

Prologue

As is conventional all other worlds revolved around Jhevek, from the smallest moon, for there are three Iceros, Tiat and Lesh, to the great and burning sun. Very little is known of 'other' worlds, yet the scholars insist that they are there, out there somewhere in the vastness of black space itself, of course there were various maps and charts to prove their existence, but that does little to convince the common man that these other worlds mean anything to him or her.

But this story takes place upon Jhevek, at least that is what it was commonly referred as, the world of Jhevek came into being many eons ago, from where or from whom we have yet to discern, this is the subject of great debate among scholars, but at this time that is not as important as the story before us. The world itself has suffered through the ages from various wars and cataclysms, but it has survived, and thrived until the present time.

During the last great cataclysm that shook the world and caused great destruction upon the land and to the seas, the very gods themselves disappeared! What became of them, no one knows for sure. But since that time all the clerics and priests have all but disappeared also, for what do you need a priest or cleric for if they cannot commune with their god? Oh of course there are charlatans out there still, pretenders only, for no one has heard from the elder gods for almost five-hundred years.

So in light of this situation there has been a rise in the worship of nature and the land itself. Scattered across the world are pockets of druids and such who proclaim that by worshipping nature itself that will bring back the elder gods. But most scholars scoff at this idea, saying that it is founded in lies and half truths. Yet they are still attracting many to their cause, leaving the ways of the cities and villages behind to live off the land in the wilderness.

In addition to this there have arisen many magic users, mages, sorcerers, and others who can use their minds to shape and mold things to their wills. They rule the lands now in the wake of the disappearance of the gods and the downfall of the clerics and priests. So people flock to them in time of need as they draw upon the energy of the very world itself the mysterious flux of power that seems to abide in all living things. They guard their secrets well and only allow a chosen few to enter their ranks.

There are numerous and diverse races scattered throughout the world, from the stoic dwarves and their various clans, to the charming and genial elves, to the gruesome goblins and their kind. There are also the humans, whom seem to be spreading and multiplying quicker than most, and of course there are the minotaurs, who prefer to keep to themselves due to fear and prejudices', but as of late have gotten more and more involved with the affairs of the other races, yet their kind seems to be becoming more and more uncommon. There are other lesser races, such as the lizard men and the giants, but the predominate races of men, elves, minotaurs, dwarves, and goblins were the crucial ones who built kingdoms and great cities across the known world.

The year is 493 KR, or King's Reckoning, the 493rd year of the reign of Kings in the Kingdom of Lijissa, one of the largest, if not the most dominate kingdom in the world of Jhevek, most all the inhabitants of the known world used the King's Reckoning as the recognized form of time measurement due to the influence this kingdom has upon the world, and because some of the wilder races simply don't care, thus it has been for the past four-hundred and ninety-three years.

We should now look at the known world, known as far as the scholars and learned men of Lijissa are concerned. It is widely held that there are five main continents scattered across Jhevek, from the mysterious frigid northern land of Hempora or the Frozen North as most call it, to the eastern great land mass known as Trirakkal, of course where the Kingdom lies is part of the continent of Jhavari, and to the west is the continent of Utensonia. There is little known of this area, for not only is it cut off from the rest of the world by vast oceans of water, but also the vast ocean of sand known as the Desert of Despair and the towering mountain chain called the Skag Mountains. What lives in this land are only heard in legends and tall tales shared around the camp fires of adventurers and travelers or by parents trying to scare their children around the home fires late at night. Also before we forget, in the far south is the land known as Cyzad, where the dragons rule the sky. An interesting place indeed, but all this has to be told at another time.

Our story begins in the Kingdom of Lijissa, in the reign of the elven King Lonthonis Brightwater, who had a very beautiful daughter named Lunansa. King Lonthonis was the fifth king in a lineage of kings who had reigned in Lijissa since the time of King's Reckoning. He was

at this time a widower, having lost his wife, Queen Taleth in the last war. Lunansa was now his only heir, for he and his wife had no other children. She was the pride of his life and the jewel of the kingdom, for all the people loved her and would do almost anything for her. But there was another war brewing on the horizon, the goblins and their allies, the dark dwarves, were massing along the border of his great kingdom and the King was worried. It seemed as if this war was inevitable, for it looked as if the forces aligned against his kingdom were going to cross the border as they had not more than ten years earlier, unless he could find a way to prevent it. Nevertheless for now he knew no way for that to happen, and then his only daughter came up missing! And thus the story begins...

Chapter 1

Breathing hard, for he was moving rather quickly down the trail, Vekao slowed to a stop. He wasn't feeling very well, his back ached, his head hurt and yet he knew that he still had to keep pushing forward. It was another long day to the coast, and he'd been on the road for over a week now in his desperate attempt to reach his friend in the port city of Koth.

His friend Lizzy, her real name was Lissidrinne Moonglade, was in deep trouble and she was counting on him to come and bail her out, again! So he found himself trudging along this trail, heading towards Koth, what lay before him, was yet to be determined, what trouble she was in, was yet to be known.

The port city of Koth was part of the Lijissa Empire. It was a rather large city and an old city, having been founded hundreds of years ago, before the Great Cataclysm. It was a busy port, which attracted a lot of merchant ships, full of exotic cargos from distant lands, cargos such as spices and ivory, or perhaps in some cases even slaves! Trade was very brisk, but at times risky, with a lot of competition between rival merchants and of course the occasional pirate.

Vekao continued along the trail now, but at a slightly slower pace, for he wasn't as young as he used to be. Vekao was a minotaur from the island of Minopis, off the coast of Lijissa. His full name was Vekao Untter, he had left the island a long time ago to strike out on his own, but that was another story. It has been a very long time now since he has seen his homeland and he was beginning to wonder if he ever would again. Physically Vekao stood over seven feet tall and

was massively built, as most of his kind, and one of his horns had been broken in half during his youth. His body was covered in scars that he had earned from his many travels and adventures over the past few years, yet for a minotaur he was considered good looking. He was strong, stronger than most of his kind really, and he knew how to use the battleaxe strapped to his broad back, he knew how to use it very well, which most of his adversaries had discovered the hard way. He was a merchant by trade, but hadn't practiced his profession in over a dozen years. In the past couple of years he had been on a quest, a mission so to speak, to discover why his old friend Davkas had disappeared.

You see Davkas was Lizzy's father and had been missing now for a good long time, longer than was normal anyway, since he was constantly sent on scouting missions for his King. He wasn't sure when and he wasn't sure how, but he was determined to find him, whether he was dead or alive, Davkas that is. So he continued to push himself, continued to look for clues wherever they might lead him, all he knew for now was that he had disappeared somewhere in the Skag mountains.. But for now Lizzy was in trouble and had sent him a message to come and come quickly. So he struck out from the town he called his home to find Lizzy and see what he could do to help her out of the jam she had gotten herself in.

Lizzy was a thief, something that Vekao didn't really approve of, but this was her trade so to speak and she normally worked alone because she didn't really trust other people. She was young though and always getting involved in areas that were too dangerous, even for one as skilled as she was. This time was one of those! She had apparently stolen something very valuable from a wealthy merchant in Koth and now she had agents of this merchant, Zhuerelm,

who were hot on her trail. She had sent a message for Vekao to come quickly and he had responded by dropping everything to come. He felt as if Lizzy was like his own and felt responsible for her well-being now that Davkas had turned up missing.

He paused along the trail he had been traveling when he didn't hear the usual forest sounds any longer, for it had become quiet, too quiet. "*Strange*" he thought, so he pulled his battleaxe off of his back and started paying closer attention as he crept cautiously down the trail. Soon he thought that he heard something over to his right, so he paused and listened...

"Well, well, well what do we have here? A minotaur and a big one at that? Have you lost your way cow-head?" said a strange gruff voice just off the trail.

Vekao turned his full attention towards the voice and that's when he heard the grunt from behind him and twisted to the side, just in time, before the spear that had been thrown at his back impaled itself into the tree next to him. Instantly Vekao rose to his full height and charged straight towards the voice, with his battleaxe leading the way! He wasn't going to let them box him in without a fight, so he pushed his way through the brush and came face-to-face with a squat, ugly man, with tattoo's on his face and neck . He was holding a sword out in front of him, but seemed to be surprised that Vekao was there in front of him, and he gave a little yelp, and jumped back a couple of feet.

"Hold minotaur! Surrender while you still draw breath!" said the ugly man to him and waved his sword around, trying to appear threatening, but failed miserably to impress Vekao.

Vekao stopped and stared at him for a second, noticed that the sword was somewhat rusty, and decided that he was being attacked by some common highwaymen. “I will neither surrender, nor hold stranger! You need to explain to me why your friend back there tried to skewer me with that spear!” Vekao snarled at him and gestured behind his left shoulder, for that was where he began to see and hear movement in the bushes behind him along the trail.

Vekao knew that he didn't have the luxury of time, so not waiting for a reply he faked a rush at the man in front of him, causing him to stumble back a step or two, and then whirled around, with quickness uncommon to one his size, and rushed straight at the second man that had emerged from the bushes. The man was big, not as big as Vekao of course, but big none the less. He must have stood well over six feet, with huge muscular arms and a massive, barrel of a chest. His face was scarred, and he had a patch over his left eye, his remaining eye was fixed on Vekao in hatred!

Vekao raised his battleaxe and began his dance, at least he liked to think of it as a dance, yet in reality it was very serious work, and he had trained hard all his life to learn it. He parried a quick slash by the man as he brought a long sword to bear on Vekao and he countered with a backwards chop with his battleaxe. The robber jumped back and stumbled over some roots on the ground, Vekao didn't hesitate as he ended the thief's life there in the forest, next to the tree where the spear still hung embedded in its trunk.

Pulling his battleaxe free, Vekao quickly turned around to get his bearings on the first man and didn't see him anywhere. Being the cowardly bandit that he was, the first man had run off when he saw that the battle wasn't going to go their way. So Vekao took the time to clean the blood off of his battleaxe and repositioned it again on his back, watching the surrounding woods all the while, then again began his long journey towards the daughter of his friend.

“Well I hope I can avoid any more distractions.” He thought to himself as he ran down the trail. *“All this fighting has wasted too much of my time.”*

He soon came to a stream and decided to fill his water skins and rest for a moment beside the stream. He didn't want to stay there long though, since he knew that the robbers could have friends nearby and could be coming back at any moment. So after a few minutes just to refresh himself he got up and continued his trek towards the coast.

Shortly Vekao came to a fork in the trail, one leading towards the mountains along the coast, while the other branched downwards to the shore. So he took the one leading to the shore, since that was where Koth was located and so he was off again. He was intrigued by the variety of plant life as he trudged along the trail, and knew most their uses. He studied it with interest, not having seen some of the different species. There were all kinds, as well as some varieties that he recognized from his travels during the war. Some of the ones he saw he knew were good for healing; some were used to make you sleep, while another had more serious properties.

Time passed, as he quickened his pace, trying to make up for lost time spent battling the robbers. He needed to find a place to make camp for the night, before it got too dark, so he began scanning the countryside around him for a suitable place. One that would provide the kind of shelter he needed and so he continued along the trail, with his long strides causing the miles to be eaten up swiftly.

He soon found something to his liking and steered himself over to the spot, just about hundred yards or so off the trail, in a thicket of trees. He didn't take long to gather some firewood and setup a camp site. Soon he had a roaring fire going and he had his bedroll out and was getting ready to eat some hardtack and cheese. Of course he was wishing that he had something better, but that was all that was left and soon he would be forced to hunt for his meals, yet tonight he had no time for that.

After his brief meal which he washed down with some fresh water from the stream, he began to stoke up the fire a bit as he was getting ready to lie down for the night. That's when he saw them...they were huge silhouettes in the night sky, barely discernable in the light of the three moons. What they were he didn't really know, but they were flying straight towards his camp fire it seemed! Quickly he doused the fire, kicking dirt, and dumping some of his water on it. He then dived over to the side and took cover behind some trees off to his right.

He soon could hear the flapping of their massive wings. Two...no three of the flying beasts! He was cautious as he peered around the tree he was crouching behind, and yet he still

could not determine what they were. But, soon his worse fears were realized as they seemed to pivot in the air towards his little camp!

The fur on his arms and the nape of his neck stood up on end. Time seemed to stand still and the air seemed thicker, if that was possible. Closer they came, closer, and then...they were gone! Just like that, they flew right over where he was crouched down, and continued on towards the coastline ahead. Vekao blew out the air in his lungs, for he was embarrassed to realize he had been holding his breathe. He slowly stood up and looked out over the horizon in the light of the three moons to see if he could spot the things circling back, but no, they were gone. He could no longer hear the flapping of their wings.

After a few minutes he began to relax a little and stopped pacing around the camp, he started a smaller fire and rolled himself up in his blanket, determined to get some sleep this night! He lay fidgeting in his bedroll, trying to figure out what he had seen, in all his travels he just couldn't place the things! It wasn't that long before he found himself fast asleep...

Waking, feeling refreshed in the morning, Vekao was happy to see his fire still held a spark. He quickly surveyed his surroundings, and determined there was no one or no thing else in the vicinity; so he got his fire blazing again. Soon he had his tin cup out and was heating some water in it to make some tea. Vekao loved his tea in the morning hours, for he had packed a few of the roots from his home for the trip and this morning was no exception. After drinking some tea and eating a little more of the rations he had packed for himself, he was up putting the fire

out. He grabbed his belongings, slung them on his broad back and was off down the trail again heading for his rendezvous with Lizzy in Koth.

Vekao found that he was humming an old seafaring tune and was in a pretty good mood, all things considered for him. He quickly made his way down the trail as it led closer and closer to Koth. He thought back to the mysterious flying creatures from last night and was mulling over in his head just exactly what he thought they were.

“Couldn’t be dragons” he thought. *“They just didn’t seem big enough. But they were big enough to make me dive behind that tree and cower like a child!”* Vekao thought angrily to himself. *“What could they be then?”*

He continued to ponder this question, over and over in his mind, as he traveled down the trail, but he really couldn’t put his finger on what he had seen in the night. Soon he was beginning to see other people walking along the trail ahead of him, some in small carts coming in his direction, others with bows hanging across their backs apparently out early to get some hunting in. Soon the trail couldn’t be called a trail any longer, but was a full fledged road, a road leading straight to the walled city of Koth.

The farmers and others that were passing by him along the road were staring at him. He tried not to stare back, for he knew that it wasn’t everyday that they saw a minotaur, especially a minotaur of his stature. His people came from across the Great Sea of the East, from a land many miles from where he walked today. Yet many minotaurs had been used as mercenaries in the

recent war, it was just that the majority of them had returned home, Vekao wasn't one of them, he had decided to stay and make this land his home, of course it was times like these that he regretted his decision.

As he walked he reflected on his friendship with Davkas. Imagine an elf and a minotaur becoming good friends! But it had happened during the war; both Davkas and he were on the side of King Lonthonis Brightwater during the War of the King, almost ten years ago now. They had joined up separately and yet ended up fighting in the same battle. Davkas was a scout, employed by the King to go before his troops and scout out enemy positions, a very dangerous, yet exciting profession. During this time he became good friends with the King and spent some time at the court of the King.

Vekao was hired as a mercenary soldier at the time, and he was soon placed in charge of a squadron of minotaurs who had joined around the same time. Vekao fought in many different battles during the war and it was during one of these battles that he met Davkas and Davkas's daughter Lissidrinne or Lizzy as they now called her. Vekao had saved Davkas's life when the goblins had burst through their line and were forcing a retreat. Davkas had fallen when an arrow pierced his leg, and the goblins were running up the gorge just when Vekao had spotted him and scooped him up with one hand and thrown him over his shoulder. They had been good friends ever since Davkas had taken him back with him; to the city of Castitrona, and it was during this time that Davkas introduced him to his family, including his daughter Lizzy. And now Davkas's daughter was in trouble, with Davkas still missing and Vekao the only one able to offer aid.

Soon Vekao found himself at the gate to the city. It was open now being that it was early morning. The activity around the gate was very busy it seemed to him, merchants were coming and going hawking their wares, while farmers came to sell their crops, beggars where there also, also it seemed that there were all kinds of races from humans and elves, why even an occasional dwarf and now of course a minotaur. There were guards posted who kept an eye on Vekao as he strode within the walls of the city. Vekao grunted at them as he passed and nodded, there was a young guard who was staring a little too much and for him Vekao gave a big wink. The guard closed his mouth and turned away, being a little embarrassed.

“Always wise to be on their good side” he thought.

He soon found himself heading up one of the main streets, looking for an inn that Lizzy had indicated on the note that was delivered to him. He was to met her at an inn named the ‘Rusty Wheel’ he was sure about the name of the place, but wasn’t sure about the location, so he asked for directions and was soon on his way there, and his meeting with Lizzy, he hoped!

Chapter 2

She crept along the outside of the manor, keeping to the shadows and trying to calm her breathing. The night was still young, but the moons were hidden behind the clouds, which made it a perfect night to do what she was attempting to do. She was in the merchant district, more commonly called The Point, of the city of Koth and she was thrilled, so thrilled that she almost blundering straight into the guard! She caught herself at the last minute and paused in the deep shadows of the home of the wealthy merchant, Zhuerelm. The guard walked on past the spot, not noticing the young elven female there, Lizzy was her name, she had come to Koth a few months prior to make her name in the world and to show her father Davkas that she could survive on her own. Of course things didn't work out exactly as she planned and here she was now creeping along in the shadows, about to break into the rich merchant's home to see what she could find.

Prior to this Lizzy had been living down by the docks and was attempting to make a living by working in and around the fishermen. But it wasn't working out too well so she soon found herself hooked up with a man named Snake...

Living in Koth was not an easy thing for Lizzy, she was young and newly out on her own, after leaving her father a few weeks ago. Of course Lizzy wasn't her real name it was Lissidrinne, yet all her family and friends called her Lizzy for short. Lizzy was an elf, her full name being Lissidrinne Moonglade, she had long pale blonde hair and deep blue eyes, she caught the attention of many a male wherever she happened to be. She had been here in Koth, a

busy port city, most of that time, yet she still didn't feel like she belonged. She missed her old home in Castitrona with her father and all her old friends from that great city. Her father, thinking about him brought back the angry words they had exchanged when she left, over two months ago now...

"Lizzy I just don't understand why you wouldn't want to train with me and become a scout, like myself, for King Brightwater?" Davkas, her father, said to her as Lizzy was walking out the door to their cottage.

"Father" Lizzy began with a exasperated look on her face "I've explained this over and over again, I do not want to be a *scout*" she emphasized the word scout as she continued her speech, "I need to see the world, while I'm still young, I'm not ready to just settle down and run errands for the King!"

Davkas was taken aback; he paused at the doorway as he absorbed the extent of Lizzy's explanation, it wasn't the first time he had heard it of course, yet it still bothered him greatly, for he was a scout in the King's employ, and was often assigned tasks by the King, so her words hurt him deeply, yet he chose not to say anything to Lizzy about it now for he figured it wouldn't help the situation.

"But where will you go?" Davkas asked his daughter with a bit of trepidation in his voice.

“I’m not sure yet, but I plan to take the south road and follow it around the coast. Perhaps I’ll settle in Koth!” Lizzy replied back to her father, knowing full well he wouldn’t like the idea she was going to Koth of all places.

“Koth! Why that place, it is home to a mixture of pirates and other scum!” her father shot back at her, instantly regretting the comment as it came rushing out.

Yet Lizzy wasn’t listening, not really listening anyway, she continued on and soon went out to the barn and started to saddle her horse. She had already taken a few things from her room and packed them in her saddle bags, along with some food from their pantry. She carried her sword which her father had shown her how to use, and the special chain mail shirt her father had given her on her eighteenth birthday. So she felt she had everything she needed to explore the world. Her father had followed her to the barn and waved goodbye as she trotted her horse down the road, the look on his face made her heart ache, yet she was determined to do what she thought was best for her.

So now here she was in Koth, living in a slightly run-down inn and trying to make her way in the world. Of course if her father really knew how she was making her way he would be even more upset, for you see Lizzy was a thief by trade. She stole things, and she found out that she was very good at it, so she continued in this line of work.

It had all started one day while she was sitting in an old tavern down by the docks, someplace her father would had shuddered to think of his young, beautiful daughter was at. She

hadn't been in Koth that long, yet she had already been forced to sell her dear horse and saddle so that she could continue to eat. She was sitting there listening to the stories the sailors and other old salts were sharing about their adventures on the seas. Deep down inside Lizzy was envious of their lives and was thinking about joining up with a crew and sailing the seas, but she was not comfortable around the water and figured she would only get seas sick and it would not pan out at all. So she sat sipping her mead and listening, soon with her sharp elven ears she picked up on a conversation that was being held across the way from her.

"I'm telling you Taithmar I have something special you need to see!" the young male was saying to the older, human female seated across the way from him at the table.

"Shhh," said the woman, apparently named Taithmar, to the younger male. "I promise I will arrange to see what you have, just be a little more discreet if you'd please." She added and gave him a sour look.

"Oh right" the young man said in reply. "Can't let everyone know what you *really* do here in Koth, now can we?"

With that comment the woman, Taithmar, rose from the table and started to walk out the door of the tavern. The young man jumped up and dashed after her, he went to grab her by the arm, but the older woman was having none of that and deftly twisted away and shoved the young man aside. He fell to the floor, landing on his rear in the process, his face turning a bright red.

“Wait! He cried after her “I didn’t mean anything by it! Will you still take a look at what I have? I could really use the coin.”

But Taithmar didn’t turn or acknowledge the young man; she simply walked out the door, giving the proprietor a funny look. Her eyes met Lizzy’s briefly and Lizzy quickly looked down into her mug of mead. The young man, Lizzy couldn’t really tell if he was fully human or had some elven blood in him, picked himself off the floor, dusted himself off a bit, and went to sit at the table again. He looked dejectedly at his ale sitting there, not really drinking it just playing with the mug. It was about this time that Lizzy walked up to him, or should we say sashayed up to him, trying to use all her womanly charms to her advantage. Of course the young man looked up at her standing there, and his mouth gaped open a bit.

“Greetings” Lizzy began when the man didn’t say anything. “My name is Lizzy. May I sit?” She asked him with a smile on her face.

“S-surely” he responded, with a big silly grin on his face and he motioned for her to sit at the chair Taithmar just vacate. He caught the serving maid’s eye and motioned her to bring two more ales.

Lizzy looked at him and said “I couldn’t help observing your exchange just now with your *friend*.” Of course Lizzy emphasized the word friend to the young man to see what his reaction would be. Then she added “Oh and what is your name?”

“Most people call me Snake, that’s not my real name of course, but that is what I go by, and I wouldn’t call Taithmar my friend necessarily. You see we are business partners in a way.” He said to her with a leering smile as his eyes drifted up and down her body, of course he tried to casually lean back a bit in his chair and placed his right leg up on the table.

Bur Lizzy was having none of it, for she knew she had him where she wanted him. Lizzy of course saw where his eyes wandered to and she smiled inwardly, she liked it when stupid males where distracted by her womanly features. Pressing this to her advantage was something Lizzy was becoming quite good at. So she saw an opening and went for it.

“Business partners huh?” she asked demurely. “What kind of business are you in?” About this time the serving maid came up with the ales and Snake flipped her a silver coin, obviously to Lizzy showing off a bit.

“Well if you must know” Snake began and he leaned in, so Lizzy leaned in closer to him and saw his eyes grow wider in excitement, which of course was the effect she was shooting for. “I am a thief by trade and Taithmar is my fence. After I steal something from some rich merchant I turn to Taithmar to fence it for me and provide me with a few coins for my trouble.” He then attempted to lean in even further and steal a kiss, but Lizzy abruptly sat back, with a coy smile on her face.

“Oh I see” she responded to him. “So you are in the business of thievery.” She said the last part with a disappointed look on her face.

“So that offends you sweetie?” Snake says to her in reply as he now leans back in his seat and takes a drink of his ale. He eyes her warily and then says “Perhaps I have said too much!” he then looks to be getting up and leaving and Lizzy quickly grabs his arm and motions for him to stay seated.

“No, no don’t get me wrong!” she says to him. “It all sounds very exciting! I was just sitting over there at the other table trying to determine what I should do with my life and this all sounds so intriguing to me.” Then she gets serious and looks him in the eye, she then leans closer to him and he can feel her breathe on his face as she leans in, she grabs his hand on the table “Snake, do you think you cold teach me your trade?”

Snake just sat there staring at Lizzy, probably two inches away from his face, he took in her beauty, marveling at her eyes, he had never met such a lovely woman before, not even another elven woman! He couldn’t believe his good fortune, the disappointing meeting with Taithmar forgotten now. He just sighed, a deep sigh, and said “Of course Lizzy, I would be honored to show you the tricks of the trade and all. But for a price.”

“Oh and what price might that be? ‘Asked Lizzy with a small smile on her face.

“I get fifty percent of anything you pilfer.” Snake responded in a matter of fact manner.

“Oh!”was all a dumbfounded Lizzy replied back

So it was from that moment on that Lizzy had taken up the “trade” of a thief. She knew instinctively that her father would not be happy with her, but she didn’t care right now. She was having the time of her life and was going to enjoy the whole experience, she was sure of it. Yet soon after she met Snake, he disappeared out of her life and hasn’t seen him since.

...creeping up to a servant’s door towards the rear of the manor house Lizzy paused to listen, not hearing anything on the other side she pulled out her tool and began to pick the lock on the door.

“Click”

The lock was open and so she gently pushed at the door, peeking around the now open door Lizzy peered inside. No one was around, all was quiet, and so she slipped inside. She walked quickly, yet quietly, along the corridor, she paused at each doorway and opening listening first then taking a quick look around the corner. She crept past a dining area, then a sitting room, she paused long there to gaze at all the books along the far wall. Then she kept going deeper and deeper into the home of the merchant, looking for something that she could take and sell to her fence.

Soon Lizzy came to a crossway, a corridor ran east-to-west so this was the one she decided to investigate. Soon she came to an area with three closed doors and a guard, she quickly hid behind a statue that was in the corridor and crouched down to think.

“OK Lizzy now what do you do? Hmm, I wasn’t expecting a guard in the home!” Lizzy thought to herself.

Lizzy decided that whatever it was the man was guarding must have been worth taking. So she decided to try a ruse and quickly undid a button on her blouse, let her hair down out of its ponytail, and pulled her dagger and hid it behind her back. She then crept back down the corridor she had come from and rounded the corner, she stood tall and began walking back towards the guard, making sure her hips moved just right...

“Halt! Who are you? And what business do you have in Zhuerelm’s home?” the guard asked Lizzy as she walked up to him at the end of the corridor, at the same time he drew his sword from its sheath.

“Me?” Lizzy smiled brightly at the guard as she sauntered up close to him, ignoring the bare blade in his hand. “Why I’m just a little lost girl looking for some company.”

The guard looked a little confused for a moment, and that was all the time Lizzy needed as she whipped the dagger around from behind her back and plunged it into the exposed neck of

the guard! His eyes widened and a small gurgling escaped from his mouth, and then he dropped his sword and slumped to the floor dead!

Lizzy felt momentarily sick to her stomach, for this was the first time in the months prior to beginning her life of crime, that she had killed another person. Yet, at the same time she felt elated! She was now free to check out the rooms at the end of the corridor, just as long as she acted swiftly!

So Lizzy listened quietly at the first door and hearing nothing she tried the handle, the door was locked, so Lizzy pulled out her tools again and tried the lock...

“Click”

...and just like that the lock was picked and she was looking inside. Seeing no one inside, she stooped down and grabbing the guard under his arms pits she slowly dragged him into the room. He was bleed profusely yet there was nothing she could do about that now, so she shut the door quietly and started to examine the room.

What she saw amazed her, there were many items scattered across a table, books, small jewelry boxes, and a dark black statue, which was apparently made from black onyx. She also saw some stunning paintings hanging on the walls around the room, more book shelves and a great chest against the farthest wall. This caught her eye so she made her way over to it. She paused in front of it staring at it, and then she knelt down and looked at its lock. She could tell

almost right away that there was something puzzling about the lock, it seemed to shimmer as she looked at it, so she rubbed at her eyes and looked again, still it shimmered slightly and so she concluded that it had some sort of magical trap caste on it. So she turned away from it and turned her attention over to the table.

For some reason the books didn't really interest her so she examined the jewelry boxes instead, there were three of them and they were exquisite! The craftsmanship of each of them was astounding to her and so she carefully took them and placed them in her bag, nothing seemed to happen so she then glanced over at the statue that was just sitting there. Not noticing anything out of the ordinary she almost absently picked it up and dropped it in her bag.

It was then that she heard the foot steps! Someone was coming down the corridor and soon they would see that the guard was missing and the blood on the floor. So she scanned the room again...

"Yes!" she thought to herself as she spotted a window.

So she moved over to the window and looked it over as quickly as she could, noticing where the latch was she drew her dagger back out and used it to throw the latch back. Then she opened the window as quickly as she could and that's when she heard it. A wailing sound came from the open window; she had set off some kind of magical alarm!

Not knowing what else she could do she quickly climbed into the window, just as the door opened into the room! Another guard stood at the door with a startled look on his face! He quickly yelled at Lizzy to stop and drew his sword, charging across the room, fortunately for Lizzy and unfortunately for the guard he failed to spot the dead guard on the floor and tripped over him, landing with a thud!

Lizzy used this time to slip out the open window and into the court yard. Of course the wailing noise the window was making continued and soon the guard patrolling the grounds came rushing around the corner of the manor!

“Halt!” the guard shouted when he spotted Lizzy and pulled his sword free.

“I think not.” Was all Lizzy said in reply and ran the other way, away from the guard and heading for the nearest wall.

Lizzy made it to the wall and with a leap she was able to reach the top of the wall and pull herself over, the guard right at her heels. She jumped for the top of the wall, for it was only about seven or eight feet high and landed on the street below. The clouds were still covering the light of the three moons, which Lizzy used to her advantage and quickly ran down the street, staying as close to the shadows as possible. She heard the guard land on the street behind her and he began to run after her.

Lizzy though was very fast for a young woman and very skilled at climbing things, so she decided to take to the roofs, and soon was climbing up a wall of a building close by. She could here the guard behind her cursing as he tried unsuccessfully to climb up after her. Soon Lizzy was blocks away with no one in pursuit so she crouched down in the shadows and waited for a moment listening. When she didn't hear the guard any long, assuming he had gone back to the manor house to report her, she climbed back down to the streets and made her way back home.

Chapter 3

Zhuerelm awoke with a start as the wailing began! Someone had opened one of the magically sealed windows! If it was that stupid guard again he would have his house wizard turn him into a pig or something! So he climbed out of his bed and went to the door of his bedroom, opening the door he entered the hallway just as the mage Vitros was rounding the corner.

“What is going on Vitros!” Zhuerelm shouted at the wizard.

“I don’t know yet my Lord, but I intend to find out!” Vitros replied back to the merchant.

So off both of them went down the stairway to the lower part of the manor. Soon they were met by a couple of the house guards who looked rather pale. They explained that they had found the dead guard outside the library where he was posted to guard and that they had spotted a blonde elven girl leaving through the window.

Zhuerelm was beside himself with rage, he shook his fists at the two guards there and pushed past them towards the library room. He stormed into the room and saw the dead guard on the floor, lying in a pool of blood. Then he glanced up and saw the open window. Following him in was the mage Vitros, who gasped when he saw the dead guard, then turned his attention to the items in the room. He gasped again when he saw the missing jewelry boxes and the missing ebony statue.

“What’s missing?” Zhuerelm asked the mage as he too started glancing around the room in bewilderment.

“My Lord, there are some jewelry boxes missing, but the most important item that I don’t see is the dwarven artifact that was here on the table.” He said as he pointed towards where the statue had been at.

“Artifact? What artifact are you talking about wizard?” the merchant turned to look at his house mage with a look of puzzlement on his face.

“Well it was something that I just recently discovered my Lord, I was going to tell you about it, soon.” Was all the mage said in reply with a smile on his face as he turned towards Zhuerelm.

“What exactly have you discovered?” the merchant said as he studied the face of the wizard.

