d had to trick the Orcs into opening up an impenetrable Dwarven bulkhead to ‘chase’ the party as they ran. He’d warned them to look out for stalactites and stalagmites, both having housed, or *been*, deadly monsters in disguise. He’d warned them to use stealth above all else, and their *failure* to do so had woken up an enormous dark serpent that they’d only escaped by using every bit of brainpower, cunning, and trickery they could scrounge together. His warning for their next adventure were just as vague, but Isaac could remember them with perfect clarity:

Wherever they were going, it would be underground, which, as a Dwarf, Rurik was perfectly fine with, as *all* of their adventure so far had been.

He’d warned that ‘Appearances can be deceiving,’ which seemed just as trite as the first set, but, from what they’d gone through, was likely *very* specific.

‘That which hides in the dark can be hurt by being exposed,’ could be literal, some kinds of undead hurt even by exposure to daylight, or could be metaphorical.

‘Your enemies’ captives can be useful in helping to defeat them,’ again was common sense, but meant that, if they found someone, they could *probably* trust them.

‘Heavily modified monsters aren’t always more dangerous, though they still are a danger’ was… worrying, the kinds of things that *could* ‘modify monsters’ usually pretty strong.

And lastly, ‘When your opponent is trying to summon something, *don’t let them*; it rarely turns out well for you,’ was just good advice, but meant they were *probably* fighting wizards, or cultists, or both.

While they’d dealt with goblins, and orcs, and a *single* insane Druid, they hadn’t really dealt with groups of *smart* enemies, and Isaac wasn’t sure how well they’d do, and if they’d all survive.

It *was* possible to raise the dead here, with divine spells, that Clerics and the like could use, but parts of this place were… different. Their ability to feel pain had been turned down, which had helped when they’d been stabbed, shot, and burned, but made sense since L&L didn’t really have any kind of ‘suffering wounds’ mechanic, characters just as deadly with a *single* hit point remaining as they would with all of them, though at zero you were knocked out, and would bleed out, unless healed or you were tough enough to stabilize yourself.

Except, when an undead shadow had sapped Fayne of her strength, literally, she’d *also* been nearly taken out of the fight completely, not through weakness, but through *pain*.

Aria had been able to channel the power of her god to cleanse Fayne of the undead-spread chill that might’ve *killed* her, but that, again, was something that *wasn’t part of the game.*

And while there were spells to raise the dead, would that bring *them* back, or just their characters?

~Hmm,~ was telepathically broadcast to Isaac, and the others, in Draconic, the language of dragons, ~I don’t have any recollection of this place, so it must be new.~

And then there were the items that were… *bonded* to them. Each of them had gotten theirs incidentally. Rurik’s sword, Kage No Ken, a blade of Spirit & Fire, had been gifted by his Daimyo, while Badger’s Force & Water quarterstaff, the *stupidly* named Nia-Gara, had been taken off an enemy in the last adventure. They’d all granted them extra powers, but *Fayne’s*, armor, Fafnir, held the intelligence of… *something.* Something old, and draconic, and which *could* take over her body, in addition to the way their body’s original owners could, but merely *chose not to.*

Thanks to a *different* set of items they’d gotten, they could maintain a telepathic bond, a kind of mental push-to-talk voice chat, which meant it not only could talk to the *elf,* it could talk to the rest of them as well.

~And yer frame of reference for ‘new’ be what?~ Isaac questioned, his thoughts carrying his accent, but *only* when pushed out to others, that mental ‘speaking’ corrupted too.

~In the last few centuries,~ Fafnir replied, with a mental shrug.

~Still, for cities, especially cities of *that* size, that’s still fast,~ Badger offered, waving at the city walls they were approaching. ~Also, there’s a line?~

*Course there’s a line, ya pure stoter!* Rurik sneered inside Isaac’s head. *You think they’d let any mangey rat inside their walls! Who knows what kind o’ filth they might be carryin’ in their mockit Tinkertot carriages!*

“Prolly checkin’ for disease an’ the like,” Isaac offered aloud, not wanting to accidentally transmit his… *passenger’s* opinions. “All packed-together like that, getting’ pure whitey was a killer in ye olden times.”

Again, the look, like *he* shouldn’t’ve said it, but Fayne nodded. “Right. We’ve got magical healing, but there’s magical diseases, aren’t there?”

Aria nodded, listing off, “Mummy-Rot, Filth Fever, Scarlet Leprosy.”

Badger frowned, “What’s the difference between Scarlet Leprosy and normal Leprosy?”

“More bleeding,” the Cleric offered. “But you only get that from undead constructs, not naturally. The necromancers see it as a feature, not a bug.”

*“Really* glad I studied illusions instead,” the wizard sighed, as Fayne maneuvered their cart into the line, the guards, in the far distance, waving a wand at each cart in turn. Not like a metal detector, but a stick with a bit of crystal on the end.

Waiting, a trio of guards, two in *full plate* made their way up, the unarmed one carrying a clipboard, while, of the other two, one was carrying a tri-pronged spear, the other… was that a bloody *gun?*

It *was*, the woman carrying a rifle, to *everyone’s* confusion, no, it was a *blunderbuss,* the flared tip a bit of a giveaway, even as Isaac thought, *Oi! How come you never mentioned guns were a thing here?*

*Gun? A Dinnae Ken the heck you’re blatherin’ on about!* his passenger shot back. *It some kind of shroom-sucker thing? Looks magical, bunch a mingin’ cheaters!*

*Do… Do you not know what a gun is?* Isaac checked, surprised.

