

## ckAge of Gloom - Day 1: The Beginning



n the deepest folds of the Empire, where metal echoes louder than prayer and the memory of the sun is worth more than silver, three figures prepared for a job that was supposed to be simple.

The city of Tik, if one could call a cluster of iron bunkers and stone corridors a “city,” was the kind of place where names disappeared and rumors thrived. It was here that Garlak, the Unbroken, found himself loading sealed crates onto a creaking, two-wheeled cart pulled by a Rocktar—a stocky, scale-covered beast of burden, bred for endurance in the Empire’s winding tunnels. Trista Athiane and Emeryn watched from a short distance, arms folded, already regretting taking this job.

Garlak said nothing. He almost always said nothing. His massive frame moved with the quiet rhythm of someone who had lifted heavier burdens than boxes. His eyes, dark and deep-set, scanned the surroundings without urgency but with unflinching focus. For him, this was routine. Another haul. Another path through

tunnels only half-remembered by the Empire's tired maps.

Beside him, Trista adjusted the wrappings covering the left side of her face, carefully tucking the loose ends back into place. Where once there had been an eye, now there was a deep scar hidden in fabric. She tightened the straps on her satchel—her own type of arsenal: herbs, salves, bandages, and a few stones that never left her person. She moved with the calm assurance of someone trained to break bones and now devoted to mending them.

Emeryn stroked and fed the beast of burden with a certain tenderness; she decided to name him Rocky. She remained attentive to her surroundings, enjoying what she knew were the last moments of peace before setting out again through the dark tunnels.

They weren't a team. Just three freelancers who happened to take the same contract from time to time. Transport sealed goods from Tik to Ner Darul. Ask no questions. Avoid known patrols. Return the Rocktar alive and unharmed... luckily the three of them as well.

Nothing in the terms said anything about strangers.

A figure approached as they were finishing preparations—a man, his form wrapped in travel-worn clothes that tried—and mostly failed—to blend with the grit of the corridors. His face was shadowed under a low hood, and though he kept his head bowed, there was an air about him that suggested sharpness hidden beneath the worn cloth. He spoke no name, only held out a pouch heavy with coin.

“Take me to Ner Darul. I’ll pay double your haul rate.”



Trista looked at Garlak. Garlak looked first at the stranger, then at the crates and lastly at Emeryn. She shrugged and responded.

“Well,” she said, voice low but friendly, “easy money for an easy haul.” Without another word, Garlak stepped aside, leaving space on the cart — no questions asked.

The stranger climbed aboard.

And that was that.

The tunnels between Tik and Ner Darul were old veins of the Empire. The path was engulfed in near-total darkness, lit only by the dull, steady glow of a coal lamp hanging from the cart’s frame. It wasn’t a problem. They were used to the dark. Rocky, their Rocktar, plodded along with sure-footed patience; he knew the way almost better than they did. This was supposed to be just another delivery.

Trista walked behind the cart, humming a Laan lullaby under her breath, occasionally reaching out to touch the stones on her satchel. Emeryn moved beside her; the faint clink of the chains wrapped around her staff the only sound she made. She kept a watchful eye on the stranger riding their cart. Garlak marched ahead, his movements deliberate. His axe—used mostly for clearing debris these days—was slung across his

back, but anyone who looked at him too long could tell it had seen blood before.

“Think he’s worth the trouble?” Trista asked, nodding toward the silent passenger.

Garlak didn’t respond. Typical. Emeryn tilted her head slightly, her tone light but firm. “Everyone’s worth trouble if they’re paying double,” she said, twirling her staff once before letting it fall back to her side. Still, her sharp green eyes didn’t leave the man for long.

They found a small widening in the tunnel, just off the main path, where Rocky and the cart could be positioned to block sight from any casual passerby. It wasn’t much, but it would allow them a few hours of rest while taking turns at watch. Trista brewed tea from dried moss and shared it with Emeryn, who accepted the cup with a grateful nod, settling cross-legged near a tiny fire barely big enough to keep warm. Garlak, after making sure everything was secured, rolled himself into his cloak and closed his eyes to rest. Trista leaned back against one of the cart’s wheels, cradling her own cup between her hands, her eyes alert despite her relaxed posture. Beside her, Emeryn remained still but attentive, her keen ears tuned for the

slightest unfamiliar sound in the tunnel's deep silence.

The stranger remained a few steps away, half-shrouded by the low shadows cast by the fire. The faint glint of his eyes was the only feature clearly visible; the rest of his face stayed hidden beneath the hood of his cloak.

"Can we at least know your name?" Trista asked, her tone light, almost playful.

"Not important," the man replied, voice low and even.

Emeryn, stirring the embers of the fire with a stick, didn't press the matter. She knew better than to dig where trust wasn't offered—especially when she could never lie to cover a careless discovery.

The hours dragged quietly, broken only by the occasional soft shuffle of Rocky repositioning himself or the muted crackle of the fire. When it was time to change the watch, Emeryn gently nudged Trista, who stretched and yawned silently before nudging Garlak awake for his turn.