“Well that we had in our possession a very powerful artifact that the dark dwarves would love to have back, something that they were willing to pay a lot of money for.” Vitros said in reply folding in front of him as he spoke.

“So this is something you have already made contact with the Dhag’arii about?”
Zhuerelm asked the mage.

“Yes Lord, I have and they were willing to pay a high price for this piece, and now they will not be happy that it is gone.” Vitros said and spread his hands out before him

“Well I suggest then good mage that you make it your mission in life to find this thief and get the artifact back!” Zhuerelm nearly shouted to him, his face turning red as he spoke!

“Of course my Lord.” The mage said simply and made a small bow.

So with that the mage and the merchant made their way out of the room, they both made their way to speak with the guard who had spotted the thief and gave chase. They asked question after question, attempting to find out any detail about the thief and what she looked like. Soon they felt like they had all the information they needed and made their way back to the library. The mage took out a bag of powder and began sprinkling it around the room, he then asked the merchant to step back out of the room and he turned and spoke a word and waved his hand at the center of the room, up from the floor sprang to life an image of Lizzy! The image went through the very motions that Lizzy made while she was in the room, the mage and the merchant watched closely as the ghostly image of Lizzy went to the table and began placing the jewelry boxes in her bag, and then took the black statue that had been on the table.

“Behold your thief!” Vitros said turning towards the merchant who had been standing in the doorway watching the image of Lizzy.

“So the question remains wizard, can you find her and get the artifact back?” Zhuelerm asked the wizard Vitros.

“That is what I intend to do my Lord.” the wizard said then added, “I will find out where this thief is at and send an assassin to kill her and bring us the artifact back.”

So with that the merchant went back upstairs to his room and closed the door, he sighed deeply and went back to his bed, lying back down he soon drifted off to sleep. Back down stairs the wizard began casting another spell, a spell that would help him track down Lizzy and with that information he would then contact an assassin and send him to kill the impertinent thief and retrieve the missing artifact.

“This would be fun...” the wizard thought to himself.

Chapter 4

She awoke with a jerk, instinctively she grabbed for her blade, and she thought that she had heard the sound of someone attempting to pick the lock on the door to the modest little room.

Tick, tick, tweek

There she had heard something! She quietly got out of bed, and crept across the floor towards the door. Her breathe was coming hard and fast, she purposely tried to calm herself down, so she rubbed the magic ring on her hand for luck.

“Breath Lizzy” she told herself. “You can’t let whoever this is get the best of you.”

Soon she had control of herself again. It was starting to come easier to her after years of living on the streets, taking care of herself. The noise had stopped and now the door was slowly being opened. Lizzy squeezed herself back as far as she could against the wall. She held her longsword close by her side. It had become her best friend in the cold and cruel world that she knew. Slowly the door inched open and soon a dark shadow started to slip into her room.

“Don’t move!” Lizzy shouted at the shadow.

It whirled and Lizzy saw that it was just a man, a man with a very big wickedly curved sword! He lunged at her and she skipped backwards, dodging and dipping as he slashed repeatedly trying to hit her. She countered with her longsword, trying to get a feel for his defenses.

“He’s good!” she thought to herself, *“but I’m better!”* Confidence was not usually a problem with Lizzy.

She began to back him up with her thrusts and slashes. Fainting to her right, and then slashing in from the left, she cut him! He grunted in pain, the wound wasn’t much, high up on his sword arm; it was bleeding and dripping blood on the floor. “Who sent you?” she asked in between blows.

“I come from my master, Zhuerelm! He sends his greetings little thief! He wants you dead!” the assassin snarled at her and tried a quick backhanded cut towards her abdomen. Lizzy just as quickly parried it and using his momentum allowed him to slide along her blade and then she expertly changed direction and opened a large gash across his front leg.

“Ayeeee! Little she-devil!” the man yelled at her. “You will die for that!”

But just as he raised his curved sword again to slash at Lizzy, she quickly slid up underneath him and buried her blade into the man’s gut! He gasped in pain and then fell over

her, and she had to scramble to not have him fall on top of her. He was dead before he hit the ground.

“You first” she said and then pulled the sword from his body then sat down on the floor breathing hard.

“This is getting old.” She thought to herself. *“I hope Uncle Vekao got my message and gets here soon.”*

Hearing foot steps in the hallway she looked up as the innkeeper came up to her open door holding a lantern and a frying pan. The sight was so funny Lizzy just couldn’t help herself and burst out laughing.

“What’s going on here? Who’s that? What’s so funny?” the blustered innkeeper, Turley, stammered at Lizzy.

“Master Turley it’s so nice of you to drop by to check on me!” Lizzy said to him “In answer to your questions; over there is an assassin who was sent to kill me in my sleep, sorry I had to kill him. The funny part is that you came to help with a frying pan!” and Lizzy burst into laughter once again.

Turley blinked a little and then a big smile crept over his face and he too began to laugh!

“Yes well Lizzy I’m glad to see that you are OK, but these little raids are going to have to stop. It’s bad for business you know?” Turley said to Lizzy in as stern a voice as he could muster at the moment.

Not expecting an answer he continued and said to her as he turned to leave, “I’ll send the stable boys in to collect the body and to clean up the mess. Try to stay out of trouble until then!” With that he did leave and walked back down the hallway, grumbling to himself as he went.

Lizzy sat on the edge of her bed, with a slight smile on her face as she watched Turley leave. The smile soon disappeared as she focused back on the dead assassin lying in her room in a pool of blood. She got up and cleaned her sword on the stranger’s clothes, and then she lit her bedside lantern then promptly and skillfully searched him for anything of value. Not finding much, besides his sword and a few silver coins, which of course she pocketed right away, she brushed herself off and so left him alone.

Soon the stable boys, Garth and Farley, came and picked up the body and cleaned the blood off the floor with an old rag. They carried him out of her room and she shut the door behind them and locked it. Lizzy then went to the corner of her room and gently pried the special floor board up with the tip of her dagger, she reached down and pulled up the parcel she had placed there a few days ago now, it was wrapped in an old rag, but she soon had it exposed and she looked at it again.

It was almost a foot tall, solid black obsidian and weighed close to five pounds, it was an intricately carved piece, and she was fascinated by it. It was beautiful, but of course she really didn't know much at all about it.

“What could it be?” she wondered to herself, not for the first time. *“What could it be, that Zhuerelm would send not one but now two assassins to try and kill me for it and take it back?”* For not more than a fortnight ago another assassin had tried to end her life, it bothered her that they were able to track her down so easily, she guessed that they were using magic of some kind.

She examined it more closely and turned it around looking for any secret compartments or anything unusual. Seeing nothing she carefully wrapped it back in the rag and placed it back within her hiding place in the floor.

She decided it was time to get dressed, so she did so carefully donning her leather breeches, for she didn't sleep in them, and the hauberk. The chain mail hauberk was special, given to her by her father, and worn in the war. It had kept her safe many times during her travels and hopefully would continue to do so. She fastened her sword to her side, with her trusty dagger on the opposite, she then pulled on her boots, donned her travel cloak and gathering up her pack she was ready to go.

She went out to the main dinning room of the inn called the 'Rusty Wheel', Turley already had a fire going and was busy cooking the morning meal, and it smelled wonderful to

Lizzy! She hadn't eaten since yesterday's morning meal now, and her stomach was telling her that it knew this too! She lingered around the fire place for awhile, trying to warm herself; it was a bit chilly this morning, at least it seemed that way to her. She took the time to pull her long blonde hair into her traditional pony tail, so that it would not fall over her eyes if she happened to get into any combat situations.

“Well Lizzy are you hungry this fine morning?” Turley asked as he walked into the room. “I have some excellent sausages this morning, and the gravy is fresh!” he added as he walked up to her and winked. Turley knew that Lizzy was especially picky on how fresh the gravy was.

“Do you have some warm biscuits to go with it all?” she asked him and returned his smile.

“Of course I do! What kind of place do you think I'm running here anyway?” he responded. “Sit down over there and I'll bring you out some.” Turley pointed to a table in the far corner of the room, knowing that Lizzy would prefer this place over the other tables.

Lizzy soon was seated and Turley was placing fresh biscuits, sausages, his special gravy and some fresh cider down in front of her. Lizzy's stomach began to rumble. She was soon munching and drinking happily away, not so much as slowing to catch her breath. In a little while she had eaten it all, she wiped her hands and mouth on the napkin Turley had left with her and pushed herself away from the table. Lizzy fished a silver piece out of her pack and then she gathered up her pack and headed for the door.

“Good day Master Turley!” she said as she walked out the door. “Hope your day goes well for you.” She added.

“Good day to you too Lizzy! Take care of yourself and stay out of trouble.” Turley cried out after her shaking his head.

The day was shaping up nicely now that she had some breakfast in her belly. Soon Lizzy found herself whistling quietly as she walked down the narrow street of the city, she kept a sharp eye out though for anyone who might be trailing her, so that she wasn't caught by surprise. She glanced at the merchandise in the windows of the shops that she passed along the way. Today she was going to speak with her fence so that she could find out what the item she had hidden in the floor boards of her room was worth on the open market, besides the sooner she got rid of it the better.

The fence was on the other side of town, so she had to cross The Point and then through the Noble district in order to get there. She wasn't looking forward to that, it was in The Point district where she had stolen the strange looking piece of art to begin with, now the man whom she had stolen it from was sending assassins to try to get it back and to end her life. That didn't make her very happy. But it did make her curious, curious as to why he hadn't reported it to the town guard, and curious as to why he wanted it back so desperately.

“It must be something wonderful indeed!” Lizzy thought to herself as she trudged along, *“perhaps even magical!”*

Soon she had come to the edge of The Point. It was the home to many wealthy merchants in town and a favorite place for thieves, such as Lizzy, to come and parlay their trade. The city guard knew this too and kept a strong presence in the area to discourage this sort of behavior. But to the really good thieves, such as Lizzy, that really didn't matter that much. She glanced around quickly, noting the positions of the guards posted and to see if there were any strangers lurking around. Not seeing anything unusual she ventured along down the street cautiously, but with a determined stride, also just to be safe she pulled the hood of her cloak up to cover her hair.

Soon she came to the crossroads where Zhuerelm's home stood. She crept along the street, keeping her head down and staying to the shadows, hoping that she wouldn't run into anyone or anything. She didn't really expect to at this time of day, she didn't dare come by here in the evening, knowing that she could easily be spotted. But she also knew that this was the best time to cross this part of town with the least amount of suspicion, soon she was past the house and the street seemed to open up, in her mind anyway, as she continued on towards her destination.

After a time she was into the Noble district, here it was even less crowded, but it was the shortest way to her destination. She walked as quickly as she could down the center of the street, not wanting to draw too much attention to herself, yet knowing that by walking in the shadows she would for sure. Her eyes darted left and right, looking for anything that might not fit. Like

that city guard over there with the crossbow pointed right at her, and the other one across the way!

Cursing to herself she leapt to the side and rolled, she came up with her sword out and ready to run back the other way. It was blocked! She was trapped! There were at least three that she could see, she glanced back behind her and the two with the crossbows were quickly closing the distance between her and them.

“Halt! Surrender!” shouted one of the guards that were blocking her exit. “Place your sword and dagger on the ground, along with any other weapon you may have and raise your hands in the air!”

Lizzy, glanced back at him and decided to do what he said, she wasn't sure if this had anything to do with her recent theft, but she had little choice at the moment. So placing her blades down on the ground she held her hands high and smiled. Who knows maybe she could charm her way out of this she thought to herself.

“What's this all about good sir” Lizzy asked the city guard who had spoken. “You put a good scare into me, thought you were going to rob me or something there for a minute!” She added trying to cover her nervousness.

“We are stopping and searching all commoners who are passing through the district at the moment. That is all you need to know!” the city guard answered back curtly.

So Lizzy stood while they searched through her pack, also making her take off her cloak and shake it out. Finding nothing, they allowed her to continue on her way. Grabbing up her items and thanking her luck that she didn't have anything of real value on her at the time, Lizzy quickly put as much distance between herself and the guards as she could.

Breathing a sigh of relief Lizzy was thankful that Zhuerelm was too secretive to alert the guard about her identity and recent theft. Soon Lizzy found herself through the Noble district and into the Dock district which was where her fence was located. She lived down here, close to the docks and had been a reliable source of income for her since her arrival in the city a couple years back. So now she was going to meet her in one of the dives here that the sailors liked to congregate at.

She entered the tavern called 'The Rose and Snake' and found her usual seat towards the rear of the place. Being early in the morning most of the 'clientele' were either in a drunken stupor or away to their respective ships, so it was mostly deserted. She ordered ale and sat waiting for her fence to show.

The time stretched out and her ale was almost gone when finally she walked through the door. Her name was Taithmar, and she had worked the docks area for many years now. She wasn't very tall for a human, standing only a little over 5 feet, but she was stout and she could handle herself in a fight if need be. She usually kept her brown hair short and covered with a hat of various styles. She sported a scar down the right side of her face from brow to cheek bone.

She wasn't a particularly unattractive woman, but she wasn't in this business to turn heads, she was in it to make money, and she was good at her job.

Taithmar made her way over to Lizzy's table. "Greetings!" she called to Lizzy as she approached.

"Good morn to you!" Lizzy called back to her and motioned for her to seat herself.

After she was seated, the barmaid had come over to take her order. Taithmar had ordered some sausages and a large glass of goat's milk, at which Lizzy had raised her brows in question. Taithmar had simply grinned and shrugged.

"So what is it you wanted me to look at Lizzy?" Taithmar speaking softly asked Lizzy, while they both glanced circumspectly around the tavern.

"It's a piece I acquired recently and now I'd like to get it off my hands quickly. If you understand my meaning?" she said in response. "It's a carving in black obsidian about this tall" holding out her hands to show the one foot height, "and I believe it may have some sort of residual magic about it." She added and then waiting for Taithmar's response.

"Hmm, interesting. Can you tell me more about what sort of carving? And why you haven't had it tested for magic yet?" Taithmar said to Lizzy, in between shoveling bites of sausage into her mouth.

“No I just haven’t had time. I was hoping you knew someone who could do it?” Lizzy whispered back to her. “The carving itself is roughly of a human in nature, a very ugly human, perhaps even a dwarf, but I’m not sure of that.”

Soon the barmaid had returned with Taithmar’s order and set it down before her, the two women stopped talking and waited for her to retreat back towards the other side of the room before they continued.

“Well I might know someone who can cast a spell to detect what sort of magic is about the carving, but it will cost you.”, she whispered back to Lizzy. “And why haven’t you had the time to do this yourself?”

“Well I’ve been ...busy” Lizzy said a little sheepishly.

“Busy huh? Well that’s understandable, considering your line of work I suppose.” Taithmar said with a mischievous look on her face. “Well we’ll have to set a time to meet so we can have this thing looked at properly” Taithmar added.

“Yeah OK, well then tomorrow night. Meet me here. Hopefully my friend Vekao will be here then.” Lizzy responded.

“Then I will see you tomorrow night then Lizzy. Be safe.” Taithmar said as she got up from the table dropped a few copper pieces down and left the tavern.

“Be safe” thought Lizzy as she sat nursing her ale. *“I just wish Uncle Vekao would make it in time to help me out of this mess!”*

Chapter 5

Walking into the inn Vekao immediately began looking for the innkeeper; soon he spotted someone who he figured had to be the innkeeper and walked up to him.

“I’m looking for a young elven girl named Lizzy. She is supposed to be staying at this inn and she’s been expecting me.” Vekao says to Turley.

Turley eyed the minotaur standing in front of him, which wasn’t easy to do since he stood a full foot and a half taller than he did, yet he looked at him and said, “Well sir, if your name is Vekao then I believe she has been expecting you. But I’m afraid at the moment she is not here. If you’d like to wait for her I can prepare a fine meal for you?” Turley asked with a look of concern on his face.

Vekao smiled at Turley and said, “Sure why not? I have no where else I need to be, so I’ll just sit and wait for her to return. But why the long face?”

“Oh nothing really, it’s just that I’m a little concerned for Miss Lizzy’s safety. You see a man attacked her here in the inn just this morning!” Turley confessed to Vekao, for Turley liked to talk.

Vekao grunted at Turley, “Really? Just this morning? What happened?”

With that Turley sat Vekao down at one of the tables and spilled the whole story to him, right then and there. He didn't get back up until Vekao's stomach began to growl. When it did Turley hopped up from the table and rushed back to his kitchen to prepare some food.

So Turley began to work his magic, not literally, but magic none the less. He began by bringing a delicious vegetable stew and some fresh oven baked bread, after Vekao downed all of this he brought him roasted pheasant, smothered in mushroom gravy. Vekao couldn't help but eat it all, he was stuffed, but he didn't care!

"Master Turley that was an excellent meal!" Vekao told the innkeeper as he came to check on him later, and to offer some of his best ale. "Well hopefully Lizzy shows up soon before I fall asleep here at this table!" he snorted.

Turley laughed at Vekao and slapped him on his back, stinging his hand in the process. "Well yes I hope she does too. Can I get you anything else?" Turley asked

"No, I'll just sit here and sip on this fine ale. Thank you for your hospitality." Vekao said to the innkeeper.

At that moment Lizzy came hurriedly into the inn and quickly looked out the window to the street. Breathing a sigh of relief, she looked over and saw Turley and Vekao staring at her with looks of concern on their faces.

“Vekao! You made it!” exclaimed Lizzy as she came running across the room. She threw her arms around Vekao and gave him an enormous hug as he was still seated at the table. He quickly stood up, with Lizzy still dangling from his broad neck.

“Lizzy, what’s wrong? You seemed worried when you came through the door a second ago.” Vekao said to her despite her clinging to him.

“Oh, well sorry Vekao.” Lizzy said as she released her hold on Vekao and dropped to the floor. “I thought that I was being followed, so that’s why I ducked in the door the way I did. But when I glanced back out the window, I didn’t spot anyone. It was very disheartening and I am afraid that Zhuerelm may be sending more assassins my way soon!”

Turley looked at Lizzy sideways and said, “Now wait just a minute there Miss Lizzy. I don’t need anymore of those types coming creeping around my inn. I will get a bad reputation from all of this!”

Lizzy looked at Turley and smiled her most disarming smile she could muster at the moment. “Master Turley I don’t intend to stick around long enough for that to happen. Now that Vekao is here to help, I hope to be moving on soon.” She said to him, and then looked over to Vekao. “I have something setup so that I can hopefully get these assassins off my back, at least for awhile. Perhaps we should retreat to my room so we can discuss what I have in mind?”

“Miss Lizzy, are you sure you don’t want me to go and talk with the guard? I can explain to them what is happening and hopefully they can get to the bottom of this!” Turley said to Lizzy.

“No, no thank you Master Turley, I would rather handle this myself please. But thank you for your kind offer.” Lizzy responded back and then quickly thought to herself, *“That’s exactly what I don’t need to happen!”*

Lizzy and Vekao excused themselves and went down the hall to Lizzy’s room. Lizzy shut and locked the door behind her and went to sit on the bed, she motioned for Vekao to sit next to her. He shook his massive head and declined, deciding to stand instead, knowing instinctively that if he had sat on the bed he would have broken it for sure.

Lizzy started the conversation by saying, “So did you want to see it?”

“It?” Vekao responded.

“The ‘item’ I took from the merchant, Vekao! You haven’t forgotten already!” Lizzy chided her friend with a smile.

“Oh that, yes sure, I guess you should show me what you have risked your life for Lizzy! You know how I feel about your chosen life style.” Vekao said back to Lizzy with a serious look on his face.

“Oh don’t be so glum!” Lizzy exclaimed back at him as she jumped up off the bed and dashed over to her hiding place to pry the board up. Soon she had the work of art in hand and was practically skipping back to where Vekao was standing, arms crossed over his massive chest.

“Well this is it!” Lizzy said to Vekao as she uncovered her prize and held it out to him.

Vekao took the unusual piece from Lizzy and studied it for a few minutes, turning it this way and that way in the fading light. Soon his eyes widened and he looked over at Lizzy who was again sitting on the edge of her bed.

“Lizzy I think I know what this is!” he said to her as he came over to stand next to her with the statue in his shaking hands. “It is a very ancient artifact that can be used to summon a very powerful earth elemental. I remember seeing it used back during the war, about the same time that I met your father. The dark dwarves used it against us and our wizards talked about it often. No wonder Zhuerelm wants it back so badly!”

Lizzy was so excited! “*So it was magical after all!*” she thought quickly to herself. “Then I should be able to get a lot of money for this!” she exclaimed to Vekao as she grabbed it back from him and held it up before her.

“Now wait a minute Lizzy! Vekao said grabbing it back from her. “This thing is very dangerous and we need to get rid of it in a hurry. So get the idea of fame and fortune out of your head!” he nearly shouted at her. Then he added more softly, ”Oh and we should probably keep it down too. Don’t want the whole world to know we have this thing.”

Lizzy smiled up at Vekao and nodded her understanding. She stood up and quickly took the artifact from Vekao’s hands and wrapped it and placed it back in the hiding place. She then turned back to Vekao and said, “well did you want to hear my plan or not?” half mockingly.

Vekao smiled down at her and stated, “sure, sure let’s hear it little one. What great plan do you have in mind?”

“Ok now that I have your attention. I have already contacted my local fence, her name is Taithmar, and is well known in the city. She has agreed to look at the piece and to take it off my hands if she thinks she can move it. Which I have no doubts in my mind now that she will immediately do so! Being that this is such a marvelous artifact and all!” Lizzy smiled and threw her arms around Vekao to give him a big hug, which was rather hard to do considering his size and all.

“Lizzy is that you big plan?” Vekao asked her with a look of concern on his face.

“Yes what’s wrong with it? I thought it was an excellent plan, one that would rid me of this piece and reward me greatly.” Lizzy explained to Vekao with a big smile on her face.

“Well first off this piece may be too hot to handle here in this city, seeing as this is the same city you ‘acquired’ it from. Second, your fence might be frightened off once she see’s that the piece is a very powerful artifact. We should probably take it to the King and see if he would want it, most likely he would give us some sort of reward.” Vekao spoke to Lizzy in his fatherly voice.

Now Lizzy was confused. She couldn’t believe that her wonderful plan was coming apart so easily. But Vekao was right. There was no way for her to dispose of the artifact here in Koth, she needed to get out of the city and make their way to see the King. She had to think...

Vekao saw the look of concern on Lizzy’s face and quietly said to her, “Well it’s not the end of the world Lizzy, we can think of a way out of this mess. Perhaps we can catch a ship and sail around the coast towards the King’s castle, or just find someplace to hide for awhile. What do you think Lizzy?”

“What do I think” Lizzy stared at Vekao. “What do I think” She repeated herself, this time with some heat behind it. “I think that I have gotten myself in a lot of trouble and now I may not be able to profit by it at all. The very thing I was hoping for, a great and marvelous item to fence, is just that, only TOO marvelous and TOO great.” She groaned and then fell over onto her bed with tears beginning to stream down her eyes.

“*Crying*” now there’s something you haven’t done in awhile Lizzy scolded herself. For crying was not one of her habits, yet here she was falling apart and crying! How embarrassing!

“Lizzy, now cut that out!” Vekao told her. “We can think of something that will work, just give me a couple of minutes to think. First we need to distance ourselves from Koth and the assassins this merchant Zhuerelm keeps sending your way. Second we will need to figure out a way to make it to see the King. I have some connections that might help, so we’ll start there. But let’s head down to the docks and see what ships are leaving the quickest. Then we can decide from there where to begin. I’d suggest that you cancel your visit with your fence though, it may not turn out as well as you had planned.”

“Ok Uncle if you think that is best.” Lizzy said from her bed. So she got up and quickly straightened herself, wiped any tears from her face and headed towards the door.

“Whoa there now wait a minute Lizzy!” Vekao called out from behind her, and then caught Lizzy by the arm. “I didn’t mean we have to go tonight! We should get some sleep and head out first thing in the morning.”

“Oh, well OK if you say so.” Lizzy said to him, and then went back over to sit on the bed.

“Hopefully there wasn’t another assassin skulking after me like I thought when I came in awhile ago, because if there was, then we will be in some trouble tonight I’m sure!”

“Well then we should setup a watch then I suppose” Vekao said to her. “I’ll take first watch, and then I will wake you after a few hours. Try to get some rest until then.”

The night came and went without any strange happenings, well not completely, at some point during his watch Vekao had heard what he thought was flapping wings, but he quickly dismissed this as being too jumpy. Lizzy yawned and went over to wake up the sleeping Vekao, shaking him awake. Vekao woke with a start, and grabbed Lizzy by the arm. She winced in pain and shouted out, “Vekao let go it’s just me!”

Vekao instantly realizing that he had Lizzy’s arm in his huge hand let her go and said, “Sorry Lizzy, I just reacted without thinking, nerves I guess.”

Lizzy looked at her friend and winked, rubbing her arm in the process. “That’s OK Vekao, I understand. I probably should have made some noise before I got too close to you in your sleep.” Lizzy said to him and smiled.

Vekao smiled back and got up from the floor where he had been sleeping. He stretched and yawned, rubbed his back and said, “Well we should get going quickly this morning Lizzy, not bother staying and eating breakfast in the inn. Maybe we could get Master Turley to fix us something for the road?”

“That sounds good to me.” Lizzy stated as she began to move about the room gathering her things, taking care to pack them carefully. She waited until the last to go and pry the board

up in the floor and remove the artifact, still wrapped in the rags, she went and placed it gingerly inside her pack. Then she looked at Vekao expectantly.

Vekao grabbed his pack up off the floor and flung it over his shoulder, he grabbed his battleaxe and slung it on also, he was ready. They both walked out the door quietly, for it was still before sun-up, and they walked down to the kitchen of the inn, there they found Master Turley already slaving away over the morning breakfast.

“Good morn to you two!” Turley all but shouted at them as they came in the room.

“Good morn to you Master Turley.” Lizzy said a bit more quietly, while Vekao just nodded his direction. “We are taking off this morning good sir and I would like to settle my debt, and to ask if we could have some rations for the road.” Lizzy added.

“Sure Lizzy, here I can put something together for you to take. And just leave a couple of gold coins over there”, Turley points to a small wooden box in the corner, “that will do for now.”

So Turley assembled a package for them to take on their journey, some cheese, dried meats, meat pies, fruits and other items, wrapped it all up for them and sent them on their way with good wishes, telling them both to come back soon, yet as they walked out the back door and headed on their way down the alley, Turley shakes his head and wonders to himself if he will ever see the lovely Lizzy or her large minotaur friend again.

Chapter 6

Davkas was sick and not getting any better. His stomach was flipping and flopping so much he thought that it would soon do a flip right out of his body. Life in captivity didn't agree with the old elf, he was used to life outside in the open air, elves weren't meant to live underground he thought to himself.

How long had it been? He was starting to lose track of time he had been held in the dungeons for so long. That was disturbing him to no end; he had to maintain his grip on the here and now if he had any hope of escape.

"Escape" he thought to himself. That light was beginning to grow dim in the back of his mind; he had been placed here over a year ago by the dark dwarves when he was caught spying for his King. But now, here he was stuck in this cell, being feed scrapes and barely enough of those to keep his strength up. What he couldn't figure out was why they were holding him in the first place? Why wasn't he dead?

It seemed like a century ago now, but it was only last year. The King had heard rumors of the goblins and dark dwarves stirring up again along his borders, so he had asked Davkas to go investigate for him. Davkas had been creeping along the border when he was surrounded by them, he thought about fighting his way through, but knew instinctively that it would be useless to do so; he then threw his weapon down and surrendered.

Most of the day Davkas spent trying to stretch his muscles in the cramped, dark cell. He also spent a lot of time thinking about his daughter Lizzy and how much he missed her. He hoped that she was doing OK, he knew the type of life style she had chosen and wasn't very

happy about it, he would have preferred that she had followed in his footsteps as a scout for the King or something similar.

His thoughts were interrupted when he heard noises in the corridor outside his cell room door; it was too early for feeding time he knew, so this was not ordinary. He quickly tensed up and decided that if they had come for him he wasn't going to go quietly, he stood by the cell door listening. Soon he heard the gruff voices of dark dwarves, then he heard a cell door being opened close by, then a muffled squeal sounding to him that it was a female being shuffled into an adjacent cell close by. His curiosity was getting to him; he had to find out who this was that they were bringing down next to him. He waited patiently until he heard the door slam shut and then the sounds of the dwarves walking noisily away back down the corridor.

“Hello?” he said quietly through the slit in his cell door. “Are you OK?”

At first he heard nothing, and then he heard the almost silent sobs of a woman. “I'm not sure, I'm not sure where I am or why I am here.” He heard the female voice say.

“Well I can help on the first part, but as to why you are here that I wouldn't know. You are in a deep holding cell of the Dhag'arii, the dark dwarves, we are along the border to the kingdom of Lijissa. My name is Davkas, I was captured almost a year ago when I was sent here by the King to spy out this area.” Davkas said to the voice.

He heard a small gasp from the woman, and then heard her say, “Lijissa? My name is Lunansa, Princess of Lijissa. I remember you Davkas from my Father’s court. You were considered captured and killed a long time ago, Father had given up hope ever hearing from you!”

Davkas couldn’t believe what he was hearing! The Princess here? His mind was reeling, think Davkas, think! “Princess! What happened?” was all he managed to croak out of his mouth.

“I’m not exactly sure myself, but I will explain as best as I can. I was outside the castle walls enjoying the day, the sun was up and bright, I was feeling very good about the day. But then the area I was walking in turned dark and cold, like a shadow fell over it, but it was more than a shadow. Then I simply don’t remember much of anything else, until I woke up here just moments ago!” Lunansa replied to Davkas.

“That sounds like they used some sort of dark magic on you my Princess.” Davkas responds back to her through the cell door.

“Yes that is what I assumed also.” Lunansa said back to him. “Well I hope that you have a plan then for my rescue.” She added, with a smile and a little laugh. “For I’m sure that I don’t want to stay here for very long!”

“Well you are probably right about that, I certainly don’t want to stay here any longer than I have to either. Although there haven’t been many opportunities to escape from this pit!”

Davkas added. “I once tried, and was soon recaptured, beaten and returned to my cell. Since then they have kept a more watchful eye on me I’m afraid. But of course I will help when I can my Princess.”

“Of course I will help when I can my Princess!” a gruff mocking voice called back to Davkas from the darkened corridor.

It was Or’acke the guard captain, who had slinked back down the corridor, listening in on their conversation. He was laughing now; Davkas and Lunansa heard the evil chuckling from the shadows of the corridor. His laughter grated at Davkas’s nerves, his hands twitched for they longed to grab the evil dwarf by the throat and throttle him then and there.

“I will be keeping my eye on you little elf, and you too *Princess* Lunansa, for you will bring us a very valuable ransom, very valuable indeed!” Or’acke called to them then started up his laughter once again. Both Davkas and Lunansa heard him walking away back down the corridor, both felt the frustration of their situation rise as bile up into their throat.

As Vekao and Lizzy made their way across the city to the docks Lizzy couldn’t help but talk about the artifact.

“So you say the piece is magical Vekao?” Lizzy called over her shoulder to the massive minotaur trailing her down the alley.

“Hush now about that out here Lizzy!” Vekao snaps at her in a harsh whisper. “We can’t be talking about that out in the open like this.” He added more gently.

“Oh! Well if you say so.” Is all Lizzy could think of as a reply. “*Who does he think he is my father?*” Lizzy thought to herself, then regretted the thought instantly, as she remembered that her Father had been missing for some time now.

They traveled in silence as they continued along the back alleys and side passages in the general direction of the docks. They soon began to hear the sounds of the dock workers, and the smell of the sea became strong. They both breathed a sigh of relief as they rounded the next corner and came within view of the docks. They hoped soon that they could find a vessel that was leaving that day and be on board, moving away from Koth and the vengeful merchant Zhuerelm.

“I feel we should look to the taverns to find what we need.” Lizzy said to Vekao over her shoulder as they trudged along the street, keeping their eyes and ears on the people and places up and down the busy dock street.

“That’s fine by me lead the way, my thirst is great right now and look forward to sipping a good ale or two.” Vekao replied back to Lizzy.

