A thunderous clap of stone echoed through the wood. Deer tore through the undergrowth; birds took to the sky. The sound echoed through the verdant valley, and subsided as quickly as it came. An overwhelming silence consumed the area, as if instinct drove the inhabitants not to return. A lone elf sentry, covered in vines, was shaken from his centuries long meditation.

With a deep breath, he whispered a phrase in an ancient tongue. As if truly sentient, the vegetation that had bonded the elf slowly released its grip, commanded to set him free. The relief of freedom was soon replaced with alarm. The elf snapped his eyes open, and jumped up as quickly as his body would allow. Stretching as he went, the elf moved toward the center of the forest.

A century’s time is but a blink of an eye to an elf, who are near immortal beings. This elf, whose name has been lost to the ages, had been in deep dormancy for nearly two. But it was too soon to wake up. Nearly millennia should have passed before his station was relieved. Yet there he was, still a child by elven standards, reacting as he had been instructed long ago.

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The sun was low in the sky when the elf started to slow his pace. Around him, the forest was gradually changing as he closed in on his destination. The once green scenery was blending into desolation. Flowers had wilted and trees were shedding dark shriveled leaves; it was high spring, the elf guessed, too soon for a season's change.

As he walked, leaves crunched under his feet. They did not feel dry, however; they seemed to have been made of stone. Delicate though it was, it's stark beauty was harrowing. The further he walked, the more desolate it became. There were no signs of life here; even the wind seemed to die. Trees gave way to a clearing of stone, and unease over took the young elf. At the glade's center, a huge stone sphere rested, showing obvious signs of age. The sphere had a slight green tint to it, the only color in the blackened area.

The elf drew his small dagger and inched forward. The sphere was of a great size, almost twice as tall as the elf. At eye level, there was a small cobweb of cracks, similar to those made by a hatchling escaping an egg. As the elf came within an arm’s length of the sphere, he could see that a single tendril of smoke was leaving the opening. The smoke moved slowly, touching the ground and immediately dissipating. Curious, the elf took his dagger and brought the edge close to the smoke. It pooled, predictably, across his blade before falling once again to the ground. He had never seen anything like it. Smoke though it was, it acted much like water; flowing and bending as if it was influenced by the elf's own breath.

He sheathed his dagger and inspected the rest of the sphere. It was perfectly round, an amazing feat for such a stone. The rock tinkled in the fading daylight; tiny gemstones were scattered evenly in the rock. The sphere was cool to the touch and smooth every inch beyond the crack. It had sunken into the earth, not by force, but from the passage of time.

The elf had walked the entire girth of the sphere. It had taken him no fewer than twenty paces. He arrived again at the cracks. The smoke had shifted its course, as if it was trying to spout in his direction. Tentatively, he reached out his hand and let the smoke touch his finger.

Suddenly, an intense burning sensation seared across his hand. The smoke, once listless, had grown tenacious. Tentacles of smoke split from the main spout and became daggers aimed at him. The elf's finger quickly began to decay, and every wound made by the smoke as it stabbed his hand followed course. With precision, the tendrils were moving up his palm. Through the searing pain and panic, he quickly grasped his dagger and cut off his hand to the wrist. He backed away, a new pain gaining his attention, though tamer than the last.

He watched his hand fall, engulfed by the smoke. Before it reached the ground it had turned black. When it finally hit the ground it erupted into a small pile of ash. The smoke retreated into the sphere, but it was not long before it started to flow again. In horror, the elf turned and ran. When the vegetation started to come into view, he slowed his stride, though still moving as quickly as he could. Clutching his amputated limb, he whispered for a simple bandage and nature provided him with a sling to place his arm in. Soothed by an impromptu salve at his amputations base, he wrapped his bindings tight with vines, before continuing on his way. He had one goal in mind, and his wound would help tell his story. He must get to the Queen. He must alert Her Majesty.