Garlak's watch passed without incident. He sat near the dying embers of the fire, sharpening the edge of his axe with slow, deliberate strokes,

the rasp of stone against metal barely audible in the heavy darkness. From time to time, he cast a glance around the small encampment, but nothing stirred beyond the quiet shifting of Rocky and the occasional drip of water from the tunnel ceiling. When the time came, he woke the others with a soft word and a gentle nudge, allowing Emeryn and Trista to finish their rest.

The journey resumed without trouble. Rocky's steady steps echoed in the tunnel, and the cart's wooden wheels creaked softly. The stranger rode silently, hands tucked into his cloak, never offering more words than necessary.

As they neared a particularly narrow passage, Emeryn raised a hand, signaling for a halt. Her sharp hearing had caught something — the faint scrape of movement ahead. Instantly, the group tensed, the quiet camaraderie of the journey evaporating into taut readiness.

They approached a checkpoint.

Three guards blocked the path. Their armor bore the sigil—an inverted drop enclosed within a triangle—marking them as enforcers of the city. One of them chewed a root stalk; another tapped his baton rhythmically on his thigh.

Without much ceremony, the guards waved the cart to a halt. Their eyes swept over the travelers with detached boredom—until they spotted the stranger.

The mood shifted instantly.

The guards' faces hardened. "Drop your weapons," one barked. "Now!"

Before they could react, more guards emerged from the shadows. Rough hands grabbed Garlak and Emeryn, forcing them to the ground. Trista barely had time to slip her morningstar aside before she was shoved down as well. The cart was pulled away, left abandoned across the tunnel, its shape swallowed by darkness.

"Stay down," a guard snapped. "No sudden moves."

No explanations. No questions answered.

Meanwhile, two guards dragged the stranger off the cart. He was still, offering no resistance.

The first blow landed across his back, a sharp thwack that echoed down the stone corridor.

Then another.

And another.



“Stop!” Emeryn cried out, lifting her head.

“Please—he’s already down. He won’t fight you!”

“Not your concern,” snarled a guard. “Unless you want to end up like him?”

Flat against the stone floor, Garlak sized up the situation: Three visible guards, maybe a fourth unseen. Weapons nearby, if he moved fast. The guards were careless, overconfident.

He was sure—absolutely sure—he could take them down before they could even raise the alarm.

At his side, Trista hissed, “We can’t leave him. We can’t.”

Emeryn nodded fiercely, meeting her gaze. “He paid for passage. We owe him at least that much.”

The guards noticed the whispering.

“What’s the chatter?” he growled, taking a step closer.

Garlak saw his moment. The guards were distracted, focusing on Trista and Emeryn. With a sudden surge, he rolled, broke into a sprint toward the cart.

“Here we go” Emeryn signaled, and she and Trista scrambled to their feet, darting behind the cart for cover. Emeryn thrust out her hand—her staff leapt from the pile into her grip with a faint hum of magic.

The guards turned—too late.

The battle was swift and brutal.

Garlak reclaimed his axe and plowed into them like a living avalanche.

One guard’s baton shattered against his armor. Garlak responded with a brutal backswing, sending the man sprawling.



Trista, her morningstar retrieved, waded into the fray beside him.

Despite her slight frame, she fought like a tempest, each blow precise and devastating. Her shield deflected a strike aimed at Emeryn, and her spiked weapon crushed the guard's side in a punishing arc.

Emeryn moved like water—silent, flowing strikes that left the guards gasping and disarmed, while leaving her untouched.

In less than a minute, the fight was over.

The guards lay groaning or unconscious.

Trista, breathing hard, immediately knelt by Garlak, checking a nasty gash along his side. It wasn't fatal—but would slow him if left untended. She muttered a quick healing spell under her breath, sealing the worst of it.

Then she moved to the stranger, her brow creased with worry. His wounds were deeper, uglier— Get him onto the cart” she said.

Together, they lifted the stranger back onto the cart, laying him flat between the crates.

Quick but careful, Trista cast another spell, stabilizing him enough to prevent death—but he remained unconscious. Then she layered rough cloths and spare blankets over the stranger, hiding his battered form casual eyes. He wouldn't be waking anytime soon and moving him too much risked reopening his wounds. While doing so, she couldn't help noticing a tattoo on his arm—a mark of the rebellion— but she wasn't sure, so she decided to keep it to herself.

While Garlak kept watch, Emeryn checked the fallen guards one by one.

None were dead. Some barely breathed, but they

assumed the next patrol would reach them in time to save their lives.

“We have to move,” said Emeryn, urgency creeping into her voice.

Rocky snorted softly, as if sensing the tension, but obediently resumed his steady walk.

The cart rolled back into the shadows of the tunnel.

Silent. Focused. Wary of every sound. Emeryn kept watch, her staff resting across her knees, alert for any sounds.

The stranger, hidden beneath rough cloth and blankets, didn't move.

Every so often, Trista leaned back to check his breathing, her heart tight in her chest.

Garlak, sitting sideways on the cart, cleaned his axe with deliberate focus, the blade flashing dully in the faint light.

Hours stretched on.