“Well I can’t promise how good it will be, but up ahead is a tavern I’ve been to a time or two.” Lizzy responded to the minotaur. She started off in the direction of the “Roaring Sea Lion”

a very common drinking house that lined the streets of the docks. You could find a great number of sailors, ship captains, and general dock workers from time to time in it's four walls, today Lizzy and Vekao only hoped to find one who would take them someplace away from the danger they faced within the city.

Vekao and Lizzy approached the "Roaring Sea Lion" and entered through the door, they quickly scanned the room for an empty table to sit at and soon found one to their liking in the far corner of the room. After they had seated themselves a barmaid approached them and asks them what they wanted. Lizzy and Vekao ordered some ale and the barmaid left to bring them their drinks.

Scanning the patrons in the room Lizzy quickly sucked in her breath, "Vekao I don't believe it!" Lizzy hissed towards the minotaur. "Over there in the corner of the room is the fence I was telling you about meeting." Lizzy nods toward the corner where Taithmar was sitting, apparently she hadn't spotted them as yet.

"What?" Vekao says to her, and he slightly and cautiously turns his head in the direction she was indicating. "Oh I see, well what do you think she is doing here at this time of day? You weren't supposed to meet her until later tonight?" Vekao says to Lizzy as he looks back to her.

At this point the barmaid returned with their order, took her coins and walked away to some other tables on the opposite side of the room. Lizzy and Vekao decided not to draw

attention to themselves at this time and to watch the table where the Taithmar was sitting with a strange looking man in a brown robe.

“Yes you are correct, I made an agreement to meet with her later on today. I can’t imagine what would bring her down here at this time of day. I’m sure it’s just a coincidence.” Lizzy said to her large friend as they continued to discreetly watch Taithmar’s table.

Soon it became apparent that whatever business she was conducting with the man it was coming to a close, quickly he rose and excused himself and left the tavern, it was then that Taithmar’s eyes wandered around the room and she noticed Lizzy. Taithmar got up from her table, while Lizzy let out a quiet moan, she walked straight over to where Lizzy and Vekao were sitting at their table and said, “Well Lizzy what are doing down here by the docks so early in the morning? Are we still meeting later on to discuss the ‘item’ you wished to show me?”

“Y-yes sure.” Lizzy stammered a little as she responded back to Taithmar. “Umm, well I’m showing my Uncle Vekao around the city and decided to stop here for a drink.” Lizzy managed to add.

“Oh good well then you won’t mind a little company then?” Taithmar said and indicated that she wanted to sit with them.

“Well sure we don’t mind at all!” Vekao responded back to her and pulled one of the chairs out for her to sit on. At the same time Lizzy kicked his leg underneath the table and gave

him a sour look, which didn't get past Taithmar as she set herself down in the offered chair. Soon the barmaid made her way over and took Taithmar's order, went away back to the bar to fetch it and was soon sliding the drink, a local fruit drink, onto the table.

"It was a pleasure to see a familiar face here in this place Lizzy!" Taithmar said to her as she began sipping her drink.

"Yes, yes it is a pleasure, so might I ask what brings you down here so early in the morning Taithmar? Got some *items* to look at here?" Lizzy said with a slight wink, as she emphasized the word 'items'.

Taithmar slowly shook her head and then quickly glanced around the room. She then leaned in closer to Lizzy and said, "No Lizzy nothing like that, and I probably shouldn't be telling you this, but we have known each other for a long time now, I was meeting with a very important messenger from King Brightwater." Taithmar quickly whispered to her.

Lizzy's eyes widen when she heard Taithmar. "What were you doing meeting with an agent of the King?" Lizzy said to Taithmar, a little too loudly. Taithmar quickly glanced around her, but saw that no one else had taken notice of the comment.

"Lizzy" Vekao said to Lizzy with a fatherly look of disapproval. "Taithmar's business is not any of our concern right now."

“Oh Vekao, don’t be so stuffy!” Lizzy said back to him and smiled. “It’s like Taithmar said, we go back a couple of years and have worked together on many an item or two.” Lizzy said and then directed her attention back to Taithmar. “So are you going to answer my question or not?” she added with a sly wink.

Amused by the banter between Vekao and Lizzy, Taithmar looked towards Vekao and smiled broadly, “Thank you Vekao for attempting to defend me and to show good manners, but I can handle Lizzy just fine on my own.” Then turning her gaze back towards the elven thief she added, “Ok Lizzy I suppose I can trust you with a bit of news. The King’s daughter has disappeared and the King has contacted all of his agents in search of any clues as to her disappearance. I was just meeting with my contact over there where you saw me sitting earlier, for I am eyes and ears for the King here in Koth.” Taithmar told Lizzy and then calmly sipped some more of her juice.

Chapter 7

The sound of dripping water was constant, a never ending noise in the back of his mind. Davkas was lying on his side, huddled in the corner of his cell; his mind was wandering back to more pleasant times between him and his family. His wife had been dead now for more than a dozen years, having taken ill when his daughter was just a teenager. Yet he remembered all the good times they shared together as family, fun times as his daughter was growing up, times of laughter, times full of excitement. But all that was in the past now, for now he was being held prisoner in a deep holding cell by the dark dwarves.

He awoke with a start, his eyes alone betraying that he had woken from a deep sleep, for the noise of his cell door banging open jerked him out of his sleep! He instantly was on guard, yet he didn't move. *"Let them think that I still slumber."* He thought to himself.

"On your feet sluggard!" shouted a guard at his feet.

Davkas sat up and yawned, "Oh is it morning already? I'm sorry but I couldn't really tell seeing as it is dark in here all the time." He replied in a cheery tone to the guard.

"Cut the wise cracks you stupid elf! The Captain wants to see you." The guard growled to Davkas and then motioned that he should place his arms out in front of himself so that he could slap the manacles on his wrists.

Davkas slowly, with great effort, moved his arms into place where the dwarf wanted them, but as the dwarf went to place the manacles on his wrists, Davkas deftly grabbed them and in one swift move had them around the dwarf's neck. The struggle began, but soon with Davkas pretty much riding the back of the dwarf, Davkas quickly had him on the ground gasping for his very life! It wasn't long before the dwarf was motionless and Davkas knelt next to him and watched to see if he was still breathing, satisfied that he was truly dead, he slowly rose to his feet and then went and peered out into the dungeon hallway.

"Strange" Davkas thought to himself, it's not like the Dhag'arii to only send one guard to his cell. But Davkas quickly shook his head and pushed the thought aside for now, his next thought was for the Princess. He made sure that there was no other guards around and quickly padded over to the cell that held Lunansa.

"Princess!" Davkas hissed through the cell door. "Are you there?"

"Yes I'm here!" came her quick reply. "What is it? What are you doing? It sounds as if you are right outside my cell door?" she added.

"Hsst!" Davkas whispered through the door, "Yes I am but keep your voice down, I am going to try and get you out."

Davkas went back to his cell and quickly searched the guard and found the keys in his belt pouch, at the same time he also took the guard's weapon, a mean looking mace. He then

went back to the Princess's cell and opened the lock as quietly as he could manage and swung wide her door. Looking inside he saw her huddled in the far corner of the room, dirty, hair in disarray and looking very gaunt and frightened. Yet when their eyes met she smiled up at him.

“Davkas! You were able to get free?” Lunansa said to him and started to get to her feet, but quickly fell back down with a grimace on her beautiful elven face.

“Yes Princess I was able to overpower the guard and escape, now we can flee this retched dungeon! Quickly now, but try and keep your voice down, more guards may come at any moment.” Davkas said to her as he reached his hand out for her to grab hold to.

Lunansa took his offered hand and smiled brightly at Davkas, and then they both scurried to the open cell door and peered around into the hallway of the dungeon. Seeing no dwarves they began creeping back up the hallway in the direction the guards would come from when they feed them or tormented them. Slowly they inched up the corridor, trying to keep to the shadows, which was fairly easy since there were very few torches burning here. Soon they found their way to a closed door at the end of the corridor they were walking in.

Lunansa looked at Davkas and said, “Well now what do we do?”

Zhuereim walked down the hallway in his home and turned the corner, he went to the panel on the wall and looked up and down the hallway swiftly, noted there were no servants or anyone else in the hallway, he deftly pressed the area that revealed the secret entry way. The

door way quietly slide open and Zhuerelm quickly entered, as he did so the torches on the wall burst into life, having a mage on staff did come in handy after all! He moved slowly, but deliberately down the passage way, he turned the corner and went to the steps leading deep down under his home. The torches here too flared to life as he began his descent.

Zhuerelm quickly went down the stairs to the main room below, the room where he would be meeting with the dark dwarves. The Dhag'arii had setup a meeting with his agents and they were coming here tonight to meet with him, they wanted their artifact and he was suppose to supply it to them. Of course that was all before the piece was stolen by the thief, for now the artifact was missing and he wasn't sure what to do.

The air next to him began to shimmer and soon his mage, the old wizard named Vitros, was standing in the room with him. Zhuerelm sighed with relief, for he felt better with the mage by his side.

“Everything is ready?” he asked the mage.

“Yes my lord, all is ready, I have cast the protective spells as you desired, and those should protect us if the dark dwarves try anything.” The mage spoke quietly back to Zhuerelm, but secretly he added *“I hope so anyway.”*

“Good, well I suppose all we do now is wait then for them to make their appearance, I just hope it is soon, it's rather chilly down here.” Zhuerelm said back to his house wizard.

The mage nodded to his employer and they both began watching and waiting for the Dhag'arii to show themselves. The mage was fidgeting somewhat with his staff, and Zhuerelm began humming quietly to himself, trying to stay calm. They didn't have long to wait for soon the air began to shimmer again and two dark figures materialized in front of them in the room.

“Greetings Zhuerelm, and to you also mage Vitros!” one of the figures exclaimed as their forms took shape. “We come from our King and bring his greetings to you.” The one to the right of Zhuerelm continued, obviously to the merchant and his mage, the royal Dhag'arii wizard Tin'ther.

“Greetings to you also, lord Tin'ther.” The merchant said in response. “I send your King It'tor greetings also. Please, what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?”

The dark dwarf mage, Tin'ther to the right of the merchant looked to his cohort in the room with him, made a gesture and said, “You should know by now what purpose our visit is for! We come for the artifact that was promised our King. We have the payment here with us. So please provide us with what we seek and we will be on our way. King It'tor is anxious to have this artifact back in our possession so that we can begin our domination of the Kingdom of Lijissa.” The other dark dwarf, who was obviously a bodyguard, shifted his feet slightly, but kept his eyes locked on the merchant and his wizard. The merchant Zhuerelm and the mage Vitros noticed that he had a large pack in his possession which made them think that this was the one carrying their payment.

Zhuerelm glanced at his wizard and then back to the dark dwarf mage, he then shrugged slightly and said, “Well unfortunately I no longer possess the artifact, someone stole it from my home and I have yet to recover it. Yet even now I have my agents attempting to locate the thief and retrieve the artifact!”

The dark dwarf mage lifted his eye brows at the news, with a look of disgust he spoke a word to his guard and then focused on the merchant. “That is not good news, not good news indeed! You need to tell me about this thief, everything that you know. My king will not be pleased by this news, Zhuerelm; we had been counting on you to provide us with the artifact for it is very special to us.”

“Y-yes, yes I know” the merchant stuttered back at the dark dwarf, then quickly looked to his house wizard. “Perhaps, Vitros can explain the details of the theft to you?”

“Yes, well I will do my best. You see recently a young elven girl broke into our good home here and pilfered the artifact for which you seek, I tracked this girl down using my spells and we sent assassins to take her life and reclaim the artifact, but to no avail since she killed both of them so far. But I assure you Lord Tin’ther we will get the artifact back soon!” The mage responded and grasped his staff with both hands with a look of determination on his face.

The Dhag’arii mage listened in silence, obviously fuming silently, when the house wizard finished his story he nodded and said, “Well we have released our servants, the shadow serpents

from the depths of our stronghold, they will help us track this little thief down and also help us recover what is rightfully ours! Soon this entire region will be under our control, and you Zhuerelm will be answering to our King as to why you allowed our property to be stolen from under your roof!”

With that the dwarven mage spoke a word of power then he and his bodyguard began to fade from sight, soon they were gone and the only ones left in the room were the merchant, Zhuerelm, and his wizard Vitros. They quickly looked at each other and exhaled audibly, for they both had been unconsciously holding their breath. Slowly they both walked back up the stairs to the secret entrance, they paused at the top of the stairs, and Zhuerelm looked at his friend the mage and said, “Perhaps we should continue our pursuit of this thief Lizzy and attempt to recover the artifact ourselves? I need you to take personal charge of finding her and getting the artifact back! In that way we will have a better position with the dark dwarves, I don’t want them to find it before we do, or else they will never give us what we deserve.” The mage smiled back at the merchant and nodded his understanding, both of them then passed through the hidden portal to the main house, with looks of determination and cruel smiles.

Chapter 8

Lizzy couldn't believe it even after Taithmar had said it; the King's daughter was gone! This was really terrible news for Lizzy knew the King's daughter, Lunansa, they weren't friends or anything like that, but she did know her from when she was growing up.

Lizzy looked at Taithmar and said, "What is being done about this? Do they know who took her and what they want?"

Taithmar answered Lizzy's questions with a sigh, "Well unfortunately there isn't much known about what happened yet, but it appears that the dark dwarves have taken her, the evil Dhag'arii. Why exactly is still somewhat in question, it is believed that they intend to use her capture to further their plans on conquering the kingdom and establishing their own king as ruler."

"That's insane!" Vekao bellowed from the seat across the table.

"I agree" Taithmar responded back to the minotaur, "But it has happened and now we are desperately trying to find the Princess!"

"Well I wish my Father was still around." Lizzy said dejectedly. "He would know what to do and where to look for the Princess!"

“Yes well I feel the same way, Lizzy.” Vekao added as he looked over at Lizzy and grasped her hand on the table. “I wish he was here too.”

Lizzy continued to stare into the eyes of her friend Vekao and tears began to well up in her eyes. She pulled her hand away quickly and wiped at her eyes to remove the tears that had sprung up there. She then turned her attention back to Taithmar, “Well since you have been so honest with me, it is only fair to be totally honest with you Taithmar.” Lizzy said as she looked at the long time acquaintance. “We were looking for a way out of the city, there have been attempts on my life Taithmar, all due to the stupid ‘item’ that I told you about!”

“Oh Lizzy I am sorry! Why didn’t you tell me that yesterday, I would have helped in any way that I could. So now that you are here, what more can you tell me of this ‘item’?” Taithmar replied to Lizzy with a look of concern and sympathy.

Lizzy looked at Vekao for reassurance, he looked into her eyes and said, “Well you might as well tell her the whole story.”

“Ok, well Taithmar this is the deal, I stole this piece from a very wealthy merchant here in Koth. It is a very interesting piece which is why I took it in the first place. But little did I realize what kind of trouble it would lead to. Since that time he has sent two assassins to kill me and take the piece back.” Lizzy started to explain to Taithmar.

“You mean this merchant didn’t alert the authorities to your crimes? He sent his own people to try and recover it? Interesting...” Taithmar said, interrupting Lizzy.

Lizzy impatiently interrupts Taithmar in turn, “Yes, and yes. And to top it all off, Vekao here claims that he’s seen this piece before during the war with the dark dwarves. He tells me he thinks it’s an ancient artifact of theirs that when used by their wizards properly will turn into a powerful earth elemental!” Lizzy adds with a look of concern in her eyes.

“Really!?” Taithmar exclaimed in a hoarse whisper, trying to contain her excitement. “I must see this artifact Lizzy! It could prove vitally important to the realm!”

“Well I suppose so.” Lizzy said hesitantly. “I was going to bring it to you to fence for me after all.” She added. “But it’s too dangerous to bring it out here in the open like this; we need to go someplace more private.”

“Well I know of a place that’s close by.” Taithmar said in response to Lizzy’s suggestion. “There’s an inn just around the corner from here, we can go there and rent a room, perhaps then we can discuss this further in private.”

Lizzy looked at Vekao to see what he thought, he gave her a shrug and nodded his agreement, so the three of them got up from their table, settled the bill with the proprietor and marched outside into the street. Taithmar took the lead and had them walking briskly through the street to their destination. It wasn’t long before it came into view and they were standing outside of the “Laughing Dolphin Inn”.

Vekao looked up at the sign and smiled, then thought to himself, “Where do they come up with these names anyway?” They then all entered the inn through the door and walked over to the proprietor, who smiled at Taithmar as she came up, “Greeting madam, the usual room I assume?”

“Yes the usual room please and also do not let anyone disturb us.” Taithmar said in response to the innkeeper as she laid out three gold coins and took the key from the innkeeper and headed up the nearby stairs to the second floor where they crossed the landing to the first hallway. Soon they came to a door at the end of the hall, where she inserted the key and entered the room. She quickly went over to light the lamp in the corner of the room and after they all had entered, quickly locked and barred the door. Then just to be sure she went to the only window in the room and pulled the shutters closed, and locked it also.

“Well here we are Lizzy, so now maybe you can show me this dangerous piece that you have acquired?” Taithmar said to Lizzy after she had secured the room.

Lizzy looked at Vekao and the minotaur shrugged his massive shoulders and smiled back at Lizzy. So Lizzy pulled her pack off her back and opened it up and withdrew the old dirty rag which still encased the artifact. She pulled the rag off of it and handed the piece over to Taithmar, but even as she did Taithmar’s eyes widened in fear and awe!

“Oh my, oh my Lizzy do you realize what this is?” Taithmar managed to whisper to Lizzy.

“Well not really only what Uncle Vekao has told me?” Lizzy croaked back to her.

Taithmar looks to Vekao and raises one eyebrow slightly. Vekao takes the hint and responds, “Well from what I remember when I saw a figurine just the same used in the last war with the goblins and dark dwarves, the wizards of the dark dwarves had this figurine that they could turn into a very powerful earth elemental, it almost won the war for them at the time, but we were able to defeat it in the end for the King has some mighty mages of his own that work for him. But that is really all that I know.”

“Well that’s pretty good, all that I can add is that since the war this has been missing from the battle field, for when the earth elemental is defeated it retreats back to the figurine where it can recuperate until needed again. Of course, as all magical items such as this, it has some limitations on its powers, it can only be used once a day, we believe, and for this particular piece it seems that it can only be used at night.” Taithmar responds back to Vekao.

“Wow!” Lizzy exclaimed.

“Yes wow, so apparently it has been found if this is the true piece, which we would have to assume it is since they have tried to kill you to get it back!” Taithmar added.

“Yes well I agree.” Vekao said in response. “And that is exactly why I need to get Lizzy out of this town, and we need to be rid of this figurine!”

“Well it must not fall in to the wrong hands!” Taithmar replied back to Vekao. “We must take it to the King.”

“We?” both Lizzy and Vekao cried at the same time, and then Lizzy added, “What do you mean we? Vekao and I were going to take the next ship out from the docks.”

“What I mean Lizzy and Vekao, is that I would like to help you in this and come with you so that this artifact can be taken to the King. If that is alright with you of course” Taithmar said in response and stood waiting for their answer.

Lizzy and Vekao just looked at each other and then smiled, shrugged their shoulders and said in unison again, “Very well!”

Chapter 9

The old elven warrior turned to his Princess and shrugged his shoulders, in essence saying, I don't know for sure. He pressed his ear to the closed door, drew in a quick breath and held it as he listened. Nothing could be heard for the first few moments, then, he heard some faint voices on the other side, someone was coming, and they were getting closer! Quickly he turned to the princess and raising his finger to his lips motioned for her to be quiet, then he grabbed her by the arm and they both scurried over to a dark corner to hide, very soon they could hear the door lock jiggling and the massive door swung inward, two burly dwarves came stomping through, with fire in their eyes. The dwarf in the lead was Or'acke, the captain of the guard. They must have grown suspicious of the guard being so long in bringing Davkas to see him that Or'acke had grown impatient enough to want to investigate himself.

Hiding in the shadows Davkas quickly stiffens as Or'acke stepped through the door, Princess Lunansa also froze and quietly started to shake in fear of the evil dwarf, but Davkas placed a comforting hand upon her arm and squeezed to reassure her. They both watched as the two dwarves hurried up the corridor to the cells where they once were held, Davkas let out his breath and motioned for the Princess to follow him. He peaked into the doorway the dwarves just came through and found no guards on the other side, so both he and the Princess went through, shutting the door behind them. Davkas quickly looked around and found something that could be jammed against the door to keep it from opening back into the guard area, so thus preventing Or'acke and the other guard from coming back through.

“We must hurry Princess and find a way out of these dungeons before Or’acke returns and alerts the dungeon guards of our escape. Even now I’m sure he has discovered the dead guard sent to bring me to him.” Davkas quickly whispers to the Princess, he then grabs her by her hand and begins to lead her away from the door and the now trapped guard captain and his minion.

Soon they come to an area lit with the soft glow of torch light, straight ahead held a set of stairs going up, the corridor to the right leading off into darkness, and the one to the left leading to steps descending down. Davkas reasoned that by going up at this point would lead them straight into the waiting arms of the guard room, but of course beyond that was their ultimate freedom, the corridor to their right didn’t seem very promising at the moment, but the one leading down may lead to some natural caves in the base of the mountain fortress they were being held at, so Davkas took a deep breath and lead the way to the left, downward deeper into the mountain, hoping to throw the dwarves off their trail.

“I don’t understand Davkas. Why are we going this direction?” the Princess Lunansa whispered to the older elf.

“It is the only way my Princess for us to have any chance of escaping I fear. By myself I will not be able to over power the guards up above, for by going up the stairs back there we would run directly into the main guard room. I know this because I have been taken there many times for questioning.” Davkas explained to the Princess as they hurried down the flight of stairs.

“I see, well you have been here longer than I, so lead on.” She replied to Davkas.

So Davkas and the Princess Lunansa continued on in the dark, depending on their low light vision to help them along the way. Soon they came to the end of the stairs and found themselves facing a closed and barred door. Davkas approached the door cautiously, he pressed his ear to the door to listen, hearing nothing he slowly raised the bar securing the door. Setting the bar to the side he tried the door, it seemed to be stuck, probably from long disuse thought Davkas. So he tugged a little harder, this time the door cracked open suddenly, and Davkas had to catch himself before his momentum threw him off balance, in the end he was able to open the door only barely wide enough where he could slip through.

Just then they heard a loud thumping sound in the general direction they had come from, most likely it was Or’acke the guard captain and his cohort discovering the door being blocked, it may take them sometime before the other guards notice they were missing, so Davkas was thinking fast. He quickly slipped through the open door and took in the situation on the other side, using his scouting skills he began to examine the surrounding area in detail. There appeared to be some signs of someone or something approaching the doorway, he couldn’t tell exactly what it was though due to the accumulated amounts of dust and dirt. He quickly went back through the door and motioned for the Princess to follow him, she came running since the thumping sounds from up the corridor were growing louder.

“We need to move quickly Princess if we hope to have any chance of escape!” Davkas said to her as she slipped through the open door. After she was on the other side, Davkas pulled

the door shut behind them, there was no way for him to block it from this side since it opened inward, so with that he turned and grab Lunansa's hand and move quickly down the new corridor.

They soon came to another junction and had to choose whether to go left or right, after examining the area again for tracks in the dust, Davkas picked the right corridor. They began trudging in that direction when they started to hear a new noise, something that just didn't sound right to Davkas in all his past experiences. It seemed to him to be a shuffling sound, or perhaps something being dragged, the trouble was it seemed as if it was getting closer!

"Davkas what is that sound?" Princess Lunansa asked him.

"I'm not sure Princess, but I don't like it." Davkas responded back to the Princess, purposely withholding what he feared inside. "But we she keep moving, hopefully we will find someplace to rest soon." Davkas added.

So they continued on their current path keeping a constant watch for whatever was making the noise. Soon they came to an area with an opening on their left, the corridor itself continued further on, Davkas checked out the opening and motioned for the princess to follow him, ducking inside they found themselves in a closed area, roughly carved out of the rock, approximately 20 feet wide and 20 feet deep. Inside this room there was scattered piles of dirt, rock and in one corner of the room a few wooden crates, oh and also a rat or two which soon scurried away at the approach of the two elves. Davkas had the Princess duck down behind the

pile of rocks in the far corner, while he positioned himself close by the doorway, with the mace in his hand.

It wasn't long before the shuffling, scraping sound got even louder as whatever was causing the noise drew near, then the smell hit him and it almost caused him to gag and retch, but then he knew what it was, a Carcass Beast! One of the most dreaded monsters to encounter underground! It was a living nightmare, a long worm-like creature which would search out the dead and dying and feed on them, thus the name and the stench from the rotting corpses that comprised its food. Davkas wasn't sure what he was going to do. He knew that fighting the beast with the mace would be a difficult task, yet what choice did he have? He also knew that running would be pointless, the beast would just continue to track them until they became exhausted, so standing and facing it now would be their best hope.

Davkas turned to the Princess and said, "Princess, I fear I know what is making the sound now, it is a dreaded Carcass monster which is probably been tracking us since we entered this area through the closed and barred door by the stairs."

"W-what can we do?" the Princess stuttered in fear.

"I will make my stand by the doorway to attempt to kill this beast, or at least drive it off, hoping that by doing so it won't threaten you." Davkas said in response to the Princess.

“I-I c-can help Davkas.” The Princess replied back to Davkas and then slowly stood up. Davkas noticed that she held a board in her hand that she must have found behind the rock pile.

Davkas was slightly amused and smiled back at the Princess, but he cautioned her to stay back and down so that the beast would not notice her, he hoped! Soon the stench and the noise coming from the corridor drew his attention back to the entry way. Davkas steeled himself for he knew that the beast was working its way up to the threshold. He braced himself as the front portion of the Carcass monster came into view, with a savage war cry he attacked!

The monster was truly horrible to look at, let alone smell, it was almost 8 feet in length, with a girth to match that of a good sized bear, it had no feet, but crawled around like a huge ugly worm, which was a fortunate thing at the moment. Davkas used the mace clumsily, for he was not used to such a weapon, he preferred his long sword which had been surrendered to the dark dwarves when they had captured him, yet he did manage to strike the beast, which caused the thing to rear up and make a sound like a squealing pig! Davkas lunged backwards, and the swinging head of the beast barely missed him!

Looked down at the mace in his hand Davkas saw that the strange blood of the creature covered it, it was a greenish blood, which too had a foul odor. Davkas watched as the enraged monster used its senses to locate him, and then it turned towards him, beginning a series of fairs and lunges, similar to a striking snake. Davkas took measure of the situation and leaned in to strike again, only this time the beast proved faster and lunged at him clamping down hard on his exposed arm!

“Aaaaeeeeeee” Davkas screamed in agony! The monster had bitten into his arm and left a bloody deep gash which now began to throb with pain! It was all he could do to not drop the mace in his hand!

“Davkas are you alright!” The Princess screamed at him.

In pain and with the wound in his arm dripping blood, Davkas danced backwards away from the stinking beast. Then he gathered himself, gripped the mace with both hands this time and swung down hard at the thing! He felt a satisfying crunch as he did, and glancing down saw that the head of the thing was cracked open! Yet it was still moving! Again he danced backward as it lunged at him trying to clamp down on his arm a second time, but this time he proved faster.

Glancing back at the Princess he finally answered her, “Princess, I am fine, just a little blood is all.” Yet the wound was agonizingly painful. *“There must be some kind of poison with the bite of this creature.”* He thought to himself.

Shrugging aside the pain he continued the fight, dodging left and then right he found another opening and struck hard at the exposed head of the creature, taking careful aim to try and hit the same spot as before. The beast squealed again, it was just then that out of the corner of his eye Davkas saw a blur move in! It was the Princess and she had found a very long spear-like piece of wood which she used to impale the monstrous beast! Davkas screamed at her to get away, but this time it hit the floor with a thud, and lay very still.

Davkas not sure if it was dead yet or just mortally wounded motioned for the Princess to stay back, Davkas approached the monster cautiously. Taking the bloody mace in both hands again he smashed down hard on its head, again and again, almost hysterical in his actions, this thing had put a scare into him for sure! The beast never moved, it was truly and completely dead! Davkas sighed in relief.

“Well I think that this monster won’t be following anyone any more, I just hope there are no more of them out there.” He said to the Princess as she came to stand next to him. She reached over and took his injured arm in her hands and gasped! When the Carcass monster bit him the saliva from the beast was starting to have its effect on his arm and it was slowly turning green and swelling! But Davkas strangely was thinking about his daughter Lizzy and was wondering how she was doing, a smile came to his face at the thought of his lovely daughter, his pride and joy, *“Oh Lizzy he thought, I just hope I live long enough to see your beautiful face again.”*

Chapter 10

Vitros was busy in his study, he was going to attempt to locate the thief again and then this time he himself was going to make the attempt to recover the stolen artifact. It was time to put an end to this madness, so here he was staring into the pool of water that he had poured into the basin, he then cast one of his most powerful spells and the water began to glow with a soft golden sheen, his spell was working! Soon a picture started to form in water basin, he saw the little thief, but who was that she was with?

“I’m not sure who you have as an ally little thief, but it doesn’t really matter now.”

Vitros thought to himself. Vitros the mage stared deeper into the picture that had formed within the basin, a minotaur and who was that other one there, there was something about that one? So he concentrated a little harder, then it seemed as he continued to stare that the person looked up and stared back! Then a word was spoken and as quickly as it had begun his concentration broke and the image was gone! Vitros sat back and rubbed his eyes.

“Hmm, very interesting thief, it seems you have someone very powerful assisting you now!” Vitros said to himself. He then got up from the chair he had been in and went to get his staff. It seemed that this would prove to be a challenging day after all!

Taithmar jerked her head around quickly! What was that? Someone was spying on them? She quickly discovered the source.

“Rashad!” Taithmar spoke the ancient word of power and the spy was gone in an instant!

“What was that Taithmar?” Lizzy looked over at the woman with her eye brows raised.

“Oh nothing really, but we need to move quickly Lizzy if we want to escape from the city and take the artifact to the King!” Taithmar said in response. With that Taithmar moved to the door and then paused before she went out. “Met me down by the docks this afternoon, be prepared for a fast departure.” And with that she slipped out the door and went straight to her home in the merchant district.

“What was that all about?” Vekao said to Lizzy after Taithmar had left. “It seemed she was in an awful hurry all of a sudden. Seemed like she got spooked by something?”

“Yes I would agree, but we do need to move, the day is quickly fading.” Lizzy said in response to the minotaur. With that Lizzy grabbed her bag and both Vekao and her went through the door and out to the street. Soon they found their way back to the Roaring Sea Lion and seated themselves, this being very close to the docks they felt like it would be the best place to wait for Taithmar. After ordering their drinks they relaxed a little and Vekao pulled out some bones and they rolled a few rounds to amuse themselves, Lizzy won most of the rounds of course and soon Vekao was shoving a few silver coins in her direction. Before long they could tell the sun was starting to set so they paid their tab, got up and left through the front entrance, on their way to the docks to find and meet up with Taithmar.

Vitros hurried through the place he called home to find his friend and master Zhuerelm. He had to tell him what he had discovered, so when he found him he was relieved and explained the situation to him quickly. Soon they had assembled a group, including Vitros, to leave in pursuit of the thief and her companions. Vitros was confident that with this group they could recover the stolen artifact and thus make their position with the dark dwarves better.

They exited the building and started making their way towards the Dock district, Vitros in the lead with his staff of power. Following him were three elite members of the house guard, the hulking warrior Talos, the petite but deadly Kyra, and the evil assassin simply called Blackhawk.

Together they worked their way through the crowds moving ever closer to the docks and their hunt for Lizzy and her group, with every intention of killing them all and recovering the stolen artifact.

“We will soon come to the Dock district Blackhawk. You scout ahead and see if you can spot the elven thief and her companions.” Vitros said to the assassin.

With that the assassin moved off by himself through the busy city streets. He kept mostly in the shadows and was good at it, so if asked most of the people on the street would not even remember his passing through. Soon the docks came into view up ahead, so he slowed and started his search, going from one side of the street to the other, peering in this tavern there, and

then that business over here. Slowing he worked his way down the street, hoping to spot them soon so that he could go and lead the others straight to the attack.