*‘Do.. Do you not know what a gun is,’* the Samurai mocked. *‘Who needs ‘guns’ when ya got glorious Dwarf-forged steel!’*

Taking a moment to clear his mind, Isaac broadcast, ~Rurik dinnae know what guns are. How ‘bout your characters?~

That spurred the others, who were all still staring, into responding, Fayne shaking her head no, Badger, after a moment, shaking his head no as well.

~I’ve seen them,~ Isaac’s mother noted, frowning. ~I mean, *Aria* has. Our- ***her*** father’s a paladin of Fienurian, god of good war, and one of his comrades used a rifle, but she didn’t know what it was.~

~I have not seen them before,~ Fafnir added. ~From the way that Fighter is holding it, it is some kind of weapon?~

~One that shoots right through armor,~ Badger stated, the guards going to each caravan, asking a question, and moving on. ~One from *our* world.~

Before they could say anything else, the lead guard, who appeared to be some kind of mage, glancing over them, eyes glowing with the white glow of someone trying to magically detect Evil, then the rainbow colors of someone detecting magic, the man’s eyes narrowing as he glanced at, in turn, Fayne’s armor, Badger’s staff, Aria’s holy-symbol, and Isaac’s sheathed katana.

“Purpose of your visit?” he questioned, making a note on his clipboard.

“We’re here to join the guild of Stet’s Protectors!” Aria stated, smiling at the man.

The mage nodded, stating, “Entry fee for adventuring parties is five gold per person. Once you join, you can show your Guild-Mark to gain entrance for free.”

“Oh, we have joined!” Badger stated. “Did the mission and everything!”

Looking unimpressed, the clipboard wielding man asked, “Do you have a Guild-Mark?”

The wizard blinked. “Um… no?”

“Then it’s twenty gold, total” the guard drawled. “Do you have infectious materials or creatures, undead, holy symbols of evil gods, airborne poisons, or explosives more powerful than alchemist’s fire in your vehicle, on your person, or in any extradimensional spaces you possess, either on your person or summonable?”

“… no?” Fayne replied, confused.

“Then pay the fee, submit to the scan, and welcome to Firebreach,” the official stated, having clearly repeated this interaction so many times he was bored of it, his eyes, once more sliding over to Aria’s chest, and the golden holy symbol resting atop it. “We could always use more clerics,” he added, before moving past them, to the merchant caravan behind them.

Soon enough they had moved forward, were scanned, paid the fine, which would’ve been *extreme* for non-adventurers, a *single* gold the cost of sleeping at a good inn with meals included, a soldier’s uniform, a shaving kit, or a good quality hammer.

Then again, with the *thousands* of gold they’d plundered, from everything except, ironically, the dragon’s hoard, which had been nothing but *copper* coins, ten of which were worth a silver, and ten of *them* worth a gold, they were fine.

Isaac was kind of surprised the *Artifact* they were carrying wasn’t setting off alarms, since even looking at the magic had caused Badger’s eyes to bleed, but, then again, it came in its own special little box, so maybe that blocked the scans? The wizard had said how enough material could block it, like a foot of stone, or *any* amount of lead, which seemed like an easy way to smuggle stuff in, but the Samurai wasn’t going to complain about *not* getting harassed by the guard.

*Ack, I could take ‘em, the bunch of soft, pampered, ninnies!* The voice in his head jeered.

*They had* ***guns***, Isaac replied.

*And we’d have Dwarvish Steel!* Inner-Rurik shot back, causing the semi-teenager to shake his head.

~What is it, Rurik?~ Aria asked, catching the motion.

~I just be, er, getting’ used to this all,~ Isaac lied. ~This ain’t like any city Rurik’s ever been in.~

*Aye, because I’ve only gone to proper, Dwarvish cities!* his internal racist announced.

*No one cares,* Isaac shot back, wondering how the others managed not to snap at *their* internal voices, not having done so *once.* That said, *he* wasn’t going to be the first one to do it, and show weakness, so he kept his expression neutral.

~My Wizarding Academy over on Gygeron, across the ocean, was big, but it wasn’t anything on this either,~ Badger added, looking to the others.

~Fayne never left the forest,~ the elf agreed.

~Paris is better,~ Aria sniffed, missing the point, but that was kind of agreement, in its own way, as their cart slowly made it’s way down the wide boulevard.

They kept going, having dealt with an entire *mountain’s* full of enemies to get to this point, having gone from individuals to a competent team of dangerous adventurers!

~So, what be next?~ Isaac questioned looking around.

~We’re going to join Stet’s Protector’s, duh,~ Fayne added. ~Weren’t you paying attention?~

*Maybe you should be payin’ attention to who ya insult, Tree-Humper!* Inner Rurik growled.

Isaac, however, just nodded. ~Aye, but, well, *where be their guild hall,* for us *to be goin’ to?~*

There was a long moment, as they all looked at each other, having gotten only the direction of ‘Go to Firebreach’.

Fayne blinked, “Oh, uh, maybe we should ask directions?”

Staring, Isaac groaned, Aria looking around for someone to bother, while his father nodded enthusiastically, as, while they might be ‘dangerous adventurers’, they *apparently* still had a ways to go.