The path widened into a crude intersection.

There, another cart waited, facing toward them.

It bore the same make as theirs—simple, rugged, built for endurance, not speed.

But the men riding it carried no goods.

As they slowed to a stop, one of the strangers stood and called out urgently:

“Where is he? Where’s the passenger?”

Emeryn, wary, leaned over the edge of their cart.

“Are you talking about our passenger?” she asked cautiously.

The strangers nodded sharply.

“We’re friends,” said the first, a woman with sharp features and dark hair tucked beneath a travel-worn hood. “We came to help him reach the city.”

Trista hesitated, then shifted the rough blankets covering the unconscious figure just enough to show his battered form. “He’s alive,” she said.

“We were ambushed at a checkpoint. Saved him—but it was close.”

Relief washed over the newcomers’ faces.

The woman smiled faintly. “I’m Talia,” she said. “And this is Bron.”

Bron, a stocky, broad-shouldered dwarf, gave a grunt of acknowledgement but said nothing more.

Talia's eyes narrowed slightly. "And the guards?"

Emeryn answered immediately, almost too fast. "We left them tied up in the middle of the road. They're alive. Hurt, but... they'll survive."

Talia gave a sharp nod.

Without waiting, she jumped down from her cart and climbed onto the travelers' to better guard the wounded man.

Bron turned their cart around and rode off in the direction the travelers had come, his face grim, his axe already in hand.

Talia said simply, "Bron will take care of it."

The implication was clear.

He wasn't going to help the guards.

He was going to make sure they wouldn't talk.

Trista and Garlak exchanged a glance, silent agreement passing between them.

Better to let Emeryn think Bron was just "covering their tracks."

The convoy resumed, moving at a cautious pace.

As they traveled, Trista and Emeryn sat closer to Talia, exchanging low questions and half-answers.

Talia eventually confirmed what they had already begun to suspect: Their passenger—and Talia and Bron as well—belonged to the Rebellion.

“We were supposed to meet him outside the city walls,” Talia explained. “Something went wrong. Thank you for keeping him alive.”

Emeryn frowned, glancing back toward the unconscious figure under the blankets. “What’s his name?” she asked.

Talia hesitated for a heartbeat, then answered: Korin

Hours later, the weary travelers reached the gates of Ner Darul.

Unlike Tik’s narrow, grim entrances, Ner Darul welcomed them with a quiet glow.

A vast underground lake shimmered at the heart of the city, its luminous waters casting a soft, pale light across the cavernous expanse. Buildings clung to the rock walls like barnacles,



others just popped out of the floor like piled rocks. Narrow paths lead to the lake and connect all the city, only the one leading outside seemed wider. The air smelled of damp stone and iron.

The checkpoint at the gate was guarded, but only loosely. A few bored soldiers waved carts through after brief inspections, their vigilance dulled by routine.

When their turn came, Talia took the lead, flashing a handful of papers with quick, practiced confidence. The guards barely spared them a glance before waving them inside.

For the first time in days, the travelers allowed themselves a slow breath.  
They had made it.



Ner Darul wasn't exactly safe. But it wasn't the endless tunnels, either.

Talia took everyone to their refuge, to tend Korin's wounds, and be safe.

Emeryn, Trista and Garlak decided to first finish the delivery and then go back to the refuge. They made the delivery without trouble, handing over the crates to a contact waiting as usual. Emeryn handed off Rockys reins with one final pat on its scaly neck. Then they headed back to the refuge.

Talia greeted and made them enter. The house was carved into a collapsed shaft wall. Inside, a fire burned low. A woman sat around it, unmoving. She introduced herself. The human woman was named Kara and was their leader.

Kara was offering her thanks for keeping Korin alive but was interrupted when suddenly Bron entered the house.

Talia and Bron exchanged a few quick words in low tones.

Bron's face was grim as he muttered something that made Talia's expression tighten.

Trista, close enough to catch the conversation, froze.

"Only two," Bron said, voice like a falling hammer.

A heavy silence fell between them.

Only two.

One had escaped.

Somewhere, deeper in the tunnels, a battered, furious guard was running for his life—and he had seen the faces of the three travelers. He knew exactly whose company they kept.

The thought sat heavy in Talia's chest, but it was her duty to inform. "You now are wanted by the guards, as part of the rebellion" she said "you might want to stay low for now"

Kara offered them shelter, as a repay for the troubles.

Talia approached them "New looks. For your own good." She said, pointing at the room in the far corner.

Emeryn and Trista chose to dye their hair a darker shade, as they were looking for a green-and-purple-haired Duranaki and a purple-haired Laan. Emeryn ended up with a pink and light blue hair and Trista's ended black.

Garlak accepted a long coat that did little to hide his size.

Food was served later. Simple stew. Stale bread.

They didn't ask questions.

They knew their time was limited now.

But for the moment, Ner Darul wrapped around them like a tired but sheltering hand.

The faint shimmer of the lake, the muted bustle of workers and merchants, the dim glow in the distance—it all gave an illusion of safety.

That night, they slept in silence. Not comfort,  
but safety.

At least for now.