Soon he came to the street that had a tavern called the Roaring Sea Lion, he cautiously continued along the street, making sure there were no city watchmen around. He turned a corner and there in front of him walked the elven thief and her minotaur friend. It wasn't hard to spot them since you hardly see that combination of races patronizing each other on a regular basis. He quickly turned back and started to make his way back to Vitro and the others. This was going to be amusing he thought to himself as he made his way back up the street.

As they continued on towards the docks Vekao began to feel uneasy, it was as if someone was watching them he thought to himself. He leaned over to Lizzy and whispered into her ear, "I feel eyes on us Lizzy, it might be nothing, but keep alert just in case."

So both Vekao and Lizzy continued on in the general direction of the docks, occasionally glancing back and forth and of course over their shoulders to see if they could spot anyone. Not seeing anyone looking suspicious they soon made their way to the docks and they both began to earnestly look out for Taithmar for she said she would meet them here. Not yet spotting her they walked slowly along the docks trying to look casual and to blend in with the crowd. Soon Lizzy tensed and she grab Vekao's arm.

“Vekao, look over there! It is someone I recognize, it is Zhuerelm’s house wizard and he seems to be coming straight for us! I fear the worse!” Lizzy said excitedly to Vekao as she peered back along the street where they had come.

Vekao quickly glanced back behind them, yes there to the left walked an older man who to Vekao’s trained eyes was obviously a mage of some kind, and there seemed to be three others with him, a hulking human male wearing a chainmail shirt, a smaller gracefully moving woman obviously a seasoned warrior and an evil dark looking man dressed in gray leathers. Vekao turned to Lizzy and motioned for her to follow and Vekao started winding his way through the crowds, as only a minotaur can, to try and put some distance between them and their pursuers.

“Lizzy listen to me they must be here to recover the stolen artifact. I don’t know how but they have tracked you down. But I’m not sure we can stand and fight them on our own, especially since they have the wizard!” Vekao said to Lizzy as they hurried along the street.

“We can take them if we can find a place to ambush them!” Lizzy replied back to Vekao with a wild look in her eyes.

Vekao just shook his massive bovine head and motioned her to follow him. After a few more moments of looking for an escape path Vekao turned to Lizzy and said, “Lizzy, you’ve lived here for awhile, is there anywhere we can make a stand without them circling us from behind?”

Lizzy thought for a moment and then responded excitedly, “Yes I believe so, follow me!”

She darted along the street, steering away from the docks and soon came to an alleyway. She paused there long enough to look back and saw that the wizard and the three hirelings were still on their tail, so she motioned for Vekao to follow and ducked into the alley. She quickly motioned for Vekao to take up a position close by the entrance, while she went a few feet further in and found a spot to take a stand, she ducked down behind some barrels and they waited.

They didn’t have long to wait for within moments a shadow appeared in the alleyway. It was the big human warrior he stood for a minute and scanned the alley, then ducked back behind the corner of the building where he came. Vekao, stayed motionless having squatted down behind some crates near the entrance, while Lizzy was a little further in hiding behind the barrels, Vekao could just barely spot her and used a hand signal to be ready. Soon another shadow came into view, but this time it was the wizard, he held his staff in front of him and moved cautiously down the alley.

“Come out little thief.” He called, “Come out so we can talk.”

“What is there to talk about old man?” Lizzy cried in response, and at the same time popped out of her hiding place and threw her dagger at the wizard Vitros.

But the wizard was ready for such a trick, and with a mumbled word the dagger struck an invisible barrier and clattered harmlessly to the ground. The wizard smiled and then raised the

staff towards Lizzy, but just before he could do anymore, Vekao came rushing at him from behind the crates close by and with a thud his battleaxe hit the invisible shield around the wizard and Vekao nearly lost his grip on his weapon as his hands went numb for an instant!

Vitros smiled at the minotaur and raised the staff in his direction, with a loud *whump* a force hit the minotaur in the chest and sent him hurtling back into the crates behind him! Vekao was shaken, he felt like some ribs were broken, yet he began to drag himself back up to face the wizard again. Lizzy just screamed and came around the barrels at the wizard with her sword drawn. It was at this time the rest of their adversaries came around the corner to join in the fight, Vekao soon found himself facing the large human warrior who had drawn his equally large sword!

The battle was on now and all the participants were clustered in the narrow alleyway. Vekao brought his battleaxe up to block the warrior's sword thrust, meanwhile the wizard turned his attention to the charging Lizzy, he raised his staff again and with the same motion as he used on Vekao he sent Lizzy flying backwards down the alley. She hit the ground hard and lay motionless.

Vekao didn't waste anytime with the large human, for he knew he didn't have time to waste, he simply took his battleaxe, turned aside a mad slash from the human warrior and stopping the momentum of his axe with superior strength brought it back around for a backhanded hack towards the warrior's chest. With a wet thud he felt it bite through his

chainmail shirt and dig into the warrior's flesh beneath. The warrior's eyes went wide and then he fell back, hitting the ground with a moan.

It was just at that time though that the woman appeared from out of nowhere and began hacking wildly at the minotaur with a longsword, Vekao was back pedaling fast trying to stay out of her reach and yet keep from being pushed up against the wall. Then the assassin with the gray leather jumped into the fray, and he too brought his sword to bear. Vekao bellowed his frustration with the situation!

In the meantime, the wizard was approaching Lizzy as she lay on the ground after his attack, he slowly walked up to her and was just bending over her when she opened her eyes and with the speed only one like herself could command, she swept her leg around and kicked the wizard hard in the knee!

“Aaaaaiieeeee!” the wizard cried and went down in a heap. He glared over at Lizzy, but she was already on the move and running to Vekao's aid! She moved with grace and quickness and soon had added her sword to the chaos surrounding the minotaur. She engaged herself with the woman and soon had her backing down the alley, barely keeping up with Lizzy's desperate blows! The wizard though was less than happy, he gathered himself and stood back up, with a determined look on his face he limped back towards the fighting. As he closed on the combatants he raised his staff towards them and spoke a word of power, springing from the staff an arrow speed forth and hit Vekao squarely in the back! He roared his rage and grabbed futilely at the spot on his back, but being a magical dart it was not there. But there was a wound and there was blood!

Keeping an eye on the assassin facing him, Vekao called back towards the wizard Vitros and shouted at him, “I will make you pay for that coward of a wizard!” But this only seemed to amuse Vitros that much more.

“I don’t think so minotaur, for I am about to end this debacle!” and with that he pointed the staff at Lizzy and with just a word she was frozen in place like a statue! Vekao bellowed and gave a massive shove of his axe at the assassin, pushing him hard against the wall! Vekao then jumped over in front of Lizzy and swatted away the sword of the woman that was directed at Lizzy’s now frozen form.

“Oh give it up minotaur! The fight is not yours. All we want is the stolen property of our master, Zhuerelm.” Vitros called out to Vekao with a sneer.

“Yeah like you will just walk away with it and let us go about our merry way! This fight is far from over as long as I draw breath and I don’t intend to abandon my friend!” Vekao snorted out to the wizard.

“We shall see about that you big over grown cow!” and with that the wizard brought his staff up in front of him.

“Yes we shall!” cried a voice back towards the entrance to the alleyway and everyone glanced quickly back that way to see Taithmar standing there with a staff of her own pointing

towards Vitros! With an angry look on her face, she spoke a word and instantly a shadow of a spear darted out and flashed towards the wizard!

“N-o-o-o-o-o!” was all the wizard could respond with before the thing struck him and he went flying back with the blow only stopping when he ended up hitting the barrels that Lizzy had originally hidden behind. He didn’t move, and just as quickly Lizzy was free and acted accordingly, she took a vicious cut at the woman in front of her! The woman warrior dodged backwards and countered the blow. Lizzy reacting to her defensive position changed her style slightly and came in with a low feint, the woman fell for this and as soon as she went to block it she saw her mistake! Lizzy did a quick reverse and brought her blade up underneath and sliced through the woman’s intestines opening her up to the world, the woman named Kyra, dropped like a brick clutching at her spilling guts. The next instant Vekao and the assassin Blackhawk took up their fight again, but it was over quickly as Vekao out muscled him, shoving him off balance with his axe and then almost cutting him in half with the force of his next blow. Vekao had to use his foot to push the assassin off the blade of his battleaxe!

The group stared at the carnage in the alley. The large male warrior was still down, the blood flowing freely from the wound that Vekao gave him, as was the lithe woman, who was now slowly crawling along the alley, groaning in pain. It wasn’t pretty and since it was still just late afternoon, they knew that before too long the city watch would happen by and they would have to answer a lot of questions. So before they could say so much as ‘hello’, Taithmar gestured for them all to follow her and they ran out of the alley and down the street. They soon came to a ship that was docked close by and Taithmar lead them up the gang plank, now being safely on

board the vessel she stopped and turned to her companions, “Well that was rather exciting don’t you think? Do you mind telling me what that was about?” she said towards Lizzy and Vekao both with a small smile upon he face.

Lizzy and Vekao just looked at her dumbfounded and then both started talking at the same time. Soon they had explained to Taithmar what had happened as they came looking for her. She just shook her head and smiled when they asked her about the staff and what she had done to Vitros the wizard back in the alleyway.

“Yes I’m also a mage.” she said to them both and smiled brightly, then added, “I thought I had told you that before.”

“No you never mentioned it.” Lizzy said to her, “and I’ve know you for almost two years now!”

“Sorry Lizzy, some things are best kept a secret.” She said with a smile and a slight wink and left it at that.

Chapter 11

With a loud crash Or'acke and the guard finally broke through the barricaded door, they both tumbled to the ground on the other side with many curses. Standing up quickly Or'acke charged up the corridor to the waiting stairs leading up to the guard chamber. He quickly entered and the guards on the other side came to attention hastily, Or'acke looking very irritated nearly growled at them, "No one has come this way!"

"N-no sir" the nearest guard managed to say in response.

"There are two escaped prisoners on the loose, the stupid elven scout and he has taken with him our newest prisoner the Princess Lunansa!" Or'acke barked at the guards assembled, just then the other guard, who had been with Or'acke during the discovery, came bursting into the room!

"Captain Or'acke, I think the prisoners have escaped to the forbidden zone! The door leading to that area is now open!" he exclaimed to the guard captain.

Or'acke reacted immediately by blowing past the stunned guard and running head long back down the stairs! He made the swift turn at the crossroads and came to a screeching halt as he approached the now closed, but un-barred door in front of him, the door that he himself had placed the bar across those many years before, the door to the only part of their fortress dungeon that they dare not go into. He stared in disbelief, and then began to chuckle to himself.

“If that is where they went, then they can stay there!” the dwarf captain said as his men came storming up behind him. “Bar the door again and then post a guard. Make sure no one comes back through that door!” He said to the gathered guards and then stormed away, for he had to speak to the king and quickly!

Davkas shrugged when he looked at his arm for he knew that this would be the result of being bitten by the beast. He looked at the Princess and smiled, then said “Well it could be worse, for I could be dead or dying.” He then took her by the hand and lead her away from the stinking corpse and back out to the corridor.

Soon they found there way to a decision point, to keep going straight along the path they were now on, or take a turn to the left, which seemed to be slanting down slightly, they decided to take the path to their left and descend down. The way became steeper still as they continued onward, plus there was moisture in the air around them, they could feel the dampness and hear the constant dripping of water down the rock walls around them. Soon they were starting to hear noises from up ahead of them, something that neither of them could identify.

“I’m not sure what that is Princess.” Davkas said to her over his shoulder as he led them down the tunnel path. The size of the tunnel they were in was roughly 6 or 7 feet across, with the ceiling being around 10 to 12 feet high n most places. Just enough room for something large to

be heading their way Davkas thought to himself grimly! But he didn't say anything like that to the Princess, for he was just determined to get her as far away from the evil dark dwarves as possible.

“Please don't worry about me Davkas for we need to keep going so that we can find someone to help you with your wound!” the Princess responded to him with a look of concern.

Davkas had all but forgotten about the bite and as he glanced down to look at his arm, to his horror he saw that the color around the bite had grown darker still and now the poison was creeping along towards his shoulder! He knew that it was only a matter of time before he would start feeling the affects and grow too weak to continue on. But for now he just wanted to keep pushing and hope for the best...regardless of what may be ahead of them, he knew they couldn't go back!

The sounds became even louder now, it was a constant thumping sound, but different, like multiple weapons striking each other or something like that is about all that Davkas could guess at. He just hoped that he wasn't leading the Princess into even greater danger! The tunnel they were trudging along started to widen, and now up ahead they could see that it was growing visibly brighter, they could actually see some sort of light coming from further on!

“We need to approach cautiously Princess and with great stealth!” Davkas whispered to Princess Lunansa as they grew closer to the source of the light. Davkas started to feel funny

however and his head began to spin, he started to stumble, but the Princess caught him before he fell.

“Davkas! What is wrong? It’s the bite from that creature isn’t it?” the Princess asked Davkas as he ended up slumping to the ground. The Princess helped him down and set him up along the wall of the tunnel, she looked at his arm and gasped when she saw how it looked! “It is getting worse Davkas! You need help! What are we going to do?” She all but sobbed in his ear.

It was all the old elf could do to keep his eyes open at the moment. He looked up at the Princess and smiled, “Don’t worry about me my Princess, here you may need this.” He said then handed her the mace from the dead dwarven guard. The Princess reluctantly took the mace and laid it down next to her. She was scared but didn’t want to let Davkas know, so she just smiled back at him and then took his hand n hers and said “Don’t worry about me, friend Davkas. I can take care of myself, you just rest now.” She wasn’t really sure about what to do, yet she knew deep down inside that everything would be alright.

Or’acke ran as fast as his stubby legs could carry him, straight to King It’tor and his court. He entered the court and came to an abrupt halt, knowing full well that he wasn’t suppose to just run up the King. Or’acke paused as he entered and glance nervously at the court chamberlain, he was an imposing figure and he looked over at the guard captain and motioned for him to wait, then with his eyes turning back to the King he soon knew why.

There on the throne sat the King of the Dhag'arii, King It'tor, son of the recently late Queen Ar'ina. He was speaking to another dark dwarf, the royal mage Tin'ther, so the guard captain quietly moved a little closer so that he could hear what was transpiring.

“If what you say is true, Tin'ther, then this is very serious indeed! I was counting on the artifact to help bolster our offenses against the Kingdom of Lijissa. Without it in our possession it will make it very difficult for us to prevail!” King It'tor said to the mage standing at the front of the dais.

“Yes I agree my King, but we have an advantage if I may remind the King that we have recently captured the daughter of their king!” Tin'ther the mage responded.

“Yes, yes I remember, so we just need to use this to our advantage then and press King Lonthonis to withdraw his troops so that we and our allies can stake our claim to the Misty Mountains like we have always desired. That or his daughter dies a cruel death!” The King laughed wickedly.

Or'acke who had been listening began to fidget, so he went over to the chamberlain and whispered in his ear. Soon the chamberlain's eyes were widening, and then suddenly he turned from the dwarf captain and hurried towards the throne and the King. When he got to the foot of the dais he stopped and cleared his throat.

The King looked very irritated, then looked at the chamberlain and said, “Yes what is it that you feel the need to interrupt us during this very important discussion?”

“Sire, excuse me sire, but it has just come to my attention that the Princess Lunansa is missing from her cell my Lord!” the visibly shaken chamberlain declared to the King.

“What!” the King cried as he stood up and glared down at the chamberlain who was now actually shaking. “What do you mean missing?” he cried.

“Well Captain Or’acke is here to explain your majesty!” the chamberlain responded to King It’tor. The chamberlain then motioned for the guard captain to approach the throne.

Or’acke walked over to stand in front of the King, he bowed briefly and then stood up straight and true. There wasn’t much that Or’acke feared, except standing in front of his King with bad news, he then went into his speech, “My King just recently this very morning the Princess Lunansa and another prisoner, an elf warrior and spy named Davkas, killed one of the guards and escaped from their cells. I have personally tracked them and have determined that they entered the forbidden zone through one of the barred doorways.”

“The *forbidden* zone? That’s not good, for you know that we can’t follow them into that area without a massive use of force, which I cannot afford at this time for I am assembling my troops on the surface to prepare for our initial assault.” The King responded to the guard captain, then turning to the mage he added, “What do you think we should do Tin’ther?”

“I believe your majesty that we should close and bar the door, but we should not allow King Brightwater to know his daughter has escaped, we can still use her as leverage. I myself will concentrate on finding the artifact.” Tin’ther replied to the King.

“Yes well that may just work!” the King said, and then turning back to Or’acke he added, “You must go and seal this door they used and leave them to their fate! Do it now Captain Or’acke!”

So with that Or’acke bowed again, then he turned and sprinted back the way that he had come, back through the guard room, with his guards all staring at him and back down to the door where Davkas and Princess Lunansa had used to enter the forbidden zone, where he made sure that the door had been barred again, and he doubled his guard.

The King then turned to Tin’ther the mage and said “Contact our agent in Castitrona it’s time he earned the coins we have sent him.”

Chapter 12

The ship, the *Blue Moon*, wasn't much but it was all that Taithmar could find and afford at such short notice. The ship's captain was named Delashyer and was the typical sea captain, big and burley with a full beard. He walked his deck with ease, he commanded respect from his crew and his passengers both, and usually got it. Today started out well and he was happy, giving Taithmar, Lizzy and even Vekao a pleasant nod and smile as he paced back and forth, the weather was holding nicely!

Soon both Lizzy and Taithmar were both feeling the ill effects of their first day at sea, since neither one was a seasoned sailor of any sort. They spent the majority of their time down in the hold on a makeshift cot trying to get some sleep, and trying to stay off the deck! Vekao on the other hand was feeling great, he had spent many years on sailing ships in his youth and was surprised at how comfortable he felt.

Vekao spent some time giving the crew a hand on deck, amazing Captain Delashyer's crew with his strength, but it really felt good to be out on the open sea with the salt spray in his face. Soon though the wind shifted and the weather started to change. The captain seemed a little concerned and spent much of his own time handling the ships rudder and peering out over the waves. Vekao came up to him and asked, "What is concerning you captain, you look worried?"

Captain Delashyer looked over at the big minotaur and said in response, "Well I'm just concerned because with the shift in the wind it appears now that there are storm clouds massing

on the horizon out there.” With that he points out towards the bow of the ship. Vekao looks to where he is pointing and nods his head in understanding.

“Yes I see it now, looks like it might be pretty nasty indeed. What do you plan to do?” Vekao said to the captain.

“Well I plan on getting us as far down the coast as possible before it gets nasty, then if the storm I feel is coming does materialize, I intend to steer us into a cove somewhere along the way to ride it out.” Captain Delashyer responded to the minotaur. “No go away and let me take care of the ship, you need to take care of the two women in your group, this won’t be easy for them you know?”

Vekao nodded his agreement with the captain and made his way down the stairs to the hold area where he soon found Lizzy and Taithmar passed out on their cots. He could tell that they were in no shape to ride out a storm so he decided it was best to stay with them here. The rocking and rhythm of the ship soon had his eyes drooping, and he found himself dozing. He awoke with a start though when the storm hit the boat a short time later!

Lizzy and Taithmar were also awake and they both looked over to Vekao with questioning looks on their faces. Vekao looked at them with sympathy and said, “It is best you both stay down here for now, we’ve run into a bad storm and the captain will be looking for a sheltering cove soon to ride it out. So don’t worry, it will be alright.” With that he rose and went back up the stairs to the deck and to see if there was anything he could do to help. He found

himself staring into the face of a terrible looking storm, and the chaos it was causing on the ship! The captain was yelling orders out to the crew and they were scrambling around trying to fulfill them. Vekao made his way gingerly up to the captain who was still at the wheel, fighting the storm. He was straining hard against the wheel of the ship, despite his size and strength, when he saw Vekao coming he motioned quickly to him to come closer.

“You seem to know your way around a ship minotaur. Do you think you could help out by steering us into the cove up ahead there? I’m just not strong enough to fight these waves, but I think you could.” Delashyer said to him as he got close enough to hear over the storm.

“I would be happy too.” Vekao cried out to the captain over the crashing of the waves, he then moved into position by the wheel and took over from the exhausted Captain Delashyer. Vekao soon had the ship under control, straining his huge muscular arms in the process, but he was slowly bringing the ship in line with their destination. He soon caught a glimpse of the cove up ahead and was making good progress towards it now, despite the heavy waves. The crew of the ship looked at him in awe, some even coming up to him to clap him on the back, Vekao just smiled.

After making there way into the sheltering cove, Vekao turned the helm over to the senior shipmate who was standing by. Meanwhile, he went back down to the hold to check on his friends, and hopefully to talk awhile. He found them both very much awake, but still not feeling too well. So he sat down beside them and started the conversation with a smile, “Well it looks like you both survived the storm!”

“Ha, ha, very funny Vekao!” Was all Lizzy could manage to say at the moment, she looked worse off than Taithmar, but both looked like they could use a day on the shore. But that would have to wait, for now they would have to settle for being anchored in the cove for the rest of the day while the storm passed by.

“Yes well I just meant that it looks like now we will be here for awhile so maybe you will start feeling better? Would you like me to find you something to eat?” Vekao asked them both.

Lizzy looked like she was going to get sick all over him, so Vekao started backing up, Taithmar just looked up and shook her head.

“Ok well then we’ll skip the food part.” He said to them and then decided it was time to take a nap. So he laid some blankets out on the floor and made himself comfortable. He was soon fast asleep, snoring loudly as only a minotaur could.

Both Lizzy and Taithmar could not believe that the minotaur had fallen asleep so quickly. They both glanced at each other and shrugged. Soon the storm had died down a little outside and both women began to feel a little sleepy themselves due to the gentle rocking of the ship which was now safely anchored in the cove. So before too long they too were fast asleep, but at least not snoring like Vekao!

The storm had passed and all was now very peaceful on the *Blue Moon* as it sat anchored in the cove. Captain Delashyer and his crew all were worn out from their fight through the storm on open water, so he left a skeleton watch just for safety sake, soon the captain and the rest of the crew were asleep, while two members of the crew took up the watch. Time passed and everyone continued to sleep peacefully. The two crew members on watch grew bored and soon they were huddled together playing at tossing the bones, neither one noticed the small row boats coming along side the ship.

As each boat came up to the ship it would pause long enough to discharge 5 to 6 figures, who would then creep up the side of the ship and wait up on the deck. Two of the figures broke off from the main group and crept forward, it was their job to subdue the two watchmen, who at this time were not very watchful! They soon came back to the others waiting in the shadows and motioned that all was clear. So they spread out and began to make their way down into the ship's hold, and into the cabins of the crew on the deck.

Vekao's dreams were filled with strange beasts and screams, he wasn't having a very restful night at all, yet he was exhausted and slept on into the night. Lizzy and Taithmar slept on too not sensing the danger creeping down the stairs at that moment! Soon the intruders had surrounded the companions and the signal was given, they quickly took out large bags and swift as can be placed them over the heads of the unsuspecting party members! Not giving anyone a chance to resist, the intruders also just as quickly clubbed each prisoner over the head so that they wouldn't awaken and fight.

It seemed like he had slept for a long time, yet it was still dark and his head hurt like crazy! Vekao started to try to rub his head and found that he couldn't move his hands! They were tied to his waist and he was not on the ship any longer! "*What is going on, what happened!*" he thought to himself.

Taithmar too awoke with a start! "*What had happened? Why did my head hurt so?*" she thought, then it dawned on her as she realized with a shudder that her hands were tied, and to her dismay her mouth was gagged, the merchant must have traced them to the ship and sent more thugs to retrieve the artifact!

The third member of the little group, Lizzy, soon woke up herself. She immediately felt that her hands were tied and feared the worse! Zhuerelm! "*He had found them again!*" she thought and groaned out loud. Of course that is when both Vekao and Taithmar could hear her.

"Lizzy is that you?" Vekao said instantly.

Lizzy perked up when she heard her friend nearby, she responded to his voice quickly, but quietly, "Yes it's me. Where are we? What happened? I have a bag or cloth over my head so I can't see a thing!"

"I don't know Lizzy, I'm in the same dilemma as you, and I can't see either! Do you think it's Zhuerelm?" Vekao responded to Lizzy. Taithmar could not speak but she did manage to make a noise with her throat which both Vekao and Lizzy heard from where they were tied up.

“Sounds like that might be Taithmar?” Vekao said cautiously. Taithmar responded by making the sound again.

“I’m not sure what is going on. I hope we find out soon though, my nose itches!” Lizzy said back to the minotaur.

Just then they heard the sound of a door being opened, then the soft steps of someone entering the area they were being held in, Lizzy soon found her hood being pulled off and then she was yanked to her feet.

“Hey!” Lizzy cried out, “Watch it!” She glared up into the eyes of the man who held her, but he just frowned at her and pulled her towards the open doorway. Both Taithmar and Vekao could do nothing but wonder what was happening to their friend, and wait. Soon Lizzy was out the door and being lead down a long dark passageway. To her it seemed like they were underground somewhere, but she wasn’t sure about that. Soon she came to a large open area and was paraded up to a man sitting at a table, he appeared to be a middle aged man, well built, and who seemed to be examining some of their belongings.

“Ah welcome to my home. My name is Perskel, I am the Lord of this place I like to call home and you are?” the man sitting at the table said when looking up at Lizzy.

Lizzy hesitated for a moment then responded saying, “My name is Lizzy sir. I want to know what you have done with the crew of the *Blue Moon* and what you are doing with my things, and with my friends!” She then clammed up and stared at him with fire in her eyes!

Perskel just laughed at her. Then he said, “You are in no position to demand anything, Miss Lizzy! I am in charge here and what I say goes. As to the whereabouts of the crew of the ship, they are here, as my ‘guests’, as are you and your friends.”

“Guests!” Lizzy sneered at the man, “Interesting choice of words especially since you have us tied up and blind folded!”

“Well that will be enough from you! I hope to get a few silver pieces or two from the lot of you. I’m intending to sell you all on the open market as soon as I can! But if you cause any trouble I can just as easily slit your throat. Take her back to the holding room!” the bandit lord exclaimed to the man who brought Lizzy in.

He grabbed her by the collar and dragged her back towards the doorway, Lizzy started to struggle, but soon gave up realizing that it was futile at this point. So she let the man take her back to the room where she originally was at and he opened the door, and shoved her inside. She stumbled across the room and ended up slipping and falling to the ground, she lay there glaring back at the man, who simply shrugged and turned away, and shutting the door abruptly.

Vekao listening the whole time called out softly to Lizzy to see if she was alright, but Lizzy ignored him for the moment, concentrating instead on trying to free her hands, which were still bound behind her back. The room was quiet, and the only sounds they could hear now were the rats scurrying around the walls of the room.

Chapter 13

Vekao called out to Lizzy again, “Lizzy are you alright! Answer me Lizzy, what’s going on?” Vekao was getting more and more concerned as the time slipped by, then suddenly he felt someone touch his arm!

“Vekao it’s me, keep quiet.” Lizzy whispered into his ear, “I’ve slipped free of the bindings and now I’ll try and free you, so hold still!”

So Vekao lay still and was silent as Lizzy started working on the ropes that held him, soon she had them worked free and she slipped the hood off his head, Vekao looked at her and smiled. Then they both went over to help free Taithmar, she looked very relieved when they pulled her hood off and removed the gag from her mouth.

“Well it’s about time. So what’s going on?” She said to her rescuers.

Lizzy quickly placed her hand to her lips to silence her, “I’ll explain the best I can, but keep your voices down, I’m not sure if they have a guard at the door or not.” She then ran lightly over to the door and placed her ear against it so that she could hear. Vekao in the meantime, continued to untie Taithmar, finally she was free and on her feet rubbing her hands together to get the circulation going again. Lizzy came back over to where they were standing and motioned for them to follow her to the far corner of the room.

“Well I don’t hear anything on the other side of the door, but that doesn’t mean they don’t have a guard posted, so we will continue to talk quietly over here.” Lizzy said to her friends.

“Sounds good to me, so now tell us what you know Lizzy?” Vekao replied back to Lizzy.

So Lizzy told both Taithmar and Vekao what had happened, and her meeting with the apparent leader of the group responsible for hijacking them. Her companions both looked concerned and they decided they needed to figure out a plan of escape as soon as possible, yet they didn’t have their weapons, and Taithmar didn’t have her staff, so it would be a very difficult course of action. They quickly ruled out Vekao trying to force the door open due to the fact that this would probably cause too much of a disturbance and alert any guards in the area.

Their plan was a simple one, Taithmar didn’t have her staff to augment her powers, but she was able to speak now, so she would wait close to the door and attempt to cast a sleep spell to put to sleep whoever might come to check on them. She was going to make them pay for what they had done! The others, Vekao and Lizzy would take the ropes that had tied them and use them to pretend to be still tied up and then they laid down on the floor, facing slightly away from the door in order to temporarily fool anyone coming into the room to check on them. Taithmar would have her ropes in place also, but she would leave the hood off so that she could keep an eye on the door. Of course this would not fool anyone for very long.

Time passed slowly for the three friends, it was an added burden to Taithmar because of the dimly lit room they were held in, one torch burned along the far wall. They sat waiting for something to happen, but no one returned for them. They were beginning to rethink just having Vekao use his brute strength on the door, when they suddenly heard a sound on the other side of the door. Someone was coming in! Finally they could put their plan in motion!

The lock on the door jiggled a little and then they could see the door beginning to swing open, well technically only Taithmar could see this from her hiding place close to the door, she waited. The door continued to open and a guard stepped into view, he was a human male dressed in leather and carrying a very large broadsword, he entered the room cautiously, he looked around quickly and his eyes narrowed slightly when he looked at Taithmar, who surprising to the guard, looked back at him! Taithmar waited for the guard to approach her before she acted, which was a good thing since coming in behind the first guard was a second guard, this one was female, young, and armed with a wicked looking longsword! It may have been that they were sent to dispose of their 'guests'!

As the first guard approached her Taithmar looked into his eyes and spoke a word of power, willing him to fall asleep. He resisted and continued forward, blinking rapidly as he did! Then it seemed to hit him like a load of bricks! He dropped over unconscious and was not moving! The second guard saw this happen and hesitated, she couldn't figure out what was happening until it was too late, Taithmar decided that a little deception was in order so she cast a very simple illusion towards the confused guard, an illusion of a goblin with a raised sword! The guard fell backwards when out of the corner of her eye she saw the illusion pop up out of

nowhere! Not knowing if it was real or not she quickly got to her feet, but then stumbled a little closer to Taithmar. Taithmar quickly reached out and pulled the legs of the guard out from beneath the woman, who promptly hit the ground with a thud! She lay there briefly stunned and moaning softly trying to roll over to defend herself, but Lizzy had taken the opportunity to flip over and throwing the ropes off herself, the hood falling to the floor beside her, she rushed over and deftly punched the woman in the jaw! The guard crumpled to the floor and lay still.

Vekao leapt to his feet and taking the ropes he quickly started tying up the two guards. They also took the hoods and used them to gag their mouths. Lizzy took the longsword from the now awakening female guard, while Vekao took up the broadsword from the first guard. Then they all went to the door and peered out it into the narrow corridor beyond.

“Well it looks like it’s clear, for I don’t hear any approaching footsteps anyway?” Lizzy spoke first.

“Yes well lead the way then!” Vekao grumbled to Lizzy, as quietly as a minotaur could do.

So very quietly the three companions slipped into the corridor and began heading in the direction that Lizzy had been lead earlier that day, back to where the man Perskel was located, they hoped! There where no others guards in sight during their trip down the passageway. Soon they came to where Lizzy was presented to the bandit chief, they hesitated at the door, pausing

long enough to listen, there was no sounds from the other side. So they entered in, Vekao leading the way.

Inside there was no one in sight, but they did spot where the man Perskel had been sitting examining there belongings. Lizzy breathed a sigh of relief and ran up to the table, she quickly went through there things and started handing stuff over to Taithmar and Vekao. The minotaur was very happy to see his trusty battleaxe still there and quickly dropped the broadsword he had been carrying. Both Lizzy and Vekao heard Taithmar exclaim with joy when she spotted her staff leaning up in the far corner of the room, she swiftly retrieved it. But, try as she might, looking all around the table, under the table and throughout the room, Lizzy could not find the one thing she most feared would be missing...the artifact!

