

*from Journey to the Shalestones*

*by Third Archivist Edric Rellian, Sage of the Astrivium and Missionary of Valdor*

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*The village of Mincreek, nestled at the foot of the Shalestone Mountains, would be of little note to most travelers. It is small, modest, and unremarkable at first. I arrived by way of the river, drawn by rumors of an ancient settlement once established here by wandering mountain folk. The land is fertile, the timber plentiful, and the stone of the eastern cliffs strong, yet there is a hush that lingers over the place. Even the wind seems hushed here.*

*While the people were polite, there was an unease in their eyes when I inquired about their customs. No temple stood in the village square, nor any shrine to the gods. As is my sacred duty, I spoke to them of Valdor, the Iron Judge, whose scales weigh the deeds of all who walk this world. I asked of their faith, their devotions, and where they sought justice in their lives. At this, their words grew scarce. "We are not lost," one elder told me. There was no anger in his voice, nor mockery—only certainty, quiet and immovable. And yet, that certainty he would not name.*

*It was only later, by chance, that I heard a word spoken in hushed conversation: Zjohlikraag. A name unknown to the holy texts, and absent from the pantheon of the righteous and the damned alike. The name passed my ears, swiftly swallowed by the night, and when I turned to look at who spoke it, the villagers fell silent. Whatever power they call upon, it is not one they will share with an outsider.*

*Yet not all in Mincreek were so closed to discourse. On my last night there, a man named Castius sought my company over a flask of mulled spirits. He spoke of fortune and fate, but most of all, he spoke of a ring—a thing of exquisite make, which he claimed to have "discovered". The ring, he said, bore a power unlike any trinket I had ever seen, though he would not demonstrate its virtue nor speak of how it came to his hand. The tale, I confess, did not sit well with me. Traders are known to pass through these lands, and theft is not beyond the reach of desperate men. Worse still, I have heard rumors of treasures long held by the cruel masters of the mountains—ogre magi, whose wrath lingers long after their relics have been disturbed. Some whisper even of Ignar the Inferno, a name best left unspoken in civilized company. If Castius' prize was once in such hands, I fear his good fortune may be short-lived.*

*I leave Mincreek today with my heart unsettled. This is a place of toil, of quiet endurance, but also of something veiled—an answer they have found but of which they will not speak. I cannot help but wonder if some errant faith took root here, one the gods might someday notice and, in their divine displeasure, erase from the world.*

*Such is the account of my travels here. Good justice be done.*