“I can’t find it! It’s not here! Now what are we going to do? We have to get it back!” Lizzy said in rapid succession. She was dashing around the room turning over piles of items and looking under anything that she thought might be hiding the thing, but not having any luck in finding it!

“Lizzy calm down.” Vekao exclaimed to his friend. “Something must have happened to it, but we won’t find it by panicking!”

“Calm down! Calm down! What do you mean calm down? It’s gone Vekao! Gone, they took it! How can this be! How would they know it was valuable at all?” was all Lizzy could say at the moment.

“Well Lizzy it was a very powerful magical item. They probably have someone in their midst who knows or at least understands magic and discovered it had a powerful aura around it! I don’t know, but rest assured we will find it, we have to.” Taithmar said in response to Lizzy.

“Well let’s go then!” cried Vekao to the two women and he began to head out the far door. He no more than opened the door when he ran straight into a man coming from the other direction.

Wham!

They collided and the man went down in a heap, while it hardly fazed Vekao at all. He moved quickly and snatched up the man by the back of the neck and hauled him up to eye level, a alarming display of his awesome strength!

“W-what’s going on?” the man stuttered at Vekao. “Who are you? Oh my! You’re the prisoners from the ship!”

“That’s right human we are and you are going to give me some answers!” Vekao snarled back at the man he was holding aloft. “The man who was here earlier, Perskel, where is he?”

“P-perskel?” The man mumbled back to Vekao. “He’s gone!”

“Gone? Gone where? When? Speak quickly human and I’ll allow you to live!” Vekao spat back at him, glaring at him and daring him to say a lie.

The man looked at the minotaur holding him, he looked back at Taithmar and Lizzy, then he said, “All I know is that he found something that he said the Dhag’arii would pay him a lot of coin to have, so he and the rest of the band took off awhile ago to a place where we meet the dark dwarves to sell our slaves.”

It was then that Vekao dropped the man to the ground. He turned to look at Lizzy and Taithmar with a look of dismay. They looked back at him just as completed dumbfounded. The bandit leader was taking the artifact to the very ones they were trying to keep it away from! If the dark dwarves got their hands on it, the war would be lost and the Kingdom of Lijissa may fall completely! They couldn’t let that happen! Just then though they heard the man who Vekao had been holding running at full speed back down the corridor! But Lizzy was quicker! She took aim and threw a dagger that she carried at the fleeing man, it hit him in the back of the head and he went down hard, slamming into the wall!

“Nice throw Lizzy!” Vekao said to here as he went sprinting up the corridor after the man.

“Thank you uncle, it was nothing” Lizzy responded back to him as she and Taithmar came running up behind Vekao. When they reached the man they found that he was merely unconscious, for the butt end of the blade had struck him in the head. He lay sprawled out in the

corridor as still as could be. The group ignored him as they went by, Lizzy only pausing long enough to grab up her dagger which was lying next to the man.

They ran on down the corridor to a set of double doors which were barred from the side they were on. So they lifted the bar and went through with weapons drawn, looking for any signs of trouble. Seeing no one on the other side, except another empty room, this one looking like a entry hall for there was no furniture to speak of and there was another set of large double doors on the opposite side of the room, about 100 feet away. They made their way over to the doors there and found that they too were barred from the side they were on, so listening at the door, and hearing nothing they lifted the bar and opened the door. On the other side was the outside world! They had found the exit to the complex that they were being held at, but there was no Perskel and no other bandits to be seen! Everyone was gone!

Chapter 14

Princess Lunansa was holding the mace in one hand and had Davkas leaning on her on the opposite side. They were stumbling down the tunnel trying to keep to the shadows, but the shadows were quickly disappearing! Lunansa was trying to not let this bother her though, she knew she had to be strong now since Davkas was obviously poisoned and may soon die if she didn't find any help soon! So on they went, further towards the sounds and the light at the end of the tunnel they were in. They soon came to a wide opening and the Princess was astonished by what she saw! There was a huge exposed area spread out before them and there were dozens of dwarfs running to and fro through the complex there!

Not knowing what to do Princess Lunansa went to turn away fearing that these were just more of the cruel dark dwarves who had captured and tortured them both. So she quickly turned to go back the other way they had come, but she was startled by a dwarf who was standing there behind them staring at them! She froze and Davkas looked up and just groaned!

“Greetings my name is Nelas, Nelas Thunderhammer, at your service.” The strange dwarf said to the Princess and Davkas as way of introducing himself. He didn't appear to be like the dark dwarves at all, for his long hair was flowing free, unlike the braids the dark dwarves preferred.

Princess Lunansa paused briefly, but soon her up bringing took hold and she responded back to the dwarf with, “Greetings to you good sir, my name is Lunansa and this is my friend Davkas, he is hurt and we need assistance please.”

Nelas looked at them, shook his head and said, “Well there isn’t much I can do for you, for I am a simple blacksmith, but maybe one of our healers could take a look at him in the city?”

“Well Nelas that would be very kind of you if you could take us to these healers then. But first a question if you would, and please answer me truthfully, is this city part of the Dhag’arii Empire?” Princess Lunansa asked him with a look of concern upon her beautiful face. In the meantime, Davkas seemed to be getting worse for he began groaning softly and his legs started giving way, the Princess was having a difficult time keeping him on his feet.

Nelas looked at her in bewilderment, “The Dhag’arii? Of course not! This is Ironhold, free home to the true dwarven clans. We are not and never have been a part of that evil race of beings! They are our sworn enemy and we despise what vile name they have given the dwarves over the years.” Then he added, “Here let me help you with your friend, I sense no evil from you, and I will take you to our healers right away so that they can tend to your friend Davkas.”

With that he came forward and took Davkas away from the Princess, he began trudging towards the underground city ahead, Princess Lunansa worriedly following behind by a couple of feet. All the while she related the story to Nelas of their capture and recent escape from the evil Dhag’arii dwarves. They came within the confines of the city, drawing stares from many

dwarves who had previously been running about their business, they came to a guard post and not far from where they entered, the guards there made them stop and explain themselves, Nelas quickly did so and they waved them on their way. He made some turns left, then right, then left again walking very swiftly, the Princess had to trot to keep pace, soon they came to a building and Nelas entered through the open doorway.

Inside they came to a room with an elderly dwarf who was talking with a couple of younger dwarves in the back corner of the room, he looked over when they came within his vision and raised a hand to the two dwarves in front of him to interrupt their conversation. He motioned for Nelas to put Davkas down on a cot nearby and went over to him.

“What is wrong? Who is this Nelas and what purpose do you bring them here?” the older dwarf said to Nelas.

“Elder Argha, these two are from above, they have recently escaped from the cruel Dhag’arii and have come through the tunnels to our home here. They seek assistance, for Davkas here has been bitten by a carcass beast and thus is slowly dying of the poison from the monster.” Nelas said quickly to Elder Argha as he laid Davkas upon the cot. The other two dwarves in the room rushed over to help ease him on the cot, and then quickly backed away so that the older dwarf could take a look at him. He came over and looked at him arm briefly, then he knelt down beside Davkas and holding onto him closed his eyes and concentrated. A golden aurora surrounded both Argha and Davkas, it grew in intensity and Davkas moaned softly, Lunansa just

stood there speechless, with her mouth open, staring at what was happening! For Argha was a mind mage!

The old dwarf stood up and looked back at the Princess, “He’ll be alright now Miss. He will just need some rest, so you both can stay here in the temple until you feel up to leaving.” He then looked at the two younger dwarves, whom he had been talking with earlier, nodded at them and they all left the room, exiting by a doorway in the back of the room. Nelas looked over at the Princess and said, “If you’d like Lunansa we could leave your friend resting here and I could take you to get freshened up a bit, plus probably find you something to eat.”

Princess Lunansa looked at the dwarf and smiled, she shook her head and smiled and said, “That is a kind and generous offer, and one I am very tempted to indulge in, but I would like to remain here with Davkas, in case he wakes up. Then I can explain to him where we are and what happened since he became unconscious.” With that she pulled a chair close and sat down next to the sleeping Davkas, the dwarven smith smiled back at her and shrugged his shoulders, he quietly walked back out the front of the building and left them both to rest. Soon Lunansa was slipping into a peaceful sleep herself.

The next morning came and Lunansa awoke abruptly, she sat up and looked at Davkas, he was still very much asleep, with a peaceful smile on his face. She sighed and got up to stretch, turning this way and that. She glanced around her and found that there was now a table next to the cot, with a bowl of water on it, so she went over to it and splashed some water on her face.

Feeling a little better today, she noticed that her stomach was grumbling. The thought of food was strong on her mind. Davkas began to stir, and soon his eyes popped open and fixed on her.

“What happened? Where are we?” he said to her, then glanced down at his arm and sat up quickly! “My arm! It’s healed!” he shouted out and looked back at Lunansa for answers!

“Davkas, you’re awake! Slow down, slow down, we are safe here. We are in the dwarven city of Ironhold! They helped me after you passed out back in the tunnels yesterday. A dwarf named Nelas helped to bring you here to their healers, who are the ones responsible for healing your arm.” Lunansa told Davkas then sat down on the cot next to him.

“Amazing, that’s all I can say amazing! Ironhold huh? Well I’ve heard of it, just didn’t realize we were that close to it, and I can’t get used to how good my arm feels now.” Davkas replied to the Princess, flexing and moving his arm around.

“Greetings friends!” Argha the mind mage said as he walked into the room. “I hope you have rested well?”

“Yes thank you.” The Princess replied to the dwarf.

“Good, good. Well if you’d like to join us for a quick meal we were just going to fix something to eat. I hope you like what we have to offer?” the old mind mage said to his guests with a big smile. So he motioned for them to follow him and lead them from the room, down a

hallway, and into a great room where before them was a massive stone table. On the table were various dishes that smelled delicious to Lunansa and Davkas, for they were very hungry. Around the table there were two other dwarves already seated, one was Nelas and the other was unknown to the two weary elves. Both dwarves stood up when they entered the room.

“May I introduce to you both King Undor ruler of our fair city, and the other dwarf you know is Nelas, the very same who found you and brought you both here yesterday.” Argha said to the two elves as an introduction.

Lunansa and Davkas both bowed to their new friends. Then Lunansa spoke for them both, “I am Princess Lunansa Brightwater of the Kingdom of Lijissa and this is my friend Davkas Moonglade who served my father as an aide and a soldier.” Lunansa replied to Argha.

All the dwarves looked at each other stunned! Princess they thought. This is the Princess? What is she doing here? And why was she being held captive by the Dhag’arii? King Undor spoke first, “I am surprised Princess Lunansa, we didn’t know or else I would have come sooner to see to your welfare! Please accept my apologies and please accept our humble hospitality, our home is your home. May I ask what the reason was for the dark dwarves to hold you captive?”

“I am sorry King Undor, please accept my humble apologies for withholding this information from you. I was just concerned that we had fallen back into the hands of the Dhag’arii, so I was being cautious. Now that I know who we are among I felt it wise to reveal the truth to you and your people. I implore your help good King and I wish to ask for some

assistance in returning to my home in Castitrona, where my Father's castle is located." Lunansa responded to the King.

"Of course we will help Princess however I can, first let us eat and then we can discuss what help we can provide to you so that you can make it back to your Father's castle." King Undor said to the Princess and Davkas, and with that they all sat down at the table to eat their meal and to discuss what avenue they could take in taking the Princess home.

Chapter 15

The King of Lijissa was sad, his daughter had been kidnapped and he was growing desperate as to her whereabouts. His best court mages were trying to determine where she was night and day now for the past few days, they were not having much luck in it though due to some kind of magic that was blocking their own magical attempts. Yet they continued to try while the King continued to keep the Kingdom running, despite the growing pain and despair in his heart. The goblins and their kind, ogres and other various creatures were attempting to mass along their borders to the north. Things were getting gravely serious and all Lonthonis Brightwater was thinking of was his daughter's safety. "*Where could she be and was she still alive!*" the King thought to himself not for the first time. His thoughts were interrupted as the Captain of the Royal Guard came running into the room.

"Your majesty, the goblins have launched an attack! Our forces are holding them back at the moment, but we must send reinforcement soon to help!" Captain Gharyn Silverstar exclaimed as he rushed up to the King, bowed at the waist, and stood waiting for the King's response. Captain Silverstar was a human male who had been in service to the King for over ten years now, he was very adapt with the broadsword sheathed at his hip, and quit handsome too, or so most of the court ladies thought!

King Brightwater pondered the news for a moment then he said in reply to Silverstar, "Captain that would deplete further or own forces her in the city. Do you feel that this would be a

wise thing to do at the moment?” The King looked to Captain Silverstar for all his military advice.

Silverstar replied to the King and said, “Sire, I do think that the most pressing need at this time would be to send the reinforcements, it would be best to stop these vile creatures at the border than at the gates of the city, but I would suggest sending messages to the Realm of Achser to the north, perhaps their Queen could send us some help?”

“Yes that is an excellent idea, see that it is done! Send out the reinforcements right away! You are right in surmising that it would be better tactically to stop them at the border.”

Brightwater said to the Captain, he then dismissed him and wandered over to his window overlooking the city down below. He noted the massive gates and walls surrounding the city proper and wondered deep inside whether these same gates and walls would hold if it came to that and yet while he stood and pondered this, his heart turned instantly to the safety and well being of his missing daughter.

It now had been two days since they were on the trail of the bandit lord and his cohorts. They had left the complex and had set out right away to follow the trail the bandits had left, it was a difficult decision, leaving behind the captain of the *Blue Moon* and any crew members that had survived, but they felt it was of greater urgency to strike out after the bandits and recovering the artifact, before they met up with the Dhag’arii! So Vekao was acting as scout, having spent

more time tracking in the wild than Lizzy or Taithmar, so with him leading the way they felt that it wouldn't be long now until they had caught up with the bandit slavers.

“Vekao please for the last time, can't we stop for a moment and take a rest? You are pushing us too hard and we won't be ready even if we do catch up to the bandits!” Lizzy said to Vekao as they trotted along the forest trail. She glanced back at Taithmar who was keeping pace, but being older, was having trouble maintaining the grueling pace that Vekao had set for them.

“Alright Lizzy, but all things considered, we need to catch these rogues before it's too late, you know that just as well as I do!” Vekao replied over his shoulder to Lizzy, and then he came to a halt as they had come to a clearing. They all plopped down where they stood, breathing hard, and began to drink greedily from their waterskins.

Lizzy was the first to break the silence, “So what will we do when we catch up to these thieving bandits? They far out number us and we will be hard pressed to catch them any time soon I fear.” She looked from Vekao and over to Taithmar to see what their thoughts on the subject would be.

Taithmar replied, “Well I for one have many plans for our friend the bandit lord and his men. I don't take too kindly to be trussed up like some animal and gagged on top of it all!” She looked to Lizzy and Lizzy shuddered slightly as her eyes met those of Taithmar.

Then Vekao spoke, “Fleas of a twice cursed dog! We need to plan this out carefully if we have any chance at all in recovering the artifact and escaping with our lives! Revenge is sweet Taithmar but revenge can also blind us to the dangers in this whole quest of ours! We must first find them and then plan some sort of ambush so that we can catch them off guard, that will be our greatest ally, surprise!” He then went back to his thoughts, having said all that he wanted to say at the moment.

Taithmar remained silent, contemplating what was said, for she knew Vekao was right, yet she was hot blooded and it was hard for her to control her emotions sometimes. She also knew though that it was her emotions that had caused her greatest grief over the years, first with her family, all of them dead now, and also with her service to King Brightwater. So she started to reel herself back in and focus on the problem at hand.

It was Lizzy who broke the silence, “Well I feel better now, perhaps we should be on our way then?” With that she stood up and stretched, then looked for Vekao to lead the way once more. He stood and looking around for the trail of the bandits, soon found what he was looking for and off they went, back along the trail still heading northwest through the forest.

It wasn't long before the sun was going down though and they had to find a place to camp for the night. So Vekao found a suitable spot and they made camp, Vekao scouted around the perimeter and soon found a small creek running nearby, he filled up their waterskins so that they would have a fresh supply. Lizzy decided to try and find something to eat, since they didn't have any rations any more, so she went and found some roots and berries and brought as many as

she could back to the camp. Taithmar used the time to pull out a spell book out of her recovered pack and was soon engrossed in reading through it, she wanted to be ready for anything when they caught up to the bandits. Of course that is *if* they caught up to them. Before long the sun was down and they had a small fire burning.

“Well hopefully tomorrow we can finally catch up to those thieving bandits.” Lizzy said to no one in particular, for she was preoccupied with using a long stick to poke at the fire.

Taithmar looked up from her book and set it down gently next to her, “Yes it would be good, especially since we are traveling further and further away from Castitrona and the King.

“Yes exactly.” responded Lizzy, still not looking up from the fire.

Vekao was still concentrating on finishing the last of the meager meal they had prepared for themselves, wishing strongly that they had some kind of meat to go with the roots and berries. He sighed and looked over at his two companions. Lizzy looked exhausted and his fatherly instincts were concerned for her, and Taithmar didn’t look much better, just then a shadow crossed the moonlight and sent a chill down his spine, he glanced upward. He froze! There in the light of the moons he could see silhouetted against the light three distinct figures, ones he remembered from before...

“Get down” he cried “and put out the fire!” Vekao rasped out, he was staring up at the night sky and the two women could see the fear in his eyes, and then they too felt the fear build up within themselves, such fear that they could almost taste it.

“V-vekao w-what is it?” Lizzy stammered back to the minotaur in fear, she was trying to desperately to smother the embers of their fire.

“I really don’t know what they are, but I have seen them before, they fly at night and are very large, almost as big as dragons, yet I’m pretty sure they aren’t dragons!” Vekao replied back to Lizzy, as he began helping her, then he made her duck down as he sensed that they were drawing closer.

All the while Taithmar was listening to his explanation and staring up into the night, when she heard Vekao’s description she murmured, “Shadow serpents.” Then she grabbed her staff up and she too ducked down hiding herself as best she could.

“What are shadow serpents?” Lizzy looked over at Taithmar and asked as they all now where crouched down, low to the ground in the darkness.

“Shadow serpents are an evil creature, spawned in the bowels of the earth, they are servants of the Dhag’arii, they travel only at night, for they despise the sunlight, and they are hard to kill since they have the magical ability to turn semi-corporal, thus their name *shadow*

serpents. Also, as we already know they have some of the same abilities as dragons to send fear into their foes.

“Sounds like the things I saw then, but what are they doing here I wonder?” Vekao whispered over to Taithmar.

“I wouldn’t know really, the dark dwarves could be using them for something, they have the ability to track magical items I am told...oh my! “Taithmar whispered back towards Vekao and then stopped. “They could have sent them to track down the whereabouts of the artifact!”

“The artifact? T-that m-means that t-they could be tracking the artifact straight to the bandits!” Lizzy whispered, stuttering again in fear, as she pressed herself even closer to the ground, scanning the skies for any sign of the serpents.

Just then they caught sight of them again, they were heading away from them though, but it was obvious to them also that the monsters were heading in the direction that they had been tracking the bandits! The friends all breathed a sigh of relief and stood up, staring at where they saw the beasts last. They all looked to each other, grabbed up their gear and started out on the trail once more, no sleep tonight for them, they felt they had to find the bandits as soon as possible, so Taithmar spoke a word softly to her staff and light sprang forth to light their way. They were back on the path the bandits had taken, hoping that they were able to find them, before the shadow serpents did, but also knowing deep down inside that it was probably a hopeless wish.

Throughout the night they traveled, ignoring as best they could the growing fear welling up inside of them, the fear that they would be too late to warn the unsuspecting bandits of the grave danger they were in. But they continued pressing forward, hoping that they could come to their aid in time, for no one deserved to fall to the shadow serpents in this way. Soon the dawn started to peak through the night, and light was coming to the surrounding forest. Taithmar extinguished her staff light and Vekao took the lead. Soon they came up over a small hill to a clearing, and they stopped, there lying before them were the slavers, the bandit group who had taken the artifact from them and it seemed that they were all dead!

Lizzy spoke softly to the others, "I think we are too late."

Vekao motioned for the two friends to stay where they were and he crept forward, battleaxe at the ready, and began to close the gap between himself and the bandits in the clearing before him. As he got closer he could tell right away that they were dead, some were mangled and bloody, while others were headless, just a corpse rotting in the early morning air. He then turned to the two women and motioned for them to follow him, and he continued scouting out in front of the group, soon he came across a few bodies that were grouped together, he motioned for Lizzy to come forward with him. Both Taithmar and Lizzy walked closer to Vekao, Lizzy came up to Vekao's side and looked down at the group lying at his feet, she made a small gurgling sound in the back of her throat when she saw the devastation there before her, and then she recognized the bandit leader, Perskel.

Taithmar, meanwhile was busy examining the bodies, she determined that the bandits had not been dead that long, but she also confirmed to herself that this was the work of the shadow serpents, they had found the bandits in the middle of the night and tore them to shreds. She walked over to where Lizzy and Vekao were standing looking down at the dead bandit leader and bent down, she took Perskel's body and flipped him over, there underneath him was the artifact, for it was still in his hand, he had a death grip on it! She quickly pried it out of his hands and held it up for Vekao and Lizzy to see they both gasped and looked at each other in amazement!

“Well it appears that the serpents caught them here in then open, massacred them, and then flew off to alert their masters.” Taithmar said to Lizzy and Vekao as they stood there staring down at her holding the artifact in her hands, “I suppose it was our good fortune that the beasts did our job for us, but now the dark dwarves will be coming and they will be very upset that their artifact is not here, we had best head east as quickly as possible and try to reach Castitrona before they can find us!” With that she handed Lizzy the artifact back, picked up her staff and started heading back down the pathway they had come on. Lizzy and Vekao hurriedly followed behind her.

Chapter 16

Princess Lunansa was sound asleep and she was deep in a wonderful dream, she was running free through a field with her true love, Captain Gharyn Silverstar. Of course her father, the King, did not know this. If he had known he would not approve. But here in her dream she was free, completely free to love, free to roam, just totally, utterly free. She loved it. She was leaning into Captain Silverstar trying to plant a nice, big kiss on him, when...

“Princess, good morning Princess it is time to awaken!” Davkas said as he stood knocking on the Princess’s door in the hallway. “We need to get going Princess. Are you alright?”

As much as she cared for Davkas he was starting to get on her nerves! Well he was right though, for they did need to get started on their journey home. So Princess Lunansa got up from the comfortable bed and made her way to the wash basin where she splashed some water on her face quickly and headed towards the door to her room. She opened the door and gave Davkas a scathing look anyway, but then she smiled and motioned him in.

“Greetings Davkas! So we are off this morn?” Lunansa said casually to Davkas as he entered the room. Davkas looked much better now that he had gotten cleaned up and outfitted with some new clothing. He moved to a chair in the center of the room and sat, while the Princess strolled over to the chest at the foot of the bed she had slept on and opened it. Inside were her meager belongings, plus a new longsword that King Undor had gifted to her, along with

some new chainmail, made from a special metal that the King would not divulge, that fit her perfectly. Lunansa was very pleased with her gifts, and she began to pull the chainmail up over her head and into place, then she donned the sword at her side, and placed the rest of her items in a pack and was soon ready to go.

“I’m ready now.” Princess Lunansa said to Davkas as she turned around.

“Good, I believe King Undor is waiting for us. He said he would send someone to escort us soon.” Davkas replied to the Princess. Just then there was another knock on the door, Davkas looked at the Princess and added, “That must be our escort now!”

Davkas got up and went to open the door. On the other side was Argha Flintrock the mind mage who had helped them earlier, standing next to him was Nelas Thunderhammer, the dwarf who had discovered them in the tunnels outside the city.

“Come in please.” Davkas said to them both with a slight bow as he held the door open for them to enter the room.

The mind mage led the way, with Nelas right on his heels. They came in and bowed to Princess Lunansa, Argha spoke first, addressing them both he said, “Greetings to you both. We hope that everything has been satisfactory for your stay here in our fair city?”

“Yes we slept well and the food has been most excellent!” the Princess replied to the mind mage. “We thank you for your hospitality.”

Davkas added, “Also we thank you for the gifts that you gave us. It was very much appreciated!”

The old mind mage and Nelas both smiled and bowed slightly in response to their comments. Then they motioned for them to follow them as they led them to see King Undor. Out the door and down the long corridor they strode, with Davkas and the Princess trailing behind. Soon they came to the double doors leading into the King’s throne room. The guards posted at the doors saluted and then opened the doors so that they could enter.

The throne room was full, with dwarves lining both sides of the room, dwarves all dressed in all manner of attire, from common servants to grandly dressed nobles, and everything in between. But what caught the attention of both Davkas and the Princess the most were the finely arrayed warriors in full battle armor standing at attention and forming a walkway to the throne where King Undor sat.

“Welcome, please join me.” King Undor said to them both as they walked down the walkway towards his throne, with the mind mage and the blacksmith trailing behind them at this point.

When they came to the dais they both stopped and waited for the King to speak again. He looked at them both and smiled, he then he stood up and addressed the Princess first.

“Princess Lunansa Brightwater, we welcome you here to our court and we are sad to see you leave, for you have brought both your charm and your beauty to us here and it will be missed indeed. Yet we understand that you need to be off on your way to your home so that you can be reunited with your father and your people. Rest assured I have sent couriers out with messages to your father to alert them to your whereabouts and well-being. They, with the help of some of my own mages, should have arrived at the gates of your father’s castle by now. So rest assured he is aware of your health and recent escape from the ruthless Dhag’arii.” King Undor declared to the Princess.

The old dwarf’s eyes then shifted to Davkas. “My friend Davkas Moonglade, you too have been welcomed here since your arrival and we are sorry to see you depart so soon. Yet under the circumstances I fully understand. I hope that you too will accept a few gifts before you depart?”

With that he motioned for one of the chamberlains to step forward. He carried a bright and shining set of dwarvish chainmail and a very nice looking sword. The items were presented to Davkas, who stood speechless with his jaw hanging open. He recovered himself and turned towards the King.

“My good King Undor Battledragon”, Davkas began, “I thank you deeply for this gift that you presented to me here this day and I am greatly honored by it and shall wear it proudly.” He finished, for the Princess had cleared her throat loudly and seemed a little perturbed that Davkas had spoken before she did, and yet she smiled over at him and stepped forward.

“Yes King Undor”, she said towards the King of Ironhold, “I am personally grateful for all your help and hospitality these past few days. I am also grateful for the presents that were bestowed upon my own self earlier.” She gestured towards the chainmail shirt and the sword, which now hung on her side. Then she added, “And I thank you that you have sent word ahead to my Father.”

King Undor Battledragon, ruler of Ironhold, bowed slightly towards the Princess and then turned towards Davkas and saluted him. He then addressed Argha Flintrock the old mind mage, “My friend, I understand you wish to accompany the Princess and Davkas on their journey to their homeland? You have my blessings sir, and the aid of two of my best guards, Captain Hammerstone and Sergeant Blackrock.” He motioned for them to step forward, which they both did and the King continued, “Also I understand NelasThunderhammer wishes to travel with you, this too I will allow since he is the very dwarf who brought the Princess and Davkas to us. So I wish you all well on your journey, Princess you are in good hands.”

With that the small party turned to leave the throne room and marched out back through the double doors, out into the hallway and towards the gates of the underground city. There they

stopped briefly and both Davkas and the Princess turned to look at the city one last time before they went through the gates.

“Well it will be a long journey home Princess.” Davkas spoke softly to her, knowing that she must be a little apprehensive about this whole ordeal. She turned and smiled at him and nodded, while at the same time gripping the hilt of her new longsword. “*Yes*” she thought to herself, “*it will be a long journey to home.*”

With that they went through the gates and began, the two dwarven warriors taking the lead, with Davkas and Nelas in the rear and the mind mage Argha and Princess Lunansa in the middle. They walked many miles that first day with nothing to challenge them along the way. Soon they came to the end of the tunnels and they stepped out of the mountain and into the open world above. The elves immediately felt better than they had for a very long time, while the dwarves shuddered and hunched in on themselves, not being used to the open skies above them. But they pressed on for it was many miles before they came to the great city of Castitrona.

They found a trail and began following it through the woods and fields surrounding the Skag Mountains. Heading almost due east they soon came upon an area where they decided to make camp for the night. Davkas being more skilled in the woods than the dwarves took Nelas with him and headed out looking for firewood for the night, also he had hopes in finding some local game so that they could have a decent meal.

Soon he found what he was looking for, a small animal trail showing signs of rabbits or something similar, so he set some traps and continued onwards in search of fuel for their fire. Davkas and Nelas found plenty and loaded themselves down. They turned to head back to camp when an arrow came zipping by their heads! Both the elf and the dwarf dropped their loads and pulled their weapons in a hurry! They turned towards where the arrow had come from and saw a quartet of goblins heading their way and they didn't look happy.

Davkas and Nelas stood their ground and met the on rushing goblins with their respective weapons, as far as they were concerned it was an even match, two against one. The goblins came in hard and fast, trying to overpower them both, yet the dwarf and elf proved more agile and danced out of their way, blocking their futile attempts to hit them with their weapons.

One of the goblins, larger than the other three, carried an old ugly looking sword, he squared off against Davkas. One of the other goblins who carried a mace also chose Davkas and the three of them started sparring in earnest. Yet Davkas was an excellent swordsman and he soon had them both scrambling backwards, fighting to stay ahead of his blade. Feinting left and then right, Davkas caused the smaller of the two to stumble, it fell backwards, tumbling to the ground. Davkas moved in quickly and ended its pathetic life by slicing through its jugular vein, its life blood draining there on the forest floor.

Meanwhile, Nelas was engaged with the other two goblins, both of these were armed with swords, one carried the bow that they initially had fired on him and Davkas, yet they too were finding out though that they were over matched.

However, Nelas decided to toy with them for awhile, he would allow them to drive him backwards, feigning that he was under distress, and then reverse the tables and drive both goblins back, he began to take them up a small hillock nearby, the two goblins hacking and slashing, trying to get to the dwarf, then Nelas stumbled over a rock and fell down hard, he began to roll down the small hill and landed with a thump at the bottom. The two goblins rushed down after him. Just as it looked bad for the old dwarf with both goblins looming up before him drawing back to stab at him a shadow closed in on them and a large battle axe came swinging in to block both swords! It was Captain Hammerstone, he and Sergeant Blackrock had heard the battle and Captain Hammerstone had come running, leaving Blackrock back at the camp in case this was a ruse.

The Captain of the dwarven guard pushed both goblins back away from the fallen Nelas. The fear in the goblins eyes was evident, they knew right away that they were in trouble this dwarf was strong and knew how to use his weapon! Soon both were being forced backwards and neither one seemed to want to be there any longer. Soon one of the goblins broke and started running from the fight, leaving the other to its fate. Captain Hammerstone wasted no time in dispatching the lone goblin, it went down in a heap when the battle axe split its skull!

By this time Davkas had dropped both of his opponents, while Nelas took up the chase of the fleeing goblin. Soon it too was down and dying, Nelas using his war hammer with deadly efficiency. All three stopped panting for breath at this point, looking around quickly for any

others that they had missed, when none materialized they all quickly made their way back to the camp.

Soon they had arrived back at camp with no other goblins in sight, the members at the camp site though barraged them with questions, which after a moment or two of this, Davkas held up his hand and said, “As far as we can tell this was just an isolated incident and these goblins were merely a roving band looking for an easy victim, they found out the hard way that we are not that easily over come. Thank you Captain Hammerstone for coming to our aide!”

Nelas too added his thanks, and they settled down into the camp site, gathered the firewood again and got their camp fire going, just before nightfall. Soon Davkas had checked the traps he had set out and came back to camp with three fat rabbits, which they wasted no time in skinning and roasting over the fire. So they enjoyed some good food, some laughter at the camp fire, and soon they had set up their watch and were ready to bed down for the night. While high over head, in the light of the three moons, wheeled three shadow serpents, again on the hunt.

Chapter 17

Taithmar paused as she mounted the next hill, she glanced backwards towards the west, dreading what she was going to see, but fortunately she saw nothing, just a bit of overactive imagination or at least she hoped it was. So as Lizzy and Vekao trudged onward up ahead, she too picked up the pace once again and pushed on. They still had many miles to cover before they reached the relative safety of the King's land, where hopefully they would perhaps run into a patrol that they might use to help escort them to see the King. That was their hope anyway, without that they didn't have much hope, for they knew that if the shadow serpents found them, they wouldn't fair much better against them than the bandits.

"How much further before we stop?" Lizzy was moaning once again. "I'm tired and need to get some rest!"

"Not much more, little Lizzy. We can stop for a breather once we reach the top of the next hill there." Vekao replied to her as he pointed towards a hill perhaps another two miles in the distance.

Lizzy just sighed and continued on, knowing that more complaining would not change the minotaur's mind. So they pushed on, the mage, the thief and the warrior, on towards their destination the fortified city of Castitrona, the capitol of Lijissa, and home to King Lonthonis Brightwater. Hoping that they could make it in time, to make it before the shadow serpents found them.

The day was quickly fading now, and finally the 'next' hill was before them and they began the ascent. Huffing and puffing at this point, they were on the edge of exhaustion, having pushed through the following night. They climbed to the top of the hill, and quickly scanned the area for any trouble before they could settle down and relax; of course they also wanted to find some good shelter nearby to setup camp.

Just as they thought all was safe a rustling sound came from the brush to one side of the clearing they were at, before they could do more than turn in that direction a pack of wolves burst through the brush and came charging at them. There must have been a good dozen mean and all hungry looking they were heading straight at them!

"Look out!" shouted Lizzy as she drew her blade and faced the leading wolves.

The companions spread out quickly and placed their backs to each other forming a loose circle, Taithmar with her staff, and Vekao with his huge battle axe, all standing and waiting for the first wave of their attack. The wolves on the other hand were already spreading out, trying to encircle their prey, the lead wolf was huge, an old graying monster of a wolf, with only one eye. He was closing fast of Lizzy now!

Lizzy held her sword ready, she waited for the last second before she made here move, and then she rolled up underneath the old wolf and sliced at him, scoring a hit down one of his

legs! The wolf wailed and snarled at her as it landed on the ground, but now it was limping, with blood oozing out the wound Lizzy had just opened on its leg.

At the same time two wolves jumped at Vekao, attempting to drag him down to the ground so that the pack could more easily attack, but Vekao was having none of that and swiftly dealt death to one and dodged the other as its jaws snapped in frustration before it landed lightly a few feet away.

Taithmar was busy herself, she weaved a quick defensive spell to provide protection, but kept it small and focused on her person so as to avoid attracting undue attention from the shadow serpents or any others nearby who could sense strong magic. So in doing so the first wolf attacking her leaped at her and smashed into an invisible shield that she had raised around herself. It slide away shaking its head, slightly stunned for the moment, meanwhile this gave Taithmar the chance to put her staff to use by smashing it into the face of the next wolf that came too close, causing it to yelp in pain and fall back.

The wolves now down to an even ten, with the lead wolf limping badly, gathered together to attack again, the blood lust having agitated them enough to provoke them to continue the encounter, that and the fact that the wolf pack leader was still standing. So again they came at the three companions, the old wolf again attempting to bring down Lizzy and the remainder now concentrating on the huge minotaur!

Lizzy dodged swiftly to try to avoid the huge, old wolf with its strong jaws snapping close to her ear, she brought the blade around quickly but this time she missed! At the same time, three of the beasts jumped at Vekao unfortunately he couldn't dodge them all, and only managed to cut one with the battle axe, while one wolf grabbed him by his left arm and attempted to pull him to the ground...with little success! Vekao grabbed at the wolf with his hand and managed to pull it free. With blood dripping down his arm he flung the wolf as far as he could, sailing it high into the air and into a nearby tree trunk! The wolf was dead before it hit the ground.

Lizzy on the other hand was not as fortunate with the large male wolf with the wolf managing to latch its jaws on her sword hand causing her to drop her blade and struggle to remain standing, with the wolf pulling her down. Taithmar saw the situation and using her staff efficiently she rammed the butt end of it into the remaining eye of the old wolf which instantly yelped and released its hold on Lizzy. But Lizzy was hurt and bleeding, her hand torn open, she knew that she couldn't grab the sword with that hand, so she reached down quickly with her left hand to bring the sword up before the wolf could recover and attack again.

Taithmar growing weary of the situation made a bold decision, she decided it was time to end this battle, so she drew upon her arcane power and cast a new spell. Pointing her staff at the old gray wolf pack leader she spoke a word of power and instantly a green bolt shot forth and struck the old wolf in the chest. With a sizzle and a loud popping sound it was instantly vaporized! The remaining wolves seeing that their leader was no more and smelling the burned flesh, turned as one and dashed off to the nearby brush, not desiring to stay and fight any longer!

Breathing a heavy sigh Taithmar went over to where Lizzy was kneeling on the ground, holding her hand and looking very worn and tired. While Vekao took a few steps after the wolves, and stood with his battle axe in hand staring after them. But he too was weary, it had been a long day for them all and now after using more magic than they had hoped to do, they could have attracted the attention of the shadow serpents! Only time would tell if that was so.

After a few moments, Vekao came back over to where the women were at, setting his battle axe down he look down at Lizzy hand to see if there was anything he could do to help. But Taithmar was already busy, digging in her pack for a healing potion to give Lizzy so that she could stop bleeding and to bring healing to her injured hand. She found what she was looking for and handed it over to Lizzy.

“Thank you.” Lizzy said to her and drank the potion down quickly for like most healing potions, it did not taste very good. But soon Lizzy’s hand stopped bleeding and the wound started mending, plus the pain had gone away so she could start moving her hand again. She looked up at Vekao, “It looks like you could use a healing potion too Vekao? Why don’t you let Taithmar give you some?”

Vekao looked over at his wounded arm and shook his head. “No save it. We may have a more pressing need for it later and should save what little we have left. This is nothing, I will just clean it and bind it, and it will heal soon enough.”

So with that they went back to the task at hand finding a suitable place to camp for the night. Vekao found such a spot before too long and he went to find some water nearby, also at the same time he wanted to make sure the wolf pack had left the area. So Vekao left the two women to setup the camp while he wandered off into the brush. Soon he had found a small stream nearby and filled their water skins, also he discovered the tracks of the wolf pack and followed it for about a mile which lead away from the area they had selected for camp and was satisfied that the wolves would pose no threat during the night, so back to camp he went.

Davkas, Princess Lunansa and the rest of their party were up early the next morning and hiking along the trail, heading in the direction of Castitrona. Soon they came upon a horrific scene, at the top of a hill! Scattered around them on the trail were various bodies, some headless, others half eaten, but all very much dead! They quickly spread out and began examining the area, they couldn't figure out what had caused such devastation. But they certainly didn't want to spend too much time in the area, mostly due to the fact that what ever had done this to these people could still be around, and the other was that the bodies were beginning to smell!

“I don't know what could have done this to these people,” Davkas said to the group, “for I don't see any tracks that I recognize, but we should move on and get the Princess to safety, otherwise I would feel obligated to stay and at least bury their bodies.”

But the dwarves all seemed to agree with the elf and they took up their journey again, heading east and away from the carnage. Soon they had put the area a mile behind them and they

called a halt so that they could rest for awhile by a stream. Filling their water skins up they discussed briefly the dead bodies and what they saw.

“Well I’m not sure what killed those poor people but one thing is for sure whatever it was didn’t leave much of any tracks. So my guess is magic of some kind.” Davkas told the group.

“Aye, I would agree with you there elf.” Captain Hammerstone replied, and then added, “But my guess would be a dragon. I’ve seen that kind of thing before and it was a dragon that had done it.”

“Dragon!” the Princess cried out with fear in her eyes. “You think it was a dragon?”

“Now why did you have to go and say that?” Davkas said to the dwarven guard captain with a frown. “We shouldn’t speculate on such a thing right now and cause the Princess to become overly concerned and frightened.”

“No need to be concerned, I was just guessing is all.” Hammerstone replied back with a lopsided smile, “Besides which if’n it was a dragon, it has moved on for sure having already feed of those poor folks back there.”

After a few more minutes they gathered their gear back up and set out again, for a while they seemed to move a little faster, all of them not wanting to take the chance that a dragon was close by.

Chapter 18

King Brightwater watched impassively as the rider was sent to dispatch his letter to Queen Yoheda. Of course there was more than the letter riding on the hooves of the swift horse and rider being dispatched; perhaps the fate of his realm was also at stake. So he watched the young rider as he went to the gates of the city, watched and hoped beyond hope that he would make it on his errand to delivery his plea for help in combating the massing armies at his borders!

“Sire” Captain Silverstar callout to the King as he entered the room.

“Yes I’m over here Captain.” The King replied and waved him over to the window.

“Sire, the reinforcements are assembled and ready to march. They await your blessings in the courtyard.” Captain Silverstar came up to the King and announced.

The King looked tired, actually he was tired, and it had been a long time since he slept through the night, but he shrugged that off, and turned to follow Captain Silverstar down the hallway, to the stairs that lead out towards the courtyard of his castle. The duties of the King never wait, for there is always something that needs to be done, something that needs his attention, so he took the long walk out to the courtyard to review the troops before they sent them on their way to the border and possibly their doom!

After sometime they came to the inner courtyard and Captain Silverstar presented the assembled warriors that were being sent to the border. Here they had a hundred horsemen, three-hundred foot soldiers, and two mounted war wizards, part of the King's personnel court. Also being sent with the reinforcements was a handful of mind mages to provide comfort and healing to those that they could. King Brightwater looked at them all, he nodded as he walked past them, he was proud of them all, from the lowliest foot soldier to the two wizards who had volunteered to ride with the troops, both friends of his, having been in service to his family for many years now. They saluted him and all turned and began their long march to the border, the King only hoped they would arrive in time to help.

“Very well Captain, I will be in my study going over some notes and such if you need me.” King Brightwater said to the young Captain and turned to walk away, but then he heard Captain Silverstar clear his throat as if he wanted to say something, so the King paused and turned back towards him. He motioned for him to say what was on his mind.

“Sire, you know that it has been a very long time now since your daughter disappeared. I know that you have had the court wizards attempting to locate through the use of their magic, yet I also know that for some reason they haven't been very successful. Yet there are rumors that the dark dwarves are the ones who took her, for their own evil gain I am sure. At least this is what our agents seem to be pointing to.” Silverstar paused as if not sure if he wanted to say what he was about to say then he continued, “Yet sire, you seem reluctant to send any search parties out to begin a search for your daughter. This I do not understand?”

The King raised his eye brows at this sudden questioning by his trusted servant. Yet he knew he could not fault the man for questioning his tactics, so he offered him an explanation, “Well Captain Silverstar I know that it might seem odd that up until now I haven’t sent out any ‘official’ search parties, but rest assured, I have sent out a search party that only I know of. They have been very active in searching for the Princess and communicate their findings back to me daily, through magical means. So don’t think that I haven’t used all the tools available to me to find my missing daughter” With that the King turned to leave, but Captain Silverstar wasn’t finished it seemed.

“Sire, please!” Silverstar began with genuine concern in his voice, “I understand that you needed to keep the information of the search party secret. Yet I feel that I could do more to help! Please sire, allow me to assembly a squadron of veterans to mount a more public search, it wouldn’t have to be a large group, but just a few select men and women who are very skilled in this type of work?” Captain Silverstar paused to hear the King’s response to this idea.

“Gharyn” King Brightwater began by using Captain Silverstar’s first name, “You are the Captain of my Royal guard I can’t have you traipsing all over the country side, when I need you here with me!”

Captain Silverstar looked at his King and nodded, but then he got a very determined look on his face and said, “Yes my King I know that this is true, yet I feel the need to be helping to find your daughter, I feel personally responsible for her disappearance. Please my King, I can leave a very capable man in charge while I am away. But I would feel much better if I was out

doing all I could to find the Princess and bring her safely home again!” Of course deep down inside his heart Captain Silverstar had a secret reason for wanting to track down the Princess.

The King pondered on this thought for a moment and then he said, “If it is that important to you then do what you need to do. But I only ask this, you can only be gone until the moons rise together in the east (this was a time approximately two weeks from this day when the three moons came up together).

Captain Silverstar immediately saluted his King and bowed low, hiding the smile that was spreading across his face, and then he came back up and turned immediately to assemble the seasoned warriors he desired to take with him. But first he had to contact Tin’ther of the Dhag’arii...

The night was uneventful and the companions were glad for this. They were tired and needed some rest, so when Vekao woke the women earlier in the morning after his watch was through, they all gathered around the small fire that was built and prepared their morning meal.

Soon the fire was put out, the gear was packed and they were back to the trail and their journey to Castitrona and their hopeful meeting with King Brightwater. This morning Lizzy lead the way, while Vekao brought up the rear of their little group. The weather was clear, with just a few clouds in the sky above, a little brisk, yet nothing that would slow hem down on their journey. Along the way, they saw some further signs of the neighboring wild-life, but there were

no further attacks by any creatures of the woods. Things were going well indeed and Lizzy was starting to feel like they were going to make it, for now they were perhaps only a few days away from their destination.

But before too long the clouds began to darken and soon after that the sun was no longer shining brightly down upon their path, and it began to rain! It rained and grew steadily harder as they continued along their way, so they had their cloaks out and they were slogging along trying to just make it to the next hill.

Vekao spoke first “perhaps we should find shelter soon?” he called out from the rear of the group.

Both Lizzy and Taithmar agreed quickly with this and they made their way to what looked to them like a cave off in the distance. It was a little ways off the trail they had been following, yet they felt it was worth the effort to make their way over to it. So they did.

Vekao held the women up at the mouth of the cave while he went in first to check it out, making sure there were no wild creatures lurking within, or any hostile enemies such as goblins or ogres. Soon Vekao came back out and motioned for the women to follow him back inside. Quickly they took off their wet cloaks and were busy gathering brush and pieces of wood they found in the front part of the cave to try and get a fire going.

“Well it is fortunate that we found this cave to shelter in over night.” Taithmar said to her friends. She used some of her magic to get the fire going, for it seemed the easiest to do at the time and soon the fire was burning and they settled down in the mouth of the cave to spend the rest of their time this day, until the storm went away at least.

But high over head the shadow serpents were out, for they preferred the darkness of the storm, with the clouds all around them. They were circling, trying to determine where the artifact had been carried to for they could sense it’s strong aura of magic. Soon they spotted the light in a small cave, so they swooped lower to investigate. Flying down low the three terrible beasts flew directly over the cave that Lizzy and her friends had settled in to ride out the storm!

“What was that?” Lizzy exclaimed and looked out into the storming sky.

“I felt it too!” Vekao said to her and stood up fingering the battle axe strapped to his back. “The shadow serpents are nearby. I can feel them drawing close.” He said then started scanning the sky for signs of the evil creatures. But it was difficult for him to see much of anything due to the weather.

Lizzy visibly shuddered and clutched at her arms. She glanced over at Taithmar who was also now looking up into the dark sky. “Yes I believe you are correct Vekao, I sense the same. We should prepare ourselves.”

With that Taithmar began to weave a defensive spell upon her and her friends, knowing that they would need all the help they could get if it came down to a battle between them and the shadow serpents! So they waited, knowing it would be better to stand in the cave than to be caught in the open by the evil creatures.

“Here they come!” was all Vekao said as he pulled the huge battle axe off his back and sprinted to the front of the cave. Soon the air split with the sound of wings flapping and a terrible screech from the shadow serpents as they swooped down for the attack!

Chapter 19

Davkas, Princess Lunansa and the other members of their party were getting tired at the pace they had set for themselves in departing the scene at the top of the last hill. Yet none of them were complaining, all wanting to put some distance between themselves and the sight of the massacre. So they trudged onward down the trail heading towards their destination.

“We should stop soon and rest before it gets too late in the day.” Davkas finally said as he led the group over the trail.

“Yes I agree completely!” Nelas said from the rear of the group. He was red faced and sweating profusely, clearly pushing himself to his limits.

Captain Hammerstone and Sergeant Blackrock both nodded their agreement and the whole group came to an abrupt halt, everyone of them breathing a small sigh of relief. Davkas helped find a suitable spot for the Princess to sit down and rest, while the dwarves all dropped to the ground where they were, not much caring if they had a place to sit or not.

Looking around them Davkas calculated that they were perhaps within a few days marching distance from Castitrona, and returning the Princess to her Father. He would be happy to get home, having been held captive for as long as the dark dwarves had kept him. His thoughts naturally drifted to his daughter, Lissidrinne, or as everyone called her Lizzy. He of course

wondered how she was fairing in the world, and what life had brought her, she would no doubt have been worried about him being gone so long.

Princess Lunansa sat on the stump, and soon she was busy rubbing her feet and day dreaming about being home. Of course her thoughts focused on her Father and seeing him again, yet it seemed she couldn't help thinking about a certain Captain of the Guard. Gharyn Silverstar, he was so handsome and dashing she thought to herself. But she had never confessed her attraction to him, she felt like it would be wrong somehow. She vowed to herself that if they made it back to her home that she would right this wrong and express her true feelings to Gharyn!

Davkas broke off from his own daydreaming and approached the dwarven leaders who were all standing together and discussing something very animatedly! But of course this is very typical of dwarves in general.

“Well I say we need to take the most direct route! The sooner we get the Princess back home safely the better!” Argha Flintrock was shouting to the other dwarves gathered around.

“That's just fine if'n you want to march right out in the open and all, I still feel the best way is to skirt the edge of the forest and approach the city from the south!” Captain Hammerstone shouted back with equal enthusiasm!

“The captain makes a very valid point.” Davkas said as he walked up to the group.

“Well I understand his concern but I feel that we should take the quickest route, and that is the path we are currently on.” Argha argued back, crossing his arms over his chest as he spoke, taking a defiant stance.

The rest of the dwarves also crossed their arms over their chests and stared back at the old mind mage, so now all of the dwarven leaders stood staring at each other, while Davkas stood in the middle of them all with a perplexed look on his face! Just then Princess Lunansa came up and placed her hand on Captain Hammerstone’s arm gently.

“I think that I should have the last word on this matter. Don’t you think?” Lunansa looked at the dwarves gathered around.

“Surely Princess we would like to hear what you say on this matter. Yet it is your safety that we are arguing for here!” Sergeant Blackrock spoke for the group in favor of taking the long way around.

“Yes I do understand, but I want you all to understand that I would like to get back to my home as quickly as possible. So I am in favor of the shortest, most direct route. If that means we need to travel in cover of darkness then I am open to that too.” The Princess replied to the comment of Sergeant Blackrock as she looked in the eyes of all the dwarves gathered there, she also caught Davkas’s eye and hoped he would argue for her too.

“Well we will go where you would have us to go Princess.” Davkas spoke up after seeing the look in her eye. “We can rest now and take up the march in a little while. Like you said, if we need to we can travel the open areas during the night.”

The majority of the dwarves grumbled slightly at this yet it was not their nature to ignore the wishes of their charge, so they all agreed to take the shortest, most direct path. They broke camp soon and took up their trek again, up and down the hills they marched, well into the evening. Soon they came to a more heavily wooded hillside and came upon another disturbing scene!

At the top of the hill in a nearby clearing were two dead wolves, another dead wolf was found a few feet away at a base of a large tree. There appeared to have been some sort of fight for the ground was roughed up and there were multiple tracks on the ground, humanoid tracks, so the wolves had attacked a group of perhaps three or so people very recently. At least this is what Davkas could piece together. He looked out at the surrounding woods scanning the area for any signs that the wolves had succeeded in their attack. He began to follow a very large set of tracks leading away and soon found a stream, the dwarves and the Princess following in his wake. But the sun was quickly going down and he wasn't sure in which direction they lead, so he stood up from studying the tracks and for some reason felt a chill down the back of his spine.

Seeing no further signs of individuals in the area the group decided to continue on their way, so into the night they journeyed, keeping hidden in the shadow of the night, hoping to make good time before they became too exhausted to go further. Up and down they went, over hills

and through shallow streams, into the night they marched. Sometime after midnight they called a halt and all fell down exhausted and worn, they set up a quick watch schedule and eating just what was in their packs and drinking from their waterskins, they soon went to sleep. Two of the dwarven guards kept first watch, and the only item of note for the night was a disturbing shadow which flew across the light of the three moons.

The party awakened to a perfect day, the clouds were high, and the sun was shining. The group of weary travelers felt refreshed and ready to get back on the trail. So after a quick morning meal, washed down with some fresh water from the nearby stream, they started up again. Davkas again took the lead, being the most familiar with the territory and of course having tracking experience.

“So how much longer do you think it will take for us to arrive at Castitrona?” Princess Lunansa asked Davkas as they were walking along.

“Oh I figure at the rate we are traveling perhaps only a few more days Princess.” Davkas said in reply.

“Ah good, I am weary of this whole ordeal, I will be happy to see my Father again.” Princess Lunansa said back to Davkas and then sighed deeply. Her thoughts drifted towards home again, it seemed like such a long time now that she had been gone!

They were making good time, and the miles were disappearing quickly behind them now. But after awhile the weather started turning, clouds were forming in the sky and before too long it started to rain. The trail was getting difficult to traverse, the Princess having slipped and fallen to the ground now multiple times. Davkas was concerned for her of course and slowed their pace considerably. But the rain seemed to be getting stronger, so he felt it was time to find some shelter so that they could ride out the storm. Argha was thinking the storm seemed a bit unnatural, perhaps magically created. But these thoughts he kept to himself.

Captain Hammerstone was the first to break the silence. "I think we should look for a place to get out of this storm!" He shouted out to the group marching along the trail.

"I agree completely!" Davkas shouted back over his shoulder in response. He motioned to them to stay together while he went ahead of the group to try and find someplace they could find shelter under, like a large copse of trees or perhaps even better, a cave or overhang of some kind.

So Davkas sprinted off ahead, trotting along, scanning the countryside along the trail, looking for anything that might work for shelter. He quickly found a nice thicket of trees close by, but ruled it out since there was a large depression under the trees, which was quickly filling up with water. Then he spotted something odd! High over head he saw three shapes wheeling and swooping in the pouring rain! Some very large shapes which at first made him think of dragons! Yet, squinting at them and focusing his eyes he saw they weren't dragons at all, but something dark and sinuous!

Quickly running back to the party he ran up and motioned for them all to duck down! Not knowing what was happening, yet trusting in his instincts, they obliged and took cover. Davkas glanced back up to see if he could spot the creatures again, but he didn't see them. But soon all of them heard a monstrous shrieking!

“What is it Davkas!” Princess Lunansa whimpered from her hiding place under a nearby bush.

“I don't know Princess, but I'm afraid we are about to find out!” Davkas cried back in response and drew his sword at the same time.

The dwarves knew that sound, they knew that for some reason there were shadow serpents up above, and now they were close by! So as one they drew their weapons, while the old mind mage. Argha, began to close his eyes, all the while they scanned the sky as best they could to try and spot the serpents. But the sounds died off as it seemed the shadow serpents moved away from their hiding place. They all took a collective sigh and began crawling out from underneath the bushes they had been crouching under.

“So what do you think all that was about?” Davkas asked no one in particular.

It was Argha Flintrock who answered him first. “I don't know but I sense that there are shadow serpents about. They are servants of the dark dwarves and this can only mean that they

are searching for something for them for they are used to track magical items of worth, besides being very deadly in their own right.” Argha spoke quietly to the party as a whole, and the Princess shuddered slightly at this news.

All eyes turned up and were searching the sky for any sign of the fell beasts. But they didn't see anymore signs of them, so Davkas silently motioned for them to follow him and they made their way further up the trail, and soon they thankfully found some large conifers to shelter them. But the peaceful surroundings soon were shattered by another shriek from the shadow serpents! They sounded very close by now!

Chapter 20

Vekao stood in the mouth of the cave and was horrified at what he saw! There flying straight at them were the three shadow serpents they had been fleeing for the past couple of days! He steadied his stance not really knowing what to do. But he also knew that due to their size they could not directly attack them in the cave, so he waited. He didn't wait long for all three landed just a little ways off from the mouth of the cave, in a nearby clearing. Vekao could hear Taithmar behind him readying a spell, but also he could hear his own heart beating loudly in his chest, and he heard Lizzy exclaim in fear, for she had caught sight of the creatures.

One of the creatures came sprinting through the trees on its stubby short legs, straight at him and the two women! Taithmar stepped in front of him then and unleashed a spell, the sunless day was brightened with the light of the fire that erupted from her out stretched hand, the great beast roared his fury at being struck with the magical fire and yet it came onward! Taithmar fell back then, too stunned to realize her spell hadn't stopped the great beast.

It was now Vekao's turn at the monster. He readied himself as he saw the beast approach, it slowed as it got closer, and it eyed him greedily with its massive black eyes. Vekao was calm as could be expected in this situation facing a beast he had never faced before. This of course was due to his many years of experience as a warrior, both on a battle field and off adventuring with his friend Davkas. Also, Vekao trusted in his battle axe, for it was enhanced against such monstrosities as this great beast was, he was confident he could inflict damage on it, but just how much before it put an end to his life, he wasn't sure.

The monster paused at the mouth of the cave, while the other two came up behind it, all three could not fit into the cave at one time, which was good for the Vekao and his two companions. The beast lunged at him then and Vekao had to dodge quickly to avoid being bitten,

he tried to backhand the beast with the battle ax, but missed. For now they were even, beast and minotaur, but only time would tell if they would survive this day!

Just as Vekao was positioning himself again to slash at the great monster with his battle-axe, Taithmar started chanting. He could hear her in the background over the rumbling of the beast. This caused him to pause and the shadow serpent took advantage of this time to rake one of its claws over Vekao's frame, slicing him in the chest, he started to bleed profusely! Lizzy screamed and Taithmar completed her spell, and then sent it hurling straight at the shadow serpent in the mouth of the cave! It was the same spell she had used to slay the evil mage Vitros in the back alley in Koth. The magical bolt went forth and struck the beast in its great head, it screamed its fury and pain, and yet it still stood! But Taithmar could tell this had sorely hurt the beast and took heart in this fact.

Vekao fell back with his life's blood leaking out the wound in his chest he was starting to wonder if he would survive this battle! Then he saw a blur in his peripheral vision, Lizzy sprang into action, she tumbled to the right of Vekao, to the left of the great shadow serpent and slashed wildly at its exposed neck, she opened a gapping wound in its neck which caused the thing to pull back out of the cave, it was roaring in anger and pain while doing so!

"Great move Lizzy!" Vekao shouted his encouragement to the young elf woman.

Just then the monster dashed back in, this time though there was something different about it! It had invoked its special defensive ability! Its movements were blurred to Lizzy's and

the rest of the party's eyes, Lizzy tried to blink it away, yet when she tried to focus on the creature it appeared fuzzy to her! Then it struck out at her, and she had to dodge away. When she went to swing at where she thought it was, it blurred out and she was off the mark! This was going to prove very difficult to hit the creature now!

Vekao shouted back at Lizzy as she sparred with the beast "Lizzy get back! I'll be alright let me handle this!"

Just then the shadow serpent caught Lizzy with a vicious blow to her midsection and she went flying back towards Vekao and Taithmar! Taithmar stepped up and caught her before she hit the ground, but the momentum carried them both tumbling backwards. Lizzy lay very still and Taithmar lay stunned for a moment. Then Taithmar was scrambling to get to her, crawling along the floor of the cave, while Vekao glanced back over his shoulder at the two of them for a moment, then he turned his full attention back to the shadow serpent. He knew he had to do something to buy them some time. So he charged the thing, howling in rage and despair, lowering his shoulder he plowed his full bulk into the creature, driving it back momentarily. He took advantage of this and brought his battle axe down as hard as he could, hoping he would connect. By sheer good fortune or as Vekao was known to say afterwards, superior skills, he did! The blow nearly chopped the creature's head clean off! The only sound it made was a gurgling sound in its throat as it died. Of course this blocked the entrance to the cave so that none of the other creatures could snake there way in, but in the same token now the party was trapped!

Davkas lead the party closer to the sounds of the shadow serpents. Soon they came to a small clearing where they could see the creatures up ahead. There were three of them from what they could tell, all gathered around the mouth of a small cave. He motioned for the party to spread out and take cover until he could figure out what was going on. As Davkas moved closer he began to see some action in the mouth of the cave. From what he could tell it appeared one of the beasts was attacking someone in the cave! He just couldn't tell who at this point.

As Davkas crawled a little closer still, one of the shadow serpents noticed him and turned towards him! Davkas wasn't sure if he should freeze in place or draw his sword. He chose the latter and drew his sword and not a moment too soon for the beast lunged at him using its wings to propel itself faster than normal. Davkas rolled to his right and slashed wildly at the monster. He missed it entirely, but luckily so did the beast! Just then the rest of his party noticed his dilemma and charged forth from hiding.

The shadow serpent roared in anger and turned towards the darting elf, it then began to blur and Davkas knew he was in trouble! He took a step back and looked around for some help, soon Sergeant Blackrock and Nelas were by his side with their weapons ready. Nelas swung his war hammer at the beast, but missed causing him to be in a very vulnerable position. The beast lashed out with one of its paws and struck him, throwing the dwarven smith back and to the ground! The creature had opened a wound in his chest and he was now bleeding badly! Sergeant Blackrock took advantage of the distraction and pressed the monster with his own weapon, he scored a direct hit to the creature's great head and it ended up screaming in pain and taking a step backwards!

The third shadow serpent was now in the thick of the battle outside the cave as well though, but the sturdy dwarves had it surrounded. Captain Hammerstone was coordinating his dwarven guards in the attack and soon had the beast on the defense. Argha Flintrock was cautiously working his way up to the scene of the battle, taking great care to stay out of harms way, yet he wanted to position himself close enough that he could take control of one of the beasts if needed, and with Nelas being struck down as he was he felt the need was there. So he crept as closely as he dared and closed his eyes so that he could concentrate better, soon he reached out with his mind against that particular beast. When he felt ready he approached a little further and felt his mind melding with the mind of the great beast, the beast threw back its head and let out a terrible roar, and then it turned on its companion and attacked it! Argha was now in control of this beast's mind, controlling its actions!

The two great beasts rolled on the ground grappling and biting at each other. Their defensive instincts kicked in and both of them began to blur and become hazy to the party members watching! The creatures battled back and forth, rolling on the ground, rearing back and throwing the other one down, soon the party members didn't know which was which, but it appeared that one was getting the upper hand.

One of the dwarven guards didn't move fast enough and was bowled over by the tumbling beasts. He was pummeled to the ground and was crushed by their great weight! He lay very still and the remaining guards moved to pull him out of the way. But when they got to him

he was already dead, so they lay him up against a large tree in the clearing and then turned their attention back to the dueling shadow serpents.

Soon the companions in the cave were wondering what was happening. The one beast was dead, but why hadn't any of the others tried to pull its dead carcass from the opening so that they could attack? Vekao was beginning to wonder this when they heard the commotion outside the cave entrance. Taithmar was attending to Lizzy who was beginning to stir slightly, the beast had opened a great wound in her side and Taithmar was busy trying to get her to drink a healing elixir. The only thing that had saved Lizzy was her fine chainmail shirt.

“Vekao! What is going on outside? I hear fighting?” Taithmar called out towards the standing minotaur. Then she added “Lizzy is hurt I will stay here with her.”

The minotaur glanced back towards where Lizzy and Taithmar were and simply nodded, then he went to the mouth of the cave and tried to see past the dead shadow serpent. After a moment or two he was able to peer out past the beast and his jaw dropped at what he saw! The two remaining shadow serpents were fighting each other? What was the cause of this he wondered?

“You won't believe this. The two beasts are fighting each other!” Vekao called back to Taithmar and Lizzy who was now trying to sit up on her own.

Taithmar ignored him for now and concentrated on Lizzy, she was badly hurt and bleeding profusely, so she was busy pouring a healing elixir down her throat. It seemed to be helping, for Lizzy had groaned a little then sat upright. But Taithmar still wore a look of concern, she wasn't sure if the potion would be enough, and this was her last one!

Taithmar then called back out to Vekao, "I think Lizzy will be alright for now Vekao, but I am concerned that she will need a healer soon. You say the shadow serpents are fighting each other?" she asked with a puzzled expression.

"Yes!" is all Vekao shouted back at her, for he was too busy now watching in amazement the battle between the two beasts! Then he noticed that there were dwarves around the beasts. Vekao thought to himself "*I wonder where they came from? And what they are doing here?*" Soon Vekao found his head started to spin and he lost consciousness and fell to the ground, continuing to bleed from his open wound.

Davkas and the Princess watched in fascination as the two beasts fought. All the while Argha kept his distance but maintained his concentration on the beast under his control. Soon the larger of the two beasts pinned the other to the ground, this was the one the mind mage was controlling, and clapped its great jaws around the creature's throat and killed it. It soon let go and looked up at the dwarves and party members surrounding it with hatred in its eyes. The dwarves closed in on it, led by Captain Hammerstone. The dwarves surrounded the beast and launched their attack, hammers, axes and mauls were used with devastating effect! The monster fought back, but had been weakened by its fight with the other shadow serpent. So soon the dwarves

had the upper hand, with Sergeant Blackrock dealing the killing blow to its head. The great beast laid still, blood pooling on the ground around it, the dwarves only looked relieved to be through with the fight. Davkas glanced over at Argha Flintrock who was leaning against a tree looking very tired. He and Princess Lunansa approached him.

“Are you alright?” Davkas asked the old mind mage as they walked up to him.

Argha looked up at them and smiled, “Yes I am alright, and just a little tired you know. It’s been a busy day!”

About this time the dwarves all began yelling and motioning for the three of them to come over by the cave. They had forgotten about the cave and the dead beast that lay within its mouth. The dwarves had approached it and had pulled the shadow serpent there away from the cave. Vekao was stirring inside the cave when Davkas and Princess Lunansa approached they looked inside the cave and they saw a huge minotaur and two women, one whom seemed to be injured. The dwarves stared down the minotaur, not knowing if he was friend or foe. The minotaur stared back, up until the time when he glanced past the dwarves and saw Davkas.

“Davkas?” Vekao said softly.

“Vekao? Is that you?” Davkas looked astonished, but soon the recognition of his old friend came to him. They hadn’t seen each other in a very long time.

The dwarves looked surprised that they actually knew each other! But the Sergeant waved his hand and they parted to allow the minotaur to pass through. Vekao quickly climbed to his feet and came out, soon both he and Davkas stared at each other for a moment, and then they grabbed the each other and hugged! Soon Vekao lifted Davkas off his feet, Davkas motioned for Vekao to put him down and found himself covered in Vekao's blood from his wound.

“Where have you been Davkas! You had me worried!” Vekao bellowed out at the elf.

“Oh you are bleeding Vekao! ” he replied back to his old friend.

Hearing the commotion outside, Taithmar and Lizzy come walking out, Taithmar supporting Lizzy, who was very bloody and her insides hurt awfully bad. Lizzy took one look at who Vekao was talking too and she pulled away from the mage and ran to her father!

“Father!” was all Lizzy could manage to cry out as she came running up to Davkas and threw her arms around him, hugging him as tightly as she could, but with a great deal of pain.

Davkas couldn't believe it! Lizzy was here? What was going on? The look on his face said all those things and more, yet he couldn't let go of his daughter! But she's hurt he suddenly realized to himself.

“Lizzy what happened to you? You are hurt?” Davkas said to her and held her out away from himself looking her over with much fatherly concern. Also, Argha, the mind mage spent some time working healing for the wounds they all had sustained that day.

“Oh Father, I can’t believe it’s really you?” Lizzy replied back, then she realized he was asking questions, so she paused and said “I was hurt during our fight with the shadow serpent. It got the best of me I’m afraid.” She told him with a half smile on her beautiful, but dirty face.

So the two parties sat down and rested there by the cave. Exchanging stories and making introductions. The shadow serpents were dead or at least the ones that had been chasing after the artifact. The old dwarven mind mage was very interested in the small black artifact that Lizzy was carrying in her pack, for he knew something of the magic that bound the earth elemental to it. So soon they were discussing the artifact in detail trying to figure out what the next move they needed to make.

Chapter 21

Captain Silverstar lead the party down the trail, the dark dwarven mage had given him specific orders for find the missing artifact and to kill the Princess! His stomach ached for he did have desires towards the Princess, yet he knew that he must carry out these orders or he would have to pay the consequences. Silently he brooded over the situation, his men arrayed behind him believing his brooding was due to the safety of the missing Princess Lunansa, they followed him, like they always followed him, with blind trust and faith in their leader.

Soon they started up the fork of the trail the Dhag'arii mage had instructed him to go, based on the last know whereabouts of the shadow serpent servants of the Dhag'arii. To his men he appeared to be just taking a random trail, in a random search for the missing Princess. Up and down the trail they galloped their horses, constantly scanning the surrounding countryside for any signs of the young girl, yet of course the Captain knew that up ahead they should find the group with the black artifact the dark dwarves so desired to have back in their possession and hopefully the Princess would not be far behind.

Up ahead the Captain had sent out a couple of scouts, one was riding back fast and so Captain Silverstar slowed the group of searchers to a halt to await the news from the scouts. They didn't have long to wait as the scout galloped up to the Captain and came to a swift stop. He looked to the Captain and saluted him then gave him the news, "Up ahead there is a group of dwarves at what appears to be the scene of a battle, for there are dead shadow serpents in a clearing not far from where the dwarves are located. I left the other scout to keep an eye on them and rode back to inform you my Captain!" The scout reported to his Captain in haste.

Captain Silverstar was hoping that this was the group he was looking for, yet the mage hadn't mentioned any dwarves. He quickly gave orders to his men, a group of twenty, selected personally by him for this particular expedition. He had them spread out a bit, then they followed after the scout as he led the way back to where he had left the other, once there they would determine the best way to mount their assault.

Davkas and his daughter, Lizzy, had spent the rest of the night telling each other about their lives since last they had talked. There was much to tell since it had been almost two years since they had seen each other. But now they were arm in arm, laughing and joking as if no time had passed at all. Lizzy was feeling a little better, the old dwarf Argha had spent time healing more of her wounds. Davkas also spent some time talking over things with Vekao. He had first thanked him though for watching over his daughter and keeping her safe in his absence.

The two parties were pretty much rested and eager to be off again. The dwarves were still committed to take the Princess all the way to her Father so they especially wanted to get back on the trail to Castitrona. So they packed up their belongings and began the journey to reach the home of the Princess. Argha Flintrock decided to walk by Lizzy and asked again to see the artifact she carried in her pack. So she carefully took it out and handed to the old dwarf. He squinted at it intently, turning it over and over in his hands, muttering slightly to himself. Finally he handed it back to her and concentrated on the trail ahead of them.

Before too long they came to a clearing, but Davkas didn't like the feeling he was getting and asked the party not to stop here but to push onward. The surrounding woods seemed very

still and too quiet for his liking, and then suddenly the whole world seemed to explode around them! They came at them like a flood, and it seemed to them that they were coming from all directions at once. Of course that wasn't the case, but they were coming hard and fast from three directions!

“Dwarves! Formation!” shouted Captain Hammerstone to the dwarven soldiers left to him.

Immediately the dwarves formed a wedge at the front of the group, while Davkas, Vekao and the rest of them covered the rear, making a somewhat complete oval shaped pattern of defense. Taithmar, Princess Lunansa and the dwarven mind mage, Argha, took up the middle of the group. Suddenly the Princess cried out!

“Stop! Hold I am Princess Lunansa and I command the soldiers of Lijissa to stop their attack!” The Princess cried out as loudly as she could with her arms waving in the air.

Having recognized the Princess, Captain Silverstar who was leading the charge in the front, brought his horse up abruptly and called for a halt quickly. His soldiers immediately came to a complete stop. Everyone in the two groups was looking very confused at the moment, until Princess Lunansa spoke again...

“Captain Silverstar! What are you doing here?” she asked the Captain from behind the hulking body of Vekao, who was eying the soldiers and the captain warily.

“Princess Lunansa! We were sent to find you!” the Captain said as he dismounted from his horse. Meanwhile his men squirmed in their saddles, confusion written on their faces at the new turn of events. Soon though their confusion turned to joy as they saw it truly was their beloved Princess Lunansa.

“Well it does seem that you have found me Captain Silverstar.” The Princess said in reply as she walked towards him with a big smile on her face, at the same time she motioned for everyone in their group to stand down.

Both parties relaxed as the Princess stepped over and greeted the valiant captain of her Father’s guard. She then went down the line and greeted all her rescuers in turn she enjoyed falling back into the role of the Princess. Soon the party as a whole were moving again and heading towards Castitrona with the warriors from the kingdom taking the lead.

All was quiet as they marched along the trail, the Princess spent a considerable amount of time riding beside Captain Silverstar, for as soon as they had started out one of the horses was brought over for her to ride. The rest of their original party made do with walking which really didn’t bother the dwarves that much, they preferred it that way. The day was quickly fading though, for they had spent a considerably amount of time discussing what had become of them and the details of their journey. So it was not too surprising to see that soon the sun would be setting and the three moons would be rising in the sky. Captain Silverstar sent one of his scouts ahead of the group to find a suitable place to camp for the night. They were still a day or two away from reaching Castitrona, which of course Princess Lunansa was very anxious to do.

It wasn't long before the scout returned with some good news. There was a good clearing up ahead that would be perfect for what they required. It had a good stream flowing through it for fresh water and a number of trees for shelter, yet it didn't have a lot of brush growing close to it so that they could see clearly around the perimeter. So they headed that way with light hearts and their stomachs growling, they would eat good that night for another scout had brought down two large deer and so they would roast them up for the party to eat.

"I can't wait to return to Castitrona and to see my Father. I hope he isn't too worried about me?" Princess Lunansa was asking Captain Silverstar as they rode along.

"He has been very worried of course my Princess, but so have I." he responded to her question and then looked over at her with a shy smile playing on his lips.

Princess Lunansa looked a little shocked at first, for his response had surprised her, but then she returned his smile and said to him, "Why Captain Silverstar! Are you flirting with me?"

At this point his face bloomed very red but he spoke up and replied to her finally saying "Yes Princess you have been on my mind lately."

They then rode along in silence for a long time, not looking at each other, yet stealing glances here and there. Soon they came to the area the scout had indicated and they all started setting up the camp for the night. The soldiers from Castitrona setup a watch with the help of

Captain Silverstar, while the dwarves filled their skins with fresh water, Vekao and Davkas set to skinning the deer and preparing them for roasting. Nelas and Argha prepared the fire and soon had a very good fire roaring. Princess Lunansa kept watching Captain Silverstar and smiled at him a time or two when their eyes met, but he kept himself busy with his men and giving them instructions for the night.

Before too long they had the deer roasting on the fire and the aroma from it was making all their stomachs to growl. The party was beginning to gather around the fire, for the sun was quickly fading now and night was upon them. The sounds of the night surrounded them, in the distance they could hear the howling of wolves speaking to each other. But they had no fear of wolf attacks this night, there was just too many of them to interest any wolf pack.

When the meal was ready Vekao and Davkas as the head cooks for the night began carving it up and passing the food around, everyone was commenting on how delicious it was and everyone's hearts turned to their respective homes. The Princess sat staring into the fire and didn't notice when Captain Silverstar got up and left the fire pit area and headed into the night. Nelas alone noticed but figured that the captain was going out to relieve himself, so he continued to sit by the fire enjoying the company. Soon the dwarves started singing an old dwarvish tune and had the whole camp site clapping along! The moons were all up at this point and everyone was starting to feel the day's journey, so a few of them excused themselves and headed for their bedrolls.

Not very many took note of the fine Captain's absence, yet Nelas who was the only one it seemed to see him leave. Captain Silverstar had a dilemma he knew that he needed to contact Tin'ther the royal mage of the King of the dark dwarves, yet he was torn, torn to his duty to the King, torn to his new found affections for Princess Lunansa, and yet he knew that if he didn't do this that he would eventually pay with his very life! So he took out the special crystal the old mage had given him for this purpose and spoke the command word into it. The crystal came to life! It began to glow with a light from within it and soon the image of Tin'ther was there before him!

"You have summoned me?" Tin'ther's image said to Captain Silverstar.

"Yes I have, I have news of the artifact, it is here within my camp." The captain replied to the mage.

"That is very interesting news indeed. You know what to do if you value your life Captain, if you would like Captain I can come and claim it now with a few of my minions, it would not be easy, yet it could be done?" the old mage said to Captain Silverstar.

About this time Nelas was getting very curious about the disappearance of the captain and since it didn't seem to be bothering anyone else, he took the liberty to sneak out of the camp in the direction he saw the captain going and as quietly as a dwarf could be he crept along the tree line to where last saw the captain disappear to. Soon he came upon the captain and was shocked to see the image of Tin'ther the mage in the presence of the captain, who appeared to

the old dwarven blacksmith to be holding a conversation with him. Nelas decided to creep a little closer for he couldn't hear as well as he liked. As he crept forward he heard a twig snap and he instantly froze...

As Captain Silverstar was about to answer the mage he heard a twig snap in the trees behind him, he twirled around quickly, drawing his blade as he did so, he couldn't see anyone, yet he felt eyes watching him. So he turned to the image of the dark dwarf mage and said "I can handle getting the artifact without any blood shed. Wait until tomorrow night and I shall have it for you." With that he ended the conversation and quickly placed the jewel back within his pouch. Then he turned his attention upon the surrounding area, he had another special gem that he could use for this kind of occasion, an all-seeing-eye. He took this special gem out and looked through it, rotating it in a slow 360 degree sweep of the woods surrounding him, and then he saw the dwarf, standing next to a tree, holding very still. He placed the gem away and crept around to where he had seen the dwarf spying on him. He knew that this dwarf probably saw and heard too much about what had went on so he didn't want to take the chance of being caught now.

Slowly he crept along, Nelas was still not moving, having seen that the image of the mage had disappeared he decided it was best to not draw attention to himself, when he saw the captain moving off, for being a dwarf he could see very well in the night, he assumed he was going to make his way back to the camp. So Nelas turned to take his first steps back towards camp himself, he was very anxious and wanted to tell the Princess and the others what he had seen so he didn't hear the captain as he rushed up behind him! The next thing that Nelas knew was that he had a longsword sticking out of the front of his chest for Captain Silverstar had

jammed the blade to the hilt through his back! Nelas gurgled slightly, then let out a slight sigh and slumped to the ground, Captain Silverstar let him fall and drew his blade out and wiped it on some leaves nearby. He checked Nelas for life, and not sensing any decided to head back to the campsite, leaving Nelas to the night.

When Captain Silverstar got back to the camp he found that most of the camp had already turned in for the night, the guards were already on duty and saluted their Captain as he came striding up. He returned their salutes and went straight to where he saw Lizzy sleeping, he quickly looked around and noticed that Vekao, Davkas and a few of the dwarves were still by the fire talking, so he crept up to where he saw Lizzy's pack and went through it quickly, he cursed softly under his breath when he didn't find the artifact, he quickly and quietly walked away and then went to sit by the fire scratching his chin trying to figure out who had the artifact?

“Greetings Captain, you seem puzzled about something?” Davkas called out to the Captain as he came walking up to the fire and sat down.

Captain Silverstar looked over at Davkas and trying to cover up his puzzlement smiled at him and just shook his head then he said, “No I was just thinking about this artifact that you had told us about earlier in the day. It will be good to get this in the hands of our mages back home and perhaps put an end to the brewing war.”

“Yes well you are right about that, it is a very important find and we are fortunate that Lizzy ‘found’ it and we can turn it over to King Brighwater.” Davkas said in reply while the dwarves and Vekao all nodded in agreement.

“Yes most assuredly, but I was wondering, does your daughter have this artifact on her now and is that the safest place for it to be?” Silverstar asked Davkas with a smile.

“No she doesn’t have it any longer, she handed it over to the good mind mage here Argha.” Davkas said in reply and pointed towards Argha Flintrock the old mind mage from the city of Ironhold.

“Yes, I have the artifact Captain. Lizzy and I discussed it and felt it was better for me to carry from this point.” Argha said to the Captain with a nod and a smile.

“Very well, very well. I was just concerned you know about who might be carrying such a potent and dangerous thing!” Captain Silverstar answered Argha back and then ended the conversation with, “Well I think I will need to turn in for now, it’s been a very long day, but a happy one.” And with that he got up and went to his bedroll.

Soon all of the party members were excusing themselves for bed and the only ones left awake were the guards posted at the perimeter of the camp. Captain Silverstar wasn’t really asleep, for he had tried to sleep but was deep in thought, trying to figure out how to get the artifact from the mind mage and feeling guilty over the death of the dwarven blacksmith Nelas.

Chapter 22

The night came and went with no disturbances, the guards changing like clockwork and everyone soon woke up with the beginning of dawn's light as the three moons set in the west. Soon the whole camp was a flurry of activity and the smells of breakfast cooking on the camp fire was making many mouths water in anticipation. This morning it was the soldiers who were doing the cooking and it wasn't long before the group came together by the fire to eat and prepare for the day ahead. Princess Lunansa Brightwater was the most anxious of the group wanting desperately to get home and see her Father.

Davkas, Vekao, Lizzy and Taithmar were all sitting by the fire, warming their feet and just beginning to eat the morning meal. They were greeting the dwarves as they came up to join them, soon it seemed that everyone was eating or packing items up for the journey, it was Argha who first noticed Nelas wasn't there with them.

"Has anyone seen that old smith Nelas?" he asked the other dwarves around the fire.

Heads turned towards the mind mage but they all shook their heads negatively and went back to their food. Argha though stood up and was looking around, "I don't see him anywhere" he said, then looked over at Captain Hammerstone and Sergeant Blackrock with a frown.

"I'll look for him" Sergeant Blackrock mumbled and got up from the fire and the food. He first looked over to where the dwarves had bedded down for the night, but couldn't see any

signs of where Nelas had slept. He was soon heading out towards the wooded area surrounding the camp site, mumbling and grumbling the whole way.

“Maybe he is just out for a morning stroll” Lizzy said helpfully to Argha.

“Well it’s not like Nelas to miss out on breakfast though, I’ve know him for a good long time now and I know he hates to miss a meal.” Argha responded back to Lizzy, but he had a very worried look on his face by this time.

Lizzy just smiled back at the old mind mage and nodded, she looked over at her father who was now standing up and looking out towards the edge of the woods, just trying to catch a glimpse of where the dwarf might be.

Soon there was shouting from the soldiers and all kinds of commotion. From the woods came Sergeant Blackrock carrying Nelas in his arms! The friends were on their feet in an instant and ran out to meet him.

“What is wrong!” was all the words that they got out before they reached Blackrock and Nelas. The Sergeant placed Nelas softly on the ground before them. Then looked up at the group, “He’s dead! I found him in the woods over yonder,” Blackrock points back the way he came, “he looks to have been stabbed and left to die.”

“Stabbed!” shouted Lizzy as she stumbled back a bit in shock. “How could that be? We are miles from any other people, it is just us and the creatures in the woods around here?” Lizzy then looks at her friend Vekao and her father for answers.

Vekao came up and examined the dwarf and the wounds on him. He said rather grimly to the group, “Well this doesn’t look like goblin work either. They are usually more brutal and sloppy in how they take a life, and I’m sure we would have heard something.”

Just then Captain Silverstar came striding up, parting his men and the others to look down at the body of Nelas. “Well what are you saying minotaur?” he asked Vekao with a cynical look on his face, “You can tell just by looking at this poor dead dwarf whether or not a goblin killed him?”

Vekao looked down at the captain and just smiled at him. “Yes human I can. I have fought and killed many goblins in my day, seen many die in wars and battles, and I am saying that this dwarf here was stabbed from behind, by a sneak thief or coward.”

“You know nothing!” Captain Silverstar snarled at the hulking minotaur and turned to leave. He then called out to his men “It is time to break camp and get back to the city. Mount up we move out within the hour” he then turned to the friends still surrounding Nelas, “you will have some time to deal with your dead friend, but we need to move out in case there is a raiding party out there somewhere just waiting to attack!” He then marched off to his horse and finished stowing his gear.

Davkas turned to his friends after seeing the Captain march off, “He’s acting rather strange for an experienced guard captain?” he said with a frown nodding towards the departing Captain Silverstar.

“Davkas please he is just concerned for our safety, there is nothing strange about that.” Princess Lunansa said in reply. “Besides he is right we need to get moving just in case there is a goblin band waiting to attack.” Then she too turned to leave but before she took two steps she turned to Argha and the other dwarves, “I grieve for the loss of Nelas I really do, he was my friend as well and I will see that he is honored when we return to my home.” She then bowed slightly to the dwarves, who nodded and bowed back towards the Princess, and then she went her way, but was soon looking about for Captain Silverstar.

Davkas and Vekao looked at each other grimly, they were not so easily convinced, yet they wanted to honor the Princess’s wishes and were soon helping the dwarves with Nelas’s body. They had decided to take him with them instead of burying him here as they did the dwarven soldier from the other day, so they took and placed him on the horse that one of the soldier had offered and got ready to leave.

But what the Princess and Captain Silverstar had said did not stop them from talking about the situation. The two old friends talked about it as they walked along with the party, they were soon joined by Taithmar and Lizzy, who had also been discussing what took place. Then

Davkas pointed out a problem in his thoughts, he pointed out that he remembered seeing Captain Silverstar coming back into the camp late last night and with a strange look on his face.

“What are you suggesting Davkas?” Taithmar said to him after he had shared what he had seen and how the captain had spoken to them all about the artifact.

Davkas just shrugged slightly in response, not saying anything else at this time. So the four friends walked on, but they kept watching Captain Silverstar, he was spending a lot of his time riding next to the Princess, which wasn't unusual in it's self, but they noticed too that he kept looking back at the dwarves, who were on the trail at the rear of the group.

Captain Silverstar was very concerned; he wasn't sure how he was going to pull this off. Here they were less than a day's ride now out of Castitrona and he didn't have much of an idea of how to get the artifact from the mind mage Argha. So he did the only thing that came to his desperate mind at the time, to fake an illness! He snuck some special black powder out of his pack on his horse, he had used this powder once before on a rival officer whom he had a feud with. It made a person terribly ill when they ingested a few pinches of it sprinkled on their food or drink, so the Captain figured if he used a little of it on the Princess, they would be forced to stop when she got sick. So he excused himself from riding next to her and rode towards the back of the group, feigning interest in the dwarves.

When the Captain reached the dwarves he asked them how they were holding up, with concern written on his face. When they responded that they were just fine and thanked him for

his concern, he drifted to the back of the column. Little did he realize that now Davkas was keeping a very sharp eye on him and noted his every movement, so Davkas saw the Captain take his water skin out and sprinkle some substance down into it, he wasn't sure what the Captain was up to but he saw this none the less.

The Captain then rode back up to the front where the Princess was riding, she smiled at him when he came up to ride beside her again. The Captain took out his waterskin and pretended to take a drink of the water, and he then offered the Princess a drink. She smiled again and took the waterskin from him. She took a long drink and thanked the Captain for the water, smiling shyly back at him, batting her eyes a little in an attempt to try and flirt with the handsome captain. He smiled back and they both laughed a little, yet Davkas was puzzled by what he had seen but didn't say anything yet.

Soon the Princess was feeling a bit strange, she was feeling really dizzy and before long she actually fell from the saddle of the horse she was riding on! The whole group gasped as one and everyone stopped in their tracks! Captain Silverstar leaped down from his horse and was at her side instantly.

“Princess Lunansa what is wrong!” he practically shouted as he rushed up to her. By this time she was trying to sit back up from the ground but was having trouble doing so. Then she leaned over to the side and vomited, and not in a very lady-like fashion either!

Captain Silverstar helped her to her feet and she leaned on him heavily as they walked to the shade of a nearby tree. The soldiers and the others all came up around her to see what help they could offer. Soon Argha Flintrock came up to offer the Princess his aid, he knelt down besides her and took her hand in his.

“What is wrong Princess?” Argha said to her as he knelt down.

“I don’t know?” the Princess responded back to him. She found that she was having trouble focusing on his face, and simply closed her eyes, and lay back down against the tree.

Argha looked concerned and questioned her on what she might have eaten that morning? When she told him that she hadn’t eaten anything, just had drunk some water, he was puzzled?

“I don’t understand what this could be? Perhaps something bit her during the night and she is reacting to it now?” Argha said with a look of concern on his face. “Princess I will try to help you if I can.” So with that the elder dwarf closed his eyes and concentrated on the Princess and her illness.

Soon though it became evident that nothing much was happening, Argha just shook his head and stood back up. “I’m not sure what is happening with the Princess.” He said, “My only thought is that this is perhaps some sort of magical attack and not an illness at all.”

Captain Silverstar then stepped in and took over the situation, “Well we must make her as comfortable as possible while I send one of my fastest riders to the King to let him know that we need to have his most powerful mages here to help the Princess.” He then turned to Argha and said, “Thank you for trying mind mage but it seems that you can do no more for her, so please step aside.”

Argha looked up at Captain Silverstar and said “B-but I’m not finished!”

“Yes you are for I am in charge here and I say step away from the Princess!” Captain Silverstar practically screeched at the surprised dwarven mind mage, his anxiety over the whole situation was growing rapidly now. He then motioned his men and all of them drew their swords menacingly.

This of course caused the small contingent of dwarves to pull their weapons free and glare at the men and elves with their drawn weapons pointed at their beloved mind mage. At this point Davkas shouted out “Enough! Everyone put your weapons away! We are not the enemy, we are among friends here.”

With that Captain Silverstar motioned for his soldiers to comply and lower their weapons then said in reply to Davkas “I appreciate your words and we do not wish to come to blows over this either, yet I must insist that everyone do as I say for the sake of the Princess.’

Davkas held his tongue he knew something was not right, for he remembered what he saw the Captain doing just moments before the Princess collapsed. Yet he also knew if he accused the Captain openly in front of his men then they wouldn't stand a chance to help the Princess. So he chose to comply for the time being, he simply nodded to the Captain and backed away, he then whispered something under his breath towards Vekao and together they walked away leaving the others behind. Soon the mind mage Argha got up to his feet, gave Captain Silverstar another withering look and the dwarves all shuffled quietly away from the Princess, but not too far.

When Davkas and Vekao got a little ways off from the rest of the party Vekao looked down at his elven friend and said "So what's going on Davkas?"

Davkas looked the minotaur in the eye, which was a little hard to do, and replied back to him "Well I have a bad feeling about all of this Vekao. I saw the good Captain back there put something in the water before the Princess took a drink of it. And then again last night I saw the Captain return alone from outside the camp looking a little shaken. I'm just thinking that there is more to what is transpiring than what he wants us to believe."

Vekao just nodded and looked back towards where the Princess still lay under the tree. About this time Taithmar and Lizzy came strolling up, trying to look bored and disinterested. Lizzy spoke first to he father "So what was that about back there?"

Davkas just looked at his daughter for a moment, he marveled how much she reminded him of her mother, his wife, who had died many years ago. But here she was all grown up and in a very dangerous situation. “Well Lizzy, Taithmar, I’ll explain it this way. I believe that the Princess is in danger, and I don’t feel that Captain Silverstar is telling us the whole truth about what is going on here. I think he has some kind of ulterior motives that would explain his actions.”

Taithmar and Lizzy just looked at Davkas kind of funny like, obviously not convinced yet that something was going on. So Davkas huddled his three friends together and explained everything that he saw to this point. In the end he seemed to convince them that the Captain was acting suspiciously and they had to have a plan of action. But they also knew they needed the help of the dwarves to have any hope of a chance. So Davkas went to talk with the dwarves...

“Well you don’t have to explain to me that something fishy is going on!” Exclaimed Captain Hammerstone said to Davkas, in a way only a dwarf would say. Very loud, and not caring to much that others might hear him, but luckily for Davkas no one else did, so after he shushed the dwarven Captain he explained the rest of their plan to him. Captain Hammerstone nodded his agreement and went and spoke to his remaining warriors, including Sergeant Blackrock, while Davkas went to find Argha Flintrock, he finally found the old dwarf sitting by himself next to an old oak tree.

“Argha, we need to talk.” Davkas called out to him as he approached him under the tree. The tree was massive and was very old; Argha was just sitting there gazing up at its branches. He

looked over to Davkas approaching him and replied, “Greetings Davkas, I was just sitting here admiring this old tree, I don’t get to see any tree’s down in Ironhold.” He then chuckled a little at his own joke, if that’s what you’d call it, and then smiled up at Davkas, who by this time was standing over him.

“Yes I can only imagine.” Davkas said in response to the old mind mage. Then he got serious and sat down next to Argha. “Could I have a word with you?” he asked him.

“Certainly, tell me what you need?” Argha replied back to Davkas.

So Davkas explained their situation to the mind mage, about what he had witnessed on the trail and what he saw at the camp the night before. Argha’s expression soon turned very sad and angry at the same time. He looked at Davkas and said “Are you sure about all of this?”

“Yes I am very sure.” Davkas said with a sorrowful look on his face. So they soon hatched their plan on how they would turn the tables on Captain Silverstar and find out what he was about.

Chapter 23

The dwarves all approached Captain Silverstar, “We have decided to head on back to Ironhold Captain. We are sorry that the Princess has taken ill but we would like to turn back now and see about our own.” Captain Hammerstone said to his counterpart. All the dwarves positioned behind him nodded their agreement, including the mind mage Argha.

“Well that is probably just as well. We can manage to escort the Princess home from here, but first I demand that you turn the artifact over to me before you leave.” Captain Silverstar said to the dwarven Captain, while he glanced over at Argha.

Argha looked over at him and said “Captain you don’t need to demand the artifact from me, I will gladly turn it over, but to Taithmar only, for she is the only person that would stand a chance in this group and that would understand the dangers of the artifact if it should become necessary.” He finished speaking and gave Captain Silverstar a look that said, I dare you to disagree.

Of course Captain Silverstar did disagree and made his position known “I feel that you are trying my patience mind mage! But if this is the game you wish to play then so be it, give the artifact to her and be gone!” With that he turned away from the dwarves and marched back over to where his men were congregated. He was speaking with them when the dwarves took their leave of the camp.

Vekao, Davkas, Lizzy and Taithmar all said their goodbyes to the dwarves, Argha took the artifact from his pack and passed it over to Taithmar, who took it from the mind mage and gave him a wink! For the dwarves were not truly leaving they were just going to trail after the party and keep an eye on things from afar, just to see what hand Captain Silverstar would play. So off they went tramping back the way the group had come, by this time the day was growing short and the men of Captain Silverstar were growing restless. They were beginning to wonder what was happening with the Princess being so ill and them just sitting around waiting for something to happen.

But Captain Silverstar insisted that they wait to see if the Princess recovered from her illness, despite the advice the old dwarven mind mage had given him. Davkas and his friends continued to watch the captain to see what he would do, especially now that they were outnumbered five times over. But they didn't have to wait too much longer for Captain Silverstar was also growing anxious and he did something out of desperation, he decided that he would go out into the woods and summon the Dhag'arii mage again, but this time he would allow him to come and take the artifact from the four friends within his camp!

But seeing the captain sneak off into the woods, Davkas decided to follow after him to see what he was going to do, yet unaware that Captain Silverstar had access to calling the dark dwarf royal mage.

Deeper into the tree line the captain went, not realizing that the old elf was following at a distance. So Captain Silverstar went to a cluster of trees in the woods close by, he took out the

gem of calling he had secreted away, and spoke the word to activate it. The gem came to life and the dark dwarf magic-user stood before Captain Silverstar again! Davkas who was hidden behind some bushes gasped in horror, for he recognized the evil dwarf!

“So you have good news I assume Captain?” Tin’ther said to him.

“Yes, yes good news. The artifact is within my grasp, I have just to seize it from the ones who now hold it.” Captain Silverstar replied back to the dwarf.

“Well again you disappoint me Captain. I want the artifact and I want it now!” the dark dwarf rasped back to Captain Silverstar.

Silverstar fell back in fear, but then he composed himself and stood up to the evil dwarven mage. He whispered hoarsely to the mage “I have it hear, or more specifically a mage has it in her possession. So if you want your blasted artifact so badly then why don’t you just come here and get it yourself then?” The captain didn’t really expect the old dwarf to take him up on the proposition of course.

With that the dark mage glared at the boldness the captain was displaying, and then he let a smile creep across his face. “Of course captain, whatever you wish!” he replied to him, then threw his arms up and spoke some terrible words, so terrible sounding were these words that Davkas covered his ears, while the young captain just stood there in shock, the blood draining from his face!

Lightening suddenly filled the sky, a hot, horrible wind blew in and all the horses back in the camp started to get jittery. Davkas crouched down even lower in the bushes he had been hiding behind, while Captain Silverstar just stared, too stunned to move at this point. The members of the party back at camp stood looking around, instinctively knowing that something was not right. Even Captain Silverstar's soldiers could tell the something was happening. *Where had this storm blown in from?* They all were thinking, yet it was not a storm, for it was a spell, a terrible, powerful spell that the mage Tin'ther had cast from miles and miles away!

One minute Tin'ther was an image projected by the gem in the captain's hand, and the next minute Tin'ther was standing there directly in front of Captain Silverstar! Davkas was in shock! He couldn't believe his eyes! How had the Dhag'arii mage done that with such apparent ease? He wasn't sure, yet he knew that he needed to warn the others! So Davkas decided it was best to creep away quietly, and so he did, little did he realize that if he had stayed and watched further he would have seen even more shocking actions!

Captain Silverstar though was not as fortunate he stood staring at the newly arrived dwarf and went to pull his sword free. It was too late! The dark mage spoke another word and the young captain was instantly frozen in place, he couldn't move a muscle, or even blink, he was totally paralyzed! Tin'ther just stood there smiling up at him, a wickedly evil smile on his dwarven face.

Davkas moved away from the scene quickly and hurried back to tell his friends. When he reached the camp everyone was standing around looking this way and that, some were watching the sky, for the lightning had appeared out of nowhere. When his friends saw Davkas approaching they ran out to meet him, the sergeant left in charge of the soldiers also went out, he called out to Davkas as he approached. “Where is Captain Silverstar?”

Davkas looked to the sergeant and replied “He is in trouble round up your soldiers and help him! I will lead you back to him, but some still need to stay with the Princess and assure her safety!” He then looked at Vekao and the others and said “I think soon we will have some company and it is not the kind of company that we will enjoy!” With that he waved them along to follow him back to where the captain was at.

Back with Tin'ther and the young captain, the old dwarven mage was busy. He immediately opened a gate and a full dozen skeleton warriors came streaming out, armed to the teeth so to speak and with red glowing eyes! He motioned that they should stay still while he dealt with Captain Silverstar, the dwarven mage pulled his dagger and walked over to where the captain stood frozen...

When Davkas and the group following him arrived back at the spot where he last saw the captain and the mage Tin'ther, they found Captain Silverstar standing there in the clearing, he was not moving! His men rushed up to him and soon discovered that their captain was dead! For when they came around to the front they saw that there was a dagger protruding from his eye! Yet he still stood! Taithmar who had come with the group soon figured out what was happening.

She fished around briefly in her belt pouch and standing next to the captain, blew some powder at him. Instantly the spell the evil dwarven mage had worked on Captain Silverstar was broken, and he fell over into her arms! She caught him and brought him slowly down to the ground, his men were horrified and the Sergeant rushed up to the Captain. Yet of course they knew he was dead, the wound in his eye was bleeding profusely now.

Soon they heard hollering and screaming coming from the camp site! So they turned as one and ran back to the camp with weapons bared hoping they could get there in time. When they got back to the camp a frightening scene met their eyes, for there in the middle of the camp, with dead soldiers scattered around him, was the dark dwarf Tin'ther, surrounded by a group of evil looking skeleton warriors and worse still, he was holding the unconscious Princess in his grasp!

“Hold evil one! What is the meaning of this? Release the Princess and we may let you live.” Davkas cried out then turned back to the soldiers and shouted, “Stand back from him for he is an evil mage of the Dhag'arii.”

“I see my reputation precedes me. I will get straight to the point. I came for the artifact, the one the mage there has in her pack.” Tin'ther said pointing towards Taithmar. “Where is the pack? I want it now or I will slay the Princess here in front of you all!”

The Sergeant stepped forward and spoke then “Let the Princess go! She has done nothing to you!” Then he took a step closer to the dwarf.

“Stop!” cried out Taithmar “Hold Sergeant. Let me handle this one”

“Surely you don’t think that we will just hand the artifact over to you just like that?”

Taithmar said to the mage while stepping forward just a bit. “We will need to know that the Princess will be safe and you will let her go!”

The old dwarven mage, Tin’ther, just laughed, a low almost bestial laugh, looking scornfully back at Taithmar. Then he answers her “You are not in a position to bargain. I will promise nothing! Just bring the artifact to me now!” Then Tin’ther took out a wand he had tucked away inside his tunic and pointed the wand at the Princess, and then looks menacingly back to Taithmar, an evil grin on his face. “Try me he says to her.”

Taithmar just shrugs her shoulders and goes to find her pack, it doesn’t take her long and she comes striding back over to the center of the camp with the old cloth wrapped artifact in hand. She comes and stands again with her friends, but before she turns to Tin’ther to show him the artifact she gives her friends a sly wink and a quick smile, for during her short time digging through the pack to bring the artifact, she had seen what she had hoped she would, their friends the Ironhold dwarves were there and they were in the process of creeping up on the unsuspecting dark mage!

Now turning back to Tin’ther she holds out the cloth wrapped artifact. Tin’ther immediately tells her to hand it over to him, she hesitates a little, then hands over the artifact to

the old dwarf. Tin'ther's eyes lit up with a hungry look, he instinctively reached his hand forward to grasp it, even though they were still more than 10 feet apart. But that was precisely the time that Captain Hammerstone and Sergeant Blackrock launched their attack, for they had been waiting for just such a moment!

The entire scene became chaotic in a flash, for the dwarven sergeant launched his small war hammer at the mage striking his out thrust hand, which of course knocked the wand from his grip. The mage howled in pain and anger, but at the same time he lost his hold of the Princess and she slumped to the ground! Taithmar tossed the artifact back to Lizzy who deftly caught it while Taithmar whirled back towards the dwarven mage and spoke a word of power and pointed her finger at him. Instantly a green ray of power shot forth from her hand which caused the old dark dwarf to howl again, but he kept his footing in spite of all the attacks!

The attack did push him a bit back away from the Princess and the party could see Argha in the background concentrating deeply. In a flash a bluish circular sphere formed around the prone form of the Princess. Tin'ther though was not going to waste any time on the Princess now, his goal was to retrieve the artifact and that's what he intended to do. So he spoke a word of power and pointed back at the soldiers and friends who were still huddled together and a wave of reddish bolts shot forth from his fingers! Three of them struck three soldiers and all of them fell to the ground dead! One struck Vekao in his left arm and he felt the intense pain burning into it. Another bolt struck Lizzy in the hand and she ended up yelping in pain and dropping the artifact.

This was what the dark mage had been waiting for, because he knew that to invoke the artifact and bring forth the earth elemental it had to be in contact with the earth and now it was! But before he could speak Davkas launched himself at the old dark dwarf, pulling his sword out and swiping at his head! The old dwarf ducked and quickly backed away from him, he touched a ring on his finger and instantly his image blurred! It was difficult for anyone to focus on him and it would be very difficult for them to now strike at him, which is what the mage wanted. Then the Dhag'arii mage waved his hand and instantly the skeletal warriors swarmed towards the remaining soldiers and friends, while a few of them broke away and went after the nearest dwarven warriors.

The skeleton warriors moved silently, their red eyes gleaming with cruel intent, the first closed on the dwarves and quickly engaged with them. The remaining skeletons met up with Davkas and a few of the soldiers who had followed him when he made his move against Tin'ther. The dwarves who had more experience than the Lijissa soldiers soon disposed of a couple of the skeletons, effectively crushing their skulls with skilled blows from their war hammers, yet the skeletal warriors unnerved some of the soldiers who shook with fright and were quickly cut down by the skeletons confronting them.

Davkas took out two of the skeletons himself, before he was joined in the fray by Vekao and Lizzy, Taithmar concentrated her attention on the evil dwarven mage Tin'ther. Unfortunately the friends were unaware that by having the artifact in contact with the ground as it was when she dropped it, the Dhag'arii mage could actually activate it from where he stood. If they had

know this, they might have tried harder to recover it, but alas they did not know it's nature and thus left it laying on th ground thinking it was safe behind them!

During this struggle Argha had snuck up from behind and pulled the Princess away to safety, he then turned his attention back to the battle with the Dhag'arii mage. Davkas had lunged and tried to attack the mage, but his attacks were to no avail at this point, having been cut off by one of the skeletal warriors. The rest of their group was busy handling the remaining skeletons there were only a few left now at this point. The Lijissa Sergeant shouted out orders to his remaining men, yet in the chaos surrounding them they seemed to hesitate at first. But in the end the majority of them stood their ground being an experienced group, and soon they had cut down two more of the skeletons!

By now Lizzy had recovered from the magical bolt and was fairly busy fighting a skeletal warrior along with one of the dwarves, she allowed the dwarf to take the fight to the skeleton and was inching her way back towards where she had dropped the artifact, in the process of reaching down to pick the up again yet Tin'ther took notice in the chaos and was not going to allow this to happen! He quickly invoked the artifact, speaking the word quickly and loudly that would do so! The very air around the group fighting shimmered with eldritch power!

As Lizzy stooped down over the artifact the ground began to shudder as if they were all in the midst of a powerful earthquake! Lizzy was having trouble just staying on her feet, let alone pick up the artifact. Argha stared in horror, along with Taithmar, Davkas and Vekao, for they knew what was happening then! Soon the artifact began to grow! Lizzy fell back from it then as

well as the remaining party members next to her there. The little statue grew and grew, and soon it was about the size of one of the mountain giants from the frozen land of Hempora that everyone feared! Only this giant was thicker and made of stone and dirt!

Tin'ther stood marveling at his accomplishment and sneered over at Davkas "Now elven dog! Taste the power of the Dhag'arii!"

Davkas and the others stood speechless, staring at the hulking dark form in front of them...soon they were forced to move for the skeletal warriors refused to pause and be awed by the powerful elemental. In the process two more soldiers and one of the dwarves paid with their lives as they were cut down from behind...

Chapter 24

Lizzy darted away from the monstrosity and ran for cover, yet some of the Lijissa soldiers standing close by were not so fortunate. The thing came to life and it struck out at them, sending them tumbling backwards, one with a shattered skull! Vekao sensing that it might attack Davkas, leaped out in front of it swinging his huge battleaxe! It bounced off the creature's hard skin and it took a swing at him next! Vekao danced back out of the arc of the blow and decided it might be best to back off a bit. Taithmar yelled at the men next to her "Get back away from it! Stand clear!"

Captain Hammerstone and his now few remaining dwarven warriors came running up to the elemental, they motioned for the party members to stay clear, in the meantime Davkas turned his attention back to the dark mage, trying desperately to strike him! But he would soon get some help for Argha stepped forward and engaged the evil mage himself, he was armed with a magical war hammer and intended to use it on his head! He swung at him and connected! Drawing a sharp yelp of pain from the mage catching him on his shoulder, the dark mage turned and pulled out his only remaining weapon, another wand! Argha was not to get a chance for a killing blow for the dark mage took aim with his newly produced wand and triggered it sending the mind mage, Argha, flailing backwards with a wave of force like a hammer to his chest!

Taithmar had turned away from the Dhag'arii mage and turned her attention to the earth elemental, she pointed at it and spoke a word, and a blast of bitter cold air came forth and struck the thing! It howled in pain and rage, for that seemed to have had some effect on it, with layers

of frost and frozen dirt hanging from it now. It turned its attention away from Vekao and turned towards the mage, it took a step forward to close the distance between them, shaking the ground in the process. The remaining Lijissa warriors had regrouped by this time, there were just a scant handful left, and they launched an attack at the thing, arrows flew into it and clattered off it, falling to the ground, no normal weapon could harm an earth elemental after all. So they turned their attention away from the earth giant and aimed their weapons at the Dhag'arii mage instead.

“Stop this madness and we will spare your life!” Davkas shouted at the dark dwarven mage.

Tin'ther just laughed and then responded by saying “You will be the ones dying this day!” With that he pointed his wand at Davkas and sent the elf tumbling backwards and into a nearby tree with a thud.. Tin'ther just laughed again. Davkas rolled on the ground, in obvious pain, the soldiers came running to his aid!

“You will pay for that!” Sergeant Blackrock shouted at the dark mage and ran towards him swinging his battleaxe as he went. He came up to the mage and attempted to strike him, but this proved difficult, and he ended up missing him terribly! The mage stepped back slightly and pointed the wand in his hand at the dwarven sergeant. Just like that the magical force in the wand struck the sergeant full in his chest! He too was flung backwards and landed in a heap and he was not moving at all! The remaining contingent of dwarves, lead by their brave Captain leaped to his aid, but when they reached him they knew that he was dead, the life blasted from him by the wand in the hand of the evil Tin'ther! Then they were engaged by the remaining skeleton

warriors, there were not many left, but there were enough to keep them occupied and out of the fight against the elemental and the evil mage, Tin'ther.

Captain Hammerstone ordered his remaining warriors to fall back away from the skeletons and to drag their comrades with them, and so they did, pulling the dead body of Sergeant Blackrock and the injured Argha with them. While this was happening Davkas had recovered his footing, Lizzy and Vekao were busy harassing the Dhag'arii wizard, while the earth elemental was attempting to reach the mage Taithmar who was once again unleashing a blast of freezing, cold ray at the thing...

Back in Castitrona, King Lonthonis Brightwater was getting some good news finally from his forces along the northern border. Queen Yoheda had heeded his call for help and had sent a portion of her army to the border skirmishes. With her forces combined now with Lijissa's army they were making progress at pushing back the invading horde of dark dwarves and goblins. It wasn't long before they had boxed them in a canyon and were in the process of drafting plans to force their surrender, so riders were rushing back and forth, along with court mages to relay the news from the front lines. To his surprise and delight, even King Undor Battledragon had sent a detachment of his army to help, for this added a very welcome addition to the forces pushing back the invaders.

"What news from the borders?" the King asked his steward who had just come from the courtyard and had taken the latest report from the rider who had been sent to the castle.

“There is very good news Your Royal highness!” the steward replied to his King “The goblins seem to be getting cold feet and their forces are dwindling during the night, soon we believe the dwarves will also begin to retreat.”

The King smiled for the first time in weeks, he felt as if a great weight was lifted from his shoulders. Yet he couldn't help but wonder about the fate of his daughter, he was also wondering if Captain Silverstar had any success in picking up a clue as to her whereabouts. He could only wonder, yet he was tired of wondering and decided he would call his remaining court mages to him to see if they could once again determine what had happened to her.

“Send for the remaining court mages. I wish to speak with them as soon as possible.” King Brightwater said to his steward who was standing by.

The old steward nodded and bowed to his King and went off to fetch the court mages as his King had commanded. Soon they started to arrive, there were only four mages left here at the castle now, for the rest had been sent to the battle lines to help fight off the invading armies. The King wasted no time in explaining what he wanted them to concentrate on now.

“As you all know the Princess has been missing now for some time. Taken from under our very noses!” the King began, and all the mages began to shift uncomfortably and look from one to another for support. For they felt that they had failed their King and his only daughter, Princess Lunansa, for allowing someone to steal her away as it seemed to be. The King continued, “We have been forced to concentrate all our attention on the battles at our borders, but

now that we seem to be making great progress there I would ask that each of you now concentrate on helping to find the Princess!”

The court mages all agreed heartily with this new direction from their King and they all four rushed out to put their heads together so that they could formulate a plan in order to please their King. They soon were congregated within their main study developing their plans. The oldest among them, an old elven mage named Tasanal, made his suggestion. He suggested that they all would caste a spell of concentration on him and in so doing they would increase his ability to caste a scrying spell. This was their best option for seeking the Princess, of course in doing so it may endanger his own life, but Tasanal was willing to take this chance.

So they began, they formed a rough circle around him and the first of the other three mages spoke a word of power and focused on the mage Tasanal, as the others joined in he soon could feel his power growing and he caste his own spell, concentrating on the young Princess Lunansa...

As this was all taking place elsewhere in the castle the messenger from Ironhold, dispatched a few days ago by King Undor Battledragon, finally arrived to inform the King of his missing daughter. He relayed his message to the King of the news of the Princess and all that had happened to her up until the time that she was leaving Ironhold for her journey back to Castitrona. The King breathed a great sigh of relief and thanked the dwarven messenger for the good news. He then summoned the steward back to his side and sent him off in search of the mages.

The battle with the Dhag'arii mage and the earth elemental wasn't going very well, for the friends knew that they would have to do something to stop the Dhag'arii dwarf from escaping with the artifact. Then Taithmar had an idea, she had battled other elemental types in the past, but never an earth elemental such as this, yet she knew that they all had some weakness. So she spoke a word quickly and took to the air! Soon she was swooping and flying straight at the elemental thing, she pointed her staff at it and spoke another word of power, this time a sharp stream of magical water shot forth from her out stretched staff and struck the elemental full in its chest! It actually moaned, a pathetic sound issuing from its maw, and Taithmar knew that she had hurt it severely!

The mage Tin'ther howled in rage and stood shaking his fist at the now flying Taithmar then he aimed his wand at her, but just before he could begin his attack, Argha had jumped up from where the dwarves had laid him and launched his own war hammer at the dark mage, in it spun connecting with his head and knocking him to the ground! The mage looking up at the mind mage in pain and surprise "H-how?" was all he could manage to say to the dwarven mage, wondering how it had managed to hit him so squarely considering his defensive blurring spell he had enacted earlier.

Argha looked down at him and simply said "My hammer is magical and with my mental guidance is capable of hitting most anything that I aim it at."

While he was yet speaking with the mage Tin'ther was feebly trying to raise his hand with his wand at Argha, the old dwarf simply kicked at his hand and the wand went flying. With that the old mage Tin'ther breathed his last, having taken to much damage to his old body, he was bleeding profusely around his head and died there on the ground, in the Kingdom of Lijissa. *(To this day it is said of the area where Tin'ther died is barren of all vegetation and life)*

As soon as he died the spell he invoked on the artifact came to an abrupt and complete halt! The earth elemental stood motionless and soon began to shrink back to its original form! It was done! It was now back to its original shape and size, the very statue that Lizzy had taken from the merchant's home many weeks ago! Then just like that the skeletal warriors that Tin'ther had summoned started to pop out of existence, one by one they disappeared from the battle field, leaving all the combatants dazed and confused for a moment, they all stood, weapons raised search the field for the enemy!

Everyone stopped and stared at the now inanimate artifact. Taithmar quickly settled down to the ground and walked swiftly up to it and scooped it up off the ground. She looked down at it in her hands then she thrust it high up over her head and shouted out in joy! The rest of the party, including the soldiers of Lijissa all shouted with her and slapped each other on their backs. So relieved were they that they had defeated the evil mage and the creatures under his control. Then they looked around at the carnage that had resulted from their battle...

... Captain Silverstar was dead, and so were more than half of the force he had brought with him, a few of the survivors were injured, Vekao was hurt, and so was Lizzy. Argha was

sorely hurt, yet he was busy looking after the still prone Princess Lunansa. The dwarves whom had returned to help were also decimated; of course they had already taken a terrible toll to their numbers from the earlier battles. But now the friends all huddled together around the Princess, their concern now was for her safety and well being. They knew they had to get her to her father's castle and the city of Castitrona! But how were they to do this in time, for they feared if they didn't hurry her health would fail altogether and she would die.

Chapter 25

Lizzy went over to sit next to her father, but she just sat there for a moment without saying anything, and without moving, just sort of staring down at the ground. He allowed her the time she needed to gather her thoughts, soon though he cleared his throat and looked over at her and smiled, reaching out he grabbed her by her hand and said “Are you doing alright Lizzy? Does it hurt much?” he said as he pointed at her wound.

Lizzy didn't respond right away, but soon she looked up at him and smiled back and said “Yes Father I am fine, the wound will heal. I was just thinking about all the people who had to die for what I did.” She choked back a sob and looked away.

Davkas glanced over at the ones who had died, and then he looked at Lizzy and gently placed his hand on her chin and turned her back to face him. He spoke softly to her and said, “Lizzy, we know it was not your intention to involve anyone in what happened. Just remember all of these here made a choice to help both the problem with the artifact and the rescue of Princess Lunansa, I'm sure they understand what you must be feeling right now. But we need to press on now and honor the lives that were laid down for our cause and bring the Princess to safety, along with placing the artifact in the hands of the King so that it can be either destroyed, if possible, or hidden away to prevent the Dhag'arii from using it again.”

Lizzy smiled back at her Father and nodded to him. The rest of the group was preparing for the night and had built a large fire, the Lijissa soldiers, now under the command of their

Sergeant were setting up a watch schedule for the night, out of the twenty sent to search for the Princess, along with Captain Silverstar, there were only a half dozen left alive. Argha was busy going from one wounded person to the next, concentrating deeply and healing one after another, even though he himself was in great pain, he also produced a few healing potions he had secreted away. Soon all the wounded had been attended to in one form or another including Argha himself and they settled down for the night. Argha made his way back over to the Princess and sat down next to her under a large tree, he decides to just lean up against the tree and ended up falling asleep quickly, for he was very tired!

Vekao couldn't sleep really he was too keyed up from the battle, so he, Davkas, Lizzy and Taithmar all sat huddled around the fire talking quietly among themselves. They spoke of the artifact mostly and what they had witnessed that day. Taithmar spoke of the power she had felt when the evil mage Tin'ther had animated the statue. She knew that if they had not killed Tin'ther when they did more of their party would now be surely dead. The others just sat with grim expressions on their faces, staring into the fire. Soon Lizzy broke the silence...

"I know now that I've learned my lesson and will refrain from 'acquiring' items that don't belong to me any more!" she said to them with a small smile on her face.

Davkas coughed a little nervously and then said "Well I for one am very glad to hear that! Now maybe I can sleep at night!"

They all shared a little laugh over that, and then they grew quiet again. Vekao had picked up a long stick and was now poking at the fire, causing little sparks of ashes to kick up in the

night air. They could hear the sounds of crickets all around them, and an occasional hooting of an owl, hunting in the night. The Lijissa soldiers had taken the first watch and there were two of them patrolling the camp perimeter. From time to time they could hear them whistling to each other in some sort of code. Soon the friends grew sleepy and one by one they dismissed themselves and crawled into their bedrolls to get some needed sleep.

Concentrating on his scrying spell the mage Tasanal soon was beginning to focus on a location...it seemed the spell was working! *There! She was there! Lying next to a tree and surrounded by...the King's soldiers? But who were those others ...* Tasanal pulled back in his mind so he could determine exactly where she was, soon he felt that he could pin point the location and he ended the spell.

“I believe I can find the Princess now!” he proclaimed to his colleagues with some excitement. “We must hurry and tell the King!”

So with that they all made their way to the King's chambers, they were soon escorted in by his chamberlain. They shared their exciting news with the King, of course the King told them of the messenger from Ironhold. So they presumed that the others that the mage had observed were the ones mentioned by the messenger. So then the King immediately asked if they could arrange to teleport themselves and some soldiers to the location where they thought the Princess was at. They agreed that they could do this with ease, due to a certain magical item they had in their possession, and so they were off again, rounding up the party to be sent to the Princess.

The morning came quickly and soon all the camp was stirring and everyone was preparing to leave as quickly as possible. They were still very concerned for Princess Lunansa and wanted to get her back to her Father's castle as quickly as possible, for they knew that from what the old dwarven mind mage had told them they needed the powerful magic that the King's court mages possessed to combat the terrible magic used to put her in the deep sleep.

Argha and the other remaining dwarves made a sled to place the Princess on and soon had it lashed to the back of one of the horses. The horse would then drag the Princess behind it along the trail, so they knew that this would make the journey a slow one, yet they didn't know how else they could transport her. The soldiers of Lijissa all had mounted and were ready to be off, the dead had been placed on the back of the now mostly unused horses and so the party started their journey to the castle, with the soldiers leading the way. Davkas, Vekao, Taithmar and Lizzy brought up the rear of the group, with the dwarves and the Princess in the middle.

They weren't on the trail for long before something strange began to happen! The air around the party began to swirl and mist and soon out of this mist a group of what appeared to be mages stepped out, along with a group of soldiers! The party came to a swift halt and everyone was straining to figure out who or what this new threat was! But soon it became clear that the soldiers with their group realized it was the King's men and let out a loud cheer!

Tasanal lead the mages closer and they stopped just short of their position, for Tasanal was still not sure what was going on. So he spoke “Greetings, we come in the name of King Brightwater! We come to claim his daughter, the Princess Lunansa, missing all these past months.”

The old sergeant, now in charge of the King’s soldiers, since the death of Captain Silverstar, replied to the old elven mage “We are soldiers of Lijissa sent by the King to find his daughter, we were following our Captain, Captain Silverstar who is now dead. We came upon the Princess who was being brought back to the Kingdom by these dwarves and their comrades, the Princess during this time came down with a strange illness and is still under the spell of what has struck her down.” He spoke the last and motioned towards the sled with the Princess Lunansa lying on it.

Tasanal came forward then with the other mages following and looked down at the Princess on the sled. Argha who was next to it then spoke “She is under a powerful spell which has given her this condition, I was unable myself to break the hold of the spell and was hoping that mages from the King’s court, such as yourselves, could do so.”

Tasanal knelt down beside Princess Lunansa and examined her closely, he then called together the other mages with him and discussed what they thought should be done. Soon they had decided, they felt there best option was to take the Princess back with them as quickly as possible, which meant using the device again to transport them back to the castle, yet they also knew that there were limitation to this and they could not transport them all back, so they had to

decide who they would take with them. The dwarves all decided to stay behind for they had no love for being magically transported, yet they felt that Argha should go with the Princess. The original Lijissa warriors sent to rescue the Princess were all chosen to go, while a contingent of the newly arrived soldiers would stay. As well as the four friends would stay behind, Davkas, Lizzy, Vekao, and Taithmar. Although Taithmar was sorely disappointed for she wanted to experience this form of transportation!

So the group heading back to the castle all gathered together and they soon were swallowed up by the swirling mist and were gone! The remaining party all blinked, glanced around at each other and then started the journey to the grand city of Castitrona. It would be a swifter journey now that they didn't have to go so slow with the sled and the Princess. So off they went, the dwarves lead by Captain Hammerstone, the newly arrived soldiers from Lijissa, and Lizzy, Davkas, Taithmar and Vekao all traveling along together.

The journey was uneventful, the sky was clear, the sun was out and a good, warm breeze was blowing in from the sea. They all made their way along the trail and then by the end of the day, they soon turned into the main road leading to the gates of the city. At the gates, which were open for it was still daylight, yet only barely, they quickly made their way through, the soldiers leading the way. Soon they found themselves at the gates of the castle and the guards there opened the gates quickly and allowed them inside the courtyard.

They all filed within the courtyard, with the soldiers peeling away and going towards the barracks instead, while they continued up to the steps of the castle itself. There they were

met by a servant who told them that they would take care of their horses, and that they were expected inside. So up the castle steps they climbed and through the great doors at the top, which were opened for them by another servant. They were led down a great hall and then led into a very large room. Inside the room were all manner of food and drink, along with wash basins to freshen themselves.

It was Davkas who finally broke their silence saying “I have been called many times to the castle, yet I have never been inside this room before, this is a great honor the King has bestowed upon us!”

The others, including the dwarves, all just gaped and looked around at the fine tapestries on the walls, and the marvelous selection of food which was laid out upon the table. Soon they heard a commotion in the hallway and then a couple of heralds entered the room, they quickly announced that King Brighwater was entering along with his daughter, the Princess Lunansa! Almost as soon as the words left the heralds mouths the King did enter, and he was escorting the now fully healed, Princess Lunansa! All the friends bowed to them as they entered the room.

“Arise good friends! For I truly call you my friends for my daughter has shared how you all had a hand in saving her from the evil Dhag’arii!” the King said to them as they came in.

Coming in behind the Princess was the old dwarven mind mage Argha, and next to him walked the elven mage Tasanal. Argha looked much better now than he had just the day before and the dwarves all smiled and greeted him as he walked over to stand with them.

Davkas spoke for the friends “We are honored by your presence King Brightwater and are very glad to see your daughter in good health once again.”

The Princess responded to Davkas and said “Davkas Moonglade, you are my guest here in my Father’s castle and are welcome to come and go as you please. I wanted to personally thank you for saving my life and freeing me from the Dhag’arii prison. Without you to guide me and protecting me all this way back to my Father’s side I’m afraid the Kingdom owes you and your friends a great debt. Please let’s all eat together now and share our stories with my Father!”

So they all took a seat at the large table, Davkas sat with his friends, next to him sat Lizzy, and on his other side sat Taithmar, Vekao sat across the table next to the dwarves. They all began eating and drinking with gusto, it was Lizzy who began the story telling, she relished explaining how she had ‘acquired’ the artifact. Taithmar and Davkas were whispering things to each other, and to Lizzy’s amusement she noticed that they were lingering and leaning into each other on occasion.

Soon the King rose and raised his cup and then he spoke “I am a grateful man, and a very grateful father who now has his only child next to him.” He paused briefly and looked down at his daughter seated next to him there. Then he continued “Rest assured good friends neither I, nor my kingdom will ever forget what you have done for us. To the dwarves of Ironhold I salute you, and I promise to offer aid to your Kingdom in time of need.” Again he paused and took a long sip of his drink, the others followed suit. He then took up his toast again “Also to the four

friends here, Davkas Moonglade, Lissidrinne Moonglade, Vekao Untter, and Taithmar Oldelm, my dear friend and eyes in the west, to you my friends I say thank you, for you will always be welcome in this house!” With that he ended his speech and everyone cheered and tipped their cups back and drank down their drinks until they were dry.

Soon they finished their meal and they all started filing out of the room, servants led them to their chambers so they could relax and refresh themselves. Taithmar presented the King with the Dhag’arii artifact for safe keeping deep within the vaults of the castle, but of course his mages would study it to determine if they could use it as a weapon themselves.

Additionally the King awarded each of them items of power and magic. To Davkas he gave a sword which was called, Goblin Bane, a sword which was used in battle by a great captain long ago. To Vekao was given a battle axe which was named Cleaver, it was once used by a long since departed King. To Taithmar the King gave a wand of fireballs, and to the dwarves the King presented them with a chest of gold to share with their King, and finally to Lizzy the King presented her with a magical ring of protection. Everyone was very grateful for what the king had awarded them with.

Lizzy and Davkas had rooms close to each other so they spent some more time together before they retired for the night, yet Lizzy couldn’t help herself and asked her Father a question. “Father during our feast with the King I couldn’t help but notice you and Taithmar. You both seemed to be enjoying each others company!” She said this all with a little smile on her face as she looked over at her Father, who now was sitting out on the balcony of his room.

Davkas turned to his daughter and replied “Well if you are asking, yes we seem to be a little attracted to on another, if you need to know.” He laughed a little and they both smiled and looked out towards the surrounding walls of the castle and the city walls beyond.

“You know it’s been a long time now since your mother died Lizzy, and I have been a little lonely. Taithmar seems like such a wonderful woman, so ...” Davkas spoke softly not looking at Lizzy directly.

“So” Lizzy interrupted he father “So you might be hanging around Taithmar more now. Am I right Father?”

“Um, yes that’s kind of what I was trying to say.” Davkas replied a little sheepishly to his daughter Lizzy.

Then they sighed there together, father and daughter, both dreaming of what might come for them in the future. Or what new danger they may have to face, but for now they were safe behind the walls of the castle, and the war was coming to a close ...or was it?

The End